

June 2020

Jonathan K. Gosnell. *Franco-America in the Making: The Creole Nation Within*. U of Nebraska P, 2018.

Anna V. Keefe

University of Wisconsin - La Crosse, akeefe@uwlax.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Canadian History Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [Ethnic Studies Commons](#), [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America](#), [Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Keefe, Anna V. (2020) "Jonathan K. Gosnell. *Franco-America in the Making: The Creole Nation Within*. U of Nebraska P, 2018.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 44: Iss. 1, Article 14. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2135>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Jonathan K. Gosnell. *Franco-America in the Making: The Creole Nation Within*. U of Nebraska P, 2018.

Abstract

Review of Jonathan K. Gosnell. *Franco-America in the Making: The Creole Nation Within*. U of Nebraska P, 2018. 347 pp.

Keywords

Franco-America, creole, francophone, postcolonial

Jonathan K. Gosnell. *Franco-America in the Making: The Creole Nation Within*. U of Nebraska P, 2018. 347 pp.

Franco-Americans, a largely overlooked ethnic group in the United States and yet the fifth largest, have held onto their French cultural traditions and their language, to varying degrees. How they have done so in spite of exile, minority status, assimilation, and a French past that is increasingly distant is the subject of Jonathan Gosnell's latest monograph. In *Franco-America in the Making: The Creole Nation Within*, he traces the contours of francophone identities in the New World after the formal end of empire to the present, and emphasizes the significance of these cultures despite their precariousness. His expansive study examines the various ways that Franco-Americans, or descendants of people from French-speaking Canada who settled in the U.S., "remember, celebrate, and perpetuate themselves" (13-14). Gosnell's usage of the hyphenated term Franco-American echoes that of French-descended people beginning in 1900. Focusing on New England and south Louisiana, he demonstrates how, through written and oral means, and with the support of organizations and institutions, Franco-Americans have preserved French cultural traditions while existing biculturally, if not multiculturally. In his investigation of what it means "to be French, not simply *in* America, but *of* America," he is careful not to homogenize the experiences of Franco-Americans, nor to overstate their reach (2).

The majority of scholarship on francophone North America focuses almost exclusively on Canada, specifically on Quebec and New Brunswick. Gosnell's book shifts the gaze to the underrepresented cultures south of the border and seeks to enhance their visibility within francophone postcolonial studies. For Franco-Americans, the *métropole* 'center' is Quebec instead of France, although metropolitan France and French culture remain central historically and symbolically. Gosnell's inquiry into francophone cultures that are within France's orbit yet outside its control is an important contribution to decentering French studies. Indeed, his study demonstrates the significance of Franco-American cultures regardless of their ties with France or Quebec.

In his efforts to position Franco-America more visibly within the French-speaking world, he aptly connects with recent debates on the concept of *la francophonie* 'Francophonie,' namely discussions on *littérature-monde* 'world literature.' Central to these discussions is the question of redefining postcolonial cultures in the French-speaking world and unhinging them from the former colonizer. Gosnell highlights the challenges inherent to framing the populations of Franco-America by showing that no single term can fully represent the diversity and intricacies of Franco-American cultures. It is therefore confusing that his book bears "nation" in the title when it is absent from his study. Rather, his approach is often informed by Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities,

especially when examining written cultures. In fact, one of the many merits of his study is a recognition of the relationship between those who claim a French cultural heritage in America, even if it is cultural and linguistic survival that unites them, when the tendency among scholars has been to emphasize their isolation.

Gosnell structures the majority of his study thematically, with the last chapter organized geographically, to give ample attention to the uniqueness of the history and traditions of Franco-Americans in Louisiana. It is in this chapter that the Creole quality of Franco-America is most pronounced, and where Gosnell discusses the term with respect to the blending of French, African, and indigenous cultures in the New World. The extent to which French New England can be understood as Creole remains unclear, and linguistic and cultural (and racial) mixing between heterogeneous populations is far more significant in Louisiana than in New England. The sections devoted to the latter region focus instead on assimilation, and the comportment of individuals and groups against the weight of Anglo-America.

Franco-Americans' resilience and persistence are among the defining features of the story of French life in America. After tracing the cultural history from the founding of *La Nouvelle France* 'New France' to postcolonial Franco-America in chapter 1, Gosnell examines the important role of organizations and institutions in the education and perpetuation of French culture and language. In chapter 2, one of the few sources to examine the Alliance Française in America, he details how its mission overlapped with Franco-Americans' efforts to preserve French cultural identity, even though the institution's elitist reputation and secular tradition occasionally clashed with the predominantly working-class, Catholic profile of francophone communities in New England. In the Gulf South, the more recent Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) has worked to promote and preserve French language and culture, but its aims are explicitly economic, since enhancing the French heritage of Louisiana can help distinguish it from other states and boost tourism. In addition to these institutions, women's organizations in New England have contributed to the transmission of culture. Chapter 3 discusses several such groups, one of which Gosnell attended for six months. Assembling allows participants to express their French cultural heritage through prayer, song, food, and games, regardless of whether they continue to speak the language or not. Gosnell contends that these gatherings provide insight into the past of Franco-America, and they have been instrumental in the continuation of francophone cultures in New England.

Shifting from oral to written expression, chapter 4 examines North American works of fiction and nonfiction, from Québécois *romans de la terre* 'rural novels' to the highly personal prose in English by contemporary writers. These Franco-American texts, mostly marginal in terms of artistic value or influence, reveal a past that is culturally quite uniform, and a present that is increasingly

transnational. Gosnell situates this postcolonial francophone literature within the *littérature-monde* movement, and asserts that the very notion may need to be decentered to better acknowledge the importance of such minority literatures. What the written word can reveal about Franco-American realities is also the subject of chapter 5, which delves into the Franco-American press in New England. Focusing on an emblematic example from 1900 to 1950, the period when these newspapers peaked in terms of circulation and influence, Gosnell underlines a strong sense of ethnic identity articulated through the use of the French language. At the same time, his analysis draws attention to the difficult balancing act of preserving Frenchness while also becoming American.

Cultural hybridization is a constant piece of the Franco-American experience, and it is the most pronounced in south Louisiana where French cultures have fused with other cultures. In chapter 6, Gosnell argues that in order to see the results of French hybridization more clearly, it is important to unpack the Cajun/Creole divide, which is far less rigid than many would have it. Through the example of Cajun music, he illustrates that Cajun/Creole cultural exchange is fostered. This occurs, somewhat more artificially, in the marketing of cuisine and through annual Mardi Gras celebrations.

This comprehensive and well-written study is an important contribution to several fields, including Francophone studies, postcolonial studies, and American studies, and will appeal to scholars working on ethnic studies, and immigration and border studies. This book will also undoubtedly interest French teachers focusing on the history and experience of Franco-American cultures in the U.S., and anyone interested in the story of French life in America.

Anna V. Keefe
University of Wisconsin – La Crosse