

In Pursuit of the “Faerie Folk”: Identity, Self-determination, and Multiculturalism in Louisiana

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In the November 2006 issue of the men’s lifestyle magazine *GQ*, food critic Alan Richman set out to discover how Hurricane Katrina had affected New Orleans’s famous cuisine. In presenting the results of his research, Richman unintentionally set off an intense national debate on Creole culture and identity by blithely red-lining an entire culture to make what he undoubtedly regarded as a humorous, somewhat tongue-in-cheek observation: “Supposedly, Creoles can be found in and around New Orleans. I have never met one and suspect they are a faerie folk, like leprechauns, rather than an indigenous race.”¹ In this throwaway remark, Richman echoed countless other uninformed people who confuse race with culture, and who hold firmly to the belief that a culture not easily defined or pigeonholed, with intangibles of identity that may only be understood by its members, must not truly exist.

New York Times food writer Kim Severson quickly responded to Richman’s thesis in her column.² Unlike Richman, Severson had no problem finding Creole people in New Orleans, several of whom discussed in an honest and introspective manner both loss and maintenance in traditional Creole foodways. It was Severson’s response that brought Richman’s essay to the attention of the Creole Heritage Center at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, Louisiana (see box on page 296), which posted a public petition on its webpage (<http://ipetitions.com/petition/creole>) so that visitors to the site could express their support for Creole heritage and identity.

What is Creole?

So, what is “Creole”? The textbook answer is that the word derives from the Portuguese *crioulo* or Spanish

criollo, from the verb “to create.” The term developed out of the colonial experience, and was used as a way to identify those people and things born in the New World from Old World stock. Hence, second generation French or Spanish colonial citizens were considered to be Creole, as were their indentured servants, slaves, mixed-race children, cattle, and produce. In Louisiana, where most U.S. Creoles either reside or originated, the term has come to identify those people whose ancestry is rooted in French or Spanish colonialism, but whose ancestors may also have been American Indian, African, Afro Caribe, or Anglo American.³ Today, as in the past, Creole culture crosses racial boundaries to include a wide range of people of varying ethnic ancestry.

More than 60 historic communities, known colloquially as Creole colonies,

lie within the political confines of the state of Louisiana. Extensive Creole communities can also be found in Chicago, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Houston. Creole people throughout the U.S. are linked by kinship, Catholicism, and the common experiences and shared understanding of cultural insiders. Still, they are constantly called upon to define and explain themselves and their heritage to cultural outsiders. The Creole Heritage Center helps to interpret this vast, multi-layered global community by educating and informing the public about the history and culture of Creole people.

Multiculturalism:

The crossing of racial boundaries by the Creole culture, Hanley states, “enriches” our society.⁴ How, though, is culture defined and used? NCSS describes culture as a way to understand ourselves as individuals and members of various groups.⁵ The definition provided in the geography standards, *Geography for Life*, states that

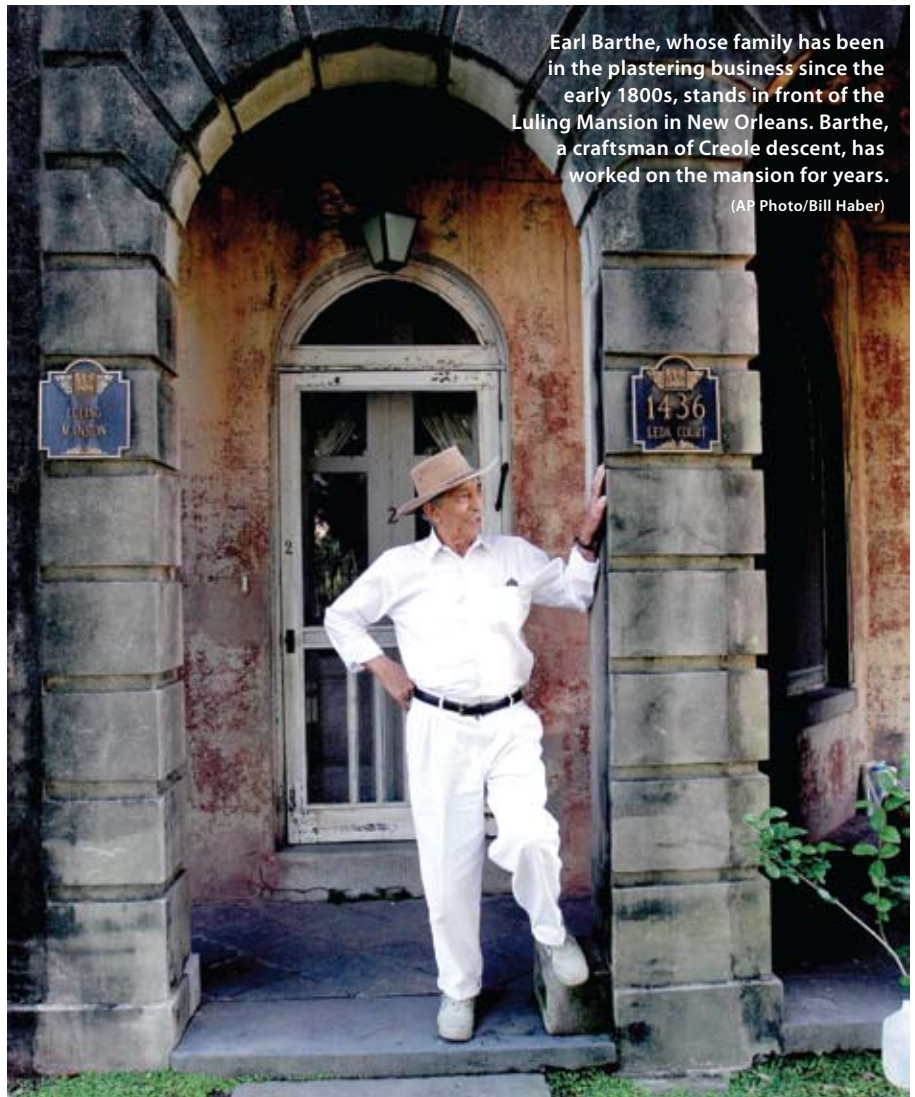
culture is a complex, multifaceted concept. It is a term used to cover the social structure, languages, belief systems, institutions, technology, art, foods, and traditions of particular groups of humans. The term is used to

define each group's way of life and its own view of itself and of other groups⁶

Hanley states that "multicultural education emerged in the 1990's to address the educational needs of a society that continues to struggle with the realization that it is not monocultural, but is an amalgamation of many cultures." The process of understanding other cultures requires more than knowledge of their holidays and food; rather, multicultural education requires critical thinking. As the NCCS strand on culture (the first theme of the social studies standards) asks: "How do belief systems, such as religion or political ideals of the culture, influence the other parts of the culture? How does the culture change to accommodate different ideas and beliefs?" To answer such questions, students need to research and learn multiple perspectives involved in any historical or contemporary experience in order to understand the rich meaning therein. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development states that multicultural education helps students understand cultural similarities and differences, to recognize the diverse accomplishments of the different ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups.⁷

Examples of Creole in the Classroom:

In Philip McClung's eighth-grade Louisiana history class, students learn about the Creole culture through sharing their personal experiences in the Cane River area surrounding Natchitoches. Students read and talk about the historical accounts of Creoles bringing music, theatre, and other forms of high culture to the New Orleans area. That serves as the springboard for making a distinction with Cajun culture, so often confused historically and socially with Creole culture. However, the Creole culture is not just a history lesson. The Creole people are a vibrant and vital part of the Natchitoches area today, and the



Earl Barthe, whose family has been in the plastering business since the early 1800s, stands in front of the Luling Mansion in New Orleans. Barthe, a craftsman of Creole descent, has worked on the mansion for years. (AP Photo/Bill Haber)

students need to see their important contributions in a current context. They learn about the uniqueness of the Creole people during the Creole Heritage Celebration, which focuses on families that students know in the Melrose, Derry, and Cloutierville communities, and acquire knowledge about Creole life and culture by using the ingredients in gumbo and other Creole dishes as a point of departure for understanding the relationship between Creoles and their natural environment.

The students of the Northwestern State University (NSU) Middle Laboratory School were invited to serve as mentors to local elementary school students in a celebration of

the Creole people at the local events center. The eighth graders helped the younger students create Creole musical instruments, joined in dances, and even created arts and crafts in the Creole tradition. Meeting Creole cooks, artists, musicians, and writers was one of the true highlights for the middle school students this year.

Textbooks and Creole Culture

At the NSU Middle Laboratory School, eighth-grade students use the textbook *Louisiana: The History of an American State* to learn about the rich cultural and historic background of Creoles. Early in the year, students learn about one cultural expression: Zydeco music. Zydeco music blends French

THE CREOLE HERITAGE CENTER

The Creole Heritage Center was established in the mid-1990s when members of the Isle Brevelle/Cane River Creole community in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana, discovered that their cultural heritage and social landscape had become the centerpiece of a newly established national park and heritage area. Through intense lobbying of politicians and the National Park Service, Cane River Creoles claimed ownership of their cultural identity and assumed a prominent role in developing interpretive plans for the park and heritage area. In this process, Creole people were called upon to answer questions of identity that few cultural communities are forced to confront. An outgrowth of this process was the publication, *"We Know Who We Are": An Ethnographic Overview of the Creole Community and Traditions of Isle Brevelle and Cane River, Louisiana*,¹ by anthropologist H. F. Gregory and Joseph Moran, Creole artist and scholar.

For the past decade, the Creole Heritage Center has served as a clearinghouse for information, a research facility, a genealogical archive, and a voice for Creole people throughout the world. In response to the controversy generated by Richman's essay, Janet Colson wrote *The New York Times* to assure readers that "Creole culture is very much alive and well."² A petition was also posted on the center's webpage (www.ipetitions.com/petition/creole/) so that visitors to the site could express their support for Creole heritage and identity.

A primary objective of the Creole Heritage Center is to assist educators in developing curricula, resources for K-12 teachers, and programs that help bring Creole culture into the classroom. The Center also works with publishers to insure that Creole heritage is included in Louisiana textbooks.³ In 2006, the Center spearheaded an effort to establish a Creole Studies concentration under the University College B.A., and a Creole Studies minor under History. This degree and minor represent the first multicultural degree offered at Northwestern State University.

Notes

1. Denver, Colo.: National Park Service, Denver Service Center, 1996.
2. Letters to the Editor, *The New York Times*, December 13, 2006. For links to Alan Richman's essay, Kim Severson's response, and Janet Colson's letter to the *New York Times*, see www.nsula.edu/creole/petition.asp.
3. Educational resources include *The Creole Coloring Book* with terms and glossary in the Creole French language and *A Creole Kitchen Re-creation*, developed by Creole food historian and cook Lillie Delphin and Janet Colson. Recent texts with information about Creole culture include Anne Campbell and Wilson A. Marston, *Louisiana: The History of an American State* (Atlanta, Ga.: Clairmont Press 1999), and *Louisiana Social Studies* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman, 2005). In 2005, the Creole Heritage Center coordinated presentations on Creole language, history, and cultural geography for the Louisiana Geography Education Alliance teachers' workshop.

and African American influences of an accordion and a rub board for rhythm. Included in this discussion on the influence of music is a discussion of the role that the foods gumbo and jambalaya play in the Creole culture. Gumbo is a traditional Louisiana dish, composed of seafood, chicken, okra and other vegetables.

After learning about the influences of Creole food and music, a discussion of the history of Creoles in Louisiana is conducted. Early in the history of Louisiana, during the period of slavery, not all African Americans were slaves.

African Americans who were free formed small communities. Residents of these communities considered themselves Creole because they were born in Louisiana instead of Africa or Europe. The book defines a Creole as an African French person born in the Louisiana colony, but this definition is contradicted by the discussion of white citizens of historical interest therein who were also identified as Creole.⁸ This apparent contradiction underscores the difficulty of defining culture, and the changing definitions of the word "Creole" through time.

By 1810, contrary to what Allan Richman could not find, New Orleans was home to over 10,000 Creoles. Many of these Creoles had immigrated to the United States from Haiti and demanded respect and power within Louisiana. Eventually, over the years, factions would form within Louisiana and fight for power. Tensions rose during the 1820s when Anglo Americans objected to the Creole plan for the state capital in New Orleans. A near riot was avoided, but the Creoles lost their push and the capital was built in Baton Rouge. The Creoles continued to grow and prosper, however, and it was they who created the tourist mecca for New Orleans: The French Quarter.

Besides Creole culture and history, eighth-grade students learn that it was a Creole of color who was at the heart of the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*. After the Civil War, many of the educated Creoles of color objected to segregation and the Jim Crow laws. Homer Plessy challenged a Louisiana law that required blacks to ride in a separate car on the train, and sued to have this law overturned. By 1896, the Supreme Court upheld the Louisiana law and established the separate-but-equal concept that would not be overturned until 1954.

Conclusion: Does it Matter?

Contrary to the impression of Allen Richman and others that Creoles are "a mythical race," the Creole culture and heritage is alive and well. Spanning the nation, with extensive communities in Louisiana, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Chicago, and Houston, Creole culture and heritage draws upon its European ancestry with pride, while also celebrating American Indian, African, Afro Caribe, or even Anglo American ancestry. Today, as in the past, Creole culture continues to bridge a racial divide to include people of varying ethnic ancestry.

The crossing of racial boundaries for Creoles draws upon various aspects

continued on page 304

Plessy v. Ferguson

Using the landmark Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) have students read the Plessy visual (John DeGesare, *Project Legal*, 1987) and discuss what they think “ancestors” means? Discuss with the students if they have ever been discriminated against because of the way they looked or acted. List examples of the discrimination discussed. Then ask the students, If Plessy had an ancestry of 7/8th white, why do you think the ticket taker demanded that Plessy move to the “colored only” train car? After the students discuss why the ticket taker acted the way he did, challenge the students to think about the following separate but equal situations:

1. A man and a woman apply for the same job. What do you think the employer needs to do to ensure equal treatment of both applicants?
2. Two students enter school, one is in a wheelchair and the other is not. Both have to go to their class on the second floor. What do you think the school needs to do to treat both students equally?
3. Two middle school students, of different races go to the same school and are the same age. What do you think the school should do to treat both students equally?

Creole Cultural Influence

Creole culture influenced music, dance, and crafts in Louisiana, and as the Creole culture spread, through diffusion, these influences can be found throughout the United States. Have students brainstorm what kinds of music they think of when they think of Louisiana. (Record correct answers, including gospel, blues, Cajun, zydeco, jazz, country, and folk music.) Have the students brainstorm music that they can think of. (Record the answers, which may include folk songs like “Skip to M’Lou” or “Oh Suzanna.”)

Teachers at the secondary level might have their students consider the following: What is the appeal of each of the different kinds of music listed by students? Where in Louisiana are they most likely to be popular? Does this tell students anything about the social background of the musicians and fans of this kind of music? How has music from Louisiana spread throughout the United States and the world? And, how has the Internet helped or hindered the sharing of music in today’s society? Does having Creole music on the Internet diffuse or enhance the Creole culture or any other culture?

Elementary teachers can explain that some of the musical instruments used included the mouth box (harmonica), cigar box fiddle, and the vest washboard or *frottoir*. While some of

these instruments may be difficult to purchase for the classroom, the students can create some of these instruments with everyday objects. To create the frottoir take file folders and fold them back and forth in little sections creating the ‘washboard’ effect. Students can play the frottoir with either plastic or metal spoons. Another instrument that can be created and used is a “shaker.” The shaker is a paper towel tube, with some lima beans inside with cellophane covering the ends. To complete the musical instruments for the classroom, have the students rub together or tap together rhythm sticks. These instruments played a key role in dances such as the waltz, two step, or a Saturday night get together where families would gather for food, music and fun.



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