ARTICLE

In Search of Place: The Importance of Chiac in Contemporary Acadian Writings

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SUMMARY

Chiac, a mixed-code dialect spoken among the Francophone population of New Brunswick, had been seen by some as an embarrassing patois not worthy of literary production until the late 1960s when it started to appear in award-winning novels by such Acadian novelists as France Daigle and featured in films by documentary filmmaker Michel Brault. From Brault's landmark short film *Éloge du chiac* (1971), which chronicles a group of junior high school students' attitudes towards Chiac to Gérald Leblanc's famous book of poetry by the same name, Chiac has slowly become accepted as a language to be embraced and examined. It has seen a resurgence in poetry, film and animation as a form of rebellion against an Anglophone hegemony and as a resistance against the erasure of Acadian culture and identity. Through the works of contemporary Acadian poets such as Georgette Leblanc and Marylou Brideau, or rappers such as Radio Radio, this article will examine how the use of Chiac has become emblematic of a new form of artistic speech bent on asserting Acadian rights and voices in 21st-century Acadian culture.

KEYWORDS: Chiac, Acadia, geolinguistics, Acadian poetry, Acadian music, Michel Brault, Marylou Brideau, Gérald Leblanc, Dano Leblanc, Georgette Leblanc, Radio Radio

As the title of Annette Boudreau and Lise Dubois's article on contemporary speakers of Chiac synthesizes so well, Chiac is a dialect that is an outgrowth of French but spoken differently: "J'parle pas comme les Français de France b'en c'est du français pareil: j'ai ma own p'tite langue." [I don't speak like French people from France, but it's still the same French even if I have my *own* litt' language.[1]] For Catherine Leclerc, a renowned linguist at McGill University, Chiac can be defined as a "mix of French and English, [it] is the vernacular spoken by many Acadians in the south-east region of New Brunswick especially around Moncton," ("Between French and English" 161) and for Marie-Eve Perrot, one of the world's foremost authorities on Chiac, "[it] is essentially a mixed code where French remains dominant quantitatively, structurally, as well as symbolically" ("Le chiac de Moncton" 318).[2] For most scholars, Chiac is seen as strongly part of a Francophone identity among French speakers in Acadia, which is, according to Benoit Doyon-Gosselin, a territory without geographical borders but situated in the provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia (54). As he specifies, in New Brunswick, out of a population of 750,000 habitants, French-speaking Acadians make up just 33% of the population (54).

As such, French speakers in Acadia, along with Quebecers before the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s, felt very much as though they were not only a minority but a group that had been dominated both linguistically and politically. Significantly, as Doyon-Gosselin points out, Acadian

literature really did not have a chance to flourish before the 1970s when new Acadian-specific presses such as Édition Acadie and Éditions Perce-Neige were founded (54). It is from such presses that such noteworthy writers emerged such as Antonine Maillet, whose rural novel *Pélagie-la-charette* won the prestigious French literary prize the Prix Goncourt in 1979. Indeed, a wellspring of writers and poets began to valorize Acadia, and especially Moncton, its literary capital, in their works. Writers such as France Daigle, Dyane Leger and Gérard Leblanc would put Acadia on the literary map, although they would hardly ever write in Chiac which was considered inferior and not worthy of literature except in the authentic dialogues spoken by their characters.[3] In this way, Chiac operates as a cultural and social marker similar to the usage of *joual*, the working-class Montreal dialect Michel Tremblay highlighted in his multi-volume series of books called *Chronicles of the Plateau Mont-Royal*, the formerly blue collar neighborhood of Montreal where *joual* was spoken.[4] Until recently, only Acadian pop stars, such as the legendary Marie-Jo Thério, as in her famous songs such as "Café Robinson" and "A Moncton," unabashedly propagated the usage of Chiac. As she sings in the latter, "A Moncton" (1995):

> Gisèle, je te call rien que de même
> A cause c'est boring ce soir
> Et qu'y a rien qui va on […]
> J'ai coaxé Mike at least trois fois
> Pourqu'y vienne watcher un movie avec moi.
>
> [Giselle, I'm calling you just like that
> 'Cause it's boring tonight
> And there's nothing going on […]
> I coaxed Mike at least three times
> To come and watch a movie with me.]
> (Quoted and translated in Leclerc, "Between French and English" 161)[5]

Similarly, groups such as the Acadian rappers Radio Radio proudly focus on their use of Chiac as an act of rebellion against the ubiquity of English in the musical world, and the musical group Les Hay Babies use Chiac more discreetly and poetically as an organic reflection of their cultural identity.[6]

Indeed, as Leclerc has underlined in much of her work, Chiac maintains a highly *ambivalent* position within Acadian society. For example, the great Acadian writer and artist Herménégilde Chiasson (who served as Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick from 2003–09 and is so renowned that he is affectionately referred to simply as "Hémé") warned that the growth of Chiac would, in fact, be a threat to French in Acadia as a whole because it represents a "progressive slide towards English" (in Leclerc, "Ville Hybride" 153). As Leclerc explains it, "reactions both public and private to Chiac constantly oscillate between legitimacy and suspicion, or even denunciation" ("Ville Hybride" 153). Others, such as Annette Boudreau and Matthieu Leblanc, see it as a way for young Acadians to reverse the alienation of French speakers who speak English in order to assimilate into Anglophone culture. Choosing Chiac, they observe, can function as a *symbol*, a way of nurturing a Francophone identity to Acadians who chose English in order to feel more accepted by the majority (Leclerc, "Ville Hybride" 160).[7] As Leclerc understands it, Chiac can serve as a "matrix for positive hybridization because it opposes a local linguistic norm that is more flexible than more established but rigid linguistic ones" ("Ville Hybride" 160). Rather

than reinforcing the "two solitudes," as Hugh McClennan famously characterized the separation and barriers between Quebec and Anglophone Canada in his novel *Two Solitudes* (1945), usage of Chiac is driven rather by a push towards bilingualism and an openness to both cultures. As "Vautour," a young Monctonian views it in a popular chat room, Acadie Urbaine (www.acadieurbaine.net):

> Moi j'care même pas si l'monde decide de parler anglais icitte parce que pour moi être Acadien dans Moncton ça veut nécessairement dire que t'es bilingue sinon get with it. A Moncton, si tu veux comprendre c'qui s'passe autour de toi, well faut que tu comprennes le français, l'anglais, pis le chiac. (in Leclerc, "Ville Hybride" 158)
>
> [Me, I don't even care if everybody speaks English here because for me, being Acadian in Moncton, that necessarily means being bilingual or else get with it. In Moncton, if you want to know what's going on around you, well you've got to understand French, English then Chiac.[8]]

The movement towards French and the assertion of a modern French Acadian identity may first have sprung into action in the tumultuous months in 1968 – when the whole world seemed to be undergoing youthful revolutionary fervor. Acadia was no exception as from February to April, the region's first and only Francophone university, the University of Moncton, was taken over by striking students who were rejecting a rise in tuition prices. Claiming that they were already at an economic and political disadvantage in the region, they marched on city hall before occupying one of the main administrative buildings on campus. These events were poignantly captured in Michel Brault's landmark documentary at that time, *L'Acadie, l'Acadie!?!* (1971) (punctuated in the title by an explanation point followed by a question mark then another exclamation point): "It's a film about 'us others'" [un film sur nous autres], Réjean Poirier wrote at the time in the only French Acadian daily *L'Evangéline* shortly after its first appearance on Canadian television in 1972:

> Acadie – a word that has been crossed off the map, a land that is not supposed to be spoken about, where the inhabitants feel tolerated especially when they know how to keep their mouths shut…. but today we no longer focus on deportations, nor the decrees from the victor. Bilingualism and biculturalism are flowing everywhere in Canada, while in Quebec, the winds of revolution are blowing. (in *Textes* 54)

At that time, *L'Evangéline* was commenting on a revolutionary current that started with Quebec independence movements in the 1960s and which inspired the events Brault filmed in Moncton; yet if McClellan's "two solitudes" accurately described the dialectic between French and Anglophone communities, the Acadian situation was more complex as French Acadians were still feeling both the sting of marginalization and unconscious exile from the original *Grand Dérangement*, the "great disturbance," the mass deportation of French settlers from the Maritime Provinces in 1775 by the British (which contemporary Acadian poet Georgette Leblanc describes so well in her epic novel poems, such as her more recent works *Le Grand feu* and *Prudent*).

This sense of internal defeat is in fact what Martin Knelman of the *Globe and Mail* picked up on in his own review of the film after its first English telecast in 1972. When the strikers ultimately fail in their goals, they all go their separate ways as they have been ejected from the university shortly after their subversive take over: "When the student occupation is quickly ended

by the police, there is an affecting air of bitterness, defeat and hopelessness among the students as they begin to realize they've been beaten" (in *Textes* 51). At one point during the film, one of the student activists admits that he sees a big difference between himself as an Acadian and his Québécois colleagues further south: "I don't know what I am," he says, "I'm searching for my identity." In several scenes of the protesters calmly speaking before the Moncton city council, the mayor repeatedly belittles them, refuses to let them speak in French, even with a translator, and patronizingly gives them "fatherly advice" to go home and forget about their childish protests. Each meeting begins with "G-D Save the Queen" rather than the official Canadian anthem and when an angry Anglophone sees the marchers walking to city hall, he yells at them, warning that "You're going to have to have a passport to come here." Another Anglophone sneers at them, "If they want the same rights, they should honor the same Queen." Meanwhile, back at the university, the students are well aware of their secondary status in Moncton. "We're minorities, we can't forget that," one of them sighs, while another waves a sign urging "Let Acadians Develop their Own Language."

In a parallel but somewhat calmer film Brault filmed shortly after the events portrayed in *L'Acadie, l'Acadie!?!* called *L'Eloge du chiac* (1969) [*In Praise of Chiac*], Brault assembled a group of junior high school students in a French school in Moncton called L'Ecole Beauséjour. During a frank and productive half hour of discussions, the students reveal how confused they are about their "national language" and the Chiac dialect. Some lament the fact that they lack the linguistic identity and clarity that Quebecers have. "We Acadians don't have a language," one boy complains, "we speak neither French nor English." Another criticizes Chiac for incorporating strangely archaic old French words with Gallicized English words. Another recounts how, when he was playing football one day, he overheard an Anglophone boy speaking about him and saying "Don't mind him; he's French." Some in the pro-Chiac camp insist on its practicality in Acadia: "I speak French," a girl tells another student, "and you understand me!" "C'est pas mal smart!" she adds enthusiastically. Even their teacher, Roseanne Leblanc admits that after graduating from a national teacher's school, when she first came back home to see her family, they made fun of her during the whole weekend for using the French word *sacoche beige* rather than the Chiac *mon purse*. While several of the students admit to being embarrassed by their Chiac as they fear it makes them sound uneducated or that it creates a distance between them and other Francophones who speak "good French," in addition to condescending Anglophones, others worry that if Acadians do not improve their French rather than their Chiac, their French could completely evaporate altogether. Yet another student confesses that he is "proud" of his dialect because it is his *own* dialect: "We're proud we're Acadians just as Quebecers are proud to be Quebecers." Another student hypothesizes, "If French can come from a mixture of Latin and Greek, why can't Chiac emerge from French and English?" Finally, as the day closes and the students head for home, they all cry out in joyous unison: "Vive le Chiac!" As André Loiselle has written, the strength of Brault's little film on the students is "precisely its focus on individuals rather than collective ideology […]. Brault allows their youthful buoyancy to thrive, without glossing over the complexity of their circumstances" (128).

In a fascinating sequel to *L'Éloge du chiac* by Marie Cadieux forty years later (2009), the same issues that tormented the students in 1968 also affects the students in the contemporary Ecole Beauséjour, now called L'Ecole Odyssée. In her *L'Éloge du chiac, Partie II*, Cadieux not only interviews current students but also brings back the original 1968 ones in the same classroom Brault had initially filmed them all in. One man, for example, who had been a vocal advocate for

Chiac in 1968, is saddened now because his daughter does not really know how to speak French very well at all. Cadieux also interviews Dano Leblanc, creator of the enormously popular comic book hero "Acadieman," who thought of himself as a Chiac "pirate of the French language."[9] When the teacher Roseanne Leblanc is interviewed forty years later, she speaks dreamily of how Chiac makes her feel so at ease when she hears it and compares it to "water trickling down rocks as you walk on them." Some of the current students also admit to feeling uncomfortably attached to Chiac which one boy explains as inescapable: "I don't have my own language, so I *have* to speak two of them."

If Chiac makes some of the new students and the old ones ill at ease however it is because they feel that it lowers their standard of French yet it remains nonetheless a vital form of expression and creativity among today's writers, poets and young people for whom it is not only a striking affirmation of difference but a resolutely spontaneous, informal means of free expression. That is why *Acadieman* struck such a chord among young Acadians today all while parodying the language the goofy superhero is meant to defend. (For example, he shops at "*Mur*mart," a Chiac version of Walmart). He even has a satirical commercial for "Chiac for Dummies," which viewers are encouraged to call in for at 1-888-Parler Mal [1-888-Speak French Badly]. "Je ne connais pas that much," Acadieman admits during an episode titled "Stephen Harper vs. Acadieman." "Je suis into it!" he declares however as he tries to make Chiac the national Canadian language. In many of the discussions in the *Eloge du chiac* sequel, the current students appreciate how easy it is to just replace French words with English ones in Chiac when they feel like it or do not want to make the effort to come up with the right French expression. Because they are surrounded by English in movies, stores and other businesses, the words just flow off their tongues in whatever language fits the situations they are in at that time. In rural Quebec, of course, the opposite is true as even big box stores in Quebec are now obligated to translate even business names into French according to Quebec's language law, known as Bill 101 (Staples, for example, changed their name in Quebec to Bureau en Gros and KFC, Kentucky Fried Chicken, became PFK, Poulet Frit Kentucky).

The uniqueness of the Acadian Francophone community with its cultural hub in Moncton differs from other Francophone cultures outside of Quebec in Canada such as the Franco-Ontarians or the French-speaking enclaves of Winnipeg (such as the Saint-Boniface section of town where famed author Gabrielle Roy was born) in that, just as Moncton itself is named for the very governor who expelled the French in 1775, the shadow of an initial historical trauma persists within the psyche of today's Acadians. As Doyon-Gosselin points out, it is easy for readers to come across a particular quote from the France Daigle novel *Pour sûr* for example and read allusions to the Grand Dérangement without it necessarily being implied. A sign in front of a building undergoing renovations reads bilingually: "We apologize for any inconvenience / Nous faisons des excuses pour n'importe quel *dérangement*," which Doyen-Gosselin reads as a covert apology for the Grand Dérangement and its ensuing guilt complex (62, emphasis added). Yet, essentially, there really is no collective guilt complex today among the Anglophone community in New Brunswick, for whom the historical trauma suffered by the French is rather abstract and distant (see Leclerc, "Between French and English" 163).

However, the Anglophone lack of attention to French issues has not discouraged Acadian writers from asserting themselves through their poetry. For example, poets such as Gérard Leblanc and his poetic heir, Marylou Brideau, have embraced Moncton as their literary capital not for its potential for division but rather for its mixture of the two languages and cultures. That is why

Leblanc's book, *Éloge du chiac* (2005) – using the same title as Brault's film about the Moncton junior high school students – focuses on what Michael Cronin has called "micro-cosmopolitism" to define the charms of smaller cities and communities in contrast to the "macro-cosmopolitism" that big cities such as London or Paris share in terms of their weighty historical and colonial legacies. Leblanc and Brideau appreciate Moncton for its tiny streets, cafés laden with extremely local history and what they perceive of as a raw synergy between the Anglophone and Francophone communities. This is why, although his book elegizes Chiac, it is not actually written *in* Chiac. As Clint Bruce remarks "[Leblanc]'s ideal of language goes beyond, and even transcends Chiac's limitations as it is used in daily life. It's a measure of his linguistic cosmopolitism that Leblanc proposes to formulate a praise *of* Chiac and not *in* Chiac" (211). This transcendence of language is, as Bruce observes, reflected in the titles of Leblanc's books such as *Geography of the Red Night*, *Transitory Places* and *The Extreme Border* (211).

Moreover, as Bruce explains, although Leblanc often uses code switching in his work rather than code mixing, which is the essence of Chiac, Leblanc views Chiac as "an emblem and the very incarnation of tolerance which can of course evolve" (211). Moreover, as Bruce asks, "This vernacular is not the result of a contact between English and Acadian French, but can it rather been seen, by its very nature, as a transcultural production?" (211). As Leblanc writes, "j'imagine dans ma langue / beaucoup de langues" [In my language (I imagine) many languages] (in Bruce 210). Similarly, he writes that he sees Chiac as especially inclusive rather than exclusive: "L'émotion/que cette langue / m'inspire / comme une mélodie / arrive dans le monde / dans des bouches humaines / comme une proposition / de *tolerance*" [The emotion / that this language / inspires in me / like a melody / arrives in the world / in human mouths / like a proposal / for tolerance] (in Bruce, 210). Chiac, in Leblanc's eyes, is in fact "not only a vehicle for linguistic tolerance but essentially one of freedom, of linguistic liberty" (Bruce 211). As Leblanc affirms: "(N)otre univers est rempli de mots alors pourquoi s'en priver?" [Our universe if filled with words, why would we want to deprive ourselves of any then?] (in Bruce, 211). In a poem entitled "Le 15 août des fous" [The Crazy People's August 15th], written as part of the annual 15 August Acadian Day celebrations in Moncton, Brideau comments on an Acadia that is "without limits":

> (C)'est notre chez-nous depuis plus de 400 ans
> c'est la culture
> la patrie
> la langue
> que nos ancêtres ont refusé de céder […]
> n'oubliez jamais pourquoi vous fêter ce soir […]
> qu'à chaque fois
> qu'un Acadien utilise 1755 comme son *PIN number*.
>
> [It's been our home for 400 years
> it's a culture
> a homeland
> a language
> that our ancestor's refused to give away […]
> Don't forget why you are celebrating tonight […]
> Every time an Acadian uses 1755 for their pin number]
> (*Rues étrangères* 90)

While the notion of memory, as well as its opposite, oblivion, are notions that contemporary Acadians (and especially contemporary Acadian writers) must struggle with daily, Chiac itself has evolved to a certain extent from a language of shame and class to one that Leclerc characterizes as one that "no longer seems so threatening" in the wake of globalization and transculturalism (Leclerc, "Between French and English" 165).

Similarly, Monica Heller observes that with the help of writers and artists, Chiac is being reinvented as the language of a modern and urban Acadia: "Linguistic minorities are suddenly fashionable icons of the new hybridity. Long accustomed to making bridges among worlds and resolving tensions and contradictions among them" (15–16). As Leblanc has also asserted, Acadian artists have transformed what was as source of contempt or derision into "an aggressive force, a witness to an actual, articulate and acknowledged reality" (in Leclerc, "Between French and English" 165). As such, when Brideau writes, in a collection of her poetry titled *Rue etrangères* [Foreign Streets] in code switching verse: "Il y aura toujours d'autres rue étrangères / à adopter et à découvrir" [There will always be other foreign streets to discover and adopt] – "*but for now* (she writes in English), I have made / these strange streets / *my home*." Her words of course could echo a whole generation of new poets who have embraced Chiac as a vibrant and culturally significant language of place, of course, but most importantly a language of home.

"La langue ne montre pas la poésie" [Language doesn't expose poetry] (48), declares Georgette Leblanc in her article published in *Lettres Québécoise* in 2021, "Ce qui ne se dit pas" [What is not said]. This manifesto, written in favor of the right to write, not only in French, as an Acadian, but also in Chiac. She takes her stand against the implicit snobbism of those who only respect "le français de dimanche" [Sunday Best French], as she puts it, a French one speaks "pour dire quelque chose d'important – comme si le français acadien en était incapable" [to say something important – as if Acadian French were incapable of doing that] (49). If some of the children interviewed by Brault in *L'éloge du chiac* felt embarrassed to speak Chiac sometimes, a new generation of Acadian authors are in fact rather proud to write in it. Indeed, Chiac is no longer a language that contributes to a feeling of inferiority or exclusion among Acadian French speakers. As Leblanc has written, now is the perfect time for Chiac to be reconsidered as a literary language:

> J'ai écrit dans un français qu'on parle toujours dans les regions acadiennes des quatre provinces atlantiques du Canada. J'ai écrit en m'imaginant que ce français était légitime comme les autres. (49)
>
> [I write in a type of French that is still spoken in the four Atlantic Acadian provinces of Canada. I wrote by telling myself that this French was as legitimate a French as all the others.]

This assertion places her writings in direct opposition to what had been generally perceived as a haughty attitude towards this enthusiastic rediscovery of a more organic written and spoken Acadian language:

> Je devrais m'affranchir de l'anti-francophonie acadien qui peut exister un peu partout en Acadie, cette personne qui cultive un dédain, avec raison certes, envers les francophones qui arrivent sur le territoire pour les accuser (par ignorance) de paresse linguistique, de mépriser le savoir et la culture en générale, de parler – ce qui ne dit pas. (49)

> [I need to free myself from the anti-Francophonie Acadian that can exist a bit everywhere in Acadia, that person who cultivates a disdain, admittedly with reason on occasion, towards the Francophones who arrive on the territories just to accuse us (out of ignorance) of linguistic laziness, of despising knowledge and culture in general, of speaking – what isn't said.]

If Chiac had been perceived as an unattractive hybrid patois by some, it has also been reborn as a source for literary achievement in the twenty-first century. It remains to be seen whether assimilation or an erosion of Francophone habits gain the upper hand, however, as Acadia, as many other Canadian provinces, will surely witness new issues and transformations in the years to come.

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Notes

[1] All translations from the original Chiac or French are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

[2] See the bibliography above for a selection of other important studied on Moncton Chiac by Perrot.

[3] In Daigle's novels in particular, characters not only speak in Chiac but actively discuss its merits and stigmas.

[4] See Michel Tremblay, *Chroniques du Plateau Mont-Royal*. Montreal: Léméac, 2000. Ironically, this formerly popular neighborhood has recently gentrified into one of the most chic addresses in contemporary Montreal.

[5] For numerous examples of Chiac in verse form, see Anne Lévesque's joyous collection *Motché perfect* (in bibliography above) which is a delightful series of poems expressly written in Chiac. She uses an epigram, a quote from Mark Abley, that underlines how, for her, Chiac is an expression of linguistic freedom: "For languages, like teenagers, love to run free." For more on Marie-Jo Thério, visit her website (www.mariejotherio.free.fr).

[6] Visit Les Hay Babies at their website (www.leshaybabies.com). For more on the group Radio Radio, visit their website (laradioradio.com) and see André Thibault's fascinating article, "Un code hybride français/anglais?" (in bibliography above).

[7] Boudreau, in another article, identifies two shifting impulses among contemporary Acadians: one towards *assimilation* through the use of official, standard French and *differentiation*, through the assertion of linguistic and national differences in "La Construction des représentations linguistiques" (in bibliography above).

[8] Although the quote is included in Leclerc, this translation is mine.

[9] Dano Leblanc's *Acadieman* aired on Rogers TV from 2005–09 (www.acadieman.com). Leblanc recently passed away of pancreatic cancer in 2023 when he was only 55 years old.