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How Do You Say Benoit?

Last name recognition or denial? BY RHEA CÔTÉ ROBBINS

French surnames lead a double life in this neck of the woods. How can I express the sense of relief I feel when I see and hear recognizable last names of the singers on the digital display during my commute—names that channel my childhood French-speaking world? They’re just like the French last names I’m surrounded by in my student list at the University of Maine—living, breathing identities all over New England—anglicized on this side of the border, resolutely French on the other.

I contact Joan Benoit Samuelson, the first-ever women’s Olympic Games marathon champion. She identifies with her French heritage but says she “grew up with the Anglo pronunciation of my last name.” Still, she happily accepts the French pronunciation. You can almost hear her sweet smile: “Benoit” with the French pronunciation was sometimes used by my friends as a nickname.

Buried below that, is there an unexpressed cultural dissonance? Who knows?

Last-name pronunciations are barbed by the immigrant experience to the U.S. We’ve experienced stark erasure in Maine’s monolingual landscape—a mill boss respelling French names into English facsimiles, teachers in classrooms re-baptizing their students with, if you think of it, merry-old-English colonialism. This marginalization wasn’t marginal. Did you know there was a state law forbidding the French language spoken in public school settings outside the classroom until the 1960s? A silence that still echoes in the culture-at-large today.

A recent Facebook discussion of last name pronunciations produced enough material for 74 pages of commentary on how people view the phenomenon of French names bastardized across the border between worlds of languages and identities.

Immigration and all its baggage happened to each and every one of us in the French heritage, along with an imposed denial of the markers of a culture, heritage, language, and ancestors via last name mispronunciation. How do we reunite who we are with who we can be? Is a rose still a rose if pronounced in another language?