

Québec, Acadia and Louisiana: The Impact of Reunions and Gatherings
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This paper explores the influence of the gatherings and reunions between Louisiana Cajuns and their cousins from Québec and the Acadian maritime provinces (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island) in Canada, beginning with the bicentennial celebration of the Grand Dérangement in 1955 through the *Rencontres des Peuples Francophones* in Québec City and the various manifestations of the *Congrès Mondial Acadien*. The effect of these gatherings confirms the concepts proposed by the members of *Projet Louisiane* in *Du continent perdu à l'archipel retrouvé* (Louder and Waddell, 1983), especially concerning the arts and culture.

In 1955, the Acadians in Canada and the Cajuns of Louisiana, in a sense twins separated at adolescence by the events of 1755, found themselves reunited to celebrate the bicentennial of the Grand Dérangement. One might initially find it curious that they would be celebrating what was arguably the most traumatic event in their history, but in fact, the message of 1955 represented instead victory of sorts for this people who had survived and preserved their identity against all odds enough to celebrate their history and culture. Moreover, they had done more than survive; they had in fact thrived in the various contexts in which they found themselves living. The result of this encounter for the Cajuns of Louisiana was to reopen the lines of communication between the isolated islands of the Acadian archipelago that had remained separated for too long. Louisiana State Senator Dudley LeBlanc took with him a delegation of young Cajun girls dressed in Evangeline costumes. This was not his first visit to the Acadians in Canada. He had organized several other similar expeditions in 1930 and 1936. His apparent goal was to bring back together the two poles of Acadian society. These initial forays served to reunite the descendants of the Acadian diaspora. They also served to further Senator LeBlanc's own political career. His reputation was based largely on his support for the Acadian cause and for the preservation of the French language in Louisiana, as well as for his efforts to improve conditions for the elderly and the poor. The 1955 trip was emotionally charged for those who discovered that many had managed to survive and even thrive despite the historical pressures, and often in remarkably similar social and economic contexts, based on a similar knack for innovating solutions and adapting to conditions.

Several more trips and a few exchange programs ensued, but nothing that approached the mainstream. In Louisiana, the most important consequence of the bicentennial reunion was a new awareness, especially among the elite who were beginning to realize that there were possible connections to a larger Acadian reality and to a wide French-speaking world. Thomas Arceneaux, Dean of the School of Agriculture at then Southwestern Louisiana Institute (now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette) and an Acadian activist, designed a new flag for Louisiana Acadians, which all took care to keep in its proper place alongside national and state

flags. During the 1960s, certain members of the community began discussing in discrete groups the effects of Americanization and the political and social consequences of the “melting pot,” which represented systematic efforts to assimilate the Cajuns, especially by the stigmatizing of their French language, for more than a century. This ongoing debate, led by the members of the *Comité de l'héritage français* (formed in 1965 to organize the bicentennial celebration of the arrival of the Acadians in Louisiana), including Wade Martin, Allen Babineaux, and later James Domengeaux, and inspired by Raymond Rogers in 1966 (Baillargeon 2007), eventually led to the creation of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) in 1968, an official agency of the same State of Louisiana that had officially banished French from its school systems in 1916. That same year, far-flung descendants of the Acadian diaspora met once again to celebrate the documentary film, *Les Acadiens de la dispersion*, directed by Léonard Forêt and produced by the National Film Board of Canada (1968). The director and several of those featured in the film, including a young Edith Butler, came to Louisiana for a Cajun country premier. The reunions were gaining momentum and a certain popularity.

In April of 1978, shortly before the first *Rencontre des Peuples Francophones d'Amérique* in Québec, the University of Moncton had organized the *Colloque sur l'Acadie*, an academic conference on the Acadian diaspora, ironically the same year that Michel Roy's *L'Acadie perdue* (1978) was published. Scholars from across the academic spectrum, including history, ethnology, sociology, economics, linguistics, political science, law, and literary studies, gathered to discuss what had become of Acadia and the Acadians following the deportation. This was, in a sense, a follow-up to the reunions of 1955, but with a focus that was academic rather than political. This did not preclude, however, a serious discussion of the implications of Acadian identity at this point toward the end of the 20th century. This multidisciplinary discussion focused on those elements that seemed to have survived among the descendants of the exiled Acadians, as well as those that had obviously changed, recognizing both developments as critical to understanding the contemporary situation. Some of the participating scholars maintained the contacts that they developed there, but at this stage, there was not yet a popular dimension.

This changed in 1994 with the first *Congrès Mondial Acadien* (World Acadian Congress), which also took place in Moncton. The website of CMA-Caraquet 2009 explains the origins of the first congress:

It was in the context of a lobster supper organized by the *Société acadienne de l'Alberta* in October, 1988, that Acadian Jean-Marie Nadeau proposed the idea of organizing a gathering of Acadians from all over the world. André Boudreau, a native of New Brunswick living in Edmonton, decided to take on the challenge of realizing Mr. Nadeau's idea. [www.cma2009.ca; translated from the original French]

The website of Cyberacadie describes the resulting events:

The World Acadian Congress 1994, which took place August 12-22, 1994, in the Acadia-Beauséjour region (southeastern New Brunswick, Canada), was the largest gathering of Acadian people since the events of the *Grand Dérangement* (1755-1762). More than 300,000 people participated in the 69 family reunions, in the academic conferences, in the festival of Acadian film and theater, and in the various concerts, as well as in the many other cultural events of all sorts.

In this International Year of the Family (1994), never was there a better time for family reunions. The importance of finding ourselves among family and of re-establishing ties that have been broken for too long is an important part of *Retrouvailles 94*.

There is no doubt that the World Acadian Congress has affected Acadia. It has permitted Acadians everywhere to regroup and renew ties, to reflect on the long voyage that we have been on for nearly 400 years, to regain confidence in ourselves and to dream of the future. [Cyberacadie.com; translated from the original French]

Louisiana Cajuns participated in an important way in the Congress and its cultural events that gathered Acadians en masse and in a very public way. During the academic conferences, important and thorny questions were raised concerning assimilation of various sorts, including the issue of Acadians in Québec, the importance of the French language as an identity marker, the social, economic and political factors facing Acadians today, and our chances for survival in the future. In the area of popular culture, the family reunions and a huge *tintamarre* (noise-making procession) became the symbolic focus of the Congress. Thousands of the descendants of those Acadians who were exiled or those who survived by hiding in the woods for decades after the deportation, and generally keeping a low profile since, came together and took to the streets in a highly public celebration of their Acadian identity, making a joyous noise and carrying innumerable representations of the Acadian flag, making their way eventually to the site of a grand closing concert that featured Edith Butler, Zachary Richard, and 1755, among others, on an ultra-modern stage for an event that was broadcast on national television across Canada. I was among the crowd and can attest that Acadian pride was raised considerably. The clearest effects, in my opinion, could be found in the solidarity generated by the reunions and in the power of the public expression of this society that is sometimes considered fragile, but that has endured despite the powerful forces allayed against it. We witnessed the birth of friendship and kinship ties that continue to thrive despite the distance between our respective homelands.

Before the end of the first Congress, it was decided that the event was worth repeating. The second CMA took place in 1999 in Louisiana, as part of the tricentennial celebration of the founding of the Louisiana colony by the French in 1699. This second Congress essentially followed the model of the first, with an academic conference, cultural events and especially family reunions. Fewer Acadians from the Canadian maritime provinces made the trip to participate than

was hoped, due in no small part to the fact that this conference, like the first, was anchored to August 15, the “national” Acadian holiday. This detracted from the Congress’ potential for success for several reasons. First, the Canadian Acadians are used to celebrating August 15th in their own communities. This date has no particular significance in Louisiana. Second, this time of year is notoriously hot in Louisiana, even for those who live there and are relatively acclimatized. Many northern Acadians expressed concern about handling the heat. And third, all of the Cajun sub-regions of Louisiana, from Lafourche and Terrebonne along the southeastern coast to Avoyelles in central Louisiana to Cameron and Calcasieu along the Texas border, insisted on participating, requiring a complex program of events that was difficult to negotiate and impossibly spread out. Despite all of these challenges, thousands of Acadians participated in this second mass rally. Louisiana Cajuns, already familiar with the festival procession called Mardi Gras, were introduced to the *tintamarre*, which had been a focal point of the first Congress. The closing concert once again brought together musicians and singers from throughout the Acadian diaspora, and once again produced moments of high emotion and great solidarity.

The third CMA took place in 2004 in Nova Scotia, a historic return to the birthplace of the Acadian people on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Acadian colony by Champlain in 1604. The Nova Scotian context posed several challenges. The conditions of the repatriation of the Acadians who appealed to return to the colony after the French and Indian Wars prevented them from settling together in one place and especially from settling anywhere near their original lands that had been taken from them as a result of the exile. Today, Nova Scotian Acadians are isolated in a few areas along Saint Mary’s Bay in the southwest, around Pubnico on the Atlantic side of Yarmouth, in Ile Madame on the northeastern part of the peninsula, and around Cheticamp on Cape Breton Island far to the north, with the largest number being now living and working in the Halifax metropolitan area, including many who have lost their native French language. But there are virtually none in the Port-Royal area where Champlain initially built his Habitation in 1604, nor in the Annapolis Valley, including Grand Pré where the exile started in 1755, nor in Beaubassin or the other regions where the deportation effort continued through 1762 despite the resistance of a few Acadian fighters led by Beausoleil Broussard. There are ironically the fewest Acadians in the sites of the greatest historical interest. Moreover, getting from one contemporary Acadian settlement to another, one must necessarily travel considerable distances through vast Anglo-Canadian regions. The people of these areas were keenly aware of the Congress and its potential to generate cultural tourism and came forward to participate in the events, producing phenomena that would have been hard to imagine only a few years before, such as an Acadian flag displayed on a bed-and-breakfast facility in Lawrencetown (which bears the same name as the British governor who deported the Acadians). At the academic conference organized for this third Congress, named Vision 2020, participants continued the debates launched at the first CMA in 1994 concerning Acadian identity, geography, and potential for the future. According to the CMA 2004 website:

The third congress, in 2004, was held jointly by several Nova Scotia communities in the ancestral Acadian region and celebrated the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first French-speaking settlers in Canada. As in the previous gatherings, musical festivals and theatrical productions displayed Acadian culture, and academics debated the meaning of Acadia in the 21st century. Debates included the best ways of preserving Acadian culture in an overwhelmingly English area, and what exactly an Acadian is in 2004. Some Acadians in the Maritimes do not recognize more recent immigrants as true Acadians. There was also a debate about whether the descendants of Acadians, who do not speak French, qualify. (www.acadian-home.org/CMA)

The *tintamarre*, now a signature feature of the Congresses, was once again featured along Baie Sainte-Marie, reversing the lessons of the past that had cautioned against doing anything to attract attention to the community. Even before the CMA 2004, a cooperative spirit had developed between Nova Scotian Acadians and Louisiana Cajuns, who share similar minority status, especially through the Université Sainte-Anne's French immersion programs and its Acadian Studies Institut, where hundreds of Louisiana Cajun students have studied French and Acadian culture over the years. Conversely, several Acadians from Nova Scotia have earned the M.A. and Ph.D. in the graduate program in Francophone Studies at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Scholars from both academic communities participate in research projects and centers, such as U.L.-Lafayette's Center for Louisiana Studies and U.S.A.'s *Groupe de recherches en études acadiennes*, as well as a joint effort to explore how to integrate variable vernacular French into the educational system at all levels.

Contact with Québec has continued, especially in the area of cultural exchanges, as well as pedagogical and other academic joint projects, including participation in the *Base de données lexicographiques panfrancophone* directed by Claude Poirier at the Université Laval. During a recent meeting of the *Biennale de la Langue Française en Amérique* in Moncton (2007), the Government of Québec announced a reconsideration of its official position within the francophone community of North America, resuming its leadership role. In 2008, the Québec Government delegation in Atlanta joined Lafayette's *Festivals Acadiens et Créoles* in celebrating the 400th anniversary of the founding of Québec in 1608, sponsoring a special performance by Zachary Richard and his group of musicians, who were mostly from la Belle Province. The organizers of CMA 2009 in Caraquet, New Brunswick, also joined the festival, sponsoring a reunion performance of the legendary Acadian group 1755.

The themes of the Congresses and of their attendant conferences reflect the consistent desire of the organizers to gather the people and to consider their future: *Retrouvailles 94* and *L'Acadie en 2004* (1994); *Un peuple, deux drapeaux* and *Acadie/Acadies: A travers des frontières* (1999); *Retour au berceau* and *Vision 20/20* (2004); *L'Acadie rassemblement* and *L'Acadie en mouvement* (2009). The theme song of the first CMA in 1994, by Johnny Comeau, also represented a call to gather: "*Acadie de nos coeurs, enfin c'est ton heure. Tes enfants reviennent dans tes bras...*" (Acadia of our hearts, finally it's your time. Your children are coming back to your arms...) In

1999, Waylon Thibodeaux continued the tradition with *“Si longtemps séparés...”* (So long separated...). In 2004, the provocatively named Acadian musical group Grand Dérangement invited everyone with *“Je reviens au berceau de l’Acadie...”* (“I’m coming home to the birthplace of Acadia...”).

It is interesting to note that the spirit of these gatherings and the results of the experiences they create derive not only from the conferences, the festivals, the Congress meetings, the publications or the films. The gatherings take place before and after the officially organized events, improvised by people who meet each other and eventually develop affective relationships with their counterparts, so long separated by time and distance, as well as by ignorance; we knew virtually nothing about each other. In this day and age, these three obstacles can be overcome all too easily. They should not continue to separate us. Not only can we occasionally take to the road or to the air to travel across this vast continent, “island” hopping throughout this cultural and linguistic archipelago. We can now also travel through cyberspace to maintain virtual contact with each other. The various francophone peoples of North America can, according to their own interests and means, pursue and maintain contacts with those we meet through these gatherings. Moisy Baudoin, a working man from Delcambre, Louisiana, articulated the experience of many during an interview that he gave to Germaine Comeau for a documentary on the Acadians of Baie Sainte-Marie. She asked him, “Why do you travel so far to come to Acadia?” He answered without hesitation, “We like the lobsters and the scallops and the festivals and all the rest, but really, it’s the people. It’s the people that we love. They welcome us with open arms like family. You don’t find that just anywhere.” This feeling of belonging, of attachment, makes us feel finally as though we are part of a larger context. In this, there is a powerful sense of validation.

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