

ACADIANS AND CANADIANS

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Et in Acadia Ego

Some Versions of the Pastoral in the Cajun Ethnic Revival

*The psychological root of the pastoral is a
double longing after innocence and happiness,
to be recovered not through conversion or regeneration
but merely through a retreat.*
(Renato Poggioli, *The Oaten Flute*)

The two traumas of Cajun collective memory are displacement and diaspora. But these traumas are wrapped in a resilient culture of hedonism: *Bon ton roulet*, as Clifton Chenier has circumscribed this remarkable immunity of Cajuns against adversity. Who are these people who would rather *fais do-do* than fight?¹ The origin of the New World *Acadien* settlers lay in rural Normandy, Bretagne, Poitou and Guienne, from where they had migrated to what is today Nova Scotia. For 200 years, the Acadians were mere pawns in the war games between the French and British. Finally they moved. After migrating south they got in the way of the Spanish and Americans in Louisiana where, to add insult to injury, their name was corrupted from *Acadiens* to *Cadiens* to *Cajuns*, thus marking both the decline in social status and their inability to master proper French. This odium of being a “backward” version of Western civilization settled heavily on the shoulders of these rural folk who, wherever they found themselves, ended up in a subaltern and despised social position, the butt of endless jokes. This persistent diasporic push factor stabilized a pattern of cultural behavior: a certain cussedness, a preference to avoid rather than confront problems, and a tendency to resort to backstage tricksterism. All in all they turned inward into an ethnic corral. As a consequence, these Acadians-turned-Cajuns remained a tightly knit, endogamic ethnic group: “dedicated, stubborn, resilient, pettifogging, inventive, exasperating, peace loving,” as a sympathetic historian, James Dormon, calls them (7). The social mortgage of a subaltern situation seemed rather permanent, but it was lifted dramatically after 1964 and into the present time, when, to their own surprise, Cajuns and their culture became one of the hottest

¹ See Clifton Chenier, *Bon Ton Roulet* (1967). *Fais do-do* refers to a Cajun dance party where children were urged to go to sleep (*fais do-do*) so the adults could begin the dance.

“commodities” on the American ethnic revival market. This revival involved most of all their music and their cuisine with Paul Prudhomme cooking ahead of the rest; but as a spin-off effect even their architecture, their habitats, their backward cussedness, and contrarian politics suddenly were “recognized” in a yuppified, multicultural world. In a pastoral recovery of ethnic virtues that even some Cajuns did not know they had, their living spaces were radically revaluated and their diaspora turned into a privileged cultural realm. The question remains: how can a lifestyle and a cultural space that for more than 200 years remained ignored and despised turn into cultural capital? Are we witnessing the invention of a tradition or a nostalgic reconstruction of a culture that never existed? Invoked by what? Ancestry, language, music, food, politics? What constitutes a coonass – the current ethnic slur for Cajuns? Is it genealogical descent, cultural achievement, or outside ascription? Is the Cajun revival due to insurgent ethnic minority politics or is this a tacit assimilation to the new American multicultural marketplace?² In terms of the theme of this volume, becoming Cajun involves a journey across space and mind, a real dispersion of francophone migrants from Europe via Canada to the American South, whose culture, though marginalized and despised by the dominant Anglo-American business elite, resisted assimilation or negative ascription and gave birth to an imaginative reinvention of a Cajun biosphere. Cajuns prevailed against the Anglo power structure by an ironic inversion of power; genteel lace curtain Acadians who had been partly Americanized came to the rescue of down-home Cajuns and engineered a revival of Cajun vernacular culture.

Let us begin with the myth of origin, the firm belief that today’s Cajuns are the descendants of Acadians who migrated from Canada to Louisiana. The first dispersion, which the Cajuns refer to as the great *dérangement*, occurred when these rural French settlers were evicted between 1765 and 1785 from their “rural Acadia” in Nova Scotia by the British because they refused to swear allegiance to the crown, which in their view would have meant giving up their language and identity. After leaving Canada they were stranded in various places in France, the West Indies, or along the coast of North America, from Massachusetts to Philadelphia, Maryland, and Charleston. None of these places were to their liking; not even Catholic Maryland fit their bill, though in all these places some Cajuns got stuck. Finally they decided, more or less as a collective,

² See Robert Lewis, “L’Acadie Retrouvée” (1996).

that they could best reestablish their habitat in under-populated French Louisiana. However, by the time most of these Acadians trickled in, the French colony Louisiana had been ceded to the Spanish. The Acadians negotiated long and hard with the Spanish governor; for they refused to be dispersed too far and wide, but insisted on adjoining holdings so that their community could remain spatially together. After a long debate they settled mainly in two areas: 1) on the Acadian Coast and Bayou Lafourche; later, after the second *dérangement*, they moved on to the Lafourche basin; 2) in the Attakapas and Opelousas Districts near Bayou Teche. The Spanish ruled lightly and left them pretty much alone, just the way the Cajuns wanted it. They adjusted well to the new climate and became successful small farmers. Indeed, the first Spanish Governor Antonio de Ulloa summarized the positive virtues of these newcomers when he confided in a letter in 1766 that the *Acadiens* were “a people who live as if they were a single family . . . ; they give each other assistance . . . as if they were all brothers, thus making them more desirable as settlers than any other kind of people” (Dormon 24).

Surprisingly, the Cajuns kept a social distance to the older Francophone Creole population of Southern Louisiana, perhaps because the latter looked down upon them as crude and backward peasants, and by their standards they were right. Surrounded by sophisticated Creoles, Cajuns chose to recreate their rural culture on the basis of a nostalgic memory of old Acadian-Canadian ways. Cajun life was a reconstruction of a lost Acadian utopia in Louisiana. Because their culture remained tight, centripetal and rigidly bounded, they, rather than acculturating to the surrounding groups, gladly absorbed and Cajunized other groups, among them Creoles, Black slaves, Indians, and even some 2,000 Germans who had been brought to Louisiana (under false pretenses) by John Law.³ In a matter of one generation, by 1790, they had carved out a comfortable, if

³ See Helmut Blume, *The German Coast During the Colonial Era, 1722-1803* (1990). The Germans had been recruited by John Law for the agricultural improvement of the colony. Law ascribed sterling virtues to the Germans, as did Ulloa to the Cajuns. Hence the two groups bonded well. Shirley LeBoeuf writes about her Cajunness and her cultural conversion: “I didn’t want to know, or be associated with my Cajun heritage. I avoided taking French in high school. I would quote the family line. ‘Well, *my* LeBoeufs came straight from France, not Canada, so I’m not a Cajun,’ conveniently forgetting about all the other Louisiana born descendants in my line. And also quoting, ‘I’m German on my mother’s side’, also conveniently forgetting about that my German great-great-grandfather Dinger settled in Morgan City and married a Cajun woman, and his descendants married Cajuns, too” (“Some Stuff about Da Cajun Grrl”).

not exactly prosperous existence. Many of them thought that their odyssey had come to an end: Utopia was reconstructed and life was simple and pleasant. In the telling of this Acadian myth of origin, one salient demographic fact is usually forgotten. By the time the 3,000 Acadians had arrived in Southern Louisiana, the total population comprised 19,455 whites and some 20,000 Blacks. In short, the newly arrived Acadians made up less than 10% of the total population; the other 90% were Creoles, i.e. French who had come directly to Louisiana, or slaves from Africa and their mixed-race offspring, referred to as “Creoles of Color”. And yet, in our days the Cajuns have managed to monopolize the ethnic provenance of the entire region. Even in areas that are today labeled Acadiana, genuine Acadians make up just 2-3% of the population. There are only about 80 family names that indicate a genuine Acadian origin. New Orleans has no historical presence of Cajuns (merely 1% may justifiably be called Cajuns), yet, in the film *The Big Easy*, it has a police department entirely made up of corrupt Cajuns.⁴ Carl Brasseaux explains this miracle of demographic take-over as a consequence of Anglo-Saxon ascription.

Cajun was used by Anglos to refer to all persons of French descent and low economic standing, regardless of their ethnic affiliation. By the end of the nineteenth century this class alone retained its linguistic heritage. Hence poor Creoles of the prairie and bayou region came to be permanently identified as Cajun, joining the Acadian ever poor and nouveau pauvre. . . . The term Cajun thus became a socioeconomic classification for the multicultural amalgam of several culturally and linguistically distinct groups. (104-05)⁵

Two changes loomed large as a growing threat to the Cajuns' hard-won peace. The development of the sugar granulation process by Etienne Boré had given West Indian sugar makers a boost. Already during Spanish rule (1766-1803) there had been a steady growth of sugar cane production in Louisiana, which led to the expansion of cane fields. Louisiana, previously an economic failure, was fast becoming a money making colony along the lines of the heavily capitalized sugar industry of the West Indies. Anglo-American investors and entrepreneurs and their black slaves began to trickle into Louisiana well before the Louisiana Purchase, hungry for real estate and new markets. When in 1803

⁴ The box office hit *The Big Easy* did much to popularize Cajun ethnicity; it also called attention to the fact that Cajun politics easily corrupts into mafiotic kinship networks, which anthropologist Edward Banfield blamed on excessive family loyalty; his term for it was “amoral familism”.

⁵ See Thomas Klinger, “How much Acadian is there in Cajun?” (2009).

Louisiana territory was sold by Napoleon to the young, purposeful American republic, the Cajuns became a demographic and linguistic nuisance standing in the way of economic development and national unity. Not even their French cultural origin saved them from contempt, for it was corrupt and unsatisfactory, an estimate shared by the defrocked Austrian monk, Charles Sealsfield, who became an authority on Louisiana ways. He described these “Canadians” as uncouth, sexually challenged liabilities to progress and well-being.⁶

The Louisiana Purchase (1803) accelerated this growing conflict over agricultural real estate and pitted the low intensity, subsistence economy of Cajun peasants against the high intensity, highly capitalized sugar and cotton production of entrepreneurially minded Americans.

By 1820 the competition for the best of the agricultural lands – those best suited to plantation development – was becoming acute and the Louisiana/Acadian habitants were occupying substantial areas of this land, especially in the Mississippi River settlements and along the Bayou Teche and upper Lafourche. (Dormon 27)

Hence a clash over space deepened between aggressive, heavily capitalized Anglos and the soft, destitute Cajuns on small ribbon farms. The latter farms were doubly desirable when fronting on the navigable waterways: biotopic Cajun space as subsistence utopia vs. Anglo-American real estate for growth, industry and marketing. It is at this juncture when Ulloa’s positive ascription gradually turned into the negative Anglo-American stereotype, which Cajuns would henceforth have to live with. In short, the stereotype became a function of real estate policy and national purpose and now included stubborn Creoles as well. An Anglo-Saxon visitor, Sargent S. Prentiss, writes about these Cajuns in 1829, “They are the poorest, most ignorant, set of beings you ever saw - without the least enterprise or industry. They raise only a little corn and a few sweet potatoes – merely sufficient to support life. . . .”⁷ The contempt of the first sentence is paired with a sense of puzzlement in the second: “yet they seem perfectly content and happy, and have balls almost every day. I attended one and was invited to several others” (Dormon 25). It would take another century for that puzzlement to turn into celebration.

⁶ Charles Sealsfield called part six of his series of novels *Exotische Kulturromane: Lebensbilder aus beiden Hemisphären*, “Nathan der Squatter-Regulator” (1836) deals with a group of pig-stealing Acadians.

⁷ The first American governor of Louisiana, William C. C. Claiborne, wrote to Jefferson with some exasperation that the francophone citizens of Louisiana were only interested in dance and leisure whereas the new American citizens were interested in industry and improvement.

The principle of forced heirship, which was codified by Louisiana civil law, and the determination to keep kinship groups together led to the subdivision of family holdings into ever smaller units, which became easy fodder for real estate hungry Anglos. Many Cajuns sold out to *les Américains* and withdrew: a second expulsion and *dérangement*. The Cajuns basically had three options for their second withdrawal. Either they could move further on into the prairie country of Southwest Louisiana where they became small subsistence farmers operating *vacheries*; or they could move to the non-arable swampland of Lafourche and Atchafalaya basins. If those two options did not work out, there was the possibility of withdrawing into the uninhabited coastal marshland.⁸ Over time the Cajuns used all three options. Either they carried their rural culture to spaces where they were safe from *les Américains* or they withdrew to the bayous, a virtually uncontrollable, fluid space, and became subsistence fisher-trappers using their pirogues for mobility. And others again set up the shrimp and crawfish industry on the Louisiana shoreline. But some stayed, made their peace with the dominant Americans, and Americanized themselves into genteel Acadians – often claiming “Creole” or “French” instead of their Cajun heritage.

The 1986 movie *Belizaire the Cajun*, directed by Glen Pitre, which is set in 1859, focuses on this second displacement within antebellum Louisiana.⁹ The plot represents a morality play on the subject of real estate.

Wealthy Anglo-Saxon regulators eager to develop and improve the land for large-scale cattle farming used vigilante methods and the rule of law to rid the arable land of small time Cajun farmers with ribbon holdings.¹⁰ The Americans felt they had every right to roll out the rule of law since the beleaguered Cajun farmers reacted to the threat of displacement by employing guerilla tactics by becoming cattle rustlers. Thus the moral scenario contains melodramatic formulas similar to those found in the Western: put pressure on the Indians until

⁸ A film documentary by Robert Flaherty “Louisiana Story” (1948, funded by Standard Oil) captures the confrontation between American progress in the form of an oil rig and a heavily romanticized Cajun *locus amoenus* in the bayous.

⁹ The date is a bit too late for the economic realignment he describes; another anachronism is the accordion used at the *fais do-do* in the film. Accordions did not reach the Cajuns until the early 20th century when the New York firm Buegeleisen & Jacobson imported the instrument from Rudolph Kalbes of Berlin.

¹⁰ This paper continues the argument begun in “Belizaire the Cajun and the Post-CODOFIL Renaissance of Cajun Cultural Capital and Space” (2005).

they react with violence, then use the moral legitimation to eliminate them. Indeed in this film we are given chase scenes of vigilantes or posses going after thieves. At a crucial moment of general social derangement Belizaire, folk healer, trickster, Robin Hood, anarchist, cook, and lover, enters the stage. By mother wit, luck and sheer bravado, he manages to save his own endangered skin, and, through his successful negotiations with the powers that be, opens two options for his group: peaceful association with the Anglo population on terms of mutual respect, but also the subsequent, large-scale retreat of the erstwhile Cajun farmers to the bayous. The plot of the film unfolds as follows. Belizaire Breaux (played by Armand Assante, who, despite his French name, is not a Cajun but New York born) does not seem to have any regular job, but lives from hand to mouth as a folk medicine man, a *traiteur* and healer. Belizaire becomes embroiled in the struggle between Cajuns and wealthy vigilante groups who want to run them out of the state. Belizaire's life-long love, a Cajun woman named Alicia (Gail Youngs), lives in a common law marriage with one of the young Anglos, Matthew Perry (Will Patton), the son of the biggest landlord. Although this younger Perry is one of the vigilantes, he is enamored of Cajun ways and tries to steer a middle course between the two groups, always under suspicion of his extended Anglo family that he may be "going native." Yet Matthew is enough of an American alpha male to resent the continued ethnic bonding between Alicia and Belizaire. Younger Perry has to be doubly careful lest he lose the plantation to his brutal and unscrupulous brother-in-law, Willoughby (Steven McHattie), and he has to be wary of Belizaire, his rival for the undivided attention of his wife. Willoughby thoroughly disapproves of his brother-in-law for going slumming with the Cajuns and for his common law marriage with a Cajun, but mostly for his growing softness towards Cajun claims to the land. To get him out of the way of his inheritance, he ambushes and shoots his brother-in-law. Suspicion falls on Belizaire's cousin Leger (Michael Schoeffling), a pathetic drunkard and cattle rustler, whom the dead Walter Perry had once given a cruel whipping. Therefore, a revenge killing would make sense. Belizaire tries to save his cousin's neck by claiming that he, not Leger, shot Perry, which, though nobody really believes it, is accepted by the authorities as a "compromise solution" in order to avoid further disruption. Meanwhile, a vigilante group of Americans has captured and shot the cousin that Belizaire desperately tried to save. Belizaire makes the most of the new turn of events by declaring his confession to be contingent on a major concession of the Anglos, namely that two of the vigilantes, who shot his cousin, will be executed along with him. The plot is resolved in a long gallows scene, where Belizaire, framed by the two vigilantes, is about to be hanged. The irony of the

biblical allusion is obvious. Before being executed, Belizaire distributes his folk pharmacy of healing potions and herbs to his people, an act of community bonding. He suggests that they ought to have a big gumbo in commemoration, a ribald reference to the Eucharist. Now he still has to find a way to take care of Alicia and her children. The common law status of her union with Perry would have prevented Alicia from inheriting any of the family fortune; Alicia and her children by Perry would have been destitute. Belizaire twists the arm of the priest who now claims that Alicia and Matthew Perry were married by him clandestinely – which makes Alicia a full heiress to the Perry fortune. Old man Perry and his daughter, Willoughby's estranged wife, tacitly accept Alicia and her children into the family by inviting them to sit in the coach. Now Belizaire goes into high gear. With the aid of a West Indian, killer-divining gris-gris doll (that incidentally has nothing whatever to do with Cajun culture) he manages to terrorize Willoughby, whose West Indian training had made him respectful of the power of root doctors. Willoughby's uncontrollable fear, which he exhibits in face of the gris-gris, outs him as being guilty of the murder. Willoughby flees in panic. Belizaire ends up a wealthy man, thanks to the deals he struck with the authorities, ready to marry Alicia, who will inherit half the plantation: a wholesale *Aufhebung* of all contradictions in a union of American and Cajun purposes.

The film is both a product and a mirror of the positive Cajun revival. Let us now return to the historical contexts which allowed this film to emerge. During the Second World War, Cajuns experienced their first cultural uplift. They found (to their own surprise) that knowing French was an advantage in and after the war. Cajuns understood and could talk to the Parisians, and, despite their foul accent, were accepted by them as distant country relatives. This put Anglo-American soldiers in Paris at the mercy of the very Cajuns they had looked down upon for their peasant French. Their reception in France made Cajun soldiers heroes at home; they discovered cultural capital in their Frenchness. Motivated by the experience of Cajun veterans, two politicians, Dudley LeBlanc and Roy Theriot, organized a bicentennial celebration of the Acadian exile in 1955. This cultural revival occurred from the top down, not from the bottom up. Neither the working class, nor the ethnic power base, but elite Cajuns of South Louisiana, who determined that they must network with French speaking Canadians and take action to preserve spoken French, were instrumental in effecting the turnabout. The revival effort by politicians was soon joined by members of the academic world. Professor Raymond Rodgers of Southwestern Louisiana University, not a Cajun but an Anglo-Canadian by birth (who admitted that his French was lousy), and Cajun Congressman James P. Domengeaux of

Lafayette joined forces. They established the State supported Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL). There were similar movements in other places of America such as the *Mouvement pour la Protection de la langue française in Nouvelle Angleterre* in New Hampshire. CODOFIL made French instruction in public elementary and high schools mandatory for five years. Yet, there was a serious problem. Since speaking French had been forbidden during the peak of the Americanization drive, there was no local tradition of teaching or learning French. No teachers who spoke French were available. So these had to be recruited from France, Belgium and Quebec. And certainly, when the linguistic chips were down, CODOFIL had no intention of teaching Cajun French, a sociolect that James Domengeaux despised – along with the music or folklore that came with it. Despite the moral uplift and diasporic networking that the public attention via CODOFIL promised to Cajunhood, the real existing Cajuns were confronted with yet another derangement, this time linguistic and cultural. Their children were instructed, not in Cajun ways, but in high French in written and spoken form. Again the ordinary Cajuns felt down-classed and deranged, for their dialect was identified as a broken tongue, now by the high French who came in from the outside as teachers. In short, CODOFIL had little to do with the revitalization of a genuine Cajun ethnic identity, of ethnic folkways or of Cajun dialects. In fact it had a totally unintended effect. It led to a radical decline of spoken French in Louisiana.

But while spoken French petered out, CODOFIL had an unexpected consequence. The revival helped create a talented tenth, an academic version of what used to be called genteel Acadians. The top-down effort created a generation of educated, young Acadians who had been so successfully Americanized that they were able to make it into some of the best schools of the country. But due to the centripetal pull of Cajun ethnicity they all came home, a return to the folk pastoral. In order to establish their own economic and ethnic *raison d'être* and to mark their difference from genteel Acadians, they began folk festivals, academic programs and public celebrations, this time of “real” Cajun ethnicity. They rebelled against their genteel Acadian fathers with their fixation on proper French. The first public concert of Cajun music was staged in 1964 in Lafayette with surprising results. In spite of a bad press and thunder storms, the convention hall was overcrowded. Cajuns far and wide had come to listen to the very music which the CODOFIL elite considered a dreadful relic of the past. Once the new spirit of public interest in folk diversity and in multicultural tolerance had gelled, Cajuns could now come fully out of the regional closet. After 1968, there was an outreach to Quebec and a networking of francophone populations

in North America began to have effects. CODOFIL represented a strong internationalization of the effort by including people from Quebec, Belgium, France and New Hampshire. Cajuns were now recognized as part of a larger francophone family and now were on the public map. All of a sudden the previously negative ascription had become a positive value bathed in a pastoral glow. New Yorkers began to dance to *fais do do* music and learned to blacken their fish (let alone their toast).¹¹ Cajun folklore became attractive and an object of study for outsiders. This revival had a latent populist or leftist dimension as well: for the people called Cajun had survived all sorts of repression due to their stubborn resistance to class oppression. Just the thing for wine-and-cheese liberals. In 1974, Lafayette, which had become the center of Cajun revival activities, welcomed a festival called *Hommage à la Musique Acadienne* which attracted 12,500 visitors. This recreation of community affected a change from a focus on centripetal kinship to centrifugal marketing, from Cajun as a private work culture to Cajun as a public fun culture with music, cooking and dancing. Hollywood discovered the pastoral attractions of Cajunhood and *The Big Easy* became an international hit.

In this process, the role of professional folklorists was not unimportant. Barry Jean Ancelet is typical of this new cohort as is the film director Glen Pitre. The former is director of the Folklore and Folklife Program of the Center for Louisiana Studies at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, and professor of French as well. Ancelet describes himself as an activist folklorist, that is, as a folklorist who does not only collect folk traditions, but nurtures and recreates dying traditions. There was, in the sixties, a battle raging between the young action folklorists, represented by the Philadelphia group, and the antiquarian folklore, represented by Richard Dorson in Bloomington, Indiana (Ostendorf, "Folksong" 93-99). Within the general cultural politics of revitalization, the role of activist folklore gives an interesting twist to the Cajun revival. It turns political and social disadvantage into a cultural and economic advantage, the Ur-American solution to all problems. Despite the empowerment of the group and the ultimate success of the revitalization movement, the new

¹¹ The Prudhomme recipe "Blackened fish" has nothing whatever to do with Cajun traditions. The *New Yorker* may be depended upon to comment on the zanier aspects of such revivals. A cartoon shows a toaster with two burned toasts sticking out, and the caption reads "Blackened toast."

Cajun awareness does not seem to have any substantial political charge (Dormon, 89). There is no divisive Cajun nationalism within America, no cultural nationalism that has a political purpose. Instead there is a strong commodification of Cajun ethnicity as a marketable capital gain.¹²

This final, largely peaceful *Aufhebung*, which the film *Belizaire* charts, also turns out to be the real historical fortunate fall, since, as a consequence of the second derangement at the hands of American regulators, Cajuns would find their spatial utopia, the bayou, and their heraldic totems, shrimp and crawfish. The director Glen Pitre is a Cajun and a member of the post-CODOFIL cohort, the first generation to make Harvard, where, in the citadel of knowledge and in the bowels of American power, they could study books on Cajun folklore and ethnicity and ponder their newly discovered *echte* identity. Pitre received a degree in *Visual and Environmental Studies*, just the preparation to produce a film on a biotope. It is telling that Pitre's CV on his webpage identifies him first as a shrimp fisherman, then as a film-maker and only then as an academic – a populist presentation of self typical for many sixties activists. This academically inspired cohort with a pastoralized sense of rural-ethnic self masterminded the revitalization of traditional Cajun culture from the top down. This occurred at the very moment, between nineteen-fifty and nineteen-seventy, when Cajun culture, particularly Cajun French, had more or less gone under due to the massive modernization and due to a relentless politics of Americanization which lasted well into the fifties, an Americanization which left its trace in the habit of giving American first names to Cajun children: Barry Jean Ancelet, Bruce Daigrepoint, Mark Savoy, and Clifton Chenier.

The film was shot on the location of a reconstructed Acadian village and the drama unfolds, like the Western, as a power conflict over culture-in-space in a *paysage moralisé*; hence the plot is energized by a morally righteous spatial nostalgia which transforms the traumatic experience of repeated diasporic displacement into grounds for a celebration of cultural survival, and thus repeats the trajectory of Cajun myth of descent: a resilient cultural identity which survived British, Spanish, and American power politics. The fictional story is embedded in the very folk art that the Cajun renaissance had just helped to restore, thus the trickster myth is embedded in an overpoweringly real sense of Cajunhood and Cajun material culture. The soundtrack is provided by Beausoleil's Michel Doucet with music played on authentic fiddles built in 1779 and 1793.

¹² Barry Jean Ancelet, "From Evangeline Hot Sauce to Cajun Ice: Signs of Ethnicity in South Louisiana" (1996).

Doucet himself is a key agent in the academic restoration of an Acadia that never existed in quite those purified, pastoral terms. The movie's celebration of particular Cajun mother wit is coupled with a dark view of American universalizing politics. This communitarian spin turns it into a Cajun version of the hip western and its nostalgio-spatial pastoralism of ethnic resiliency in an Americano-centric world. The overall aura of the film's closure is not revolution or rebellion but peace, made possible by the soteriological figure of Belizaire, who comes across as half wonder-working, trickster Jesus, half as a non-violent, peace-giving Bayou Ghandi.

Did these activists know what they were doing? Of course they did. Barry Jean Ancelet, co-author with Glen Pitre of a book on Cajun culture, signifies on his own complex identity in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*:

Visitors to South Louisiana invariably bring their own cultural baggage. French Canadians, for instance, who seek in Cajuns a symbol of dogged linguistic survival in predominantly Anglo-Saxon North America, find virtually no Anglo-Franco confrontation and an absence of animosity in cultural politics. The French who seek vestiges of former colonials find instead French speaking cowboys (and Indians) in pickup trucks. They are surprised that the Cajuns and Creoles love fried chicken and iced tea, forgetting this is the South; that they love hamburgers and Coke forgetting this is the United States; and they love cayenne and cold beer, forgetting this is the northern top of the West Indies. American visitors usually skim along the surface, too, looking in vain for traces of Longfellow's *Evangeline*. (422)¹³

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“Beyond the Bayou”

Sociocultural Spaces in Kate Chopin’s Louisiana Short Stories

Kate Chopin (1850-1904), probably best known for her novel *The Awakening* (1899), was a very prolific writer, who, in less than fifteen years, authored one play, three novels, almost a hundred short stories plus a great number of poems, essays, and reviews. She now holds a secure place in the American literary canon, but her position was slow to develop. Regarded as “a bright light on the national literary scene” (Petry, Introduction 5) during her lifetime, she subsequently fell into oblivion and by mid-century was largely forgotten. Per Seyersted’s groundbreaking biographical and editorial work of 1969 was needed to rediscover Kate Chopin herself and her oeuvre for a wider audience. She has usually been classified as a Southern local colorist whose prose is comparable to the works of New England writers such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. This assessment originated at the end of the 19th century and has since become a fixture in American literary history. As an 1894 review in the *Hartford Daily Courant* illustrates, her earliest commentators led the way by characterizing her stories as “faithful, artistic transcripts of picturesque local life” that “deal successfully with that ’Cadian country which is comparatively terra incognita to the fictionist” (rpt. in Petry, *Essays* 43). Four years later, a reviewer for *The Nation* aligned her with one of the best-known literary representatives of the American Northeast: “Her [Chopin’s] stories are to the bayous of Louisiana what Mary Wilkins’s are to New England, with a difference, to be sure, as the Cape jessamine is different from the cinnamon rose, but like in seizing the heart of her people and showing the traits that come from their surroundings; like, too, in giving without a wasted word the history of main crises in their lives” (rpt. in Petry, *Essays* 49).

Toward the end of the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st century more and more scholars drew attention to the fact that Chopin’s prose was not as simplistic as it might appear on the surface level (Batinovich 80; Gibert 71; Goodwyn 4), and they were increasingly hesitant as to where exactly she and her writing belonged. This classificatory uncertainty has extended to the use of the term ‘local color,’ which is still applied to Chopin’s fiction, but in a much more qualified way. Thus Lynda S. Boren states, “Neither was she [Chopin] a slavish idolator of region or local color, even though she absorbed

and transformed it so uncannily in her depiction of Louisiana's Cajun-Creole milieu" (2). Likewise, Donna and David Kornhaber remark, "For Chopin, more so than for other local color writers, the meeting of cultures in the unique context of her nineteenth-century Louisiana home was in many ways a highly complicated affair" (17).

I would like to go one step further than these and other critics and argue that Kate Chopin was ahead of her time. Although the depiction of her as a local colorist is not completely invalid, it tends to gloss over the innovative representation of sociocultural domains and of cross-border interactions in her oeuvre. By choosing a locale with a rich history, a place where Acadians from Canada,¹ Blacks, and Native Americans meet with people of European descent, Chopin opened up a seemingly restricted space,² positioned the South in a global sphere, and raised universal questions of identity and belonging.³ Concentrating on the two short story collections *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897), I will address questions of race, ethnicity, class, and gender that, in Chopin's writing, are clearly configured in terms of space. I intend to show that Chopin anticipated 20th-century ideas of transnationalism and multiculturalism as they have been articulated in the USA and Canada by Randolph S. Bourne and others, thus turning her Louisiana into a model for North American societies at large.

I.

The local color tradition, which flourished in the last third of the 19th century, is considered by critics as an important step in the development of realistic forms of expression. At its origin were long-standing American attempts to not only cut the political ties with the former mother country but also to

¹ For the Acadians ('Cadians, Cajuns) and their complex history, including Le Grand Dérangement of 1755, which brought many of them to Louisiana, see Conrad and Rushton. For 19th-century developments, see Brasseaux.

² As Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson explain, "[s]pace is the general idea people have of where things should be in physical and cultural relation to each other. In this sense, space is the conceptualisation of the imagined physical relationships which give meaning to society" (9).

³ See Marcia Gaudet, who stresses that "Kate Chopin used the Louisiana settings and people in her stories and novels to write about things of universal significance and appeal" (45).

achieve linguistic and literary independence.⁴ The reliance on specific, often little known, regional locales, be they in New England, the South or the Far West, allowed writers of fiction to present the manners and customs of their inhabitants and to make use of unique idioms. Whereas in the beginning, typified characters, their vernacular speech patterns as well as their provincial ways of life were employed for comic effects only,⁵ a change was discernible after the Civil War: more and more writers started to depict regional cultures in an earnest manner, often in an effort to preserve in fiction the old ways of the past that had started to vanish (Spiller et al. 650-1, 848). However, as Henry Nash Smith explains, there were certain limits as to how far a writer could go in his realistic renderings of life. Decorum had to be observed and thus ethical righteousness became part of the set formula for the local color story, which was centered on the notion of “the heart-of-gold”:

If immorality could not be forgiven, certain other less central aspects of barbarism, such as incorrect speech, illiteracy, and uncultivated manners, could be condoned and even enjoyed as picturesque, provided the author demonstrated the inner moral purity of outwardly crude characters. (Spiller et al. 793)

When Kate Chopin turned to writing and started envisioning a literary career, the vogue of local color fiction was well under way. It was spurred by a constantly growing number of periodicals, which tried to cater to the urban reading public’s literary taste,⁶ with the publishing industry of Boston, Chicago, and New York leading the field. The twenty-three tales and sketches later collected in *Bayou Folk* as well as the twenty-one specimens of *A Night in Acadie* were, with very few exceptions, first published in magazines with a national circulation such as *Vogue*, *Harper’s Young People*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Century* (Chopin 1054-55).⁷ Contrary to what might

⁴ See, for example, Noah Webster’s *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828; Gove 4a) and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s insistence on American “[s]elf-reliance” in cultural matters (163-65).

⁵ Carlos Baker states that “characters were sometimes embarrassed and stereotyped by being saddled with the responsibility of representing a particular region” (Spiller et al. 847).

⁶ See Donna Campbell’s remark: “In its characteristic form of the short story or sketch, local-colour fiction presented a carefully crafted vision of an authentic, unspoiled America, a picture comforting to city-dwellers beset by problems of modernisation and urban life” (30-31).

⁷ Chopin “was never keen on attracting a Southern audience. Of the seven stories published in the *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, her log book notes that all were rejected from five to

be expected, Chopin was not writing isolated pieces but constructing a linked panorama of contemporary life. Not only did she stick in her short stories to a circumscribed setting, namely the rural area of Natchitoches⁸ and, less frequently, the city of New Orleans, but she also had characters of one story reappear in another story (Lattin), thus employing linking strategies in order to form a larger whole.

Kate Chopin, a native of St. Louis, Missouri, was familiar with the region she depicted, having lived with her husband in New Orleans, “this most exotic of American cities” (Benfey 5), and later in Cloutierville, a small village in Natchitoches Parish, in the Northwestern part of Louisiana. In 1884, however, after the premature death of her husband and before the publication of her first literary work, she moved back to St. Louis (Beer 1; Toth 18). Ultimately, Kate Chopin combined an insider’s and an outsider’s perspective in her œuvre, a practice which prevented her from writing mere nostalgic pieces, full of sentimental reminiscences, and made her use “cool irony” instead (Boren 7). A two-throated approach is also discernible in the way Kate Chopin inscribed herself in the local color tradition. Whereas, on the one hand, she lived up to the readers’ and publishers’ expectations by providing standardized insight into the regional life of the American South, thus ensuring her literary success and financial profit,⁹ she, on the other hand, tried to open up and enlarge that very tradition. Rather than solely modeling her short stories on the set formula mentioned above, Chopin drew added inspiration from other sources. These ranged from the short prose of French writer Guy de Maupassant, some of whose stories Chopin translated into English (Reilly 71; Sempredora 84-85), to anthropological texts on Acadian culture in Louisiana (Seay 38-40). As her critical commentary on “The Western Association of Writers” reveals, she valued the depiction of “human existence in its subtle, complex, true meaning, stripped of the veil with which ethical and conventional standards have draped it” (Seyersted, *Works* 2: 691). However, she

fourteen times by Northern periodicals before Chopin submitted them there” (Thomas 107-08).

⁸ For geographical and historical specifications on Natchitoches, see Warren (98).

⁹ As Heidi Johnsen explains, publication was to a large degree dependent on the writer’s readiness to stick to established patterns: “When Chopin penned stories that fulfilled the local color writer category and upheld the societal values of true womanhood, she was able to find receptive publishers. Her later stories, however, pushed beyond that kind of acceptance and began questioning society while exploring other options, leaving Chopin outside the boundaries magazines like *The Atlantic* and the *Century* had set” (54). See also Ewell (79).

could not always openly follow this stance and had to find indirect ways of expression. Local color, as Kate McCullough persuasively argues, often served her “as a cover” (190), allowing her to put forward ideological positions and forms of behavior that might be deemed controversial, for, “as a genre, [it] was seen as quaint and conservative of old values” (201).

Chopin’s ambivalent relation to the local color tradition is most obvious in her story “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” where she introduces it as a topic (Steiling 197). The two first paragraphs read:

It was no wonder Mr. Sublet, who was staying at the Hallet plantation, wanted to make a picture of Evariste. The ’Cadian was rather a picturesque subject in his way, and a tempting one to an artist looking for bits of “local color” along the Têche.

Mr. Sublet had seen the man on the back gallery just as he came out of the swamp, trying to sell a wild turkey to the housekeeper. He spoke to him at once, and in the course of conversation engaged him to return to the house the following morning and have his picture drawn. He handed Evariste a couple of silver dollars to show that his intentions were fair, and that he expected the ’Cadian to keep faith with him. (Chopin 318)

Although Kate Chopin here connects the local color tradition with the realm of painting, her story may nevertheless be read as a metadiscursive commentary that exposes her views on one of the strands of emerging American literary realism.¹⁰ What she takes issue with is the “picturesque subject,” as it is called in this excerpt, or, more precisely, the way certain sociocultural groups are represented by the artist (Steiling 199). From the very beginning of her story, Kate Chopin points to the unequal social status of her characters. Evariste is introduced by his first name only and is thus denied the more respectful designation of “Mr.” given to the painter. Moreover, he is immediately taken to be a typical representative of a specific group, as the term “[t]he ’Cadian” indicates.¹¹ The fact that Evariste is first perceived “on the back gallery” of the Hallet plantation coming “out of the swamp” hints at a

¹⁰ This is not Chopin’s only reference to the local color tradition. In the story “Athénaïse” she self-ironically comments, “[The magazine] had entertained her [Athénaïse] passably, she admitted, upon returning it. A New England story had puzzled her, it was true, and a Creole tale had offended her, but the pictures had pleased her greatly” (375).

¹¹ As Maria Hebert-Leiter explains, Chopin’s word choice is revealing: “her use of the term *’Cadian* . . . demonstrates the move toward American identification and away from more traditional Acadian culture and reflects an interstitial moment between *Acadian* and *Cajun* identification” (65).

dreary state of existence, which is further enhanced in the following paragraph, when the reader learns that he and his daughter Martinette live in a “low, homely cabin of two rooms, that was not quite so comfortable as Mr. Hallet’s negro quarters” (Chopin 318). Chopin leaves no doubt that the Acadians are poor people who rank at the bottom of the social ladder, often having closer connections to the Black population than to the Creole whites.¹² Their simplicity is illustrated by the way Evariste and Martinette first react to Mr. Sublet’s proposal. While father and daughter “could not understand [the] eccentric wishes on the part of the strange gentleman, and made no effort to do so” (318), Aunt Dicey, a woman of African descent, quickly grasps Mr. Sublet’s intentions and warns Martinette of the negative effects her father’s willingness to have his picture painted might have. She explains in her local vernacular:

“jis like you says, dey gwine put yo’ pa’s picture yonda in de picture paper. An’ you know w’at readin’ dey gwine sot down on’neaf dat picture?” Martinette was intensely attentive. “Dey gwine sot down on’neaf: ‘Dis heah is one dem low-down ‘Cajuns o’ Bayeh Têche!’” (319)

With this derogatory caption in view, the advance payment that Evariste received from Mr. Sublet no longer appears to Martinette as a welcome means to ease their lives: “The silver dollars clicked in her pocket as she walked. She felt like flinging them across the field; they seemed to her somehow the price of shame” (320). Consequently, she and her father decide to give the money back.

The story takes a decisive turn the next morning when Evariste, fishing in Carancro lake, rescues Mr. Sublet’s son Archie, who had gone out in a boat and nearly drowned when it capsized (322-3). Out of gratitude, Mr. Sublet proposes to produce a portrait of Evariste and publish it with the caption “A hero of Bayou Têche” (323). But Evariste is still not ready to have his picture painted, as he does not perceive his deed as heroic. It is only when

¹² See the following references to Martinette’s clothing: “The girl’s shoes were considerably worn and her garments were a little too thin and scant for the winter season” (Chopin 319); “Her blue cottonade skirt scarcely reached the thin ankles that it should have covered” (322). That Chopin’s initial depiction of the Acadians is in line with their commonly acknowledged social standing becomes apparent when one considers the following assessment by Michele A. Birnbaum: “Within the codified hierarchies of race and class in post-Reconstruction Louisiana, Acadians were considered ‘lesser’ whites. Their lower class status and rural lifestyle set them apart economically, ethnically, and linguistically from Creole society” (311). For negative stereotypes of the Acadians see also Brasseaux (3, 100-03).

Mr. Sublet takes up Mr. Hallet’s idea to have Evariste choose the caption that the latter is willing to be depicted. He asks Mr. Sublet to publish the portrait with the following text: “Dis is one picture of Mista Evariste Anatole Bonamour, a gent’man of de Bayou Têche” (324).

Chopin has, without any doubt, modeled Evariste according to the standards of the local color tradition: although he is illiterate (324) and speaks only “uncertain, broken English” (322), he is morally pure, humble and helps his fellow human beings in case of need. But Chopin goes much further in her story, transferring the question of ethical honesty from the characters depicted to the artist depicting them. She raises the question of who has the right to name and classify individuals and social groups. The respect that Evariste receives in the end by being allowed to choose the caption himself rather than having it bestowed upon him by a stranger is a clear sign.¹³ And not surprisingly, Evariste asks for his full name to be printed, which marks him as an individual. He does not want to be seen as a representative of a specific ethnic group, but as a socially esteemed gentleman, similarly to Mr. Sublet himself. It is only consistent, then, that Kate Chopin’s story bears the title “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” a title which shows a reverential attitude towards the Acadians.

II.

Chopin’s obvious wish to counter stereotypical representations of individuals and groups in her writing often goes together with a transcendence of seemingly constricted sociocultural realms. A strong spatial orientation is already apparent from the titles of her stories, which include “In and Out of Old Natchitoches,” “In Sabine,” “Love on the Bon-Dieu,” “A Night in Acadie,” and also “Beyond the Bayou,” which I adopted for the title of my essay.¹⁴ At the outset of the stories, Chopin’s characters are usually bound to

¹³ Steiling rightly remarks, “The substance of the tale is that the rendering of individuals as ‘types’ is a literary exploitation” (199). See also the following statement by John A. Staunton: “Chopin demonstrates the need for a more participatory narrative rendering of local life” (219).

¹⁴ The fact that, in this story, the bayou serves both as a concrete Louisiana setting, as “a real barrier,” and as an “integral symbol” (Rowe 7), makes it a fitting reference point for my line of argument.

specific spaces, in line with the rigid social structures that, even after the Civil War and the Reconstruction period, tended to prevail in the South. In the course of the stories, however, reconfigurations take place which oppose the notion of a strictly hierarchical Southern society and introduce alternative ways of life that stand in contrast to the common discourses on race, ethnicity, class, and gender.¹⁵ This pattern is also discernible in “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” where initially Evariste is associated with a small cabin, the swamp, and Carancro lake, while Mr. Sublet enjoys his visit at the Hallet plantation. Both Evariste and Martinette approach Mr. Hallet’s homestead, but linger on the gallery and hardly dare to enter it (Chopin 318, 321). With the rescue of Archie Sublet, however, the invisible boundary becomes permeable. Determined to bring the child back to his father, Evariste goes inside Mr. Hallet’s house. Martinette immediately asks him to come home with her (323), but Mr. Hallet insists that both have breakfast in the large dining-room, where they are served, however, “with visible reluctance and ill-disguised contempt” (323) by Wilkins, Aunt Dicey’s son. With characters from different ethnic groups, various walks of life, and a variety of ages being united in one room, Chopin stresses communal features and points to a humanitarian basis shared by all. Those who still think in fixed categories, like Wilkins, who looks down upon his Acadian neighbors, have to learn to show respect and acknowledge the worth of their fellow beings.

A readjustment of sociocultural relations and the spatial realms that go along with them can also be observed in the story “Loka.” The title character, “a half-breed Indian girl, with hardly a rag to her back” (Chopin 266), grew up in the woodlands on Bayou Choctaw, where she was beaten by the squaw old Marot and instigated to steal, beg, and lie (269). No longer ready to take this treatment, Loka decides to leave her home and appears in Natchitoches. Although her name suggests a certain rootedness, Loka is a border-crosser, an itinerant figure. After a short interval, in which she works as a tumbler-washer in an “oyster saloon” (266), The Band of United Endeavor, a charity organization composed of the town’s most respectable women, decides on her future. The charity ladies, whose depiction is peppered with a considerable amount of irony (Ewell 69), place Loka with the Padues, a large Acadian family, which has a modest income from farming (Chopin 266, 269) and is thus a little better off than Evariste and Martinette in “A Gentleman of Bayou

¹⁵ On Louisiana society at the end of the 19th century, see Domínguez (593-95).

Tête.”¹⁶ Madame Laballière, the wife of the plantation owner, argues that both sides would profit from this set-up: Baptiste and Tontine Padue would get help with their daily chores, whereas Loka would learn how to work and would receive moral guidance (266).

One day, at the Padues’, while she is alone with baby Bibine, Loka is overcome by homesickness. As the following passage reveals, this longing is rendered in spatial terms, with the woods being identified as Loka’s innate place:

Loka’s gaze, that had been slowly traveling along the edge of the horizon, finally fastened upon the woods, and stayed there. Into her eyes came the absent look of one whose thought is projected into the future or the past, leaving the present blank. She was seeing a vision. It had come with a whiff that the strong south breeze had blown to her from the woods.

. . .

How good it felt to walk with moccasined feet over the springy turf, under the trees! What fun to trap the squirrels, to skin the otter; to take those swift flights on the pony that Choc-taw Joe had stolen from the Texans! (269)

Loka, sitting on the open gallery (268), and thus in a transition zone between the enclosed space of the house and the natural surroundings, decides to leave for the woods and take Bibine with her. When the family returns from its outing and notices that Loka and Bibine are gone, Tontine Padue, who is characterized as “aggressive” and “direct” (267), immediately falls back on her earlier assessment of Loka, namely that she is a “*sauvage*” (267, 270).¹⁷ And she adds, “straight you march back to that ban’ w’ere you come from” (272).¹⁸ For Tontine, Loka does not belong to their place. Her husband Baptiste, however, is of a different opinion. When Loka explains that her love for Bibine kept her from running away for good and prevented her from taking up her old lifestyle again, Baptiste is convinced that one cannot separate Loka from her guardian angel. He sees her as a girl who has been too severely treated by his wife and who needs more personal freedom. Claiming his position as master of the house, he asks his wife for indulgence, pointing

¹⁶ See Brasseaux, who stresses “the internal class and cultural cleavages” among the Acadians, thus countering the traditional view of them as a “monolithic people” (xiv).

¹⁷ Loka’s alleged savageness is once again underlined by the narrator’s comment: “It was difficult to distinguish in the gathering dusk if the figure were that of man or beast” (271).

¹⁸ Tontine probably refers to The Band of United Endeavor, which sent Loka to the Padues, but this passage might also be read as alluding to her Native band members.

to the difference in ethnicity and socialization on the part of Loka.¹⁹ Ultimately, it is not only for Loka to learn to act responsibly and to adapt to her new surroundings in the Acadian household, but also for Tontine to learn to show respect and consider the wishes of Loka. The educational process is a mutual one, resulting in an inter-ethnic “United Endeavor.”²⁰

Human universals like sympathy and love, which in “Loka” trigger the reconfiguration of sociocultural spaces, also pave the way for change in other stories. A striking example is “Azélie,” a tale that brings together Acadian and Creole characters, although in the latter case, the ethnic affiliation is not spelled out and can only be deduced from the characters’ names, their use of the French language, and their social standing. The Acadian girl Azélie Pauché, who hails from the area of Little River, currently lives with her father Arsène, her brother Sauterelle, and her grandmother in a cabin on Mr. Mathurin’s plantation, “far away across the field of cotton” (Chopin 441).²¹ Her father tries to earn a living by sharecropping (441), but as Azélie’s outward appearance reveals (438), there is not enough money for basic needs. At the beginning of the story, she approaches the large plantation house, which includes a store for the farm workers, intent on getting groceries. However, rather than expressing her wishes of her own accord, she waits under a tree until she is addressed by the planter from above, a scene which clearly illustrates the difference in social status. Having learned what Azélie has come for, Mr. Mathurin sends her to Mr. Polyte, who is in charge of the store (438). Polyte, well-dressed and good-looking, treats Azélie with haughtiness (439). He is reluctant to supply her with all she asks for, as he fears that her father’s crop will not cover the sums that have already accumulated in his daybook (439-41). Polyte’s conversations with both Azélie and Mr. Mathurin show that he has a fixed, rather disparaging idea of the Acadians. Vis-

¹⁹ Baptiste explains, “We got to rememba she ent like you an’ me, po’ thing; she’s one Injun, her” (272).

²⁰ A clear distinction between “outsider figures [who] habitually misread conduct, character, or race in context, as opposed to canny insiders who register an intuitive regional authority,” as Heather Kirk Thomas proposes it for Chopin’s oeuvre (97), seems impossible to draw, as the case of Tontine Padue proves.

²¹ What Dara Llewellyn specifies for Chopin’s story “Beyond the Bayou,” namely that “[t]he very real physical distance and barrier between the two homesteads represent the also very real social, economic, and racial separations between the characters” (256), largely holds true as well for the story “Azélie.”

à-vis Azélie ’Polyte speaks of “the lazy-bone ’Cadians in the country that know w’ere they goin’ to fine the coffee-pot always in the corna of the fire” (439). And when he talks to Mr. Mathurin, he refers to Azélie’s family as “that triflin’ Li’le river gang” (441) and adds, “I wish they was all back on Li’le river” (441). Shortly after, the reader learns that it is in particular Azélie whose presence ’Polyte resents (442). Here the story reaches a crucial turning point, for ’Polyte’s behavior suddenly appears in a new light: his haughtiness towards Azélie betrays itself as a cover for his obvious attraction to the girl. Similarly, his use of stereotypes may be read as an attempt to conceal emotions that he is not ready to admit, not even to himself (444).²²

However, the negative image of the Acadians gains further support when Azélie breaks into the store one night. She is detected by ’Polyte, who first reacts with both verbal and physical violence,²³ trying to make her conscious of her misdemeanor, but then lets go of her and shields her from prosecution (443-44), thereby giving in to his innermost feelings. Although ’Polyte initially sees his love for Azélie as a “degradation” (444), the urge to be near her is so strong that he starts roaming the vicinity of her cabin and invites her to come to the store, where he pays for her goods (444-45). He then fashions the plan to marry her and have her live with him on the plantation, when, at the end of the season, the rest of her family will go back to Little River, a place that, in his eyes, is associated with death (446). He is convinced that he might turn Azélie into a better being, freeing her from “the demoralizing influences of her family and her surroundings” (445). Azélie, however, is not willing to leave her father and returns to Little River with him. Displaying solidarity with her family and her sociocultural group (446), she emulates values that were held high by the Acadians both in Canada and in their later places of exile.²⁴ At the end it is ’Polyte who has to make concessions: he

²² This passage is prepared for by the narrator’s reference to ’Polyte’s “*pretended* air of annoyance” (438, emphasis added), with which he first meets Azélie.

²³ See the following passages: “He seized her arm and held her with a brutal grip” (443). ““So – so, you a thief!’ he muttered savagely under his breath” (443).

²⁴ That Azélie has her father’s well-being in mind is already apparent when she breaks into the store. Not only are the articles she is trying to procure probably meant for him, namely “some packages of tobacco, a cheap pipe, some fishing-tackle, and the flask which she had brought with her in the afternoon,” she also complains: “You all treat my popa like he was a dog” (443). See E.D. Blodgett’s remark, “the family [is] the central socially ordering principle of Acadia” (111-12). See also Rushton (15).

gives up his job with Mr. Mathurin²⁵ and exchanges the plantation for Little River in order to be together with Azélie (446-47).

While all three stories, “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” “Loka,” and “Azélie,” depict the crossing of borders in a literal and in a metaphorical sense, the latter text appears as the most daring one. In opposition to late 19th-century gender expectations, it is the woman here who asserts her wishes and determines her place of residence. Moreover, ’Polyte, whose social position is more elevated than Azélie’s, counters the much more frequent pattern of upward mobility when he decides to move to the Acadian settlement of Little River. Without any doubt, the reconfiguration of sociocultural realms based on tolerance and respect comes in diverse forms in Chopin’s stories. Championing individual life styles rather than stock solutions for identity and belonging, Kate Chopin clearly exceeds the typical local color story. Her fiction, as Winfried Fluck convincingly argues, might instead be read as “a kind of testing ground in which conflicting or even contradictory impulses collide and interact” and which “allows the expression of culturally unacknowledged wishes and fears” (152).

III.

In a now famous article, published in 1916 in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Randolph S. Bourne develops his concept of a “Trans-National America” and pits it against the established model of the US ‘melting pot.’ Convinced that America has given too much attention to the cultural heritage of the British mother country, trying to assimilate immigrants to what is only one strand of a whole array of traditions (86-87), he envisions “a new cosmopolitan ideal” (88) in which different sociocultural groups collaborate but stay distinct (90): “America is transplanted Europe, but a Europe that has not been disintegrated and scattered in the transplanting as in some Dispersion. Its colonies live here inextricably mingled, yet not homogeneous. They merge but they do not fuse” (91). In order to illustrate more clearly what he has in mind, Bourne has recourse to a second metaphor, namely the weaving of a motley piece of cloth:

²⁵ Interestingly, ’Polyte’s work ethics changes after he has fallen in love with Azélie. As the narrator remarks, “He had always been an industrious, bustling fellow, never idle. Now there were hours and hours in which he did nothing but long for the sight of Azélie” (444). And later, “It soon became evident that ’Polyte’s services were going to count for little” (446). ’Polyte thus approximates the laziness for which he had earlier blamed the Acadians.

America is coming to be, not a nationality but a trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors. Any movement which attempts to thwart this weaving, or to dye the fabric any one color, or disentangle the threads of the strands, is false to this cosmopolitan vision. (96)

Interestingly, however, Bourne limits this cosmopolitan conception to the Northern States, for he regards the American South as “culturally sterile,” lacking any “cross-fertilization” (90): “The South, in fact, while this vast Northern development has gone on, still remains an English colony, stagnant and complacent, having progressed culturally scarcely beyond the early Victorian era” (89-90).²⁶

Here I propose to read Bourne against the grain and to extend his comparative approach. Seen through the lens of Bourne, Chopin’s depiction of vibrant sociocultural realms in Louisiana displays a high degree of novelty. The diversity of these realms²⁷ not only aligns the American South with Bourne’s transnational North, but also prefigures the concept of ‘multiculturalism’ (Steiling 199-200) as it was developed in Canada in the first decades of the 20th century, supplanting the earlier model of “Anglo-conformity” (Day 8). Tolerance, respect, and mutual understanding are common ingredients of this new concept, which has often been metaphorically rendered as the ‘mosaic’ and which, in the 1970s, was adopted as an official state policy in Canada. The intermingling of the English and French languages in Chopin’s œuvre adds to the perceived similarity, because Canadian multiculturalism, confirmed by the Multiculturalism Act of 1988, has been realized within a bilingual framework (Fleras and Elliott, chap. 7). Using her short stories as an experimental space for probing into diverse social discourses and practices, Chopin does not solely concentrate on ethnocultural affiliations. She brings in questions of race, class, gender, and economic status and thus considers aspects which critics of Canadian multiculturalism reprimanded politicians and other state officials for having neglected (Bannerji 107, 109-10; Dupont and Lemarchand 325).

The fact that Chopin tries to counter stereotypes and raise awareness for the possibility of a fluctuating social setting, in which identities are mutually

²⁶ Bourne focuses on European immigrants and fails to adequately consider the Native and the Black population.

²⁷ Janet Goodwyn characterizes this diversity *ex negativo* when she writes, “There is no national, whole-cultural normalizing pressure in Chopin’s fiction; assimilation into the larger community of the United States is not a concern here” (5).

negotiated, is also apparent from the fact that some of her characters are not ethnically or racially identified. Again and again, this has led critics to speculate on the origin of her characters, often with contradictory results (Gaudet 50). Rather than seeing whiteness as an essentialist innate quality, for example, Chopin reveals it as a construct which changes and differs in function depending on the circumstances in which it is being used.²⁸ The dynamic quality of Chopin's sociocultural spaces along with her foregrounding of human universals allows, in the end, to raise the question whether her ideal perhaps even veers towards a model of society that may be termed 'transcultural.' Regardless of the answer, there is no doubt that Chopin's concept goes "beyond the bayou."

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²⁸ More often than not, "[w]hiteness is . . . ascertained as a cultural way of being in the world" (Shaker 26). The following dialogue between Aunt Minty and Lolotte in the story "A Rude Awakening" illustrates this very clearly: "'An' dah you is!' almost shouted aunt Minty, whose black face gleamed in the doorway; 'dah you is, settin' down, lookin' jis' like w'ite folks!' / 'Ain't I always was w'ite folks, Aunt Mint?' smiled Lolotte, feebly. / 'G'long, chile. You knows me. I don' mean no harm.'" (Chopin 238-39). Whereas Aunt Minty is introduced as an African American woman (233), Lolotte remains ethnically unmarked; her brown eyes (231), her brown complexion (232), and her black hair (238) could be indicative of different groupings.

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JACQUES POTHIER

Northeast by South

Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha and Antonine Maillet's Acadia

*Tell about the South. What it's like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there.
Why do they live at all.* (William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 142)

The most famous Canadian in Faulkner's fiction – but is there another one? – is responsible for one of the best-known quotations from Faulkner, next to the often misunderstood “the past is never dead, it is not even past”: it is Shreve McCannon asking Quentin Compson to tell him about the South. A Southern writer keenly aware of his regional identity, Faulkner did not necessarily see a Northern interest in the South, but suggested that it took a Canadian to develop a candid interest in the otherness of the South.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* provides another example of the strange relation of the South with Canada: when she started her best-selling novel, noticing that in the whole United States slavery had now become virtually legal thanks to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, she decided that only Canada was properly an abolitionist North, in a Union which had become for all practical purposes a wider South as far as slavery was concerned. This is a pattern that you can find repeatedly in the life-story of contemporary Haitian writers such as Dany Laferrière, a fugitive from the repressive regime in Haiti, who fled first to the South, and then went on to Canada to escape from the climate of racist violence in the South of the United States.

Faulkner seemed to crystallize this radical antagonism of values between the South and Canada when he had Shreve McCannon as the fascinated Other to Quentin's Southern Hamlet in *Absalom, Absalom!*. As if, just as you had to have been born there to understand what the South was about, you had to have been born in central Canada to wonder how being from the South was possible. But then, Faulkner had had personal experience of Canada: stuck there for months at the end of the First World War by the Spanish flu quarantine, he seems to have honed his talent as an author of fiction when he wrote south to his mother.¹

¹ See *Thinking of Home: William Faulkner's Letters to His Mother and Father, 1918-1925*

The Canada I propose to address here is not Shreve's English-speaking Canada, but rather a region that shares with the Old South some common historic features that set it apart from the rest of the continent. To expand C. Vann Woodward's statement in *The Burden of Southern History* that the South was American long before it was Southern, it may be worth noting (as Renald Bérubé once did for a special issue of the French literary journal *Europe* devoted to the "new voices in the South") that Québec was Canadian long before it was Québécois, or that Québec was Canadian long before the rest of Canada.² Bérubé points out that both the Southern state of Virginia and the province of Québec were the core of the early development of their respective federations: whereas Virginia provided four of the first five Presidents of the United States, the Maritime provinces and Québec were originally populated as New France, and it was only gradually at the end of the 19th century that "Canada" came to be used when referring to the whole region north of the United States. Besides, the Canadian confederation of 1867 arguably was a consequence of the end of the American Civil War and the race west between the United States and Great Britain at the time of the first transcontinental railway lines. New France, as the South, was subdued by a stronger power, and both regions experienced military defeat and its consequences – military occupation – on their own soil. As Bérubé read Faulkner, he pointed out he could effortlessly identify with the South against the North, the black against the redneck. Woodward observed that the defeat gave the Southerner a more tragic sense of life, a more acute sense of its complexity, sensitivity to the dialogism of voices, easily transferred to similar historic conditions, as when the Vietnam War became an extended metaphor of the Civil War in Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*.

I propose to explore the hypothesis of an unexpected pairing – seeing a Canadian South of sorts in what is actually eastern Canada, French Acadia, through the work of a Canadian francophone writer, Antonine Maillet. There are two links between Faulkner's South and Maillet's Acadia: first, of course, the history of the Acadian people, most of whom were expelled from the Maritime provinces and eventually settled in Southern Louisiana to become the Cajuns, and the literary fact that the core plot of *Absalom, Absalom!* stemmed from a short story entitled "Evangeline," taking its title from Longfellow's epic poem about an Acadian woman separated from her fiancé in

² See Bérubé (33-34).

the Great Disruption,³ who hunts for him through the whole continent until she eventually finds him on his deathbed. Faulkner's unpublished story entitled "Evangeline" is first documented in 1931. The story is told by a narrator, with the ironic teasing of a co-narrator named Don, the forerunner of Shreve in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Of course Faulkner's "Evangeline" is not about the plight of the Cajuns – neither is Longfellow's, for that matter.

None of Faulkner's fiction takes place in Canada, or involves Canadians, other than the role of an external observer, which is assigned to Shreve in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*. In the crucible of Faulkner's mind, there may have been a combination of the Canadian theme of "Evangeline" with the character of the co-narrator of the original short story which produced the Canadian character in the later novel. What explains the title of Faulkner's "Evangeline" is the separation of two star-crossed lovers, never reunited before their death, enduring a romantic destiny such as the one of Longfellow's Evangeline. *Evangeline* is also a source of collective identity and pride for francophone Acadians (although Pamphile Le May's rendering of the text in French *alexandrins* changed the rhythm of the original).⁴

With *Pélagie-la-Charrette*,⁵ Antonine Maillet became the first non-French citizen to receive the most prestigious French literary award, the Prix Goncourt, in 1979. *Pélagie* reverses the direction of Evangeline's flight, and to emphasize the intertextual connection Maillet has *Pélagie* return to Acadia in 1772-73, fifteen years after Governor Lawrence deported the Acadian people from the province of Nova Scotia in 1755. This ethnic cleansing resulted in the Acadians being crowded in the holds of transport vessels and dispersed throughout the North American colonies, with many families unable to meet again. In Antonine Maillet's novel, *Pélagie* returns to her home village, called "la Grand'Prée," echoing the "Grand Pré" Evangeline and her people were driven away from in Longfellow's poem (Maillet gives the name of the village as "la Grand'Prée," which seems to be a return to the authentic toponym as if it had been misappropriated by the Anglophone poet, as Acadia had been misappropriated by the British Crown). *Pélagie* represents the Acadians who refused to be displaced and decided to return home, those "few

³ "The Great Disruption" is Philip Stratford's translation for the phrase "le Grand Dérangement" in Antonine Maillet's text.

⁴ See, for instance, "Le mythe d'Evangéline."

⁵ Subsequent references to Philip Stratford's translation will appear in the text.

Acadian peasants, whose fathers from exile / Wandered back to their native land to die in its bosom” that Longfellow himself mentions in the last paragraph of his poem (l. 1393-4).

While Longfellow’s *Evangeline* told of the misery of removal and separation, of endlessly wandering exiles, *Pélagie-la-Charrette* tells of piecing together the fragments of a community, of returning to the native soil. *Evangeline* mentioned the lure of Louisiana as a cheerful alternative to the old country, and *Pélagie* also mentions a few companions of the protagonist to whom Louisiana provides an opportunity to “transplant” the country south, with the prospect of new life-styles as planters on the rich virgin alluvial soil of Louisiana, where French is already spoken. As Anatole-à-Jude puts it, “[t]here is a fine lot of our own people settled there already. Be it in the north or in the south, it will always be Acadie, and we’ll always be at home there” (*Pélagie* 101). In her quest for her lover, Longfellow’s *Evangeline* also found herself among happily settled Cajuns:

Welcome once more, my friends, who long have been friendless and homeless,
 Welcome once more to a home, that is better perchance than the old one!
 Here no hungry winter congeals our blood like the rivers;
 Here no stony ground provokes the wrath of the farmer.
 Smoothly the ploughshare runs through the soil, as a keel through the water.
 All the year round the orange-groves are in blossom; and grass grows
 More in a single night than a whole Canadian summer.
 Here, too, numberless herds run wild and unclaimed in the prairies;
 Here, too, lands may be had for the asking, and forests of timber
 With a few blows of the axe are hewn and framed into houses.
 After your houses are built, and your fields are yellow with harvests,
 No King George of England shall drive you away from your homesteads,
 Burning your dwellings and barns, and stealing your farms and your cattle.
 (*Evangeline*, l. 986-998)

But *Pélagie* will not have it: she is undoubtedly what Faulkner would have called one of the unvanquished. She decides that the banishment of the French Acadians from the Atlantic Provinces cannot be condoned, because the identification of the people with the soil is a fact that physical banishment just cannot break off.

What a woman, this *Pélagie*! Capable single-handed of bringing her people home. And of bringing them back against the current. For the current ran south in those days, and *Beausoleil* had seen half his people slip into it and let themselves be carried along to the Antilles or Louisiana. But now who had crossed his path but this stiff-necked, proud-browed woman who dared stand up to her people. (*Pélagie* 77)

Pélagie, widowed by the Great Disruption, becomes the widow of a family, of a people, of Acadia itself, which she nevertheless sets out to bring back to life. Her story becomes the epic of Acadia. Like Scarlett O’Hara, she can be counted upon to retain the pride of the people: “All heads, male and female, turned toward Pélagie. If Acadie had not perished body and soul in the Great Disruption, it was thanks to women” (*Pélagie* 112). Such unvanquished female characters abound in Maillet’s work, as is evinced by the memorable strong figures who give their names to her novels or plays – *La Sagouine*, or *Mariaàgèlas*, the bootlegger. As Janice Kulyk Keefer noted in a review of Maritime writers, “Her female protagonists are characters who spring into life – and words – in the gaps left them by the men in their lives.” Among the legacies of the patriarchal South that Pélagie breaks away from is slavery when as a fugitive slave joins the pilgrims in Charleston as they continue on their way North.

There are a number of features that Antonine Maillet borrowed from Faulkner – and that consciously, since she mentions them in interviews:⁶ the creation of her apocryphal postage stamp of Acadia, the recurring characters who change, develop and become richer from one novel to the next, and certainly the oral quality of her style that she takes to a different pitch, and this is what I want to focus on in the rest of this essay.

Maillet’s orality is not just embodied in the spoken quality of the language, but in the narrative situation itself: in the “prologue” to her novel, Maillet justifies her narrative technique by explaining that for the French Acadians who had returned from exile, survival depended on silence – they came back on tiptoe, through the back-door as it were. A century later, the third Pélagie, *Pélagie-la-Gribouille* (which can be understood both as “messy” or as “the scribbler” – the English translation reads *Pélagie-the-Grouch*, which fails to do justice to all the implications of the original) will have to tell the stories of her ancestor through a collective process of narrative recreation reminiscent of what occurs in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*. But her confrontation with the truth and the legends is staged by a main narrator, a woman who is the writer’s contemporary. This authorial voice tells of the historic facts of the Acadians’ migration back to the Maritime provinces in a voice that seems to function at times like the unifying, omniscient voice of the narrator of a historical novel, but this authorial voice is constantly questioned by other modes of narration. This main narrator fictionally

⁶ For example in “Un brin de Faulkner.”

inherits the story from the ring of fireside Acadians (including Pélagie-la-Gribouille) who make up a secondary narrative frame, a group of descendants of the migrants discussing the past of their people in New Acadia in 1880, when Acadian identity really coalesced.⁷ At each fictive diegetic level of narration, Maillet has some younger members of the group listening: those are the ones who will report (and distort) what they heard to the next generation. Maillet also identifies the narrators' voices by their pronunciation (with different spellings) or their level of culture – for instance when the narrator warns that a character couldn't have thought about a specific biblical comparison because he just wasn't religious enough, or when another perspective conveys the popular rural lore of how the Acadians yoked their cattle differently from their Anglophone neighbors. But mostly, the text seems to be generally broken up into fragments of tales cut off by interpolated objections that are difficult to trace. Still, who cares about consistency or facts in the fiction? The contemporary main narrator sums up the miserable year of 1777, reflecting: “Why 1777 alone contained the seven years of lean kine and the seven scourges of Egypt. / . . . The ten scourges of Egypt,” an unidentified voice interposes – but it might be from another time. “Ten if you wish,” the voice resumes, “but let me tell you, the Acadians had their hands full with seven and would have passed up the other three without a whimper” (*Pélagie* 184). The interpolated remark is introduced by suspension points, which function somewhat like the shifts from italics to roman types in Faulkner, to indicate a change in the narrative authority, or a change from narrative to dialogue. They are to be distinguished from the usual hyphen, which in French typographically signals a change of speaker.

The New Acadia is a patchwork, and so is the story of this secret migration north, made up of disconnected patches of individual stories told by fathers to sons about ancestors, distorted by the desire to distract or educate, or just plain tall tales that may be inherited from south-western humor as well as from Antonine Maillet's French legacy of Rabelaisian carnevalesque. As she says about one of her characters:

For it mustn't be forgotten that Beausoleil-Broussard, like Bélonie, sprang from a people of storytellers and chroniclers who had produced Gargantua and his noble son Pantagruel, and that he remembered all the horrific and dreadful tales passed along from generation to generation while roasting chestnuts by the corner of the fire. (*Pélagie* 140)

⁷ For a Genettian approach to the narrative structure in *Pélagie*, see Magessa O'Reilly, “Une écriture qui célèbre la tradition orale: Pélagie-la-Charrette d'Antonine Maillet” (1993).

At the outset of *Absalom, Absalom!*, we read that “[Quentin]’s very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth” (12). Antonine Maillet’s commonwealth is more extroverted: it is made up in the present time of the conference of the heirs arguing about whose story they will choose to hear about the past, and this quiet negotiation in itself creates the Acadian community. The success of some of these stories depends on their evocative symbolism: like the battle at sea involving the last Acadian sloop, caught in the fight between a British man-of-war and an insurgent Virginian sloop, two valiant Davids to a Goliath, as the Acadian captain chooses not to stay neutral but to help the Southern ship. As she tells the story, the narrator thinks of its future epic inflation into a legendary and profoundly significant memory of an act of bravery – a merger of future and past, characteristic of Maillet’s manner. In the half-legendary collective narrative, it is told how the Acadian captain remembered his Rabelais and went on to tell how they chased the English ship north, eventually reaching the arctic latitudes where the air is so cold that words freeze and fall as hail – a story that French readers are familiar with from the Third Book of Rabelais’s *Adventures of Gargantua and Pantagruel*. At this point, the audience is so engrossed that the narrator does not know how to stop: the stories become too attractive for historical truth to be heard. One century after the events, the Acadians of the late 19th century identify with the American freedom fighters against their common English enemy, and they tend to imagine that their ancestors of 1774 did too – but what if they actually turned against the “Anglo-Saxons” regardless of what side they were fighting on? Who is there to tell? Could not the younger generation, born in exile in Georgia or South-Carolina, identify with the American patriots? Like an American Moses, Pélagie restores Acadia to her people. But *La Grand-Prée* is deserted forever, as the Acadians spread over the country. In an epilogue to the novel, Antonine Maillet, who mentions that she is kin to Pélagie, states that she does not have mixed feelings about Acadia. In Bouctouche, in 1979, she completed her epic on the three hundred and seventy fifth anniversary of Acadia. It was a celebration to a past not past.

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