An Exploration of Evangéline: Poem, Myth, and Pop Song

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ABSTRACT

The Grand Dérangement is the forced exile of the Acadians by the British Crown, occurring in 1755. Evangeline from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was published in 1847. The poem is based on the love story of Evangeline and Gabriel, and is set during the Grand Dérangement in Grand-Pré. The poem was an instant success in part due to the popularity of character-based literature at this time. Part of the appeal of the poem was the themes of Christianity that Longfellow inserted into the story. This research paper examines how Evangeline migrated from a story to a myth because of Acadian Elites linking the specific story of Evangeline to the Acadians' cultural past. Acadian elites were able to transpose their identity in this story of the Deportation as result of the themes of the Grand Dérangement present in Evangeline. The manner in which artists have built on Longfellow’s Evangeline in their musical works is also explored. Each musician has a unique interpretation of the poem as well as of the Acadian heroine, Evangeline.

KEYWORDS

Grand Dérangement, Acadian, Evangeline, Myth
The Acadian World Congress is held every five years, attracting Acadians from around the world. The seminars and conferences component of the Congress involves discussions of major themes, which promote an image of modern Acadia. Acadian cultural identity requires constant examination as it is forever evolving. In the past, Acadians have used myths to differentiate themselves from Anglophones and other Francophones. The manner in which myth, and in particular, Evangéline as a myth, has been used up to now can provide context as to how new myths could help convey the sense of a modern Acadian identity.

The poem *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie* was written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and published in 1847. The poem is set during the Grand Dérangement, the forced exile of the Acadians by the British Crown, occurring in 1755. This poem quickly became widespread and was read by people worldwide. The story of Evangeline was able to excel in popularity due to the height of character-based literature at that time. Themes of the poem, such as purity and innocence, understood within the spectrum of the Catholic religion, enabled it to resonate with both Acadians and non-Acadians alike. How did Evangeline migrate from a story to a myth? Acadian Elites cited Evangeline as a replica of the Grand Dérangement and encouraged the Acadian population to link the fictional story to their cultural past. Indeed, Evangeline has characteristics that enable it to be assumed as a cultural myth.

Since it was published, Evangeline has inspired the artistic works of various artists. How has Evangeline influenced the songs of musicians? Each musician has a unique interpretation of the poem as well as of the role of the Acadian heroine, Evangeline. This paper examines the musical interpretations of *Evangeline* by Michael Conte and Angèle Arsenault.

*The Grand Dérangement*

For the purpose of this paper, Acadians are defined in relation to the territory they inhabited in the early half of the 1700s. Acadians are the descendants of French settlers who arrived on Sainte-Croix Island in 1604. They subsequently developed the French colonial territory called Acadia, which at one time covered the Canadian Maritime provinces, parts of Quebec, and New England. Despite Acadia being under English rule since 1713, the Acadians refrained from taking an oath of loyalty to the King. Their choice to remain neutral would lead to their displacement by the British (1755-1763). British ships took the Acadians to the thirteen colonies and regions in Britain and France. This relocation of the Acadians is referred to as the Grand Dérangement.¹

The poem *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie* was authored by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and published in 1847.² The poem is about the love story of Evangéline and Gabriel, and is set during the Grand Dérangement in Grand-Pré. On their marriage-day, the inhabitants of Grand-Pré are notified that the British Crown is seizing their properties and they are being expelled from the region. Evangeline and Gabriel are placed on two separate rafts, and sent to the thirteen colonies. In the second section of the poem, Evangéline searches for her fiancé Gabriel for many years but is unable to find him. After renouncing her search, she settles in Philadelphia and becomes a nun, dedicating her life to aiding the sick and less privileged people in the city. Infected with small

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² Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was one of the founding fathers of American literature.
pox, Gabriel is brought into the hospital where she works. Evangéline recognizes her long-lost love and takes him into her arms, but Gabriel passes away as she kisses him. This is the final scene of Longfellow’s poem, but it is the prologue of adaptations of *Evangeline* that would spread worldwide.

**The Origins of Evangeline**

The time period in which the poem *Evangeline* was published assisted in its popularity. *Evangeline* was published in book format in the 19th century, which was a time when character-based novels were popular. Five thousand copies of *Evangeline* were sold in the first year, and one hundred years after its first appearance, 270 editions and 130 translations had been written. Its continued success enabled *Evangeline* to travel across cultural boundaries and resonate with both Acadians and non-Acadians alike. There are differing opinions about the origin of *Evangeline*. It is popular belief that the poem originates in a tale relayed by Reverend Horatio Lorenzo Connolly, rector of St. Michael’s Episcopal Church in South Boston, to Nathaniel Hawthorne, an American novelist and short story writer. Hawthorne did not wish to use this story as an influence for his work. The story was retold to Longfellow at a dinner party that both Hawthorne and Connolly attended. Longfellow reportedly stated, “It is the best illustration of faithfulness and the constancy of [a] woman that I have ever heard or read”. Hawthorne permitted Longfellow to use the story. Longfellow’s intention was not to write on the Acadian Expulsion, but rather the image of Christian virtue. In *Evangeline’s Quest*, Judith Cowan, a writer and professor of literature, states, “It was a story where he said that he could describe a woman’s fidelity, her feminine qualities, that courage and endurance that woman may display in difficult times”. Longfellow sought to inject the nature of human dignity into his writings.

Novels of the Nineteenth Century were centred on the virtuous soul and the manner in which they could stand out in their surroundings. They depicted individuals that were engaged in their

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4 The novel is a fictitious narrative of book length. Longfellow's *Evangeline* embodies both of these characteristics; therefore, for the purpose of this paper, the poem is equated to novel.


7 Ibid, 5

8 Idem.


10 Neilson, Supra pp. 5

11 Idem


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communities. In The Novel in Search of Itself: A Historical Morphology, Thomas Pavel writes, “Seeking plausible examples of moral strength and beauty, these authors examined the universe…to discover examples of virtue buried in the foggy past, lost in exotic countries, or trapped in the labyrinth of modern society.” Longfellow implanted these virtues into his heroine Evangeline.

The Virtues of Evangeline

Evangeline’s persistence to find her fiancé Gabriel is a depiction of ultimate loyalty and love to another. This intense tale of love is attractive to many readers. The quest for love is a predominant feature of various artistic works in Western society. This concept resonates with readers because love is some thing that people seek out in real life. This is the ideal that Evangeline and other works advertise as the necessary component to a fulfilling life. The name Evangeline did not exist in the Acadian community prior to the creation of this poem. Historian, Maurice Basque, claims that it is likely that the name Evangeline has Christian origins. Basque states, “It may be derived from Eve, the first woman…along with Evangelical, meaning good news.” Evangelicals live in accordance with Christian morality. Similarly, the character Evangeline embodies Christian virtues that other women could aspire to imitate.

Evangeline reflects the Nineteenth Century ideal of the puritan Victorian woman. She is described in detail as the embodiment of perfection. Villagers viewed her brown hair, black eyes and porcelain skin as the characteristics of a perfect woman. As an unmarried woman her natural beauty invoked that of ultimate purity. The poem reads, “Fairer was she when, on Sunday morn, while the bell from its turret/Sprinkled with holy sounds the air, as the priest with his hyssop/Sprinkles the congregation, and scatters blessings upon them/Down the long street she passed, with her chaplet of beads and her missal.”

This quote depicts Evangeline as a loyal Catholic woman. She is an expression of a saintly persona living among the Acadian people. “Many a youth, as he knelt in the church and opened his missal, fixed his eyes upon her, as the saint of his deepest devotion.” Christianity was deeply rooted in society at the time of the creation of Evangeline. The religious themes in Evangeline faired well with the Acadian population, as they were an astute Catholic group. The character Evangeline also resonated with non-Acadians who practiced the Catholic faith.

Acadians and non-Acadians alike were able to relate to Evangeline because it resonated with the themes of their Christian societies. The character Evangeline is a moral compass that

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14 Idem.
16 Pellerin, Supra
19 Idem.
20 Griffiths, Supra pp. 29
anyone may aspire to replicate. The Acadians of Grand-Pré bestow on her the status of deity on earth. In *Myth and Meaning*, Levi Straus states, “in all American mythology…we have deities or supernaturals who play the roles of intermediaries between the powers above and humanity below”.21 Evangeline links the reader to a divine sense of morality that resembles a heavenly existence. The Christian themes in *Evangeline* are also present in mythology. The poem’s characteristics enabled it to be assumed by Acadians as a cultural myth.

*The Migration of Evangeline from a Story to a Myth*

Acadian elites have used *Evangeline* as a cultural myth to provide Acadians with a common history that they could relate to. The term myth holds more than one definition. Daniel Francis depicts myth as an explanation of the past that enables people to feel engaged in a national enterprise.22 Myths are able to comfort and inspire people that can connect to them.23 However, they exclude individuals that do not view themselves as being reflected in the stories.24 These people can force their way into the story of a nation by creating their own myths.25 A story of a nation is a collection of myths describing a history of said nation. Acadians have done this using the poem *Evangeline*.

In the late Nineteenth Century, Acadian cultural elites were scrutinized for being unable to differentiate themselves from other cultural groups, specifically French Canadians.26 For example, a critic for the Montreal newspaper, *Le Pays*, in 1868 writes, “One cannot grant a nationality to a people unless they stand for something and unless they have “une vie propre, un caractère distinctif…ensemble d'idées, de moeurs, de faits politiques…de direction vers un but nettement défini et clair pour tout le monde”.27 At this time, *Canadiens*28 wished to recognize Acadians as a subset of their cultural nation.29 Acadian elites used the poem *Evangeline* to claim that their cultural identity was rooted in the Expulsion. *Evangeline* captured the notion of Acadian identity during the Acadian Renaissance from 1867-1960. This was a time for nation building and increasing a collective awareness about Acadian identity.30 Prominent Acadian issues began to be addressed in this period.31 The renaissance enabled *Évangeline* to become a prominent Acadian symbol, since at this time Acadian elites were looking for some thing to act as a marker for their identity.

23 Ibid
24 Ibid
25 Ibid
26 Araki, Supra pp. 4
27 Ibid
28 *Canadiens* refers to the population of the Saint-Laurence valley, descendants of New France settlers. At the time of Confederation, they will slowly becoming to be called French Canadians.
29 Ibid
31 Ibid

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In *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals*, William Doty asserts that for a myth to have vitality it must “[address] itself directly to the need of the culture to have answers concerning questions and problems of human existence”. Acadian elites used the poem to connect the dispersed Acadian community to common history, which shaped their cultural identity. For Acadian Nationalists who lacked a historical record of Acadian’s shared experiences to present as their cultural identity, *Evangeline* was the perfect text. The 1865 French translation of *Evangeline* provided Acadians with common text to read and learn about their identity. In presenting *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?* in 1882, French philosopher Ernest Renan depicts myth as being able to assist a nation in constituting an identity. Myth is depicted as the binding characteristic of a nation, which aids in its continued existence. Renan defines myth as, “a shared memory of a common history of…sacrifices, common suffering…that affectively motivates the present will to bind together, to act in a unified fashion”. This definition corresponds to how Acadian elites used *Evangeline* to connect Acadians to a shared identity associated with their deportation. This inspires Acadians to ensure that their identity remains firm despite their dispersion.

A myth can be better interpreted by examining the manner in which persists in existing societies. Strauss articulates, “myths of a given population can only be interpreted and understood in the framework of the culture of that given population”. The myth of Evangeline can be understood in the way it has been used as an instrument of identity. Acadians view the events in *Evangeline* as a historical replica of the Grand Deportation and relate it to their cultural past. Despite the fact that aspects of the poem could be based on some truths, the poem still remains a fictional story. In *Myth*, Steblin-Kamenskij states, “myth is a narrative that is held to be true by those who create and preserve it, no matter how untrue to reality it may seem”. Those that create and preserve myths view them as being real; thus, these people also consider the characters and events in it to be real. What may originate as an artistic creation can evolve into a myth presumed to be founded on historical fact the more it is told. Despite emerging as a fictitious character, Evangeline has achieved the status of a real person.

*The Migration of Evangeline in Music*

Many artists have sought to build on this Acadian myth since it was published. These artists have been able to breathe new life to the story of *Evangeline*. This is evident when examining musical interpretations of *Evangeline*.

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33 Ibid
35 Strauss, Supra pp. 22
36 Ibid
Music has historically played a significant role in Acadian communities. Music was an important part of religious functions, social gatherings, and family entertainment. In her essay *Acadian Folk Songs*, Elizabeth Brandon writes, “It was sung not only for pleasure but it accompanied the daily chores of the people. Singing was an especially popular form of entertainment during their veillées, social gatherings of family, friends and neighbours.” Currently, Acadian music has moved beyond the personal sphere and occupies its own genre in the eyes of the media. Non-Acadians are also able to hear this music since it is able to travel across boundaries because of new media and technology. Various songs explore Acadian themes, such as the deportation, or *Evangeline*.

*Evangeline* has inspired numerous artistic works such as plays, movies, opera’s, and popular songs. This illustrates that the myth of Evangeline has continued to inspire Acadians and non-Acadians alike to build not only on the narrative but also on the myth itself. This section of the paper focuses on portrayals of *Evangeline* in music. This medium has been selected because of the ease of accessibility of music across diverse boundaries, such as language or culture. Artists who have used the myth of Evangeline as a basis for their music have had varying interpretations not only of the poem but also of the character. The manner in which the heroine is presented in music can alter the public’s perception of said character. A listener’s perception could be more easily influenced if they have not read *Evangeline* and are relying solely music to gain insight into the heroine.

In 1971, Michel Conte wrote the song “Evangeline”. Numerous artists have performed this song, including Quebecois singer Isabelle Pierre. Conte does not deviate from Longfellow’s portrayal of Evangeline; the song is simply a retelling the poem. After hearing it, people can understand the basic plot line of *Evangeline*. The final stanza highlights the survival of *Evangeline* and the Acadian people despite the deportation. The song reads, “Il existe encore aujourd’hui/Des gens qui vivent dans ton pays/Et qui de ton nom se souviennent”. Conte recognizes the continued existence of an Acadian nation. However, it is difficult to mark on a map the location of this nation, since Acadians are dispersed across different territories due to the deportation.

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39 Ibid

40 Ibid

41 Ibid 113


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The myth of Evangeline has bypassed borders and resonates with people worldwide. The song states, “Ton nom c’est plus que l’Acadie/Plus que l’espoir d’une patrie/Ton nom c’est le nom de tous ceux/Qui malgré qu’ils soient malheureux/ Croient en l’amour et qui espèrent.” The myth acts as a link that connects people to the cultural history of Acadians and the deportation. Acadians as well as non-Acadians can connect to the underlying themes of Evangeline, specifically the subjects of love and hope. These prominent themes are also present in many of the books, movies and plays that society is exposed to and seeks to experience.

Angèle Arsenault’s “Evangeline Acadian Queen” was released in October 1977. Arsenault’s song presents Evangeline in a way that is distinct from Conte. The song focuses on the commercialization of Evangeline and the way that she has evolved from a fictitious character to a pop cultural icon. In the second last stanza, Evangeline declares that she will popularize her name by investing in future enterprises. The lyrics read, “Je m’en vais pour investir/Dans les compagnies de l’avenir/Afin que l’nom d’Evangeline/Soit connu en câline/Évangeline Fried Clams/Évangeline Salon Bar/Évangeline Sexy Ladies Wear/ Évangeline Comfortable Running Shoes”. This song depicts how the likeness of Evangeline has been used for advertising. For example, the Annapolis Valley Cider Corporation Limited offered for sale Evangeline Dry Ginger Ale. This misappropriation of Evangeline is in contrast to Longfellow’s original concept.

Each of these songs takes a different approach on Evangeline. The striking differences of the songs demonstrate that once some thing hits critical mass its interpretation is left open to the eyes of the reader. Myths by their very nature are open to multiple interpretations, which can give the original myth new meaning. Since the reader experiences the poem through their own lens, they bring with it their own understanding, which can influence others interpretations through retellings of the myth.

Re-evaluating Evangeline

This essay has discussed how Evangeline is a cultural myth that portrays Acadian identity. A century after the peak of its success however, since the late 1960s, many Acadians have begun to feel that “she symbolizes a silent and resigned Acadie and would prefer more authentic symbols”. In the book L’Acadie du Discours, Jean Paul Hautcour examines the period of the 1960s and 70s, when Acadian intellectuals began to question the advantage of symbols such as Evangeline for current Acadian culture. Various contemporary Acadian writers have rejected the Evangeline myth, and have replaced the character Evangeline with alternative cultural heroes. For example, in Evangéline Deusse, Antonine Maillet unveils a depiction of Evangeline that is a Twentieth Century Acadian woman living in exile in Montreal. However, it is

43 Idem.
44 Bisson Supra pp. 117
48 Ibid
questionable if this is a rejection of the myth of Evangeline or whether it simply builds on the existing myth.

The Tale of Evangéline is not merely a time honoured literary piece that is enjoyed by readers. It is a part of the cultural heritage of the Acadian people, which provides useful insight into the heart and minds of the Acadians during one of the worst experiences in their history. Evangeline has migrated from a story to a myth due to the work of Acadian elites. The myth of Evangeline has become so identifiable that it has been considered a historical event rather than a work of fiction. Recently, Acadians have rejected the myth of Evangeline as a cultural symbol because they do not believe that it embodies the characteristics of their modern identity.

If Acadians reject the Evangeline myth will a new one be created? Can Acadians be united in a cultural identity without the existence of myth? These are questions that will require additional research on this topic. The representation of Acadian identity in contemporary society must be further addressed. The Acadian World Congress revaluates Acadian identity every five years because it is constantly shifting.

Works cited


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