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Peforming Louisiana: the history of Cajun dialect humor and its impact on the Cajun cultural identity

Debrah Royer Richardson

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, richardson@lacollege.edu

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PERFORMING LOUISIANA:
THE HISTORY OF CAJUN DIALECT HUMOR AND ITS IMPACT ON
THE CAJUN CULTURAL IDENTITY

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 Theatre

by

Debrah Royer Richardson
B.A., Louisiana Tech University, 1974
M.A., Louisiana Tech University, 1993
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For my husband and cheerleader, Bill, who supported me with his love and strength.

For my children, Rob, Megan, and Joshua, and their spouses,

Amanda, Michael, and Lauren, whose pride and belief in me kept me going.

For my beloved grandsons, Cole and Caden, so that they will know their history and find
joy and pride in their heritage.

For all the people who told me, even at my advanced age, to “go for it,” especially the
Deans at McNeese State University and Louisiana Tech University, who also told me
“ABD’s are a dime a dozen,” and “the best dissertation is the one that’s done.”

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I could and should do this.

Finally, for my Tante Deuce, who started me on this journey long ago with her stories
about my family and my birthright. I wish she were here to see how she influenced me to
want to know more about the Cajuns.

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ABSTRACT

Cajuns, the descendants of the Acadian diaspora begun in 1755, chose to live a largely isolated existence in Louisiana until elements in the nineteenth century began concerted efforts to assimilate the Cajuns. By the beginnings of the twentieth century, the dual challenges of enforced schooling and the prohibition of spoken French affected the Cajun sense of pride.

Around the same time, outsiders (satirists from Louisiana who were not of Cajun descent) used the Cajun dialect, in publications and on the radio, to humorously skewer Louisiana politics. Over the last century, Cajun dialect humor has evolved along specific lines that have closely followed the evolution of the Cajun cultural identity. Cajun dialect humor was associated with outsiders and would remain that way until the 1960's. The process of reclamation has been a long and arduous journey, one that has prompted internal struggles leading to negotiations within the community over competing identity narratives. Even though Cajun humorists have supplanted the original satirists in performing the ethnic humor, these negotiations have often placed the practitioners of the dialect humor in the position of beggars at the gate, apologizing for stepping outside the boundaries set by self-appointed gatekeepers, and forcing them to amend their performances to fit certain acceptable guidelines.

The inside/outside duality of Cajun dialect humor led to a showdown within the community, allowing gatekeepers to set parameters on what style of humor would be tolerated and which would not. The dialect humor was divided into the "old," unacceptable style and the "new," established style. In this work, I am arguing for a return of the "old" style of humor by demonstrating its place in Cajun history. By

restoring the “old” with the “new” style of humor, I believe this will strengthen the overall comic product and ensure the future of Cajun dialect humor.

CHAPTER ONE/INTRODUCTION—THE CLASH OF CULTURE(S): THE PROBLEM WITH CAJUN DIALECT HUMOR

Usually the Boudreaux character in Cajun stories is supposed to be stereotypical of the funny side of the Cajun culture.

(L. Boudreaux 22)

Boudreaux was sitting in the City Bar in Maurice, La. one Saturday night, and had several beers under his belt. After a while, he looked at the guy sitting next to him, and asked him, "Hey, you wanna hear a good Aggie joke, you?"

The big guy replied, "Let me tell you something. I'm an oilfield roughneck, I weigh 270 pounds, and I don't like Cajuns. My buddy here is a pro football player, weighs 300 pounds, and he doesn't like Cajuns either. His friend on his other side, is a professional wrestler, weighs 320 pounds, always has a chip on his shoulder, and he likes Cajuns even less than we do, and we are all Aggies. Do you really want to tell us an Aggie joke?"

Boudreaux, all 150 pounds of Cajun attitude, told him, "Well, I guess not. After all I don't want to have to explain it three times!"¹

In March 1988, the first International Cajun Joke Telling Contest was held in Opelousas, Louisiana. The organizers, the Opelousas Tourism and Activities Committee, did not inform the audience of just how momentous an occasion this was going to be. The audience, unknowingly, had been invited to witness a proverbial signing of a Declaration of War. Taking a stance in what had been an ongoing battle within the culture, the organizers formally declared that "certain kinds of Cajun humor were not considered funny, not considered amusing or acceptable to decent people, and would not be tolerated at this function." If those first contestants wanted to win, they had to use

¹ Smiley Anders Column, The Advocate [Baton Rouge, LA] January 27, 1998

humor that was clean, in good taste, and typifying the Cajuns as “happy, open, goodhearted” people (Angers *Truth* 82-83).

That night marked, in a clear and definite fashion, the division between the “old” brand of Cajun dialect humor and the “new” brand of Cajun dialect humor. Since the “old” had actually existed alongside the “new” for quite a while, the declaration that night was more “an idiom of sibling competition rather than of inheritance” (Anderson 187). No one doubted that, even without invoking their names, the “Opelousas Proclamation”² was specifically targeting outsider Justin Wilson, the leading proponent of the “old” brand of humor, and insider Bud Fletcher, whose humor might be considered more for mature audiences and sometimes in questionable taste.

Wilson had long been the subject of much heated debate and a few measures of disgust³ within the Cajun community. It was felt by many that he had taken the “old” style of humor over the top. His Cajun characters “depended mostly upon an exaggerated Cajun accent, a silly-looking costume or a punchline that belittled the Cajun people” (Angers *Truth* 83). As the Cajuns were in the midst of reclaiming their heritage and their culture, Wilson was being put on notice that his brand of humor “was not considered funny, not considered amusing.” On the other hand, Bud Fletcher, whose “Outhouse” recordings tended toward risqué jokes (Bernard *Americanization* 95), was being told that his humor was not “acceptable to decent people.” This event served as a defining moment that still produces repercussions within the Cajun community.

At the time of this “defining moment,” I was across the country performing Cajun dialect humor in the “old” style. Unfortunately, I missed the announcement; it would be

² This is the title that I am giving the event.

³ Wilson claimed he was “half-Cajun” on his mother’s side. This claim remains in dispute.

a long time before I was made aware of the parameters the event organizers wished to place upon Cajun performance. In the ensuing time period of nearly fifteen years, I was blissfully ignorant of operating so far outside the guidelines of my community with my routines. My material was always “clean,” so that was not the problem. The problem was the characters that I had created for my shows, many of them based on impressions of Cajun characters from my childhood. Continuing in this style puts me in conflict with the gatekeepers of the Cajun community. Therefore, I feel it is safe to say that there is a “problem” with Cajun dialect humor. I also have a concern about my place in the Cajun community and whether I can still categorize myself within the Cajun culture.

The purpose of this work is to argue for reclamation of the “old” style of Cajun dialect humor as a part of our history that needs to be remembered and restored. I will also argue for stronger inclusion of all of the dialect humor as a representation of the Cajun cultural identity. To accomplish this purpose, I will focus on three tasks: first, discovering what events led to the devaluing of the “old” brand of dialect humor; next, arguing for a restoration of the “old” style of Cajun dialect humor; and then, exploring the impact of Cajun dialect humor on the Cajun cultural identity, as a whole. To that end, this work will survey not only the history of Cajun dialect humor, but also the history of the Cajun people, and the foundations of the Cajun cultural identity. I will examine how communities work, in general, and then how the Cajun community continues to function after four hundred years of challenges.

This project is a scholarly endeavor, but it is also a personal journey for this Cajun child. The last two decades have wrought undeniable changes in the Cajun community.

These changes challenged my own sense of ethnic and cultural identity. I hope that, after the completion of the research, I may find my place within my own community.

I grew up, in some ways, a stereotypical Cajun: Catholic, poor, surrounded by a large French-speaking family, most of whom had not completed high school. I will always remember the first Cajun joke I ever heard:

It seems that ol' Marie was listening to the radio when she asked Claude, "Mais, where is you 'yet'?"
Claude shook his head, "you 'yet'?"
"Mais, oui," said ol' Marie, "you 'yet.' The radio said dat dis lady was shot an' de bullet is in her 'yet.'"

While the joke plays into the struggles that many of the older generations of Cajuns experienced, I thought nothing of it. I developed quite a fondness for "ol' Marie and Claude" through the years. They were the "Boudreaux and Thibodeaux" of my childhood. Even though they were Cajuns, just like me, they belonged to the older generation of Cajuns that barely spoke English, a group that I had been able to pocket as being completely different from me. As a child, I lived below the poverty line, but I still considered myself to be different from "ol' Marie and Claude" and "those kinds of Cajuns" because I lived in a town, spoke excellent English, and attended Catholic school.

For my own sake, I needed to put a distance between the Cajuns like Marie and Claude and myself because I had already been taught, as a child, that there was nothing much to be proud of in being of Cajun descent. My generation of Cajuns had not been allowed to grow up with an unshakeable pride in our heritage. Our parents were shamed into not teaching the Cajun French dialect to us for fear we would be unable to compete in a world already encroaching on the closed society their parents had fought to preserve. I did not even hear the story of the Cajuns and how they came to be in Louisiana until I

was studying Louisiana history in the eighth grade, and then only through the study of Longfellow's *Evangeline*. It should be no surprise that my peers and I bought into the idea of Anglo-American supremacy in all things, giving us particular reason to feel superior to our elders. No one ever came out and said so, but I came to understand that to be Cajun was to be stupid, uneducated and dirt poor. Where was the pride in that? The Cajun language seemed to belong to "ol' Marie and Claude" and our parents, as did the old ways of our culture, and I experienced the natural disdain of a city dweller for those "unfortunate" enough to live in the country or the swamps. It was, therefore, permissible to laugh at the misadventures of "ol' Marie and Claude" because I was "different," "better," "American."

The separation of "ol' Marie and Claude" into "other" is just a part of the problem with Cajun dialect humor. There are other elements that need to be addressed. I will be dividing those elements into four specific issues in this work. Since the idea of devaluing the "old" style of humor came about after Cajun activists began a movement to reclaim the Cajun cultural identity, I will first be exploring the dynamics and issues of cultural preservation and ethnic revitalization. The question then becomes, who gets to choose what is kept and what is discarded in the quest for preservation? To answer that query, I will be looking at how communities work, how power is distributed, and what happens to those who do not fall in line with the decisions being made. The solidarity and coherence of a community are dependent upon how well the power structure functions, so I will also define the inhabitants of the communities: the gatekeepers, the fence-jumpers, and the folk.

Cajun musician, Dewey Balfa, a leading preservationist from the beginning of the movement, once said, “Cultural preservation doesn’t mean freezing a culture or preserving it under glass. A culture is preserved one generation at a time.”⁴ The ongoing battle for successful transmission of the Cajun culture has known some wonderful successes and some spectacular failures, especially in the attempts to pass on the Cajun French language. In a strange turn of events, attempts to transmit the French language in Louisiana became a stumbling block for the dialect humor. The Opelousas Proclamation is now the standard for Cajun dialect humor, so only one form of Cajun dialect humor, the “new” brand of humor, is being transmitted to the next generation of Cajun humorists. I will be arguing that an important part of our history has been lost in the transmission of just this one style of Cajun dialect humor.

Another problem with Cajun dialect humor within the Cajun community has to do with the fact that, almost from the beginning, the humor was a marketable commodity that was being exported outside the community. That marketable commodity comes wrapped in a particular narrative so the question arises, who selects the narrative and who benefits or loses from the choice? Is the debate over the various narratives really a question of stereotypes, community and identity, or is it a question of who benefits financially?

Who can belong to a community? What are the ties that bind? The second topic I will research concerns who can be called a Cajun. One of the unexpected problems with the reclamation movement was that Cajunism became such an attractive way of life that many outsiders continue to seek inclusion. Instead of delineating Cajuns specifically in the concept of Cajunness, the movement opened the door to a more fluid definition, one

⁴ *The Times of Acadiana*, January 19, 2005, p. 33.

that included ascribed traits as well as those of geographical proximity. Do the Cajuns have, indeed, an “imagined community” (Anderson 6) rather than an “authentic” one? The answer to that question will bear on who can self-identify as a Cajun and, therefore, who can make decisions for the community.

The third area of interest provides the bulk of the discussion of this work: how did Cajun dialect humor become a problem? How does Cajun dialect humor fit within the tenets of the Cajun cultural identity? Who has the right to make decisions about the appropriateness of certain forms of the humor? I will be answering these questions as well as investigating the various stereotypes about the Cajuns and how some of the dialect humor, which uses the stereotypes, came to be considered “demeaning.”

For the fourth issue, I will make a case for the acceptance and rejuvenation of the “old” style of humor, by discussing certain theories of ethnic humor, comparing Cajun dialect humor with other forms of ethnic humor, such as Jewish humor, which shares certain traits with Cajun dialect humor.

In this study, I will also be looking at the choices and the choosers throughout the Cajun history, especially in the nineteenth century, when a rupture took place within the Acadian community. This socioeconomic divide split the group into the “Genteel Acadians” on the upper end and the “just-plain Cajuns”⁵ on the lower end. By the twentieth century, the Genteel Acadians decided that any attempt to control the just-plain Cajuns correlated to “herding cats.” The Genteel Acadians then took it upon themselves to move for legislation to force the just-plain Cajuns into assimilation and Americanization. The tensions that continue from that time involve the laidback style that many just-plain Cajuns choose to live, a way of life that often nurtures the

⁵ Folklorist Patricia K. Rickels is credited with naming the two groups this way (251).

stereotypes. The stereotypes are a part of the contested narratives, which then feeds the problems with Cajun dialect humor. The split is still with us, although I have heard some Cajuns say that there is no such thing as a “Genteel Acadian,” just someone who is “full of themselves.”

Whether you call them Genteel Acadians or cultural elites, there are still those within the Cajun community who concern themselves with perceptions of the Cajun culture. There are also activists within the community who are also concerned with those perceptions. Many of them belong to my generation of Cajuns, those who had grown up in the ‘50’s and ‘60’s, the same ones who went on the offensive to reclaim our disappearing heritage.

Because we had been acclimated to the American culture, my generation had not found it difficult to go away from Louisiana to follow our dreams through college educations and jobs in the wider world. It would be our time away from Louisiana, our time of “passing” as non-Cajuns, a time that would be termed “exile experiences” (Bernard *Americanization* 108), that would make us come to a realization of what we were missing back home.

Returning to Louisiana, some of the exiles organized a group to help other Cajuns regain a pride in their heritage. Although the Genteel Acadians had been unsuccessfully attempting to inspire just such a movement for decades, it would be the just-plain Cajuns who would lead the charge. Shane Bernard notes, “From this grassroots pride and empowerment movement rose a vague philosophy that might be called ‘Cajunism’—the feeling that the Cajun lifestyle was the best way of life” (*Americanization* 108). The philosophy of ‘Cajunism’ then gave birth to a concerted effort in Louisiana, in the

1980's, to recognize, to preserve, and to promote the Cajun Culture through many different venues.

I am a seasoned performer of Cajun dialect humor in the “old” style. I am also an “insider” to the Cajun community, having been born and bred a full-blooded Cajun. At the age of twenty-one, however, I married an “American” (as my daddy called him) and moved away. I only returned to the area a decade ago, so I am a bit of an “outsider” as well. Straddling this cultural divide puts me in a unique position as both participant and observer. It also forces me to seek my own cultural identity as a Cajun because there have been some changes within the Cajun community. It is no longer enough, I’ve discovered, to have been *born* a Cajun, you have to *act* like one, too. There are plenty of directors (purists, gatekeepers, etc.) who want to tell you *how* to act, but the scripts are fluid, at best. To explore this issue, I will be discussing “authenticity,” especially who can be considered an “authentic” Cajun. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, I have a personal interest in the outcome of this investigation because I am trying to determine if I can still be considered an “authentic” Cajun.

Ethnographers tend to define Cajuns as French-speaking Catholics who marry endogamously (Henry *Blue Collar* 11, 126). I am descended from the Acadians who survived the Expulsion but, like the majority of my generation of Cajuns, I don’t speak Cajun French. Since I lack many of the typical cultural markers, I am in a tenuous position to argue for the restoration of the “old” style of humor. However, I am also quite fond of my created persona, The Cajun Lady, and want her to be welcomed within the Cajun community. I would, especially, like to compete in the International Cajun Joke Telling Contest but, as things stand right now, I wouldn’t have a prayer of winning.

The Cajun Lady would be classified as “demeaning” to the Cajun people, when I have nothing but the best intentions. Perhaps the arguments in this work will go far to restoring The Cajun Lady to the Cajun community.

Stereotypes of the Cajun people have always been a part of our history, but the more persistent images surfaced in the nineteenth century and evolved into a widespread belief that all Cajuns lived the life of:

happy savage[s] living in a moss-draped bayou paradise, fishing and trapping for sustenance. Expressing a simple devotion to Catholic ritual and a naïve, not to say stupid, response to the modern world, he speaks an unintelligible French patois or perhaps thickly accented English to a large brood of barefoot children and spends every Saturday night at the *fais-do-do*. (Baker 95)

Even before that stereotype had taken root, the mythic elements of the *Evangeline* story comprised what most outsiders knew about the Cajun community. To add to the sense of exoticism, the first *Tarzan* film was shot in Terrebonne Parish in the early twentieth century, confirming Louisiana as an alien locale. Later films would continue the vision of Louisiana as foreign and show its people to be both strange and wonderful. They were “wonderful” because they were “strange.”

In the Opelousas showdown, the gatekeepers were promoting their own stereotype of the Cajuns as “happy, open, goodhearted people,” the stereotype deemed most suitable for exportation to the outside world. The Cajuns have long been a people in search of a cultural identity and have been playing at creating one. Created identity involves a measure of “forgetting” and “remembering” that “engenders the need for a narrative of ‘identity’” (Anderson 205). The selection process weeds out which parts of

history will be reclaimed (remembered) and which parts are consigned as debris (forgotten).

Within this conversation on selection, forgetting, and remembering can also be found the discussion on the “appropriateness” of Cajun dialect humor. Selected stereotypes hang on the marketability of Cajun products, the commodification of the Cajun culture, as well as in-group coherence. The question remains, therefore, just who moderates the disputes and makes the decisions for the community? To whom do I plead my case for the return to the “old” style of humor?

Methodology

Because the Cajuns were, by and large, not a literate people, the method that particularly fits the study of the Cajun cultural identity is what Gallagher and Greenblatt reference as an analysis of “culture as text” (8, 13-14). The Acadian/Cajuns have left very little in the way of a “paper trail,” especially their own written history. Scholars have no choice but to look at the ephemera (which, in this case, gives true meaning to the word), and to the writings of others about the Acadians/Cajuns. Because history is (re-) written by the winners, and because the Acadian/Cajuns “lost” each skirmish, the story of the Acadians/Cajuns is shrouded in myth and stereotype.

Diaspora and years of exile, followed by decades of isolation, have contributed little to the collected historical data. The “truth” of what took place and just who the Acadian/Cajuns were/are is not readily available. Since the Cajuns did not write their own history before the twentieth century, I must look to the cultural markers, the throughlines within the material written about them. As an “insider” to the Cajun culture, I will also be comparing my lifetime of observations with the comments of other insiders

and the number of outsiders who wrote about the Acadians and the Cajuns. The Cajuns have long been a favorite source of exploration by folklorists, historians, ethnographers, and the media. From this font of fascination has, unfortunately, flowed a mist of myths, stereotypes and “fakelore”⁶ (Dormon viii). The Cajun dialect humor and the Cajun cultural identity are bound together by the aforementioned “mist,” and it will be my task as scholar to analyze the fragmented source material, the labels, the folklore, and even the fakelore to divine the formation of the Cajun cultural identity.

The theory of New Historicism will serve as the underlying model for the study of Cajun history and the creation of a cultural identity. According to John Brannigan, in his book, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*, New Historicists practice “a mode of critical interpretation that privileges power relations as the most important context for all kinds of texts” (8). New Historicists tend to study power, what forms that power takes within a community, and how the power structure changes from one time to another. Even though I have few “texts” to analyze, the culture will serve for examination, placing the community firmly within the historical context. This method plays into my desire to examine the power struggle between the Genteel Acadians and the just-plain Cajuns. I want to analyze how that struggle for control, which began in the nineteenth century, continues to impact the Cajun culture today.

Beyond the historical framework, and because this is a study of culture, my methodology also takes on an ethnographic bent. This approach includes personal interviews with proponents of the “new” humor, various gatekeepers and preservationists, as well as just-plain Cajuns I have met throughout my times of research. I have attended multiple performances of Cajun dialect humor, including the International Cajun Joke

⁶ I will explain this term more fully in another chapter.

Telling Contest. At each event, I took the time to interview members of the audience as well as those who were helping with the event. My time was mostly devoted, however, to interviewing the performers themselves, who could not have been more gracious with their time and their knowledge of their craft.

I have also spent time with whatever primary source material was available, keeping in mind that the majority of the material was written by the British or the French in the eighteenth century. The British and French historians found it expedient to “spin” history in such a way that the Acadians were sinners. A century later, however, after Longfellow’s lyrical treatment of the same events in *Evangeline*, the Acadians became saints. The truth must lie somewhere in between.

I agree with Canadian/Acadian scholar, Naomi E.S. Griffiths, when she states:

Acadian history is an almost perfect subject of inquiry, for the Acadian community has an obvious beginning and a complex and intricate development. There were no Acadians before the middle of the seventeenth century; that is to say, until then there were no people whose community identification of themselves was “Acadian.” . . . the explanation of Acadian distinctiveness does not lie in the transference of an identity already forged in Europe.

(*Contexts* xvii)

One of the primary concerns of this dissertation is how the Cajun identity was formed and how that identity has managed to survive against the odds. Since ethnographers tend to study qualitative methods, this process suits my study of a mostly illiterate culture.

This work is a synthesis of the material that is available, primary and secondary sources, plus the formal and informal interviews. I believe that the Opelousas Proclamation was a “performance of power;” what it was restricting was a “performance of culture.” In making this statement, I am using Erving Goffman’s definition of

performance to inform this thesis. Goffman asserts, “A ‘performance’ may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (15). The two models of New Historicism and an ethnographic approach will help me to argue that both types of Cajun dialect humor are “Performing Louisiana.”

Cajun humor has not been the subject of an extensive research project before and this work certainly does not claim to be exhaustive. Barry Ancelet did an article for the *Journal of Popular Culture* in 1989 called “The Cajun Who Went to Harvard,” but other than that, the study of Cajun dialect humor has been relegated to a footnote, a chapter in a book, or a few paragraphs about the Cajun people.

As a “crossover Cajun,” one who is both an insider and a relative outsider, I hope that I am able to maintain the impartiality necessary to keep this work scholarly and useful to other researchers. I am attempting to view my culture, a culture that has experienced some change since I was a child, through the eyes of both an adult and a scholar, as a participant and an observer. I hope to exhibit a fair rendering of judgment when I am done. Right now, what I observe is a performance of culture. We are *acting* like the Cajuns that the world wants to see, taking on ascribed behavior. From a cultural viewpoint, we are looking at the reclamation of a cultural identity through a performance of culture. Historian Clarence Mondale cautions against the careless reclamation of a cultural identity:

When we conserve a past, we make history. We make history because we must, to understand ourselves and our present circumstances. Because the past we conserve is necessarily problematic, we need to be self-critical and self-reflective in coming to collective decisions about what to remember and what to forget. (Hufford 16)

As decisions are made on what to preserve in the Cajun community, I am hoping that this work will inform and restore. The culture my grandchildren will inherit is at stake.

Contributing Studies

This study will be drawing from the works of other scholars in four areas: Acadian/Cajun studies/history; Ethnic studies; Cultural theory; and studies of Humor as it pertains to culture and ethnicity. Although there is little analytical work being done in the specific field of Cajun dialect humor, there are many scholars researching Cajun ethnicity and culture, and their work will be laying the foundation for my own research. Two important contributors to the field are Dr. Carl Brasseaux, the Director of the Center for Louisiana Studies, who has published many works on the history of the Acadians/Cajuns, and Dr. Barry Jean Ancelet, whose contributions to the study of Cajun music and Cajun storytellers have informed my research. Dr. Shane Bernard's work, *The Cajuns: Americanization of A People* has been particularly helpful in creating a timeline for the Preservation movement, the cultural tensions, and the battle the humor has fought for recognition. Two historical works that are foundational to my research on the history of the Acadians are *A Great and Noble Scheme* by Dr. John Mack Farragher, an exhaustive account of the events leading to the Cajun diaspora, and *Acadian Redemption* by Warren A. Perrin, an exploration of the diaspora through the experiences of my heroic ancestor, Joseph "Beausoleil" Broussard. For Acadian history studies, the scholar of note is Naomi E.S. Griffiths, whose interdisciplinary approach and archival research aided me beyond measure.

From the area of Ethnic Studies, I am using James Dormon's seminal work, *The People Called Cajuns: An Introduction to Ethnohistory*, in which Dormon expounds

upon the notion of ascription, the process whereby certain qualities are ascribed to a group of people, both by themselves and the others outside the group (ix). I am using ascription as the explanation of certain traits found among the Cajun people to avoid accusations of essentialism. I have often heard Cajuns say, “Of course, we’re friendly (or hospitable or whatever), we’re Cajun.” They seem to be performing their lives according to the positive attributes they have ascribed to themselves, and that self-description goes to the question of what, exactly, is Cajunism.

Blue Collar Bayou is a scholarly ethnographic approach to the Cajuns that is both qualitative and quantitative. In the introduction, the authors, Henry and Bankston, describe what it means to be a modern Cajun, the geographic implications, and the history of the Cajuns. Their goal was to look “at what continues to make it a distinctive group of people in the eyes of its members and in the eyes of others” (3). They then go on to explore theories of ethnicity and what it means to be ethnic in contemporary America (6), explaining the paradox of Cajun ethnicity. They ask the question, “Why is there so much attachment to Cajun ethnicity and to other American ethnicities when ethnic traits seem to be declining?” The answer to this question is important to my thesis. Through scientific analysis of public records, the authors lay out the public portrayal of Acadians/Cajuns: “Cajuns’ propensity for eating, dancing, drinking, playing music, and gambling is noted almost everywhere and constitutes the bulk of non-occupational activities recorded” (71). The authors succinctly analyze the outside view of Cajuns and how “Cajuns have appropriated the already-made image as a basis for their self-identification. The ethnic revival of the 1970’s gave the Cajuns an intensified interest in self-portrayal” (75).

To answer the questions posed earlier about gatekeepers and the boundaries of culture, I am extremely grateful to the previous work done by Fredrik Barth in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Anthony P. Cohen's *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, and to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. Other contributing texts include *The American Kaleidoscope* by Lawrence H. Fuchs, *Strange Country* by Seamus Deane and *Postethnic America* by David Hollinger.

To study humor as it pertains to culture and ethnicity, I will be relying on the studies done by Lawrence E. Mintz, who edited *Humor in America: A Research Guide to Genres and Topics* and Joseph Boskin, whose works, *Humor and Social Change in Twentieth Century America* and *Rebellious Laughter: People's Humor in American Culture* introduced me to the idea that stereotypes could be used for good and humor as well "as a device of subversion and protest" (38). I owe a great debt to Christie Davies for his groundbreaking work in ethnic humor. His work *Ethnic Humor Around the World* showed me that Cajun ethnic humor has its own niche in that type of humor. Davies also wrote an enlightening piece called "Exploring the Thesis of the Self-Deprecating Jewish Sense of Humor" published in the text *Semites and Stereotypes: Characteristics of Jewish Humor*, which put the Cajun stereotypes into perspective for me. His more recent text, *The Mirth of Nations*, made clear the ins and outs of the arguments about self-deprecating humor. I must also thank Avner Ziv and Anat Zajdman for editing an informative set of essays called *Semites and Stereotypes*, a most useful collection. For specifics about the problem with Cajun dialect humor I looked to *New Orleans Times-Picayune* columnist, Howard Jacobs, who chronicled the public skirmish over publishing Cajun dialect humor while recording the changeover from outsiders to insiders through the years.

While I will be building on the foundation of the studies that have gone before me, I must also be charting new territory, since analyzing Cajun humor in its historical perspective has not received the attention that it deserves. I realize that I have staked a position that might disturb some members of my community. I walk a fine line because of my involvement in Cajun dialect humor and a need to be a part of my culture. There are those who will try to argue that I am romanticizing the events and the people or that I am essentializing the Cajuns. I hope that is not true. This work represents the last five years of my life. As Sister Mary John taught us when she made us memorize *Invictus* in the ninth grade, “My head is bloody, but unbowed.” I will take my stand for what I believe in, and I believe that a return to the “old” style of humor will benefit our culture.

As stated before, I am very proud of my heritage; I can only trust that I am representing my people honestly. Besides, I am not the only one who thinks the Cajuns have proven to have an amazing ability to survive through difficult odds. As observed by other historians and scholars: “the most consistent element in Cajun country may well be an uncanny ability to swim in the mainstream” (Ancelet et al xviii).

Chapter Overviews

To argue for the relevancy and legitimacy, as well as the “authenticity” of Cajun dialect humor, I have divided this work into seven chapters. The first chapter has, I hope, served the purpose of establishing the “Problem” that Cajun dialect humor faces within and without its cultural boundaries, especially as it pertains to the cultural identity. I have entitled this chapter *The Clash of Culture(s)* because I see struggles within the Cajun community about what constitutes the appropriateness of behavior, but I also see a struggle over what is represented to the outside world. Outsiders and their version of the

Cajun community serve as the draw for tourism to Louisiana, the number two industry in the state. Since the tourists are also a factor in the decisions being made, they are, then, part of the “problem.”

The second chapter *Preserving a Cultural Identity* details the work of the gatekeepers, fence-jumpers, and the folk in the preservation of a cultural identity. I will be using the African-American community, and their gatekeepers, as a comparison to those in the Cajun community. While there is a special uniqueness to each group, there are certain similarities within the two cultures. Both share the experience of diaspora and exile. Both have been marginalized, especially in the area of power. Both know what it means to occupy the lower rung of the socioeconomic ladder in America.

In the third chapter, I will explore the early history of the Acadians and how they created a cultural identity. I will explain how that identity was transformed from a legacy to a myth and then to a stereotype. I will trace the foundations of the Acadian people and how they were uprooted from their homeland. The fourth chapter will convey the history of Cajun dialect humor, where outsiders began *Performing the Cultural Identity* to annoy Louisiana politicians and to affect Louisiana politics. This resistant humor was quite successful but would lead, many decades later, to a showdown within the Cajun community.

Chapter Five will explore the debate over the “appropriateness” of Cajun dialect humor as it was played out in the media and in the community. I will analyze the tension within the community and the lingering sense of shame that hovers over the performance of Cajun humor and some performers. The disagreement also seems to have mirrored the ethnic struggles in the rest of the country as well. To that end, I will be looking at the

social factors, such as the movement in America for Political Correctness, and how that led to the denouncing of ethnic humor, in general.

In Chapter Six, I will analyze the style of Cajun ethnic humor, and how it fits squarely within the realm of ethnic humor from around the world. There are, however, some marked differences in the style and delivery of Cajun dialect humor that set it apart. Such differences support my championing the humor as a bona fide method of reclamation. I will include an analysis of my own created persona, The Cajun Lady and how the “problem” of Cajun dialect humor affects my performance. I will explore audience reactions through previous performances and what her future may hold, arguing for a return to the fun of the “old” style of humor. The seventh chapter will serve as a conclusion, so I am entitling it *Representing a Culture: The Future of Cajun Dialect Humor*.

As stated before, this study makes no claim to be exhaustive in its three main fields: humor, culture, and Louisiana Studies, but it does merit value and significance in those spheres. If you google “Cajun humor,” you will find 119,000 hits, so there is an interest in Cajun humor. However, most of the websites are concerned with *examples* of Cajun dialect humor, not with any analysis of what Cajun humor means to the culture. Amazon.com lists 17 books, collections of Cajun humor, many of which include recipes. Because of tensions between the “old” and the “new” Cajun dialect humor, Cajun humor was marginalized to the extent that it cannot stand on its own. Most collections of Cajun stories end with recipes of Cajun favorites, including the monthly internet newsletter from established Cajun humorist, Dave Petitjean.

In *Nous Sommes Acadiens/We Are Acadians*, Myron Tassin ends his pictorial look at Cajuns a little differently. Instead of recipes, he includes some Cajun jokes, believing that they “illustrate that a Cajun is pretty wise or a devilishly shrewd fellow when the situation presents itself” (96).

There is evidently a real need to examine the role of Cajun humor as regards the politics of culture, especially since Cajun humor plays the role of redheaded stepchild to the music and the food as expressions of the Cajun culture. Caught in a cultural and political struggle, Cajun comedians are limited in their performances by the Opelousas Proclamation. I hope to prove that the “old” style of humor has foundations in ethnic humor and was never meant to “demean” the Cajun people. As Christie Davies points out:

Joke tellers are social not ideological creatures and laugh at groups whom they can portray as expressing an exaggerated version of their own failings rather than groups whom they regard as completely strange and alien.

(Mirth 15)

It is not really a matter of retrieving and reclaiming the “old” style of humor just because it is old. The old style had a merit of its own and should be preserved on that basis. The “old” style of Cajun humor paid homage to the older generations of the Cajuns and should continue to do so.

As for the other areas of this dissertation, showing how communities work will give glimpses into how the Cajun community works. Other ethnic groups may decipher how this culture continues to survive. The history portions of this work service the Cajun community and Louisiana Studies. No one has done such an overview that follows the Acadians/Cajuns from 1604 to the present. On a personal note, perhaps the journey of

one Cajun from insider to outside/insider may speak to others struggling with assimilation and a longing to return to their roots.

CHAPTER TWO—PRESERVING A CULTURAL IDENTITY: GATEKEEPERS, FENCE-JUMPERS, AND THE FOLK

The trouble wit' most Anglo-Saxon people
in America is that they want aver'body
to t'ink lak' they do. But if only they
would come down here, see the way we
live, they see our way of life is superior.
Lot's of people try to change us, but
six mont's after they come they're
Cajuns, too.⁷

Boudreaux was on a flight from Paris back to Cajun country. A tall, slender, gorgeous blonde woman was in the seat next to him. When she opened her laptop, he asked her, "Watchu workin' on dere, sha?"

"It's research data obtained through a comprehensive study to determine what kind of man a woman is most attracted to," answered the beautiful blonde.

"Chooooo! Dat's interesting," said Boudreaux. "Watchu fine out?"

"Well," said the blonde, "our study indicates that the type of man women are most attracted to are doctors. They're intelligent, professional, save lives and do a lot of good for mankind. The next group is the Native American Indians. The study reveals that women are attracted to the richness of their skin, their dark hair and beautiful eyes. They are a very attractive people."

"Mais, dat makes a lotta sanse to me, yeah. Doctors and Indians. But who's da tird group, beb?"

"Oddly enough," said the blonde, "It's the Cajuns."

Boudreaux's heart started pounding so that he thought it would pop out of his chest. He excitedly blurted out, "Mais, why, sha?"

"Because," answered the blonde, "they are fun-loving and have such a unique and interesting culture and language. By the way, we haven't been formally introduced. My name is Mary Smith. What's yours?"

Boudreaux puffed his chest out and pumped her hand, "Mais, I'm Doctor Tonto Boudreaux, yeah!" (C. Boudreaux 89-90)

⁷ Lawrence Wright, "In Quest of the Unreconstructed Cajun," *Southern Voices*, I (1974), 34.

Whoopi Goldberg, in a one-woman show for the Bravo channel,⁸ capped her performance with a joke. Goldberg prefaced the bit by quipping that the joke would offend “the Community,” the same community that had given her “instructions” as to what would be appropriate. With her face puffed at the cheeks, lips pursed in disapproval, her eyes looking down her nose and shoulders hunched, Goldberg spoke of “the Community” with the same vocal resonance of a Black patriarchal elder. She repeated the term a second time in exactly the same way so that her live audience as well as the home audience would know just which “community” she was referencing. It was not the first time that Goldberg had put herself on the outs with members of her community.⁹ She proudly considers herself to be “truly politically incorrect,”¹⁰ stating so as she took the stage to host the Presidential gala in 1993.

Suffice to say that Whoopi knows her community, knows the parameters that the gatekeepers have established; yet, she happily jumps the fence that has been erected. She has a point to prove about humor and its impact on the cultural identity of a community. After warning her audience in her more recent performance, Goldberg told the following joke:

A little black angel was floating in heaven, trying out his wings. When he saw God, he flew over to Him and said, “Am I an angel?” To which God replied, “No, niggah, you a bat!”

The audience was neither all black nor all white, and their laughter ranged from embarrassed titters to full out guffaws. When the laughter died down, Goldberg looked at

⁸ Telecast April 14, 2007 at 11 am CST.

⁹ In April, 1993, Goldberg and her then beau, Ted Danson, shocked many when he showed up at her Friars’ Club roast in blackface. Goldberg defended Danson’s actions to the dismay of many in her community. *Times* [New York], October 14, 1993.

¹⁰ *Times* [New York], November 1, 1993.

her audience and asked, “Why is that funny? What makes it funny?” No one seemed to know why s/he had found it funny or why s/he had found it offensive. In a mixed audience, did blacks feel that it was their joke and therefore, they could find it funny? Did whites feel as though they were crossing cultural lines if they found the use of the “n-word” humorous? Goldberg had discussed controversial topics throughout the hour of her performance. None of the other topics compared to the potentially explosive invoking of the “n-word,” but her challenge proved an interesting ending to her comical schtick. Her act certainly spoke to larger questions concerning ethnic humor. What makes ethnic humor funny? Offensive? Does it depend on the audience? If the gatekeepers of a community are going to set parameters, what are the consequences for being a fence-jumper?

To be honest, I found the joke funny, not because of the content so much as the delivery of a master comedienne. Goldberg’s experienced and professional delivery covers a multitude of sins, and even grants her a sort of immunity. It doesn’t hurt her cause that she is a well-known fence-jumper who ignores the chastisement of her community gatekeepers in her belief that she is looking out for the folks. With her question, Goldberg braved the disfavor of the establishment and the gatekeepers. She also challenged her audience to analyze the dialect, the humor, and the boundaries of community.

In the opening chapter, I discussed the Cajun community as a key component in the trials facing Cajun dialect humor. In this chapter, I will describe the Cajun community, as I seek out definitions of community and how communities function. I will also draw some analogies between the Black community and the Cajun community. I

will illustrate and highlight the community inhabitants: the gatekeepers, fence-jumpers, and the folk, their individual roles in the preservation of a cultural identity, and how the various forces impact the Cajun community. I will explore the power dynamics that are used to keep the folk in line with the vision of the gatekeepers. It is also important to note just what is at stake in the Cajun community. The “problem” with Cajun dialect humor is really a debate over which Cajun stereotype is the approved one to market to the world, a problem that can only be solved by the Cajun community.

To begin defining the term “community” in relation to the Cajun culture, it is important to note that all communities could be metaphorically considered to be “gated” communities. At first glance, the term “gated community” conjures up images of high concrete walls encircling a haven for the privileged, the wealthy, and the select. Within the walls, the well-manicured lawns and stylish homes, each built to the specifications well above the minimum allowance of square footage, declare the exclusion of anyone of the “wrong” social or economic standing from becoming an inhabitant. Once accepted, the tenants who have been deemed worthy enough to live in such surroundings must abide by set rules that govern the landscaping, the size of the garage and driveway, and the cleanliness of the curb. The fencing and gates allow for controlled access to the grounds, and the gatekeepers maintain the balance for the good of the community, always keeping a watchful eye for encroaching fence-jumpers or even the just-plain folk,¹¹ who can only dream of one day winning the lottery and the opportunity to live in such splendor.

¹¹ I will be using the term “folk” throughout this work to mean the people in a community who are not the gatekeepers or the fence-jumpers. There is no attempt on my part to segregate the folk into a lower socioeconomic stratum or to romanticize them as the keepers of the cultural stuff.

Many scholars seem to think that the concept of community is difficult to define. Sociologists cannot even agree on how many forms of community there ought to be; they do, however, share with Dennis E. Poplin the belief that “today men and women the world over are supposedly engaged in a ‘search for community’ (i.e. a quest for unity and involvement with other human beings)” (1). Perhaps we could be satisfied with such a simplistic description if Poplin’s definition didn’t appear to lean more toward the ideal than the practice of community. As we will see, a good portion of Americans long for the *ideal* of community, their own Wisteria Lane (before the dialogue begins), Mayberry in all its glory, or even the bar where “everybody knows your name.” The *ideal* of a community, what I will call “The Mayberry Ideal,” is the place where everyone knows everyone else and what is expected of them to live in this community. Rules may be unspoken, but they exist for the betterment of the community. Everyone within the community knows the other members and, for the most part, needs are communally shared and met. In “Mayberry,” outsiders are treated gently but firmly; they are often the ones who need to learn the lesson encapsulated in the denouement of the show. The lesson teaches them that their outsider perspective of sophistication cannot hold a candle the homespun wisdom of the “folk” who populate the Mayberry Ideal.

It is difficult to separate the folk in the ideal from the folk in the real due to the paternalism of many of the gatekeepers. The folk, in any real community, are those whose hearts and minds are the basis for the struggle between the gatekeepers and the fence-jumpers. The folk, the people who make up the bulk of the community, are the gatekeepers’ constituency. They are the ones for whom the decision-makers make decisions.

From the inception of their cultural identity, the Acadians/Cajuns “saw themselves rather as ‘plain folk,’ without pretension or affectation by comparison with elitist values of the dominant class with whom they came into contact” (Dormon 40). Only after the socioeconomic separation in the nineteenth century did the Cajun community develop gatekeepers and fence-jumpers. In modern times, the gatekeepers are no longer restricted to the Genteel Acadian class. Gatekeepers have also risen from the academic and business sectors to direct the folk who self-identify as “just-plain Cajuns.”

Without the folk, there would be no community, no boundaries and, therefore, no gatekeepers needed to protect them. In contemporary culture, the folk are the targets of study by the ethnographers, folklorists, sociologists and the literati. In their minds, the folk are “the *essential* and *unchanging solidarity* of traditional society ... the epitome of simple truth, work and virtue, the antithesis of all that was overcivilized, tired, conventional, and insincere” (McKay 12). They are the *ideal* inhabitants of an *ideal* community and may be completely unaware of just how ideal they are. Ian McKay contends, “That which is unchanging, the true, solid, and possibly even providential core of a culture and society, resides within the Folk” (13). It is for this reason that the folk are the basis for such intense study, their folklore, stereotypes, songs, myths, and superstitions. The gatekeepers feel responsible for maintaining the “purity” of these outpourings, even if some of these outpourings are the recent creations of the folk for the express purpose of marketing or representing the culture.

The idea of a community is different from the ideal in that it is the reality. The practice of community invites comparisons to a very popular personal computer game

introduced in the 1980's. *SimCity* is a simulation game (yes, it conforms to the idea and not the ideal) that has continued to gain popularity in all its various versions. It simulates the creation of community. In one version, the player is elected Mayor and is thereby endowed with the power to control a city through building permits, permission for people to move in or out, and a service infrastructure. The Mayor is responsible for making choices as to how his/her community functions—how many fire or police stations? How many hotels? What type of community will it be? Will the community spend its money on the homeless? (Will there be homeless?) Or will it spend its money on the arts? These choices can, as in real life, make or break the game for the Mayor.

The current website offers the opportunities for the player to “Customize lots and drop them into your city for a whole new level of control!” or to “Grab notable, real-world architecture to add to your cities!” More importantly, the gamester is assured that **“You’ll never be alone once you join the SimCity 4 Community!”** That is quite a promise, but it plays to what Robert Booth Fowler refers to as the “reality of the project. Community, its nature, and its desirability are now part of the conversation of many political intellectuals in the United States; it has become the watchword of the age” (3). The players recognize that the internet has allowed them to participate fully in this “imagined” community.

An “imagined community,” according to Benedict Anderson, is a community where “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). Members imagine themselves to share certain traits and behaviors

and this sharing unifies them under a name, an ethnicity or a culture. Imagined or not, this definition explains the idea of community, especially for the Cajun community.

Some ethnic communities, like the Cajuns, involve a geographical component that cannot be overlooked. While the Cajuns are descendents of the Acadians from Nova Scotia, it is only those who made it to the Gulf Coast who are considered to be part of the Cajun community by those within the community. Those of Acadian descent who grew up, for example, in the Tidewater section of Virginia do not refer to themselves as “Cajuns.” The term “Acadians” represents a far larger community that encompasses all descendents of the exile, now scattered to the four winds. Every five years, the *Congrès Mondial Acadien* draws tens of thousands from all over the world for the “communion” that Anderson invokes as part of an “imagined community.”

There is, for both the Cajun and the Black communities, the factor of solidarity or bonding. Both Cajuns and Blacks cling to a tradition as well as an idea of what it means to be Cajun or to be black in America. The tie that binds the Cajun and the Black communities is their nomadic diaspora that contributed to a sense of outsider status in the place where they have spent hundreds of years.

While there are many definitions or classifications to choose from when one wants to discuss community, I will be using this definition: “The concept of community invariably invokes the notion of commonality, of sharing in common, being and experiencing together. This is the root concept implied in most uses of the word” (Fowler 3). For most ethnic communities, such as the Jewish community, it is characterized not so much by locale as by what Robert Nisbet has called “a high degree of personal intimacy, emotional depth, moral commitment, social cohesion, and

continuity in time” (47). Jessie Barnard invokes the German, *Gemeinschaft*, to “refer to community in this sense. It is older than the local community, being characteristic of nomadic tribes as well as fixed agricultural settlements ... dealing with some kind of unity, of co-unity, whatever the nature of the uniting bond may be” (Bernard 4). Cajuns experience *Gemeinschaft* or, “little community” (McKay 13), because the lingering effects of the diaspora and centuries of isolation unite them.

Now that I have established a working definition of community (dealing with some kind of unity, of co-unity, whatever the uniting bond may be), I wish to establish definitions of “gatekeeper” and “boundary” as they apply to communities and, especially, to the Cajun and Black communities. My reading on this specific topic has led me to the works of Anderson, Cohen and, especially, Barth. Each has contributed to my understanding of how communities function and how the boundaries of those communities operate. In addition, I will discuss the term, “fence-jumpers” as I am applying it to members of the Black and the Cajun communities. Using McKay’s definition, I will reference the folk as the core group of any community.

Definitions of gatekeepers and gatekeeping are more often found in business texts and are considered to be a positive aspect of small group communication. Group Leaders are expected to “gatekeep,” “to control the flow of communication: Draw the nontalkers into the discussion and tactfully cut off the monopolizers and other nonfunctional members in an attempt to give all members an equal chance to communicate” (Hamilton 233), and many gatekeepers may see themselves as this type of community leader. It is more likely that they fall under the terms that Barth uses, that of “cultural innovators” or “change agents” (33). In less industrialized ethnic groups, these are the people, mostly

the “elites,”¹² who have more contact with the outside world and are therefore considered to be better able to make decisions for the group. They sometimes have a foot in both camps and act as the go-betweens to decide what is best for the less industrialized group. Some of these decisions include just how much the group should participate in the outer world and how much the outer world should be allowed into their closed circle. Gatekeepers also make themselves responsible for the way the outside world looks at the community. They often feel that they must care paternalistically for the “folk.”

In the real world, the folk are different from The Mayberry Ideal Folk. Real world folk are perceived by the gatekeepers as incapable of making decisions for themselves or the group. The innocence of the Ideal Folk is translated into ignorance and naiveté on the part of the real world gatekeepers; therefore, the folk need keepers, gatekeepers, to be precise. In the world of the gatekeeper, the folk are really “Other,”¹³ but they are *our* “Other,” and only the elite of that community can look down on them. The need to protect, and the overprotection that ensues, constitute a dichotomy evident in the gatekeeper mentality.

It may be easier to imagine the gatekeepers of a community through the mental picture of a fisherman ready to cast his net as he stands ankle deep in the surf washing upon the shore. Behind him are other fishermen, involved in the equally important occupation of repairing their nets. The nets are usually rather round with holes or squares that perform an important function—they let out the excess, what the fishermen do not want to catch or keep—while the strands of the net gather what is meant to stay. Those who repair the nets do so to maintain the functionality of the net as it works as a

¹² Defined as a group or class of persons or a member of such a group or class, enjoying superior intellectual, social, or economic status. It is usually from this class that gatekeepers arise.

¹³ For a definition of “other” used in this sense, see Bhabha’s *Location of Culture* or Said’s *Orientalism*.

metaphorical boundary—both to keep and to discard. As the fisherman casts his net, he acts as the gatekeeper, prepared to scrutinize all that is caught by the net and standing ready to toss back into the swirling ocean anything he deems not good enough for the day's harvest. It is a symbolic act, but then, according to Cohen, so are community boundaries (12) and the gatekeepers who are there to protect and defend.

These “symbolic boundaries” are what set apart each ethnic group, each community, and each nation. All of the boundaries are symbolic because the various groups, communities, and nations have agreed upon them. The lines of demarcation may appear on maps but they are only figuratively drawn in the sand (Benedict 6). Because there are no tangible walls to maintain, the figurative walls are what must be upheld and that is the focus of this part of the chapter: to comprehend and demonstrate the symbolic boundaries of community and their contrived means of maintenance, along with the people entrusted with that preservation—the gatekeepers. The boundaries must be upheld because:

If the members of a community come to feel that they have less in common with each other than they have with the members of some other community then, clearly, the boundaries have become anomalous and the integrity of the ‘community’ they enclose has been severely impugned.
(Cohen 20)

To keep this from happening, gatekeepers are either employed or self-employed in most communities.

And how does one rise to such a height in a community, especially one that prides itself on its egalitarianism? Cohen contends that there is always differentiation or stratification within a community. There may be informal structures of leadership, but these structures “have means of attributing status and prestige” (21). Barth refers to those

who have raised themselves to the higher strata as “the elite,” while Anderson references the “bilingual intelligentsia” (15). Cohen refers to this stratification as the “myth of egalitarianism”(21), the belief as was so in *Animal Farm*, that “all animals are equal” in a community but “some animals are more equal than others.”

In one case study, Anderson observed that those who were at the forefront of nationalism, those who were responsible for helping to create and maintain the boundaries, were more likely to be “a coalition of lesser gentries, academics, professionals and businessmen, in which the first often provided leaders of ‘standing.’” The next tier of leaders would come from “myths, poetry, newspapers, and ideological formulations, and the last, money and marketing facilities.” In most situations, Anderson believes, “intellectuals and entrepreneurs predominated” (79). Obviously, education and the ability to get wealth play a part in decision-making at this level. Barth contends, “ethnic groups not infrequently become differentiated with respect to educational level and attempt to control or monopolize educational facilities” (Barth 34). That is why I believe so many gatekeepers can be found in university settings. From this power base, they are more able to codify the symbols of their group and to maintain vigilance over the printed expressions of their culture.

Protecting and codifying symbols seem to be the main functions of the gatekeepers, for how can one delimit what has not been codified? Symbols are “ideal media through which people can speak a ‘common’ language, behave in apparently similar ways, participate in the ‘same’ rituals, pray to the ‘same’ gods, wear similar clothes, and so forth, without subordinating themselves to a tyranny of orthodoxy. Individuality and commonality are thus reconcilable” (Cohen 21). Once these symbols

have been codified then the gatekeeper knows the parameters of his job. He is to protect and defend the symbols from all enemies, both foreign and domestic; he must keep the symbols from losing their value as a frame of reference.

Membership is based on recognizing the symbols for what they mean to their particular group. Without that ascribed meaning the symbols are ambiguous and useless to the group. Once accepted, they become very “effective as boundary markers of community,” even having the power to create “*communitas*, an identification among members which is so absolute as to be tantamount to the stripping away of all those social impedimenta which would otherwise divide and distinguish them” (Cohen 55).

Community boundaries begin at the point of departure from other communities. “The boundaries are *relational* rather than absolute; that is, they mark the community *in relation* to other communities” (Cohen 55). It is how members of a community are able to recognize other members of their community—through their ability to recognize those who are not. “If a group maintains its identity when members interact with others, this entails criteria for determining membership and ways of signaling membership and exclusion.” What is at stake here is maintenance of the boundaries as it is the “boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses” (Barth 15).

The boundaries of the Cajun community include several cultural markers, what Barth defines as the “cultural stuff.” The method for self-identification and self-inclusion recognizes the actions and behavior of Cajuns, even before blood relationships. People are always surprised to find that I am a Cajun. Except for dark hair, I have none of the obvious markers that proclaim me to be what I am by blood. My most egregious failure,

however, falls from my refusal to sacrifice The Cajun Lady to political and cultural expediency. I am a fence-jumper.

There are sanctions within each community for fence-jumpers, and it is the gatekeepers who often oversee these sanctions. As the Catholic Church has understood for centuries, the most powerful sanction is excommunication, to be denied a place at the table. Barth reminds us, “if a person is dependent for his security on the voluntary and spontaneous support of his own community, self-identification as a member of this community needs to be explicitly expressed and confirmed; and any behavior which is deviant from the standard may be interpreted as a weakening of the identity, and thereby of the bases of security” (36-37). In the Cajun community, these sanctions are exhibited through lack of support for the fence-jumper. The Cajun community is, after all, a small community. The gatekeepers are cognizant of movement within and without the group. An elite group polices the boundaries and scrutinizes the aspiring products of group members. Gatekeeper approval or disapproval, like that of New York theatre critics, often presages the success or failure of any effort or expression of the Cajun culture. Fence-jumpers and their work are simply marginalized until they are brought back into the fold.

Self-identity is the hallmark of membership in any group. Rather than lose the coveted membership in the group, the errant member is more likely to curb his behavior to return from deviance to the norm. There may be mavericks (fence-jumpers) in any group, but the limits of their rebellion will be based on their need to belong to their group. As Cohen tells us, those boundaries usually begin with the symbols, “in which people not only mark a boundary between their community and others, but also reverse or

invert the norms of behavior and values, which ‘normally’ mark their own boundaries” (Cohen 58). When Cajuns host thousands of outsiders at each festival across south Louisiana, they do lay out the welcome mat. Cajuns are glad to have people come to share the fun and leave their tourist dollars behind. Tourists are happy to come eat, drink and be merry and *laissez les bon temps rouler*, for a time. When Sunday comes and the last truck is loaded, the outsiders are expected to surrender their temporary Cajun identity and go home. Once the party is over, members of the Cajun community have no difficulty in distinguishing those who are members of the culture and those who are not. Cohen explains:

People become aware of their culture when they stand at its boundaries: when they encounter other cultures, or when they become aware of other ways of doing things, or merely of contradictions to their own culture. The norm is the boundary: its reversal, a symbolic means of recognizing and stating it. Such awareness is a necessary precondition for the valuing of culture and community. The process of evaluation is accomplished through the use of symbolic devices ... and is a precondition for its maintenance. It rests upon the contrivance of symbolic boundaries. (Cohen 69)

How does one know when one has stepped outside the boundaries of their community if the boundaries are symbolic instead of tangible? It is because the members of the communities themselves have delimited the lines of demarcation. To live in a community or ethnic group, one should be aware of the boundaries and how they are maintained. You may not always be aware of the gatekeepers until you try to step outside those boundaries.

Fence-Jumpers, dissenters within any community, are handled with swift justice. For example, the leaders of the Black community, especially gatekeepers Jesse Jackson

and Al Sharpton have instituted strict parameters for blackness and inclusion in the black community. Condoleeza Rice¹⁴ and Colin Powell¹⁵ are not considered “black enough” because of their support for the Iraq war. Their stellar accomplishments as the first black National Security Advisor and the first black Secretary of State continue to be glossed over within the Black community. Biracial presidential candidate, Barack Obama, also struggles with accusations that he is not “black enough.” The question of his racial “authenticity” may affect support for his candidacy.¹⁶

Not all gatekeepers have a Napoleonic complex; however, there is a sense of artificiality to the idea of policing community boundaries, especially given that the lines between what is acceptable and what is not are often very thin and so many of the traditions that are being protected are recent, yet accepted, inventions (Hobsbawn 1). Through these inventions, the gatekeepers preserve their power base and the need for them to be spokespersons for the community.

Bill Cosby is a spokesperson for his race, a self-appointed gatekeeper. Cosby’s admonitions often compete with the efforts of other gatekeepers. Due to disagreements with Cosby’s message, the other gatekeepers have cast him in the role of fence-jumper, doing their best to weaken the messenger. As soon as he begins his discussion of personal responsibility, women come out of the woodwork to accuse him of various and sundry things. Whether or not he is guilty of their accusations is not as germane as the timing of the accusations. He has wandered from the prescribed path and must be brought back to heel. Even his highly successful television show in the ‘80’s came under fire for not showing the “reality” of American life for American blacks. Cosby was

¹⁴ Erin Aubrey Kaplan. “Condoleeza Rice and the New Black Paradigm.” *LA Weekly*. January 27, 2005.

¹⁵ “Belafonte won’t back down from Powell Slave Reference.” CNN.com/US. October 16, 2002.

¹⁶ Ta-Nahisi Paul Coates, “Is Obama Black Enough?” *Time*. February 1, 2007.

criticized for putting forth the idea of a successful pediatrician married to a successful attorney raising their children to be contributors to society and positive role models for the black community.

Cosby is especially not allowed to voice opinions on foul-mouthed black comedians or rap music. Rap music has long been a lightning rod for controversy in the Black community. There are those who laud the music for bringing the community together and giving the supporters an identity. The identity comes complete with clothing, music, movement, and a way of talking that is so distinctive (and hip) that even white folks mimic it. Like the sororities and fraternities, there is an attraction to a community in which the members are called “brothers” and “sisters.” The gatekeepers defend rap music as freedom of expression and freedom of speech, calling it “honesty,” while defying the detractors who point out that the vast majority of the music is denigrating to women and calls for violence against white people, especially policemen.

Just like in Cajun comedy, black comedians can be fence-jumpers, too. Black comedians can receive the same umbrella of support as the rappers, so long as they keep to the established parameters. Chris Rock, Corey Holcomb, and Bernie Mack have strayed from the accepted script, incurring the wrath of the gatekeepers through their humor. In a 2004 *USA Today* article, writer Yolanda Young reports that these comedians are “part of a growing trend of black comedians chiding the pathologies that plague segments of the African-American community.”¹⁷ For example, Corey Holcomb—NBC’s *Last Comic Standing* contestant and self-described ghetto Dr. Phil—frequently mocks the commonality of illegitimacy and multiple partners with quips such as, “I have

¹⁷ Yolanda Young, “Comedians Chide Blacks to Change,” *USA Today* 22 July 2004, 6 Sept. 2005
<http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2004-07-22-young_x.htm>

two six-year-olds and they ain't twins." Stand-up comedian and HBO host Chris Rock uses the punchline: "I love black people, but I hate n-----", those whom he describes as lazy, unscrupulous, or proud of themselves for staying out of jail.

Rather than staunchly defending *their* freedom of expression, the gatekeepers want to punish these comedians for being fence-jumpers and stepping outside the lines in presenting their version of the community narrative to the world. The comedians are taking flack for their honesty and being admonished as critics (unnamed in Young's article) "have called these rants oversimplified and insensitive characterizations of the poor." The gatekeepers, on the other hand, empower the rappers to the full extent of their first amendment rights. Just like in the Cajun community, gatekeepers make decisions about the community's methods of expression based on what the gatekeepers consider to be appropriate.

The interesting thing about fence-jumpers is that they actually see themselves as gatekeepers similar to the analogy of the fishermen I gave earlier in the chapter. They do not see themselves as attempting to leave the community. Instead, they see themselves as protecting the community, standing in the gap for the folk while keeping communication open with the outside world. Cosby bravely tries to break the hold that the other gatekeepers have on the folk in the hope that the folk will take responsibility for themselves and no longer succumb to the lure of "protection" by the Black leadership. It is an internal struggle of titanic proportions.

Beyond the struggles and power plays, the main concerns within both the Black and Cajun communities have to do with assimilation of the folk into American society.

Psychiatrist, Dr. Alvin Poussaint, in a PBS interview, agreed with some of Cosby's points, stating that he sees:

a lot of black youth now are anti-education and anti-intellectualism, [and] feel that getting an education is being white, is acting white. We never had that in previous generations, this is something new. I think this is very, very disconcerting that black youth are culturally adapting such postures when the high school dropout rate is so high, when they're going to jail at increasing rates, it's in fact really very high, and in jail about 70 percent of inmates have not graduated from high school. So Cosby's plea around educating, parents really tending to their children, reading to them, teaching them how to speak Standard English is well taken and very important.¹⁸

The Black community exhibits a divide, much as the Cajuns did in the nineteenth century. The divide manifests itself through differing values—an aspiration for assimilation for the upper and middle class Blacks and a desire to celebrate the Black culture for the “folk.” This rift exemplifies “the conflict ... between the nation’s strictly nonethnic ideology and its extensively ethnic history” (Hollings 136). The debate over assimilation continues to negotiate with the roots of culture, even in this “postethnic” country.

Because the Cajun culture did not experience socioeconomic schism until the nineteenth century, Carl Brasseaux posits that the first gatekeepers in the Cajun community were actually the folk (*Acadian* 20-21). In the mid-nineteenth century, the Genteel Acadians attempted to appropriate the keys to the community gates. These Genteel Acadians almost succeeded in altering the entire community before control was wrested away and returned to the folk.

¹⁸ Online NewsHour. “Tough Talk.” *A NewsHour with Jim Leher*. PBS, July 15, 2004.

The Genteel Acadian Mouton family led the Acadian gatekeepers in the nineteenth century. Patriarch Jean Mouton, in the avant-garde for Americanization, delivered a son to Georgetown University and a grandson to West Point, thus laying the foundation for the Mouton dynasty in Louisiana politics (Brasseaux *Acadian* 96). A tour of the Alexandre Mouton house in Lafayette leaves no doubt of the level of assimilation into the Anglo-American culture and the attempts by the Genteel Acadians to drag the just-plain Cajuns with them.

More recently, CODOFIL¹⁹ founder and self-elected gatekeeper James Domengeaux led the Genteel Acadians in the efforts to bring the Continental French culture to Louisiana in place of the Cajun culture. Domengeaux's tenure as gatekeeper was not an unqualified success. The problem with the Genteel Acadians' attempt at cultural revival in the 1970's mirrored the problems of a century before:

Unlike other such efforts, the Cajun movement began at the top, not at the bottom, i.e., the original generative force was not among the working-class advocates of 'white ethnic power,' but rather among the representatives of an elite body of French-speakers of South Louisiana who determined that they must take action to preserve the spoken French language of the area lest it be forever lost. Few if any of them seem to have realized the greater potential of their quest; indeed, most of them would have never admitted to a Cajun ethnic status at all, though many admitted to an *Acadian* heritage of the Genteel Acadian/Longfellow's *Evangeline* sort. (Dormon 81)

Indeed, the original driving force behind the movement was not even a Cajun at all. Dr. Raymond Rodgers, a Canadian by birth, was a political science professor at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. It was Rodgers who approached Domengeaux, a former Congressman, and together they began their efforts to revitalize bilingualism in

¹⁹ Council for the Development of French in Louisiana. Subsequent chapters will go into more detail on this organization and its effect on the Cajun Cultural Identity.

the state of Louisiana (Dormon 81-82). Unfortunately for the Cajun culture, Domengeaux had differing cultural symbols that he wanted codified. He brought in Francophone teachers from around the world who denounced the Cajun French, substituting International French for the native language of Acadiana (Bernard *Americanization* 93). As his Genteel Acadian ancestors had done before him, Domengeaux sought to bring the just-plain Cajuns into line with his vision of French Louisiana, with the emphasis on *French*. Ignoring the Acadian history, Domengeaux wanted Louisiana to reflect the elegance of France and the continental French cultural values, anything that would erase the stigma attached to the Cajuns.

It is difficult to find much that is negative written about Domengeaux and his efforts, as though there is a “Cajun Code of Silence” which protects Domengeaux from criticism. Instead, he is often praised for doing “much to rehabilitate the Cajuns’ self-image” (Brasseaux *French* 79) through the creation of CODOFIL. Anecdotal evidence counters the accolades heaped on Domengeaux’s endeavors. While the elite have praise for his efforts, most of the just-plain Cajuns are not fans. If Domengeaux had anything to do with the rehabilitation of the Cajuns’ self-image, it was through a reversal of his influence. The resurgence of Cajun ethnic pride had more to do with the Cajuns’ reaction to Domengeaux’ trumpeting of the ascendancy of the Creole/French pride than with Domengeaux’s actual efforts. The just-plain Cajuns enacted their own revival when they began to look at what Cajun culture had to offer them as a whole. The folk were the “blue-collar groups that had traditionally been the main cultural guardians” (Brasseaux *French* 79). It is from this group that Cajun music, food, and humor have taken a stand and found their way out of the community to nonmembers beyond Louisiana.

Many Cajun gatekeepers are now more likely to be found in university settings. In researching this work, I have met a handful of the present gatekeepers of the Cajun community. Barry Jean Ancelet, who may be considered a founding father (or at least a favored son) of the preservation movement for the Cajun community, is a “reluctant” gatekeeper. When I asked him if he considers himself a gatekeeper, he quickly answered, “I wouldn’t dare!”²⁰ Ancelet believes that the Cajun community is too egalitarian to suffer gatekeepers. Outsiders, however, have no such qualms. Journalists, scholars, ethnographers, and other researchers coming to Louisiana to study Cajuns usually begin their trip by interviewing Ancelet and Carl Brasseaux. Both men willingly make themselves available to any and all who are trying to find the “truth” about Cajuns. As Cajun activists, both labor to assure that it is the truth, or at least the accepted narrative, that is being disseminated. That makes them gatekeepers whether they accept the term or not.

Brasseaux is definitely the man to see if you are studying the history of the Cajuns. From his position as director of the Center for Cultural and Eco-Tourism at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Brasseaux stands as a leading expert in Cajun/Creole studies and has published thirty-three volumes of research in the field. A direct descendant of exiled Acadians, Brasseaux is dedicated to researching the true history of the Acadians/Cajuns and telling that story to the world. Brasseaux does not seek power for himself or for a political purpose; his interests lie solely with seeking and disseminating the truth as his research finds it to be.

Ancelet has spent considerable time in the field amassing stories of Cajun folklore in the original dialect and researching Cajun music. Ancelet aids in organizing festivals

²⁰ Personal interview, February 14, 2006.

to bring people to this part of Louisiana so that they can get a “true” taste of the Cajun culture. Ancelet is an advocate for preservation and a tireless worker for the cause. I am not certain that he is as reluctant a gatekeeper as he perceives himself to be. When I asked Dr. Ancelet about Cajun humor, he was quick to correct any misapprehension I had about the difference between Cajun humor and Cajun dialect jokes. In his mind, Cajun humor is more likely to be in French, have more elements of storytelling, and come from inside the community. He sets very high standards for inclusion, standards that I will explore more fully in Chapter Five of this work. I will also be defining “authentic,” as it pertains to culture, in a later chapter.

Throughout this chapter, I have been seeking to understand my culture and my place in it. Envisioning the fisherman with his net is easy to do. To catalogue the contents of the net is not so simple. Our roots are deep and our identity is distinctive, distinctive enough to survive two attempts at ethnic cleansing—one physical and the other spiritual. Hollywood has attempted to box us in with their renditions of swamp dwellers that parallel the wild man of Borneo, but the stereotype that surfaces again and again is of a people who are friendly, family-oriented, good cooks, good musicians, good Catholics, people who are fiercely independent and self-reliant. Just how much truth there is in this stereotype is anybody’s guess, but it is certainly the reflection of the way that Cajuns have chosen to live their lives. Cajuns, by and large, accept the stereotype set by the Opelousas Proclamation. They are embodying the very stereotype that says the very best about them by being “happy, open, good-hearted people.” This is a good, workable definition of “ascription,” taking on selected cultural markers. In a later

chapter, I will explore how “Boudreaux and Thibodeaux” supposedly conflict with this particular description.

There are those within the community who believe that Cajuns have become completely Americanized because they have shopped at “Wal-Mart, K-Mart, and Winn-Dixie; bought Coca-Cola, Pop Tarts and Campbell’s soup with Visas or MasterCard; and drove to suburban homes in SUV’s or minivans made in Detroit, Korea, Japan, or Germany” (Bernard *Americanization* 145). I believe that some scholars have mistaken urbanization for Americanization or, perhaps, the process of Americanization is not yet complete. Adaptability has always been a major strength of the Cajuns, so urbanization is just one more example of their flexibility. If Cajuns were completely Americanized, you would no longer see those SUV’s and minivans parked in countless numbers in a relative’s front yard for a family celebration at Christmas, Easter, Mother’s Day, or Tante Vi’s birthday. Family, food, and fellowship still exemplify the heart of the Cajun culture. As far back as the nineteenth century, Brasseaux notes:

Acadian community spirit was ... undergirded by frequent nocturnal visits, or *veillées*. In these visits, which were usually held in the idle winter months after the evening meal, hosts and visitors divide[d] into groups by sex and age. ... Though the conversation was inevitably dominated by males, the usual topic of conversation was not politics or agriculture but folktales. (*Acadian* 30-31)

Storytelling and gossip still dominate Cajun events, and the assembly still encompasses family, food and fellowship. When Cajuns no longer congregate in multigenerational gatherings, this loss of intergenerational bonding will truly be the death of the Cajun culture.

In this chapter, I have defined community and its inhabitants, the gatekeepers, the fence-jumpers and the folk. I have discussed the roles that each are expected to play to make the community function. Right now, there is dissension within the Cajun community over some of our cultural markers. Because we are not united in claiming ownership of all of our cultural markers, outsiders like Adam Sandler have appropriated some of those elements. Sandler took the “old” style of humor several steps over the top in his film, *The Water Boy*. I believe he was immune to criticism because the audience had nothing “authentic” for comparison. I doubt that Sandler’s usual SNL audience remembers Justin Wilson, and the current Cajun humorists are not national and international stars. Arguably, a united front in Cajun dialect humor would release the tension over performance styles, and that support could produce a star outside of our community. Once the outside world knows how Cajun dialect humor is *supposed* to be done, the audiences will be less likely to settle for a wannabe or, at least, be able to recognize the imposter as a fake.

In the next few chapters, I will be charting the history of the Cajun people and how our community came to be divided. Knowledge of the story of the Cajun people will also help to explain why some Cajuns have tried to erase the memory of the “old” style of humor. I will be using the same information to argue for its restoration.

CHAPTER THREE—CREATING A CULTURAL IDENTITY: FROM LEGACY TO MYTH TO STEREOTYPE

The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive and unrealistic.

John F. Kennedy (1917-63)

Facts are stubborn things.

John Adams (1735-1826)

A man in New York City decided to write a book about churches around the country. He started in San Francisco, working east from there. Going to a very large church, he spotted a golden telephone on the vestibule wall and was intrigued with a sign that read "\$10,000 a minute." Seeking out the pastor he asked about the phone and the sign. The pastor answered that this golden phone was, in fact, a direct line to Heaven and if he paid the price, he could talk directly to God. The man thanked the pastor and continued on his way.

As he continued to visit churches in Seattle, Salt Lake, Denver, Chicago, Milwaukee, and around the United States, he found more phones, with the same sign, and the same answer from each pastor. Finally, he arrived in lovely Breaux Bridge, Louisiana. Upon entering St. Peter's Catholic Church on Broussard Ave., he saw the usual golden telephone. But THIS time, the sign read "Calls: 25 cents." Fascinated, he asked to talk to the priest. "Father Boudreaux, I have been in cities all across the country and in each church I have found this golden telephone and have been told it is a direct line to Heaven and that you could talk to God, but in the other churches the cost was \$10,000 a minute. Your sign reads 25 cents a call. Why?"

Father Boudreaux smiling, replied, "Sha, you in Louisiana now...dat's a local call."²¹

The summer of 2004 will be remembered for many things—America was at war, a war on terror waged in the country of Iraq and, at home, a culture war carried out with particular prejudice in states now colored red and blue. Just as destructive, multiple

²¹ Smiley Anders Column, The Advocate [Baton Rouge], January 27, 1998

hurricanes marched across the state of Florida. On the international front, the Olympics returned home to Athens. With so many important events clouding the horizon, it would have been easy to miss another homecoming taking place in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. Once “scattered to the four winds,”²² thousands upon thousands of the descendents of the Acadians now gathered to attend the *Congrès Mondial Acadien* in Grand Pré, “coming home to a place” that many of them “had never been before,”²³ a place that had witnessed the expulsion and devastation of their ancestors, a place that had long been denied them.²⁴ And they came, most of them coming from the U.S. state of Louisiana, to meet “cousins” and to participate in family “reunions.” As they stood beneath the four hundred year old willow trees that had been planted by their ancestors and marveled at the amazing dyke system, many chests filled with pride and awe at their heritage. It was, after all, what they had come for—what they had paid for—a chance to seek, to conserve, and to celebrate their cultural identity.

The purpose of this chapter is to ascertain the foundations of the Cajun cultural identity, and to trace the development of the identity as it survived mounted attacks from both the inside and the outside. Our ancestors left us a great legacy, a legacy that was turned first into a myth and then into stereotypes. These centuries-old events led to struggles over favored stereotypes, the fight for a dominant cultural narrative, and even a battle for control of the dialect humor.

²² *The Two Voices* Alfred, Lord Tennyson, stanza 11.

²³ “Rocky Mountain High,” sung by John Denver

²⁴ The original order exiling the Acadians from Nova Scotia was signed in 1755 and, according to Warren Perrin, had never been officially rescinded. “Cajun tourists were technically defying a centuries-old military edict and were subject to prosecution” (124), until Elizabeth II signed an official apology to the Acadians and their descendents on December 9, 2003.

Most people assume that the Acadian/Cajun cultural identity began in the nineteenth century when the term “Cajun” first appeared as the more common term. The assumption arises because of the overwhelming emphasis placed on the Exile and its aftermath. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that the formations of the Cajun cultural identity can be traced to the early seventeenth century, and that a name change did not change the people or their cultural values. To fully explore this proposal, it is important to know the ancestors of those Cajuns, the Acadians, and their story. The two are entwined, since the Acadian identity is very much the root of the Cajun identity. Although four hundred years and a continent separate the original Acadians and their descendants, the similarities still resonate and factor very much into the question of just who can be called a Cajun, who can make claims to community, and who can, therefore, make decisions about the identity and the Cajun dialect humor.

In order to prove that the Cajun cultural identity was well established before the Expulsion, I will explore the history of the Acadian/Cajun identity from its inception to its nineteenth century challenges. I will begin by giving a short history of the Acadians insofar as it supports the argument for the beginnings of the cultural identity. There is not enough room in this work to give the entire history, nor is there any reason to do so since there are some recent studies that detail the subject, most notably works by John Mack Faragher, Carl Brasseaux, and Naomi E.S. Griffiths.

In the second part of the chapter, I will relate the change from “Acadian” to “Cajun,” how a poem became an origin myth and the foundation for stereotyping a people, and then how that stereotyping negatively impacted the morale of the Cajuns,

leaving them no choice but to labor to find themselves again in a world that is all too ready to claim that the Cajun culture is “dead.”²⁵

When I began this scholarly journey to seek my cultural heritage, I also began to share my findings with other Cajuns and was surprised at the ignorance of the rich heritage of our community. Despite the number of books that have been published on the subject,²⁶ it seems that the majority of Cajuns have no idea of our very special history, other than the fact that “we were kicked out of Canada.” The more I research the more I recognize just how much our ancestors sacrificed to retain our cultural identity and how important it is to relay that sense of identity to the members of the community. Knowing the depth of our cultural heritage would help us to attain the power necessary to own our cultural markers. Our community cannot hold on to its cultural identity if only the cultural elite retain the knowledge of the foundations for that identity.

There are still too many Cajuns who grew up without an unshakeable pride in their heritage, who actually refuse to be called “Cajuns” or “Acadians,”²⁷ even though they are fully descended from the first settlers of L’Acadie. I trust this work can help other Cajuns to accept the importance of our ancestors and our ancestry. Once I understood the strength, grace, and courage required to guard our inheritance for four centuries, I also understood that it was outsiders who created the myths and stereotypes that have lingered to this day. Outsiders who never understood just who the Acadians/Cajuns were, or what cultural values we hold dear, found it too easy to be dismissive of

²⁵ Dr. Barry Jean Ancelet is often quoted as saying, “Just when they pronounce the Cajun culture is dead, the corpse sits up in the coffin.”

²⁶ The books on Acadian/Cajun history tend to be scholarly rather than of mass appeal.

²⁷ These observations are based on recent private interviews with people of Acadian descent, some who speak French, who tell me that their preference is to dispense with the terms “Cajun” or “Acadian” because of the negative feelings still attached to those terms, feelings they have carried since childhood.

the Cajun people. This is the reason our gatekeepers are so selective about what is being kept and what is being discarded. The myths about the Cajuns began even before the exile of the Acadian people. The clouded history of the Cajun people is why it is so important to analyze those myths and stereotypes and their impact on the cultural identity. To do so, I must first establish the foundations of the Cajun cultural identity.

Many historians have narrowed the story of the Acadians/Cajuns to that fateful summer and fall when lives were turned upside down and decades of diaspora began. As Thomas Fiehrer states, “After biological and social reproduction, migration is undoubtedly the most characteristic fact of human existence. Migration is the motor of social change and the leaven of culture. It is the wild card of politics and the handmaiden of history” (1). There is no denial that the exile years were central to the continued recognition of the Acadians as a separate people, nor can it be denied that the attempted ethnic cleansing of the Acadian people and their culture had long lasting ramifications on both Nova Scotia and Louisiana. July 28, 1755 was, therefore, a pivotal date in the Acadian Odyssey.²⁸ The forced migration of the Acadians is not, however, the beginning of their history, nor is it the complete story of these people.

Acadian history really began in 1604—before Quebec, Jamestown, or the *Mayflower*—when France sent adventurers to settle what would become the first permanent European settlement north of Florida in North America (Jobb 2). Over the next few years, through friendship and intermarriage with the local Mi’Kmaq Indians and despite repeated incursions from the British and counterclaims from the Scots and the

²⁸ This is the date the official decision was made to deport the Acadians from the colony of Nova Scotia (Ross 61, Perrin 97).

French, the settlers looked away from their mother countries to embrace their new home, L'Acadie.

There is some debate about the origination of the name "L'Acadie." There are those who believe that Verrazano named it "Arcadie" after a popular Italian poem that spoke of a paradise called "Arcadia" (Henry *Blue Collar* 33). Over the years, the "r" was somehow lost. His 1524 letter to the French government actually speaks of a land "which we have called 'Arcadie' because of the beauty of its trees." Champlain referred to the region as Arcadia in 1604, but the original French land grant named the area as "la Cadie, Canada," supporting the idea that the term originated from an Indian word, "akade," or "quoddy," which means a place where fish, birds, fur-bearing animals and forests of valuable trees abound (Winzerling 3-4). After visiting Nova Scotia and seeing the names of towns like Shubenacadie, Tracadie-Sheila, Musquodoboit, and even Passamaquoddy in Maine, I, at first, tended to agree with Champlain. After some consideration, I think that the origin of the name does not need to be an either or. *Both* may be right. The Souriquois²⁹ Indians called the area "Cadie" or "Kaddy" when Verrazano arrived. He might have then been reminded of the poem due to the similarity to the word and called the place "Arcadie."

Either way, the area of Arcadie or la Cadie impressed its original visitors with its sylvan lushness and the fertile ground was called L'Acadie. The name, L'Acadie, remained until 1621 when James I, so certain of his supremacy and eventual success in attaining control of the region, gave the area to Sir William Alexander, Earl of Stirling, who called it Nova Scotia, "New Scotland" (Herbin 23). Between 1628 and 1763, the

²⁹ This is the name originally given to the Indians by the French. They were not known as the Mi'Kmaq until the 17th and 18th centuries. (Herbin 15).

land was referred to as “Acadia or Nova Scotia” in just about all international treaties (Griffiths *Contexts* xix). The original European settlers, who fully intended to stay there, called it “Acadia” and came to be known as “Acadians,” the first such group to be given a New World name (Doucet 1).

Based on Longfellow’s *Evangeline*, journalists assume that the Acadians were all French Catholics who had originally emigrated from Normandy. Brasseaux writes that at least 55% of them came from “the *Centre-Ouest* provinces” (*Founding* 30), and James H. Dormon categorizes them as “largely of peasant French stock” (Conrad 233). Griffiths reminds us that the Acadians were not just Catholic peasants; the Acadians were also made up of Basque fishermen as well as “bad-tempered Scottish farmers with a tendency to tell government officials to mind their own business and Irish sailors with an eye for pretty women” (*The Acadians* xi). According to Oscar Winzerling, the original group of 150 colonists in 1604 was comprised of “convicts, laborers, some Huguenot ministers and Catholic priests, and some nobles such as Samuel Champlain and Jean de Poutrincourt” (4). Since European women were not among the first arrivals to Acadia,³⁰ the original families were interracial in nature. The colonists developed strong and lasting relationships with “the people of this land.”³¹

Although some of the European customs remained, it was the combination of the different ethnic groups with the environment and the Mi’Kmaq that “produced a distinct society. Local conditions produced particular problems which were solved by distinctly

³⁰ The colonists landing in 1632 had a few women but the bulk of French families did not begin to arrive until 1636. These were given the title of the true “First Families of Acadia” (Stacey 39). Shortly after their arrival, the first child of French parents was born in Acadia. (Faragher 44)

³¹ The “people of this land” are the Mi’Kmaq Indians, members of the Algonquin tribe. Their name is sometimes spelled “Micmac,” “Mi’kmaq,” or “Mikmaq,” or even transliterated as “Micmaw.” I will use the spelling as found within the body of each quote.

Acadian methods” (Griffiths *Contexts* 63). For example, grievances of any kind were more likely to be settled amongst themselves without bothering the courts. If they did “bother the courts,” it was done more as a form of amusement rather than malice (Brebner 41), or it concerned the land (Brasseaux *Founding* 8). Arthur G. Doughty notes,

On the whole, they were a strong, healthy, virtuous people, sincerely attached to their religion and their traditions. The most notable singularity of their race was stubbornness, although they could be led by kindness where they could not be driven by force. Though inclined to litigation, they were not unwilling to arbitrate their differences. ... The term ‘Mister’ was unknown among them. (14)

The Acadians had created such a tight, egalitarian community that settling grievances could become an event that involved everyone. While the Acadian home was paternalistically presided over by the father, the women offered their wisdom to help settle disputes (Perrin 9-12), and it was the women who took responsibility for handing down the culture and cultural mores, a trait that continued into the twentieth century (Brasseaux *Acadian* 42).

By the time of the Expulsion, the Acadians had become their own people with unshakeable ties to the land. John Mack Faragher explains:

The inhabitants had come from a variety of backgrounds—Catholic but also Huguenot, French but also Mikmaq, English, Irish, even Spanish. Their culture was a combination of old and new. Their families were patriarchal and extended, and although some were better off than others, their society essentially egalitarian. They were peripheral to the main currents of the Atlantic, but deeply connected to it through trade and commerce. They identified weakly with the distant mother country, but enjoyed close and amicable attachments to the native people. They had ceased to think of themselves as colonists and begun to develop a *perspective indigène*. (69-70)

In developing a *perspective indigène*, the settlers who had come from a “by no means homogeneous” background (Griffiths *Contexts* xvii) now characterized themselves as Acadians, an identity that owed less to where they had come from and more to their ability to adapt to the new land, the disparate groups of Europeans each bringing their particular strengths to create a distinctive Acadian lifestyle. Besides their extended kinship system, distinctive language and speech patterns, the early Acadians had “a more uniform socioeconomic background; and a far greater degree of social equality. When coupled with a common North American identity, these characteristics set them apart from their neighbors and provided the elements of social cohesion necessary to forge a nationalistic identity” (Brasseaux *Founding* 3), the foundations of a cultural identity. This coming together created a strong people, strong enough to withstand what was yet to come.

France tended to forget this province due to its own political problems at the time, so the independent-minded Acadians took responsibility for their survival, pioneering a New World lifestyle unlike any other New World communities (Daigle 110,114). Rather than building towns and then gathering people to live there, the Acadians grouped their farms into communities of their extended families. The Acadians were, much like their descendents, predominantly endogamous (Henry *Blue Collar* 126), tending to marry within and among the original families, thus creating extended families throughout the settlements, leading the Acadians to see themselves as one people and solidifying the foundation of a cultural identity. “The family formed the basic social unit in Acadia. The cohesiveness of the Acadian family was particularly important, not only because of the isolation and vulnerability of the colony, but also because the marshland farming

depended entirely on co-operative labor” (Ross 36-37). Dormon explains, “their family structures tended toward extended kinship, featuring multi-generational residential units and a close working relationship among several parts of these units for convenience and security through teamwork” (11).

Noted Acadian genealogist, Bona Arsenault, gives further examples of how the Acadian family lifestyle helped to form the cultural identity:

The settlers’ rustic cabins dotted the slopes between the sea and the forest and parents with their sons-in-law and daughters banded together and worked as teams. Married sons of the same family often lived in their father’s house or nearby and respected the father’s authority. This was the source of the deeply rooted virtues of the Acadian hospitality. Their deference to and respect for parents as well as their almost religious veneration towards the ancestors was without parallel. These virtues are still to be found today in most descendents of these early settlers. (54)

The much-vaunted Cajun hospitality, a trait that many Cajuns use for self-description, can be traced to the communal lifestyle established by their ancestors. My own family was trained to the notion that someone showing up at your home unexpectedly at dinnertime should not be considered an inconvenience, but an opportunity to visit. Hadn’t prepared enough food? Cook another pot of rice or add a potato to the soup, just do whatever is necessary to accommodate the numbers. I was taught that this is what you do because you are a Cajun. The unexpected visitors are usually members of your extended family who will reciprocate when your children show up at their door. The concept of calling before you arrive is practically unknown and would make you “uppity” if you expected what, in other societies, would be considered a courtesy. After some four hundred years and despite Americanization,³² this particular Acadian to Cajun trait may

³² See Shane Bernard’s book, *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People*

be completely self-ascribed,³³ but it is also completely recognizable in its original form. These traits support my contention that the Cajun lifestyle is grounded in the Acadian cultural traits.

Despite their devotion to the extended family, the Acadians of L'Acadie were not a completely closed community (Daigle 110), as some have tried to name them, so they were able to build onto their population through exogamous relationships as well. "Since approximately 25 to 30 percent of recorded Acadian marriages involved a partner from elsewhere, the increase of the Acadian population between 1710 and 1748 was not only the healthy expansion of a self-generating population. It also owed something to the attraction and assimilation of outsiders" (Griffiths *Context* 47). Attraction and assimilation are other traits that have been handed down to their Cajun descendants, qualities that remain very much a part of the identity. These traits are part of the reason that the Cajun people have continued to thrive 250 years after the Exile. Family continues to be the core of the Cajun life, and as a continuing contribution to the Cajun identity.

Because many of the settlers were semi-illiterate and listed in the census as *laboueurs*, some historians and journalists, especially after the publication of *Evangeline*, have tended to discount the Acadians as unskilled peasants. Had these investigators looked further, they would have discovered tailors, weavers, masons, and gunsmiths as well as yeomen farmers and fishermen (Ross 29), not to mention those who were able to create the elaborate dyke/*aboiteaux*³⁴ system.

³³ According to James Dormon, "Ascripted" traits within an ethnic group are the ethnic traits that distinguish the group and how they see themselves. This is the "cultural stuff" (Barth) that marks the boundaries. "Self-ascription is the basis of ethnic identity and therefore plays the key role in creating an emotional sense of self and group awareness. (3)

³⁴ Wooden sluices that kept the saltwater from incursion in the fields.

The creation of the dyke system³⁵ alone should have been enough to convince the detractors that while the Acadians preferred a simple life, they were not simple people. Simple people would have been unable to tame the world's highest tides in the Bay of Fundy through such a technologically advanced system.³⁶ This system allowed them to develop settlements based on the reclamation of salt marshes, the only North American colonists to do so (Ross 35). Having wrested this land from the sea, they were rewarded with some of the most fertile fields on the continent (Rushton 31, Daigle 110).

Survival was the name of the game and, while the Acadians tended to be communal and neighborly (the building, care, and maintenance of the dykes could be considered to be everyone's responsibility), there were still economic levels within the community. The Acadians left behind medieval feudalism in Europe and quickly embraced the New World concept of land ownership by people of their social stratum. Commitment to the land forged a republican,³⁷ yet communal society that included the Mi'Kmaq, a cultural trait that shared very little with any of their other neighbors.

While an Acadian identity was still in the making at the close of the 1680's, one can already see many of the characteristics that were to be important later. In these early years of struggle, the community developed attitudes towards external authority, whether secular or religious; to the possession and development of land, to the Micmac and Malecite peoples; and to the larger colonial settlements of New France and New England. ... The emerging Acadian identity was created from the daily rhythm of activity and the changing relationships between the migrant and the new world. (Griffiths *Contexts* 4)

³⁵ It is estimated that they were able to reclaim land equal in size to the island of Manhattan. (Rushton 35)

³⁶ The system was so advanced that, after the expulsion, the Yankee farmers could not maintain it themselves and had to rely on the Acadian prisoners to restore them and then teach them what to do. (Faragher 428)

³⁷ They sent representatives to represent the community whenever there was a need to interact with the government. (Ross 59)

The Acadian “attitude” to the Mi’Kmaq created a collective relationship with the natives that was unparalleled in North America, even to the point of calling the Mi’Kmaq “the people of this land” rather than “savages” (Faragher 39, Ross 15), as the other indigenous people were called across the continent. Instead of attempting to force the Mi’Kmaq to accept the ways of the Europeans, the Acadians were willing to accept the Mi’Kmaq way of life (Faragher 37). The Acadians respected the natives, an attitude that was unlike that of the Puritans who sought to convert the so-called “savages” and possess their land (Faragher 47), not necessarily in that order.

Without this “attitude,” the Acadians might have been incapable of surviving the often-inhospitable wilderness in those difficult first few decades. Not only were they able to survive, they were able to thrive. Because they were able to create their own land near the shore, they had no need or desire to spread beyond into the sacred hunting grounds of the Mi’Kmaq, thus cementing the relationship that continued to be mutually beneficial (Arcenaux 6). From the Mi’Kmaq, the Acadians learned area farming techniques and the lore of local medicinal plants (Griffiths *Contexts* 25). In return, the Mi’Kmaq were open to learning about Catholicism, and more than a few converted to the Acadian style of that religion,³⁸ which probably then allowed for greater ease of intermarriage (Faragher 37-38).

With such peace and camaraderie between the newcomers and the Mi’Kmaq, as well as the ability to draw their families around them on their own land, Acadia could have been the Arcadia for which it was supposedly named. The Acadians were contented in their lifestyle, leading the last French governor of Acadia to remark, “The more I

³⁸ As with other influences in their lives, the early Acadians molded Catholicism to fit their needs instead of the other way around.

consider these people, the more I believe they are the happiest people in the world” (Stacey 51). Unfortunately, Acadia was situated in a contentious location on the North American continent. “Ownership” went back and forth between France and England, as the two superpowers continued to wage war with each other over these “borderlands.”³⁹

The Acadians distanced themselves from the hostilities, maintaining their neutrality as well as their independent streak, and chose instead to build forts and supply the soldiers of *both* sides. In the over 150 years since the Acadians had settled the new land, they had forged for themselves a solid and unshakeable identity that would take them and their descendants through the Expulsion of 1755 and beyond. “By the dawn of the eighteenth century, the Acadians were no longer French settlers in the New World. ... They were North Americans who spoke French, not Frenchmen living in North America.⁴⁰ ... They had evolved into a distinct people, an immense extended family that was hardworking, independent-minded, sometimes boisterous, and ever wary of authority” (Jobb 58).

This unshakeable, and separate, identity led to distrust of and from the British. It also led to the denial of help from the French when the British decided to destroy the Acadian culture and seize their homes and property. “The Acadians considered themselves Acadians, the French considered them unreliable allies, and the English, unsatisfactory citizens” (Griffiths *Acadians* 37).

Even though the Acadians were officially British subjects by this time, the British referred to them as the “French Neutrals,” thus giving some rationale to those who were

³⁹ Acadia changed hands nine times before the Deportation (Doucet 2), a helpful dress rehearsal for life in Louisiana where ten flags flew over the state, three flags in three days in the early nineteenth century.

⁴⁰ An important concept to remember when considering why the Acadians refused to remain in France after the exile.

suspicious of just where Acadian loyalties would lie in the world war⁴¹ about to be waged. The British military leaders and the Anglo-Americans of New England were already suspicious of the Acadian lifestyle, a way of living that did not seem “right” to them. The Acadians created a lifestyle of self-sufficiency that differed from that of their Yankee neighbors in New England, as well as the French in New France. The British, the French, and the Yankees judged the Acadians as “an indolent people, some variation of Tennyson’s lotus eaters” (Griffiths *Contexts* 56), a stereotype of the Acadians/Cajuns that has lasted to this day. Their Anglo-American neighbors were angered that the Acadians worked hard enough to care for their own community but not hard enough to have more to trade to the Yankees who were battling starvation at this time (Rushton 35).

Despite the aspersions being cast about them, the Acadians worked very hard, though their method was one of cooperation and mutual aid. The community reached out to make certain that the widows’ farms were also cared for and that anyone willing to work did not go hungry. The Acadians had an active trading system with the New Englanders who purchased the Acadian surpluses (Arceneaux 15-16); however, once their basic needs were met, the Acadians saw no reason to expend unnecessary energy in the fields when they could be spending time with family and friends. As stated before, family was the building block of their community, and they saw no reason to look beyond that for “luxuries.” They did not feel a need for “imported possessions more elaborate than a few iron pots, bottles of liquor, and bolts of red English cloth with which to supplement the wool and flax garments they wove for themselves,” so they “never went on to develop a proto-capitalist economy with its surpluses, money, government, banks,

⁴¹ The French and Indian War (the part that was fought on the North American continent) began two years before the Seven Years War (the part that was fought on the European continent) and involved all of the Superpowers, thus it could be considered to be a world at war.

and soldiers” (Rushton 35). This more insular style of living fit perfectly with their desire to remain neutral in their contested borderlands. The Acadians had thought their neutrality would save them, and it was, instead, used against them. It was no match for the greed of those who had less ability to adapt to the land and its people.

On July 28, 1755, Chief Justice Belcher published a brief explaining why he thought the Acadians should be forcibly removed from their lands. To sum, he thought they were “too contrary” and that they would “hamper the progress of establishment of English settlers” (Arsenault 122-123, D. Le Blanc 140-141). Concerned by the Acadians’ neutrality, as well as their friendship with the Mi’Kmaq, not to mention a hunger for their lush farmland, the British created a plan to solve the problem of the “neutral French.” Calling the proposal a “great and noble scheme,” the British prepared a strategy to eradicate the Acadian culture. Faragher believes the events “bear a striking similarity to more recent episodes of ethnic cleansing” (xix).

John Winslow, the Anglo-American officer charged with overseeing the Expulsion (Hansen 27), wrote in his journal [*Italics mine*]:

We are now hatching the *noble and great project* of banishing the French neutrals (Acadians) from this province; they have ever been our secret Enemies, and have encouraged our Indians to cut our throats. If we can accomplish this Expulsion, it will have been *one of the greatest deeds* the English in America have ever achieved; for among other considerations, the part of the country which they occupy is *one of the best soils in the world*, and, in that event, we might place some good farmers on their homesteads.⁴² (Arsenault 123, D. Le Blanc 151)

⁴² From *Winslow’s Journal*, Massachusetts Historical Society. A version of this part of the journal, which calls it “A great and noble Schme” appeared in letter form in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on September 4, 1755. (Faragher)

This declaration condemns the British with every word. While trumpeting the military rationale for the expulsion, their main justification shows covetousness for “one of the best soils in the world.” They did indeed “place some good farmers,” bringing in the starving farmers from Massachusetts to take the farmland.

Historians have found no evidence to support the accusations against the Acadians. While the Mi’Kmaq fought with the French to rid Nova Scotia of the British during the French and Indian War, there is no evidence that the Acadians encouraged the Mi’Kmaq “to cut [their] throats.” There is, however, ample evidence that the British used every opportunity to raid and burn Acadian homesteads. When these repeated incursions failed to get the Acadians to obligingly remove themselves from the land, the British resorted to a campaign to vilify the Acadians. The Acadians, as targeted by the British, began to assume an unwarranted position as bogeymen.

In the buildup to the French and Indian War, the British of Nova Scotia sought any excuse to prove to their government that the Acadians deserved to be completely evacuated from the province, going so far as to blame the Acadians for raids and atrocities that were completely the responsibility of the French and Indians (Winzerling 9-10). The rhetoric was powerful enough to dehumanize and demonize the Acadians. After all, the Anglo-Americans had already convinced themselves that the Acadians were ignorant, selfish, and lazy. Now the Acadians were considered a threat to the well-being and welfare of the settlers of New England and completely undeserving of the fertile land they had created⁴³ or the lifestyle that did not imitate the denizens of New England or New France. Those denizens thought it was only fitting that the Acadians be stripped of

⁴³ The Acadians created a large portion of the land they cultivated by reclaiming the acreage from the sea through a series of dykes.

their homes, their property, and be blended into the other colonies so that their way of life would vanish.

This particular episode of ethnic cleansing is not often taught in schools, as students are no longer required to read Longfellow's romanticized homage, *Evangeline*. The story of the Acadian exile is, for the most part, lost in the hallowed halls of history. Canadian children are taught that the "real history of Canada began in Quebec" (Doucet 9), and American children are taught about Jamestown and the *Mayflower*. No mention is made of the *Jonas*, the ship that carried the first Acadian colonists to the North American shore (Farragher 1), or the relationship formed between the Acadians and the Mi'Kmaq. History has ever been the story of the "winners." With the loss of their homeland, the "losers" would remain so in the eyes of the world and many of their descendents, even into modern times. The exile is pivotal in Cajun history; the loss of the community's power began here, at this time.

The "Expulsion," as the British named it, was whitewashed in the history books as "The Deportation," a term that connotes that the Acadians had been in L'Acadie illegally and deserved to be deported. To the Acadians, the "Expulsion" was termed "*Le Grand Derangement*," a "Great Disturbance" that separated families (Doughty 138-139), some never to find each other again (Winzerling 17). The exile, spanning some five decades, resulted in the deaths of thousands through disease, exposure, and starvation, not to mention the losses when two less than seaworthy ships carrying exiles sank (Griffiths *Contexts* 93).

The Acadians were herded onto crowded ships destined for English colonies along the Eastern seaboard or France. Groups of the exiles continually tried to make their

way back to L'Acadie, only to be re-captured and shipped somewhere else by the British. Their homes were burned to prevent the population from returning (Daigle 113). In an ironic turn of events, given the previous accusations against the Acadians, British troops under the command of Colonel Monckton descended on Sainte-Anne des Pays-Bas “killing and scalping scores of Acadians, including women and children” (Faragher 405). Many of the escapees were hunted down like criminals for nearly a decade. Those who were found were arrested, and then deported or thrown into prison for the extent of the war. The Acadians were spread across three continents and a host of countries, and it would take decades for them to gather in such strength again.

The “great and noble Scheme” was successful in removing the Acadians from their property, but it failed in its original intent. Nova Scotia’s lieutenant governor, Charles Lawrence, sought to completely eradicate the Acadians’ culture and their existence as a separate people. He did not seek their deaths; he simply wanted them gone and unable to return to the land he controlled. He hoped to expel the Acadians and to divide them “among other British colonial societies in North America where it would be impossible for them to organize themselves as a distinct and separate community. They were to be assimilated within the context of each separate colony ... and become undifferentiated from the distinct group” (Griffiths *Contexts* 64). Lawrence thought to turn them into what they had heretofore not been in the opinion of the British—good citizens.

Griffiths posits three reasons why the Expulsion worked against the perfidious purpose of the British lieutenant governor of Nova Scotia and why the Acadian identity still remains strong and distinctive to this day. First, long before the events of the exile,

the Acadians had come to see themselves as a distinct group; outsiders also recognized them as a separate people (*Contexts* 75). When they first arrived in France, Santo Domingo, Liverpool, Maryland, Georgia, South Carolina, Boston, or even a decade later in Louisiana, the groups, no matter how big or how small, announced themselves as “Acadians,” and that is how they were referenced in governmental correspondence.

Secondly, when they arrived in the places where they were supposed to be “assimilated” and “undifferentiated,” none of the colonial leaders knew what to do with the Acadians. Unfortunately for the British, the receiving colonies were unprepared for the unexpected arrival of so many exiles. Although they were, in actuality, subjects of the British crown and, therefore, entitled to all the rights and privileges of the citizens of any British colonies, it was easier for the colonial governments to disregard those rights. In refusing the Acadians the status of citizenship, those governments would not have to be responsible for the care and feeding of the exiles (Faragher 373-374). The first exiles sent to Connecticut were treated as welcome guests, but the rest were treated as servants, slaves, or as prisoners of war, just like in the other colonies.

Thirdly, Griffiths believes that the Acadians shared an “interpretation of the deportation and its aftermath. By the end of the eighteenth century, a shared Acadian belief had evolved about why the deportation had occurred and what it had meant for the Acadian community” (*Contexts* 97). They saw themselves as innocent people who had committed no crime deserving of what had been done to them. What had been done to them was unspeakable. As if the horrors they had experienced in their homeland were not enough, the Acadians had even more nightmares to follow. No matter where they were sent, upwards of 50% of them perished in one form or another. The survivors had

to watch their parents, sisters, brothers, and children die from starvation, exposure, and disease. Since they had been allowed to take little with them when they were expelled, some were reduced to begging from door-to-door (Faragher 375).

After being confined to their ships, under guard for several months, the Acadians sent to Pennsylvania succumbed to various diseases, including an outbreak of smallpox. Only then were they allowed to disembark, but they were still isolated and supplies were slow in reaching them. A Quaker who visited them remarked “they were without shirts and socks and were sadly in need of bed-clothing” (Doughty 144). The Pennsylvania government reinstated a law allowing officials to take the Acadian children away from their parents so that the children would learn English and also a trade (Jobb 151-152).

In Georgia, the Acadians were treated as indentured servants and forced to work as plantation hands as their children began to be kidnapped and sold into slavery (D. Le Blanc 332-333). In Massachusetts, Acadian children were taken from their families and distributed as foster children among British families (Arsenault 152) until the Acadians petitioned the government for their return. Nothing the Acadians had faced to this point could compare with the horrendous loss of their children. “Although the practice of putting children out to service was common among colonial Britons, it was rare among Acadians” (Faragher 378).

The colony of Virginia refused to take the Acadian exiles at all, so the Acadians were sent to England as prisoners of war⁴⁴ (Ross 64). Virginia Governor Dinwiddie “saw the Acadians as ‘bigotted Papists, lazy and contentious’” (B. Le Blanc 47). To the

⁴⁴ At war’s end, the survivors of this particular group made their way to France where they gathered with others such as the 800 who had been kept in prison in Nova Scotia until the end of the war when they, too, were shipped off to France (Braud iii). By 1785, they emigrated to Louisiana, where, presumably, their wanderings finally came to an end.

colonial British, the “bigotted” [sic] Acadians had committed the dual sins of dedication to Catholicism and lack of obeisance to King George. This shared narrative and sense of corporate injustice tended to unify the Acadians throughout their travails.

I believe a fourth reason for the continuation of the cultural identity underscores the three posed by Griffiths. The concept of family remained preeminent in the lives of the Acadians. In Massachusetts, the Acadians spent much of their time crisscrossing the colony and beyond, looking for relatives. They were so desperate to find family members and therefore, so active in their travel, they offended their hosts, and legislation was passed limiting their movements.⁴⁵ This governmental attempt to corral the Acadians met with little success and had no effect on the exiles’ determination to find family members.

The original dispersal was, by no means, the end of their wandering. Robert G. Le Blanc estimates that it took approximately fifty years until the last of the Acadian exiles finally found a home and settled (122). For all of the exiles, no matter where they resided, living conditions were appalling and many were gathering themselves and their families to wander once again in search of a home, a new Acadia. Ultimately they made their way, by land or by sea, either back to Nova Scotia (where they found no welcome and restricted access to any land⁴⁶) or to the new “Promised Land”—Louisiana, a place that was now controlled by the Spanish, though it still contained French-speaking people (D. Le Blanc 315).

⁴⁵ For stories based on primary sources on this topic, read Faragher’s *A Great and Noble Scheme*, Chapters 13 & 14.

⁴⁶ They could not return unless they agreed to settle in groups of no more than ten and to sign an anti-Catholic oath (Perrin 33), nor were they allowed to buy back their old farms or even to resettle near them. (Doucet 83) “Like the Mi’kmaq, they had been put safely away on reservations.” (Doucet 110)

But why Louisiana when the exiles had been offered places in Santo Domingo or France? Many had been willing to leave the domination of the British colonies to go to France, but France was not willing to support the exiles' desertion from the umbrella of the British government. More importantly, those Acadians already in France were coming to the realization that there would be no land there for them to call their own. After generations of owning their own land, a return to feudal France was abhorrent to them.

By removing the Acadians from L'Acadie, the British had not just destroyed a settlement of people; they had separated families—parents from children, brothers from sisters, as well as the extended relatives—and a people from their land. The desire to recreate Acadia somewhere else was, I believe, twofold in nature: first, it expressed the need to reunite and reconstruct their family units, and secondly, it articulated their desire to reclaim the land. Their New World independent attitudes made them quite different from the local populations in France (B. Le Blanc 49), so France was not a viable alternative. To survive in France, the Acadians would have ultimately been forced to assimilate into French culture, something the Acadians could not bring themselves to do. To survive in Santo Domingo would have required a capital infusion in the indigo and sugar plantations, something the indigent Acadians could not hope to achieve (Brasseaux *Quest*⁴⁷ 10). Louisiana had vast unsettled areas where they could reunite their families and recreate their farms and family-dominated villages.

Property ownership was a huge part of the cultural identity of the Acadians; their love of the land proved second only to their fidelity to family. Cajun writer and Preservationist, Revon Reed, contends that it was land, first, and family, second:

⁴⁷ Each of the citations from Brasseaux's *Quest* is taken from primary source correspondence.

Après sa terre, l'amour du Cajun est à sa famille. Pour mieux nous comprendre, il faut savoir que la vie du Cajun tourne autour de ses relations personnelles et intimes dans sa famille-même: du mari à sa femme; des parents aux enfants; de grand et grand-grand-parents aux parents; de nénette à parrain; de tante à oncle; du premier jusqu'au dernier cousin! (Reed 28)

I may disagree on the order, but I do agree that the Cajun loves two things—his family and his land, loves common to both Acadians and Cajuns. Many Cajuns, in my experience, still tend to live in family compounds. “Acadian demography has always rested on numerous families related to each other by intermarriage: not only was each village formed of allied families, but links of kinship also united different settlements” (Braud 14).

When the Acadian Diaspora, begun in such sorrow in 1755, came to a conclusion in Louisiana, I doubt that many of the exiles considered that they had arrived in “heaven,” as the joke at the beginning of the chapter denotes. I also doubt they found the inhospitable area to be Longfellow’s “Eden of Louisiana.” The overwhelming heat, saturated humidity, the mosquitoes, oversized roaches, and the diseases associated with heat, mosquitoes and roaches were waiting to welcome the exiles. Arriving “in misery and in great need” (Brasseaux *Quest* 78), they were nevertheless determined to establish *Nouvelle Acadie*. The call of the land and family was so strong that they defied the Spanish Governor’s wish to send them to the royal fort of Saint Louis de Natchez.

The correspondence of the time shows the Acadian leaders using their wives and finding excuses to convince the Governor to allow them to settle with their relatives and friends at Cabanocey⁴⁸ (J.K. Voorhies 85). The Acadians told Governor Ulloa that,

⁴⁸ This was the first “Acadian Coast” in Louisiana. The word comes from the Chetimachas word “Cabahannoces” which means, “place where the ducks roost.” This area became St. James Parish.

although the land at Natchez was suitable, it was “too isolated” and that they were afraid of being “exposed to Indian harassment” (Brasseaux *Quest* 116). Although the Spanish government answered each of the Acadians’ concerns, the Acadians were adamant or, as observed by Ulloa and his Aide, Piernas, “obstinate,” “rebellious,” “ungrateful” and “pestering and begging as is their nature” (Brasseaux *Quest* 114-123).

It is not at all surprising that the Acadians would stand strong for what they wanted. Some of the first Acadians to arrive in Louisiana in 1765 were the ones who had defied the exile orders and remained in Nova Scotia until they knew there was no chance at all to regain their land. At war’s end and upon release from prison, Joseph “Beausoleil” Broussard led a group of exiles that hired ships, made their way to Santo Domingo and then on to Louisiana. This group was “tough; they had fought for their rights, they had kept their families together, and they migrated as families. . . . They were a very determined people, not lethargic and certainly not complacent” (Arceneaux 339-340).

Determination (what some had referred to as “stubbornness”) was at the core of the Acadians’ search for a new home, and this allowed the exiles to be forward looking. “Rather than falling into bitterness and despair, the exiled Acadians took stock of their new reality. . . . The collective memory and oral traditions offered a source of tools that would guarantee the group’s survival” (Daigle 114).

This determination and adaptability, combined with the wariness of authority that had set them apart from their Anglo-American neighbors in L’Acadie, served them well in Louisiana, allowing them to settle the swamps, marsh, and prairie lands, the areas of

Louisiana that were less appealing to the Creoles⁴⁹ of New Orleans. Purposely choosing the more isolated areas, the exiles were able to continue the development of their unique culture (Arceneaux 338, R.G. Le Blanc 123). The Acadian identity had been forged on the frontier, founded in familial response to hardship, deprivation, and the need to defend their families against the outside world. These foundational traits fashioned the aspects of identity carried from L'Acadie and were transmitted to their descendents.

Again, there is no reason to give a detailed history of the Acadian/Cajun experiences here since Carl Brasseaux has more than ably covered the information in his books, *The Founding of New Acadia* and *Acadian to Cajun: Transformation of a People, 1803-1877*. Suffice to say that the Acadians, for the most part, revisited their style of living in the new land and reproduced their “different” lifestyle, re-opening themselves to the same types of criticism and stereotyping from the surrounding Anglo-Americans and French Creoles who did not understand the Acadians’ “lack of ambition.” Once again, their lifestyle was misunderstood simply because many of them did not desire to live beyond their needs.

In predispersal Acadia and in the early years of settlement in Louisiana, the Acadians were not materialistic in the modern sense. They aspired only to a comfortable existence, and though they consistently produced small agricultural surpluses for sale to acquire commodities they could not themselves produce, they did not labor to produce cash surpluses for the sake of possessing specific material goods, particularly the trappings of high social status. Thus, though significant economic differences existed among individuals, the poorest predispersal Acadian

⁴⁹ The original definition of “Creole” was anyone of French or Spanish descent born on the North American continent, therefore, according to this definition, all Cajuns are Creoles but not all Creoles are Cajuns. The Creoles of New Orleans were the upper class. The men of this class took mistresses from the quadroons through a regularized, recognized method and their offspring began to take on the name of “Creole” as well, which explains how the modern term has come to denote black people of French descent, especially in Louisiana. For this work, I will be using the original definition unless so designated in later chapters.

considered himself no less worthy than his wealthiest neighbor. (Brasseaux, *Acadian*, 3-4)

The line, “considered himself no less worthy than his wealthiest neighbor” is as true today of Cajuns as it ever was. It is generally acknowledged within the community that “you can tell a Cajun from a mile off—but you can’t tell him a damn thing up close.” It is also generally acknowledged that anyone trying to be “bigger than his britches” will be cut down to size. Cajuns have little patience with those, especially those within the group, who are pretentious, who think that their money, education, etc. makes them better than anyone else. This is one of the major sources of tension within our community. It is also the reason Barry Ancelet refuses the appropriate title of “gatekeeper.”

This egalitarian attitude has been present from the beginning, but it went underground for a while (about a century and a half) when the Antebellum Acadian society turned into a stratified community, with gentlemen farmers on top and yeomen farmers (and the rest of the community) on the other end. Perhaps the stratification began as early as 1811, when Louisiana became the first state in the United States to have an English-only law.⁵⁰ The upwardly mobile, or Genteel, Acadians, trying to keep up with the Creole Aristocracy (Brasseaux *Founding* 192-193), accepted the English language and the Anglo-American ways. With that upward mobility came a further separation within the Acadian community, between those who owned slaves and those who did not (Arceneaux 304).

These Genteel slave owner/assimilationists began to look down on their less affluent Acadian neighbors and, for the first time, a major division of “us” and “them” appeared within what had once been a fairly egalitarian group. The Genteel Acadians

⁵⁰ There would not be another state to require that English be the “official” language for over a century when Nebraska did so in 1920. Jim Bradshaw, [The Advertiser](#) (Lafayette), May 28, 2006, 1C.

indulged in a kind of Morlock versus Eloi partitioning of the community, going so far as to join the short-lived American Party, opponents of immigration and all things foreign. Also called the “Know-Nothing” party, the American party was nativist and anti-foreign. It had evolved in the 1840’s and 1850’s as a reaction to a new influx of Irish and German immigrants and managed to get a toehold in New Orleans politics for a short while.⁵¹

As Brasseaux comments, “The cultural apostasy of the Acadian nativists, manifested in their support of the American party, belied their changing cultural and linguistic orientation and presaged the wholesale postbellum migration of the Acadian gentry into the Anglo-American mainstream” (*Acadian* 99). With the purchase of their slaves, the Genteel Acadians sold their birthright and turned their back on the identity that had carried them through the Expulsion. The abandoned lower-class Acadians were left “as the sole heirs to their ethnic identity [and] they became an object of national and regional derision” (*Acadian* 99). Though the American Party did not last long, its legacy was far-reaching. Suspicion of anyone or anything “foreign” dominated the landscape of the latter half of nineteenth century America, especially among Southerners who felt they could only accept immigrants if those immigrants confined themselves to the agricultural areas that needed their influx of labor (Shanabruch 507, 510).

By the end of the Civil War, the Acadians had become dirt-poor subsistence farmers or hunters and trappers in a state where almost everyone was now dirt poor (Jobb 209-210). The Genteel Acadians were much fewer in number, and the stratification was reduced to the “culturally steadfast masses. ... Acadians came to be almost universally

⁵¹ According to Louisiana historian Alcée Fortier, the “Know-Nothing” Party (another name for the American Party) lost support in Louisiana when it was discovered that the party intended to proscribe Catholics and Catholicism. (254-255)

regarded by outsiders as a poor and ignorant people, a distortion that has persisted to the present” (Brasseaux *Acadian* 88).

The Acadians once again had multiple societal strikes against them: first, they were poor Southerners (the losers), which meant they were automatically devalued in the eyes of the conquering Yankees, who were once again the dominant society. Secondly, they were Catholic, an anathema to the Protestants of the north; thirdly, they spoke a kind of archaic French, not the French that refined people who had spent their Grand Tour on the Continent would speak; and lastly, they were content to live within their means and did not strive for luxuries beyond their basic needs. Outsiders judged the Acadians to be lazy, and all of the preceding attributes as ones they would associate with a lower socioeconomic level.

It was also around this time that the name “Acadian” was abbreviated to “Cajun,” a fitting term for a poor, ignorant, lazy, un-American denizen of the swamps of Louisiana. Although the name was not at first a derogatory term, it evolved to be just that. The “Land of *Evangeline*,” the home of the Cajuns, came to be seen as a backwater, the quaint language and customs of its people devolving into a permanent stereotype.

Historians, especially those from Louisiana, tend to hold Longfellow at fault for confirming the negative stereotyping of the Acadians in his romanticized homage, *Evangeline*, and sending the myth around the world. Published in 1847, the epic poem was vastly popular, not only nationally, but internationally as well. Longfellow’s broadly drawn Acadians were the only representatives, either in the literary world or the real one, outside of Nova Scotia or Louisiana, so the *Evangeline* saga was the only characterization of the Acadians and their plight (Brasseaux *Search* 7). The poem, written nearly a

century after the original diaspora, rallied its readers to pity and righteous indignation on behalf of the hapless yet “simple” Acadians, who had, according to the poem, been living an idyllic pastoral life, an extension of Adam and Eve in the Garden, frolicking all the day long until the evil snake evicted them from paradise.⁵²

The story behind the writing of *Evangeline* begins a few years before Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote the poem. Nathaniel Hawthorne brought dinner guest H.L. Conolly, a Maine clergyman, to Longfellow’s home. Conolly had heard the story of a young Acadian girl and her missing bridegroom from a parishioner⁵³ and had shared it with Hawthorne half a decade before, but Hawthorne did not feel the story was for him. Longfellow had wanted to write an epic and now he had a story that moved him, a story, as he writes in the opening paragraphs, of “the beauty and strength of woman’s devotion.”

Using Conolly’s account as an outline, Longfellow’s *Evangeline* tells the story of an ill-fated Acadian girl, “that maiden of seventeen summers,” who was sent into exile within days of her betrothal and fated to search for her fiancé, Gabriel, for untold decades, only to find him on his deathbed. Unfortunately, Longfellow knew but little of Louisiana, or Grand Pré, as it turns out, and doing his research in the Harvard University Library did not help him as much as he believed it did. The information there was sketchy at best and hopelessly flawed at worst. He depended far too much on the work of authors like Haliburton and Abbé Guillaume Raynal, who had determined that the Acadians had been simple peasants (Brasseaux *Search* 11), what might be termed one-

⁵² For a complete rendering of this story and its aftermath, read Brasseaux’s scholarly work, *In Search of Evangeline*.

⁵³ The parishioner was the wife of George Mordaunt Haliburton, nephew of the well-known historian, Thomas Chandler Haliburton. (B. Le Blanc 53)

dimensional characters. Longfellow was a writer of literature and not a historian, and it was not the last time that he amended history to fit his literary ambition.⁵⁴

It is obvious from the very first line, “This is the forest primeval,” that Longfellow had never been to Grand Pré, because there is no “forest primeval.” That area of Nova Scotia is just what the name suggests, a big meadow or prairie, and the ocean does not boom within its “rocky caverns” because it is not an area of rocky caverns. Longfellow may have been envisioning the rocky coasts of New England, but not that section of New Scotland. The poem is full of such inconsistencies. The original story claimed that the Expulsion had taken place on what was to be the wedding day of the young couple; Longfellow chose to begin the poem right after the betrothal. In setting the background for the idyllic little village, Longfellow has the priest strolling solemnly down the street, with the villagers showing him reverent obeisance and “words of affectionate welcome.” There was no priest in Grand Pré that year; therefore, he could neither stroll down the lane, nor could he have led dear Evangeline on her journey.

Another scene that could not have taken place is the tender scene on the beach, where Evangeline bids a tearful farewell to her love, watching while Gabriel and his father are placed upon a transport that will separate Evangeline and her love for the rest of their lives. While the scene works for the passionate epic, the men had already been aboard the transports for some time before the women embarked (Herbin 151-161).

Although there is no historical evidence that any of the exiles traveled this way, Evangeline seeks her Gabriel throughout their lifetime, always one step behind him, from Nova Scotia down the Mississippi to Louisiana, through the Ozarks and up into Pennsylvania, where the story ends with Evangeline becoming a nun and spending her

⁵⁴ See “Paul Revere’s Ride” by Longfellow (1863).

days nursing plague victims until the day she finds Gabriel dying on one of the pallets. In the romantic ending, Longfellow emphasizes their “exile without end” by describing their lonely, unmarked graves:

Still stands the forest primeval; but afar away from its shadow,
Side by side, in their nameless graves, the lovers are sleeping.
Under the humble walls of the little Catholic churchyard,
In the heart of the city, they lie, unknown and unnoticed.

They were reunited in death as they could not be in life, but, alas, they remained unheralded and unmourned.

The story fired the imagination of the American public as well as Canadian historians who began to research the exile for the first time, “primarily to justify the deportation and subsequent extermination of their ‘French Neutral’ forefathers” (Brasseaux *Search* 13). The Nova Scotian government commissioned Thomas B. Akins to research the archives to find “those documents which possess the greatest historical value” (ii). In the 1869 preface to his collection, Akins admits that he “carefully selected all documents in possession of the government of this province that could in any way throw light on the history and conduct of the French inhabitants of Nova Scotia, from their first coming under British rule, until their final removal from the country” (ii). I am not certain that he was aware that he was admitting to a one-sided re-creation of history by “throwing light on the *conduct* of the *French* inhabitants” [Italics mine]. By carefully selecting the documents, Akins was able to create a carefully constructed archive that vindicated the actions of the British and once again placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of the Acadians. The one-sided historical documents did not go to waste, however, as they would later influence the Cajun morale, convincing them that their

ancestors had deserved to be deported from their property, setting the stage for them to seek something good about themselves and their ancestors.

Prior to the Cajun revitalization movement, the Cajuns had believed the stereotypes as they had been labeled, for nearly a century. To add to the further deterioration of the Cajun sense of self-worth, the name “Cajun” came to be a blanket term for anyone in south Louisiana who lived below the poverty line, especially those who were “the shrimp fishermen, the muskrat trappers, the moss pickers, the oystermen” (Dorson *Buying* 230). It no longer mattered to outsiders whether people were descended from the Acadians or not. If you were poor, from Louisiana and spoke a type of patois, then you were a “Cajun.”

In small pockets today, among the middle generation, you will still find those who do not want to be labeled as “Acadians,” or “Cajuns,” and especially not as “Coonasses,” because the pejorative aspects of these terms still linger in their psyche. Seeking something to cling to in order to regain their self-worth as a community, the Acadians in Canada and the Cajuns in Louisiana looked to the plight of *Evangeline* for salvation.

Despite the accumulation of albeit one-sided historical documents to prove otherwise, *Evangeline* became a form of “Fakelore,”⁵⁵ as more and more people began to accept the poem as “the authentic account of the exile” (Brasseaux *Search* 14). “Gentle Evangeline” who was “the pride of the village” entered the pantheon of American literature, launching operas, films, songs, stories, novels, and paintings and, some would say, an entire tourist industry (B. Le Blanc 78). If you go to Grand Pré today, you will see her statue. “Like the Evangeline of fiction, the Evangeline statue at the Grand-Pré

⁵⁵ Richard Dorson coined the term “fakelore” to mean “a synthetic product claiming to be authentic oral tradition but actually tailored for mass edification.” (5)

National Historic Site stands on a pedestal. She is portrayed in blackened bronze in a flowing dress, frozen in mid-step as she gazes wistfully into the distance in search of her lost Gabriel and her lost homeland” (Jobb 20).

While the Acadians maintained a strong oral tradition, most of the stories of the Expulsion had disappeared by the end of the nineteenth century, coinciding with the ever-dwindling sense of ethnic pride (Brasseaux *Search* 18). Seeking to build upon the popularity of the heroine and the poem, Genteel Acadian Judge Felix Voorhies created a further myth of Evangeline by claiming that the story was true. He had it from his very own grandmother! Voorhies wanted to help restore a sense of Acadian pride,⁵⁶ so he wrote a novella of the Exile, claiming that the story had been handed down to him from his grandmother, who had known the original “Evangeline.”

Calling his text, *Acadian Reminiscences: The True Story of Evangeline*, the Judge told a touching story that paralleled Longfellow’s tale to some degree. The “real” Evangeline, he said, was named Emmeline LaBiche, and Gabriel was really Louis Arcenaux. Emmeline had been orphaned as a child, so the story goes, and was adopted by Voorhies’ grandmother. When she turned sixteen, Emmeline became engaged to Louis, but just before their wedding day, “the barbarous scattering of our colony took place” (82). In true heroic fashion, Louis resists the British soldiers and is wounded. He is then carried onto a ship while Emmeline observes, then faints. After coming to, Emmeline begins the search to be reunited with her lost love. Through her trials, Emmeline is saddened but “sweet tempered,” earning the name “Evangeline, or God’s little angel” (84). Voorhies’ story ends in Louisiana on the shores of the Bayou Teche where Emmeline and Louis are finally reunited. He is not dying, as in Longfellow’s story; he

⁵⁶ I will explain more about what was happening in the community in 1907 in another chapter.

had given up hope of ever seeing Emmeline again and has married. Upon hearing the tragic news, “God’s little angel” loses her mind, never to regain it. She lives the rest of her life like Ophelia, strolling by the bayou, plucking flowers, singing songs of old L’Acadie, believing herself still sixteen years old, and awaiting her wedding day. After quietly expiring in the arms of her adoptive mother, Emmeline is buried under the very oak tree where she had once again seen Louis and discovered that he no longer belonged to her.

The story was published in 1907 and, like most fakelore, grew its own legs. Voorhies’ use of the wise grandmother imparting cultural truths was a powerful method of awakening cultural pride, and his story grew to supplant *Evangeline* as the “true account of the exile,” especially among the embattled Cajuns seeking another weapon for their arsenal in the war for their ethnicity and the salvaging of their culture. “The enthusiastic public response to Voorhies’ story resulted in part from the south Louisianians’ desire to identify the heroine more closely with the region” (Brasseaux *Search* 19).

Few scholars took on the claims of Judge Voorhies effectively until Brasseaux did so in 1988. Brasseaux believes that Voorhies’ story was “clearly intended to be fiction” (*Search* 18) but if that was so, the intention fell short. In the introduction to the 1977 reprint, Voorhies’ grandson, Felix Birney Voorhies, gives no hint that he believes anything other than the “facts” of his grandfather’s story:

The author was best able to present this story as it was handed down to him by word of mouth by his grandmother who adopted Evangeline when orphaned at an early age. The writer repeats the story in a simple narrative manner characteristic of the Acadians. (10-11)

Seventy years after the first printing, the story was still treated as though it were factual. Folklorist Patricia K. Rickels even recommends that folklorists could get much from Chapter Two where the grandmother “Depicts Acadian Manners and Customs” as the chapter title says (220).

The cultural indoctrination has been wildly successful. It was only when I read Brasseaux’ book that I, a community insider, discovered that not only had there never been an Emmeline, but that there is no grave beneath the “Evangeline Oak” on the shores of the Bayou Teche in St. Martinville. There is no “secret grave away from the tourist areas where she is ‘really’ buried.” Despite the publication of Brasseaux’ book eighteen years ago, it would still be difficult to find many Cajuns who are aware of the truth about Emmeline. Area tourist bureaus have done such a great job of perpetuating the sad tale of Emmeline and her less than faithful Louis that most Cajuns will still defend the myth as the complete truth and the vindication of our ancestors’ travails.

Such faith in the fakelore of Emmeline LaBiche exemplifies the Cajun need for myths and legends within the culture. Dr. Barry Jean Ancelet believes that *Evangeline* “stole our history” because she alone became the symbol of the Acadians/Cajuns, leaving no room for the real stories of courage. The story co-opted the opportunity to create a myth from within the community (*Evangeline’s Quest*). Even the myth that was created from within our community was based on *Evangeline* instead of on true stories of the Expulsion. “Beausoleil” Broussard was a true hero of the common man, the type that films are written about as star turns for actors like Charlton Heston or Bruce Willis. It is strange that no one created myths and legends about “Beausoleil” Broussard, or that there

had even been available information about him outside of academia or St. Martinville⁵⁷ until the publication of Warren Perrin's book.

My *Tante* Deuce,⁵⁸ who handed down most of the family history that I know, never mentioned her most illustrious ancestor to me at all. If she had known anything exciting to say about the Broussards in Louisiana, she would have shared it with me. I believe *Tante* Deuce may not have even known the exploits of the great "Beausoleil" Broussard because, by the time *Tante* Deuce was born at the end of the nineteenth century, the Expulsion had become the Deportation in the minds of most of the Cajuns. The older generations failed to transmit the exile stories to their children and grandchildren. The story of *Le Grand Derangement* was relegated to the attic as though it were a dark secret from the past, something to be hidden, an object of shame that grew out of a lingering stigma that, somehow, the Acadians had deserved to be banished from their homeland.

For generations, the topic was taboo, as the Cajuns, dismissed as white trash, their culture denigrated and ridiculed, embraced the legends of Evangeline and Emmeline as a method of reclaiming their self-esteem (Jobb 209, 211). The story of Evangeline was the sunshine part of the story, something to be held up with pride, because she was someone who had been accepted by the outside world as a bona fide representative of the heart of the Acadian/Cajun people. It would be many decades before you would see signs advertising any products carrying the names "Acadian" or "Cajun," but "Evangeline"

⁵⁷ The town of St. Martinville, near Lafayette, houses the Acadian museum and many genealogical records as well as a statue of "Beausoleil Broussard."

⁵⁸ She was born Anaice Broussard, the youngest daughter of my great-grandfather, Mozard Pierre Broussard. She was called "Deuce" as an endearment because she was the youngest.

became the symbol of our people and was seen on everything from farm implements to white bread (*Evangeline's Quest*).

There are those, however, who, far from thinking of the poem as a negative stereotype, consider *Evangeline* responsible for the Acadian Renaissance, for drawing all Acadians to a type of Acadian Nationalism, whether they were the Acadians of Louisiana or the Maritime Acadians from Canada. Indeed, anthropologist Kasuko Ohta has likened the story of Evangeline and her Gabriel to an origin myth, concluding that the poem, coming at just the right time for the Acadians to reclaim their identity, became a vivid image that helped spur the Acadian Nationalism movement, the basis for the Acadian Renaissance (*Evangeline's Quest*). While *Evangeline* did prove a bonanza to the tourist bureaus of both areas, the poem's pastoral images created a stereotype that would trouble the Acadians/Cajuns for decades.

With renewed interest in the two places both claiming to be "The Land of Evangeline," journalists sought out the "simple" descendants of the "simple" Acadians and "found" them. On his 1859 tour of Nova Scotia, author Frederick S. Cozzens saw the heroine as "the unsceptered Queen of this little realm" (25). Having read the poem and the same sources that Longfellow had used,⁵⁹ he also spoke of the Acadians as he had expected to find them: "the simple Acadian peasant," "ignorant of the great events of the world; a mere offshoot of rural Normandy,"⁶⁰ "credulous, pure-minded, patient of injuries" (265). Cozzens was just one of many who embellished the stereotype with their preconceived notions of what they would find in both Nova Scotia and Louisiana.

⁵⁹ He proudly cited Judge Haliburton's *History of Nova Scotia* and Mrs. Kate Williams' version of *Evangeline* in the Preface.

⁶⁰ Here is another place that Longfellow got it wrong. The Acadians had not come from Normandy as Haliburton had once thought. The poem confirmed the incorrect history and set it for at least a century.

Unfortunately, Louisiana would suffer more in the biased comparison between Canada and the southern United States. The difference between the impressions of Louisiana and Nova Scotia had to do with geography and the post-bellum arrogance of the American press corp. In Nova Scotia, the Acadians were perceived to be simple bucolic hostages to an earlier, more nostalgic time. The Louisiana Acadians, on the other hand, bore the full brunt of disdain. The journalists judged the Acadians of Louisiana too different from the mainstream to warrant a closer look.

The post-Civil War South began to draw Northern correspondents who were sent to see how the conquered people were faring. The next step in stereotyping the Acadians in a publication came in 1866, when A.R. Waud, an internationally famous lithographer, called the Louisiana Acadians “primitive people,” “good representatives of white trash, behind the age in everything,” and even “Acadian niggers”⁶¹ (“Harpers Weekly” 670). Like most of the outsiders who came to Louisiana, Waud came seeking the “Eden of Louisiana” and found the land to be beautiful, but its inhabitants less so. He concurred with the judgments that had gone before him and found the people to be poor, lazy, Catholic, inbred, rebellious and without ambition. Through his words and pictures, he sent “a clear message of cultural and moral depravity to Victorian America” (Brasseaux *Acadian* 102).

In 1873, a journalist described Cajuns as “the least intelligent” of south Louisiana natives, while the author of an 1887 Harper’s article quoted a local as calling them a “no good” lot who “don’t know more’n a dead alligator” (qtd in Bernard *Americanization* xvii). Cajuns were considered the lowest of the low, and, despite the efforts of the Genteel Acadians to find other explanations for the term, there are those who believe that

⁶¹ A pejorative term used by Louisiana blacks against other blacks that were considered to be inferior.

the less than graceful term “Coonass” stems from the perception that Cajuns were hung on a lower socioeconomic rung than even the poorest Blacks, who were pejoratively termed “Coons.”

The Cajuns, the descendents of a proud people who had endured untold hardship to establish a new homeland, entered the twentieth century as targets of scorn, contempt and derision from within and without their community. It would be the latter part of the twentieth century before the Cajun descendents of the original exile would rise up to reclaim their identity, igniting an internal struggle over who could make decisions about the community and how the community could self-identify.

Despite the internal battles, it is not hard to understand why the Cajuns have engendered so much interest in scholars, journalists and tourists:

Establishing an ethnic identity and maintaining it for two centuries in the place of origin and its vicinity is, without doubt, a noteworthy achievement. But when an ethnic population experiences an exodus from the homeland, preservation of identity becomes increasingly difficult.

(Woods 271)

I am an heir to a great legacy, a descendant of courageous people who braved the odds to survive. Their deeds are the stuff of myths and legends, or at least one myth that became legendary. Once the outside world pockets an ethnic group in a certain way, it is difficult for the ethnic group to rise above the world’s version. That’s how marginalized people become a stereotype. It’s especially difficult to rise above the self-ascribed versions. In the following chapters, I will continue to chronicle the rise of the stereotypes, and to trace the impact of a community at war with itself, especially over methods of expression.

CHAPTER FOUR—PERFORMING THE CULTURAL IDENTITY: THE HISTORY OF CAJUN DIALECT HUMOR

Full-fledged ethnicity is characterized by at least two qualities—a long tradition and a strong tendency toward self-perpetuation.
(Woods 6)

Boudreaux worked hard for his candidate in the Justice of the Peace election. He was very surprised to find himself later brought into court.
“Mais, how come ya arrest me?” inquired Boudreaux.
“You are charged with voting seven times,” the judge said sternly.
“Charged?” exclaimed Boudreaux. “Ah t’ought ah wuz getting’ paid, me!”
(C. Boudreaux 98)

It is my premise in this work that, despite its opponents, both the “old” and the “new” styles of Cajun dialect humor deserve a place as a viable export and representation of the Cajun cultural identity. To support the rationale behind my premise, it is important to establish the foundations of dialect humor in Louisiana, its past impact on cultural identities, and its continuing impact on the Cajun cultural identity today. In the first chapter, I laid out the differences between the two types of Cajun dialect humor and how one style gained supremacy within the Cajun community. To be clear, I am defining Cajun dialect humor as humor that is performed about Cajuns (Henry *Blue Collar* 171), using a Cajun/English patois. The other form of Cajun humor involves jokes and stories that are usually told in Cajun French by francophone speakers in Louisiana. That style of humor is excluded from my discussion of the dialect humor, mostly because there is very little controversy there. The controversy surrounds the Cajun dialect humor, now divided into the “old” style and the “new” style. The “old” brand refers to the style used by

Justin Wilson and others, and included costumes, exaggerated accents, and an emphasis on malapropisms. The “new” brand is the privileged style of the current crop of Cajun humorists, humor that can only show the Cajuns as “happy, good-hearted people.” The “old” style was mostly associated with outsiders and a few insiders. The “new” style is almost exclusively the purview of insiders.

In this chapter, I will trace the history of Louisiana’s dialect humor from its beginnings as “local color” literature in the late nineteenth century to its use as political humor from 1889 to 1957. The dialect humor later experienced an unexpected turn when it became the center of a storm of controversy, in the 1970’s and ‘80’s, becoming the victim of Political Correctness. Standing against that movement as it affected Cajun dialect humor, my purpose as a fence-jumper myself is twofold: to encourage the gatekeepers and the folk in the Cajun community to reassess the “old” style of humor and, secondly, to remove the overall taint that lingers on all of the Cajun dialect humor.

For over a century, Louisiana’s dialect humor has generated a culture war within the Cajun community. The contenders include upper-crust Creoles, Genteel Acadians, and the just-plain Cajuns, along with a plethora of “Cajun wannabes.” In the previous chapter, I discussed the upper-crust Creoles as being the aristocracy of Louisiana, especially New Orleans. The Genteel Acadians were those in the Cajun community who aspired to be like the upper-crust Creoles. The just-plain Cajuns were the “folk” in the Cajun community and, ultimately, the arbiters of all things Cajun, despite what the gatekeepers thought. I consider Cajun “wannabes” to be people who want to be Cajuns, but cannot claim blood or marriage ties.

All of the aforementioned have proven to be the characters (one might even call them combatants) in the ongoing drama surrounding the discussion of Cajun dialect humor. The ultimate prize is the power inherent in the control of a cultural identity and the political sway that accompanies that authority. In Louisiana, politics are a dynamic, ubiquitous force, and gatekeepers are often empowered politically to make decisions in an array of areas, even concerning the performance of humor. Throughout this chapter, I will discuss the formation of what led to dialect humor in Louisiana and how, even as the Cajuns reclaimed their humor in the latter half of the twentieth century, the proliferation of that humor became “another contested outcome” (Henry *Blue Collar* 171).

In an article sketching the history of Cajun dialect humor, *New Orleans Times-Picayune* editor Howard Jacobs referenced John McLoughlin, as “the first dialectician on record.”⁶² McLoughlin began writing a series of faux letters to a nonexistent cousin in 1889, for the purpose of influencing the political climate of New Orleans. The letters were first published in *New Orleans Times-Democrat*. Given the topic of Jacobs’ article, I am guessing that Jacobs was suggesting that McLoughlin was the first to put the Cajun dialect on record. My research shows that Jacobs was wrong in his assertion, especially since McLoughlin’s dialectical efforts seem to have been more Creole than Cajun. Also, McLoughlin was not in any way the first to record the different dialects. That is not to say that McLoughlin did not play an important role in the history of Cajun dialect humor. His work laid the foundation for Walter Coquille, who would impersonate Cajun characters for political satire. While Jacobs considered McLoughlin the first to use Cajun dialect humor in print, McLoughlin did not tell jokes. He used humorous characters and

⁶² Jacobs, Howard. “Cajun Humor: Laughing all the Way to the Punchline.” *The Times-Picayune* [New Orleans] June 26, 1975.

dialect for political purposes. His work indicated more of an evolution from the work of “local color” artists.

To tell the whole story of the Cajun dialect humor, I need to start at the beginning, and McLoughlin does not represent the actual beginning. I believe that dialect humor in Louisiana had its foundations in the literary “local color” movement that followed the Civil War, a movement that was spurred by a growing hunger for the exotic by readers in New England. The victorious Yankees now controlled the South through carpetbag rule and could afford to be generous to their defeated foes. Also, now that the war was over, northerners were happy to put off the malaise and weariness of war. Through reading popular travel books, they were now drawn to the exotic locales to the south and west of them and wanted to know more about the strange places and the equally alien inhabitants (A. Turner 23). As feature correspondents headed south to survey the post-war recovery, the stories they sent north were more likely to be sympathetic to the Southerners (Rubin 15) (and, as stated previously, more likely to be derogatory to the Cajuns). The Yankees viewed the Southerners, once former enemies, now as defeated victims. Since slavery was no longer the divisive issue, people of conscience everywhere could satisfy their curiosity about the South and especially that most exotic city of all, New Orleans.

For the most part, the upper-crust Creoles of New Orleans were pleased with the romantic and mythic stories and novels being written about them. These stories helped the Creoles in Louisiana maintain their vision of themselves as the gracious, genteel society of decidedly *white* aristocrats (Jackson 22). Just as Longfellow had romanticized the Acadians in *Evangeline*, these authors contributed to the myth of the upper-crust Creoles, continuing to idealize their provincial lives. For the Creoles in New Orleans, it

was as though the Civil War had never touched them, and they could continue to play out their antebellum status as the landed gentry in complete control of their kingdom, a myth that would be perpetuated by Southern writers like Kate Chopin and others.⁶³

Chopin, a French-Creole insider, had been raised on her aristocratic French great-grandmother's tales of the Creole elite of St. Louis and the settlement at Natchitoches, Louisiana (Seyersted 13). She later married a Louisiana Creole and lived out her great-grandmother's stories among the "proud, graceful, and aristocratic, hot-blooded and irrational in matters of love and honor" Creoles of New Orleans (Seyersted 75-76).

Defining the term "Creole" to readers outside the community has always been difficult for Louisiana writers, mostly because the word became a contested and, therefore, a loaded term. The origination of the term means "home grown" and stood for those of French or Spanish descent who had been born in the Western hemisphere. Defined this way, Creoles lived everywhere from Martinique to Canada and would include the Cajuns. The aristocratic francophones of Louisiana used the term to refer only to themselves and meant it to include those who "had only the purest French and Spanish blood in their veins" (A. Turner 3). Free People of Color, however, were also francophone, though often descended on the wrong side of the blanket from the aristocratic Creoles. These FPC also referred to themselves as Creoles, and that is how the term began to be used by their descendents in Louisiana today.

Writing about nineteenth-century New Orleans, Chopin and local colorist George Washington Cable had decidedly differing views of just who the Creoles were. Chopin captured Louisiana as she saw it, and created Creole characters that were distinctively

⁶³ Wilson, Charles Reagan, and William Ferris, eds. *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1989. Internet accessed June 2, 2007.

different from her Cajun characters. The Cajuns were “simple, honest, and God-fearing;” they were also good-natured, lazy, the “same French peasants their ancestors were when they left the old country” (Seyersted 76). Chopin used the Cajun dialect in her stories, just as Cable did. The main difference between her treatment of the Cajuns and that of Cable’s is that Chopin’s Cajuns employed the same stereotypes that would later breed the characters Boudreaux and Thibodeaux.

In contrast, her Negro [sic] characters were completely aware of the gap between the Cajuns and the Creoles and exactly where they fit, with the Creoles above them on the social ladder and the Cajuns somewhere below. Chopin’s stories were popular because they sanctified the Creole preeminence in social and cultural affairs, thus allowing the Creoles to feel that all was still right with their world.

Even more popular were the stories contained in the *Great South* series, written by Edward King for Charles Scribner and Company between 1873 and 1874. Although King usually avoided stories about economics and politics, he did write in support of investors taking an active role in the rebuilding of New Orleans, claiming that the city could recover completely if removed from the stranglehold of the carpetbaggers (Rubin 15-16). The Creoles were delighted to support King’s pleas since that would have returned their city to its antebellum glory (and their control).

King’s observations of the Negro population were especially derogatory. While the white Creole was sympathetically portrayed as a victim of the war, his elegant lifestyle, hopes and dreams destroyed by the loss of his slaves (King 32), the Negroes were shown to be incapable of handling their new-found freedom.

But the negroes, taken as a whole, seem somewhat shuffling and disorganized; and apart from the statuesque

old house and body servants, who appear to have caught some dignity from their masters, they are by no means inviting. They gather in groups at the street corners just at nightfall, and while they chatter like monkeys, even about politics, they gesticulate violently ... as a rule, the negro of the French quarter is thickheaded, light-hearted, improvident, and not too conscientious.

(King 35)

King had a romanticized vision of the South, especially of Louisiana. His purpose is clear in the preceding paragraph—to demonstrate in the vilest way possible how he felt about Negroes and their freedom. While the carpetbag government tried to give the Negro some equality, King was doing his best to recreate the pre-war social strata of New Orleans. Through these stories, King tried to demonstrate what Southerners had always contended, that the freed Negroes could not govern themselves, the Creoles deserved a return to their authority and privilege, and “that the Carpetbag governments were corrupt and remained in power only through force” (Rubin 17).

By sending these observations to northern readers who had the power to change the status quo, the *Great South* series may have “helped pave the way for the final abandonment of Reconstruction” (Rubin 17). There was one slight problem with the social hierarchy that King was supporting. He did not understand that, while the Genteel Acadians had ascribed to equal status with the Creoles, even the Negroes of the time knew that the Cajuns belonged on a lower social rung than the blacks. King had been caught up in the romanticism that surrounded the literary Acadians and transferred that to the Cajuns.

His writings on the Cajuns show that King had obviously studied Longfellow’s *Evangeline* before visiting the prairies to find the Acadians. There he saw only an “earthly paradise,” “the grand estates,” and “superb forests.” His only reference to the

usual discussion of the “isolated” Acadians is the one sentence that states, “There are Frenchmen and Frenchwomen among them who are as remote from any active participation in the politics of the state or the country at large, as if they lived in France” (King 85). For both Chopin and King, it was as if the Acadians had never created a separate identity from their French roots. Chopin saw them as the gentle Norman peasants of Longfellow’s myth, and King saw them as extensions of the aristocratic Creoles. Just as he paid obeisance to the upper-crust Creoles of Louisiana, King honored the Genteel Acadians. To be aligned with their idols, the upper-crust Creoles, was the Genteel Acadian’s apex of aspirations (Brasseaux *Acadian* 92). For both the Creoles and the Acadians, King continued to expand upon the myth of their nobility, and they accepted his words with all the *noblesse oblige* at their disposal.

The Creoles did not, however, welcome all the literary expressions of their culture. The elite Creoles had been horrified in 1879, when the author and editor of the *Daily Picayune*, Mrs. Eliza Jane Nicholson, began to write a “Society Bee” under the assumed name, Pearl Rivers, for the express purpose of reporting on the social activities of the New Orleans elite. Despite their initial resentment at this unprecedented intrusion into their private lives, it was not long before the elite were not only devouring the gossip column, but were desperately vying to be mentioned (Jackson 16). They began to see the column as one more reflection of their cachet, an instrument to flaunt before those who sought to wrest the city from the Creoles’ rule and a way to hold onto their identity.

The Creoles were barely hanging on to their cultural identity when they began to feel that homegrown “heretic,” George Washington Cable, was attacking them. A native son of New Orleans, Cable was born in 1844 to parents of Anglo-Saxon and German

descent. The Cables had moved to New Orleans from Virginia before their fifth child, George W. was born (Rubin 23). The Panic of 1837 had taken everything George, Sr. had, so he moved his family further south. Within a few years, he had recouped his losses, becoming a successful businessman, and thus accepted by the American society in New Orleans.

It was a happy childhood; George and his siblings spent their days fishing in the lakes and canals and running tame through the markets or along the river levee, watching and listening to the slaves as they worked on the docks (Rubin 25). It would be these experiences that would allow Cable to capture the essences of Louisiana life. To Cable, that life included all of the people who had helped create his childhood memories, whether they were slave or laborer; the sights and sounds of America's most European city contributing considerably to who he was. Thus, it is Cable who should be considered "one of the pioneers of the dialect tale" (Vedder 266).

Cable began to write at the height of the "local color" movement. Cable fit well into the movement since the topics of race, caste, and class were Cable's main interests as well. In the style of writers like Bret Harte and Joel Chandler Harris, the school of "local color" was a form of realistic fiction that held to the literary Genteel Tradition, conveying only the positive and the uplifting through "romantic plot structure and quaint descriptions of an idealized provincial life" (Rubin 45). Cable differed from his fellow colorists in that he refused to be bound by the rules of the Genteel Tradition, preferring the authentic to the quaint.

Discovered and sponsored by Edward King, Cable first wrote Creole vignettes to be published in *Scribner's Monthly*, beginning in 1873. The vignettes were immensely

popular with the readers, including many in New Orleans, who were thrilled to have a light shining once again on their lovely city. Unfortunately, not all found the light to be a positive one. Supported by many upper-crust Creoles, the French Daily newspaper, *L'Abeille*, *The Bee*, claimed Cable “had distorted their character and had maligned their ancestors in Louisiana history” (A. Turner 7). These Creoles felt that, with every stroke of his pen, Cable was tearing at the very fabric of their society.

Their resentment lay squarely in the fact that Cable’s characters were “myth-breakers,” and Cable, a non-Creole who read and spoke French (A. Turner 6), was considered a heretic because he did not support the local talking points. Instead of reflecting the myth of gentility that the Creoles had so carefully nurtured, Cable’s realistic Creole characters encompassed the original definition of “Creole,” meaning *all* those who could claim French or Spanish blood and had been born in the Americas, including, to the absolute horror of the upper-crust Creoles, the Cajuns. “Many of his characters were poor, illiterate, and spoke a delightfully broken English (which, though authentic, was resented by the Creoles)” (Jackson 14-15). To be lumped into an indiscriminate heap with poor blacks and Cajuns was the ultimate insult to the Creole elite. The Creoles were particularly concerned with how outsiders would come to perceive their society as reflected in these stories and believed that Cable had knowingly “destroyed the Louisiana of Chateaubriand and Longfellow” (A. Turner 39).

Cable would also be at odds with the northern editors, the arbiters of the movement, since the local color movement celebrated “the quaint, the nostalgic, pleasing aspects of regional life—the exotic, the beautiful—and not for its ugly, unattractive aspects, which were equally real” (Rubin 17). The prevailing taste for local color stories

was also a taste for sectional reconciliation, returning the Negro to his antebellum place in the world—unseen and unheard, a position fully supported by King’s *Great South* series.

As a young man, Cable had joined the Confederate army, fighting unrepentantly to retain slavery. His early stories reflected his vision of Creole life in all its glory and none of its detractions. As Cable matured, so did his vision of his surroundings; Cable realized he could no longer be only an observer of how social inequities continued to affect his neighbors. Cable felt he must use his talent to tell the whole story, and he began to find himself at odds with his fellow citizens as he argued for civil rights for the Negro.

Cable stepped even further beyond his community’s acceptance by indulging in “tasteless” topics that heretofore had been considered unsavory for public consumption. Of particular interest to Cable was the ongoing legacy of the half-caste products of miscegenation and its effect on the lives of those children. Miscegenation was a double standard and a double-edged sword. While it was permissible for the Creole males to have mixed-blood mistresses, the issue of those relationships could not marry outside of the black race, if their social position would even allow them marriage.

Cable hoped his stories would hold up a mirror to the hidden lives of the upper-crust Creoles. By exposing these practices to the outside world, Cable hoped to put an end to the “shadow” lives to which these children were condemned. In this piece from one of his most popular stories, Cable reveals the old Creole family secret of mixed relationships. The story is that much more evocative because Cable chronicles the mother’s perspective. The narrative creates compassion in the heart of the reader for this

mother who only wants the best for her child and is willing to sacrifice whatever is necessary. Cable writes:

Père Jerome was confounded. He turned again, and, with his hands at his back and his eyes cast down, slowly paced the floor.

“He is a good man,” he said, by and by, as if he thought aloud. At length he halted before the woman.

“Madame Delphine---”

The distressed glance with which she had been following his steps was lifted to his eyes.

“Suppose dad should be true w’at doze peop’ say ‘bout Ursin.”

“*Qui ci ça?*” (What is that?) asked the quadroone [sic], stopping her fan.

“Some peop’ say Ursin is crezzie.”

“Ah, Père Jerome!” She leaped to her feet as if he had smitten her, and, putting his words away with an outstretched arm and wide-open palm, suddenly lifted hands and eyes to heaven, and cried: “I wizeh to God—*I wizeh to God*—the whole worl’ was crezzie dad same way!”

She sank, trembling, into her chair. “Oh, no, no,” she continued, shaking her head, “’tis not Miché Vignevielle w’at’s crezzie.” Her eyes lighted with sudden fierceness.

“’Tis dad *law*! Dad *law* is crezzie! Dad *law* is a fool!”

(*Creole* 232)

The law that Madame Delphine condemned was the law that she had broken by betrothing her young, beautiful, light-skinned octoroon daughter to a white man. Madame Delphine argues that the law is wrong and should not pertain to her daughter, who is “seven parts white” (Cable *Creole* 233). To guarantee her daughter a good marriage to the man she loves (a white man), Madame Delphine concocts a story denying that Olive is her daughter, claiming she is the daughter of two whites of untainted blood. Not even Olive knows that Madame Delphine is sacrificing their relationship to secure a future for her daughter. Madame Delphine confesses her crime to Père Jerome just prior

to dying from a broken heart, knowing that he is bound by the privilege of the confessional and must take the truth to his grave.

The story, besides placing a sympathetic face on a human problem,⁶⁴ is full of references to the Creole rules of society. One such rule is that the Creole women were not allowed to sit with the quadrone in the park: “The two ladies rose up; somebody had to stand; the two races could not both sit down at once—at least not in that public manner” (Cable *Creole* 241). These rules were not discussed in polite society; they were simply understood. It is no wonder that the Creoles were not fond of Cable’s depiction of their genteel life, since it exposed the ruthlessness of the caste system that ruled Louisiana. Post-bellum Creoles had been unable to hold on to their wealth, but they were doing what they could to hold on to their social status.

Cable also spent time traveling through the prairies of Louisiana in search of the Cajuns, and his portrayal of them is probably the closest of all writers to the reality of the times. In his travel notebook, Cable wrote that he recognized their speech as “an ancient French patois,” but that they had progressed to using two languages: “in law and trade, English; in the sanctuary and at home, French” (155). As part of his pre-journey research, he wrote, “These are the children of those famed Nova Scotian exiles whose banishment from their homes by British arms in 1755 has so often been celebrated in romance,” and “they largely outnumber that haughtier Louisianian who endeavors to withhold as well from him as from the ‘American’ the proud appellation of Creole” (Cable *Creoles* 3-4). It must not have pleased the upper-crust Creoles to be called “haughty” or to be reminded

⁶⁴ The law against miscegenation was a racial problem, but Cable was showing that this is a mother trying to protect her child, regardless of race. He was giving the effects of the law a human face.

that they continued to be outnumbered by Cajuns, Americans and any number of immigrants.

Cable seems to have liked the Cajuns as a people. In his short story, “Carancro” [sic], Cable has a Cajun family take in a destitute Creole woman and her son. The woman dies soon after, and the child is raised among the sprawling Cajun family in the home of Sosthène and *la vielle*.⁶⁵ The story reflects Cable’s observations of the Cajuns on the prairies, how their homes were open to anyone in need,⁶⁶ and their families were often extended through their generosity, a holdover from their days in L’Acadie. Calling the child, “my little Creole,” Sosthène laughingly explains why the boy will more likely grow up to be a lover and not a fighter:

“Aw, naw!”—he shook his head amusedly—“he dawn’t like hoss. Go to put him on hoss, he kick like a frog. Yass, squeal wuss’n a pig. But still, sem time, you know, he ain’t no coward; git mad in a minute; fight like little ole ram. Dawn’t ondstand dat little fellah; he love flower’ like he was a gal.” (Cable *Creoles* 252)

It is easy to see that Cable had a keen ear, because he had quite a handle on the Cajun dialect as well as the Creole dialect. The dialects were sometimes a problem for his northern readers, so Cable began to scale back the use of dialect by inserting particular phrases to suggest the dialect, rather than entire conversations, as he had done before.

The use of dialect was not his only “mistake” as far as the Creoles were concerned. Rather than tapping into the Creole’s longstanding disdain for the Cajuns, Cable instead celebrated the cultural tendencies that allowed them to be Good Samaritans to even the Creoles. Add to that his sympathetic pieces favoring the Negro Creoles, and

⁶⁵ “old woman,” a term of endearment for his wife

⁶⁶ As mentioned in the previous chapter, this was a trait that was carried from L’Acadie. Hospitality remains a strong Cajun cultural marker.

the fashion for Cable's art slowly ebbed in Louisiana. Though he had been favorably compared to Mark Twain, he never achieved the popularity or the notoriety of Twain (Rubin 19). The upper-crust Creoles simply regarded Cable "as a traitor to his race, his State, and his party" (Vedder 262), and so he moved north to find a more favorable climate for his works and for himself. Writing in 1894 about the way Cable had been treated in his hometown, Henry C. Vedder surmised, "The feeling against Mr. Cable will pass away. . . . The South will yet come to a better mind, and will see in Mr. Cable one of her most gifted sons" (273). Vedder was right, but it would be the 1950's before Arlin Turner re-introduced Cable to a waiting Southern world. It is certainly possible that Cable's reputation in New Orleans had been so besmirched that, even a century later, Howard Jacobs skipped over Cable's contributions to literature to showcase a more favored son, John J. McLoughlin.

Since the late 1830's, New Orleans had been a "divided" city, with the Creoles firmly entrenched in the French Quarter and the Americans upriver in the Garden District. By the 1880's, the Americans were trying to extend their authority into the heretofore Creole-controlled part of the city (Jackson 14). The upstart Americans, intent on "modernizing" the city, would have been wiser to remember that they were dealing with a very old, very established culture where things were handled differently. Having already suffered through the carpetbaggers during Reconstruction, the Creoles were not prepared to turn over control of their section of the city to the next set of the power-hungry. Resentment ran high against the high-handed dealings of so-called reformers, as the battle for mayor raged between the reform groups and several old-fashioned political

machines, especially one called “The Ring,”⁶⁷ each with their own interests to protect. None of the agendas turned out to work in the best interests of the city, as New Orleans maintained its status as a “thoroughly debt-ridden” metropolis (Jackson 28-54), for which there seemed to be no solution. “By the end of the 1880’s the budget was in such a state of chaos from mismanagement that the municipal government was almost paralyzed” (Jackson 48).

John J. McLoughlin, an Anglo-American attorney and well-respected, upstanding member of New Orleans society, wanted to speak against what he perceived to be political wrongs happening in his beloved city. McLoughlin did not want to appear as though he were attacking the people of New Orleans, so he needed another way to get his point across. Like Cable, McLoughlin found the Creole/Cajun struggle with bilingualism to be quite charming and a bit disarming as well, so he created a working-class francophone persona named ‘Jack Lafaience,’ a satirist in the classic tradition, to be his mouthpiece. There seems to be a question whether the character was supposed to be Creole or Cajun. McLoughlin himself referred to the character as Creole, but the dialect would be that of a lower-class Creole rather than an upper-crust one. Whether the character was Creole or Cajun, he was definitely “other” from both McLoughlin and his intended audience, who were most likely the upper-crust Creoles and the American businessmen of New Orleans.

Howard Jacobs believed Lafaience’s dialect to be Cajun. In his column, “Remoulade” for the *Times-Picayune*, Jacobs recognized that the “essays of the period reflected the beliefs, customs and prejudices of the early settlers of New Orleans. But the

⁶⁷ The Ring was the machine led by working class whites, including immigrants and was at the forefront for finding jobs for those immigrants as well as supporting gambling and attracting black votes (Hair 12).

dialect is distinctly and unmistakably Cajun.”⁶⁸ Even McLoughlin’s son mentioned how his “late father used to give talks and write articles in Cajun dialect.”⁶⁹ I have to disagree with both Jacobs and McLoughlin the younger. Although Jacobs lived in New Orleans, he was neither Cajun nor Creole. The dialect is definitely francophone, but it is not necessarily “distinctly and unmistakably Cajun.” In my experience, surrounded by the Cajun dialect, I have never heard anyone put an “h” sound in front of each vowel the way that the Creoles do, nor is “never” usually pronounced “nevair.” By reading the letters out loud, I found the rhythm is laid out and the rhythm, to my ear, is French Creole, not Cajun. McLoughlin may have thought he was doing a Cajun accent after all, but a comparison of the written dialect with that of Cable’s, his contemporary, or with that of Walter Coquille who followed, reveals both Cable and Coquille as more Cajun, and McLoughlin as more Creole. Although Lafaience’s dialect was probably Creole and not Cajun, it is still important to look at McLoughlin’s contributions to political satire and Cajun dialect humor, since his work definitely laid the foundation for the Cajun satirists that would follow him.

Using this nom-de-plum, McLoughlin had “Lafaience” write letters to a nonexistent cousin, *Mon cher Sylvestre*, using the Creole dialect to disarmingly discuss the civic problems of the day through anecdotes, a host of created characters, and a cozy combination of homespun sass and wisdom. Writing in the *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, the forerunner to today’s *Times-Picayune*, Lafaience railed at the 1889 tax hikes proposed by the “bêtes Americains”:

Sylvestre, yo’ can see th’ h’objec’ of that tax—those
nouveau riche w’at leev h’on that Saint Charles Avenue.

⁶⁸ Times-Picayune, February 24, 1961

⁶⁹ Times-Picayune, August 31, 1962.

They want asphalt, an' gravel, an' gotter wid cover h'on
ev'ry strit. They want to kill th' crawfeesh! Ah, I see theh
design, me. An' w'en Jack Lafaience see, he see well, yes.
An' w'en those optown Yankee try fo' kill th' crawfeesh,
Jack Lafaience will be theh, yes, to protect th' emblem of
ou' country, it.⁷⁰

The letters were immensely popular. They succeeded as the powerful and influential vehicle that McLoughlin had conceived them to be. Through Lafaience, McLoughlin helped to defeat “the drainage tax in 1889, ... elected the ‘regular’ ticket in 1892; his demand for the removal of Henry Clay [a statue] from Canal Street was eventually recognized, and it was his impassioned appeal that influenced the Constitutional Convention to adopt the grandfather clause in 1898” (McLoughlin 15-16). McLoughlin also argued in favor of the Louisiana Lottery system, while Cable published newspaper articles against it (A. Turner 9). Lafaience’s arguments sound very modern since his rationale for the lottery echoes the same rhetoric we hear today. The lottery was expected to fund Charity Hospital and teacher salaries even back then (McLoughlin 34-37). It is especially interesting that Lafaience took on a certain Irish Judge McGloin in the matter of the lottery, since McGloin was McLoughlin’s father-in-law (McLoughlin 154).

Addressing the Round Table Club in 1912, McLoughlin summed up the successes of his character:

Therefore, it is with arrows tipped with good-humored satire, that my hero fights his civic battles, and the first one sped long ago ... Jack, with his license, on such occasions good naturedly tickled the public rib, and a chuckle taught the popular idol the lesson that was to be learned ... Jack Lafaience, though he has sped his shafts right and left, amidst friends and opponents, has had very few foes.
(McLoughlin 14-19)

⁷⁰ *Times-Democrat* [New Orleans, LA] May 28, 1889.

As Jack Lafaience, McLoughlin had a “license,” a freedom to speak his mind that he would not have enjoyed otherwise, and he used that license to “prick the bubble commonly called ‘big-head’ on the part of men in high positions” (McLaughlin 15). This freedom to tilt at the politicians must have held quite an attractive allure because a few decades later Walter Coquille would do the same thing, using the medium of radio instead of newsprint.

As with many others who would follow him, McLoughlin was quick to reassure his listeners that his Creole characters did not represent all Creoles. Instead, he believed that his Jack Lafaience was:

a type, an amusing specimen with wit and philosophy corresponding, I might say, to well-known characters borrowed from the dear Emerald Isle. This is a type of one small class among a people who are as refined and cultured as those of any community in the world. (McLoughlin 18)

McLoughlin was Irish-American and could have used the Irish dialect just as easily, but McLoughlin’s audience was always meant to be the upper-crust Creoles or the “bêtes Americains,” and not the swamp Irish or the Germans. By appropriating the “charming” Creole dialect, he could reach his target audience, and it is obvious that McLoughlin knew his audience. There had been some immigrant problems in the city of New Orleans just prior to this time, and a strong nativist bent was still lingering (Higham 87-91). The lower-class Creoles and the Cajuns may have been “other,” but they belonged to Louisiana in a way that the Irish or the Germans did not.

Most political interests in the last decade of the nineteenth century and beyond concerned an ongoing power struggle for control of New Orleans. The participants were the Americans in the Garden District and the Creoles in the French Quarter. Since the

battle lines were drawn pretty much down Canal Street, McLoughlin was wise to attempt to swing the votes that mattered. As mentioned before, it was a worthy attempt because McLoughlin was able to influence several votes during Lafaience's tenure as sage to the city. The letters were first published in 1889 in the New Orleans *Times-Democrat* and became a regular feature until McLoughlin's death in 1921, by which time the paper had evolved into the *Times-Picayune*.

By the late 1920's, the dialect humor took on an even bigger target—Huey P. Long, governor of Louisiana and, some would say, dictator in his own right. Radio, a favorite medium for Long's agenda and self-promotions, answered back with the appearance of a Cajun character named “Boudreaux,” who was built solidly on the legacy of Jack Lafaience. Lafaience had spoken the dialect as most working-class citizens would have spoken, but Lafaience did not misspeak his words. Coquille, on the other hand, mimicked the colorful Cajun patois and added over-the-top malapropisms. For example, Coquille once signed an autograph for a fan “wit' deep 'infection.”

Coquille was an outsider to the Cajun community, but he was the initiator of what would later be called the “old” style of Cajun dialect humor. Coquille created his character as a spoils politician so that he could satirize Louisiana politics with the same verve as McLoughlin. Because he was on the radio instead of the newspaper, Coquille must have felt that his character needed to be even more outrageous than Lafaience had been.

According to his November 23, 1957 *Times-Picayune* obituary, Walter Coquille started out as a typewriter salesman and rose to the position of manager. It was at this time that Coquille began playing with the Cajun dialect, honing his characterization of his

created persona, Telesfore Boudreaux, “de maire of Bayou Pom Pom fo’ de tent’ conservitave time” (Coquille *Speaks* 22). Like Garrison Keillor, who fashioned a community called Lake Wobegone many decades later, Coquille created the bayou settlement of Pom Pom, complete with a full set of characters that lived their lives in the little town that “could not be found on any map” and had soon graduated to radio, becoming “perhaps the region’s most popular Great-Depression era program” in Louisiana (Brasseaux “Justin Wilson” 523). Culled from the imagination of Walter Coquille, *Maire* Boudreaux ruled his little acre of the world as a comic version of a Huey P. Long-style politician.

Through the patois-rich voice of Telesfore Boudreaux, Coquille commented on the absurdities of life, love and politics. “Whether he talks of national affairs or of local, you find the thoughts of Telesfore Boudreaux are the thoughts of the Man in the Street. And always you find them linked with laughter” (Frost 9). Boudreaux was a “Cajan” [sic], a “*sage homme*” (wise man), who spoke in the patois found around Bayou Lafourche and whose wise observations of the local and political scene made people laugh while he made them think. “There is laughter in him. There is sanity. There is a searchlight quality that penetrates the fog of pomposity with which the self-anointed Great Ones surround themselves, and we see them through the rifts in that fog, and we laugh” (Meigs 5).

For both McLoughlin and Coquille, it was the perceived pomposity and big-headedness of politicians that drew them to do what they did. The chance to use “the foolish things of the world to confound the wise” was just too good to pass up. Mayor Boudreaux’s credo included the statement, “Me, I believe in outpromising any an’ all

politicians” (Coquille *Speaks* 6), a direct slap at Long’s political assurances. In the foreword to Coquille’s second collection of tales, Roark Bradford explains:

The main thing I like about the Mayor of Pom Pom is that he never spoils a good story for the sake of statistics. Most politicians bore you to death quoting the record on what they have done or what the opposition hasn’t done. But not that M’sieu Boudreaux. No. He just sits and talks and talks and talks. And when you wake up the next morning, you have a feeling that here, at last is a man who hasn’t promised to do a single thing for you, but who will, probably do what every other politician promises to do and never does: Lower taxes and increase the appropriations.
(Bradford 7)

Coquille played the crooked politician with great gusto, and if some Louisiana politicians were made uncomfortable by seeing themselves reflected through Coquille’s witty observations, then so be it. Huey P. Long liked to say he was a “fan,” but it seems he had no choice but to turn the humor back on Coquille. To have seriously threatened the radio show would have caused his supporters to look perhaps a little too closely at what ol’ Kingfish was doing. It also might have further enraged the anti-Long bloc of capital legislators, most of whom came from New Orleans, Coquille’s hometown. New Orleans had never backed Long in any of his endeavors (Hair 167), and challenging Coquille would not have done anything to bring support into Long’s coffers. Long needed all the support he could get since he had national aspirations, his eyes squarely on the prize of becoming president of the United States.

On the other hand, Long was just like the New Orleans elite when it came to having their names mentioned in the media—they were willing to overlook the negative when their egos were being stroked just through being mentioned (Jeansonne 59). Long did comment, however, “The Mayor of Bayou Pom Pom is the only guy who ever defied

me and got away with it. If I ever find that little crawfish village of Pom Pom, I'm going to impeach the Mayor!" Retorted His Honor disdainfully, "Me, I not only defy you to impeach me, Huey, I go so further as defy you to find Pom Pom on the map!" (Coquille *Speaks* 1).

Mayor Boudreaux had the ubiquitous (for Louisiana) ability to "re-elec" himself. His explanation for his success? He was a "preservationist," working hard to protect the emblem of the state, the brave crawfish. He had to protect the crawfish because:

"I vote me dose crawfish. How can I lose an election wit' eighteen million crawfish backing me up? I never voted a dead crawfish in ma life. An' dass more den you can say about some politician wat vote tomb stones." (Coquille *Speaks* 45)

Voting "tombstones" was a time-honored Louisiana technique for winning elections.

Long's politics of winning at any price (White ix) gave Coquille ample fodder for his broadcasts. Perhaps a truer explanation for Coquille's success concerns the time period as much as his target. Even though Long was loved by the Cajun people (Hair 93), that did not keep the people from enjoying the radio show, much like those of us who enjoy Saturday Night Live whenever the show does political satire. No one does political satire quite like SNL, and I think that Coquille was offering much of the same entertainment for his time.

The fictitious Mayor of the fictitious Bayou Pom Pom pompously ruled his little corner of the world just like Long ruled Louisiana, especially in the matter of the public dole. Both dipped happily into the public funds while ensuring that their many relatives had a place on the payroll (Jeansonne 58). Long once told a friend, "I want power so that I can do all the things I want to do" (Jeansonne 64), and Long would do whatever it took

to solidify his power base, even going so far as to hire a cartoonist to maliciously denigrate his enemies, a quite effective propaganda campaign since the majority of Long's constituents could not read newspaper articles, but could chuckle at the cartoons (Jeansonne 86). In response, Coquille used the power of radio to caricature Louisiana's Napoleon⁷¹ in all his glory. Coquille's tour-de-force efforts lasted for about thirty-five years until his death in 1957, twenty-two years after the death of his "favorite" politician, Huey P. Long. Long's death did not impinge upon Coquille's performances, however, since there was no dearth of Louisiana politicians for *Maire* Boudreaux to challenge.

Coquille had been the reigning dialect humorist in his day and was so popular that I cannot find anyone who spoke out against Coquille's performances or his books, which not only preserved some of the performances, but also included illustrations that today would be considered not only politically incorrect, but just plain wrong. The books' illustrations included black characters straight from the minstrel stage with very round, very black faces and artificially enlarged lips. Coquille seems to have gotten a pass from all of the various cultures in Louisiana; one possible reason could have to do with how the upper-crust in Louisiana felt about Huey P. Long. Being a part of the anti-Long bloc in Louisiana gifted Coquille with a lifetime of immunity.

Not only was Coquille given a pass about his humor and his illustrations, but also I have found no one anywhere questioning his roots. Coquille was a prominent citizen of New Orleans, did not claim to be a Cajun, is never referred to as a "Cajun," nor does anyone question his right to do Cajun jokes. Even though Coquille died before the Cajun ethnic revitalization process, I have read no negative analysis of his characterizations.

⁷¹ Long preferred to read biographies of powerful men like Napoleon, Julius Caesar and Frederick the Great and learned about revenge and hatred from *The Count of Monte Cristo*. (Jeansonne 12)

This surprises me because his characters exhibited the stereotypical Cajun that the gatekeepers have tried to suppress. Coquille wore a costume and spoke with an exaggerated accent that was not his own, and yet the activists honor him as the grandfather of all Cajun humorists.

As a matter of fact, his popularity remained so high that in his latter years a female comedienne began to appear in the created persona of “Mrs. Telesford Boudreaux.” Mrs. Alta Lee Kennedy, the wife of a prominent Lafayette lawyer, and one of the few Cajun comediennes, became a professional party crasher as part of her act. Wearing a dress, black gloves, and a hat with a net, “Mrs. Telesford Boudreaux” looked like she could have been the Mayor’s wife from a little Cajun town. The only problem with Mrs. Kennedy’s character was that she never asked Coquille’s permission to borrow his character’s name, although she had made one slight letter change by calling herself “Mrs. Telesford Boudreaux” instead of “Mrs. Telesfore Boudreaux.” When asked by others how he felt, Coquille, by this time in his twilight years, simply muttered a “good-natured protest”⁷² and certainly never took legal action to have her stopped.

Up to this point, there had been few Cajun dialect humorists who were actually of Cajun descent, for the simple fact that most of those who could claim to be descendants of L’Acadie were still telling their jokes in French. The dialect jokes, as I have been describing them, were strictly performed in the English/French patois. That is why Cajun dialect humor was the purview of outsiders for such a long time. The moment was coming, however, for “real” Cajun humorists to take the stage.

After Coquille’s death in 1957, Cajun dialect jokes continued to appear in the newspapers, more often than not an individual joke rather than as part of a character’s

⁷² “Bayou Pom Pom ‘Mayor’ is Dead.” *Times-Picayune* [New Orleans], November 23, 1957.

spiel. That did not mean that there were no Cajun storytellers at large. Maud O'Bryan, Want Ad reporter for the *Times-Picayune*, posted this announcement in her February 14, 1961 column, "Up and Down the Street," entitled "Cajun Storytellers Still Calling Up":

Ever since Bill Randle of Cleveland, Ohio advertised Jan. 13 to interview Cajun storytellers, Cajun accents have assailed the receiver on Up and Down the Street's phone. The latest: F. W. Adams (no Cajun) who called long-distance from Long Beach, Miss., to spout "Cajun" at us. "I've been writing French dialect stories for 55 years," Adams announced. "I use six Cajun assumed names such as Jean-Baptiste and Louis Composte. If Bill Randle would like to read my Cajun yarns, he's welcome." (Mail 'em to Bill Randle in Cleveland).

Adams must not have had enterprising relatives to publish his work after his death,⁷³ and I don't know if he ever did "mail 'em to Bill Randle in Cleveland," but I have never had the opportunity to read any stories about characters named "Jean-Baptiste" nor "Louis Composte." It is, however, interesting that this style of Cajun dialect humor remained a completely regional event, remained predominantly the domain of non-Cajuns and continued to center around New Orleans for nearly a decade.

In the mid-1960's, Hilda Kilmer duBois, wrote a weekly column called *Toujours Tee-Père* for the *Daily Advertiser* [Lafayette LA]. Just like McLoughlin, duBois' character, "Tee-Père" wrote "letters" detailing experiences with politicians. Unlike McLoughlin, the "letters" definitely used the Cajun dialect. In one such story, a politician who spoke only English was making a speech to a group of French-speaking Cajuns about the need for bridges. "Tee-Père" was acting as interpreter and after the politician spoke for several minutes, delivering a "not so funny joke," Tee-Père's interpretation was much shorter. The politician asked Tee-Père how he was able to get

⁷³ McLoughlin's work was published by his wife and distributed by his son after his death and Coquille's works continued to be distributed by his daughter.

all that the politician had said into such a short interpretation. Tee-Père answered, “Ah non, M’sieu. That joke, she was not so too pretty good for the Cajuns, so I just told them that you have told a very funny story and if they want them bridges, they better laugh, by damn!”⁷⁴ (I am especially curious to know how a female columnist was able to get away with using an expletive, even one as mild as “damn,” in a family newspaper in 1966. Is it because it was part of a dialect story?)

Others were publishing Cajun jokes in the newspapers in a seeming random fashion, as though they had a few inches of space, and a joke would fit quite nicely. It was also around this time that Cajuns were sharing their own jokes in English, and most of the Cajuns doing this seem to have been traveling salesmen of one form or another. As they would go on their routes, they would pick up jokes and spread them, much like the troubadours of old who brought gossip and tales of daring-do to whatever castles were on their route. Sooner or later, one of those jokes would make it to the newspaper.

Howard Jacobs credits Breaux Bridge oil products salesman, Julian Broussard, with this story of one of his elderly cousins, Anse Broussard, who told his spouse:

“Us we got to pass ourselves from dis vicinity, yeah. Too many Broussards to suit my copercity, me.” So they embarked on an automobile trip to the Pacific Northwest. Reaching Colorado, they paused at a service station for gas. To their astonishment, just across the highway was a plant, **BROUSSARD’S FACTORY**. “Les pass ourselves back home r’at now,” said Papa Broussard disgustedly. “Dis mus’ be de place dey make dem doggone Broussard, I tole you dat.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Kilmer duBois, Hilda. “Toujours Tee-Père.” *Daily Advertiser* [Lafayette, LA], September 11, 1966.

⁷⁵ “Broussard Clan was Impossible to Elude.” *Times-Picayune* [New Orleans], May 9, 1962.

Newspaper editors, salesmen, and many others kept the dialect humor afloat, but there was still a void to be filled after the loss of Coquille's character, and there would be many vying for the crown (Brasseaux "Justin Wilson" 523).

Two of the most successful aspirants were Bud Fletcher and Justin Wilson, the latter of which would unexpectedly become a lightning rod for controversy (Henry *Blue Collar* 171). The Cajun community was quicker to embrace Fletcher because he had been born in the small Cajun city of Jennings and really knew his way around the dialect.⁷⁶ For example:

Cajun talespinner Bud Fletcher tells of the Teche country dwellers who brought deyseff's to New Or-le-anh to make one dem how-you-call cruise in de crib-e-yonh. One dem fallow cas' an eye on all dat water what dey got dere an' pass a remark: "Cot dog, dass de mos' water I aver saw, me." Dat odder fallow look out on de ocean and he say like dis: "I 'ope to tole you. And dass jus' de top of it, it."⁷⁷

Fletcher differed from Wilson in that his humor was more likely to center on the comic situations and the innocent Cajun's reaction to it. His humor was created with the accent, but not the malapropisms. It makes sense that his accent would be more genuine since he had grown up as a half-Cajun (on his mother's side) in a Cajun town. Wilson, on the other hand, had come late to the dialect and was also much more of a showman than Fletcher.

Fletcher was an oilman by trade who created a persona named "Cyprienne Robespierre," who used a Cajun dialect for his performances. Paying homage to Coquille by calling himself the "Mayor of Barricade" (after the road signs "Barricade ahead"), Fletcher billed himself as "a kind of Will Rogers whose humor is about such on-

⁷⁶ "Robespierre to Appear Here Saturday For Ray Tire Co." *Daily Iberian* [New Iberia, LA, January, 25, 1962.

⁷⁷ "Prodigal Doubloon Outlay for Float 17." *Times-Picayune* [New Orleans], February 21, 1968.

beat subjects as children, relatives, job seekers and a blend of Gallic Americana with a touch of seasoning peculiar to the bayou country of South Louisiana.”⁷⁸ While the joke above is innocuous, many people considered most of Fletcher’s humor to be “too risqué” for the public at large, a feature that limited his audience (Bernard *Americanization* 95). His so-called risqué humor would be appropriate for the “Family Channel” in today’s society but, in the early 1960’s, there was a clearly marked line between what was appropriate in “mixed” company and what was not. Fletcher often appeared at banquets, store openings, conventions (where his audiences would be predominantly male), and other places where he could tell his stories. Fletcher was popular enough to sell over 90,000 copies of his comedy LP, “The Tall Tales of Cyprienne Robespierre.”⁷⁹

A. J. Smith, a noted Cajun humorist from Lake Charles, was a Bud Fletcher fan from way back. According to Smith, “He was the most authentic to the actual Cajun humor. His delivery didn’t sound forced or faked. He didn’t make a stereotype of the Cajuns” (Angers *Cajun Humor* 22). This is a very interesting comment because an analysis of Fletcher’s comedy does not reveal him immune from the main complaint leveled against the old style of Cajun dialect humor. In Trent Anger’s opinion, this type of humor was making fun of illiteracy, and was “not a laughing matter. It’s not funny in any language, in any age, anywhere, under any conditions” (*Truth* 84). Angers does concede that the humor has some basis in truth, that the Cajuns historically had struggled with the English language. Many Cajuns had been “unschooled and illiterate ... a few

⁷⁸ “Robespierre to Appear Here Saturday for Ray Tire Co.” *Daily Iberian* [New Iberia, LA], January 25, 1962.

⁷⁹ “Jamais de la Vie! C’est Cyprienne Robespierre Qui Viens au Village.” *Abbeville Meridional* [Abbeville, LA], April 12, 1962.

generations ago,” but that is not true anymore. “So, the old jokes painting the Cajuns as illiterate are not only in bad taste, but also out of date and inaccurate” (*Truth* 84).

While Smith’s comment serves as a show of support for Bud Fletcher, it is also a reflection of the rampant prejudice among many within the Cajun community against the upstart Justin Wilson. As far back as the late 1960’s, I remember hearing my mother say of Wilson that she couldn’t “stand him.” She knew he was not a Cajun and thought his exaggerations were making fun of her, of all of us. She put her money where her mouth was, too. She owned at least a couple of Bud Fletcher’s albums (I was, of course, not allowed to listen to them), and none of Justin Wilson’s albums.

To ameliorate some of the criticism erupting in the Cajun community, Wilson announced to the world that he was a Cajun, or at least half-Cajun (on his mother’s side, like Fletcher). He called himself a “half-bleed,” and it was from this moment that the master storyteller began to weave the myth of his heritage. His beginnings were shrouded in mystery, and the artist used sleight-of-hand to keep it that way, causing multiple rumors to abound.

Not since *Evangeline* or “Emmaline LaBiche” had there been a character of such mythic proportions until the advent of Justin Wilson, who became the best known and most popular Cajun humorist, even to this day. Mention Cajun humor to just about anyone, and Wilson’s name will be the first on their lips, “I gar-on-tee.”⁸⁰ Try to tell those same people that Wilson was not really a Cajun, and they will look at you as though you have questioned the pope’s religion.

Even Wilson’s birthplace became part of the mystery. The Cajun cultural elite rose up to deny he was a Cajun and to further deny he was from Louisiana. People soon

⁸⁰ This was Wilson’s most memorable catchphrase, along with “How ya’ll are?”

“heard” he had “really been born in Texas.” “No,” said others, sagely, “Mississippi.” In *Justin Wilson’s Cajun Humor*, editor Howard Jacobs lists Amite, Louisiana as Wilson’s birthplace, but Wilson told Shane Bernard that he had been born in Roseland, Louisiana. Wilson also told Bernard that he was “part Cajun and proud of it,” and that he had learned to speak French from his mother and a neighbor when he was growing up (Bernard 95). The Brasseaux’s research, however, reveals that Wilson’s mother, “Olivett Toadvin was of French-immigrant ancestry, not of Acadian/Cajun descent ... Nor was she French-speaking, according to the 1910 census of Louisiana” (“Justin Wilson” 524).

Wilson’s avowal that he was a Cajun throughout numerous interviews and a lifetime of work begs the question, “Who can be a Cajun?” There is ample quantitative evidence to demonstrate that the descendants of the Acadians of L’Acadie abound. Very few of them speak Cajun French anymore, and fewer of them are even Catholic, but they can still trace their bloodlines back to pre-dispersal Nova Scotia.

On the other hand, there is ample qualitative evidence of people in Louisiana who are living the Cajun lifestyle, indulging in “some ethnic particularism [that contributes] to isolating Cajuns from a perceived and desirable mainstream” (Henry *Blue Collar* 171). If these people wish to self-identify as Cajuns, like Wilson did, do we allow them full status as a Cajun? The more I research, the more I meet the people who have chosen to live in south Louisiana, the more I am convinced that there are many like Justin Wilson, people who long to belong to a community with such “ascribed traits as the consumption of alcohol, caffeine, and fatty food, [and] a relaxed lifestyle” (Henry *Blue Collar* 171).

In his book, *The American Kaleidoscope*, Lawrence Fuchs explains that ethnic groups in America reconfigure identities all the time. Adaptation strengthens the group’s

ability to survive; however, the group must strongly self-identify to accomplish the reconfiguration. It is not difficult to reconfigure identity since self-identification is built from within the context of each community (331-333). Cajuns have the ability to restrict membership within the community to only those who carry the blood of the exiles, or to admit anyone who ascribes to the approved traits. Wilson should have been admitted “by the back door” because he self-identified as a Cajun, and because he was a “happy, open-hearted” person.

From his youth, Wilson had enjoyed telling stories and longed to work professionally as a humorist. His early efforts were not promising, however, until a fateful meeting with Will Rogers in 1935. Rogers saw something special in Wilson and encouraged him to follow his dreams. Wilson took that advice and his future career as a yarn-spinner was launched (Wilson and Jacobs 10, Fontenot 266). First he had to get a “real” job. Through his father’s contacts with the state government, and despite his inability to complete his degree at LSU, Wilson was able to secure a position as a safety engineer. This “real” job would take him deep into Cajun country where he would meet the delightful people and learn the rhythms of the language. Using these experiences and borrowing from Coquille’s “Boudreaux,” Wilson crafted his humorous, homespun yarns and the persona that would secure his position as a Cajun humorist and chef.

Never forgetting that he owed his first job to the largesse of the Long machine (Fontenot 265), Wilson disregarded the political bent of McLoughlin and Coquille, and centered his performance on the stereotypical Cajun to create his exaggerated characters. Wearing red suspenders and a belt, a string tie and a Panama hat, Wilson strutted his

uneducated, less than bright, but often canny, alcohol and fun-loving Cajuns for the world to see:

Dey got two fallow in Rayne in de Golden Peasant Cocktail Loonge. Dass on Highway 90, how-you-call de Old Spaniel Trail. Well, dey got so dronk dey can't clam down from dem Stool, an' dass bad, you year? Finally dey unclam' deyse'ves and got down on dey han's an' knees an' walk out. On de odder side of de Old Spaniel Trail is de Sodden Pacific Railroad track, an' dem fallow start walkin' on de track.

"You know," one say, "Dass de longess' set of stairs Anywhere in de worl', I ga-ron-tee."

"I don't mine de stairs som much," de secon' one say, "but dem low han'rail is givin' me de devil."

(Wilson and Jacobs 32)

In addition to the general mangling of words, Wilson incorporated a vocabulary of malapropisms that are still used by young Cajun comedians to this day. His characters would "park paralyze to de curb" or shoot a "twice barrel Caribbean," while the police "petroleum" car would blow its "syringe." These terms had first been recorded by Baton Rouge native, J.B. Kling, in 1961 but came to be associated with Wilson's act instead.

As a chef of the Cajun cuisine, a television star, author, recording artist, and as a humorist in the Cajun style, Wilson has been the only Cajun humorist to become nationally and then internationally known (Brasseaux "Justin Wilson" 524). Wilson became the master of being in the right place at the right time, always one step ahead of the marketplace. His ability to market himself is why he was so successful. Some might have called him an opportunist; he certainly recognized opportunity when it came his way.

McLoughlin and Coquille had been encouraged to publish their popular tales in book form, and in his book of letters, McLoughlin included other speeches he had given

as himself as well. When Coquille first published his “Boudreaux” stories, he included New Orleans recipes as bonus material. When Wilson began publishing in 1965, he first produced a cookbook of Cajun recipes, not his stories. Wilson told people that he had learned to cook at a young age in order to avoid working out in the field (Brasseaux “Justin Wilson” 524). It would be this early skill that would help him cross the great divide that arose between him and the activists during the resurgence of ethnic pride in America. A happy chef was evidently less threatening to the cultural identity than a Cajun humorist who wasn’t really a Cajun. Perhaps Wilson thought it would be easier for the Cajuns to accept him as a Cajun if he were a good cook.

It may be difficult to discern completely whether Wilson was an opportunist in the negative sense or simply an entrepreneur with his finger to the wind. According to the father and son historians, Carl and Ryan Brasseaux, Wilson rode the crest of the “burgeoning Cajun cultural renaissance.” He continued his success by creating a Cajun cooking show for PBS in the 1970’s, giving him a wide platform for selling his comedy albums and cookbooks, bringing him national and international notoriety (524).

By the 1990’s, the cooking show had helped accomplish Wilson’s goal—even the majority of the Cajuns were finding him, if not a “treasure,” at least innocuous. It was not just the show, however, that made the difference. Times had changed. As a group, the Cajun community was celebrating its ability to embrace those who wanted to celebrate with them, reminding themselves that there were three ways to be accepted: by the blood, by the ring, and by the back door. This held true for all except Justin Wilson, who had done all he could to gain entrance. He took on the outer appearances of a Cajun, an appetite as big as all outdoors, a love for life and people, and he could cook, too

(Jacobs “Introduction” *Justin Wilson* 5-7), but it was never enough. To outsiders, Wilson was the insider of all insiders of the Cajun community. How surprised those outsiders would be to find how Wilson “was reviled by the Cajun cultural elite” (Fontenor 265). Because of his fame, he came to represent the Cajun community to the outside world. I’m not certain anything can be done to change that. I’m not certain that I want to change that. Wilson provided a great service to our community. To destroy his legacy would accomplish little except to challenge our self-identification as “big-hearted” people.

CHAPTER FIVE—PRESERVING THE CULTURE: RECLAMATION AND POWER

The Black Power movement, for example, arises from the struggle of an ethnic group for self-consciousness and self-identity. (Woods 3)

Boudreaux, Shawee, Cowan and T-Brud were playing a round of golf with a \$200 wager on the match. Boudreaux had a 10-foot putt on the 18th green to win the money. He eyed the break from every angle and was meticulous in setting up to stroke the ball. As he was settling in his stance for the putt, a funeral procession started to pass. Boudreaux put down his putter, took off his cap, placed it over his chest and waited for the procession to pass. After the last vehicle was out of sight, Boudreaux picked up his putter and resumed his putting stance. Seeing this, Shawee said in amazement, "Mais, sha, dat wuz da mos' touching ting ah naver did see befo', me. Wit da match on da line, ah can't bleave you stopped playing ta pay you respects! Wat a decent ting ta do, Boudreaux!" "Yabbut, Clotilde was a good woman, yeah," replied Boudreaux. "We wuz married fo' 25 years, us!"

(C.Boudreaux 127)

The Acadians brought their culture and their identity to Louisiana after they were exiled from their homeland in Nova Scotia. Over two hundred forty years have passed since their arrival in Louisiana, and their descendants, the Cajuns, are in the process of reclaiming that culture and that identity. The process of reclamation is difficult and involves an interesting cast of characters, especially in the area of Cajun dialect humor. In this chapter, I will be continuing the saga of Justin Wilson, an "outside insider" to the Cajun community and a proponent of the "old" style of Cajun humor, in order to argue for a revival of the "old" style of humor.

Wilson was not the only practitioner of Cajun humor in the '60's and '70's, but he attained both national and international acclaim due to his cooking show broadcast on PBS. The "old" style of Cajun dialect humor, then, became the style best known outside of the community. It is not surprising that outsiders were responsible for the dispensing of Cajun dialect humor to the outside world since it was outsiders who initiated Cajun dialect humor as a genre in the first place. Insider Cajun humorists were usually telling their jokes in French, so they had no need to use the macaronic patois that came to be associated with Cajun dialect humor. As mentioned in a previous chapter, it was customary in the Cajun community to fill the long winter nights with folktales and jokes. Cajun raconteurs populate the Cajun community in greater than average numbers, having the chance to practice their skills and to learn from others in the multigenerational gatherings.

Beginning around 1960, Cajun humorists, descendants of the Acadians, began to tell their jokes in English. Even in the matter of the insider humor, a division emerged between those who chose to use the "old" style of humor and those who wanted to use what would come to be called the "new" style of humor. It may be confusing to someone outside the Cajun community, but the "new" style of humor was really not that new. The humorists in the "new" style were employing the simplistic form they used when they were telling the jokes in French. This simpler form engages the style of storytelling; the art is all in the delivery, as it would have been on those long, winter nights, just translated into English now. The "new" style of humor belonged to humorists like Dave Petitjean and A. J. Smith. The "old" style of humor had spawned humorists like Justin Wilson, Ralph Begnaud, and John Plauché.

The “old” style of humor was more farcical, relying on costumes, exaggerated accents, props, and other dramatic techniques. Critics of the “old” style find these dramatic devices to be demeaning, but I think of the classic comics like Red Skelton (playing Clem Kadiddlehopper), Milton Berle (in a dress), and Minnie Pearl (with the price tag hanging from her hat).

A close analysis of both the “old” and the “new” brands of Cajun dialect humor finds very little real difference between them, just more politics. The “problem” with the “old” style of Cajun dialect humor has less to do with its classic comic roots and much more to do with the Cajun cultural identity and perceived attacks on the Cajun people. Insiders Ralph Begnaud and John Plauché used the “old” style, so the Opelousas Proclamation could have simply said, “Don’t be like Justin Wilson or Bud Fletcher.”

My continuing aim in this work is to reclaim the “old” style of Cajun dialect humor, re-join it with the “new” style of humor and establish Cajun dialect humor as the third prong of the Cajun cultural identity. The food, the music, and the humor make for a solid expression of the Cajun cultural identity and can serve together as exports to the outside world. The food and the music are two commodities that are already easily recognizable as Cajun products. The humor should become the third.

Tourism⁸¹ is the second largest business in the state of Louisiana. The double blow of hurricanes Katrina and Rita were just as destructive to the business of tourism as they were to the physical infrastructure of the state itself. Cultural Tourism is a very large part of the tourism business. Cajun food and music are already doing their part to

⁸¹ Tourism was the leading business before the hurricanes; Oil and gas now have that honor. Rebuilding New Orleans and other hard-hit areas should bring back tourism as the number one business.

entice people back to the state. While the Cajun dialect humor plays a small part now,⁸² I think that more can be done to strengthen humor's contribution to Cultural Tourism.

In this chapter, I will argue for the "old" style of humor by narrating the historical events that led to the devaluing of the "old" style of humor and how that prejudice has tainted all of the Cajun dialect humor. I believe that both styles of humor should come together to create a product that is a viable export, a recognizable and respected commodity that did not die with Justin Wilson. This goal is not an easy one to accomplish since Cajun dialect humor, more than the music or the food, is ensnared in the lingering negative feelings about the Cajun cultural identity. Although the major battle against the use of the dialect humor was waged in 1974, Cajun dialect humor has never really lost the "taint," and some performers feel a sense of defensiveness that hangs on from 1974, when elitists from CODOFIL went on the offensive against Cajun dialect humor. It has been my objective to demonstrate the events that led to the Opelousas showdown discussed in the first chapter. To accomplish this goal, it has been important to illuminate the historical foundations of the humor and to explain how the humor lost its importance as a cultural marker.

In the previous chapter, I related the history of Cajun dialect humor from its humble beginnings in the stories of George Washington Cable to its use as political satire in New Orleans and the state of Louisiana, first in newsprint and then on the radio. The main practitioners of the political humor, John J. McLoughlin and Walter Coquille, enjoyed successful careers that each spanned three decades, skewering politicians and politics in Louisiana. McLoughlin began in 1889 and continued until his death in 1921.

⁸² A handful of Cajun dialect comedians perform at conventions and meetings. Source: Kent Gonsoulin, telephone interview, May 27, 2007.

Coquille began sometime in the 1920's, and his death in 1957 left a vacancy that was happily filled by a handful of aspiring comedians (Brasseaux "Wilson" 523). Justin Wilson stepped in as the "heir-apparent" and never relinquished the title. Since neither McLoughlin nor Coquille had been Cajun, their comical heirs did not feel that being Cajun was a requirement for filling the position. Unfortunately for those comics who were to follow, times had changed, and the Cajun cultural elites were more sensitive about just who could represent them outside of the community. Commencing in 1974 in the *Times-Picayune* and continuing for several weeks, a battle was waged over the Cajun cultural identity, its representatives and its representations. The purveyors of Cajun dialect humor soon became an early casualty, with most of the slings and arrows zinging toward Justin Wilson. I will detail this skirmish later in the chapter.

In the ongoing struggle for control of the Cajun cultural identity, Wilson was not actually the problem, although his fame and over-the-top performances made him the likeliest target. The reaction to Wilson was really a symptom, and it was unfortunate that he made his appearance at that particular moment in Cajun history. Had Wilson been better known in the first half of the twentieth century, like Walter Coquille, or if he had been born in the second half of the twentieth century, like the current crop of Cajun humorists, he would most likely have been spared the frontal attacks. Columnist Jim Bradshaw, a longtime writer for *The Advertiser* [Lafayette, LA] explained:

Wilson came to real popularity during the 1960's and 1970's, just as "things Cajun" especially our food and music began to get national notice, and Cajuns began to get a renewed Cajun Pride. That was two-edged for Wilson. On the one hand, people who never noticed such things began to wince, if not take offense, at his caricature. And, on the other hand, we kind of threw up our hands as EVERYTHING Cajun was being overblown and imitated

by outsiders so much so that Cajuns felt overwhelmed and helpless to do anything about it ... The Cajun fad was hot and everybody tried to jump on the bandwagon.⁸³

Bradshaw relates that up to that point, “people who never noticed such things began to wince.” Only as Cajuns became more self-aware did some begin to realize that Wilson’s exaggeration was “offensive” to them. Wilson was probably caught by surprise by the negative publicity. After all, he was merely riding the coattails of the well-loved Walter Coquille and the lesser known, J.B. Kling, comedians whose work was foundational to Wilson’s schtick.

Despite opposition within the Cajun community, Wilson rode that bandwagon to national and international prominence. Wilson has been dead since September 2001, yet his name is still the one most associated with Cajun dialect humor. Even though there are some quite talented Cajun performers of the dialect humor, no one has, as yet, been able to surpass Wilson’s renown. The advent of television and Wilson’s fusion of dialect humor with Cajun cooking had given him an invaluable platform (Brasseaux “Wilson” 524), as well as a “safety net” for the humor.

In this chapter, I will explain the timely events that led to Wilson becoming the poster boy for Political Incorrectness, the factors and the factions involved, and how those events have set the stage for continuing tensions, more subtle yet still noticeable within the Cajun community. I will explore the debate over the “appropriateness” of Cajun dialect humor, as it was played out in the media and in the community, analyzing the tension within the community and the lingering sense of shame that hovers over the performance of Cajun humor. As I have mentioned before, the devaluing of the “old”

⁸³ Email interview, April 12, 2007.

style of Cajun dialect humor came down to the politics of power, insiders versus outsiders. It also has become a matter of insiders versus insiders.

The struggle within the Cajun community mirrored events in the rest of the country as ethnic groups were revisiting their own particularities. Sociologist Harold R. Isaacs suggested the trend be called, “retribalization” and noted the early 1970’s in America as “the chronological point at which the contrast between an older species-consciousness and a newer ethnic-consciousness can be seen most vividly (Hollings 57). Centering on ethnicity allowed ethnic groups to move from the margins to a liminal space they created for themselves. The term, “ethnic” lost its implications of “outsider” and instead came to stand “for situatedness within virtually any bounded community regardless of its relation to other communities” (Hollings 64).

As discussed in Chapter Three, the late 1960’s and early ‘70’s saw the return of the middle generation of Cajuns who had gone away to school or to work and had their “exile experiences.” It was this group of exiles who ignited the ethnic revitalization in Louisiana, representing a coming together of the “newer ethnic-consciousness.”

As the Preservation Movement began to grow in the 1970’s, cultural elitists made decisions about what to preserve. The music was a natural choice since it was very much a part of the culture, even the music played on accordions, an instrument which did not come from *L’Acadie*. Most Cajuns my age grew up attending *fais-do-do*’s and dancing to the music, the little girls standing atop their father’s feet and sons being taught by the *memères* and various *tantes*. *Fais-do-do* means to “put to sleep” and reflects the fact that babysitters were practically unknown. The children would attend the dances right along with the rest of the family, and the little ones would be put to sleep in a corner so that

everyone else could dance and have a good time. Pre-dispersal Acadians had a musical repertoire consisting of medieval French ballads and drinking songs, usually sung a cappella. They brought no musical instruments with them when they were exiled; they brought the songs and adapted them to the new instruments they found in their new home (Bernard *Swamp Pop* 40)

Although some of the songs were brought from L'Acadie and are certainly worthy of preservation, this stipulation does not rule out Cajun dialect humor. Like other elements of the culture, the accordion came to Louisiana with other settlers (in this case, the Germans) and was absorbed into the Cajun way. The style of Cajun music that stands as a cultural marker has grown to international popularity. This is a relatively recent style, having only emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century. As more and younger Cajun musicians have come on board, the music has evolved. What makes this style of music truly Cajun is how the musicians adapt to the new, more contemporary styles, while improvising with the old ones that they learned as young musicians. Thus, the art form is ever in a state of flux and evolving with the different musicians (Ancelet "Cajun Music" 285) who continue to create truly unique sounds.

That may yet be the strength of Cajun music, just as it has been the strength of the Cajun people, the ability to adapt and yet retain the originality and uniqueness of the culture. Today's popular Cajun music shares the same timeline with the Cajun dialect humor. The main difference between the music and the humor is the agencies that pushed them to the public forefront. The music enjoyed a bottom to top rise within the Cajun community. The dialect humor began with outside agents who were then supported by the Genteel Acadians. The "old" style of humor continues to be associated

with outsiders, while the “new” style is now associated with the insiders. The most successful movements within the Cajun community have been those that began with the folk, many of whom remain unaware of the inside/outside dynamic as it pertains to Cajun dialect humor.

While the music was blazing the trail for the resurgence of Cajun pride, the food began to make its impact a few years later. Visitors to the state of Louisiana had always enjoyed Cajun food, but the ethnocentrism of the previous decade led to a further awareness of ethnic foods and other ethnicities in the next decade. American Scholar and U.S Senator, Daniel Patrick Moynihan declared, “The year 1980 marked a coming of age for the United States’ ethnic heritage. For the first time, the U.S. Census asked people about their ethnic background” (10). This new emphasis on ethnicity led to all ethnic foods becoming more popular as ethnic restaurants ventured from the big cities to the American countryside and the now more adventurous palates of the folk. The food, as an ambassador from the Cajun culture, grew to popularity in the 1980’s when Paul Prudhomme, a Cajun Chef from Opelousas created an instant classic he called “Blackened Redfish” (Smith 44), and a phenomenon was born. (This was not a typical Cajun dish, and many have joked that when anything had been “blackened” in the past, it was fed to the dogs.)

Yuppies in New York and California were drawn to this new cuisine. These young, urban professionals were suddenly blackening everything and calling it Cajun. Faux Cajun seasonings, spicy hot, began to grace grocery store shelves. Prudhomme wannabes set up shop all over the country, and Americans were soon feasting on mock Cajun cuisine. Corporate America hoped to benefit from the trend, and soon even Cajuns

were being introduced to “Cajun Spice Potato Chips” (Bienvenu 30). The chips were perhaps the most egregious imitation of all since they were unnecessarily spicy and bore no resemblance whatsoever to the handmade chips our grandmothers had made for us. Not only was our food being co-opted by outsiders, but also a new stereotype was formed in the belief that all Cajun food is spicy, like Popeye’s Fried Chicken.

Despite the imitators, Cajun cuisine is very much a part of our culture and an example of adaptation. Louisiana’s terrain and food sources were vastly different from the Maritimes so the Acadians, as always, had adapted, borrowing seasonings like cayenne and saffron from the Blacks, gumbo and red beans and rice from the Creoles, and the list goes on as they “borrowed” from anyone else who had something tasty to offer. Cajun cooking, like the Cajun dialect, has never been necessarily the same across the state. Through his PBS cooking show, Justin Wilson did more to standardize Cajun cooking than just about anyone else. The selling of cookbooks has done the rest.

Both the music and the food came from mongrelized beginnings only to be tempered by the Cajuns and others into a recognizable and acceptable style. The historical parallels between the music, food, and dialect humor is unmistakable. All three of these elements deserve attention within and without the Cajun community.

Although humor is such a part of the Cajun lifestyle, it is not surprising that Cajun dialect humor, like the Cajun stereotypes, was initiated by outsiders and only adopted publicly by the Cajuns themselves after the Cajun cultural revival of the 1960’s. Since Cajuns were more likely to tell their jokes in French, it would have been a natural expectation that outsiders would not understand their humor; it is understandable that they kept it amongst themselves for generations. Take, for instance, the story of the

young bride who wished to please her young groom by cooking his favorite food. It all ended sadly when she misunderstood her mother-in-law's instructions. His favorite food was *poisson* (fish), not the *poison* (poison) she served him! To make the joke funny in English would require an explanation, and a joke that is explained definitely loses something in the translation.

While it is difficult to make that joke funny in English, such was not the case with all of the jokes. As more of the Cajuns became bilingual, so did their humor (Ancelet *Harvard* 103). Even in English, Cajun humor is still just as likely to be derived from word misunderstandings and malapropisms. This is a sore point for those opponents who see that as demeaning to the Cajuns. No one seems to remember that the Cajuns became bilingual, a trait that is to be cherished and not demeaned. Besides, dialect humor in Louisiana was not initiated for the purpose of debasing the Cajuns or the Creoles; its original purpose, instead, was to humorously roast politicians and to inaugurate political action against outsiders.

While the music and the food are exotic enough to be recognized as exclusively Cajun, the only thing exotic about the "new" Cajun dialect humor is the dialect, which some find to be demeaning. Some comics naturally speak with a "Cajun accent," but some of us have lost our accents through education, so we must replicate an "authentic" Cajun accent. The judgment over "authenticity" is more in the ear of the beholder and could cause a problem if the performer's accent is perceived as exaggerated.

The actual "problem" with the dialect humor, as far as the Genteel Acadians and some academics are concerned, is that it does not fit with the narrative of the children of *Evangeline*. In truth, there is little in the Cajun cultural identity that does fit with the

poem. If I have analyzed the information correctly, Genteel Acadians believe that the children of *Evangeline* should walk blithely through life as though through a sylvan glade with naught on their minds except the next time they go to church or school. They can certainly not be the hard living, hard drinking denizens of the swamp. And certainly not as one journalist described them:

Cajuns I think of as missionaries, come to this planet to teach us that fun is of the nature of ultimate substance itself, an ontological act of being. In other words, it goes with the turf. You exist, therefore you eat spicy food and drink saucy beverages. You live, therefore you sing, you dance, you laugh, you love. (qtd in Angers *Truth* 97-98)

Cajun dialect humor tends to play with this particular cultural image quite a bit. It is understandable that the elite of the Cajun community would prefer not to be humiliated by the stereotypes associated with the just-plain Cajuns. This disconnect has its roots in the nineteenth century. It also has bearing on the discussion of Cajun dialect humor.

When visiting the prairie Cajuns in the latter part of the nineteenth century, George Washington Cable filled his notebook with his observations. Cable wrote in his notebook that the Acadians had a “painful susceptibility to ridicule” (152). Perhaps that is why, just prior to the Civil War, the Genteel Acadians committed what Brasseaux has called “cultural apostasy” (*Acadian* 99) by going underground and divesting themselves of any association with the poorer elements of their culture. The Genteel Acadians, those who owned slaves and had, therefore, the ability to gain wealth, predominantly led the split because they had aspirations to make themselves over in the image of the upper-crust Creoles of New Orleans. A people who had heretofore been unashamedly egalitarian were now divided into Genteel Acadians and just-plain Cajuns. Aided and abetted by the Genteel Acadians in the late nineteenth century, there were those in the

outside world who created negative stereotypes about the just-plain Cajuns, branding them as ill bred, feral, and ignorant,⁸⁴ thus lumping them with the Indians and the Negroes.

Being mingled with the Indians and the Negroes was not such a comedown for the egalitarian Cajuns as one might think. As discussed in Chapter Three, the Acadians of L'Acadie had a longstanding, mutual relationship with the Mi'kmaq Indians. Their descendants would have seen nothing wrong in working with people of other races, especially those who were on their economic and social level. As a result, the Cajuns often traded with the slaves of the neighboring plantations, offering goods for services and treating them as equals. This exercise infuriated at least one plantation owner who thought the Cajuns were a bad influence because they exhibited the wrong kind of work ethic. The Cajuns only worked hard enough to get by and never as hard as a slave was forced to work. With the Cajuns as role models, the slaves could see that freedom and survival were not mutually exclusive (Olmstead 280-281).

After the Civil War took away the right to own slaves, the Genteel Acadians recognized their need to re-align themselves and their children with the Anglo-Americans, those who now had access to wealth and power (Brasseaux *Acadian* 4-5, 97-98; Dormon 30). This realignment caused an ever-widening schism in the Cajun community. The Civil War had reduced the Genteel Acadians to genteel poverty, and it was becoming more difficult to distinguish them from their poorer brethren. It was also at this time that the melting pot of Louisiana began to churn, and more and more francophone citizens were being lumped under the generic title of "Cajun." In other

⁸⁴ In his article for *Harper's Weekly*, dated October 20, 1866, A. R. Waud called them "primitive," "grossly ignorant," and noted that "to live without effort is their apparent aim in life, and they are satisfied with very little." (670)

words, if you spoke French, lived in south Louisiana and were impoverished, you were now considered a Cajun. The title was more socioeconomic than ethnic in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Henry *Blue Collar* 40, Brasseaux *Acadian* 105).

Nearing the turn of the twentieth century, the descendants of the 1755 exile were divided into two groups. The Genteel Acadians were on their way to regaining some of the power they had lost after the Civil War, but the just-plain Cajuns remained in an economic downturn. The rift became a chasm as the smaller educated class and the larger underclass separated because of economic and cultural differences (Brasseaux *Acadian* 150). The Civil War had so devastated the area that the just-plain Cajuns had no opportunities to improve themselves. They were condemned to hire themselves out as sharecroppers or to subsist on the bounty of the swamps and the bayous. This economic decline would persist through the Great Depression and just beyond World War II (Bienvenu 28). As a result, the just-plain Cajuns would live the stereotypes that had been spread about them. Outsiders would continue to seek out the children of *Evangeline* and to be disappointed in what they found.

Alcée Fortier, a distinguished Creole academic, took a journey through Cajun country in 1890 because he had “thought of the Acadians and their dialect as an interesting subject to study” based on the “genius of Longfellow” (Fortier 282). Fortier displayed his prejudice in seeking the Acadians and not the Cajuns by invoking *Evangeline*’s noble children. How surprised he must have been to find them to be “as a rule, lacking in ambition. They are laborious, but they appear to be satisfied if, by cultivating their patch of ground with their sons, they manage to live with a little

comfort” (Fortier 288). Fortier was merely confirming what Olmstead had observed nearly forty years before.

It was the Genteel Acadians who sought wealth and power; the just-plain Cajuns’ culture was that of contentment with what they had. Fortier also noted:

The greatest defect of the Acadians is the little interest they take in education; a great many are completely illiterate. As the public school system progresses, education will spread gradually among them, and being an intelligent race they will produce many men like Alexandre Mouton.⁸⁵ Education will, of course, destroy their dialect, so that the work of studying their *peculiar customs and language* must not be long delayed. (Fortier 288) [Italics mine]

Fortier’s prophetic words would be proven correct, of course, but education did not “spread gradually among them.” Fortier further urged that “all Louisianians take heart the cause of education and make a crusade against ignorance in our country parishes!” (291), and it was not long before the Genteel Acadians and others were rallying to his cry. Enforced attendance at public schools began the decimation of the Cajun language, and forbidding the speaking of Cajun French on school grounds continued the destruction.

The Genteel Acadians wanted the Cajuns to become fully Americanized and thought the best way to expedite Cajun acculturation into the American mainstream was through education. In a one-two punch, the Louisiana state government began to unravel all that the Cajuns had struggled to preserve. First, the Louisiana Compulsory Education Act of 1916 mandated public schooling for all children. Then, the Louisiana constitution of 1921 changed the previous law that had allowed schools to offer bilingual education (Dormon 70). Cajuns were forced to send their children to Anglo-American schools with

⁸⁵ Alexandre Mouton was governor of Louisiana from 1843 to 1846 and founder of a Genteel Acadian dynasty, including a Senator and a West Point graduate.

predominantly Genteel Acadian teachers who subscribed to Roosevelt's dictum⁸⁶ about assimilation, so Cajun French was proscribed, even on the playground. Severe punishments accompanied the slightest infraction⁸⁷ (Hallowell 75, Jobb 226). As a consequence, Cajun children and their parents began to conclude, "French monolingualism was now ... a certain sign of class inferiority" (Dormon 70), and Cajuns found themselves apologizing for not speaking the "good" French.⁸⁸

The sense that there was something "wrong" with speaking Cajun French would affect the generations to come. The shame that infected the Cajun children would, in turn, keep them from teaching their children to speak French. It was the second major attempt to erase the Acadian culture, only this time the Anglos were aided by some of the Acadians themselves, setting them on the path to what some would call complete Americanization.

By the early twentieth century, the Genteel Acadians, the same ones who had attempted to have nothing to do with the Cajuns, were now endeavoring to repair the rift between themselves and the just-plain Cajuns. This attempt at gathering the "family" did not stem from any fraternal loyalties, but rather from the sense that the negative stereotypes associated with the Cajuns were impinging upon the reputations of the Genteel Acadians. They paternalistically thought the only way to curb the negativity was to rewrite the stereotypes in order to make the just-plain Cajuns more acceptable to both themselves and the outside world.

⁸⁶ Roosevelt vigorously campaigned against the idea that a citizen could be an American and something else, charging that there was only room in this country for one flag and one language and that if any man "tries to keep segregated with men of his own origin and separated from the rest of America, then he isn't doing his part as an American." (Auchincloss 750-751)

⁸⁷ My aunt, Lou Ella Cormier Istre, remembers being smacked on the hand with a ruler for any lapses. Further interviews with older Cajun relatives and acquaintances yield similar stories.

⁸⁸ My mother still subscribes to the belief that her fluent Cajun French is inferior to the Parisian French and is always surprised when she finds she is able to converse with nonCajuns in French.

Most of the attempts to rewrite the stereotypes had to do with resurrecting the *Evangeline* myth, as the Genteel Acadians found in their heroine an opposing emblem to the stereotypes that had been so prevalent. Sanctifying *Evangeline* as the “true” story of the Cajuns would, they thought, make them more suitable to the Anglo-American society.

Unfortunately, the just-plain Cajuns could not or would not embrace the *Evangeline* story as their history because they knew it for the Anglo-American myth that it was. To remedy the situation, Judge Felix Voorhies, a Genteel Acadian and direct descendant of the diaspora, took the myth one step further by creating *the* “True” version of the poem, one that he hoped would truly draw the two sides together as well as further affirming the Acadians in their own eyes and the opinion of the Anglo-Americans.

Voorhies hoped to remind the Cajuns of their roots and their history, thus engendering a sense of pride in them. The story, of course, was not completely true. As mentioned in a previous chapter, Voorhies supposedly based the story on the reminiscences of his grandmother as he sat at her knee. Carl Brasseaux exposes this as a falsehood, since Voorhies’ grandmother had passed away before he was born. The book was first published in 1907 and Voorhies had supposedly sat at the knee of a woman who had been fully-grown in 1755. If anyone had done the math at that time, they could only have come to one conclusion. Voorhies could not possibly have been writing firsthand information from someone who was an adult at the time of the Expulsion. Voorhies was an esteemed Judge, a Genteel Acadian, so he must have had some rationale for trying to construct another version of an accepted myth.

A perusal of family letters and other ephemera from the Voorhies family⁸⁹ reveals that scholars, especially from Canada, were showing continuing interest in the *Evangeline* story, interest that was ramped up the moment the “true” story was published by Voorhies in his book, *Acadian Reminiscences*. Many different people wrote to Voorhies, hoping to confirm various details of the route that his *Evangeline*, “Emmeline LaBiche,” supposedly took in search of her Gabriel, “Louis Arcenaux.” One Canadian from Montreal, Edmond Montet wrote on February 10, 1918 that he had brought the book to the attention of his historical society after having found the story mentioned in the *Woman’s Magazine* of January 1917. He wanted to know if it was true that *Evangeline* was not a fictional character, and was she really called “Emmaline LaBiche?” The collection does not have a copy of Voorhies’ March 5, 1918 response to Montet, but it does have Montet’s return letter of April 19, 1918 in which Montet asks, “*la tombeau d’Emmeline existe-t-il en Louisiane?*” I wish I had Voorhies’ response to that question: “Does the tomb (grave) of Emmeline exist in Louisiana?” Voorhies obviously maintained his heroine’s validity, and thus a second, more powerful myth of the Acadians was born, one that even Cajuns could believe in.

Never in any of the correspondence does Voorhies even hint that there is no truth to the story. Voorhies was a crusader, a man with a mission. He was striving with all his might to bring the Cajuns back to a position of pride and acceptance. He was proud of the book’s success, stating, “when that book of mine has been extensively read, received with flattering appreciation in the literary world, so much so that three editions of the work have been exhausted and a new edition may issue shortly.”⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Voorhies Family Collection, Louisiana Room, Dupre Library University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

⁹⁰ Personal letter to W.C.Soulsby, Cleveland, Ohio. No date. Found in Felix Voorhies collection. UL.

Alas, Genteel Acadian efforts to revitalize the Cajun culture and to promote pride in the just-plain Cajuns were doomed to failure. The Genteel Acadians did not understand the need for a bottom to top, grassroots movement. State Senator Dudley “Coozan Dud” LeBlanc was another Genteel Acadian who sought to help the Cajuns gain a pride in their heritage. LeBlanc is probably better known for taking on Huey P. Long (and losing) and for the creation and selling of “Hadacol,” a patent medicine that owed most of its popularity among its constituents to the ethyl alcohol which comprised twelve percent of the ingredients (Clay 155).

Many Cajuns may not realize the extent of LeBlanc’s devotion to the cause for Cajun pride. LeBlanc spent time researching his family tree, going back eleven generations to René LeBlanc, a character in Longfellow’s *Evangeline* (Clay 8). LeBlanc then published a book meant to engender the pride he felt in his heritage in other Cajuns. Cobbling together some oral history with a healthy dose of outrage, LeBlanc released the self-published book, *The True Story of the Acadians* in 1937. The book did not accomplish LeBlanc’s goal at the time of its first publishing. The Cajuns were not ready for ethnic revival just yet, but LeBlanc kept trying to get the Cajuns to be proud of who they were and where they came from.

LeBlanc promoted connections between the Acadians of Louisiana and the Acadians of Nova Scotia. As early as 1930, LeBlanc had taken a group of “Evangelines” to Grand Pré, and the following year two “Gabriels” escorted Canadian “Evangelines” to Louisiana (B. Le Blanc 66). This cultural exchange was based mostly on the romantic ideals of separated relatives being united after nearly two centuries. The cultural exchange opened up relationships with Acadian cousins in Canada and was repeated in

1936, 1946, and 1963 (B. Le Blanc 66). The exchange would also lay the foundation for tourist extravaganzas as Acadians and Acadiana became a thriving marketing tool in both areas. At least in this regard, LeBlanc was successful. By the end of the 1950's, tourism would become the ranking business in the state of Louisiana, bringing in an estimated \$290 million per year and leading to a commercialization of the Cajun culture (Bernard 48).

The year 1955 marked two hundred years since the deportation and diaspora of the Acadians. Genteel Acadians organized a committee to celebrate the Bicentennial of the Expulsion and called the event the Acadian Bicentennial Celebration, or ABC. To ensure that the celebrations would remain “genteel,” its organizers set into place two policies that reflected the Genteel Acadians’ obsession with Anglo-American values. The first policy predetermined their preference for the term “Acadian,” as opposed to the corrupted version, “Cajun.” The second policy fixed their preference for the term “migration,” fearing that referencing the thirty-year attempt at decimating a culture as an “expulsion” might offend or embarrass their Anglo-American or Canadian friends (Bernard *Americanization* 50-51). In support of this effort to re-label the expulsion, Ed Willis, a Louisiana Representative, sent a letter that was read into the ABC minutes on January 19, 1954, suggesting that the group should “celebrate the landing, not the exile.”

⁹¹ Celebrating the landing would have reflected badly on no one and put to bed any ill feeling that might have lingered among the Cajuns over the loss of their ancestral homeland, not to mention the families that were decimated.

These organizers, led by Dean Thomas Arceneaux of the Southwest Louisiana Institute (later to become USL and then ULL), and a Genteel Acadian, took pride in their

⁹¹ Meeting minutes, Acadian Bicentennial Committee Collection. Louisiana Room, Dupre Library, ULL.

accomplishments, believing they had re-introduced Acadian pride to the Cajun population. It was, however, another top-to-bottom attempt that never really reached the just-plain Cajuns. As stated before, power movement from above instead of below remained an ongoing problem within the preservation movement (Dormon 81). Those leading the movement were the elites who claimed Acadian ancestry and refused to be called “Cajun.” By denying their Cajun background, they weakened their chances of drawing the community together.

The Cajuns at this point were still internalizing the negative values attached to their culture and their language. *Evangeline* meant little to them, and it would be difficult to convince them to preserve a language that had literally been “beaten” out of them, a language they had been afraid to pass on to their children. It would take the ethnic movement happening in the rest of America, outside of the Cajun community, to finally get the attention of the just-plain Cajuns. They would at last begin to think of preserving and celebrating their heritage, but it would be their Louisiana heritage they would want to celebrate, more than the myth of *Evangeline* or even the days of *L’Acadie*.

The late 1960’s saw the rise of the “Black Power/Black is Beautiful” movement in America. The success of this movement led to a resurgence of ethnic pride in many other areas as well. Observing the ethnic movement in the rest of the country, the Genteel Acadians believed their time had come. The Genteel Acadians had worked so hard for so long to inspire exactly this type of movement in the Cajun community and saw the national ethnic revival I discussed in the beginning of the chapter as a timely opportunity to try again.

At the same time that the Genteel Acadians were about to launch another top to bottom effort, the middle generation exiles returned. These young Cajuns, mostly academics and musicians, organized a group to help the Cajuns regain pride in their heritage. For a while it remained a mostly local effort, but the movement began to gain momentum, especially by the late 1970's. Thanks in large part to Alex Haley's book *Roots*, many Americans became interested in genealogy and began to trace their ancestors. Just like the rest of America, Cajuns were glued to their television sets in January 1977 to follow the stories of Kunta Kinte, Kizzy and Chicken George. It was not difficult for the Cajuns to draw parallels between that diaspora and their own. The Cajuns, just like millions of Americans that year, were inspired to trace their own ancestry. Even those who had little knowledge of what had been left behind in *L'Acadie* were moved by Haley's story of a family and their desire to remain a family at all cost. Intergenerational family units, just like those found in Haley's story, continue to be foundational to the Cajun cultural identity.

From this impetus and the efforts of the preservationists, the Cajun cultural identity reformed. Cajuns were now young, hip, and American. While they had mostly missed out on the "Age of Aquarius," they were jumping wholeheartedly into the new "Age of Ethnicity" (Bernard *Americanization* 87). Some went so far as to be "more-Cajun-than-thou" (Bernard *Swamp Pop* 110). This attitude, first suggested by musician Benny Graeff, front man of the group Rufus Jagneaux, referred to the Cajun cultural elites who tried to control the parameters of "Cajunness."

Meanwhile, the 1970's saw the election of the first Cajun governor of Louisiana. There had been Acadian governors in the 1800's, but this was the first Cajun elected in

the twentieth century. Edwin Edwards, as governor, was good for the Cajuns, encouraging them to speak French at home and to be proud of who they were. Gumbo was served as a state dish, and crawfish boils were held on the Capitol grounds. Cajuns began to embrace the heretofore-pejorative term “coonass” and proudly put it on their license plates. At the local high school football games, we even learned a new cheer, “ungawa, ungawa, we got that coonass powah!” This type of rowdiness confirms that the movement was led by the just-plain Cajuns, because the Genteel Acadians would have been appalled by such a display, and probably were.

Happily leading the rowdies, Edwin Edwards pretended to be proud to be a French-speaking Cajun, knowing that his rallying cry, “Cajun Power” would help him to get elected, and it did. Only to his closest confidantes did Edwards show his true contempt for his background (Vidrine 73), a contempt that had been bred on the public school grounds when he had been one of the children that had been punished for speaking French. Spurred by his childhood experiences—and quite possibly the fact that the Cajuns were the largest minority-voting bloc in Louisiana at that time (Vidrine 69), Edwards threw his full support behind the CODOFIL movement to try to bring back the speaking of French to the younger generations. The Council for the Development of French in Louisiana, or CODOFIL, was signed into law by Governor John J. McKeithen and chaired by Jimmy Domengeaux, and thus was born the second “great and noble scheme” launched to obliterate the Cajun culture.⁹²

Of course, that is not how CODOFIL was sold to the people and government of Louisiana. The original charter gives as its purpose the preservation of French “as it is

⁹² There will be many who will dispute my assertion, but analysis of the fruits of the organization can leave me with no other conclusion.

spoken in Louisiana.” The charter ignited hope in the hearts of some. In his February 17, 1970 column, “Comment ça va,” published in the Eunice, Louisiana newspaper, columnist Matt Vernon bemoaned, “But gradually we are losing much of what is so charming about our section.” Vernon was speaking to the ever-growing concern among the older generations that creeping Americanization was taking hold of Cajun Country. Vernon pronounced his support of CODOFIL because he believed, like so many others, that we were “perhaps one generation away from complete disappearance if something isn’t done to popularize this ancient tongue.” I wonder how he would have felt if he had realized that under Domengeaux, CODOFIL had no intention of protecting that “ancient tongue?”

Destroying the Cajun culture had, of course, not been the intent of activist Raymond Rodgers. Rodgers was a Canadian who had come to Louisiana as a professor at USL, the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette (now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette). Rodgers realized just what was being lost by not preserving the Cajun language and energetically sought to do something about it. Attempts by other groups in previous decades had not met with much success. Rodgers met with Domengeaux, a Genteel Acadian, attorney and U.S. Congressman and convinced him to support the effort to preserve “the linguistic base of the ethnic subculture” (Dormon 82). The two worked together to get backing from the state legislature, and CODOFIL was born in 1968. Rodgers’ contract at USL was not renewed so he returned to Canada, leaving Domengeaux in line for sole chairmanship of the Council.

In this position, Domengeaux set himself up as gatekeeper to maintain control over the inflow and outflow of cultural icons, and it was not long before Cajuns were

realizing that Domengeaux fully intended to replace the Cajun culture with the more “refined” French culture he envisioned for Louisiana. James Dormon contends that revitalizing the Cajun ethnic identity “was never the goal of the organization.” The original goal, according to Dormon, was to “create contacts with other French-speaking peoples of the world” (84). The advertised goal of the organization and the true goal of the organizers diverged from the very beginning. The end result was that elitists created an elite organization to exhibit the natural superiority of the International community rather than finding and preserving the very best of the Cajun/Acadian culture. Dormon further explained: “Domengeaux and the local French-speaking elitists in charge of the program [CODOFIL] were patently uncomfortable with the Cajun folk tradition, preferring to associate themselves with the tradition of the white Creoles and the Genteel Acadians” (85).

Rodgers wished to help preserve Louisiana’s ethnic subculture, and there is no doubt from his speeches and letters that the subculture he sought to preserve was the Cajun culture. Despite his good intentions, Rodgers was still an outsider to the community and as such had failed to understand the social politics involved in the salvation of a culture, especially one that had witnessed the Genteel Acadian struggle for dominance in the last century, a struggle that had engendered mostly apathy in the just-plain Cajuns. Domengeaux showed his disdain for the Cajuns and even for his mongrelized Acadian roots. He used his authority and the organization that was supposed to be the channel for preservation to bring back the original French, bypassing any and all of the legacy of *L’Acadie*.

James “Jimmy” Domengeaux, even years after his death, remains a polarizing figure in Cajun history. There seems to be no intermediate opinion about Domengeaux. Most people cast him as a saint or a sinner, a hero or a villain. Shane Bernard refers to him as “an elite,” an “upper class preservationist” (73). Carl Brasseaux explains that the Domengeaux family began as the scions of “Gallicized German Creole families” who were married exogenously to Acadian women and the children were thus reared as Acadians (*Acadian* 39). Ancelet recognized that Domengeaux promoted himself as a gatekeeper to the community by “keeping a tight rein on the early Louisiana French movement” (“Problem” 347).

To the French, Domengeaux was a hero; not only did the French government make him a Commander of the Order of the Legion of Honor of the French Republic in 1988, they also named a street after him to honor him for maintaining international relations between France and her original colony,⁹³ almost as though the Louisiana Purchase had never taken place. Domengeaux held numerous honorary degrees, and USL created an Eminent Scholar Chair in Foreign Languages in his name.⁹⁴ On the other hand, most of the Cajuns (and some nonCajuns) I’ve interviewed (who have asked not to be identified) did not see Domengeaux as anything other than a “bigot,” an “elitist,” and “pretentious.” It is not difficult to understand their reactions based on Domengeaux’s actions.

Just as the Acadian Bicentennial group had set policies in 1955 that favored the Acadians over the Cajuns, Domengeaux moved quickly to implement policies that would, at first, continue to diminish the Cajuns’ pride in their language and themselves. Since

⁹³ Beverly Corbell. “French street to be named for CODOFIL founder.” *The Advertiser* [Lafayette, LA], December 10, 2003.

⁹⁴ Encyclopedia of Cajun Culture

the Cajun dialect was a spoken, not written language, Domengeaux convinced his supporters that only the “good” French should be taught, arguing, “Do you teach *joual* in Quebec? Do we teach hillbilly English in America” (Henry *Blue Collar* 177)?

In what would come to be called “Standard French imperialism” by some young Cajun activists (Henry *Blue Collar* 177), CODOFIL moved into the schools in Louisiana and hired French-speaking teachers from Canada, Belgium, and France, thus ensuring that the French taught in the schools would not be Cajun French, but rather what the Cajuns refer to as “Parisian French.” It is the French that is spoken internationally, but not the language that was carried from Nova Scotia to Louisiana and therefore, not the language that is spoken in the home by their grandparents. Cajun French is the French that was spoken in the seventeenth century in France and should have been preserved just on that basis, if for no other reason.

Domengeaux had further argued that French should be taught in the primary and secondary schools so that the students could have a lifelong exposure to the language. Others argued that it would be more effective to begin in the universities, to “develop a corps of native Louisiana teachers” (Ancelet “Problem” 346). Time has shown that those others were correct. By not beginning in the universities, the movement has never been able to generate enough native, French-speaking teachers, but that was not Chairman Domengeaux’s only mistake. Instead of centering the first efforts in the Acadian parishes, with French-speaking parents and grandparents to help with homework, the program was implemented across the state and resources were therefore diluted, thus limiting the program to the elementary schools. I was a junior in high school when CODOFIL was signed into law and a freshman in college when implementation began.

By starting in the elementary schools, the program bypassed a large part of the generation that had already suffered the loss of their language, the middle generation that has worked the hardest for revitalization of their ethnicity.

I was still in Louisiana attending college when the first outside teachers arrived to begin teaching in the schools. I remember that much was made of the arrival of the outside French teachers. I particularly remember the pictures of them as they stepped from the plane onto the tarmac at the airport, being hailed as saviors. “Real” French people were arriving to teach “real” French to the Cajun children and to save the culture. What must the French-speaking Cajuns have been feeling to see such a display? I believe this blatant disregard for the genuine Cajun culture is why “despite its relative success on legal and political fronts, CODOFIL consistently found itself frustrated in its attempts to generate grassroots support among the Cajuns” (Ancelet “Problem” 346).

Even worse, many of the CODOFIL teachers showed their contempt for the rough-spoken Cajun French, further denying the students the chance to reclaim their heritage through the language. All of the “French Immersion” schools in Louisiana today teach International French. For the first three decades of the project, Cajun French-speaking grandparents were not invited to come for conversation or to help with pronunciation, at least not officially, so the ban on speaking Cajun French on public school property was essentially still in effect. In recent years, there have been efforts to change the attitude towards Cajun French, but many fear that it is too little, too late. The program has never generated enough native speakers that teach, so outside teachers are still being brought into the school system. Personal interviews with student teachers currently in the immersion schools have revealed evidence that the prejudice of the

outside French teachers against Cajun French is still alive and well. Students are often corrected harshly for asking about the differences. Though Domengeaux has died, his legacy lives on.

The current CODOFIL administrators, under Cajun activist Warren Perrin, are fighting to repair their reputation in the Cajun community, but it is an uphill battle. Most Cajuns have never “supported CODOFIL, and indeed, often voiced opposition to the program” (Dormon 85), and it was this opposition that finally drew the just-plain Cajuns together to take a second look at their language and their culture. As the Cajuns became proactive in studying the CODOFIL problems, Cajun self-awareness led to a “major resurgence of ethnic pride, far beyond the institutional limitations of schools and CODOFIL” (Rushton 294). As a result, Domengeaux is given far more credit than he deserves for the Cajun ethnic revival.

Domengeaux’s empowerment in the revival movement was not satisfied just to bully the people into accepting “Parisian” French. As a powerful Genteel Acadian and former U.S. Congressman, this attorney had an unprecedented amount of authority given to him. As the leader of CODOFIL, Domengeaux set himself to be the leading gatekeeper of the Cajun community. His authority would impact the music, but most especially the dialect humor.

When some Cajun musicians approached Domengeaux to use his position and authority to back a concert of Cajun music, Domengeaux at first refused, seeing no benefit to the movement in celebrating the hoary old music of a dying culture. These were the same young musicians and academics that had shared “exile experiences” and returned home. Believing it was the right time to honor Cajun music, these young Cajuns

persevered, and sponsored a “Tribute to Cajun Music.” The 1974 event was originally going to be held in the USL student center, but the organizers decided to move the event to Blackham Coliseum, an 8000-seat venue. The Tribute was so successful it drew an estimated 12,000 people (Bernard *Americanization* 106). The event unexpectedly launched a grassroots Cajun movement, a bottoms-up movement led by the just-plain Cajuns.

Domengeaux, wanting to remain at the forefront of the movement, had to admit that he’d been wrong about Cajun music, a very difficult thing for him to do (Bernard *Americanization* 105-108). His apology paved the way for him to take credit for the event, and, in the ensuing thirty plus years, people now “mis-remember” CODOFIL as the instigator of the event and Domengeaux as its hero.

Based on the success of the Tribute, CODOFIL did begin to sponsor several “Acadian” reunions along the lines of those that Dudley LeBlanc had initiated in the 1930’s, “a Great Reunion of the Acadian People.” Although the word “Cajun” was still not used, the primary participants were the just-plain Cajuns. The reunions set the stage for more festivals that ultimately began to celebrate the Cajun traditions and lore. The festivals engendered even more than expected. As Dorman tells us, “The sense of a felt ethnic identity with a *positive* value attachment was by then palpable in the crowds. CODOFIL had indirectly brought about a phenomenon its directors never intended” (86-87).

It must have been difficult for Domengeaux to watch the Cajuns seek after their own culture and not the more refined continental French one. From his position as self-proclaimed gatekeeper, Domengeaux had already rebuked Governor Edwards for using

the term “coonass” to describe himself. Edwards’ lower-class Cajun values were anathema to Domengeaux, and he took it upon himself to offer criticism in the hope that the governor would ascribe to the level of Genteel Acadian. It never happened. Edwards may not have been really proud of being a Cajun, but he was certainly too proud of being the proverbial sow’s ear to be affected by Domengeaux’s dictum.

Since CODOFIL considered itself a watchdog agency over anything having to do with expressions of the French language, it is no surprise that Domengeaux next turned his authority toward Cajun dialect humor. Domengeaux had lost the argument against the Cajun music and was determined to undermine the dialect humor. Domengeaux likely convinced himself that it would be easier to find supporters among the Cajuns to join him in denouncing the practitioners of the dialect humor. As early as 1962, a joke appeared in the newspaper using the Cajun dialect to share an anecdote about a ride in a taxicab. A mother wrote in to the newspaper, objecting to the use of the patois, her concern being that her son would be affected by the inappropriate use of the language. In his September 1, 1962 column, “Remoulade,” *Times-Picayune* editor Howard Jacobs printed the letter of Donald Savery defending the use of the dialect:

Many languages are spoken on this globe. ... Within each language there are dialects, provincialisms, colloquialisms, etc., ad infinitum ... That lad should know how much fun Damon Runyon had and how much money he made and how many friends he had and how much enjoyment he afforded for millions ... Is there anything wrong with the Cajun dialect or my Yankee twang? Words can easily become fighting matters. And fighting just leads to destruction.

To raise the use of the Cajun dialect to the level of Runyonesque puts a delightful spin on the Cajun dialect humor. It certainly makes me proud to be a performer of the humor.

Domengeaux did not see Cajun humor that way nor did he seize the admonishment at the end of the previous paragraph. Words matter and “can easily become fighting matters.” In 1974, Domengeaux used his bully pulpit at CODOFIL to take on what he perceived as a threat, especially to his version of the Cajun cultural identity, the dialect humor as defined by Bud Fletcher and Justin Wilson. Domengeaux’s first salvo was a news feature in the *Times-Picayune* in which he was quoted as saying “that such exploitation was an affront to persons of Acadian (or Cajun) origin.”

In his “Remoulade” column of May 30, 1974, Howard Jacobs answered by calling the news feature a “carefully orchestrated effort by the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) to discredit and discourage Cajun talespinners in their use of the well-known dialect.” Jacobs based his accusation on the fact that the people writing “these philippics” were persons active in CODOFIL. These were not the first letters commenting on the dialect humor, although the previous letters had been “less acid in tone.” Evidently, Jacobs and other editors across the state had been bombarded with letters for weeks:

A graphic example was an abusive letter that appeared in a Mamou paper by a local attorney denouncing Justin Wilson for his “disservice” to the Cajuns by his dialect stories. A few weeks later we were the recipients of an equally condemnatory letter from one Warren Authement, Lafourche Parish school superintendent. Authement went further than any previous critic by gratuitously injecting the opinion that the ethnic background of this columnist was all the more reason he shouldn’t indulge in this form of Cajun humor since his co-religionists had “also” been victims of discrimination.

Up to this point, correspondence in support of his columns and the jokes had leaned heavily on the positive side and were signed by people with Cajun surnames. In other

words, the just-plain Cajuns were enjoying the jokes. It was the Genteel Acadians in CODOFIL and their elite brethren who were “offended.”

The timing of the attack was quite remarkable and could have been bad for Jacobs and Justin Wilson, given that the book Jacobs had edited with Justin Wilson on Cajun Humor would be published that summer. Any success in disavowing dialect humor would have put a crimp in the sales of said book, so it is no surprise that Jacobs came out swinging. Domengeaux, however, swung back.

Domengeaux took the time to answer each of Jacobs’ accusations, and the *Times-Picayune* published his response in the Sunday edition of the paper on July 21, 1974, some seven weeks after the initial column. Domengeaux defended Cajun humor as that which was spoken in French, not dialect, that it was “marvelous, philosophical, glowing with life humor. ... For it is in this language that the humor resides. By preserving the language, we preserve the culture.” This is an interesting statement, considering that Domengeaux had heretofore shown no interest in preserving the Cajun culture or the Cajun language.

Domengeaux went on to defend the work of Walter Coquille because “he didn’t ridicule the Cajun people.” In Domengeaux’s mind, Fletcher and Wilson were “imposters who [were] trying to wring out a living by using not Cajun humor but jokes that make Cajuns look backwards, dimwitted and stupid.” On the other hand, Domengeaux believed the Cajuns to be “the least sophisticated people in the world ... a breath of fresh air in a stultified, manneristic, standardized world.” It is interesting that Domengeaux considered Cajuns to be unsophisticated at the same time he contended that they were “at home on the bayous and in the drawing rooms,” while pleading, “Please don’t ever try to

change us.” It is especially interesting to see Domengeaux, the Genteel Acadian, align himself with the just-plain Cajuns.

According to Domengeaux, any French-speaking Cajun could use Cajun dialect humor, so long as it was spoken in French. Cajuns were unsophisticated yet at home in a drawing room. Domengeaux considered himself a Cajun. *Quel incroyable!* On the other hand, Domengeaux also defended the humor of McLoughlin and Coquille, proudly stating that he had introduced Coquille to “Washington society and to the national TV networks,” because Coquille “brought forth the essence of Cajun wit as did before him J.J. McLoughlin under the pen name of Jack Lafaience.” Neither McLoughlin nor Coquille, as noted before, performed in French, so evidently Domengeaux had a double standard for the Cajun humorists performing in the 1970’s, as opposed to those who had gone before.

Analysis of the humor of both Coquille and Wilson finds very minor differences, certainly not enough to launch such an attack on the “old” style of humor. Howard Jacobs thought the question might concern the dialect rather than the jokes. In his “Remoulade” column, published the same day as Domengeaux’s tirade, Jacobs further argued that, “the real issue is whether Cajun dialect is, in fact, derogatory.”

Domengeaux discredits those Cajun talespinners who are unacquainted with the French language. This gets back to another basic question. If Cajun humor needs must come clothed in French trappings, then of course a knowledge of the language is indispensable. But if its heart-blood is distorted English, then the raconteur need not speak fluent French. In fact, all the modern-day talespinners, as well as Coquille and the earlier James J. McLoughlin (Jack Lafaience) employ (or employed) little or no French except for an occasional Gallic exclamation.

What Domengeaux did not recognize was that the dialect humor had evolved, just like the music. Cable used the dialect to humorous advantage in his novellas and stories. McLoughlin used it as a form of political tirade. Coquille's work would lay the foundations for what is called the "old" style of Cajun dialect humor today. Coquille dressed the part, walked the part and talked the part, but he still told long, involved stories. Wilson and Fletcher also dressed for their parts, but their stories became shorter, with faster punchlines, more in the manner of stand-up comedians. This shorter style was the only real difference between the work of Coquille and Wilson. In addition to the Mayor, Coquille created other personages who lived, breathed, and walked in the mythical place called "Bayou Pom Pom." Coquille's humor, like that of McLoughlin, was specific to its time period and to the politicians and political hi-jinks of their eras. There were probably some other political hi-jinks involved in the attack on Wilson. I am hazarding a guess here when I say that there was more to this than the public feud. It is well known in the Cajun community that Domengeaux had been anti-Long, like his friend, Walter Coquille. Wilson, however, had been a Long supporter. This political enmity would certainly have been enough for Domengeaux to use his position to try to bring Wilson down (Fontenot 271).

It wasn't long before the public was taking sides in the matter and writing their opinions to the *Times-Picayune*. Published in "Remoulade" on August 15, 1974, the public responses to the columns by both Domengeaux and Jacobs were, however, the most telling of all. The letters selected by Howard Jacobs to be published ran in favor of the Cajun dialect humor by quite a margin. Since I do not have access to the original letters, I am going to have to trust that Jacobs was fair in his reporting.

Many of the letters expressed this kind of tone, the feeling that, “The CODOFIL chairman is getting worked up over nothing.” From the Rev. James Clement:

Yes, I am 200 per cent Cajun (pure bleed) and I thought CODOFIL’s job was to foster the use of the French language in Louisiana—and not to tamper with Cajun-French dialect or humor ... I know hundreds of people who still talk like Justin Wilson and Bud Fletcher ... I get a sneaky feeling that CODOFIL wants to make Frenchmen out of us. Me, I want to stay a real Cajun, mais yah!

Clement evidently was on to Domengeaux because he nailed the chairman’s agenda, that Domengeaux wanted “to make Frenchmen out of us.” To his mind, there was a difference between being French and being Cajun French. Domengeaux knew the difference, too. He could just not believe that anyone, given the chance, would choose to remain a backward Cajun when they could become a refined Frenchman.

Don Olsen, a columnist for the Daily Iberian [New Iberia, LA] disagreed with the idea that the jokes had to be told in French, insisting “that would be almost as out of character as telling them with a German accent.” Noted author and journalist, Harnett T. Kane was “surprised at the manner in which some [were] overreacting. Not once to my recollection have I received complaints in French Louisiana or elsewhere.” Kane was referring to the Cajun characters in his novels, characters that were drawn not too differently from their ancestors that had graced the stories of George Washington Cable.

A citizen of Crowley, Louisiana, who just signed his letter, “One of Them,” disagreed with the supporters of the dialect humor, stating, “No one has ever heard a real Cajun the way these so-called humorists talk,” an interesting comment since the Cajun dialect tends to change every so many miles across Louisiana. The dialect is much “thicker” in Lafourche parish than it is in Calcasieu Parish, so the citizen from Crowley

might find it difficult to make such a sweeping statement. He, however, “disagree[d] with Mr. Domengeaux that the Cajun [was] being demeaned by these people.” Mrs. Nell Jacob of Ponchatoula concurred,

I don't like this criticism of Justin Wilson and others who use Cajun dialect. Can't see that he hurts anyone, and I personally get a big laugh from his stories. They sure haven't hurt my morale any.

Mrs. Jacob's response seems to represent the way most people saw the humor, as something fun and not offensive. Mary Anne Pecot deBoisBlanc puts it best, I believe, when she writes:

I am a Cajun, having been born in the glorious Bayou Lafourche country. I agree that this beautiful culture should be preserved—humor, dialect, patois, broken English and everything else that represents its way of life. If we accept what we are, we have the 'Dignity of Man.'

There were many who believed and still believe (I get the same response when I interview people at Cajun comedy functions) that the Cajuns (read Genteel Acadians and gatekeepers) who instigated the attack on Cajun dialect humor were losing their sense of humor and trying to take our sense of humor away from the Cajuns in general. John Redmond, as quoted in the *Times-Picayune*, declared: “I do honestly believe we're fast losing our much-vaunted and bragged about sense of humor. We seem to have lost the capability of laughing at ourselves.”

Even Judge Felix Voorhies' grandson, Rousseau Van Voorhies, weighed in on the argument:

May your pronouncement on a fatuous attack on the Cajun character and Cajun humor and conviviality by extreme elements in CODOFIL shed light and truth on this important educational controversy in Louisiana today, Cajun and otherwise.

And with that statement, Voorhies drew the argument back to where it belonged, back to CODOFIL and its leader, who had overstepped the original intent of the Council.

Unfortunately, the quite public battle against the dialect humor has continued, though a little more quietly. Its echoes can be heard in the apologies of the Cajuns who are recording the jokes in print and in the rules that Cajun comics must obey before performing in certain venues.

Curt Boudreaux, who holds a Masters of Education degree, introduces his book of Cajun dialect jokes, *Never Kiss an Alligator on the Lips!* with this qualification:

People in general do silly and, oftentimes, humorous things. Cajuns are no exception. This book will be an attempt to present some of these mishaps and see the funny side of life. Obviously, in most instances, there has been a gross exaggeration of facts and events, but they still furnish a keen insight into the Cajuns' love for life and living. Their kindness, generosity and loving nature are unmatched.

Hopefully, no one will get "bent out of shape" or be offended by this book. Believe me when I say that it is not my intent to put anyone down. I am proud of my name and heritage, but I believe we should not take ourselves so seriously that we can't laugh at some of the things we say and do. The ability to laugh at oneself is essential to happiness in life and Cajuns possess the capacity to do just that. Laughter is the sunshine of the soul and a sign of a mentally healthy person. So I assume it is safe to say by the greatest stretch of the imagination that I am attempting to promote mental health. Be that as it may, I simply want you to laugh and have fun as you read this book. (14-15)

Mr. Boudreaux, an obviously educated Cajun, still feels the need to preface his book with his innocent intentions. Over the last few years, I have attended several Cajun comedy revues and informally questioned members of the audience. The answers are always the same. They enjoy the Cajun dialect humor but would "most likely" be offended if it were

demeaning to the Cajuns. The difficulty for most of them is the definition of “demeaning.” Only Barry Ancelet seemed to have an answer for me. In a personal interview,⁹⁵ Ancelet explained that if the joke makes the Cajun sound stupid, then that is demeaning, but if it makes the Texan sound stupid, then it is not.

The last chapter contained several examples of the “old” brand of humor. The following is an example of the “new” style of humor:

Boudreaux had taken a job as a taxi driver and picked up a Texan at the airport. On the way to the hotel, they passed Blackham Coliseum. The Texan asked how long it had taken to build. Boudreaux replied that it had taken a couple of years. To which the Texan replied, “well we have one like that and it only took one year to build.” Boudreaux just nodded. Then, they passed the Albertson’s grocery store, and the Texan asked how long it had taken to build that one. Boudreaux said, “oh about six months.” “Hmph,” the Texan replied, “we got an Albertson’s and it only took three months to build.” Boudreaux just nodded, and soon they were passing the Cajun Dome. “Well,” said the Texan, “how long did it take to build that?” “I don’t know,” said Boudreaux, “it wasn’t there this morning.”⁹⁶

The joke follows the rules by making certain it is the Cajun who comes out on top in the skirmish, and it is the Texan who bites the dust.

In this chapter, I have discussed the reclamation of an ethnic identity and how the just-plain Cajuns, once they banded together, were able to engender their own power. I have related the role of the Genteel Acadians within the Cajun community over the last century to show the impact of their cultural apostasy on the Cajun cultural identity. This role led to what may have been a politically motivated personal attack on Justin Wilson. Genteel Acadian, Jimmy Domengeaux, used his authority as head of CODOFIL to sabotage the “old” style of Cajun dialect humor because that was the form of humor most

⁹⁵ February 14, 2006.

⁹⁶ I heard Jonathon Perry perform this one in person at Cajun Comic Relief, January 7, 2006.

associated with Wilson. This assault on a particular brand of humor led to a devaluing of the type of humor that I perform.

I don't believe there should be any distinctions between the "old" and the "new" Cajun dialect humor. I also believe that Cajun dialect humor is an important part of our cultural heritage. Cajuns still enjoy laughing at Boudreaux and Thibodeaux. The humor can be used to tell outsiders about our unique culture and the people who are still able to laugh at themselves and their foibles after four centuries on this continent and a diaspora that is still a part of our collective consciousness.

My main purpose for this work is to regenerate some excitement about Cajun dialect humor. Right now, there are not enough venues to support Cajun humorists as a full-time position. If the community does not begin to support Cajun humorists, if we do not do our best to preserve the Cajun dialect humor, the current crop of humorists may well be the last Cajun comics standing.

CHAPTER SIX—PERFORMING LOUISIANA: THE “APPROPRIATENESS” OF CAJUN DIALECT HUMOR

The recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification. In restaging the past it introduces other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition. (Bhabha 3)

Grandpa Boudreaux went in for his annual physical checkup on his 92nd birthday. A few days later the doctor saw the elder Boudreaux walking down the street with a gorgeous young lady on his arm. “Man, you’re really doing great, aren’t you, Grandpa Boudreaux?” observed the doctor. “Mais, yeah, sha, but ahm jis doin’ watchu told me ta do,” replied Grandpa Boudreaux. “Getta hot mama and be cheerful!” “Oh no! That’s not what I said,” responded a worried doctor. “I said you got a heart murmur! Be careful!” (C. Boudreaux 57)

In the introduction to her 1972 study of one ethnic group’s search for identity, Sister Frances Jerome Woods analyzed the contemporary development in art from an emphasis on group dynamics to an exploration of selfhood and identity. This movement paralleled a societal progression that also explored selfhood and identity. Woods considered these movements to be the impetus for the ethnic revitalization efforts of the 1960’s and concluded that,

An individual who identifies with a people, who has a true sense of identity, particularly one that has exemplified courage and an ability to rise above hardships, is not as likely to suffer alienation. (3)

Although Woods’ book, *Marginality and Identity*, traces one Black Creole family through ten generations, her findings speak to the Cajun search for a cultural identity, as

well. Through their ethnic revival movement, Cajuns are closer to embracing “a true sense of identity.”

The Cajun revitalization efforts of the past decades revolved around reclaiming the Cajuns’ past history. There are inherent problems with trying to resurrect the past: sketchy source material, inaccurate reminiscences, and a selection process that ignores the painful memories. Sometimes the uncomfortable events took place so far in the past that no one remembers the foundation for the discomfort; yet the repercussions from those events continue to reverberate, and even evolve into traditions. I am reminded of the story of the new bride who cut off the end of her ham before putting it in the oven. When her husband asked why she cut the ham, she replied that it was “tradition,” because her mother had always done so. A call to her mother uncovered the fact that it was “tradition” because *her* mother had always done so. A call to the grandmother resolved the dilemma: her pan had always been too small for the ham, so she had to cut off the end of the ham to make it fit!

Inventing traditions often evolves from expediency, and that can include political expediency. The Opelousas Proclamation responded to tensions within the Cajun community, tensions that were promulgated by the gatekeepers’ desire to control the narrative within the Cajun community. Masquerading as an attempt to control the narrative was an underlying attempt to control the influence of Justin Wilson and Bud Fletcher. Within the Cajun community, the comedy of Wilson and Fletcher was relegated to the status of “old” humor. Such a sweeping indictment of their brand of humor caught other performers in the sweep, including my own created persona, The Cajun Lady.

As a performer of Cajun dialect humor, I am concerned that my community lost a precious part of its history and legacy for the future when the “old” style of dialect humor was prohibited. As discussed in previous chapters, some gatekeepers considered the “old” brand of Cajun dialect humor to be “demeaning” to the Cajun people. A look through the history of Cajun dialect humor reveals a disconnect with this argument. The Cajun community gatekeepers honor Walter Coquille, whose comedy aligns more with the “old” brand than with the “new. I find little difference between Coquille’s performances and that of Justin Wilson. Coquille wore a costume, used an exaggerated accent, and intermixed his English with malapropisms, autographing his books, “Wit’ deep ‘infection.’” Coquille gets a pass for performing the same style of humor, while Wilson bears the brunt of the community’s indignation.

One explanation for this, certainly, could be that Wilson was performing during the politically correct era of ethnic revitalization, and Coquille was long dead. That rationale seems almost too easy since decades have passed since that time, yet the distaste for the “old” style (especially anything by Wilson) still lingers. A closer look at the events surrounding CODOFIL and its leader exposed a more personal reason: Domengeaux and Wilson sat on opposite sides politically. Domengeaux preferred that someone other than Wilson would stand as representative for the Cajun community. As a result of Domengeaux’s vigorous attacks against the “old” style of humor, the tension continues within the community over the proliferation of jokes and joke books about Boudreaux and Thibodeaux, two characters that define the “old” style of humor. There is also an underlying “taint” to the “new” style of humor, partly because Cajuns are not

fully aware of the events that affected the humor they grew up with, the humor of Bud Fletcher, Justin Wilson and John Plauché.

The purpose of this chapter is to argue for the “appropriateness” of *all* Cajun dialect humor as a representative cultural element of Cajun preservation, both the “old” and the “new.” To this end, I have divided the chapter into two parts. In the first part, I will analyze different theories and styles of ethnic humor for the purpose of demonstrating how Cajun dialect humor fits within the international canon of dialect humor. In the second part of the chapter, I will explain the different styles of Cajun dialect humor, placing special emphasis on the current crop of Cajun humorists. I will include an analysis of The Cajun Lady, and how she fits into the debate that has separated the “old” from the “new” Cajun humor.

I am arguing for a return to the “old” style of humor. I wish to celebrate the diversity of styles and to represent the Cajun culture to the outside world with these distinctive comic characters. In my estimation, a select few promoted their own agenda to sanitize the humor and the community. The divisiveness caused by this group of people weakened efforts to present Cajun dialect humor as a respected element of our culture. Returning to the “old” style and weaving it with the “new” would strengthen Cajun dialect humor overall. By allowing the free rein of creativity, I believe that Cajun dialect humor could rival the popularity of “redneck” humor and give “The Blue Collar Comedy Tour” some competition.

Critics of my case may well want to dispute the “authenticity” of Cajun dialect humor, but there is no basis whatsoever for their argument. I concede that Cajun dialect humor was begun by outsiders and later adopted by the Cajuns themselves; however,

there is evidence that the types of jokes used by the Cajun humorists today have a longstanding history within the Acadian/Cajun oral tradition.

The gatekeepers, who have selected the food and the music as representations of our culture, have already admitted that both are products of twentieth-century reclamation efforts (Bienvenu et al 17). As stated in the previous chapters, Cajun food and Cajun music evolved in the last century to become the product that is now marketed as “authentic.” Cajun food and Cajun music, as they are today, are really examples of Cajun adaptation to the circumstances brought on by the diaspora and urbanization. Since the Cajun comedians molded Cajun dialect humor to reflect the Cajun lifestyle and the adaptations necessary for survival, I believe the humor deserves to be the third prong of the Cajun culture, to be recognized and marketed with all the vigor and support of the other two. I propose that Cajun humorists should be presented at festivals, their humor included in cookbooks (since recipes are always included in the joke books), and their stories granted national and international recognition at such events as the *Congrès Mondial Acadien*.

Cajun purists⁹⁷ prefer to think of Cajun humor as the traditional humor where the jokes are told in French. Privileging Cajun French humor over the macaronic dialect humor is now problematic since the number of French-speaking Cajuns has dwindled so drastically. If Cajun humor only worked in the French language, there would be a very limited audience for the jokes. We would be in greater danger of losing our oral tradition because there are fewer and fewer people to pass on this history.

⁹⁷ I am defining this term to mean those Cajuns who adhere strictly to certain parameters of “Cajunness,” such as descent from the original Acadian bloodlines, must speak French, etc. This is not meant to be derogatory, simply a distinction.

Christie Davies tells us that what is taking place in the Cajun community is a natural progression: “As so often in America, dialect stories were told by the second generation (who had safely mastered the English language and American culture) about their predecessors in the first generation” (“Exploring the Thesis” 31-32). Although the middle Cajun generation is not officially the “second generation” of Cajuns, we are the second generation in terms of mastering the English language and Americanization.

Until James Domengeaux challenged Cajun dialect humor in 1974, the genre was an accepted part of the Cajun cultural identity. “The bulk of traditional stories has always reflected the view from the inside. Within the borders of their own context, Cajuns have never been afraid to laugh at their own foibles” (Ancelet “Harvard” 101). It also fits the chosen lifestyle of most of the Cajuns who ascribe to a *joie de vivre*, a lifestyle that celebrates the motto *Laissez les Bon Temps Roulez*.⁹⁸

The continued practice and study of Cajun humor is important since “jokes provide insight into how societies work—they are not social thermostats regulating and shaping human behavior, but they are social thermometers that measure, record, and indicate what is going on” (Davies *Ethnic Humor* 9). What has been “going on” in the Cajun community is a struggle over representation and forms of recognition. It is time to cease the struggle and to recognize that “Boudreaux and Thibodeaux” are very much a part of who we were and who we have become. They serve as reminders of all that has been accomplished in our community, and we should welcome them to the show. We are, after all “performing Louisiana” for the rest of the world. The music, the food, and the humor all serve as examples of our cultural performance (Goffman 15).

⁹⁸ Personal phone interview with Dave Petitjean, May 23, 2007.

It would take too long to analyze all of the forms and theories of ethnic humor. There are about as many differing theories of ethnic humor as there are ethnic groups. To narrow the study to just what pertains to the Cajun dialect humor, I have chosen some particular areas of comparison. I want to demonstrate how Cajun ethnic humor is similar to other forms of ethnic humor and therefore not necessarily demeaning. For this inquiry, I am looking to Jewish humor for explanations of self-disparaging humor and to the Maritime Acadians of the nineteenth century for published humor that was meant to help the Acadians cope with their changing times. Today's Newfoundlanders share a similar history and background with the Cajuns, as well as a tendency toward stupidity jokes. The "Newfies" enjoy telling stupidity jokes, especially about themselves, which sets up my argument that the stupidity jokes of Boudreaux and Thibodeaux tend more toward expressions of affection and are not meant to be demeaning.

Before delving into the study of ethnic humor, I would first like to tackle this question of authenticity. In earlier chapters of this work, I have explained the emergence of the Acadians and how they became today's modern Cajuns. The history extends through several centuries and multiple continents. I have argued that some of the cultural traits of the original Acadians have survived nearly intact in their contemporary descendents. I cannot, however, argue for full authenticity. The one trait that seems to rise above the others in both the pre-diaspora Acadians and the modern Cajuns is the ability to adapt for survival. Dr. Ancelet once told me that Cajuns have "a remarkable way of adapting and falling on their feet,"⁹⁹ but once adaptation begins, authenticity is difficult to maintain. The Cajun ethnic activists made valiant attempts to preserve the Cajun language, but have had little success. Each attempt to retain what was lost is an

⁹⁹ Personal Interview, February 14, 2006.

attempt at retrieval, not preservation and is most likely doomed to failure from the beginning. In his book, *Strange Country*, Seamus Deane explains:

every claim to authenticity is shadowed by an answering inauthenticity ... What was really authentic could not be retrieved and still retain its original condition. It would bear within it—either in footnotes, headnotes, introductions, translations, glossaries—the marks of its historical transmission. (Deane 106-107)

No matter what we do, no matter how we try to maintain valid and genuine elements of culture, there is some slippage, some sacrifice of the “real” we must accept. That is why the activists cannot argue “authenticity” when defending the food and the music over the humor. The food and the music bear the marks of historical transmission, but they are accepted as authentic because the Cajun people deem them so. It is a choice the Cajun people have made because they long for concrete expressions of their cultural identity, and they are willing to accept these “answering inauthenticities” in place of what has been lost. In another generation, there will be no one left to know that blackened redfish was never a Cajun dish before the 1980’s. Crawfish Fettuccine “Alfredeaux” will continue to headline the menus at “Authentic Cajun” restaurants. Will it matter that the Cajuns are now making crawfish fettuccine in their homes? Does that make fettuccine an authentic Cajun dish? It may not be “authentic,” but it will become Cajun because Cajuns will always add their own flavors. This fettuccine will be seasoned with Tony Chachere’s Creole Seasoning, and no one will remember that it was a dish originating in the 1990’s. After all, adaptation is an inherited Cajun trait, a trait shared with any culture that has survived for any length of time.

Cajun humor is a good example of Cajun cultural adaptation. Even though outsiders initiated Cajun dialect humor, insiders have now co-opted the humor. Their

badge of pride is the “new” style of humor, and these humorists “are more apt to have their audience laugh with Cajuns than at them” (Henry *Blue Collar* 172). While neither the “old” nor the “new” can make absolute claims to “authenticity,” enough elements of those long winter evenings and the sharing of folklore remain to warrant the salvaging of the complete genre of Cajun dialect humor. I have observed, however, that the “new” style of humor receives more support from Cajun scholars and outside ethnographers. The Cajun scholars are often community gatekeepers and, since the ethnographers usually interview the scholars first, the filtering of information may be through a limited spectrum.

The study of humor is no laughing matter. In fact, the study of humor has been considered quite a serious undertaking for centuries. From Plato and Aristotle to Francis Bacon, Jonathon Swift and Freud, great thinkers, philosophers and playwrights have asked the questions, “Why is it funny?” and “What makes us laugh?” (Patai xiii). By the late 1960’s, Americans were adding new questions, such as “Is that joke offensive?” and “To whom *should* it be offensive?” This era of political correctness seriously impacted Cajun dialect humor, and echoes of this negativity can still be felt today.

The analysis and interpretation of humor remains a difficult and somewhat inexact, albeit politicized, field of study. And the main differences of opinion and contradictions seem to reside particularly in the area of ethnic humor. I’m not certain I understood just how big a challenge I was taking on in trying to analyze ethnic humor. I do know that, in order for me to understand what is taking place in my own community, it is important that I recognize similar elements in other communities. There has been so

little research done in the area of Cajun dialect humor that I must use other ethnic humors to gain the information.

Some researchers believe that ethnic humor evolved as a coping mechanism for the assorted groups as they experienced their various diasporas, a sort of “gallows” humor to get them through their trials (Miller 67). Carolyn Miller has discovered through her empirical investigations that using humor as a coping mechanism was more likely to be so among the Jews than among the black subjects and even less so among the non-Jewish whites in her research. Although the Jews and Blacks shared the necessity of coping with hard times, their methods of coping differed, and their varying cultures had an impact on their use of humor in those circumstances (66-67). Jewish humor has allowed Jews to survive a marginalized existence (Berger 9). The following is an example of an inside joke about a cultural attribute that many within the Jewish community will recognize, the length that Jews will go to avoid an unpleasant scene:

Three Jews are about to be shot by a firing squad, and each is offered a blindfold by the captain of the squad. The first Jew takes the blindfold, and the second Jew takes the blindfold. When the third Jew says that he would prefer not to wear a blindfold, the one next to him says, “Take a blindfold. Don’t make trouble.” (Lewis 47)

Some humor theorists argue that this type of recognition of certain propensities within the community builds social cohesion (Lewis 48). Freud sees such humor as a situation in which “the ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality” (162), but I think it is more likely that Jews have felt marginalized throughout the ages, and this style of humor shows the Jews coping with their fate in the best way that they can. That coping mechanism exhibits a cultural trait that does “build social cohesion.” This may explain why there is a “disproportionate representation [of Jews] in humor-related professions.

In the United States, Jewish comedians have dominated their field for generations”¹⁰⁰ (Miller 59). This style of comedy also attests to a universality that allows non-Jews to enter the Jewish world and enjoy the humor. It is the Jewish ability to laugh no matter what the situation, to tell jokes about themselves and their traditions (Saper 80) that makes the humor so accessible. For example:

Izzy the gangster has been shot by the mob on a street in Brooklyn not far from the tenement where his mother lives and is waiting with dinner. Mortally wounded, he staggers, crawls, creeps up three flights of stairs to his mother’s apartment. As his mother opens the door, he cries: “Ma, ma, listen. I’ve been shot...” “Come, Izzy, you’ll eat first and talk later.” (Saper 80)

The joke about Izzy the gangster could be making fun of Jewish mobsters; instead, it points to the fact that even mobsters have mothers who act like mothers, even in desperate situations. The joke is self-deprecating, but it is also telling a universal truth about mothers, thus making it available to the non-Jewish audience. Both of the previous jokes also find their charm in the rhythms of the Jewish/Yiddish speech patterns. The choice of language is very telling and confirms that these jokes have their origin in Jewish humor. The pattern of the familiar dialect enhances the homey feel of the humor. You might call it “comfort food for the humorous soul.”

I have interviewed Cajun humorists and I have interviewed their audiences. The audiences are usually cross-generational, although the majority of the audiences usually consists of the middle generation, my generation. We laugh; the jokes are funny. We also look at each in fond remembrance (even if the person next to me is a stranger) when one of the comics begins to tell a story of his *tante* struggling with her English. We know his *tante*. Well, not really, she is just a familiar character to us because she is like so

¹⁰⁰ A 1975 study found that 80 percent of the most famous American comedians were Jewish. (Ziv viii)

many of the previous generation, and that is why we smile. This is humorous comfort food for the Cajun soul.

Oddly enough, Cajuns do not tend toward jokes about our mammas. Since the vast majority of Cajun humorists are men, Cajun humor tends to be about wives instead of mothers. Another factor in this choice is that Cajuns have a long history of endogamous marriages made at young ages (Henry *Blue Collar* 126), so the jokes are about Cajun wives instead of about Cajun mothers. The jokes are rather Henny Youngman-esque, playing on the downtrodden husband. It is interesting that the “old” Cajun dialect humor was abandoned because it was supposedly demeaning to the Cajuns. The following is an example of a “new” style of Cajun joke, and some might see this as demeaning to women. Humorist Dave Petitjean tells this one:

Father Scola could make some good sermons. One day he was talking on the Ten Commandments and, boy, did he get excited. He was jumping up and down. Beating on the pulpit. He said you have to obey the Ten Commandments. He said everyone has sinned and messed up at some point. “Some of you think you’re perfect,” he said. “Well, nobody’s perfect!” He got more and more excited. “Anyone out there who thinks he’s perfect, stand up,” he said. After a while, Clabert stood up. “I can’t believe you think you’re perfect!” Father Scola said to him. “No, not me, Father,” Clabert said. “I’m just standing in for my wife’s first husband!” (Angers *Cajun Humor* 9)

The Battle of the Sexes has been an ongoing topic for humor since before Aristophanes penned *Lysistrata*. It is particularly interesting that most of the Cajun wife jokes fall into this category since the Cajun community tends toward patriarchy, even in the twenty-first century. This exchange between veteran Cajun humorists A.J. Smith and Dave Petitjean

was recorded in *Swapping Stories*, an undertaking of The Louisiana Storytelling Project, and attests to the popularity of this kind of humor:

A.J. Smith: Falvey [A.J.'s wife] cooks, I swear, she tries that Cajun cooking, but that woman don't have the commitment.

Dave Petitjean: What you mean...?

A.J. Smith: Well, you heard they got blackened fish, blackened this—all I get is darkened. [All laugh]. She says, "I can't bring myself to burn it." How's about that blackened toast? I get blackened toast now and again.

Dave Petitjean: Audrey asked me the other day. Because, I got the same problem. Audrey's a Cajun girl. Cleans the house spic and span. ... She washes the bananas—everything. When we first got married, I got up one night, went to the kitchen, made me a sandwich; when I come back, she's already made the bed. [Audience laughs]. One day, she said, "Dave, I want to go someplace I ain't never been in my life. Oh, I said, "Good. Why don't you try the kitchen?" The toast—the toast you talking about?... One day, she asked me, she says, "Dave, you think the toast is done?" I said, "I won't be able to tell you until the smoke clears out the window."

Dave Petitjean: Now look. I know that. I know that. I'm kidding. I get so far in the doghouse sometime—for this kind of stuff... [that if] you come to my house, I don't know if I ought to shake your hand or lick it. [Audience laughs.] Oh, no. It gets bad.

A.J. Smith: When you get that far back in the doghouse, they got to feed you with a slingshot, man—[Audience laughs]. ...

Dave Petitjean: Now, *wa-a-it* a minute. At my house, I rule the roost.

A.J. Smith: Uh-huh?

Dave Petitjean: Course, she rules the rooster. [Laughter].
(Lindahl et al 162-163)

The jokes that are scattered throughout this exchange make fun of the wife's position in the household as a scold. The men are still in control, but they pretend to quake before their powerful wives. I wonder how the feminists might deconstruct the humor here and if they might not find it demeaning to the wives. If I were to discuss this with these

gentlemen, they would reply that it was all in fun, they love their wives, and the wives know that they didn't mean anything. I think the same could be said for the "old" style of humor. It was all in fun, and it was not meant to be demeaning to the Cajuns. It is difficult to argue for the "new" style of humor when regarded in this light. If the "new" style of humor gets to stay, then the "old" style of humor should be welcomed back home, too. Demeaning is definitely in the eye of the beholder.

No matter the rationale, the Henny Youngman-type of marital humor will continue to be accepted so long as Cajun dialect humor remains dominated by male humorists. While marital humor is a comic standard, this politically correct humor may also be a reflection of the changing responsibilities in the Cajun home as younger women go out into the workforce and seek advanced college degrees. This would not be the first time that humor was used to hold on to a traditional way of thinking. The latter half of the nineteenth century was a time of change for the Maritime Acadians. The Maritime Acadians are the cousins of the Cajuns, sharing the same antecedents and a knowledge of the exile. While there were some francophone newspapers in Louisiana in the nineteenth century, they mostly serviced the Creoles and the Genteel Acadians, not the Cajuns. Given the type of humor that is popular in today's Cajun circles, I can only imagine that, had there been Cajun newspapers, the jokes would have been quite similar to those of the Maritime Acadians.

The earliest recorded Acadian jokes in newspapers in the Maritimes began to appear in 1867, with the founding of the first Acadian francophone newspapers. It was an era when the Maritime Acadians were beginning to experience their own renaissance, an effort to reclaim their heritage (Andrew 59). The jokes selected by the elite Acadian

editors seem to have reflected the growth of the Acadian community at that time. By 1869, trains were bringing tourists to view the “Land of Evangeline,” putting the Acadians front and center for the world (B. LeBlanc 81-83). Industrialization and urbanization were stressful to the Maritime Acadians, and the jokes provided a coping mechanism for them (Andrew 61). The Acadian society was suffering a sea change, and the jokes were purportedly being published “to enforce community standards of behaviour, to help people cope with tensions in a society where reality never measured up to these standards and to amuse by unexpected twists in word use” (Andrew 60-61).

The newspapers continued to reflect changes in the ever-changing society. Jokes about “lawyers and politicians almost disappeared as Acadian men became significant in these professions, then re-appeared as Acadians took control of their own newspapers” (Andrew 60). Around 1877, jokes about women began to appear with increasing frequency, and those jokes were usually hostile, suggesting a reaction to the changing status of women as they began to enter the workforce. The jokes were used to put women in their place and to make the men feel better for it (Andrew 60). They were also used to allow the readers the opportunity to laugh at anyone who did not conform to “appropriate” standards (Andrew 61). Cajun jokes are more about fun than actually trying to get anyone to change their behavior. They reflect the stereotype rather than one individual.

As the years went on, favorite targets in the Acadian newspapers included the naïve, the foolish and the drunk, longstanding characters in Acadian oral humor, many even dating back to France in the time of Rabelais (Maillet viii). It is not that difficult to make the leap to today’s Cajun dialect humor and the Boudreaux and Thibodeaux jokes

with their ongoing tradition of jokes about the naïve, the foolish and the drunk. These Cajun jokes have value because they are part of a longstanding oral tradition. They are also no worse nor are they more demeaning than the wife jokes.

To demonstrate that Cajun jokes are social thermometers, I'd like to show some different types of jokes that have been around for a long time. These jokes reflect what is important to the Cajun people. Since the foundations of the Cajun culture continue to be family and faith, it is not surprising that popular topics in the longstanding oral tradition are family and faith, particularly the Cajun form of Catholicism. The late, great "Mr. Cajun Himself," Roy Theriot, a member of CODOFIL (Bernard *Americanization* 94), used to tell this one:

One day a priest was sweeping the steps of his church before Mass and a little Cajun boy came up to him and said, "Father, I would like for you to conduct a funeral service for my dog."

The priest responded somewhat indignantly, "My boy, we don't bury animals here."

Disappointed, but understanding, the boy said, "That's okay, father, but do you think the Baptist preacher down the road would do it for \$250?"

"My boy, why didn't you tell me your dog was Catholic?" the priest exclaimed. (Angers *Cajun Humor* 45)

The Cajuns have a long tradition of anticlerical humor going all the way back to colonial times (Ancelet "Harvard" 102) so priests, St. Peter, going to heaven, the devil, and even the Pope are all acceptable targets for Cajun humor:

A few years ago de Pope visited New Orleans. What most people don't know is dat Boudreaux was hees driver dare. After de Pope had been in New Orleans for a while he axed Boudreaux eef he could drive de car. He said dat he wanted to relax some. So dey switched places. De Pope was in de fron' seat an' Boudreaux went to de back seat. When de Pope got behind de wheel, he started to speed and weave in and out of cars. De police stopped him. When de

policeman came to de window, he quickly called on hees
radio to de headquarter. He say, "I need some help. I jus
stopped a very importan' person."
De headquarter responded, "Who is eet?"
He say, "I dono' know, but de Pope is hees chauffer."
(L. Boudreaux 128)

This joke is not original to the Cajun repertoire. I am certain that I have heard it before with another VIP in the front seat, but these two jokes are classic examples of how Cajun humorists have adapted other stories to fit their particular style of comedy. The first joke is a simple adaptation of a joke told by any Catholic. There is no attempt to use the dialect here and I would be curious to see which joke would attract more laughter if performed before a Cajun audience. My guess would be the second joke because the dialect adds to the timing and the flavor of the joke. Here it is the anticlericalism as well as the Cajunisms that make the joke funny and certainly funnier than the first joke. Like the Jewish/Yiddish jokes, the dialect adds a particular charm to the humor. If we continue to toss out the "old" style of humor, we are left with comics telling funny stories with an accent instead of something that is truly unique. While there are similarities among all of the ethnic humor, I believe that the costumes and the rest of the "old" schtick in Cajun comedy add to the uniqueness of our presentation and should therefore be preserved.

Some researchers consider ethnic humor to be an aggressive response by the minor culture against the dominant culture trying to dictate to them (Davies "Exploring the Thesis" 30-31). On the other hand, there are those who believe that ethnic humor is often used against the minor culture by the dominant culture as a way of maintaining a sense of their own supremacy (Davies *Mirth* 201). Ethnic humor as aggression can be seen in some of the earlier jokes about the Cajuns.

Outside of the community, there are those who will tell mean jokes about anyone. It would be ridiculous to claim that all ethnic jokes are clean or that the point of the joke is innocuous when it is nothing of the sort. The Newfies collect stupidity jokes about themselves, but they also collect “dirty” jokes about themselves, especially the ones that are created by the neighboring Canucks. For example:

Why do they put a fish on the altar at a Newfoundland wedding? To keep the flies off the bride.

Or:

What do you call a snotty-nosed Newfie? Greensleaves.
(Davies *Mirth* 123)

Barry Jean Ancelet was treated to this joke on a flight from Halifax when the English Canadian seated next to him did not recognize Ancelet’s ethnic heritage:

Why does America have niggers and Canada have frogs
(French Canadians)? Because America had first choice.
(Ancelet “Harvard” 105)

The doubly racist aspects of the joke reflect that there will always be bigots who think they are funny. That does not mean that gatekeepers must police the arena of comedy. So long as we have a capitalistic society, First Amendment rights will battle against the marketplace. Just ask Don Imus. Cajun audiences will not support hostile comedians. What really bothers Ancelet, a Cajun preservationist and noted francophone scholar, about Cajun dialect humor is that he finds: “A basic assumption of ethnic jokes about the Cajuns was that they were impossible to educate” (“Harvard” 106), so the jokes circulating for a time reflected the Cajuns’ natural antipathy to their enforced schooling. This disconnect between the schools and the Cajun culture afforded the Anglo-Americans much laughter at the expense of the Cajuns, but the Cajuns got something from the jokes, too. For example:

Two cousins started school together. The teacher was asking everybody their names. When she got to the first cousin, he said, "Poo Poo." She said she was not going to put up with such behavior and asked him again. "Poo Poo," he said again. So she sent him out of the classroom. As he walked past his cousin, he said, "Come on, Ca Ca, she won't believe you either." (Ancelet "Harvard" 106)

To the Anglo-Americans, the joke is funny because of the names and because it looks like the Cajun cousins have no interest in learning (Ancelet "Harvard" 106). To the Cajuns, the joke is funny because the teacher is obviously an Anglo-American who has no understanding of the Cajun tradition of nicknaming everyone¹⁰¹ (Saxon et al 188). It is the educated teacher who suffers from ignorance here. While gently mocking themselves and their traditions, the Cajuns also deliver a coup de grace to the arrogance of the American educators. The joke shows the Cajuns coping with adversity, and that is always a good lesson. The joke also supports my premise that Cajun dialect humor may be self-deprecating, but it is not self-loathing. Perhaps it is the pain behind the joke that the gatekeepers are trying to dull. Nevertheless, I think these jokes are important history lessons. For one thing, it keeps the idea of the nicknames alive and, for another, opens discussion about how the older generations were treated at school.

Freud may not have agreed with my assessment of the previous joke since he thought of Jewish humor, especially self-disparaging humor, as "rebellious criticism directed by the Jew against himself or other Jews who share his Jewish characteristics" (Saper 80). In other words, Freud believed that the Jews hated themselves and showed that self-hatred through their humor. Noted ethnic humor theorist, Christie Davies,

¹⁰¹ In my stepfather's family, the children were named "Audrey," "Hillman," "Sandy" and "Ethel," but their nicknames were "Gross Soeur" (Big Sister), "Ta Tee," "Ba Boo" and "Dee." Their uncle was called "Shawee" and family history suggests he may just as well have served as the prototype for the Shawee that often accompanies Boudreaux and Thibodeaux on their many adventures.

disagrees with many of these theorists, including Freud, explaining, “the telling of self-mocking jokes is very widespread among all manner of minorities but ... it is doubtful whether these jokes are self-derogatory and [therefore] the masochistic self-hatred thesis is a nonstarter.” Davies goes on to state that all groups, including professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, have favorite jokes about themselves that they tell within the group. Some politicians have been known to collect the disparaging jokes that are told about them (“Exploring the Thesis” 33). George Herbert Walker Bush even invited *Saturday Night Live* impersonator/satirist, Dana Carvey, to the White House for a command performance of Carvey’s famous impression of the President. I am not surprised that former President Bush would do this. Each time that I have heard him speak, he has exhibited a delightful sense of humor and an ability to laugh at himself. The father of our current president tells many self-deprecating stories and can be quite charming as he discusses his international faux pas in throwing up on the Japanese Prime Minister.¹⁰² Perhaps, because he is a WASP, Bush is expected to do self-deprecating stories or maybe it is just that, like many ethnic groups, the former President would rather get the jabs in himself before his enemies can do so (Saper 81). I, myself, use self-deprecating humor, especially Cajun humor, to extract myself from uncomfortable situations. It is a self-defense mechanism as well and a strong argument for continuing the access to the jokes.

Growing up as a Roman Catholic and attending Catholic school, I was privy to some fairly funny jokes about priests and nuns, so I recognize the truth behind Davies’ statements. Further, as a performer of Cajun dialect humor, I have no choice but to second Davies’ premise that self-mocking jokes do not necessarily translate into masochistic self-hatred (“Exploring the Thesis” 41). But what about the stupidity jokes

¹⁰² Centennial Celebration, Louisiana College, Pineville LA, November, 2006

that are the bane of the Cajun purists? If self-deprecating jokes do not translate into masochistic self-hatred, then why are there parameters on the kinds of jokes that can be told at the International Cajun Joke-Telling contest? To answer these questions, I will look to the Newfoundlanders and their stupidity jokes that relate to some of the stupidity jokes that continue to circulate about the Cajuns, our so-called “old” style of humor.

There is much that the Cajuns and the Newfies have in common. Both Cajun Country and Newfoundland are goldmines for folklorists (Baker 95), and both groups share a reputation for being good storytellers (Davies *Mirth* 136, Ancelet *Cajun and Creole Folktales*). The Maritimes are the ancient homeland for the Cajuns, and this affects the culture of both groups. For example, both the Cajuns and the Newfies tend toward stories that involve the land because these activities are still a large part of their lifestyles (Davies *Mirth* 140). While Newfies tell their own stupidity jokes about themselves, they cannot claim ownership of those jokes because the Canadians tell Newfie jokes, too.

According to Davies, one of the things that make the Newfie stupidity jokes different from typical stupidity jokes is the measure of wit and intelligence it takes to tell the jokes (*Mirth* 135). In other words, stupidity jokes, when told by the Newfies about themselves really reflect the intelligence of the teller. There is a canniness in the telling of the jokes for both the Cajuns and the Newfies. That is the reason the jokes are not demeaning.

The stupidity jokes for both groups are usually about the backwards people, isolated from the outside world, having to face technology for the first time. A popular Newfie joke shows the naïve perceptions of a villager:

Aunt Paish Bartle, when confronted with the inevitability of an aeroplane trip for a medical emergency, asked if she could sit by the door: “Because, if we don’t get up there in the sky and anything goes wrong with that thing, I don’t intend to run any risks. I want to be right by the door so that I can open it and walk out.” (Davies 140)

Similarly, Boudreaux exhibits his own brand of naiveté:

Boudreaux was taking his first helicopter ride to an oil rig in the Gulf in mid-January. It was extremely cold and he was shivering. After awhile, Boudreaux looked at the pilot and asked, “Sha, ya tink we could turn off dat big fan up dere fo’ a lil while til ah warm up, me?”

(C. Boudreaux 137)

A major variation between the two jokes is the use of dialect in the Cajun story. Both Aunt Paish and Boudreaux exhibit the innocence of someone who has not traveled very much outside of his typical milieu. Their first meeting with technology baffles both of them. This has been an ongoing theme in both the Newfie and the Cajun jokes. The main difference is that English is a first language for Aunt Paish, but for Boudreaux it is a second, unwelcome bother, as it has been throughout Boudreaux’s somewhat checkered past. Boudreaux’s checkered past is the main reason he should be considered a Cajun folk hero and not a desecrator of a sacred cultural identity.

Without permission from the Cajun community gatekeepers, Boudreaux has become, just like Justin Wilson, a recognizable representative of the culture. And, just like Wilson, the humor that accompanies Boudreaux is considered “demeaning” to the Cajun people because Boudreaux encompasses all that was just discussed in the stupidity jokes. Boudreaux has never had a television show but, through the sale of joke books, has visited more states and foreign countries than just about anyone else in Louisiana. Boudreaux is a part of a cottage industry that has endorsed the commodification of the

Cajun culture. His books are available at check out registers in local restaurants, stores, and gas stations. Boudreaux has become the ubiquitous symbol of Cajun humor and there is no way to stop his progress. Boudreaux is here to stay. That is why I think it is important to recognize the character's donation to the history of Cajun humor.

The character, Boudreaux, began his life as Walter Coquille's creation, Telesfore Boudreaux, "De Mare of Bayou Pom Pom," a wily and crafty spoils politician. After Coquille's death in 1957, Boudreaux went into hiatus for a time; certainly throughout the main contretemps over the dialect humor, which took place in 1974. While COFOFIL leader Jimmy Domengeaux seemed to lose the public battle in the newspaper, he was more successful in the overall war. Fellow activist Paul Tate gave his support to Domengeaux's cause, calling the dialect humorists "redneck bigots and racists," thus influencing many in Acadiana to turn away from Wilson and Fletcher to good-natured Cajun French humorists like Revon Reed (*Bernard Americanization* 85). This "dust-up" did not, however, seem to affect the "real" Cajun dialect humorists who had been quietly active during all this time, performers like Dave Petitjean, Johnny Hoffman, and Murray Conque.¹⁰³ Petitjean, Hoffman, and Conque made their reputations by keeping the Cajun jokes "clean" and, through word-of-mouth, they continue to work at conventions and gatherings.¹⁰⁴ These men have been steadily employed as Cajun humorists since the early 1960's. Most people outside the Cajun community correlate Cajun humor with Justin Wilson, but it is these three men who have truly kept the faith throughout the tough times, and it is their legacy that needs to be celebrated both by the Cajun community and

¹⁰³ For biographies of these men, see *Cajun Humor*, published in 1997 by Acadian House Publishing.

¹⁰⁴ Personal interview with Dave Petitjean, May, 2006.

the outsiders who enjoy a good Cajun joke. It's too bad none of these men had Wilson's publicist.

Because Cajun humor is not at the forefront of the ethnic revitalization, there are just a handful of Cajun humorists who are performing regularly. Only six really stand out and are called upon to perform recurrently. Four of them have been around for a while and they have welcomed the other two to the brotherhood. The first four are the above-mentioned Petitjean, Hoffman and Conque and A.J. Smith. The other two up-and-comers are Kent Gonsoulin and Jonathon Perry. There are no women among the top players. When I asked Gonsoulin why this was, he reminded me that men far outnumber women in all comedy venues¹⁰⁵ and he is right. Stand-up comedy is still a male dominated venue, but especially so in the Cajun comic arena, a holdover from the patriarchal influenced society.

Another reason I am including these gentlemen in this part of the chapter is that they are the gatekeepers of Cajun dialect humor. If I am to have any success in bringing back the "old" style of humor, these are the men who must first be convinced. It is good to know your opponent in any encounter. I have interviewed all of these men in person,¹⁰⁶ and spoke to both Petitjean and Gonsoulin on the phone just recently. I was curious to find if they could explain the term "demeaning" and why the emphasis on "clean" jokes. Petitjean explained that the Cajun humorists decided that "clean" humor was a more appropriate representation of the Cajun culture. Originally, the humorists were responding to the humor of Bud Fletcher and to comics outside the Cajun culture. They also discovered that keeping the humor clean enlarged their audience base.

¹⁰⁵ Phone interview with Kent Gonsoulin, May 23, 2007.

¹⁰⁶ My conversations with Smith and Conque were very brief, not at all as extensive as the others.

Petitjean sums it up this way: “why offer the audience something they can get just anyplace?” As for the term “demeaning,” it didn’t take long to realize that the term in Cajun humor is synonymous with the work of Justin Wilson or Bud Fletcher. Here, too, it is felt that Wilson’s “old” style of humor is not appropriate for the Cajun people.

Petitjean believes the secret to their success and longevity has been twofold. First, they exhibit the Cajun attitude that appeals to insiders and outsiders, and second, they’ve kept the jokes clean, which also appeals to a large percentage of their audience. Petitjean describes the Cajun attitude as one that celebrates life. “Love Life and Life will love you back” has been one of his lifelong themes. When I asked him how he has handled having any of his jokes branded as “inappropriate,” Petitjean replied that there is always the possibility of someone in an audience who might be offended. As a bald man, he likes to tell bald jokes and has had the wives of bald men come to him after the performance to chastise him for making their husbands feel bad. Petitjean says he decided long ago to live by the motto that later came to be associated with Mother Teresa, “What you think about me is none of my business.” It is this insouciance, this “go your own way” attitude that Petitjean attributes to the ongoing popularity of Cajun ethnic humor.¹⁰⁷

None of these men disliked Justin Wilson, personally. Their main concern was that Wilson was not a Cajun humorist; he was a humorist who told Cajun stories in the tradition of Walter Coquille. Wilson’s style was over-the-top and flamboyant. His Cajun characters couldn’t speak good English *or* decent French,¹⁰⁸ and the Cajun cultural elites found him to be offensive, yet he was popular among the Cajun working class (Fontenot

¹⁰⁷ Phone interview with Dave Petitjean, May 23, 2007.

¹⁰⁸ Personal interview with Dr. Barry Jean Ancelet, February 14, 2006.

265). As discussed in the previous chapter, Wilson was a victim of a concerted effort to spoil his career, but Wilson definitely had the last laugh. As I mentioned before, six years after his death, his name is still the one most associated with Cajun dialect humor.

Bud Fletcher was half-Cajun, but his stories were mostly for adult audiences and some people were offended by his humor. That did not seem to impact the popularity of his “Outhouse” recordings, even in the Cajun community (I am fairly sure I remember my parents owning one of his albums; I was not allowed to listen to it, of course). An example of one of his jokes was that his character thought, “Grape Nuts was a form of venereal disease,”¹⁰⁹ a fairly mild comment by today’s standards but certainly considered risqué in the 1950’s and ‘60’s. He broke the “rules” of engagement by referencing a body part below the waist, and that is why Fletcher’s humor has not been considered for preservation. However, if the “old” style of humor is resurrected, I predict it will not be long before some enterprising young comedian revives old Bud’s comedy.

On the other hand, Petitjean, Hoffman, Smith, and Conque were Cajuns who told the same types of stories that had been told in French, but were now translated into English. They made a concerted effort to keep the jokes clean. Hoffman told me that he was just sharing the types of stories that he had grown up hearing, things that particularly tickle the Cajun funny bone.¹¹⁰ This difference is what allowed Petitjean, Hoffman and Conque to fly below the negative radar and accounts for the longevity of their popularity within the Cajun community. It is also why their comedy is supported by the purists and promoted somewhat to the conventioners from out of state. Petitjean was one of the humorists taking the lead at the Opelousas showdown in 1988.

¹⁰⁹ Related to me in a phone interview with Kent Gonsoulin, May 23, 2007.

¹¹⁰ Personal interview with Johnny Hoffman, January 7, 2005.

As I continue looking at the evolution of Cajun dialect humor, I must examine the events that led to that momentous occasion when Petitjean led the group to set standards for the humor. It was also a time where the Cajun cultural identity experienced mixed feelings. On the one hand, Cajuns were excited that outsiders were interested in the Cajun culture. On the other hand, some Cajuns were uncomfortable with the stereotypes that were being sent around the world with the characters like Boudreaux and Justin Wilson. The culture was being revived and revitalized, but some of the “wrong” aspects were coming to the fore and that included Cajun dialect humor.

The 1980’s were watershed years for the Cajun culture. After two hundred years of near anonymity, the Cajun culture was “discovered” by the stylemakers. Historian Shane Bernard explains, “Once derided as backward, [the Cajun culture] suddenly became associated with words such as *hot, chic, trendy*. Mainstream society not only discovered Cajun culture but embraced it, usurped it, and reshaped it almost beyond recognition into a highly marketable commodity” (*Americanization* 112).

The initial excitement over discovering ethnicity in the ‘60’s had toned down; the genealogy phase of the ‘70’s was passing. Now the Cajuns had to decide what to do with all this marketable “cultural stuff” (Barth 15). The marketing of the Cajun culture began with well-heeled yuppies wanting to experience the exotic, just as they were discovering Cajun chef Paul Prudhomme’s home cooking. Prudhomme became the Cajun of the hour and, along with other Cajun chefs like John Folse, began to publish successful cookbooks (Bernard *Americanization* 116, Bienvenu 54). People in other states were paying big bucks for anything that had an alligator on it. Food vendors were busy shipping gumbo,

pralines and Louisiana Hot Sauce; thus was born an industry that marketed the Cajun culture.

Along with commodification of their culture, Cajuns seem to have traded one stereotype for another, a perceived downside of the marketing thrust:

The stereotype formed in the nineteenth century portrayed the Cajun as the alien brute of the bayou, unaffected by time and progress, wallowing complacently in illiteracy and rural backwardness. The current, popularized version of this stereotype is that of a hedonist whose ancestral instincts require a spicy regimen of dancing, drinking, crawfishing, brawling, and occasional lawbreaking to make the bland modern world of *les Américains* more palatable.

(Henry *Blue Collar* 171)

An ongoing concern to the gatekeepers of the Cajun community is that this nod to hedonism and *joie de vivre* has “undermined the dignity of the people, but also scared off some of the potential new industry that is sorely needed in Louisiana today” (Angers 8).

Those who support Angers’ supposition point to industries that are looking for educated workers and believe that the jokes and stereotypes are keeping these companies from locating here. There may be some truth to the idea that Louisiana’s uneducated workers are keeping industries away, but that probably has a lot more to do with Louisiana’s education system, which ranks us 49th in education in the nation. That score has little to do with the stereotypes or the jokes. On the other hand, Cajun humorists play a small part in feeding the tourist industry in Louisiana, an industry that could use some help right now.

On the upside of the marketing movement, Cajuns began to divest themselves of the lingering cultural shame and to revel in their newfound pride in their way of life as the Cajun culture was displayed for the world. Now that being Cajun was associated with

acceptance on a national level, the character, “Boudreaux,” experienced a miraculous resurrection, along with a larger scale of acceptance of the dialect humor. Cajun storytellers came out of the woodwork to tell Boudreaux stories in books, tapes, and now DVD’s. Several books have referred to the aforementioned storytellers as “a whole new breed of humorist” (Angers 9, Henry *Blue Collar* 172), but they really weren’t all that new. Petitjean¹¹¹ and the others had been there all the time; they had just been mostly overshadowed by all the hype and hoopla given to Wilson and Fletcher.

The question is, of course, what was lost in bringing in the “authentic” to replace the imitators? The “new” style to replace the “old?” One of the criticisms of the “old” style of humor was that it relied on “exaggerated Cajun accents,” another question of authenticity. All of the Cajun humorists today use a Cajun accent. For some of them, it is their natural way of speaking. The rest of us have been Americanized, or we live in a part of Louisiana where the accent is not as thick. To perform the Cajun dialect humor, we have to fall back on the sounds and rhythms of our childhood. Personally, I listen for my Aunt Lou Ella’s voice in my head, and then aim for that accent, so it’s fairly authentic, on my good days.

Another difference between the “old” and the “new” humor involves the use of costumes. The Cajun costumes usually reflect someone from the swamp or the country, wearing overalls and a straw hat, rather like the characters on the popular 1960’s television show, Hee Haw, Cajun TV star Polycarp, or the equally popular member of the Blue Collar Tour, Larry the Cable Guy. Costumes do not seem to have hurt their popularity at all. I am certainly not advocating that anyone wear a costume if it does not

¹¹¹ Petitjean released his first album in 1961.

fit his or her style. I do think that a performer should have the freedom to wear a costume, if it fits their character. It all depends on the audience.

To please his new audience, Boudreaux gave up being the “Mare of Bayou Pom Pom,” lost his first name, and acquired a buddy named Thibodeaux to share in his adventures. No one really seems to know how that came to be. The stories just appeared. Boudreaux and Thibodeaux became the embodiment of all the swamp dwellers that outsiders expected Cajuns to be. As the two characters grew in prominence, books with collections of their stories were purchased and sent worldwide as part of the efforts to market the Cajun cultural identity. Today’s humorist just needs to begin with “Boudreaux was talkin’ to Thibodeaux ...” and he has the audience’s complete attention. Just like children sitting down to “Once upon a time,” the listeners know that the joke or story is going to be good.

There really should be a much larger number of Cajun humorists since Cajuns probably have a larger than average number of raconteurs (Angers *Truth* 82). Sitting on the porch at sunset to *veilléz* (*veillées* are evening visits) with friends and family, not to mention the unprecedented number of intergenerational family gatherings, just naturally led to story telling, the more outrageous the better. The storytellers were not a venerated group; they were such a normal part of any assembly that they tended to be taken for granted. From the young to the old, Cajuns performing their lives and their history abound, providing “a community with important social needs: laughter within its own context and self-criticism through humor” (Ancelet *Cajun and Creole Folktales* 194).

If humor encompasses such an “important social need,” then why are there so few humorists? With such a large pool of talent available in the Cajun community, but only a

few professional performers, I would like to hazard a guess at what hinders these humorists from sharing. Either the “taint” still hangs onto the humor after the denunciation in the ‘70’s and ‘80’s, or perhaps there are more “old” style performers like me who no longer feel welcome at the table.

Even though there have been attempts to declare ownership of the jokes, a lingering sense of disapproval remains over the dialect humor. It is not an overt sense, not something you can put your finger on easily, but it is there. The mild censure is subtly reflected in the fact that the joke books are rarely published without including Cajun recipes, as though the humor is incapable of being marketed alone. The locals themselves usually publish the joke books, especially the Boudreaux and Thibodeaux stories, usually without the approval of the gatekeepers. This lack of overall support contributes to an uneasy feeling on the part of the performers because the gatekeepers, like those involved in the Opelousas Proclamation, rule only certain areas of performance.

Because Cajuns have worked so hard to regain their self-esteem and their belief in their culture, no one wants to see that pride diminished in any way. Gatekeepers nominated Justin Wilson as the poster boy for “demeaning” the Cajuns, even though he was innocent of any maliciousness. Wilson found a style of humor that suited him based on Coquille’s prior work, but neither of those men were the “real deal;” they were not “authentic.” Coquille had a radio show and Wilson used television, so the stereotypical Cajun was thus established through their media efforts. Even though he died in 2001, Wilson’s tapes are still available at his website, and his legacy lives on. Wilson’s comedy will always be invoked as the standard used to exemplify “demeaning” to the Cajuns.

His “exaggerated Cajun accent, a silly-looking costume or a punch line that belittled the Cajun people” (Angers *Truth* 83) would now be designated as the “old brand of humor” (Henry *Blue Collar* 172). The gatekeepers cannot control the marketing aspect of Wilson’s comedy, but they can control performances within the community. Humorists could still choose to perform this way, but they would not be allowed the coveted prize of being crowned the winner of the International Joke-Telling Contest (Angers *Truth* 83).

To maintain control and to counteract this assault on Cajun pride, the gatekeepers (Cajun comedy division), have taken the responsibility of nurturing the younger comedians in the “new” brand of Cajun comedy. The following is a list of suggestions (rules) that was created by Dave Petitjean for the annual Opelousas International Joke-Telling Contest:

CLEAN HUMOR GUIDELINES FOR THE JOKE TELLING CONTEST

Our goal is to promote and use not only clean but squeaky-clean humor. We feel that these guidelines will help to reach that goal. We appreciate your cooperation.

No risqué material
No 4-letter words
No off-color words
Body language, no innuendoes
No demeaning of others (Exception, Texas Aggies)
No sarcastic humor. Some people use sarcasm like a knife, inserting it quickly, turning it for effect, and then pulling it out before the victim realizes he or she has been stabbed.

Ethnic humor: If you must use ethnic humor, make your own race or ethnic group the brunt of the jokes.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CONTESTANTS

Have them send a tape of their 10 minutes. It does not have to be at a live performance. It can be done at their home. An audience reaction is not necessary. The purpose of the

tape is to hear the material they plan to use. Let contestant know that points will be taken away for violation of these guidelines. Will vary. Committee could give point range to judges and a copy of the guidelines.¹¹²

The guidelines have been very successful in breeding the new brand of humorists, and the more established humorists have mentored the younger ones. There are now multiple opportunities for performance, and these opportunities usually involve a mixture of the more established comedians with the younger. It is still not enough to raise Cajun dialect humor to the level of the food or the music, but it is a start.

Beginning the season each year, Goodwill Industries in Lafayette sponsors “Cajun Comic Relief.” Held in early January each year, the program showcases at least four Cajun comedians and a Cajun band. The comedians take center stage to usually sold-out audiences for two performances in the large Heymann Auditorium, and the proceeds go to support Goodwill Industries in the Lafayette area. The audience can be assured that the comedians will be the “new” breed of humorists because event organizer Jim Richard attends the International Joke-Telling Contest to look for fresh talent, assured that the humorists will know and follow the guidelines.

Every now and again, some of the older humorists (who do not use the “old” brand of humor) will put together a Cajun Comedy Tour, along the lines of the Blue Collar Comedy Tour. On the docket, the audience will get to enjoy such comedians as Murray Conque, A.J. Smith and relative newcomers like Kent Gonsoulin and Jonathon Perry. Gonsoulin and Perry are the heirs-apparent to the “new” humorists and will be the likeliest to mentor the generation that follows them. They are both quite popular and their styles, while maintaining the standards set before them, are already blazing new

¹¹² Reprinted with Mr. Petitjean’s permission.

pathways. I've had the opportunity to see them perform several times and they are always crowd pleasers. They are also the future of Cajun dialect humor, having been mentored by comic gatekeepers; yet, they have a freshness that is all their own.

Perry, an attorney in Kaplan, Louisiana, plans to run for a government office soon. Perry's humor flows easily about lawyers and politicians, especially in Louisiana. As the father of three young children, he also does some funny bits about raising children in today's society. Gonsoulin, on the other hand, has perfected a self-effacing persona who seems to be amazed by the little insanities of daily living. Quite the observer, he often threads his own life experiences into his humor. He has one bit about his "tante" which might have been considered "demeaning" as she struggles with the English language. Instead, Gonsoulin's charming delivery reminds everyone that they have an aunt who struggles with the English language, especially in Cajun country. By using the aunt as a device, Gonsoulin places the emphasis on an *individual's* inability to handle the language rather than saying "The old Cajun" and indicting an entire ethnic group.¹¹³ Thus, Gonsoulin has discovered a method for using the "old" style of humor without being demeaning. As a young humorist, Gonsoulin does not carry with him the same aversion to Wilson or Fletcher. He joins other young Cajuns, like historian Shane Bernard and my own children, who are able to see past the political problems of the past to a Cajun future that is built on reclaiming whatever can be reclaimed.

Justin Wilson and Bud Fletcher, Walter Coquille and the Mayor of Bayou Pom Pom, are all a part of our past, a part of our cultural history. Boudreaux and Thibodeaux represent the generations of Cajuns who went before us, who struggled to make a life for us, their descendants, in this "Eden of Louisiana." They also represent the Cajun children

¹¹³ Phone interview with Kent Gonsoulin, May 23, 2007.

in the first half of the twentieth century who bore the punishment for speaking French. Boudreaux and Thibodeaux may be stereotypes, but there is the whisper of truth in their stories, a whisper of our history as well.

When I commenced this work, I did not realize how much it would turn into a labor of love for me. I have discovered a new excitement for what I do, but have also realized that I must make some changes. I began my career away from Louisiana so I only had the old notions to guide me. When I was a child, we enjoyed an old Cajun character created by John Plauché on our local ABC station out of Lafayette. Plauché played the character “Polycarp” and would announce himself as “Polycarp Phillippe Pecos, Number 2,” warning us playfully, “don’t ask for number one ‘cuz dat’s my daddy and dey don’t like him anyway.” This was a delightfully fun character, the one I was giving homage to as I later created my own persona of “The Cajun Lady.” Since I had been out of Louisiana since my marriage in 1974 and only returned in 1991, I was unaware of the changes between the old and the new comedy. I was also unaware of the cultural changes that had been wrought by the reclamation movement.

In the previous chapter, I explored what was happening in Louisiana during the great revitalization process. I had lived outside of Louisiana from 1974 to 1991, so my own exile experience was similar to and yet different from the cultural activists of my generation (since I was unable to return to Louisiana as soon as they did). I had married an “American” who had taken me away from Acadiana and my family, so I was observing the events from a distance with more than a little amusement and, perhaps, equal measures of chagrin. I had been absent from Louisiana for about fifteen years when the Cajuns were “discovered.” The lifestyle I had once sought to escape seemed to

haunt me from the grocer to the media, in the products on the shelves and the commercials on TV, shouting my ethnicity. The emphasis was not on the poverty and fear of outsiders that had plagued my childhood, but rather on the openness of the Cajun hearts and hands, as well as the “wealth” to be found in the Cajun culture and cuisine. I was jolted into examining my own memories of my childhood, comparing them to the stories and remembrances of other Cajuns. It was brought home to me that the story of the Cajun diaspora and the forced evacuations should be a source of pride and not of shame, because we not only survived as a people, we prospered as a people. With a renewed sense of my heritage, I began to reclaim the memories of my childhood in order to pass them on to my own children.

Living outside of Louisiana, I was surprised to discover that I was not the only one with a hunger for all things Cajun, and I began to market my particular skill of “performing Louisiana” for the public. I was often hired to “do” *The Cajun Christmas*, a re-telling of Clement’s story in which Saint Nick arrives in a pirogue pulled by eight alligators with names like Gaston, t-Boy, and Renee. After clearing it with the publishers, I was even invited to do a radio reading in Georgia that played that entire month of December.

Jeff Foxworthy lent the Cajuns a helping hand with his “You might be a redneck if...” and Cajuns began to write their own versions of “You might be a Cajun.” Dan Burkhalter suggested a contest to choose the best ending to the phrase and it became the most popular feature in his column in 1996. Some examples of the submissions are: You might be a Cajun if ... watching Wild Kingdom inspires you to write a cookbook, or you think the head of the United Nations is Boudreaux- Boudreaux Guillory, or if you learned

to play bourèe [a popular card game] the hard way—by standing up in your crib (CHS Cultures of Louisiana).

I began to collect other Cajun stories so that I could work in the other months and was accepted everywhere we moved. By the time I returned to South Louisiana in the late 1990's, I had a fairly extensive collection of stories. I did not expect to use them in Louisiana because I thought they would be 'old hat.' However, I discovered that the people of Louisiana were just as hungry for all things Cajun as people in other places had been. I was able to put the stories to good use. *The Cajun Night Before Christmas* was one I used often for the creation of a character I just generically called "The Cajun Lady." I've even had the opportunity to narrate the story while a cast would, in costume, act out the story of how Saint Nick makes an appearance at a Cajun cabin in the swamp. That would definitely qualify as the "old" brand of humor and a vote in favor of its resurrection because the audiences were always thrilled.

The Cajun Lady made her first official appearance in the Christmas pageant at First Baptist Church in Lake Charles in 1999. I had been asked to direct the opening act of the pageant, but I had a difficult time getting the timing to work out. There were some gaps in the script that would drag the tempo down, and I knew something had to happen to solve that problem. During the final dress rehearsal, I came to the realization of what would help the timing, so I warned the actors that a new character was being added, there would be no time for rehearsal, that they would just have to "wing it." I went home that night and created a costume for the new character. I had not even named her and could not think of a name for her, so she became the "Cajun Lady" by default.

The next night, the stage showed an airport holding area. The scene was set for Christmas 1999. The premise was that Y2K had jumped the gun and all the flights were being grounded. As the second flight let out its passengers, the audience (and the cast) was introduced to a woman of the swamps with a Cajun dialect who loudly denounced anything that was getting in the way of her going to “Hawaya.” The Cajun Lady took her place on the stage with all the other waiting passengers, but her microphone remained on so that she could do running commentary on all that was happening. Her outrageous remarks and behavior were very popular with the audience; after the show, the “Cajun Lady” was invited to perform in many venues.

From her crawfish hat to her faux leopard slippers with the toilet paper stuck to the bottom, The Cajun Lady is, on a basic level, a kind of classic character (Davies *Ethnic Humor* 310). She is a woman “of a certain age,” the eternal virgin looking for a husband.¹¹⁴ Ever at the ready, she carries a homemade bridal veil and asks the audience to recite her prayer with her:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
A box of boudin at my feet.
If you should see a handsome man,
Send him my way as fast as you can.

She carries a grocery bag of “necessities” and the audience never knows what will be pulled out next. A good Cajun girl, she always has food to serve anyone who is hungry. She keeps her oversized boudin balls warm in her armpit. The baby alligators with sticks stuck through their gullets and out their tails are available for the ever popular “alligator on a stick.” Instead of Boudreaux or Thibodeaux, The Cajun Lady tells of the adventures of her dimwitted cousin, Thibeaux, whose response to every question is “I dunnoooo.”

¹¹⁴ A definite homage to Minnie Pearl.

She also tells of her sister, Bertrille, whom all the boys wanted to marry until she ran off with the postman after receiving all the gifts in the *Cajun Twelve Days of Christmas*.

Critics of *The Cajun Lady* may be quick to point out that my characterization is not too far off from that of Kathy Bates' "Mama" character in *The Waterboy*. Having performed *The Cajun Christmas* for so many years, I believe that I was more influenced by that and "Polycarp" in the creation of the character than in watching *The Waterboy*. My other characters certainly predate Bates' creation by a couple of decades. At least, my accent was more "authentic" than that of Bates or any of her co-stars. Perhaps they should have filmed in Louisiana instead of Florida.

Through this work, I have come to realize that *The Cajun Lady* is very much a throwback to my Cajun childhood. As such, she deserves to take her place with the other characters that have "performed Louisiana." Even though some may dismiss her egregious costume and props, I hope they will soon come to see the charm and good humor that she has been able to spread. I really like my character and she has been a big help to me because the costume and props established the character the moment I walked onstage. The audience knew what to expect without my having to invoke "Boudreaux and Thibodeaux" (they seem more like a "guy" thing).

I will have to sometimes manage without my crutch. You see, I have now set my sights on the International Cajun Joke-Telling Contest and *The Cajun Lady*, as she lives now, could never win. I keep my jokes clean, but I am intuitive enough to know that the character that I created would be considered "demeaning" by the judges, even though I created her in all innocence.

In this chapter, I have argued for equal respect for the Cajun humor along side the food and the music as icons and viable exports for our community. Since it is the gatekeepers who get to make the decisions on what is acceptable, I have chronicled the changes that have taken place, adjustments that have been made to make the humor suitable to community tastes. I have also argued for the return of the “old” brand of humor, the humor that has been representing our community for a long time. I have traced the growth of the “new” breed of Cajun humorists, those who will take us to greater heights with their creativity and love for this community. I believe that Cajun dialect humor, as it is performed today, is only half of what it needs to be. By combining the old and the new, we strengthen our humor to where it is an appropriate representative of Cajun preservation. I also believe that I have proven that Cajun dialect humor is not really that different from any of the popular forms of ethnic humor and should be supported wholeheartedly from within and without the community. *Laissez les Bon Temps Roulez!*

CHAPTER SEVEN—REPRESENTING A CULTURE: THE FUTURE OF CAJUN DIALECT HUMOR

American by Birth,
Southern by the Grace of God.
--Bumper Sticker

Southern by Birth,
Cajun by the Grace of God.
--Pete Richardson

One day, a Cajun died and went to hell. The devil was making his rounds and saw the Cajun over in the corner having a party.

"Hey, you!" said the devil. "You're not supposed to be having a good time in hell. After all, it's burning hot in here."

"Oh," said the Cajun, "It's not that hot in here. It gets this hot in Louisiana in July."

The devil left but was determined to make it uncomfortable for the Cajun, so he turned up the temperature even more. Later the devil passed back by the Cajun and saw him boiling crawfish and having an even better time. "Hey!" said the devil. "You stop that! You're not supposed to be enjoying yourself in here. This is hell and it's burning hot in here."

"It's no big deal," said the Cajun. "It gets this hot in Louisiana in August."

The devil left very angry with the Cajun and determined to make him uncomfortable.

"Okay," said the devil. "If you like the heat, I'm going to make it cold", and then turned down the thermostat until it was freezing cold.

When he went back to check on the Cajun, he saw from afar that the Cajun was jumping up and down in a frenzy, throwing up his hands, laughing and smiling. "This is really too much!! Why is he so happy?" As he got close to the Cajun, he heard him shout, "The Saints won the Super Bowl!! The Saints won the Super Bowl!!"

Throughout this work, I have been analyzing two interrelated issues: the Cajun cultural identity and Cajun dialect humor. The aim of my exploration has been to find my own place within the Cajun cultural identity. As a Cajun by birth and a practitioner of

Cajun dialect humor, my interest in these areas is personal as well as scholarly. I undertook this journey because there is a “problem” with Cajun dialect humor, a continuing stigma attached to the style of humor that I present in my performance.

When I first began this project, I did not know what I would find concerning Cajun dialect humor. My initial research disclosed that Cajun dialect humor was used as a political tool. Thus, I hoped to find Cajun dissenters using the dialect humor as a battle cry against the dominant Anglo-Americans. Instead, I discovered that Cajuns weren’t even contributors to their own dialect humor in English until the early 1960’s. At the time that Cajun dialect humor was initiated in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Cajuns were telling jokes, stories, and tall tales, but they were telling them in French and just for the “fun” of it. The Cajuns’ main venues were not commercial; they used the barbershops, country stores, and the front porches, where they would gather for the evening *veillée*. Cajun dialect humor, as we have come to know it, was begun by outsiders and used for various purposes, chiefly that of satire in the political arena, especially in New Orleans. By the 1920’s, outsider Walter Coquille, who employed dialect humor for political ends, also began the commodification¹¹⁵ of the dialect humor.

Cajuns, as the main purveyors of the dialect humor, came about slowly, and rebellion against the dominant society has not been their mantra. Rather than being dissidents, Cajun performers of Cajun dialect humor tend to perform the comedy because they enjoy it. They love to laugh and to make others laugh. Cajun dialect humor is still marketable, but only one of the current Cajun humorists, Murray Conque, is a full-time comedian. While the others sell their tapes and DVD’s, it is a side business for them,

¹¹⁵ McLoughlin was not paid for his contributions to political humor, but Coquille made it a business. Cajun dialect humor has been used for marketing purposes ever since.

which they practice because they enjoy it. Similar to the Cajun concerts, the Cajuns attending the comic performances enjoy a sense of solidarity, a celebration of our cultural heritage. The comedy fills a need within the community or the venues would not be continually sold out.

How, then, can I claim that there is a problem with Cajun dialect humor? Because a tension still underlies Cajun dialect humor and the culture. The tensions still involve competing narratives: the “new” humor celebrates the Cajun as “happy, good-hearted people,” while the “old” humor reminds us that we were once a people who struggled with enforced schooling and the English language and, yes, we know how to have a “good” time. The competition between the “old” and the “new” has its foundations in the rift that ruptured the Cajun community in the nineteenth century. The division was both social and economic; the upper class became the Genteel Acadians and the lower class became the just-plain Cajuns. That bifurcation of the Cajun community continues to haunt our culture.

Even though the Civil War made paupers of them all, the Genteel Acadians were able to recover somewhat, but the just-plain Cajuns did not begin to recover until after WWII. The extended stint on the lower socioeconomic stratum created stereotypes about the Cajuns that have followed them to this day. Recovery for the Cajuns after WWII also witnessed a trend toward Americanization and assimilation. Some of the baby boomers born during that time would leave Cajun country for education or work. Their “exile experiences” would allow introspection and a new appreciation for their cultural heritage. They returned to Louisiana to initiate a revitalization and reclamation movement.

Historically, outsiders created the Cajun dialect humor. By the time the Cajuns were ready to take ownership of their own dialect humor, outsider Justin Wilson was already an established star. Wilson's status was and is really the "problem" with Cajun dialect humor. Wilson had a PBS cooking show in the 1970's, which launched his version of a Cajun stereotype. That stereotype has never dimmed in the minds of the outside world. Mention Cajun humor to people outside the Cajun community and their first reaction is often "Justin Wilson." Even six years after his death, Wilson is still the comic most associated with Cajun humor.

In an attempt to undermine Wilson's preeminence in the field of Cajun dialect humor, gatekeepers to the comic community established a set of guidelines for Cajun dialect humor that dismissed Wilson's style as the "old" style and instituted a sanitized version as the "new" style. The costumes, exaggerated accents, the malapropisms, anything that was deemed "demeaning" to the Cajuns was to be eradicated. From that time in 1988, the "Opelousas Proclamation" set parameters for the performance of Cajun dialect humor.

As a scholar, I have been exploring how communities work, especially ethnic communities, investigating the gatekeepers, fence-jumpers and the folk, and how each function within the community dynamics. In the area of Cajun dialect humor, all of these figures come into play. The gatekeepers made a decision in 1988 and have been able to implement its influence across the board. The folk have accepted the decision and continue to promote its implementation. The one area that falters is the notion of "demeaning to the Cajun people." Only the gatekeepers seem to know what that means. The folk are quick to denounce any humor that "demeans," but their training from the

gatekeepers does not include anything more than a nebulous idea. Having observed the audience at a venue that included both “old” and “new” performers, I discovered that the audience laughed just as much at all of the comedians, not just the “new.” The audience’s judgment had more to do with material and delivery (more the latter than the former) than it had to do with style. If the folk do not recognize the fence-jumpers, then what has been accomplished through the proclamation?

In this work, I have argued that there is a problem with Cajun dialect humor and that, through the process of ethnic revitalization, gatekeepers assumed the task of corralling the fence-jumpers and training the folk to recognize the rebels. I have stated that the problem with the Cajun dialect humor is also a problem with the Cajun cultural identity.

I have affirmed that the Cajun cultural identity can be traced to the 1604 landing of the ship *Jonas* in the area that would become known as Nova Scotia. The Cajun cultural identity, forged in an uncompromising land, tempered by diaspora and a decades-long exile, was maintained through the settling of another inhospitable land, Louisiana. The Cajun cultural identity has survived Americanization, bifurcation and urbanization. I believe we can survive the continuing stereotypes, especially since the stereotype that is most celebrated is that of fun-loving, happy people who would give you the shirt off their backs. That stereotype is already celebrated through the food and the music, and it brings an especial joy to the tourist bureaus of Louisiana because it draws people and their money to the state.

Through the last two decades, the sanitized humor has not been as overall successfully marketed as Cajun humor in the time of Justin Wilson. Regularizing the

comedy succeeded in stifling creativity. We have also lost a portion of our history. Wilson was not the only one who was performing in costumes. We need to celebrate our cultural icons: John Plauché, whose “Polycarp and his Pals” entertained the Cajun children every Saturday morning in the 1960’s, and “Anatoo,” who still performs in various venues. These are just two of the many who have been left behind. I have argued for a return of the “old” style of humor to be combined with the “new,” so that the ancient rift can be finally closed and the Cajun community united.

I believe that my community did Justin Wilson a great disservice. He accomplished much in getting Cajuns noticed by the outside world. While I understand the angst that consumed many of the young Cajun activists over the fact that Wilson was a successful outsider during a time when they were reclaiming their heritage, I also believe that it is time to put the inside/outside dynamic aside, especially as it pertains to Wilson. Wilson made himself very much a part of our history, and we should embrace him while we embrace the “old” with the “new.” The Cajun community will be the stronger for it.

For this Cajun child, this work has been a journey of discovery. I am no longer concerned about my place in my culture. I am a champion fence-jumper: no French, an exogamous marriage, and no longer Catholic. I perform the “old” style of humor in the guise of The Cajun Lady, wearing an outrageous, over-the-top costume and using a good amount of stereotypical devices. I don’t drink alcoholic beverages and my dancing days are over, except for weddings and such events. The only thing “Cajun” about me anymore are my bloodlines. That is why I am arguing for a return to the “old” style of humor. When I play The Cajun Lady, I am revitalized. I am reclaiming “Polycarp” and

my childhood. I am honoring “ol’ Marie” and “Claude.” I am also sharing that narrative with my audiences, who have always seemed to enjoy the characterization. Through this form of Cajun dialect humor, I am reclaiming my past.

Carl Brasseaux once said, “*Un peuple sans passé est us peuple sans futur,*” (a people without a past are a people without a future). As discussed in the last chapter, young Cajun humorist, Kent Gonsoulin, is the model for beginning to embrace the old with the new by including an “old” style character, his “*tante.*” He has shown us how to re-weave the tapestry of our past. Hopefully, that is the future of Cajun dialect humor.

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VITA

Debrah “Pete” Royer Richardson is an assistant professor of Theatre and Communication Arts at Louisiana College in Pineville, Louisiana. Before coming to Louisiana College, Debrah taught speech and theatre at McNeese State University and the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Pete worked for the Governor’s Program for Gifted Children, directing *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Oliver*, *Bye Bye Birdie* and *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Her favorite acting roles include “Bloody Mary” in *South Pacific*, “Miss Prism” in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and “Jack’s Mother” in *Into the Woods*. Debrah is also a storyteller using two different personas. Depending on the venue, she appears as “Miz Pete, the Story Lady” or as “The Cajun Lady.” Debrah has worked in church theatre for over thirty years, directing teams, writing and directing church pageants, as well as working as the church drama specialist for various churches. She currently directs the traveling Drama Team, *Testify!* at Louisiana College and will graduate from Louisiana State University in August with the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theatre.