Rethinking the Contemporary Influences of Commerce on Language Use: Lessons for the Åland Islands from an Imperfect Comparison with Madawaska, Maine

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Abstract

Located in between, but separated from, the mainlands of Finland and Sweden, the Åland Islands have for a century negotiated complex relationships of politics, language and culture with both regions. Åland is an autonomous territory of Finland but its language base is distinctly Swedish rather than Finnish. Technically, Åland's single official Swedish language is protected by the Finnish constitution and even a ruling of the Council of the League of Nations. But Ålanders have long feared incursions from Finland that might erode the protections for Åland's Swedish speech. In the academic literature these fears have largely been addressed in terms of the legal competences held by Åland as an island territory and/or the politics that drive Åland's relationship with its metropole Finland. This research note shows that the Swedish language in Åland may be at threat from a novel angle, namely shifts in both language and imagined community that can occur in the wake of changing global business relationships. To explain this threat, the research note explores the corresponding shifts that have transformed the remote and formerly bilingual region of Madawaska in the northeast United States. Although from a distant location – geographically, politically and culturally – this story of Madawaska stands as an important and potentially controversial cautionary tale for Åland.

About the author

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Keywords

The Åland Islands, Madawaska, territorial sovereignty, international commerce,
global value chains, protection of regional language and culture

1. Åland / Finnish + Swedish intersections

Located both beautifully and strategically in the Baltic Sea between Finland and Sweden, the Åland Islands have been the subject of extensive scholarly engagement. The town of Madawaska, Maine, however, at the north-easternmost corner of the United States, sits largely outside of academic discourse, unheard of by most. For reasons that I will explain, I believe that the story of Madawaska – in regard to language, culture and commerce – can and should be of interest to thinkers and commentators on the potential future directions of Åland's special Swedish-speaking status and characteristics.

For purposes of Åland, Madawaska is interesting here not because it is identical to Åland but rather because its dissimilar trajectories nevertheless suggest possibilities that stand outside much of the current Åland debate.

Here I should make clear that I am neither trying nor pretending to [re-]solve the challenges facing Åland. I desire instead to disrupt the current channels of debate by suggesting pathways to new ideas and possibilities that exist and may in the future open up in and around Åland, specifically at the intersections of language, culture and commerce (even if not necessarily in that order). Let me explain.

The Åland Islands – most commonly referred to simply as Åland – is a region of some 6,500 islands that lies geographically in between the mainlands of, as noted, Sweden and Finland. The territory is an excellent example of what Karlsson refers to as a sub-national island jurisdiction "where intelligent strategic agents make creative and innovative use of their material and immaterial resources, including jurisdictional powers." (Karlsson 2009:139). Today, Åland maintains a population of over 29,000 (ÅSUB: Statistics and Research Åland), with more than a third in the main town of Mariehamn (Spiliopoulou Åkermark et al 2019:3). The economy is driven by tourism, as both inspired and facilitated by Åland's opportune location between the national capitals of Sweden and Finland. Åland has taken advantage of this central location by creating itself as a destination for many of the ferries that daily criss-cross the intervening waters between Stockholm on the one side and Helsinki and Turku on the other.

Åland has a complex and interesting history, much of which is outside the scope of this article. Most relevantly, the Åland Islands were during much of modern history a domain of the Swedish Kingdom. In following, the home language of the people of Åland has for centuries been Swedish.

Finland also, for some six centuries, belonged to Sweden. The administration of Åland during this period was managed out of the Finnish city of Turku (Spiliopoulou Åkermark 2019:2). When Sweden was defeated by Russia in 1809, it gave up Finland – together with Åland – to the Russian empire (Joenniemi 2014:81). (It might be noted that through both Swedish and Finnish rule the Finns were remarkably successful in preserving their

own elaborate language, and therefore have waged their own heroic linguistic battles over time.) With Finland's independence in 1917, Åland became a part of independent Finland.

Many of the inhabitants of Åland were not, however, happy about being allocated to Finland (Spiliopoulou Åkermark 2019:5–6; for a more complex picture see Nihtinen 2017:51–54). This is not surprising, given that the Ålanders spoke Swedish and maintained strong social and commercial ties with Sweden. The matter received international attention and ultimately the Council of the League of Nations ruled that Åland should continue to belong to Finland, albeit with protections in regard to its Swedish language and culture (Spiliopoulou Åkermark 2019:6). The ruling provides a number of specific safeguards for Åland, including "internationally guaranteed self-governance," a local assembly with "wide-ranging executive power within Åland's autonomy", and the right to retain Swedish as the sole official language (Joenniemi 2014:84). Åland expert Professor Markku Suksi has cited Åland's self-government status vis-à-vis Finland as "the oldest existing autonomy arrangement in the world" (2013:51).

Two major challenges have previously presented themselves to the extensive patchwork of laws that protect the vibrancy of the Swedish language spoken by the vast majority of Ålanders. First, there has for over a century been a fear among many Ålanders that the Finnish national government could seek to minimise or even remove the special protections that apply to Åland (e.g. Öst 2016). And second, perhaps somewhat ironically, Finland's membership in the European Union has in fact constricted some of the powers of self-rule that Åland has fought so hard to sustain (e.g. Silverström 2008), even if other powers have been enhanced through EU membership. These two challenges, which Åland has so far weathered with remarkable resilience, have received direct attention in the academic literature, largely in regard to the legal competences that Åland possesses as an autonomous territory (e.g. Suksi 2013; H. Jansson 2007; Hepburn 2014; Nihtinen 2017).

I suggest here, however, that Åland's Swedish-language foundation is currently at risk from a new avenue of erosion from Finnish forces. This new avenue is not in the traditional form of law or politics but rather is being carried into the islands by means of contemporary business relationships. And although it is too early to tell, it is possible that the COVID-19 pandemic has set in motion subtle changes that will heighten these risks.

Certainly, similar phenomena are evolving at myriad locations around the globe. My intent is not to present Åland as unique but rather the opposite, to argue that Åland is not unique and therefore, more importantly, not immune to these global trends. I use the example of Madawaska in part because the story there is so traceable, so clear; but of course, other stories exist in other locations, each with their own insight, and hopefully researchers will continue to map – and to connect – these developments.

2. The relevance of my own place in the story

The evidence to support my claims is drawn from events that have unfolded in the far away – and formerly French-speaking – town of Madawaska, Maine in the United States. I will turn shortly to Madawaska, but first it is essential that I place myself in the story. This placement is perhaps as much about the legitimacy of my authority as a scholar in this particular area as it is about framing the novel nature of my perspective, which, as I will explain, arose through a set of lived experiences.

For my part, I grew up far from Åland, in a small town called Macon, Georgia, in the American Deep South. When I was 15 years old I packed up and moved for a full year to Tornio, Finland, just below the Arctic Circle. As fate would have it, Tornio is a border town that is situated on the very point where Finland and Sweden meet at the top of the Gulf of Bothnia. Tornio, together with Haparanda, the Swedish town across the river border, form a larger community.

The border between Tornio and Haparanda is, thanks to the political integration of the EU, a politically open one. The border was likewise largely open even when I arrived in 1986, such that we could pass back and forth at will. Indeed, from my adopted home in Tornio, I crossed over to Haparanda every few days in order to make some purchase or other that was either cheaper or better on the Swedish side of the border. (For example, Haparanda had the only dedicated CD shop in the area, and also, importantly, boasted the best hamburgers.)

I arrived in Tornio in June and was doggedly determined to learn Finnish, a language well known for its complexity. By December I had asked my host family to stop speaking English to me and by the end of the year I found I could fully express anything that I wanted in Finnish, even if my grammar was not always particularly graceful. On the Swedish side of the border most residents and shop-keepers were bilingual and so my Finnish carried me there as well. But I developed a growing fascination for the many small differences that animated the peoples on either side of the border. So back and forth I went, for a whole year, watching, listening, and driving my host family crazy with my many questions.

Two years later I decided to pursue this fascination by learning more about the "other side": I enrolled in university in Sweden. I went on to spend four years in the country, mostly in Linköping and Örebro, studying and working, including translating Swedish books to English. I was enchanted by the language and now speak only Swedish with my two teenaged children.

The point is that my experience on the Finnish-Swedish border shaped my life. At the intersection of law and anthropology, much of my academic research has focused on issues of sovereignty precisely because sovereignty signifies not only boundaries but also the cultural phenomena – like language – that can flourish within them.

In 2019, I was honoured to spend, with my family, three months as a guest researcher at the University of Turku in Finland. Turku is somewhat of a bilingual city and – speaking Swedish at home and in a location where my children studied in a Swedish-language school – I was again immersed in overlapping environments of Finnish and Swedish. How could I not, then, visit Åland myself to begin to experience its unique position in regard to such overlap?

Åland is a magnificent place: friendly, pretty, and with a beautiful dialect of Swedish. One of the things that strikes me about Åland is the degree of defensiveness about their Swedish language and the culture it animates. The use of language itself is in fact institutionalised – and protected by law – in a number of ways:

> Swedish is the official language of Åland. It is used in state administration, Åland administration as well as municipal administration. Moreover, as a rule, Swedish is the language used in contacts between Åland officials and state officials. (Spiliopoulou Åkermark 2019:25)

Further, to be granted a legal right of domicile in Åland, applicants in most instances must demonstrate that they are "satisfactorily proficient in the Swedish language" (Öst 2017:224).

As a scholar, I see two overlapping aspects to the efforts of Ålanders to maintain these language protections. On the one hand, there is the question of law, structure and competencies: what is Åland *permitted* to do in regard to rules about language? On the other hand, there is the experience of Swedish languageness and the unique culture of the islands. We might say: what does it *mean* to be an Ålander?

That meaning articulates itself in many ways. For instance, Åland has its own flag. Of course, the having of a flag – and the prolific display of that flag – speaks volumes. I myself was quite interested in the fact that Åland's car license plate numbers all begin with the letter Å. This may not seem noteworthy, given that the name of Åland itself begins with this letter. The symbolic force becomes clearer when it is explained that Åland is the *Swedish* name of the islands (they are called Ahvenanmaa in Finnish); further, the letter 'Å' is, itself, a Swedish letter that does not exist in the Finnish alphabet (other than to make it possible to represent Swedish words). So the Å of the license plate numbers is a bit like a slap in the face to the Finnish metropole: it says, in effect, "we are not you."

But there is real fear in Åland about incursions against their language protections (e.g Öst 2017). That fear has driven Åland politics for a hundred years now, with some ebb and flow (see Nihtinen 2017). Most recently, during Finland's conservative/nationalist government from 2015 to 2019, Ålanders' foreboding that mainland Finland would revoke some or all of Åland's special language status was once again acute.

So far, in any event, Åland has succeeded impressively with its protections of its Swedish languageness. And, again, the literature on the legal *competences* of Åland for the most part supports the sustainability of these protections. And I hope that to be true. But troubling questions do exist about whether, and how, small regional cultures and languages can survive today in a globally integrated market. In this regard my time in Åland caused me to think back on yet another border that I lived on, this one in a very remote – and historically French-speaking – region of the US and Canada.

The story is worth telling in detail because it provides insight for Åland. I hasten to reiterate that the insight is not derived out of any exactness of the comparison. Indeed, as will be quite clear, any comparison between Madawaska and Åland will necessarily be imperfect due to a range of factors that include the geography, history, language and culture in each, not to mention the diverse legal and political frameworks, such that Finland is officially a bilingual country whereas the United States is not; the Swedish language is protected in Åland whereas the French language in Madawaska is not; the list goes on. There is then perhaps a temptation to dwell on the differences at the expense of the similarities. I continue to maintain, however, that the differences neither taint the insight nor discredit the conclusions: Madawaska tells us that there are significant conversations yet to be had in this area, as well as important research still to be inspired.

3. Locating Madawaska

Nestled on the very northern tip of the state of Maine, the small town of Madawaska is in many ways remote. From the rest of the US, for instance, it is more than a six-hour drive up to it from the city of Portland. And if you make that trip, you'll discover that more than two full hours before reaching your destination, Interstate Highway 95 just ends. As if indicating that American infrastructure planners felt there was no reason to travel farther north, the national highway simply veers off into Canada well before reaching the top of the state.

Madawaska itself, stretching along the Canadian border, lies in the shadow of the significantly larger and solidly French-speaking population of the city of Edmundston, New Brunswick. The majority of Madawaska's own residents are the descendants of Acadians who settled the area in the late 1700s. Madawaskans have thus traditionally been French-speaking. Yet, after more than two hundred years of maintaining French as a first language, local residents are currently shifting toward English with a corresponding re-calibration in imagined community. Why?

The answer is more complex than it might initially appear. First, as to language, Madawaskans are not currently subject to targeted nationalist agendas that seek to convert

them to English speakers (or, aside from some local activism, to have them retain French either). Their language shift thus cannot be explained purely by politics. Second, the shift cannot be driven by surrounding cultural magnetism or mass-media influences. After all, unlike their Cajun cousins in Louisiana, Madawaskans are not a linguistic minority in their larger community. Au contraire, Madawaska is a considerable distance from English-language political or cultural centres, pressed instead against the much-larger and thoroughly French-speaking Edmundston. In fact, the dominant culture along this whole stretch of the Saint John River Valley is francophone. Edmundston surely therefore could provide to the people of Madawaska a more than adequate anchor of French language culture and media, and even politics. But it does not.

Moreover, given that early settlers set up residence on both sides of the river that now separates the US and Canada, most of the families in the region have branches in both countries. In light of these genealogical connections, and also because of the historical homogeneity in the area, many of the residents have long possessed dual imagined communities, one of the US and the other of francophone Canada. The shift to English as a first language, however, is severing the Canadian component from the imagined community of the residents of Madawaska. In other words, the shift to English is causing this dual-community identification to be replaced by an American community that is increasingly sole and exclusive.

As I will explain, existing scholarship fails to explain these shifts. But the failure is fortuitous because it invites the investigation of elements of nationalism and community identity that otherwise have gone unnoticed. Here, because of Madawaska's particular characteristics, those formerly hidden elements become visible. Indeed, far from Boston or Portland – far, even, from Bangor – the town serves as a rare site for examining theories of nationalism and community, uncontaminated by the typically contested forces that historically have impacted Åland and other places, including power struggle, political debate, and even the influences of media and popular culture.

As such an investigation will demonstrate, these transformations in Madawaskans' language use – which reflect the corresponding change in national cultural identity – stem from a two-part process. The first involves the circumstances that cause monetary relationships to connect Madawaskans to the English-speaking US/Maine rather than to the often-closer French-speaking Canada/New Brunswick. Just as Ong argues that "economic calculation" has become "a major element of diasporic subjects' choice of citizenship" (1998:136), economic possibility has been a major element of Madawaskans' choice to look south for business partners. Key here is that the framework for such economic possibility has been transformed over the past 40 years: changes to both the form and function of transnational corporate commerce – changes that are part of the evolution of global supply

chains into what have been termed *global value chains*, which I elaborate on below – are having dramatic effects on the daily lives of individuals who are increasingly implicated, with a resulting impact on group identity.

Second, while these monetary relationships provide the *pathways*, the shift in national cultural identity can only be fully actualised because the imagined community of the US is one that *fits*. (Whether the imagined community of Finland is one that "fits" for Åland is of course another matter, but as I note below there is some research suggesting at least a basis here (Tillitsstudie för Åland 2018:68–70).) In other words, the residents of Madawaska are not imagining themselves into a foreign community but instead into one in which they already recognise themselves. This is significant because in a vacuum, Madawaskans might instead have trended, consistent with the dominant culture in the region, toward an imagined francophone community that is by consequence primarily Canadian.

As a sign that there is a relationship between nationalism and global value chains, the role of Madawaska here is therefore significant. Moreover, these processes unfolding in the remote Saint John River Valley have broader relevance. For one, as the situation in Madawaska confirms, the contemporary political economy simply demands that far-flung economic actors, such as those in the Saint John River Valley, become more intimately integrated in their respective global value chains, systematically connected with corporate headquarters and lead firms. Furthermore, Madawaska simultaneously demonstrates not only that the economic sustainability of regions like the Saint John River Valley is dependent on integration into global value chains (as has been widely claimed: see e.g. OECD, WTO and World Bank Group Report), but also that such integration impacts national identity.

For my part, I engage in these questions by relying on a serendipitous and potentially novel methodological manoeuvre. Here, the ethnographic work that I do is based on a trove of emails that I myself wrote. On its face, such a source of fieldnotes would hardly be either surprising or of interest. What makes my methodology unique, or at least uncommon, is that I wrote the emails in question many years before I had ever taken my first undergraduate course in anthropology. As such, although the observations and the very contents of the emails are "mine," they are nevertheless unfiltered by theory and uninhibited by anything other than then-existent social mores themselves. The contents of the emails are, to be sure, as raw as any informant's, and yet the words that I seek to understand are still my own. In this way, my methodology challenges some of the us/them tensions of traditional ethnography, while simultaneously manifesting expanded angles of self-reflexivity.

4. Madawaska speaking

Some time ago, scrolling through old computer files, I made a marvellous find in the form

of a small anthropological treasure. There on my screen, among the digital miscellany, I discovered a long-forgotten icon that led to an extensive compilation of emails that I had once sent to friends and family. The year was 1996 and I had moved from my home in Georgia to Maine's Madawaska, as I mentioned, the northeastern-most point in the continental United States.

I began to read through the first of the emails. My move to Madawaska was in the days before Facebook and Instagram, before the widespread e-transmission of life's most trivial events, and there were in fact some in my social circle who were not aware of what I was up to, even after I had left Georgia. Smiling, I recalled how I had been looking for some new and remarkable location to move to with the modest amount of money that I had diligently succeeded in saving. To do so I had opened an atlas and, with a fearless curiosity of the Unknown, had for hours traced my fingers all across a giant map of North America. Inspired by Madawaska's apparent remoteness, and upon discovering that the area was traditionally French-speaking, I decided to make the move.

In 1996 I barely even knew what "anthropology" was. But as the contemporary me continued reading those old emails, I realised that what I had uncovered in the emails were archives, textual snapshots taken in real-time … these were notes from the field, *fieldnotes*, of the simplest yet most unadulterated form. More than correspondence, these were observations of the everyday from a true participant observer. As "fieldnotes" they were certainly clouded by my own personal perspective – a perspective that was riddled with immaturity, frequently privileging humour over ethics. But still, their beauty was that they were written with no agenda: they did not benefit from the structure of theory but more significantly, neither were they limited or even affected by it. This was unedited data which anthropological theory could now, after the fact rather than before it, make sense of in relevant ways.

So with growing interest, I printed out the emails. The stack was fairly thick, there were 136 pages of tight text. And as I read, I kept shaking my head. This really was quite a coincidence, it kept occurring to me. After all, after my time in Finland and Sweden, my PhD later focused on the role of national borders, in that case in regard to issues of sovereignty and nationalism in the Cook Islands, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and Australia. And there I had been, so many years ago, in Madawaska, so close to Canada that the short bridge to Edmundston began at the bottom of my street, just a few hundred metres from my door. Every morning, as I had stepped out of my apartment, I could see more of Canada than I could of the US.

Borders. Nevertheless, Madawaska is hardly a typical border town. Instead, it is more of a regional sub-unit, a fact which at times revealed itself in peculiar ways. As my emails noted:

> Just how distinct is the culture here from the rest of Maine? Well, when you enter the state of Maine from the south, there are large, official signs wishing you Welcome To Maine. However, when you enter Maine from the north, that is to say, from Canada, there are no such signs. It is only after you leave this whole area – i.e., exiting Madawaska on US Highway 1 in one direction or Fort Kent in the other – that there are such signs welcoming you to the state!!! (So where on earth does the State Legislature seem to think you've been before that??)

On a day-to-day level, however, the most salient manifestations of Madawaska's positioning involve language, especially the French speech in the area. Indeed, even in regard to English, the effects of the French language were pervasive. Not only did many Madawaska residents speak English with what could be called a "French accent," but structural aspects of English speech were also impacted:

> Or people use French syntax, sort whenever it pleases them: "Yeah, he's a good guy, him," this woman at work was saying yesterday. Him? Or this other woman today was talking in the break-room, in a perfect American accent, mind you, and at one point she said, and I quote, "it's nothing funny when you have frost-bite by your hands." And this is, of course, when people aren't mixing actual English with actual French.

In addition to local variations of English, my emailed comments on language frequently focused on the local dialect of French. Indeed, there was so much French in Madawaska. But the younger generations are increasingly choosing English as their first language. As they do so, they are also choosing an Americanness over a Canadianness. Why?

5. Existing scholarship does not explain Madawaskans' language shift

Central to the myriad territories of the globe today, the concept of nationalism describes how political forces seek to make the nation the "primary form of belonging" (Ignatieff 1993:5). As such, nationalism is the phenomenon by which the boundaries of group identity are pressured (often in the channels of materialist inertia) to expand or contract in order to match the state's political boundaries (Hobsbawm 2007 [1990]). These same processes have long animated Åland, whose residents "overwhelmingly" refer themselves as *Ålanders*, rather than Finns, Swedish Finns or Finnish Swedes (Joenniemi 2014:87; Tillitsstudie för Åland 2018:68–70).

Sometimes these nationalist pressures are from above, as states seek to consolidate power by eliminating minority views. "Since some forms of cultural and ethnic variation

must be 'matter out of place' to nationalists," writes Eriksen, "ethnic variation is frequently defined by dominant groups as a problem, as something one has to 'cope with'" (Eriksen 2002:122). Other times, the pressures are from below, as minority groups seek to create new nation-states, that is, to erect nation-state borders around their already-existing group identity, as happened in the fall of the former Yugoslavia. Either way, both the boundaries and the substance of national group identity are frequently contested. Certainly, this has long been the case in Åland (Nihtinen 2017).

The study of nationalism is thus important for at least two reasons. First, examinations of the mechanisms by which national group identity is formed and affected are key to understanding the conflicts described above, whether of the homogenising agendas of states or the state-seeking activism of minority groups. Second, in this age of globalisation, there is no question that borders are in many ways becoming more porous; the form and the function of the nation-state are *changing*. As Åland manages its complex integration into the EU, it is facing these challenges on multiple levels (Suksi 2013:55–56; Hepburn 2014:475–478). Understanding the trends of nationalism that underlie and make up nation-states and autonomous regions alike therefore sheds light on these changes.

The insights of Benedict Anderson here are well–known – even if contested (see e.g. Kelly and Kaplan 2001:22; Chatterjee 2004). Anderson suggests the centrality of print capitalism in creating the cohering force of what he famously terms "imagined communities" (2006 [1983]). According to Anderson, demands for capitalist gain caused early print-makers, for efficiency's sake, to rely on dialects that were broadly understandable by the largest possible number of people. As a consequence, the speakers of the various sub-dialects of Europe became linked through the newly created common language. They also came, through the group-inflected references that they then read in that language, to "imagine" themselves as part of a single community, one that "is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). Once bolstered and bounded by political borders, these communities became fortified in the form of nation-states; the citizens of those nation-states, in turn, so strongly took on the identity of their given nation-state that they became willing to die for their newly created country (Calhoun 1993:219; Anderson 2006 [1983]).

With its basis in print capitalism, the driving force of Anderson's imagined-community theory is materialist, economic. And to be sure, ranging from Wolf's (1997 [1982]) seminal account of the symbiotic development of the nation-state and globalisation, to Heller's (2010) genealogical analysis of minority francophone speakers in Canada, the pervasive and at times brutal relationship between political economy and nationalism has been broadly interrogated. No such study, however, has specifically linked evolving nationalist trends, whether in Åland or elsewhere, to the systematisation of corporate global value chains.

Another particular fact about Madawaska is that – unlike Åland – the region has been subject to surprising little contest or conflict since the area was first settled by Europeans in the 1780s. Those first Europeans, known as Acadians, were one of two major branches of land migrants who were fleeing violent British antagonism in nearby Nova Scotia. While this particular group trekked north, the other branch was forced to migrate south, becoming the Cajuns of what is now Louisiana. The term Cajun is in fact simply a variation of the word Acadian (for an in-depth discussion of the term Acadian, see Keppie 2011), marking the two groups' common heritage.

When this northern branch of French-speaking Acadians settled in the broader region surrounding Madawaska, they were a largely homogenous group. And although their settlement from the beginning straddled both sides of the Saint John River, it was split by no political or cartographic boundary because the administrative jurisdiction of the entire area, from a colonial/European perspective, had not yet been definitively established. (Obviously and unfortunately, I myself am reproducing a colonial/European perspective in this article by omitting any discussion of the Native/Indigenous histories of this region, histories which deserve their own attention.)

Uncertainties regarding the colonial administration caused political disputes to arise, not among the local residents, but at a higher level between the governments of the United States and of the pre-Canadian British American Colonies. These disputes, growing in scope and intensity into the 1800s, were larger geo-political conflicts that did not directly stem from or relate to the local settlements along the Saint John River. Still, the resolution of these conflicts came to have a monumental impact on the area. Most significantly, through the Webster–Ashburton Treaty of 1842, the border between the US and the British American Colonies was set straight down the Saint John River, slicing the local Acadian community politically – albeit not yet socially – in two.

In subsequent years, on the side of the river that would later become Canada, French-speaking migrants from Quebec began to arrive. As the numbers of these former Quebecois – now known as *Brayons* – increased, their mass became the predominant cultural group in Edmundston, absorbing many of the Canada-side Acadians. Nevertheless, a large number of descendants of the original Acadian settlers remain in Edmundston, a substantial portion of whom retain ties to their US-side kin, even though the bulk of the social and political affiliation of these Canada-side residents is now solidly Canadian (Wright 2009:100).

On the US side of the border, however, social and political identification has been less stable, as evidenced by the marker of language use. To paint the picture with an overly broad brush, I frequently noticed in Madawaska that in a given family the grandparents spoke French as a first language and (some) English; the parents spoke both French and English but preferred English at home; and the children spoke almost solely English with

maybe (a little) French. More officially, some accounts list 90 percent of the area's US-side residents as now having English as a first language, while 95 percent on the Canadian side are first-language French speakers (Wright 2009:100).

The important question then is *why* this shift is taking place. Indeed, the shift is especially curious given that the town of Madawaska: (1) is traditionally French-speaking; (2) is politically insignificant, that is to say, is not the target of strong political or activist attention; and (3) is not only distant from any English-speaking cultural centre but is also pressed squarely against a French-speaking cultural anchor.

As noted earlier, in the face of these characteristics, the existing scholarly literature fails to offer an adequate answer. This is so for two major reasons.

First, existing theories of nationalism do not explain the choice of Madawaska's residents to identify with the US rather than Canada. After all, most scholarly discussions of nationalism involve disputed territory (e.g. Boldt and Long 1984:546) or contested allegiance (e.g. Ignatieff 1993), either in whole or in part. As Chatterjee points out in a different context, government "always operates on a heterogeneous social field, on multiple population groups, and with multiple strategies" (2004:60). In regard to Madawaska, however, these strategies are usually focused elsewhere; as beautiful as it is, Madawaska is small and insignificant in world politics. Even in the state of Maine, neither Madawaska's potential votes nor its minimal economy have much effect or influence on state politics or state consciousness. Most of the residents of other parts of Maine barely seem to know the region even exists.

Second, theories of media influence do not explain Madawaska. It must be remembered that although Madawaska and Edmundston lie cartographically on opposing sides of national borders, they still parallel each other on either side of the river, like two parts of a zipper between once unified cloth. And to be sure, Edmundston is a French-speaking cultural base, solid not only because of its mass – the city is some four to five times more populous than Madawaska – but also because it is the municipal unit of an official French-speaking part of the province and therefore its French language usage is embedded in, as well as approved by and reproduced by, the state itself.

As a consequence, there is a full French-speaking social network available to the residents of Madawaska – indeed, most Madawaskans have relatives in and around Edmundston, and many even hold dual citizenship (Wright 2009; see also Ong 1999). The anchor of Edmundston thus means that the full panoply of popular media is available in French – radio, television, movies, sports, books, etc. (see generally Eriksen 2002:105). In fact, in a given instance, *more* is likely available in French than English. Following Appadurai, who describes the "emergence of a postnational political world" in the wake of expanding mass media and imagined communities, Madawaskans might be predicted to trend towards the

French language and camaraderie with their relatives in Edmundston. But instead, the opposite is true.

6. The centripetal force of economic networks, the centrifugal reach of cultural phonemes

I return to the underlying question: given that Madawaska lies far from US metropolitan areas and political centres, but adjacent to an anchor of French-speaking language and culture, why is it that the residents of Madawaska, after having spoken French in the region for over two hundred years, are now shifting to English? Since Madawaska lies on the US side of the border, the answer might seem obvious: under the political umbrella of the United States and subjected to the English-language "community" of American media, Madawaskans are simply re-calibrating their own imagined community. But as I have described, such an explanation is incomplete at best and deceptive at worst.

I suggest that the answer here is two-part. The first is based on economics. As might seem obvious, the national border between the US/Madawaska and Canada/Edmundston is indeed an important factor in the severing of US-Madawaskans from the linguistic base of Canada/Edmundston. But the border's true relevance is due less to its *political* ramifications, and is more so because of the consequences that this political border imposes *economically*. The regulatory function of the border, after all, disrupts and hinders capital flow (e.g. Hardt and Negri 2000:150) in multiple ways that simultaneously encourage Madawaskans to form economic relationships with US entities and discourage them from engaging in such relationships with Canadian businesses.

These economic relationships are of course more than the simple transfer of money. Rather, monetary transfers are necessarily embedded in a peculiar type of social relationship. As such, by entering into economic relationships, the paths mapped by the monetary transfers create conduits of communication that take place through language. Whether the transactions involve purchases, sales, or loans, local Madawaskans thus become linked to networks of English-speakers who manage the transactions from distant locations elsewhere in the US.

This phenomenon is captured by the insight of global value chain analysis. This body of research is driven by a multidisciplinary group of scholars who address what global supply chains have become in the contemporary global political economy. In relevant part, corporate supply chains were originally made up of companies who stood largely in arm's-length relationships from each other. Today, however, global competition – combined with pressures for social responsibility – have caused significant transformations to the form and function of corporate commerce. Global value chain scholars highlight two important

features of these transformations. First, powerful corporations are today exerting increasing control over their entire supply chains (e.g., Gereffi, Humphrey and Sturgeon 2005; Kaplinsky 2004). Second, and as a consequence of that control, corporate supply chains are becoming ever more integrated systems (e.g., Sobel-Read 2014), even if that integration has yet to be fully recognised socially or regulated legally (Sobel-Read 2020).

In sum, corporate influence is binding together, in novel and unprecedented ways, vast networks of actors; in this manner, corporate power has become increasingly pervasive and invasive, constantly monitoring and even intervening at every level of manufacturing and agriculture, from labour standards to environmental protection, and from corporate boardrooms to family farmers and contract labourers on the factory floor (Gereffi and Fernandez-Stark 2011; Humphrey and Schmitz 2008).

The effects of this systematisation of corporate-driven relationships can be seen in the processes at play in Madawaska and Edmundston. In Madawaska, when I lived there, there were only a few brand-name chain stores, primarily: K-Mart, McDonalds, Subway, Rite Aid, as well as Key Bank. None of these entities is Canadian, instead they are headquartered respectively in Hoffman Estates, Illinois; Oak Brook, Illinois; Milford, Connecticut; Camp Hill, Pennsylvania; and Cleveland, Ohio. (By contrast, there are many well-known Canadian chains in Edmundston, including Canadian Tire and coffee-and-doughnut mecca Tim Hortons.) The money to and from these U.S. branches in Madawaska of course links them directly to their geographically diverse yet all-American corporate headquarters. More importantly, the employees themselves of these branches are linked to far-flung American cities through their day-to-day procurement of the materials necessary to make the branches run, whether the products on K-Mart's shelves or the coffee in McDonald's' cups. Those procurement processes entail economic relationships with myriad suppliers, requiring continual communications with vendors, suppliers, and shipping services throughout the United States.

Equally significant, there are naturally also local businesses in the area. And where ownership and operations are local, the actors in such businesses might be thought to retain financial independence within this narrow French-speaking zone. But banking introduces another important component here, especially in regard to money-lending. As Lenin recognised over 70 years ago, based on the inherent power differential and long duration, the relationship of lender to borrow allows the former to have a significant influence on the latter:

> In my opinion it is precisely this that forms the economic basis of imperialist ascendancy. The creditor is more permanently attached to the debtor than the seller is to the buyer. (Lenin, quoting Schulze-Gaevernitz 1939:101)

It is noteworthy that there is only one bank in Madawaska, which, not surprisingly is the one that I used while I lived there: Cleveland-based Key Bank. Given this fact, and even if one factors in the two local credit unions, a significant portion of all financing for local businesses as well as individuals necessarily comes by way of American financial systems outside the region. Home mortgages and small-business loans alike therefore link local Madawaska borrowers to English-speaking financial networks.

Moreover, when interacting with the bank itself, one certainly has the option of speaking French with many of the employees, but as was the case with my own petty savings account – which at one point dipped to $1.15 – all official documents were in English. So just as one was wooed by glossy English-language brochures, one also bound oneself legally through English-language loan – and account – agreements.

In a related way, credit cards, whether for personal or business use, will primarily be obtained, if not from Key Bank, then through one of the major US credit card suppliers. In addition to official documentation, any communication with the credit card supplier will necessarily be in English; and even if calls are routed to, for example, India, the conversation will still be conducted in a well-contrived cultural simulacrum of Americanness.

A further key economic connection between Madawaska and the English-speaking US comes in the form of purchases and sales between local businesses and English-speaking US customers. For instance, during most of my time in Madawaska, I worked at a frozen-potato processing plant which I'll call Polar Frozen Industries. And I must admit, I worked hard there – including starting at 5am and one time working for thirteen days straight with no day off. Among other things:

> These past few days I've been doing some "inspecting" at work. To "inspect" means that hundreds of thousands of little pieces of frozen potatoes pass by in front of you on a conveyor belt, while you stand very close to the opening of a –15 degree (F) freezer, and you have to pick out any of the hundreds of thousands that have the tiniest black spots on them, for example. It's fun for about five minutes. Then your back hurts and your neck hurts and your shoulders hurt and you want to go home.
>
> There are usually 2–4 of us inspectors at any given time. If you're the first one it's not bad, because you know that if you miss a defective piece then one of the other inspectors will probably get it. If you're the LAST one however, you know that if you miss one of the bad ones, then that baby's going into the box, to either be received by some unsuspecting consumer, or to be discovered by some grumpy quality inspector at Campbell's or Pillsbury who's not going to be very happy. What pressure! It's like you're standing there and there's a monster, and you know that if the monster gets past YOU, then it's going to eat your entire village. Well, ok, it's not exactly the same, but I'm sure you can see the amazingly striking similarities.

And all for wages of $4.40 an hour, later raised to $4.65 an hour. But significantly, as the above excerpt shows, that $4.40/$4.65 an hour was *not* funded by local buyers (and certainly not by French-speaking ones from Edmundston) but instead by purchases from massive American companies – like Campbell's and Pillsbury, as well as Stouffer's. These giants incorporated our potatoes into products ranging from canned soup to frozen potato wedges that they sold all around the US. And although expressed through my silly comedy, the above excerpt – showing the fear we had of quality inspections by the likes of Campbell's and Pillsbury – further gives a sense of the intensity of the social relationships that piggy-backed on the economic ties. This intensity is emblematic of the systematisation of contemporary global value chains: rather than arm's-length purchases, whereby a buyer simply accepts or rejects the goods as is, here representatives from the corporate buyers were constantly intervening in our performance in a hegemonic, command-and-control style (e.g. Sobel-Read 2020:164–67).

A mock Q&A from another email sheds additional light on the seriousness:

> Dear Mr. Potatohead,
> Recently I heard some potato-workers talking about "defects." I was pretty sure they were talking about me, but before I resorted to violence, I wanted to check with you.
> Defected in Detroit
>
> Dear Defected,
> Why no, you're not defected. A "defect" in the potato industry refers, among other things, to a rotten piece of potato that gets into boxes of frozen potato-cubes or potato-slices. Many companies are very strict about the number of defects allowed in the products they sell. For example, Stouffers Inc. recently sent a letter to [Polar Frozen Industries, Inc.] where I work and told them that the next time they (ie, Stouffers) receive a load (ie, tens of thousands of pounds) and are doing their quality control on that load, if they find more than TWO defects per twenty-one POUNDS, they will send the ENTIRE shipment back. That would suck, eh?
> Mr. Potatohead.

In other words, the sale of a given product is generally more than the simple exchange of the product for money. Instead, the exchange – especially in continuing or recurrent business contexts – is both embedded in and gives rise to social relationships (see Macaulay 1963). Those social relationships, as here, can certainly entail distinct differences in power. Yet in spite of these differences – or often perhaps because of them – the social relationships influence behaviour, in this case mandating English-language usage while simultaneously tying local Madawaskans to the broader American community.

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Economic ties alone, however, are not enough, to change language use and community allegiance. As Hobsbawm counsels, national affinity must be understood "in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people" (Hobsbawm 1990:10). In regard to Madawaska, the transformations of language and affinity become consummatable only because the imagined community of English-speaking America to which the residents are invited is *recognisable*. I suggest that residents of Madawaska have for some time had available to them *two* imagined communities, one of Edmundston and francophone Canada, and the other of English-speaking Maine and the rest of the US. It is quite possible that those dual imaginations have co-existed with little friction and could have continued to do so; my point is that the economic relationships with English-speaking America have tipped the balance – but that is not the whole story.

In ending up with the job at Polar (which was solely because none other was available in the whole area), I was fortunate in that I had an unusual opportunity to interact with individuals from a broad swath of local society. This was because unemployment had recently soared throughout the area, and so individuals from a variety of backgrounds – from loggers, to accountants, to grocery-store clerks – were forced to work there.

One of the things that surprises me most about my time there is how generally seamlessly I was able to interact with this range of local residents, in spite of differences of (geographical) background, language and dialect. As I hinted at above, those linguistic differences, indeed, were more common than one might have guessed. For example:

> Unfortunately, before I can start working whole-heartedly on my French, I have to learn how to understand these people when they speak ... English! I mean, sometimes people will repeat something to me like three times, and finally I just have to say something like: "Could you please say the exact same sentence that you're saying now, but using different words?"
>
> ---
>
> I've written before about some of the communication problems which have taken place between the locals and me. Well, not much has changed in that department. The other morning a new guy came into the break-room.
>
> "Does anyone know what time Mike the foreman gets here?" he asked the group of us.
>
> "He usually emerges about now," I answered politely.
>
> "Where the fuck's that?" the new guy answered.
>
> "He should be here soon," I said.

But through – or sometimes around – spoken language, we usually seemed to understand each other in terms of a shared cultural grammar. Salient here are theories of cultural-resource tool boxes: in evaluating cultural practices, Shearing and Ericson (1991) have

concluded that members of a group possess a certain, limited number of practices available to fit any given situation. For example, when greeting another person, one culture might allow hand-shaking where another might require a cheek kiss.

The point is that I, as a sample representative of mainstream America, usually shared that cultural tool box with the local residents. This mutual understanding often manifested itself in the most everyday of circumstances, however silly:

> The most satisfying part of working lately has been that a number of my earlier acquaintances have now become friends, and trust me, when things get slow, we have ourselves a grand ol' time! You really have to in order to survive. We laugh and joke and make faces, and of course, we throw potato-pieces at each other. What more could you ask for? (Except maybe that it hurt a little less when you got pegged with a frozen chunk of potato!) Even the ex-nun of 17 years has been known to throw a potato or two at me to keep us in good spirits.

Although seemingly trivial, I would argue instead that essential components of mutual cultural intelligibility shine through in these sorts of articulations of the mundane. Indeed, in the childishness, in the bored utterances of juvenile humour that made the days passable, we communed:

> I work with several people who are prime examples of people who should NEVER be given spare time. For example, the line was down for a little while this afternoon, and the foremen were elsewhere in the building trying to fix the problem. While we waited, this was what took place in my vicinity:
>
> - two people were sprinting around trying to stick pieces of tape to each other's backs;
> - one person was pretending to sneeze and then flicking little pieces of potato onto the floor;
> - one person was busy drawing happy-faces and polka dots on the tape in the tape machine, so that when we would later run boxes through it, the boxes would come out taped with happy-faces and polka dots.

There were many more examples. My point here is that these various comments, jokes, and actions were not only shared but share*able*. They were tools from a cultural tool box to which we all – they as locals, and I as a transplant from mainstream America – had access to. Even more accurately, I would say that these actions and articulations of culturally-specific humour are in essence cultural *phonemes*.

A phoneme, in linguistic terms, refers to the set of varying ways that individual speakers or groups articulate a specific sound, such that – because of the structural opposition that differentiates them from "other" sounds – the variations are perceived by all the members

of the group to be "one sound." For example, the 'ou' of "house" is characteristically different when spoken by many Canadians as compared with many Americans. And yet, that 'ou' is still within the relevant phoneme, it continues to fall within the acceptable range of comprehension for speakers of both Canadian and American English: there is no compromise to the *meaning* or understandability. The same is true as among individual language-speakers – our pronunciation of each sound is inevitably and irreparably *slightly* different based on our pitch, tone, etc., and yet, language functions without interruption.

A similar phenomenon occurs, I suggest, in regard to culture. In other words, our actions might vary slightly, not only the sounds of our words but also the *substance* of our sentences might differ in tenor, but we nevertheless recognise each other's *meanings*. (In the structural opposition of semiotics, a kiss on the cheek is a friendly greeting in part precisely because it is not a kiss on the lips.) And on these meanings, we build social relationships. Anderson (2006 [1983]) discusses phonemic variation in regard to the dialects that were bridged through the languages driven by print capitalism; his *imagined communities* assume a similar phonemic role for culture, though he never breaks down his analysis to that level.

Here, I rely on such a micro-level of analysis to make a more general claim. This claim is that American culture is not unfamiliar to the residents of Madawaska; more importantly, American culture is not a foreign phenomenon that Madawaskans simply recognise, instead it has become a culture in which phonemically and semiotically they recognise *themselves* (see Althusser 1970). It is worth stressing that what is at issue here is not a media-and-pop-culture story. Certainly, many people around the world are "familiar" with American culture through the seemingly endless proliferation of television, film and music, among others. But the question for Madawaskans is not about superficial awareness but rather about the lived experience that makes American culture comfortable enough for them to see themselves within it.

Highlighting the relevant underlying structural opposition, Eriksen discusses ways that "[g]roup identities must always be defined in relation to that which they are not – in other words, in relation to non-members of the group" (Eriksen 2002:10). As such, he describes the impassioned drive among the Breton minority in France to speak Breton: "[t]he militancy concerning language can therefore be seen as an anti-French political strategy" (Eriksen 2002:109). Here, however, a contrary process is in play. Rather than entrenching their local group identity in *opposition* to mainstream American culture, the culture of local Madawaskans is becoming phonemically synonymous with that larger culture.

As such, when Madawaskans' economic relationships with US corporations/global value chains carry with them social relationships, as they necessarily must, Madawaskans enter them not via translated terms but through shared phonemes, not across communities but within one. The process is cyclical, ever-aggrandising. Even though the national

border that separates Madawaska from Edmundston freely allows the exchange of cultural resources, it still restricts capital flow. This political border thus forces local residents, for *financial* reasons, to engage in economic relationships with American rather than [French-speaking] Canadian business partners. In the conduits of those economic relationships – relationships which are ever increasingly being mandated, constricted and enforced through the systematisation of global value chain business – residents of Madawaska simultaneously develop social relationships, which, as noted, are always already (Althusser 1970) comfortable. And in that comfort, the local language becomes slowly untied from its local moorings, dislodged from historical context; the siren's call of the English language and American identity grows all the louder and an imagined community shifts to a US farther south.

7. From Madawaska to Åland

Åland, there is no doubt, lies far from Madawaska, geographically and culturally. But the comparison deserves attention. As noted, support for the Swedish language in Åland has of course benefitted from the islands' proximity to Sweden. The Swedish state has provided, within easy reach, a linguistic anchor for media, sport and business, among others. And indeed, the hold of the Swedish language in Åland remains strong:

> The territorial autonomy of the Åland Islands should be seen as a compromise of Finnish sovereignty. In terms of protecting the Swedish language and culture on the Åland Islands, the settlement seems to have succeeded in resisting a "Finnishization" of the Islands for almost 100 years now. Indeed, the proportion of inhabitants in the Islands who have registered Finnish as their mother tongue has remained largely steady over the course of a century. (Öst 2016:231)

But institutional arrangements that have made this achievement possible to date do not necessarily guarantee long-term success. As Suksi points out, the ongoing vitality of Åland's autonomy has depended on "an element of constant negotiation and co-operation that aims at defining and re-defining the parameters of and interface between the two spheres of government [Åland and Finland]" (Suksi 2013:52).

In other words, the success of the Swedish language in Åland is not solely due to the institutional relationship itself as between the territory Åland and the Finnish metropole. Instead, the success is thanks to the flexibility that that institutional relationship has generated. So far, this flexibility has helped Åland to surmount a century of challenges. But the flexibility likewise leaves Åland open to challenges.

In the background, as discussed above, the nature of global commerce is changing. Historically, purchases and sales were largely made at arms-length, and thus, such transactions may have had little effect on Åland. But through global value chains, as well as other means, once independent firms are becoming more thoroughly integrated: who Ålanders do business with now *matters* more than ever before.

Like Madawaska toward francophone Canada across the river, Ålanders can easily look across the near waters to Sweden for many of their needs, both linguistic and business-oriented. But Finland remains a tempting target for business – and why not? Even with the otherwise open borders of the EU, Finland continues to be the "domestic" market. This *domestic-ness* is indeed partly structured – if not intensified – economically by the specific contours of Åland's special arrangement with the EU (e.g. Silverström 2008:268). Based on this arrangement, a tax border exists between Åland and other EU member states, including Sweden, bringing without a doubt some local benefits for Åland but also serving as a small barrier to commerce outside Finland. According to one politician on Åland, quite simply, "[t]he tax border makes it easier to do business with Finland." (Östling 2020(2), quoting Nina Fellman).

In regard to cross-border trade it should be noted that the prevalence of the English language in Ålanders' transnational commerce, whether with mainland Finland or beyond, does not change these observations. The reason, as discussed above, is that outside language use on its own is not enough to bring about significant transformations (just as inner-group language use, on its own, is often insufficient to maintain that language against erosion from the outside). Instead, as with Madawaska, what is important is the full set of factors that influence a given group. I am suggesting here, in regard to Åland, that perhaps to date, and given ongoing changes in the world, that full set has not been properly accounted for.

Further, tourism from mainland Finland remains an important source of income for Åland. As such, employers in many industries in Åland have increasingly begun preferring employees who are competent in Finnish as well as Swedish (H. Jansson 2007:26). As a result, in spite of the strong quantitative figures seeming to demonstrate the dominance of Swedish, "bilingualism is thus expanding" (Östling 2020(2) [translation mine]) and a subtle layer of Finnish is clearly already there, potentially pushing toward the surface.

But obviously, skills in Finnish alone are not enough to cause shifts like the ones that have taken place in Madawaska. The question then is whether Finnish and Swedish/Åland's cultures are sufficiently similar so as to allow, or even to facilitate, a corresponding slippage of imagined community as I have described regarding Madawaskans. For sure, Ålanders and Finns alike would argue vehemently against any such overlap. But I am not so certain, and some research suggests at least a reasonably strong sense of affiliation by Ålanders for Finland (Tillitsstudie för Åland 2018:68–70). Indeed, I suspect that some fifty years ago

French-speaking Madawaskans might have held similarly strong sentiments about their differences from English-speaking mainstream Americans.

In regard to Åland, although perhaps contested, Harry Jansson has argued that the growing preference noted above of local employers seeking to hire Swedish-Finnish bilingual employees "is leading to noticeable changes in the population structure of Åland" (2007:26 [translation mine]). So the point is that regardless of recognised sentiments one way or the other, it is now beyond question that these overall shifts in global commerce are definitely occurring, with effects in Åland. It is possible that, as in Madawaska, these effects are at least beginning to impact local understandings of self among Ålanders as well.

Perhaps even more significantly, there is now an additional process at play: the COVID-19 pandemic. In the unfolding flow of this pandemic, two factors have in emotional terms – and therefore potentially in regard to imagined communities – arguably pushed Åland closer to Finland. First, the national border closures that took place at the beginning of 2020 of course largely severed Åland from Sweden, physically at least. On its own, this may not have had much of a long-term effect. But second, Sweden took a drastically different approach to the pandemic than did Finland. In short, Finland managed to subdue the virus whereas Sweden did not (and in many regards did not try) (e.g. Goodman 2020).

Åland was for much of the pandemic spared from the most serious effects of the virus, in part because of regulation by the Finnish state. Ålanders thus succeeded for so long against the virus as *Finns*. And because of the border closures, it was for some time predominantly only Finns who were visiting Åland (because this was as close to "international travel" as they could get) (Ålandstidningen 2020), replacing the usual hordes of Swedes. The relationship between Åland and Finland grows closer.

At the same time, as of the writing of an earlier draft of this article, the border with Sweden was just beginning to re-open. Although the economic boost that Swedes could bring with them was welcome in Åland, there was a real fear about Swedes importing the virus into these island communities that had otherwise fared so well (Östling 2020(1); Ålandstidningen 2020). There was, then, a novel element of "us" and "them" that imposed itself in the historically strong Åland-Sweden relationship. It remains to be seen whether this wedge will be temporary or permanent – but it was created, and could indeed grow and have longer-term consequences.

Linking back to Madawaska, there are for sure critical differences between Åland and Madawaska, and I do not mean to shy away from these. Geographically, the location of Åland on the maritime highway between Sweden and Finland, as compared with Madawaska's spectacular remoteness, generates distinct dynamics and possibilities. Among other things, Åland is not only impacted by the cultural vibrations of tourist flows but also is

a much more convenient launching and landing pad for immigration and emigration (e.g. ÅSUB: Statistics and Research Åland), with corresponding ripples to the local imagined community.

Most interesting in regard to differences, from my own perspective, is the fact that Åland maintains control over the series of legal levers that regulate its form of sovereignty more generally and its control over language and culture more specifically. In this way, Åland as a political territory has the ability to make choices about its cultural composition that are entirely unavailable to Madawaskans. I have written elsewhere that sovereignty is neither a thing nor an idea but rather a mechanism by which a group is able to regulate its relationships with others; that regulation, however, always entails compromises because of competing economic and cultural demands (Sobel-Read 2016). In Åland, for example, restrictions on the rights of foreign/non-Swedish-speakers to purchase land and open businesses definitely strengthens the standing of the Swedish language. But these rules have the corresponding effect of depressing land values and raising shop prices, such that, as Gunnar Jansson has written, it can be said that landowners and consumers pay the price for these cultural and linguistic protections (2007: 133–34). Whether, then, these prices and protections make up the right balance for Åland is naturally the subject of much debate, and indeed, there are of course competing interests in regard to the correct calibration of all of these regulation-managed compromises.

7. Conclusion

The fact remains that the relationship between Åland and Finland has provided a political and institutional structure through which Åland has been able to maintain strong laws that protect its minority Swedish language. After over a hundred years of fears of "Finnishisation", Ålanders have retained an impressive degree of autonomy. The vibrancy of Åland's specifically Swedish-language protections have not even been dampened by the demands of the European Union, although this membership by both necessity and design requires the transfer of competencies from all member territories and therefore has reduced at least some of the overall authority of the Åland government.

For Ålanders then, in the jurisdictional space of their islands, there is every reason to be optimistic. But beneath the surface, global economic shifts continue to take place, and with them, changing conditions and relationships, all of which are affected – or have been exacerbated – by the COVID-19 pandemic. And so throughout, Madawaska stands as a cautionary tale. Madawaska may be located at a considerable distance from Åland, geographically, legally, politically and culturally – but nevertheless, in this world of globalisation, the transformative linguistic events that have unfolded there are, in the end,

perhaps not so far-fetched.

As I noted early on in this article, my goal in the preceding pages has not been to *resolve* the challenges that Åland currently faces in regard to its unique Swedish language and culture. That said, I personally take these challenges seriously, not as theoretical curiosities but as real issues with impacts on real people. And based on the literature and on my own conversations with Ålanders on the subject, I remain convinced that the dynamics of the situation have not yet been fully recognised or mapped. This means that any resolutions that do exist may be more difficult to discover.

My intent here is therefore to open novel avenues of conversation – avenues, which, with some luck, will lead to previously hidden insight along with new pathways of research, all of which will hopefully help to support more vibrant policy choices not only in Åland but also from metropole Finland. To that end, it would be valuable to see future research especially in regard to the cross-border commerce that Ålanders partake in. Here I think the most interesting aspect relates not to quantitative figures but rather to investigating *who* Ålanders are choosing to do business with, *why* they are making those particular choices, *how* the relationships are structured and play out (including language use) and *what* the consequences are in terms of both relationship-building and subsequent commercial opportunities. Similarly, it would be interesting to build on existing studies regarding Ålanders' perceptions of themselves (e.g., Tillitsstudie för Åland 2018) to provide more detailed and nuanced information about those perceptions. With more [qualitative] data in these areas, the results could be combined with the existing literatures on legal competencies and language use, among others, to provide a more robust platform for future engagement and Swedish-language protection for Åland, with corresponding lessons for other smaller territories and states around the globe.

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