Going Mobile: The French-Canadian Immigrant and the European Attitude Towards Movement

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I am concerned with two meanings of religion in this essay. The first is that of the Catholicism of French-Canadians during the nineteenth century. The second meaning has to do with the way in which human beings meaningfully inhabit the world in relation to ultimate reality. This understanding of religion is intimately tied to notions of identity, the social body and the way in which they are oriented to and make sense of the world and the people inhabiting it. It is from this vantage point that I will outline two modes of French-Canadian identity in North America. The first is that articulated in the notion of *la survivance*, which runs like a mythic thread throughout the French presence in Canada. I will suggest that there is an alternative understanding of French-Canadian identity that can be found in the *movements* of French-Canadians across the continent, and that this identity can be discerned *prior* to that explored in *survivance* in time and in the consciousness of not only French-Canadians, but also in all new world peoples.

It has been noted that the experience of space in North America has played a more important formative role in the shaping of Christianity--and the European identity in general--than the experience of time.[1] The journey to the Americas itself demanded an unprecedented length of time at sea away from even the vaguest hint of dry land. And once arriving in the "New World" the sheer vastness of the landscape was unlike anything before experienced by Europeans. A plethora of personal accounts made by the earliest explorers, priests and traders from France, Britain and Spain document the inability of these Europeans to make sense of the newness

of their experiences. The colours of birds, the magnitude of varieties of flora and fauna, the otherness of the indigenous populations they encountered could only be explained in terms already available in the European languages of discovery, politics and religion.[2] But at the same time, there is the sense that these writers were quite aware that these people, plants, and animals fell far outside the boundary of all previous experience. Their reaction to this newness, suggests literary critic Stephen Greenblatt, was like the startle reflex of babies exploring the world for the first time.[3] The radical alterity of the new world was not only immediately apparent to those first explorers, but it also shook them to the core of their identity. Their own sense of the order of the world was jeopardized by this previously unknown landmass and the peoples who inhabited it. Where did they belong in God's plan? They were no longer certain of exactly who they themselves were.

But this experience was masked in a language of what Europeans expected to find in these lands across the ocean. Columbus died convinced that he had not discovered something new to the European imagination, but something quite old.[4] Later conquerors and colonists interpreted their experiences and understandings of the peoples they encountered in light of political and religious traditions of Europe. Traders and colonists from France sought furs, never meaning to stay long in North America. They found noble savages who appeared to be one with the natural world of the continent, and many French endeavoured to learn their ways. But once stable French colonies dotted the landscape and pushed further inland, these Mi'kmaq, Abenaki, Huron, Iroquois, and the *coureur de bois* who travelled, lived with, and wed them, became something less than noble in the European imagination.[5] They were understood as a danger not only to themselves, but also to the good of civilization. Puritans from England sought a land of freedom where they could set up a purely religious community that would become the model adopted by all of Europe and so usher in the founding of the New Jerusalem.[6] The plan had always been to return to Europe. Wholly dependant upon the local indigenous people that first winter, the Puritans never did leave North America, and the following winter they raided the food stores and assaulted their native providers.[7] Seeking a land and city of Paradise, they had found Satan's minions running through the dark forests of New England.

This is to say that Europeans have had a rather ambivalent relationship with notions and the act of movement across space in relation to sedentary patterns of living.[8] This is perhaps revealed best in the peculiar

social status of the European pilgrim on his way to the Holy Land. On the one hand, the pilgrim attained high social prestige in his or her act of moving from one location to another: from a marginal point in the European sacred geography to a sacred centre, a location that served to orient the Christian world to a specific geographical point that was potent with the manifestation of God's power on earth.[9] But on the other hand, as a result of his or her liminal status--of being betwixt and between[10] the normal social, political and geographical order of Christendom--the pilgrim was understood to be at risk of falling prey to sins and evils to which the normal Christian, content to remain at home, was not subject.[11]

Travel of any kind is dangerous. Whether it is from one known location to another, or from one social status to a different one, the period of transition that exists betwixt and between these stable positions is chaotic. Fundamentally, these liminal spaces constitute the utter unmaking of the individual followed by the reconstitution of that person in his or her new identity.[12] For a time, the individual has no status--not human, but not non-human. Between neighbour and stranger, between child and adult, human beings have recognized the powerful and dangerous nature of the boundary, and have devised rituals to guide the individual or community through those border zones. The potentiality and creativity of the liminal space is necessary for the existence of human communities, but there is a danger that accompanies this space. It is impossible to remain in a liminal status: such an attempt would lead to destruction rather than creation, as the person or group of people would lose their status, their identity--they would no longer have a viable place in the larger social body, except at its margins.[13] In Europe of the Late Middle Ages, women, the insane and pilgrims were all considered to partake of this dangerous aspect of liminal status to varying degrees.

These were the dangers that lurked in the forests and grottos across Europe and the ocean beyond the sight of land. Wild men, mermaids, witches, warlocks, and the dreaded wandering Jew, were creatures of the European imagination that lived in no fixed location and could be found anywhere and everywhere just beyond the power of the local lord or the next unknown island. The land between home and destination were unknown, and the potential for imagining what a traveller might encounter was limited only by the bounds of cultural creativity. But a pilgrim did not just run the risk of encountering one of these creatures; he or she could become one of them if distracted on their quest and wandered from their path.[14] This risk was serious enough to have been identified as one of the

chief sins of the middle ages: curiosity. Though pilgrims undertook the journey between human settlements in a sanctioned traversal through Christendom's sacred geography, by that very same act their own status within the social order of towns and cities was unfixed. While performing this sacred rite across the landscape, pilgrims could be accused of wandering without purpose, the last thing a good Christian should do. Wandering was perceived as a threat to the stability of the social order, and religious and political authority.[15]

Further, the voyages of exploration symbolized by Columbus' journey across the Atlantic can be understood as commensurate with the older tradition of religious pilgrimage.[16] These voyages suggested a new mode for the understanding of the meaning of human movement between stable human settlements while remaining within the same general framework as the pilgrimage. In Columbus's voyage one finds the last pilgrimage and the first voyage of discovery: curiosity became the rule, though what continued to be perceived as aimless wandering remained deviant. In other words, the attitudes, language and meanings surrounding the Christian pilgrimages remained as vital sources of meaning for the interpretation of not only the voyages of exploration, but also for the dynamics of colonialism, and were utilized to carve meanings out of both sides of contact zone boundary.[17]

I am suggesting that this ambivalent attitude concerning the status of those who were perceived to be wandering without reason was carried across the Atlantic by European priests, traders and colonists, and the language and attitudes surrounding this subject were quickly deployed in an effort to make sense of the newness of the new Wworld. The language developed in Europe to talk about people and things that existed or travelled between the settlements of the continent--and even the very act of making pilgrimages--can be seen as providing colonial Europeans in North America with a concise worldview concerning movement and settlement. More often than not, the religious attitude developed in Europe concerning wandering was used to justify the subjugation and exploitation of North Americas indigenous peoples. In Canada, the Jesuits and other missionary organizations quickly discovered that the best way to Christianize and civilize the Native Americans they encountered was to separate them from other native communities and move them into sedentary missionary towns. The United States employed a similar tactic in its efforts to move native communities out of the way of its westward expansion, and in the early twentieth century implemented the Dawes Act,

which forced tribal groups to give up their communal land and settle on small, privately owned plots.[18] The status of human being came with geographic fixedness. The measure of rational thought and human freedom was marked by one's location in relation to a centre of religious and political power.

But this ambivalence was not deployed solely to signify the indigenous populations of North America. Though the language of wandering was deployed to distinguish and reify notions of European civilization from the modes of living of non-western peoples, it could also be deployed to signify groups and individuals internal to the west. Immigrant communities were interpreted under this rubric, perhaps none more so than those French-Canadians who emigrated from Quebec during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to New England. And so the problematic nature of the validity of the binary formulation primitive/civilized is raised. Though these terms have fallen out of fashion in most academic fields, for the most part it seems that the use of the now preferred designations non-western/western is usually more cosmetic in nature rather than substantive. This is part of what I would like to suggest by focussing on French-Canadian immigrants to the United States. The categories employed by the human sciences to make sense of the world since the beginning of the European colonial enterprise have served more to obscure the intimate and material relationships--the blending, blurring, and mixing--between peoples and places that occurred as a result of that colonization. The experiences of French-Canadian immigrants reveal that the west's empirical other is not located in some distant time or space, the west is the non-west, the primitive is the civilized, and vice versa.[19] The strangers are at home where the indigenous are strangers.

Stand in the Place which You Were

Language, religion and land were held as the core of French-Canadian identity as it was formulated by many of the Catholic clergy in Quebec.[20] During the second half of the nineteenth century, in the face of the growing urban and industrial centres of Canada and the United States, French-Catholic clergy began to place an even greater importance on these "pillars of *survivance.*" In order to worship the Lord properly and fruitfully, French-Canadians pleaded for their right to speak their mother tongue.[21] In Ontario and further west, this notion became the centre of decades of bitter legal, ecclesiastical, and sometimes physical conflict.[22]

And while the promise of better paying jobs for less hours of work lured the young and lonely to the cities, Catholic clergy in Quebec preached a message concerned with a return to the land and protests against the material and moral manifestations of the western expression of modernity.[23] They laid claim to the expression of French-Canadian cultural memory: the land fed by the St Laurent had been given to them by God, and had supported French-Canada for four hundred years. The French-Canadian occupation and transformation of the land of North America was a revelation of God's power and His design for humanity, a design that featured French-Canadian Catholics in the central role.

But despite this claim to propriety based on divine revelation and term of habitation, hundreds of thousands of French-Canadians found the work and the land of Quebec too hard. The clergy of Quebec located the identity of French-Canadians in their rootedness to particular geographic locations and to particular modes of meaningfully inhabiting those regions. French-Canadian Catholics were *habitants*. But this definition neglected a large portion of the history of francophones in North America, as well as an ever increasing portion of the French-Canadian population.

Underneath the history of farming was a history of trapping, fur trading, exploring, and missions across nearly the whole of North America. The claim that French-Canadians rightfully inhabited the portion of the continent demarcated as Quebec denied a history of movement and the forming of relationships that harkened back not only to the earliest *voyageurs* and *coureur de bois*, but also to those Europeans who first crossed the Atlantic, and further to those theorized earliest modes of human existence that were trans-humance in nature.[24] So fundamentally, the reification of an identity based on fixedness in space was in fact denying the very locus of French-Canadian identity founded in the movement across space, and in the experience of the confrontation with the material forms of the world in that act of movement. It was a refusal to except the reality of the situation that French had not always been spoken in North America, a refusal to remember that French-Canadians had once been strangers and that this land they now called home had once been called home by other human communities. The reification of this claim meant in a very real sense that those prior communities' right to claim the land of the St Laurent as home would not be acknowledged, and that those French-Canadians who felt the impossibility of living a meaningful life in Quebec and chose to move themselves and their families

to the mill towns of New England had become traitors to *survivance* and to the French-Canadian race.

New England was never a place the immigrants from Quebec planned on remaining for very long. The mills offered a promise of quick and easy money, but the United States held the threat of godlessness and a loss of self. From the pulpits of Catholic churches across the province, and into the popular imagination of many French-Canadians, the United States was, on the one hand, recalled as a place of material gain and spiritual destitution. Quebec, on the other hand, seemed to offer the exact opposite, and for those who chose to emigrate, neither option appeared as a viable mode of existence. The movement of Europeans in the new world was always movement away from a stable centre in search of a spiritual or economic gain, but this movement always implied a return to the centre. The fact that the return trip was rarely ever made--became the locus for a new sense of self that led to the obfuscation of the initial act of movement that had brought them to their new home in the first place.

But the activity of moving across North America had been the primary mode of life for French-Canadians long before sedentary colonies began to thrive. The act of immigrating to the United States was consummate with this sense of self stemming from the origins of a consciousness that was distinctly French-Canadian and no longer French. So in a sense, the immigrant was taking part in an activity that was a founding experience in what it meant to be French-Canadian.

This was encouraged in part by the proximity of Quebec to the states of New England. The ease of traversing this distance made the meaning of the United States quite a different one for the French-Canadians than it was for other immigrant communities coming to the country from Europe. One could always return to Quebec, so the pressure to take on the citizenship and language of the United States was never greatly felt until the early years of the twentieth century. And further, had not much of this land once been claimed by France? New England was part of the collective history of the French experience in North America. New England was not wholly other; the border between the United States and Canada was hardly a real separation, and many of the towns in northern Maine rarely heard a word spoken in English.

During the first fifty years of French-Canadian immigration to the mill towns of new England--from around 1830 to 1880--the farms and forests of Quebec were returned to quite often. As one can imagine, the number of French-Canadian immigrants who returned to Quebec was

disproportionally greater than any other immigrant who returned to their home country. In the summer, many families would return to their farms to visit relatives or to work the land. In the winter, many young men made their way to the logging camps of Quebec and northern New England. And even those who spent most of their time at factory work in New England moved about not only from job to job in a given factory, but also from factory to factory, earning themselves the revealing title of *coureur de facteries*.[25]

The ease and frequency of this movement by the French-Canadian immigrant communities in New England was at the root of the American imagination of them as empirical others. For Charles H. Long, the empirical other is "a cultural phenomenon in which the extraordinariness and uniqueness of a person or culture is first recognized negatively."[26] Instead of being recognized as joint members in the construction of the new world and as long-time geographical neighbours, the immigrants from Quebec were identified with just about every irrational or deviant category in the American academic and popular imagination. Though language and religion were the primary otherly qualities singled out as negative in the United States, these modes of expression were fuelled and reified by the nearness of Quebec to New England.

The language used to marginalise and demonize the French-Canadian immigrants, like all language of deviance deployed by the modern nation-state, was shaped and altered by events and people around the globe that were imagined as threats to the stability of the United States.[27] When labour strikes broke out in Fall River, Massachusetts in the 1870s, French-Canadians were flagged as deviant papists.[28] Later, these immigrants were documented in 1881 by Carroll Wright of the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labour Annual Report as the "Chinese of the East."[29] At the same time, Protestant religious revival was sweeping through the eastern part of the country, and the United States army was deployed to exterminate native American communities and chase Bringham Young's Latter-Day Saints across the continent. In its attempt to solidify a distinct "American" identity, the United States was following the pattern set down in the formation of the nation-states of Europe: national identity was formed by the exclusion of individuals and communities from a geographical area based on religious, political, and ideological distinctions rather than a recognition of those who happened to inhabit a given region.

The ambivalent language and attitude concerning movement can be seen in the twentieth century as well. Following the end of the First World War, the dominant academic and popular discourse in the United States was concerned again with national identity and Protestant morals and worldview. Simultaneously, secular scientific theories riding the wave of Newton, Bacon and Darwin, began to gain popularity, and new hypotheses of the origin and nature of the world and humanity vied for dominance alongside biblical interpretations of existence. Revolution in Russia in the name of economic equality and Lenin's secular vision of humanity added to the religious and national fervour in the United States.[30] All of this provided new ways of talking about movement in the same fashion as European pilgrimages. Communists could be found wandering about anywhere and godless theories were in every direction threatening to swallow God's chosen people.

Similar cases and results occurred elsewhere in the country, and the charges of "godless" theories blended with the language of marginalization already being used to make sense of the French-Canadian presence in New England. The language deployed to make sense of these immigrants was made up of the headlines of the early twentieth century. Many were identified as being Sacco-Vanzetti anarchists on top of being satanists. In these terms, French-Canadians were threats to the good Protestants of New England, who could--in the opinion of some--bring about the downfall of the entire United States.[31] The habit of the French-Canadians to remain partial to their own language to the near complete exclusion of English, and their still vital, continual movement around the towns of New England and back into Quebec were felt to shake the stability--the fixedness--of the religious, social, political and economic structures of the country. In a sense, the movement of the immigrants from Quebec forced Americans into an uneasy confrontation with the fact that their country and ways were contingent and not a *de facto* part of reality. Their refusal to accept the meaning of the United States as a sacred space and time as a viable mode of being for them was apparently understood as a chaotic danger to the political order and authority of the United States.

In the 1920s, pro-union and reform-minded Franco-American newspaper writers in Rhode Island protested factory conditions and pleaded for language rights while at the same time calling for national-style churches. French-Canadians, once they realized there was no going back to Quebec, quickly adopted the United States as their home, but in order for it to be a viable one, they wanted access to what was most

meaningful to them. This earned them the ire of the United States--who marked these writers as dangerous communists--and the Pope, who excommunicated the staff of the *Sentinelle* until they signed a document renouncing their demands.[32]

The multivalent assault on the French-Canadian right to speak French served to unify the once disparate communities of francophones in North America, and those living in northeastern Ontario and New England quickly went from being traitors to French-Canadian Catholicism to being the *avant-garde* of a half-dreamed of francophone Catholic colonial empire. The ambivalent western attitude towards the status of movement becomes clear here, when suddenly those who were once beneath contempt were now given at least a symbolic position of honor.

The very act and manner of this movement across a portion of North America by these immigrants, therefore, helped to create and maintain a conscious sense of a distinct identity that was rooted in the primary modes of being of the first French-Canadians, but took into account the newness of their experience in the mills of New England. Those French-Canadians who never returned to Canada and made New England home knew they were no longer Canadian, but also recognized that their history and experience in North America was distinct from that of the United States. They were French-speaking Catholics in an English-speaking Protestant country and the name the community elites took on themselves reflected this awareness. As Franco-Americans, these recognized that they were new world people.

Movement has played a fundamental role in the shaping of the consciousness of North Americans, and it has been through a denial of the meaningful nature of this movement that political and religious authorities have exerted their power to marginalise and silence individuals and communities in an effort to reify their own understandings of meaningful existence to the exclusion of all other potential modes. Movement forces a recognition of the ever-changing nature of life, it allows for the recognition of intimate and fluid mutual relationships with others and with the world. The urban centre deploys a central ordering structure onto the world, and its centripetal and centrifugal dynamics of power--economic, religious, political, social--define human relationships with themselves and with matter in a manner that attempts to obscure the origins and meaning-ful exchanges.[33] Relationships become defined in terms of productivity, profit and usefulness instead of mutuality and reciprocity. The land of North America was seen as vast and empty by European colonists, ripe for

economic exploitation because the actual people inhabiting the land were not using it in ways consummate with a European understanding of meaning. Their movements across the landscape were pointless and dangerous because they did not appear to be productive but only mindlessly wandering.

But the Europeans, when they reflected upon it, saw their own movement as potent with meaning; their movement would bring riches, technology, civilization and perhaps even the New Jerusalem.[34] But, there is also the sense that the Europeans and their descendants in North America never acknowledged their movement in any meaningful fashion. The fact that a three-month ocean voyage had been necessary to bring them from Europe, and the subsequent movement across the geography of North America was obscured by a language that never fully developed a way of expressing the radical newness of the European experience of the new world. Instead, actions, expressions, sights and sounds continued to be expressed in manners proper for Europe.

In the context of North America, the European attitude towards movement has helped to create a situation where individuals and communities are seen as strangers in their own homes. The French-Canadian immigrant experience of undergoing the new world raises the problematic nature of this dynamic historically while delimiting a space for the interpretation of new world peoples that would recognize what those communities who have had to undergo the European colonial process have always known; they too are the other, and there is more than one way to tell the story of the new world.

Endnotes

1. Sydney Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), Chapter 1.

2. Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 95-97.

3. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

4. Leonard I. Sweet, "Christopher Columbus and the Millennial Vision of the New World," *The Catholic Historical Review* 72, No. 3 (July 1986): 381.

5. Robert Choquette, *Canada's Religions* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2004).

6. Winthrop, John. "A Modell of Christian Charity," in *The Puritan Tradition in America, 1620-1730*, ed. Alden T. Vaughan (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), *passim*.

7. George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and the Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), especially Chapter 2, John Eliot.

8. Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 1999), 92.

9. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 12-17.

10. Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 95.

11. Christian K. Zacher, *Curiosity and Pilgrimage: The Literature of Discovery in Fourteenth-Century England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

12. Arnold van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1960), 24.

13. Turner, *The Ritual Process,* 95.

14. Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages: A Study in Art, Sentiment, and Demonology* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970); and Peter Brown, *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 42-43.

15. Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*, 123.

16. Long, *Significations,* 109. "Columbus understood his voyages as pilgrimages . . . What he noticed in the world he travelled through were landmarks, and these marks were placed within the context of an inner piety and faith recorded in his spiritual diaries, combining the inner and the outer pilgrimages in a manner reminiscent of the stations of the cross" (110).

17. Robert Choquette, "French Catholicism Comes to the Americas," In *Christianity Comes to the Americas*, ed. Charles H. Lippy, et al. (New York: Paragon House, 1992), 183-185. A useful example of this is Choquette's discussion of the attitudes of French missionaries and French colonials toward the brandy trade in seventeethn-century New France. For the missionaries, the trade and the traders were identified as evil, while for the colonial administration, the trade was eventually deemed vital to the survival of the colony.

18. Vine Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died For Your Sins* (New York: Avon Books, 1970).

19. Charles H. Long, "Indigenous People, Materialities, and Religion: Outline for a New Orientation to Religious Meaning," in *Religion and Global Culture: New Terrain in the Study of Religion and the Work of Charles H. Long*, ed. Jennifer I.M. Reid (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2003), 174.

20. Claire Quintal, ed., *Steeples and Smokestacks: A Collection of Essays on the Franco-American Experience in New England* (Worcester, MA: Institut français, 2003), 2.

21. Robert Choquette, *Language and Religion: A History of English/French Conflict in Ontario* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1975), 71-72.

22. Choquette, *Language and Religion.* See especially Part I: Preliminary Skirmishing.

23. Philippe Sylvain, and Nive Voisine, *Histoire du catholicisme Quebecois 2, 1840-1898* (Montreal: Boreal Express, 1991).

24. Long, *Significations,* 109.

25. Yves Frenette, *Brève histoire de Canadiens français* (Montreal: Boréal, 1998), 91.

26. Long, *Significations*, 90.

27. Jon Oplinger, *The Politics of Demonology: The European Witchcraze and the Mass Production of Deviance* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1990), 257-260.

28. Philip T. Silvia., Jr., "Neighbors From the North: French-Canadian Immigrants vs. Trade Unionism in Fall River, Massachusetts," in *Steeples and Smokestacks*, 151.

29. Gerard J. Brault, *The French Canadian Experience in New England* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1986).

30. Oplinger, *The Politics of Demonology*, Chapter 7: The Red Scare.

31. Calvin E. Amaron, *Your Heritage, or New England Threatened* (Springfield: French Protestant College, 1891), 128.

32. Sorrell, "*La Sentinelle . . .*" 344.

33. Long, *Significations,* 79.

34. Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*, 27, 68.