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Jonathan Gosnell, *Franco-America in the Making: The Creole Nation Within*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. xv + 347 pp. Photographs, illustrations, index. \$60.00 (US). ISBN-13: 978-0-8032-8527-9.

Review by Jacques Henry, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

Jonathan Gosnell's *Franco-America in the Making: The Creole Nation Within* proposes an ambitious "cultural expedition from the colonial experiment of la Nouvelle-France to postcolonial Franco-America" (p. 15). Drawing from a vast written documentation—in addition to prose, poetry, and press articles it includes minutes of associative meetings and transcribed interviews gathered through episodes of fieldwork—it charts the emergence, development, and subsidence of a Franco-American identity. He boldly posits that "Franco-Americans are Creole by virtue of their Old World culture and hybrid experiences in the New World" with "extensive contact with African and Native Americans cultures" (p. 10). As to the theoretical apparatus, the author "probe[s] postcolonial, transatlantic and border theories" (p. 6) calling at different junctures on Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha, Fredrick Barth, Pierre Bourdieu, Edward Said, Eric Hobsbawm, and Gilles Lipovetski.

The first of the six chapters comprising the book is dedicated to the "dream and reality" of Franco-America and seeks to make sense of the French presence in America. It begins with an overview of the "members of the greater French family of North America" who possess "a singular historical experience and cultural particularities, yet share a language, a predominant religion, and minority status in North America" (p. 22). It then moves to a wide-ranging discussion of a New World French ethnicity (p. 32), combined with an historiographic reading of the hopes and failures of the French colonial experiment in the Americas. It concludes with an illustrated survey of the few and symbolic remnants of the French colonial presence (French nouns, the ubiquitous *fleur de lys*) and a brief account of the ethnic revival initiated from Maine to Louisiana in support of the French language and a hybrid identity.

Chapter two discusses how social and cultural institutions—parochial schools, mutual aid societies, and cultural organizations such as the Alliance Française, The Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) and Franco-American cultural centers—have fostered and supported Franco-Americans. A significant section is dedicated to the creation and ideology of the Alliance Française, the embodiment of French republicanism that would strangely enough develop in "devoutly Catholic communities in the United States" (p. 77). Yet, its objectives, mainly the diffusion of the French language, coincided with the values and hopes of the *survivance* movement of the early twentieth century until the 1940s. Then the US chapters became "more Francophile than francophone" (p. 79) and most of them had disbanded by the 1990s.

By then in Louisiana, CODOFIL (a state agency) was helping teaching French in public schools, sponsoring ethnic festivals, supporting mass media in French, and making "strides toward Cajun and Creole collective engagement in the heritage culture" (p. 94). Along with highlighting the remarkable but limited participation of teachers from French-speaking regions of the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe,

Gosnell evokes the tensions that occasionally arose between militant Cajuns objecting to the imperialist stance of France, and issues of racial integration. The chapter ends with vignettes of Franco-American cultural centers such as the Centre Franco-Américain in Manchester NH, and the Franco-American Heritage Center in Lewiston ME which basically operate as social clubs where Francos can meet, converse in French, and access community archives. Gosnell highlights the symbolic aspect of the “repositories of francophone postcolonial thought,” (p. 104) i.e. French plaques in Louisiana, and historic buildings—old mills, churches—in New England.

Chapter three examines the role of women’s organizations such as Les Dames Franco-Américaines and le Cercle Jeanne Mancé. Elite, Catholic, and advocates of *la survivance*, these organizations acted as “protectors of the language, faith and traditions” (p. 149) during their heyday between the 1930s and 1990s. At one point the Fédération Féminine Franco-Américaine included one hundred such organizations totaling some 47,000 members from all over New England. In addition to an historical review, Gosnell provides a close ethnographic look at recent meetings where the American, Canadian and French national anthems are sung, pledges are made, educational scholarships are awarded, and religious or patriotic activities are planned in both French and English. Sometimes meals of traditional *soupe aux pois* and *tourtières* are served but attendance and interest have been waning.

Chapters four and five offer a wide-ranging look at Franco-American literary and written production in novels and newspapers. Chapter four first situates Franco literature within the movement of *littérature-monde*, “a world literature in French attentive to new voices from the post colony”, or what Gosnell calls “transnational literature in French” (p. 151), so that Franco-American cultures which are “obscure within the American urban landscape” might be freed “from their ethnic confinement” (p. 153).

The works of Franco-American authors Robert Perreau—*L’Héritage* (1983)—and Normand Beaupré—*Le Petit Mangeur* (1999)—like those of Louisiana authors Revon Reed and Jean Arceneaux insure that the voices and experiences of Franco-Americans are still being heard, even though their distribution and readership are limited. Originating as serials in late nineteenth-century newspapers and emulating American French language works—from Louis Hemon’s *Maria Chapdelaine* (1913) and Félix-Antoine Savard’s *Menaud, maître draveur* (1937) to *Pélagie la Charette* (1979) by Acadian writer Antonine Maillet—English language literature also extolls the virtues of the Franco-American people, attached to their Catholic faith, French heritage, and homeland, which is not France but a new “*patrie* created in the New World” (p. 170).

Despite documenting the loss of language and the strong attachment to traditional values, Gosnell reaffirms his claim of “*créolité* of the French peoples and cultures in America, of the French and francophone experience that renders them distinct” and even “strikingly different” (p. 171). His argument includes a focus on Jack Kerouac—who defined himself as “the Iroquois Canuck of Breton heritage” (p. 175)—and his unrealized efforts to create a truly hybrid Franco-American novel. Gosnell acknowledges the “precariousness of French letters in the francophone world” (p. 175) and skillfully illustrates the difficult cohabitation of French and English in Franco literature. Jacques Ducharme (writing in the 1940s), Louise Appell (writing in the 2000s), Rhéa Coté Robbins and David Plante writing in English, have produced “a corpus of texts that is organically French, but not necessarily always written in the language of Molière” (p. 179). Tellingly, Gosnell recognizes that “the forgetting is still not complete” (p. 180).

Chapter five presents an historical overview of the Franco-American press: “over 200 French-language newspapers printed in New England for French-Canadian emigrants from 1850 through almost 2000, although only a few papers managed to survive into the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s” (p. 190). He also notes the existence of a French-language press centered in New Orleans but it had stopped publishing by the early twentieth century. The Franco-American press shares several traits: use of the French language—“the most persuasive indication of their being distinctly Franco-American” (p. 190)—affiliation with the

Catholic church, a focus on local community affairs, news from French Canada, and family-oriented features with an eye toward the female readership. As he extolls “the strong sense of identity” (p. 231), Gosnell chronicles the gradual and seemingly inexorable decline of the Franco-American press and the manifestations of a discrete identity, concluding that its latest defenders, academics such as Marthe Péloquin and Claire Quintal “had successfully escaped the Franco-American cultural ghetto and had gained wider recognition in the francophone world” (p. 232).

Chapter six is dedicated to Louisiana where “cultural fusion or *métissage* took place to a greater extent than anywhere else in Franco-America” (p. 19). Under the puzzling heading of “unmasking the Creole cowboy”, this chapter seeks to examine “the fusion of French, African, and indigenous experiences in North America and the ensuing journey from French to francophone on the Gulf Coast over the past four centuries” (p. 235). Indeed, Gosnell uses the latest paradigm of the French Atlantic to consider Louisiana sitting “at the crossroad, at the intersection of currents” (p. 235), and Creole consciousness, “a cosmopolitanism that binds outside the usual realms of separation” (p. 235).

There follows a discussion of the term “creole” (pp. 240-244), an account of the increasing integration of Creole and Cajun dimensions, and of the emergence of a *culture-monde* defined by “technoscience, the market, the individual, the media and consumption” (p. 246). Extended sections are unsurprisingly dedicated to the current pillars of Louisiana francophone identity, music and cuisine. Focus is placed on creolized roots and crossover performers, such as Cajun and Creole zydeco musicians. The discussion of cuisine, where the “borders between Cajun and Creole are clearly ambiguous but ultimately unproblematic at table” (p.259), highlights the main tropes of Louisiana cuisine, gumbo, crawfish, and boucheries. The impact of tourism and mass production on authenticity is alluded to (p. 261) but not discussed. The chapter ends with a primer on the segregated celebrations of Mardi Gras, and the literary renaissance headed by Cajun scholars and activists.

“How can an ethnic group acknowledge an adopted American identity but also maintain its French cultural traditions?” Gosnell asks at the beginning of his conclusion (p. 279). He reaffirms “the willingness to transform Old World cultures into contemporary modes of life” (p. 279) and asserts that the “memory of a distant French past [is] to sustain a Franco-American present and future” (p. 279). Then, surveying the Statue of Liberty, a “curiously relevant kind of symbol for Franco-Americans” (p. 281), the June 24 celebration of the Franco-American Day in Lowell MA, and commemorative monuments and other markers in French, he concludes that “Franco-Americans are still in the process of making themselves” (p. 289).

An informative read, Gosnell’s treatment of Franco-American identity struggles displays some analytical weaknesses. One is the flat definition and narrow use of the concepts of “Creole” and Creolization. Introduced early, “Creole” is mostly defined as a combination of “Old World culture and hybrid experiences” along with “extensive contact with African and Native Americans cultures” (p. 10). Indeed, cultures in Creole Franco-America “are both rooted and nomadic, of Old World and New, traditional and modern” (p. 5), a description that basically fits all cultures. In addition, discussion of Creole identity and the creolization process is largely limited to Louisiana, weakening the argument of a hybrid framework unifying Franco-America. Tellingly, the word “Creole” does not appear in the sections dedicated to New England Franco institutions and media and for good reasons since the author concedes that “many Franco-Americans would probably not self-identify as Creoles” (p. 10).

Given this weak premise, Gosnell appears to resort to assertion more than demonstration. The existence of Franco-America as a Creole nation is affirmed (pp. 2, 35) but not demonstrated. Scholars and historians—Jay Gitlin, Nick Spitzer, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, writers and advocates of *la créolité*—are called upon but little demonstrated connection is made with the Franco experience or ideology beyond Louisiana. The labeling of the Congrès Mondial Acadien where the Acadian diaspora regularly gathers as a manifestation of “a French Creole nation” (p. 35) borders on misrepresentation even when Cajuns (sorry, no Creoles

here) are involved. Despite his valiant attempt, Gosnell is left early on with the unavoidable finding that “much of the contemporary Franco experience in America is relegated to memory and folklore, articulated in history books, noted within walls of institutions, and carved into commemorative stones” (p. 53). The historical and ethnographic evidence he presents supports this assessment better than his theorized making of a Creole nation.

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