The Assimilation of Acadian Communities in the Maritimes: Another “Non Standard Account”

Chrisjohn, Young and Maraun (1997) discuss how the “standard account” of the treatment of Native peoples by European colonists “disposes neatly of all problems related to Indian Residential Schooling” (p. 4). I would argue that the “standard account” of history in general disposes of many other “problems” as well. History is selective by nature, which means that some things become a part of the historical canon and others do not. The histories that make it into the canon are usually those that are privileged by the dominant group in society, which in the case of the Maritimes is white, middle-class, and largely Anglo-Saxon. The histories of minority groups, such as those of Aboriginals and African Canadians, are underprivileged and therefore usually “underwritten.” In the same sense, Acadian histories are underprivileged in the historical canon of this region (Clarke, 2000). In this paper, I explore the “non standard account” of Acadian communities in this region and how that account intersects with my own privilege, experiences, and sense of knowledge. In particular, I will look at issues surrounding the 20th century lived experiences of marginalization, discrimination and assimilation, along with the rise of nationalism in the Acadian community.

My own roots are Anglo-Saxon, but I think that I share some commonalities with Maritime Acadians. We share the land, first and foremost. My own hometown is very close to the Acadian settlement of Chéticamp, in Cape Breton. We share skin color, which, in our Euro-American society, is undoubtedly a privilege. We also, in some cases, share socio-economic status. There are many things we do not share, however. For example, I have never had to fight to preserve my language and culture. I have also never been forced to learn another language to obtain gainful employment. It is because of these similarities and differences that I am interested in exploring Acadian history in more detail.
“Acadians” are the descendants of early French settlers in the Maritimes (Williams, 1977). After Britain regained permanent jurisdiction over the Maritime region in the 18th century, the Acadian population became marginalized. After experiencing expulsion during Le Grand Dérangement in the 1750s and 1760s, many Acadians returned to the Maritimes (Perrin, 2005). Their lands and houses had been confiscated and redistributed to British citizens (Perrin, 2005). The Acadians were faced with rebuilding their lives from the ground up. Over the years since, Acadian people have faced political, cultural and economic marginalization, discrimination, and assimilation (Hautecoeur, 1976). They have had to struggle to preserve their culture, traditions, and language (Castonguay, 1997). Although the historical canon does not leave the Acadian people out of its sweep, most of what students learn about Acadian history has to do with the period leading up to and directly after Le Grand Dérangement. Acadian history of the 20th and 21st centuries is often neglected by mainstream history.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, the Acadian people have often been thought of as ‘in between’ two dominant cultures: they are often thought of as ‘not quite French,’ but are definitely not Anglophone either (LeClerc, 2005). Because of their geographical location in the Maritime Provinces of Canada, which is a predominantly Anglophone region, the Acadians have been subjected to strong Anglo-Saxon influences for centuries (Castonguay, 1997). This exposure has had a significant assimilative impact on Acadian language, culture and traditions, and resulted in the adoption of many English linguistic and cultural conventions (Castonguay, 1997). In response, Acadian communities have orchestrated resistance efforts, which have been characterized by a struggle for equal opportunities in terms of education and employment and a rise in Acadian nationalism.
Many Acadian communities are rural, as opposed to urban (Clarke, 1998) and therefore contain fewer schools and workplaces for their members. Like residents of other rural communities, members often commute to the nearest city or large town in order to work and attend classes (Clarke, 1998). The problem that this necessity causes for members of an Acadian community is that often (though not always) the nearest city or large town is predominantly Anglophone. In order to function in these spaces, French-Canadians are forced to learn and work in English almost everywhere except for in the privacy of their own homes. Understandably, Maritime Acadians often become concerned about the degradation of their language and culture that this type of situation reinforces.

I have seen these issues arise first-hand in my home region of Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. My parents live near the Acadian community of Chéticamp, and I have visited there often over the years. Chéticamp used to be a self-sustaining fishing community that was largely insular and segregated (Clarke, 1998). The Chéticamp I remember was a lively, bustling little town, windswept and located on the edge of the ocean. The houses were very colorful, with fishing boats docked everywhere along the water. There were plenty of restaurants and small shops and a French school that taught children from the earliest grades up until their completion of high school. The collapse of the fishing industry and the codfish moratorium has led to a major increase in the unemployment rate in this small rural village, which has resulted in many community members having to travel to nearby urban centers for work (Clarke, 1998). Many of these people end up working in factories or call centers in dominantly Anglophone areas, and therefore must adapt to spending a significant portion of their time interacting in English. What’s more, this economic downturn has led many families who are unable to commute simply to leave Chéticamp and move to urban areas in order to find work. Population has therefore declined over
the past two decades, and what population remains is much more Anglicized than before. As a result of both of these factors, education for Acadian children in their first language has been threatened. The school now teaches children both English and French, with emphasis on the importance of learning English at a young age in order to “survive” in our society. The government has even, at times, threatened to close the school in Chéticamp due to declining enrollment rates. If this were to happen, the children would need to be bused to the nearest large schools, all of which are predominantly English-language schools that offer French Immersion programs.

The last time I went to Chéticamp was in February of 2009, and it was easy to see the effect of economic downturn on the region. The community now caters to tourists, hoping to capitalize on its Acadian culture in order to keep on. The community’s website is evidence of this focus, as it expounds the “interesting” bits of Acadian culture, such as rug-hooking, in advertising terms, with the obvious hope that this advertising will draw more visitors from the outside (Chéticamp, 2008). The problem with an economy that centers on tourism is that communities experience the seasonal ebb and flow of capital, and begin to struggle throughout the winter months (Boudreau & White, 2004). In addition, the large influx of Anglophone visitors in the summer months tends to have a disproportionately assimilative impact on francophone communities (Boudreau & White, 2004). It was the off-season when I last visited, so almost everything was closed for the season, even restaurants and stores. The community was all but a ghost town. The only establishments that seemed to be open were a small diner, a corner store, and the local Co-operative grocery store. The buildings were considerably more dilapidated than I remembered. I could not help but think of how marginalized and oppressed this community is: up until the collapse of the fishing industry, it managed to survive (even
thrive) in its “bubble,” but now, the economic plight of the community has led to its increased assimilation into Anglophone society (and therefore increased marginalization of Acadian culture and language). Members of the Acadian community of Chéticamp (and those beyond, who are experiencing similar issues) have joined together to resist this assimilation and marginalization, with some success.

Acadian communities became active in their advocacy in the 1970s (Castonguay, 1997). As neoliberal policies have advanced over the past several decades, social services and supportive programming has been significantly eroded (Castonguay, 1997). Services, including educational institutions, are often consolidated in urban areas, which can result in long commutes for the residents of rural communities or lack of accessibility for those unable to commute. For Chéticamp and the several smaller, francophone communities that surround it, this erosion means a significant reduction in French language schools for Acadian children (Even, 1971). Current trends in the education system involve consolidating smaller schools into larger institutions and closing those that experience declining enrollment rates. In some areas, consolidation means that students must travel over an hour from their homes to their schools. I, too, experienced this as a high school student: my hometown is rural, and my high school was located in the nearest urban center about thirty minutes away by bus. Acadian families have advocated extensively on behalf of their children’s rights to education in French. Although many of the French language schools in smaller francophone communities have been closed due to declining enrollment, over 20 French-language schools still remain in Nova Scotia (one of which is in Chéticamp) as a result of this extensive advocacy (Chéticamp, 2008). In recognizing this need to advocate on behalf of their linguistic and cultural preservation, Acadian communities like Chéticamp have developed a form of nationalism over the past several decades, which has helped to solidify and collectivize
their efforts to resist assimilation, marginalization and domination by their Anglophone neighbours, and to give them some measure of power over their own fate (Magord, 2008).

Acadian nationalism is not a new phenomenon. It actually began in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, but its momentum faded after several decades (Hautecoeur, 1976). When the Acadian population returned after \textit{Le Grand Derangement}, it remained largely isolated and segregated from neighboring Anglophone communities. As previously stated, many Acadian communities remained rural and isolated in an attempt to resist assimilation (Clarke, 1998). Many communities depended solely upon the fishing industry for their economic survival (Clarke, 1998). With the collapse of the fishing industry, isolationism became less economically sustainable, and a rise in advocacy for Acadian issues occurred (Magord, 2008). As a result of this increase in the number of Acadians speaking out against assimilation, domination and marginalization came an increasing call for the recognition (on the part of the government and of greater society) of the importance of preserving Acadian language, culture and traditions, and therefore an increasing sense that Acadians should be recognized as a separate “nation,” much like Quebec (Clermont & Gallant, 2005). Acadian nationalism has served as a collectivizing force that has encouraged members of Maritime francophone communities to speak out, and to advocate for the preservation of their ways of life. Nationalism has allowed Acadians to attempt to wrest some power, as a minority ethnic group, from the dominant groups of society. Most of all, they desire agency over their future, which is something that has largely been left in government hands over the decades (Clermont & Gallant, 2005). In attaining more control over their economic, linguistic, and traditional pursuits, they can ensure the continued survival of those traditions (Magord, 2008). Acadian nationalist groups have mainly lobbied for a voice in government, as evidenced by the creation of a short-lived Parti Acadien in New Brunswick.
(Gauvin & Jalbert, 1987). They argued for legislated protection for their language and traditions, and support from the government to return to their previous stature as separate, distinct, and self-contained francophone communities (Gauvin & Jalbert, 1987). Acadians do not desire integration with Anglophone society, rather they seek to be designated a “separate, distinct, but important” nation within Canada. They desire to be valued by our society as an important contributor to Canadian history and heritage.

Over my own short lifetime, I have witnessed an immense loss of power and ownership in Acadian communities over the fate of their language and traditions. Much like the Native populations, who were once self-sustaining and separate nations, the Acadians have become a minority group in a largely white, Anglophone region. This minority position has led to a significant degradation in their culture, tradition and values, as they have been forced to assimilate in order to survive economically. If only our societies had taken the lessons from the Two Row Wampum Treaty and learned to value each other as separate but important entities, and respected each other’s differences, perhaps we would not be where we are today (Woodland Indians Forum, 2007). Instead, our society places far too much emphasis on the importance of the “almighty dollar” and simply does not value these minority traditions as it should. The power that dominant groups exercise to destroy cultures in these situations is almost overwhelming, and I feel guilty to have played a part in this domination to some extent. Growing up, I definitely did not value cultures that were alternative to my own. I sometimes even made fun of the Chéticamp dialect’s peculiar mix of French and English. My uncle is from Chéticamp, and a popular pastime during holidays was to make fun of certain expressions he used – he didn’t mind, but I never realized how complicit I was in the undervaluing of Acadian culture by through this activity. I think that all members of dominant groups of our society need to be careful when
behaving in these ways; even small things like my actions above can have an impact on cultures. Even more so, they are indicative of the overall value that dominant groups place on minority cultures, and that is a bit scary.

Up until now, I have not particularly used my power and privilege in society to do “good”; rather I have believed that by “not doing harm,” I’ve been acting as a “good person.” I know now that this is incorrect. I have been complicit in many societal wrongs, and feel as though this course has better prepared me to realize my complicity, at the very least. I have tried to use this space to take a page out of Chrisjohn, Young and Maraun’s (1997) book and to tell a story of the Acadians that is “non-standard,” in the sense that it has largely been written out of our common history. All Nova Scotians learn about “the Acadians” in public schooling, and everyone is aware of their presence, but I think that their 20th and 21st century struggles to resist assimilation and economic marginalization are almost always neglected. We learn about the tragedy of Le Grand Dérangement, but we forget the tragedy of the gradual assimilation that the capitalist, neoliberal system has made necessary in the past few decades. We forget about how recent this struggle is for the Acadians, and some of us do not even know that it is ongoing and very much a part of their daily lives. I have tried to underscore the absolute importance that Acadians place on retaining their language, culture and traditions, and the emphasis they place on being able to pass those things on to their children. In this sense, they are much like any other minority culture, struggling to survive in a predominantly white, Anglophone region. Much like the Aboriginals’ struggle to retain and re-learn their traditions, the Acadians face much the same struggle, and theirs is similarly “forgotten” by a mainstream society that is more worried about “economic progress” and “integration” than valuing its priceless diversity. I think that for me, as a social worker, reading for this paper has reinforced the need for me to ensure that I remain
reflexive in my practice, and that I try my best to hear and value other perspectives, points of view, and contexts. Nonetheless, I am left with many questions. How do I do this? How can I link these theories more directly to my practice? How can I make sure to “hear” the non-standard accounts if they are summarily “unwritten”? How can I encourage the “selection” of more diverse histories in our canon? What is my role, as a social worker, in ensuring that these histories get heard? I do not know the answers to these questions, but I suppose I do have my whole career to try and figure them out.
References


