



CREOLE

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it was considered impolite not to speak French at the dinner table. There were always relatives there who felt much more comfortable speaking French than English. My great grandmother grew up in the French Quarter. ... Her prayer books (were) in French; her cuisine was French or Creole."

Racial components

While these interview excerpts express the ethnic-cultural dimension of Creole identity, it was the racial-structural differences that confused and concerned Anglo-Americans and led to generations of racially inflected controversy over what it means to be Creole. Although both Creoles and Americans engaged in intimate relationships across racial lines, Creoles – both those born in Louisiana, and those originally born in Saint-Domingue who emigrated to New Orleans following the revolution in Haiti – were more willing to acknowledge the children who resulted from these unions and to support their well-being and education.

It was not unusual, for instance, for Creoles of color to choose white persons as godfathers and to have this recorded in the records of the Catholic church. Quite often, the child of color was related in some way to the white godparent. Americans, on the other hand, were much less comfortable with publicly recognizing mixed-race offspring and more inclined to hide or deny paternity.

Because of these different approaches to mixed-race relationships, Americans generally assumed that all Creoles were mixed race. It was difficult, in the Anglo-American imagination, to embrace the dual reality that it was possible to both recognize mixed-race offspring and be white.

The following interview excerpts illustrate how many white Louisianans with Creole heritage continue to labor under this American misunderstanding. One young woman describes her experience as follows:

"I'd go back to Cane River and I'm looking for Creole speakers up there because I had been working with the Creole group here, Les Creoles du Pointe Coupée, and I wanted to hear their Creole French. I wanted to see what they spoke like, did they say this for that or what did they say. And I couldn't find a single Creole speaker, but everybody that I went up to and told I was Creole understood that I was mixed race. And I wasn't trying to say that. I was trying to say that I was Creole, my family is Creole, we're French and I didn't realize that other people had that other association with it until I was confronted with it. ... I remember (one man), and I talked to him for a long time and he said, 'Wow, you're really fair.' And he said something about my hair or something and I was like, 'Oh, I'm white Creole.' He just looked at me funny."

This is one example among many where a white person of Louisiana Creole heritage is questioned for considering herself to

be Creole. This is a situation where the assumption is that those who are ethnically and culturally Creole must also be mixed race. The historical record indicates, however, that the ethnic-cultural and racial-structural dimensions of Creole identity are related, though separate dimensions of the Creole experience in Louisiana.

White and black Creoles

Another white respondent, a middle-aged woman, described her experience in the 1970s learning that there were both white and black Creoles:

"When I got to St. Joseph, it was a small school. I want to say it was maybe a hundred in my freshman class. By the time I graduated it was maybe 1971. ... What I started to learn at that point, was the other interpretations of Creole. St. Joseph Academy in New Orleans was one of the early schools to integrate in the 1960s. ... I heard my mother say something about 'The Creoles.' And it was in a different context. ... It was in a context of she said those are good Creole families. I didn't know what they were talking about. That's when I started to learn about the African definition of it. ... I just remember being curious ... You mean there's something else to this? More of a confusion than anything else."

Her confusion came from assuming in the late '60s and early '70s that her white Creole world was the only Creole world. The process of integration at St. Joseph's, however, broadened her understanding. A

generation later, her daughter went through her own rite of passage as a white Louisianan with Creole heritage.

"(My daughter) has always known that she is French Creole. ... At eighth grade, here's some substitute

teacher in some discussion – I have no idea what – and she says, 'Well, I'm Creole.' And the teacher says, 'Oh, no, honey I don't think so.' Now it was a white teacher, but her interpretation was that Creole was the African

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