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Elphège Daignault, the excommunicate, will repent” (“Penitent” 30). These are the opening words to a small article tucked away on page 30 of the February 25, 1929, issue of Time. Daignault—a lawyer, newspaper publisher, and Franco-American community leader in Woonsocket, Rhode Island—had been excommunicated for protesting an English Only language policy implemented by the American Catholic Church in its parochial schools nationwide. The major organ of protest was Daignault’s own French-language newspaper, La Sentinelle. The reporter for Time opined that Daignault’s repentance would cause “slight comment” in the “smart houses” of Protestant America (30). Perhaps, but the news certainly would have caused a stir among the large Franco-American Catholic population of Woonsocket, which at the time numbered 51 percent of the city’s population (Sorrell, “Survivance” 91). Daignault’s acquiescence to the church’s language policy would prove to be devastating for the long-term survival—la survivance—of Francophone culture in Woonsocket.

In 1924, the Diocese of Providence embarked on a mandatory subscription from all parishes to raise funds for the construction of a diocesan-run high school in Woonsocket. The school would teach all subjects in English, and French would be offered as a foreign language. Up to that point, all parochial schools run by Franco-American parishes taught a fully bilingual curriculum, in which French was the language of instruction for half the day, and English for half the day. But French was taught as the mother tongue (la langue maternelle) and English was considered a foreign language (un langage étranger). In effect, the mandatory subscription required Franco-American parishes to financially subsidize a policy of estrangement from their own maternal language.

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Daignault viewed this as a policy of forced assimilation, and he used La Sentinelle to voice the Franco-American elite’s opposition to the plan. The Sentinelle Affair, as this conflict became known, proved a brief but tumultuous chapter in the troubled relationship between French and English in New England. The affair consisted of a specific arrangement of arguments and political positioning between Irish Catholic ecclesiastical leaders and Franco-American civil leaders that resulted in the eradication of French and the political and economic hegemony of English in one small region of New England. Although the American Catholic Church had encouraged and supported the construction of non-English-speaking ethnic enclaves since at least the 1880s, by the 1920s it found arguments in favor of English Only useful as a politically expedient means of centralizing its own diocesan administrative structure. As Evelyn Sterne points out, this move was designed to help the church protect and advance its interests against Protestant political control (Sterne 59).

In “The Dartmouth Conference and the Geohistory of the Native Speaker,” John Trimbur contextualizes the conflicts of the Sentinelle Affair within “a long and largely ignored history of education in the United States for which the medium of instruction was either a language other than English or bilingual” (163). Trimbur calls for recovering these forgotten histories as a way of exploring “the ambivalence toward English that has characterized the unsettled linguistic history of the United States” (166). Recovering the history of the Sentinelle Affair for teachers and scholars of English studies will reveal two important and interconnected insights. First, histories of white ethnicity and American assimilation often contain stories of the eradication not just of languages but of nascent “borderlands subjectivities”—to borrow a phrase from Damián Baca (146). Recovering these stories of eradication helps to reveal the role that English language policy has played in the social construction of whiteness. Second, arguments about language policy are often tied to policies of economic development and, as such, are motivated by competing material interests that constrain all participants’ abilities to imagine first, what constitutes a development and second, what a common language can be. The Sentinelle Affair serves as an historical case study of a particular process of administrative centralization and the corresponding hierarchization of language difference that accompanies such centralization. This process established English as a de facto official language in the United States, and it had the ancillary effect of establishing other languages as subordinate “home” languages, whose primary function became the maintenance of an isolationist ethnic identity that resisted Anglo-American assimilation.

**Speak White**

Developing an understanding of Franco-Americans’ seemingly intractable loyalty to French and their militant rejection of English in the early twentieth century first
requires a critical understanding of the connection between English and whiteness in the cultural narrative of American immigration. The historian Richard Sorrell argues that the militancy with which the Sentinellists resisted assimilation poses a challenge to the “traditional assumptions about the ethnic life of America’s white immigrant nationalities” (“Sentinelle” 69). Those assumptions undergirded two nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theories of assimilation: “Anglo-conformity” and “the melting pot” (Gordon 85). Each of these theories posited a homogenous white ethnic immigrant experience, in which immigrants transformed their languages and cultural practices into a fixed, “old-country” heritage and voluntarily adopted new American values, cultural practices, and the English language. The persistence of these assumptions is worth noting. For even as Sorrell argues that the Sentinelle Affair complicates any “simple model of immigration-assimilation” among ethnic whites (“Sentinelle” 67), his own account of the incident is marred by some of the same traditional assumptions that he claims the Sentinelle Affair forces us to question. He insists, for example, that the failure of the Sentinellist resistance is evidence that white assimilation was an inevitable outcome of Franco-American immigration history. He says the Sentinellist resistance failed because they were “trying to oppose inevitable waves of both history and the future” (“Sentinelle” 74), and that this failure affirms “the impossibility” (72) of la survivance as a viable cultural practice in the United States.

Like other histories of white ethnicity, the tension between language rights and ethnic identity for Franco-Americans seems to be defused by the apparent inevitability of white assimilation. Issues of language loss, the loss of cultural identity, and the loss of an enclave’s cultural and linguistic self-determination seem small relative to the rewards of white privilege. But teleological arguments such as these obscure important insights into the motives and meanings of the cultural practices that came to a head in the Sentinelle Affair. If we reject teleological arguments, we begin to see this sense of inevitability as a product of the terms that cohere around the word immigrant. To call the experience of Franco-Americans part of the story of American immigration is to simultaneously confer a legal status and a discourse on their language practices and on their relationship to the US border. The inevitability of assimilation—and the expectation that the immigrant should want to assimilate—is already implicit in immigration discourse. Immigration discourse withholds from the immigrant the agency needed to make use of immigration as a cultural tactic.1

Daignault recognizes the polarizing effect of immigration discourse in defining the arguments that make up the Sentinelle Affair. In the opening pages of Le vrai mouvement Sentinelliste, he sets two positive and opposing terms against each other: le mouvement and l’agitation, movement and agitation (8). Daignault envisioned Sentinellist opposition as un mouvement, a popular movement to protect minority language rights from rising nativist sentiment.2 From the point of view of the
Province diocese, however, the efforts of *La Sentinelle* were not *un mouvement*. As articulated in their English-language newspaper the *Providence Visitor*, Daignault and the other Sentinellists were politically motivated agitators. J. Albert Foisy, the most vocal critic of the Sentinellists, called Daignault a “violently zealous battler” engaged in a nationalist struggle against the Irish episcopate (23). The Sentinellists could have no legitimate cause for opposition other than to perpetuate a long-standing ethnic feud that went back to the arrival of Irish laborers in Québec in the 1840s (Foisy 18). They could have no other reason for resisting the American dream of assimilation, *la fantaisie de se faire assimilateur*, the same dream that had allowed the Irish to ascend from the status of unskilled laborers to positions of authority in the diocese (Daignault 28).

For Daignault and Foisy, there seemed no way out of the opposition between *le mouvement* and *l’agitation* in defining exactly who Franco-Americans were and what they were trying to do. But by bracketing off the set of immigration-assimilation terms that entrench Daignault and Foisy in opposition to each other, and by reframing the migrations of French Canadians across the US border in terms of diaspora, what emerges is a different set of relationships between English and French than is possible through the cultural narrative of white assimilation. In forming the argument that French Canadian migrations constitute a diaspora, I follow sociologist Rogers Brubaker’s suggestion that rather than thinking of diaspora as a historical fact, as a substantive “bounded entity,” we might instead think of it as “a stance, a claim” (12). The usefulness of taking a “diasporic stance” is that such a stance recognizes historical narrative itself as a form of argumentation. Historical narratives informed by immigration discourse seek to merely “describe” French Canadian migrations in the legalistic terms of regulated border entry, de-emphasizing the political interest-edness of all historical narrative. Rather than seeking to merely describe the world, the diasporic stance instead “seek[s] to remake it” (12).

Brubaker offers three criteria by which one might justify taking a diasporic stance toward the movement of a people, criteria which will help us develop a set of alternate terms for thinking about the relationship of French to English. Dispersion is the first criterion of diaspora, most traditionally a “forced” and “traumatic” dispersion across borders outside the homeland (5). Two key events in French Canadian history are worth noting in this regard. First is Britain’s 1755 expulsion of the Acadian French settlements of Nova Scotia after the British defeated the French at Fort Beauséjour. More than 6,000 Acadians were scattered over the American colonies along the Atlantic coast, including more than 1,000 who were refused entry at Virginia and were rerouted to France. Acadian settlements that dated to the original 1604 establishment of New France were burned and destroyed (Ross and Deveau 101).

A second key event is the 1840 Act of Union, which consolidated a heavily indebted Upper Canada—which was mainly Anglican British—with the financially
solvent Lower Canada, which was largely made up of the French-speaking colonies of Québec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia (Redonnet, R. St. Onge, S. St. Onge, and Neilsen 63). The Act of Union was motivated by the recommendations of Lord Durham in his 1839 Report on the Affairs of British North America. Durham recommended “subjecting” the French “to the vigorous rule of an English majority” through a legislative act of union. He believed this would lead to the forced assimilation of the French, which he described as a “destitute” nationality “with no history, and no literature” (294). French Canadians entered New England after 1840 to escape the economic and political consequences of this act, fleeing British eradicationist tendencies, the imposition of Upper Canada’s large public debt, and the new legal designation of the French Canadian as a second-class citizen in the newly created Province of Canada.

The second criterion of diaspora is a particular “orientation to a real or imagined ‘homeland’ as an authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty” (Brubaker 5). This orientation was articulated in French Canadian culture as *la survivance*. Following the handover of New France to the British in 1763 and the ensuing threats of forced assimilation, *la survivance* arose as a network of Francophone cultural institutions, practices, attitudes, and beliefs embodied in the Catholic religion (*la foi*), the French language (*la langue*) and French Catholic customs (*les moeurs*) (Sorrell, “Survivance” 91). In “Rhetorics of Survivance,” Malea Powell, citing Michel de Certeau, describes survivance as a tactic originating in the cultural space of the Other and capable of responding to imperialism’s “systems of dominance” (405). French Canadian settlements in New England during the nineteenth century used American immigration as another cultural tactic of survivance, as the United States–Canada border functioned to protect Franco-American parishes within a larger Catholic network, making possible the maintenance of a French presence in the midst of Anglo domination.

Sorrell points to the proximity of Québec as one reason for the persistence of *la survivance* in New England, as Franco-Americans were able to move back and forth across the United States–Québec border (“Survivance” 95), maintaining real and imagined ties to the Québec homeland. But the relationship of survivance to the idea of a homeland is a complicated one, as it risks conflating claims to a homeland with claims to indigeneity, ignoring the fraught relations among Anglo, Franco, and indigenous presences. As Scott Lyons has noted, claims to a homeland and to indigeneity are two subtly different claims. The Act of Union did not colonize the Québécois in the same way that the French had colonized the lands of the Mohawks and Micmacs. Lyons is right to point out that the colonial presence is still manifested in scenes such as the 1990 Oka Crisis in Québec (87). Powell likewise notes that the occupying force that colonized indigenous lands “has not been, nor will it ever be, withdrawn” (“Rhetorics” 399). However, where Lyons sees the need for drawing firm boundaries between the rhetorical work of indigenous nations and Euro-
American nations, Powell sees the transformative possibilities of rhetorical work that acknowledges the simultaneous and layered presences of indigeneity, colonization, and imperialism, to which we might also add layers of immigration and diaspora. She calls for constructing out of these layers “a trickster alliance as the basis for a new French and Indian War” (“Rhetorics” 400).

I argue that the foundations for this alliance lie first in adopting a diasporic stance toward Franco-American settlement in the United States, reframing it in terms of dispersion and survivance rather than in terms of a resistance-assimilation binary dictated by immigration discourse. Second, the foundations for a trickster alliance lie in the recognition of hybrid cultural forms as tactics of survivance/la survivance. Powell argues for a scholarly practice that self-consciously engages with the power of Vizenor’s trickster metaphor, a metaphor capable of turning scholarship into a “tease that allows us access to the ironic, not tragic, presence of the tribes, a practice that is survivance” (“Rhetorics” 401). Although Lyons acknowledges that the hybrid nature of the trickster provides a means of escape from the “disabling binaries” of colonial discourse, he stops short of endorsing hybridity, “a word that used to reference seed corn and cattle,” as a term to now describe “people of color” (92).

While Lyons would prefer to firmly draw the boundaries of rhetorical sovereignty, Powell sees in trickster survivance tactics “a middle ground teeming with change and possibility” for all of us (“Down by the River” 40). For her, alliance and adaptation tactics must use available means to construct identity and build community, the establishment of a “middle ground” of sharing, where all cultures recognize that they must change if they are to survive (39). The correspondences and divergences of survivance/la survivance are at the heart of any “trickster hermeneutics” and constitute a middle-ground “homeland” between indigeneity and diaspora.

The final criterion of diaspora, and one tied to discussions of hybridity in Lyons and Powell, concerns what Brubaker calls the “boundary maintenance” of the dispersed population (6). As the French dispersed across New England, they also redrew the cultural boundaries against the prevailing political boundaries that separate Québec from New England. French migrants managed to do this through the establishment of a cross-border system of churches, parochial schools, and Catholic colleges that enlisted the United States–Canada political border as a tactic of la survivance. Sorrell notes that Franco-Americans relied on Québec to train French-speaking priests and nuns to run their churches and schools. Students graduating from French schools had access to French-speaking colleges in Québec (“Survivance” 97) and to Assumption College—Le Collège de l’Assomption—originally founded as a French-speaking Catholic college in Worcester, Massachusetts (Daignault 67). French Canadians were able to settle across the US border partially because the Catholic Church operated as a transnational cultural institution, encouraging the formation of French-speaking parishes in New England and allowing them to
maintain a network of communication with Québec. The church episcopate shuttled back and forth across the political border to build and staff parishes that could cater to Francophone congregations in the United States.

Thus, prior to the polarization of French language rights into either a popular *mouvement* or a political *agitation*, a cultural and ecclesiastical *rapprochement* governed cross-language relations, as the American Catholic Church operated as part of a transnational and translingual organization. The terms of the cross-language relationship provided the frame through which Franco-American cultural practices were understood. The earliest Franco-American parishes chose to speak French, and that choice was officially recognized by the English-speaking episcopate. Once a centralized language policy was enacted by the church, however, the church’s own cross-language relations transformed into the polarized arguments and political positioning of the Irish episcopate against the Franco leadership. Two competing vantage points emerged: the minority vantage, in which maintaining one’s language was a means of cultural preservation; and the nativist vantage, in which refusing to accept English was a means of political resistance.

Taking a diasporic stance toward French settlement in New England counters the cultural narrative of white assimilation and the perception that the outcomes of the Sentinelle Affair were inevitable. Franco-Americans were not considered white in early twentieth-century New England because they refused to accept English, and white status was not an inevitable outcome of the Sentinelle Affair. Rather, incidents such as the Sentinelle Affair constructed English as the language of assimilation, and constructed other languages as languages of resistance. The imposition of white status on Franco-Americans was viewed as Anglo encroachment, a threat against *la survie* in the tradition of the 1755 expulsion of the Acadians, the 1763 acquisition of New France, and the 1840 Act of Union. Franco-Americans in New England, and in Québec prior to the Quiet Revolution, were admonished to “speak white” when overheard speaking French by an Anglo. The slur became so familiar to French speakers that in 1974 Québécoise poet Michèle Lalonde published a nationalist poem titled “Speak White,” which vehemently satirized Anglo claims to linguistic superiority and the accompanying denigration of Canadian varieties of French.

In 1980, “Speak White” was dramatized as a film by the National Film Board of Canada in order to document the uneasy settlement of French and English in Québec province. In the poem, Lalonde ruthlessly represents the Anglo point of view, characterizing Canadian French as “uncultured stammering” (*nous sommes un peuple inculte et bégue*), “a language of swearwords” (*rien ne vaut une langue à jurons*) in relation to the “admirable tongue” (*oui quelle admirable langue*) of English (Falardeau and Poulin). The poem satirically locates the “genius” of English in its ability to talk about “production profits and percentages” (*parlez-nous production profits et pourcentages*) and to institute a “monopoly” (*le monopole*) both economically and linguistically
over French-speaking people. Rather than the oft-cited economic benefits that accompany access to English, Lalonde’s poem argues that the English monopoly regulated French Canadian access to resources, relegating the people to the status of second-class citizens in the Francophone provinces. This regulation corresponds to Alastair Pennycook’s observations of the regulatory effect of English on access to resources in the peripheries of the British empire (Cultural Politics 14). In the context of an English monopoly, French is devalued, good for nothing but telling “the story of how a race of servants live” (pour raconter / une vie de peuple-concierge). In a gesture of defiance, however, the poem indicates the subversive power of French to outlast Anglo hegemony, to survive, “to tell you yes that the sun is setting yes” (pour vous dire oui que le soleil se couche oui), an allusion to the rise of Québécois nationalism in the image of the sun finally setting on the British empire.

**The Sentinel Affair**

With this conceptual framework in place, we can now look more closely at the specific uses to which the church put arguments in favor of English Only policies. In the 1920s, two such policies took effect in Rhode Island within a year of each other, one civil and the other ecclesiastical.³ The first was a state law, the Peck Act, passed in 1922, which required parochial schools to make English the primary language of instruction for teaching math, history, civics, and English (Rafael 27). Following a six-month labor strike organized by a multilingual immigrant workforce all along the East Coast, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed the law based on what Sterne calls a fear of ethnic “labor militancy” on the part of industrialists and their political allies (219). The law was similar to other nativist-inspired state laws passed in the 1920s and, like those other laws, was eventually declared unconstitutional.⁴ As aggressive as it was in its attempts to anglicize an ethnically diverse state, because the Peck Act was so quickly overturned, it proved not to be a serious threat to the Franco-American community.

According to Daignault, more significant was a policy developed by the Catholic Church in the United States and outlined in a pamphlet called *A Catechism of Catholic Education*, published by the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC) in Washington, DC, in 1922 (Ryan). One goal of the catechism was to remedy the fragmentation of the Catholic Church in the United States by centralizing the education policies of the nation’s parochial schools, in effect taking the schools out of the hands of local parish officials and instead putting them under the control of a national council of bishops. This centralization was partially enacted financially, through programs of mandatory taxation, through suspension of diocesan support for local parish projects, and through the promotion of diocesan development projects (Daignault 66). The centralization was also enacted linguistically, through a language
policy that required English as the medium of instruction in parish schools for all subjects except religion (Daignault 58).

Here we can see the kind of relationship between English language policies and planned development that Pennycook has observed in the peripheries of the British empire where, rather than proffer English language instruction as a means to socioeconomic advancement, English Only policies in fact “restrict access of non-English speakers to economic resources and political institutions” (Cultural Politics 19). Though the goal of NCWC’s language policy was to unify the Catholic Church in English, the real consequences of the Providence diocese’s implementation of that policy was that English became a gatekeeper to parish development. Further, it produced and regulated the non-English-speaking parishes as Others within its own newly centralized bureaucracy.

The roles of English as a gatekeeper to development and as the medium through which the Other was produced and regulated were deeply intertwined. Daignault accused the diocese of restricting the ability of the Franco-American community to continue to produce French-speaking priests who could serve in the local parishes. This restriction hindered the relationship between Franco-American parishes and the parishes of Québec, where the birth, marriage, and death records of the ancestors of Woonsocket families were stored. The church’s language policy, then, would produce a cultural and familial amnesia: a people who would no longer understand their own history except in English-speaking terms, as isolationist French speakers in a firmly integrated English-speaking American diocesan network. Daignault saw the language policy as an attempt to “rupture” the transnational alliance between Franco-Americans in New England and French Canadians in Québec (27). The policy in fact did disrupt a Franco-American/French Canadian educational system designed to produce a French-speaking clergy that could serve Franco-American congregations throughout New England. That transnational education system had made it possible to use immigration as a cultural tactic of *la survivance*.

Daignault protested the diocese’s decisions to put a complete stop to all parish development projects, to redirect all parish revenue toward centralized diocesan projects, and to execute a mandatory tax without taking a vote first (66). He argued against the diocese language and development policies on multiple fronts, enlisting canonical law, civil law, and NCWC’s own position on parents’ rights. He insisted that not only did NCWC claim no official authority over any diocese (57), but in fact its position on language represented neither the American Catholic Church nor the church in Rome. The Roman Church, he noted, was not an “agent of Anglicization” (61)—it had never assumed the role of “denationalizing” peoples, and the bishops who endorsed the NCWC plan were violating canonical code (62). He pointed out that, in the same document in which it advocated instruction in English, NCWC also affirmed parents’ fundamental rights to direct their children’s education (Ryan 69),
which implied that they should be able to choose the language in which their children learned. Daignault argued that, by striking down the Peck Act, the Supreme Court recognized the right to education in languages other than English (62). Regarding the tax policy, he suggested that a “voluntary subscription” be the diocesan policy on its own development projects, so that parishes might choose how to best allocate their funds across parish and diocesan projects (72).

Despite all of these arguments, the bishop of the Providence diocese went ahead with the language and development plans. The Sentinellist opposition defied his decision and challenged its legitimacy in two Vatican tribunals. When both tribunals failed, Daignault sought protection from the civil courts by filing a suit against the diocese corporation, thus violating Canon 120 of ecclesiastical law, which grants “special jurisdiction” to the clergy and protects them from being summoned in court (Foisy 184). In 1928, the pope responded by excommunicating fifty-eight members of le mouvement Sentinelliste (Daignault 191) and placing La Sentinelle under interdict, forbidding Catholics from reading it.

The redirection of parish revenue into the construction of an English language school thus extended past the material economy of the diocese into the spiritual economy of the Catholic faith. Daignault and the other fifty-seven excommunicates were caught between two conflicting value systems, both of which made salvation contingent on language policy. On one hand was the value system of Québecois culture, distilled in the familiar saying “qui perd sa langue perd sa foi,” or “who loses their language loses their faith” (Pelloquin-Faré 63). From this perspective, the Sentinellists’ protest against English Only was an attempt to make their cultural worldview cohere, to maintain the nexus of language, faith and family that was the embodiment of la survivance. On the other hand was the value system of the American Catholic Church and, by extension, the Holy See. In this system, the maintenance of French now meant official exclusion from the sacraments of the church. Prior to the NCWC policy decisions, these two systems were not in conflict with one another, but rather operated in concert. Following the enactment of the NCWC language and development plans, these systems polarized into the assimilation and resistance of immigration discourse.

**LANGUAGE AND CONSCIENCE**

Ultimately, Daignault submitted to the obligations of the excommunication, the newspaper was suppressed, and he was returned to the blessings of ecclesiastical society. The terms of Daignault’s reconciliation with the church required him to sign three documents renouncing his opposition to the episcopate and affirming the dissolution of La Sentinelle. Daignault signed the documents in French, _Je, soussigné, déclaré condamner . . . _ (I hereby condemn . . .) (208), presenting an ironic resolution
to a conflict partially centered on the role of French in performing the sacraments of the church. Although Latin was the official language of the Mass, French was the language in which the sacraments were conducted in Franco-American parishes, including the sacrament of confession. Confession provided a link between the parish church and the parochial school; it was the point where religious doctrine and pedagogy converged. Confession was an examination of the individual’s adherence to the lessons of moral instruction given in the classroom.

Daignault’s reentry into the church required him to voluntarily disclose and condemn his actions as violations of canonical law: in effect, to confess. He and the other excommunicates were required to attend church on February 24, 1929, in which their confession and repentance was read aloud to the congregation (Foisy 218). This language act maintained in its own way the kind of linguistic and cultural continuity he was striving for all along. He had feared that one of the outcomes of English Only instruction would be children confessing in English, though they might still sin in French. In fact, by the time Daignault published *Le vrai mouvement Sentinelliste* in 1936, he expressed little surprise “that we have begun confessing our children in English” at the diocese’s new English-language high school (60). Pennycook notes a colonial binary between English and other languages in the peripheries of the British empire, in which native peoples were seen as absent of morality and religion and needing to be saved by the civilizing work of English education (*English* 56). *A Catechism of Catholic Education* sought to reproduce a similar colonial binary, displacing the colonial/native dialectic with a nativist/immigrant dialectic. Just as Pennycook says, “Calcutta became dirty only as London became clean” (*English* 64), so we might say that French became sinful only as English became holy.

It’s important to note, however, that not all Frenches are equal. French in the Franco-American enclave of Woonsocket was stratified by social class and education level. The variety of Canadian French that Daignault published and championed in *La Sentinelle* was not likely to be the French spoken within *les petits Canadas*, or French Canadian ghettos, of Woonsocket. In relation to standard Québec French, the French of the working class immigrant was *un mauvais français*, a “Canuck” French, the low vernacular associated with rural Québec (Redonnet, R. St. Onge, S. St. Onge, and Neilsen 72). This French may have been heard in the schoolyard of Woonsocket’s parochial schools and may have been occasionally used in the classroom as a language of instruction, but it would not have been formally taught or encouraged. The low vernacular would have been a sign of moral turpitude and cultural ignorance from both the Anglo-American vantage and the vantage of the Franco-American elite.

English speakers, the French parochial schools, and the Franco cultural elite instead favored *le bon usage* of metropolitan Montréal and Paris, and sought to distance themselves from the Canucks in the ghettos of *les petits Canadas*. The cultural elite among the Franco-Americans in Woonsocket had more in common with
Anglo-Protestants in terms of the value placed on Parisian French versus vernacular Canadian French. The linguistic economy of Woonsocket in the 1920s designated English as the prestige language and the language of salvation. French was stratified into Parisian French, which carried its own prestige among Anglos; standard Canadian French, which was the metropolitan French of Montréal and the French that Daignault would most likely have identified with; and the vernacular Canuck French at the bottom, which for Anglos and Franco-American elites alike was a language of moral turpitude.

Whether the passing of *A Catechism of Catholic Education* actually affected the languages in which confession was heard in Woonsocket is less important here than the fact that Daignault recognized a connection between language use and the examination of conscience. He feared that one’s soul depended on the language he or she used, and the Vatican’s excommunication affirmed that fear. Though it may be impossible to recover the specific words uttered in Woonsocket confessionals of the 1920s, Daignault’s fear was borne out for the excommunicated Sentinellists, whose reentry into the church—their salvation—depended on their rejection of French language rights and on their acceptance of English as the language of instruction in their children’s schools.

**Borderlands Subjectivities**

The church’s language policy transformed the Catholic struggle to purify one’s soul by means of confession into a cultural struggle to preserve Franco identity and agency in a contested discursive space. Struggle, or *la lutte* (Daignault 52), is an important concept in the Sentinelle Affair. Daignault locates the site of struggle somewhere between the material and the imaginary, a space in between. This is the space occupied by *Saint-Siège* (Daignault 183), the Holy See, the political and fiduciary embodiment of the Vatican’s spiritual power. As much as he was engaged in a spiritual struggle to save his own soul by renouncing his language rights, Daignault was also implicated in a political and psychological struggle. In the public sphere, he was engaged in a struggle against policy: the NCWC language policy and the civil and ecclesiastical laws governing parish taxation (31). On the level of the cultural imaginary, he was engaged in *la lutte pour la survivance*, a struggle for cultural, linguistic, and familial continuity with an imagined past.

The French language was a means of negotiating a political border that threatened to dislocate Franco-Americans from their Québécois ancestry. The preservation of French allowed for an imagined continuity of family lineages and histories across political divisions of time and space. The financial policies of the diocese in effect monetized the cultural allegiance of ethnic parishes, firmly drawing a political border between Québec and New England. Foisy rejected the idea that *la survivance* was a
struggle of the cultural imaginary, instead arguing that the struggle consisted of a small Franco-American leadership engaged in a campaign of political agitation against the Irish American episcopate in Rhode Island. Foisy seemed unable to recognize the psychological aspects of linguistic struggle, acknowledging only a long-standing ethnic feud between Irish American Catholics and Franco-American Catholics over hard-won material gains in Protestant New England (13).

And here we come up against the way language performs, or gives some material manifestation to, what Baca calls the “collective imagination” of a culture (145). In a way, the entire Franco-American cultural imagination was enacted through the political resistance, spiritual exile, and eventual capitulation of the Sentinellists. The Sentinelle Affair served as a proving ground for la survivance, resulting not only in its failure as a tactic of resistance, but also providing a kind of verification that such tactics had been necessary for French Canadians and Franco-Americans all along. The Sentinellists did not merely identify as French; they identified as French in the midst of Anglo domination. They didn’t merely speak French; they spoke French in a linguistic economy that valorized English.

This dual identification—as Franco survivor and Anglo Other—produced a borderlands subjectivity in Franco culture that in many ways resembles the kind described by Baca. In “Rhetoric, Interrupted,” Baca describes the borderlands subjectivity of La Malinche, Hernán Cortés’s Nauhuatl interpreter and intermediary in his dealings in Mexico. The historical Malinche was a Mayan slave given to Cortés as a servant. She quickly became his “foremost interpreter, advisor, mistress, and mother of his child” (146). Baca searches Malinche’s historical acts of translation for their “present-day symbolic and rhetorical potential” (147). He sees in her position as cultural intermediary a manifestation of Nepantlisma, “a state of dwelling in a border-space” (146). Following Gloria Anzaldúa, Baca describes a borderlands subjectivity as not being positioned in one of two opposing worldviews—the opposition between mouvement and agitation, for example. Rather, it is a position “torn between ways,” a position that “embodies multiple contradictions and sets them into motion through translation” (147). The negotiation of multiple languages and cultures is transformed into a way of thinking. It’s subjectivity as shuttling back and forth across borders.

The terms I’m using here may appear to equate borderlands subjectivity with psychic pain, as though Malinche was caught in a struggle between opposing forces that threatened to leave her identity fragmented or “torn.” But Baca presents the borderlands subjectivity as a valuable and productive development in cultural identity, not a struggle so much as a “dwelling” (146). Just as Malinche gave birth to the first mestizo, borderlands subjectivities give birth to new languages that can make differences cohere. Along these lines, Powell identifies the “middle ground” of indigenous survivance not as a site of psychic pain but as a site of new cultural production. She
shows how Susan La Flesche Picotte makes both indigenous identity and the “civilized” rhetoric of imperialism cohere in the figure of the “civilized Indian.” Powell specifically notes, in her careful reading of La Flesche’s letters as a young girl, that La Flesche “isn’t struggling” and “she isn’t torn between cultures.” She “simply is—an ‘Indian’ girl who studies and reads and sings with Senators” who once visited their home (“Down by the River” 49). La Flesche’s borderlands subjectivity is a space between both Indian ways and white ways, a middle ground that rearticulates the “torn between ways” of Nepantlisma in positive terms.

Baca’s use of Malinche as a metaphor for borderlands subjectivity transforms colonialism’s political struggles over contested terrain into an internalized, psychological state. This transformation advances the tradition in rhetoric and composition to define struggle “as an internal process” (Bruffee 693). In theorizing the productive uses of difference in collaborative learning, scholars such as Bruffee and John Trimbur “psychologize” the term struggle by locating it within individual consciousness, as an internalization of the public sphere. Trimbur sees struggle as a “standard feature of contemporary social existence” that we experience psychologically as a “polyphony of voices, an internal conversation traversed by social, cultural, and linguistic differences” (“Consensus” 609). Baca advances and complicates the idea of psychological struggle first by making it multilingual and second by explicitly making it a productive and valuable dwelling place. Then Powell explores the rhetorical acts that construct a middle ground out of this internalized polyphony of voices.

Likewise for the Sentinellists, the political dividing up of the contested terrain of the Providence diocese was psychologized into a desire for imagined continuity with the past, but it was not a past in which one lived a pure and authentic Francophone existence. Rather, it was a past made of la survivance, a past made of struggling against the political divisions and cultural differences that stem from the presence of Francophonie amid Anglo domination. Out of that desire, the Sentinellists acted rhetorically, constructing a series of civil and ecclesiastical arguments designed to carve out a social and political space in which Francophone cultural identity was neither relegated to nor severed from the past. For the anti-Sentinellists, however, questions of language rights could not be considered part of the process of designing the political unification of the American Catholic Church. Language difference (la différence de langage) was an insurmountable barrier between Franco- and Irish Americans, and the fragmentation or unification of the church was at stake (Foisy 4).

To my mind, the larger issue here that has pitted the groups against each other is the insistence on language differences and cultural preservation rather than on the “torn between” ways of a borderlands subjectivity. The precarious status of white assimilation in New England for both Irish Americans and Franco-Americans led both groups to reify their differences in relation to the centralizing language policies of NCWC. The need for the Irish American clergy to maintain their status,
and the resulting need for the Franco-American parishes to resist submission to it, ended up constraining all of the participants’ abilities to imagine what a common language could be. The enforcement of English acquisition strikes me as a politically expedient solution for the episcopate in terms of church unification, but one that was in fact more deeply divisive because it set French against English, instantiated them as discrete languages that served different purposes, and subjected the speakers of one language to the speakers of the other. This is a point that neither Foisy, nor Daignault, nor Monsignor Hickey, the bishop of the diocese, seems capable of seeing.

As we have learned, the failure of the Sentinelle Affair to carve out a cultural and political space in which Francophone culture could survive in the midst of Anglo domination was not an “inevitable” failure borne from the impossibility of refusing the benefits and privileges of white assimilation. In fact, the failure of the Franco-American community’s leadership was not even a failure of la survivance as a whole. Sorrell notes that a significant number of more “moderate” Francos disagreed with the Sentinellist opposition and did not approve of Daignault’s aggressive challenging of the church (“Sentinelle” 72). To rearticulate this in terms of Powell’s work on survivance, we might say that the larger Franco community recognized that la survivance could not be pursued through official channels of power. The failure of the Sentinelle Affair was the community elite’s failure to adopt appropriate survivance tactics, the tactics of finding a middle ground in which one could appear authentically French while at the same time appearing to “speak white.”

These tactics were adopted by the “moderate” Francos who did not support the Vatican tribunals or the civil suits against the diocese. These moderate Francos included a large number of Canucks from les petits Canadas, the French Canadian ghettos, where the practice of everyday life required making “calculated action[s] determined by the absence of a proper locus, a production of knowledge determined, like Vizenor’s postindian, by its absence, not its presence, in discourses of power” (Powell, “Rhetorics” 405). To call them moderate, however, is to assume that they were voluntarily taking up a position in the discourses of power and felt they had something at stake in the arguments between the Sentinellists and the diocese. Rather, we might follow Powell and reformulate moderation in terms of “tactical authenticity.” Powell describes the use that Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins and Charles Eastman make of dominant representations of Indian identity to perform the “civilized Indian” as a category “in between” Euroamerican and Native American cultural values (405). She argues that Eastman’s cultural identity as a “civilized Indian” is the result of his participation “in a rhetoric of survivance in which his practice of what I’m calling tactical authenticity is what enables his survival as an Indian/Dakota person” (418). This tactical authenticity can be seen operating behind the paradoxical cultural identity of moderate Franco-Americans, who (to quote one Franco-American living in Woonsocket in the 1970s) could claim that they were Americans “no different
from anybody else” at the same time that they could claim a Francophone cultural identity that distinguished them from all other Americans.5

As shifting regional populations attempted to lay claim to rights and resources across national and political borders,6 the linguistic division between French and English in the United States became reified. The church’s English Only policy linguistically enacted a political border between New England and Québec province at a time when that border was becoming culturally inconsequential, as large colonies of Francophones settled throughout the region. Sorrell notes that by 1900, “almost as many ‘ethnic French Canadians’ lived in the United States as there were French Canadians remaining in the Québec homeland” (“Survivance” 92), with the largest concentration living in New England. Conflicts similar to the Sentinelle Affair occurred in Maine, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. In all of these places, the nascent development of a borderlands subjectivity—la survivance of a Francophone culture in the midst of Anglo domination—was eradicated by a centralized policy of English-language instruction and diocesan control.

Linguistic enactments of political borders are continuously reproduced in contemporary language practice among white English-speaking monolinguals in the United States. First is through the aforementioned dislocation of family lineages, so that non-English-speaking generations of the past either become vestiges of an “old country” or are forgotten altogether. Recovering the ignored and forgotten linguistic construction of racial and ethnic identity among white monolinguals goes beyond white ethnic studies and identity politics. It is a necessary part of the construction of a cross-cultural and cross-language rhetoric and composition alliance. It produces the trickster metaphors and the borderlands subjectivities necessary for developing “a new language, one that doesn’t convince us of our unutterable and ongoing differences, one that doesn’t force us to see one another as competitors” (Powell, “Down by the River” 41).

Recent work in rhetoric and composition seeks to shift the tradition away from the classical Greco-Roman history and to instead situate rhetorical study in the context of continental and indigenous rhetorics. The essays collected in the 2004 special issue of College English testify to the need for this shift (see also Baca and Villanueva; Lyons; Villanueva). Part of the value of such work is that it can help us to articulate “a useable past in which Native writings are critically important, not just ‘included’” in Western rhetorical traditions (“Down by the River” 41). Histories like the Sentinelle Affair, for example, can make use of continental and indigenous rhetorical study in order to understand migratory or diasporic rhetorics in terms other than the cultural narratives of assimilation and resistance, narratives that create a sense of inevitability in stories of how non-English-speaking people capitulate to the dominance of English. The study of white assimilation should include the study of the eradication of nascent borderlands subjectivities through the spread of
English. Such accounts will help forge the kind of cross-cultural alliance Powell calls for, moving beyond discursive enclaves such as “Indians who study other Indians in composition and rhetoric” (“Rhetorics” 429). Along these same lines, Baca’s work seeks to interrupt “enduring macro-narratives, by forcing them into contradictions and making them speak in a plurality of tongues” (150). From the point of view of Sentinellist history, the alliance between indigenous and diasporic rhetorical work begins in the recognition that en français, la Nouvelle-Angleterre est le nom du paysage politique, non pas le nom du pays.\(^7\)

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**Notes**

1. Regarding the use of immigration as a cultural tactic, compare Ralph Cintron’s account of Don Angel in *Angels’ Town*. Don Angel uses false identification cards and immigration papers as “a display of identities allowing his person to escape observation” (57). Cintron identifies curtailments of self-interest as the institutional motive for “verifying” and “certifying” identities through the use of photographs, numbers, and signatures, techniques through which the institution protects itself against the individual. Yet Don Angel uses these same techniques to advance his own self-interests. We might see the motives behind French Canadian immigration in a similar light, as Franco-Americans used the verification processes of immigration as a way of protecting and advancing a French presence in the midst of Anglo domination.

2. Alan Kraut describes nativism as the belief that immigrants from southern, central, and eastern Europe posed an “imminent danger” to the politics, religious practices, economic activities, public health, and racial purity of an Anglo-Saxon, American way of life (173–74). The idea that white Americans were monolingual native English speakers is connected to what Kraut calls “a pattern of Caucasian unity” that emerged in the United States in the 1920s as part of a hierarchical division of humanity into what were called the white race and the Mongoloid and Negro “lower” races (194). Nativist arguments against immigration and for race theory were widespread in the decade just prior to the Sentinelle Affair. For a fuller understanding of such arguments, it’s worth consulting some of the works published at the time. See, for example, Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race* and Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color against White World-Supremacy*.

3. The passage of an ecclesiastical law would have had a far-reaching impact on the residents of the city. Even today, the population of Rhode Island is majority Catholic, and the Franco-American community of the 1920s would have been almost exclusively so. Daignault estimates that in Woonsocket, three of every four Franco-American families sent their children to a French-speaking parochial school (Rafael 27).

4. In *Rhode Island History*, William McLoughlin notes that the Peck Act was declared unconstitutional one year after it was passed. Sterne describes a similar law in Oregon that was also eventually overturned.

5. Identifying this tactical authenticity is part of another study I’m conducting of the cultural identity and language attitudes of Franco-Americans in the generations following the Sentinelle Affair. In transcripts from a series of unpublished interviews that were conducted of French Canadian descendants living in Woonsocket in the 1970s, blending is the term repeatedly used to refer to tactical authenticity. Franco-American youth are described as having embraced assimilation and of having fully “blended” with other American youth, while at the same time conveying an attitude of ethnic distinction by continuing
to speak French, consuming French media, and expressing a sense of negation and loss at the dwindling presence of French culture in Rhode Island.

6. In its map of “States and Governments,” the International Francophone Organization (OIF) depicts the bilingual Canadian “member-state” provinces of Québec and New Brunswick that surround New England (“États et gouvernements”) as the largest Francophone region in the Western Hemisphere. Geographically and historically speaking, New England is situated as the southernmost French-speaking area of this region. Yet, politically speaking, it has never been an OIF member-state and, in its very name, the New England region enacts the French-English linguistic division I am describing.

7. In French, “New England” is the name of the political landscape, but not the name of the geographical area.

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