

# Staging *La Francophonie*: Tradition, Tourism and Acadian Musical Spaces on Prince Edward Island

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*Abstract: This article examines how tradition, tourism and identity discourses intersect in representations of “Acadia” at play on Prince Edward Island (PEI). Focusing on the phenomena of Acadian kitchen parties and dinner theatre productions, I consider how the Island Acadian community represents itself and is represented musically in and beyond the Island’s cultural scene. I explore how tourism shapes PEI’s cultural landscape and how movement to (by tourists) and from (by touring local musicians) the Island informs how francophone Acadian identity is understood and expressed musically. More broadly, I question how, by commodifying tradition, tourism contributes to defining and marketing the “local” and how emic and etic expectations that result from these processes translate to artistic creation.*

*Résumé : Cet article se penche sur la manière dont les discours sur la tradition, le tourisme et l’identité s’entrecroisent dans les représentations de « l’Acadie » qui se jouent sur l’Île du Prince Édouard (IPE). En me concentrant sur le phénomène du « party de cuisine » acadien et les productions de dîner-théâtre, j’examine la façon dont la communauté acadienne insulaire se représente elle-même et est représentée musicalement sur la scène culturelle de l’île et au dehors. J’explore la façon dont le tourisme façonne le paysage culturel de l’île du Prince Édouard et en quoi les arrivées dans l’île (celles des touristes) et les départs de l’île (ceux des musiciens locaux partant en tournée) nous indiquent que l’identité francophone acadienne se comprend et s’exprime musicalement. Plus généralement, je m’interroge sur la façon dont le tourisme, qui « mercantilise » la tradition, contribue à définir et à mettre en marché le « local », et sur la manière dont les attentes émiques et étiques résultant de ces processus se traduisent en création artistique.*

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July 27, 2008—Mont Carmel, Prince Edward Island. I’m acutely aware of the sweat pouring off of Bernard Félix, the robust French Newfoundland accordianist sitting to my left. The floor vibrates as his feet pound out a rhythmic *tic-a-tac-a* pattern on the hardwood floor. His powerful arms push and pull the instrument’s bellows enthusiastically, his right elbow coming within an inch of my nose. I edge my chair back slightly. The set of reels ends with applause

and shouts of encouragement from onlookers congregated around the kitchen's island as flautist Philippe moves into a lilting Irish air he taught me only a few weeks before. I join in, followed by a few others. The second time through the tune, our eyes meet for a brief moment in a mutual acknowledgement of the satisfying groove we've established. A minute later he catches my eye again, although this time I recognize it as a silent signal that he's about to change tunes. Sure enough, Philippe moves into the well-known Cape Breton strathspey "Christy Campbell's" and the rest of the group follows suit. The circle of musicians changes frequently as players give up their chairs to step outside, refill their drink or socialize. I catch a glimpse of Nick, a beginner step dancer, on the other side of the kitchen showing off his new steps to some friends who, in return, are teaching him a more complicated "shuffle-step-kick" step. Eventually, I, too, am pulled away from the circle, making way for other musicians who will add their own flavour to the evening's soundtrack. Around midnight, Colette announces that there is a pot of homemade *fricot*<sup>1</sup> on the stove, and we dive in, fuelling our bodies for several more hours of music-making.

— author fieldnotes, July 27, 2008

*Les parties de cuisine* (kitchen parties), such as the one described above, occupy a curious thread in discourses about Acadian identity on Prince Edward Island (PEI). No longer exclusively private events that take place in the home, kitchen parties exist in both private and public spheres. The "kitchen party" is a part of the local Acadian culture that is widely promoted in advertisements, event descriptions and biographies of musical groups, both on and off the Island. Promotional material for staged shows in the tourism literature toot phrases such as "The kitchen party comes to the stage!" (Indian River Festival 2008) and "Discover the rich cultural heritage of the Acadians with a real Acadian kitchen party" (Box Office PEI 2012). Although kitchen parties do take place outside of the Acadian community, it appears that the tradition has emerged primarily as a symbol of Acadian culture. For some locals, kitchen parties exist as but memories of a by-gone age, while for others they have been reinterpreted and recontextualized to suit contemporary social and economic needs, as well as artistic tastes. Other participants in the traditional music scene, particularly some musical groups, cultural organizations and concert promoters, have adopted the tradition as a marketing strategy for traditional Acadian music on a global scale.

What exactly PEI “Acadian music” is varies greatly from person to person and community to community, reflecting the influences of other cultural groups throughout eastern Canada. Traditional instrumental music is largely fiddle-based, accompanied by piano or guitar, and many Acadian fiddlers accompany themselves with percussive foot-tapping (*podorhythmie*). In the late 1990s, the group Barachois popularized an older style of fiddling that emphasized a syncopated bowed rhythm known as the “shuffle.” Nevertheless, most fiddlers in the *région Évangéline* blend this older style with strong influences from the fiddle music of nearby Cape Breton Island. Individual artists and groups like Vishtèn (2012) and Ten Strings and a Goat Skin (2013) have introduced new instrumentation, stylistic influences and repertoire, particularly from Québécois and Irish traditions (for more on Acadian fiddling, see Forsyth 2011, 2012; Perlman 1996).

This article examines how tradition, tourism and identity discourses intersect in representations of “Acadia” at play on PEI. Focusing on the phenomena of Acadian kitchen parties and dinner theatre productions, I consider how the Island Acadian community represents itself and is represented musically in and beyond the Island’s cultural scene. I explore how tourism shapes PEI’s cultural landscape and how movement to (by tourists) and from (by touring local musicians) the Island informs how francophone Acadian identity is understood and expressed musically. More broadly, I question how, by commodifying tradition, tourism contributes to defining and marketing the



Fig. 1. Kitchen party, July 2008. (Photo by Colette Aucoin.)

“local” and how emic and etic expectations that result from these processes translate to artistic creation.<sup>2</sup>

### “Anne’s Land”? Locating PEI’s *Francophonie*

At 5,656 square kilometres, PEI is Canada’s smallest province, joined to the mainland by the thirteen-kilometre Confederation Bridge.<sup>3</sup> The population of the Island is estimated to be 146,105, most of whom are of British ancestry (Prince Edward Island Statistics Bureau 2013). Agriculture, fisheries and tourism are the Island’s primary industries, with tourism drawing over a million visitors each year (Tourism Research Centre 2008). There is little doubt that experiencing island culture is an important part of the tourism “product” and a substantial factor in PEI’s competitiveness as a tourism destination (MacDonald 2011). In their typology of cultural tourists, McKercher and du Cros (2003) argue that cultural tourists “represent a new type of mass tourist who seeks

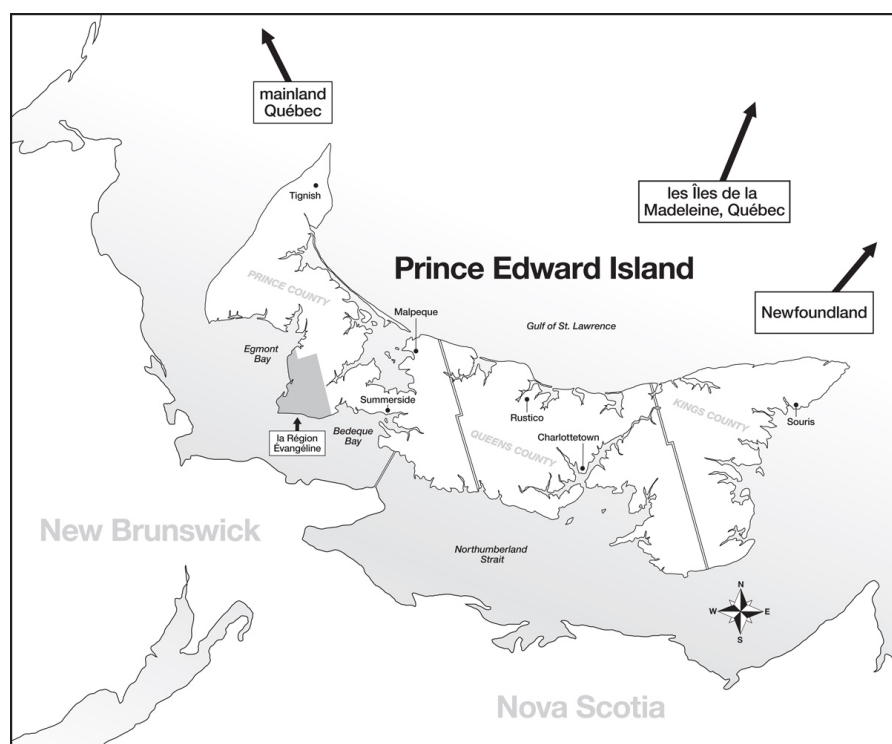


Fig. 2. Map of PEI. (Map by Wilco van Eikeren.)

meaningful travel experiences” (Yun et al. 2008: 101); analyses by the World Tourism Organization support this suggestion, finding that more than 40 per cent of all international tourists self-identify as “cultural tourists” (Richards 1996: 23). As marketable alternatives to the numerous accessible “sun, sand and sea” attractions the Island has to offer, sites and pastimes dedicated to Anne of Green Gables, such as Cavendish (the setting for many of Lucy Maud Montgomery’s beloved novels),<sup>4</sup> and a variety of other leisure activities now top the Island’s tourist activities. In recent years, there has been an emerging emphasis on culinary travel and eco-tourism. According to a 2003 report released by Tourism PEI, activities related to “experiencing Acadian culture” made up 25 per cent of tourist activities in the province (Tourism PEI 2003). More recent reports by Tourism PEI do not distinguish between Acadian and non-Acadian tourist activities, but, having spent a significant amount of time in the province since 2005 conducting research and visiting friends and family, I have observed an increase in tourist-centred Acadian-related cultural events across the Island in this period.

It will come as little surprise to those who have driven through the Island’s pastoral landscape that a 2011 Census analysis revealed that over 50 per cent of Islanders live in rural communities and small towns, compared to the Canadian average of just under 20 per cent (Statistics Canada 2012). Nevertheless, the Island has experienced a pattern of rural outmigration similar to the rest of Canada, with population growth in rural areas declining while urban areas are growing (de Peuter and Sorensen 2005). A total of about 1,135 people, just over 4 per cent of PEI’s population, identify as francophone, whereas nearly 23 per cent of Islanders claim French or Acadian ancestry. With the exception of concentrations of Acadians in the urban centres of Summerside and Charlottetown, the Island’s francophone and Acadian community is essentially rural and concentrated in Prince County. Around 2,250 people reside in the *région Évangéline*, the least anglicized region of the Island and where Acadians represent the majority in some towns and villages, including Wellington, Mont-Carmel and Abram-Village (Arsenault 1998, 2012).

Rapid modernization spread through PEI in the postwar era, arriving latest in the most rural and isolated areas. Advances in technology and mechanized agriculture and the consolidation of rural schools in the early 20th century resulted in the loss of economic and cultural independence for many communities. As cultural enclaves of a socially and economically disadvantaged group, the Acadian regions of *Prince ouest* (West Prince) and the *région Évangéline* experienced modernization later than many other parts of the Island. The relative isolation of these rural communities contributed to the

retention of a distinct French dialect and distinct cultural practices, including customary private traditions of *frolics* (communal work sessions followed by a party), *Mi-Carême* (a mid-Lent festivity) and kitchen parties, even as they were disappearing to varying degrees in communities of Scottish and Irish heritage.

### To *Ceilidh* or not to *Ceilidh*: Tourism and Identity Discourse

The Acadians are descendants of the first French colonists who arrived in eastern Canada's Maritime Provinces (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and PEI) from provinces in Centre-Ouest France between 1632 and 1653 (Basque, Barrieau and Côté 1999: 17-19). Today, there are an estimated 3 million people worldwide with Acadian heritage, approximately 300,000 of whom live in Canada's four easternmost provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, PEI and Newfoundland and Labrador (Statistics Canada 2007).<sup>5</sup>

Broadly speaking, there are two dominant discourses about Acadian identity in the 21st century. The first celebrates a transnational Acadian community unified in its struggle for cultural retention and recognition as a minority in North America. This group is connected by an historical consciousness of a shared past, the pillar of which is *Le grand dérangement* (the Great Upheaval)—the 18th-century deportations of thousands of Acadians from eastern Canada between 1755 and 1763—and an imagined homeland of *Acadie*. These connections are framed by a discourse of pan-Acadian identity that

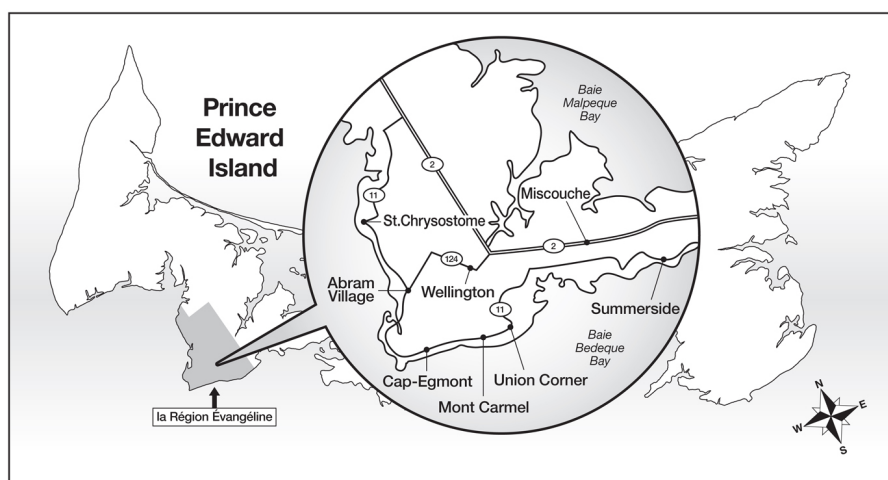


Fig. 3. Detailed map of the *région Évangéline*. (Map by Wilco van Eikeren.)

has been fuelled, at least in part, by the transnational nature of the late 19th-century Acadian National Conventions and the subsequent pentennial Acadian World Congress, which seeks to unite disparate groups of Acadians throughout the global diaspora under themes of linguistic and cultural retention, family reunification and the promotion of Acadian identity and culture.<sup>6</sup>

Situated within this broader movement toward transnational solidarity are localized narratives about regional “Acadianness,” or what Shawn Pitre calls “*acadieneté*” (2002), throughout Atlantic Canada. These local and regional identities are important ways of articulating Acadian experience; particularly at the local level, even under the umbrella of a broader idea of *Acadie*, cultural difference is articulated with increasing urgency, resonating with Chela Sandoval’s theory of “differential consciousness” (1991), which she defines as the act of privileging or de-emphasizing particular aspects of one’s identity. The notion of differential consciousness rings true particularly in PEI’s small francophone Acadian communities, where musical traditions and their accompanying narratives convey a primary concern with distinguishing local Acadian culture in these areas from that of mainland Acadians and, to a lesser extent, other French-speaking groups in the region, including people from Quebec, France and elsewhere. These narratives also seek to distance the Island Acadians culturally from PEI’s anglophone communities and, specifically, from the Island’s dominant Scottish heritage (even though most Island Acadians do have some Scottish or Irish heritage) by highlighting distinct cultural practices, such as those “private” and customary traditions identified above, as well as perceived—and sometimes newly constructed—notions about stylistic differences in vocal and instrumental genres.

While Acadians have long occupied a marginalized position in the Island’s historical narrative, as well as in its cultural, political and economic landscapes, celebrations of the Island’s *francophonie*, or francophone culture, are increasingly visible on concert stages across the Island and widely promoted in the tourism literature. As in many other musical, especially fiddling, traditions, the increasingly public nature of Acadian culture has contributed to a repositioning of traditional musical practices from customary, private, community-based and participatory events to staged performances across the Island (see, for example, Feintuch 2001, 2004; Harris Walsh 2002; McKean 1997). This shift reflects a marked increase in the attention local Acadian culture has received from the province’s tourism industry in recent years and the increasingly transnational nature of Island musicians’ careers. At the same time, this shift reveals a desire within the community to promote a localized Island Acadian culture that is distinct from that of off-Island Acadians and PEI’s other cultural groups.

The tourism industry relies on the production of and the ability to market this difference. As in other parts of Atlantic Canada, traditional music on PEI is moving increasingly from the private to the public sphere as a young generation of musicians realizes the tourism potential and employment opportunities available to them through the promotion of traditional music.<sup>7</sup> This shift from private to public reflects an interest by Tourism PEI to promote traditional music across the Island and a marked increase in the province's attention to Island Acadian culture in the past decade.<sup>8</sup>

The provincial tourism industry's emphasis on the Island's traditional music scene, more broadly, is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the number of ceilidhs (a Gaelic word originally meaning "visit" that has become part of the English vernacular and is pronounced "KAY-leees") that take place in anglophone communities across PEI from May through August. These weekly evening events—the Island's modern response to the decline of the community dance hall tradition and the predominant, public display of the Island's Scottish heritage—are open to the public for a small fee (usually ranging from ten to twenty dollars) and widely advertised in newspapers, tourism brochures and on the radio, and often attract large crowds of tourists as well as some locals. Ceilidhs take on a variety of forms depending on the host and venue, ranging from set dances (also known as "square sets" or, in francophone Acadian communities, "*des sets carrés*" or "*des danses carrées*") with a live band to informal, often participatory, concerts hosted by local musicians and their musical guests that feature storytelling, singing, fiddling and step dancing. Both of these interpretations of a ceilidh reflect the term's flexible definitions in various parts of Scotland and Canada as a visit, party, dance or concert. As in neighbouring Nova Scotia, where, particularly on Cape Breton Island, ceilidhs have emerged as primary tourist attractions, the majority of ceilidhs on PEI are presented as informal variety concerts, hosted by a local musician, and feature a line up of musical guests. The popularity of these events for both locals and tourists in Nova Scotia has influenced the increased demand for ceilidhs on PEI. Moreover, the interest in this ceilidh culture on PEI is attributed to the establishment in the early 1970s of regular ceilidh events at the Orwell Corner Historical Village Community Hall, in eastern PEI. Marketed as "Ceilidh at the Corner," the weekly events linked the Orwell ceilidh to a sense of historical "authenticity" so precious to tourist experience, complete with pressback wooden chairs set up in the community hall and lanterns lighting the path from parking lot to hall. Curiously, PEI historian and resident Edward MacDonald notes that the word "ceilidh" was virtually unknown in his home community—which



was Highland Scots but non-Gaelic-speaking—prior to the 1970s. Instead, they were called concerts or parish concerts. But by the 1980s they had been re-branded as ceilidhs and the success of Orwell Corner spawned imitators across the Island; today, visitors can have their pick of ceilidhs every day of the week (Edward MacDonald, email correspondence, September 10, 2012).<sup>9</sup>

Despite the appetite for ceilidhs on PEI, francophone Acadians have not adopted this public “ceilidh culture.” My conversations with Island Acadians suggest two plausible explanations for this. First, parties remain largely private affairs, held in the home, and are not advertised publicly. Although set dances were once prominent features of public gatherings and private house parties in the Acadian community, solo step dancing now predominates, particularly among younger generations, as the modern preference for dance entertainment at such parties and festivals. Second, ceilidh culture is associated primarily with the Island’s dominant Scottish heritage. This point was frequently brought up in my interviews with musicians and music/dance enthusiasts. Tourist brochures frequently reinforce this distinction, suggesting that ceilidhs were brought to the Island by Scottish and Irish settlers, while kitchen parties arrived with new Canadians from France, even though, to my knowledge, there is no evidence to suggest that kitchen parties are historically linked to Acadian culture. Nevertheless, the deliberate distancing of Acadian communities from this tradition reflects and reinforces Acadians’ desire to distinguish themselves culturally from other Islanders.

At least discursively, if no longer always in practice, the kitchen party is a more common musical context in the Island’s Acadian community. Unlike ceilidhs, which, at least on PEI, have evolved into public, commercial events, kitchen parties in the Acadian community cross into both private and public domains. In both contexts, they appear in myriad forms. Private kitchen parties vary in size depending on the host and occasion, and they can range from intimate gatherings of close friends and family to large, raucous events that involve a broader sample of the community. Yet, despite the frequency with which the tradition is linked to contemporary musical practice in the Acadian community in tourism literature and public discourse by both Acadians and non-Acadians, these events are occurring with less and less frequency and in different forms today than they were only a couple of decades ago. I will return to some of these changes later in this article.

My intention here is not to give the impression that kitchen parties take place solely in the Acadian community. While I acknowledge that the tradition occurs in a variety of forms throughout the province and Atlantic Canada more

broadly, this article is concerned instead with the contemporary manifestations of kitchen parties and the discourse linking the term and tradition to the Island's Acadian community. The definition of "ceilidh" as a social activity that might include music as well as storytelling, gossiping and card-playing, among others, brings that term closely in line with the "kitchen party" as it is understood today. These types of social gatherings have a long history in Acadian, Scottish and Irish communities across PEI and have been important forms of social entertainment throughout most of the Atlantic region for decades. Before television and other technologies became commonplace in the late 1950s—later, in some parts of rural PEI—individual music-making and, in particular, spontaneous gatherings featuring music and dance, were primary leisure activities. In an interview with Ken Perlman, fiddler Archie Stewart of Milltown Cross, Kings County, describes how a typical evening would unfold:

Back then ... there was no radios, there was no television, and that was the only entertainment we had—in the wintertime, probably once a week, somebody'd have a house party. And ... everybody'd bring a pound of sugar and they'd make fudge and we'd have fudge and then they'd clear all the stuff out of the kitchen and I'd get the fiddle out and away they'd go and they'd dance 'til 12 or 1 o'clock and that was an evening's entertainment. There was nothing else! And it was good pastime. (Perlman 1994: 25)

Gatherings such as those described by Archie Stewart feature prominently in the childhood memories of many Islanders. Growing up in the 1960s, Helen Bergeron (née Arsenault) explains that "house parties were regular events for us ... it wasn't a planned thing. People would just drop in" (Bergeron 2008). These were predominantly multi-generational gatherings in which family and friends would congregate to relax, pass time or weather a winter storm. Souris-area musician Kevin Chaisson recalls that such gatherings always included making music:

This is as true as I'm sittin' here. If there was a storm forecast, say for a Friday night or even [a] Thursday night, the house would fill up with people. Honest to God, they'd be coming hoping to get "storm stay." You know, so there was a big upright piano down in the living room ... it was just [*shakes his head and laughs*] ... the music was just a great time. (Interview, July 14, 2008)

Nevertheless, the use of the term “kitchen party” by members of the Acadian community involves a self-conscious carving out of cultural territory through the choice of label, even though the roots are similar to those of the “ceilidh” on PEI and, depending on your perspective, they can look remarkably similar. Despite its rich history across the Island, the kitchen party tradition has taken on a particular association with the Acadian community that is propagated by members of the Acadian community and external parties.

### Rural Cultural Tourism and *La Cuisine à Mémé*

As an economic activity, cultural tourism in the *région Évangéline* has developed slowly since the 1960s in response to the need to diversify the local economy and participate in the Island’s tourism. As in other peripheral and rural areas, the *région Évangéline* looks to tourism for employment and raising the level of economic welfare. The most prominent artistic endeavour to date in the *région Évangéline* was a long-running seasonal dinner theatre production called *La Cuisine à Mémé* (Granny’s Kitchen) which many locals describe as “putting the *région Évangéline* on the map,” both for Islanders and audiences “from away.” The productions’ comical plots revolved around the lead character, Mémé—a term of endearment for a grandmother, similar to “Nana” or “Granny”—and followed the now-celebrated character through birthdays, visits from relatives “from away,” holidays and family feuds. While the term “dinner theatre” can be applied to any meal and entertainment combination, *La Cuisine à Mémé* followed a “feast format”: a four-course meal served around a three-act musical comedy with audience interaction throughout. Actors sing, dance, play instruments and serve food and drinks while remaining in character from the moment they seat the audience until they take their final bows. This model of interactive dinner theatre has been adopted by theatre companies across Canada (and perhaps elsewhere), although Atlantic Canada has the highest concentration of such productions.

Throughout its twenty-four-year production run, from 1984 to 2007, *La Cuisine à Mémé* became an important ingredient of the region’s identity and was quite successful in bolstering the local economy during the summer months, attracting busloads of primarily francophone tourists as well as locals, most of whom would usually attend at least once a season. For many Maritime francophones, *La Cuisine à Mémé* remains a primary point of reference to PEI’s francophone community, and many local musicians have participated in at least one, if not more, productions. Moreover, as for members of the well-known musical group Barachois, who began performing together in the context of the

dinner theatre, the experience often led to other performance opportunities and musical projects.

In an interesting twist on the “historic” representations of Acadian culture that have filled the pages of tourism literature in the last couple of decades with romantic images of quaint rural folk in 18th-century-style costumes and depictions of Longfellow’s fabled heroine, Evangeline (McKay and Bates 2010), *La Cuisine à Mémé* highlighted aspects of contemporary local Acadian culture and explained and poked fun at particular Acadian traditions (such as kitchen parties featuring dance and music), local personalities and quirky behaviours. Although conceived initially as a unilingual French production, *La Cuisine à Mémé* developed into bilingual shows with French songs but a blend of English and French dialogue for the purpose of reaching a broader tourist market. The following transcription of an interview with local Acadian step dancer and fiddler Jocelyne Arsenault gives some examples of how the local culture and dialect were featured in the productions:

JOCELYNE ARSENAULT: [*La Cuisine à Mémé*] was in both English and French. There was always mention of *galettes blanches*, *râpure* and *pâté* and stuff like that.<sup>10</sup> Typical Acadian food. They’d always put in points about Acadian stuff and we always used Acadian words [which would be explained in English] on the back of the program.

MEGHAN FORSYTH: Do you remember any of those words?

JA: *Coquemar* [pronounced “cock-marre”], which is a tea kettle but translates [as] “dead rooster.”

MF: The other day I learned a new word: *tcheque* [pronounced “chuck”].<sup>11</sup>

JA: Yes, [that means] *quelque* [some]. You won’t be able to find it in the [French] dictionary, just the Acadian one! (Interview, August 6, 2008)

In her study of Górale traditional music in Canada, Louise Wrazen analyzes how staged performances allow these Highlanders from the south of Poland to integrate the past and present by “presenting a music complex associated with the old world within the acceptable parameters of new world concepts of ‘entertainment’ and ‘spectacle’” (1991: 187). By engaging a public forum, Wrazen explains, “Górale are not only recreating the images

and experiences of their past ... they are also publicly stating who they are” (187). Similarly, by foregrounding older language and images in the productions, *La Cuisine à Mémé* engaged in what anthropologist Isar Godreau calls “discursive distancing,” offering representations of Acadian collective identity that emphasized temporal and spatial separation from the present by locating “phenotypic and cultural signs ‘somewhere else’ and in pre-modern times” (Godreau 2002: 283). At the same time, the use of humour and musical entertainment create an opening through which performers address stereotypes of Acadian culture and contemporary social issues in a format that is accessible to cultural outsiders.

The popularity of *La Cuisine à Mémé* inspired successive musical theatre and other productions that continue to be staged annually in the *région Évangéline* and surrounding areas. These productions provide seasonal employment to the area’s local artists and thus serve as short-term economic tools for the community. Contrary to MacDonald and Jolliffe’s predictions for the development of a thriving cultural tourism industry in the region (2003), however, as a result of the 2005 closing of *Le Village de l’Acadie*, a pioneer museum constructed in the 1960s, due to bankruptcy, rural cultural tourism in the *région Évangéline* has fallen short of producing any long-term economic benefits. Although there are some other small attractions in the region, such as the impressive *Maison de bouteilles* (a series of buildings made entirely of glass



Fig. 4. *La Cuisine à Mémé*, 2004. (Photo by Orrin Livingstone.)

bottles), an historic church and a few artisan stores, the level of tourist activity in the region has fallen significantly since the early 2000s and is a point of concern for many members of the community. Some local residents attribute this decline in the region's tourism to a lack of vision with regard to possible projects, the short summer tourist season and a lack of funding to develop long-term projects in the region.

This last point hints at a contentious issue for many Islanders and entrepreneurs in the culture and tourism industry: the province's focus on all things Anne—that is, Anne of Green Gables—centred tourism and the relative neglect of non-Anne attractions and events. The perceived narrow focus of the Island's tourist industry and the short-term economic potential of small-scale cultural tourism aside, the *région Évangéline's* tradition of staging seasonal shows remains an important aspect of the region's cultural life and local volunteers and performers continue to present dinner theatre and other musical productions during the summer months. In Tignish, western Prince Co., for example, there is an annual Acadian dinner theatre production called *V'nez Chou Nous* which is now in its twenty-third year. The Centre Expo in Abram-Village also presents an annual dinner theatre and the musical variety show *Le Fricot* (2006-2012).

### Translating the Kitchen to the Stage: The Legacy of Barachois

The expressions “*parties de cuisine*” and “kitchen parties” were not used prior to the 1990s in Acadian communities across PEI. French-speaking Acadians in communities like Abram-Village, in the heart of the *région Évangéline*, recall that friends and family would refer to an evening of music and socializing as “*une veillée*” or “*une soirée de musique*” (Georges Arseneault, interview, August 20, 2009). The expression “kitchen party” came into popular usage on PEI through the influence of the acclaimed PEI Acadian group Barachois, who adopted it in their performances, stage talk and promotional material, ultimately turning the phrase “Acadian kitchen parties” into a household expression and a symbol of Island Acadian culture both locally and abroad.

Known for their humorous performances, repertoire of old songs and distinct manner of playing, Barachois (1995-2003) cultivated a niche for their music by recreating the experience of an informal kitchen party on the stage (see Forsyth 2011 for a discussion of their music and influence). Barachois members included siblings Albert Arseneault and Helen (Arseneault) Bergeron, from St-Chrysostome; Louise (à Alyre Gallant) Arseneault from Mont-Carmel; and Chuck Arseneault from Montague in southern Kings County. Their

performances took elements from the kitchen parties they remembered as typical of the events from their childhood—including stories and jokes; step dancing; comedic routines; and high-energy, foot-tapping music featuring the pump organ, fiddle, *podorhythmie* (seated foot-tapping), *djigger* (mouth music),<sup>12</sup> homemade percussion instruments such as utensils and suitcases, and audience participation—and translated these elements to the concert stage (see discography). As group member Helen Bergeron explains, “most of the gags that you see [on stage] are just a recreation of what you used to see at a house party, so it’s really easy to get inspired for what to do”(2008). Building on Erving Goffman’s structural division of tourist settings into “front” and “back” regions (1959), Dean MacCannell suggests that the front-back dichotomy be treated as “ideal poles of a continuum ... linked by a series of front regions decorated to appear as back regions, and back regions set up to accommodate outsiders” (1973b: 602). Barachois’ performances complicate MacCannell’s notion of intermediary types of social space, most of which involve some aspect of simulating the “backstage” setting (“stage sets,” eat-in restaurant kitchens and so on), in that Barachois unapologetically brought “kitchen music” to concert halls without the pretence of disguising the physical setting as anything but a concert stage. The “authenticity” for which



Fig. 5. Photo of Barachois. (Courtesy of Barachois.)

Barachois garnered acclaim stemmed rather from the group's ability to convey genuineness in their musical output and stage banter, and bring elements of private entertainment to the public eye. As in the processes of discursive distancing evident in dinner theatre productions, their recontextualization of kitchen parties from their customary place in the home to the stage has resulted in new cultural forms that speak "in and to the present, even if they do so in terms of the past" (Kirshemblatt-Gimblett 1995: 370).

Although the group made a conscious effort to present an intimate experience to their audiences, Helen stresses that their aim was neither to impart a lesson in Acadian history nor to discuss their musical style; rather, Barachois' shows only indirectly addressed aspects of Island Acadian culture and everyday issues in their community, focusing instead on humour, theatrics and entertainment. She describes her experience of staging the tradition:

We just did what we did. It was not a sentimental "oh, big victimhood of the Acadians" type of thing. It was just this goofy, more Amand [her uncle]-type thing. With Louise's wild fiddling and Albert as the second fiddler, they would do a lot of duos.... There was a ton of goofiness. So it was that side of being Acadian that we focused on. That was more natural to us anyway, because that was how we witnessed our culture growing up. I mean, words like "Acadian" and "culture" and "tradition" weren't even in our vocabulary growing up. So we were just presenting what we grew up with.... It was easy and natural for us to claim ourselves as an Acadian group because that's the only thing we knew! So nobody could say, "Well, that's not really Acadian" because that's what we are. Sorry! That's what we do. That's who we are.... If we did interviews and we were asked about the style then we would explain it, but it was just something that was presented and we didn't shove it down people's throats. We're just an Acadian band and if you want to know what's Acadian, well, here you go. (Bergeron, interview, July 14, 2008)

The members of Barachois acknowledge that a sense of cultural awareness blossomed over the course of their career as a result of their choices to foreground the experience of a kitchen party in their performances. In a media interview in the early 2000s, Helen explained that her own cultural awareness, evident in the group's creative processes toward the end of their career, was relatively newfound:



We didn't grow up talking about being Acadian, we just were. We spoke French at home and English when we left the area. We didn't learn about our culture in school. It's just in the last few years that we've been discovering a lot about our history. There's a lot of pride in one's culture; it's kind of a trendy thing nowadays. (Qtd. in Waisberg 2008)

Barachois' influence is felt in numerous other musical ventures in PEI's western region, including the shows of other groups (like Gadelle, Chiquésa, En Acadie and Les Girls), dinner theatres and musical cabarets, who, to varying degrees, incorporate the idea of a kitchen party in the design of their shows. Finally, in 1995, the prominent musical family of fiddler Eddy (à Arthur) Arsenault and some of their friends (including Barachois) released an album entitled *Party Acadien*, which was recorded by the CBC during a staged house party. The recording intentionally highlights the informal setting of the event, including background social noise (such as talking between tunes, laughing, "whooping" and other shouts of encouragement by party "guests") and a "raw" production quality that evokes the live event. *Party Acadien* is widely acknowledged by local musicians to be *the* representative recording of Acadian traditional fiddling on PEI (and, to some, Acadian music more broadly). The tunes included on the album range from PEI Acadian variants of older Scottish and Irish tunes to more recent compositions, and the album's repertoire has become standard repertoire for musicians in the *région Évangéline*.

### Traditions in Transition: Kitchen Parties as Discourse and Ritual

While kitchen parties have come to represent traditional Acadian music on the Island for most Islanders and visitors and have proven to be a lucrative marketing tool for some bands and tourism initiatives, some musicians point out that the association between Acadian music and kitchen parties is nevertheless misleading; naturally, Acadian music occurs neither solely in kitchens nor in the impromptu manner suggested by the label "kitchen party." In fact, for some musicians, such as members of the Acadian group Vishtën, this symbol of Acadian social life on the Island has proven a stubborn obstacle. While the group's members acknowledge a variety of influences that include the informal musical traditions they grew up with, the group presents a style of music that draws on traditional Acadian repertoire, new compositions and a variety of contemporary influences that fall under the broad category of Celtic music. Vishtën's music is meticulously arranged, produced and performed, and they consider their style of music and performance to be distinct from

the spontaneous nature of music-making at kitchen parties. Yet, the group is frequently (and, in their view, misleadingly) marketed by agents and event organizers under headings such as “Acadian kitchen party with Vishtèn.” Complicating matters further is the fact that the tradition of kitchen parties features prominently in the group’s “stage talk” about their home communities on PEI and the Îles-de-la-Madeleine (the Magdalen Islands of Quebec), in which they paint a somewhat romantic picture of social cohesion through images of frequent, roaring kitchen parties (Forsyth 2012).

Similarly, local musicians and music enthusiasts often refer to the centrality of the kitchen party tradition in their communities, citing such parties and other musical family gatherings as their first exposure to traditional music as youngsters and the primary motivation for their later musical endeavours, such as learning to dance, playing an instrument or organizing a band. Within the public discourse around kitchen parties, participants return to several themes, including shared experience (such as positive musical and social interactions) and the importance of the kitchen party tradition for the preservation of local Acadian culture and community identity. Step dancer and fiddler Marie Livingstone explains that the social aspect of music-making at these parties is important for the preservation of Acadian culture: “*C’est une façon pour la communauté de se regrouper pour passer un temps social et pour garder cette culture vivante*” (It’s one of the ways the community comes together to pass the time and to keep the culture alive [translation by author]; Livingstone 2009). Vishtèn member Pastelle LeBlanc echoes the sentiments shared by many about the role of kitchen parties in fostering social interaction and preserving the culture. She emphasizes that the multi-generational and communal aspects of kitchen parties are integral to the tradition:

[Kitchen parties] bring people together and they get to play together ... and it’s good for the tradition to continue because it’s people from all ages that participate usually. [It] goes to the wee hours of the morning and I think it will continue on because people enjoy themselves. They’re getting bigger and bigger when people know there’s a party [going on]. It’s word of mouth, I mean, nothing will go out promotionally or anything saying [that] there’s a party this weekend. It’s usually family members or friends and they invite people, and then *they* invite people. (Leblanc 2010)

Such themes of shared experience, preservation and community identity are common in the public discourse surrounding the tradition of kitchen parties.

For some participants, the kitchen party tradition might well be viewed as a form of what the late musicologist Christopher Small has termed “secular ritual” through which the participants such as musicians, dancers and guests “explore and celebrate the relationships that constitute their social identities” (1998: 234). Small posits that regardless of the form the ritual takes, whether informal and small-scale, formal and grand, or in between, “to take part in it is to take part in an act that uses the language of gesture to explore, affirm, and celebrate one’s concepts of ideal relationships” (98). In the kitchen party context, participants articulate a common perception of the “ideal relationships” that underlie their community through what Small calls “patterns of gesture” (95) that include the participation of musicians of various generations and levels of musicianship, as well as such signals and vocalizations of encouragement and other positive interaction among participants. In bringing together these elements, the kitchen party tradition affirms a sense of community for participants and acts as a celebration of their local culture.

Yet, this is a living tradition that, over the last generation or two, has undergone a transition and not all participants agree that the tradition still upholds the aforementioned social functions in the Acadian community. That change occurs in this context is not a surprise; as folklorist Burt Feintuch notes in his work on Northumbrian piping sessions, community is a “social process” as opposed to a “body of people” (2001: 25-26). It appears that the model of the tradition that is widely disseminated in stage dialogue, media and public discourse no longer accurately reflects the “social reality” (Turner 1987: 73) of the PEI tradition in its modern form, as people contend with busier modern lives and older generations are increasingly alienated in many social contexts. Indeed, the reality that it once mimicked has increasingly vanished, leaving behind the staged simulacrum as its cultural echo.

Local discourse about change within the kitchen party tradition since the mid-1990s suggests that perceptions of the tradition and its contemporary manifestations are anchored in particular points of reference held by different generations of musicians: an older generation that experienced kitchen parties first-hand as adults at what is considered the tradition’s peak in the 1970s and 1980s; a middle generation that experienced those same parties through their parents and who are most aware of the divide between the past and present nature of the tradition; and a younger generation whose point of reference includes only the stories of older practices, often retold almost as local legends. As the tradition evolves and is reinterpreted by subsequent generations of musicians, the relationships between individuals, the traditional values associated with communal music-making, and the social and musical interactions between musicians have shifted. Kitchen parties still take place in

private homes, but positive narratives about the tradition, such as community identity and cultural preservation, are coupled with a hushed discourse of discontent about how the tradition is enacted today and a sense of nostalgia for the kitchen parties of previous decades, even if one has not actually experienced them directly.

This quiet discourse is largely focused on skeptical perceptions of change within the tradition, such as the infrequency and spontaneity of events; the dominant demographic of participants, who tend to be younger musicians; a general decline in informal step and set dancing; and a lack of awareness among younger musicians of the etiquette of participating in this context, such as how to read the unspoken rules of a jam as a newcomer, and knowing what, when and for how long to play. Most participants attribute these changes to the breadth of modern entertainment options available to people today, increased opportunities for formal learning and the decline in social entertainment like group dancing. Musicians also attribute the lack of spontaneity and musical “life,” or energy, at kitchen parties today to a broader change in the traditional music scene from “party” or “dance” fiddlers to performance-oriented musicians who, in the words of one musician, “seem to have less fun.” Peter Arsenault, of Mont-Carmel, recalls the “roaring” kitchen parties he experienced growing up in a large musical family in St-Chrysostome:

On Sunday afternoon there'd be relatives coming down from all over the place and everybody [went to] our grandfather's house which was right next door to our house. *That* was the place to go when you wanted to listen to hoppin' music. P  p   (granddad) would take out the plywood sheet there, put it on the floor and dad and Amand would set up and, *man*, that thing was just roaring! And [the kids] would be sitting on the stairs, like in the hall, and [we] could kind of see the old folks just partying on in the kitchen on Sunday afternoons and wondering what the big stir was about, you know? And yeah, those days are gone. They had some *mind-boggling* parties. [Also] at Grady and Helen's, when Dad (Eddy    Arthur Arsenault) and Edward (   Polycarp) were kind of a hot duet there. Man, they had some great parties there. The only reason why those parties were cookin', like more than any party you can go to now, was because Dad and Edward were there, and Louise (   Alyre). Those people are ... party fiddlers. Like, people now are performance fiddlers—so when they're not performing, they're not really playing. (Interview, July 28, 2008)

Peter's description resonates with another's memories of a social context this musician no longer believes exists in the community:

I swear to God, you'd walk out of [a party] at 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning [not believing] what just happened in there. [It was] just *wild!* And, you know, it bothered you for weeks. But it doesn't happen anymore—it just doesn't happen. It takes characters like [Eddy Arsenault and Edward à Polycarp Arsenault], the older players, because they've been playing for parties for ... the past seventy years. [Today] it's way more performance-oriented, a lot straighter, tighter. You have to be perfect.... Fiddlers seem to be way too serious. People are taking the music just way too seriously ... instead of having a little bit of fun—so what if you screwed up? I was on fire! Do you know what I mean? Every note has to be perfect now. And back then, yeah, it was rough and it was scratchy but it was cookin'. More so than it is now I think. (Anon., interview, July 13, 2008)

A couple of decades later, the scene has changed dramatically. In general, the average age of players and attendees is between twenty-five and thirty-five years old, and participation in such events tends to coincide with musicians' musical associations in other contexts, such as a group of friends and musical troupes. Whereas the older generation was once the life of the party, it is now consciously or unconsciously alienated from many these gatherings. This contrasts markedly with some musicians' memories of two or three decades ago when the musical entertainment was left to the older, most renowned fiddlers, and beginners would rarely consider playing among the more experienced musicians unless they were invited to join in. The tendency toward performance (versus dancing) has resulted in younger musicians having a broader repertoire that privileges tunes for listening over tunes for dancing, as well as repertoire from diverse fiddling traditions. Musicians over sixty years old now attend intermittently, often only when a gathering is hosted by an immediate family member or close friend, and they rarely participate in the actual music-making. Unfortunately, because older musicians are no longer active participants in these types of social gatherings, older repertoire and the language of gesture long associated with social music-making are not being transmitted to younger players. In contrast to the situation that I describe on PEI, Feintuch has observed a process of "reassertion" (2001: 151) in the Northumbrian piping tradition in which contemporary house parties are intended to replicate domestic musical practices, re-creating the social and musical experience of previous eras.

The musicians who experienced the kitchen party tradition at its peak express that, musically, the tradition has lost much of the importance it once carried in the community and many of these musicians find today's gatherings less satisfying. Whereas music and dance once inspired and propelled these gatherings, kitchen parties now function primarily as pretexts for social interaction among friends. It is not surprising that the kitchen party tradition has followed the familiar pattern of generational divide that is apparent in social contexts both on and beyond the Island, although I would argue that ties to family and community have been retained longer in these small, rural Acadian communities than in other parts of the Island. Older and middle generations struggle to sustain the customs, such as kitchen parties, that have traditionally defined Acadian life according to their recollection of gatherings of particular people at particular points in time; naturally, however, Acadian life on the Island has changed significantly within a matter of a few decades and younger participants are adapting the tradition to suit their changing interests and musical tastes.

These varying perceptions about traditional Acadian culture and what constitutes a "successful" kitchen party have resulted in the distancing of some participants from the tradition. These conflicting narratives and experiences spurred some musicians to start the Friday Night Acadian Jam ("the Jam"), an informal tune workshop and jam session held in the town of Wellington that is geared toward older beginner-intermediate players. A "jam" in this context is similar to a "session," a musical gathering in which players (usually playing a variety of instruments) play together and take turns leading sets of tunes. Regular attendees often share a particular repertoire of tunes. The Jam acts as a "preparatory phase of performance" (Schechner, qtd. in Turner 1987: 8) for participation in a range of musical events, from private kitchen parties to a variety of public performances, such as dinner theatre and group jam sessions. One musician who attends the Jam intermittently described it as fulfilling the same role in the community as kitchen parties once did, albeit with limited participation from the broader Acadian musical community: "It's not your typical kitchen party, but it kind of plays the same role" (Patricia Richard, interview, October 26, 2009). While people still host private kitchen parties, the ideal relationships that once characterized the tradition have changed, leading some members of the community to turn to other options, such as the Jam, to fulfill their desires for musical and social interaction. Regular participants of the Jam have no pretence of adhering to either historical definitions or outside models of a "good" jam; rather, they have constructed a new tradition to meet their particular needs (see Forsyth 2011: 203-18).

## Conclusion

PEI Acadian musical culture appears to be undergoing a transition and formalization to presentational or performance-oriented music-making from what participants recall as a largely informal, community-based participatory type of tradition (Turino 2008). At the same time, Acadian music, like other expressive forms, exists in multiple spaces. As Sheldon Posen writes in his essay on the significance of context and “authenticity” in Newfoundland music, contexts and “how [contexts] shape the meaning of the activities within them” are key (Posen 1993: 136). Participants of the PEI kitchen party tradition, whether they are locals or tourists, seem to be searching for a sense of authenticity. According to reports by Tourism PEI (2003; Tourism Research Centre 2008), tourists are searching for authenticity in their experiences; local Acadians are searching for it even as modernity accelerates the assimilation of their unself-conscious, reflexive culture. Although the staged versions of kitchen parties no longer seem to replicate events as they once were, contemporary Acadian kitchen parties appear to exist easily in myriad forms, each “event” shaped differently by its contexts and participants.

MacCannell claims that commercialization destroys authenticity by promoting a “staged authenticity” (1976), that is, constructed tourist settings under the guise of the “real thing.” This view has been rebutted by Cohen who argues that new cultural developments which began as purely commercial ventures can gain importance and authenticity over time through a process he terms “emergent authenticity” (Cohen 1988: 379-80). The experiences of many of the Acadians with whom I work suggest that the Friday Night Jam and dinner theatre productions fit Cohen’s notion of “emergent authenticity.” After numerous years of weekly gatherings, the Jam is the “real thing” for many of its participants, and dinner theatre productions have become an integral part of the community’s cultural life. Even as the modern experience of the PEI tradition has shifted, a popular narrative about the traditional kitchen party of yore still exists that emphasizes music and dance, family, the “wild” and spontaneous nature of parties and the role of these events in maintaining a sense of social cohesion in small communities. This narrative is disseminated both on- and off-Island through the staged acts of professional and semi-professional Island Acadian musicians. Consequently, memories of older practices have been sustained and are propagated by multiple generations of the community that do not necessarily reflect the participants’ lived experiences. While some conceive the tradition as a defining aspect of cultural life in the region, contemporary kitchen parties function as a kind of heightened ritual, in which participants enact a connection, however imagined or romanticized, to the social relationships that form the basis of their communities. ❀

## Notes

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1. *Fricot* (sometimes called *le fricot à la poule*) is a very popular stew found throughout *Acadie*; it usually consists of chicken, potatoes, carrots and onions, spiced with summer savory. Some people add dumplings. *Fricot* was traditionally made when visitors stopped by someone's house or during festivities such as a *frolic* or evening gathering. See Boudreau and Gallant (1975: 38).

2. The study of tourism has been a prominent part of the anthropological literature since the 1970s (see Graburn 1977, 1983; MacCannell 1973a, 1973b 1976; Nash 1996; Burns 1999; Chambers 2000; Gmelch 2004). In the field of ethnomusicology, cultural tourism studies developed in the 1990s. "Tourism ethnomusicology" and the study of commodification of tradition have since become significant areas of ethnomusicological inquiry (see Kaeppler and Lewin 1988; Sarkissian 2000; DeWitt 1999; Krüger and Trandafoiu, forthcoming; Connell and Gibson 2003; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 1998).

3. The bridge opened to traffic in the spring of 1997 and has been characterized by Baldacchino as "the most keenly debated and most traumatic event in the modern history of PEI" (2007: 329). For a discussion of the impact of the bridge on the culture, ecology and tourism of the island see Baldacchino (2007) and Forsyth (2012: 11-16).

4. See Tye (1994) for an examination of the impact of tourism on local culture in Cavendish.

5. Rather than associating "Acadian" with ethnic identification, some Acadians and non-Acadians define an Acadian as a native French-speaking person from the Canadian Maritime Provinces. According to several Acadians who participated in my study, a considerable number of francophone Canadians living in Atlantic Canada (acknowledging persons of Acadian origin in Newfoundland and Labrador) who are of Acadian descent list "French" as their ethnic background instead of "Acadian." Thus, the census figures neither take into account the population of non-Acadian francophones or anglicized Acadians (that is, Acadians for whom English is their mother tongue and the language spoken in the home) on PEI, nor do they account for individual interpretations of ethnicity. Over two decades ago, historian Naomi Griffiths wrote that "there are likely more than 1 million people of Acadian descent in Quebec, 200,000 in Ontario and



the western provinces, 400,000 in the northeastern United States, and 800,000 in Louisiana” (1999, s.v. “Acadian”).

6. See Forsyth (2012) for a discussion of pan-Acadian identity. Griffiths (1973, 2005) provides an insightful examination of Acadian history with an emphasis on migration and Acadian identity formation, while Forsyth (2011) and Lockerby (2008) provide comprehensive overviews of PEI Acadian history.

7. The fact that there are more opportunities for youth in work in the cultural sector in this region is significant. Analysts have identified a “demographic drought”—an aging population, the out-migration of youth and a shortage of qualified labour—as the greatest challenges facing Atlantic Canada; see the 2002 “Rural Youth Study, Phase II” discussion paper published by the Government of Canada (R. A. Malatest & Associates Ltd 2002) and DeMarco and George (2009) for examinations of demographic changes taking place in Atlantic Canada, the resulting labour shortage and the future of young Atlantic Canadians.

8. Parallels on two other islands dominated by Scottish Gaelic identities have been documented by Thomas McKean, on the transition “from house party to public event” on the Isle of Skye, Scotland (1997: 101) and by Burt Feintuch in his article on Cape Breton fiddle music (2004: 85).

9. See Shelley Cameron-McCarron’s article “Come Ceilidh: Reeling Through PEI Culture” for a description of the Orwell Corner ceilidh (2010).

10. *Galettes blanches* are white rolls typically served with butter and jam or molasses; *rapture* is a casserole with pork and grated potatoes; and *paté* is a meat pie served with molasses. These dishes are prepared and labelled differently in different Acadian communities through the Maritimes.

11. I have borrowed the spelling of this word from Louise Péronnet (1995).

12. There are several names for the practice of “mouth music” in the Island Acadian community, including *turlutter*, *djigger* (to jig; after the Anglo- expression “jigging”; used predominantly in the *région Évangéline*) or *tonner* (to tune; used predominantly in western Prince Co.). Some mainland Acadians use the phrase *reel à bouche* (mouth reels) to describe this practice, but in Island Acadian and some Québécois communities, *reel à bouche* often refers to tunes played on the harmonica/mouth organ. There are many forms of this practice around the world with different names, such as chin music, liltling, *musique à bouche*, diddlage or diddling (in Ireland) and *puirt-a-beul* (in Gaelic).

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