

From *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany*, vol. 14 (1999)

**The Limits and Direction of Creolization:
From Mercier's *L'habitation St. Ybars* to the Eunice Mardi Gras**

Barry Jean Ancelet

The creolization process that blended French, Acadian, Spanish, German, Anglo-American, Native American and African cultures in South Louisiana is evident in the region's architecture, the cuisine, the music, the literature and the language. Much of what is wonderful about south Louisiana culture is the result of this rich cultural cross-pollination. On the one hand, this blend involving blacks and whites occurred despite the slave codes before the Civil War and despite Jim Crow segregation after Reconstruction. Yet there were and still are limits to this process. Socialization has traditionally been closed especially by whites, especially in situations where courtship is likely. Recent events in the dance halls and Mardi Gras indicate that, while the creolization process continues to fuel the development of exciting cultural expressions, its racial limits are still evident. Based on historical and literary descriptions of nineteenth-century French Louisiana, including Alfred Mercier's *L'habitation St-Ybars*, as well as an examination of traditional celebrations, such as weekend dances and the annual Mardi Gras, this paper will explore the social boundaries of the seemingly boundless creolization process.

In Mercier's *L'habitation St. Ybars*, plantation life is characterized by lots of affective contact between the planter's family and his slaves. There is an especially strong bond between the planter's children, Démon and Chant d'Oisel, and Mamris, the Creole woman who essentially raised them and who is described as descending from African royalty. She is enlightened, having heard the family discuss the Rights of Man, but she considers herself part of the St. Ybars family.

Démon especially is a problem child. He prefers the wild outdoors to the plantation house. He prefers to speak Creole and eats in the kitchen with Mamris, rather than with his own family in the dining room. He understands the slaves and loves them. It is implied that he will be a good master, but these are the very reasons why he will not. Pélasge, the French teacher St. Ybars has hired to handle his difficult son, succeeds in harnessing his energies and natural intelligence by teaching him on his own ground. Démon learns to question everything including the plantation system itself.

St. Ybars, who is no longer in love with his wife, becomes interested in Mlle Nogolka, a teacher brought in to instruct Chant d'Oisel. She rejects his advances one night in the midst of a violent symbolic storm, and he goes into a rage and humiliates his wife the next day. When Démon defends his mother, tentatively at first, then more defiantly in front of the rest of the family and the slaves, St. Ybars attacks him, too. Mamris instinctively defends her beloved charge, coming between father and son. St. Ybars is then forced by the slave code to punish Mamris, the very heart and soul of the family, because she has raised a hand against her master. The bond that has developed between Mamris and the family threatens the entire plantation system. St. Ybars is eventually convinced to reconsider by Mlle Nogolka, but by then the creolization process that makes the family and the culture so strong and interesting has found its limits. The willingness of St. Ybars to have Mamris flogged or even killed over her natural reaction to protect her own belies the seeming peace and order of the system. Ironically, it is one

of the black overseers, Man Séramis, who laments cynically: "Les blancs ne savent plus régner." [Whites no longer know how to rule.] The crisis, during which Démon and his father nearly drown and reemerge from the Mississippi River, symbolizes the need for this rotten system to die and be reborn.

That same stormy night, the potential for rebirth, a beautiful "white" baby girl, is found on the doorstep of the house. Shortly thereafter, Titia, a light-skinned slave bought by St. Ybars in the opening scene of the novel who later ran away pregnant by a white man, returns to the plantation, making it fairly obvious to the attentive reader that this too will come to a head. The baby is named Blanchette and raised as one of the family. She grows up to be clever and beautiful, a spark of joy and everyone's favorite. She and Démon eventually fall in love. But this of course is not to be. Le duc de Lauzan, an embittered former house slave now back as a carpetbagger after the Civil War, exposes her as the child of Titia. This brings about the final breakdown of the family and its caste system. The beloved child is automatically ostracized despite the years of love and affection she had known as part of the family because she is legally black. The absurdity of the situation is underscored by the fact that she is anything but black in color, culture and name. She eventually commits suicide, and so does the entire plantation society that brought about this horrible dilemma. The creolization process that contributed to the rich cultural and social life of the plantation was ultimately unable to overcome the boundary between the races in matters of courtship and kinship.

In real life, the situation was similar. Every extant description of traditional music events from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both in literature and in colonial documents, indicates that the bands were composed of black and white musicians performing together. This creolization of European, African and American Indian styles produced the exciting sounds of Cajun music and zydeco (as well as the blues, jazz and rock and roll, by the way). The dancers at these same social events, however, were invariably all black or all white. This practice continues into the twentieth century to some extent, perhaps best characterized by the partnership between Creole accordionist Amédé Ardoin and Cajun fiddler Dennis McGee who performed and recorded together in the 1920s and early '30s despite strict Jim Crow segregation rules. There is evidence deep in both Cajun music and zydeco traditions of the influences of each on the other: Cajun music is bluesy and zydeco is sung in French. Both traditions share much common repertoire. Yet even the Ardoin/McGee partnership was problematic when courtship was (even remotely) in question.

Ardoin was one of the most popular musicians of his day, among white Cajuns as well as black Creoles, yet he eventually died as a result of the brutal beating he received at the hands of a few indignant white men after he accepted a handkerchief from a white girl to wipe the sweat from his brow during a Saturday night dance. It mattered not that she was the daughter of his white employer who knew him as a friend of the family, and that she had simply reacted instinctively in a humane way to relieve his distress from the heat, as she would have had they been out in the fields picking cotton. But they weren't in the fields picking cotton. They were in a dance hall where dancing and courtship were at stake. And the friendship ties he enjoyed with the host family did not protect him from the wrath of the protectors of white purity. This remarkable musician and singer, a major creolizing force, profoundly influenced the development of both Cajun music and zydeco

because he played and lived across cultural barriers. This precarious position eventually proved to be fatal.

Racial tension involving dance halls is still evident today. Though Cajuns can easily attend zydeco dances, Creoles are still not welcomed in many traditional Cajun dance halls. The limits of the creolization process are still clear in this precarious social setting. In the 1970s, members of the younger generation that had followed the civil rights movement were delighted to discover Clifton Chenier in Creole clubs such as the Blue Angel and the Bon Ton Rouley. When I went to the Blue Angel with a few white friends in the early 1970s, I remember that we were the only white people for many blocks. This was certainly not unheard of. Whites have attended black clubs in lots of places from Harlem to Storyville. But these were troubled times. There was ongoing tension in the community over the lessons of coming together at the water fountains, on the buses and at the lunch counters. Yet the prevailing sentiment in the club was repeated by almost everyone, "Don't worry about anything, baby. Everybody's welcome here. You won't have no trouble." I realized later that we were perfectly safe there because unlike Cajun dance hall patrons, those Creole patrons were not interested in enforcing barriers. They seemed delighted instead that barriers may be coming down. It is also undeniable that it would have been disastrous for something to happen to us in that club. The wrath of the white community would have fallen on the patrons and the owners as it had on the characters in Mercier's story and on Clifton's predecessor Amédé.

Meanwhile, however, the inverse was not true. Not long afterwards, a black bus driver was turned away from the Triangle Club in Scott as Cajun music rocker Zachary Richard played inside one hot Sunday afternoon. The bus driver wasn't even trying to penetrate the social event or test the barriers. He had simply driven a busload of French tourists to the club and was looking to wait inside where it was cool. To his credit, Zachary Richard declined to continue playing when he heard what had happened. He went on to clearly state his repugnance for the blatant racism displayed there that afternoon. But the line that had been drawn exposed the racist, exclusionary standards that ran deep in the community. This occurred not in the context of ante-bellum slavery when the St. Ybars when Blanchette met her fate, nor in the Jim Crow segregation of the 1940s when Amédé Ardoin met his. This was in the 1970s, when black and white children were going to the same schools, when no one really noticed anymore who sat where in restaurants or on buses. Yet the dance hall which has long functioned as a primary setting for courtship within traditional Louisiana French society remains as closed as the universities, lunch counters and polling booths once were.

It should be pointed out by way of balance that traditional Cajun society has historically been extremely territorial and that dance halls have long been one of the most important definers of local community. Where people went to dance on Saturday nights identified their neighborhood or regional allegiance as much as and maybe even more than where they went to school or to church. Terrible fights over someone from another village dancing with the local girls were not uncommon. These sorts of conflicts have diminished (though not disappeared) over the years.

During the 1970s, Clifton Chenier broke through some of the local color barriers, playing at white dance halls such as Jay's in Cankton and Willie Purple's in Lafayette to enthusiastic crowds without incident. This was not unusual (jazz and blues musicians have long performed for white audiences in lots of places). Amédé Ardoin had played for

lots of white dances. But Clifton had a policy, even in Creole clubs, of never taking a break. He never left the bandstand, not even to go to the restroom. Perhaps the reason he never had trouble was because he never tried to penetrate the social activity of the clubs he played. On the other hand, during the 1950s and '60s, swamp popper Camille Thierry (Cookie of Cookie and the Cupcakes who had a major regional hit with "Mathilda") was threatened and even beaten more than once for pursuing relationships with white women. He and the band played black and white dances, as did many of the emerging rockers, such as Fats Domino, Little Richard and Chuck Berry. But like Amédé Ardoin before him, it wasn't Thierry's playing that got him in trouble; it was his crossing the courtship color line.

These barriers continued to break down, in the same direction at first, then both ways in certain places. A few Creole dance halls eventually began to attract mixed crowds. Hamilton's and the Bon Ton Rouley in Lafayette began by having an open night, generally on Wednesdays, that attracted a mostly white crowd to these primarily Creole places. Later, there developed several restaurants that also programmed Cajun and Creole music on a regular basis. There, too, Cajuns and Creoles, as well as visitors from all over, gathered to eat, dance and socialize. The restaurant setting seemed to mitigate the socialization/courtship factor. As Cajun music and zydeco became increasingly hip during the revival years in the 1970s and '80s, a few dance halls emerged where both styles were presented to mixed audiences. The Liberty Theater in Eunice, associated with the Jean Lafitte National and Historical Park, began programming Cajun music and zydeco on the same nights, attracting both Cajuns and Creoles into the theater and onto to the little dance floor at the foot of the stage. This cross-cultural experiment has had its delicate moments. Some Cajuns expressed concern about the possibility of mixed couples dancing there. It eventually happened and those that couldn't deal with it didn't come back. Danny Poulard, a light-skinned Creole musician who grew up in Eunice, confessed to feeling powerful emotions about coming back from his adopted San Francisco to perform there. He explained that, in his youth when the Liberty was still a movie theater, he was denied access at the front door because he was too black, and that he was also denied access at the back door because he was not black enough.

But throughout those years of change, the old-time Cajun music dance hall has remained a bastion of segregation. In part, the reason for this is that, with rare exception, Creoles have shown little interest in attending such places. The public places that were important, schools, restaurants, movie theaters, modes of transportation, have all been integrated. There has been virtually no pressure by the Creole community on the Cajun dance hall, except in cases like the Triangle Club incident in Scott. And more recently, at La Poussière in Breaux Bridge. There again, an African-American was turned away at the door. As it happened, she was an attorney from Chicago in Louisiana for a convention, and she brought a civil suit against the owners. It is probably not incidental that she was from Chicago. The case has attained some local and national notoriety (NPR's Daniel Zwerdling did an in-depth report on the situation). But it is not clear that this will break down the color barriers in the region. While Cajuns, especially young Cajuns, seem to be keenly interested in zydeco, few Creoles express interest in Cajun music. Though both are open-air and open to all, typically the annual Zydeco Festival in Plaisance attracts lots of whites, but the annual Cajun Music Festival in Lafayette attracts few Creoles. Cowboys, a young hangout near Lafayette open to all, attracts both black and white

patrons on Wednesday nights to dance to the "high-energy" music in the mix, but few African-Americans seem to be interested in attending on the other nights when the club features country music. The U. S. Attorneys working on a settlement of the La Pousière case expressed an interest in exploring innovative solutions that may bring the two cultures together beyond this isolated case. Interestingly, the success of the Corner Bar experiment in the same town predates this case by at least ten years. They did with music what the law will undoubtedly fail to do. But then again, that experiment lasted only a short while.

Mardi Gras, another important definer of local community (Lindahl and Spitzer) has long been traditionally segregated along racial as well as sexual lines. Though males and females now mix in some versions, blacks and whites almost invariably still do not. (An exception is in LeBleu Settlement where I have seen blacks and whites riding together.) This issue recently came to a new head when a black visitor from Kentucky tried unsuccessfully to join the Eunice Mardi Gras. He was first told someone at the sign up table that "Niggers have never run in the Mardi Gras before and they are not going to start now." Later, the Captain tried (ineffectively) to soften the stance, explaining that the Mardi Gras Association could simply not be responsible for his safety, since all participants were masked and thus anonymous. Again, this visitor was not testing the barriers. He was not a member of the local population. It could in fact be argued that, race aside, someone from Kentucky has no business trying to participate in such an intimate ritual based on people fooling their families, friends and neighbors from behind a mask. If one goes to the Dakotas to experience an American Indian ritual, one should not expect to be allowed to don tribal dress and dance into the sacred circle either. The fault for this incident lies partly in the fact that the Eunice Mardi Gras is promoted as open to all. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the racist intent of excluding this visitor. If the person had been a black Creole from the community, he would have likely been excluded just the same. As in the case of the dance halls, these barriers only exist on one side of the road. White folklorists and filmmakers, such as Nick Spitzer, Les Blank and myself, have accompanied the black Creole rides, eaten the gumbo, and danced at the evening balls. These same components of the Cajun Mardi Gras remain largely inaccessible to Creoles. The man from Kentucky did not intend to penetrate the ritual. He was only along for the ride, following the action in a pickup truck with friends from this area who had invited him to join them for the day. He chose not to protest the decision, apparently for reasons unrelated to the racist stand of the Mardi Gras Association, but his white Cajun friends were embarrassed and did protest. The press reported this unfortunate and ugly incident. But it remained unresolved.

All eyes were on Eunice the following Mardi Gras. The Association discussed what to do, finding itself forced to face issues deeper than first expected. The more enlightened members regretted the unfortunate events of the previous year and wanted to avoid such moments in the future. Some found themselves wondering about the wisdom of extending a wide-open invitation for anyone to participate in the ritual, and explored what other neighboring communities have done to assure appropriate, local participation. (Petit Mamou, for example, requires that all participants dress and mask according to local tradition, know the local version of the Mardi Gras song, and be ongoing members of their Mardi Gras association.) At the same time, they could no longer avoid the race issue and have tried to develop a sensible, sensitive and safe policy in case local black

Creoles choose to join in on the run. Other communities have been forced to deal with similar issues, with mixed results. In Mamou, a separate (but equal?) Creole run leaves town the same morning in another direction. The town of Iota has faced serious racial tensions brought on not only by the inappropriate meddling of an uninformed priest, but also by the potentially controversial practice of black-face and the genuine feeling of exclusion from the festivities by some members of the community. These issues are forcing communities to come to terms with themselves publicly in a way that they have not done privately. The cultural equivalent of busing and forced integration probably would be counterproductive. However, it is clear that the cultural equivalent of segregation can no longer be tolerated or ignored.

Though there are important issues involving the politics and philosophy of cultural tourism in both of these contemporary cases, the Eunice Mardi Gras and the La Pousière, the bottom line is that the real border in the creolization process is clearly apparent in black and white terms. Though many things have changed profoundly since Mercier wrote *L'habitation St. Ybars*, there are too many other things that have not. Certain arenas involving socialization, especially as regards courtship and territoriality, remain accessible by essentially one-way streets. While the process of creolization has enriched both Cajun and Creole cultures, the word most properly belongs to the Creole community, since it is there that the blending process really occurs.

References:

- Ancelet, Barry Jean. 1989. *Cajun Country*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Ardoin, Alphonse. 1978. Personal interview.
- Brasseaux, Carl, et al. 1995. *Creoles of Color in the Bayou Country*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Fontenot, Canray. 1978. Personal interview.
- The Creole Controversy*, d. Karen Snyder. WLAE-New Orleans.
- Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo. 1992. *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. Baton Rouge.
- J'ai été au bal: The Cajun Music and Zydeco of South Louisiana*, d. Les Blank and Chris Strachwitz. Brazos Films.
- Lindahl, Carl. 19xx. "Bakhtin and the Nature of Carnival Laughter," unpublished manuscript.
- Mercier, Alfred. 1881. *L'habitation St. Ybars*. New Orleans.
- Mire, Patrick. 1993. *Dance for a Chicken: The Cajun Country Mardi Gras*, videotape documentary. Attakapas Films.
- Spitzer, Nicholas. 19xx. *Zydeco and Mardi Gras...*, diss. U. of Texas, Austin.