FROM EVANGELINE HOT SAUCE TO CAJUN ICE: SIGNS OF ETHNICITY IN SOUTH LOUISIANA, *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany*, vol. 12 (1997)
Barry Jean Ancelet

A recent exchange of e-mail information on regional place names and ethnic identification raised some interesting issues. What kind of markers do people use to publicly identify and express their cultural or ethnic identity? How do these markers work, both within the community and without. Are there layers of meaning hidden under the intended surface? Roland Barthes indicated "as soon as there is a society, every usage is converted into a sign of itself." (Barthes 1968: 41) Umberto Eco developed the notion of architectural connotation exploring the attachment of meaning to form and function. (Eco 1986: 64) Semiotic studies of cities and societies inspired by these notions generally focus on architecture and urban development as forms of symbolic language and social expression. This paper focuses on the symbolic language and social expression of actual *signs,* the kind businesses use to identify themselves to the public, with the notion that such a public display of ethnicity may tell us something about the community in which this occurs.

Names, of course, can carry important cultural messages. In South Louisiana, even personal names can act as a cultural barometer. During the Americanization of the Cajuns in the early part of this century which included, among other things, the banishment of the French language from schools and upwardly-mobile society, for example, French-speaking parents typically gave their children English first names and French middle names, thus retaining a certain ethnic connection but hiding it under a protective layer. This paper will examine another South Louisiana naming practice in the world of business. Using the business listings in telephone books, as well as photographs of the contemporary street scene, this paper will explore the evolution of overt ethnic and cultural identification in the signs displayed by businesses in Cajun country, tracing the movement from Evangeline to Acadian to Acadia to Acadiana to Cajun and finally to the emerging use of the French language. An American Folklife Center sponsored team of researchers coordinated by C. Ray Brassieur documented similar public expressions of culture and ethnicity among the northern Acadians in the Maine Acadian Cultural Survey, for the National Park Service (1992).

The ethnic evolution of the Louisiana Cajuns has been well documented (Brasseaux 1987 and 1992; Dormon 1983; Rushton 1979; Allain and Rickels, in Conrad 1978). The Acadians arrived in Louisiana between 1765 and 1785 after being exiled from what had become Nova Scotia by the British in 1755. There they created a complex new society for themselves, incorporating influences from their French, Spanish, German, Anglo-American, Scottish, Irish, African and Native American neighbors. This new society continued to be called *cadien* in French, but in English it came to be called Cajun. In English the term had variety of connotations, especially the negative one meaning "poor white French-speaking trash." Ironically, it is this English term that has now come to be known nationally and internationally especially through the popularity of the culture's food and music. While *Cadien,* remains what these people simply call themselves in French, the term Cajun has

only recently (since the 1970s) been considered widely presentable in public, and this for specific, traceable reasons.

The negative self-image that emerged among many Cajuns around the turn of this century was due to several factors: the arrival of Anglo-American grain farmers from the Midwest in the late nineteenth century, the arrival of Anglo-American oil developers primarily from Pennsylvania, Texas and Oklahoma beginning in 1901, the nationalism which preceded and accompanied World War I, and the leveling effects of the Great Depression. Following World War II, this trend was reversed, eventually leading to the creation of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) in 1968 and producing a new generation of Cajuns interested in preserving the culture and language of their heritage. This evolution, which can be heard in the music and oral tradition of the Cajuns (Dormon 1983; Ancelet 1984, 1989a, 1989b, 1991 and 1994), and tasted in their food (Gutierrez 1992), can also be seen in the way the Cajuns identify themselves publicly in signs, especially those with a connection to the music, food and tourism industries.

The first ethnic identity marker to be considered publicly acceptable was Evangeline, referring to the heroine of Longfellow's epic poem of the same name. Louisiana historian Mathé Allain speculated that Evangeline was considered safe first because of the Americans' clearly expressed appreciation for the romantic nineteenth-century poem (Allain 1983) and later because of the tourism factor. (Brasseaux 1988; Ancelet 1982) The first Lafayette telephone book in 1906 already listed an Evangeline Oil Company, a branch office of the company that first struck oil near Jennings in a field also named after the errant heroine. (I chose Lafayette for the telephone book survey because of its position as Cajun country's major urban center, more radically affected by the oil-driven booms than other small cities in the area, bringing to bear influences from both inside and outside the culture.) During the 1930s, interest in Evangeline was reinvigorated by the release of the silent film classic of the same title starring Dolores Del Rio, in 1929. By the early 1940s, the number of Evangeline listings had jumped to eight as new businesses were added to the subsequent phone books. This number held fairly steady, creeping up to 11 by the mid-1950s. Then between 1955 and 1966, the number shot up to 20. Two factors coincided to produce this jump. First, many new businesses were created as a result of the migration of rural folks to towns during the years following World War Two. Second, an ethnic revival was in the making led by local politicians such as Dudley LeBlanc who organized a bicentennial celebration of the survival of Cajun culture centered around a return to Nova Scotia in 1955. This new consciousness is reflected in the increase in the number of businesses sporting the name of the matron saint of the Acadians. Interestingly, however, this number did not continue to rise significantly. By 1976, there were only 25 Evangeline businesses. By 1983, at the height of one of the biggest oil-driven economic booms in the area's history, that number only reached 27, and today, it has fallen to 19. Thus, while Evangeline was the first ethnic code word used in business signs, it did not retain its position of importance compared to other code words that emerged later representing different social and cultural bases and dynamics.

Another word to become associated with the public expression of ethnicity was Acadian, first appearing in the 1930s, coinciding with Louisiana Senator Dudley

J. LeBlanc's first forays back to the Acadian maritime provinces of Canada. Throughout most of the 1940s and up to 1955, there were two or three Acadian listings in Lafayette. By 1960, the number had jumped to nine and it continued to climb steadily to 38 by 1976, shooting past Evangeline. The name Acadian apparently sounded a resonant note in the early Louisiana French renaissance movement, marked by the establishment of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana in 1968. By 1983, that number had almost doubled to 60. Yet, today that rise has leveled off with the number falling slightly to 59.

The term Acadia emerged for the first time in the business listings in 1963. Psychologically, this may have represented a slightly more radical expression of ethnicity, one that carried a territorial connotation, invoking the lost homeland of the Acadian exiles. There were no more than two Acadia listings until 1974 when the number crept up to only four. In 1983, there were only eleven and today that number has fallen to six.

Interestingly, another term that also connotes territory has become by far the most popular ethnic code among Lafayette business listings today. The word Acadiana, a combination of Acadia and Louisiana, coined and first used by local television personalities, such as Floyd Cormier and Bill McGoffin, to help define the coverage area of their new television station, KATC-TV 3, the local ABC affiliate established in the early 1960s. Acadiana first appears as a business listing as early as 1964, only one year after the first appearance of Acadia, but that number rises steadily to reach double digits at 10 in 1969. By 1976, there were 58 businesses with Acadiana in their names. By 1983, there were 144, and today there are 175. It is interesting to consider the reasons that Acadiana caught on while Acadia did not. The linguistic fusion Acadiana represents the successful contemporary integration of Acadian culture in Louisiana. As such, it is a clear affirmation of the status quo rather than what be a subtle threat. And it looks forward rather than backward. Interestingly, it is also untranslatable into French.

One year after the first public appearance of the term Acadiana, the term Cajun made its debut with a single listing in 1965. In 1968, the year that CODOFIL was established, the number had reached only three. During the early 1970s the number seemed to peak out in the low teens. By 1976, it had slipped to eight. But in 1983, there were 34 Cajun business listings, and the number continues to rise. Today there are 50 (including two spelled with a K). The difficulty this term had in taking root early on was very likely due to its problematic nature, especially within the African-American community for whom it connotes little more than "poor white French-speaking trash" and for whom it was often the responding insult to hurtful words hurled in their direction, roughly the counterpart of the "n" word.

Among the first to attempt to rehabilitate the term was the University of Southwestern Louisiana. The sports teams' mascot was the bulldog, but during the rise of USL's basketball program to national prominence during the late 1960s and early 1970s, some clever sportscasters nicknamed the teams first the Frenchman, then the Ragin' Cajuns. The latter moniker stuck with the administration of newly appointed President Ray Authement, himself a Cajun from nearby Bayou Lafourche. On campus, the new married student housing complex was named Cajun Village.

And usage naturally spilled over from campus. The first Cajun listing was in fact a popular local bar named the Ragin' Cajun.

Despite this new popularity, the term remained for many a loaded one. On campus, sports staffers strained to formulate a visual image of this Ragin' Cajun to serve as a mascot. The emerging faction of proud Cajuns resisted ideas which would demean their ethnicity (such as swamper attire). Eventually, university officials compromised with the past, opting for two bulldogs, one named Ragin' and the other, Cajun.

Today the word Cajun has been "rehabilitated" to the point that it is even overused. Fueled by such factors as tourism, it is applied to everything and anything, producing some remarkable juxtapositions [Cajun Credit, etc.] including political campaigns [Reagan Cajun]. One can now go fishing in a Cajun-brand boat, with Cajun-brand ice in the ice chest and Cajun-brand crickets for bait. And many area restaurants now feel compelled to identify themselves as Cajun restaurants. All of this self-consciousness once prompted musician, instrument maker and local sage Marc Savoy to answer a reporter's question, "Are you sorry the Cajuns have been discovered?" with "I'm sorrier the Cajuns have discovered themselves." Beyond Savoy's quip, this frantic self-identification may indeed by symptomatic of a fear of drowning in the American mainstream. The term is also often diluted by its misapplication to things that come from other elements of Louisiana's cultural blend, and appropriation by other non-Cajun areas of Louisiana, such as New Orleans, for its perceived touristic benefit. [slides] The black Creole community is especially sensitive to this flood of interest and have begun to protest being left out of the cultural credit line. [slides] Recently, the rather unsubtle un-Cajun protest was refined by groups such as CREOLE, Inc. whose campaign seeks to encourage the inclusion of black Creoles instead of the exclusion of the Cajuns. During the years when the Cajuns were struggling for cultural and social equality, black Creoles were involved in the Civil Rights movement. It was not until recently, once Jim Crow was dismantled to the point that no one really noticed anymore from what water fountain a person drinks, that the black Creoles began to feel that it could afford the luxury of exploring and enhancing the French and Creole sides of their heritage. Though the term Creole was widely used in nineteenth-century advertising to describe locally produced products (cattle, horses, mules, vegetables, shoes, etc.) and slaves born in the area, it was dropped as a reference in throughout most of the twentieth century and only reappeared in the business listings in the 1980s. There were 5 in 1983; there are the same number today. There remains considerable uneasiness over the public image of the term Cajun, symptomatic, in part of the negative value ascribed to the word Cajun, especially among black Creoles.

The slur, coonass, a derogatory reference to Cajuns whose origins are unsure, is apparently too openly vulgar and offensive to be found in the business listings, since it has never appeared there, and still does not. Yet some Cajuns display the word in other kinds of public signs including hats, t-shirts, bumper stickers and license plates. Some of these try to take the sting out of the insult by using it themselves and turning it into a "smile-when-you-say-that" term, while others have simply internalized the negative values it conveys about their own culture and identity.

In addition to self-ascribed code words (from Evangeline and Acadian to Cajun), other cultural icons can also intensify the message in signs. Some, such as oak trees, are locally generated and linked to the Evangeline mythology and its heirs. Emmeline LaBiche, erroneously thought to be the local prototype for the Evangeline character, is said to have waited for her beau (Louis Arceneaux) under an oak tree and thus it has become a cultural symbol for faithfulness and endurance. Other symbols are imported but have undergone radical redefinition. The *fleur-de-lys,* for example, formerly a symbol of the French monarchy and occasionally of quality or excellence (Ballinger and Ballinger 16) is now used by the historically populist Cajuns (Brasseaux 1987 and 1992; Dormon 1983) simply as a sign of French-ness. Crowns, another symbol of monarchy turned symbol excellence (Ballinger and Ballinger 88-89) are also ironically used and confused with Cajun identity, perhaps influenced by Huey Long, the immensely popular and populist former governor of Louisiana who declared "every man a king." There is also the possibility that the tradition of Mardi Gras "royalty" in urban centers such as New Orleans, Houma and Lafayette may have also contributed to the use of crowns and the vocabulary of royalty as cultural references.

The most recent trend in the public expression of ethnicity among the Cajuns has been the use of the French language in signs. This language, which previously had been considered a social liability, is now increasingly considered an important cultural identity marker and a source of pride (Ancelet 1988). Predictably, these French language signs can be a problem for the generations of Cajuns who were not allowed even to speak French at school, much less learn to read and write it. [errors] Sometimes business owners weigh in on the side of the trend, but without taking a real chance. [Le Stitchery/Le Video Store]. But as this trend evolves, the spelling is corrected and the process is refined. [Le Café des Artistes, etc.] Businesses involved in the use of French in signs tend to be upscale: schools and daycare establishments, restaurants, arts-related enterprises, and the offices of doctors and lawyers. Since the use of signs is an important part of attracting attention to potential customers, business sense usually tempers linguistic fervor to produce signs in which the name of the business is in French, spoken by a significant part of the population and now considered the emerging chic, but the message is usually in English, the language read by all. There are, however, a few bold examples that double the message or even reverse this pattern. And recently, local governments at the city and parish levels have begun to commit themselves as well to Louisiana's other official language. These messages in what used to be the "problem language" represent what is perhaps the most daring, overt statement yet of a cultural self-image which continues to evolve in South Louisiana.

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ANCELET, Barry Jean (University of Southwestern Louisiana) THE SIGNS OF ETHNICITY IN SOUTH LOUISIANA: FROM EVANGELINE HOT SAUCE TO CAJUN ICE. Using a variety of tools, including the business listings in old telephone books, as well as historic and contemporary photographs, this paper will explore the evolution and meaning of overt ethnic and cultural self-identification in the signs and labels displayed by businesses in Cajun country, tracing the movement from Evangeline to Acadian to Acadia to Acadiana to Cajun to the use of French.