

2012

Literary expressions of Creole identity in Alfred Mercier's L'Habitation Saint-Ybars and Johnelle

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LITERARY EXPRESSIONS OF CREOLE IDENTITY
IN ALFRED MERCIER'S *L'HABITATION SAINT-YBARS* AND *JOHNELLE*

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

In

The Department of French Studies

by
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May 2012

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Completing this dissertation would not have been possible were it not for the incredible people who helped, inspired, and motivated me at every step. I would especially like to acknowledge my chair, Dr. Jack Yeager, who has mentored me with kindness and patience from my first year as a graduate student. His guidance throughout this journey has helped me to grow as a scholar and develop my voice as a writer. Thank you so much, for everything. I would also like to acknowledge my committee members, Drs. Katharine Jensen, Rosemary Peters, and Pius Ngandu, for their support. Their interest in my work, advice, and ability to challenge me have been invaluable to my progress.

I must also recognize my friend and colleague, Dr. Julia Reineman, for her unrelenting encouragement and optimism. She has helped me over many hurdles of all kinds and supported me through the highs and the lows of the writing process.

A big “thank you” also goes out to my parents and the rest of my family, especially my sister, Maggie, for her camaraderie and Brian G. for his “tough love” and understanding.

Merci à toutes et à tous!

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines nineteenth-century Louisianan author Alfred Mercier's novels and their roles as emblems of Francophone Creole cultural identity. During the nineteenth century following the Louisiana Purchase and subsequent anglophone influx, the French-speaking Creole population faced a cultural upheaval. Unable to completely identify as either French or American, Creoles occupied an uncertain space. This study demonstrates that Alfred Mercier's works articulate a hybrid identity that is neither French nor American but rather a multicultural construct. The first chapter examines the nineteenth-century Creole community's problematic positioning between French and American cultures. Chapters two, three, and four center on two of Mercier's texts and concentrate on his depictions of race, gender, and language, respectively, while incorporating a historical perspective and establishing a literary context using works by more well-known French and francophone authors. This analysis shows that Mercier's representations take into account the multiplicity of cultures established in Creole society, contesting the perception that Creole identity can be defined singularly.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Louisiana's connection to France has distinguished its inhabitants and their culture from those in the other United States. As Carl Brasseaux notes, however, this link has tended to eclipse the multiculturalism on which Louisiana society is built. He writes that beginning in the nineteenth century, "sweeping generalizations based upon superficial impressions... [depict] Louisiana's French-speaking community as a social and cultural, sometimes even a racial, monolith" (1). Yet while the state is well-known for its French roots in North America, it has a hybrid culture that is all its own (Brasseaux 1, Dessens 224, Pritchard 43). Louisiana is linked not only to France and the United States, but also to West Africa, Spain, and Canada among other places.¹ Population shifts due to slavery, immigration, and regime changes have all contributed to this diversity, and there can be no monocultural definition of this community because of it. As the nineteenth-century travel writer Benjamin Latrobe writes: "What is the state of society in New Orleans? is one of many questions which I am required to answer by a friend who seems not to be aware that this question is equivalent to that of Shakespeare's Polonius. He might as well ask: what is the shape of a cloud?" (*Journal* 169). South Louisiana, centered in New Orleans, is a distinctive amalgamation of different peoples and therefore no one group can claim it completely.

This dissertation examines Louisiana's nineteenth-century French Creole literature, demonstrating that these works emblematically reveal their hybrid cultural identity.² This

¹ Historians attest to the diverse heritage of the state from Alcée Fortier, Charles Gayarré, and Grace King in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to Shannon Dawdy and Jennifer M. Spear in more recent times.

² This dissertation follows Virginia Dominguez's definition of the word Creole: "a person of non-American ancestry, whether African or European, who was born in the Americas" (263). For nineteenth-century Louisiana, "Creole" implied only European heritage with the term "Creole of colour" being reserved for African-descended individuals (Thompson 12-13). As the works on which this study focuses were primarily written during that time period, we adopt this racial understanding of the word as well. This study also uses "Creole" to denote the language that is "native to the southern part of Louisiana where African, French, and Spanish influence was most deeply

work's originality lies in that it locates Louisiana's Creole community outside of the French and American cultures that typically define it. Rather than relying solely on a historical or geographic categorization, this study highlights the multiculturalism that has forged Creole society and traces those diverse influences in primarily nineteenth-century literary depictions of Louisiana written by those who lived there. By interpreting a variety of literary themes that each reflect Creole hybridity, we are able not only to confirm the multiculturalism that is unique to Louisiana, but also to uncover perceptions of Creoles' distinctive identity. Like other recent works examining Louisiana culture and history reveal, Shannon Dawdy's *Building the Devil's Empire*, Shirley Thompson's *Exiles at Home*, and Jennifer M. Spear's *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans*, for example, Creole Louisiana is a unique society within North America.

While this dissertation examines a number of Louisiana's Creole authors as well as writers from throughout the francophone world, it focuses in particular on Alfred Mercier (1816-1894). Mercier's typical Creole upbringing, his prominent position in New Orleans society,³ his cultural influence as a founding member of the *Athénée Louisianais*, and his prolific writing all more than qualify him to represent the nineteenth-century Creole literary world (Tinker, *Écrits* 356). More than that, however, the unique insight into Louisiana culture that his works provide marks Mercier not only as a representative member of Creole society, but also as its champion.⁴ Lafcadio Hearn confirms the vital role that Mercier plays in studies of Creole Louisiana, remarking that his novel, *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, is "un roman créole, écrit par un Créole, consacré à la vie créole" (Tinker, *Écrits* 357). By centering this study on Mercier and his texts,

rooted historically and culturally" (Hall 157). The latter definition is primarily relevant for the discussion of language in Chapter Four.

³ In his biographical sketch of Mercier in *Les Écrits de langue française en Louisiane au XIXe Siècle*, Tinker relates various anecdotes from the author's life that testify to his social standing (351-9).

⁴ See Appendix A for a chronology of events from Mercier's life.

then, we gain his personal insight into his culture at the same time that we confront the Creole literary movement that he leads. From his journals to his novels, Mercier allows his readers to glimpse nineteenth-century Creole Louisiana through his unique lens. Yet it is Mercier's assertion of his hybrid perspective that makes him the primary figure in this study.

This dissertation focuses primarily on two of Alfred Mercier's French-language texts, his 1881 novel, *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* and his 1891 novel, *Johnelle*, and interprets his expressions of Creole identity in each. Race, gender, and language figure prominently in these works, and it is through Mercier's depictions of these constructs that he reveals Louisiana's diversity and asserts Creole identity. Although Mercier was prolific in many genres, it seems likely that novels provided the ideal medium for completing this work while not offending the dominant social conventions. Mercier includes controversial topics such as racial segregation and "passing," non-traditional gender roles, and Louisiana's Creole language to frame his portrait of Creole society, and indeed, many of his contemporary reviewers do not seem to be offended by these potentially negative aspects. One unknown reviewer writing in a column of the *Franco-Louisianais* of December 3, 1887 praised Mercier and his work unreservedly: "Situations attachantes, style clair et brillant à la fois, dans lequel domine un parfum poétique avec un fond de philosophie et de morale, telles sont les qualités qui distinguent l'écrivain." Nevertheless, Mercier's thought-provoking portrayal of race, gender, and language demonstrates Creoles' multicultural mixed heritage, challenging the notion that they can be identified as either French or American only and instead showing how Creoles are defined by their hybridity.⁵ The chapters that follow provide a comprehensive view of race, gender, and language and their

⁵ Sylvie Dubois and Megan Melançon explain that "[i]n the 1869 edition of the Larousse dictionary, the French term *créole* referred to those born in, or native to, the local populace; but the 1929 edition depicted Creole as correctly designating only a Caucasian population" (237). Mercier's use of the term generally corresponds with the 1869 definition, however, some of his contemporaries, notably Charles Gayarré, adhered to the idea that Creoles could only be white (Thompson 51-2, 61).

significance in terms of Creole identity in Mercier's texts. We approach each from a historical perspective, analyzing its origins and development from Louisiana's colonial beginnings to the nineteenth century, recreate the author's literary context by including analysis of contemporary and/or similarly structured works, and finally interpret Mercier's own portrayal. Studying his texts and the literary conversation in which they are engaged with French and American writers leads us to a more informed understanding of what it means to be francophone in nineteenth-century Louisiana.

Chapter One lays a foundation for our analysis of Mercier's novels by examining identity, hybridity, and the cultural conflict facing Creoles in the nineteenth century. It begins by building a basic understanding of identity that relies on Judith Butler's conception of gender as a social performance. For Butler, rather than being an innate quality or personal choice, gender is a role determined by dominant social norms that individuals are compelled to perform. While Butler's work is primarily focused on gender, theorists such as Louis Miron and Jonathan Xavier Inda transpose her argument onto race, demonstrating that this understanding is not limited to gender and suggesting the performativity of cultural identity as well. Considering cultural identity as a role that is shaped by a society's system of norms allows us to see how hybrid subjects can be alienated from a heritage culture despite their close link to it. Francophone authors Ying Chen and Myriam Warner-Vieyra demonstrate this process in their novels *Les Lettres chinoises* and *Juletane*, respectively. Chen and Warner-Vieyra depict hybrid characters that face exclusion from one of their heritage cultures. A comparable cultural duality is expressed in Creole writing from Louisiana, reflecting similar hybrid circumstances. By looking at the Creole community's unique position between French and American culture and the real-life conflict between those two identities, readers can delve into a deeper awareness of that

hybrid experience. Finally, by looking at a sample of Mercier's writings on different cultures, we are able to establish his awareness of the factors affecting belonging. Beginning with a study of identity and moving forward to analyze the Creole cultural predicament of the nineteenth century, this chapter establishes a foundational understanding of the cultural and social complexities affecting the Creole community and Alfred Mercier's writing.

In Chapter Two we explore how Mercier portrays race. First taking a historical approach, we trace the development of racial identity in Louisiana from colonial times to the nineteenth century. Because of the limited number of French colonists, racial mixing was essential to survival during the colony's first years, and the resulting biracial population worked to reorder the black/white binary prescribed by the *Code Noir*. The emergence of new racial identities such as the *gens de couleur libres* confirmed early Creole society's legitimizing of the new, more complex structure. In the early nineteenth century, however, the rise of the plantation system increased reliance on African slaves and redefined racial identities by way of the "one drop rule."⁶ Following this "rule," individuals with any amount of African heritage were forced to adopt a black identity as society attempted to diverse hybridity into binarity. Thus, the same social separation of blacks and whites that the *Code* had prescribed for colonial Louisiana was adopted in the era following the Louisiana Purchase. In Mercier's novel, *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, both his depictions of the city and the plantation plainly show this nineteenth-century racial segregation. The white Saint-Ybars family, for example, owns the large plantation while blacks work as slaves. Yet at the same time that Mercier shows how Creole society works to keep the races segregated, he also unveils the mixing between blacks and whites that undermines the binary. His novel incorporates mixed-race characters including those who "pass" as white despite their African heritage, challenging the notion of racial "purity." In this way Mercier

⁶ The "one drop rule" reflects the "meaning that a single drop of 'black blood' makes a person black" (Davis 5).

demonstrates the permeability of the boundaries between black and white and protests against the ruling racist norms. Mercier's mixed-race characters not only confront contemporary racial discourse, however; they also call Creole performances of singular identities into question. Mercier's emphasis on Creole society's mixed heritage contradicts the perception that Creoles can be identified as only French in two ways: first, by showing that even so-called "pure" white Creoles can be of mixed racial heritage, and second, by creating a parallel between racial and cultural plurality. With his depictions of race, Mercier actively challenges a monocultural definition of Louisiana Creoles.

Chapter Three focuses on how Mercier's representations of certain characters' gender roles reflect his remarkable vision of male-female equality for the Creole community. Like other Western societies, Louisiana evolved as a patriarchy. In this structure women are considered to be subordinate to men, and their social function reflects this inequality. Mercier's work is heavily influenced by such idealized notions of gender. For example, in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, women are defined in physical terms. When one mother fails in carrying out her duties as a mother, for example, she simultaneously seems to fail as a person. Her slave, however, does fulfill her maternal tasks and achieves a more respected position in the novel. A similar situation is depicted in *Johnelle*. One female character embraces her maternal obligations and is devoted to raising children. Despite his initial acceptance of such patriarchal portrayals of women, however, Mercier includes more revolutionary characters that reflect his own, more progressive views. Indeed, although male authority was privileged in the state, authors have historically depicted Louisiana, and New Orleans in particular, as a space where unruly women contest male dominance. Mercier continues this trend in both *Johnelle* and *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*. He incorporates an intellectual young woman who becomes actively engaged in the political sphere

and an intersex character who destabilizes the male-female binary structure. Mercier's portrayal of these individuals not only reveals his remarkable perspective on social equality, it also demonstrates his vision of a distinct Creole identity in Louisiana. He uses his portrayal of gender identity to show that Creoles must move beyond their French heritage and accept their own hybrid culture.

Chapter Four analyzes how Mercier's incorporation of Creole language into *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* and *Johnelle* works to assert a distinctive, hybrid Creole identity, as his representations of race and gender do. Similar to our interpretations of those concepts, Louisiana's multicultural history plays a vital role in linguistic terms as well. Although the state was initially founded by francophones, later influxes of speakers of English, Spanish, Italian, German and African languages came to have a great impact on the dominant French language. As the other languages began to be used alongside the French, they eventually permeated it, creating new forms of expression that were unique to Louisiana, including Cajun French and Louisiana French Creole.⁷ Literary representations of Louisiana in English and French alike have consistently paid tribute to the inhabitants' distinctive language, either by describing the characters' accents or composing their dialog to reflect linguistic differences. Mercier likewise includes Louisiana-specific language, writing extensive portions of his texts, primarily dialog, in Louisiana French Creole. More than simply providing an element of local color, however, the language becomes a defining aspect of Creole culture in his narratives. Because Mercier depicts Louisiana Creoles as speaking a language that is not the same as metropolitan French, he actively

⁷ According to Becky Brown, "[i]t is commonly reported that three discrete varieties of French are spoken today: Colonial, Cajun, and Creole." She goes on to clarify that "[a]pparently the situation of Louisiana is somewhere between three discrete varieties, on the one hand, and one completely leveled variety, on the other. Furthermore, the growing presence of International French is significant. The linguistic picture can thus be more accurately understood in terms of a continuum of overlapping, less discrete categories in a dynamic model. Together, these categories - which encompass all of the varieties of Louisiana French (Cajun, Creole, Creolized Cajun, Cajunized Creole, International French, etc.) - constitute the linguistic repertoire of the francophone speech community" (73-4).

sets that population apart from francophones in France. In this way Mercier's use of Creole language in defining Creole culture links to Patrick Chamoiseau's and Raphaël Confiant's concept of *Créolité*. These Martinican authors assert their Creole language as part of their declaration of their independence from French culture.⁸ For Mercier, writing only in French would likewise seem to prove its hegemonic hold on Creole culture in the United States. By writing in Creole as well, Mercier is able to delimit a unique Creole identity that, like their language, is linked to France but is not French.

Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to deepen our understanding of Louisiana's relationship to France and the rest of the francophone world. By establishing the autonomy of Creole culture, this study challenges what Jean-Marc Duplantier has noted as critics' tendency to "dismiss pre-1915 Francophone literature as a derivative and inferior imitation of literary trends in metropolitan France" (1). It presents Creole writing as a literature in its own right, providing a perspective that counters Edward Tinker's determination that "leur inspiration et la marche de leurs pensée étaient françaises" (*Écrits* 10). More recently in her 1991 thesis, *Johnelle du Dr. Alfred Mercier: Nouvelle Édition Critique*, Gwen Laviolette has suggested that Creole authors were inspired to duplicate the works of French authors that they read. This work looks beyond the initial connections to either French or American writing that tend to characterize Louisiana Creole literature and builds upon Duplantier's assertion that "[w]hile the literatures that emerged from these two former French colonies still relied heavily on French models, they were written not in an effort to conform to the social and artistic expectations of the former colonial culture, but to propose a unique regional "Creole" identity, in the case of Louisiana" (2). While we establish a foundation of both American and French texts that contextualizes the study and

⁸ Chamoiseau, Confiant and Bernabé write: "Le créole, notre langue première à nous Antillais, Guyanais, Mascarins, est le véhicule original de notre moi profond, de notre inconscient collectif, de notre génie populaire, cette langue demeure la rivière de notre créolité alluviale" (43).

emphasize the connections that do exist between them, ultimately we see that Creole literature surpasses those definitions and is a distinct literature in its own right. This study, then, actively broadens the scope of what can be considered as francophone, as well as expanding readers' sense of the cultural effects of imperialism, in terms of both time and space.

CHAPTER 1. HYBRID IDENTITIES: LOCATING THE SELF IN LOUISIANA

The historical tensions between colonizers and the colonized forged complex and problematic conceptions of cultural identity in colonial and postcolonial environments. This is in part due to the hybridity that often characterizes such societies.⁹ In these contexts, where varying policies both engendered and attempted to deny crossings of culture,¹⁰ individuals' senses of self became (and in some cases continue to be) fraught with issues of "in-betweenness, diasporas, mobility, and cross-overs" (Loomba 145). Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon among other important writers have asserted that colonized peoples in particular, as the targets of "civilizing" colonial policies, struggle with a traumatic and problematic hybridity and the conflicting desires to accept or deny it.¹¹ In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha describes "a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once that makes it impossible for the devalued, insatiable *évolué* (an abandonment neurotic, Fanon claims) to accept the colonizer's invitation to identity" (64).¹² Indeed, Ania Loomba explains that "liminality and hybridity are necessary attributes of the colonial condition" and that "colonial identities are always a matter of flux and agony" (148). Colonial identity is thus marked by its instability. While it must be acknowledged that the colonizers have played a pivotal role in the orchestration of this syncretic process, it can also be noted that they are themselves confronted with a complex hybridity similar to those they colonize. Colonizing populations likewise struggle to locate their identities between their origins and new cultural influences.

⁹ This work adopts Bill Ashcroft's, Gareth Griffiths's, and Helen Tiffin's definition of hybridity as "new transcultural forms [created] within the contact zone produced by colonization" (*Concepts* 118). This chapter focuses on cultural hybridity specifically, but it can also take a linguistic, political, or racial form (118).

¹⁰ The French *Code noir*, for example, forbid interracial concubinage and marriage in the French colonies, while "nineteenth-century Colombian, Pedro Fermín de Vargas, actually advocated a policy of interbreeding between whites and Indians in order to 'hispanicise' and finally 'extinguish' Indians" (Loomba 145).

¹¹ See Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930*.

¹² Bhabha's conception of this unstable duality is primarily rooted in his perception of colonial subjects' compulsion to mimic colonizers' culture while not being accepted as an equal.

John Elliott states in his analysis of identity in colonial societies of the Atlantic that, following their displacement to the New World, European colonists and early immigrants “found themselves trapped in the dilemma of discovering themselves to be at once the same, and yet not the same, as their country of origin” (9).¹³ Elliott’s assertion is particularly relevant in the case of Louisiana’s primarily francophone New Orleans-centered Creole culture. The society was initially established in the seventeenth century as a French colony, and its inhabitants continued their connection to French culture through the nineteenth century despite their geographical distance. Yet at the same time, they were also proud of their American heritage.¹⁴ As Mary Louise Pratt explains, Creoles sought to create “an independent, decolonized American society and culture, while retaining European values and white supremacy” (175). Because of this duality, francophones in Louisiana faced uncertainty in the attempt to define their identities as well as the boundaries of their community, a sentiment that can be interpreted in their literature. Thus, while this group cannot be considered to be postcolonial in the same way that colonized populations are, their positioning between multiple cultural allegiances echoes the constant “flux and agony” that Bhabha recognizes in the case of the colonized. This instability came to a head in the nineteenth century. Cultural conflicts resulting from the Louisiana Purchase and the War of 1812 in particular contributed to increased anxiety over identity and determining who qualified as insiders in Louisiana society and who were considered to be outsiders.

This chapter sets a foundation from which readers may analyse Alfred Mercier’s literary representations of Louisiana’s hybrid culture by examining how social identities are constructed and the important role that hybridity plays in that process. Mercier’s writings as well as those of

¹³ Elliott traces the “Atlantic colonial world from Ireland to Brazil as a relatively homogenous unit, moving in common response to common requirements and pressures” (4).

¹⁴ These sentiments are primarily visible in Creole literature, particularly poetry. Ruby Van Allen Caulfield explains that Creole writers’ “great love for Louisiana manifested itself...in...patriotic poems,” for example, but that “France was present, too, in the minds of these writers” (94-6).

other Louisiana authors such as Adrien Rouquette and Sidonie de la Houssaye during the nineteenth century reflect this population's conflicted perspective as members of a society moving forward from French colonialism while facing Americanization and immigration head-on. In this way, their literature shines a light on the cultural issues confronting nineteenth-century Louisiana. To begin, we look at how identity is assigned and performed using Judith Butler's analysis of gender as a model. As other theorists have shown, namely Louis Miron and Jonathan Xavier Inda, Butler's conception of gender as a performed identity rather than an innate quality is also valuable for analyses of race and culture. Next, we apply this understanding of identity to francophone expressions of cultural hybridity. Authors Ying Chen and Myriam Warner-Vieyra both focus on characters that are torn between two cultures in their novels, *Les Lettres chinoises* and *Juletane*, respectively. These works can be read as examples of the complexities of dual identities. By examining these two texts, we establish a framework for understanding articulations of hybridity in Louisiana literature. We also look at the multiple cultural factors at work in francophone Louisiana, primarily during the nineteenth-century. Like other colonial and postcolonial populations, Louisiana's French-speaking society was confronted with a split sense of identity at this time. For many Creoles, their unique positioning between French and American cultural traditions complicated their ability to belong to either one. Finally we see that, although Mercier did not write extensively about his sense of Creoles' cultural duality, his texts exploring other cultures serve as evidence of his awareness of the elements complicating belonging and his ability to reflect upon his own dilemma. Caught between past and emerging cultural influences, many like Alfred Mercier struggled to situate their own identities.

1.1 Assigning Social Identities

In order to approach the complexities affecting Louisiana specifically, we must first establish a framework for understanding identity more generally. To that end, here we examine the theoretical work of feminist critic Judith Butler and her conceptions of how social roles and identities are created and enforced. Butler's perspective provides a particularly useful foundation for understanding identity because she sees it as a performance that society imposes on individuals. By relying on her work, we are able to approach the dual cultural associations that split Creole identity with a sense of individuals' powerlessness to simply integrate into one or the other. For Butler, one's social identity is neither a personal choice nor is it an innate quality. Rather, it is a social assignment that is determined based on a subject's relation to that society's dominant norms. Individuals do not choose; instead, they are called to their assigned role, an act that she refers to as "interpellation." While Butler's focus is on gender, other theoreticians have extended her work to issues of racial identity and have shown that these are similarly framed in performativity. Discussing this process and how racial as well as cultural roles are assigned in a similar way opens a window onto the duality that confronts Louisiana Creoles. We understand their experience as the performing of conflicting roles: Anglo-Americans call them to a French identity, while the French call them to an American one.

In her 1993 book *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler discusses how gender roles are created and enforced in society. Her work is built on a foundation of speech act theory – the idea that by saying something, one carries out an action¹⁵ – and puts forward her understanding that a society literally calls individuals to roles that are founded in that society's set of norms. From

¹⁵ See John L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* and John R. Searle's *Expression and Meaning* for further explanation of speech act theory.

birth, the materiality of an individual's body is decoded by those norms and determines his or her role. The subject is then continually interpellated into a performance of this identity.

In their discussion of Butler's text, Louis Miron and Jonathan Xavier Inda examine one of Butler's examples of this process. They explain that, "[t]he utterance 'It's a girl!,' which traditionally welcomes a baby into the world, is not so much a constative utterance, a statement of fact, as one in a long series of performatives that constitutes the subject whose arrival they announce and through which the girl is continuously gendered throughout her lifetime" (94). Identifying the baby as a girl, then, calls her to perform the female role at the same time. This initial statement creates the female subject identified as such. As Butler states, "[t]he 'I' neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves" (*Bodies* 8). Thus, it is through the articulation of these gendering speech acts that the subject is called to perform a particular gender.

In her discussion of Butler, Catherine Rottenberg is quick to point out that, despite the temptation to understand the performance of social roles as the individual's option, agency is not a factor in this determination. Rottenberg writes: "Performativity, it is important to underscore, is not conceived here as the subject's freedom to choose or 'play at' a variety of identities, but rather as both constitutive of identity and a constraining manifestation of dominant norms" (6). So, individuals cannot pick and choose what role they prefer.¹⁶ They have little to no agency in terms of choosing a role that will keep them viable in society. The dominant social norms, what Rottenberg also calls "regulatory ideals," are what determine the role that each individual must embody in their particular context. Rottenberg goes on to clarify that "*regulatory ideals*...circulate and operate in the service of particular power relations, such as

¹⁶ Even in situations where an individual "passes" from one racial identity to another, society and the dominant norms ultimately influence identity. See page 61.

heteronormativity and white supremacy. Thus, according to a theoretical framework based on performativity, dominant norms help shape who we are and what we desire, and subjects are compelled to identify with these norms if they wish to maintain a non-marginal existence” (37). As Rottenberg indicates, depending on the set of norms that dominates the cultural discourse in a given social context, different roles are assigned. Socially viable identities are defined and assigned through these norms, not through a subject’s agency. However, the initial performative statement alone is not enough to complete the subject’s assignment to a gender identity. In order for the social performance to continue and for the subject to maintain her identity, she must continually and repeatedly be called to her role as a girl (Butler *Bodies* 8-10; Miron 94).

Despite the constraints that social norms place on individuals’ identities, it is possible for these norms to be broken down. Calling individuals to their role is a process that continually repeats, necessarily. Yet the silences between those repetitions open up the potential for a departure from the assigned role. Butler explains that:

Construction is neither a single act nor a causal process initiated by a subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects. Construction not only takes place *in* time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms...yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions... This instability is the *deconstituting* possibility in the very process of repetition, the power that undoes the very effects by which ‘sex’ is stabilized, the possibility to put the consolidation of the norms of ‘sex’ into a potentially productive crisis. (*Bodies* 10)

The process of interpellating the subject is thus unstable because an identity cannot be formed in a single speech act; it must be repeated. As Miron and Inda emphasize, a female must be continually called “girl” to enact that role. Within the silences that separate the repetitions, however, is the possibility of reassigning the subject. It then becomes possible for individuals’ assigned social roles to be deconstructed. In terms of Butler’s primary focus, gender, this sets into motion the destabilization of heteronormative social roles. Upon entering a different social realm, one without heteronormative dominance, for example, the individual will enact a role conforming to new cultural priorities. Yet this understanding of identity can move beyond gender. Butler’s conceptions of performance, interpellation, and repetition can also be applied to other forms of identity.

Ann Pellegrini, Louis Miron, and Jonathan Xavier Inda adapt Butler’s work into their analyses of the construction of race. According to their arguments, just as society interprets a subject’s body and assigns a gendered role in accordance with its norms, it does for race as well. Rottenberg similarly suggests that “[l]ike norms of gender, race norms operate by compelling subjects to assume or identify with certain identity categories...in the case of race, subjects identify as either black or white” (43). As with gender, Rottenberg points out that society imposes certain racial roles onto individuals based on physical signs. She states that, “racial identity and classification seem to be constituted through skin color” (38).¹⁷ These roles limit individuals to the realm that material aspects of their bodies imply in society, depending on dominant norms. Despite an individual’s personal agenda, society labels and compels each person to adhere to his or her prescribed position in society, just as Butler has shown to be the case in terms of gender.

¹⁷ Although Rottenberg takes a considerable amount of space describing and promoting Miron and Inda’s argument, she does not fully accept it for her own analyses. For her, there are too many other factors at work on racial constructions of identity, namely desirability (37).

In “Race as a Kind of Speech Act,” Miron and Inda invoke a pivotal moment from Frantz Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs* as an important example of how society compels bodies to occupy racial roles and how these roles affect them. Fanon brings attention to a disturbing experience where, upon seeing him, a child calls out: “Maman, regarde le nègre, j’ai peur !” Others exclaim: “Tiens, un nègre!” (Fanon 90). For Fanon, as Miron and Inda note, these highly charged cries are interpellations to his socially prescribed role as black. Fanon is reminded that society will not allow him to be without also being black. To a world with a racially charged set of norms, he is not simply a man, he is a *black* man:

Alors que j’oubliais, pardonnais et ne désirais qu’aimer, on me renvoyait comme une gifle, en plein visage, mon message. Le monde blanc, seule honnête, me refusait toute participation. D’un homme on exigeait une conduite d’homme. De moi, une conduite d’homme noir – ou du moins une conduite de nègre. Je hélais le monde et le monde m’amputait de mon enthousiasme. On me demandait de me confiner, de me rétrécir. (Fanon 92)

Despite Fanon’s own unwillingness to comply, society will not accept him unless he adheres to the role it has assigned him. Miron and Inda further the parallels between race and gender by connecting Fanon’s interpellation: “Tiens un nègre!” with Butler’s: “It’s a girl!” (99-100). Both of these calls compel an individual to a particular social performance, racial or gendered. Although the roles that each call implies are different, the basic formulation by which they are assigned is the same.¹⁸ Race, like gender, can be understood as an assigned identity that individuals are called to perform.

¹⁸ Miron and Inda acknowledge that their argument’s limited scope is problematic: “For the purposes of this paper...we will act as if it were possible to talk about the subject as a singular entity. The reason for doing this is that since this is our first stab, as it were, at thinking through a notion of racial performativity, we felt it would be

Butler's framework and Inda's and Miron's application of it to racial issues help to solidify an understanding of the process of identity formation as well as the multiple variables that are involved. In addition to gender and race, cultural identity also has a performative aspect. In the same way that individuals can be interpellated to a female or black role, they can be called to social performances as American, African, Chinese, French, etc. Having been designated as American, for example, an individual is then compelled to perform an American cultural role in order to be accepted in society. For those individuals with a hybrid cultural identity, including those living in colonial or postcolonial societies, however, this process becomes more complex. As Fanon points out, these individuals have a dual sense of self: "Le Noir a deux dimensions. L'une avec son congénère, l'autre avec le Blanc" (13). A community's perception of a subject's sameness or difference can initiate a different cultural performance, each linked to one side only of this two-dimensional self. Although the subject may simultaneously identify with an ensemble of cultures, when attempting to assimilate into a particular society, his or her difference, as a result of hybridity, distinguishes him or her as a foreigner. Julia Kristeva affirms that "l'étranger commence lorsque surgit la conscience de ma différence" (8). Thus, where individuals have unstable, hybrid identities, interpellation can cause a cultural divide and alienate the subject from one or more elements of his or her identity, setting into motion the "flux and agony" that Bhabha describes. For a clearer picture of this process in terms of hybrid cultural identity, we examine two francophone novels that incorporate issues of such duality: Ying Chen's *Les Lettres chinoises* and Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane*.

easier if, for now, we bracketed other socially significant identities...So frankly, one of the limits of this paper is that it excludes the significant ways in which race relates to other positions" (96).

1.2 Francophone Portrayals of Hybrid Cultural Identities

Expressions of cultural identities, particularly hybrid ones, can be interpreted in well-known and more obscure texts from a wide variety of genres, time periods, and geographical regions. In terms of the francophone world as well, authors of colonial and postcolonial French-language texts from France and elsewhere – e.g. Raphaël Confiant, Ying Chen, Maryse Condé, and Ananda Devi – incorporate issues dealing with in-betweenness and defining the self. Two salient examples of works exemplifying such conflicts are Ying Chen’s 1993 epistolary novel, *Les Lettres chinoises*, and Myriam Warner-Vieyra’s *Juletane*, published in 1982. In both of these texts, cultural belonging is challenged when hybrid subjects are interpellated to perform foreignness. Chen’s novel is particularly relevant to this study because of its North American setting while Warner-Vieyra’s depiction of a return to a heritage country also resonates with the Louisiana Creoles’ relationship with France. Although characters in each work initially seek to belong to both of the cultures that define their existences, Chinese and Canadian in *Les Lettres chinoises* and Caribbean and African in *Juletane*, ultimately the differences that their hybridity entail set them apart and prevent them from assimilating.

In *Les Lettres chinoises*, Chinese Canadian author Ying Chen relates the story of three characters as they write letters to each other and move through a transitional period in their lives.¹⁹ Students Sassa and Yuan and their romantic relationship are at the core of the novel, and when Yuan moves to Montréal from China, leaving his fiancée behind, questions of identity, belonging, and tradition begin to affect their connection. With Yuan, the author portrays an individual performing his original cultural heritage in the context of an adopted culture. Chen shows us that one side of a hybrid identity can become more entrenched, even as individuals

¹⁹ This is a change from the first edition of the novel in which Chen focuses on four different characters. See Émile Talbot, “Rewriting *Les Lettres chinoises*: The Poetics of Erasure.”

integrate into another society. Rather than easily assimilating into the francophone culture of his new adopted home, Yuan is constantly recalled to his Chinese identity. Consequently, he feels closer to Chinese culture than he did before. While he has distanced himself geographically from his Chinese roots, he simultaneously feels more connected to it as a result of his interpellation to a Chinese role by Montréal society.

As Jack Yeager points out, identity is a major theme of this text: “the novel presents the dilemma of the immigrant caught between cultures, the search for an identity – new, rooted, or hybrid – and the seeming impossibility of finding such an identity if one is a visible outsider” (“Immigrant” 140). While Yuan, who has left China for Montréal, admits to having abandoned his native culture, “j’abandonne une terre qui m’a nourri,” at the same time, he feels a renewed patriotism and sense of his Chinese identity as he starts his life in the new culture (Chen 9). He writes home, “c’est en quittant ce pays que j’apprends à le mieux aimer...je pourrais dire que c’est aujourd’hui, bien plus qu’à d’autres moments de ma vie, que je ressens un profond besoin de reconnaître mon appartenance à mon pays” (Chen 10). For Yuan, leaving home makes him realize where he thinks he belongs culturally, even as his thoughts of returning to China become less and less frequent. His heritage cultural identity becomes more noticeable to him as he attempts to assimilate into his adoptive culture. Yet although he choose to go to Montréal, this choice of identity is not his own.

In *Les Lettres chinoises*, Yuan is interpellated to a performance of his Chinese identity. The new society of which he is now a part in Montréal compels him to be Chinese, rather than simply allowing him to integrate into Canadian culture. Officials and regular citizens alike constantly ask him where he is from, thereby reminding him that he is not from Montréal and seeming to indicate that he cannot be an equal member of their society. He writes home to

Sassa, “[c]’est important d’avoir un pays quand on voyage. Un jour, tu comprendras tout cela : quand tu présentes ton passeport à une dame aux lèvres serrées, quand tu te retrouves parmi des gens dont tu ignores jusqu’à la langue, et surtout quand on te demande tout le temps de quel pays tu viens” (Chen 10). The dominant culture in Montréal requires Yuan to be an outsider. As a hybrid Canadian, his difference from the established cultural norms set him apart. To be accepted in Montréal, his outside cultural role must be performed. Like Fanon, he is not simply a man; in Montréal he is a *Chinese* man.

In her 1982 novel *Juletane*, Guadeloupean author Myriam Warner-Vieyra takes an epistolary approach similar to Chen’s. She relates the story of a Caribbean woman’s struggles following her marriage to an African man and move to Senegal through journal entries discovered by a young social worker. In Warner-Vieyra’s work, the protagonist, Juletane, is alienated from her heritage culture rather than a newly adopted one. Here, interpellation’s effect upon hybrid cultural identity is reversed in comparison with Chen’s character. Upon her return to the land of her roots in Africa, Juletane is denied cultural belonging and instead identified as a foreigner. The differences that her native-born African counterparts perceive call her to perform an outsider’s role; it is the only way they will accept her. Moreover, because she refuses to conform to their perceptions, she is marginalized.

Rather than renewing a cultural affiliation, Juletane fails to gain recognition of her belonging or having belonged in Africa. She is disenfranchised from her cultural identity. Although she has dreamed of returning to the land of her ancestors and has imagined feeling connected to the culture there, she is devastated when she finds that she does not fit in at all: “L’arrivée sur cette terre africaine de mes pères, je l’avais de cent manières imaginée, voici qu’elle se transformait en un cauchemar” (Warner-Vieyra 35). Everything feels unfamiliar to

her, but even more importantly, she is not accepted as an equal member of Senegalese society. Her husband points out to her that by challenging Senegalese norms, including plural marriage, she will be excluded: “[Il] m’informa que nous n’avions pas le choix, et que si nous refusions, nous serions rejetés par toute la communauté” (48). Thus, she cannot be herself and also be accepted as a member of the community in Senegal. As in Yuan’s story, Juletane does not control her own role in society and despite her initial desire to fit in, she is ultimately ostracized.

Juletane is most notably called to an outsider role by her husband’s third wife, Ndeye. The other woman refers to her as a “toubabesse,” a term which unquestionably distinguishes her as an outsider. Juletane remarks: “Voilà que pour elle je suis folle et, ce qui est tout aussi vexant pour moi ‘toubabesse’ : elle m’assimilait, ni plus ni moins, aux femmes blanches des colons” (Warner-Vieyra 79). Here, Ndeye controls Juletane’s cultural role. She interpellates Juletane to a performance that, instead of aligning her with Africans, identifies her as a European colonial, a clear allusion to her perceived foreignness.

Warner-Vieyra’s novel demonstrates that in their attempt to belong to one element of their hybrid cultural identities, subjects find themselves cast as outsiders. In her book, *Postcolonial Representations*, Françoise Lionnet confirms that individuals may never rejoin a heritage culture. She particularly discusses female characters who visit the place of their origins and unsuccessfully attempt to connect to their traditions. Lionnet writes: “If for them exile is an attempt to return to and renew old roots, their quest ends in nothing short of complete failure” (90). Lionnet points to the emotional rupture that Warner-Vieyra’s protagonist experiences as an example. Indeed, instead of fulfilling her dream of finding her cultural roots when she arrives, Juletane only enters a nightmare of displacement.

The complexities that are at work in Chen's and Warner-Vieyra's also emerge in Louisiana Creole literature. Like Yuan and Juletane, French Creoles' literary representations of themselves are characterized by a struggle with dual cultural forces. Although these authors express their pride in their French origins and a determination to maintain their ties to these roots, at the same time, their sense of their American culture is an equally important part of how they portray themselves. Furthermore, because of their shared split identities, readers can also link nineteenth-century Louisiana Creoles to the same obstacles to cultural belonging facing Yuan and Juletane. Indeed, Creoles were caught in-between; Americans called them to enact a French cultural role, while the French, who did not accept the Creoles as French, received them as only Americans.

1.3 Creole Hybridity

In the first lines of his 1953 memoir of New Orleans, *Creole City*, Louisiana historian and literary critic Edward Tinker sets the scene for approaching Creole cultural hybridity. He writes: "It is of the union of Marianne and Uncle Sam – that strange shotgun marriage between an utterly foreign population and our American people, which took place in 1803 – that I shall try to tell you" (xiii). The imagery Tinker employs in his description of the city's cultural history is apt, for even as he writes of an ostensibly "American" city more than 150 years after the "strange shotgun marriage," his words belie the struggle to meld that continues to confront the cultures. Whether in the 1800s or the 1950s, Creoles and Anglo-Americans appear to be two distinct groups. Anglo-American Tinker also noticeably distinguishes between "our" people, the Anglo-Americans, and the "foreign population," the Creoles. The portrait that Tinker paints of culture in Louisiana in these few lines reveals how problematic it is, particularly for those citizens living there in the period immediately following the Louisiana Purchase. The 1803

union of the French Creole and Anglo-Americans reorganized, or disorganized, the cultural dynamic in Louisiana.

Like the fictional characters, Juletane and Yuan, depending on which social group dictates the ruling social norms, Creoles are excluded from either the American or the French side of their heritage and called to perform an outsider's role. Because of their hybrid cultural heritage that incorporates both French and American elements, Creoles' identities are unstable, and they can perform as either American or French, whichever reflects difference. Nineteenth-century Anglo-Americans, for example, compelled Creoles to perform a French cultural role. At the same time, French citizens called Louisiana Creoles to enact their American identities. Resonating with Chen and Warner-Vieyra, Creole authors Alexandre Latil and Dominique Rouquette demonstrate Creole sentiments reflecting this split between French and American heritages in their literary works. Their poetry in particular expresses a cultural ambivalence that connects to their fellow francophones' novels.

New Orleans-born Creole Alexandre Latil (1816-1851) provides a poetic example of the split of his identity in his 1841 "À Barthélemy." He writes: "La belle Louisiane a bercé mon enfance, / Et ses fils, tu le sais, au seul nom de la France / Sentent tous palpiter leurs cœurs" (7-9). Latil highlights the split nature of Creoles' identities by demonstrating their sentimental attachment to their heritage culture, while also specifying that they are from "la Louisiane." Similar to the character of Yuan in Chen's novel, Latil expresses Louisiana Creoles' sense of a close connection to the country of their origins, even despite decades of geographical and political separation. Like the Chinese Canadian, once he is outside of his heritage culture, it seems to define him even more certainly.

On the other hand, Creoles are not equal cultural members in France. Instead of performing a French identity, their sense their American culture becomes stronger in French society. Dominique Rouquette (1810-1890), a Creole writing in Paris in 1838, expresses such feelings in “Exil et Patrie”: “O ma sainte pinière, ô mes bayous sans nom, / A vous toujours me lie un mystique chaînon ! / Je suis, je suis toujours l’enfant de la savane, / Le sauvage banni qui reveut sa cabane” (25-8). Rouquette’s poem also reflects that Creoles are torn between two places and two senses of self, yet with a different emphasis. His writing echoes Juletane’s realization upon her arrival in Africa. Having arrived in the land of his heritage, the Creole feels himself to be distanced from it and, instead, more connected to his roots in Louisiana. The lines of his poem conjure up a poignant image of homesickness, but his title may have an even more meaningful message. The reader can read the words *exil* and *patrie* to describe a single place, rather than describing two separate and contrasting places. Perhaps here, Rouquette has Paris in mind, in which case his poem can be read as an important articulation and affirmation of Creole hybridity and instability. Moreover, Latil’s and Rouquette’s examples indicate that both Louisiana and France can be interpreted as both an exile and a *patrie*.

In this section, we move forward from the duality that Latil and Rouquette demonstrate in their poetry to examine the larger picture of hybridity affecting Creole culture. We not only look at the process that formed this hybridity, but also at how each aspect of Creole cultural identity is performed or repressed depending on the prevailing social norms. The following examination adopts a primarily historical perspective that addresses both the American and French elements of Creole culture. By analyzing defining moments and experiences in Louisiana’s history, we attempt to reconstruct the Creole experience.

1.3.1 Becoming American

From the time of the colony's settlement onward, many Creoles in Louisiana remained devoted to keeping their French traditions. As historian Alcée Fortier describes it, "[t]he Louisianians loved the mother country and were proud of the name of Frenchmen" (*Studies* 2). Despite France's sale of Louisiana to Spain in 1768, there is evidence that Creoles continued to be attached to their original language and culture into the 1900s. According to Sylvie Dubois, it was not even apparent that the French language would cease to be widely used in Louisiana until after the Civil War ("Interview").²⁰ The strength of the Creoles' regard for France and French language and culture becomes clearer when we note that at the time of the 1768 exchange of power, many Creoles were angry with France for abandoning them. Some even participated in a rebellion against the incoming Spanish government, a political move that rejected either country's right to govern the colony (Roberts 79-106; Gayarré 2:158-209; Fortier, *History* 206-30).²¹ The rebellion was not successful, however, and their actions were suppressed by the incoming Spanish governor. Moreover, those who were responsible for the disturbance were sentenced to death (Gayarré 2:303-13). While their violence was instigated by French politics, the Creoles could not deny their cultural attachment to France. Their anger seemed to be motivated by the shock of being deserted by their *patrie*.²² For example, Nicolas Lafrenière, the lead organizer of the 1768 rebellion, declared his enduring loyalty to France at his execution: "I

²⁰ Edward Tinker corroborates that "[les Américains] ne tentèrent jamais de proscrire l'usage du français. Jusqu'en 1880, il était permis de faire des discours en langue française dans les deux Chambres législatives et de dépositions en français devant les tribunaux ; de plus, la loi prévoyait des interprètes pour ceux qui ne parlaient pas la langue anglaise" (*Écrits* 5).

²¹ Creole author, Louis-Armand Garreau's 1849 novel, *Louisiana*, provides a fictional retelling of the rebellion.

²² Gayarré notes that during the change of administration, "[w]omen and children were seen rushing to the post which supported the French flag, and kissing it with passion; the air was rent with thousands of cries of: *Long live the King! Long live Louis the well-beloved!*" (2:205). He also states that "[Louisiana colonists] Foucault and Lafrenière addressed [Charles-Philippe Aubrey, the former French governor], and requested him to resume the government of the colony in the name of the King of France" (2:206).

am French! The cry of liberty has been heard!” (Roberts 89). Apparently, Creoles like Lafrenière wished to keep their connection to France.

Despite the transfer of the colony to Spanish dominion, many Creoles maintained their customs. French continued to be spoken throughout the colony, and wealthy francophones continued to send their children to school in France, a tradition that perpetuated that cultural connection (Tinker, *City* 147). Fortier points out that, in many ways, maintaining these customs was possible because the Spanish rule of Louisiana was not overly invasive, despite the colonists’ initial fears. He explains his personal impressions:

From 1763 to 1801, Louisiana was a part of the Spanish empire, but French continued to be the language of the colony, and Spanish was merely the official tongue. Most of the Spanish officials married ladies of French descent, and the language of the mother was really that of the family. A great many Creoles of Spanish origin do not know a word of Castilian, but speak French as well as native Frenchmen. The Spaniards in Louisiana have left as traces of their domination a high and chivalric spirit, a few geographical names and a remnant of their laws to be seen in our civil code, but have exerted very little influence on the language of the country. (*Studies* 2-3)

As Fortier notes, the intermarriage of French and Spanish Creoles contributed to the relatively easy assimilation of the Spaniards into the francophone community.²³ Moreover, as Alfred Mercier’s pamphlet, *Du panlatinisme*, evidences, the shared Latin heritages of both groups most

²³ Gayarré expresses a similar point of view of the period of Spanish domination in his *History of Louisiana*, writing that in 1766 King Charles III of Spain instructed Governor Ulloa that, “I have resolved that, in that new acquisition, there be no change in the administration of its government, and therefore, that it be not subjected to the laws and usages which are observed in my American dominions, from which it is a distinct colony” (2:158).

likely also facilitated an easy integration of the two populations.²⁴ Indeed, unlike the later American domination, Spanish authority did not affect customs that their predecessors had established as French colonists on such a large scale, and so, Creole society's French cultural connection changed little from when it had been a French colony.²⁵

Although many Creoles were able to maintain a connection to French culture in Louisiana following the Spanish takeover, a number of texts suggest that their native-born French counterparts did not accept them as equally "French." Their heritage could not be denied, but as the writings of French historian Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz and French diplomat Paul D'Abzac indicate, Creoles were nevertheless considered to be outsiders in France. By the time of Thomas Jefferson's Purchase, Louisiana had already been politically separated from France for thirty-five years. Moreover, Creoles lived in a subtropical and culturally diverse environment that was very different from anywhere within the borders of France at that time. In his memoirs of Louisiana published in 1758, Le Page du Pratz remarks upon the effect of the new environment on the French born in the colony. He notes that the climate affected the children of French colonists, making them more like the children of the Native Americans. He writes: "J'ai toujours été porté à croire que les soins qu'ils [the Native Americans] prennent de leurs enfans dès leur naissance, contribuoient beaucoup à les bien conformer, quoique le climat y fasse aussi sa part, car les Créols Français de la Louisiane sont tous grand, bienfaits & d'un beau sang" (309). Echoing the similar connection between a people and their climate that

Montesquieu draws in his 1748 *L'Esprit des lois*, Le Page du Pratz observes that the climate was

²⁴ Alfred Mercier's pamphlet, *Du Panlatinisme: nécessité d'une alliance entre la France et la Confédération du Sud*, was published in 1863 and reveals the perceived similarities that bind Latin-based cultures together.

²⁵ Gayarré details some of the administrative changes in the colony, such as the construction of the Cabildo, in his *History of Louisiana* (3:1-10). On a cultural level, however, he confirms the continued connection to France, noting that a French visitor in 1802 remarked upon Louisiana Creole's similar customs and their effect: "these entertainments, under the circumstances in which they were given, were the result of a useful and enlightened policy, because they strengthened the common customs and manners which connected us and the colonists, causing them to cherish what is French" (3:617).

altering the French in Louisiana, making them stronger and healthier. His juxtapositioning of the natives and the colonists in his description, however, implies that the climate was making the French less like Frenchmen and more like Native Americans, essentially reassigning the colonists culturally.

This cultural evolution is demonstrated by nineteenth-century poet Adrien Rouquette's experience at school in France as related by his biographer, Dagmar Lebreton in 1947. Rouquette, elder brother of Dominique Rouquette, was one of many Creole boys who were sent to France for his schooling. He attended the *Collège Royal de Nantes* in 1829, and the early period of his schooling there was difficult. His fellow French students did not allow him to fit in with them. As Lebreton describes, they considered him to be foreign: "Swarthy and tense, with his imperfect French, he seemed strange and uncouth to the mocking Bretons" (33).²⁶ Despite his French heritage, to them he was an American, and it was only by adopting an American role that they would accept him. Lebreton writes: "After he had stood the taunts of his schoolmates long enough, one day he withdrew into himself and suddenly emerged in the role of the witch doctor or medicine man. They wanted a savage; he would give them what they wanted. Gesticulating angrily, dancing the war dance, in a mixture of English, French, and Choctaw, he chanted a wild tale of the bloody tomahawk" (34). Rouquette's dance was his initiation of a performance of an American cultural identity, the only way that his fellow students would accept him. Lebreton confirms that, having finished the performance, "[h]is conquest was complete; he had established himself securely, and he was able to look upon his new surroundings with a more discerning and more justly critical eye" (35). This episode demonstrates that in France, this Creole was indeed not accepted as French, yet that he could take on an active role as an

²⁶ There is a sense of irony about this situation, given that Brittany is often recognized as particularly culturally distanced from the rest of France. See Heather Williams, *Postcolonial Brittany: Literature Between Languages*.

American. Despite his French heritage, Adrien Rouquette's hybridity set him apart, and that difference compelled him to perform the social role of an outsider to French culture. Indeed, as Lebreton indicates, it was precisely the "mixture of English, French, and Choctaw" that was accepted as "American."

Vicomte Paul D'Abzac remarks upon the same differences that Le Page du Pratz noted in 1758 and that distinguished Rouquette from his fellow students at school. According to D'Abzac, "[l]es créoles de la Louisiane sont des français modifiés, au physique et au moral, par le climat, par le contact des anglo-saxons et surtout par l'institution de l'esclavage. Il est intéressant de savoir ce que sont devenus, sous cette triple action, les hommes de notre race" (1). For D'Abzac, who served as the French consul in New Orleans in the late nineteenth-century, Louisiana Creoles were too far removed from the French milieu, or "modifiés," to be able to be considered as French themselves. They were part of a new, American culture. Although he acknowledges their French roots, calling them "les hommes de notre race," in his view, they had become something different. Le Page du Pratz's observations, Rouquette's personal experiences, and D'Abzac's personal views together suggest a general French perception that Louisiana Creoles were not accepted as equally French. They imply that, ultimately, Creoles' American heritage defined them in French eyes, setting them apart. This perception was reversed, however, in Creoles' interactions with Anglo-Americans, who defined them in terms of their French roots.

1.3.2 Remaining French

Despite the fact that some Creole families had been established in North America for generations and could date their ancestors back to the first days of the French colony, Anglo-Americans did not generally consider them to be equally American. The Creoles' different

cultural origin and language kept the two groups separated after the 1803 union. Moreover, French Creoles no longer dominated society at that time. Unlike the period of Spanish control, following the Louisiana Purchase, Anglo-Americans controlled Louisiana society, and thus their norms were privileged. Benjamin Latrobe's 1819 observations of New Orleans confirm that the post-1803 influx of English speakers overpowered the Creole way of life: "Americans are pouring in daily, not in families, but in large bodies. In a few years therefore, [New Orleans] will be an American town. What is good and bad in the French manners, & opinions must give way, & the American notions of right & wrong, of convenience & inconvenience will take their place" (*Impressions* 35). Latrobe, an Englishman, highlights the different roles that the two groups performed in New Orleans society, referring to them as "American" and "French." Notably, Latrobe adopts an Anglo-American perspective and does not describe the francophone citizens as Americans or even Creoles; instead they are "French." Presumably because Creoles did not fit the Anglo-American norm, Latrobe could not identify them as Americans.

While a number of Creoles remained loyal to France following the regime change in 1768, at the same time they had also established an American cultural heritage. In fact, by the early nineteenth century, many Creoles valued the American component of their identity. As in other parts of the United States, being native-born in America was a highly esteemed quality in nineteenth-century Louisiana culture (Hirsch 139-41). In fact, according to Alcée Fortier it is in these terms that Creoles were able to accept the United States (*Studies* 3). In his opinion, no matter how important their French identity was to them, he and his fellow Creoles were also connected by birth to the larger American context, including the United States. Although their native language was not English, Fortier and those sharing his perspective felt the same pride of

belonging to America that citizens in the rest of the United States did. Fortier explains his personal view that,

the Louisianians cherished the language of their ancestors, and for a long time did not care about learning English. [However,] [t]hey were not less Americans in the sense of nationality, for did not the Roman provinces defend the Republic and the Empire as well as Italy herself? Are the Swiss less patriotic because there are four different languages spoken in their country? Are not the Catalans as jealous of the honor of Spain as the Castilians themselves? (*Studies* 3)

Fortier's explanation demonstrates his perception that Creoles were proud of being Americans and that they believed that they were a vital component of the United States, alongside their anglophone counterparts. Fortier is not alone in having this view. Adrien Rouquette likewise indicates his sense of his own Americanness by allying his poetry with that of Anglo-American authors. He writes in his preface to his collection of poetry entitled *Les Savanes*: "Pour peindre l'Amérique avec une touché de vérité...il fallait donc des enfants né du sol ; il fallait des Américains...une voix du Midi, une voix symphique de la Louisiane, devait répondre à toutes ces voix fraternelles du Nord et de l'Orient" (3-4, 11-12). Indeed, Creoles had no reason to consider themselves less "American" than the Anglo-Americans. Nevertheless, Creoles' origins distinguished them from other Americans who called them to perform a foreign role in their own country. According to the dominant social structure, Creoles were to be interpellated to French identities.

The first Anglo-American Governor of Louisiana, William C. C. Claiborne, provides an example of how Americans called Creoles to a social performance as French in one of his letter reports from 1804. He writes: "A *Fracas* also took place at a Public Ball, on Thursday last,

which altho' it arose from trifling causes, has occasioned some warmth. It originated in a contest between some young Americans and Frenchmen, whether the American or French Dances should have a preference" (331).²⁷ In this letter, Claiborne refers to the francophone residents of New Orleans as "Frenchmen," in direct contrast to the "Americans" who were of anglophone origin. The Creoles' dancing inclinations, not matching those of the anglophones, highlighted their cultural difference. From the Anglo-American point of view, the Creoles' French-influenced preferences defined them. While Claiborne's single example only represents the social context and an apparently isolated event that was not overly significant in political terms, it reflects the general tension pervading Louisiana society.

The same cultural clash that became evident in social settings came to affect more important political matters as well. This is particularly apparent during the first decade of American domination of Louisiana, when the United States was engaged in the War of 1812 with Great Britain. This conflict drastically affected Creole-Anglo relations in Louisiana. As historian Robert Remini explains, New Orleans played a major part in this war, logistically. Following his victories at Pensacola and Mobile, American General Andrew Jackson needed to stand his ground in New Orleans to maintain the United States' control in the Gulf South (Remini 18-24). More importantly, this was a time for Creoles to prove their allegiance to the United States. Remini points out that many of the United States generals did not expect Creoles to remain loyal to their new government (16). Yet in the battle of New Orleans, Creoles, Anglo-Americans, and even foreign French living in the city all joined under Jackson to overthrow the British forces (Gayarré 4:580). More remarkable is that those Frenchmen who were not citizens but who merely resided in New Orleans could have escaped military duties if they wished. Instead, many of them chose to fight. As Charles Gayarré describes in his account of the battle,

²⁷ Fortier gives a more detailed account of the ballroom conflict in his *History of Louisiana* (2:290-91).

“they had ceased to be Frenchmen; they had scorned to claim themselves aliens in order to avoid bearing arms; they had become Americans to fight the veterans of Wellington” (4:580). Instead of maintaining any cultural or national distinctions, these groups all joined together and fought off the British. When the news of the United States’ victory over Britain came out, politician Charles J. Ingersoll proclaimed, “[w]ho is not proud to feel himself an American,” a rhetorical question which captures the sentiment of the soldiers in Louisiana (Remini 194).

Despite their victory, Jackson was suspicious of the French volunteers among his soldiers. Gayarré explains that, “[a] number of them obtained certificates from Tousard [the French Consul] as to their national character, which they presented to General Jackson by whom they were countersigned and the bearers permitted to be discharged. But, in a few days, so many of these certificates were issued, that Jackson suspected them of being improperly granted by Tousard” (4:580). Disregarding their efforts, and the legal fact that they were not citizens and therefore not compelled to military duties, Jackson ordered all French subjects expelled from the city as punishment (Gayarré 4:580; Fortier, *History* 3:150-75; Martin 382-415). As the certificates essentially affirmed French loyalty to the United States, Jackson’s move can be interpreted as an interpellation of their foreign identity, undermining any cultural rapprochement.²⁸ The French were forced to travel to Baton Rouge and exiled from New Orleans (Brand 290, Gayarré 4:581). This dealt a strong blow to Anglo-American relations with their francophone compatriots.

²⁸ Historian H.W. Brand gives the alternate point of view in his 2005 biography of Andrew Jackson: “Some French nationals devised a scheme by which they appealed to the French consul in the city, who furnished documents declaring their freedom. French-speaking American citizens caught on to the game, and claiming French citizenship, were similarly rewarded” (289). This account opens up another perspective that reveals the instability of Creole identity and the cultural tensions following the Louisiana Purchase.

Not only were the deported French outraged, Creoles felt the threat of discrimination as well.²⁹ To Jackson, evidently, French loyalty to America was less than that of their anglophone counterparts, suggesting his view that they could not be equally American. One Creole, Senator Louis Louaillier, was public about the outrage and discrimination he felt from Jackson's suspicions and the action he took against the French soldiers. Louaillier wrote an appeal against Andrew Jackson's deportation of the French soldiers which was published in a newspaper. He was subsequently imprisoned (Gayarré 4:586-608; Fortier, *History* 3:152-60; Martin 383-407). Although Louaillier was released from prison shortly after his arrest, this move was taken seriously by the majority of the Creole population. According to Gayarré,

the cry rose that Jackson hated the French; that he had never treated them with proper consideration; that he had always kept aloof from the Creole and French population, whose language he did not understand; that he had, notwithstanding his compliments and honeyed words dictated by policy, entertained against them the most insulting suspicions; that, on his arrival, he had systematically surrounded himself with the "new-comers" in the State, and taken as his confidential advisers men who were notorious for their prejudices against the old population. (4:585-6)

In this way Jackson demonstrated to Creoles that he could not look beyond origins or language and see fellow Americans. His lack of confidence in the French residents spoke volumes to Creoles, who felt the snub as well, as Gayarré's account reveals. Coupled with Governor Claiborne's account of the tensions a few years earlier, General Jackson's reaction and the fallout from it underscore that the Creole population both felt and was perceived to be foreign.

²⁹ Gayarré's own antagonistic perspective in relating this episode decades after the fact reveals the extent and the lasting effects of such discrimination. He writes: "The saving of New Orleans, if not due to the French, was certainly not due to the capacity of General Jackson, but to the arrant stupidity of the British" (4:582).

Creoles were caught in the middle of two identities. Unable to belong wholly to either of the social realms associated with their hybrid culture, they were perpetually in-between. Their identity was out of their control and, furthermore, a source of emotional distress, as we saw with Rouquette and the Creoles who fought for General Jackson. Their inability to integrate into a new American-dominated society in particular points to complications in the larger state of social affairs in New Orleans. In fact, fitting in was difficult and emotionally trying for many groups living in the city, not only Creoles. For example, while Creoles could not be Americans, Americans faced a similar exclusion by Louisiana Creoles.

The reversal of Anglo-American exclusionary culture comes to light in particular in the situation of writer George Washington Cable. Cable was not a francophone. His family was of German heritage and came to Louisiana from Virginia. Nevertheless, Cable was born in New Orleans and identified with Louisiana culture (Ladd 40). Cable's different heritage, as well as his views on race, however, prevented many prominent Creoles in the nineteenth century such as Charles Gayarré and Adrien Rouquette from recognizing him as one of their own (Thompson 121-6).³⁰ As a result, Cable was not accepted as a Creole and, moreover, his works faced constant attacks for being *faux-louisianais*. Shirley Thompson explains that Cable's literary conflict with Creoles was "about the right to claim New Orleans as home," noting that Cable "[came] up short" (310). Following the publication of his 1880 novel, *The Grandissimes*, "[Creoles] continued to regard [Cable's work] as a public insult and an arraignment of their whole civilization" (Tinker, *Creole* 216). Yet this situation was just as alienating for Cable as

³⁰ Virginia Dominguez explains the protocol for such an identification: "Anglo-American, Louisiana-born children were born into the Creole/American conflict. Although usage allowed it, few children of Anglo-American parents seem to have identified themselves openly as Creole. Classification as Creole had social-cultural connotations that were incompatible with classification as American. In general, though not universally, persons identified as Creole spoke French and identified with French culture. So it was something of an anomaly to hear an American referred to as Creole" (125).

the one that affected his francophone counterparts in the reverse. He explains his hurt feelings at being excluded, proclaiming that, “[i]t was easy for Louisianians to be Americans; but to let Americans be Louisianians!—there was the rub” (*Creoles* 217). Cable’s sense of this “rub” indicates his upset at not being allowed to fit into Creole society, although it seems he only saw his own exclusion at this time. In spite of not fitting in with the Creoles, or indeed because of it, Cable continually published works that were set in Louisiana and featured Creole characters; among his most well-known are *Old Creole Days* (1879) and *The Grandissimes* (1880). As nineteenth-century critics and those afterward reveal, Cable’s identity was an ever-present factor in his writing.³¹ Cable’s more well-known cultural clash and his resulting literary productivity suggests that similar tensions were acting upon his contemporary Alfred Mercier’s writing. Just as Cable’s problematic cultural situation influenced his work, Alfred Mercier’s sense of his hybrid Creole identity may well have motivated his writing.

1.4 Alfred Mercier and Perceptions of Cultural Identity

Nineteenth-century Creole author Alfred Mercier’s personal reflections on the cultural conflict are limited and do not include many references to his own struggles. Moreover, in the few instances where he does discuss Creole culture, he approaches it in general terms, for example in his *Biographie de Pierre Soulé*.³² Yet identity, particularly cultural identity, did, in fact, interest him, and he devotes many pages in his journals, pamphlets, and novels to studies of

³¹ Adrien Rouquette’s *Aboo and Caboo* focuses in large part on Cable’s Anglo-American heritage while Edward Tinker and Barbara Ladd both comment on Cable’s identity issues in their criticisms of his work. See Tinker, *Creole City* 208-222; and Ladd, *Nationalism and the Color Line in George W. Cable, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner* 40-42. Chapter Four also provides a closer look at Cable’s conflict with the Creoles.

³² Pierre Soulé emigrated to Louisiana after being exiled from France on suspicion of conspiring against the Bourbons. In 1828, he married Alfred Mercier’s sister, Armantine, and worked as a lawyer and in politics, eventually becoming a Senator. He also tutored several of New Orleans’ elite in law, including Napoleon Bonaparte’s nephew, Achilles Murat. From 1853-1855 he served as the U.S. Minister to Spain. He is known for his work on the Ostend Manifesto and for his support of the Confederacy during the Civil War. He tutored Mercier as a youth and they developed a life-long relationship. See Arthur Freeman, “The Early Career of Pierre Soulé,” and Alfred Mercier, *Biographie de Pierre Soulé, sénateur à Washington*.

culture. Mercier often wrote about the elements of community that he thought tied individuals together.³³ These include similar accents and linguistic patterns, linked heritages, and resemblances between different generations, simply put, culture or what Edward Said terms, “all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms” (*Culture* xii).

Although Mercier did not write extensively about his personal struggles with Creole hybridity, some of his texts demonstrate that he did feel a cultural disconnect. In particular, he notes that the well-to-do Creoles’ practice of sending their children abroad to France for their education was culturally alienating. He writes: “Pensez-y! huit années de collège [sic], quatre ou cinq ans de droit ou de médecine, loin du sol natal et de ceux que l’on aime: de là une foule de conséquences dignes d’attention” (*Biographie* 53). Although he does not point to himself specifically here, like other Creole youths of his class, he attended school in France.³⁴ In fact, when Mercier returned home to New Orleans after completing his education in 1836, he had already spent nearly half of his life in Paris, separated from his family and Louisiana culture (Hamel, *Introduction* 8). Although he apparently still considered Louisiana to be his “*sol natal*,” it is clear that he was torn by his dual allegiances. In this section, a look at some of Mercier’s writings on culture outside of Louisiana utilizing the lenses of language and shared customs will allow us further access to his thoughts on his questions of identity and belonging and his perception of the fixed boundaries of culture that influence these concepts.

³³ Texts in which Mercier writes about such elements range from his novels, including *L’Habitation Saint-Ybars*, *Lidia*, and *Le Fou de Palerme*, his personal journals, and his articles in the *Comptes Rendus de L’Athenée Louisianais*.

³⁴ In 1830, Mercier left home and traveled to France to join his elder brother, Armand, at the collège Louis-le-Grand in Paris (Robertson 35-6).

1.4.1 Language

Language is one of the elements of cultural identity that Mercier discusses most frequently. In fact, from his pamphlets and articles to his fictional works, language is an almost ever-present element in his cultural considerations. While his linguistic interests include grammatical analyses and other technical approaches, more often he presents languages in terms of the cultural groups with which they are associated. His emphasis on accents in particular points to his view that they are building blocks of culture. Mercier's observations hinge on the idea that certain cultures are connected to certain ways of speaking. Among the many instances that appear throughout his body of work, we look at two typical examples here. The first is included in his article on culture in the Engadin valley, and the second is featured in his portrait of a German travel companion. Both of the examples focus on language in terms of a particular cultural identity and reflect the author's view that language and culture are interconnected with the limits of former influencing the borders of the latter.

In 1878, Mercier published an article entitled "L'Engadine" in *Comptes Rendus de l'Athénée Louisianais*. The article is a study of the history, geography, and people of the Engadin valley in southern Switzerland. He begins with a brief description of the language of the region: "La langue de l'Engadine est le *romantsch* ou *ladin*. Ce n'est pas un patois, mais bien en idiome *suï generis* aussi ancien que le français ou l'allemand. Elle paraît dériver de trois sources, du celte, de l'étrusque et du latin" (181). Having explained the language on a basic level, Mercier moves on to reflect upon its cultural significance. He forms his study of the language in terms that restrict cultural identity in the Engadin valley. The report that follows incorporates an explanation of the variation in accent to seemingly draw borders around what belongs in the Engadin culture: "Dans la Haute Engadine l'accent est très doux ; il tient le milieu

entre l'espagnol et l'italien" (181). As Mercier details the range of accent in the region, he begins to build corresponding borders around the culture. Where the Romantsch accent grows less noticeable, as in Upper Engadin, he connects the language with other cultures such as Spanish and Italian. As the language becomes less distinctive, then, so does the culture. Essentially, Mercier delineates the cultural range of this region using his understanding of the limits of language. In his account, the linguistic boundaries of the area appear to be equated with its cultural limits.

Further on in the article, Mercier attempts to put down in writing his aural experience of Romantsch in the Engadin valley. He gives as his example a popular expression in *engadinoise* culture. He first gives the French translation of the original wording: "Les montagnes restent immobiles, mais les gens se rencontrent" (181). He then goes on to present the original version, explaining that "[q]uand un engadinois le cite, on croirait qu'il parle le dialecte catalan : 'Las muntagnes staun salda, ma la glied s'incuntran'" (181). Mercier makes the language more accessible and the cultural difference it signals more accessible to his readers in Louisiana by including it in the text. His description, however, sets a standard that limits the range of pronunciations that can be included in his understanding of the Engadin inhabitants' cultural identity. By doing this, he is also delineating boundaries for the language of the *engadinois*. By writing it down he effectively fixes a rendition of the Romantsch accent, making it unchangeable. Being a part of the Engadin valley culture, in Mercier's assessment involves engaging in certain patterns and using this particular language is one of them. For Mercier, then, Romantsch is a sign pointing to a certain identity.

The second example demonstrating Mercier's view of the role of language in cultural identity comes from his personal journals. In June of 1879, Mercier set out on a trip to Europe

and Africa. During the Atlantic crossing by steam boat, he made the acquaintance of a young Alsatian woman whom he describes as “parleuse,” “expansive,” and “bavarde” (Robertson 120, 122).³⁵ What was most striking to him, however, was her strong German accent when she spoke in French. He explains: “J’ai rarement entendu l’accent allemand plus prononcé que dans sa bouche” (Robertson 120). From this declaration it becomes evident that Mercier is already beginning to visualize this woman’s cultural identity through his interpretation of her accent. Even though she is rooted in a liminal space with contested national belonging, Alsace, Mercier overrides that question. Because of her particular way of speaking, Mercier is able to envision and then interpellate her to a specific cultural identity: German.

Mercier goes on to transcribe how the woman speaks phonetically in his journal. He records every aspect of her German pronunciation in detail. His representation is based on their conversations, including the first few words they exchanged:

Ah! Ce ne vut pas long, dit-elle; l’avvaire de quatre churs. Che m’égappai sans rien tire à bersonne. Mais chen ai assez di Texas et té relichieuses. Cé sont des goguines ; che les ai blantées là, che suis bartie de Houston sans dampour ni drompette. Mais quand che suis arifée à New York, che me suis abergue que les relichieuses n’afaiant mis que la moidié té mon linche et té mes betites avaires tans mes malles.” (Robertson 120-121)³⁶

This is a typical sample of the meticulous notes Mercier took of the German woman’s strong accent. Throughout the rest of the crossing, Mercier continued to document everything she said to him in a similar fashion, detailing her accented French. His thorough attention to her speech

³⁵ Alsace was not French in 1879 as a result of having been annexed to the German Empire as part of the peace agreements that concluded the Franco-Prussian war (Howard 449).

³⁶ “Ah! Ce ne fut pas long, dit-elle; l’affaire de quatre jours. Je m’échappai sans rien dire à personne, mais j’en ai assez du Texas et des religieuses. Ce sont des coquines ; je les ai plantées là, je suis partie de Houston sans tambour ni trompette, mais quand je suis arrivée à New York je me suis aperçue que les religieuses n’avaient mis que la moitié de mon linge et de mes petites affaires dans mes malles” (Robertson 121).

coupled with his continual referrals to her cultural heritage indicates his interest in the way she speaks in terms of her performance of culture. Here again, Mercier draws boundaries around German culture affirming his perception of her identity. His understanding that identifying as German is coupled with this accent in French effectively calls her to a cultural role. Moreover, Mercier's documentation of the woman's accent sets down a linguistic standard; this type of pronunciation becomes a frame for his expectations of individuals who can be identified as German. In his observations of the woman, then, Mercier again links language and culture, inscribing Alsace and its people within the boundaries of German culture.

Mercier's studies in these two instances evidence his opinion that the use of a particular language or accent indicates belonging to a corresponding culture. Likewise, its members, according to his thought process, can be expected to speak a certain language or with an accent. Mercier's conception of the link between language and culture as exhibited in his nonfiction writings constructs a complex framework for approaching the author's understanding of the restrictions that affect his own cultural identity. As we have already seen, leading American and French perceptions in the nineteenth-century formed cultural boundaries restricting Mercier's and other Creoles' ability to define themselves and that perpetually assigned them to social roles as outsiders. The examples included in this section suggest that Mercier was aware of these boundaries delimiting cultural identity. Yet while his personal experience with such restrictions serves as a motivation to contest them in his fiction, here, he problematically imposes similar limitations on others. Apparently, his personal experiences overwhelm his awareness of the universality of his situation. There are other instances in Mercier's corpus of works where culture and language come together such as in his *Étude sur la langue créole en Louisiane* and his pamphlet, *Du panlatinisme. Nécessité d'une alliance entre la France et la Confédération du*

Sud. The two examples presented here, however, highlight Mercier's conception of language as an important element in defining culture while also demonstrating the broad scope of his vision and integrating real-life examples. For him, shared languages, accents, and speech patterns can indicate a common identity.

1.4.2 Shared Customs

In addition to language, Mercier considers the shared customs and affinities of the members of a particular cultural group to be an important element of their identity. Just as similar accents can indicate a shared identity, so can their traditions, preferences, and principles. For him, these elements define a culture's borders in the same way that language does. In his writings Mercier makes a connection between such shared traits and cultural identity. Two typical examples demonstrate Mercier's perception that certain cultures are bound together by their members' similar ways of thinking, preferences, and habits. One is from his biography of the politician Pierre Soulé, and the other is drawn from his novel, *Lidia*.

In his 1848 *Biographie de Pierre Soulé*, Mercier gives the personal history of his brother-in-law and mentor who had, at the time it was written, recently been elected a Louisiana Senator. Straightaway, Mercier takes care to note Soulé's origins, referring to him as, "l'homme du midi, l'enfant du soleil" (19). This clarification functions as more than a nostalgic look back at his roots. By specifying where Soulé is from, Mercier is seemingly also implying what sort of a person he is. He links Soulé's character to what he understands to be the general tendencies of the population in the Midi, or southern France. He explains: "Le Midi fut toujours adorateur du son, de la forme et de la couleur, Au Nord appartient l'esprit d'examen, d'analyse : le Nord dissèque, le Midi crée" (89). In the author's view, Soulé's personality is not unique. Rather, it is a sign of his cultural belonging. Being from a particular place, then, denotes a particular set of

personality traits. All of those originating in the same culture possess the same or similar qualities, and people in the Midi are, in Mercier's depiction, linked together by their shared inclination towards creativity. In essence, then, simply by indicating where he comes from, Mercier interpellates Soulé to a performance of identity. Mercier further emphasizes his point by contrasting the Midi with the North and connecting a certain set of traits to the culture that is established there. For Mercier, the different culture that exists in the Midi is clear. As he sees it, this cultural group is bound and identified by its shared habits and preferences.

Mercier's 1873 novel, *Lidia*, provides our second example of his understanding of the connection between resemblance and shared cultural identity. Once again, Mercier's text reflects the author's idea that individuals who originate and are identified in the same culture possess the same or similar personality traits. In *Lidia*, Mercier has one of his characters use her cultural identity as a method of affirming her disposition and convictions. The novel is set in France and is about a young girl, Lidia, who struggles with corrupt religion during her stay in a convent while her mother is obligated to travel abroad. The scene in which this declaration is made takes place in the convent where the main character is staying. Lidia, described as a young Sicilian girl, is talking with a priest, a Lombard from Milan, about a conflict between herself and the Mother Superior of the convent. As she makes clear her intention of defending herself, however, she also proclaims her cultural identity. Lidia explains to the priest: "Tu sauras que dans l'histoire de notre pays, les Castrovillari sont célèbres pour n'avoir *jamais fait une promesse ou une menace sans la mettre à exécution*...[Je suis] sicilienne de caractère, Or je te préviens que si quelqu'un d'entre vous ose mettre la main sur la fille de Castrovillari, je lui plonge ce couteau dans le cœur" (*Lidia* 137). The author proves Lidia's sense of honor and her determination by asserting her cultural identity. This text reveals Mercier's opinion that Sicilians are determined

and protective and that they keep their promises. His intentional connection between Lidia's culture and personality demonstrates her conformation to the norm for her culture. The description of her particular beliefs and convictions connect her to Sicilian culture, especially her family, the Castrovillari. In this sense, her behavior acts as a proof of her culture and vice versa, demonstrating that Mercier's conception of culture is also founded upon the notion of a shared system of principles and inclinations.

Mercier was aware of different cultural identities, and he had an active interest in their performance and interpretation. By examining these examples of his depictions of identity and his ability to assign others within a cultural role, readers are able to form an understanding of his conceptions of the boundaries of culture and extend it to assert his awareness of Creole culture and the issues with belonging affecting that group. Although he does not write extensively about his personal struggles with the duality of Creole identity, his awareness of identity as set and inflexible and his own tendency towards generalization indicate that he was not ignorant of its limitations and, thus, the complex consequences that could affect those with hybrid backgrounds, like himself. Indeed, these portraits function as distancing ways by which he can ultimately examine his own identity. In this sense, his writing becomes a process of locating himself.

1.5 Narrating Hybrid Creole Identity

This chapter establishes a foundation for analysis of Mercier's fictional texts *Johnelle* and *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*. By examining how social identity is formed, the difficulties of hybridity, and in what ways Creole identity is assigned and performed, we build a sense of the complications that Mercier dealt with as a Creole. In addition, his own portrayals of members of cultures outside of Louisiana serve as evidence of his personal awareness of the restrictions that

interpellation can place on individuals' identities, a key issue in nineteenth-century Louisiana's cultural clash.

Judith Butler's framework guides us to the understanding that the cultural identity that an individual adopts is not necessarily the result of a personal choice. Rather, it is primarily influenced by the dominant social group and their norms. Creoles, in France or in Louisiana, not being in the majority, are thus called to roles based on those cultures' norms rather than their own. Therefore, instead of being able to belong to American or French culture, members of this group are interpellated into an outsider's role. Mercier's examinations of his Alsatian travel companion's language and Pierre Soulé's link to the Midi, for example, showcase his awareness of identity. Yet his depictions, which effectively interpellate them into inflexible cultural categories, coupled with the indeterminacy of his own identity send a mixed message. While these portraits reveal the author's understanding of the factors that can affect cultural belonging, their problematic relation to his own situation parallels the precarious positioning of Louisiana's Creole culture.

In the chapters that follow, we examine how Mercier writes about Creole cultural instability in his literary works. He negotiates complex racial identities, mixed heritages, language, and gender roles, all of which reflect back onto his own struggle to negotiate his sense of his world and his culture. Mercier's novels suggest the articulation of a hybrid identity that is neither French nor American but a multicultural construct that integrates elements of both, contradicting the practice of identifying Creoles solely as either French or American. His texts contest a singular definition of culture in Creole Louisiana. Instead, they assert its multiculturalism, laying a foundation for a rapprochement with other Creole communities as well as postcolonial societies.

Taking into account Trinh Minh-ha's assertion that "by writing, one situates oneself," we can see that Mercier's writing serves as a way to engage with questions of cultural identity. Indeed, by narrating Louisiana's Creole world, Mercier narrates himself. It allows him to contest the authority of the Anglo-American and French norms that define him and his compatriots as "other." As a result, Mercier characters become an embodiment of his Creole culture. Studying his texts and the confusion of identity that they reveal opens a dialog with French and Anglo-American culture. Ultimately, Mercier leads his readers to a deepened understanding of what it means to be Creole in Louisiana. Moreover, by examining his novels in this context, we can expand our understanding of Louisiana's relationship to the rest of the francophone world and North America.

CHAPTER 2. UNRULY BODIES: REORDERING RACIAL IDENTITIES IN *L'HABITATION SAINT-YBARS*

The body is an important site in the study of identity. Bodies are inscribed with signs that can reflect the socially constructed categories of race, class, and sex.³⁷ F. James Davis confirms that racial identities especially are linked to the body and its appearance in his 1991 book, *Who is Black?* He explains that “the system of racial classification...is based on the measurement of visible traits of human anatomy” (19). Thus, one’s physicality can serve as a link to a certain race.³⁸ This connection plays a vital role in the social and cultural politics of nineteenth-century Creole Louisiana. In this polarized environment individuals who identified as white were privileged, while those whose bodies restricted them from that racial category were relegated to a more limited social role. Yet as Alfred Mercier demonstrates in his 1881 text, *L’Habitation Saint-Ybars*, relying on physical appearances alone to determine racial identity in Creole Louisiana is problematic. His characters illustrate the mixed-race reality underlying the racial dichotomy dominating that society, challenging the practice of defining race through the body. Ultimately Mercier’s depiction of race undermines the Creole social hierarchy that privileges individuals with unmixed, white heritage.

This chapter begins by briefly looking at the history of race relations in Louisiana, starting during the colonial period and moving through the nineteenth century. A multidimensional understanding of racial identity was established in the colonial era that was altered to a strict black/white dichotomy in the decades following the Louisiana Purchase due in part to the rise of the plantation system. Despite efforts to keep the races separate in the

³⁷ In *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts*, Andrew Edgar and Peter R. Sedgwick examine the body’s cultural significance and provide sources for further study (31-2).

³⁸ Davis goes on to explain that “*rac*es are categories of human beings based on average differences in physical traits that are transmitted by the genes not by blood. *Culture* is a shared pattern of behavior and beliefs that are learned and transmitted through social communication. An *ethnic group* is a group with a sense of cultural identity, such as Czech or Jewish Americans, but it may also be a racially distinct group” (18).

nineteenth century, however, mixed individuals whose black heritage was not evident could “pass” from one category to another, working around the social order. Moving on, we see that literary depictions of mixed-race individuals play a significant role in the political and cultural debates on interracial relations. Authors from the colonial era to the nineteenth century composed texts dealing with race that had real-life implications. These include Moreau de Saint-Méry, Victor Hugo, and Louisiana authors Victor Séjour and Sidonie de la Houssaye, as well as Alfred Mercier. Yet while numerous writers incorporate racial elements, Mercier’s approach in *L’Habitation Saint-Ybars* stands out. Many of his characters are mixed-race in some way, and rather than privileging their black or white heritage only, the author acknowledges a biracial identity. In this way he destabilizes the racial hierarchy rather than perpetuating it. Finally, we see that Mercier’s depictions of biracial characters go beyond issues of race to also offer insight on his personal vision of his culture. His negotiation of race can simultaneously be read as an attempt to situate Creole identity. Instead of fixing Louisiana’s Creole society in singular terms, Mercier redefines his world by asserting its hybridity.

2.1 Racial Identity and Interracial Relations in Creole Louisiana

Through much of Louisiana’s history since its founding as a French colony, a European center of power dominated society. Racial identities and their assigned social roles derived from a Eurocentric point of view. Indeed, colonial legislation identified Louisiana inhabitants of European descent as white, while those with African lineage were classified as black.³⁹ Because of widespread mixing during the colonial period, however, nonwhite identities in eighteenth-century Creole society developed to be far more varied than the single racial signifier of black could represent. In 1819, Benjamin Latrobe noted that there were “white men and women...black negroes & negresses...mulattoes...[and] quarteroons” (*Impressions* 22). Liminal

³⁹ The 1685 French *Code noir*, for example.

categories such as the mulattoes and quarteroons that Latrobe observed contested the prescribed social order. Following the economic rise of the plantation system in the nineteenth century, however, this multidimensionality was overpowered. Creole planters' reliance on slave labor motivated a reorganization of their society into two polarized groups.⁴⁰ Louisiana citizens who did not define themselves as white were collectively pigeonholed into a black racial identity at this time (Ingersoll 329-31). Yet the diversity of bodies challenged this new order. Indeed, despite attempts to enforce the black/white racial division in nineteenth-century Louisiana, the continuation of practices like passing reveal this binary structure to be only a veil over much more complex social workings and that the more varied racial order formed in colonial days was too firmly ingrained in society to be effectively suppressed.

2.1.1 Racial Mixing in the Colonial Era

Race played an important role early on in Louisiana society. Seventeenth-century French colonial policy made racial identity a legal matter. The *Code Noir* established racial categories of white and black and assigned different social roles to the members of each. The Eurocentric perspective of the *Code* privileged white French colonists while relegating blacks to subordinate roles as slaves. It also dictated the strict separation of the white and black racial groups (Chesnais 56). Yet the reality of life in early Louisiana contradicted the colonial agenda. As the colony struggled to establish itself, survival superseded the need to preserve white dominance, and interracial couples formed as a solution to the dwindling population (Hall 63). As a result, the rise of a mixed-race social group contested the binary system prescribed by the French colonial administration (Hall 63).

⁴⁰ Thomas N. Ingersoll details this reordering in *Mammon and Manon* and describes it as “an old regime made anew” (283-313).

Louis XIV's *Code Noir*, first issued in 1685 and again in 1724 with the intention of defining African slaves' position in French colonial society, delineates two main groups.⁴¹ It primarily refers to "*nos sujets*" and the "*esclaves nègres*" and goes on to identify the French subjects as white while referring to the African slaves as black. These two races were to occupy different roles in society, and they were not meant to mix. The 1724 version of the *Code* in particular sets a key point of this separation, forbidding marriage between members of different races: "Défendons à nos sujets blancs de l'un et l'autre sexe de contracter mariage avec les Noirs, à peine de punition et d'amende arbitraire ; et à tous curés, prêtres ou missionnaires séculiers ou réguliers, et même aux aumôniers de vaisseaux de les marier" (Chesnais 57). According to this rule, interracial marriages were prohibited and anyone caught participating in this act risked being punished.⁴² Thus, French colonial law strongly discouraged black Africans and white French subjects from interacting with those not of their own race. The harsh conditions of colonial life, however, made this separation nearly impossible to maintain in reality.

Despite the ban on interracial relations, sexual unions between members of different races were common in early Louisiana. For the sparse population of the struggling colony, survival took precedence over the fight for power and privilege. Immigration from France was limited in the eighteenth century; after an initial surge in the 1710s and 1720s, the population dwindled.⁴³ Moreover, the great majority of colonists were male. Because of the limited number of inhabitants and the lack of French females, mixed unions between French colonists and

⁴¹ Louis XIV's 1685 code applied to all of France's colonies, including Louisiana. In 1724, a separate code was issued in Louisiana exclusively. See Robert Chesnais, *L'Esclavage à la française: Le code noir (1685 et 1724)*.

⁴² In *Building the Devil's Empire*, Shannon Dawdy also notes that "[s]exual abuse of slaves, as well as concubinage, were explicitly outlawed" (303).

⁴³ Dawdy explains that, following the 1730s, "Louisiana saw no significant immigration from Europe or Africa until the beginning of the Spanish rule" (*Building* 7).

African slaves were necessary to the continued existence of the colony. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall explains that “[t]here were many more men than women among whites as well as blacks. Race mixture was common and widely accepted... The city’s early history involved a struggle for survival on the most elementary level. Desperation transcended race and status” (“Formation” 63).⁴⁴ Due to the limited population, the continued existence of the colony came to depend on mixing. Its inhabitants necessarily overruled the racial order that was prescribed by the colonial administration. Consequently, a new biracial population formed in the colony; as early as 1732, six individuals classified as *mulâtres* were counted in the New Orleans census (Spear 94-5).

The presence of mixed-race individuals in Louisiana society threw the binary racial order into question. On a foundational level, the new population ruptured the authority of the strict dichotomy merely by existing. Jack Yeager has described such forces as “[a] seemingly undefinable ‘third’... [that] disturbs binarity and creates crisis” (“Blurring” 221). A racial identity that was in between white and black challenged the validity of the *Code*’s racial order, simultaneously threatening the legitimacy of the dominance of one race over the other. In this way, according to Hall, the colonists’ interracial relations “undermine[d] the hierarchical ideals of the French colonial empire” (“Formation” 64). Confusion over how to categorize individuals of mixed-race and define their social role only threw the assignment of the master and slave social roles further into question. As many white slave-owners chose to free their children from their unions with black slave women, this situation became more complicated (Dominguez 24). Instead of simply “undermining” French ideals, the interracial unions which grew out of necessity in the eighteenth century eventually altered race in colonial Louisiana society beyond the scope of two primary categories of black and white (Dominguez 100).

⁴⁴ See also Spear 11, 17-20 and Dawdy, *Building 2*.

2.1.2 A Multidimensional Racial Order

The complications resulting from the white slave-owners' practice of freeing their mixed-race children helped to establish a legitimate third racial category in Louisiana. These free biracial individuals formed a new racial identity that came to be known as the *gens de couleur libres*, and they represented an important social group (McKinney 86). Virginia Dominguez explains that although the term *gens de couleur libres* at first appears to refer to a strictly legal differentiation, free black vs. enslaved black, the racial aspect of this emerging category was of vital importance to its development.⁴⁵ According to Dominguez, "the social processes that led to the emergence of free people of color – sexual unions between European settlers and African slaves and the manumission of their offspring – made it de facto a classification by ancestry. *Gens de couleur libres* became a near-synonym for offspring of mixed European and African unions" (24).⁴⁶ The term *gens de couleur libres*, then, designates a specifically mixed-race group, making it particularly noteworthy for its impact upon the dichotomy stipulated in the *Code Noir*. It reflects the racial evolution of Louisiana's colonial population. The adoption of racial terminology that reflected Louisiana's mixed reality further worked against the order prescribed by the *Code*. It also paved the way for the recognition of even more varied conceptions of racial identities. The prevalence of interracial unions in eighteenth-century Creole society powered the increasing diversification of racial terminology, forming new categories.

Colonial Louisiana and the diversity of the people inhabiting it were steadily growing and the two-race system of whites and blacks limited to the respective roles of "master" and "slave"

⁴⁵ In the *Code Noir* a free group, "*l'homme noir, affranchi ou libre*," is also described, but is rarely directly addressed excepting in reference to their interactions with slaves. This category is different from the *gens de couleur libres* in that it is not clearly linked to the racial mixing that Dominguez describes, but an individual's legal status.

⁴⁶ Moreau de Saint-Méry notes a similar development in Haiti in 1797, stating, "[c]'est le concubinage des Blancs avec les négresses, qui est la cause que les Mulâtres affranchis sont aussi nombreux" (107). See also Spear 92.

was inadequate. The new category served as proof of this evolution. During the course of French rule and until the end Spanish domination, interracial individuals grew to be deeply established in Louisiana's social convention, particularly in New Orleans. In fact, by the time the colony was turned over to Spanish control in 1769, this racial classification was already becoming more widely-accepted. In Spanish Governor Alejandro O'Reilly's census of that year, the *gens de couleur libres* were counted separately from the *Noirs*. While this category was not comparable in size to the others at this time – there were only 99 *gens de couleur libres* compared with 1,288 black slaves and 1,803 whites – they were documented as a separate racial group nonetheless (Dominguez 100).⁴⁷ Following the wider recognition of this category, racial identities continued to expand beyond simply black and white. The *gens de couleur libres* only marked the beginning of modifications to the social order as a result of the interracial unions during the eighteenth century.

As France's colonies, as well as those of other European countries, continued to develop, contemporary travelers and intellectuals adopted an array of new racial categories in an attempt to identify their diverse inhabitants. Edward Long, Cornelius de Pauw, Hilliard d'Auberteuil, and Moreau de Saint-Méry are prominent examples of authors whose texts incorporate new terminology reflecting individuals' mixed-race backgrounds.⁴⁸ These included *mulâtre*, *quarteron*, and *octoroon*, indicating one half, one quarter, and one-eighth African ancestry, respectively. The terms *mulâtre* and *quarteron*, in particular, came to be widely used throughout

⁴⁷ While un-mixed manumitted slaves eventually joined their ranks as well, what is important to note here is that the origins of the category are in the rising population of interracial individuals.

⁴⁸ Long, *History of Jamaica* (1774), De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains, ou Mémoires intéressants pour servir à l'Histoire de l'Espèce Humaine. Avec une Dissertation sur l'Amérique & les Américains* (1771), D'Auberteuil, *Considérations sur l'état présent de la colonie française de Saint-Domingue* (1776), Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue* (1789).

Louisiana.⁴⁹ While these new racial categories may reflect a desire to solidify racial segregation, at the same time, they also opened up more flexible social roles. For example, Jennifer Spear puts forward that *mulâtres* in New Orleans were often more likely to be free, explaining that “[m]ore than two-thirds of the free people of African ancestry were identified as mulâtres” (92).⁵⁰ In addition, individuals with an eighth of black ancestry could be recognized as white. Thomas Ingersoll notes the social custom that “if a quadroon, the grandchild of a Negro, had a daughter by a white man, the children of that daughter by a white man would be white” (329). Ingersoll’s and Spear’s examples reflect that as social identities became more accommodating of diversity, breaking down the racial binary, people of color’s social function became more liminal as they straddled the roles of both races. The development of new racial norms and customs worked against the polarization of the *Code Noir* until the end of the eighteenth century, when the population faced a reordering of the racial categories.

Following the Louisiana Purchase, Creole society began a process of racial reformation which was spurred in large part by the economic success of the plantation system (Christian 152). Despite the necessary adaptability of social boundaries during the first hundred years of Creole Louisiana’s history, new conceptions of the racial hierarchy and its importance motivated a reworking of the well-established multidimensionality into a restrictive binary structure (Ingersoll 327-9).

2.1.3 Race, Slavery, and the Plantation System in the Nineteenth Century

At the close of the eighteenth century and in the era following the Louisiana Purchase, plantations in Louisiana began to be economically successful (Christian 152). Plantations were

⁴⁹ Although the term “octoroon” was known in New Orleans and could be used in that social context, mixed race individuals often “passed” to a white racial identity if they had an eighth African ancestry or less (Ingersoll 329).

⁵⁰ Spear goes on to note the possibility that women given their freedom were more likely to be considered to be of mixed-race ancestry, suggesting a link between their freedom and a perception of European heritage.

dependent upon slave labor and so, as their profits began to rise, the importance of slavery did as well. While slaves had been used in Louisiana since the eighteenth century, the new economic growth stimulated a startling expansion of the practice. Individuals of African descent were increasingly put to work laboring on plantations producing cotton, sugar, and tobacco.⁵¹ Ollie Gary Christian explains that in the nineteenth century, “[t]he production of sugar cane and tobacco increased the number of slaves and sugar and tobacco producing plantations in Louisiana” (152). The horror of this situation and the inhumane conditions in which slaves were forced to live goes without saying.⁵² In France, for example, First Consul Napoléon Bonaparte’s 1802 *Loi relative à la traite des noirs et au régime des colonies* reestablished the black code, reinstating slavery and implementing violent measures for regulating race relations: “à peine de punition corporelle, qui ne pourra être moindre que du fouet et de la fleur de Lys, et en cas de fréquentes récidives et autres circonstances aggravantes, pourront être punis de mort” (Castaldo 61-2).⁵³ In order to combat abolitionists’ growing arguments against slavery and keep their financial interests safe, plantation owners in Louisiana attempted to justify the practice (Ingersoll 329-32). Their arguments worked towards keeping individuals of African origin enslaved; the success of the plantation economy depended upon it. According to Ingersoll, “[t]he planters’ most pressing goal was to reduce dramatically the number of emancipations” (327). The new discourse focused on a supposed “natural” racial order that emphasized the physical differences between blacks and whites and supported a racial re-categorizing of bodies in Louisiana.

The planters’ stance on race relations worked to separate the European and African populations which had previously blended together. Unlike the multi-layered colonial society

⁵¹ According to Ollie Gary Christian, “Louisiana’s plantation economy was highly diversified” (152).

⁵² Herbert S. Klein and Peter Kolchin discuss slavery and its consequences extensively in their works *The Atlantic Slave Trade* and *American Slavery*, respectively.

⁵³ Louisiana, having been traded back to France by the Spanish in 1800 under the Treaty of San Ildefonso, was included in the territories affected by this development (Eakin 151).

that Gwendolyn Midlo Hall outlines, the races became polarized in the nineteenth century. During the eighteenth century, the French colonists overturned racial segregation out of necessity. At this point, however, motivated by financial success and economic growth, they accepted and even promoted the subjugation of their counterparts of African origin. Ingersoll points out that “[t]o maintain racial slavery, henceforth the assumed biological line between whites and blacks had to be patrolled more strictly or the logic of race would collapse” (335). This change occurred as plantation owners came to rely absolutely on slave labor. As Daniel Rasmussen confirms, in order to protect their case for the enslavement of blacks, planters played on notions of the physical differences between blacks and whites and argued to keep them separated as the *Code Noir* had stipulated previously.

A principal myth that planters adopted to justify their use of slave labor posited that blacks were better suited physically to the hard labor in Louisiana’s intense climate than whites. Daniel Rasmussen outlines in *American Uprising* that “the planters used the very strangeness of the land -- with its heat and disease and wild, uncontrollable river -- to justify the mass importation and forced labor of African slaves. [Planter Jean] Destrehan saw Africans as uniquely matched to the hot weather and tough work” (17). Rasmussen quotes Destrehan’s reasoning for his support of black slave labor; he explains that “the necessity of employing African laborers...arises from the climate and the species of cultivation pursued in warm latitudes” (17). For him, the physical differences between whites and blacks pointed to inherently different capacities for labor, which he found to be particularly relevant in the intense climate of South Louisiana. Destrehan further describes his slaves as “those whose natural constitution and habits of labor enable them to resist the combined effects of deleterious moisture and a degree of heat intolerable to whites” (17). The planter’s argument centers on the notion

that black slaves were “better suited” to plantation work than whites.⁵⁴ This explanation, then, attempted to link slavery to certain bodies and explain it as their natural state. By organizing their argument around the physical implications of one’s racial heritage, planters like Destrehan forced a reorganization of the social order to separate between those who had African ancestry and those who did not.

The planters constituted a powerful force on social reorganization, but they were not the only group influencing nineteenth-century Creole society. Shirley Thompson also outlines the growing Anglo presence that coincided with the rise of the plantation system as a factor in this re-ordering. She argues that “Americanization has functioned as a ‘grim reaper,’ forcing a vibrant (Creole) ethic of irrepressible cultural mixture to retreat within a stultifying Anglo-American racial and moral binarism” (7). The influx of Anglo-American values alongside the increasingly dominant plantation system effected a reordering of the racial hierarchy from that of colonial days, suppressing the variety of racial categories that had developed during that time and resurrecting a binary racial order that resembled that of the *Code Noir*. Yet as Daniel Rasmussen’s work suggests, in order to support the assertion that the black race was “naturally suited” for slavery, all of those with black heritage would have to be affected by it, even individuals whose heritage was mixed. To force society to fit a racial binary, then, any amount of black ancestry had to be enough to be identified as black.

2.1.4 Reordering Race and the “One Drop Rule”

The changes in Creole society – the rise of the plantation system along with the influx of Anglo-Americans – helped to motivate a return to a binary social order that segregated the races and to solidify the master-slave protocol. Biracial individuals, however, faced a more

⁵⁴ Denis Diderot anticipated the nineteenth-century planters’ argument in his *Encyclopédie*. He explains his view of Africans “as ‘by nature vigorous’ and therefore better suited for work in ‘the excessive heart of the torrid zone’ than Europeans” (Spear 77).

complicated reordering of their racial identity in the efforts to protect this dichotomy. Rather than continuing to acknowledge the different groups engendered by interracial mixing, mixed-race people were identified only by their black heritage (Ingersoll 329-30). Consequently, intermediary racial classifications were denied, and any amount of black heritage categorically defined an individual as black (Ingersoll 330).

The process of identifying individuals with any amount of African heritage as black only is referred to as the “one drop rule.” This “rule,” which came to be widely adopted in the nineteenth century, reflects the view that even the smallest degree of black ancestry is enough to identify an individual as black (Ingersoll 330). James F. Davis explains that in this system, “a black is any person with any known African black ancestry... it became known as the ‘one-drop rule,’ meaning that a single drop of ‘black blood’ makes a person black” (5). According to this perspective, having any black heritage, or even being suspected of it, implied a black racial identity and essentially nullified any white heritage. By invalidating the white ancestry of a biracial individual, the one drop rule helped to reestablish a racial binary system (Davis 42). It also worked to control the perceived integrity of that system’s two racial groups.

Mixed-race categories such as the *quarterons*, for example, did not only represent racial groups in their own right, they also represented stepping stones in between the initial categories of black and white. While it was a tradition in New Orleans that a person with only an eighth of black ancestry could “pass” to a white racial role before the turn of the nineteenth century, Louisiana politicians signed an act into legislation that essentially banned this practice in 1808 (Ingersoll 329). Moreover, it put an end to the official recognition of mixed racial categories. Ingersoll explains:

The legislature passed an innocuous-sounding law that went into effect in 1808 requiring notaries and other people acting in an official capacity to designate any and all free blacks in their records as either ‘free man of color’ (FMC) or ‘free woman of color’ (FWC). At one stroke this eliminated the method by which free blacks could document their lineages, especially their transition through the traditional three generations to white legal status. (329)

With the adoption of this legislation, the possibility of transitioning was terminated and mixed-race individuals’ white heritage was no longer recognized, even for those who were free.⁵⁵ Thus, politicians worked to erase the racial diversity upon which Louisiana’s Creole society had been built.

James F. Davis asserts that in the first half of the nineteenth century, “[t]he one-drop rule received more solid support than ever throughout the South, for the simple reason that it helped defend slavery” (47). Yet as the work of Davis, Shirley Thompson, and Werner Sollors reveals, many members of Louisiana society with mixed African and European heritage could not obviously be categorized as black. Popular belief held that there were specific physical markers associated with black racial heritage, but this method only resorted to adopting vagaries as concrete proofs.⁵⁶ Although some individuals claimed that even small fractions of African ancestry could be determined, there was no reliable test for race (Sollors 157-8). Consequently, the weakness of this nineteenth-century racial order opened up cracks in the Creole social structure. The possibility of making mistakes when determining an individual’s race threatened the integrity of the racial categories. Although it had become a social taboo and even a legal

⁵⁵ Shirley Thompson also notes that interracial marriages were made illegal once again in the 1808 Digest, a change from the Spanish rule that had allowed such relationships (11).

⁵⁶ One of the most well-known examples of these is the notion that a faint blue hue to the fingernails indicates African descent in a pale-complected person (Sollors 143-161).

question as cases such as the well-known *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Desarzent v. LeBlanc* and Desmaziliere evidence, passing from a black to a white racial identity was still possible through those cracks (Thompson 15-7, 68-73).

Individuals who were part black yet who were so fair that this part of their heritage could not be detected disrupted the nineteenth-century New Orleans social hierarchy, occupying an in-between space. Their bodies were neither white nor black, but had the possibility of being both at the same time. This liminality opened up the potential for a reassignment of racial identity even within the strictly polarized society. While the white supremacist regulatory norms compelled subjects with black heritage to perform black roles, within the silences when they were not being actively called to that identity, they could be interpellated to perform as whites as well (Rottenberg 37). Although these individuals were essentially performing identities that would marginalize them, by taking advantage of society's misinterpretation of their bodies they escaped the limitations of the racial category imposed upon them. They infiltrated the borders of white identity and disordered it from within. Nevertheless, passing, like the one drop rule, also privileges one side of identity over another. As Shirley Thompson explains, "choosing to pass as white might finally secure [a] person a certain level of freedom, but this choice would also undercut the cultural resources of the group as a whole" (79). Thus, individuals who passed did not fully escape the system. They did, however, rework it to their advantage, and to the anxiety of those who supported the notion of racial "purity."

The practice of passing was not a secret, however, and concerns over the potential breakdown of the integrity of racial identities surrounded the mixed-race body. These real-life tensions were reflected in literature. Writers focusing on racial mixing and biracial individuals became important participants in the discourse on race relations and identity. As authors

constructed biracial characters, they necessarily charged them politically, asserting their own stance in the debate on race and the racial order.

2.2 Literary Representations of the Mixed-Race Body

According to Werner Sollors in *Neither Black nor White*, “[i]n simply representing Mulatto characters, writers were inevitably taking sides, and literature functioned as an active participant in an ideological debate” (134). By merely including mixed-race individuals in their works, authors became involved in a larger discussion of race. Depending on how mixed individuals were portrayed, texts could discourage racial mixing or function as a link between the black and white populations to bolster interracial relations. Creole authors in the nineteenth century are among those writers who used their characters to address racial ideology, but the roots of this tradition go further back. In fact, during the colonial period in the eighteenth century, European writers such as Moreau de Saint-Méry used the controversy surrounding mixed-race unions to channel their representations of the biracial body into a larger debate. By portraying them negatively, Saint-Méry’s text validates white concerns over interracial relations. Authors continued to depict mixed-race characters as a way to address conceptions of race in the nineteenth century; Victor Hugo’s *Bug Jargal* is a well-known example. In Louisiana, Creole writers Victor Séjour and Sidonie de la Houssaye likewise feature biracial characters in their works. By writing about mixed-race characters, authors joined a dialog on race and identity. It offered them a way to address white anxieties over the instability of the boundaries between the races and the perceived breakdown of the social hierarchy, among other issues. In Louisiana and France, literary texts and their authors played a key role in the development of racial discourse.

2.2.1 The Eighteenth Century: Moreau de Saint-Méry

Enlightenment intellectuals and authors of the eighteenth-century represented the mixed-race body in their works.⁵⁷ French writer Moreau de Saint-Méry in particular used his depictions to comment on race in the French colony of Saint Domingue, present-day Haiti, following the literary trend of representing biracial individuals in political terms. His text, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la Partie Française de l'Isle de Saint-Domingue*, written on the eve of the Haitian Revolution, politically charges the mixed-race body to openly engage in the larger social discussion of race. Like many of his contemporaries, Saint-Méry portrays violence, sexual depravity, and a general “baseness of mind” to be inherent to the mixed-race individual (Garraway 235). His text presents a critical depiction of the biracial population, resonating with contemporary negative opinions of interracial relations.

In his *Description*, Saint-Méry portrays mixed-race individuals as detrimental to the social order, validating European disapproval of interracial unions. As an outcome of mixed-race relationships, biracial individuals were already a controversial topic in France during the eighteenth century; indeed, the social separation prescribed by the *Code Noir* makes clear that the ruling French perception during this period deemed such relations to be inappropriate. Saint-Méry’s textual representations of the mixed population confirmed this. The author describes biracial women as overly-sexualized, explaining that “l’être entier d’une mulâtresse est livré à la volupté, et le feu de cette Déesse brûle dans son cœur pour ne s’y éteindre qu’avec la vie” (104). In his text, mixed-race women are seemingly predisposed to prefer pleasure over what were considered to be their normal social duties in the eighteenth-century, such as motherhood.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ See note 48.

⁵⁸ See Rousseau, *Émile, ou De l’éducation*; Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*; Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*; and Maza, “The ‘Bourgeois’ Family Revisited: Sentimentalism and Social Class in Prerevolutionary French Culture.”

Doris Garraway explains that “Moreau [de Saint-Méry] suppresses their maternal capacity, thus denying them any role in the biological reproduction of colonial society” (236). By representing the *mulâtresses* in roles that are outside of women’s normal, maternal role in society, Saint-Méry suggests that they pose a threat to society. Their perceived preference for pleasure over duty seems to prove their negative influence and their potential to break down the eighteenth-century social order.

Saint-Méry’s portrayal of biracial woman as non-maternal, and therefore seemingly unable to conceive, seems to imply not only that the offspring of interracial couples are degenerate, but also that racial mixing is dangerous for colonial society. Their suggested reluctance, even inability, to have children spells disaster for the colony’s population; it can only decline if society ceases to reproduce. Following this viewpoint, if interracial mixing is allowed to continue, the colony will be doomed to failure. Thus, by demonstrating that *mulâtresses* are sexualized and they cannot or will not have children, Saint-Méry’s representation supports the eighteenth-century perception that individuals with mixed heritage are detrimental to society. More than merely outlining his personal perceptions of colonial life in this text, these portrayals of mixed-race women participate in a greater cultural and political discourse on race taking place at the end of the eighteenth century.⁵⁹

As the Haitian Revolution dawned, writers in the colonies focused their writings on the role that mixed-race individuals played in inciting blacks to violence against whites. Marlene Daut explains that, “those of mixed race were often depicted as being principally responsible for the Revolution” (6). Saint-Méry’s depictions of the mixed-race individual as hyper-sexualized connect his writing to the dialog on racial discourse surrounding the Revolution and function as a

⁵⁹ Saint-Méry’s depictions of the *mulâtresses* were likewise linked to the paternalistic discourse on gender at this time, which is explored in Chapter Three.

way in which the author himself takes a stance. In this context readers can understand Saint-Méry's text to use representations of mixed-race individuals to become involved in the real world debate. His negative characterization of biracial females in Saint-Domingue is not simply his portrait of Caribbean life, it presents an argument on interracial relations in the colonies.

Nineteenth-century European and American authors alike followed the format adopted by Saint-Méry.⁶⁰ Their representations of mixed-race individuals also functioned as reflections on real-life discussions of race. French-language writers in North America likewise did not neglect this important literary subject matter. Louisiana authors wrote novels featuring biracial characters that engaged with issues of race and identity in nineteenth-century Creole society. We can see that the same strategy by which Saint-Méry addressed contemporary racial issues was incorporated into nineteenth-century literature, in particular in works by Hugo, and Creole authors Victor Séjour, and Sidonie de la Houssaye.

2.2.2 The Nineteenth Century: Victor Hugo, Victor Séjour, and Sidonie de la Houssaye

Mixed-race characters became increasingly popular and grew to be widely adopted in nineteenth-century literature. As with Saint-Méry's text, these authors' representations of such characters have real-life implications. Their portrayals of biracial individuals also "resonated with cultural expectations and political interests in the real world" (Sollors 134). Similar to the way that Saint-Méry's depictions of the biracial population in Haiti engaged with eighteenth-century perceptions of that group's cultural role, Victor Hugo, Victor Séjour, and Sidonie de la Houssaye used mixed-race characters as a way to participate in racial discourse in the nineteenth century. Their works *Bug Jargal*, *Le Mulâtre*, and *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans*,

⁶⁰ These include Alexandre Dumas, Madame Charles Reybaud, and Victor Hugo in France and Harriet Beecher Stowe, George Washington Cable, and Sidonie de la Houssaye in the United States.

respectively, all comment on perceptions of race relations through their characterizations of individuals with mixed heritage.

Victor Hugo's depictions of mixed-race characters in his 1826 novel, *Bug Jargal*, play on contemporary notions of racial heritage and identity to politically charge the biracial body. Chris Bongie corroborates this, stating that "the mulatto—embodied most spectacularly by Biassou and Habibrah—emerges as the place, the topos, where an anxiety about racial (in)differentiation can play itself out" (252). Hugo's representation of mixed-race characters functions as a way through which to enter into the dialog on dominant conceptions of race in the nineteenth-century. Set during the early years of the Haitian Revolution, Hugo's work deals with a turbulent time frame when the social order privileging whites faced a real threat of being overturned. Rather than focusing on this conflict as a struggle primarily between whites and blacks, however, Hugo uses his novel's setting to address concerns over racial mixing. His fictionalized portrayal of Revolutionary leader General Biassou as biracial functions as a deliberate move to bring the events of the Revolution in position to inform his readers' perceptions of mixed-race individuals. By depicting important players in the violence against whites as mixed-race, Hugo's novel offers commentary on race relations, suggesting that miscegenation poses a legitimate danger to the prevailing social order.

Among Hugo's mixed-race characters, the description of General Biassou is particularly noteworthy as an example of the author's engagement with racial discourse outside the text. In *Bug Jargal*'s fictional account of the Revolution, Biassou is described as a mulatto. As Bongie points out, however, the real historical figure on whom the character is based was not of mixed heritage. Although this originally stems from the author's misreading of a historical text, he chose not to correct it later: "Hugo mistakenly identified Biassou as a mulatto...Rather than

correct this mistake in the novel, Hugo chose to build upon it” (206). The reader can understand Hugo’s decision to continue portraying the character as mixed-race instead of amending his error as a demonstration of his active involvement as a participant in the nineteenth-century discussion on race relations. By portraying the Revolutionary leader character as a mulatto, Hugo appears to directly link the overthrow of white social control to the mixed-race population. Instead of being a mere coincidence, Bongie shows that this move is eventually an intentional one that directly connects the biracial body to the violence of the Revolution.

The character Biassou not only functions as a figurehead representing interracial hostility, he also actively incites racial conflict in the novel. When speaking to a gathering of soldiers, for example, he directly addresses the mixed-race members of the group, invoking their personal ties to their enemies and influences them to seek vengeance: “Sang-mêlés, ne vous laissez pas attiédir par les séductions *de los diabolos blancos*. Vos pères sont dans leurs rangs, mais vos mères sont dans les nôtres” (123). While the general recognizes the *sang-mêlés*’ close relationship to the whites, he also affirms their link to the black race and goes on to describe their white fathers as “barbares” and encourage their participation.⁶¹ Hugo’s depiction of Biassou’s foundational role in initiating such violence further establishes him, and the mixed-race population that he represents, as dangerous. Marlene Daut confirms that Hugo’s depiction of mixed-race characters seems to prove that “the ‘nonwhite’ offspring...pose the biggest threat to the white family, and, in the end, to the nation” (8). By portraying an important mixed-race character as hostile and incendiary in this way, Hugo appears to validate white fears and racial discrimination, speaking directly to concerns over racial mixing. With *Bug Jargal*, Hugo brings

⁶¹ Marlene Daut and Chris Bongie have both explored the mixed-race individual’s role in the Revolution as patricide.

the literary trend for depicting race exemplified in Saint-Méry's earlier text into a new century of racial relations.

Other nineteenth-century authors used depictions of mixed-race characters to engage in this discourse, resonating with Hugo's work. In Louisiana, Creole authors Victor Séjour and Sidonie de la Houssaye also included representations of mixed-race characters in their texts. By doing so, they integrate their Creole perspective into discussions of race and identity. There is no question of the authors' understanding of the importance of these characters to the texts, both in terms of culture and social politics. Biracial individuals take central roles in these fictional texts and are crucial characters. Séjour's and de la Houssaye's works, *Le Mulâtre* and *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, respectively, confront race and interracial relations head-on, outlining the critical position that this issue takes in Creole society as well.

Like his French counterpart, Victor Séjour focuses his narrative on a mixed-race lead character as a way to address nineteenth-century discussion on race in his 1837 novella, *Le Mulâtre*. Séjour draws on the perception that biracial individuals are dangerous to the social order that Saint-Méry and Hugo adopted into their earlier texts. Like their works, Séjour's depiction of mixed-race characters is built around a society dominated by white plantation owners. His representation, however, is oriented towards destabilizing rather than solidifying the social hierarchy that privileges whites. By writing about a mulatto character, he politically charges the mixed-race body to symbolize the dangers of racial discrimination and violence on the Creole plantation.

Séjour's novella depicts a mixed-race individual who eventually becomes dangerous as an argument against miscegenation, specifically as a form of violence. Georges, the main character, is the child of a black slave after she "fut presque violée" by her master, a white

plantation owner.⁶² Without knowing who his father is, Georges is repeatedly angered by the white plantation owner's unjust treatment of his slaves as he grows up, including Georges' own mother and wife. He threatens his master's life multiple times before he eventually kills the white man in an impassioned outburst. When Georges realizes that his master is also his father, however, he kills himself. Georges' murder of his father is symbolic of the tendency towards degeneracy and violence that Saint-Méry and Hugo depict in their representations of mixed-race individuals. Yet the plantation setting coupled with the character's mixed heritage charges his actions beyond a biological predisposition to violence. His father's death can be understood as a symptom of the more widespread hostilities between whites and blacks, including rape.

In Séjour's vision of Louisiana's nineteenth-century social order, the races are unable to have healthy relationships. Daut asserts that in this society, "[t]he power structures instituted by slavery prevent "real" contact from occurring between blacks and whites, just as it prevents "real" contact from taking place between fathers and their children" (15). Instead of blaming biology, Séjour looks to more tangible causes. In fact, the source of Georges' aggression is clearly shown to be outside of his biological makeup. Despite his inability to check his rage, the author states that "Georges avait toutes les dispositions nécessaires à devenir un très honnête homme" (Séjour). Instead of emphasizing his anger as deriving from his mixed blood, Séjour points to what drives his anger: the injustices perpetrated by whites against blacks, in particular the tenuous condemnation and hanging of his wife, Zélie. Thus, Georges becomes a symbol that fights miscegenation, but rather than working to protect white supremacy, Séjour's representation argues for human rights. Georges' murder of his father is a reaction to the large-scale violence against people of color in nineteenth-century Louisiana.

⁶² The author explains that "[p]endant près d'une année, elle partagea la couche de son maître" (Séjour).

The bloody ending of *Le Mulâtre* reflects the negative consequences of the racial hierarchy. Georges and his father reflect Séjour's vision of a society in which whites and blacks are separated and prejudiced against each other, despite their shared heritage. The author's depiction of Georges works against the continuation of this social order. Ultimately, Georges's actions demonstrate that injustice and white privilege, not miscegenation itself, lead to violence. In this way, Séjour's text offers pointed commentary on race relations in Creole society, following the pattern that Werner Sollors has outlined. Written in the first half of the nineteenth century before the major Creole literary movement built up momentum, Séjour's text is lauded as the first short story written by a person of color in the United States (Sollors 164-5). Thus, his text sets a precedent for fictional representations of race in Louisiana. Fifty years later, author Sidonie de la Houssaye took up the same theme. As the title suggests, her multi-volume work, *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, also features many main characters of mixed-race.

Sidonie de la Houssaye's *quarteronne* characters reflect on real-life discussions of race relations like Séjour's *mulâtre*. As the texts preceding hers do, de la Houssaye's work plays on contemporary discourse to present a case against miscegenation and interracial unions. Her negative characterization of mixed-race female characters links to Moreau de Saint-Méry's representation of females in Saint-Domingue, suggesting the author's support of the argument that mixed-race individuals pose a threat to white dominance. Contrasting with Séjour's text, de la Houssaye depicts whites as the victims of mixed-race "sexual temptresses." She draws a picture in which biracial females overpower whites, reversing the racial hierarchy and seemingly negatively affecting the way of life in New Orleans. Like other works dealing with mixed-race characters, Sidonie de la Houssaye's *quarteronnes* are politically charged, allowing her text to actively participate in the argument on race and the color line in the Crescent City.

De la Houssaye's depiction of mixed-race women draws on elements from the portrait presented by Saint-Méry a century earlier. Like his representation of mulattas, her *quarтеронnes* prefer pleasure over duty. They do not engage in the normal activities associated with women's social duties in nineteenth-century Louisiana, and they are often aggressive or violent. For example, the character Violetta is described as a "démon qui se donnait avec [les commis] des airs de princesse, leur lançait à toute minute les démentis les plus vulgaires et leur envoyait à la tête, quand l'idée lui en prenait, les marchandises, les épithètes et les sobriquets les plus grossiers et même les plus indécents" (230). Moreover, they rarely recognize authority and are only interested in pleasurable activities such as dining out, attending balls, and having affairs.⁶³ The *quarтеронnes*' hedonism contrasts with the maternal black "mammy" stereotype,⁶⁴ as well as the dutiful wives and white mothers that de la Houssaye also portrays, seeming to confirm that mixed-race individuals are inherently degenerate and not disposed to become mothers as opposed to women whose heritage is not mixed. Their perceived aversion to motherhood plays a principal role in demonstrating the "unnaturalness," and thus the unacceptability, of racial mixing.

Christine Koch Harris confirms that sterility or simply being non-maternal is linked to mixed-racial heritage in order to serve as a strike against miscegenation. According to Harris, this becomes clear as de la Houssaye's few characters of mixed-race who do become mothers and renounce the traditional ways of the *quarтерonne* lifestyle are accepted as white. She

⁶³ Like Saint-Méry's earlier portrayal of mixed-race women, these representations also actively engage with the prevailing paternalistic notions of gender in nineteenth-century Louisiana. This thread is explored in Chapter Three.

⁶⁴ "The Mammy was created by white Southerners to redeem the relationship between black women and white men within slave society in response to the antislavery attack from the North during the ante-bellum era, and to embellish it with nostalgia in the post-bellum period... The Mammy was the positive emblem of familial relations between black and white. She existed as counterpoint to the octoroon concubine... In addition, the Mammy was integral to the white males' emasculation of slavery, since she and she alone projected an image of power wielded by blacks – a power rendered strictly benign and maternal in its influence" (Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress* 201-3).

explains that “[t]hrough motherhood, they are finally totally cleansed of their unwhiteness, becoming what de la Houssaye repeatedly refers to as a ‘sainte du logis’” (61). Those *quarteronnes* who are not depicted in the novel as self-indulgent or violent and instead become dutiful mothers are passed to a white racial identity. They no longer adhere to the behavioral stereotypes of mixed-race individuals. Instead, their more dutiful conduct seems to disprove their biracial heritage thereby allowing them to integrate into white society. This reflects back on the non-maternal *quarteronnes* to show that these women are not “natural” and do not benefit the social order. In this way, de la Houssaye’s text argues against miscegenation, drawing on white fears that interpret mixed-race individuals as a threat to society.

The way that de la Houssaye portrays mixed-race women and their behavior highly charges her novel and brings it front and center in the debate on race in Louisiana. Her negative characterization of her characters’ behavior as sexualized seems to confirm fears over racial mixing. Their un-motherly social roles further suggest the group’s inherent danger to the social order. Working in opposition to Séjour’s novella, the author here shows that mixed-race women are a danger to the racial hierarchy and presents a case against racial mixing. Nevertheless, like Séjour’s, de la Houssaye’s literary representation reveals her position on racial relations in Creole New Orleans; her fiction becomes a way for her to become involved in real-life social issues. By examining the works of Victor Hugo, Victor Séjour, and Sidonie de la Houssaye, readers can visualize these authors’ approaches to addressing issues of race in literature. Understanding the importance of their representations of race sets the stage for interpreting the role it plays in forming Creole cultural identity that is vital to an analysis of Alfred Mercier’s work.

Alfred Mercier's work, *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, offers him a similar opportunity to participate in the debate on race in the second half of the nineteenth century. His narrative centering on a young *passé blanc* woman, Blanchette, Mercier delves into an exploration of New Orleans' racial hierarchy, echoing his fellow authors, both French and Creole, and connecting his novel to theirs. He portrays the struggle of negotiating a double heritage and the toll that repressing one or the other takes on the mixed individual, using his representation of the mixed body to engage with the racial discourse that privileges unmixed racial heritage. With his depiction of mixed-race individuals, Mercier reveals the hypocrisy and the disordered reality of race relations while also confirming his place in the network of authors dealing with race. Blanchette and her disordered identity open up an important dialog on and with Creole society.

2.3 Depicting Race and Mixed-Race Characters in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*

In *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, the racial order in Louisiana's Creole society is spun into a major narrative thread. Alfred Mercier's account of the Saint-Ybars family, spanning the antebellum era to the 1870s, integrates the racial dichotomy enforced by the plantation system and depicts the social pressures to maintain it that existed in and around New Orleans during the nineteenth century. Yet Mercier's narrative rebels against polarized racial roles and segregation. He does this primarily by constructing characters that navigate both the white and black social realms and dwell in the borderlands of racial identity, demonstrating that black and white are inextricably linked. This is true even for the privileged plantation owner. His two *humeurs* reflect the two racial categories: "Sur l'habitation Saint-Ybars, les esclaves appelaient la moitié droite du visage de Vieumaite *le côté du soleil* ; la moitié gauche *le côté de l'ombre*" (35). In Mercier's vision of Louisiana, even a person of unmixed heritage defies polarized definitions of race; Old Monsieur Saint-Ybars, a French Creole, has both a dark and a light side. Ultimately,

the author's portrayal of mixed-race individuals confronts the real-life racial discrimination in Creole society. His characters challenge the restrictive categories of white and black and the notion that they should be segregated. Moreover, by focusing on the extent of racial mixing in Louisiana, he questions the stability of racial categories which comes to bear on conceptions of Louisiana Creole identity in general.

2.3.1 Unveiling a False Binary in *La Nouvelle-Orléans*

In the first half of his novel, Mercier introduces his reader to the racial dichotomy that structures New Orleans society while simultaneously revealing the incompatibility of that system with the city's diverse population. He uses the setting of a New Orleans slave market to establish a clear separation of social roles and space for blacks and whites. Following the order dictated by the plantation system, blacks are slaves, and whites are the masters. Yet the presence of a light-skinned, mixed-race slave at the market throws the validity of the binary into question. This individual challenges the assignment of identity and social roles based on skin color, but more importantly, she is symbolic of the suppressed reality of racial diversity in Creole society.

From the first pages of his novel, Mercier brings us into the restrictive binary racial structure that orders New Orleans' population. The narrative begins at a slave market in antebellum New Orleans. This highly-charged setting, where white buyers are distinguished from the black human chattel, establishes our awareness of the social distance between the races early on. Faced with such an environment, the reader is forced to visualize the separate realms and roles to which the plantation system compels the different bodies. This separation becomes more apparent as he continues the description of the slave market. Mercier outlines the division between white and black bodies in terms of mobility. While the black slaves are fixed and stationary at the market, the white slave trader moves about, pacing as he waits for customers:

À chaque pièce correspondait, sur le trottoir, un escalier de trois marches; sur les degrés de l'un et de l'autre se tenaient debout quelques nègres et négresses... Un homme de race blanche, grand et robuste, allait et venait de la chambre des hommes à celles des femmes, jetant de temps en temps un coup d'œil du côté de la rue, comme font les marchands qui attendent la pratique. (12-13)

Reading through the passage, readers gain a sense of the inequality between the two groups. While whites are mobile, blacks are restricted in the market and in the city space itself. The slave market represents the epicenter of the plantation-influenced social polarization. As he introduces us to the setting, Mercier begins to shape our understanding of the different roles and realms that are assigned to the different bodies in New Orleans. Notably, there is no mention of barred windows or doors nor are there any other physical enclosures in this description. Instead, readers visualize individuals who are bound by the force of social pressures. These pressures are concentrated in the center of the slave market and they radiate throughout the city space, spreading the binary racial order. With this scene only a few pages in, Mercier's priority becomes clear: educating his readers on the social implications of Creole racial hierarchy and pushing us towards a cultural awareness.

There is little doubt that Mercier's purpose here is to enlighten his readers to the reality of social dynamics. The author describes the spectacle of the market as seen through the eyes of a French character, Anthony Pélasge, a scholar and tutor who is only just arrived in the city and not yet acquainted with the local customs. Pélasge's unfamiliarity provides the context for the author's presentation of Creole society; his perspective as a newcomer to Louisiana guides the reader. Pélasge becomes conscious of the differences between the white world and the black world when he first comes into contact with the slave market. Just as he realizes the reality of

the racial hierarchy of his milieu at this moment, so does the reader. Whether or not Mercier's audience is already familiar with Creole racial hierarchy, Pélasge's reactions make clear what Mercier wants us to understand. As Mercier continues his sketch of the scene, however, he begins to point us towards a different perception of race. Despite our initial visualization of the slave market, the social binary is not as concrete as it appears at first glance.

Mercier describes the slaves as "nègres" and "négresses," racial terminology which points to African origins and confirms their black racial identity. As we saw earlier, however, the multiplicity of racial categories were reorganized into a dichotomy in the nineteenth century. This change had the result that individuals who identified as black in Louisiana could be only part African. In order uphold the practice of slavery, planters forced mixed individuals to deny their non-African heritage. Mercier does not overlook this fact. As Pélasge takes in the vision of enslaved bodies at the slave market, the character notices that one of the slaves stands out: "Il y avait une esclave qui tranchait sur la masse par son teint et son attitude. Le jeune étranger, la croyant de race blanche, parut fort étonné de la voir dans un groupe de négresses à vendre" (16). He sees a young woman, the character Titia, with a light complexion that points to a mixed heritage with likely more European than African ancestry. The "jeune étranger," Pélasge, associates her looks with a white racial identity, which does not fit her apparent status as a slave. Titia thus ruptures the duality of the slave market.

While at first the reader is shown a slave market with clear boundaries that separate the white and black racial identities, this dichotomy collapses when Pélasge sees Titia. Her body belies her social role as a black slave. Although she is restricted and enslaved just as the other blacks in the market are, she appears to be white. At the same time that Mercier reconstructs the New Orleans social order within his novel, he also begins to show that there is no real order to

the system at all. Merely by depicting Titia, a mixed-race character, Mercier throws the binary system into dispute and creates a crisis of racial categories. Werner Sollors confirms that “[mixed-race individuals’] representation (indeed, their very existence) has always challenged and still challenges, the notion that there is an obvious and easily definable boundary between black and white” (*Neither* 241). Mercier does just this with Titia. He cuts through the racial discourse of the plantation system to reveal that racial categories oriented around a black/white dichotomy are invalid in this society.

At the moment that Pélasge sees Titia, he and the reader grasp the arbitrariness of racial identity and the impossibility of defining it through the body. Mercier demonstrates that black and white are not related to skin color but to social constructions of power. Light and dark-complected people are both equally discriminated against and enslaved. Racial identity has to do with economic gains and subjugation, not with heritage at all. It does not follow biological lines. Daphne Patai and Murray Graeme likewise assert that what they term “white-black” characters “call attention to the real motive behind the attribution of inferiority to others: the protection of privilege, both material and physical” (qtd. in Sollors 235). Pélasge’s startled first glimpse of Titia makes us conscious of these realities behind the racial hierarchy. Moreover, it presents us with the possibility of crossing its boundaries. For example, if a person who appears European can be a slave, then it follows that a person with African heritage can take on the free social role of a white. The character Titia opens up such possibilities, both theoretically and literally.

Titia’s role in breaking down binarism becomes more concrete when the reader learns that she will have a child.⁶⁵ As the novel progresses, M. Saint-Ybars, who is the head of the family on which the novel focuses, and his daughter arrive. While M. Saint-Ybars discusses

⁶⁵ Mercier describes Titia’s grandmother as a *mulâtresse* which may indicate that Titia is a *quarteronne* or even an octoroon. This means that her daughter, Blanchette, would have an eighth or less African heritage.

business with the slave trader, Titia, hoping to secure a place on a respectable plantation, convinces his daughter, Chant-d'Oisel, to have her father buy her. When M. Saint-Ybars inquires about buying her, the trader reveals that Titia is being sold because her former master's son was romantically involved with her:

On m'a chargé de la vendre pour éviter un grand malheur. Un des fils de la maison est devenu éperdument amoureux d'elle ; on a craint qu'il ne fît un coup de tête. On lui a fait entreprendre un voyage sous je ne sais quel prétexte ; on profite de son absence, pour faire disparaître sa dulcinée. Je crois, soit dit entre nous, qu'elle est... (18)

The trader's ellipsis is as clear as a straight-forward declaration. Titia is expecting a child, one with a white father. This development further clarifies Mercier's intentions to showcase the senselessness of the racial binary through this character. Even though Titia evidently has mainly European ancestry, and their white son is in love with her, her former masters are unable to accept her. They cannot look past her black heritage (despite its near-invisibility) and do not accept the intermingling of social realms which, according to their views, should remain separate. Consequently, the family is forced to send Titia away because their son's love for her destabilizes the racial hierarchy, "un grand malheur." Black slaves cannot enter into the privileged white sphere. Yet her child is proof that the reverse is true, in spite of the fact that, in the eyes of her former owners, she is not their equal.

Mercier reinforces his readers' understanding of the racial order in Creole society with the story of Titia's forbidden relationship and pregnancy. Having initially presented her as a stark contrast to the other African slaves at the market, he goes on to assert the impossibility of her belonging in the white world. She is caught between the two racial realms of the ruling

dichotomy. The rest of this thread of the novel unwinds more complications that stem from being both white and black, including the generational consequences that trouble those of mixed-race. As we have seen, the very existence of a mixed-race person troubles the binary order espoused by the nineteenth-century system. Titia's mere presence at the slave market throws it into question. After she arrives at the plantation, Mercier's setting paves the way for further unsettling of the racial hierarchy. Her child, a daughter who is suggestively named Blanchette, follows in the footsteps of her mother and symbolizing the mixed-race reality underlying the false dichotomy.

2.3.2 Transgressing Racial Categories on the Saint-Ybars Plantation

In the second half of the novel, Mercier transposes the previously established racial binary onto the plantation setting and again shows the complex dimension underlying it through the character Titia, in this case through his depiction of her relation to her child. After giving birth to her daughter, who is light-complected like herself, Titia obscures her maternal role and entrusts her to the Saint-Ybars family as a foundling. In so doing, the mother passes her daughter from a black identity to a white identity so that she may be spared from the slavery and discrimination that she would face as a black woman. Furthermore, her act of passing reveals mixed heritage is not limited to black racial identity; those who identify as white are equally diverse.

The majority of the rest of the novel takes place on the Saint-Ybars family's plantation where the races are also segregated into different social roles. The white, French Creole Saint-Ybars family owns the plantation and are part of a privileged upper class. Conversely, the black characters work as slaves on the plantation. As in the city, not only is there a social distance that keeps those identifying as black and white apart, there is a physical element to their separation.

The Saint-Ybars family lives in the plantation house and their slaves live in cabins set away from the house in an area referred to as “le camp.” Thus, on the plantation the reader sees a distinct racial dichotomy that is similar to the division in the urban slave market setting: privileged white European and restricted black African. However, as at the slave market, the mixed-race body is able to cut across the plantation’s racial boundaries.

After Titia arrives at the Saint-Ybars plantation, the time for her to give birth nears and she begins to plan for her child’s future as a member of white society. Rather than looking forward to it, however, she is tormented by the idea that her child will be a slave: “elle...dit en pleurant qu’elle était la plus malheureuse des femmes de penser qu’elle mettrait au monde un petit être voué à l’esclavage” (83). The mother-to-be refuses to accept this future for her baby. Making a decision that could anticipate maternal characters in both contemporary and later novels, for example Grace King’s *M. Motte* (1888) and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Titia arranges a plan to prevent anyone from knowing that the child she carries has African heritage. She runs away and has her baby while off of the plantation. Later, she secretly brings her newborn daughter back and leaves her for the Saint-Ybars family to find and adopt as one of their own. While separating herself from her child is difficult, Titia believes that this is the best course of action for her baby. She admits, “c’est pour le bien de l’enfant” (99). In depicting this act, Mercier demonstrates that Titia sees passing her daughter and her motherhood as the only way to free her daughter from a life of slavery and oppression.

When the Saint-Ybars family finds the child the next morning, they immediately decide to adopt her, as Titia hoped. She is named Blanchette as the Saint-Ybars family finds her very pale skin remarkable, even for a white child. Their gesture in naming her confirms Titia’s achievement in cutting her maternal ties with the baby. Having removed the evidence of her

daughter's African heritage, the mother seems to liberate her daughter from a life of slavery and to make it possible for her to live as freely as a person of pure European heritage.⁶⁶ Not one member of the Saint-Ybars family supposes that their new adopted daughter is any less white than themselves, and their acceptance of Blanchette into their family completes Titia's act to overcome the racial hierarchy in Mercier's novel.

Although the Saint-Ybars do not guess the secret of Blanchette's origins, one of the family's other slaves, Lauzun, does and decides to use Titia's secret against her to his advantage. Having failed in the past to seduce her, he threatens to reveal this secret unless Titia will sleep with him. Rather than choose between protecting herself or her daughter, Titia takes her own life. Titia had already severed her maternal ties to her own child to save her from slavery; killing herself becomes her ultimate expression of this break. With her suicide, Titia further obscures Blanchette's "blackness." Moreover, she turns the tables of power on Lauzun. She leaves a note behind, written to Lauzun, saying: "À vous la responsabilité de ma mort. Respectez le secret de la petite innocente: sinon soyez maudit!" (155). When Lauzun sees Titia's dead body and reads the note she left for him, he breaks down, held in check by his vision of her.

The memory of Titia and her words haunt Lauzun. The character has already gone to extremes to protect her daughter, taking her own life. At this point, the reader perceives a further step to ensure her daughter's safety from slavery taken from beyond the grave. Not long after her death and Lauzun's subsequent fainting attack at seeing her note and her corpse, Titia's spirit haunts him, determined to protect Blanchette's secret:

Titia, pâle et raide, monta tout droit du fond du puits, tenant Blanchette dans ses bras, et resta suspendue dans l'air, au-dessus du rond béant. M. de Lauzun tomba

⁶⁶ Werner Sollors describes this as "involuntary passing," occurring when "the individual may be too young to decide for himself...or because it is arranged for him or her by others" (251).

sur ses genoux, et dit entre quatre ou cinq hoquets : ‘Grâce Titia ! je vous donne ma parole d’honneur la plus sacrée que je ne dirai rien.’ Titia inclina la tête, et d’une voix éteinte : ‘ c’est bien, chuchota-t-elle ; à cette condition, je te laisse tranquille.’ (158)

Her threat of a curse forces him to recognize his guilt in her death and, as a result, to remain silent about Blanchette’s past. Even though her body (a site that reveals her black identity) ceases to exist, his remembrance of Titia and his vision of her ghost protects her daughter from being revealed as black or forced into a life of slavery. Lauzun, fearful of his vision of Titia, obeys her wishes. He believes that as long as he keeps Blanchette’s past secret, he will not be disturbed by Titia again.

Titia’s maternal sacrifice represents a further revolt against Mercier’s depiction of the nineteenth-century social constraints that delineate how different backgrounds define identity in Creole society. The mother impels her daughter into the white social realm, where she alters the landscape, although unknowingly. Yet despite the fact that neither Titia nor her child appear to have African heritage, ultimately, she cannot purge the baby’s body of its ancestry. She can only play upon perceptions of race and obscure the visible signs of it, in particular, her own maternal role. Titia’s child, then, carries the truth of her heritage with her into the white social realm. Her ability to fit into white society dispels the notion that the different races should be separated. In this way, Titia defies the limitations that confine her daughter and other members of their race. She enacts a move that brings the African body across white boundaries, fighting racial categories and their restrictive social roles.

In spite of the hope for social progress that Mercier evokes with this image of troubling racist social boundaries, it is important to note that his progressive view of the female social role,

which we explore in Chapter Three, is sacrificed in order to make his argument for race. At this point, Titia's power is limited by patriarchal stereotypes of the female role and defined by what she can do as a mother. Additionally, Titia's apparent success at defying racial restrictions still privileges one part of her daughter's race over another. She has not undone the system, only navigated around it. Blanchette is denying one of the elements of her heritage just as she would be if she identified as black and were relegated to the social role of slave. Mercier cannot accept this, ultimately. Like the author's own Creole hybridity, Blanchette's mixed heritage depends on both of the elements that form it.

Blanchette grows up as an equal Saint-Ybars, never suspecting herself of having black heritage. When her adoptive brother, Démon, returns from school in France, the two fall in love and become engaged.⁶⁷ Not one member of the Saint-Ybars family can guess that Blanchette is officially black according to the prevailing conceptions of race in Mercier's depiction of Creole society. Although she is unaware of her past, her mother and the truth of her heritage haunt her existence in the white social realm. Just as Titia's power over Lauzun continues from beyond the grave, so does her biological link to Blanchette. She is still the mother of Blanchette, no matter how this fact is concealed. While Titia has freed her daughter from the confines of a black slave identity, she has only done so by negotiating around the plantation system's restrictive racial dichotomy. Mercier destines Blanchette for a more significant role in race relations, one that will compel the acknowledgement of both sides of her ancestry.

⁶⁷ Despite the threat of incest that can potentially be interpreted in this relationship, and thus link Blanchette and Démon to characters in other works such as Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's lovers, Paul and Virginie, Mercier's two characters are not raised side by side nor do they occupy a similarly intimate space. In fact, there is no suggestion of a relationship between them until after Démon returns from his stay in France, during which time he was separated from Blanchette as well as the rest of his family.

2.3.3 Uncovering Interracial Heritage, Overcoming Binarity

Mercier builds upon the character Blanchette as the novel progresses, channeling his views regarding the contemporary racial discourse outside of his text through his portrayal of her. The author puts her in a critical position in terms of her own race. Rather than allowing this character to continue to pass, and deny part of her history, he forces her to recognize her black heritage. Yet this racial unveiling does not force her to identify as black only. Blanchette is faced with the more important task of accepting both elements of her identity. By refusing to allow the denial of either her white or her black heritage, Mercier presents a case against racial segregation, as well as the racial binary itself. At the same time that her white fiancé defends her black heritage, he also continues to recognize her white ancestry. Rather than defining identity in terms of either/or, he sets up an unconventional scenario to demonstrate that instead of choosing one over the other, Blanchette can be both white and black at the same time.

In the final portion of the novel, set during the years following the Civil War, Lauzun moves away from the Saint-Ybars plantation and chooses to ally himself with the expanding Anglo-American population in New Orleans. At this time, his fear of Titia's retribution lessens significantly. She no longer holds him in check with her threat, and so eventually, he reveals the truth about Blanchette's mixed heritage. The nineteenth-century racist society that Mercier portrays is scandalized, and Blanchette herself is shocked. Like the rest of the Saint-Ybars family, she never guessed or even considered that her mother could have been black. This news creates turmoil in Blanchette's life as the people around her attempt to re-place her in the social order.

After learning the truth about Blanchette's heritage, Démon's aunt and cousins in particular attempt to keep her from marrying Démon, telling her that she is not white. Blanchette

allows herself to be persuaded, believing it to be her destiny. As a black woman, what she now considers herself to be, she accepts that she should not marry a white man. When Blanchette explains her reason for breaking off their engagement to Démon, however, he rejects her altered vision of herself. He argues, “la destinée!... Tu te trompes Blanchette ; tu appelles destinée ce qui n’est que l’effet de l’injustice humaine. Ne dis plus que nous succombons sous le poids de la fatalité. Le destin n’a rien à faire ici ; le bourreau qui nous sépare est le fils de l’orgueil et de l’ignorance ; il n’existe pas dans la nature” (239). Mercier uses Démon to demonstrate that Blanchette’s unveiled past has no effect on her social function. Through Démon’s dialog, the author indicates that nothing about Blanchette herself has changed since discovering the truth about her mother, only society’s perception of her. She cannot simply cease to acknowledge one side of her heritage upon her discovery of another.

Démon’s plans to marry Blanchette do not change after her black heritage is revealed and neither does his understanding of her white identity. He states to his family, “Blanchette fût-elle noire comme l’ébène, s’il me plaisait à moi de la trouver à mon goût, vous n’auriez rien à dire” (215). Yet while he acknowledges the newly-revealed element of her past, he does not ignore her European heritage. Defending his point of view against his family’s prejudice, Démon makes a case for his marrying Blanchette by comparing her mother’s slavery to white ethnic groups who have faced enslavement. Instead of only focusing on the injustice of African slavery, thereby limiting his support of Blanchette to defending her black racial identity, he also reconnects her to her white, European ancestry. He presents this argument to his aunt and other family members saying,

[v]ous faites un crime à Blanchette d’avoir eu pour mère une esclave. Vous oubliez, chères amies, que nos ancêtres aussi ont été des esclaves. Oui, nous tous

qui vivons sous ce ciel béni de l'Amérique, descendants de Français, d'Anglais, d'Espagnols, d'Italiens, d'Allemands, de Portugais, de Suisses, de Suédois, etc., tous nous sommes les petit fils de malheureux qui ont traversé de longs siècles, le front courbé sous le poids de la servitude. (216)

As Démon explains his conception of the history of enslavement shared by multiple groups from Europe, he ties their pasts to Blanchette's, thereby reconnecting her with a white identity. While his understanding is built on a tenuous connection between forced slavery and servitude, at times indentured, this perception allows him to defend her not only as a black woman, but also as a white woman with a history of slavery in her family. This multipoint defense reveals Mercier's demonstration that Blanchette is both white and black. Démon says the privileging of one race over another within New Orleans' social structure is unjust; his argument shows that it is the same in the case of an individual. Mercier's depiction of Démon's approach suggests the author's intention to show that Démon's and Blanchette's future lies in their ability to accept both elements of her heritage and resistance of the pressures built up by a racist society to acknowledge only one or the other. Indeed, by renouncing her white identity and identifying herself solely as black, Blanchette is merely feeding society's racist process. In order to truly fight subjugation, she must accept both her black and white ancestry as Démon does.

Mercier initially explains Démon's approach to race in New Orleans by emphasizing his extended absence from the city's society and his European education. His progressive approach to Blanchette's mixed heritage is quite unlike the rest of Creole society. When Blanchette attempts to cede to social pressures and deny her white ancestry, she counters Démon's opinions by explaining to him that he has forgotten the racial prejudices of Creole society: "vous avez vécu longtemps en Europe, vous avez oublié les préjugés du pays" (238). Mercier emphasizes

the role that European influence has played on Démon's point of view to explain his argument against white social privilege and racial segregation. Yet we can determine a less obvious explanation for Démon's investment in this issue: similar to Blanchette's situation, his perspective is affected by both black and white racial factors. Although Démon is the child of two white plantation owners with no apparent African genealogy, he has been influenced by the effects of racial mixing in Louisiana. Thus, while Mercier's implication for Blanchette is important, she is not the only one in Mercier's portrayal of Creole society who faces a dual identity.

2.3.4 The Scope of Mixed-Race

In *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, mixed-race individuals can be understood not only as a result of interracial sexual unions, but also of cultural interactions between whites and blacks. In her study of the white plantation family tradition of relying on black *nourrices*, Shannon Dawdy explains that in eighteenth-century Louisiana racial traits were thought to be transmitted through breast milk. It was perceived that not only would a white infant's racial "purity" be compromised as a result of these arrangements, but also that the emotional attachment to his or her *nourrice* would work against the racial hierarchy. Dawdy's historical work lays a foundation for interpreting Démon's identity as biracial. As Démon's mother was unable to nurse, he and his twin sister were nursed by one of the family's slaves, Mamrie. Because of his exposure to her milk, Démon's whiteness is, in theory, compromised. Thus, Démon's defense of Blanchette and his refusal to limit his understanding of her identity may not only reflect on her, but may also be relevant for himself, even as a member of the white Creole population.

When the slave Mamrie becomes a *nourrice* for her mistress's children, she assumes the maternal duty of nursing, consequently taking on a role in forming Démon's biological make-up

that many considered to be as important as Mme Saint-Ybars's own. According to some perspectives on race, the milk with which she nurses him, milk from a black body, could transmit her "blackness." White critics of the practice in Louisiana including writer Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz drew on eighteenth-century European ideologies of motherhood and nursing that were motivated by anxieties over social class divisions. At this time it was believed that children would follow the personality traits of the women who breastfed them. Ann Stoler explains that, "[a] baby was thought to absorb the 'personality traits' of his nurse when he drank her 'whitened blood'" (145). This discourse on mothering, influenced by recommendations made against the use of wet nurses by influential figures such as Rousseau in his pivotal text, *Émile, ou De l'éducation*, advised that breast milk could affect the formation of a child in the same way as the blood of his or her biological parents. This ideology centered on issues of class and on class transgressions in Europe. Those who agreed with it worried that their children would grow to behave more like their servant nurses than their higher-class parents. In the colonial environment, European anxieties over class were translated to reflect racial concerns.

In "Proper Caresses and Prudent Distance: A How-to Manual from Louisiana," Dawdy examines how Le Page du Pratz, who lived in the French colony during the 1720s and 1730s, "applied a racial meaning to established beliefs about bodily fluids and temperament" (150). She demonstrates Le Page du Pratz's take on European notions of breastfeeding in his *Histoire de la Louisiane* and how it functioned with race relations in the colonial society, pointing to the writer's description of the negative effect that he perceived African slaves had on white children. According to Le Page du Pratz's view of Africans, "[les enfants blancs] n'en peuvent jamais apprendre rien de bon, ni pour les mœurs, ni pour l'éducation, ni pour la Langue" (343). His negative perception extends to a critique of the popular practice of using African slave women as

wet nurses, which he condemns, echoing the European critics' related argument. As Dawdy points out, he believed that as breast milk was one the most intimate ways of forming a child and aiding its development, white French colonists and Creoles disadvantaged their children by relying on African women as nurses. He writes: "De là je conclus qu'un père François & sa femme font bien ennemis de leur postérité, lorsqu'ils donnent à leurs enfans de telles nourrices ; car le lait étant le sang le plus pur de la femme, il faut être marâtre pour donner son enfant à nourrir une Etrangere de cette espèce" (343). Through the act of nursing, he contends, white children are altered by their black *nourrices*.

This is one way the reader may understand Démon to be mixed. Although both of his parents are white, his white identity becomes questionable by way of his black nurse, Mamrie. Démon's racial identity can be interpreted as unstable because he has been infused with Mamrie's "blackness." Biologically, according to Le Page du Pratz and those sharing his view, he has been affected by the milk he drank as an infant. Moreover, the close connection that develops between the *nourrice* and the white children on the Saint-Ybars plantation suggests a secondary force working to reorder Démon's racial identity. Besides the transmission that occurs through the act of nursing itself, the bond that grows between a *nourrice* and a child jeopardizes the racial hierarchy. Mamrie forms a close connection with the children she nurses that continues throughout their childhood and as they grow up. Although his sister becomes more independent as she matures, Démon remains devoted to Mamrie throughout the novel. In fact, his relationship with his *nourrice* is closer than the one between him and his biological mother: "De tous les enfans de Mme Saint-Ybars, Démon était celui qui aimait le plus sa mère, quoique peut-être il aimât davantage Mamrie" (56). His intimacy with Mamrie positions her in a more maternal role than his "real" mother thereby creating another threat to the racial order.

Démon's filial affection for his *nourrice*, like other interracial relationships, threatens the establishment of Creole society's racial hierarchy. As Dawdy explains, "milk was a form of blood that could create biological, as well as affective, ties of kinship and thus degrade the ruling group's claims to racial superiority" ("Proper" 149). Interracial bonds of affection like those between Démon and Mamrie put white racial privilege at risk. Similar to the collapse of racial order that Titia's first owners sought to avoid with their son's romantic liaison which brought a slave into the privileged white social sphere, a *nourrisson*'s attachment to his or her nurse breaks down whites' position of power. His or her racial identification is thus challenged in terms of community loyalty in addition to biology.

While Démon's racial identity is never directly thrown into question in the text, the majority sentiment against racial mixing that Mercier does incorporate into his representation of nineteenth-century Creole society suggests that these prejudices may still be valid in the strict dichotomy espoused by his Creole society. Furthermore, Dawdy confirms that the racial anxieties described by Le Page du Pratz carried over into multiracial nineteenth-century colonial societies: "Breast-feeding and the use of wet nurses were to become a significant focus of ideas regarding racial contamination and child rearing in nineteenth-century imperial regimes" ("Proper" 149). Mercier's representation of Démon's interracial upbringing, then, suggests that we may link him to Mercier's more obviously mixed-race characters; he, like Titia and Blanchette, is faced with dual racial tensions. Understanding the extent of Démon's investment in interracial identity contextualizes his defense of Blanchette as a mixed-race individual and, more importantly, the larger picture of race relations in Mercier's novel. In fact, these characters embody the mixed reality of nineteenth-century Creole society.

2.3.5 Racial Binariness, Cultural Duality

The racial order that confronts Mercier's biracial characters is emblematic of the Creoles' positioning between French and American identities. Blanchette and her interracial identity crisis and Démon's mixed upbringing, for example, reflect the Creole population's similar hybrid predicament. Just as these characters are forced to navigate liminal identities faced with a binary, so is Creole society in terms of its cultural hybridity. The characters' and the society's conflicted experiences parallel each other. Consequently, Démon's rejection of the idea that one race can be more important than the other may be interpreted to reflect the related struggle that Louisiana Creoles face as a francophone minority in North America. It is defined equally by all the elements of its makeup, just as Démon envisions Blanchette. Moreover, Mercier's emphasis on the widespread racial mixing affects Creole society itself, working against a singular definition of that population. Both in terms of race and culture, Creoles' multidimensional reality cannot be denied. Indeed, Mercier's characters' racial complexities speak to the duality of Creole culture.

Whether by depicting a shared ancestry or the result of acculturation, Mercier represents what are perceived to be separate racial groups as affecting and altering each other to the extent that notions of racial "purity" are nullified. Instead of denying racial mixing, then, Mercier's story acknowledges it as a part of Louisiana's heritage and pushes for its acceptance. The characters in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* challenge the real-life boundaries that separate whites and blacks. While the binary social order of the nineteenth-century compels mixed-race individuals to pass to a singular identity of white or black, Mercier's characters acknowledge both lineages. Because they resist privileging one racial element of their identity over another, they work towards the dissolution of the social boundaries that separate the races within the novel. The

progress of these characters also mirrors Mercier's own issues with being Creole. Their efforts to accept dual racial identities can represent his struggle to define himself culturally.

Like his characters, Mercier is faced with a double identity. As a Creole, his cultural orientation fluctuates between French and American depending upon his environment, just as Blanchette moves between white and black racial identities. In nineteenth-century Louisiana, Creoles performed a French social role, while they were identified as Americans when abroad. What Mercier uncovers in terms of race relations in his novel comes back to reflect on this identity crisis. At the same time that he debunks the notion of "pure" white heritage by emphasizing racial mixing, he also challenges the limits of French identity in the city. As he demonstrates his characters working towards embracing all of the elements of their mixed heritage, he indicates the similar task set before Creoles. His text calls for Creoles' acceptance of all elements in their cultural make-up and to look beyond their French heritage in order to define themselves on their own terms.

Mercier's representation of Démon's explanation and defense of Blanchette's mixed heritage as well as his allusions to Démon's interracial background call Creoles' performances of French identity into question. Instead of clinging to a singular conception of Creole racial identity, Mercier demonstrates the role that mixing plays in Creole culture, both in terms of interracial heritage and acculturation. With Blanchette, he shows how even the palest-complected of individuals can find African ancestry in their pasts. The character of Démon demonstrates how, even when one's ancestry escapes mixing, Creoles are affected through their close contact with members of a different race. Instead of claiming an exclusively French heritage for Creoles, then, Mercier uncovers a heritage that is strongly linked to Louisiana's inhabitants of African origin. This move makes a statement in terms of race as well as ethnic

identity. It dismisses the notion that Creoles are only French and instead leads towards a self-definition of culture in Louisiana. Mercier's novel acknowledges that more than French cultural forces are at work in their society. It is not only a French community, and its inhabitants are likewise more than French.

2.4 The Future of Creole Society

The outcome of Mercier's story offers a final reflection on his vision of race and its resonance with the Creole multiculturalism. The unhappy ending that the author draws for Blanchette and Démon predicts his dismal vision for Louisiana's Creole society if racial discrimination driven by the myth of Creoles' "Frenchness" continue. His characters open the door to a vision of a more sustainable French-language culture in South Louisiana, one that accepts multicultural influences while also recognizing the undeniable role that French heritage does play, yet their inability to realize a future together demonstrates the obstacles facing nineteenth-century Creoles.

The racist society that Mercier portrays does not allow the couple to live out their lives together. It is unable to forgive either character: Blanchette, for having a black mother and Démon, for not rejecting her for it. Compared with the harsh society they face, these two are extraordinary for being able to transcend racial identity and social prescriptions in this milieu. Even so, Blanchette and Démon kill themselves when they realize they will never have peace together. Evoking Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and their *liebestod*, Démon takes strychnine and Blanchette shoots herself with his gun. Despite their acceptance of each other, social pressures are ultimately responsible for their sad ends. The deaths of these two characters signal the possibility of a similar fate for Louisiana Creoles in real life.

With this narrative, Mercier demonstrates how the social order, based on a false binary system, will destroy Creole society. Absent racial discrimination and the notion of white privilege, Démon and Blanchette might have married and lived on. Instead, the racial restrictions make this impossible, not only killing the characters, but threatening the destruction of their culture as well. Essentially, this tension becomes unliveable for them. His fictional characters point to real-world issues; through our reading of race in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, we can interpret Mercier's view that the Creole population cannot go on if it does not embrace all aspects of its makeup. The deaths of Démon and Blanchette allude to the possibility of the Creole community demise, but Mercier goes on to more clearly predict this prospect.

In the final chapter of *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, Mercier describes the Saint-Ybars plantation as a place that has already fallen victim to the force of racism, and he calls attention to the possibility of such a fate for Creoles. The Frenchman, Pélasge, who is still staying there alone, is visited by a friend from the days before the war who encourages him to leave the plantation and Louisiana, saying: "comme tout est triste ici...on se croirait dans un cimetière abandonné. Pélasge, votre place n'est plus ici. Vous avez donné assez de votre âme au passé ; l'avenir vous réclame" (266). The plantation is now a thing of the past. This is an end the reader may also envision for the rest of the Creole world. Démon's and Blanchette's deaths, the decline of the Saint-Ybars family and Pélasge's ultimate abandonment of Louisiana all indicate the destructive nature of the dominant social processes at work there. The continuation of Louisiana's Creole culture, then, can be interpreted as dependent upon a revision of the prevailing notions of race and cultural identity.

Mercier's integration of mixed-race individuals in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* is notable for the progress it encourages and for the insight it offers on the author's own identity struggle. This

novel demonstrates the nineteenth-century author's forward-thinking political views and his feelings of cultural responsibility through its depiction of the mixed body. The intertwined stories of Titia, Blanchette, and Démon unveil the potential to alter perceptions of Creole Louisiana as French. Moreover, they reflect the author's refusal to accept a solely French identity for himself and his acknowledgement that more than one heritage is implicated in Creole culture. This chapter explores Mercier's understanding of his native culture's diverse heritage and demonstrates his desire to expose the hypocrisy of racial segregation. In the following chapter, we see that Mercier is as invested in issues of gender as he is in those of race. Just as he asserts his hybrid identity through his depictions of racial mixing in nineteenth-century Louisiana, so he does in terms of gender.

CHAPTER 3. TROUBLING GENDER: QUESTIONING PATRIARCHY IN *L'HABITATION SAINT-YBARS AND JOHNELLE*

Depictions of gender,⁶⁸ like those of racial identity, can take on significant meaning in literature. Lizbeth Goodman has stated that gender is “a factor in the writing, reading, and interpreting of literature” (xii). This chapter examines gender’s importance in literary works from and set in Louisiana. According to historical accounts, in particular Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz’s eighteenth-century work, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, Creoles adopted a patriarchal order relegating women to domesticity beginning in the early colonial stages of their society and throughout the nineteenth century. Yet literary depictions of gender roles in Louisiana often present a challenge to this structure, particularly through female characters. Reflecting the Creole capital of New Orleans’ own disorder as a multicultural metropolis, many writers create characters that defy traditional patriarchal constructs. Texts ranging from L’Abbé Prévost’s eighteenth-century novel, *Manon Lescaut*, to Tennessee William’s twentieth-century play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, highlight the importance of gender in Creole society, particularly New Orleans, and the ways in which gender representations affect our understanding of that environment.

Creole author Alfred Mercier reinscribes and then challenges Louisiana’s patriarchal order in his novels, *L’Habitation Saint-Ybars* and *Johnelle*. In both of these works, he portrays women who are trapped in a male fantasy of female domesticity. These characters are rendered socially powerless and confined to the domestic sphere. Some of his characters serve an exclusively maternal function, while others simply defer to male authority. At the same time that he depicts these restricted gender roles, however, he also deviates from the prevailing social

⁶⁸ Lizbeth Goodman defines gender as “a social or cultural category, influenced by stereotypes about ‘female’ and ‘male’ behavior that exist in our attitudes and beliefs,” and goes on to state that “[s]uch beliefs are often said to be ‘culturally produced’ or ‘constructed’” (vii).

structure. Like writers before and after him, L'Abbé Prévost, Sidonie de la Houssaye, and Kate Chopin, for example, Mercier also constructs characters that contest the patriarchal system.⁶⁹ He contrasts with those authors, however, and does not introduce female power only to suppress it later; an unruly female character does die, but unlike other heroines, her death is not exceptional as characters who are not a threat to patriarchy also die with her. His textual reordering of gender identity thus suggests his rejection of a real-world society that privileges men over women. Furthermore, we can connect his challenging of patriarchy to his efforts to assert Creole identity and culture. Mercier's interrogation of male-dominated social order is motivated by his desire to build a self-sustaining Creole society that moves beyond its French foundation and French cultural hegemony.

This chapter explores patriarchy and gender identity in Louisiana's society and literature and connects Mercier's troubling of idealized female roles to his view of a Creole society that defines itself on its own terms. First, we examine Mercier's remarkable vision of gender equality for nineteenth-century Creole society. The author argued for the equal education of men and women in Louisiana, rejecting the tradition of French education that historically linked Creoles to their French roots but also alienated them from their culture and excluded women. Moving forward, we explore the evolution of patriarchy in both France and Louisiana from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth. Next, we see that despite Louisiana's patriarchal order, literary works from Louisiana and elsewhere have a tradition of depicting unruly female characters within this space. Prévost's *Manon Lescaut*, Sidonie de la Houssaye's *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, for example, are part of a diverse network of texts portraying females who challenge male authority but who are

⁶⁹ Although Mercier does not confirm having read Prévost himself, his close friend and colleague, Charles Gayarré, refers to the French author's novel, *Manon Lescaut*, in his *History of Louisiana*, which suggests that Mercier also may have been familiar with the text.

ultimately punished for their transgressions through death. These authors do not allow the threat that such women pose to male authority to remain, showing that there is no place for unruly women in a world of sons and fathers. Mercier's novels resonate with such works. He represents a male-dominated order in both *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* and *Johnelle*, in particular defining the female gender role in terms of women's physicality. His female characters' social success or failure is tied to their bodies, especially their ability to breastfeed. Yet like Prévost, de la Houssaye, and Chopin, Mercier also creates characters that deviate from this order in each of the novels. Because these characters are not killed off or only die along with characters that pose no threat to patriarchy, however, Mercier's novels present a challenge to male-idealized gender roles. Despite the weight of the traditions that bears down on his fiction, his real-life perspective emerges through his inclusion of a few exceptional characters. Finally, we examine the link between Mercier's portrayal of gender and his conception of Creole identity. In questioning male dominance of the social sphere, Mercier is also challenging Creoles' continued link to French culture, a connection that he demonstrates ultimately limits their future.

3.1 Mercier and Gender Equality

Alfred Mercier openly expressed his real-life progressive vision for Creole society when he deplored the lack of equal educational standards and social involvement for men and women in Louisiana in his *Biographie de Pierre Soulé*. Written in Paris in 1848, this work features a case against the existing inequalities between males and females in Louisiana, focusing specifically on the exclusion of Louisiana's female population from schools. The author rejects the notion that females must be relegated to the domestic sphere necessarily as well as the belief that a wife's function should be limited to mothering her husband's children. Instead, he imagines a female social role that includes active participation in the public arena and allows

females and males to be intellectual equals. The solution that he presents is a new school by and for Creoles that does not exclude women. This equality, as Mercier sees it, is a vital component in the efforts to protect Louisiana Creole culture.

Mercier openly asserts his belief in equal social roles for men and women. In the course of making a case for improving education for the Creole population in Louisiana, thus preventing the need to send children to schools abroad, he simultaneously argues against the neglect of female education.⁷⁰ While male Creole children were typically sent abroad to France for schooling in Mercier's time, females were not included in this tradition.⁷¹ Mercier contends, however, that both genders should have the same level of schooling. In his opinion, if Louisiana schools were to make the necessary improvements to attract Creole students away from French institutions, females should not continue to be excluded. He explains his vision of the school that ought to be established, writing of an "école nationale, où le riche et le pauvre apprendront toutes les sciences, celles aussi que nous avons l'impertinence d'appeler des *arts d'agrément*, de pur agrément, lorsque ce sont peut-être celles qui exercent la plus profonde et la plus salutaire influence, cette école, la seule vraie, la seule digne de la liberté, il faudra la réclamer aussi pour les femmes" (95). As Mercier sees it, women should be able to take advantage of the new schools' offerings as well as men. In fact, he points out that Louisiana's male Creole youth are not the only ones who require a better schooling option at home; females are equally in need and, moreover, present as important a case for improving education in the state as male students do.

⁷⁰ Mercier's argument that Louisiana should have a better school system is also linked to his opinion that Creole children should not need to go abroad for schooling in part because it alienates them from their culture. See page 38.

⁷¹ "The Constitution of 1868...set up a public school system system," but those schools were mostly "of low quality" (Taylor 120). As Tinker confirms, before the Civil War, the educated classes generally attended schools in France (*City* 147). Alcée Fortier mentions a "central school" that Mercier attended before leaving for Louis-le-grand in 1830 (258). Robertson refers to the school as the "Ecole Centrale" (35).

Mercier argues that women in New Orleans have been treated unfairly as a result of the lack of equal education for both males and females. He points out that, throughout history, women have not been recognized as men's equals. Even in his own lifetime, despite attempts to rectify the unfair structure, society has discriminated against women. In the *Biographie*, Mercier exposes the false equality that exists in his world and chooses not to accept it. He explains the situation, declaring,

[L]es femmes pourraient nous accabler, l'histoire à la main ; car elles tiendraient là un long et irréfutable acte d'accusation. Elles ne sont nos égales que d'hier. Et encore ! parce que le Code civil les appelle au partage égale des fortunes, nous croyons leur avoir rendu tous leurs droits. Partage égale ! que dis-je ? l'éducation du fils a coûté trois fois, quatre fois plus que celle de la fille ; et parce que chacun recueille une somme semblable dans l'héritage, vous dites que leurs parts sont égales ? (*Biographie* 96-7)

Mercier challenges the traditional roles that society assigns to women and that keep them from having the same access to education as men. He asserts that women should strive to develop their minds just as men do. In his view, being female is not a valid excuse for neglecting one's intellectual faculties, nor is it an acceptable reason for keeping an individual from studying. Instead of accepting women's relegation to the domestic sphere, Mercier argues that women should be the academic equals of their male counterparts. The author questions and confronts those females who do not pursue the same intellectualism that males do:

Qu'est-ce donc qu'une jeune fille, qui n'entend pas un mot de ce que son père dit à son frère. Qui ne sait rien répondre à son fiancé, dès que celui-ci s'élève un peu dans la sphère des idées ! Qu'est-ce donc qu'une épouse, pour qui les travaux de

son époux sont un mystère, et qui reste froide aux triomphes de son intelligence !
Qu'est-ce donc enfin qu'une mère, à qui son enfant demande l'explication la plus simple, et qui lui répond : -- Mon cher enfant, je le sais encore moins que toi !

(95-6)

In Mercier's opinion, a female should not neglect or allow others to keep her from developing her intellectual abilities simply because of her gender. Being a woman alone should not prevent her from having a responsibility to pursue an education. Mercier believes that daughters and wives should be able to understand and equally engage with their father's and their husband's work. Women should not be kept in the dark about such things when they can be included in stimulating intellectual dialog, both at home and in the larger public context.

Mercier contends that encouraging equal education can only have beneficial results, for women specifically, as well as for society in general. Giving females access to the same education that men receive is not only more just, but it also builds a stronger francophone community which is one of his goals for Creole Louisiana (Tinker, *Écrits* 356). Mercier bolsters his argument for gender equality by providing an example of the negative impact on society that results from neglecting women's education. He recalls meeting a female Parisian acquaintance during the political upheaval following the Revolution of 1848 which ultimately birthed France's Second Republic. When he inquires as to her opinion of the changes, she responds with indifference. Her lack of interest in what Mercier deems to be critical events in French politics upsets him and strengthens his rejection of the repression of women's intellectual development, as he explains:

Avant-hier, je rencontraï une jeune personne, intelligente à coup sûr, mais n'ayant reçu qu'un quart d'éducation, moins peut-être. Je ne l'avais pas vue depuis deux

mois. – Eh bien ! vous voilà heureuse, Mademoiselle, m’écrai-je avec confiance.
– De quoi donc Monsieur ? – Comment ! de quoi ? la France, la République... –
O mon Dieu, Monsieur, république ou royauté, qu’est-ce que cela peut me faire, à
moi ? j’y suis tout-à-fait indifférente. Cette réponse me fit mal... Est-ce sa faute ?
Oui, un peu ; mais si on lui eût appris à connaître sa patrie, à l’aimer, elle n’eût
pas prononcé ce mot ingrat. (98-9)

Not allowing females the same schooling opportunities as males, as this conversation reveals, weakens the *patrie*. This experience frames Mercier’s rejection of French tradition in a Louisiana context. Rather than continuing Creoles’ reliance on inherited social norms, Mercier’s argument for female education ruptures that connection and works to outline an independent and sustainable Creole culture, a new kind of “*patrie*.”

Mercier seeks to remedy this situation within his own community in Louisiana. He asserts that an “*école nationale*” will help to ground Louisiana’s youth in their own culture and also that by allowing and encouraging women to go to school, Creole society will be strengthened. Mercier’s line of reasoning here supports the notion that Creoles must turn their attentions to ensuring that women and men are equally educated if they are to keep their own culture alive, rather than looking to a traditional link to France. The survival of their *patrie* depends upon it. His support of gender equality, however, runs counter to the deeply patriarchal culture that characterized the Creoles’ nineteenth-century society and other Western societies. In Louisiana this order was influenced in particular by their French roots established in the eighteenth century.

3.2 French Patriarchal Heritage in Louisiana

A dominant trend in eighteenth-century discourse stressed the importance of male authority in society, a belief that French colonists in Louisiana incorporated into their emerging culture. Intellectuals like Jean-Jacques Rousseau writing in his 1762 work, *Émile, ou De l'éducation*, imagined patriarchy as the model for an ideal society and promoted a gender hierarchy that relegated women to domesticity. In this structure, men control the public domain while women are excluded from it.⁷² As Lynn Hunt has shown, growing fears of women's social power at the time of the French Revolution helped this order to take hold in France. Influenced by the increasing popularity of this mind-set, authors' production of idealized representations of females multiplied leading up to the Revolution (Hunt 154). Bernardin de Saint Pierre's classic novel, *Paul et Virginie*, serves as one example of a literary work that features such images. At the same time, records of Creole life in eighteenth-century Louisiana show evidence of a parallel integration of patriarchy. Frenchman Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz's written observations of this time in particular demonstrate the Creoles' emphasis on the importance of women's domestic responsibilities. By examining the development of this social order both in France and Louisiana, we may visualize literary representations of idealized women's roles as a link between French and Creole societies.

3.2.1 Returning to a "Natural" Order in France

The notion that the paternalistic family hierarchy serves as a model for the larger population is fundamental to the eighteenth-century French conception of society. While the move to promote and enforce male social authority was a major element of the Revolution, even prior to that, the *ancien régime* structure in France resembled that of a family. In *The Family*

⁷² In *The Sexual Contract*, Carole Pateman outlines this division of power through her explanation of two social spheres: "the private womanly sphere (natural)" and "the public, masculine sphere (civil)" (11).

Romance of the French Revolution, Lynn Hunt explains that “[t]he king [was] the head of a social body held together by bonds of deference; peasants deferred to their landlords, journeymen to their masters, great magnates to their king, wives to their husbands, and children to their parents” (3). Like a family headed by the father with the wife and children in descending levels of authority and bonded together by duty, the French hierarchy formed a pyramid structure headed by the king and branching out into the estates, each level answering to its superior. Although this system was founded upon male authority, women were still able to affect eighteenth-century society as *salonnières* within this order. In fact, Dena Goodman states that these women “were conducting the Enlightenment” (74). Goodman goes on to explain that “the salonnières were not simply ladies of leisure killing time...Like the philosophes who gathered in their homes, the salonnières were practical people who worked at tasks they considered productive and useful. They took themselves, their salons, and their guests very seriously” (74). Yet Revolutionary fears over women’s political influence combined with a parallel discourse led by intellectuals such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Restif de la Bretonne worked to re-designate women into strictly domestic roles under the guise of a return to a more natural social order.

On the eve of the Revolution, women’s ability to have an impact on society and politics began to generate widespread concern. Confidence in women’s roles within the public arena began to diminish during Louis XV’s reign when his mistresses, the Marquise de Pompadour and the Comtesse Du Barry, were discovered to influence royal policies. Encouraging the reaction against intellectual women like the *salonnières*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Restif de la Bretonne argued that “[i]nstructing [women] would overturn the sexual order” and “turn men into women” (Hunt 90). As this fear of female power gained momentum, Rousseau’s and de la Bretonne’s assertions were supported by depictions of the next king, Louis XVI, as feminized,

weak, and no longer capable of leading France. To combat what they determined to be a dangerous trend, men called for change that would ensure their dominance, what they perceived to be the more natural order, stifling the *salonnières*' power.

As part of their attempt to deny female power and reassert men's authority over the public realm, Rousseau and other Enlightenment *philosophes* looked to the state of nature in structuring their points of view regarding each gender's role in society. According to Carole Pateman, contract theorists like Rousseau asserted "that men's right over women has a natural basis" (41). Rousseau frames his argument for male dominance around the primitive, "natural" society of the paternalistic family. In this social structure, fathers reign supreme over the other members of the household and act as the sole representative in the public space, while women serve a primarily domestic function and have little agency outside the home. Mary Trouille confirms that "[t]hroughout his writings, Rousseau invokes nature – his own highly subjective and masculinist conception of it – to define women's role and to justify their subordination" (17). By promoting the adoption of social norms informed by the state of nature, Rousseau encouraged women's exclusion from the public arena and demonstrated that their intended role was a domestic one.

The idealized vision of social order that Rousseau's patriarchal discourse emphasized in his effort to defuse the *salonnières*' female power and return the "natural" balance between men and women focused on women's maternal ability. Throughout his writings, Rousseau's understanding of the female role is primarily linked to women's bodies. Their capacity to give birth and breastfeed in particular came to define his vision of their domestic social function. Trouille writes: "For Rousseau, anatomy is destiny. In his view, women's physiology determines their fate, both biologically and socially" (15). Rousseau shows how the female social role is

informed by women's "natural" maternal abilities most notably in his 1762 *Émile, ou De l'éducation*. More than simply announcing this connection, however, he strongly advocates this structuring of gender. Trouille notes that "[b]y underlining the continuity between woman's procreative function and her social role as wife, mother, and *maîtresse de maison*, Rousseau subtly shifts from the physical to the psychological, from the natural to the social, which he presents as mutually reinforcing and mutually justifying" (15). Indeed, although this perspective was motivated by men's fear of female power, women were convinced to support this ideology as well. Rousseau both supported his position and encouraged women to adopt more domestic, maternal roles by arguing that this change would be beneficial and allow women to contribute to society. "According to Rousseau, the exclusion of women from public life was necessary to preserve the purity and moral vigor of the home, so that the family could become the basis for the moral regeneration of society" (Trouille 18). Moreover, he played on women's feelings, declaring that their husbands would be influenced by their renewed commitment to motherhood as well: "Mais que les mères daignent nourrir leurs enfants, les mœurs vont se reformer d'elles-mêmes, les sentiments de la nature se réveiller dans tous les cœurs; l'État va se repeupler...Qu'une fois les femmes redeviennent mères, bientôt les hommes redeviendront pères et maris" (Rousseau, *Émile* 17-18). By structuring his argument through the state of nature, Rousseau made a case for revising gender roles in eighteenth-century France. This ideology supported Enlightenment writers' agenda, but it also came to play a role in more artistic expression as well, supplying authors especially with a "natural" fantasy of society (Hunt 154).

The order that supported the *philosophes*' stance against allowing women to take public roles also inspired the literary authors of the era. Glorified images of domestic women proliferated in the time leading up to and during the Revolution of 1789. Most narratives

centered on salutary fantasies of society formed under female domesticity; French authors focused on family bonds and idealized visions of motherhood or female chastity.⁷³ Works such as Denis Diderot's *Le Fils naturel* (1757), Rousseau's *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), and Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788) portray the family and intimate relations while underscoring the natural origin of the characters' affections. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's text is perhaps one of the most well-known works of this era. His characters, a small family living on the Île de France, all reflect his own fantasy of the patriarchal family that informs Rousseau's ordering of gender roles, the female characters in particular.

3.2.2 Representing Women on Île de France

Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's well-known novel, *Paul et Virginie*, is a prominent example of works depicting idealized females. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's characters, Madame de la Tour and Marguerite, embody a patriarchal vision of motherhood set in Île de France (modern day Île Maurice). The two women are exiles from France and are both mothers to infants; Madame de la Tour is an upper-class widow, and Marguerite is unmarried and lower-class. Both achieve personal fulfillment through breastfeeding and raising their children. The satisfaction they derive from performing these actions inscribes them within the "natural" domestic role that patriarchy assigns to women. Moreover, it reaffirms their identities as females. Their daughter, Virginie, is also implicated in this structure, representing, as her name suggests, the importance of female chastity. This character also reveals the threat that male discourse perceives from female sexuality. When Virginie matures sexually, she is quickly sent away from the island community and then dies on her voyage home. Her death simultaneously saves the family from

⁷³ Sarah Maza elaborates on the link between politics and literary depictions in her article on sentimental family values. She explains that as a result of the social upheaval, literature began to focus on "fantasies of primitive, natural fusion: nursing mothers or incestuous siblings were figures destined to reassure readers or viewers that it is nature that provides the deepest and most universal connections" (209).

the dangers of female desire and reinscribes her within a fantasy of chastity. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's classic work is a prime example of the emphasis on women's domestic role that defined gender in eighteenth-century French society.

In *Paul et Virginie*, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre delineates the female gender role by depicting "natural" acts of maternity, or rather, maternal functions that Enlightenment discourse had idealized, most notably breastfeeding. As Rousseau's states in *Émile*, "[l]e devoir des femmes n'est pas douteux," it is breastfeeding (16). Inspired by the state of nature, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre creates a maternal fantasy on an unspoiled island.⁷⁴ His two mother characters bond with their children as well as each other by breastfeeding, but at the same time they realize their ultimate duty as females within the author's social construct:

Les devoirs de la nature ajoutaient encore au bonheur de leur société. Leur amitié mutuelle redoublait à la vue de leurs enfants, fruits d'un amour également infortuné. Elles prenaient plaisir à les mettre ensemble dans le même bain, et à les coucher dans le même berceau. Souvent elles les changeaient de lait. 'Mon amie, disait madame de la Tour, chacune de nous aura deux enfants, et chacun de nos enfants aura deux mères.' (118-19)

Breastfeeding is so enjoyable for these women that it makes their exile happy. In fact, the mothers literally experience a kind of ecstasy through this act. Through their sharing of the task, the two women form a new intimacy and build their relationship, echoing the positive motivation for women to accept domesticity that Rousseau presented: "L'attrait de la vie domestique est le meilleur contre-poison des mauvaises mœurs. Le tracas des enfants, qu'on croit importune, devient agréable; il rend le père et la mère plus nécessaires, plus chers l'un à l'autre, il resserre

⁷⁴ Rousseau also notes the importance of a society's environment, writing that: "Les villes sont le gouffre de l'espèce humaine... Les femmes grosses qui sont à la champagne se hâtent de revenir accoucher à la ville: elles devraient faire tout le contraire" (*Émile* 36).

entre eux le lien conjugal” (*Émile* 17). Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s portrayal of Madame de la Tour’s and Marguerite’s great enjoyment and sense of fulfillment in performing a simple maternal chore underscores that the domestic realm is a female space and seems to prove that women are not meant to act in the public arena because, as these two characters appear to confirm, their true calling is at home and their most fulfilling activities are those associated with maternity.

The image of breastfeeding in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s text also reasserts the perceived link between female gender and maternity in patriarchy. As Judith Butler has argued, individuals’ gender identities depend upon the repetition of performative acts that continually inscribe them within the social constructs of a male or female gender. According to Butler, “gender is complexly produced through identificatory and performative practices” (*Undoing* 212).⁷⁵ Here, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s depiction of Madame de la Tour’s and Marguerite’s breastfeeding is also a portrayal of their enacting of a performance that reasserts their female identities in society. Thus, as the two women breastfeed, they reaffirm their places within the social construct of femininity as well as confirming male domination of the public world. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre further develops his delineation of paternalistic values by representing the dangers of female desire and sexuality that emerge when the children grow up.

When Virginie begins to mature, her close relationship with Paul is in danger of going beyond a brother-sister bond. As both children reach puberty, Virginie is confronted by new sexual urges: “Cependant depuis quelque temps Virginie se sentait agitée d’un mal inconnu... Quelquefois, à la vue de Paul, elle allait vers lui en folâtrant; puis tout à coup, près de l’aborder, un embarras subit la saisissait; un rouge vif colorait ses joues pâles, et ses yeux n’osaient plus

⁷⁵ Butler explains that her point in making this argument “was to combat forms of essentialism which claimed that gender is a truth that is somehow there, interior to the body, as a core or as an internal essence, something that we cannot deny, something that which, natural or not, is treated as a given” (*Undoing* 212).

s'arrêter sur les siens" (157-8). Virginie's first stirrings of desire cause her to put the integrity of the social order at risk, marking her as an unruly woman. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's representation of the two mothers' reactions further implies the possible breakdown of the family if Virginie seduces Paul. They force Virginie to leave the family and travel to France to take care of her aunt who has become ill. In fact, when the aunt writes to Madame de la Tour about her illness, the mother is pleased to have an opportunity to send Virginie away and remove the threat that her daughter's budding sexuality poses: "Madame de la Tour n'était pas fâchée de trouver une occasion de séparer pour quelque temps Virginie et Paul" (168). In her mind, keeping the two young people apart will protect their society. The author's decision to have her sent away points to the danger that this idealized structure perceives from female desire and sexuality and the necessity of removing it. Virginie is gone for over two years, living in France with her aunt.

Although Virginie eventually begins her voyage home, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre does not permit her to come back to the island. He chooses for her to die in order to protect the order of the natural family. Virginie does not simply expire, however. When her ship is caught in a storm, the author does not allow the character to save herself. When a sailor tells her to take off her clothes and swim, she refuses out of modesty. Rather than remove her heavy clothes and swim to shore away from the sinking ship, the character is overwhelmed by her sense of chastity and compelled to remain clothed and die: "elle, le repoussant avec dignité, détournait de lui sa vue... Virginie, voyant la mort inévitable, posa une main sur ses habits, l'autre sur son cœur, et levant en haut des yeux sereins, parut un ange qui prend son vol vers les cieux" (224-5). Consequently, through her death she is re-designated within an idealized construct of femininity as an image of purity and virtue. Her body, a sign of female sexuality, remains covered, and her

death confirms the “natural” society’s safety from the dangers of her desire. Virginie is held captive by patriarchal conceptions of her gender role that call for her modesty and repression of her desires, even at the cost of her life.

The fact that Virginie must die in order to fulfill her role and assure the moral integrity of the island family’s society signals other problematic aspects of the text. Although Bernardin de Saint-Pierre attempts to create a vision that demonstrates the benefits that female domesticity have on society as outlined by Rousseau, ultimately he fails. Despite the author’s efforts to situate the novel in a “natural” world that is unspoiled by issues such as those facing eighteenth-century France, class, for example, he is unable to do so. As maternal as they are, the women still live in a class-based society and even have slaves. His seemingly equal society is only a façade. This is evident simply from the names of his two maternal characters, one being “Madame” and the other going only by her given name, Marguerite. Madame de la Tour also enjoys certain benefits due to her aristocratic background. This is most clear in the inequalities of land distribution between the two women as described by the narrator:

J’en formais deux portions à peu près égales ; l’une renfermait la partie supérieure de cette enceinte, depuis ce piton de rocher couvert de nuages, d’où sort la source de la rivière des Lataniers, jusqu’à cette ouverture escarpée que vous voyez au haut de la montagne, et qu’on appelle l’Embrasure, parce qu’elle ressemble en effet à une embrasure de canon. Dans l’autre portion je compris toute la partie inférieure qui s’étend le long de la rivière des Lataniers jusqu’à l’ouverture où nous sommes, d’où cette rivière commence à couler entre deux collines jusqu’à la mer... La partie supérieure échet à madame de la Tour, et l’inférieure à Marguerite. (95-6)

Bernardin de Saint-Pierre thus conjures up a vivid image of the *ancien régime* hierarchy as he describes the differing levels of the two land plots. Yet like his simple choice of their names, the words *la partie inférieure* and *la partie supérieure* alone imply Madame de la Tour's class advantage over Marguerite. That the mothers and their children are also served by two slaves, Domingue and Marie, who are not included in the family unit, further demonstrates Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's problematic portrayal. While his characters adopt gender roles that conform to the *philosophes'* perspective informed by the state of nature and even inhabit a natural environment, their society does not actually escape the concerns over social iniquities that affected France at this time.⁷⁶

Even in spite of the text's failure, since its first publication, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's novel was widely celebrated by its readers. During the Revolution, a sort of cult sprang up around the fictional family portrayed on Île de France. People in France as well as outside of the country became obsessed with the novel. Lieve Spaas points out that "when [scholar and author] Paul Toinet compiled his bibliographical and iconographical catalogue of *Paul et Virginie* in 1963, he was able to identify more than five hundred editions, half of which were translations into many different languages, frequently adorned with illustrations" (317). As the numerous translations show, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's text gained wide popularity even including in Louisiana. Indeed, Alfred Mercier confirms having read the novel himself. In his poem, "Patrie," he recounts reading the novel during his youth: "Je me souviens de la grande harmonie / Des flots du lac qui baignaient mes pieds nus; / Là je lisais Paul et sa Virginie, / On souriait à mes pleurs ingénus" (Weiss 130). For this reason, readers can be sure of his having been exposed to at least one French depiction of idealized female domesticity in literature. Yet

⁷⁶ Lieve Spass explores Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's contradictions further in "*Paul et Virginie*: The Shipwreck of an Idyll."

even before Alfred Mercier's time, people in Louisiana were establishing their own version of French patriarchy. Eighteenth-century Creoles were influenced by the same fantasy of women's domestic responsibilities that discourse on gender in France at that time encouraged, restricting their access to the public realm. Like their French counterparts, Creoles focused on women's supposed "natural" maternal duties.

3.2.3 Idealized Gender Roles in Louisiana

Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz's observations of mid-eighteenth-century Louisiana society demonstrate the existence of a discourse similar to the one that inspired Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's novel. In his work, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, first published in three volumes between 1751 and 1753, Le Page du Pratz reveals the integration in Louisiana of a male conception of an idealized female social role focusing on motherhood. Echoing the arguments of his counterparts in France, he argues that Creole mothers should not neglect what he perceives to be their natural duty of breastfeeding, and even makes note of a wider social investment in the matter. This revelation of a Creole adoption of male privilege and its shaping of notions of gender in their community uncovers a link between the two societies. Even as French interest in the colony waned, the persistence of their patriarchal social order in Creole society maintained their French cultural connection.⁷⁷ Thus, the male-dominated gender hierarchy in Louisiana points to an inheritance of a fear of female power and the relegation of women to domesticity.

In Le Page du Pratz's observations of society in Louisiana, he reveals that those Creole women who opted to use wet nurses instead of nursing their infants themselves were chastised. By detailing the extensive help that most wives in Louisiana had from slave labor at that time, he

⁷⁷ Historians such as Catherine Clinton, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Sally McMillen have demonstrated that patriarchy persisted well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries throughout the southern states, including Louisiana. See Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*; and McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*.

makes a case for encouraging women to breastfeed their own children. He argues that with all the domestic help they have from slaves, women have no excuse for not performing their “natural” duties. According to Le Page du Pratz,

dans un pays tel que la Louisiane, où les meres ont toutes les commodités pour se faire servir, pour faire porter & accommoder leurs enfans...il ne reste donc à la mere que le faible soin d’allaiter son enfant & de se décharger du lait qui le nourrit. Je ne veux point m’amuser à critiquer la mollesse & et l’amour propre des femmes qui sacrifient ainsi leurs enfans ; on voit assez d’ailleurs combien la Société y est intéressée. (1: 343-4)

Not only does the writer allude to the negative perception of women who do not breastfeed, he also points to the labeling of such women as lazy and selfish in the larger social discourse. Le Page du Pratz’s description of notions of women’s social obligations in Louisiana aligns with the arguments made by Rousseau and others in France. Like them, he demonstrates the pressure to adopt idealized gender constructs that emphasized the female maternal function of breastfeeding, reinscribing women within social roles defined solely by their physicality and that stifled their intellectual abilities. Moreover, Le Page du Pratz’s representation of the prevalence of this perception reveals the more widespread adoption of French social protocol in Louisiana.

Since the founding of Louisiana, Creoles looked to their French roots for social guidance. This is especially evident in legal matters. In an essay on women’s legal rights in colonial Louisiana, Vaughn Baker discusses Louisiana’s early tradition of implementing French legislation as their own. He explains that, “civil government began in Louisiana in 1712 when Louis XIV ceded the colony to Antoine Crozat” (7). As a result of this transfer, Crozat, the first proprietary owner of French Louisiana, received a royal charter from the king of France. This

charter, called the *Coutume de Paris*, established the king's edicts as law in Louisiana. French law, then, was also law in the colony of Louisiana. Later on, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Creoles again looked to France, adopting Napoleonic codifications as guidelines for rewriting their own law following the Louisiana Purchase.

As Suzanne Desan explains, the authors of the Napoleonic Code “reasserted the patriarchal authority of fathers over children and husbands over wives, and attempted to secure the boundaries of legitimate families” (284). The new legislation provided for “limitations of women’s power” while increasing men’s power (Desan 285). Only a few years later in 1806, the territory of Orleans' administration⁷⁸ appointed several lawyers to prepare a similar civil code for Louisiana (Haas 4). By 1808, the document was complete: “This compilation was based on the Napoleonic Code of 1804, the works of Domat, Pothier, and Aguesseau being used to supplement the deficiencies of the [Code in] Louisiana” (Sherman 251). The authors in Louisiana supplied their own words, although they also borrowed directly from the Napoleonic Code, Pothier and Domat being two of its original crafters (Sherman 237-40). While in terms of some legal rights women benefited from the resulting Louisiana Civil Code of 1808, little improved in their overall status in the transatlantic passage: “The Louisiana Civil Code allowed married women more control over the property that they brought into the marriage... Wives could sell, mortgage, donate, and will their personal and real property, *assuming they had the approval of their husbands*” (McMillen 43, my emphasis). The Creoles’ history of adapting legislation for their own community from France’s model, even after they were no longer a colony of France, evidences their continued connection to French tradition particularly during

⁷⁸ After the Louisiana Purchase all land south of the 33rd parallel became the Territory of Orleans, the rest being named the District of Louisiana. The Territory of Orleans encompasses what is now the state of Louisiana minus the Florida parishes. See David P. Currie, “The Constitution in Congress: Jefferson and the West, 1801-1809.”

the nineteenth century as they confronted Americanization and the polarization of the dual sides of their cultural identity.

At the same time that Creoles maintained a male-dominated order and idealized female roles, literary works set in Louisiana challenge this structure. Authors, including Alfred Mercier, echoed the Creole cultural capital of New Orleans' own perceived disorder that Shannon Dawdy has outlined: "With incredible rapidity following its founding by the French in 1718, New Orleans gained a reputation as a wild town and a colonial failure, a reputation that has endured" (*Building* 2). Literary depictions of this "wildness" that focus on gender work against Creoles' real-life ties to French social order. Unruly heroines embody or become associated with the Creole environment. In the process of revealing a "disorderly" social structure in Louisiana through the portrayal of characters who transgress the boundaries of gender, authors play upon the emphasis on female domesticity that links the two societies. Consequently, this trend reveals literature's pivotal role in disputing French cultural domination of Louisiana.

3.3 A Tradition of Contesting Patriarchal Fantasy

Literary depictions of women in Louisiana have a tradition of crossing outside of male-idealized gender roles. From the eighteenth century in France and L'Abbé Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* to anglophone Kate Chopin's *Edna Pontellier* on the eve of the twentieth century, female characters set in this milieu have a history of confronting patriarchal authority and the social restrictions that it places on women. Chateaubriand's *Atala* who, similar to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Virginie*, dies to protect her virginity is one notable exception to this tradition.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ This may be because Chateaubriand's text opens a dialog on gender in France, rather than providing commentary that is focused on the colonial context. In her article, "*Triste Amérique: Atala* and the Postrevolutionary Construction of Woman," Naomi Schor further discusses the character *Atala*'s relevance for conceptions of femininity in France. See also Margaret Waller, "*Cherchez la Femme: Male Malady and Narrative Politics in the French Romantic Novel*," and "Being René, Buying *Atala*: Alienated Subjects and Decorative Objects in Postrevolutionary France."

Nevertheless, Alfred Mercier's nineteenth-century novels are part of a pre-existing dialog that French and English-language literature opens up on male social dominance in North America. His characters are connected to a larger network of female representations that cross the boundaries of gender. Acknowledging this pattern is a key component of and first step in understanding the exceptional way in which Mercier's characters resist the French patriarchy adopted by the Creole community. Here, the reader visualizes a precedent for literary depictions of women in Louisiana by examining a variety of examples from texts written by Creoles and non-Creoles whose female characters combat idealized representations of their gender such as those embodied by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's maternal characters and instead echo the threat to male social domination posed by Virginie and her female desire.

Authors frame their depictions of unconventional female characters in Louisiana in a variety of ways. This section examines three works with differing approaches. First, readers see how colonial Louisiana is presented as a fitting environment for women who refuse to stay within the limits of patriarchal propriety. Abbé Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* is a prominent example of a female character that reflects the more widespread disorder of early New Orleans by defying social protocol. Next, we look at how exotic depictions of women defy male idealizations of the female role. Sidonie de la Houssaye's *quarteronnes* are women whose perceived exotic quality makes it possible for them to defy restriction to the domestic realm.⁸⁰ Unlike white women who are subordinate to men, the *quarteronnes* support themselves, can assert power over men, and are publicly involved. Finally, a female character that rejects patriarchal gender hierarchy in an attempt to redefine the female role is examined. Kate Chopin's character, Edna Pontellier, is unsatisfied in her life as a housewife and mother. Edna

⁸⁰ The term *quarteronnes*, or quadroons, designates primarily female mixed-race individuals with one-fourth African ancestry.

ceases her efforts to fit into the original French social order in Louisiana when she discovers her true self, and personal fulfillment is outside of the role that is socially acceptable for her gender. The works of Prévost, de la Houssaye, and Chopin all exemplify a literary tradition of resisting patriarchal gender roles in Louisiana.

3.3.1 Manon Lescaut

In L'Abbé Prévost's 1731 novel, his female character's disorderly behavior is linked to the wild landscape of colonial New Orleans. When Manon Lescaut acts in a way that Parisian society deems to be unacceptable for a woman, she is eventually sent to Louisiana with her lover, Des Grieux. Rather than being strictly a punishment, however, sending Manon away is presented as more of a precautionary measure. The colony is depicted as a more appropriate place than France for "loose" women and whores, females who do not adhere to social protocol. Unlike Paris, New Orleans has no strict social order at this time: survival is a higher priority than decorum. An environment such as this seems to be the place where women like Manon belong. Colonial New Orleans also resists control. Even in a society where she can fit in more easily, however, Manon is still seen as a source of disorder that must be removed. The character dies by the novel's end. Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* is a prominent example of how unruly female characters can embody the likewise perceived environment of Louisiana. As early as the eighteenth century, a tradition that links women who resist patriarchal gender roles with Louisiana emerges.

Prévost depicts Manon as a libertine who refuses to accept the modesty and chastity that is assigned to women in her society. Rather than resigning herself to domesticity, Manon operates in a manner that is contrary to the model that Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's Virginie offers. She follows classic *femme fatale* form, women who "go their own way, are passionately

desired by their narrating menfolk, and somehow are the cause of all the crimes the latter commit, even down to their own murder” (Segal 23). Indeed, Manon is ostentatious, takes multiple lovers, and resists male authority in general. As her lover Des Grieux explains in the novel, “Manon était passionnée pour le plaisir” (85). Moreover, she only half-way attempts to hide her offending activities from society. For these reasons, she and her relationship with Des Grieux are perceived negatively in France. The other characters believe that she influences him to be as unruly as she is: “Her body and the desire it provokes are responsible for whatever will follow; nothing will be the hero’s fault” (Segal 25). In fact, she does persuade Des Grieux to participate in activities that are illegal. Yet as Manon’s brother puts it, in France, for “une fille comme elle... une fille telle que Manon,” a girl *like her*, this is to be expected (89). Thus in Prévost’s depiction of eighteenth-century France, it is expected that a female who crosses the boundary of acceptable behavior for her gender should also be criminal.

The answer for protection against Manon’s bad influence is to exile her to North America. As Jennifer Spear has indicated, eighteenth-century French society looked to colonial New Orleans as a place to send problematic citizens, not only in Prévost’s fictional account, but also in real life (Spear 44-5). The French author refers to these individuals as “de malheureux bannis” (204). Manon fits in because of the colony’s status as a destination for French exiles like herself. More importantly, however, her unconventional behavior is in line with the survival-driven attitude that characterized everyday life in colonial New Orleans. Continued existence depended upon one’s capacity to take on roles that would not be acceptable depending on one’s gender. In his article, “Cherchez Les Femmes: Some Glimpses of Women in Early Eighteenth-Century Louisiana,” Vaughn Baker points out the necessity of disregarding gender-appropriate behavior when faced with the hardships of colonial life. He writes that, “[b]y January 1687, the

colonists numbered only twenty or twenty-one, seven of them women, and dire hardship in Louisiana continue to decimate their ranks. The surviving accounts tell grimly of women and children being forced to participate in hunting if they wished to eat” (23). As Baker describes, the harsh lifestyle in early New Orleans forced colonists to cross the lines that had defined men’s and women’s social roles in Europe. In this case, women were forced to act as men and hunt simply in order to survive. Colonial New Orleans, then, can be understood to reflect the more socially mobile *modus operandi* of a woman who rejects the confinement of patriarchal authority.

When Manon and Des Grieux arrive in New Orleans, they are faced with a challenging environment, yet they feel more at ease in the less restrictive society. Manon was reviled for refusing to adhere to the gendered codes of behavior in Paris. Order in primitive Louisiana is more lax, however, and consequently, she is no longer exposed to the same judgment. From a historical standpoint, because her non-traditional lifestyle more closely corresponds to the (lack of) order in the colony, she fits in more easily. The character Des Grieux points out this positive aspect of the change of environment to Manon by describing America as a place, “où nous n'avons plus à ménager les lois arbitraires du rang et de la bienséance” (207). As Des Grieux recounts, they are no longer forced to adhere to French social protocols in “a natural world inhabited by ‘savages’” (Miller 81).

Given a fresh start, Manon does attempt to assume a new role, however, her death not long after the couple’s arrival prevents the realization of their domestic bliss. Nancy K. Miller explains that “[r]ealizing the injustice of her past behavior toward Des Grieux, Manon resolves to dedicate herself to the new version of the couple, accepting the principle of exclusivity” (80). Her desires and the disorderly behavior and troubling of gender boundaries that accompany

them, however, are too much of a threat to Prévost's conception of society. Although the New World setting and its anonymity provide Manon with an opportunity to escape her unruly reputation, she nevertheless remains a "source of disorder" in Louisiana and is ultimately punished for her transgressions (Miller 81). Naomi Segal points out in particular the "feminization" of Des Grieux as a result of Manon's "superior power," as a danger to patriarchy and male domination (24-5).⁸¹ In fact, Manon is the embodiment of the very environment that French colonists attempt to tame. Consequently, the author extinguishes her female power, killing off Manon at the end of the novel.

Prévost's text is one of the first works to link Louisiana to a representation of a disorderly female. His character, Manon Lescaut, is a widely celebrated example of a woman in New Orleans who rejects domestic submission.⁸² Her story jumpstarts the tradition of depicting women in this environment, launching a literary trend that ultimately grows to include authors from Louisiana. Not only have French authors looked to the former colony to compose portraits of women who challenge gender hierarchy, but Louisiana writers have as well. Mercier and his contemporaries, and those who succeed them, carry on the tradition of creating characters that subvert male authority, thus affirming the connection between such depictions and the Louisiana setting.

3.3.2 New Orleans' *Quarteronnes*

In Sidonie de la Houssaye's *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, Louisiana's mixed-race female population challenges male-idealized gender roles. De la Houssaye's *quarteronnes* manipulate a myth of exoticism that differentiates them from other women and

⁸¹ Segal further explains that Manon "carefully reverses the biological roles of male and female" (24).

⁸² Shannon Dawdy notes that it was "one of the top-selling novels of eighteenth-century France" (*Building* 25).

helps them gain independence through their system of *plaçage*.⁸³ While the *quarteronnes* wield power over their male patrons, the other women in the novel, mostly white women, are relegated to a life of male domination. Under their assumed guise of exoticism, the *quarteronnes* escape the restriction that other women faced and thus subvert male authority by constructing a realm of mystery and otherworldliness.⁸⁴ Like Manon Lescaut, they are an example of women who challenge the idealized gender roles of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's maternal characters within Louisiana.

Drawing on the social division between a female domestic domain and a male public one, de la Houssaye inscribes the *quarteronnes* within roles that seem more appropriate for the male gender in a patriarchal setting. The *quarteronnes* are active in public, while white women are occupy domestic roles. De la Houssaye depicts her white female characters as the embodiment of the patriarchal vision of femininity. These characters retreat from public society in order to devote themselves to their duties as wives and mothers. In her narrative focusing on a quadroon named Violetta, the author highlights the white Creole housewife Hermine Saulvé's embracing of domesticity, stating that "[t]out entière à ses devoirs d'épouse et de mère, Hermine fuyait le monde" (143). Hermine does not stray from the social role that has been assigned to her gender. She stays at home, fleeing the public realm, and fully commits herself to her domestic duties. The *quarteronnes*, on the other hand, are not depicted in domestic roles. They are neither maternal nor do they accept living in confinement. The author characterizes Violetta as being a master of "dévergondage, de luxure et du libertinage le plus vil" (223). This negative depiction, which ultimately plays into the author's own identity, indicates that instead of accepting

⁸³ Christian Hommel explains that *plaçage* is a system of illegitimate unions between white men and quadroon women (14).

⁸⁴ As Hommel notes, Werner Sollors outlines the existence of a mythical representation of quadroon women in literature in his work, *Neither Black nor White yet Both*.

relegation to the domestic sphere, Violetta and the other quadroon characters take advantage of a life of spectacle and social performance to support themselves rather than depending upon male protection.

According to Christian Hommel, de la Houssaye's portrayal of the *quarteronnes*' greater degree of freedom is inspired in part by the real-life exotic myth that grew around mixed-race individuals in the nineteenth century. As Hommel explains, New Orleans' *quarteronnes* were perceived as women who were exotic and other, different from any other place in the United States. This was particularly true in the states in the North:

c'est dans la presse américaine du Nord publiée à New York, Boston, et Cincinnati que les bals de quarteronnes donnent avec autant de force une image stigmatisée de la Nouvelle-Orléans. Il suffit de s'intéresser à la littérature populaire américaine publiée entre 1830 et 1860 pour voir émerger un imaginaire du sud. Au XIX siècle, les États du Sud sont pour ceux du Nord un autre Orient.
(23)

The *quarteronnes*, their balls, and their system of *plaçage* were major elements in the creation of this image of New Orleans as an exotic space.. At the same time, the *quarteronnes* capitalized on this perception to improve their lives. Hommel clarifies the real-life challenge facing quarteronnes, “[s]i elles ne jouent pas ‘la carte du mythe’, de l’irrésistible Créole de couleur, elles doivent accepter une condition socio-économique inférieure et se mettre au service des autres” (22). By showing how quadroon characters capitalize on male curiosity in her fictional work, de la Houssaye demonstrates that these women undermine patriarchal authority. In fact, her *quarteronnes* have the ability to reverse the social hierarchy: they wield power over men. As exotic women, they are served rather than being forced to serve others themselves.

De la Houssaye's characters re-order the racial order as well as the gender hierarchy. Instead of conceding to male authority, as is expected in patriarchy, the *quarteronnes* have power over their male patrons. Remarkably, the author describes these men as the slaves of the *placées*. She depicts one of them in particular as being "non seulement l'amant, mais l'esclave de Violetta la quarteronne" (248). De la Houssaye's terminology here confirms that these women are not just able to subvert male authority, they destroy it. Moreover, by capitalizing on the exotic aura that surrounds them, the *quarteronnes* even reverse the nineteenth-century racial order governing the master and slave relationship.

Sidonie de la Houssaye's strikingly negative depiction of the quadroon women is notable, suggesting a motive beyond a mere representation of *libertinage* and disorder in the Creole capital. She does not punish these women primarily by killing them; instead she counterbalances their transgressions against patriarchy by inscribing herself as well as her white female characters within roles that are suitably domestic for male authority. Looking at her characterizations of mixed-race women guided by Joseph Roach's notion of performing the self by performing the other opens up a deeper significance behind her use of intense terminology such as "le plus vil." According to Roach, "circum-Atlantic societies, confronted with revolutionary circumstances for which few precedents existed, have invented themselves by performing their pasts in the presence of others. They could not perform themselves, however, unless they also performed what and who they thought they were not" (5). Considering de la Houssaye's portrayal of the quadroons as a manner of performance, readers can see a link opening up between her depictions of them and of white women like herself. The *quarteronnes'* transgressions against patriarchy as independent women with desires and sexual power come to confirm the author's own strict observance of that social order. By emphasizing the degree to

which the mixed-race women deviate from the traditional gender roles, she effectively reinscribes herself more securely within an idealized female role, demonstrating her own fulfillment of her social duty. Roach outlines the process as “this custom of self-definition by staging contrasts with other races, cultures, and ethnicities” (6). Thus, the *quarteronnes*’ power over men indicates their unruliness while also ensuring de la Houssaye’s place in Louisiana’s male-dominated social order.

The *quarteronnes* of de la Houssaye’s work are an integral part of the landscape of New Orleans. Their “unfeminine” behavior, as Christine Koch Harris has termed it, differentiates them from women elsewhere in the United States, as well as the other women in New Orleans, like the author herself (119). De la Houssaye’s representation of the *quarteronnes* reveals how these women challenge male authority while emphasizing their importance to the culture in New Orleans. As in Prévost’s novel, in *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, women who reject the social order are depicted as belonging in/to New Orleans; their otherness affects how Louisiana is portrayed, marking it as an unruly and worrisome space in literature. In this way, Sidonie de la Houssaye continues the tradition of portraying Louisiana as a place where patriarchal gender roles are challenged.⁸⁵

3.3.3 Edna Pontellier: Redefining the Female Self

Kate Chopin’s 1899 work, *The Awakening*, offers a third portrayal of a woman in Louisiana challenging the hierarchy of patriarchal social structure. The main character, Edna Pontellier, throws off the restriction of what those around her believe to be appropriate behavior for a woman and decides to live for herself, instead of for her family. Edna chooses to engage in activities that are perceived to be disorderly, including leaving her husband and children, having

⁸⁵ For study of de la Houssaye’s text, see John Perret’s dissertation, “A Critical Study of the Life and Writings of Sidonie de la Houssaye with Special Emphasis on the Unpublished Works” and Alice Parker’s article, “Evangeline’s Darker Daughters.”

affairs, living alone, and earning her own money. Like Manon Lescaut and the *quarтеронnes*, she finds personal contentment in a life that others deem unacceptable. Also like Manon, however, Edna's rejection of patriarchy also clinches her demise. Chopin's text is one more instance of an author linking Louisiana to female characters that refuse to comply with codes of behavior imposed upon them by patriarchal idealization.

Edna's awakening moves her to throw off the restrictions of the idealized role prescribed for her gender. After several years of marriage, attempting to fulfill her responsibilities as a female, she decides to take control of her own life. Dorothy Jacobs details the events of her revolt as "moving out of the confinement of marriage, defying patriarchal authority, eschewing the tyranny of housewifery, and neglecting obligations to societal functions" (86). Indeed, Edna completely abandons her former life of simply obeying her husband's wishes and her children's demands. Instead of continuing to attempt to fulfill her obligations as a devoted wife and mother, she forges a new role for herself. She lives as she wishes, like Manon, and chooses to fashion her own life, like the *quarтеронnes*. At the same time, she acknowledges the dominant view of such actions: "By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex" (Chopin 127). Yet she does not want to depend upon her husband. Edna awakens to her decision to become self-sufficient and chooses to live for herself, rather than focusing on making others happy. These actions are all part of her rejection of the restrictions that patriarchy places on women.

Chopin's character finds freedom beyond the boundaries of idealized gender constructs in Louisiana. Like Manon Lescaut, Edna was not born in the former French colony. Throughout the novel, she reminisces about her childhood and upbringing in Kentucky. But also like Manon, Edna is finally able to learn how to accept her authentic self in New Orleans. Here, she

discovers how to live uninhibited by social protocol, just as Manon did before her. Edna's choice to leave behind her identity as a mother and wife and instead live for herself shows her disregard for the gender hierarchy. Edna is another example of a woman who refuses to accept domesticity in Louisiana. Kate Chopin's novel, published on the eve of the twentieth century, yet again continues the tradition of linking women who reject male authority with Louisiana.

While Chopin's character establishes a life for herself outside of her prescribed role, it is not sustainable. She is unable to overcome her sense of her wickedness in refusing to adhere to the submission that society compels her to accept. At the end of the novel, Edna swims far out into the Gulf of Mexico in an apparent suicide. Her death thus resonates with those of Manon Lescaut and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Virginie*. Although her death is her choice, and, moreover, the author orchestrating this choice is a woman, like those of Prévost's and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's characters, it signals the threat that an unruly woman poses to male authority. In essence, although she battles the gender norms that dictate her life, Chopin's character is unable to escape from the perception, even her own, that she is a danger to society and kills herself in order to purge a source of disorder.

By examining these portrayals of women who fight patriarchal authority in literary works set in Louisiana, the reader can visualize a network of texts taking shape around Alfred Mercier's fiction. These novels provide a context in which he too can move to challenge Creole Louisiana's nineteenth-century gender hierarchy in his fiction, and from which readers can begin to interpret it. Mercier's writing, unlike his personal opinions, is heavily influenced by the patriarchal tradition that structures Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's novel. Yet he is also linked to the literary tradition of featuring unruly women in Louisiana who refuse patriarchal authority, connecting with Prévost's, de la Houssaye's, and Chopin's texts. Clearly, Mercier's focus on

gender is not something new when it comes to Louisiana literature, but what is innovative about his work is the way in which he approaches his portrayals of characters who disrupt the patriarchal gender hierarchy within Creole Louisiana. Mercier forms portraits of women in idealized roles alongside positive images of those who fight social restriction. He creates controversial characters like an outspoken young woman and an intersex individual to contrast with the domestic fantasy of breastfeeding mothers and docile, obedient wives. Furthermore, although these characters are sources of social disorder, this does not condemn them to die. The fact that his resisting heroines/heroes do not die for their transgressions against patriarchal gender roles reflects his own extraordinary stance on gender equality at the end of the nineteenth century.

3.4 Portraying Patriarchy on the Creole Plantation

In *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, Mercier inscribes the Creole plantation within a male-dominated social structure, ceding to the patriarchal *bienséances* that confine his literary expression. He depicts his characters in idealized gender roles that correspond to those in a traditional social order; male characters occupy roles of authority while females are portrayed as subservient to men. Female characters in the novel are especially noticeable in this regard; echoing Rousseau, their social roles are restricted by their physicality.⁸⁶ Many of Mercier's female characters are defined by their maternal instincts and their abilities as mothers in raising their children. The unmarried women in the novel are confined to the home and defined by their chastity. They are portrayed as weak and frail, physically unable to leave the domestic environment, exemplifying another aspect of the male vision of femininity. While patriarchy is primarily demonstrated through women's roles, Mercier's male characters are also implicated. Men are portrayed as powerful leaders of society whose authority cannot be questioned. The

⁸⁶ See pages 104-6.

Saint-Ybars family patriarch, M. Saint-Ybars, for example, rules his home and his family with absolute power. This portrayal of males further reveals the text's alignment with a paternalistic structure, reflecting a male-oriented leadership. By examining the different gender roles assigned to male and female characters in Mercier's text, then, readers can understand how the author represents traditional, French visions of patriarchy, creating a foundation on which to eventually challenge it.

3.4.1 The "Failed" Mother

In *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, female characters generally occupy social roles that are defined by a woman's maternal abilities. This is primarily exemplified by the mistress, Mme Saint-Ybars, and her slave, Mamrie. After she gives birth, Mme Saint-Ybars is unable to breastfeed her two infant twins, Démon and Chant-d'Oisel, and instead, her slave Mamrie becomes their *nourrice*. As the novel progresses, the mistress deteriorates mentally and physically and becomes unable to function normally, suggesting that her failure to nurse her children, a vital element of the idealized female gender role, destines her to fail as a woman. In fact, she is marginalized within the family structure. Mamrie, by contrast, fulfills her female duties by breastfeeding her mistress's children, and she functions as a respected member of the family throughout her life. Unlike Mme Saint-Ybars, Mamrie meets her maternal obligations. As a result, she remains socially viable. Using these two characters, Mercier creates an environment in which it is clear that women's social acceptance is defined by their success as mothers, echoing Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's depictions of the female gender. Mme Saint-Ybars and Mamrie and their different roles within the novel demonstrate the patriarchal order structuring Mercier's fiction.

The story of Démon's and Chant-d'Oisel's birth is recounted in the first half of the novel as part of our and the newly-arrived French tutor Anthony Pélasge's introduction to Mamrie. Mme Saint-Ybars and Mamrie each become pregnant within four months of each other; Mamrie gives birth to her child first.⁸⁷ Only a week after Mme Saint-Ybars's twins are born, however, tragedy strikes when Mamrie's four-month old contracts tetanus and dies. She is devastated and becomes deeply depressed, retreating from her normally active life. At the same time that her slave is mourning, Mme Saint-Ybars has her own troubles following the birth of the twins; she is unable to nurse:

Il y avait une semaine que Mme Saint-Ybars allaitait ses nouveau-nés, lorsqu'elle eut plusieurs frissons, à la suite desquels elle éprouva des douleurs aiguës aux deux seins. Une nuit, malgré tout son courage, elle ne put supporter l'atroce torture qu'elle éprouvait toutes les fois qu'elle voulait apaiser la soif des enfants.
(47)

Although Mme Saint-Ybars tries to nurse, she is unable to continue, and she gives up the task in order to rest. The reader is made to understand that the character attempts to overcome her ailment. She wants to care for the infants, but the pain makes it impossible. This development, however, has repercussions that affect her maternal role. After she ceases to nurse her children, her slave takes on the task for her.

When Mme Saint-Ybars cannot nurse, Mamrie hears the twins crying and takes them to her room to rock them to sleep. Not only has she experienced a great loss, but also her maternal instinct has been ignited. She deeply desires to care for and nurse her child, doubling the sadness she feels. This feeling persists as she attempts to calm Démon and Chant-d'Oisel. When she

⁸⁷ The narrator does not make clear who the father of Mamrie's child is, although he does allude to the fact that she has many suitors of a variety of racial backgrounds (Mercier, *L'Habitation* 49).

falls asleep holding them, her dreams of motherhood predispose her to nurse, and the hungry infants take advantage:

Le laisser-aller du sommeil lui fit prendre une attitude si penchée, que l'extrémité de son sein droit se trouva en contact avec les lèvres du petit garçon. Mamrie rêvait ; elle se voyait dans le jardin, assise au pied d'un arbre... et elle goûtait cette sainte et douce sensation qu'éprouve une mère qui allaite son enfant. Elle en ressentit une joie si vive qu'elle se réveilla. Quel ne fut pas son étonnement en voyant, à la lueur de la veilleuse, une petite bouche rosée fortement appliquée à sa poitrine. La petite fille s'étant mise à crier, elle lui donna l'autre sein qui ne fut pas refusé. (48)

When Mamrie awakens, she is surprised and happy to discover that she is still lactating and is able to fulfill the task that she was dreaming of for her own child. She instantly forms a bond with the twins; moreover, her happiness in nursing conquers the deep sadness at having lost her own child. As a result, she becomes exemplary of Rousseau's designation of breastfeeding as "ce devoir si doux que la nature impose [sur les femmes]" (*Émile* 18). By breastfeeding her mistress' children, then, Mamrie is able to realize her supposedly natural maternal inclination, albeit unintentionally.

Mercier's decision to represent Mamrie's role as a wet-nurse coming about informally suggests his challenge to patriarchal depictions of female characters such as Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's early on. As Pratima Prasad points out in her article "Intimate Strangers: Interracial Encounters in Romantic Narratives of Slavery," constructions of gender are also tied up in racial

discourse and fears of racial mixing.⁸⁸ The two mothers in *Paul et Virginie*, for example, are white, and while they have a slave, Marie, she is excluded from the communal breastfeeding that bonds the white women together with their children. Instead, Marie's function is limited to labor. According to Prasad,

maternal milk, a powerful symbol of the fecundity and the reproductive labor of the two European women, sets them apart from the purely productive labor that Marie's role in the community represents. Marie does not produce any children, and the little textual space that is devoted to her primarily enumerates her worker-skills ("industrie"), such as basket-making, cloth-weaving, cooking, poultry-raising, the selling of wares at the local market, etc. (4)

In *Paul et Virginie*, motherhood and breastfeeding are limited to the white characters, and the black female slave is excluded from the maternal circle. Mercier's narrative, however, runs counter to the racially polarized depiction of childcare that Prasad points out in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's novel. While the French author does not associate motherhood or its related tasks with the black woman, in Mercier's novel, a black slave becomes the primary maternal figure when Mamrie involuntarily replaces her mistress. Moreover, the fact that the switch from Mme Saint-Ybars to Mamrie occurs on its own suggests that this interracial mother-child bond is as "natural" as patriarchal discourse imagines breastfeeding to be. By casting the maternal assigned females as black, however, the Louisiana author invokes a stereotypical representation of Southern motherhood: the black Mammy. Despite the author's own more progressive views that challenge traditional notions of racial and gender roles, his inclusion of the typical Mammy figure again evidences the obligation to tradition that weighs down his text and his expression of

⁸⁸ Prasad states in her article that "one of the unstated yet forceful principles of Bernardin's fictional utopia is a benevolent form of racial segregation" (3). Although the two slave characters, Domingue and Marie, are bonded to the family, they are not included in the family unit.

his personal opinions. Of the Mammy, Catherine Clinton writes: “she alone projected an image of power wielded by blacks – a power rendered strictly benign and maternal in its influence” (201). By adopting this trope and limiting the black female’s authority to her maternal influence, authors defuse a source of power that could weaken both white dominance and male authority. Mercier concedes his character to this racially motivated tradition, as from this point on, Mamrie replaces Démon’s and Chant-d’Oisel’s birth mother for nursing, and even as a maternal figure overall.

Although Mme Saint-Ybars desires to breastfeed her children, as Mamrie does, her painful physical condition makes it impossible. Yet she is not recognized as a mother for only wanting to nurse, carrying out the act itself is vital. For this reason, the maternal role and its responsibilities are transferred from her to her slave. Moreover, the physical pain she suffers while attempting to nurse further invalidates her social role. Mme Saint-Ybars’s giving up of nursing is portrayed as a tragedy, rather than as a way to manage her physical condition. The narrator in the novel explains that, “Mme Saint-Ybars, atteinte d’abcès multiples, dut renoncer au bonheur d’allaiter ses jumeaux” (48). Clearly, there is no “bonheur” for Mme Saint-Ybars when she attempts to breastfeed, yet the apparent perception of the act, as the narrator presents it, is that it should be a joyful experience. Unlike Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s characters, who take pleasure in breastfeeding and are drawn closer together by it, for example, Mme Saint-Ybars is unable to enjoy such an experience. Consequently, the physical pain she feels when she nurses sets her apart from the female gender role in patriarchy which, echoing Rousseau, appears to be rooted in her physicality. Her disability, then, and not simply choosing not to nurse seems to be what confirms her label as a “failed” mother. Ultimately, it is her physical ailment that signals

her inability to fulfill patriarchy's idealized role for her gender. It is also what marginalizes her in the novel's society.

As Mamrie and Mme Saint-Ybars demonstrate, breastfeeding and motherhood are inextricably linked in this section of the novel. As the story progresses it becomes clearer and everyone in the household comes to consider Démon and Chant-d'Oisel to be Mamrie's children, and not Mme Saint-Ybars's: "On s'habitua à dire *les enfants de Mamrie*. Mme Saint-Ybars elle-même disait, le matin: 'tes enfants ont-ils passé une bonne nuit?'" (49).⁸⁹ Even Mme Saint-Ybars recognizes Mamrie, the woman who successfully nursed, as the mother of the twins. This connection is emphasized by the fact that this part of the narrative is attached to our introduction to Mamrie. The children and her role as their mother are integral elements of her identity, rather than her mistress's. Readers see in this way that Mme Saint-Ybars's inability to nurse her children leads to the loss of her motherhood.

In this scenario, nursing takes on an importance beyond providing nourishment. It serves as a test for maternity, suggesting that "real" mothers are those that can and do breastfeed. In this society, those who only give birth but are unable or unwilling to continue their role by breastfeeding their children are denied maternal status. Moreover, because breastfeeding is directly linked to motherhood, it is also connected to womanhood. To paraphrase Rousseau, there is no question about her duty (*Émile* 16). In fact, Mme Saint-Ybars' lost motherhood does eventually affect her overall social role as a woman. Because individuals' gender identities depend upon the repetition of performative acts, when Mme Saint-Ybars ceases to perform the maternal act of breastfeeding, she is no longer identified as a mother. The importance of her maternal status or lack thereof for her gender identity becomes more pronounced as the character develops and the narrative continues.

⁸⁹ This also can be interpreted to affect the children's racial classification. See pages 86-9.

Mme Saint-Ybars is denied any viable role in the plantation's society. After the reader learns of Mamrie's adoption of her twins as *nourrissons*, Mme Saint-Ybars fades to the background of the novel until towards the end. At this point, the consequences of her inability to breastfeed become clear. She wastes away until she is only a pale version of her former self, becoming almost zombie-like: "Quand on adressait des questions à Mme Saint-Ybars, elle ne répondait que par monosyllabes.... [Elle] ressemblait à une morte qui n'a pas trouvé la paix dans le tombeau, et qui la demande" (187). Mercier's portrayals suggest that, by failing to perform the role assigned to her gender, Mme Saint-Ybars cannot live. Mercier makes motherhood a defining aspect of the female gender, and when Mme Saint-Ybars does not fulfill that role she is marginalized. A comparison of Mme Saint-Ybars' fate with Mamrie's further strengthens our understanding that her inability to properly mother her children is to blame for her ostracization.

Mamrie, contrary to her mistress, is full of life throughout the text and even comes to command respect from her master's family. She is revitalized by her adopted maternal role: "on vit renaître sa santé et sa gaîté" (48). Nursing Démon and Chant-d'Oisel lifts her out of her depression and gives her a new sense of purpose and happiness. Moreover, having fulfilled the maternal duty assigned to her gender, she achieves a privileged position in the patriarchal society that Mercier depicts. While she had always been well liked by the family, her new role as the acting mother of the Saint-Ybars children elevates her status to nearly equal to that of the family members: "Mamrie avait toujours été une des domestiques les plus gâtées par Mme Saint-Ybars; alors, elle le fut plus que jamais ; elle fit, pour ainsi dire, partie intégrante de la famille" (48). Mamrie enters into the family circle as a direct result of the maternal role she takes on for the twins. Although she cannot literally become an equal of the Saint-Ybars, she is much more

accepted and gains much more recognition and respect than the other slaves. Her experience is the reverse of her mistress's. Like Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's characters, Madame de la Tour and Marguerite, Mamrie embodies the bliss that patriarchal discourse promises to women who embrace domesticity. As Mme Saint-Ybars is pushed aside, Mamrie enters the center of family relations. The vitality and purpose that come with her adoption of her maternal role are defining qualities of this character throughout the novel. In fact, her last moments are spent avenging Démon, after his and Blanchette's deaths.⁹⁰ The force of her maternal instinct to protect her children ensures her acceptance and viability in Mercier's representation of Louisiana's society.

It may come as no surprise that Mamrie, and not Mme Saint-Ybars, is the woman who can breastfeed the twins and reaches the goal of motherhood assigned to the female gender role. Her name, Mamrie, and its resonance with the words *mammaire*/mammary as well as the racial term, Mammy, is a noticeable link between the character and her capacity to mother and breastfeed; even her name reflects her maternal duty. Moreover, recognizing it demonstrates once again Mercier's adoption of patriarchal notions of the female role. Here, breastfeeding is a part of achieving motherhood and likewise womanhood. Yet simply wishing to nurse is not enough; there can be no compromise in this setting. Mamrie and Mme Saint-Ybars are not the only female characters that demonstrate the existence of this order, however, nor is the importance of a woman's maternal role the only way that Mercier depicts a patriarchy within his novel. Although she is not a mother, Mercier's depiction of Blanchette also points to a social order that privileges men.

3.4.2 Fragile Femininity

Mercier incorporates physical fragility into his portrayals of women, reinforcing the connection between their social role and their bodies. The Saint-Ybars family's adopted

⁹⁰ I refer to these events on page 92.

daughter, Blanchette, in particular is depicted as weak and frail. Because of her delicate constitution, she must be protected. Although she is also depicted as intelligent, her lack of physical strength overrides her intellectual abilities to prevent her from playing a social role outside of the male-protected domestic sphere. Mme Saint-Ybars's painful breastfeeding affected her maternity and her social function as a result, and Blanchette's fragility likewise affects her own social role, reinforcing the understanding that the female gender role is tied to the body. Although readings of the character of Blanchette are complicated by her mixed-race background, by rendering this female character as frail, Mercier further embeds an order of male authority into the society he portrays in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*.

Mercier uses the intense climate of South Louisiana as a foil to showcase female physical fragility. Blanchette is described as so delicate that she is barely able to survive in the subtropical heat. Although she is able to keep up appearances, she is nonetheless affected by this environment: "Quoi qu'elle se portât bien, sa constitution était d'une délicatesse extrême. Le climat de la Louisiane était trop chaud pour elle; elle ressemblait à une de ces plantes frêles et diaphanes qui croissent dans l'ombre des vallons du Nord, et qu'un rayon de soleil accable" (161). Beneath her exterior, she is not strong. In fact, the author describes her fragility as an extreme case. Despite the fact that she was born and grew up in this weather and has known no other climate in her life, her frail nature makes her incompatible with it. More than this, however, she is described as so delicate that a single ray of sunshine could hurt her. She can literally not leave the house without the threat of an assault on her health. Because of this danger, she is necessarily confined to the domestic sphere. Her own well-being requires her relegation to the home.

Werner Sollors has argued that depictions of mixed-race individuals, like Blanchette, as weak and frail can be interpreted as promoting the point of view that interracial relations are not beneficial to society, and that mixed-race characters are degenerate. Indeed, Blanchette's racial heritage is an important element of Mercier's narrative. Yet as Catherine Rottenberg, Louis Miron, and Jonathan Xavier Inda point out in their analysis on interpellation and race, there are too many factors at work on identity to exclude individual elements.⁹¹ Thus, while Blanchette's fragility can link her to the tragic mulatta trope that more certainly defines her mother, Titia, at the same time, the reader can acknowledge the patriarchal traditions that also inform this character.

Although her body is weak, Blanchette is portrayed as intelligent. The character is educated just as any other young Creole woman would be, including her adopted sister Chant-d'Oisel. Pélasge, the tutor who was initially engaged on the plantation to teach Démon only, also teaches both of the daughters. Mercier describes Blanchette as having "une intelligence facile" (161). Despite this, her intellectual power seems to lose significance in the larger picture that Mercier draws. The author counterbalances her strength of mind by making her an embodiment of weakness. Her frailty overwhelms her strong mental abilities. By depicting her as intelligent, Mercier seems to hint at an attempt to ward off paternalistic idealizations of women's social function. Yet he nullifies that effort by imbuing her with such frailty. Through Blanchette, Mercier essentially renders the possibilities of the female role to be as compelling as "une de ces plantes frêles et diaphanes," a dying plant, as readers see in the author's own comparison.

Mercier appears to designate Louisiana's public arena as a male space by describing its potential to harm the female body. His portrayal of Blanchette seems to demonstrate that

⁹¹ See notes 17 and 18.

females are not capable of handling the hazards that exist beyond the protection of the domestic sphere. The rigors of the world that exist outside domesticity would make a public role too dangerous for a woman as frail as Blanchette is. Blanchette's fragility dissolves any possible threat that her intelligence might have posed to male authority. For her own protection, the reader assumes, she must deny any personal aspirations and remain within the protection of the domestic sphere. Mercier imprisons female intellect and social influence within weak bodies, thereby diffusing their power. By rendering this character as too feeble to leave the house, then, Mercier again brings the social order of gender roles in line to support male privilege.

3.4.3 Paternal Authority

Mercier's portrayal of his female characters confines them to the domestic sphere and either diminishes or negates the power they can exert in society. His male characters, however, are represented as being the ultimate authority. While Mamrie, Mme Saint-Ybars, and Blanchette are too busy being mothers, are socially marginalized, or are too weak physically to assert their authority, men take charge, give orders, and control their family members' lives. M. Saint-Ybars, the owner of the plantation and the head of the Saint-Ybars family, constitutes the primary example of male power in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*. M. Saint-Ybars wields authority over his family and the entire plantation, including the employees and the slaves. His power is absolute. No one else is able to alter or even question the patriarch's orders. By examining this pivotal character, readers see yet another example of Mercier's integration of a patriarchal structure into *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*. The presence of male social dominance within Mercier's novel becomes clearly visible when we analyze M. Saint-Ybars and his role.

From the first, when the reader meets him in New Orleans at the slave market, M. Saint-Ybars is understood to be a figure of authority. His mere presence as a patron of the slave

market points to the extent of his power over the inhabitants of the plantation. This perception of him is reinforced as the author draws a link between the Creole character and a king of the biblical world, “le grand roi assuérus.”⁹² The comparison between the plantation owner and the king establishes a precedent for understanding the kind of authority that M. Saint-Ybars has in the social microcosm of the plantation. A king, as an autocratic ruler, has sole power in his state. By connecting M. Saint-Ybars to this kind of leader, Mercier signals to his readers the absolute and unquestionable authority that can be expected from this character. As the story progresses, readers see the articulation of this power.

When M. Saint-Ybars and Chant-d’Oisel return to the plantation from New Orleans, Mercier exposes the extent of the father character’s demands of his family and their duty to him. M. Saint-Ybars essentially perpetuates the order established by his own patriarchal father: “Une discipline sagement raisonnée s’appliquait à tout le personnel de ce domaine, maîtres et esclaves. Saint-Ybars était sévère, mais juste...Il aimait tendrement son père, [Vieumaite,] et le vénérât ; mais, à son tour, il exigeait que ses enfants, dont il se savait aimé, eussent pour lui-même le plus grand respect” (33). The entire social structure of the Saint-Ybars plantation is organized around paternal authority and maintaining respect for the father figure. Everyone living on the plantation is implicated in this hierarchy of power that privileges the father, but his closest family members demonstrate its significance most clearly.

After M. Saint-Ybars’s arrival, the family gathers to share a meal, their first with the new French tutor, Pélasse. The mood in the household, however, is tense. Everyone senses that something is not right among the family members, particularly between the master and mistress:

⁹² In the Bible, the character, King Assuérus, also spelled Ahasuerus, is a tyrannical figure (*King James Bible*, Esther 1.1-10.3).

Mme Saint-Ybars était inquiète et gênée; elle servait mal. Son mari lui reprocha sa maladresse en termes amers et sarcastiques...Mme Saint-Ybars, en passant une assiettée de court-bouillon, en laissa tomber sur la nappe. Son mari la railla dans un langage, qui, dur au début, devint progressivement grossier et même injurieux. Elle fit un mouvement pour se retirer ; mais, se ravisant, elle reprit sa place et se tut. (105)

In this scene, the reality of their family life and the dominance that M. Saint-Ybars exerts over his wife, children, and slaves is demonstrated. He acts callously and unjustly towards his wife, who is distracted from her duties as a hostess. When she accidentally spills, he lashes out against her cruelly, and she is unable to retaliate. Because he is the master of the entire plantation and everyone who lives there, including his wife and family, Mme Saint-Ybars's reaction can only be quiet acceptance of his abuse. She accepts him as an absolute ruler and therefore is unable to reject any part of his control over her life.

Many members of the Saint-Ybars plantation are present at this scene and witness M. Saint-Ybars's mistreatment of his wife. Most are shocked but, like Mme Saint-Ybars, are unable to challenge the authority of the plantation's master. Their responses are only quiet, sympathetic distress: "Ses filles et ses brus rougissaient ; les hommes se regardaient, peïnés mais irrésolus. Chant-d'Oisel pleurait ; Démon dévorait ses larmes" (105). If anyone were to resist M. Saint-Ybars's domination, it would be a serious offense that would threaten the entire order of the plantation society.

Mercier initiates his questioning of patriarchy in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* when Démon is pushed to the limit by his father's abuse of his mother and contests his authority. Despite the fact that he knows his father's power is absolute, he does not allow the injustice against his

mother to continue: “Soudain Démon, le poing serré, le visage en feu, frappe sur la table et s’écrie : ‘Eh bien! non, je ne veux pas! c’est injuste’” (106). This outburst causes even more anxiety among those present. They realize the severity of Démon’s reaction and that by criticizing his father’s behavior, he is challenging paternal authority: “une même anxiété étreignait toutes les poitrines” (106). While this scene presents a complicated view of the plantation society, the nervous reactions of the other diners to the child’s outburst is another indication of the social order that privileges males in Mercier’s depiction of Louisiana. It would not be so upsetting if it were not unacceptable. More importantly, M. Saint-Ybars himself is aware of the nature of his son’s disobedience. Démon’s outburst is a direct assault on his father’s power. As the patriarch, he cannot tolerate this kind of insubordination, and so he attempts to reassert his dominance over his son.

Démon, however, is too angered to be brought into submission at this point. The scene unravels into violence between the father and son, which eventually involves the relationship between master and slave. Mamrie hears the disturbance and comes running to protect her *nourrisson*. In another demonstration of her maternal devotion to Démon, she attacks M. Saint-Ybars for threatening his son. Without thinking about the consequences, she throws an ax at her master. He is not hurt, but if his son’s defiance is unacceptable, the insubordination of a slave is an even more serious offense. The people looking on are taken aback. In fact, the shock of her action is enough to momentarily defuse the tension of the situation. Everyone knows that Mamrie may die for her actions. As the master, M. Saint-Ybars must be respected, and therefore Mamrie’s disobedience must be punished. Whether he wants to or not, his dominance as patriarch is at stake. As another slave explains: “Ni clémence ni demi-mesure, dit-elle ; on est maître ou on ne l’est pas : quand on est maître, il faut être respecté à tout prix... Mamrie a levé la

main sur son maître ; elle mérite la mort” (127). As at the dinner table, the other characters’ reaction to an individual’s contesting of patriarchal authority reveals how ingrained paternalism is in this society. The master’s authority over his plantation is absolute and those who challenge it must be punished in order to maintain it. This scene reveals the power of the paternal figure in Mercier’s plantation society and the unacceptability of insubordination.

M. Saint-Ybars is convinced not to punish Mamrie at the end of this conflict. She is cherished and esteemed by so many people on the plantation that they are willing to argue for her to be spared. Yet like Démon’s outburst, showing mercy to Mamrie is a move that opens up the potential to question patriarchy’s hold in Louisiana. The same slave remarks that this leniency goes against the entire establishment of the plantation system: “Monsieur, dit-elle, les blancs ne savent plus régner; ils faiblissent ; dans dix ans il n’y aura plus d’esclaves” (133). This slave’s speculation points to white male authority as an inherent part of this society; without it, in her estimation, the plantation system will fail. Thus, Mercier’s depiction of the importance of the father’s power as well as the unacceptability of insubordination shows just how vital that order is to Creole plantations. A father’s absolute and incontestable power over his family must be accepted at all costs, no matter who is affected or how just it is. Given the complicated view he offers of this society and his more liberal views of race relations, however, the female slave’s prediction may reflect Mercier’s own agenda. Rather than accepting male privilege and slavery, Mercier’s depiction of Creole plantation life hints at the possibility of a more progressive future, a vision that is more clearly articulated later on with Chant-d’Oisel. Yet Mercier’s incorporation of male domination is not limited to the plantation setting; he also adopts it in his portrayals of New Orleans.

3.5 Portraying Traditional Gender Roles in New Orleans

Mercier revisits the patriarchal social structure that he created in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* in his 1891 novel, *Johnelle*. In this later work, readers again see Mercier's use of paternalistic constructions of gender, particularly in terms of female roles. As on the plantation, in *Johnelle*'s setting within the city of New Orleans, women are limited by their ability to conform to idealizations of maternity. The female characters in *Johnelle* are inscribed into a gender role that is defined by a male fantasy of motherhood, and those who do not fulfill the maternal function that is required of them are marginalized. Society rejects and ostracizes them. The female characters that do fulfill their prescribed duties, however, are accepted by society. Examining how Mercier applies such restrictions to his female characters exposes the social structure that frames his novel. Moreover, his integration of idealized constructions of gender into this work points to his understanding that a similar order affects nineteenth-century Creole New Orleans as well.

There are many female characters in *Johnelle*, and the majority of them are mothers. These women are or are not accepted and are portrayed either negatively or positively based upon their approach to their maternal duties. One of these women, Cordélia, the mother of the protagonist, is not content with her lot in life. She openly discusses her unwillingness to have children, although she does give birth to one child despite an attempt to abort it, and her wish to be single. She does not fit her society's maternal prescription for the female gender. Consequently, Cordélia is portrayed in a negative light and described as a social outsider. This character contrasts with the positive portrayals of the other female characters that are happy to be mothers and enjoy taking care of children. Her neighbor, Mme Roséma who is devoted to her children, for example, is praised by the other characters and occupies a more privileged position.

Because Cordélia does not choose to live according to patriarchy's construction of a woman's function, she is outcast and vilified. Mercier's characterizations of both female characters is evidence of his depiction of New Orleans as a patriarchal space in *Johnelle*.

3.5.1 The "Bad" Mother

The novel's main character, Tito Metelli, is a young man who lives in New Orleans with his mother and grandmother. As a child, Tito is excited to learn that his mother, Cordélia, is expecting a second child, and he is devastated when the child is born prematurely and dies. He is even more upset when he finds out the truth about his mother's miscarriage of his unborn sister, Johnelle, fifteen years later. Through his grandmother, Tito learns that Cordélia willingly aborted his sister. When he discovers this, he can no longer respect his mother. Tito cannot reconcile her decisions with the way he feels women should act. Informed by an idealized understanding of the female role, Tito sees Cordélia's choices as selfish and unfair to him. In an attempt to comfort himself, he focuses on what he perceives to be a more proper maternal figure: a neighbor, Mme Roséma. This character is devoted to her offspring and to caring for them, which Tito believes is more appropriate female behavior. In the end, Tito not only refuses to acknowledge Cordélia as a mother after learning the truth about Johnelle, he also ceases to accept her gender identity. Her rejection of maternity, central to femininity in Tito's mind, denies her womanhood. Moreover, it catapults Tito into an obsession with his deceased sister from which he does not recover.

As a youth, Tito feels a deep connection to the baby even before it is born, and predicts that it will be a girl. He himself chooses her name, Johnelle, deciding to call her after his best friend, John: "Tito, avec la naïveté de son âge (il avait huit ans), avait fait promettre à sa mère que l'enfant qu'elle portait alors, serait une fille, et qu'on la nommerait Johnelle" (36). Tito

imagines that he and his friend will be two brothers for Johnelle and that the three of them will always be together. Unfortunately, John dies not long after Tito finds out about his mother's pregnancy. A month later, his mother loses the baby. The reader also learns that only three months before Johnelle's death, Tito's father dies, isolating him further. The compounded tragedies that Tito experiences so early in his life go on to affect him in his early adulthood. He is devastated and nearly driven crazy over the death of his sister. Although he does not understand the sequence of events as a child, when he is older, he is able to realize that his mother's choices and actions are what brought about what he sees as his tragic loss.

As an eight-year-old, Tito's only explanation of the death of his sister is what he hears from his nanny that "bon Dgié pran li pou fé ain nange avec" (40).⁹³ Even this gentle account fails to relieve his grief. In order to deal with his sadness, Tito continues to hold on to his dreams of her, bordering on obsession. He imagines what she might look like every year on her birthday, speaks often with her spirit, and thinks about what they might have done together. His mental projection of her is so sweet and loveable that he is convinced that everyone would like and admire her had she lived. Yet he eventually hears his mother and grandmother discussing how Johnelle was, in fact, not wanted. Tito first learns the truth about Johnelle and the circumstances of her death when he hears his mother, Cordélia, and his grandmother, Telli, arguing. At the moment that he overhears them, Telli is shouting at Cordélia and calling her to acknowledge the truth her actions: "Tes fausses couches! C'est à moi à moi, que tu oses parler de tes fausses couches! Appelle donc les choses par leur nom, et dis tes avortements.... On se souvient de tes visites chez la Tuehomo et chez la Perforari" (49).⁹⁴ Telli refuses to overlook her daughter-in-law's active role in the death of Johnelle as well as the other fetuses she aborted.

⁹³ "le bon dieu l'a prise pour en faire un ange" (40).

⁹⁴ La Tuehomo and la Perforari are, according to Reginald Hamel, Creole and Italian expressions, respectively, signifying abortionists (49).

Cordélia does not object to this characterization, and moreover, she does not attempt to refute it following Telli's outburst. It is unclear what the two women said to each other before Telli's exclamation, but as the conversation continues, it becomes obvious that Cordélia has never wanted children and that Tito's survival was extraordinary. This news forces Tito to come to grips with a new vision of his sister's death, as well as of his mother.

Tito is shocked by the revelation that his mother did not want to have Johnelle, and it changes his feelings towards her. Although he has been a loyal son up to this point, the act of what he perceives to be murder weighs heavily on him: "Tout un univers moral venait de s'écrouler en lui. Il eut la sensation d'un homme, qui, après un tremblement de terre, se réveille au milieu d'un amoncellement de ruines" (50). He reacts by denying Cordélia as his mother: "Vous avez tué en moi tout respect filial. Je n'ai plus de mère" (50). Tito is angry with her not only because she denied him the sister that he so wanted, but also because he does not believe her actions were those of a proper mother. The character's understanding of motherhood echoes the patriarchal ideal. He associates a certain kind of behavior with the title of mother. Cordélia does not wish to have children, and she has chosen to terminate pregnancies. Because neither she nor her actions meet his standard, he cannot accept or respect Cordélia as a maternal figure. Although Cordélia does not fulfill Tito's criteria for motherhood, other female characters in his life do.

The female character, Mme Roséma, functions as Mercier's embodiment of the ideal female in *Johnelle* and provides another counterpoint to Cordélia. She is the Metelli family's next door neighbor. She has raised her own children and is now bringing up her grandchildren as their parents are dead. She also occasionally takes on the job of comforting and guiding Tito following his estrangement from his mother. Mme Roséma is truly in her element when she is

engaged in a maternal function. She voluntarily fulfills and even surpasses the obligations of her gender's role, not only for her own children, but for her grandchildren and her neighbor's children as well. Tito is impressed with her strong maternal inclination and affirms both her status as a mother and as a woman. He tells her, "[v]ous êtes une honnête femme, vous, et bien dévouée. Après avoir été une vraie mère pour vos enfants, vous l'êtes pour vos petites-filles" (55). Tito is not only appreciative of Mme Roséma's maternal devotion, he also reads it on a deeper level to determine that she is a good woman. In his eyes, Mme Roséma's strong instinct clearly marks her as a committed parent and therefore worthy of his respect. Unlike Cordélia, Mme Roséma is a "real" mother who adheres to obligations of her gender to the letter. For Tito, then, Mme Roséma fulfills her role as a woman.

The positive characterization of Mme Roséma is echoed by Tito's pet dog, Noutte. Noutte is the mother of a litter of puppies, and similar to the portrayal of Mme Roséma, the dog reflects a patriarchal fantasy of motherhood. Noutte is devoted to her offspring and dutifully completes her maternal tasks, especially nursing. While Tito is still reeling from learning the truth about his mother, Tito notices the dog whining for him: "C'était Noutte qui l'appelait. Ses deux petits chiots pendus à ses mamelles, l'empêchait d'aller à lui.... Il la caressa et lui murmura : --Tu ne tues pas tes petits, toi, Noutte. Si un chat-tigre s'en approchait, tu te précipiterais sur lui et tu te ferais dévorer, pour leur donner le temps de fuir" (50). When Tito sees Noutte nursing her puppies, he takes it as evidence of her mothering skills. He interprets Noutte's instinct towards her puppies as representative of the behavior of a proper mother. His connection between breastfeeding and proper mothering is evidence of his patriarchal view. Noutte is only a dog, yet this scene demonstrates Tito's idealization of maternity.

Noutte does not live long, and when she dies, strikingly, Tito remarks sadly that her strong maternal sense made the animal more worthy than some human females: “Elle valait mieux, par exemple, que telle femme de ma connaissance qui n’a jamais eu même l’instinct de la maternité...il y a tout plein, aujourd’hui, de ces monstres de femmes qui...” (79). Tito cannot even finish his sentence, he is so overwhelmed by the anguish he feels at women like Cordélia who do not approach motherhood in the same way as Noutte. As he says, he considers them to be monsters. It is notable that Cordélia’s intentional decision to reject domesticity and motherhood is portrayed much more negatively than Mme Saint-Ybars’ inability to breastfeed. Rousseau, for example, does not allow for varying interpretations of women’s success or failure in carrying out their duty. He outlines women’s “mépris” and “dépravation” as the primary reasons for which they choose not to breastfeed, and while he admits that “leurs devoirs sont plus pénibles,” his perception of the act as “natural” does not allow for the equally natural afflictions that can prohibit it (*Émile* 6). Mercier’s background in medicine, however, perhaps provides him with a more nuanced perspective. Therefore, while Mme Saint-Ybars simply fades away because she is incapable of fulfilling her duties, Cordélia’s purposeful choice redefines her outside of the female gender completely. She is not simply a failed woman, she becomes a monster. Tito is not alone in having such an opinion, moreover. Other characters in the novel share his viewpoints, in particular Telli, his grandmother.

Like Tito, Telli believes that motherhood and womanhood are based upon supposedly natural maternal instinct, echoing Rousseau (*Émile* 6). She thinks that a “real” woman has an undeniable sense of maternity that she is compelled to fulfill, agreeing with Tito’s reflections on Noutte’s behavior. During her verbal altercation with Cordélia, Telli ironically compares her daughter-in-law and others like her with women who do adhere to patriarchy’s role for women:

“Alors, nous, les vieilles mères créoles, qui laissions venir tous nos enfants et les nourrissions de notre lait, nous étions, dis-tu, des truies. Toi et tes pareilles qui tuez tous les vôtres, vous êtes les vraies femmes?” (49). Her ironic question belies her actual view that the only “real” women are those who nurse their children. Under her implied tone, the reader can detect her view that females who choose not to carry out their pregnancies should not be accepted as real women, “vraies femmes.” By moving beyond traditional models for gendered behavior, Cordélia and her generation of woman throw their female identity into dispute. Indeed, in Telli’s opinion as in Tito’s, since Cordélia chose to abort her baby, she lacks any maternal instinct; thus, society should not accept her identity as a female. Instead, she is a monster. To be a woman one must act in accordance with society’s conception of a woman’s role.

Like Mamrie and Mme Saint-Ybars in *L’Habitation Saint-Ybars*, Mercier’s mother characters in *Johnelle* illustrate his adoption of idealized notions of the female role. The stark contrasts between the characters who are portrayed as successful mothers – Mamrie, Mme Roséma, and Noutte – and those who are not – Mme Saint-Ybars and Cordélia – serve as an indication of the patriarchal perspective structuring his narratives. More than reflecting his experience of nineteenth-century Creole Louisiana as a male-oriented society, however, Mercier’s gender constructs engage with the inequalities that he observed and deplored in his own life. While he presents characters that embrace the prevailing social hierarchy in his novel, he does this in order to set up others that challenge and negotiate their way around it. Although male authority dominates the settings of both *L’Habitation Saint-Ybars* and *Johnelle*, Mercier also incorporates characters that defy it. In this way, the author aligns himself with the tradition of representing disorderly females in Louisiana. Moreover, it leads us to the political goals of

the novels: to challenge the perception that Creole society must rely upon French traditions and culture.

3.6 Challenges to Patriarchy

The majority of Mercier's characters point to the author's espousal of a male-dominated social structure; however, a small number of them question that system. As we have seen thus far, Mercier's depictions of his male and female characters and the different roles that he assigns to them in his novel are significant indications of such an order. His female characters are consigned to domestic and maternal duties, and his male characters take on roles of authority, which is typical of this kind of traditional hierarchy. By constructing his characters in this way, Mercier demonstrates his perception that the prevailing social order both in the city of New Orleans and on the nearby Creole plantations privileges men. Yet at the same time that Mercier endorses a paternalistic norm by incorporating idealized conceptions of gender into his text, he also seems to interrogate this structure. Characters depicted in both *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* and *Johnelle* oppose that system. This move contests the novel's dominant social order and throws the author's commitment to it into question, echoing his more progressive view of gender in his own life. Mercier's choice to include characters that do not fit traditional gender roles reveals his confrontation of society in his novels, opening up a dialog that challenges male dominance.

In *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* and *Johnelle*, Mercier includes characters that resist relegation to a specific gender role. In the former, one female character escapes the confinement to domesticity prescribed for her gender. Chant-d'Oisel, the Saint-Ybars family's youngest daughter, voices a controversial political stance on slavery and abolitionism. Mercier's choice of character to engage with the public realm and to express controversial opinions is an abrupt

departure from his depictions of domestic female characters like Mme Saint-Ybars and Mamrie. This indicates the author's vision of a society that overcomes dominant social divisions and espouses equality. In *Johnelle*, Mercier introduces an intersex character who identifies neither as male or female. This secondary character is not heavily featured, yet his very presence disrupts the polarized order of the novel's conventional society. Therefore, despite adopting a traditional social order, Mercier's texts reveal his alternative vision of a Louisiana Creole society made stronger by fully integrating of all of its members.

3.6.1 Chant-d'Oisel

Although most of Mercier's characters on the Saint-Ybars plantation are defined by male-idealized gender roles, Chant-d'Oisel resists this pattern. In fact, she never seems to truly fit in with the rest of her family. Unlike the portrayals of her mother, *nourrice*, and adopted sister, Mercier's depiction of Chant-d'Oisel is focused on outlining her intellectual determination and her political points of view. The author uses her voice to communicate important arguments for the abolition of slavery and for human rights in the setting of Antebellum Louisiana to his readers. Thus, readers get to know Chant-d'Oisel through her expression of her opinions, rather than by her physicality or her mothering skills. Moreover, unlike *Manon Lescaut* and *Paul et Virginie*, there is no male voice relating the story; the reader meets each character, including women, by way of the same third-person omniscient narrator. At the end of the novel, she does die, but her death does not reflect the author's neutralization of female power; her death is not a punishment. In fact, she dies as her entire family does, implying the author's vision of the breakdown of Creole society. That this female character escapes restriction into a patriarchal gender role is a notable departure from the novel's norm for female characters. It suggests the author's expression of his personal vision of a future of equal gender roles.

Chant-d'Oisel is depicted early on as an independent thinker and a caring person who puts others' needs before her own.⁹⁵ Readers first meet Démon's twin sister with her father in the New Orleans slave market.⁹⁶ This scene provides the setting for the author to showcase Chant-d'Oisel's courage to overlook the prejudices that could influence others to not take action. While M. Saint-Ybars talks to the slave trader, Chant-d'Oisel notices a developing situation that disturbs her. She senses danger from a man seeking to purchase the mixed-race slave, Titia, and acts quickly to protect her:

La fille de Saint-Ybars...n'avait pas besoin qu'on lui mit, comme on dit vulgairement, les points sur les *i*; elle comprit la détresse de l'esclave, et se sentit prise de compassion. Revenue près de son père, elle lui dit en lui montrant la jeune femme : 'Papa, achète-la pour moi ; elle est bonne coiffeuse, bonne couturière.' (17)

When she senses the imminent threat facing Titia, Chant-d'Oisel acts without hesitation to protect her. Instead of being blinded by issues of race and social hierarchy, she looks beyond these categories and does what she can to help. The daughter convinces her father to bring the woman home with the idea to have her serve as a nurse and hairdresser in the household. Chant-d'Oisel's comportment is not characterized by the physical frailty that plagues her adopted sister. Instead, she is determined to realize her plan. Even when her father initially attempts to dismiss her wish, she persists: “ – Mais, mon enfant, répondit Saint-Ybars, nous avons tout cela à la maison. – T'en prie, papa, reprit la fillette, achète-la pour l'anniversaire de ma naissance qui est

⁹⁵ As the character explains to the recently arrived Frenchman, Antony Pélasge, Chant-d'Oisel is not her birth name: “je m'appelle Amélie; mais il paraît que quand j'étais petite, mon bonheur était d'écouter le chant des oiseaux, et quand j'étais seule, je chantais pendant des heures entières en regardant la campagne et le ciel. Á cause de cela, mon grand-père qui a l'habitude de donner des sobriquets, dit un jour : 'Eh bien ! puisqu'elle chante toujours comme ses amis les oiseaux, je la nomme Chant-d'Oisel...Depuis ce temps-là, mon nom d'Amélie a disparu” (26). Interestingly, the image of a singing bird that her name conjures for the reader connects to the character's devotion to liberty and her commitment to humanitarianism.

⁹⁶ See pages 74-7.

dimanche prochain; tu me rendras si heureuse, cher papa” (17). Furthermore, while her compassion can possibly be explained by the supposedly inherent maternal role that patriarchy ascribes to the female gender, Chant-d’Oisel also demonstrates an unwillingness to be trapped in social roles when she defies the racial order and reaches out to the slave. She does not defer to another’s authority, even when that might not be socially acceptable.

Chant-d’Oisel’s self-determination becomes particularly evident when compared to that of her sibling. As a young child, Chant-d’Oisel had the same *nourrice* as her twin brother Démon. Although her brother maintains a close relationship with Mamrie throughout the novel, Chant-d’Oisel grows up to be significantly more self-reliant. She is not dependent upon Mamrie emotionally or physically, and she does not require the same intimacy from their nurse that her brother does. This difference between the twin siblings serves as an indication of Chant-d’Oisel’s independence and, moreover, is uncharacteristic of the submissive female role in a patriarchal social setting. This aspect of her character further sets her apart from the other females on the plantation.

Chant-d’Oisel’s ability to formulate opinions that are outside of the majority point of view come to the forefront of the novel after her brother leaves the plantation. When Démon leaves for France to attend school, his sister is able to take a more visible position in the household, and in the novel. In a sense, this tradeoff between the siblings signals the author’s imagining of males stepping aside and freeing up socially active roles for women. At this point, Mercier turns the focus to Chant-d’Oisel and positions her to become a force working for social progress. The strong-minded humanitarian at the slave trader’s in New Orleans reappears here as a firm abolitionist. Mercier describes the young woman’s unwavering rejection of slavery, a viewpoint that goes against her entire family’s way of life:

Elle était ouvertement opposée à l'institution de l'esclavage; par convenance elle n'en parlait pas devant les domestiques, mais au salon elle prenait son franc-parler. Elle ne quittait jamais le terrain des principes ; ce n'étaient pas des opinions qu'elle avait mais des convictions ; si elle avait fléchi devant des considérations d'intérêt, elle eut commis, au tribunal de sa conscience, un acte de lâcheté et de trahison envers la cause de la vérité et de la justice. (159-60)

Mercier outlines Chant-d'Oisel's opposition to slavery here. The institution goes against her principles, and she speaks frankly about it, even though her beliefs are in opposition to the majority view in Louisiana at the time. As the reader saw in the slave market scene, however, Chant-d'Oisel cannot conform to another's ideology simply because it is expected of her. Her expression of her abolitionist views are another example of her individuality. Unlike her mother, Mamrie, and her adopted sister, Chant-d'Oisel is poised to enter the public arena. Moreover, Mercier's portrayal of this character directly contradicts one of Rousseau's assertions of the pleasures of breastfeeding that are intended to motivate women to accept relegation to domesticity: "le plaisir de se voir un jour imiter par leurs filles, et citer en exemple à celles d'autrui" (*Émile* 18). Instead of following a maternal pattern, Chant-d'Oisel takes on the man's world unapologetically, and in this way escapes the confines of domesticity that restrict her fellow female characters in the novel.

While this is already a significant development given the passive social roles to which the other female characters are consigned, Chant-d'Oisel goes even further by vowing to take action. Slavery was the backbone of the plantation system and Creole society's economy. Public displays against it might result in violent backlash even for a man during this time. This does not stop Chant-d'Oisel. She focuses on fighting slavery actively instead of allowing herself to take a

backseat to the injustices in which her family has implicated her: “Eh bien ! je ne pleurerai plus, disait-elle; c’est honteux; je parlerai, j’agirai. J’ai le droit de dire ce que je pense. On peut me lyncher, ça m’est égal ; je ne tiens pas à la vie, s’il faut, pour la garder, se condamner à un silence que reprouve ma conscience ” (160). Chant-d’Oisel believes in her right to speak and her right to act, at least to clear her and her family’s consciences. She is not interested in following the example set by the other women in her house. She has the ambition to be a political activist, even if it costs her her life. She will not be relegated to keeping quiet behind the scenes.

At the same time that Chant-d’Oisel breaks the norm for her gender, Mercier portrays her in a positive light. She is not attacked or rejected by her friends and family for her differing views and her non-traditional behavior. In fact, she is depicted as an encouraging example who is well-respected: “chacun parmi ceux qui pensaient comme Chant-d’Oisel et lui devait prêcher, dans la sphère de son influence, l’émancipation progressive des esclaves, sans jamais sortir du langage calme prescrit par la raison. Chant-d’Oisel, aimée et respectée de tous, pouvait le faire mieux que personne” (160). Even her staunchly authoritarian father who was so easily enraged by his wife and his son’s disrespect is unconcerned by her passion for the public arena. Rather than being interpreted as a threat to society and male authority, Chant-d’Oisel’s opinion is presented as a beneficial influence. Even more remarkable is that, unlike her fellow heroines who challenge their prescribed domestic submissive roles, she is not killed off in order to protect the social order. Mercier effectively allows her offenses against patriarchy to go unpunished. She does die, but her entire family dies with her, signaling the potential demise of Creole culture in real life and not the dangers of female power. Thus rather than being a punishment for transgressions against male authority, her death serves as a motivation for change.

Chant-d'Oisel fights the patriarchal gender norms that Mercier reinforces with his depictions of Mme Saint-Ybars, Mamrie, and Blanchette. She represents female potential and the progress that promoting active public roles for women would bring to Louisiana. Like the rest of the Saint-Ybars family, Chant-d'Oisel does not live to the end of the novel; despite her death, she represents female equality on the plantation and throughout Creole society.

3.6.2 Illud

In *Johnelle*, Mercier again privileges idealized gender roles only to later challenge patriarchy. The reader encounters a character who disrupts that social order during Tito's visit with a friend, Doctor Plana, after finding out about his mother's purposefully terminated pregnancies. Sensing Tito's depression and anxiety, the doctor attempts to calm him by telling him the life story of his assistant, Illud. Doctor Plana further discloses that Illud, already a complex individual as a Mexican national of Native American descent living in New Orleans, is intersex and does not identify with either the male or female gender. This is a significant revelation in terms of the novel's social order. Illud interrupts the duality of patriarchy. Because he is intersex, he does not seem to fit either of the gender roles offered by such a society.⁹⁷ Instead of conforming, Illud forges a third space for himself that is outside of that dichotomy. This character destabilizes the traditional conceptions of gender within Creole society, and more specifically, challenges the discourse that denies Cordélia's identity as a woman for not wanting to have children. Mercier builds up a concrete image of patriarchal social order in his representation of New Orleans and then confronts it by integrating this character who lives outside of prescribed gender roles.

Illud is first introduced in the novel as Doctor Plana's assistant, and is only mentioned a few times until the doctor relates his life story to Tito, when the character's personal ordeal

⁹⁷Mercier uses the pronoun "il" when referring to Illud in his text which I translate into English as "he."

comes to bear on Tito's own crisis. The story begins as Doctor Plana explains that Illud was abandoned and nearly killed as a newborn when his family could not assign him a gender role within a social order based upon a male/female dichotomy. The doctor relates that, following Illud's birth, an elder of the family declared, "[n]i garçon, ni fille; on ne peut en faire ni un chrétien ni une chrétienne. Il faut le jeter à l'eau" (88). The family is not able to determine a gender for the infant. His physicality presents a conflict with the only two available options in society; he cannot be definitely assigned to either one. In this way it becomes clear that Illud's approval in society depends upon his ability to conform to a gender role. As he is physically unable to meet this condition, his family rejects him and decides to drown him. Yet Illud is rescued before he is drowned, is given to Doctor Plana, and eventually goes to New Orleans with him to work as his assistant, where he enters Tito's story.⁹⁸

Rather than attempting to conform to the society that rejects him, Illud occupies a third space that is outside of the traditional duality with the help of Doctor Plana. The doctor explains this to Tito: "Comme l'enfant n'appartenait ni au genre masculine ni au genre féminin, je l'appelai *Illud*, d'un des pronoms adjectifs qui, en latin, comme vous le savez, servent à désigner le genre neutre" (89). The name that the doctor gives him corresponds to the neuter grammatical gender in Latin, designating him within a third space. Instead of living as male or female, then, Illud associates himself with this grammatical gender which represents an identity option that is outside of the male/female dichotomy. Indeed, this act of naming is an important step in affirming Illud's social role: "Name-giving customs play an important role in a person's life journey as a socially accepted member of a culture" (Haviland 136). Moreover, Illud's presence

⁹⁸ This character closely parallels the true story of Herculine Barbin (1838-1868), originally published as a confession narrative in a French medical journal in 1874 and later republished by Foucault. Barbin was assigned a female gender role at birth only to be later redesignated as a male. As a French-trained doctor, Mercier may have been familiar with and even inspired by these real-life events. See Wing, "How Herculine's/Abel's Story Is Simplified: Bringing Truth to Sexuality in Herculine Barbin."

forces recognition of the possibility of identifying outside of female and male roles and breaks patriarchy's authority as a result.

Marjorie Garber confirms the challenge that a disruptive element presents to gender binarism in her book, *Vested Interests*. She explains that the existence of a third sex, in the case of her work created through transvestism and here represented by Illud, "challenges easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of 'female' and 'male,' whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural" (10). Like cross-dressing and its enactment, Illud's body that rejects an either/or identification crosses gender boundaries and ultimately throws categories into crisis through what Nathaniel Wing refers to as "the threat posed by [the intersex individual's] non-identity" (118). Garber asserts that, as a result, "[t]he binarism male/female, one apparent ground of distinction (in contemporary eyes, at least) between 'this' and 'that,' 'him' and 'me,' is itself put in question" (16). Although the character Illud does not take an overtly subversive position, as Chant-d'Oisel does in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, his mere presence in *Johnelle* complicates notions of gender.

Illud challenges patriarchal social order; yet, like Chant-d'Oisel, he is portrayed in a positive light. He likewise remains unpunished. Contrasting with Illud's birth family, Doctor Plana, who acts as his guardian, is accepting of the intersex individual and even eventually sees him as a beneficial influence in his own life. As the child grows up, Doctor Plana takes an interest in Illud's physical difference, which is not surprising given his profession,⁹⁹ but he also makes note of the character's spiritual and moral development. He explains to Tito, "[j]e laissai de côté l'anomalie de son corps, pour observer le développement moral de cet être" (89). The doctor's focus on Illud's moral development suggests his initial suspicions that not fitting into an accepted social role may contribute to an individual's designation as an outsider or outlaw. This

⁹⁹ Both the author and the character are physicians (Tinker, *Écrits* 355-6).

is reminiscent of the situation surrounding Tito's mother, Cordélia, as well as Prévost's Manon Lescaut. But while Illud does not fit into any accepted gender role in Mercier's representation of New Orleans' society, Doctor Plana comes to recognize his high moral and spiritual capacities. In fact, he declares that having this individual in his life has been an eye-opening experience: "Illud fut pour moi une révélation. Il possède le bien suprême, que tous nos systèmes de philosophie et de religion essaient vainement de nous donner, la paix de l'âme" (91). The doctor is surprised to see Illud's goodness and his positive attitude as he grows up. He is able to achieve a peace of mind that individuals who do fit into traditional gender roles may never have. Ironically, he is less unruly than more widely socially accepted characters in the novel.

Doctor Plana asserts that Illud serves as an example of how living outside of prescribed social roles can be positive. After assuring his assistant's high level of morality, the doctor states that Tito should take Illud's story and his success as a lesson. The personal achievement of the intersex individual, despite not fitting into society built on binarity, serves as a lesson against anxieties over fitting the norm. As the doctor says, "[c]royons-en son exemple, mon cher Tito : fermons notre âme à tout ce qui peut la troubler, surtout au chagrin venant d'autrui" (91). Taking Illud as the example, Doctor Plana instructs Tito not to let other's actions, specifically his mother's, affect his own. It serves as a lesson for Tito not to give up on his own life because of his distress over his mother and his sister. More importantly, it demonstrates the fallibility of gender roles, contrasting with the notion that by adhering to these "natural" roles, individuals defend society against moral degeneration.¹⁰⁰

Doctor Plana's observations of Illud ultimately indicate the possibility of a re-evaluation of gender roles throughout the novel, and Cordélia's situation in particular. Illud and the

¹⁰⁰ Rousseau writes, for example, that when women reject their maternal duty "[e]verything follows successively from this first depravity. The whole moral order degenerates," while, as the reader has already seen, "[l]'attrait de la vie domestique est le meilleur contre-poison des mauvaises mœurs" (*Émile* 17).

doctor's positive portrayal of his life outside of the gender dichotomy provide a counterpoint to the negative characterization of Cordélia's unmotherliness. Moreover, the doctor himself works against the reader's perception of inflexible gender norms. He is as devoted to his adopted child as Mme Roséma is, for example, yet because he is male, this character questions traditional conceptions of gender. Doctor Plana's nurturing relationship with his adoptee assigns the maternal task of child-rearing to a male, which further complicates the hierarchy. Consequently, both he and Illud work against this characterization, demonstrating that patriarchal gender roles are unnecessary. Indeed, Illud achieves a personal contentment and success in a gender identity that he forges outside of the traditional dichotomy, and neither he nor Doctor Plana are punished or vilified for the threat they pose to binarity. Illud and his story thus suggest Mercier's vision of an alternative to the prevailing order. The author's inclusion of characters that trouble gender roles reflect his reaction against a male-dominated hierarchy.

Mercier's disordering of traditional notions of gender through characters like Chant-d'Oisel and Illud ultimately represents his rejection of a unilateral French identity in his own world. As we saw in Chapter Two, Mercier rejects the myth of a racially un-mixed French identity in New Orleans and emphasizes the collision of peoples that make up Creole society. Here, readers can see that Mercier's subtle yet effective questioning of patriarchy in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* and *Johnelle* may also be a part of his progressive outlook for Creole culture, envisioning a future that depends upon accepting gender equality.

3.7 Gender Equality and the Future of Creole Culture

Recalling Mercier's encounter with a French female acquaintance who is uninterested in the political events building up to the Second Republic, readers see that his conceptions of

gender and the survival of a culture are knit closely together.¹⁰¹ The author uses his acquaintance's indifference to these important events to exemplify the cultural deterioration that is the consequence of a lack of equal education for men and women. Mercier's argument in terms of French education also reflects on the Creoles' social circumstances. By not allowing females access to the same education as males, Creoles are only further weakening their *patrie* and ensuring the demise of Franco-American culture. In fact, his novels, *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* in particular, imagine Louisiana's inherited French emphasis on female domesticity as sounding the death knell for Creole society. Mercier's novels challenge Creoles' identification with traditional French social norms governing gender roles in his novels, creating the possibility for the strengthening of Creoles' ranks as well as the identification of their culture on its own terms. As a vital component of Louisiana's population, Creole women must be mobilized in the fight for cultural survival.

Mercier was equally frustrated with the indifference that his fellow Creoles exhibited as he was with that of his French friend. In his personal journals he details an episode in New Orleans, similar to his experience in Paris, where others' behavior again reflected their lack of concern for their *patrie*. He writes: "La séance de l'Athénée, hier, a été bien froide... Le Dr Devron qui devait nous lire un travail sur l'eucalyptus, était absent sans nous avoir prévenus. L'indifférence de notre population est vraiment déplorable" (Robertson 89-90). Mercier does not limit his critique of "l'indifférence de notre population" to Creoles alone; yet given his devotion to the continued use of French in Louisiana, theirs was the more alarming betrayal. The understated interrogation of patriarchal gender roles that Mercier presents in his fiction is a reflection of his own rejection of a passive society. Mercier sees no valid reason for educating men over women, and furthermore, in his view, educating women can be a key element in

¹⁰¹ See pages 100-2.

keeping Creole culture alive when the majority of those who are able to act in public are indifferent to it.

Chant-d'Oisel, for example, challenges the relegation of women to the domestic sphere and the neglect of women's education that privileges men. She becomes the voice for a progressive Creole society, signaling female potential. Likewise, as her and her family's deaths imply, the future survival of Creole society depends upon its ability to progress beyond French traditions and to work towards the solidification of their own culture. Mercier writes: "de cette nombreuse et brillante famille des Saint-Ybars, il ne reste plus personne; maîtres, enfants, domestiques, tous morts ou dispersés... Ainsi vont les choses de ce monde" (*L'Habitation* 254). The demise of Chant-d'Oisel and the other members of the Saint-Ybars family represents a reversal of Kate Chopin's heroine's death; rather than social pressures forcing the death of an individual, the deaths of Mercier's Creole characters signal these pressures' detrimental effect upon an entire culture.

The juxtaposition of Mercier's argument for equal education for women in Louisiana with the portrait of his politically indifferent French female acquaintance speaks volumes about his desire for Creole society to progress beyond traditional French patriarchal notions of gender. Rather than continuing to follow French social patterns in Louisiana, Mercier pushes for a move forward. He makes a case for social progress over holding onto traditions that threaten Creole culture. In this way he suggests that equality between the sexes would contribute to the future of an autonomous Creole society.

CHAPTER 4. CHANNELING *CRÉOLITÉ*

Like the body, which can be racially coded and gendered, how and what individuals speak can be interpreted to reflect identity. Speaking with a particular accent or using a certain set of vocabulary words, for example, influences how individuals are interpreted and what roles they are assigned in a given social context. In this way, language can be understood to act as a system that structures social interactions and consequently shapes how individuals assess themselves as well as each other. Bonny Norton states that “[e]very time we speak, we are negotiating and renegotiating our sense of self in relation to the larger social world, and reorganizing that relationship across time and space. Our gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, among other characteristics, are all implicated in this negotiation of identity” (350). The language that one speaks, more than being a form of communication, then, also functions as a means by which individuals navigate and are situated in society.

This connection between language and identity constitutes another way that Alfred Mercier’s work reorients his readers’ cultural perceptions of New Orleans’ Creole population. Just as the author’s re-working of race and gender roles demonstrate that Creoles evolved beyond the boundaries of their French roots, so does his depiction of their language. Mercier contradicts the belief that Creoles speak only French which could link that group to an exclusively French identity. Instead, he portrays his characters speaking in Louisiana French.¹⁰² Although he composes both *L’Habitation Saint-Ybars* and *Johnelle* primarily in metropolitan French, which would seem to reinforce the belief that the Creole community identifies predominantly as French, his characters’ dialog is mostly formed of the linguistic results of the melding of French colonists with other groups. The author uses Louisiana French Creole in particular, but he also

¹⁰² Following Becky Brown, I define “Louisiana French” as the ensemble of languages spoken by francophones in Louisiana, which includes Louisiana French Creole as well as Cajun and colonial French.

includes a version of French that is altered as a result of exposure to a variety of other languages. This unravels the monocultural definition of South Louisiana. By showing that French evolves into language specific to Louisiana and incorporating it into his text, the author undercuts the dominance of French in Creole culture. As he alters the reader's sense of language in his world, Mercier also asserts its hybridity.

In this chapter, Mercier's textual rendering of Louisiana French comes to the forefront to reinforce our understanding of the multicultural heritage of Louisiana's Creole population, both in the urban space of New Orleans and on the rural plantation. To begin, we examine the linguistic atmosphere in Louisiana, focusing on the shift away from the language of the *métropole*. Although French was initially used by the colonists, as their society became more established and diverse, their language changed. Later, we see how anglophone and francophone writers alike include references to the state's unique forms of expression. In the nineteenth century and beyond, authors continually made note of the way their characters speak in their works set in Louisiana. This analysis provides a basis for understanding Mercier's approach to depicting language. From his philological study to his incorporation of what he refers to as "la langue créole en Louisiane" into both *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* and *Johnelle*, Mercier's written representation of Louisiana French serves as confirmation of a distinctive cultural identity in Louisiana.¹⁰³ Furthermore, Mercier's approach to language can be linked to the literary work of Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant and their concept of *Créolité*, fleshing out a

¹⁰³ In this study I refer to Louisiana French Creole and Martinican Creole as languages rather than as dialects. As Richard Wardhaugh points out, these two terms are somewhat ambiguous as there are no universally-accepted criteria for distinguishing between language and dialect (25). In a general sense, however, "[l]anguage is used to refer either to a single linguistic norm or to a group of related norms, and dialect is used to refer to one of the norms" (25). Therefore, because I understand Creole to exist on its own terms rather than as a regional variety or "inferior" version of French, I use the term "language." Alfred Mercier also refers to Louisiana French Creole as a "langue" in his *Étude*, although, like other Creoles, he uses that term interchangeably with *dialecte* and *patois*. See also Edward Finegan, *Language: Its Structure and Use*.

comparison with Louisiana authors that Sybil Kein has already noted (“Introduction” xvi). These Martinican authors invoke Creole language as a tool to assert their independence from French dominance and to underscore the multiculturalism that is at the foundation of their society, resonating with the Louisiana author’s own use of language. Here, Mercier’s linguistic focus is unveiled as an indication of his refusal to be labeled only as either French or American. Using his own language, Louisiana French, provides a way for him to locate himself outside of those two politically charged cultures, and instead to define himself on his own terms.

4.1 Cultural Diversity in Louisiana’s Language

While much attention to Louisiana’s linguistic heritage is focused on French, this language is only a preliminary step in the development of what Becky Brown refers to as Louisiana’s “verbal repertoire” (70). Similar to the evolution that has been noted in Canada and the Caribbean, Louisiana French is altered from its European origins.¹⁰⁴ As the work of linguists Sylvie Dubois, Thomas Klingler, and Albert Valdman indicates, French in Louisiana has been exposed to and influenced by a multitude of new social factors. Even within the state, French evolved differently in different communities (Brown 73-4). This process of change is a result of intercultural contact and serves as evidence of the coming together of different populations. The linguistic results of this “creolization,” then, become symbols of the social interactions that formed them. In fact according to Nicholas Spitzer, that word has been “used by scholars to describe the process of language formation that resulted from cultural contact” (59). Thus, as different groups of people integrated within Louisiana’s Creole society, their language became lasting proof of their diverse past.

¹⁰⁴ Jean-Benoît Nadeau and Julie Barlow as well as Anthony R. Lodge et al. discuss the altering of French in Canada and the Caribbean.

Historically, francophones have played a major role in settling the southern part of the state. That Louisiana's language and customs are rooted in French culture as a result is undeniable, even in the twenty-first century. Yet, the diverse social mosaic that grew from these roots takes the French language beyond that monocultural background. The array of peoples, even within the francophone population, had an impact on self-expression throughout South Louisiana. In New Orleans specifically, as colonists established a new society and began to interact with other groups, their speech changed in several ways. First, French and African expression became enmeshed on the plantation which noticeably altered the colonists' original language (Spitzer 61). Later on, immigrant speakers of Spanish, English, and Italian, among others, settled in New Orleans and also had the potential to affect francophone expression (Thompson 33-5). Ultimately, Louisiana's language reflects the variety of its peoples.

4.1.1 Louisiana's Diverse Francophone Expressions

The influx of different groups with French heritage constitutes an important multicultural influence on Creole society and language even before we consider the ethnic diversity that affects expression in New Orleans. In addition to the colonists who came directly from France, the Acadians, or Cajuns, arrived from Canada after 1755 and emigrants from Saint-Domingue settled following the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) at the end of the eighteenth century and into the early nineteenth. Despite the fact that these three groups have similar French origins, their cultures are founded in different circumstances and developed separately (Brown 70-1). Moreover, while all are French-speaking, their languages each evolved somewhat differently.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, even within the francophone portion of Louisiana's population, we can note the existence of a multicultural population with varied linguistic backgrounds.

¹⁰⁵ Research completed by Sylvie Dubois and other linguistics scholars reveal that religion, especially the Catholic Church community, is also responsible for language shifts in Louisiana. See Sylvie Dubois, Emilie Leumas, and Malcom Richardson, "Spatial Diffusion of Language Practices within the Catholic Church in Louisiana."

The Cajuns had their own cultural identity and brought their own version of French with them when they arrived in Louisiana during the eighteenth century. Instead of living as a transplanted French population and maintaining a French identity in Canada, they established their own society and Acadian culture. Becky Brown notes that the Cajuns' language in particular had begun to progress beyond its roots before their 1755 expulsion: "The Nova Scotians brought with them the language and culture of Acadia. This group had already subsisted for 152 years apart from France (1603-1755), and a distinct Acadian identity was firmly established. Furthermore, their language had a chance to evolve to a certain extent" (70). When they arrived in the colony of Louisiana, the Cajuns brought with them a language that was adapted specifically to their community. Consequently, they did not simply blend seamlessly into Louisiana society, as Alcée Fortier's personal reflections indicate. Indeed, even after more than a hundred years of living in Louisiana, he considered Cajuns to be members of a different cultural group from his own. In his 1894 *Louisiana Studies*, for example, Fortier traces the history of the Cajuns and affirms the differences between them and the Creoles, the author's own culture, even going as far as to distinguish a separate "Acadian race" (163). Consequently, although they were equally francophone, the Cajuns can be understood to have diversified the social and linguistic setting in Louisiana.

In the early nineteenth-century, refugees from Saint-Domingue imported language and culture that were equally separate from that of the Creoles in Louisiana. Although there are many similarities to be noted between the two settlements, Louisiana and Saint-Domingue developed as individual sites.¹⁰⁶ Nathalie Dessens confirms that the colonial process in Saint-Domingue was "different in many ways from that experienced in Louisiana" (246). Perhaps the most notable difference is that while Louisiana was a poor, struggling colony, Saint-Domingue

¹⁰⁶ They were both plantation societies, for example (Dessens 244).

“became the richest colony in the world” (Dessens 247).¹⁰⁷ Thus, while both Louisiana and Saint-Domingue were founded by francophone colonists, the *émigrés* were outsiders to Louisiana’s Creole culture when they arrived. Their different experiences formed separate cultural identities and French usage. After settling in Louisiana, the Saint-Dominguans altered not only the social makeup, but the local language as well (Brown 70, Dessens 238).

Following their arrival, according to Dessens, the Saint-Dominguans imported cultural traditions and beliefs that brought new vocabulary into Louisiana French. She states that, “[t]he first manifestations of their influence are to be found in the introduction into the Louisiana Creole language of words that did not exist before and that were imported without any possible doubt from Saint Domingue. They correspond to realities typical of the Caribbean and unknown in Louisiana until then” (258). When they began interacting with Creoles, the Saint-Dominguans integrated new customs into popular use which also affected language. The influx of voodoo practices, for instance, drove the integration of new vocabulary into Louisiana French Creole. Dessens points out words such as *gri-gri* among her examples.¹⁰⁸ Thus, through Creole contact with other francophones, terms that were not common in Louisiana prior to the Caribbeans’ arrival worked their way into common expression.

Vocabulary is not the only evidence of the change Saint-Dominguans brought to Creoles’ language. Dessens also outlines the effect on syntax in Louisiana’s Creole. She cites the work of Alfred Mercier as explained by his contemporaries, Alcée Fortier in particular. In his study of Louisiana French Creole, Mercier notes the adoption of a dative case and credits the influence of the Saint-Dominguans: “Nous devons cette manière de parler aux émigrés de St-Domingue”

¹⁰⁷ Shannon Dawdy discusses some of the unique difficulties that colonists in Louisiana faced in *Building the Devil’s Empire* (28-30). See also Pritchard 43.

¹⁰⁸ *Gris-gris* are “little packets of herbs, stones, and other bits and pieces designed to bring luck, love, health” and are used in voodoo practices and rituals (Herczog 204).

(12). Mercier's observation is further evidence that the francophones from the former colony in the Caribbean altered language as they integrated into Creole society. The changes to vocabulary and syntax that Dessens and Mercier note thus demonstrate how language was noticeably altered as a result of Saint-Dominguan emigration.

Louisiana is often characterized as French, and it does indeed have historical ties to that culture. Yet this identification is complicated when examining the roots of the state's populations of French origin. Even among the so-called "French" population, there is a diversity that challenges a monolithic identification of Louisiana's society and language. As Brown points out, three different French cultural groups can be traced in Louisiana: Creole, Cajun, and Saint-Dominguan (70).¹⁰⁹ Just as any other outside cultures might, francophone groups originating outside Louisiana were able to influence the dominant expression. The Creoles' interactions with the Cajun and Saint-Dominguan populations that came after them can be understood to have diversified their language.¹¹⁰ Thus, within the francophone community, there is a recognizable multicultural force working on language. Looking outside of this group, however, points to more cultural forces that likewise affect the French language in Louisiana. Creoles were in contact with a large African slave population early on in their history, and the African influence contributed major changes to francophone expression in the Creole community, as well as the diversification of the community itself.

¹⁰⁹ The Saint-Dominguans eventually were absorbed into Creole society while the Cajuns remained more distinct, as Fortier notes. This may be due to the more similar lifestyles of Creoles and Saint-Dominguans. Dessens explains that they were both organized as plantation cultures. See note 106.

¹¹⁰ This dissertation adopts a definition of Creole as "a person of non-American ancestry, whether African or European, who was born in the Americas" (Dominguez 263). Thus, we can consider this group to be composed primarily of Louisiana natives and descendants of French colonists, contrasting with the Acadians and Saint-Dominguans who established their own American culture before arriving in Louisiana (Brown 70-1).

4.1.2 Louisiana French Creole

The interaction between Africans and the French-speaking population led to the further development of Creole language in Louisiana. This Creole, also referred to as Louisiana French Creole, emerged from the integration of the French and African languages in the plantation setting.¹¹¹ Nicholas Spitzer explains that the process of linguistic creolization involves the incorporation of words from a variety of different languages. In the case of Creole in Louisiana, “the leximes or words usually come primarily from the language of the *metropole* [sic], with additional words from African, Native American (in North and South America), and other European sources” (61). Because of the variety of cultures associated with these linguistic factors, Louisiana French Creole represents the social diversity of the region. As Becky Brown notes, “[t]he intermingling of populations has led to the intermingling of languages” (74). As a result, Louisiana French Creole constitutes another instance of Louisiana’s varied social makeup being reflected in language. As Africans and French colonists assimilated, French evolved into a substantially different form of expression.¹¹²

Many wide-ranging theories attempt to explain the particulars and the politics behind the development of Creole in general, but most link the process to some level of cultural exchange taking place between planters and their slaves.¹¹³ Brown confirms that in Louisiana, “the language that evolved out of the planter/slave contact situation was a creole variety now known

¹¹¹ See note 2. Alfred Mercier also refers to this Creole dialect as “La langue créole en Louisiane” (*Étude* 1).

¹¹² It is important to note that the social divisions and conflicts as a result of slavery played a role in influencing perceptions of language and how it evolved. For example, what many members of Alfred Mercier’s Creole community considered to be Louisiana French Creole, a language that developed as a result of intercultural contact, was different from the language that African slaves used among themselves as a way of communicating without their masters’ knowledge. As Gérard Césaire explains, for Creoles like Mercier in the nineteenth century and even decades later, “[p]arler créole...ça voulait dire ‘parler petit nègre.’” For the purposes of this work, here we examine Creole in Louisiana as it is understood by the white, slave-owning Creole population.

¹¹³ Spitzer states that the details of the origins of languages such as Louisiana French Creole run from the “baby-talk” theory to the notion that they develop as parallel languages. He also notes that most scholars today focus less on the politics of the languages’ origins and instead study them as the “linguistic results of a complex array of historic and geographic cultural contacts in ‘discovery, exploration, trade conquest, slavery, migration, colonialism, (and) nationalism’” (60-1).

as Louisiana French Creole” (70).¹¹⁴ As the two social groups, French masters and African slaves, and their differing cultures became enmeshed, a new language emerged.¹¹⁵ In fact, French Creole is quite different from French despite the role that the European language played at first. Spitzer notes that such Creole languages “are usually unintelligible to speakers of the metropolitan language,” and that they have “an integrity of their own” (Spitzer 61). Writing in the nineteenth century, Benjamin Latrobe attests to this statement. He refers to his interactions with residents who spoke Louisiana French Creole and remarks that, despite his comprehension of French, Creole is “unintelligible to [him]” (*Journal* 222).¹¹⁶ Latrobe’s inability to understand Creole confirms its separation from its French origins. French in Louisiana had transformed into an entirely new expression as a result of cultural interactions.

Creole eventually took the place of the French language in New Orleans and the surrounding areas in some circumstances and children were often raised to speak Creole first.¹¹⁷ Even though most of the French Creole population spoke primarily the French of the *métropole* as adults, Creole was their first language, which they used predominantly for their first decade of life. Some, like Alfred Mercier, spoke it exclusively (Mercier, *Étude* 2). He states that “il y en a même parmi nous qui ont fait usage exclusivement du dialecte des nègres, jusqu'à l'âge de dix ou douze ans” (*Étude* 2). Especially for those individuals who spoke only Creole as children, this language served as a sort of native tongue. Lafcadio Hearn’s nineteenth-century observations of

¹¹⁴ We can distinguish between creole, a step in the evolution of language, and Creole, which has reached an endpoint in its evolution. See Wardhaugh 53-84.

¹¹⁵ Both Dessens and Mercier note that some variety in Louisiana French Creole is detectable depending on the region, confirming its characterization as a language. Mercier simply distinguishes between Creole in the country and the city, while Dessens puts forward a wider range stating that “the Creole languages of Louisiana often vary from one parish to another” (258).

¹¹⁶ Spitzer has pointed out that those who speak Creole languages with similar linguistic elements from different places can generally communicate easily. Louisiana French Creole, for instance, closely resembles Creole in Haiti and in Martinique.

¹¹⁷ It is important to note that the experience in Acadiana in the western part of the state was different, as that area was primarily inhabited by Cajuns who did not have slaves and did not speak Creole primarily. Although, as Becky Brown notes, the languages do cross over, and Creolized Cajun and Cajunized Creole are both recognized (74).

New Orleans corroborate Mercier's description of this practice among French Creole families. Hearn confirms Creole's function as a native language, writing in his article "The Creole Patois" that Louisiana French Creole,

is the maternal speech; it is the tongue in which the baby first leans to utter its thoughts; it is the language of family and of home. The white creole child learns it from the lips of his swarthy nurse; and creole adults still use it in speaking to servants or to their own little ones. At a certain age the white boys or girls are trained to converse in French; judicious petting, or even mild punishment, is given to enforce the use of the less facile but more polite medium of expression. But the young creole who remains in Louisiana seldom forgets the sweet patois, the foster-mother tongue, the household words which are lingual caresses. (*Writings* 745)

Hearn's description reinforces our understanding that the common practice in New Orleans was to teach children to speak Creole first and to encourage them to speak only French as they grew older, at which time they would presumably be sent to school abroad. This tradition shows that instead of depending exclusively upon a European language, Creoles turned to a language that derived from their own society. By choosing to have their children speak Creole instead of French, they demonstrated that they were not bound to one aspect of their linguistic heritage, but rather recognized their society's multiculturalism.

It is important to note that there was no one group in New Orleans to which the use of Creole was limited. Although Mercier and others describe the Creole language using the pejorative term "patois" and call it a "dialecte des nègres," which seems to restrict its use to the African Creole community or to the uneducated classes as an "inferior" version of French, these

same writers also frequently refer to it as “notre” or “ours” (Castellanos 146; Mercier, *Étude* 8, 12). In this way they assert their ownership of the language and affirm their personal investment in it. Indeed, Hearn and Mercier point out that Creole was important to the culture of whites as well as blacks in nineteenth-century New Orleans.¹¹⁸ While Sybil Kein has characterized the Creole language as “a divisive tool” that separated “the schooled from the unschooled, the intellectual from the peasant, the free from the slave, the rich from the poor,” what we see here challenges that viewpoint (“Use” 131). Instead, Creole emerges as a shared cultural symbol. In fact, Edward Tinker states that it was common for children in the nineteenth century to resist learning French: “leurs parents essayaient, non sans difficulté, de leur enseigner un français correct” (*Écrits* 401). Thus, despite the fact that Louisiana French Creole was often described using negative terms and was often associated with only certain social groups, in reality Creole functioned as a unifying element of culture in New Orleans and not a divide.

Louisiana French Creole is a significant example of how language can adapt to the community that uses it. This is because it is the linguistic outcome of the coming together of different peoples. As such, it serves as a testament to the multicultural forces working on all elements of Creole society. We can see Creole as a further demonstration that the language used by the Creole community reflects their multicultural reality. Moreover, rather than being perceived negatively as kind of jargon, Hearn, Mercier, and others demonstrate that Louisiana French Creole occupied an important role in their cultural traditions. Creoles not only adopted Louisiana French Creole as their first language, teaching it to their children before French, they also came to associate cultural belonging with the language which they show by referring to it in possessive terms. As more people from varied backgrounds made their homes in South

¹¹⁸ Similarly, there was no one group to which the use of French was limited. Mercier and Hearn both state that even the least privileged inhabitants of New Orleans could speak in both French and Creole.

Louisiana, more languages entered into Creole society. These also came to be integrated into Louisiana French, further engraving the city's unique makeup in language.

4.1.3 Multiple European Languages

French, in its various forms, and Creole are not the only languages that play a part in nineteenth-century New Orleans culture. In fact, visitors and natives alike have commented on the great variety of expression that they heard throughout the city. As new ethnic groups established themselves in society, their languages were incorporated as well. Brown affirms that the culture of "south Louisiana is rooted in the continual flow of immigrants both past and present" (71). Because of this flow of people, the use of Spanish, English, and Italian, among others, eventually came to influence New Orleans' francophone language. While their effect was not as extreme as the process of creolization that resulted from the combination of French and African cultures, they nonetheless contributed to the evolution of Louisiana French. New words, expressions, and accents were adopted into common speech.

Nineteenth-century writers note the linguistic diversity in New Orleans. Resident George Castellanos describes in particular the remarkable aural experience of the Sunday French Market in his memoirs of that era. He writes that "[t]here, every conceivable language, from Choctaw to Greek or Maltese, not to omit our sweet, euphonious Creole French, was spoken" (146). Castellanos indicates the broad span of native and foreign languages that could be heard throughout the market. It is telling that in his account, French is not a dominant element. In fact, he only explicitly notes its presence here in its creolized form. Rather than showing that his society relies on one language only, the author illustrates a truly polyphonic milieu.

Echoing his fellow writer, Lafcadio Hearn also remarks on the variety and unique combination of languages in New Orleans. Yet, Hearn does not just indicate the diversity as

Castellanos does. He also shows the potential that it has for altering the dominant expression. In his article “Voice of Dawn,” he relates in great detail the scene of the city in the morning and the chorus of vendors, including “Italians, negroes, Frenchmen, and Spaniards,” that punctuate it with their voices. He demonstrates the active linguistic fusion occurring in the city as accents and vocabulary from different languages become intertwined in popular usage: creolization *en cours*. Hearn approaches Creole culture from an anglophone point of view, therefore he gives his examples in English:

The vendor of fowls pokes in his head at every open window with cries of ‘Chick-EN, Madamma, Chick-EN,’ and the seller of ‘Lem-Ons-fine Lem-ONS!’ follows in his footsteps. The peddlers of ‘Ap-PULLS,’ of ‘Straw-BARE-eries,’ and “Black-Breezes,’ all own sonorous voices. There is a handsome Italian with a somewhat ferocious pair of black eyes, who sells various oddities, and has adopted the word ‘lagniappe’ for his war cry, –pronouncing it Italian wise. He advances noiselessly to open windows and doors, plunges his blazing black glance into the interior, and suddenly queries in a deep bass, like a clap of thunder, ‘LAGNIAPPA-Madam-a! –lagniappa!’ (*Writings* 720)

Hearn’s amusing description paints a vivid portrait of the diverse linguistic backgrounds of those living in New Orleans. As Castellanos does, rather than exclusively describing francophone accents, he depicts a collection of voices that represent a variety of cultures. His representations of the irregular rhythms and intonations in English reveal how the different languages intermingle and meld together. While his portrayal focuses on English, it nevertheless informs our understanding of French and its evolution in this milieu. By detailing the different accents, Hearn shows how language can reflect the diversity of the social make-up.

Our examination of the history and evolution of French language in Creole society reveals the reality of that population's diverse heritage. Because the language Creoles spoke results from francophone contact with a variety of other groups, ultimately, it connects this group back to their multicultural influences. We see that they did not rely on metropolitan French exclusively, a fact that contradicts the linking of Creole culture to a solely French background. Instead, language is a testament to the collision of diverse cultures in South Louisiana. Lafcadio Hearn details this process in English, but many literary authors writing about Louisiana – George Dessimmes and George Washington Cable, in particular – demonstrate it occurring in French. In their texts, they reveal how words from Spanish, Italian, and other languages become a part of the local expression, forming versions of French that are unique to Louisiana's Creole society. In this way, the portrayals of language in literature are a key factor in contradicting the notion that Creole culture depends solely upon its heritage from France linguistically. Authors' depictions of their Louisiana characters' speech point to the multitude of cultural influences at work on their language.

4.2 Language and Identity in Louisiana Literature

Writers consistently make an effort to showcase their sense of the linguistic atmosphere in Louisiana, whether coming from an anglophone or francophone perspective. Nonfiction authors such as Lafcadio Hearn and Henry Castellanos are part of this trend, but those who produce literary works are also included. The manner in which language is depicted in fictional texts is not always the same. What characters speak is represented as anything from a slight accent to a more negatively perceived *patois*. Yet, whatever the form of the language, it invariably appears and becomes a defining aspect of a character's identity. Authors as diverse as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Anne Rice write about Louisiana's inhabitants and include

references to the way they speak.¹¹⁹ While some of these authors merely describe the Creole community as French-speaking, others show an evolution from the language of the *métropole*. By depicting their characters speaking an altered or creolized French, these authors simultaneously mark the development of a distinct Louisiana identity.

Looking at the range of representations of French expression in nineteenth-century New Orleans-focused literature establishes a basis for linking Creole language and cultural identity in Mercier's novels. First, it is important to have an understanding of what languages are ascribed to francophone characters from Louisiana in literature in general and how both francophone and anglophone authors incorporate these forms of expression into their texts. In this section, we examine two novels that are set in New Orleans and that portray the city's unique linguistic landscape. These texts, one in French, George Dessommes's *Tante Cydette*, and one in English, George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes*, depict francophone characters who speak French and English, as well as Louisiana French Creole. Both Dessommes and Cable are Mercier's contemporaries, and published their novels within a few years of *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* and *Johnelle*. Examining the works by Dessommes and Cable sets the scene for interpreting Mercier's adoption of Creole in his novels as well as understanding his cultural motivations for doing so.

4.2.1 General Trends in Depictions of Louisiana Language

Not all portrayals of language in Louisiana are the same, but there are three distinguishable categories into which depictions of francophone expression in Louisiana generally fall. These are: French, most often used by the New Orleans elite, Cajun or *Cadien*, used by the Acadian people, and Creole, spoken primarily in New Orleans and on the nearby

¹¹⁹ Rice describes her character, Louis, as having a French accent in her novel, *Interview with a Vampire*, and Longfellow describes his hero, Gabriel Lajeunesse, in *Evangeline* as a *voyageur*.

plantations.¹²⁰ These categories are by no means all-encompassing but adopting them helps to organize our approach to literary representations of South Louisiana's linguistic environment. Examples of works that depict French in New Orleans include Sidonie de la Houssaye's *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, and Victor Séjour's *Le Mulâtre*. Some examples of works that represent dialog in either the Cajun or Creole languages are Kate Chopin's collection of short stories, *Bayou Folk*, and George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes*. Throughout the corpus of fictional works set in Louisiana, then, characters are generally depicted speaking French, Cajun, or Creole.

Although many Louisiana-focused texts are written in English, they still include the distinguishing aspects of the local French language. Anglophone writers such as Chopin, Cable, and King often simply describe a particular accent, or they incorporate dialog in French, Cajun, or Creole side by side with English. Francophones like Mercier, Dessommes, and de la Houssaye, however, generally write their narratives in metropolitan French and compose their characters' dialog accordingly. Despite their different perspectives, authors writing in both French and English can effectively represent language in Louisiana. Indeed, these depictions are equally important for anglophone and francophone writers. Whether it is French, Cajun, or Creole, language sets the cultural scene of their portrayal.

While representations of French and Cajun in Louisiana are important in their own right, here, the focus is on the Creole language and identity. For this reason, we are not looking at the adoption of Cajun or metropolitan French in Louisiana-centric literature in depth. Instead, in order to contextualize Mercier's incorporation of Louisiana French Creole, this work focuses on two nineteenth-century novels set in New Orleans that center on Creole characters and that put a

¹²⁰ See note 102.

particular emphasis on the way they speak: George Dessommes's *Tante Cydette* and George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes*. Both feature the language used by francophone Creoles living in New Orleans. Their detailed depictions of the Creoles' speech function as a vital link between the reader and a vision of New Orleans society. Through Louisiana French, Dessommes and Cable provide a sense of the unique Creole cultural identity that their contemporary, Alfred Mercier, evokes in his novels.

4.2.2 Language in *Tante Cydette*

George Desommes incorporates a focus on the language used by French Creoles in his 1888 novel, *Tante Cydette*. The work tells the story of a large Creole family and their spinster aunt, after whom the book is named, who is constantly match-making and meddling. The francophone text, published in 1888, is primarily composed in metropolitan French, including much of the characters' dialog. Yet, the author also demonstrates the existence of a distinctive French language used in the Creole community. In certain instances, Dessommes noticeably differentiates Louisiana's francophone language from that of France. He incorporates dialog written in Louisiana French Creole, he consistently interjects English words and phrases into the Creoles' French speech, and he describes a less formal approach to conversation in Louisiana compared to France. Dessommes's depiction of language in Louisiana reveals that it has been altered from its roots and become something other than French. Ultimately, language here reflects Creole culture, demonstrating the possibility that it has evolved as well.

The author establishes a difference between expression in France and Louisiana early on by featuring a brief interjection in Louisiana French Creole. The narrative opens as an Easter Sunday service in New Orleans is concluding. After the priest announces the end of the service, the attendees impatiently and noisily exit the church. The scene is described as a clamor of

voices with many individuals speaking all at once about different things. Six of these voices stand out and are represented in the text. All are in French, except for one in Creole: “Mamzelle, prends donc garde, *vô fripé tô mô la robe!*” (41)¹²¹ This exclamation is one of a few that can be made out amidst what Dessommes describes as the “brouhaha” of voices leaving the church. The author’s choice to include a Creole voice among the few that are distinguishable showcases the unique francophone expression used in New Orleans. Its mere presence alerts the reader to the linguistic difference between France and Louisiana. The Creole is clearly different from French. Although a relation between these two languages is evident, the words in Creole are not immediately clear to the francophone reader. They require some deciphering, like any other foreign language. While the overall appearances of Creole in the text are limited, the positioning of this phrase at the very beginning of the novel alerts readers from the start that what Dessommes’s Creole characters speak is, to echo Homi Bhabha, “not quite” French (*Location* 86). His use of the language in the first scene sets a pattern that continues in the rest of the text.

Dessommes’s characters who are not depicted speaking in Creole are still linguistically set apart. They speak a version of French that integrates English words and phrases. The principal characters in *Tante Cydette* generally speak in the more widely understood metropolitan French in which Dessommes composes the rest of the narrative. Yet, the author interjects English words into many of their French conversations, recalling the description of intermingling language given by Lafcadio Hearn from his real-life observations. In Dessommes’s work, English expressions are sometimes used for emphasis, for instance when a character exclaims enthusiastically: “*All right!* mon cher” (92). Occasionally, English vocabulary expresses a particular idea, such as when a Parisian character visiting the Creole family is described as being “[f]ort peu *practical*” (88). At other times, English and French are

¹²¹ “Vous fripez toute ma robe” (182).

juxtaposed without any particular explanation at all. For example, at one point, a character bids farewell to her francophone company in both languages: “Adieu, good bye!” (44). This pattern breaks the dominance of metropolitan French. The depiction of his characters’ usage of an anglicized French forces the reader to see that expression in Louisiana is not limited by a French linguistic heritage. Dessommes’s depiction of this *franglais* demonstrates the result of different languages coming together. As Creoles integrate with Anglo-Americans, their speech evolves.

Even to the characters within the novel, variances in communication in France and in Louisiana are evident. A Parisian character who is visiting New Orleans and becomes friends with Tante Cydette and her family remarks upon a striking difference that he perceives between French and Louisiana expression. He explains to one of Tante Cydette’s cousins that, “ce qu’on ne trouve pas chez nous, je le répète, c’est cette franchise, ce laisser-aller, cette familiarité avec laquelle vous accueillez, du premier élan du cœur, celui qui vous plaît” (81). The Parisian notes that citizens of Louisiana are much less formal and more open in speaking than their French counterparts.¹²² Although his observations do not concern concrete linguistic elements such as vocabulary or syntax, his remarks still outline a different tradition of expression in Louisiana from that in France. The Creoles’ more familiar approach sets them apart from their French roots. Not only have the concrete elements of their language adapted to their unique situation, but the customs surrounding it have as well.

George Dessommes’s representation of the French used by Creoles in Louisiana highlights its difference from language of their European counterparts. Even though the majority of his novel is written in metropolitan French, he is still able to incorporate various elements that distinguish separate forms of expression. Rather than assuming that Creole and French

¹²² Despite this feeling of familiarity, the characters still reserve the “tu” form for their intimate friends and family and use the “vous” form for their other acquaintances.

characters speak the same language in this novel, then, readers begin to visualize the existence of a variety of French that is unique to Louisiana. Indeed, the author affirms within his own novel that this is a form of expression with which a Frenchman must learn to become acquainted. Consequently, language can be read as a sign that the Creole characters themselves are something other than French. With his depiction of the way Creoles speak, Dessommes opens our eyes to how they have separated from French. Their modification and appropriation of language connects to their cultural evolution. Even though they have French heritage, Creoles cannot be identified categorically as French.

George Dessommes's portrayals of the language used by Creoles, whether a form of French born from cultural *métissage* or Louisiana French Creole, connect his readers to a vision of New Orleans as a society that exists in its own right. As Ida Eve Heckenbach explains, Dessommes was, like most Creoles, against the anglicization of New Orleans. At the same time, however, he was hopeful to preserve “une culture hybride” (18). This hybridity incorporates, but is not solely dependent upon, their French heritage. The author's approach to depicting Creole and the French of Louisiana in his text reflects his hope. As a cultural insider, Dessommes's portrayal of Creole culture has personal implications. On the other hand, his fellow writer, George Washington Cable, has a different stake in the matter. His novel is more overtly political, but more importantly, Cable's representation of Creoles comes from different linguistic perspective. Despite these differences, Cable also links his depiction of language to identity in Creole Louisiana.

4.2.3 Language and Controversy in *The Grandissimes*

George Washington Cable, like his francophone compatriot, highlights the language used by Creoles in his 1880 novel, *The Grandissimes*. Set at the beginning of the nineteenth century,

the story follows a young German-American's ventures into the Creole community as he starts a new life in New Orleans. Cable's depiction of New Orleans' society is highly charged. He broaches many sensitive topics, in particular, the clashing of Anglo-American and Creole cultures following the Louisiana Purchase. Language comes to the forefront here as Cable relies on it to demonstrate the tension between the two groups during this era. He emphasizes Creoles' reliance on French and their disdain for English. As a result, linguistic preference becomes a defining element of identity. Yet at the same time, his representation also indicates a difference between French in Louisiana and France. Cable focuses on language in a number of ways that distinguish Creoles both from the French and Anglo-Americans. He writes out his Creole characters' French accent phonetically, he incorporates French words into their English conversations, and he represents Louisiana French Creole. Although his characters seem to prefer an alliance with France over the United States, Cable's novel also points to the Creoles' linguistic, as well as cultural, evolution away from their French roots.

Cable structures his portrayal of Creole society around his perception of a notion that politicizes the entire idea of language in Louisiana. He depicts a strong Creole hostility towards the English language. His Creole characters reject English as well as the incoming Anglo-American administration. When the anglophone protagonist arrives in New Orleans, he quickly learns that the francophones are not receptive to the Anglo-American population influx. In one of the first conversations that he has following his arrival, a Creole declares that "English is not a language, sir; it is a jargon! And when this young simpleton, Claiborne, attempts to cram it down the public windpipe in the courts, as I understand he intends, he will fail! Hah! Sir, I know men in this city who would rather eat a dog than speak English" (Cable 53). This character does not accept English or an anglophone government. He prefers the French language and a political

alliance with France. Choosing French over English is a trait that Cable connects to being Creole and uses to set that group apart from other Americans, reflecting the clash of cultures examined in Chapter One. By demonstrating such a strong resistance to English with a simultaneous preference for French, Cable affirms Creoles' difference from himself and his anglophone readership. This move reflects the author's tendency to distance Creoles from other Americans. As the novel moves forward, he continues to delimit a separate identity for Creoles through language.

Cable's phonetic rendering of the Creoles' francophone accent when speaking English is one of the most remarkable ways that he situates them through language. The accent that he depicts is often quite strong and accompanied by false cognates so that the anglophone protagonist has difficulty understanding. In his article, "French-English Literary Dialect in *The Grandissimes*," William Evans offers some insight into the author's strategy for representing the Creole accent. He explains that "[t]he Creole, according to Cable, 'makes a languorous *z* of all *s*'s and soft *c*'s except initials' and he 'flattens long *i*, as if it were coming through cane-crushers'" (212). The protagonist's Creole landlord provides a particularly clear example of the technique that Evans describes. In one scene, he attempts to speak with the anglophone but struggles. He explains that he has prepared breakfast for his tenant: "Idd you' bregfuz, m'sieu" (121). Later in the conversation, he mentions where he was raised and educated: "Ah was elevade in Pariz" (121). Cable's rendering of the Creole's inexact pronunciation is startling in its detail. More than simply altering the letters *S* and *I*, Cable infuses French into English.

The author's depiction of the Creole's accented pronunciation of English inscribes the character within an "othered" identity. His lack of ease with the dominant form of expression among Americans shows that it is not his native language. Thus, it restricts him from fully

integrating into American culture and sets him apart from Cable's Anglo-American readers. Because he does not speak English as skillfully as the anglophone character, he is set outside the boundaries of that culture. At the same time, however, it echoes Dessommes's work that highlights cultural integration of Anglo-Americans and Creoles rather than exclusion. Instead of seeing the Creole's manner of speaking as only an uneasy English, the reader can interpret it as a mingling together of English and French. The accented blending of the two languages is evidence of the cultural fusion that necessarily precedes a linguistic one. Despite the political tensions between the two groups, they are both still integral parts of Louisiana society. As Cable distinguishes between Anglo-Americans and Creoles, he also shows how they come together.

The author further establishes our sense of the integration of the two different cultures in New Orleans by incorporating French into his characters' English conversations. Creoles switch languages at key points to add emphasis, resorting to their native Louisiana French language at emotional moments. For example, when one character, Aurore, is shocked at her landlord's demand for money, she interjects a few French words that reflect her reaction: "Ah!" retorted Aurore, '*par exemple! Non? Ee thingue we is ridge, eh?*'" (73).¹²³ The character has an accent like many of Cable's other Creoles, but the author also chooses for her to slip in a few French words that seem to affect her message. Like his phonetic renderings of their accent, this move reinforces the reader's perception that Creoles are linguistically set apart from anglophones. The character's use of French words when speaking English again points to New Orleans' unique state as a francophone society within the primarily English-speaking United States. Yet, Cable's approach here again resembles Dessommes's in *Tante Cydette*. His decision to pepper French words into the English dialog reveals the merging of the two languages. Like his depiction of

¹²³ Interestingly, Cable further mixes our understanding of Louisiana language by representing the G sound in English through a French spelling. Instead of writing "thing," he writes "thingue." This spelling would also indicate that the final consonant is released in French.

their accent, this linguistic mixture demonstrates the Creoles' evolving speech as a result of the cultural contact between Creoles and Anglo-Americans.

The French accent and vocabulary that Cable assigns to his Creole characters can be seen as a part of his depiction of the tensions between Creoles and Anglo-Americans at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but they also show how language is affected by the coexistence of these two cultures. Cable seems to portray Creoles' aversion to speaking English and their reluctance to adapt to the Anglo-American domination by describing their strong accents and seeming reliance upon French words. Yet, whether his Creole characters' accent in English can be interpreted as the result of their conscious choice or not, it is symbolic of the interaction between the two populations. Without the Anglo presence there would be no reason for Creoles to use English in New Orleans, and they would not have established these particular speaking patterns. Their French accent and word choices set a precedent for speaking English and serve as evidence of the syncretism occurring in New Orleans. Although Cable depicts the Anglo-Americans and Creoles as uneasy neighbors, they nonetheless influence each other. This is what his approach to their language reveals, in English as well as French.

While Cable emphasizes the Creoles' reliance on French, he also distinguishes between its manifestations in New Orleans and France. Presumably to preserve his novel's readability for an anglophone audience and still portray a francophone atmosphere, Cable indicates when his characters are speaking French while rendering their dialog in English. At these moments he is careful to specify what kind of French they are speaking. The author clearly distinguishes between the language spoken in New Orleans and metropolitan French. A member of the French-educated Creole class, for example, is described as speaking "Parisian French" (141). In another scene, Cable states that a character's "French was unprovincial" (2). At the same time,

other Creoles are portrayed speaking Louisiana French Creole. That Cable deems this difference to be so marked that it is worthy of note in his novel implies his perception that French has evolved into a new, Louisiana-specific language. Cable is not, however, consistent in how he labels this form of expression, reflecting the instability that Becky Brown's definition of Louisiana French also shows.¹²⁴ Cable uses the terms "Louisiana French" and "the slave dialect" (2). While the second implies certain class and racial associations, the author defies that perception by specifying the language used by an "auburn-curved, blue-eyed" youth as "the Creole French of the gutters" (247). Despite his inconsistent labeling of this speech, the author's meticulous distinguishing between metropolitan French and French Creole in New Orleans demonstrates his view of the importance of portraying a francophone expression unique to Louisiana.

Cable not only describes New Orleans' Creole, he also includes textual representations of it throughout his novel. Like Dessommes, Cable incorporates dialog in Louisiana French Creole. In one instance of his depiction of the language, an upper-class Creole, Honoré Grandissime, and a merchant girl, Clémence, briefly exchange greetings and converse. She calls out, "*Bou zou, Miché Honoré,*" and he replies, "*Comment to yé, Clemence*" (93).¹²⁵ Even more than Cable's descriptions of the language that his characters use, this rendering of it into the text makes it a real and undeniable part of his portrayal of a distinct cultural identity in New Orleans, as it is in Dessommes's novel. Yet, unlike Dessommes, Cable's cultural positioning highly charges his representations of Creole society and places them front and center in the clash of identity politics in nineteenth-century New Orleans.

¹²⁴ See note 102.

¹²⁵ That both of these characters communicate in Creole reinforces the understanding created by Mercier and Hearn that the language is spoken throughout New Orleans, and not just by one segment of the population. Gavin Roger Jones has described this as a "radical" choice by Cable; however, given what we have already seen from Mercier and Hearn, this may not seem so radical here (125).

Cable's approach to depicting his interpretation of Creole speech is impressive in its explicitness and attention to detail. While on one level Cable's work represents Louisiana's Creole inhabitants and their unique self-expression as part of a larger cultural portrait, readers can also see the author's depiction of language as a point of attack on Creoles within an Anglo-centric visualization of Louisiana. One of Cable's main goals for his novel is to address race relations in Creole society, a topic which would be expected to be controversial given the fact that it was published only shortly after Reconstruction.¹²⁶ Yet, his critique of Creole society stretches its focus beyond an interest in social justice. Cable negatively characterizes upper-class Creole society to influence not only his readers' awareness of that group's attitude toward race, but also our interpretation of their loyalty to their roots. He depicts Creoles' pride in their culture as obnoxious and closed-minded. For example, at one point a character declares, "the Louisiana Creole is the noblest variety of enlightened man!" (55). The linking of such statements to the Creole community's resistance to adopt an exclusively anglophone social protocol undeniably tinges their French speech with an unpleasantness that affects even the meekest of Cable's characters. Instead of respecting the boundaries of identity in Louisiana, Cable's text mocks Creoles and denies their relevance to American society and culture as a whole.

His thoroughness also renders his work problematic. As Cable is a member of the Anglo-American community and seen as an outside aggressor by Creoles, his portrayals are entangled in a discourse that Homi Bhabha has described as mimicry. They suggest the author's attempt to assert his authority over Creoles in New Orleans by taking ownership of their culture textually. According to Bhabha, mimicry "'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" (*Location* 122). At the same time that Cable seeks to exactly represent the Creoles' linguistic, as well as cultural,

¹²⁶ Shirley Thompson explains that "Cable offers [the characters in his novel] as an example to the South and ultimately to the nation of how to reckon with historical wrongs and achieve interracial cooperation" (125).

difference from the rest of the United States, he seems to take possession of it. Cable's representation of Creole culture can be read as an attempt to dominate it in order to overpower it, echoing the similar movement in American politics. This was not lost on the nineteenth-century Creole population. In fact, *The Grandissimes* was published during a time when many Creoles were concerned with maintaining their traditions, and Cable's somewhat demeaning representation of Creole culture was taken as a direct assault.

Cable's work set in motion a reaction among the Creole population that attempted to deny him ownership of their culture.¹²⁷ Among the Creoles who reacted negatively to *The Grandissimes* following its publication were Adrien Rouquette and Charles Gayarré. Adrien Rouquette voiced his opinion of the work in a particularly unrestrained and creative manner. In the same year Cable's novel appeared, 1880, Rouquette published his *Critical Dialog between Aboo and Caboo on a New Book or A Grandissime Ascension*, a text that was highly critical of the anglophone's portrayal of Creoles and their social customs. Rouquette states that "[t]he subject of this 'Critical Dialogue,' is the last work of the Dignissime George William [sic] Cable – 'The Grandissimes' – which work is but a sequel of the 'Old Creole Days'" (4). Essentially, Rouquette rejects the portrait of Creoles advanced by Cable and denies any authority that Cable purported to have in his depictions of their way of life. Throughout the three sections of this satirical work – introduction, dialog, and song – Rouquette assesses and condemns his contemporary's novel, working to destroy the believability of his representations.

In his disparaging of Cable's work, Rouquette links *The Grandissimes* to Molière's *Les Précieuses Ridicules* and compares the author himself to a Choctaw chieftain, Mingolabee, known for lying. He refers to Cable's style as "spiteful" and "pedantic" (4). Rouquette declares,

¹²⁷ In this vein, it is noteworthy that Dessommes's and Mercier's works focusing on Creole society were published after Cable's controversial novels. This may indicate that these authors envisioned their texts as a way to reappropriate their culture.

“[t]his Précieux Monsieur Délicieux, this Mingolabee Tasimbo, this deplorably untruthful Novelist, has afflicted us with a new brood of gravely-comical Grandissimes, Belles Dames and Belles Demoiselles Délicieusement Précieuses Ridicules, whose unmista-*kable* features betray, their vulgar, jocose, – and I may say, – outlandish ancestry” (6). Rouquette paints a deeply ironic picture of Cable’s characters, setting his readers on guard against taking them at all seriously. He seems to encourage reading *The Grandissimes* as a bad joke. Furthermore, his use of the word “outlandish” implies his focus on Cable’s Anglo-American roots from outside of Louisiana as a means of bringing his portrayals of Creole society further into question. By emphasizing that Cable’s characters were created by an author who does not belong to the French Creole community in New Orleans, Rouquette raises doubts about their authenticity and believability. Indeed, he clearly shows this is his intention when he says that Cable’s works were mistakenly understood to be taken from real-life: “They were given as *novels* and...taken for HISTORY” (4).¹²⁸

Rouquette not only argues against the way that Cable depicts Creoles in his text, he also does so with the work itself. By composing his *Critical Dialog* primarily in English, not French, he contradicts the notion that Creoles reject English and that they are not as skilled in communicating in it as other Americans.¹²⁹ He even seems to make a show of his dexterity with the language through extensive word play. For example, he plays upon Cable’s name, referring to the author as “despi-*cable*” and “*Cablish*, that is to say *Devilish*” (10-11). This is another challenge to Cable’s so-called authentic portrayal of New Orleans Creoles. Rather than being unable or unwilling to use English, on the contrary, Rouquette turns the tables on Cable when he

¹²⁸ Although the narrative is fictional, Cable’s controversial subjects directly engage nineteenth-century stigmas in an effort to unmask real-life social injustices. See Thompson 121-2 and Kein, “Use” 131-2.

¹²⁹ In fact, after turning eleven, Rouquette spent five years in Kentucky and New Jersey and thus learned to speak English fluently from a young age (Tinker, *Écrits* 401).

uses the anglophone's own language against him. He shows his own mastery of Anglo-American culture when he chooses to compose his criticisms in their language, seemingly reversing Cable's appropriation of Creole expression in the process.

Despite his resounding rejection of Cable's novel, Rouquette confirms some elements of his anglophone compatriot's portrayal of Creole society. Although it is primarily composed in English, Rouquette incorporates words in French throughout his scathing critique. He trades between English and French words in order to achieve a truly evocative tone. For example, when describing *The Grandissimes*, one of the speakers, Aboo, declares that, "[t]here is in it all something *cabalistic*, *cablish*, *qui accable*" (12). Yet, he ends up undercutting his point to discount Cable's work. Rouquette's reliance upon a blended expression actually authenticates the existence of the mixed linguistic atmosphere that both Dessommes and Cable depict in their fiction. His use of a kind of *franglais* is a repetition and confirmation of the sort of language that Cable assigns to his characters. In fact, as a work that is more critical than fictional, Rouquette's dialog is even more convincing evidence that the interactions between Anglo-Americans and francophones affect language in New Orleans.

In the same vein, Rouquette's sarcastic Creole-language song at the end of the text is evidence of the important role that it plays in the Creole community. By writing in Creole rather than French, he again supports an aspect of Cable's portrait of Creole life. Shirley Thompson links his use of Creole to a strategy to reject the notion that Creoles were of mixed race. She argues that "opponents of black equality, including the 'friend of the Indian,' Abbé Adrien Rouquette, could also access the satiric power of the Creole language to lampoon African American culture and racial liberals like Cable" (105). Yet despite any intention to deny Creoles' mixed heritage, the work itself undercuts its author's stance. Rouquette adopts Creole

at a pivotal moment in the defense of his culture and as he is attempting to convey his superior knowledge of it. Ironically, relying on Louisiana French Creole at this point suggests that his cultural identity is indeed founded upon the merging of African and French culture. Not only does Rouquette's text end up supporting Cable's depiction of race that argues for black equality, it also validates the distinction he makes between the varieties of francophone language in France and in New Orleans.

As Rouquette attempts to take back his culture from what seems to be an appropriation by anglophones, he confirms their depiction of it. Although he literally challenges Cable's authenticity, the message that comes from his critique works to confirm it. Even when he attempts to deny his mixed heritage, his *Critical Dialog* reveals the contrary. Nonetheless, the hostilities that surround Cable's novel of which Rouquette's text serves as proof demonstrate just how closely language and culture are tied in New Orleans' identity politics, and how important literary representations of it are to either the protection or the domination of Creole society. Indeed, Thompson describes a strong rejection of Cable's work, stating that "the vehement backlash against him had forced him into exile in New England" (101). Even more so due to the tensions and controversy that surrounds it, *The Grandissimes*, as well as Rouquette's *Critical Dialog*, serve as valuable examples of the important role that language plays in representing Creole culture.

George Dessommes, George Washington Cable, and Adrien Rouquette all portray their personal experience of language in Louisiana. They make clear that, whether coming from an anglophone or a francophone point of view, people in New Orleans speak differently from groups elsewhere. They reveal that the Creoles' language is neither French nor English, although it can include elements of both. More than merely showing that they speak a distinct

language; however, these authors also demonstrate how language becomes a defining factor of Creole culture. Dessommes's text implies a cultural evolution beyond French heritage with his rendering of Louisiana's francophone language, while Cable's, informed by his Anglo-American perspective, points to the vital role that one's self-expression plays in navigating identity in society. Adrien Rouquette's impassioned reaction to Cable's work confirms language's role in cultural negotiations. Ultimately, we can see that literary representations of language function as important declarations that define Creole culture. In this way, these works reinforce our understanding of their identity, not as French or as American, but as Louisiana Creoles.

Even outside of Louisiana, literary representations of language work to help define specific francophone identities. We can link the incorporations of Louisiana's Creole in these texts, especially Dessommes's novel, to the depiction of local language in works from all over the francophone world by authors such as Antonine Maillet, Michel Tremblay, and Patrick Chamoiseau. These writers use their respective depictions of Creole or another variety of French in a political move to reinforce the difference of their respective cultural identity. Rather than supporting a unilateral French heritage, these authors highlight their progress beyond their French roots by emphasizing their unique form of expression. Similarly, we can understand Alfred Mercier's use of Creole as part of his rejection of a primarily French definition of Creole culture. Like his fellow francophones both inside and outside of Louisiana, Mercier adopts Creole dialog in his fiction to showcase the existence of a Creole identity that goes beyond the boundaries of the French category.

4.3 Mercier's Representation of Creole

Mercier integrates Creole language throughout his works. In some ways, his focus surpasses that of his contemporaries' novels. Louisiana French Creole is much more present in

the case of his texts as the author composes numerous long passages in Creole and even devotes entire studies to the language. Because of Mercier's intimate connection to the language, it makes sense that he would include it in his representations of Creole society. He, like many children of French heritage in New Orleans, grew up speaking Louisiana French Creole and did not learn French until he was eleven years old (Mercier, *Étude* 2). His history of connecting language to culture as well as the comparable works of his contemporaries, however, widens the scope for interpreting the linguistic aspect of his texts.¹³⁰ Mercier's use of the Creole language can be understood to serve as a reflection of a distinct Creole identity. Following the precedent established in Dessommes's and Cable's novels, his decision to depict characters that speak in Creole rather than being limited to the language of the *métropole* demonstrates the existence of a separate cultural identity in Louisiana. Their different language points to their cultural difference. In this way, Mercier's approach to language fosters an acceptance of Creoles' cultural *métissage* instead of promoting unwavering nostalgia for France. Indeed, just as his linguistic focus in previous texts calls others to particular cultural roles – i.e. Pierre Soulé and his Alsatian travel companion – here, Mercier effectively interpellates Creoles to a distinct identity. Like his depiction of race and gender roles, Mercier's focus on language provides him a way to reorient his sense of his own identity and show that Creoles have moved beyond the bounds of a single heritage. Rather than emphasizing their ties to France, Mercier brings attention to their *Créolité*.

Although Louisiana French Creole is frequently represented in literary portrayals of New Orleans' culture, Mercier's rendering of the language is uniquely structured. For most authors, the strictly oral nature of Louisiana French Creole presents a problem in writing it. Because there is no standard to follow, each author transcribes it differently. We can see evidence of this

¹³⁰ See pages 39-42.

disparity by looking at Dessommes's and Cable's written interpretations of the Creole speech. Even though Dessommes's sample of the language is small, his is different from Cable's rendering.¹³¹ Mercier addresses the problem of transposing Creole into a recognizable written form while keeping its phonetic integrity. He studies Louisiana's Creole, analyzing it in linguistic terms and assigning it a textual representation that he goes on to use in his works of fiction.

In a linguistic study that Lafcadio Hearn called "one of the most valuable and curious contributions to American philology we have seen," Mercier dissects and reconstructs on paper Louisiana French Creole. His *Étude sur la langue créole en Louisiane* is composed of a brief introduction, a three part grammatical study, and a short Creole story that serves as a practical application of the author's work. While this is not an exhaustive work, it serves a valuable purpose just as Hearn notes. The study presents certain pronunciations and vocabulary aspects that are particular to Creole, simultaneously assigning a written representation to a language that was previously only spoken. Through his efforts towards a systematic representation of Louisiana French Creole on paper, Mercier not only preserves an important element of culture, he also demonstrates the vital role that Creole plays in his personal conception of it.

Simply working towards a written form of the primarily oral language tells of Mercier's personal incentive to focus on Creole, as Becky Brown reveals. At a fundamental level, his textual rendering of Creole can be interpreted "as a key ingredient for language maintenance" (Brown 69). By recording the language as he experiences it himself, Mercier captures a lasting image of Creole in the nineteenth century. Yet, his work has more significance than as a means of preservation. In her analysis of the more recent efforts to set a standard for writing Louisiana's Cajun and Creole languages, Brown gives an explanation of the cultural impact of

¹³¹ For example, Dessommes uses a circumflex accent where Cable and Mercier do not: "tô" instead of "to."

the recording process that also resonates with earlier attempts, including Mercier's. According to Brown, because of "the complexity and the conflict involved in the choice and spelling of the written word... each decision entails a negotiation of one's identity and social role" (69). Thus, as Mercier renders Louisiana French Creole into a textual form and makes decisions regarding the spelling and writing of each word, he also reflects upon his investment in the language. Essentially, his representation of the language is bound up in his conception of himself.

Mercier is not unaware of the importance that his work on Creole has for cultural identity in New Orleans. In fact, his own view of his text is in line with Brown's. He states in his introduction to the *Étude* that, "[u]ne langue dans laquelle on ne lit ni n'écrit, s'altère et s'oublie rapidement" (2). Like Brown, he sees his textual rendering of the language in his study as a way to keep it alive. At the same time, his efforts serve another purpose by making it possible to put Creole culture into its own words. Using the method of transcription that he outlines himself, he is more easily able to render Creole language in his works of fiction, opening the door to a deeper expression of his own cultural identity. He goes on to do this in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* and *Johnelle*. Although both novels are primarily composed in French, Mercier includes many instances in which his characters speak in Creole which he incorporates directly into the text.

4.3.1 Language on the Creole Plantation

In *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, Mercier incorporates extensive sections of Creole that actively set Louisiana culture apart from that of France. This is most evident in the portion of the narrative that features the Saint-Ybars family's son, Démon, and his nourrice, Mamrie, as Mercier composes much of the dialog between the two in Louisiana French Creole. Simply switching from French, the primary language of the novel, to the characters' Creole conversations sets the stage for approaching cultural difference through language. As in

Dessommes's and Cable's novels, this linguistic difference seems to signal a parallel divergence of cultures. Our sense that their language is evidence of such a separation is confirmed by Mercier's characters' own awareness of the difference between French and Creole. Mercier incorporates Parisian characters who, just as the readers do, conceive of Démon's Creole as a language that is foreign to French. That they respond in this way effectively prevents a generalized definition of speakers of Creole as French. Mercier clinches our understanding that Louisiana French Creole represents an identity that is specific to Louisiana when, upon returning from his schooling in France, Démon no longer speaks in Creole and is alienated from his culture. His use of French seems to be connected to French identity, while Creole is associated with Louisiana. In *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, language informs our perceptions of the Creole population's cultural autonomy.

Mercier's decision to write in French seems at first to confirm French cultural dominance in Louisiana. His integration of Creole, however, undercuts that implication. In fact, while recent editions of the book in 1989 and 2003 include translations of the dialog into standard French, when it first appeared, these sections had no explanation at all. As in Dessommes's *Tante Cydette*, without a translation, the reader of standard French, native or not, is forced to work out the words' meanings, just as though he or she were decoding any other foreign language. Looking at one of the many instances where Mercier writes in Creole illustrates the obvious difference between that language and French. In the following scene, a young Démon has just trapped some small birds, and he is attempting to show them to Mamrie without letting them escape:

Démon le repoussa à l'intérieur, en disant avec impatience: 'Resté don tranquil, bête ! -To bon toi, lui dit Mamrie; to oté li so laliberté é to oulé li contan. Mo sré

voudré oua ça to sré di, si yé té mété toi dan ain lacage comme ça. -Mété moin
dan ain lacage ! s'écria Démon sur le ton de la fierté indignée ; mo sré cacé tou,
mo sré sorti é mo sré vengé moin sur mouné laïé kit é emprisonnin moin.' (52-53)

The difference between the Creole and the French text is striking at first. To a francophone reader, the sentences and phrases that link the dialog together stand out amidst the unfamiliar Creole words spoken by the characters. The languages are not so far apart as to prevent a French-speaking reader from comprehending the Creole. Nevertheless, it does require some effort. Even after deciphering the words, a complete understanding might not be possible, as Benjamin Latrobe notes from his own experiences (*Journal* 222). Furthermore, for more modern readers, the French translations that are added in recent editions of the novel heighten our sense of the languages' dissimilarity. That it could be considered necessary to translate these passages is a further confirmation of Creole's separation from French. Consequently, the reader's initial encounter with this dialog in the text brings to light the heterogeneity of French and Louisiana cultures. In essence, their respective members do not use the same language.

This hinting at Creoles' cultural rupture with France by way of their language is not inadvertent. In fact, the author anticipates his readers' reaction to the printed Creole of his text within the novel's storyline. When an older Démon goes to Paris to complete his studies at a *collège*, he stays in touch with Mamrie by writing letters to her in Creole. Both his letters and her replies engage the interest of his Parisian host family, the Garniers. The Garnier family's reaction to Creole reflects our own in reading the text. The family in Paris is struck by the difference between Creole and French as the readers are. The family finds Démon's native language fascinating:

Il écrivait à Mamrie en créole ; elle lui répondait de la même manière. Les lettres de Mamrie faisaient l'admiration de M. et de Mme. Garnier ; ils les montraient aux amis de la famille, Démon les traduisait. M. Garnier en fit publier plusieurs dans un journal de philologie, avec des commentaires sur la langue créole par Pélasge. (146)

The Garniers' curiosity and the fact that they draw others' attention to the letters reinforce our understanding that Creole is not simply an offshoot of French that can be easily understood by French speakers. This scene emphasizes Creole's status as a form of expression in its own right. The Garniers' reaction echoes the reader's own sense of the distinction between the two languages. Because their interest in the Creole language highlights this disconnect, it also forces Mercier's reader to draw lines between French and Creole cultural identities. Démon's host family's unfamiliarity with Louisiana French Creole sets those who speak it apart from themselves, thereby preventing an identification of Creoles as French. In this way, the Parisian characters' response to Démon's correspondence can be read as an active demonstration of the gap between French and non-French identities. Through their, and our, introduction to Creole, the singularity of the culture of those who speak it becomes clearer.

Mercier's depiction of the Parisians' interest in Louisiana language highlights its difference from French, but Démon's letters themselves are revealing in terms of confirming the author's goal of establishing a Creole identity outside the reach of French culture. By choosing to have his characters correspond in Creole, he seems to imply that writing in that language is a typical occurrence, just as it might be in French. This was not the case in nineteenth-century New Orleans or elsewhere in Louisiana. Creole was primarily an oral language at that time, despite the fact that the author characterizes it otherwise, and, as previously mentioned, there

was no generally accepted method of representing Creole.¹³² In comparing Dessommes's, Cable's, and Mercier's textual representations of it, there are marked differences. Mercier's system for recording the language is a creation for his own purposes, and there was no apparent consensus on how to render Louisiana French Creole textually in the nineteenth-century. Yet, by presenting the idea that Creole is commonly used for written communication within his novel, Mercier seems to aim at strengthening his reader's sense of its integrity as a language in its own right. His exaggeration of Creole's role makes it easier for the reader to conclude that it is the language commonly used in this society. Overstating its function in this way indicates that Mercier is indeed attempting to privilege Creole and to forge an association between it, not French, and his culture.

When Démon returns from France, he no longer uses Creole and his *nourrice*'s reaction to this change reinforces Mercier's connection between language and identity in Creole society. Although Démon is able to stay in contact with his family for some time after moving to France, following the outbreak of the Civil War, communication becomes much less frequent, if it occurs at all. Upon his return years later, his primary language has shifted. While before his departure Démon speaks chiefly in Creole, when he returns, he only uses the French of the *métropole*. The day he arrives at his home, his *nourrice* is startled by this change. As she sees it, he speaks the language of France. She says, "To blié parlé créol ; mo oua ça ; tapé parlé gran bo langage de France" (195).¹³³ At this point, Démon no longer appears to use Creole for communication.¹³⁴ What is revealing about her pronouncement is the distinction that she makes between Louisiana French Creole and "the language of France." In her mind, what one speaks can be indicative of

¹³² In fact Mercier is contradicting his own proclamation that "il va sans dire qu'il n'y a pas d'orthographe dans la langue créole ; il n'y a que des sons" (*Étude* 3).

¹³³ "Tu as oublié le créole; je vois ça ; tu parles le grand beau langage de France" (195).

¹³⁴ It appears that he has indeed forgotten or at least ceased to use Creole completely, as the character does not speak one word of the language for the remainder of the text.

one's cultural affiliation. French, however, does not seem to indicate an association with Louisiana. Mamrie appears to think of Creole as the language of Louisiana, while French is the language that is spoken in France. As Démon no longer speaks in Creole, his *nourrice's* assertion throws his identity as a Creole into question.

What we can infer from Mamrie's remarks about Démon's use of French, that he no longer identifies as Creole, is strengthened when he later shows his inability to accept the local customs. His change of language comes to reflect his own personal cultural shift. Not only has Démon ceased to speak Creole, he also holds more progressive, European views on race relations, for example. As we saw in Chapter Two, his affection for his adopted sister, Blanchette, is unchanged by the revelation of her black heritage, contrary to the standards of their society. She points out that, after being in Europe, he has forgotten that interracial marriage is not accepted saying, "vous avez oublié les préjugés du pays" (238). Démon's rejection of race relations in Creole society showcases that, like his language, his relation to culture is altered. He no longer speaks Creole, and he has moved outside of his community's attitudes. Even though one is not necessarily the direct cause of the other, the circumstances surrounding Démon's return nevertheless highlight the existence of a relationship between his culture and what he speaks. In this episode from his novel, Mercier points to the understanding that Creole society is framed by its own language, Louisiana French Creole.

By integrating Creole into *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, Mercier establishes a clear difference between French and Louisiana culture which more clearly defines two separate identities. Although French heritage is a visible part of the makeup of Creole society, it is only one of many. At the same time that he privileges the role that the language plays in his depiction of Creoles, Mercier is also challenging the notion that Creole identity is solely a French

construction. He reveals these differences by showing that Creoles rely on a language whose very foundation is in the former colony's diverse make-up. Instead of promoting an understanding that Creole society is based in the same French as the *métropole*, he shows that Louisiana gains its own voice. Mercier uses that voice to put their independence from French culture into words. He continues to approach language in a way that asserts Louisiana Creole culture in his later novel, *Johnelle*. As on the plantation, within the urban space of New Orleans, Creole language sets the boundaries of culture.

4.3.2 Creole Language in New Orleans

In *Johnelle* Mercier builds upon his earlier portrayals of Creole language. As in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, a significant amount of the characters' dialog is in Creole. Yet rather than continuing to contrast language in France and in Louisiana, he moves forward to legitimize Louisiana French from within Creole society. Mercier sets up this approach when he casts the protagonist, Tito Metelli, as a Creole of Italian heritage, not French. By doing so, he avoids pigeonholing his depictions of Louisiana francophones as ethnically French. The author implies that fluency in Louisiana French is not limited those with ties to France. As a result, we come to understand that having an Italian background does not exclude Tito from New Orleans's francophone community. He speaks French and Creole because he is from Louisiana, and they are also his languages. In this text Mercier also offers insight into how Louisiana Creoles make French their own. His characters draw from a vocabulary that is influenced by a variety of languages including English, Spanish, and Italian reflecting the similar cultural diversity of Creole society. This blended expression serves as evidence of New Orleans residents' appropriation of French. In *Johnelle*, Mercier underscores that French and Creole are Louisiana

languages in their own right instead of serving as lingering ties to France which might also affect our understanding of their culture.

Even before beginning the story, the author reminds us of the vital role that language plays in his representations of Creole culture. He reaffirms our understanding from *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* that Creole is separate from metropolitan French, and that to know one of them does not necessarily imply an easy comprehension of the other. In his foreword Mercier addresses his readers from outside Louisiana who were disappointed that he had not translated his Creole dialog into French: “Des lecteurs étrangers ayant regretté, lors de la publication de *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, que l’auteur n’eût pas traduit les endroits où des personnages de son récit s’expriment en langue créole, il s’est mis à l’abri de ce reproche en écrivant *Johnelle* : un renvoi au bas de la page donne l’équivalent en français” (31). Consequently, in order to meet the needs of his foreign readership, Mercier opts to include French translations of the Creole passages in his 1891 novel. Yet, this matter extends beyond a simple problem of comprehension to have broader cultural implications. It speaks to the validity of Creole’s role in New Orleans.

The real-life inability of readers from outside Louisiana to understand Creole reflects its authority as a form of communication in two ways. Firstly, the fact that individuals who are not from Louisiana are unable to understand Creole demonstrates the language’s cultural specificity. It is not to be equated with French or considered as simply a corrupted form of French. Although Creole has roots in the European language, it has become a unique aspect of Louisiana culture. Secondly, the ease with which Mercier’s compatriots comprehend Creole demonstrates that it is an accepted language. The author only indicates that “des lecteurs étrangers” do not understand Creole in his foreword, his Creole audience does not seem to have the same problem (31). Mercier’s domestic readership’s implied ability to comprehend Creole suggests that it is

pertinent and actively used in Louisiana.¹³⁵ His ability to write in Creole and have it be understood by a Creole audience is evidence of its legitimacy in Louisiana society. Furthermore, the author's reaction to his foreign readers' concerns is also telling of the language's importance. Mercier does not choose to stop writing in Creole altogether. Instead, he simply makes it more accessible by including French translations in his later novel. By continuing to use Creole despite a negative reaction from his readers, Mercier affirms our sense that, for him, language is a vital element of portraying Creole New Orleans.

If the presence of Louisiana French Creole in the text is important to Mercier's vision, his depiction of the range of people who speak it is as well. Several characters in *Johnelle* speak Creole, but not all of them have a French ethnic background. The principal character, Tito, is of predominantly Italian heritage. Nevertheless, like many Louisiana natives, he grows up speaking Creole. One of the many scenes in which he is represented speaking Creole occurs shortly after his sister, Johnelle, is stillborn. Tito's *nourrice*, Man Délaïde, takes him to see her: "–Ga, man Délaïde, dit Tito, li tro joli. –Oui, li é tro joli, remarqua la bonne vieille; cé pou ca que li mourir; bon Dgié pran li pouf é ain nange avec. Anon, li tan nous tournin, to acé oir li. –Atanne, man Délaïde, ma bo li" (40).¹³⁶ In this scene, young Tito communicates in Creole just as any other child in New Orleans might, regardless of his lack of French heritage. Moreover, he continues to use it as a young adult.¹³⁷ By describing Tito, a New Orleans resident without direct ties to France, as a fluent speaker of Creole, Mercier shows its cultural inclusiveness. We see that Creole is not simply a secondary form of communication for French speakers nor is its use

¹³⁵ Mercier's contemporaries, Adrien Rouquette and Alcée Fortier, were also fluent in Creole, implying that this was not an unusual skill, even among New Orleans' educated elite. In fact, given that a large portion of the members of that social class were raised to speak Creole first, we can assume that it was common knowledge (Mercier, *Étude* 2).

¹³⁶ "–Regardez, mère Délaïde, dit Tito, elle est trop joli. –Oui elle était trop jolie, remarqua la bonne vieille ; c'est pour cela qu'elle est morte; le bon Dieu l'a prise pour en faire un ange. Allons, il est temps de nous en retourner, tu l'as assez vue. –Attendez, mère Délaïde dit Tito, je vais l'embrasser" (40).

¹³⁷ That Tito continues to speak Creole when he is an adult further strengthens our understanding of Démon's cultural severing when he returns from France.

limited to those of only French or African heritage. With Tito, Mercier reveals that Louisiana French Creole is spoken by all members of New Orleans society, thereby reconfirming the legitimacy of its role as a common language.

In addition to demonstrating the extent to which Creole language functions as the voice of Louisiana's diverse Creole culture, Mercier gives evidence of Creoles' adaptation of French. Similar to Hearn, Cable, and Dessommes, Mercier represents the varied influences of New Orleans' diverse francophone population on the formerly European language that make it their own. His characters incorporate English, Spanish, and Italian words and expressions into their French conversations. There are several instances of this throughout the text. The narrator, for example, characterizes Tito's mother, Cordélia, as "*une de ces fast young ladies*" when referring to what society perceives to be her inappropriate behavior (41). Later on, Tito's grandmother, Telli, adopts an Italian expression. When discussing Cordélia's visits to an abortionist, she calls him "*la perforari*" (49).¹³⁸ Spanish is also integrated into Mercier's characters' conversations. Titio's friend and mentor, Doctor Plana, and his assistant, Illud, refer to each other as "*Chiquito*" and "*Padre*," integrating Spanish terms into their interactions that further demonstrate how different influences come together to affect French in New Orleans (121).¹³⁹ These instances mark the crystallization of a Louisiana French that exists in its own right. Through his depiction of an evolved vocabulary in his novel, Mercier testifies to the appropriation of the French language by his culture. Consequently, he denies it the ability to limit cultural definitions of those who speak.

In *Johnelle*, Mercier looks within Creole society to establish its independence. Instead of drawing on French perspectives to reveal Creoles' cultural difference, the author plays down

¹³⁸ I examine this in more detail on pages 144-6.

¹³⁹ I study these two characters on pages 156-60.

their French heritage to focus on the overall picture that language draws of their environment. Indeed, only a few of the characters in *Johnelle* are described as having French heritage. Mercier's portrayal of individuals without ties to France, like Tito, who speak in Creole or French and his demonstration of the development of Louisiana French reveals that these languages have become elements of Louisiana's own culture, rather than bits of French culture in Louisiana. Through their appropriation of the French language, Creoles of all different backgrounds can define themselves on their own terms and in their own words. Louisiana's languages and the people who speak them have evolved. In this way, the author rejects a French identity for Louisiana. Rather than stemming from a French ethnic and linguistic heritage, Creole culture rests on the shared traditions developed by the combined efforts of a diverse population. By emphasizing the multiculturalism of Louisiana's francophone Creoles, Mercier shows that what was once French in their culture and language has become definitively *Louisianais*.

In both *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* and *Johnelle*, Mercier's descriptions of language assert the existence of a Creole culture that is independent of France. Whether by focusing on the development of their own form of expression or by revealing the evolution of a francophone language that is native to Louisiana, his works draw on the ties that connect language and culture to reveal the diverse foundations of nineteenth-century Creole identity. We can understand Mercier's depictions of language, then, as part of his rejection of the notion of a primarily French definition of Creoles. His works link back to those of his contemporaries George Dessimmes and George Washington Cable, as well as those of francophone writers outside of Louisiana who also use Louisiana language to establish francophone identities that go beyond the boundaries of the French label. Rather than supporting a unilateral French heritage, these authors, like Mercier,

highlight their cultural difference from their French influence by emphasizing their particular languages. Mercier's extensive use of Creole in his works resonates especially with that of two authors of the 1980s *Créolité* movement in Martinique: Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant. Similar to what we see in Mercier's works, these two authors adopt Martinican Creole into their literary works to establish a sense of identity that exists outside of French culture.

4.4 Expressing Creole Culture through Language

The way Mercier depicts language in his works can be understood to imply his vision of Louisiana's cultural autonomy, an interpretation that anticipates the work of Martinican writers Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant.¹⁴⁰ Like the Louisiana author, Chamoiseau and Confiant draw upon their knowledge of Creole language in their fiction as a way to rout French dominance of their culture. Although Mercier does not explicitly note that this is the purpose of the Creole language in his works, Chamoiseau and Confiant do. Their concept of *Créolité* assigns language an important role in the struggle for the acceptance of Creole cultures in their own right. This movement rejects the enduring French linguistic and cultural dominance of the Antilles, declaring that "[l]a francisation nous a forcés à l'autodénigrement" (Bernabé 14). In its stead, the proponents of *Créolité* visualize Creole language as potentially providing an alternate form of expression among Antilleans and playing a vital role in solidifying cultural autonomy.¹⁴¹ By examining the Martinican authors' understanding of Creole's cultural significance, we are able to establish a model for interpreting Mercier's use of the language. As the three novelists appear to use Creole to similar ends in their fiction, the Martinicans' affirmation of their

¹⁴⁰ Chamoiseau and Confiant do not, however, make any references to Mercier's work in their *Éloge*.

¹⁴¹ Unlike Chamoiseau and Confiant, however, Bernabé's fiction is mostly composed in French.

intentions reflects back on Mercier's work, linking language and identity more solidly in the Louisiana author's texts.

In order to build the connection between Alfred Mercier, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, it is important to acknowledge the role that language plays in the overall picture of postcolonial literature as well as in works from the Antilles and Louisiana. Language acts as a highly political element in many postcolonial societies. Indeed, using local expression as a way to circumvent imperial control is not exclusive to writers from any one country or region; this topic has been addressed by writers globally. Yet because cultural circumstances in the Antilles differ, the approach taken by Chamoiseau and Confiant is set apart. Unlike other postcolonial societies, Antilleans are not generally in direct contact with their heritage languages; therefore Creole, rather than an indigenous language, serves as the alternative to imperial French (Britton 25). In their 1989 *Éloge de la Créolité*, Chamoiseau and Confiant build upon this idea, claiming that Creole's important role in the Antilles makes it capable of rivalling that of the *métropole*. These authors go on to apply the principles of their manifesto to their work in real life, intentionally using Martinican Creole as a means to assert Creole culture in their novels. As we trace the Martinicans' perceptions of language's postcolonial significance to their literary works, we can also see a connection to Mercier's writing. Chamoiseau and Confiant provide a paradigm for reading Mercier's incorporation of Louisiana French in his texts.

4.4.1 Postcolonial Language

The language question is, of course, not limited to writers from North America or the Antilles. This choice plays a significant role in literature throughout the postcolonial world.¹⁴² As Frantz Fanon explains, all colonized peoples are caught between two dimensions – their own

¹⁴² There are many sources addressing the issue of language in a postcolonial setting, among them, Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*; Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, *Decolonizing the Mind*; Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*; and Bill Ashcroft, *Post-colonial Transformation*.

culture and the imperial culture – with assimilation to the colonial power carrying more social privilege (Fanon 15). Colonizers have historically used language as a way to establish this cultural dominance (Brathwaite 281-2). Fanon writes that “[t]out peuple colonisé... se situe vis-à-vis du langage de la nation civilisatrice, c’est-à-dire de la culture métropolitaine” (14). In this context, imperial factions promote their language over indigenous expressions, disrupting the locals’ link to their native culture and creating a sense of inferiority that ultimately contribute to the colonial psychosis at the core of Fanon’s work (14-16). According to Fanon, “[p]arler une langue, c’est assumer un monde, une culture” (30). As Fanon’s text demonstrates, language and culture are closely connected. As a result of this link that he outlines, we may understand the act of reclaiming an indigenous language as one possible avenue for breaking down colonial power and taking back local identity. For the postcolonial writer, then, language becomes a tool for resisting colonial control.

It is known that one of the most powerful methods of dominating a colonized society is usurping the native language. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin write: “Language is a fundamental site of struggle for post-colonial discourse because the colonial process itself begins in language. The control over language by the imperial center...remains the most potent instrument of cultural control” (261). Virtually every culture that was colonized by the English, French, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese suffered the traumatizing loss of its language while that of a foreign power was privileged in its place.¹⁴³ As colonial language overpowers the local one, the accompanying cultural perspective affects the indigenous way of life as well. Indeed, as Fanon asserts, the Antillean has been cut off from his or her own culture by French imperialism: “Il n’a pas de culture, pas de civilisation, pas ce ‘long passé d’histoire’” (27). Instead of

¹⁴³ David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance discuss the widespread nature of this phenomenon further in *The Making of Literate Societies*.

connecting to their own past, Antilleans instead seek to assimilate into French culture. Edward Kamau Brathwaite likewise affirms the capacity that foreign language has for alienating a society from its own culture when he notes that enforcing the use of English only in Caribbean schools denied colonial subjects the chance to connect with their own culture: “in the Caribbean...the people educated in [the colonial] system came to know more, even today, about English kings and queens than they do about our own national heroes, our own slave rebels, the people who helped to build and to destroy our society” (282).¹⁴⁴ As a direct result of being denied access to their own language, people in the Caribbean were distanced from their own heritage. This foreign cultural domination is challenged, however, when colonial subjects reverse the imperial agenda to take back their indigenous languages.

Postcolonial writers encourage resistance of imperial languages and the resurgence of their native ones as part of decolonization. Writers in Africa, India, and the Caribbean among other places have supported what Albert Memmi terms “la liberation et la restauration de sa langue” (127). As Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong’O famously argues, imperial language is incapable of authentically expressing his identity. He writes: “Values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race...All this is carried by language” (267). In order to reclaim and protect his Gikuyu identity, he advises a return to the indigenous language of his culture and a revolt against English. For him, taking back language becomes a simultaneous reclamation of his culture and identity.

The process of rejecting colonial language is more complicated in Creole societies than in Ngugi’s Kenya or elsewhere in the postcolonial world. As Edouard Glissant clarifies in *Le Discours antillais*, unlike other colonies, in the Creole communities of the Antilles, individuals

¹⁴⁴ Francophone communities in Louisiana, Cajuns in particular, faced a similar alienation from their culture in the twentieth century when the state’s 1921 constitution banned the use of French in schools (Henry 187).

have no cultural recourse from colonial authority. Celia Britton explains Glissant's view that there is "no *historical* 'hinterland' in Martinique or in any community whose population was transported: that is, there is no indigenous culture into which the colonized people can retreat, as they could in colonial India or Africa" (25). The majority of people in Caribbean societies, including Martinique, were brought or came from elsewhere. Consequently, they are also removed from their native culture and language. As a result of this separation, these individuals are seemingly limited to the colonial language. Creole, however, offers another option for escaping it.

4.4.2 Writing *Créolité*

Creole provides Antilleans who are estranged from their heritage language a way to circumvent the unilateral cultural control of French imperialism. As a language of their own making, Creole becomes a surrogate heritage tongue that, like an indigenous language, is capable of subverting the colonial authority of French (Britton 25). Martinicans Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant most notably approach Creole as a way to undermine French domination. In their *Éloge de la Créolité*, these authors famously challenge the validity of privileging French in their multicultural society and support Creole as what they believe to be a more culturally-appropriate alternative. Chamoiseau and Confiant encourage Antilleans to embrace Creole, working to break down prejudices against it. Furthermore, they go beyond theoretical terms and set their ideas into motion by incorporating elements of Martinican language in their novels. Chamoiseau's and Confiant's established efforts to reclaim their culture through language and their use of literature as a means to that end connect their work to Alfred Mercier's (Corcoran 213, 237). Ultimately, the parallels between their approaches suggest that their uses of language are motivated by similar goals.

Although the uprooted populations of the Caribbean are isolated from their original cultures and languages, Creole emerges as a substitute. While it was first spoken by both slave and master, slaves appropriated and strategically altered the language so that their masters would not understand: “[Slaves] gradually formed a particular usage of Creole, which the master did not understand but did not realize that he did not understand... Creole thus developed as a subversive language whose purpose from the start was not simply to communicate but also to conceal its meanings, thereby turning the masters’ language against him” (Britton 25). As Britton points out, the common usage of Creole among Martinicans developed out of efforts to retreat from the language of colonial authority, French. In this way, Creole is able to fill a political role similar to one that a native language in India or Africa can. It operates opposite metropolitan French even while it continues to be informed by French (Britton 2-3). Just as the Gikuyu language gives voice to Ngugi Wa Thiong’O’s cultural identity, then, Creole provides the Martinican novelists with a means to self-expression. Consequently, we may consider Creole to function like an indigenous language.

Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant perceive Creole as the language through which the people of the Caribbean can articulate themselves and their culture authentically.¹⁴⁵ In their view, Creole holds the potential for the free expression of a truly Antillean voice, despite the colonial agenda that seeks to devalorize it in favor of French.¹⁴⁶ As they see it, as the language that has grown organically from their unique multicultural contexts, Creole can fulfill Caribbean societies’ need for a form of expression that reflects their diverse reality. Writing in their *Éloge* with Jean Bernabé, they state that “[l]e créole, notre langue première à nous Antillais,

¹⁴⁵ Their ideas have been criticized, however, by fellow Caribbean authors including Maryse Condé. See Maryse Condé, “*Créolité* without the creole language.”

¹⁴⁶ Fellow Martinican Frantz Fanon notes the prejudice cultivated against Creole in the Antilles, explaining that “[à] l’école, le jeune Martiniquais apprend à mépriser le patois... Certaines familles interdisent l’usage du créole et les mamans traitent leurs enfants de ‘tibandes’ quand ils l’emploient” (15).

Guyanais, Mascarins, est le véhicule original de notre moi profond, de notre inconscient collectif, de notre génie populaire, cette langue demeure la rivière de notre créolité alluviale” (43). Unlike metropolitan French, their own language resonates with the plurality of Creole identity.¹⁴⁷ Because Creole reflects this social reality, it opens new doors to Antillean expression. Novelists Chamoiseau and Confiant realize apply their theory in this way when they use Creole in their own literary works.

Despite their shared outlook on the significance of the language, the ways in which Chamoiseau and Confiant incorporate Creole into their literature differs. Chamoiseau writes in a creolized language of his own making, manipulating French to “preserve the flavor of Martinican popular culture,” while Confiant has authored entire works in Creole as well as in a Creole-influenced French (Ormerod). Yet, whether they are writing works entirely in Creole – e.g. Confiant’s *Kòd Yanm* – or simply using a Creole-inspired French – e.g. Chamoiseau’s *Texaco* – the authors’ incorporation and embracing of this language still undercuts the colonial legacy and cultural hold of French.¹⁴⁸ Thus, by composing their literary works in Creole, either completely in the language or more strategically, these authors assert an identity of their own making and reject the colonial legacy of French.

By incorporating their Martinican Creole language into their novels, these authors ground their literature in a Martinican identity that defines itself on its own terms. Rather than continuing a pattern of colonial literature in a European language, Chamoiseau’s and Confiant’s texts are part of a Creole literature of its own expression. Writing in Creole as Confiant does, or

¹⁴⁷ The authors of the *Éloge* detail these diverse influences on Antillean society: “La Créolité est l’agrégat interactionnel ou transactionnel, des éléments culturels caraïbes, européens, africains, asiatiques, et levantins, que le joug de l’Histoire a réunis sur le même sol” (26).

¹⁴⁸ The same issue of reader accessibility that confronted Mercier following the publication of *L’Habitation Saint-Ybars* affects Chamoiseau and Confiant. Patrick Corcoran notes that Confiant was motivated to compose more works in French “by his practical need to connect with a readership” (213). Beverly Ormerod likewise notes the problem of “the very small public able to read, or willing to buy, works in Creole.”

in a Creole-influenced French as Chamoiseau does effectively fulfills their need for an authentic form of self-expression that does not fall into the trap of imperial control. It is out of this active choice to circumvent French linguistic dominance that the link between Chamoiseau's and Confiant's novels and Mercier's fiction emerges. The Martinicans and the Louisiana author are equally devoted to establishing and defending their Creole identities and in both cases, language provides them with the opportunity to make their case.

4.4.3 *Créolité* and Mercier

Chamoiseau's and Confiant's embracing of Creole and the way they use it in their novels closely parallel the role that language plays in Alfred Mercier's texts. Mercier's written representation of Creole is an initial link to his two Martinican successors. The authors' shared emphasis on their cultural diversity as a way to differentiate themselves from France and their use of language as a means to portray it, however, reveal an even more compelling connection. In this way, Mercier's novels foreshadow the postcolonial discourse on language a century after him. Chamoiseau's and Confiant's texts resonate with Mercier's, not just in terms of their incorporation of Creole elements, but also because of the role that language plays as a cultural armament. Like Chamoiseau and Confiant, Mercier's assertion of culture through Creole language can be understood as intentional.

Mercier's transcription of Louisiana French Creole corresponds closely to the ideology of the *Créolité* movement. His study of Creole in his *Étude* and his large-scale use of the language in both *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* and *Johnelle* bring his efforts in line with one of the Martinican writers' goals: to establish Creole in writing and in doing so, legitimize it and the culture it carries. They clarify in their *Éloge* that "[l]a littérature créole d'expression créole aura donc pour tâche première de construire cette langue écrite, sortie indispensable de sa clandestinité" (45).

We have already seen that Mercier goes further than other Louisiana writers by studying Creole in depth. His *Étude* in particular works towards establishing a written representation of Louisiana French Creole by laying down a framework for transcribing it. Mercier follows up the work in that text with the extensive incorporation of Creole in the form of dialog for his characters. Essentially, he puts his study of the language to use in his novels. This approach resonates with what the authors of *Éloge de la Créolité* advise: “nous croyons qu’un usage fecund de l’interlecte peut constituer la voie d’accès à un ordre de réalité susceptible de conserver à notre créolité sa complexité fondamentale, son champ référentiel diffracté” (49-50). Mercier gives Louisiana French Creole a more established written representation and forces public recognition of the language by incorporating it into his published texts. Like his Martinican successors, Mercier releases Louisiana French Creole from a purely oral existence, making it and its culture more visible.

Mercier actively works to maintain Louisiana French Creole and bring it to readers who are not familiar with it. By transcribing Creole in his *Étude*, Mercier attempts to maintain the importance of the language of his culture and not let it be forgotten. This work extends to his novels, where even “des lecteurs étrangers” are exposed to the language as the author’s comments in his preface to *Johnelle* reveal.¹⁴⁹ These efforts show that Mercier actively worked to create more awareness of Creole in Louisiana. Rather than let it be ignored or forgotten, he brings it into the open. Likewise, he does not allow the multiculturalism of Creole society to be glossed over or misremembered.

What draws the representations of Martinican and Louisiana French Creole more closely together and ultimately links their purposes is the way that the authors employ these languages to showcase their cultures’ diversity. The writers of the *Éloge de la Créolité* explicitly pay homage

¹⁴⁹ See page 204.

to the collision of cultures in Creole society for the development of their Creole. They refer to the multilingual environment that characterizes Creole communities and note that out of that mixture emerges their own language: “De ce terreau, faire lever sa parole. De ces langues bâtir notre langage” (43). They encourage an acceptance of this diversity, arguing that it fosters the growth of Creole language and provides a way for Creole culture to resist French imperial dominance. In Martinique, this diversity includes, “le créole, français, anglais, portugais, espagnol,” and other cultural elements (43); all play an important role in the establishment and assertion of an independent Creole culture. Mercier’s work contains a similar, yet more subtle, emphasis on the embracing of multiculturalism as a way to foster cultural autonomy. In *Johnelle*, his characters’ seamless integration of English, Italian, and Spanish vocabulary, for example, demonstrates a similar level of multilingualism at work in Louisiana *Créolité* that is found in the *Éloge*. Furthermore, the stark contrast that Mercier sets up between French and Creole in *L’Habitation Saint-Ybars* showcases that rather than only being a version of French used by members of the uneducated classes, Creole has evolved into a language in its own right. Although Mercier does not explicitly affirm that his intention is to emphasize diversity in his novels or his *Étude*, the way that he represents language nevertheless leaves his readers with a sense that culture in New Orleans and the Creole world outside the city is not exclusively rooted in French heritage. Creole language becomes a means by which Louisiana’s Creoles define themselves independently from France.

The authors of the *Éloge de la Créolité* draw the connections between Martinique and Louisiana themselves. While they highlight the historical connections that bind Antillean Creoles together, they also point out that even outside the Caribbean, all Creole societies share similar characteristics. Beverly Ormerod explains that, for them, creolization is not a process

that is limited to one geographic area. According to her, Chamoiseau, Confiant, and Bernabé define Creole culture as “a mixed culture that arose from the forced, nonharmonious confrontation of different languages, customs and world-views. Its manifestations are perceived beyond the Caribbean and the Americas: the authors claim to have Creole affinities with the Seychelles, Mauritius, Reunion, and other African, Asian and Polynesian peoples” (Ormerod). What is of interest for this study in particular, is that the authors mention Louisiana specifically as part of the Creole world. They state that “aux U.S.A., la Louisiane et le Mississippi sont en grande partie créoles” (31-2). This declaration reveals that Chamoiseau, Confiant, and Bernabé themselves form a link between their Creole culture and that in Louisiana. By including Louisiana in their understanding of the Creole world, they confirm that Louisiana’s Creole culture can be asserted in the same ways that they prescribe in their manifesto, reinforcing our vision of the connection between them and Mercier.

Mercier’s motivations for defining his identity outside of French cultural dominance are not rooted in the same sort of conflict that faces the former colonies in the Caribbean like Martinique. He does not confront the same racism or prejudices that Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant do nor is he entangled in the colonial psychosis on which Fanon focuses. Yet Creoles’ struggles to locate their culture in the face of nineteenth-century Americanization prove Mercier’s stake in asserting a Louisiana-specific identity. His understanding of the link between language and culture is similar to those of his Caribbean counterparts, allowing him to likewise identify himself and his community on their own terms, and allowing his readers to build connections between these authors, their texts, and their motives. Indeed, despite their different situations, Mercier and his Martinican successors have a shared need to define themselves through their own culture. Furthermore, as the authors of the *Éloge de la Créolité* point out, their

societies are founded on diversity. Mercier anticipates his successor's argument and actively reminds his readers of the multiculturalism of which they are a part by including the Creole language. For him, asserting a specifically Creole identity must be part of Louisiana's acceptance of a multicultural society. His inclusion of Creole dialog in his novels, then, suggests his support of a multicultural vision of Creole Louisiana.

By incorporating Louisiana French Creole and emphasizing multilingualism in his depictions of Louisiana's nineteenth-century Creole world, Alfred Mercier challenges easy definitions of its population. His unveiling of how language has evolved beyond French also challenges the identification of Creole people with their French roots alone. More than that, the undeniable presence of Creole language in his works can be read as a declaration of *Créolité*, freeing himself and his characters from defining themselves through any one culture. Instead, through his revelation of how language is "disordered" in Louisiana's Creole society, he actively shows his readers the hybridity of his culture, and the impossibility of a singular definition of Creole identity.

CONCLUSION

Through a triangulation of Mercier's representations of race, gender, and language in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* and *Johnelle*, we are able to visualize the construction of an expression of Creole identity. The author's focus on these politically charged concepts and his challenging of traditional depictions simultaneously fights the dominant outsider perception that defines Creoles as French and works to forge their separate identity on their own terms. Indeed, Mercier's writing confronts the competing interpellative scenarios that split his hybridity and offers an alternative approach to his problematic identity.

Mercier incorporates race, gender, and language in his novels in ways that both reflect and parallel Louisiana's distance from France, asserting Creole hybridity and identity. He does this in terms of race in Blanchette's and Démon's story in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, for example. Drawing on a widespread literary tradition of using portrayals of mixed-race individuals to engage with social politics, Mercier incorporates biracial characters that contest customary binary conceptions of race relations in Creole society. This narrative thread thus problematizes not only the association of exclusively white racial identities with Creole identity, but also the notion of singular identities. Mercier's interrogation of male-dominated society through his depictions of Chant-d'Oisel and Illud in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* and *Johnelle*, respectively, continues his portrayal of a culturally autonomous Creole community. These two characters deviate from the usual gender roles that are assigned in a patriarchal social structure, opening up a new perspective on gender and authority in society that looks beyond French tradition. In this way, Mercier contests and interrogates the limitations that Creoles' French cultural heritage imposes on them and opens an avenue for Creoles to embrace their own hybrid traditions. Finally, we see that Mercier challenges French cultural hegemony in Louisiana by

incorporating Louisiana French Creole. Instead of composing his novel entirely in French, which would seem to confirm France's dominating influence on Louisiana culture, Mercier's depiction of his characters' use of Louisiana's Creole language demonstrates Creoles' cultural evolution beyond their French roots. Thus, his readers are able to form a more complete understanding Louisiana's cultural autonomy by visualizing it on a linguistic level.

While this study focuses on representations of race, gender, and language, readers can also reflect upon additional instances of Mercier's expression of Creole cultural hybridity. In *Johnelle*, for example, Mercier inscribes Italian characters with the same French cultural heritage that is typically assigned to other Creoles. During the nineteenth century, Italians occupied an uncertain area in North American societies.¹⁵⁰ In New Orleans as well, the Italian community's relation to other social groups was uneasy (Maselli 35-43). Yet Mercier aligns French and Italian cultural identities in New Orleans, demonstrating that the two cultures are not only compatible, but also inextricably linked. Mercier's unexpected disordering of perceptions of Creoles' heritage shows that there can be no distinguishing of separate French or Italian cultural groups. There is simply Louisiana's own Creole culture, complex as it is.

Joseph Maselli and Dominic Candeloro point out in their 2004 work, *Italians in New Orleans*, that, "Italians have always been here" (9). In fact, from the seventeenth century on, this group has played a major role in Louisiana's history.¹⁵¹ As in other North American cities, their influence was met with positive and negative reactions. In 1891, the year that Mercier published *Johnelle*, a particularly violent expression of cultural hostilities occurred. In March of that year, one of the biggest mass lynchings in the United States took place in New Orleans. Eleven Italians were attacked by a mob on suspicions that they murdered a police chief. Richard

¹⁵⁰ In Boston, for example, Italians were often discriminated against (Puleo 63-99).

¹⁵¹ According to Maselli and Candeloro, seventeenth-century French explorer Robert de la Salle was accompanied by Italian Enrico de Tonti in his travels along the Mississippi River (10).

Gambino confirms that this violence was in part culturally motivated in his book, *Vendetta*: “In regard to Italian-Americans, the New Orleans lynching was at once both a means of limiting their position, participation, and possibilities in the American community at the time, and one of the first major stimuli of the stereotype of inherently criminal Italian-American culture” (x). In New Orleans, then, Italians were considered to be substandard citizens whose social mobility had to be limited. The violence that erupted in March of 1891 serves as both proof and cause of the social limitations imposed on New Orleans’ Italian community. It is amidst this social climate that Mercier published *Johnelle*.

At a point in the Creole capital’s history when different groups struggled to coexist, Mercier produced a novel that destabilizes traditional labels. Tito is described as a *Louisianais* and does not even speak Italian, although he does speak French Creole. Only his name gives any indication of his heritage as Mercier grafts Italian ethnic heritage onto French Creole culture. In this way, Mercier’s characters break with the more hostile images of the Italian community. By doing this, he demonstrates how, like race, different ethnicities in New Orleans have become inseparable. Just as Blanchette embodies Mercier’s challenge to racial segregation, Tito represents his rejection of Italian stereotyping and ghettoizing. As in *L’Habitation Saint-Ybars*, here, Mercier brings awareness to the important fact of a constantly evolving cultural hybridity in New Orleans that is vital to Creole society and differentiates it from either its Anglo-American or French counterparts.

Rather than providing a concrete resolution, however, the assertions of this study are tempered with complications. Mercier’s representations of race, gender and language, like Creole identity itself, are not unproblematic. While his challenging of convention is clearly visible in some instances, in others it is not or even seems to become a confirmation of

traditional mindsets. This complicates his work and brings up questions about his motives that his problematic depictions of others' identities first raised in Chapter One. The author's inconsistent representations of race, his perpetuation of patriarchal norms, and the racial tensions underlying the use of Louisiana French Creole in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* and *Johnelle* are all issues raised in this reading of Mercier's texts and, moreover, testifying to the difficulties associated with the instability of Creoles' cultural identity.

Mercier's portrayal of the mixed-race body and gender roles and the undeniable racial implications in his depictions of Louisiana French Creole problematize our understanding that Mercier's novels echo the Creoles' disordered identity by challenging convention. Although we see that his representations of race, gender, and language move beyond traditional conceptions of these constructs in some cases, reflecting the Creoles own positioning outside of the dominant perceptions of their identity, he also follows tradition. Concerning race, for example, although Mercier's portrayal of Blanchette and Démon reveals a more forward-thinking approach to race relations, other mixed-race characters appear to validate literary stereotypes. Blanchette embodies Creoles' multicultural heritage; rather than limiting her to one racial identity only and thereby conforming to certain dominant literary trends, Mercier shows how she can simultaneously identify with both elements of her heritage. At the same time, however, he depicts Lauzun, the mixed-race character who made Blanchette's black ancestry public,¹⁵² in a negative way. Lauzun is portrayed as a malicious and resentful person which seems to confirm racist notions of mixed-race individuals and reinforces white fears of mixing. Just after the deaths of Blanchette and Démon, an angry Mamrie outlines his offenses:

Lauzun, mo fi, to pa connin ça moune di?... eh bien! yé di cé toi qui cause tou
maleur laïé rive. Cé toi ki soufflé, avec ain cerbacane, di poive é piman dan zié

¹⁵² See pages 80-3.

Lagniape, pou colé ain lette dan so poche. Cé toi ki cause Titia néyé li même dan pi. To cause Démon pranne poison-là ; to cause Blnachette mourir oucite. E to té cré tou ça sré pacé comme ça comme arien ! To cré ta sorti mézon cilà pou trompé fie encor avé to bel promesse, épi apré ça pou fé to faro é to vanteur. Non, mo garçon ; tan pou réglé to conte vini.¹⁵³ (250)

In this scene as Mamrie details her grievances against Lauzun and prepares to punish him, the tensions that weigh down Mercier's optimistic spin on *métissage* become evident. In her eyes, Lauzun is to blame for many of the reasons behind the downfall of the Creole plantation family, casting him in a negative role that is at odds with the more positive portrayals of Mamrie and Saint-Ybars, who are not of mixed heritage. Lauzun thus challenges the acceptance that Mercier puts forward with Blanchette and Démon. Here he becomes as threatening to society as Victor Hugo's Biassou in *Bug Jargal*, the mixed-race general leading the Haitian Revolution and works against the understanding of hybridity that Mercier builds with his other characters.¹⁵⁴ This character is an example of then tensions within Mercier's novels and that prompt the continued study of his work on a variety of levels.

The dominance of patriarchal structure in his novels also restricts the Louisiana author's gendered articulation of Creole difference. Despite his remarkable characters, Chant-d'Oisel and Illud, who open up cracks in Louisiana's social order, the fact that the majority of his characters are caught in idealized constructs impedes his troubling of gender that expresses Creole cultural difference. Madame Roséma in *Johnelle* and the contrast between Mamrie and Mme Saint-

¹⁵³ Lauzun, mon fils, tu ne sais pas ce qu'on dit?... et bien ! on dit que c'est toi qui as causé tous les malheurs qui arrivent là. C'est toi qui as soufflé, avec une sarbacane, du poivre et du piment dans les yeux de Lagniape pour voler une lettre dans ses poches. C'est toi qui as causé Titia de se noyer dans le puits. Tu as causé Démon de prendre du poison, et tu as causé Blanchette de mourir. Et tu crois que tout cela se passerait comme ça, comme si rien n'était arrivé ! Tu crois que tu sortiras de cette maison pour tromper les filles encore avec tes belles promesses, et puis après ça, pour faire le faraud et le vantard. Non, mon garçon ; le temps de régler tes comptes est venu" (250).

¹⁵⁴ See pages 65-7.

Ybars in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* in particular reinforce the male fantasy that by assuming domestic roles and carrying out their “natural” maternal duties, including breastfeeding, women are helping to improve society and defend morality. They correspond to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s maternal characters’ demonstration of Rousseau’s argument for female domesticity, and even reinforce it: “L’attrait de la vie domestique est le meilleur contre-poison des mauvaises mœurs” (*Émile* 17). In this way, Mercier’s portrayals of women help to recreate the sense that the female intellect is dangerous, in spite of the author’s personal beliefs to the contrary. Certainly the challenge to the conventional order that Chant-d’Oisel and Illud present is important, but it remains problematic that Mamrie, Madame Roséma, and the majority of other female characters are not invoked in this troubling of male authority. Rather than addressing such constructs directly, Mercier takes a backstage approach that seems to lessen the impact of his argument.

Finally, the perception that Creole language is linked solely to the black community in Louisiana creates challenging circumstances for interpreting Mercier’s integration of Louisiana French Creole. Mercier and other French Creoles in Louisiana claim the language as their own and grew up speaking it, as did Creoles of color. Yet the nineteenth-century racial politics at work in their society forced the suppression of the extent of that language’s influence by defining it as a “black dialect.” Indeed, Shirley Thompson has pointed out that some Creoles, most notably the historian Charles Gayarré, denied the extent of the role that Louisiana French Creole played in their culture as a way to protect white authority: “Gayarré had insisted that ‘an educated gentleman of the [early nineteenth century] never addressed his wife or daughter in the jargon of the negro’” (104). Statements such as these deny the universality of the Creole language in Louisiana, but moreover, Gayarré’s and other’s argument also denies their society’s

widespread multilingualism. The repercussions of this racial conflict underlying language in Louisiana for Mercier specifically are reflected in Louisiana scholar Sybil Kein's analysis of his work. Kein sees Mercier's use of Creole in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* as merely part of his depiction Louisiana's black population, and the fact that he is able to portray a person of color who speaks both Creole and French is remarkable to her: "In the beginning of the novel, a young Frenchman approaches a 'negress' and addresses her as 'Madame.' She answers him in Creole and then, seeing that he does not understand her, answers him again in French. Having a black character respond in French shows at least a touch of sympathy for the humanity of that character" ("Use" 128). Kein's understanding does not take into account the significance that Creole and French both have for Mercier and other whites in Louisiana. Her analysis reveals the heavy weight that racism and race relations places on representations of language, including Mercier's, and demonstrates the depth of work that remains to be done on these texts. The complications surrounding language, as well as race and gender, in Mercier's novels reflect the instability of the very hybridity that they express, opening up many more avenues of research into Louisiana writing.

The multiplicity of constructs that Mercier manipulates to challenge traditional perceptions, as well as the complications and contradictions at work in his texts, reveal the greater picture of instability and disorder in Louisiana. By acknowledging this conflict and playing it out through race, gender, and language in his novels, Mercier engages a centuries-old perception of undefineability and liminality that has persisted. Even today when speaking of New Orleans, travelers might refer to "the Big Easy," or use the phrase "Laissez les bons temps rouler." These expressions reflect a city that relaxes social limits and moral restrictions, a place where anything goes. Instead of resisting this uncomfortable in-between positioning, however,

Mercier embraces it – even while the pessimistic outcome of *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* in particular suggests the author's sense that such an existence is ultimately unliveable – and from it formulates his own conception of Creole cultural identity.

In *Building the Devil's Empire*, Shannon Dawdy explains that the Creole capital of New Orleans was originally intended to be a new French metropolis in America (16). Only about twenty years after it was founded, however, the venture was declared to be a failure. Lawlessness and chaos had taken over what was meant to be a French Catholic American *métropole* (16). Dawdy goes on to point out that New Orleans' perceived failure designated it as a “dark” counterpart to Paris, “the city of light” and the center of the Enlightenment (26). In contrast to the light and order in Paris, New Orleans became a cultural disaster.¹⁵⁵ Yet Mercier's work showcases the Creole capital's own progress beyond such notions. In his novels the conception of the city as a failed French metropolis is transformed to emphasize its success in creating something new. By confronting this “disordered” heritage, Mercier offers a way for Creoles to exist on their own terms. Rather than letting French or American culture dictate what they are perceived to be in terms of a presumed geographical, cultural, or linguistic connection, “American” or “French,” Mercier proposes a different approach. He shows that Creoles cannot simply play the role of French or American. Louisiana and its diverse people must together embody a multicultural heritage.

¹⁵⁵ Although Dawdy describes Paris as the center of light, an interesting twist to this comparison emerges when considering that Lutetia or Lutèce, the name of early formations of Paris, means muddy, swampy, or dirty. This description seems to bring the two cities closer together (C. Jones 1-4).

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APPENDIX A: CHRONOLOGY OF ALFRED MERCIER'S LIFE

- 1816 Alfred Mercier is born on the family plantation in McDonoghville, LA on June 3rd.
- 1828 Mercier attends the *École centrale* in Louisiana where he studies Latin and Greek. He also receives instruction from his brother-in-law, Pierre Soulé.
- 1830 Mercier leaves New Orleans for Paris, France to attend the *Collège Louis-le-Grand* with his brother, Armand.
- 1836 Mercer completes his education at the *Collège Louis-le-Grand* and begins studies to become a lawyer only to abandon the project shortly thereafter.
- 1837 Mercier returns to New Orleans.
- 1838 Mercier travels to Boston to improve his English. He returns to Louisiana by the following year.
- 1842 Mercier returns to France with his nephew, Nelvil Soulé. He also publishes his first works of poetry, *La Rose de Smyrne et l'Ermite du Niagara* and *Erato*, in Paris.
- 1842-1847 Mercier travels throughout Europe with a group of friends and colleagues including his nephew. They visit France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy.
- 1848 Mercier publishes his *Biographie de Pierre Soulé, sénateur à Washington* in Paris.
- 1849 Mercier marries Virginie Vézian in Paris and begins work on a medical degree at the *Faculté de médecine* in Paris.
- 1855 Having completed his medical studies, Mercier and his family travel to New Orleans where Mercier begins work as a physician.
- 1859 Mercier returns to France, accepting a post working for the *ministre des Colonies* in Paris.
- 1868 Mercier and his family move back to New Orleans following the conclusion of the Civil War.
- 1875 Mercier helps to found the *Athénée Louisianais*.
- 1879 Mercier travels to Europe and North Africa from May to August.
- 1880 Mercier publishes *Étude sur la langue créole en Louisiane*.
- 1881 Mercier publishes *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*.

1885 Mercier is made Officer of the French Academy.

1891 Mercier publishes *Johnelle*

1894 Mercier dies on May 12th.

APPENDIX B: BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SELECTED WORKS BY ALFRED MERCIER

La Rose de Smyrne et l'Ermite du Niagara. Paris: Jules Labitte, 1842.

Biographie de Pierre Soulé, sénateur à Washington. Paris: Dentu, 1848.

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