

Creole is, Creole ain't: Diachronic and synchronic attitudes toward Creole identity in southern Louisiana

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ABSTRACT

Creole identity in Louisiana acquired diverse meanings for several ethnic groups during the French and Spanish regimes, before and after the purchase of the Louisiana Territory, and through the last part of the 20th century. In spite of a strong shift toward “Black” identity by many African Americans in the state, those who are fluent Creole French speakers now seem to be the repository of Louisiana Creole identity. This article presents a diachronic study of the different meanings applied to Creole identity which resulted from dramatic social, political, and economic changes. It also delimits and defines the actual attributes of Creole identity within two representative African American communities. Because of the historical and political conditions underlying Creole identity, African Americans who still identify as Creoles insist on linguistic attributes, rather than on the criterion of race, as essential characteristics of their ethnic identity. (Creoles, Louisiana, ethnicity, identity, African Americans, French)*

European colonization during the 17th and 18th centuries gave rise to numerous Creole societies all over the world. In the 1869 edition of the Larousse dictionary, the French term *créole* referred to those born in, or native to, the local populace; but the 1929 edition depicted Creole as correctly designating only a Caucasian population – further noting that, “by way of analogy, it could be used to refer to non-Caucasian peoples of current or former colonies” (Dominguez 1986:15). A recent English dictionary (American Heritage 1992) gives five definitions of the word *creole* which pertain to identity: (a) A person of European descent born in the West Indies or Spanish America; (b) a person descended from or culturally related to the original French settlers of the southern US, especially Louisiana; (c) a person descended from or culturally related to the Spanish and Portuguese settlers of the Gulf States; (d) a person of mixed Black and European ancestry who speaks a creolized language; and (e) a Black slave born in the Americas, as opposed to one brought from Africa. In Louisiana, “the term came early to include any native, of French or Spanish descent by either parent, whose non-alliance with the slave race entitled him to social rank. Later, the term was adopted

by – not conceded to – the natives of mixed blood, and is (was) used among themselves” (Cable 1910:41).

Given these choices, almost all the people in Louisiana could call themselves “Creole.” Creole identity could refer to descendants of the original European colonists in Louisiana – White or Black, slave or free. White descendants of French and Spanish settlers, as well as the descendants of the German, Irish, and Acadian immigrants who came to the state prior to its purchase in 1803, could legitimately call themselves “Creole.” In addition, Creole identity could be applicable to the descendants of the *gens de couleur libres*, the free people of color or “colored Creoles” who were considered the “elite” class of mixed ancestry in New Orleans for several generations. Creole identity could include the descendants of African slaves, a majority of whom were from the Senegambia region of Africa, as well as the descendants of the French Caribbean slaves who came into the state during the last decade of the 18th century.

To discover who in Louisiana today actually identifies as Creole, and what the boundaries and characteristics are which set this community apart from others, we have adopted both a diachronic and synchronic approach. We have analyzed the struggle between the different ethnic groups who were trying to exercise choice over who and what they were during the French and Spanish regimes, before and after the Louisiana Purchase, and through the last part of the 20th century. Creole French identity has been claimed by various groups – Whites/Colored/Blacks born in North America, White/Colored/Black speakers of Creole French, and Whites/Colored/Blacks of the middle and upper class of New Orleans, whether or not they spoke Creole French – but the term has acquired a more restricted meaning, being mainly confined to African Americans in South Louisiana who have Creole French-speaking ancestors. Therefore, in order to delimit and define the cultural characteristics of Creole identity within the African American population in Louisiana today, we conducted a survey of 240 individuals in two representative Creole communities. Based on our results, it can be hypothesized that a Creole re-identification process has taken place within the social/historical environment in the state, and that it forced certain choices among the possible labels of ethnicity and identity. The ramifications of this continue to affect the Creole community in Louisiana today.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

As native-born colonists from various groups – immigrants or those forcibly brought – acquired diverse social, political, and economic positions for themselves, the notion of Creole identity underwent dramatic changes and acquired several meanings (Dominguez 1986:13). Here we present an overview of the social/historical situation from the beginning of the colony to present-day Louisiana.

The French regime

In 1678 an immense territory along both sides of the Mississippi River fell into the hands of the French, who chose to establish their base in what became Biloxi (Mississippi). They eventually relocated to a swampy area at the end of the Mississippi River, and named the area “Nouvelle Orléans” in honor of Duke Philippe d’Orléans (Cable 1910). In addition to military personnel, French-Canadians, and French settlers, the population consisted of enslaved Indians and indentured servants (the latter constituted almost half of the population of colonial Louisiana). As the colony expanded, the work system of servitude was strained by the limited supply of poor Whites, and by the political situation vis-à-vis the Indians. Because of the unprotected status of Africans, the scales were tilted in the direction of using Black slaves as laborers. More than 6,000 slaves were brought to the colony between 1719 and 1731; nearly 4,000 of them were Bambaras from the Senegambia region of Africa (Hall 1992). They spoke a Mande language related to Mandika, and were in contact with speakers of other Niger-Kordofanian languages – including Ewe and Yoruba, which were not intelligible to them (Dubois 1998).

Although biracial unions between White and Black were legally forbidden, they were socially accepted in the colony. The offspring of these multiracial unions, called “mulattos,” were never recognized as White, but were often manumitted. The number of free people of color was so high, and the link between free-colored status and mixed ancestry was so strong, that in 1810 the Louisiana Supreme Court presumed all people of mixed race to be free (Hall 1992). As several researchers have noted, the tripartite system of race in the colony at this time consisted of Whites, Colored, and Blacks, with the significant distinction between the two black populations being based on slavery (Dominguez 1986, Hall 1992, Fairclough 1995).

Historical evidence shows that, during this time, the term “Creole” designated first-generation, native-born European settlers, as well as black slaves, free people of color, the offspring of mixed unions, and immigrants. A death entry for a man named Robert Talon dated May 23, 1745, described him as “the first Creole in this colony” (Dominguez 1986:96). In addition, the term “Creole” was used as a noun in baptismal books (1731–33) and marriage registers (1726–30), in which people were identified as “Creoles from this parish,” “Creoles from Mobile,” etc. The term “Creole” alternated with other terms such as “native,” “sauvage” (when referring to Amerindians), “slave,” “Negro,” “Creole Negro,” and “mulatre.” Even in 1750 and 1760, manuscripts and documents show little evidence of an exclusive political faction or social group labeled “Creole” (Dominguez 1986:98). Since French Louisiana was a brutal, violent place, where survival was on the line, “notions of racial and/or cultural and national superiority were a luxury” in the attempt to eke out an existence in the colony (Hall 1992:155).

Spanish regime

When the Spanish government took possession of the Louisiana Territory around 1768, as the result of a treaty between France and Spain, the inhabitants of the area reacted with hostility to the taxes and impositions placed on them. The whole population rallied behind the French flag, as an affirmation of their French identity, and expelled the first Spanish governor. The government, in an attempt to instill loyalty toward the Spanish crown and to establish secure political and economic ground, facilitated the immigration of politically “safe” refugees and the private ownership of land. Along with the Spanish elite, several francophone groups were given large or small land grants: the Royalist aristocracy fleeing the French Revolution, White Creole bourgeoisie, the Acadians deported from Canada, a small elite group from St. Domingue (Haiti), and free people of color.¹ They all profited from the rapid explosion and huge success of the sugar cane plantation system and other farming activities (tobacco, cattle, indigo cultivation). Neither the Cajuns nor the immigrants who had assimilated into their community chose to identify as Creole; however, the other groups were recognized as Creole, which “led the way to the creation of a self-styled (Creole) aristocracy” (Dominguez 1986:104). As Hanger (1996:2) states, “It was during . . . the Spanish rule in Louisiana that free persons of African descent . . . made their greatest advances in terms of demographics, privileges, responsibilities, and social standing.” Because mixed ancestry and light skin provided higher status and afforded more social opportunities for non-Whites, the community of free people of color, or Colored Creoles (CCrs), came to acquire an exceptional degree of wealth, education, and freedom, as compared to Black Creoles (BCrs). At the same time, the White Creoles (WCrS) and CCrs came to form a distinct socio-economic community that shared the upper end of the class structure in Louisiana (Dominguez 1986).

Although the WCrS insisted that Creoles were by definition White, they allowed the CCrs to identify themselves as Creoles too, claiming with a certain pride that “New Orleans has had an unusually superior class of black” (Judge Minor Wisdom, quoted by Fairclough 1995:10). Regardless of social tensions between WCrS and CCrs, the social networks of both Creole groups were dominated by the same strict rules of conduct. Each group married and socialized only within itself, insisting on exclusivity and social distance from the other groups around it. Although Creole identity did not correspond to a real racial division during the Spanish regime, it certainly acquired a socio-economic dimension in terms of being French. Creole had a strong connotation of being French (or having been assimilated into the French culture), of being wealthy, and of having higher status than other groups.

The American regime

The purchase by the US of the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803 set the stage for a rapid process of linguistic and cultural assimilation by the Creoles into

various groups.² The area more than doubled the size of the US, and was instantly invaded by land-hungry Anglo-Americans who disdained the French Creole culture, language, and Catholic religion. The preempting by Anglo-Americans of things French was manifested in several ways. In New Orleans, books, magazines, and newspapers switched from French to English – including the prestigious *Moniteur de la Louisiane*, the colony's first newspaper, which was forced to publish articles in both French and English. The first state constitution, adopted in 1812, was written entirely in English and mentioned no specific rights for francophones, although they were the majority in the state. There were also clear geographical and architectural differences between areas of town where Creoles lived and those where the recently arrived English-speaking population lived. In the political arena, Creoles associated themselves with Democrats, whereas the English community supported the “Whig” or “Know-Nothing” parties.³

As Hamel explains (1984:271), there were several reasons why the elite Creole community initially exhibited nonchalance toward the anglophone “threat,” and indifference to the rapid establishment of the anglophone authority. First, the liberalism and freedoms previously acquired led them to believe that the rapidly growing Anglo-American population would continue to protect and value their culture as much as they themselves did. Second, they took little or no notice of other groups in the state – considering themselves the natives, and therefore superior to the recent arrivals. Finally, having profited hugely from the plantation economy, the Creoles did not trouble themselves about establishing economic ties with the new arrivals.

As the English-speaking community grew, however, the Creoles began to lose political, social, economic, and numeric dominance; and an anti-American sentiment also began to grow (Lanusse 1911, Desdunes 1911). Interestingly, it is at this time that one finds the most documents identifying people in Louisiana as “Creoles” (Dominguez 1986), perhaps because of the rapidly growing awareness of the danger posed to their culture by the “outsiders.” Cultural attributes such as French ancestry, the Catholic religion, and the French language became crucial common denominators for Creole identity. To be sure, the children of Anglo-Americans technically had the right to call themselves Creoles, under the original definition of “native-born in Louisiana”; but growing negative social and cultural connotations of the Creole identity within the English-speaking population made it a very unattractive proposition. The inevitable process of anglicization had begun in the state, and it was not to be reversed.

The Civil War and Reconstruction

With the approach of the Civil War, and as hostility between Whites and Blacks grew, the cultural and linguistic boundaries between the WCRs and the anglophones began to blur. Both groups increasingly perceived the entire Colored population (BCRs and CCrs) as the common enemy, regardless of their social status (Dominguez 1986:136). The upper class of WCRs switched to English and began

to mingle with the anglophone population in areas such as politics, occupations, religion, and traditional cultural events (Mardi Gras balls and parades.) They also began to campaign to change the previously ternary system of classification – White, Colored, Black – into a binary one based solely on race: White vs. Black. For the White population, whether Creole or anglophone, there was no longer any distinction between CCRs and BCRs. The CCRs were additionally perceived as a threat because of their wealth, land-owning status, and social standing. They became a target for frustrated Whites, who sought various means to decrease their influence and the potential influence of the large free Black population.⁴

Because of pressure by Whites, this period witnessed three major social changes which forever changed the fate of the CCRs and BCRs. The First was the passage of a state constitution in 1898 which stripped them of all political influence (Fairclough 1995). Although the US constitution guaranteed suffrage for the freed slaves, the state constitution established literacy as a necessary and sufficient condition for voting, and only the elite of the CCRs were able to meet this. The installation of a poll tax gave voter registrars additional ammunition to use against the freedmen and CCRs; the former had very little of value, while the latter were rapidly losing property, valuables and cash. Unable to vote or to participate in the state's political life, "blacks were in no position to mount an effective challenge to white supremacy" (Fairclough 1995:6).

The second decision which affected the population of CCRs was the campaign to make miscegenation illegal, by portraying them as responsible for "human chaos" and general misery. By depriving the CCRs of social and legal status as a separate population (as had been the case heretofore), and by making it a crime to live with or marry a person of the opposite race, Whites effectively forced them to claim either White or Black heritage. The following appeared in the French gazette *Le Moniteur* on July 13, 1873:

The moment has come for the sons of Louisiana to declare themselves. It is imperative that everyone choose to be either white or black. Two races are here: one superior, the other inferior . . . their separation is ABSOLUTELY necessary. Let us separate then, from this day forward, into two well-defined groups: the white group and the black group. The position will then be clear: White Louisiana or Black Louisiana. The Carillon will hang the flag of the whites, with the profound conviction that it is only under its folds that one can save Louisiana (quoted by Dominguez 1986:137, our translation).

The third requirement, and the most damaging to the CCRs' society and culture, was the demand for *sang pur*. Absolutely pure White blood, "untainted" by any hint of Black ancestry, became the rallying cry for White Creoles seeking to distance themselves from the CCRs. It became the de-facto law in the state that one had to prove White ancestry for five generations (called the "1/32nd law"). In extreme cases, 1/64th Black blood was enough to label a person as Black. Accompanying the demand for pure-bloodedness was a heightened scrutiny of

bloodlines and ancestry. WCrS and CCrS were further polarized when anglophones began to insinuate that WCrS must have a “touch of the tarbrush” or “skeletons in their closets,” since they continued to identify themselves as Creole, like the BCrS and CCrS. This caused the extremely tenuous identity ties still existing between WCrS and CCrS to disintegrate even further, and engendered a severe backlash among the WCrS who felt themselves losing their identity, and/or being identified with the Black Creoles. Because of the work of a small but vocal minority of Whites, and the relative lack of political power in the Black community, the definition of Creole acquired a “white only” label which was to persist for many years.⁵ The aftermath of the Civil War – total economic disarray, massive destruction of social and political institutions, and bungling on the part of the newly installed “Yankee” politicians – kept Louisiana in chaos for many years. Racial polarization between the White and Colored/Black populations became even more acute with the emergence and rapid growth of racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Knights of the White Camellia. As a result, in spite of their being enfranchised and free, a mass exodus of the CCrS and BCrS occurred, and Louisiana became predominantly White for the first time in years.

The Segregation period

From the early part of the 20th century until after the Civil Rights movement, segregation was increasingly legalized and formalized as a way of life in Louisiana, as well as in other areas of the South. Creoles were consistently identified as White, and the existence of CCrS or BCrS was rarely mentioned (Dominguez 1986). For the former slaves, freedom from slavery did not mean freedom from racism, oppression, or extreme poverty. Racial segregation was legalized by the US Supreme Court in 1896, ensuring that schools, churches, public transportation, and residential areas were to be “separate but equal.” Whites’ insistence on treating all persons with any African ancestry as members of a single class insured that the CCrS too would experience this separation. In an effort to combat this, the CCrS “determined that . . . they would be the social and political leaders of their race” (Brasseaux et al. 1994:104). As Fairclough noted (1995:3), they were a “skilled, assertive and self-confident group” who resisted the legal sanctions imposed on them by whites with all the means available to them. They established the first branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in New Orleans in 1915, which provided legal aid and monetary support when possible. The CCrS also kept a tenuous hold on political power by keeping in contact with White Republicans, although the voting of Blacks steadily declined until after the Civil Rights movement. In the social arena, the CCrS established a network of doctors, lawyers, bankers, and insurance agents which helped Blacks who were unable to access these services elsewhere (Fairclough 1995). In the educational realm, the Commission on Interracial Cooperation made dramatic improvements in the number and quality of schools which were established for non-Whites.

In spite of these successes, the plight of both BCrs and CCrs became worse. Whites, even those who fought hardest for Blacks' rights and equality, believed in keeping the races segregated, and concentrated instead on "improvements within the structure of racial segregation" (Fairclough 1995:12). BCrs and CCrs, however, viewed the interracial cooperation between Blacks and Whites as a stepping-stone toward complete equality and the ultimate abolition of segregation. In addition, the social and economic divisions among the CCrs and BCrs proved difficult to overcome. BCrs – former slaves living in rural areas, for the most part – were extremely poor, and they viewed the New Orleans CCrs with suspicion. They were often isolated in remote, almost inaccessible communities, where they maintained the French language and cultural traditions; by contrast, the Creoles in New Orleans had become increasingly anglicized by this time, both socially and linguistically.⁶

The lack of quality education in public schools, along with the discrimination experienced by BCrs and CCrs, led them to turn to the Catholic Church for parochial education. Though they fought long and hard against segregated churches and parishes, they eventually acquiesced in order to have access to better schooling. As Fairclough notes (1995:14), this ironically "preserved the church's core support among black Catholics." This allegiance to the Catholic Church became more and more important as a marker of Creole identification for Blacks.

With the advent of the depression in the early 1930s, any vestige of cooperation between Whites and Blacks ground to a halt. Around the same time, as Fairclough (1995:17) remarks, the distinction between the Black groups in the state – BCrs, CCrs, and Black Americans without French ancestry – "became increasingly blurred through intermarriage, social mobility, the decline of the French language, and the sheer weight of white supremacy." Louisiana laws of racial classification were expanded in 1940 so that "any degree of traceability was sufficient for Negro classification" (Brasseaux et al. 1994:123); these remained in place until 1970, when the state legislature passed another act stating that 1/32nd Black blood was sufficient for African American identification.⁷ An increasing number of BCrs and CCrs – being legally forced into choosing Black identity, and also subject to the colossal effect that the Civil Rights struggle exerted on America's Black population during the 1950s, 60s and 70s – began to look at black identification as a "badge of honor" (Brasseaux et al. 1994:124). This change is reflected in the findings presented below on Creole identity and identification as African American, as well as in the analysis section.

CREOLE IDENTITY IN MODERN LOUISIANA

As Dormon correctly notes (1996:11), "the value attachments of Louisiana Creoles to their ethnic identity has shifted notably over the decades of the twentieth century." The changes undergone by Creoles from the beginning of the colony to the present day are briefly summarized here. At the beginning of the colony, Cre-

ole identity included the first generation of native-born European settlers, as well as Black slaves and free people of color. Opposition to the Spanish regime brought to the forefront the criterion of French ancestry, as well as a socio-economic connotation of wealth and higher status. In the American period, Creole identity became a counterpoint to American identity, and was expanded to encompass French ancestry, socio-economic divisions, occupational differences, and religious and linguistic divergence. During the Civil War and Reconstruction, only French ancestry, racial differences, and linguistic divisions were maintained as distinctive Creole features. This trend continued throughout the post-bellum and segregation periods. Because of social pressure, legislative “initiatives,” and the overwhelming presence of English in the state, French language use has subsided, leaving French ancestry and racial classifications as the key components of Creole identity in the late 20th century.⁸

Before the American period, and before a large portion of French speakers in the state were assimilated into the anglophone population, the various Creole populations spoke different forms of French. Creole French in Louisiana “is a reflection of settlement patterns and of two centuries of language contact and language variation” (Marshall 1997:346). Dubois 1998 shows that, although the DIFFERENCES between the dialects have been highlighted in previous research, in fact the similarities were greater than previously thought. WCrS spoke a French dialect derived from multiple 17th and 18th century regional vernaculars, called “colonial French,” as spoken at the beginning of the colony. BCrs, to a large extent, were descendants of the slave population; and they spoke varieties of French (today referred to as Creole French) which developed gradually.⁹ The Creole French repertoire included earlier French versions that involved a large selection of grammatical and structural characteristics from the French dialects spoken by the WCrS, as well as the later normalized stages of their language (Dubois 1998). Although the CCrs could speak either colonial French or Creole French, depending upon whom they interacted with on a regular basis, the majority of CCrs always associated themselves with the French spoken by WCrS (Dominguez 1986:211).

The question we pose is: What does Creole identity mean in Louisiana today? Do several Creole populations exist? Is there a WCr population, parallel to the community of CCrs and BCrs? In an attempt to answer these questions, we assessed the linguistic profile of each of the Creole populations, determining the size of the francophone groups and French ancestry groups by using cross-tabulations made by the US Census Bureau.¹⁰

The Census data summarized in Table 1 show that Whites claiming some type of French ancestry substantially outnumber Blacks. Within these two groups, about half claim to have no connection with the French-Canadians exiled to the state in the mid-1700s. Those claiming both French ancestry and French linguistic ability are a fairly small percentage – 12% for Whites, 20% for Blacks. In addition, results in Table 1 show that claiming French ancestry has lost its value

TABLE 1. *Percentage of Blacks and Whites cross-tabulated with language and ancestry.*

Language and Ancestry data from Census Bureau tabulations	
White	Black
Percentage of people in Louisiana who claim some type of French ancestry (French, Acadian, French-Acadian)	
37%	1.2%
960,401/2,582,041	14,352/1,165,880
Among those who claim French background or ancestry, percentage of those who claim only French ancestry (other than Acadian and French-Canadian)	
52%	54%
497,721/960,401	7,713/14,352
Percentage of people who claim only French ancestry (other than Acadian and French-Canadian) and who claim to speak French (all varieties)	
12%	20%
52,941/497,721	1,517/7,713
Percentage of people who claim to speak Creole French regardless of ancestry	
9.6%	89%
607/6,310	5,610/6,310
Percentage of people who claim to speak Cajun French regardless of ancestry	
94%	4%
25,830/27,613	1,167/27,613
Percentage of people who claim to speak Standard French regardless of ancestry	
83%	14%
189,046/227,755	32,257/227,755
Percentage of people who claim to speak Creole French but have no French ancestry	
16%	95%
100/607	5,326/5,610

among Blacks, whether they speak French or not. Of the 5,610 people who claim to speak Creole French, 95% of them claim no French ancestry. The African Americans who tend to claim French ancestry are those who do not speak French. When ancestry is disregarded, it can be seen that close to 90% of the respondents who claim to speak Creole French are African Americans. Whites who claim to speak Cajun French or French far outnumber African Americans.

What conclusions about Creole identity in Louisiana can be drawn from the results of the identity and linguistic questions in the census bureau data? Very little, as regards ancestry only; half of both the White and Black populations claim French ancestry. However, the historical evidence mentioned previously (the linguistic and cultural assimilation of the WCRs into the anglophone community), as well as the “remarkable reduction in the size of the white Creole community over the past century” (Dominguez 1986:189), lead us to believe that the people who maintain that they are WCRs represent a very small population.

From the linguistic point of view, the results are more significant. It is apparent that Creole French is still used in Louisiana, and that it is linked to race, contrary to what other researchers have claimed (Chaudenson 1979, Neumann 1985). It is evident that the White population who claim to speak Creole French fluently is extremely small. It is the Black population in the state that constitutes the largest repository of the Creole language. If one considers language to be an important cultural identification marker, BCrs should also be seen as the repository of Creole identity in the state.

The case of the CCRs is complicated by the fact that the census data do not distinguish racial classifications. The CCRs have always constituted a small community, even in their colonial heyday (Wingfield 1961). In rural areas outside New Orleans, the majority of descendants of CCRs do not identify themselves as Creole (Dominguez 1986). There still exist, however, a few CCR communities that have never lost their sense of pride in being different from BCrs and from African Americans with no French ancestry (cf. Woods 1972, Mills 1977, Brassaux et al. 1994).¹¹ These small CCR groups who still maintain some sort of distinctiveness are scorned by the African American population for a variety of reasons. Some CCRs married white Cajuns, and have been assimilated into that population. In the New Orleans area, a large number of CCRs, especially those with the highest socio-economic status and the lightest skin color, became integrated by “passing as White” into the white anglophone community (Blanchet 1941, Dominguez 1986).¹² The ability to “pass” was often viewed, both by BCrs and by African Americans without French ancestry, as traitorous and pretentious, while it was likely to be viewed by the White population as a result of incredibly “good manners” (Dominguez 1986).

However, historical evidence – as well as the current sociolinguistic situation in the state – leads us to believe that the majority of CCRs, regardless of their geographic location, have merged with the more numerous BCrs into the African American community, rather than into the White community.¹³ In addition, many African Americans in larger urban areas in South Louisiana today are increasingly taking an interest in reviving their language and culture.¹⁴ A movement for the preservation of the Creole culture was established by groups of Creole activists, as exemplified by C.R.E.O.L.E., Inc., and the Un-Cajun Committee (both based in Lafayette) and by the Southern Heritage Foundation (in Opelousas). These organizations claim that too much attention is being paid to the White Cajun culture, at the expense of the CCRs and BCrs who are the major representatives of Creole culture today.¹⁵ Some of these activists preach a hard line. “You’re either Black or you’re White. There is no easy way out,” said one person interviewed for a *New York Times* article – echoing, nearly one hundred years later, the infamous declaration from *Le Moniteur* quoted earlier.¹⁶ These attitudes highlight the racial binary division still at work in the state (White vs. non-White) rather than the tertiary distinction (White, Colored, Black).

The choice of constructing our sociolinguistic survey about identity and language, using African American respondents, was influenced by all the factors discussed above, along with the fact that WCrS and CCrS represent neither a large enough populace nor a linguistically and socially close-knit enough community to ensure a scientifically controlled study. Notice that we do not attempt to survey exhaustively all the Creole groups in the area. In that we focus on “core” members of the most representative Creole communities in South Louisiana, questions of the boundaries of the Creole community in general remain in abeyance. Studying all the questions simultaneously would far outstrip available resources, competence, and interests. However, we believe that important evidence has emerged from this attitude study (cf. Dubois & Melançon 1998). The BCrS represent a separate Creole community, sharing sociolinguistic attitudes regarding Creole identity – i.e., who is Creole in Louisiana today, and what the social attributes of these people are.

METHODOLOGY

To determine the synchronic effects of these diachronic changes imposed on Louisiana’s Creole population, a survey was conducted in two Creole communities (Breux Bridge and Opelousas) in South Louisiana. Census bureau statistics showed that a large proportion of people in these areas claimed to speak Louisiana Creole French (LCF) at home, and that each of these parishes contained the largest percentage of African Americans in the southern part of the state. In addition, the socio-economic levels of these two places are quite different; the Breux Bridge area is rural, and is relatively poor compared to the Opelousas area, which is more urban and economically advantaged.

Opelousas has experienced many of the changes which larger cities have undergone in 20th century America. The extended family structure is no longer as strong as it once was. Families have moved off the ancestral land into town, to be nearer to job opportunities and schools. Dual working-parent households are common, and young children are often put in day care or pre-school, rather than being cared for by a family member. The racial situation in Opelousas has also changed considerably. Traditionally considered a White Cajun community, this area has acquired a much stronger Black and Creole identity in the past thirty years.

In Breux Bridge, French language use among young people and children was and is still much more prevalent than in Opelousas, even to the extent that a few families have children who are monolingual in Creole French until they attend school and receive instruction in English. Family structure in the Breux Bridge area tends to be very close-knit, with several generations living together in one house, or nearby on family land which has been passed on down from one generation to the next. The grandparents or great-grandparents are usually the caregivers, producing opportunities for young children to be exposed to the Creole French spoken by their older relatives.

Because of enforced and voluntary isolation from the state's larger anglophone population, as well as the effects of well-entrenched racial discrimination, both the Breaux Bridge and Opelousas Creole communities have maintained their integrity and close social ties. The analysis of the social network of the 120 respondents of each community shows that the two geographical areas do not present a significant difference in the strength of the network, nor is there any correlation with gender. However, the younger generation in Breaux Bridge shows a slight tendency to have more open social networks. This may be because they have been forced to find work outside the area, on account of the lack of job opportunities in town.

Our sample population consisted of 240 African Americans, chosen randomly.¹⁷ The sample is distributed evenly by gender and geographic location and is divided into three age groups: the younger generation, 20–39 years of age; the middle-aged group, 40–59 years of age; and the older group, 60 years of age and up. The ancestry/language ability category, established during the earlier pilot survey, includes four groups of 60 respondents each:

- (a) Individuals who speak Creole French fluently and have Creole French ancestors (parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts etc.)
- (b) Individuals who speak Creole French but not fluently, and have Creole French ancestors.
- (c) Individuals who speak only English and have Creole French ancestors.
- (d) Individuals who speak only English and do not have Creole French ancestors.

Category (d) was included to insure that the general African American population in this area of the state was represented. Many African Americans in South Louisiana today have a Creole background, but some have no Creole ancestors. Creole French fluency was self-reported; and this was verified later by correlating the results of an extensive question in the survey, about the linguistic ability of the informants and their reported level of ability in Creole French. The Linguistic Ability and Background index (referred to as the LAB index, see Dubois 1997a,b, Dubois & Sankoff 1996) proved to be statistically significant, and was factored into the analysis. The sample is detailed in Table 2.

The questionnaire, which was verbally administered, consisted of 46 questions about issues such as education, attitudes toward LCF, the teaching and learning of LCF and other French dialects, Creole identity, type of social network, and degree of exposure to LCF (Melançon 1998). The questionnaire was developed using a template from Dubois et al. 1995a,b, and the results obtained from piloting it with open-ended questions. We constructed a pilot questionnaire which included several open-ended questions on cultural identity. A total of 30 individuals answered the questions. For the final version of the questionnaire, some of these questions were transferred into closed questions that incorporated the writ-

TABLE 2. *The Creole stratified sample.*

	Breaux Bridge	Opelousas	Total
Women 20–39	20	20	40
Women 40–59	20	20	40
Women 60+	20	20	40
<i>Subtotal</i>	60	60	120
Men 20–39	20	20	40
Men 40–59	20	20	40
Men 60+	20	20	40
<i>Subtotal</i>	60	60	120
Total	120	120	240

ten responses of the respondents. For all the questions, the answer “other” was available.

Although xenophobic attitudes have been attributed to the French population in Louisiana by some researchers, none were experienced during this project. Very few refusals were encountered, with lack of time being the most common reason for non-participation. The response to the investigation was overwhelmingly positive; many respondents volunteered additional contacts, telephoned relatives and friends, and suggested other areas for investigation.

Once the fieldwork was done, the responses were coded and entered into a computer database. StatView 4.5 was used as a statistical tool, and results were obtained using cross-tabulations and stepwise regression analysis. Gender and place of residence were not flagged as significant factors; but it was found that age and linguistic ability strongly influenced the criteria associated with Creole identity and the respondents’ self-identification.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

We present the results of two questions about Creole identity. The first question refers to the characterization of Creole identity, while the second deals with the self-identification of the respondents. The two questions were:

(i) In order to be considered a true Creole, which of the following attributes does a person need to have: Creole ancestors, parents and grandparents who speak Creole French, speak some form of French, speak Creole French, learn Creole French as a first language, live in a Creole town, live in Louisiana, belong to a specific race, have a specific religion?

(ii) How do you identify yourself?

The criteria deemed necessary to be considered a true Creole by our respondents are illustrated in Table 3. Creole ancestry has been selected by a majority of

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TABLE 3. *Criteria necessary to be considered Creole.*

	"In order to be considered a true creole, it is necessary to ..."				Total
	Yes		No		
	N	%	N	%	
have Creole ancestors	188	78	52	22	240
have parents/grandparents who speak Creole French	180	75	60	25	240
speak some form of French	145	60	95	40	240
speak Creole French	126	53	114	47	240
live in Louisiana	102	43	138	57	240
learn Creole French as a first language	86	36	154	64	240
live in a Creole town	80	33	160	67	240
be a certain race	48	20	192	80	240
be a certain religion	18	7	222	93	240

the respondents as the most important defining characteristic of Creole identity. Having grandparents and parents who speak French is also considered a major attribute for Creole identity. These two characteristics, which often delineate a traditional linguistic community, are highly regarded by a large percentage of our respondents. Thus Creole identity based on an ancestral and linguistic community is still emphasized, and the older generations are seen as the torchbearers of this identity.

Insofar as language ability is concerned, a majority of respondents state that having some sort of linguistic ability in French is important. Speaking Creole French is seen as a necessary component of Creole identity by slightly more than half of the respondents, whereas having Creole French as a first language is largely rejected as an important attribute. Linguistic ability in Creole French influences the respondents' attitudes toward speaking Creole French and having it as a first language. The more linguistic ability one has in Creole French, the more these two criteria are seen as necessary. The further removed one is from the language and from Creole ancestry, the less one believes that these two factors are necessary ingredients for Creole identity. This shows that the core of people who believe that speaking Creole French is important are the ones who possess this ability.

Learning or speaking the language oneself is viewed as less necessary. It is also a possible reflection of the tacit understanding that, in order to merge fully into the African American culture (as well as the general American culture), English language skills are necessary. The linguistic stigmatization experienced by the elderly also plays a role in the rejection of Creole French language by the younger generation. Many of the older generation were punished and scolded as young children when they spoke French, and they expressed many times that they did not want their offspring to be mistreated in the same fashion.¹⁸

Living in a Creole area or in Louisiana is viewed as being relatively unimportant as a criterion for Creole membership. In their definition of the Creole identity, the respondents take into account the fairly large number of their relatives who have out-migrated to other areas of the US for socio-economic and political reasons. By claiming that living in Louisiana is not a necessary condition for Creole identity, the respondents can (and did) assign this identity to their family members living outside the state.

The results about race and religion are somewhat surprising, given their historical importance in identifying as Creole. A total of 93% of our respondents view religion as the least important criterion of Creole identity. Although once considered a major cultural component for this group, Catholicism has been either replaced by other religions – or, as in American society at large, Creoles have become more secularized, and no longer view religion as an important cultural attribute. When asked about the importance of race in the hierarchy of Creole characteristics, our respondents strongly rejected it as being an important criterion.

There is no simple explanation for the result about race. It is accepted by the White and the African American populations in the state that Creole identity today is inherently a “Black” possession – or, at the very least, a racially mixed attribute. WCrS stopped calling themselves “Creoles” partly because of the strong association between racial mixing, Black ancestry, and identification as Creole. Therefore, one might posit that there is no need to claim that race is an important facet of Creole identity. However, we find it more plausible that this result shows the respondents’ sensitivity to the historical and political conditions underlying Creole identity, i.e. the fact that WCrS as well as CCrS claimed or claim Creole identity. BCrS have always been the most stigmatized group of the Creole population; they are descendants of slaves, they have lived in rural areas, and they have maintained the French language. Rather than defining their Creole identity on the basis of race, BCrS insist on the linguistic attribute and their Creole French background as being essential characteristics of their ethnic identity.

This attitude is particularly striking in the BCrS’ responses to questions about the status of Creole French and of learning/teaching the language. Close to 94% believe that members of the community should learn Creole French as a second language, instead of any other form of French. When asked about the quality of Creole French, a majority of respondents (67%) claim that it is as good as academic French. The attitudes of WCrS and CCrS toward Creole French can help explain the symbolic importance attributed to Creole French by our respondents (the BCrS). Dominguez (1986:211) pointed out that, as far as the WCrS and CCrS are concerned, speaking Creole French is proof that one either (a) does not have pure French ancestry, or (b) comes from a racially mixed background, since the “true” Creole only spoke “colonial French.”¹⁹ The cohesiveness of the Creole communities that were investigated, as opposed to the WCrS and CCrS populations, is achieved through their pride in their Creole French language and background.

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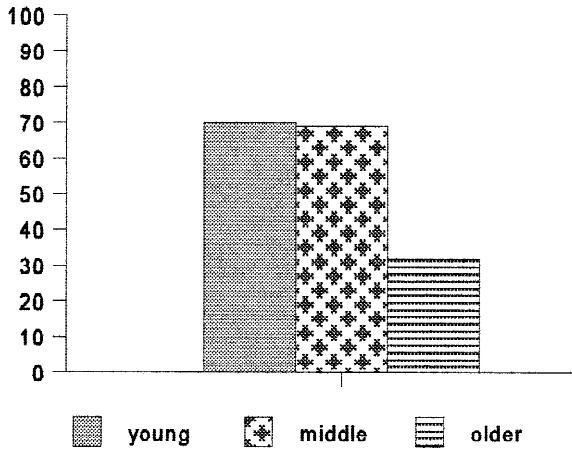


FIGURE 1: African American identification and age.

When asked how they identify themselves (American, African American, Creole American, Creole or other), the majority of the respondents selected the African American label, regardless of their linguistic ability in Creole French. Figure 1 indicates that age has a strong influence on identification as African American.

The younger and middle-aged respondents tend to adopt the African American label (70% and 68%, respectively) much more than the older generation (33%). When these results are correlated with the historical processes and evolution undergone by these communities, it can be seen that the monolithic image held by Whites of Creole society – as well as the far-reaching effects of the Civil Rights movement, with its emphasis on “Black power” and an “us against them” mentality – strongly influenced our middle-aged and younger speakers. It is precisely these groups who were raised on and exposed to new ideas and who received rights which, although legalized after the Civil War, had in fact long been denied Blacks. The middle-aged group chose to “partake of the larger dimension of the African American experience” (Dormon 1996:177), and to claim blackness as a “badge of honor,” as previously noted by Brasseaux et al. (1994:124); and the younger group has imitated them. Claiming Black identity has become a vehicle for establishing complete equality in the social, political, and economic domains. Creole identity, which theoretically could be claimed by almost anyone in Louisiana, has no significant value with respect to fighting racial discrimination.

Linguistic ability does play a very important role in the selection of the American and Creole identities. The more fluent one is, regardless of age, the more one identifies as Creole, as can be seen in Table 4. Conversely, people with no linguistic ability in Creole French and no Creole background tend to consider themselves American, clearly refusing any classification of color or

TABLE 4. *Linguistic ability and background and identity.*

	African-Amer		American		Creole		Total	
	n.	%	n.	%	n.	%	n.	%
Ancestry, fluent Creole French speakers	30	50	7	12	23	38	60	100
Ancestry, semi-speakers	37	62	5	10	10	18	53	100
Ancestry, but no Creole French	35	58	14	23	10	17	59	100
No ancestry, no Creole French	35	58	25	42	0	0	60	100
Total	137	59	52	23	43	19	232	100

ethnic differentiation. Ironically, if the Creole community in Louisiana were to undergo the same revitalization from which the Cajun community has benefited in recent years, these “Americans” might find themselves rapidly converting to Creoles.

CONCLUSION

Our results support Dominguez’s claims (1986:188) that, although Creole identity is assumed to follow from ancestry, self-identification as Creole entails an element of choice as to group membership, and is not simply a corollary of ancestry. At the beginning of the colony, Creole identity had no racial overtones; it was applied to first-generation and native-born colonists, whether White, Black, or ethnically and racially mixed. The term evolved and began to be associated with CCrs and WCrS – the high-status, elite groups who exploited the work and social system in place in the state to acquire immense wealth, to the detriment of enslaved BCrs. With the onset of American rule in the colony, nervous WCrS began to insist on excluding CCrs from their social and economic power bases, and perceived both CCrs and BCrs as a threat. In response, CCrs and BCrs clung more fiercely to their French heritage, language, and Catholic religion. By the time of the Civil War, the racial situation in the state had switched from a ternary to a binary racial classification system, and a majority of WCrS had merged with the various anglophone groups in the state. In addition to a small group of elite WCrS who insisted on pure White blood as a requirement for Creole self-identification, Reconstruction and the Jim Crow segregationist era rapidly ensured that anyone with any Black blood, regardless of French ancestry, came to be assigned to a single group. Parallel to the de-emphasis on French heritage was a concomitant decline in the use of the French language and cultural attributes in all Creole groups.

Louisiana Creoles have experienced tremendous changes because of the social/historical pressures exerted on the community and the fact that Creole French has been strongly stigmatized. The effects of these changes on the choice of ethnic

identity has, without a doubt, been considerable, and has led to the emergence of alternative definitions of Creole identity. White Creoles largely gave up their Creole identity by assimilating themselves into the culture of the southern American English-speaking population (although there are vestiges of pride in a “European” heritage among some of the WCrS, and a few still claim to be Creole). Because claiming European ancestry was strongly discouraged for anyone of mixed race, and eventually lost its former prestige, the majority of CCrs integrated into the BCrs. More recently, both groups have chosen to identify themselves with the African American population, which provides them a stronger identification status. This substantial change of identity is clearly led by the middle-aged generation, and is reinforced by the younger one. In spite of this strong identity shift, a few BCrs still emphasize their Creole distinctiveness and have become the keepers of the Creole identity in modern Louisiana. This identity seems to be founded most of all on ancestry, on having older relatives who speak Creole French, and on speaking some form of French, preferably Creole French. This definition is quite homogenous throughout the Creole communities we investigated; there were no significant gender and network differences, nor any geographical distinction.

Results from our previous study on the maintenance of Creole French (Melançon & Dubois 1997) showed that the progressive attrition of speakers who use Creole French as their primary language of interaction, along with the constriction of the functions of Creole French, constitutes a sociolinguistic situation which can be considered a harbinger of language death. This linguistic attrition will of course greatly affect the definition of Creole identity. With the demise of the language, the lack of emphasis on Catholicism, and the claim of African American identity, the only basis for Creole identity will, ironically, be the original definition: being descendants of the original inhabitants of the colony.

This article contributes to a broader understanding of the Creole culture and its place in Louisiana’s ethnic diversity. As Trépanier notes (1991:161), Black Creoles remain unintegrated in the supposedly homogeneous mixture of French identities in the state. Our results indicate that it would take considerable and rapid reinforcement at both the local and state level to sustain the Creole culture and language. Given that Creole identity is largely chosen by those who speak fluent Creole French, it is possible that, once the language is gone, identification as Creole will also disappear.

NOTES

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¹ The Acadian population (shortened via English phonological processes to “Cajun”) was expelled from present-day Nova Scotia around 1755, and forms the largest French-speaking group in the state today. Throughout the remainder of this article, this group will be referred to as Cajuns, although the usage of the term is a modern adaptation. Cajun French originates in the French of the Acadian colonies, Canada, itself manifesting features of the Southwest region of Oil (including Poitou and Saintonge) and other regions of France. Its linguistic system differs relatively little from other non-standard varieties of French in North America – particularly Acadian French, to which it is the most closely related.

² Spain had ceded the territory back to France a few years earlier as “spoils of war.”

³ Both the Whigs and the “Know-Nothing” parties at this time (and up to, during and shortly after the Civil War) were associated with racism, anti-Catholicism, and xenophobia.

⁴ Attempts were made to “repatriate” free Blacks to Africa, to “recolonize” them in Mexico and Haiti, and/or to destroy them by the actions of the *comités de vigilance* (Brasseur 1996:77–78).

⁵ During this time, the idealized and romanticized version of “pure White” Creole identity came to fruition. Historians like Fortier 1894 wrote vindictive diatribes against applying Creole identity to anyone with a hint of Black blood, and they portrayed Creoles as the White, genteel, impoverished yet proud descendants of French or Spanish heritage.

⁶ In New Orleans, schools had begun using English almost exclusively (with the exception of some private and parochial schools); most church services were conducted in English; the “media” of the time (newspapers, gazettes, magazines and pamphlets) were usually printed in English; and business transactions (especially in the anglophone part of the city) were conducted strictly in English. French had largely attained the status of a “family language.”

⁷ The 1970 act was rescinded in 1983 after being contested in court. The Louisiana Bureau of Vital Statistics today relies on racial self-identification, with the assistance of social workers and nurses to establish race for newborns (personal communication with the director of the LBVS).

⁸ Creole French, although much reduced in day-to-day transactions and the social arena in general, is still viable and is still used by a small percentage of Creoles in the state.

⁹ The Creole French present-day lexicon and morphological system have been described by several researchers. We only cite the major studies published to date: Mercier 1880, 1881, Morgan 1960, 1970, Tentchoff 1977, Hull 1979, Neumann 1985, Marshall 1991, 1997, Klingler 1992, Klingler et al. 1997.

¹⁰ These numbers were obtained from the special tabulations of the 1990 US Census Bureau. We wish to thank Linda White for her help and assistance.

¹¹ These authors describe the Cane River Creoles, who have traced their French connection back seven generations to a white planter and his black mistress, and who have a festival/family reunion every year. Many of this group have also “passed for White” and moved to California, where they have established a thriving community, and publish a newsletter about Louisiana Creoles.

¹² See Dominguez 1986 for a detailed account of the *passe pour blanc* (‘passing as white’) process within the CCrs community in Louisiana.

¹³ Samuels 1974 also discusses this process, and attributes it largely to the Civil Rights movement.

¹⁴ Interestingly, this revival was aided (unintentionally) by the Cajun French renaissance movement in the state, which created an awareness of the French linguistic and cultural traditions still surviving in the area (Dubois & Melançon 1997).

¹⁵ These groups object to, among other things, Lafayette’s major music venue being called the “Cajundome,” the local university’s football team being referred to as the “Ragin Cajuns,” and the geographic region around the town being called “the heart of Cajun country.”

¹⁶ The Lafayette Tourist Commission recently included the word “Creole” in its advertisements for the first time. Dismissing any racial connotations, the head of the tourist bureau claimed that “this isn’t about Black and White or anything in between. This is about green – greenbacks. We’re happy to promote everybody and everything as long as it helps the tourist business” (Ayres 1997).

¹⁷ We stopped passers-by in front of grocery stores, Wal-Marts, courthouses, bars, and restaurants to solicit responses. Our respondents often suggested further contacts, which we pursued either in person or by telephone.

¹⁸ This attrition trend has an effect on the maintenance of Creole French in Louisiana (see Melançon & Dubois 1998).

¹⁹ The variety of derogatory terms used to demarcate the language used by French-speaking Blacks in Louisiana is especially revealing: *français-nègre*, *couri-vini*, “broke-down French,” and “that *mo-gain* stuff.”

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