Sometime in the fall of 1838, Nathaniel Hawthorne took a walk through Salem with an Episcopalian clergyman named Horace Conolly. As they made their way through town, Conolly told a remarkable story. Over the next few months, Hawthorne “brooded” over its dramatic possibilities. He thought long and hard about turning it into a novel or short story, but ultimately decided to pursue other themes: “It is not in my vein,” he concluded. In the spring of 1840, however, Hawthorne invited Conolly to accompany him to a dinner party at the Cambridge home of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Once Longfellow’s other guests had gone home, Conolly told the story again, taking “about an hour” to guide the mesmerized authors to its fever-soaked conclusion. Sensing a rare opportunity, Longfellow pounced. Extracting a promise from Hawthorne (who was suddenly beset by second thoughts) not to “treat the subject in prose,” he announced his intention to attempt an epic poem. After years of delay, eighteen months of writing, and dozens of scrapped drafts, Longfellow finished in February 1847. Published that fall, the final product was called *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie*.

*Acadie* was Acadia, an old French colony to the north and east of Massachusetts in what are now the Maritime Provinces of Canada. Longfellow had never been there, but had taken a crash course in its history. What he learned mesmerized him. Home to powerful, mobile bands of Mi’kmaq natives, Acadia had been settled by would-be fur barons from France’s western provinces in 1604. As the seventeenth century progressed,

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a few French migrants put down roots along the Bay of Fundy, transforming the region’s salt marshes into fertile farmland with an extensive network of dikes and sluices. As the Acadian population grew, intertwining in complex ways with the resilient Mi’kmaq, the colony became something of an imperial football. Enduring invasions by the Scots would-be colonizer William Alexander, various New England land-grabbers, and even the Dutch, Acadia changed hands several times, but always returned to France by some quirk of European treaty-making. Then, in 1713, three years after a particularly successful Anglo-American invasion, a war-weary Louis XIV gave the colony to Britain, leaving its two thousand French-speaking, Catholic Acadians in a bind. For the next two generations the Sun King’s former subjects proclaimed political neutrality, but mutual suspicions gradually toxified relations between the Acadians and the administrators of the rickety British garrison that ruled the renamed province of Nova Scotia.²

The protagonists of Longfellow’s poem, Evangeline Bellefontaine and Gabriel Lajeunesse, grew up in what the author called Nova Scotia’s “forest primeval.” Like their neighbors in the village of Grand Pré, they wanted nothing more than to get married and mind their own business, but in 1755 the affairs of empire intervened. That summer, with Great Britain and France on the brink of what would become the Seven Years’ War, Nova Scotia’s invasion-wary lieutenant-governor ordered the entire Acadian population – by then about fifteen thousand people, or roughly the contemporary population of Boston – removed from the province. As British regulars and Massachusetts volunteers roamed

the countryside burning homes, capturing civilians, and herding them into the hulls of waiting transport ships, Evangeline and Gabriel became separated. Each was sent off to exile in a different Anglo-American port on the Atlantic seaboard. Longfellow did not specify the pair’s destinations, but allowed (accurately enough) that Acadians struggled for survival from “the cold lakes of the North to sultry Southern savannahs.”

Evangeline started looking for Gabriel immediately, picking up a trail of sightings and rumors that extended for thousands of miles into the North American interior. After a near-miss on the Atchafalaya River in Louisiana, she tracked him to the presidio town of Los Adayes in present-day Texas, but remained two steps behind as Gabriel headed northeast toward the Ozarks, across the Nebraska plains, and deep into the Wind River Mountains. He doubled back to trap and hunt on the Saginaw River in Michigan, but Evangeline found only his abandoned cabin. Graying, tired, and finally resigned to solitude, she became a “Sister of Mercy” in post-revolutionary Philadelphia, making her nighttime rounds “where disease and sorrow in garrets languished neglected.” Then, in 1793, yellow fever struck the city. As Evangeline ministered to the sick and dying in an overcrowded Quaker almshouse, she stumbled, at last, upon a skeletal, feverish Gabriel. He died in her arms; fulfilled, she died too, and while busy Philadelphians shuffled by their unmarked graves unknowingly, the descendants of Acadian exiles retold this story of separated lovers for generations. The end.

And the beginning. For in the years after 1847, Longfellow’s poem captivated readers everywhere. Publishers issued no fewer than 270 editions and 130 translations.

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4 Ibid., 82.
(into Danish, Flemish, Czech, and Norse, among other languages) within a century.5 As she composed *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the late 1840s, Harriet Beecher Stowe even cribbed the name of Longfellow’s heroine for her own Evangeline (Eva) St. Clare, the angelic, doomed daughter of Tom’s second owner. Longfellow’s poem resonated most deeply, however, with the Acadians themselves. Like Evangeline and Gabriel, the real victims of the 1755 assault on Nova Scotia had been split up, shipped off, and scattered to a mind-boggling array of destinations. But by the mid-nineteenth century, their descendants had overcome much to gather again, forming tight-knit communities in the Saint Lawrence Valley, the margins of the Canadian Maritimes, and Louisiana, where they came to be known as Cajuns. They “devoured” *Evangeline* in its French translation, turning the poem’s final reunion into a symbolic expression of their own communal “resurrection.”6 As one twentieth-century observer put it, Acadians embraced Evangeline as “a historical personage who truly lived, who truly suffered, and who embodied Acadia.”7 Although Longfellow wrote *Evangeline* as a general tribute to the “faithfulness and constancy of woman,” Acadians adopted his “maiden of seventeen summers” as an emblem of their particular history as a persecuted, yet resilient people.8

Outsiders shared the Acadians’ admiration for *Evangeline*. To be sure, a few Anglo-American scholars and officials chafed at the “severe charges against our nation”

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8 Hawthorne and Longfellow Dana, *The Origin and Development of Longfellow’s “Evangeline”*, 12.
leveled by Longfellow’s nineteenth-century admirers, compiling documents and writing histories in defense of the 1755 expulsion. But theirs has become a minority opinion. Aside from outliers like Francis Parkman (an anti-Catholic Boston Brahmin who derided the Acadians as “enfeebled by hereditary mental subjection” to their priests) and Edward Hamilton (whose 1962 book on the French and Indian War featured a chapter called “The Acadians Asked For It”), Acadian history has largely been informed by Evangeline’s sympathetic take. This, of course, is not to suggest that for the last century and a half historians have merely repeated Longfellow’s story, minus the Victorian-era verbiage. Most, however, have focused on the Acadians’ capacity to reverse the 1755 expulsion, a theme that Longfellow’s readers could scarcely have missed. The Acadians’ “persistent struggle to keep connected to one another” continues to frame both popular and scholarly interpretations of their diasporic experiences, planting them on the moral high ground of a colonial past flooded with exploitative, warlike, and even genocidal characters. Like Evangeline, the Acadians’ history is a hard story, but a good one.

And like Evangeline, this book reconstructs the grand dérangement – the lyrical, double-edged French name for the series of Acadian removals and migrations that began in 1755 and lasted for two generations. Although it commanded the attention of their eighteenth-century contemporaries, the Acadians’ story remains too little known outside

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11 Faragher, A Great and Noble Scheme, 369.

12 Grand dérangement is usually rendered into English as “great upheaval.” Dérangement, however, can mean both “disorder” (as in upheaval of disarrangement) and “derangement” (as in insanity).
of eastern Canada, Louisiana, and the equally serried ranks of Acadian historians and modern-day Longfellow devotées. And that is unfortunate, for the grand dérangement touches on a question that has long captivated students of humanity’s most inhumane undertakings: the slave trade that dragged millions of Africans to the New World, the expulsion of indigenous Americans to unfamiliar western lands, and the catalogue of modern atrocities that set millions of desperate people in motion worldwide. Namely, what does violent displacement do to its victims – to their sense of identity, their relationships with others, and the fabric of their culture? While on a much smaller scale than the crimes listed above, what happened in 1755 can help us understand the burdens carried by unwilling migrants, and the mysterious process of “re-articulation” by which exiles made lives for themselves in strange places. The grand dérangement may be history, but it is hardly the irrelevant past.

Still, given the blatant immorality of the expulsion (the Acadians cannot help but be the good guys, while the Anglo-Americans will always be the heels), what more can be said about it? To begin to answer that question, I want to invite you to consider the following counterfactual scenario:

What if Horace Conolly, who on that night in 1840 told Longfellow the story that became Evangeline, had been just a little better informed?

Conolly first heard the tale of separated Acadian lovers from a French-Canadian relative of Thomas Chandler Haliburton, an early historian of British Nova Scotia. But

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that woman was hardly his only source of conversation. As rector of Saint Matthew’s Episcopal Church in South Boston, Conolly spent most of his days within a mile of the busiest ports in the United States. Ships, sailors, and the news they carried were part of his daily routine. Given his neighborhood and occupation, one can imagine Conolly, engaged in idle dockside chit-chat with a parishioner, merchant, or ship’s captain, getting wind of a truer, more macabre story of Acadian life and death.

Conolly could easily have heard it from the crew of the Salem whaler *Cavalier*, who had picked it up from an American consular official on the island of Saint Helena; or from Captain Edward Ray of the New Bedford-based *Rebecca Sims*, who learned of the tragedy while his ship lay at anchor off the Chatham Islands in the South Pacific. In any case, word spread fast. Details culled from the men of the *Cavalier* showed up in New England newspapers early in 1839. For his part, Edward Ray returned to Massachusetts in August of that year and remained there until the summer of 1840, no doubt recounting the remarkable things he had seen in the South Seas to friends all over Boston. Had Horace Conolly’s ears pricked up at the right time, his introduction to the Acadians – and the content of the conversation that so enthralled Longfellow – would not have run through the beatific, self-sacrificing girl later known as Evangeline. Instead, he might have told the story of a young Acadian man named Achille Gotrot.

As Conolly would have understood it, Gotrot’s story was both exotic and gloomy. Its climax took place in 1838 in the Bay of Islands, a vast cove on the east coast of New Zealand’s North Island. Nearly seventy years after Captain James Cook first surveyed its

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15 *New Bedford Mercury*, March 29, 1839, August 2, 1839, and June 12, 1840.
“several harbors…safe and commodious,” the Bay of Islands clung to the frayed edge of European civilization.\textsuperscript{16} Perched on the bay’s southern rim, the British settlement at Kororareka sustained a thousand convicts, deserters, and whalers, many of whom seemed to be in perpetual residence at one of the town’s many brothels. The Maori proved even more troublesome. Around 1810, the Ngapuhi, a kinship group native to the North Island, began to acquire European muskets at a terrifying pace.\textsuperscript{17} They used these new weapons to accelerate old conflicts over territory and honor, implicating hundreds of Maori in a cyclical quest for \textit{utu}, or revenge. European taste for contraband “curiosities” (notably the tattooed heads of Maori war victims, for which visitors paid in guns) only sped the region’s descent into instability.\textsuperscript{18} So well-known were such atrocities that in 1826, when the French explorer Jules Sébastien-César Dumont d’Urville spied Maori canoes cruising south from the Bay of Islands, he proclaimed that their oarsmen rowed in “the ghastly expectation of feasting on the bodies of their enemies and seizing booty.”\textsuperscript{19} Others cast the Bay of Islands as the “Hell-Hole of the Pacific,” and urged anyone within earshot to drop anchor elsewhere.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{16} John Hawkesworth, \textit{An account of the voyages undertaken by order of His present Majesty, for making discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere} (Perth: 1789), vol. 3, 154.

\textsuperscript{17} Andrew P. Vayda, “Maoris and Muskets in New Zealand: Disruptions of a War System,” \textit{Political Science Quarterly}, vol. 85, no. 4 (December 1970), 562-3.


Achille Gotrot, however, sailed into this confusing scene with a clear sense of purpose. Serving as captain of the whaler Jean Bart, he had departed the French port at Dunkerque on July 18, 1837, bent on returning with a record haul of sperm oil. Thanks to its value as an industrial lubricant, spermaceti had enjoyed a resurgence in price (its last, as it turned out, before the rise of the petroleum industry). Privy to fresh intelligence about the coastal waters of Australia and New Zealand, the Jean Bart’s owner dispatched a small fleet in hopes of cornering a new supply.\(^{21}\)

Gotrot’s journey, however, went wrong from the start. Prospective crewmen in Dunkerque and Le Havre shunned him, spooked by tales of a previous voyage to the Cape of Good Hope on which the thirty-three year-old captain had failed to recover nine harpooned whales in a row. Although he finally managed to find enough sailors, Gotrot had no such luck with the big fish. Upon reaching the Bay of Islands on February 16, 1838, he had netted only six hundred barrels of oil, far from the twenty-six hundred needed to turn a profit. Days later, Gotrot made a final, terrible choice. Whether prodded by an angry crew or his own sense of failure, he issued a few orders and descended alone into the Jean Bart’s hold. There, flanked by his meager cargo of blubber, Gotrot pressed the barrel of a pistol to his temple and squeezed the trigger.

After disposing of Gotrot’s body, the Jean Bart’s crew left the Bay of Islands and headed southeast, making the five-hundred mile journey to the Chatham Islands. Once there, the sailors received some Moriori natives (an indigenous people recently threatened by British-sponsored Maori invaders) on board for a round of trading. For reasons that

remain unclear, it went badly. Driven from the boat by jumpy Frenchmen wielding long-staffed deck spades and swords, the Moriori returned better armed, killed the crew, and burned the Jean Bart to the water-line. Edward Ray and the Rebecca Sims stumbled upon the scene in June of 1838. Having received “nothing but good treatment” during his previous visits to the islands, Ray talked to a few Moriori, learned of Gotrot’s suicide and the Jean Bart’s apparent provocations, and blamed the French. Jean-Baptiste-Thomas Cécille, captain of the French whaler Héroïne, searched for the Jean Bart’s wreckage that fall, but found only “yards broken on the rocks, pulleys, rudder hinges, the ship’s bell” and a single letter addressed to Achille Gotrot. By then, Achille’s story was already on its way to Horace Conolly’s Boston.22

Evangeline it wasn’t.

Indeed, had Conolly related Gotrot’s story to Longfellow and Hawthorne, both authors might well have dismissed the subject matter as better suited to their ghoulish, ill-tempered rival, Edgar Allan Poe.23 But if Longfellow had chosen to write about this troubled young man and his failed voyage to the South Seas, we might now think about Acadian history very differently.

After all, Evangeline helped frame the Acadian past around a powerful sense of community. Longfellow’s Acadians “dwelt together in love” before 1755, were “[b]ound by the bonds of a common belief and a common misfortune” thereafter, and remained “incomplete, imperfect, [and] unfinished” until completing the “endless search” for one

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22 This précis of Achille Gotrot’s final voyage is drawn from Yves Boyer-Vidal, Le retour des Acadiens: Errances terrestres et maritimes, 1750-1850 (Paris: Éditions du Gerfaut, 2005), 173-193. My deepest thanks to Mr. Boyer-Vidal for sharing his insights on this subject with me.

23 See Poe’s Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket (Boston, 1838) for his take on a young man adrift in the South Seas.
another during the *grand dérangement*. Gotrot, by contrast, barely identified himself as an Acadian at all, made few efforts to connect with other victims of the expulsion, and generally lacked Evangeline’s quiet persistence. Where Longfellow’s heroine sighed a saintly “Father, I thank thee!” after Gabriel’s death, Gotrot responded to his misfortunes by fumbling with the *Jean Bart*’s malfunctioning boilers, cursing his insubordinate crew (“They still don’t know who’s boss,” he growled), and finally, as a rival whaler crowed, “blowing his brains out.” With such a character as Longfellow’s protagonist, some of the blanket claims that have cropped up in recent histories – that as a group, Acadians made “tremendous sacrifices,” “worked as a team,” and “attempted to foster peace” in a world saturated by war – might have been tempered by a fuller sense of the possibilities and perils facing the victims of 1755.

Longfellow’s take on Achille Gotrot might also have encouraged bigger thinking about the *grand dérangement*’s geographical scope. Although most of its narrative predates the foundation of the United States, *Evangeline* reads like an American hymn. With his childhood love close behind, Gabriel criss-crossed the expanding empire of Longfellow’s day, traveling from the Louisiana Purchase to territories conquered in the Mexican-American War to the commercial cities of the Atlantic coast. Still, the pair remained stubbornly Acadian – which, *per* Longfellow, was not much different from remaining stubbornly American. Evangeline chose Philadelphia as her final stop in part because “her ear was pleased with the Thee and Thou of the Quakers/For it recalled the

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past, the old Acadian country/Where all men were equal.”

But like so many Acadian exiles, Achille Gotrot moved in even wider circles, and dealt with dislocation in a very different way.

Take his family. Achille’s grandfather, Charles Gautreau *dit* Maringouin (whose nickname translates, roughly, to “Skeeter”) escaped the 1755 assault on Nova Scotia by fleeing to French-controlled Île Saint-Jean (now Prince Edward Island). Captured with nearly 3,000 other Acadians in 1758, Maringouin and his children were wedged into a British ship and deposited in Boulogne-sur-Mer, a minor port on France’s northern coast. Four years later, his twenty year-old son Gervais left Boulogne, completing a harrowing Atlantic crossing to the mouth of the Kourou River in Guiana. Awash in Enlightenment optimism, Louis XV’s ministers envisioned a new kind of colony along the Kourou – a food-producing dynamo powered by a radical social experiment: African slavery was to be prohibited by law. Within a few months of Gervais’s arrival, however, ten thousand would-be migrants (German-speaking peasants, mostly) had died of disease, starvation, or despair on the river’s banks. Gervais somehow skirted disaster, gaining passage back to Boulogne in 1765.

But by 1773, he was on the move again. With 1,500 other Acadians recruited in France’s coastal towns, he headed for the landlocked plains of Poitou. There, the crown had funded a colonial venture no less ambitious than the Kourou colony. Divided among six brand-new, angular villages outside the town of Chatellerault, the Acadians would

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jumpstart the region’s flagging economy by clearing and farming uncultivated land. Locals (“mere automata,” according to one Poitevin nobleman) would learn from their hard work, fecundity, and deference. A boom in new investment, land clearances, and techniques was sure to follow, leading French agriculture out of its perceived decline—and, more to the point, endowing the kingdom’s core with the economic power necessary to crush the hopelessly overextended British Empire. High hopes notwithstanding, it did not work. In 1775, the Poitou colony spiraled into anarchy. Ministerial conspiracies and intellectual chest-bumping buffeted the Acadians from without, while insubordination, intimidation, and violence overwhelmed their villages. In 1776, the settlers fled in convoys to the port at Nantes; ten years later, many of these same Acadians would accept a Spanish offer to migrate to Louisiana.30

Gervais Gautreau did not follow. Instead, he went back to Boulogne, where his family’s travels accelerated. His son Charles (who, it seems, began rendering his name as Gotrot) became a ship’s captain, joining dozens of boulonnais privateers who preyed on British shipping for Napoleon’s empire; captured in 1807 after a bloody engagement in the English Channel, he spent six years shuttling between Norman Cross, a notorious gaol in the Midlands, and a prison hulk in Chatham Harbor. Born in 1805, Achille came of age as his now-freed father turned to long-distance shipping. He went along as a “cabin boy,” making voyages to Brazil and the Mediterranean. Although the fourteen year-old burst into tears upon “leaving Mama at the end of the dock” and “evacuated all

of [his] bile” during a storm in the Bay of Biscay, the sea had his soul. After Achille passed the round of examinations required to become a bona fide whaler, Boulogne-sur-Mer was caught up in a frenzy of French speculation over New Zealand. Triggered by an abortive attempt to establish a French settlement on the North Island in 1837 (a scheme concocted by Charles-Philippe-Hypolite de Thierry, a high-flying con artist who also planned to cut a canal across the Isthmus of Panama), a flood of profit-seekers surged into the South Pacific from across northern France. Among them was the captain of the Jean Bart.  

Taken together, thousands of individual lives like Achille Gotrot’s make up the grand dérangement. Extensive though they were, his family’s migrations represent only a fraction of the Acadians’ eighteenth-century history. That story encompasses much more: smaller-scale, yet profoundly unsettling displacements in and around Nova Scotia prior to 1755; a diverse lot of post-1755 North American destinations, ranging from Savannah in the south to Boston in the north; the remote coasts of Saint-Domingue, the catastrophic Kourou colony in Guiana, and Port Saint Louis, a French outpost in the Falkland Islands; a settlement on Belle-Ile-en-Mer, a windswept island off the southern coast of Brittany, and the fallow fields of Poitou. Moreover, had designing men gotten their way, this list of Acadian landings might have included dry farms in Spain’s Sierra Morena, the islands of Corsica and Jersey, a forest in eastern France owned by the nonagenarian ex-king of Poland, Ile-de-France (now Mauritius in the Indian Ocean), and

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31 Boyer-Vidal, Le retour des acadiens, 149-150.  
the “central mass of the Antarctic continent,” allegedly spotted by a French mariner in 1773. As Longfellow might have discovered through Achille Gotrot, the breadth of the grand dérangement did not simply reinforce the Acadians’ identity as Acadians. Rather, the exiles’ multiple collisions with empires, peoples, and places turned many of them into something else entirely.

On this very human level, the grand dérangement merits a hard look. But perhaps more importantly, the aftermath of 1755 can reveal a surprising portrait of an imperial world in transformation. The fate of empires during and after the Seven Years’ War is often summed up with tidy simplicity: French humiliation (total) and British ascendancy (absolute, but tempered by a looming crisis over imperial finances and political rights in British North America). Coursing back and forth across the Atlantic like a tracer dye, the Acadians illuminate a more unstable reality. Desperate to populate new frontiers and vulnerable borderlands, determined to preserve metropolitan populations, and ever-more wary of the risks posed by African slaves, political leaders and Enlightenment-era entrepreneurs in London, Paris, and Madrid took creative steps. All-white settlements in the Caribbean, agricultural way-stations to future outposts on terra australis incognita, internal colonies in the French and Spanish countryside – these were manifestations of a fitful, but general attempt to remake the world on the fly. This sudden burst of imperial imagination has, for the most part, disappeared from the history books. But it is inscribed – it is legible – in the lives of Acadians like Achille Gotrot.