

One Drop Myth

Creole identity beyond the racial binary

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The Gulf Coast was a melting pot before the rest of what became the United States even pondered the concept.¹ While certainly not a raceless place, the region's peculiar French and Spanish origins included an openness to miscegenation and the development of a rainbow of skin colors and complexions. When President Jefferson, the man who first put to ink the philosophies behind the hierarchical racial binary,² sent William Claiborne to govern his new Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the governor found that the prevailing American ideas about racial hierarchy would be difficult to impose on such a strange place. In Louisiana he confronted Creole people, referred to by France's Code Noir as "*gens de couleur libres*," who occupied a place in between the races Claiborne was familiar with in his native Virginia.³ These Creoles accessed privileges Claiborne associated with whites, such as land ownership, private education, and standing in the business community.⁴ They were active citizens who led vibrant community groups and churches. Many of them owned slaves and operated sugar plantations in the bayous surrounding the port and proved to be formidable political obstacles to Claiborne's plans of Americanization.

Creole people of color, who occupied this unique rung of society, would be quick to remind the hurried Claiborne and the other American entrepreneurs rushing to secure their foothold in the region, that they were not "black" or "yellow" or "mulatto." They rejected the calculus that yielded American terms like "octaroon" and "quadroon." Creoles were creole, plain and simple, and they expected the respect their station entitled them to. When the predominant American racial binary was



Self-identified 'Creole' girls from Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana.

forced onto the Gulf Coast, it never seemed to fit. Creoles reacted to this imposition in a variety of ways: some through passing, others by simply rejecting it. The influence Creoles had in shaping the region's society created a complex counterpoint unique to the Gulf through the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Jim Crow era which followed. These complications baffled Americans sent to organize the unruly region. Claiborne's troubles with race were mirrored in Reconstruction by the bullish governance of Generals Benjamin Butler and Nathaniel Banks, who were confronted by Creoles resistant to the imposition of American racial ideas.⁵ As Jim Crow cast its ugly shadow into the Deep South, the Gulf Coast proved the last hold-outs against its imposition and the first place to strike out against strict racial segregation.

This is why Tremé shoemaker Homer Plessy joined the activist Comité des Citoyens and it is why he sat on the white portion of the streetcar in protest.

¹ The phrase "Gulf Coast" refers herein to the region anchored by the ports of New Orleans and Mobile that have a cultural influence unique from the rest of the American South, due to their French and Spanish colonial origins. This region geographically includes most of Louisiana stretching northwest to Natchitoches and south along the Sabine, across the Mississippi Valley from Natchez, MS, south and then east across the coast to Mobile Bay in Alabama. Some scholars such as Jane Landers extend this region to include the Florida Panhandle.

² I am referring here to Thomas Jefferson's description of predominant racial hierarchies and opinions offered by his "Notes on the State of Virginia," 1787. It is worth noting Jefferson wrote this about the same time he infamously carried his mixed-race slave Sally Hemmings off to France.

³ Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told* (NY: Basic, 2014), 50-5.

⁴ John Blassingame, *Black New Orleans* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1973), 155.

⁵ Joseph Logsdon & Caryn Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans," from Hirsch & Logsdon, eds., *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1992), 223.

Plessy, in his rejection of the blackness imposed on him by Americanization and its “one-drop” rule, did what many Creoles did.⁶ By holding fast to their unique mixed racial identity, their very existence stood as a challenge to the unforgiving Jim Crow white supremacist binary. Creoles, by insisting on their Creole-ness, tapped into a long Creole protest tradition.⁷ They ended up resisting one drop rules, school segregation, and voting restrictions. They became civil rights trailblazers, not necessarily to lift up African Americans and promote equality or for other altruistic purposes; but to hedge their own privilege.⁸ In doing so, they nudged the nation toward ideas of post-racialism long before the concept found proponents outside of the Gulf Coast.

Creoles and the roots of a deviant American racial binary.

Very few regions in America celebrate history as much as the Gulf Coast. From its Mardi Gras celebrations, distinctive musical traditions, and unique cuisine; the region seems an exotic and celebrated exception to the American story. For the historian interested in the vital field of American race relations, this might disqualify it as a place worth studying, as such studies would be limited in their scope and application to other regions. The swamps surrounding New Orleans could serve only as a peculiar exception to the rule of the racial binary that dominated American racial thought since the 19th century. When historians, following Bernard Bailyn’s lead in the 1980s, zoomed out and began seriously looking at a super-national “Atlantic World,” the Gulf Coast’s “peculiar” tripartite racial hierarchy looked less the useless exception and more the rule. As Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon put it, the region should be looked at “not as an exceptional case to be ignored but as a significant counterpoint against which to measure the rest of a *deviant* North America.”⁹

The historian most responsible for this widening of the lens, and the most cited in the sub-

field of Creole studies, is activist Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, who since 1971, has studied Creole culture in global context. Her early work on slavery in Cuba and Haiti gave her later 1992 contribution to the field of Creole studies, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, a global perspective.¹⁰ From this global point of view, Midlo Hall working through colonial court and genealogical records in America and Spain, was able to construct the earliest history of the *gens de couleur libres* and their transition from African slavery to freedom.¹¹ From the very beginnings European hegemony in the Gulf region was unsettled. Amerinds of the Natchez and Chickasaw nations worked alongside imported Africans as slaves in the fledgling, distant French colony along the lower Mississippi. Alliances shifted frequently during the earliest years, with some blacks joining the Natchez in revolts against French rule and others maintaining ties with the French.¹² Some Africans found themselves linked to local Amerind groups who gave them safe harbor when they adopted run-aways. Some were linked through sex and familiar relations to their white neighbors, who were despised by elite whites and most of whom were sent to the far-flung post as punishment for crimes in France. Midlo Hall finds accounts in the records of the elites preferring to hire Africans because, as one of them put it, it is “impossible to use white men or women because of their laziness as well as their licentiousness.”¹³ In the earliest records of New Orleans, blacks served as constables, executioners, and soldiers alongside whites. Wendy Ann Gaudin summarized Midlo Hall’s argument when she wrote, “To be a *free French* or *free black* or *free person of color* in colonial Louisiana may not have signified three vastly different experiences.”¹⁴ Race did not define one’s place in the hierarchy of the French Gulf. People were more defined by their individual situations.

Facing frequent crises brought about by Indian wars and the harsh natural environment, Midlo Hall argues racial hierarchies were always more a matter of

⁶ Keith Medley, *We as Freeman: Plessy v. Fergusson*. (NY: Penguin, 2012).

⁷ Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1997).

⁸ G. Reginald Daniel, *More than Black: Multi-racial Identity and the New Racial Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 5.

⁹ Arnold Hirsch & Joseph Logsdon, eds, *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1992), 189.

¹⁰ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Social Control in Slave Plantation Societies: A Comparison of St. Domingue and Cuba* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1971); and *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the 18th Century*, (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 1992).

¹¹ Taking a cue from the famous database of slave ships compiled by David Eltis, decades of Midlo Hall’s research on Louisiana slavery is available online at www.ibiblio.org/laslave

¹² Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 100-1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁴ Wendy Ann Gaudin, *Autocrats and All Saints: Migration, Memory, and Modern Creole identities*. Ph.D. Diss, (New York University, 2005), 6.

principle than of practice.¹⁵ Midlo Hall's Louisiana was "an extremely fluid society where racial hierarchy was ill-defined and hard to enforce."¹⁶ This is not to say Europeans did not attempt to control racial hierarchy, which the Spanish attempted to impose after the 1795 Pointe Coupee Insurrection, the colony's first racially linked crisis in the colony.¹⁷ Even before Spanish occupation, which began in 1763, the French Code Noir imposed strict racial boundaries, but miscegenation and even mixed race marriages continued despite these laws imposed from outside. This resistance to outside racial laws continued to be a defining characteristic of Gulf Coast Creole political culture through the 20th century.

Emancipation records collected by Midlo Hall showed patterns that uncover the roots of the unique tripartite racial hierarchy. Children of French masters and their Creole slaves were expected to be freed as children. While Creole women were able to attain manumission through litigation or purchase by family members, the most common path to freedom was "through sexual relations with white men."¹⁸ Many gained more than freedom, but also inherited property and the status that accompanied it from their white fathers and lovers.¹⁹ Many Creole woman were plagued by the immorality that accompanied the Gulf tradition of concubinage called *plaçage*, but as Adelaide Mariotte of Natchitoches explained to her grandchildren, she "had disgraced herself to uplift her race."²⁰ As the population of mixed-race people continued to rise, more of them found themselves outside of bondage and as what the Code Noir defined as *gens de couleur libres*.²¹

While racial identity proved important, it was not the simple binary that developed in the English colonies. The same processes Midlo Hall described in her studies of Louisiana were outlined in her studies

of French St. Domingue and Spanish Cuba. Jane Landers' study of Spanish Florida shows a similar situation that leads to a tripartite racial society.²² In Landers' Florida like Midlo Hall's Louisiana, the necessities of labor shortages, war, and nature trumped Spanish codes of racial hierarchy. What Florida was left with was an Afro-Floridian and mixed-race society far more complex than their black neighbors to the north in the English Carolinas who were entrenched in racially based slavery. Landers and Midlo Hall see Creole society emerging in a slavery system that resembles that of other "Latin" colonies. Creole society is not so unique as it is a normal phenomenon. Echoing some of the conclusions of Carl Degler's comparative study of slavery in the Americas, what is *not* normal is the type of binary that developed in the English colonies that became the United States.²³ As Degler wrote, "No such place is reserved for the so-called mixed blood in the United States; a person is either a black or a white."²⁴

Failed attempts at the imposition of the American binary on Creoles.

While the idea of tripartite racial hierarchy was not unique to the Americas, it was strange to the United States. After Claiborne's clumsy attempts to Americanize the European-facing, potentially Bonapartist Creole, made American by the Louisiana Purchase, he was forced to accept their demands to be included in decision-making along with whites and Americans. What Claiborne feared most, was another rebellion like the infamous 1795 rebellion at Pointe Coupee upriver from New Orleans. During the short period of Spanish occupation between 1763 and 1800,

¹⁵ Ibid., 160. Winthrop Jordan, in his Dec. 1993, *Journal of American History* review wrote that Midlo Hall's depiction of colonial Louisiana's crises "makes the history of Jamestown appear a well-ordered parade."

¹⁶ Midlo-Hall, 128.

¹⁷ Ibid., 238-74.

¹⁸ Ibid., 273-4. The role of Creole women in keeping families together and in attaining freedom is merely referred to by Midlo Hall and others. A gendered study of Creole history could be an invaluable addition to the subject.

¹⁹ Virginia Meacham Gould, "A Chaos of Iniquity and Discord: Slave and Free Women of Color in the Spanish Ports of New Orleans, Mobile, and Pensacola," from Catherine Clinton & Michelle Gillespie, eds., *The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 232.

²⁰ Gary Mills, *The Forgotten People: Cane River Creoles of Color* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1977), 158.

²¹ The population of *gens couleur libres* is shown to increase by Census records, per the research of Dominguez, Gould, Midlo Hall, and Cossé Bell.

²² Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana: U of IL Press, 1999).

²³ Carl Degler, *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1971) Also see Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1959) and Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (Boston: Beacon, 1947).

²⁴ Degler, 107.

colonial officials like the Baron de Carondelet were just as confused about Creole loyalties as Claiborne, and this confusion built up as racial tensions escalated after the French Revolution and the Haitian slave revolts.²⁵

Carondelet's reaction was the same as Claiborne's: that is, to acquiesce to the demands of the Creole population in fear that they might side with slaves in a rehashing of the Haitian revolution. For the Spanish governor the Creole might also act as a wedge against planters who were upset with his new slave laws, meant to mollify slave complaints about mistreatment.²⁶ Fear of Jacobin-influenced black slave uprisings grew among whites, which included a large minority of white refugees from Haiti. The position of the Creole as a middle racial caste, strange as it was to American sensibilities, was accepted by Claiborne as a solution to soothe racial tensions and to build up a loyal constituency.

Historians like Brook Thomas and Gary Mills argue that the indeterminism of Creole racial identity ended up elevating the *gens de couleur libres* as a unique caste in the Louisiana racial hierarchy.²⁷ Even though Louisiana was being absorbed into the developing and alien American political and cultural tradition so averse to such a tri-racial caste system, Creoles were able to maintain their separate status from blacks. As Albion Tourgée famously argued on behalf of Plessy in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, the inclusion in this racial caste was a form of property that was potentially constitutionally protected. Tourgée saw racial identity as “the master-key that unlocks the golden door of opportunity.”²⁸

Creoles of color jealously guarded their separate identity from blacks from attempts at Americanization. As Gary Mills notes in *The Forgotten People*, his study of the Cane River Creole colony in northwest Louisiana, “those who lost the most in the conflict [that is, the imposition of the racial binary] were members of the third caste.” Mills notes that free blacks were rounded up and imprisoned in Maryland as early as 1715 and not allowed to even enter Virginia after 1793. While free blacks were

banned from owning firearms in Virginia, Creoles in Louisiana were encouraged to form militias.²⁹ It is true that Creoles in the Gulf were spared the brunt of the humiliation suffered by other free people of color and managed to secure a sense of citizenship. In practice they never

were quite equal. Racial purity was always an issue for Creoles and certain steps were taken by authorities to differentiate Creoles who might appear “white” from whites.³⁰ For instance, in an effort to curb miscegenation, the Louisiana Civil Code ordered Creole women to mark themselves by wearing Afro-inspired turbans called *tignons*.³¹ Creoles were forced to walk a tenuous line between black and white, a line that was transformed by the Civil War and the emancipation of nearly 380,000 black slaves in Louisiana.³² Mills argues that these events would eventually lead to their disintegration as a political body and make them “the forgotten people.”

The rise and fall of radical republican Creoles.

Caryn Cossé Bell has written extensively on this interplay between culture, society, and politics in the statewide Louisiana context. Her 1997 work *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition* picks up where Midlo Hall leaves off: at the height of Reconstruction racial tensions in New Orleans during Reconstruction.³³ Cossé Bell uses her monograph to dispute historians' claims that Creoles were conservative protectors of their own prestige and privilege, but were, in fact radicals bent on seeing the republican ideals of the French and American



Creole woman wearing tignon.

²⁵ Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1997), 28-9.

²⁶ Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 376-7.

²⁷ Gary Mills, *The Forgotten People: Cane River Creoles of Color*. (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1977).

²⁸ Brook Thomas, *Plessy v. Ferguson: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford, 1997), 30.

²⁹ Mills, 194-5, 198.

³⁰ Gould, 237.

³¹ Virginia Dominguez, *White by Definition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1986), 25.

³² U.S. Census, 1860.

³³ Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1997).

Revolutions come to full fruition.³⁴ Much of her thesis rests on the Radical Republican Constitution of 1868, in which Creole organizers were able to secure the voting rights that were taken away by the state's 1864 Constitution, one which imposed a racial binary upon the state by granting voting rights to whites and not to "colored" people.³⁵ Cossé Bell, despite her efforts to do the opposite, shows an empowered and politically active Creole elite dedicated to the securing of civil rights for their caste. If freed blacks in Louisiana benefitted from Creole political gains, it was a happy byproduct of republicanism, and was of little consequence to Republican Creoles.

Previous to the Civil War, as pressures mounted between the North and South, Creoles experienced a clampdown on the civil rights guaranteed by the Louisiana Civil Code since 1795.³⁶ Echoing the concerns of the Baron de Carondelet who was reacting to Pointe Coupee slave insurrection and Claiborne who worried about a local bubbling-up of the Haitian uprising, white Americans following the 1831 Nat Turner Rebellion in Virginia suspected Creoles of holding anti-slavery sentiments.³⁷ Instead of currying favor with Creoles as Carondelet and Claiborne did, American planters clamped down on their Creole neighbors and treated them with great scrutiny. The twenty years preceding the Civil War saw a breakdown in the status of the "middle caste." Cossé Bell guides the reader through dozens of such restrictions passed by the Louisiana legislature. Creoles were facing restrictions on their participation in the Catholic Church, the banishment of their fraternities, and restrictions on their right to own or exchange property.³⁸ As if these laws weren't enough of a stress on the Creole community, the city of New Orleans was experiencing immigration and Creoles found themselves competing with newcomer white Germans and Irish in the job market.³⁹ White fear of Creole "aggressions" fueled physical violence at times and legal repression from the even the Louisiana

Supreme Court, where one justice concluded that "no colored person can be a citizen."⁴⁰

Cossé Bell turns her attention to the diaspora that repression created. While most fled to the North, some turned to France where they were influenced by the Romanticism of French socialists like the mixed race Alexandre Dumas. They also witnessed a French republic that ended slavery across the empire and granted full franchise to all freed blacks.⁴¹ These Creole leaders returned doubly dedicated to radical causes and unwilling "to accept an inferior status in their native land."⁴²

As Union troops rolled into New Orleans, many of these disaffected Creoles returned ready to claim even more than the status of second class citizens which they had held since colonial era, but to claim "*egalité*" in the spirit of republican France. Many who made up this French leaning intelligentsia ended up contributing to a French language radical newspaper, *L'Union*. The paper, edited by Paul Trévigne, called on its Creole readers to abandon the idea of gradual emancipation and referred to slavery as "a cursed demon."⁴³ François Boisdoré, a great Creole orator, wrote in *L'Union* that free blacks should rise up in the spirit of the French Revolution and demand liberty. He concluded that Creoles should "expel from our hearts all caste hatred as a gardener skillfully uproots from his garden the tree whose fruit is a deep going poison."⁴⁴

The Creole leaders who were part of *L'Union* advocated for Creoles and all people of color to volunteer for the Union army. Their efforts were well received by General Butler who gladly organized several companies of free blacks from his New Orleans base.⁴⁵ Cossé Bell writes that Creoles who joined the Confederate Native Guard did so under duress and threats to life and property, but fails to mention that much of that property was enslaved

³⁴ Cossé Bell, *Revolution...*, 6-7.

³⁵ The 1864 Constitution *did* grant suffrage to "colored" veterans of the Civil War.

³⁶ Cossé Bell, *Revolution...*, 81.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 81-4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴¹ Logsdon and Cossé Bell, 209.

⁴² Cossé Bell, *Revolution...*, 227.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 231.

human beings.⁴⁶ General Nathaniel Banks, who took over Butler's command in late 1862 asked the Creole officers to resign their commissions, in an effort to curb white resentment of mulatto in the military. White soldiers were upset by Creole officers' "arrogance and self-assertion."⁴⁷

Creole supporters of *L'Union* also organized political efforts to see equality guaranteed by the proposed Constitution by creating the Union Association, regardless of race. As they met resistance, they pulled back their demands for racial equality and suffrage for all people, regardless of color, and instead asked for suffrage for those who were free in the antebellum period. Cossé Bell argues that historians who see this as the sell-out of a "self-serving, caste conscious elite" tend to ignore pragmatic political decisions made by Creole leaders.⁴⁸

Reacting to ardent calls for equality by the Creole press, now centered on the bi-lingual reincarnation of *L'Union* called the *New Orleans Tribune*, William Lloyd Garrison wrote, "When was it ever known that liberation from bondage was accompanied by a recognition of political equality?" Creole response was outrage that Garrison would fail to see them citizens as they always had been, but instead as "a vulnerable mass of property-less, uneducated former slaves."⁴⁹ While the Creole intelligentsia worked unquestionably for the rights of all "oppressed, whether black, yellow, or white," when they found themselves lumped in with freedmen, they chafed.

Cossé Bell works hard to dispute claims like that of John Blassingame who in his seminal *Black New Orleans* paints different picture of the men who surrounded *L'Union* and the *Tribune*. Blassingame sees the Creole intelligentsia less as republican patriots and more as opportunist paternalists. If there was to be a black body politic, Creoles "felt their education entitled them to a natural position of leadership within the Negro community."⁵⁰ As soon as Creoles found the political pressure against universal suffrage insurmountable, they abandoned black

freedmen as their compatriots and instead sought to gain whatever rights they could to re-establish themselves as a second caste.

The haughty language of inclusion gave way to survival, especially as Reconstruction drew to a close. White Leaguers and humiliated Confederates took to the streets fighting black Unionists as Democratic politicians shredded the inclusive 1868 Constitution, the greatest achievement of Cossé Bell's heroes.⁵¹ The hope of radical Creoles was replaced with a new Constitution in 1879, restricting Creole voting rights and setting the stage of Jim Crow's entry into Louisiana. The *New Orleans Bulletin* in 1874 on its front page declared, "The white race rules the world, the white race rules America, and the white race will rule Louisiana."⁵² Segregation and the binary that accompanied it exacerbated the growing disunity between freed blacks and Creoles of color, who not only were different in education and property, but also in language and religion.⁵³

Despite the efforts of Cossé Bell's Creole heroes to first eradicate all forms of legal prejudice, the political will to see the aims of the 1868 Constitution through did not exist. Eventually President Grant called for "peace at any cost," in response to the political turmoil in which the Reconstructed South was embroiled. Even P.B.S. Pinchback, the mixed-race politician sent to the Senate with the support of Creole radicals gave into pressure and publicly accepted segregation of schools and called for blacks to give up questioning "this order of things." Creole leaders like Rudolph Desdunes chafed at Pinchback's accommodationism as betrayal. Desdunes accounted for the political move by his former ally as one "of American reasoning" as opposed to virtuous French ideas.⁵⁴

After the Supreme Court overturned most of the Radical civil rights laws in 1883, the states began to pass more discriminatory laws. The minds of whites were hardened by war and political instability. To them it was a simple matter: Creoles of color and freed blacks were simply "colored." Virginia Dominguez, unlike Cossé Bell, saw little good for

⁴⁶ Ibid., 232.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 239.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 251.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 253.

⁵⁰ Blassingame, 153.

⁵¹ Cossé Bell, *Revolution...*, 278-280.

⁵² Medley, 86.

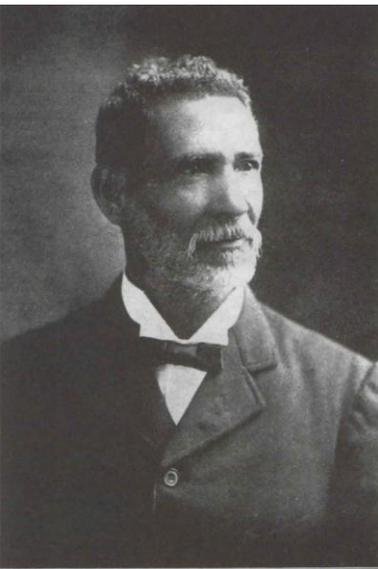
⁵³ Blassingame, 22.

⁵⁴ Logsdon and Cossé Bell, 252.

Creoles in the 1860's, a period she calls a "disaster."⁵⁵ Even so, Creoles did not submit to the racial binary imposed on their culture from outside forces. Creole radicals, led by Desdunes, fought tooth and nail every law in the courts.

The Creole shoemaker Homer Plessy, who was born in the midst of the Civil War, would join Comité des Citoyens, a group led by many of the same elites who fought for the franchise during the 1860s. Plessy was inspired by the columns of Creole advocate Rudolph Desdunes, who called the fight against Jim Crow "a guerre a mort."⁵⁶ Plessy himself was no Desdunes, but what he did provide was the ability to "pass" for white. Keith Medley wrote that most of the Comité's members "were so light-skinned they could have easily disappear into white society."⁵⁷ The Comité intended to show just how tenuous and ambiguous racial identification was.

Some black leaders worried that the case was not about changing Jim Crow for the majority of those afflicted by it, but more about maintaining the rights Plessy's light Creole skin and appearance previously afforded him.⁵⁸ In fact, part of Albion Tourgée's



Rudolph Desdunes

argument was that Plessy suffered loss when conductors denied him the privilege due to someone who appeared to be a white man.⁵⁹ This became a non-issue when Justice Brown declared that the Plessy suffered no loss because he was *not* white, but in fact "colored." The standard would become "a preponderance of

blood," and was to be determined state by state. When they lost the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, the Comité ceased to meet and Desdunes stopped publishing his *Crusader* newspaper because it was "fruitless" and "decidedly dangerous."⁶⁰ Reflecting on the events of his life in his history of the Creole people, Desdunes wrote that "absolute submission augments the oppressor's power."⁶¹

Jim Crow and the incognito, insular Creole community.

The work of sociologists like Virginia Dominguez and ethnographers like Muriel Crespi show that there would be a splitting apart of the Creole people during this post-*Plessy* period which saw the American racial binary take root even in the ever-exceptional Gulf Coast.⁶² Xavier's Wendy Ann Gaudin, whose research focuses on Creole self-identification, and the University of New Orleans' Arnold R. Hirsch are two of the few historians studying Gulf Coast Creoles in the 20th century. Instead of adopting Mills' view that the failures of Creoles to maintain the tripartite hierarchy made them an obsolete, "forgotten" people; Hirsch and Gaudin see *Plessy* more as a turning point. For them *Plessy* is not the end of Creole people. Jim Crow was a parting of the ways, in a sense. Two general strategies for dealing with the imposition of the racial binary were adopted by most Creoles.

Gaudin explains that Creoles split into two camps, aligned with the binary. As Jim Crow intensified and the One Drop Rule became law, some Creoles of color identified with blacks and merged nearly indistinguishable into the black community.⁶³ This path was chosen because of familiar relations many Creoles had with blacks, while others chose it because as "colored" people, they faced the same legal status and obstacles under Jim Crow as blacks. No longer did these "black Creoles" consider themselves educated, civilizing forces over blacks. They continued to fight directly against segregation in the

⁵⁵ Dominguez, 132.

⁵⁶ Medley, 114.

⁵⁷ Medley, 126.

⁵⁸ Mark Golub, "Plessy as 'Passing': Judicial Responses to Ambiguously Raced Bodies in *Plessy v. Ferguson*," *Law and Society Review* 39, no. 3 (Sept., 2005), 571.

⁵⁹ Thomas, 30.

⁶⁰ Logsdon and Cossé Bell, 259.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁶² Muriel Crespi, "A Brief Ethnography of Magnolia Plantation: Planning for Cane River Creole National Historical Park," Paper 96 (Washington: NPS Publications and Papers, 2004).

⁶³ Gaudin, 15.

courts, but did so as disaffected black persons. Most notable of this tradition was NAACP lawyer A.P. Tureaud who, while a Creole, overtly and purposely identified with the black community of New Orleans and who continued the radical tradition inherited from Desdunes.⁶⁴

Another group, the one upon which Gaudin focuses her studies, held fast to their unique Creole identity through fraternal organizations, neighborhoods, and common churches. This second group, Gaudin explains, “rejoiced in their separation from African Americans” and “cultivated various manifestations of their whiteness” including “anti-black racism.”⁶⁵ The choice of these “Creole separatists,” Gaudin argues stemmed often from a want to maintain business or familiar relations with whites, fear of white supremacist violence, and because many never identified with their African heritage in the first place.⁶⁶ The separatist “white” Creoles maintained a protective hedge with their racial identification with whites, even if this identification proved shaky. Separatists scorned the use of the word “Creole” as a source of identity by their “black” neighbors, seeing black Creoles as “opportunists... pilfering a term they knew, as colored persons, did not refer to them but to white (and privileged) persons.”⁶⁷

But the hundreds of interviews upon which Gaudin bases her research, does not present these Creole separatists as completely ignorant of their Creole identities. The Creole divide of the 20th century was not the end of the Creoles. They were still a distinct people, apart from others. Unlike their white Anglo neighbors, they identified with the Catholic Church and preferred their children to court and marry within the Creole community.⁶⁸ They carried with them a moral sense of moral superiority when compared to their Anglo white counterparts. So while they may have participating in what Gaudin calls “Bright Flight,” to escape the worst of Jim Crow, they never completely self-identified with the Anglo whites.⁶⁹

This Creole divide along the binary lines was not complete and not a life sentence. Creole people went back and forth within their lifetimes, passing from white to “colored” and back again depending on their situations. Of the many stories Gaudin shares, one that most clearly illustrates the motivation behind passing in the Creole community was that of “Miss Merc,” who pointed at a photo of her dead, black Creole husband on the wall and explained that when she found herself a widow she also found it best to pass. “He died and left me to raise my girls, so I went to the other side ‘cause I made more money that way,” Miss Merc explained to Gaudin.⁷⁰

Passing was so frequent that the Creoles used the term *passablanc* to describe people who “crossed over.”⁷¹ Incidents of passing shows that Creoles were also quite “cognizant of what was expected of them as colored citizens.” Their response to their role in the binary as “colored” people was to, as Gaudin puts it, “completely disregard it.”⁷² In doing so, they defied the “one drop” rule that was so critical to maintaining the boundaries of the racial binary, while avoiding dangerous confrontation with the pervasive Jim Crow. Dominguez notes that “the successful *passablanc* breeds both jealousy and pride in the community he leaves behind.” Instead of seeing individuals as traitors, the Jim Crow system was blamed by Creoles for the parting. So Creole families who identified as “black” presented Dominguez with “skewed” genealogies in attempts to protect the identities of those branches of the family tree that passed. Sometimes this process was painful as it required complete separation from loved ones.⁷³

Racial thinking seeped into the Creole community, as Gaudin’s research uncovers frequent incidences of colorism. Darker skinned Creoles refused to associate with lighter skinned Creoles, and vice versa. Association with the wrong people could out *passablanc*. Gaudin’s subjects speak of a “reverence for lightness of skin, ambiguity of race, superiority over ‘other Negroes,’ and likeness with

⁶⁴ Arnold Hirsch, “Simply a Matter of Black and White: The Transformation of Race and Politics in 20th Century New Orleans,” from Hirsch and Logsdon, eds. *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 262-319.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 107, 269-271.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 139-140.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 154.

⁷³ Dominguez, 161.

whites.”⁷⁴ Appearances were all too important, especially for Creoles attempting to access white privilege. Gaudin’s subjects comment frequently on “olive skin,” nose shapes, and “good hair.”⁷⁵ Aside from the infamous paper bag tests, Creoles reported the use of a “comb test” to enter Creole community dances. If a comb could easily pass through a person’s hair, they were deemed to have “good hair” and could enter dance halls.⁷⁶ These types of conversations and the diction used by participants, Gaudin explains, were the product of gossiping *within* the community. There was a “code of silence” when interacting with outsiders.⁷⁷ This “code of silence” might be the reason Creole history is so hard to track after the *Plessy* decision so fundamentally transformed the racial landscape in the Gulf Coast.

There was no need to overturn Jim Crow, Gaudin argues, since Creoles were able to manipulate the weaknesses of the laws based on racial binary. Creoles suffered little loss compared to darker skinned African Americans, as long as they passed “the eye test.”⁷⁸ Their frequent passing broke down the effectiveness of the Jim Crow system in Louisiana in practice. It seems oxymoronic, but it is true to say that Creole separatists simultaneously resisted and reinforced the color line. So while some might paint these people as opportunists acting in their own self-interest, these people of un-American origin also inadvertently began the process of chipping away at American racial concepts. As one of Gaudin’s informants proudly told her, “Them white folks didn’t know that we was all around them.”⁷⁹ Gary Mills concluded that the Creole were “forgotten people” and it seems being forgotten proved a boon in the era of segregation. Using the tools of ethnography and anthropology, Gaudin shows, the seemingly dead tradition of Creole resistance that Cossé Bell identified in her works was alive and pulsing just under the surface throughout the early 20th century.

The pioneering figure using this multi-disciplinary approach to uncover Creole resistance is

the much-cited Virginia Dominguez of the University of Illinois’ anthropology department.⁸⁰ Her first work *White by Definition* was as adored by sociologists and anthropologists as it was maligned by historians.⁸¹ Still, it opened the door into the hidden world of the Creole for later researchers like Wendy Gaudin by showing how the tools of anthropologists can create a framework for understanding the incognito sub-altern group. Dominguez reconstructed genealogies, conducted interviews, and dove deep into post-*Plessy* legal challenges to the racial binary.

Dominguez shows a picture of the Creole from the outside, as Gaudin takes a more inside look. Dominguez studies not only the Creoles who descend from the *gens de couleur*, but also those who identify as “Creole” who descend from white French origins. The binary and its power was seen in the battle these white Creoles waged against Creoles of color. Anglos who knew of famous Creoles of color like Desdunes and Plessy, came to associate the Creole identity with that of “colored” people. Anglos assumed that even their white French Creole neighbors had “a touch of the tarbrush” in their family trees.⁸² Arguments in local newspapers and in pamphlets over ownership of the term “Creole” popped up and became quite common after the *Plessy* case, as whites tried to assert their place at the top of the hierarchy. White Creoles and Creoles of color seemed happy to share their identity before the imposition of the binary because nothing like this appears in the literature before Reconstruction.⁸³ Before Reconstruction, the “others” were foreign Anglo-Americans. Race was not a point of divergence as it later became under the power of the “One Drop Rule.” Just as the debate concluded with white Creoles successfully attaining a place among Anglo whites in the polarized racial hierarchy, it seems Gaudin’s Creole schism takes place.

Dominguez takes the story of the Creoles of color into the Civil Rights era and presents a group continuing to defy racial classification. Her informants refused to fully participate in the civil rights

⁷⁴ Gaudin, 140.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 141, 143.

⁷⁶ Dominguez, 164-5.

⁷⁷ Gaudin, 140-2.

⁷⁸ “Eye test” was a term used frequently by the *passablanc*, notable on Gaudin, 145.

⁷⁹ Gaudin, 271.

⁸⁰ Dominguez served as President of the American Anthropological Association from 2009 to 2011.

⁸¹ Most notable among her detractors was David Rankin who complained about her frequent historical errors and citation problems. David Rankin, “Review: White by Definition,” *Journal of American History* 74, no. 2 (Sept., 1987), p. 531.

⁸² Dominguez, 141.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 142.

movement and continue to use anachronistic terms like “colored” well into the 1980s since they were uncomfortable with “black” or “African-American.” As Dominguez explained, “To be ‘colored’ was to have *some* color, to carry some amount of Negro blood in their bodies; to be black... is to have *only* Negro blood;” or as one Cane River Creole interviewee crassly put it, to be black is “to come straight out of the jungles of Africa.”⁸⁴ Many informants denied the existence of “Creoles of color” altogether.⁸⁵ They continued to call marriages between blacks and Creoles “mixed marriages,” although they hid uncouth racial objections and instead focused their objections on class, religious, and educational differences.⁸⁶

Creole contributions to Critical Mixed Race Studies

The identity crisis of the Creole people did not go away with the slow death of Jim Crow in the 1950’s but only seemed to grow more complex as Creoles continued to dismiss that they were African Americans. As prejudice, redlining, and arguments over bussing and welfare continued to draw distinctions between blacks and whites, Creoles continued to walk the fine line between black and white, leaning as much as possible toward privileges they associated with their status as middle class people. As recently as 1982, Creoles were going to Louisiana courts to have themselves declared white, even if no legal privilege was then attached to the racial status.⁸⁷

Their complex history and ambiguous appearance made them hard to categorize and frustrated the aims of segregationists and white supremacists. The racially ambiguous Creole are seized upon by critical mixed race studies experts like G. Reginald Daniel who sees these mixed race people on the racial frontiers as pioneers. Creoles by their ambiguous identity effectively resisted Jim Crow’s “one drop” rule at a time when it proved impossible to overcome by other African Americans. Like Gaudin and Dominguez, Daniel credits these ambiguously

raced Creole with “breaking” Jim Crow, even if they never aimed to dismantle the racial hierarchy.⁸⁸ Merely by denying the power of the binary, they were able to find the loose threads in the curtain that separated black from white in America, and began the process of tearing it down.

Daniel sees further racial complication as the key to creating a post-racial and color-blind society, but his opponents in the field like Minka Makalani are not as impressed with this complication as a path to the end of racism and the promotion of a truly color-blind and post-racial society and instead see multi-racial identity like that of the Creole as detrimental to righting the oppression of African Americans. Makalani argues that instead of breaking down barriers, such an identity would lead to Gaudin’s “Bright Flight,” and would serve only to rationalize racism and isolate blacks.⁸⁹ The history of Creole identity in American history can be implemented by both Daniel and Makalani. Daniel sees Creoles tearing apart Jim Crow by blatantly ignoring it, but Makalani sees a group dedicated to racial hierarchy and that actually harbored anti-black racism in their struggle to be counted as a people apart from blacks.

Mixed-race politician and *L’Union* friend P.B.S. Pinchback called for color-blindness all the way back during Reconstruction, “I am a citizen. We are proud of our manhood... We would not lighten or darken the tinge of our skins, nor change the current of our blood.”⁹⁰ The Creoles of color stood proud, perhaps even arrogantly proud, in the face of the incoming tide of American white supremacy. Their resistance to change or fade away into the imprecise racial binary, although constantly challenged, proved an impossible obstacle for segregationists to overcome. Eventually the mere existence of Creole passing back and forth between the seemingly impenetrable wall between white and “colored” was enough to show the chink in the armor of Jim Crow. Their success on the racial frontiers seems to counter reason.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 163.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 168.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 164.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 1-3.

⁸⁸ G. Reginald Daniel, *More Than Black? Multiracial Identity and the New Racial Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 5.

⁸⁹ Minkah Makalani, “Race, Theory, and Scholarship in the Biracial Project,” from Theodore Koditschek, Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, and Helen Neville, eds, *Race Struggles* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), pp. 138-153.

⁹⁰ Medley, 77.