With the 1950 publication of his first novel, *The Town and the City*, Jack Kerouac saw a measure of success. Although sales were disappointing, major outlets reviewed the book (Nicosia 300–310, 319), signaling the twenty-seven-year-old writer’s obvious talent.¹ One milieu in which Kerouac’s accomplishment was especially appreciated was the Franco-American or French-Canadian community of New England, in which he had grown up and to which he maintained close ties. Members of this population, who had left Quebec mainly between 1840 and 1930 under severe political, cultural, and economic pressures, were understandably pleased to see the mainstream prominence of “one of their own.” This interest in traditional U.S.-American success was somewhat complicated by the Franco-American community’s strong commitment to *survivance*, the set of practices designed to maintain cultural identity, especially with regard to the continued use of the French language. Certainly aware of the history and conditions of his home community, Kerouac was thrilled to read Yvonne Le Maître’s review of *The Town and the City* in the French-language weekly *Le Travailleur*, published in Worcester, Massachusetts. His reaction to this review, a letter to its author, is a remarkable document for the way it reveals the major role of his relationship to his community in his approach to writing. This role is evident throughout his work—not just in his fictional depictions of French Canadians but also in his consistent fascination with the great variety of cultures in the United States and how they show signs of heterogeneous origins. As background for my assessment of this role, I will provide some brief observations on Franco-American life, especially those aspects of it that signal the massive cultural upheaval marking Kerouac’s work.
Among the French Canadians of New England, *survivance* was a continuation of the disposition of the francophone population of Quebec: they responded to policies of the British Canadian government, which were heavily informed by cultural and linguistic disparagement of French Canadians and exerted pressure on them to assimilate (Dickinson and Young 158–168, 182–183). One of the effects of their marginalized position in Canada was the economic fact of restricted access to affordable credit; interest rates in the early 1860s went as high as 72 percent (Roby, *Franco-Americans* 12–14 and *Histoire* 19). Many peasant families knew overwhelming debt, which could best be alleviated by taking advantage of the growing industries south of the border (Roby, *Franco-Americans* 13). As many people and families fully intended to return, the importance of maintaining identity among the anglophone majority of New England remained strong: it entailed continuing fluency in French, consideration of Quebec as the homeland, avid devotion to French Catholicism, and a conception of cultural and “racial” kinship with France itself. Survivance took place mainly through the churches, parochial schools, newspapers, and social clubs, against local pressures to assimilate.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Franco-Americans had firmly established their communities in New England; they numbered around 573,000, an astounding figure given that the French-Canadian population of Quebec at the time was just under 1,322,000. The total number of French Canadians in the United States and Canada at the time approached 2,413,000; so about 24 percent of the population lived in New England, in the range of half as many as in Quebec (Roby, *Histoire* 22–27). The French-speaking population of some New England cities exceeded 50 percent (Roby, *Histoire* 7). The region was literally understood on both sides of the border as an extension of Quebec, an idea captured in the term “le Québec d’en bas,” “Quebec below” or “lower Quebec,” that Pierre Anctil has signaled. At the same time, Franco-American community leaders were interested in establishing the population in the United States: education emphasized full bilingualism, and prominence in anglophone society could serve as a means of increasing awareness of the identity and culture of the Franco-Americans, hence paradoxically strengthening survivance against assimilationist forces. This part of Franco-American life was a resistance to U.S. melting pot ideology: it presented itself as a contribution to the broader culture by insisting on recognizing the latter as made up of multiple component cultures, each of which needed to look continually toward its ancestry.

Reviewing Survivance

Le Maître’s review of *The Town and the City*, appearing in the March 23, 1950, issue of *Le Travailleur*, is a mostly laudatory assessment, no small feat on Kerouac’s part. Besides her status as the most distinguished Franco-American journalist of the first half of the twentieth century, she was also very distinguished in anglophone circles.