

Critical approaches to *Jeanne la fileuse*: An immigration novel for transnational times

by Cynthia Lees

Recent awareness of Francophone cultural hybridity in the postcolonial world has focused attention upon identities as diverse as Franco-Vietnamese, Franco-Manitoban, and Franco-Russian, to name but a few. There has, however, been little critical attention paid to another hybrid group—the Franco-Americans of New England. Indeed, of the many ethnicities that swelled the immigrant work force in manufacturing centers of the Northeast from just after the Civil War until the Great Depression, Franco-Americans remain, perhaps, the most unrecognized of these collectivities. Their literary texts, though largely unknown, reveal the complex negotiation of identity of those who live in the borderlands between two cultures; these narratives of individual and collective strategies for survival merit inclusion in French and Francophone course offerings at the post-secondary level.

Like other ethnic literature produced in the United States and written largely for the working class (Swedish-American, German-American, and Polish-American, for instance), Franco-American texts concern themselves with the ways in which migrants re-order their lives and re-establish their homes in new surroundings. Immigrant literatures, whether written in the South, the Great Plains States, the East Coast, or elsewhere, share similar themes: the safeguarding of linguistic communities, the maintenance of faith and cultural traditions, and the resistance to change. These ideological texts often function as propaganda vehicles, seeking to influence the attitudes and behaviors of their readership by urging rejection of the dominant culture and defying the pressure to assimilate. In short, immigrant texts perform a kind of virtual nation-building, promoting fidelity to the homeland left behind and attempting to ensure the survival of its distinct cultural heritage in the host (often hostile) country.

One such text of literary nationalism, Honoré Beaugrand's *Jeanne la fileuse* (1875), is a novel that refutes widespread criticism in the press over the mass exodus of French Canadians to the United States.¹ Beaugrand, elected mayor of Montreal in 1885, may be best known today to city residents and tourists alike for the *métro* stop, the terminus of the green line, which bears his name. This newspaper owner, entrepreneur, world traveler, and soldier who fought for Maximilian in the Franco-Mexican War was in his day, however, a well-known member of a group of nineteenth-century French-Canadian authors who lived in New England and who wrote in French; indeed, Beaugrand is credited with writing the first Franco-American novel, published serially in *La République*, a Fall-River French-language newspaper which he owned.² In the Preface to the first edition, the author clearly announces his purpose: “Le livre que je présente aujourd’hui au public . . . est moins un . . . travail littéraire qu’une réponse aux calomnies que l’on s’est plu à lancer dans certains cercles politiques contre les populations franco-canadiennes des États-Unis” (75). Exploring migrants’ abject poverty, abysmal working conditions, and feelings of alienation engendered by the loss of the old way of life—that is, the loss of the ancestral farmlands of Lavaltrie and Contrecoeur northeast of Montreal—*Jeanne la fileuse* chronicles workers’ attempts to survive and to prosper in the cotton mills of industrialized Fall River, Massachusetts.

In this critical reading of *Jeanne la fileuse*, I explore three overarching approaches to teaching the text that effectively frame the narrative and that also suggest rich interdisciplinary topics for student research, essays, and oral presentations. These approaches are by no means exhaustive; they do, however, provide an introduction to a diaspora that one historian has identified as the defining event in 19th-century French Canada.³ The first approach provides a theoretical foundation constructed upon the complementary concepts of space and place. The second approach examines the main characters as obvious archetypes—those *coureurs de bois*, landed gentry or *seigneurs*, and *fils de la Liberté* that function as figures of mythic proportions in the political and economic history of nineteenth-century agrarian Quebec. And, because fully half of the novel is set in Fall River, a third approach concerns itself with the migrant experience in the Bay State in ethnic neighborhoods dubbed *Petits Canadas*, permanent loci of poverty, high mortality rates, overwhelming pollution, and intolerable working conditions.⁴

Coming to terms with space and place

The history of the French in New England, both cultural and literary, emerges as inseparable from their movement through *space* and subsequent settlement in *place*, and this notion grounds much of Franco-American prose fiction. Indeed, Franco-American writers, from Beaugrand to Kerouac to Proulx have recognized that spatiality—the affective and social experience of space—informs individual and communal practices, cultural identity, and social order. Space is inherently dynamic and translates into movement, openness, fluidity, instability (for instance, in Kerouac’s *On the Road* or in Proulx’s *Accordion Crimes*). Place, on the other hand, represents pause, attachment, fixity, stability. Thus, space and place are related but not equivalent constructs. And at some points, the two seem less discrete than these designations might imply. For instance, Fall River as a *place* of dwelling or residence intersects with Fall River as an urban *space* in which characters work out the conditions of power, marginality, class, gender, and ethnicity.

In its split narrative, *Jeanne la fileuse* juxtaposes vast landscapes of Canadian forests and rich farmlands with the industrialized space of Fall River, Massachusetts, with its tenements and textile mills—structures into which migrants crowd like worker bees. The sentimental textual reconfiguration of Quebec in Part I (*Les campagnes du Canada*) functions as a mimetic substitute for the homeland itself, reminding its readers, in the tradition of a *roman de terroir*, of the glorious land left behind. Part II (*Les filatures de l'étranger*) depicts the constructed spaces of the urban landscape and can be read as an historical or journalistic text with its factual references to rail service schedules, to wages earned for piecework, to cost of lodgings, and to the disastrous Granite Mill fire.

Part I’s reaffirmation of the old pastoral dream—the sacredness of the land in agrarian tradition—celebrates the natural landscape in scenes of rugged beauty that serve as the backdrop for the entrance of Pierre Montépel. This son of a Tory landowner defies his father’s wishes, rejects an arranged, advantageous marriage, and pledges himself to penniless Jeanne Girard, daughter of the patriot his father had denounced. The narrator’s bucolic treatment of rural space

in the first half of the text, the romanticized portrait of agricultural production, scenes of haying in a pastoral setting, and open-air banquets and dancing under the stars, all evoke, particularly for the generation of readers who lived through the Patriot Rebellion and the political fallout in its aftermath, the importance of the land and the deep-seated cultural beliefs inscribed therein. Jeanne's father's tale of exile in Burlington, Vermont, on the heels of the failed rebellion, his dispossession of all his property and goods, and his eventual repatriation to Quebec function as a *mise en abîme* of Jeanne's fate.

The inscription of the rural space of Quebec into the text transforms the natural landscape into literary idiom, and the narrator assigns to this landscape certain values rooted in a nationalistic discourse revealing the influence these iconic spaces exerted over the development of a distinctly French-Canadian character. This identity, worth transmitting to future generations in Franco-American enclaves of New England, constitutes the cultural baggage migrants brought with them and defended, for the better part of a century in some communities, in the face of pressure to assimilate into Anglophone culture. The communities—Fall River, Lowell, and Holyoke, Massachusetts, Woonsocket and Providence, Rhode Island, Manchester and Nashua, New Hampshire, and Biddeford, Lewiston, and Waterville, Maine, among others—are the locales in which Franco-American novels take place, communities in which characters seek to construct a viable self. With first- and even second-generation Franco-Americans bouncing between two locales—New England and Quebec—place-based identity emerges as a particular concern in narratives in which individuals invest places with meaning just as places shape and control the individuals who inhabit them.⁵ The significance accorded to places such as urban tenements, churches, and city streets reveals a preoccupation with emplacement not uncommon among migrant populations and their literatures.

Archetypes in *Jeanne la fileuse*

The Patriot Rebellion and its Republican ideology, one that Pierre Montépel comes to embrace during his university years spent in Montreal, figure prominently in Part I of *Jeanne la fileuse*: “Pierre avait appris à honorer les noms des martyrs de l’oligarchie anglaise et à maudire la mémoire de ceux qui les avaient livrés à la vengeance implacable des tribunaux tories” (92). The

narrator takes pains to reconfigure provincial space as a comprehensive image of the glory days of French-Canadian nationhood, unmediated by the social values and political power inherent in British rule of its Canadian territory. The rehabilitation of archetypal figures of French-Canadian lore is very much on the order of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Québécois texts that fashioned their own *lieux de mémoire* in which *coureurs de bois* and *défricheurs*, along with explorers and missionaries, were proposed to the reading populace by a number of Quebec authors, thus foregrounding the collective identity of the French-Canadian nation.⁶

“Les campagnes du Canada” begins with the return of Pierre, who, having argued with his father over the liberal bias and the cost of a university education, returns to the farm after a nine-month self-imposed exile in the forests north of Ottawa. The period of gestation in the womb of the woods precedes the birth of the narrative, which begins in the spring of 1872. Pierre, at the stern of the birch bark canoe, maneuvers the craft through the narrows above l’île Saint-Sulpice, an image that evokes, in its shape and liquidity, the birth canal. The return of the voyagers also foreshadows the repatriation of migrant workers from New England. The work in the forest (and, by implication, in the factories) is a series of “journées d’un travail presque surhumain” (86), a work fueled by “la pensée du retour au foyer” (87).

Pierre, abandoning his university career in Montreal, had entered the wilderness the previous fall. His clothing, described by the narrator as “moitié français, moitié indien” (82), draws the reader’s attention to his unresolved status, his hybrid identity, and it alludes to his metamorphosis under the influence of wilderness space. Primitive living seems to have transformed him into a mythic figure, the legendary *coureur de bois*. In support of this point, I would argue that Montépél is almost always described as being between places, as crossing borders. In the opening pages of the text, the narrator situates him between the wilderness and Lavaltrie. After falling in love with Jeanne, he often is seen in motion between his home in Lavaltrie and hers in Contrecoeur. When one encounters Pierre at the end of the narrative, he is travelling between Contrecoeur and Fall River, Massachusetts. This constant movement implies his archetypal role as a *coureur de bois*.

The two patriarchs of the novel—the often pompous Jean-Louis Montépel, Tory and *seigneur* and the kindly Jean-Baptiste Girard, former *Fils de la Liberté* in the failed Patriot Rebellion—represent well-known archetypal figures in French-Canadian lore. Montépel, in his youth, acted as a British informant and betrayed Girard and his compatriots to the colonial authorities. Whereas Montépel dedicates himself not to republican ideals of egalitarianism but rather to the values of a hierarchical society, ever eager to solidify its position of power and to protect its profit margin, Jean-Baptiste Girard typifies the legendary *Homo canadiensis*, the true patriot. A member, in his youth, of the Sons of Liberty under the leadership of Louis-Joseph Papineau, Girard fought for a republic free of repression and independent of Great Britain. His escape into the forest, into the wild space of nature, invokes the geography that shapes him and informs his identity. And as a patriot, Girard appropriates some of the mythic stature reserved for a true hero of French-Canadian culture. In view of their diametrically opposed values and lifestyles, Montépel and Girard can be considered representative of pre-Confederation Quebec, with its political, social, and economic polarities.

Montépel's and Girard's relationship to place creates a palpable tension in the narrative, one that depends upon the shifting perspective of two lifestyles—that of gentleman farmer and of freedom fighter—lifestyles rooted in the ancestral land. In contrasting the sedentary nature of the *seigneur* with the mobility of the patriot, the narrator makes use of land-based metaphors to foreground divisions between social classes. Indeed, so intensely do the clans inhabit these ancestral lands that the physical environment itself reflects the settlers' social and political identities. Lavaltrie, home to the wealthy, long-established Montépel family, bustles with prosperity, and its name graces the opening chapter of *Jeanne la fileuse*. Lavaltrie's luster can be traced to its founding fathers: “Baptisé du nom de ses fondateurs, le bourg Lavaltrie fut jadis le lieu de résidence d'une de ces vieilles et nobles familles françaises qui émigrèrent en grand nombre au Canada vers le milieu du XVII^e siècle” (81). Lavaltrie's poor relation, Contrecoeur, lying on the opposite shore and a league downriver, does not enjoy as glorious a heritage as Lavaltrie. In its checkered past, Contrecoeur proved itself to be a hotbed of Patriot activity, even sheltering a secret rebel militia. Girard, recounting to Pierre his own involvement in the Patriot Rebellion, explains that “[l]e village de Contrecoeur, se levant à la voix du grand tribun populaire, Louis-Joseph Papineau, s'était préparé pour la lutte et formait avec Saint-Denis et

Saint-Charles, le centre de l'insurrection" (147). The narrative thus establishes a reciprocal relationship between the constitution of places and people. The places in Part I emerge as concrete *and* symbolic, made up of seigneurial lands and humble cottages as well as myths and legends. The boundaries of Lavaltrie and Contrecoeur function as agents of exclusion, as *lieux de mémoire*, creating collectivities with shared, distinctive identities.

The rupture between Pierre and his father that closes Part I of the novel prefigures the break between French-Canadian families and the homeland chronicled in Part II. A far more permanent rupture in the family fabric, however, awaits Jeanne Girard. On the heels of the departure of Pierre and her brother, Jules, for seasonal work in the woods, the patriarch, Jean-Baptiste, succumbs to an attack of apoplexy. In her orphaned state, the heroine glimpses the enormous changes that face her: "Jeanne sentait qu'elle allait entrer dans une sphère nouvelle et ce n'était qu'en tremblant qu'elle mettait le pied sur le seuil de l'existence inconnue qui se présentait devant elle" (215). Jeanne's identity, no longer defined and circumscribed by her role as daughter, opens up to the external world to reconstitute itself in the new urban space of Fall River, Massachusetts.

Les filatures de l'étranger: Fall River, Massachusetts

Symbols of urban space—the Old Colony and Newport Railroad, Fall River Iron Works, and The Granite Mills Manufacturing Company—dominate the topography of Part II. Dedicated to Jeanne's experiences in the industrial city of Fall River, the second half of the novel can be best described as a hybrid text, a combination of *Bildungsroman* (in which she travels to a new land, experiences a measure of independence, and works to finance her repatriation), historical novel (in which the immigrant experience, including the devastating Granite Mill Fire, is chronicled), and popular romance (in which Jeanne is reunited with her true love). "Les filatures de l'étranger" is, therefore, as much Jeanne's story as "Les campagnes du Canada" is Pierre's.

The narrator, in recording actual salary schedules, inventories of goods on hand, and reports on employee performance, seeks to preserve the historical record of the French-Canadian

immigrant experience in Fall River. The historical details he includes in chapters entitled “Fall River, Mass.,” “La filature,” and “Les salaires dans les filatures,” however, seem particularly biased, with data chosen to portray that experience in the best possible light. For instance, in regard to education he writes: “Riches et pauvres sont traités avec l’égalité la plus démocratique sur les bancs des écoles publiques. Rien n’est donc épargné pour donner à la jeunesse ouvrière les avantages d’une éducation libérale. . .” (256). It was common practice for school-age children—as young as seven years of age for that matter—to work seventy-two hours a week, thereby significantly increasing the family’s earnings.⁷

Painting a rosy portrait of the Yankee inhabitants of Fall River, the narrator describes them as a “peuple qui accorde l’hospitalité la plus franche et la plus cordiale, à tous ceux qui désirent marcher dans la voie honorable du travail, du progrès et de la civilisation” (247). Vitriolic letters to local newspapers, bitter debates in the Massachusetts legislature about immigrant laborers, and widespread debate about the foreign element invading New England all speak to strong nativist sentiment against French Canadians and do not support the picture of a cordial and hospitable Anglophone community. In its distorted representation of living and working conditions in Fall River, Part II seems to function more as a propagandist recruitment tool for the capitalist sector than as a defense of those who had left their native land and who cherished the hope of returning to the family farm.

Indeed, as the months drag on, and Jeanne suffers from the fatigue that a six-day workweek engenders, there is little in the narrative to suggest that she is torn between the two spaces that function as poles of her existence. Contrecoeur, the rural pole, locus of solitude and rootedness, contrasts sharply with Fall River, the urban pole and place of sociability and impermanency. Jeanne, a young woman who adapts quickly to work in Granite Mill, functions as a kind of poster child for the successful millworker engaged “dans la voie honorable du travail” (268). In fact, the narrator insists that “Jeanne . . . se trouvait dans une position relativement heureuse” (269), thus banishing any feelings of nostalgia or homesickness she might have experienced. As for other immigrant families, regret over the loss of individual freedom and the boredom resulting from the monotony of repetitious tasks—both normal reactions to work in a textile mill—quickly pass, according to the narrator, when the first payday arrives and the worker

feels “la satisfaction bien naturelle de pouvoir toucher régulièrement le prix de son travail” (255). Satisfaction in the upward mobility possible for hard-working immigrants and praise for so-called honorable work in the service of wealthy mill owners seem a puzzling about-face for a narrator so eager to condemn the elder Montépel’s greed and his dedication to increasing his personal fortune. That the text diverges pointedly from the ideology of egalitarianism so prominent in the Patriot discourse of Part I illustrates the way in which the narrative subverts its own agenda.

This ambivalence becomes even more apparent as the mill, a symbol of unflagging confidence in material progress, self-destructs in a hellish fire. In a chapter entitled “L’incendie du Granite Mill,” based on the disastrous fire of September 19, 1874, flames burn men, women, and children alive. This fire, coming at the end of the narrative, lends both tension and unexpected complexity to the text. Beaugrand incorporates into the novel actual accounts of the Granite Mill blaze published in another of his newspapers, *L’Écho du Canada*. Jeanne Girard’s name, for example, is simply added to the top of the list of actual workers injured in the fire. This weaving of fiction and “fact” contribute to the journalistic feel of the second half of the novel. The heroic death of Michel Dupuis, burned alive saving Jeanne and two children from the flames, has its source in the factual account of one John Bosworth, an account published in *L’Écho du Canada*. Ironically, the tragedy occurs the day before Jules’s and Pierre’s expected arrival in Fall River.

Although in his Introduction to *Jeanne la fileuse* Roger Le Moine proclaims the episode of the fire to be without ideological purpose, the incident, from my perspective, serves to undermine Pierre Montépel’s stature as the hero of the text. Montépel, in his role as *coureur de bois*, absents himself at key junctures in the narrative, thus contributing to the reader’s impression of him as inadequate or ineffective. He seems the stuff of legends, not of daily life. As such, he fails to save Jeanne on two occasions. After the unexpected death of her father, Jeanne travels to Fall River under the protection of the Dupuis clan, poor migrants who welcome her into their family. Their eldest son, Michel, who hides his love for Jeanne, ultimately gives his own life to save her from the flames. In times of crisis, Pierre, whom the narrator characterizes as “un idéal d’accomplissement de l’individu” (43), fails to provide any meaningful help for Jeanne, his fiancée. Michel Dupuis, on the other hand, becomes a steady, quiet presence in Jeanne’s life. He

also takes on a proactive role as a member of Fall River's *Cercle-Montcalm* and, as the chosen delegate of the local branch of *La Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste*, he travels to Montreal and participates, just three months before his death, in the 1874 celebration of Saint-Jean-Baptiste day.⁸ The reader is, in the final analysis, underwhelmed by Pierre and is left to ponder whether Michel, a man of action, a faithful, patriotic *habitant* sacrificed to Montépel's happiness, may indeed be the real hero of the narrative.

The homeland regained

A brief epilogue serves to repair the rupture between Pierre and Jean-Louis Montépel, who, in signing over his estate to his son, ensures a comfortable future for the new landowner and his bride, Jeanne. The members of the Dupuis family eventually rescue the family farm and return to the ancestral land. Only Jules remains in Fall River, establishing a grocery store with Pierre's financial backing and enjoying, as a successful small business owner, a part of the American dream. The epilogue, an easy, pleasant conclusion to the text, seems an improbable resolution to a host of narrative problems.

Jeanne la fileuse elaborates a post-Conquest politics of identity rooted in the heritage of the families of Lower Canada—families of *habitants*, of *patriotes*, and of sympathizers with the Crown. In his depiction of rural Quebec, the narrator crafts a romanticized portrait of a glorious homeland in the tradition of the *roman de la terre*. He chronicles, with equally uncritical praise, the welcome extended to French-Canadian immigrants, their employment and educational opportunities, and their social and kinship networks in Fall River's *Petit Canada*. What muddies the waters is his promotion, in Part I, of the egalitarian ideology of the *Parti patriote*, one that signifies a rejection of colonial rule and the exploitation it implies. This position sits uncomfortably with the pro-capitalist stance of the second half of the narrative that champions industrialization (with its inherent exploitation of the working class). Such an about-face undermines the narrator's reliability and creates an ambivalent text, one that leaves the reader with unresolved questions: does the Granite Mill fire belie the utopic portrait of urban life? does the repatriation of Jeanne and the Dupuis family weaken or support the narrator's defense of

those French Canadians who settled in New England? and does Pierre's ultimate choice of the sedentary lifestyle of the wealthy landowner over the mobility and rugged individualism of the *coureur de bois* imply the narrator's acquiescence to the dictum, "*Restons chez nous*"?

Criticism of the narrative, one that undermines its own agenda, is not new. At the time of publication, a contemporary of Beaugrand's, Joseph Desrosiers, critic for the *Revue canadienne*, struggled to reconcile the author's enthusiastic support of repatriation with his unstinting praise of the immigrant experience in Fall River: "Avec une perspective aussi brillante, nous ne devons plus nous étonner du grand nombre des Canadiens qui émigrent aux États-Unis; mais si une chose doit plutôt nous surprendre, c'est que le reste de la population ne se détermine pas à émigrer en masse." In regard to artistic concerns, Desrosiers dismisses Beaugrand's genre-bending approach as ineffective and as a stylistic affront to Quebec's established literary canon: "Puisque l'auteur avait besoin d'écrire un pamphlet, pourquoi n'en a-t-on pas écrit un tout simplement! . . . car avec le système adopté par M. Beaugrand, nous avons un roman où l'on parle politique, un pamphlet où l'on parle d'amour" (qtd. in *Jeanne* 46-7). The text's hybridity may be one of its most appealing features and certainly establishes it within the genre-crossing multi-ethnic literature of the United States.

Over the course of a century, the French-speaking peoples of New England (a group whose descendants now number around five million) came to view themselves as beings in their own right; they stopped looking homeward over their shoulder and waited less impatiently for the arrival of the postman. Many of French-Canadian descent do, however, still identify with their heritage, and in 2008, the 400th anniversary of the founding of Quebec City, a group of Franco-Americans gathered in the Parc de la Jetée to offer a monument commemorating the ties between French Canada and New England. Claire Quintal, representative of the Franco-American delegation, offered remarks at the inauguration of the *Monument Franco-Américain* and spoke of common ancestors and common dreams, of farms left behind, and of toil in the factories of a foreign land. Explaining the meaning of the gift she added: "Et nous, leurs descendants, avons voulu démontrer que même si nous vous avons quittés, nous ne vous avons pas oubliés, que nous nous souvenons de qui nous sommes et d'où nous venons."

Jeanne la fileuse and other Franco-American texts examine how space and place (and the related tropes of topography and memory) inform the ways in which migrants construct their identities as they respond to their environment—living in it, moving through it, and assigning meaning to it. In so doing these narratives provide an effective springboard for inquiry into the evolution of Franco-American ethnic identity, one inextricably linked to notions of geography, mobility, and homelands. Franco-American narratives, rich in variety and yet so unfamiliar to many in the academy, merit consideration for use in the classroom. These texts have much to say about issues that continue to surface in the transnational times and borderless spaces that constitute the twenty-first century.

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Notes

¹ The massive migration of French Canadians to the United States prompted George-Étienne Cartier, Québec-born statesman and Premier of Canada East prior to the Confederation, to quip: “Laissez donc faire; ce n’est que la canaille qui s’en va. Les bons nous restent et le pays ne s’en portera que mieux” (cited by Roger Le Moine in his Introduction to *Jeanne la fileuse*). Reactions of native New Englanders to the arrival of French-Canadians reveal a similar climate of intolerance: Massachusetts Labor Commissioner Carroll D. Wright labeled them the Chinese of the Eastern States, and Swinton’s primer on geography, widely used in New England schools and published the same year as *Jeanne la fileuse*, describes them as “a gay, polite, simple-hearted folk, generally quite ignorant, and caring little for all the great new things that are setting the world astir. Of course, you must understand this as a description of the peasants. . . . And you must not think that all Canadians belong to the French race. . . . There are many thousands of English, Scotch, and Irish Canadians. These are the highly intelligent, progressive people. . . .” (40).

² Other nineteenth-century writers born in Québec who lived for a time in New England and who wrote about their experiences as exiles or immigrants include Rémi Tremblay (1847-1926),

Emma Dumas (1857-1926), Anna Duval-Thibault (1862-1951), Louis Dantin (1865-1945), Adélarde Lambert (1867-1946), and Camille Lessard Bissonnette (1883-1970).

³ Albert Faucher (1915-1992), economist and historian, was a professor at Laval University for forty years.

⁴ Underpinning these proffered critical approaches to *Jeanne la fileuse* is the firm conviction that literature courses—be they introductory ones that teach important concepts for novice readers through brief literary excerpts, survey courses that situate French and Francophone texts in their literary, historical, and social contexts, or advanced offerings that challenge learners to apply literary theory and criticism to their reading—most effectively engage and energize students when they provide opportunities for the sustained, active involvement of all learners both within and beyond the classroom. Carefully arranged, dynamic interactions among class members may include small group- and round-table class discussion of student-scripted questions posted in advance to the class website; oral presentations of individual or group research topics (in the learners’ own fields of interest—history, politics, economics, material culture, women’s studies, for instance) by way of poster- or power-point presentations; and the writing of reactions to texts at the student blog page, thereby encouraging, throughout the course, an ongoing dialog among learners. *Jeanne la fileuse* and other Franco-American texts that I’ve taught (such as *La Jeune Franco-Américaine*, *Canuck*, and *Les Enfances de Fanny*), lend themselves to further inquiry into, say, the immigration patterns among first- and second-generation French Canadians; the pre-Confederation history of Quebec; labor history in New England mill towns; the political power of Franco-American voters; discrimination and violence against French-Canadian mill workers; and the role of women in the Franco-American family, to name but a few topics that students have researched. In my own experience, overwhelmingly positive student feedback over the past several years at all levels of language-learning has documented a significant expansion of vocabulary, an increase in oral proficiency, and an improvement in crafting well-argued essays. In the end, such an approach to the teaching of literature, one that pretty much eschews lecture and note-taking, develops student initiative and succeeds in creating self-determinant, independent scholars.

⁵ More than just restless instability on the part of the working-class poor, the constant crossing and re-crossing of the Canadian border can be viewed as both economically- and ideologically-driven behavior. The temporary return to the homeland can be attributed to a

number of causes: slowdowns in the textile industry, breaks between seasonal jobs, and the celebrations of important religious and secular holidays.

⁶ French-Canadian writers of the nineteenth century who championed a rich, pre-industrial *patrimoine*—agrarian and Catholic—include Philippe Aubert de Gaspé, Patrice Lacombe, P. J. Olivier Chauveau, Joseph-Charles Taché, Hubert Larue, Henri-Raymond Casgrain (l'Abbé Casgrain), and the well-known Antoine Gérin-Lajoie, author of *Jean Rivard, le défricheur*, an iconic novel of nation-building, originally published in 1862.

⁷ Mill employees—carders, spinners, weavers, mechanics, bobbin boys—all worked twelve hour days, either returning home at the noon whistle or bringing lunch in a pail. Jeanne would have overseen six to eight power looms during her twelve-hour shift, and like other adult operators, would have supervised the boys who supplied fresh weft bobbins to the machines (Roby 81).

⁸ Honoré Beaugrand, founder and first president of *l'Association Montcalm de Fall River*, articulates these goals in the organization's constitution: "Le but de la société sera de rassembler dans des démonstrations patriotiques, la jeunesse de Fall River et de reviver par des discussions ayant rapport à l'histoire de notre pays, la mémoire des hauts faits d'armes de nos ancêtres qui ont rougi de leur sang valeureux les plaines et les forêts du Canada, notre patrie commune" (54). As for the 1874 observance of Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day in Montreal, the event was championed by Quebec politicians and editors of French-language newspapers in New England (who ran a series of advertisements promoting the event). This extraordinary celebration, which attracted over 20,000 participants, was designed to "redonner aux émigrés le désir de rentrer au bercail" (Beaugrand 23). The celebration failed to spark the desired repatriation.

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