Negotiating the Mainstream: The Creoles and Cajuns of Louisiana[1]

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Our ancesters looking at a map of North America in 1700 might have fairly predicted that North America would be mostly a French- and Spanish-speaking place,with a small enclave of English speakers on the Atlantic coast. France had begun to develop its colonies in 1604 with the founding of what would become Acadie, fully three years before Jamestown. A few years later, it extended into what is now Québec. Samuel de Champlain's Habitation at Port Royal was remarkably prosperous, cooperating with the local Mi'kmaq tribe to develop highly successful survival strategies in the rich forests and tidal basins, and establishing l'Ordre du Bon Temps, the first social club among Europeans in the New World, indicating that those early settlers understood the difference between surviving and thriving. By 1613, they were doing so well, in fact, that they attracted the attention of the newly arrived English in what is now Virginia. Captain Samuel Argall took a boatload of his English compatriots to Port Royal. When the Frenchmen were occupied in the woods preparing for winter, they looted the place and then burned it down, leaving the French without resources or shelter. They survived with the help of the Mi'kmaq and returned to France via supply ship the next spring. The French returned to Acadie in 1632 and once again thrived there for a century, despite changing flags several times between the English and the French. The settlers there were the first Europeans in the New World to develop a name for themselves that was rooted in this new land called Acadie, based on *kadi* or *katik* or *algatig* the Mi'kmaq word for the place and on Arcadie as Verrazano called as early as 1524 (Paul Ross 2000:17; Deveau 1992:8; Dupont 1977:19). They called themselves Acadiens. The British eventually gained what turned out to be final control of the colony in 1713 and began to develop plans to rid the place of those pesky Acadiens whom they perceived as French. In 1755, the British arrested all of the Acadiens they could catch, preventing revolt by separating men, women and children, and deported them to the thirteen British colonies in an effort eliminate the Acadien identity by dispersing them. Many died en route. Many were turned away by colonial governors who saw themselves already strapped for resources. Some were sold into indentured servitude. Some saw their children taken away and placed in the homes of good British subjects for reindoctrination. Some were sent to English jails. Some were repatriated to France. Some eventually walked back to what was now Nova Scotia and were allowed to resettle there (though not on their former lands) after the end of the French and Indian War in 1763 when Montcalm was defeated on the Plaines d'Abraham. Some eventually made their way to Louisiana where they sought to preserve their identity, language and culture in that French colony. By the time those who went to Louisiana got there, though, Louisiana had been given to Spain (in 1762). They were welcomed nevertheless and resettled there. They were the ancestors of today's Cajuns.

Louisiana had become a French colony in 1682 when Cavalier de la Salle and his French Canadian exploration team reached the mouth of the Mississippi River. La Salle immediately turned around and said, "Je prends possession de toute la terre vidée par ce fleuve au nom de Louis XIV, roi de France et de Navarre." Easy to say. With that apparently simple pronouncement, the French came into possession of the entire Mississippi River basin, and the Lakota, Dakota, Oglala, Cheyenne, Crow and lots of

other members of various First Nations became French subjects in theory. In practice, developing Louisiana proved to be a considerably more difficult. There were the occasional outposts and some regional development that led to what became the Illinois Country, Kaskaskia, the Old Mines – Ste Geneviève area. There are still some place names that echo a French past – Vincennes, Terre Haute, St. Louis, Prairie du Rocher. Some names have undergone considerable pronunciation changes – the Nez Percé, Détroit… Some parts of this vast territory came under pressure rather quickly from the westward expanding British colonials who followed Daniel Boone through the Cumberland Gap, and control of the Ohio Valley was renegotiated. Other places, such as parts of Missouri and Illinois retained French influence into the beginning of the twentieth century. The very last native French speakers of the Old Mines district are just passing away now. Their stories and songs were collected in the early twentieth century by scholars such as Joseph Médard Carrière (1937), Ward Dorrance (1935) and Rosemary Hyde Thomas (1981). Cecilia Ray Berry (1946) had made a similar collection of the songs of the old Illinois country. The French in Upper Louisiana did not have enough numbers to resist the encroachment of Anglo-American language and culture. Also, as members of a non-English speaking Catholic minority, they were generally relegated to the lower rungs of the social ladder.

In the southernmost part of Louisiana, there was the largest concentration of French settlement. This critical mass carried French language and culture through the twentieth century and into this twenty-first. The older generations of Cajuns and Creoles are living proof that it is still alive, though it is certainly waning. It is interesting to consider what has happened in this remarkably stubborn remnant of French-speaking North America. The region, which some anthropologists have described as "south of the South" (Gutierrez 1992: 4) and "the northern tip of the Caribbean" (Spitzer 1982), also shares linguistic and cultural connections and influences with the Creole islands of the Antilles. Arctic cold fronts sometimes remind orange growers and sugar planters that we do live on the continent after all, though we strain farther south.

South Louisiana is a dialectal region of the French-speaking world, but it would be a serious over-simplification to think of it as a homogenous region. There is a great variety of sub-regional dialects of French spoken here, based on three main currents: the colonial French that developed among the descendants of the French who first began to settle Louisiana in 1699, the Creole that developed among the descendants of the African slaves brought to work on the French colonial plantations, and the Cajun French that evolved among the descendants of Acadians who began to arrive in Louisiana in 1765 after they were exiled from their homeland in what is now Nova Scotia. Yet there is little pure linguistic stock today. The basic sources influenced each other in areas where the groups came into frequent contact. For example, Cajuns along the Bayou Teche are as likely to speak Creole as their black Creole neighbors, while black Creoles living out on the southwestern prairies tend to speak what amounts to modern Cajun French. Many move effortlessly and even unconsciously between dialects according to the context. All three basic sources were also modernized by steady trickles of immigration, especially in the 19th century by the so-called "petits Créoles," economic immigrants from France, and by refugees from Toussaint L'Ouverture's Haitian revolution, as well as by contemporary academic influences.

French was the language of everyday life and government in Louisiana into the 19th century. French Creole planter society supported a small but thriving Louisiana French literary scene including published poets and novelists, theater and opera. French

enjoyed equal status in newspapers, legal proceedings and daily commerce. But the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and statehood in 1812 placed serious pressure on French Louisiana to conform to the language and culture of the United States. With the end of the Civil War, French Creoles understood that their future was necessarily going to be American; they immediately began to send their children to English-language schools. By the turn of the twentieth century, their transition to English was virtually complete. Ordinary Cajuns and black Creoles did not get the message until much later, beginning with the arrival of Anglo-American farmers from the Midwest in the 1880s, reinforced by the arrival of Anglo-American oil workers and developers from Texas, Oklahoma and Pennsylvania in the early 1900s. This process was intensified by the nationalistic fervor that preceded and accompanied World War I, by the relief efforts that accompanied the great flood of 1927 and the agricultural and economic depressions of the 1920s and 1930s, all of which brought national level relief efforts exclusively in English.

"We have room for but one language in this country and that is the English language for we intend to see that the crucible turns out our people as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house and we have room but for one loyalty and that is a loyalty to the American people" (in Crawford 1999: 28). Those words were spoken by former president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, premier spokesman for the nationalistic fervor that fueled the politics of this country at the turn of the twentieth century. This political philosophy was put into practice throughout the land in an effort to meld America's many cultural and ethnic groups into "one nation, one people." This was the time leading into the first World War and many feared that the diverse makeup of this country could blow apart. Teddy Roosevelt, whose image is on Mount Rushmore, is often considered the very embodiment of American patriotism. In one sense, however, Roosevelt didn't trust, or even understand the Americanization process. He doesn't seem to have understood that people from all over the world came here to America to participate in a new experiment based in part on allegiance by choice. This misunderstanding and lack of trust led to some of this country's most shameful moments, such as the wrongful internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. Roosevelt had insisted, "There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism" (1915). This same misunderstanding also led to the myopic policy of establishing English as the national language by punishing the use of other languages.

We saw through the economic and political versions of our political isolationism rather quickly and soon went back to pursuing trade and diplomacy with other countries. The effects of America's war on languages other than English have been less easily reversed. Though we have now learned that one language can be added without subtracting another, and that people can use a *lingua franca* to communicate on an effective level while preserving their own local languages to communicate on an affective level, minority linguistic communities across the country, including the Cajuns and Creoles of South Louisiana, are still reeling on the brink of extinction. The few exceptions, most notably the Hispanics and Haitians whose numbers are constantly reinforced by contemporary migration, still make many of this country's English-speakers nervous, as attested by the recent burst of activity by the proponents of a movement called English First. This group, whose rhetoric echoes the philosophy of Teddy Roosevelt, seeks to make English the only official (and legal) language of this country to "stop a direct attack on our American way of life" by ending "the foreign language threat to English." In 1986, Texas Representative Jim Horn wrote in an English

First promotional letter, "I don't know about your forefathers, but when mine came to America, the first thing they did was learn English." I hardly think that was the first thing Mr. Horn's forefather's did. The first thing they likely did was to look for a place to sleep and eat, and they probably were able to accomplish this in their native language because there were lots of people in the port of entry who still spoke it. And I don't know about Jim Horn's forefathers, but mine were already in South Louisiana living and speaking French here before America became America, and long before Louisiana became part of America.

The fate of the French language in South Louisiana is representative of what happened in many parts of this country. In 1803, when Napoleon sold Louisiana to Thomas Jefferson in the biggest real estate deal in history, the territory, which stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada, was divided up by politicians. Artificial political boundaries ignored cultural regions and historical settlement patterns. The new State of Louisiana included the piney hills of the north and east with its English-speaking farmers, the bayous and prairies of the south with its French-speaking Cajuns and Creole farmers, the rich alluvial plains along the Red and Mississippi Rivers with drawling "aristocratic" planters, and New Orleans with its multilingual, multicultural urbanites. The decision to include these culturally diverse regions within the boundaries of this one state was the first step in what was to be a rather lengthy and brutal process of assimilation, especially for the French-speaking residents of south Louisiana.

When the time came for statewide laws, the very cultural and linguistic diversity which made for rich new blends, such in architecture, music and cuisine, put a strain on the state's artificial borders. Early versions of the state constitution made valiant attempts to legitimize the French language, but by the end of the Civil War, the French Creoles, who were plugged into the economic and political systems, got the message that they would not be able to preserve a separate identity based on language, ethnicity and culture for the region and began to conform to the national model, sending their children to English-language schools.

Upwardly mobile Acadians who had also participated in the Civil War got the same message for the same reasons. There were, by then, Acadian generals and governors, bankers and businessmen. For many others, however, the Civil War was simply not their affair. These did not join the effort willingly and, once drafted into the service of the South, they strained to get out of it. Yeoman farmers had no one else to run their farms in their absence, so many simply deserted and walked home from nearby battlefields, such as Bisland and Irish Bend.

The Civil War also threw black Creole society into an uproar that would last at least for the better part of a century. The complexity within the black French-speaking community was in effect eliminated by the same laws that freed the slaves. After Reconstruction, one was simply white or not. The descendants of landed, educated and cultured *gens de couleur libres* suddenly found themselves legally below the lowest whites, including many subsistence farming Cajuns. The tensions that understandably developed strained the cultural and social exchange that had previously characterized the relationship between Cajuns and yeoman black Creoles who after all shared a common language and similar economic conditions.

In Louisiana, the Catholic Church did not provide a support structure for the French language as it did among the 19th-century French Canadian mill town settlers in the Northeast. There, immigrants from Québec and the Canadian Maritimes brought with them a religious-based French-language private school system that helped to preserve the

language at least through Jack Kerouac's generation. In Louisiana, there were a few French schools among the Cajuns, but they were rare, far apart, and frequently seasonal at best. While the children of Cajun subsistence farmers may have gone to school when they could, farming duties overrode education and they regularly were kept home to help with plowing, planting, hoeing and harvesting. Furthermore, traditional societies such as that of the Cajuns often considered formal education outside the home to be threatening to the natural transmission of information from one generation to the next.

Meanwhile, America made clear the way and the road signs of nationalism and the large-scale marketplace were all in English. By the turn of this century, Roosevelt's battle cry, "One nation, one people, one language!" thundered across the land. The approach of World War I induced a quest for national unity that suppressed regional diversity across the country. In Louisiana, free public education was eventually made available throughout the state, but beginning in 1916, mandatory English language education was imposed in the southern part of the state in a well-meaning effort to haul the French-speaking Cajuns and black Creoles into the American mainstream. As a result, Cajun and black Creole children were punished for speaking the language of their parents in school, often by teachers with the same last names as the students. Several generations of young Cajun and black Creole first-graders, forced to wet their pants at school because they could not ask permission to go to the rest room, soon associated their native language and culture with social stigmatization. Those who could joined the headlong rush toward the language of the future. Soon speaking French was considered not unlike picking your nose: it was something well-raised people did not do in public.

These changes had far-reaching cultural and social implications. All that came from the outside along with the English language was imitated and internalized. Western Swing replaced Cajun music in the dance halls. Black Creoles, who had preserved their language and traditions largely in isolation, became increasingly involved in the civil rights movement which they rightly felt to be their most pressing struggle. Their *jurés* and *lalas* gave way to rhythm and blues and soul. The discovery of oil fueled an economic boom that brought both groups out of their 19th-century barter- and subsistence-based economy into America's money-based economy just in time to have none during the Great Depression.

Huey Long's new highways and bridges speeded the process along. First shared by horse-drawn buggies and the new horseless carriages that increasing numbers of Cajuns and black Creoles on salaried jobs could now afford, these elements of improved transportation opened the countryside and linked the bayous and prairies of South Louisiana with the rest of America.

South Louisiana was finally humming down a newly paved road toward homogenization and the American Dream. But was this the right road? Stress cracks appeared on the social surface: alcoholism and suicide among young musicians and artists; juvenile delinquency among children who *could* no longer speak to their grandparents because of the language difference, and *would* no longer speak to their parents because of television; self-denigration among a people who now called themselves "nothing but Cajuns," and even "coonasses." Black Creoles, trying desperately to escape from the trap of being too black to be French and too French to be black, couldn't change their color, but they could change their language. Louisiana's French cultures were beating a fast retreat, bearing the stigma of shame.

Then, in the late 1940s, the tide began to turn, particularly among the Cajuns at first. Soldiers in France during World War II had discovered that the language and

culture they had been told to forget made them invaluable as interpreters and made surviving generally easier in provincial France. After the war, returning GIs sank into the hot bath of their own culture. They wanted to sleep in their own beds and eat Mama's home cooking. And they wanted to hear their own kind of music while they danced and drank to forget the war. Dance halls throughout south Louisiana once again blared the familiar and comforting sounds of homemade French music. The glowing embers of the Cajun cultural revival were fanned by local political leaders who used the 1955 bicentennial of the Acadian exile (by the British from what is now Nova Scotia in 1755) as a rallying point for the revitalization of ethnic pride. The message of 1955 was that the Cajuns had survived the worst; their culture and language were injured but alive.

In 1968, the State of Louisiana officially fostered the movement with the creation of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL), appointing former U.S. Congressman James Domengeaux its chairman. The message of 1968 was that it was officially all right to be Cajun in public again. But the movement was not without problems. CODOFIL found itself faced with the monumental task of creating a quality French language education program from scratch. Older Cajuns who had written "I will not speak French on the school grounds" a few thousand times had learned the lesson well and avoided inflicting on their own children what was then considered a social and cultural deficiency. The mandate of CODOFIL, as a state agency, covered the entire state, right up to its old artificial borders. For these reasons, CODOFIL was forced to water its wine and pressed only for the establishment of French as a second language in the elementary schools. A dearth of native-born French teachers compounded the problem and CODOFIL opted to import teachers from France, Belgium and Québec as a stopgap. This, along with a broad program of cultural exchanges, brought the Louisiana French experiment to the attention of the Francophone world. Meanwhile, activists on the home front felt that the indigenous language and culture were once again forced into the shadows as many Cajuns dutifully echoed past criticisms, apologizing that their language was "not the real French, just broken-down Cajun French."

On the other hand, the Cajuns no longer felt alone. For their own reasons, France, Belgium and Québec became interested in fanning the fires of self-preservation along the bayous. They invested millions of *francs* and *piastres* to create a life-support system in the hopes that French culture and language might ultimately survive and even thrive in South Louisiana. Along with money and teachers have come hordes of tourists eager to visit this long-lost, long-forgotten "exotic" place where, against all odds, French has somehow survived in the belly of the beast. This contact has shown the Cajuns that, contrary to their childhood lessons, their French works just fine to communicate with folks who speak "real" French. And with the gradual defusing of Jim Crow segregation, black Creoles are now becoming increasingly interested in preserving the French parts of their culture through associations such as the recently formed Creole, Inc.

The increasing numbers of visitors to South Louisiana invariably bring their own cultural baggage and eventually have to reassess their interests in the light of certain realities. The Québecois who come to find a symbol of dogged linguistic survival in the North American context find virtually no open Anglo/Franco confrontation and a confounding absence of animosity in cultural politics. The French who seek romantic vestiges of a former colony find French-speaking cowboys (and Indians) in pickup trucks. They are surprised at the Cajuns' and Creoles' love of fried chicken and iced tea, forgetting this is also the American South; at their love of cayenne and cold beer, forgetting this is the northern tip of the West Indies. American visitors usually skim along

the surface, too, looking for traces of Longfellow's Evangeline and a lost paradise where past and present meet like the sky and water on the horizon, and where cypress knees provide a literal visualization of roots.

To understand today's Cajuns and Creoles, one must take a long, hard look at their culture and history. Friendly, yet suspicious of strangers; easygoing, yet among the hardest nuts of all to crack; deeply religious, yet amusingly anti-clerical; proud, yet quick to laugh at their own foibles; unfailingly loyal, yet possessed of a frontier independence, Cajuns are immediately recognizable as a people, yet defy simplistic definitions. Black Creole culture is just as complex, involving more than the obvious confluence of African and French heritages. Before the Civil War, most black Creoles were slaves on French plantations, but others, called *gens de couleur libres,* held positions in the business and professional communities and sometimes owned their own plantations and slaves. Furthermore, many generations of miscegenation and intermarriage with whites and Native Americans produced an intricate internal caste system within black Creole society based on such factors as skin tone, dialect, education, wealth, and family history.

The most important constant in South Louisiana culture may well be an uncanny ability to adapt. Cajuns and Creoles have always been able to chew up change, swallow the palatable parts and spit out the rest. This selective adaptability has become indeed the principal issue of cultural survival in French Louisiana. Before, change was slow, organic and progressive. Now, much of it is imported at a dizzying pace. And exported. There are now at least a few Cajun restaurants in most major cities, many of them run by people whose only connection Louisiana French culture is the purchase of cookbooks by Paul Prudhomme and John Folse. There are also a few Cajun bands in most American cities and a few in other countries. In fact, there is even a group based in Scotland which performs as the Edinburgh Playboys. National fast food chains picked up on the fad. Burger King dipped its fish patty in crab boil and called it a "Cajun Whaler;" Pizza Hut promoted a "New Orleans-style Cajun Pizza," which makes about as much cultural sense as Dennis Quaid's crossbreed (Cajun and New Orleans Irish Channel) accent in "The Big Easy;" and Pabst Brewery introduced a new brand called Cajun beer which, the label explains, is "brewed in the time-honored Cajun tradition" (in Milwaukee), and contains "authentic Cajun flavoring," the ubiquitous cayenne pepper. (For gumbo, maybe, but beer?) And Cajuns have made it onto Hollywood storyboards, in films such as *Hard Times* (1975), *Southern Comfort* (1981), and *No Mercy* (1986) as a community of barefoot, belligerent swamp-dwellers among whom a hero can get into exotic trouble without a passport. Unfortunately, many Cajuns are internalizing the media image of themselves. One can now fish out of a Cajun brand bass boat with Cajun brand bait, and put the catch in a Cajun brand ice chest filled with Cajun brand ice. Musician and cultural activist Marc Savoy expressed concern for what seems to have become a very self-conscious fad. When asked by a journalist if he regretted that the Cajuns have been discovered, he retorted, "I regret more that the Cajuns have discovered themselves."

Meanwhile, the fight to save the language looms large because many fear that if it is lost, the culture will go with it. To be sure, Cajuns and Creoles will eat gumbo and crawfish for the foreseeable future, but is "Jolie Blonde" sung in English still Cajun music? And where does zydeco end and soul begin? What happens to a culture when something as basic as its mode of expression changes? To answer some of these questions, it became clear that a period of self-discovery would be necessary. The University of Louisiana at Lafayette (then the University of Southwestern Louisiana) led

the way by providing the necessary basic research. But this represented a major retooling of the academic machinery.

Increasing numbers of young parents are interested in providing access to French education for their children. Many are requesting French immersion programs for their school districts. And universities are beginning to furnish French teachers with the interest and the training to Louisianify the teaching of French in the region. At the same time, ironically, the natural transmission of French from the older generations is fading rapidly, the result of decades of intense Americanization that caused a rip in the social and linguistic fabric. In order to insure the future of French in Louisiana, it will be necessary to utilize the same school system that once outlawed French as a language of instruction. Interestingly, typical language education methods are designed to eliminate the variability found in the natural context. Language instruction, for first or second languages, is typically designed to standardize and regularize. Ordinarily, language education methods are based on pedagogical principles that allow for a minimum of variability, especially in the early years to avoid confusing young students with too many possibilities and exceptions. But creativity and variability are essential to all languages in their natural living contexts. If we are to use the schools in an effort to regenerate French in Louisiana, not just as a simple academic exercise, but as a functional language for everyday life, without trading the richness of regional speech for the relative sterility of imported standard French, it will be necessary to reinvent the pedagogy to develop a system that not only tolerates dialectal variability, but actually celebrates it and even teaches it. One might imagine that this would create mass confusion among teachers and students alike. However, early experiments in this vein seem to show that methods based on variability coincide well with the way students learn languages naturally. Young students especially are interested in actually linguistic creativity, coming up with non-standard codes that distinguish them from previous generations in their first language. (One need only to visit a playground to hear this rich tradition of variation, precisely the sort of language variation that teachers try to discourage in the classroom and replace with an invariable standard.) Young students are not intimidated by language in its natural complexity. On the contrary, it comes across as honest, direct and teeming with possibility.

Early in the effort to revive French in Louisiana, between 1968 and the early 1970s, students learned “Comment allez-vous?” the first days of school. This expression is virtually unknown in Louisiana French. First, the singular “vous” is used only in very rare circumstances (to indicate an unusual formality), and second, we would not make the liaison with the “t”. Students returned to their homes and tried what they had learned in their new French class only to find that their native French-speaking family members did not understand what they were saying.This was not because the French that was spoken in their homes was inferior, but because it was not familiar and did not anticipate the regional speech patterns of people who only had an oral knowledge of the language. Parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles scratched their heads wondering what in the world a “tallez” was and the connection that could have been made to the living laboratories in the experience of virtually every student was lost. At the time, representatives of CODOFIL were reluctant to consider the notion of incorporating the local variety in the classroom. CODOFIL President James Domengeaux insisted that Cajun French could not be taught because it was only an oral language and had no grammar: “Why should we perpetuate illiteracy in the classroom by teaching Cajun French? It’s an oral language. It doesn’t have a grammar. It doesn’t have a written form.”

Some argued in response that most languages are oral, that all languages have a grammar, whether it is codified or not, and that Cajun French could be written even if most of its speakers could not do so by simply using the orthographic strategies provided by the French language. Cajun French is after all, a regional variant of the French language. We say “le nez,” “la tête,” “la bouche,” “la main,” le doigt,” etc. Domengeaux knew that language difference was a potential social irritant in the context of America. He had also been warned not to let what was causing linguistic chaos in Québec get a foothold in Louisiana. He often explained that what he wanted to accomplish in Louisiana was an evolution, not a revolution. He was always careful to point out the lack of opposition to the French movement among Anglo-Americans in the rest of the state and the country. (In retrospect, he may have done the cause a disservice by depriving it of a clear opposition against which to strain.) He refused to enter into a debate concerning linguistic or pedagogical issues, admitting that he was not qualified in these areas, but he also effectively prevented change by declining to reconsider his position.

At the same time, CODOFIL programs underwent several outside evaluations, including those independently supervised by Albert Valdman, Jan Lobelle and André Paquette. All were commissioned by CODOFIL in the hopes of justifying its position; all recommended instead the “Louisianafication” of French education in the state (e.g. Paquette et al 1978). In addition, several ethnologists, including Alan Lomax as well as Gerald Gold, Dean Louder, Eric Waddell and the members of Projet Louisiane, suggested consistently that CODOFIL had perhaps inadvertently done as much harm as good by discounting the value of Cajun and Creole French in favor of standard French. Toward the end of the 1970s, several native Louisiana activists began openly demanding a restructuring of French education in the state. James Donald Faulk’s *Cajun French I* (1977) was proposed as an alternative textbook and was almost adopted by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE). Faulk was responding directly to the increasing disenchantment with imposed standard French. Unfortunately, his good intentions were not supported by pedagogically or linguistically sound methods. His text was ultimately rejected for several reasons. First, it was not organized to function as a true textbook, though it contained a wealth of information about the culture and the language. Second, it featured two columns, one a meticulously accurate pronunciation guide and the other an English translation, but it lacked an essential element, a column written in teachable French. Activists striving for a method to to teach Louisiana French had long insisted that one could write was said in the region, but Faulk opted to adopt his pronunciation guide (based on English phonetics to more immediately reach his students who could already read English) as a new writing system. The underlying intent was great, but his specific solution was potentially dangerous, threatening to divorce the local language unnecessarily from its French origins as well as from the rest of the Francophone world. For example, to render “He is fixing his car,” “Il est en train de réparer sa voiture,” in standard French, Faulk proposed “Eel a ahpra ahronja son shahr,” which no member of the Francophone community would understand in print. With one more step, he could have arrived at the solution, “Il est après arranger son char,” which respects what is said in Louisiana while using French orthography. Visual communication is still a possibility with a few lexical, syntactic and stylistic negotiations.

Many felt it was important to defuse Faulk’s defective method, but activists wanted also to preserve its intent. CODOFIL President Domengeaux was experiencing a public relations nightmare trying to deal with the situation. He was quoted as saying, “You would be a functional illiterate after reading this book” and “Teaching Cajun

French would be worse than teaching red-neck English" (UPI 6 April 1979). Eventually, in exchange for assistance in resolving the Faulk affair, Domengeaux agreed to consider the activists' arguments. The publication of *Cris sur le bayou* (1980), the first collection of contemporary Cajun French and Creole poetry, added to the discussion. In 1980, with the hiring of Cajun French activist Richard Guidry as a supervisor of French instruction, CODOFIL and the Louisiana Board of Education confirmed a major shift in pedagogical and linguistic philosophy and policy. Teachers such as Amanda Lafleur, Brenda Mounier, Phoebe Trotter, and Caroline Ancelet began to seriously explore and develop ways to establish meaningful links between the native Louisiana French-speaking community and the educational system. One of the keys to making this work is the development of additional sources of information for the classroom. Typically, teachers and textbooks are the sole sources of information. Even with the best of intentions, even the best teachers cannot be expected to provide variation of this sort, especially if they are from France, Belgium or Québec. But if they are receptive, in this new system, parents and community members can provide local versions of French language and culture to be integrated into the system. In addition, guides to cultural resources, including films, music, and stories as well as lists of lexical variants, have been developed. Clever and resourceful teachers have shown that students learn language well when they are also learning to tell stories, sing songs, discuss recipes, and collect oral histories in the language.

As a native South Louisiana French-speaking Cajun, I experienced this process first-hand. When I studied French, first at Cathedral-Carmel High School in the 1960s and then at UL-Lafayette (then USL) in the 1970s, I came to understand that we didn't know much about ourselves at all. In high school and college courses, French was taught as a foreign language. We eventually learned all about the kings and composers, artists and authors, wines and cheeses of France, but virtually nothing about our own French culture in Louisiana. We didn't take up much space on the library shelves. During my last year as a student at the university, I started working with the Smithsonian Institution on festival projects in Washington and in Louisiana, which led to the first Cajun Music Festival in 1974. Then I left for Indiana University where I studied French and folklore. When I came back home in 1977, there were signs that things were already changing. University President Authement had created the Center for Louisiana Studies in 1973 and the Center for Acadian and Creole Folklore in 1974, giving academic legitimacy to the study of our own history and culture.

These changes became part of the academic infrastructure so that we would now have the opportunity to learn about ourselves. While this may sound parochial and provincial, typical of a regional university, it was in reality part of a far-reaching plan, representative of President Authement's strategy to develop the potential of this university in daring new directions. The basic principle was to identify areas in which we could excel, areas that no one else was addressing. It would have been foolish to compete with traditional French Ph.D. programs at other universities, especially the one nearby at LSU, particularly with our limited resources. So we concentrated on what we could do best, something virtually no one else was doing in a systematic way: studying our own language, history and culture.

Upon my return to Lafayette, I met a kindred spirit, David Barry, then a brand-new assistant professor with a Ph.D. in French philosophy from UCLA. We devised a couple of new courses, one on Louisiana French Folklore and the other on the French literature of Quebec. These turned out to be the first steps on a road that would eventually lead to our new Ph.D. program in Francophone Studies, one of only three of its kind in

the world. Dr. Barry eventually expanded his own exploration to include the French-language literatures of Africa and the West Indies. Building on the work of her unsung predecessors, including Hosea Phillips, Marie Del Norte Theriot and Ruby Landry, Shirley Abshire developed a course and structured materials on the Cajun French language. Former students, such as Richard Guidry and Amanda Lafleur, have continued this work. In 1983, Dr. Barry received a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to develop an interdisciplinary undergraduate program in North American Francophone Studies. Mathé Allain expanded the playing field further, studying the literature of the Acadian Maritime Provinces and the Maghreb, as well as French Louisiana. Since then, other faculty members have turned their attention various parts of the Francophone world, including Belgium and the Indian Ocean. Of course, France remains at the core of this activity.

Eventually what started as a marginal interest became more and more part of the mainstream of the department as faculty members published books and articles on Francophone issues, including French Louisiana. In 1984, the university hosted a conference and founded the Southern Council on Francophone Studies, which eventually became the Conseil International d'Études Francophones. The program launched a journal, *Études francophones* (formerly *Revue francophone*), which publishes works on a wide variety of interdisciplinary issues related to *la francophonie.* It was this flurry of activity that led to the proposal for the Ph.D. program in Francophone Studies led by Dr. Barry, who was then department head. Around the same time, the Department of Foreign Languages was renamed the Department of Modern Languages, partly an updating of terminology and partly an acknowledgment of the fact that French was not a foreign language in Louisiana.

In an attempt to understand ourselves well, we discovered the world in our own backyard. As zydeco master Clifton Chenier said often, "It's all right here, man. Just got to figure out what to do with it." Biologists can learn about the nature of life in general by studying a species and its context intensively. Similarly, we have learned much about the Francophone World and indeed the world in general by taking a careful look at South Louisiana and its French connections. Serious research in the literature, history, architecture, music, oral tradition and culture of French Louisiana has led us to the rest of the French-speaking world in Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia, as well as the rest of North America. Graduate students in U.L.-Lafayette's Francophone Studies program, hailing from all over the Francophone world, including Québec, the Acadian Maritime provinces, sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb, the Antilles, as wells from various parts of the United States, including Louisiana, have produced dozens of dissertations and theses on a wide range of Francophone issues via an equally wide range of disciplines, from literature and film to enthnology and medical anthropology to linguistics and pedagogy.

The development of the Francophone Studies program has been naturally interdisciplinary from the beginning. There was woefully little information available in print. Yet, hidden behind every problem, there is an opportunity. Scientists and engineers are trained to think this way. Every one should. To find out about the culture, we would have to try other angles. Folklore provided a critical research approach. There were lots of living libraries out there; but they did not write their stories, they told them. This kind of research put us on the cutting edge of contemporary post-post-modern scholarship. We went from underdeveloped to avant-garde in nothing flat. I began doing fieldwork on my own, recording songs, tales, legends, and oral histories. Others, such as Alan Lomax, Elizabeth Brandon, Harry Oster and Ralph Rinzler, had already recorded substantial

collections over the years. They generously provided copies of these for our archives, explaining that they would have loved to have deposited them somewhere in Louisiana, but there had been no place then. No one had been interested enough locally when they had first come through. As copies of these past collections came together in one place, the development of Cajun culture and music became clear. Now, for example, we can hear what the music sounded like from the 1930s through the '40s, '50s, '60s and '70s, in home recordings as well as on commercial records. The narrative recordings in these collections also inadvertently produced one of the largest corpuses of naturally recorded French dialects in existence.The basic historical research necessary to penetrate beyond Longfellow's *Evangeline* was provided by members of U.L.-Lafayette's Center for Louisiana Studies. The big picture has begun to take shape.

As we explored the cultural expressions of the Cajuns and Creoles of South Louisiana, we found that the approach we had adopted took the research on exciting excursions across space, time and disciplines. Animal tales and magic tales (collected by a number of scholars, including Alcée Fortier, Corinne Saucier, Calvin Claudel, and Elizabeth Brandon) go back to Western Europe and Africa. But this ancient oral tradition also constantly adapts and updates itself to remain vital, producing jokes, tall tales and legends that reflect local and contemporary realities and act as social and psychological barometers. Nineteenth-century Louisiana French literature has obvious origins in the literary tradition of France, while contemporary Cajun and Creole literature is marked by its recent passage from oral tradition to written tradition, thus resembling in some ways the literature that emerged from medieval French oral tradition, as well as the Creole literature that began to emerge more recently in the Antilles. Cajun music and zydeco are blends of European, African, and Native American traditions that are also affected by contemporary influences such as social and linguistic pressures and popular styles. The presence of fairies in ballads such as "Pierrot Grouillet et Mademoiselle Josette" indicates roots in pre-Christian pagan cultures, "J'ai passé devant ta porte" has been traced to Spanish sources, while the music of Wayne Toups is clearly a fusion of Cajun, zydeco and southern rock. Based on the recordings made by Alan Lomax in Louisiana in 1934, and a few clues from the colonial plantation culture of the Indian Ocean, the term "zydeco" itself seems to lead through the Creole connection of the Caribbean to the courtship ritual music of the SeneGambia region of West Africa, and only coincidentally came to mean "snapbeans" after the fact. The country Mardi Gras is rooted in medieval French tradition and African processional singing, as well as Neolithic springtime renewal rituals. The Creole or "Acadian-style" cottage is the result of a blend of Western French and Afro-Caribbean architectural influences further adapted to function in this Gulf Coast environment. Cajun and Creole cooking, which recently took America by storm, as Chef Paul Prudhomme so eloquently puts it, "because it tastes good," has roots in a similar blend of French and African culinary influences and New World ingredients.

If any of this effort is go beyond the academic exercise, students must also see that there are viable things to do in the language. Languages do not exist in a vacuum. They are used to convey ideas, to make people laugh or to move them to tears. And as everyone with children knows, if it's not on television or in cyberspace, it's not real. Cajuns and Creoles must write stories and poems and songs in French. They must produce plays, radio and television programs, and video games in French. They must IM in French. They must yell at baseball umpires and soccer referees in French. It takes time to build this kind of momentum and it remains to be seen whether French immersion students will communicate to each other in French when they ordering hamburgers or

pizza. There are signs of renewed vigor in the rest of the community. Clever local businessmen are attracting attention to their wares and services by advertising in French. Some young parents are speaking French to their children on purpose. A few young authors are writing poems, plays and short stories in French on purpose. Some of their works have been published in Louisiana, such as the collective *Acadie tropicale* (1983), Richard Guidry's *C'est p'us pareil* (1982), and Zachary Richard's *Voyage de nuit* (1987). Other works have been published in Québec and New Brunswick, including Zachary Richard's *Faire récolte* (1997) David Cheramie's *Lait à mère* (1997), Jean Arceneaux's *Suite du loup* (1998)*,* Deborah Clifton's *A cette heure, la louve* (1999). A few have turned to prose, including Antoine Bourque's *Trois saisons* (1986). May Waggoner gathered the original plays of Le Théâtre Cadien in *Une fantaisie collective* (1999). Louisiana teachers are gradually replacing the imports and French immersion programs are taking root in the elementary school system. Cajuns and black Creoles are learning to harness the forces that previously eroded the culture and its expressive language. Local access cable television has created an important new outlet for programming in local terms. There have even been a few movies produced in French, including Glen Pitre's *Fièvre jaune* and *$8.50 le barril.* The Louisiana French culture and language have been the focus of a number of documentaries, including, including Les Blank's *Spend It All* (and *J'ai été au bal* (1989)*,* André Gladu's four part series *Le son des Cadiens* (1976)*,* and *Zarico* (1985)*,* Nick Spitzer's *Zydeco* (1984) (Glen Pitre's *Good for What Ails You* (1998)*,* Pat Mire's *Anything I Catch* (1990)*, Dance for a Chicken* (1993)*,* and *Against the Tide* (2000)*,* and most recently Jean Bourbonnais' *Contre vents et contre marées* (2001)*.* Cajun and Creole music, once dismissed as "nothing but chanky-chank," has infiltrated radio, television and the classroom and been recognized on the national traditional music scene, with Beausoleil and Clifton Chenier winning Grammy Awards and a number of other musicians receiving nominations. With festivals and recording companies watering the roots at the local and national levels, young musicians are not only preserving the music of their tradition, but improvising and creating new songs for that tradition. Local music events such as the Cajun Music Festival and Festival International, both in Lafayette, and the Zydeco Festival, in Plaisance, and the weekly "Rendez-vous des Cadiens" live radio broadcast from the Liberty Theater, in Eunice, attract locals as well as visitors from all over America and many parts of the world, thus providing an important validation from the outside.

While the French language struggles to maintain its role in the cultural survival of South Louisiana, there are other changes in style which reflect the recent acculturation of modern influences. People drink Cokes, eat hambugers and recognize Madonna throughout the world. It is no different in south Louisiana. Young musicians would be less than honest if they pretended that they never listened to the radio. Thus, the sounds of rock, country and jazz are incorporated today as naturally as were the blues and French *contredanses* of old. Contemporary groups, including Beausoleil, the Mamou Playboys and Feufollet, continue to sing primarily in French, but also experiment with bilingual and even English only lyrics. Some young singers do not speak French but imitate the sounds of traditional French lyrics. Some, like David Greely, Steve Riley, and Dirk Powell, feel compelled to learn the language of the lyrcs they are singing. Young audiences are increasingly unable to understand the lyrics of the music that is driving the dance. One can fairly wonder how long singers will sing in a language that neither they nor their audiences understand. Contemporary Cajun poet and songwriter Jean Arceneaux challenges just this problem in a recently penned song:

Comment ça se fait, bébé,
Je suis après chanter, bébé,
In a language you don't understand?

T'es après danser, bébé,
Et t'amuser, bébé,
While my words just echo 'cross the land.

> What's at stake?
> What will it take?
> C'est pas assez…
> Danser sans comprendre.

Tout en anglais, bébé,
Jamais en français, bébé,
Can't understand the boys in the band.

Qui c'est toi t'es, bébé,
Quoi c'est tu fais, bébé,
Yeah, you, just try to understand.

> What's at stake?
> What will it take?
> C'est pas assez…
> Danser sans comprendre.

(Jean Arceneaux 2006, used by permission)

The cultural history of another challenging song, Zachary Richard's "Réveille" indicates that things can change. When Richard sang his Acadian national anthem at the second Festival de Musique Acadienne in 1975, while he and thhe members of his band members waved a flag and held their fists in the air, people in the crowd wondered what was going on, and why Eddie Richard's kid seemed so worked up. The song grabbed the attention of the rest of the French-speaking world, especially in Quebec and the Acadian Maritimes where politics and culture were deeply intertwined. Richard refrained from performing the song in Louisiana for two decades. In 1995, on the twentieth anniversary of his first performance at the same festival, Richard tried his song on the crowd again. This time thousands joined him singing the lyrics with their own fists in the air. Subsequent generations of Cajun and Creole musicians, initially inspired by Zachary Richard and Michael Doucet in the 1970s, are finding their own ways into the future, innovating new songs from their own imaginations and re-energizing old ones from existing archival sources. Some of the contemporary Cajun and Creole band names, such as the Lafayette Rhythm Devils, Wayne Toups ZydeCajun, Bonsoir Catin, TRIO KREYOL, and the Lucky Playboys, illustrate the creative possibilities that are fused with traditional bases.

Cajuns and Creoles are constantly adapting their culture to survive in the modern world. Recent events, including two devastating hurricanes and the equally devasting post 9-11 anti-French political storm, have strained this survival strategy. However, the

French-speaking population of South Louisiana did not suffer the diaspora that many black Creoles from New Orleans have experienced. Evacuees from the coastal areas are already heading back to rebuild their homes and lives. The ever-increasing demand for Spanish because of today's social realities are encroaching on long-established French education programs. Yet CODOFIL and the parish school boards continue to adapt and adopt new strategies, including the highly effective – and thus increasingly popular – immersion programs. State universities in Louisiana require a minimum of two years of high school "foreign" language study for admission, which bolsters French as well as Spanish and a few other languages. Faculty and students at U.L.-Lafayette and L.S.U. have established programs to teach Cajun French and Louisiana Creole alongside standard French. Vernacular French is also finding its way into the elementary and secondary school classrooms, along with the native Louisiana cultures that they convey. It is not uncommon for students learning French in Louisiana to make use of Cajun and Creole song lyrics and Mardi Gras practices as well as national textbooks. The real challenge will be convincing and retooling the educational system to not only tolerate regional linguistic variability but even teach it, as suggested by L.S.U.'s Bernard Cerquilglini in a recent *French Review* article (2006) and by Amanda LaFleur and myself in Albert Valdman's *Le français en Amérique du Nord* (2005) [c.f. also my series of articles in *Entre Nous, bulletin du Centre Provincial de ressources pédagogique de la Nouvelle Ecosse* (2004-2005)]. These experimental efforts have increasing basic research support in the form of the *Dictionary of Louisiana Creole* (1998) and the upcoming *Dictionary of Louisiana French* (n.d.), as well as a variety of linguistic studies.

Change is not necessarily a sign of decay, as it was first thought. On the contrary, it is likely a sign of vitality. The latest arrivals on the cultural scene, Hispanic and Vietnamese refugees, have begun to fish and farm alongside their established neighbors, and local restaurants show the signs of the continuing blending process: crawfish egg rolls and crawfish tamales. The early effects of Americanization were rightly considered drastic because it was too much too fast and the regional melting pot boiled over. The cooks of South Louisiana culture have since regained control of their own kitchen and continue to simmer a gumbo of rich and diverse ingredients.

Note:

[1] Parts of this article appeared previously in "A Perspective on Teaching the 'Problem Language' in Louisiana," *The French Review,* vol. 61, no. 3 (February 1988), 345-356; and "Jolie Blonde à l'école," in *Teaching and Research in the University,* ed. Lewis Pyenson (Publications of the Graduate School, vol. 2. Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1996).

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