Who Are We?
What Louisiana Can Teach Us About Being American

Angel Adams Parham

The Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science are versions of talks given at the School's weekly Thursday Seminar. At these seminars, Members present work-in-progress and then take questions. There is often lively conversation and debate, some of which will be included with the papers. We have chosen papers we thought would be of interest to a broad audience. Our aim is to capture some part of the cross-disciplinary conversations that are the mark of the School's programs. While Members are drawn from specific disciplines of the social sciences—anthropology, economics, sociology and political science—as well as history, philosophy, literature and law, the School encourages new approaches that arise from exposure to different forms of interpretation. The papers in this series differ widely in their topics, methods, and disciplines. Yet they concur in a broadly humanistic attempt to understand how, and under what conditions, the concepts that order experience in different cultures and societies are produced, and how they change.

Angel Adams Parham is Associate Professor of Sociology at Loyola University-New Orleans, and a Member in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study, 2011-2012. Parham received her B.A. from Yale University in 1994 and her Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2003. She has research interests in immigration, citizenship, and culture. Her work is motivated by an interest in how contemporary globalization—with its intensified flows of people, goods, and cultures—challenges traditional modes of belonging while also signaling the potential for new kinds of solidarities. These interests have led to research on regions with high levels of international migration where the interest is in understanding how movements of people redefine local and national cultures and forms of belonging. Related to this, she engages in work that considers the possibilities and limits new communications technologies provide as we attempt to imagine ourselves in communities and as actors beyond the conceptual and physical borders of nation-state. She has published in the journals *Global Networks, Diaspora,* and *Social Identities.* In addition, she has an essay in the edited volume *Geographies of the Haitian Diaspora,* edited by Regine Ostine Jackson, and an essay forthcoming in *American Creoles,* edited by Martin Munro.

Who Are We?
What Louisiana Can Teach Us About Being American

The title for this talk echoes a question that has been going on since the founding of the United States. The question, often addressed through contentious dialogue, has been answered in quite different ways. On the one hand, there is Samuel Huntington's 2004 book in which he answered that "we" are essentially Anglo-American, and that the best attributes of "our" heritage are in danger of being overcome by the continued migration of people from Latin America and the Caribbean to the United States.[1] On the other hand, my title is also inspired by a quite different way of answering the question. Michael Walzer has addressed the question in a collection of essays entitled *What It Means to Be an American*.[2] In that volume, he examines our struggle to live with the tension between being both a united and a diverse country. He concludes that we do *not* need some kind of unifying Anglo-American culture. Instead, we must become comfortable with plurality and engage in the hard work of accommodating cultural differences. Today I invite all of us to enter into this ongoing conversation. With this talk I propose another approach to answering the question of who we are.

I will use Louisiana as a lens through which to explore this question. Louisiana may seem a curious choice because it is often portrayed as being decidedly unlike most of the U.S. Consider, for instance, the following reflections on the state beginning in 1819 and going on through 2007. The first cites the reaction of Benjamin Latrobe to sighting New Orleans for the first time:

> As the *Clio*, on which he had sailed from Baltimore, pulled up to the New Orleans wharves in early January of 1819, 'everything,' Latrobe wrote in his journal, 'had an odd look.' It was impossible, he continued, 'not to stare at a sight wholly new even to one who has travelled much in Europe and America.[3]

Latrobe observed in his writings that things were done very differently in New Orleans, including the marketing of goods on boats which offered exotic foods and still flew the French tricolor even though Louisiana had achieved U.S. statehood in 1812.

A second observation about Louisiana comes from Henry Miller's 1945 book, *The Air Conditioned Nightmare*. He writes:

> The scene before my eyes was that of a Chinese painting....Sky and water had become one; the whole world was floating in a nebular mist. It was indescribably beautiful and bewitching. I could scarcely believe that I was in America.[4]

Here Miller is responding to his visit to Bayou Teche in New Iberia, Louisiana. Even more than a century after Latrobe, Miller finds Louisiana unusual and arresting. Finally, in 2007 we find a tourist publication beckoning us to: "[Come enjoy a] gumbo of pleasures in America's most un-American city: The French Quarter".[5] In all three of these assessments—across nearly two hundred years—we see Louisiana portrayed as an unusual, even un-American place. I want to argue against these popular views, however, that Louisiana is really representative of the U.S. experience.

I begin this argument by drawing our attention to a U.S. territorial map (fig. 1) which makes visible the patchwork-like quality of U.S. geographies, histories, and cultures. While we know intellectually that the U.S. was pieced together, this map reminds us of the various colonial regimes and cultural histories that existed before these territories became part of what is today the United States.

Figure 1: U.S. Territorial Acquisitions[6]

Hawaii, for instance, became a U.S. territory in 1900 and did not achieve statehood until 1959. The way race and culture work in Hawaii is different from the Anglo-American experience in other parts of the country. California and large swaths of the South West were part of Mexico, heirs to a Spanish colonial legacy still apparent in the architecture, foodways, and racial and ethnic composition of these areas. To the east of Louisiana there is Florida, acquired from the Spanish in 1819. But the southernmost part of the state was not developed until quite late in the nineteenth century with Miami's incorporation in 1896. Miami was, in fact, built by large numbers of Bahamian laborers along with African Americans and others from West Indian backgrounds.

Thus, if we start with Hawaii and work our way east travelling through California, New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, and down through Florida—to name just a few areas—we find ourselves immersed in histories and cultures that are quite different from what is often portrayed as a normative Anglo-American U.S. experience. But given what a large chunk of the country is included here—and there are other relevant areas I haven't listed—rather than seeing these areas as "unusual", we should more properly understand them to be in line with the *normal* experience of hybridity in U.S. society and culture. It is in this sense that Louisiana is representative of U.S. experience.

Furthermore, given the diversity of cultures, colonial experiences, and current patterns of immigration across the U.S., we should consider our understandings of race and culture to be continually in flux rather than fixed or enduring. I would push even further to suggest that rather than viewing the U.S. as majority "white" in a settled and uncomplicated way, we should understand ourselves to be involved in the constant negotiation of contrasting racial and cultural frameworks where "whiteness" and "otherness" are points of struggle, particularly for newcomers who must somehow fit themselves into the existing racial and cultural terrain.

When we think in these terms, we can identify four potential outcomes of this negotiation of racial and cultural difference.[7]
Path 1: Dominant framework takes over.
Path 2: Preservation of alternative frameworks.
Path 3: Situational shifting between frameworks.
Path 4: Broadening of the dominant framework to include new practices, characteristics, and/or groups as mainstream.
These pathways all exist at the same time, with some individuals or groups going one way and some another. At any given time there are, I suggest, four critical questions we should ask about these paths:

- With what frequency are the different paths being taken?

- What are the social and political implications associated with each path?

- Which paths or combination of paths do we consider to be most conducive to racial and cultural justice?

- What kinds of practices or projects help us to move in the direction of our vision of racial and cultural justice?

Engaging in discussions that help us to address these questions can encourage us to think carefully and critically about the direction we are moving in terms of accommodating racial and cultural difference. The last two questions are, I expect, the most contentious. We could certainly have a long discussion about what we consider to be "racial and cultural justice." And while the question is not easily or quickly resolved, I would like to propose that Path 4 best serves the interests of racial and cultural justice. My proposal is based on the definition of "mainstream" I use for Path 4.

I consider racial and cultural characteristics and practices to be mainstream when they are no longer denigrated AND when they do not usually have negative effects on life chances. It is very important to note here that it is not necessary for a racial or cultural characteristic to disappear in order for it to become mainstream. It is possible, in fact, that those characteristics may become positively valued and subsequently adopted by racial or cultural others.

This definition of "mainstream" weaves together three different strands of theory concerning race, cultural difference, and inequality. The first of these is Omi and Winant's work on racial formation and, specifically, their conceptualization of the "racial project." [8] They describe the relationship of racial projects to racial formation as follows:

> ...think of racial formation processes as occurring through a linkage between structure and [cultural] representation. Racial *projects* do the ideological "work" of making these links. *A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines.* [9]

The strength and innovation of the "racial project" concept is that it combines cultural and structural aspects of race. They describe how the racial formation process is constituted through small and large-scale racial projects. Large-scale projects are generally carried out by the state, as in the example of the laws that supported racial segregation. But small-scale projects embedded in everyday interactions are also crucial to the reproduction of racial inequalities. Small-scale projects can occur in the simple act of conversation over a meal. To give an example, one person may say to another: "If black people weren't so lazy, there would be no need for welfare." With this statement, the speaker has constructed a racial project. The "laziness" of black people is a cultural representation of blackness. This cultural representation is then accompanied by an implied structural project: Eliminate the resources that welfare provides and black people

will work. In the definition of the mainstream offered above, the invidious linkage that racial projects make between culture and structure is undone. In the broadened mainstream, racial and cultural characteristics lose their denigrated, stigmatized character. At the same time, the structural position of the previously marginalized is no longer systematically disadvantaged as a result of these racial and/or cultural characteristics. Thus in the process of becoming mainstream, racial projects concerning the group in question are dismantled.

The second strand of the mainstream definition offered above comes from work on the "new assimilation" carried out most notably by Alba and Nee in their book *Remaking the American Mainstream.*[10] Scholars who are constructing a new approach to assimilation explicitly reject an Anglo-conformist approach to understanding assimilation. Instead, they see it as a two-way process where immigrants become more like Americans and Americans become more like immigrants. In their definition of "mainstream," Alba and Nee place emphasis on the improved life chances of immigrants as a significant indicator of entering the core. They define the mainstream as "that part of society within which ethnic and racial origins have at most minor impacts on life chances or opportunities."[11] They do not dwell in any significant way, however, on *how* ethnic or racial origins may be linked to structural outcomes. This is where the concept of racial projects does the analytical work of making that linkage.

The third and final strand of the definition of the mainstream is based on work by Jeffrey Alexander in his book *The Civil Sphere.*[12] Alexander is also interested in the process by which marginalized groups come to be part of society's core. He outlines three modes of incorporation: assimilation, hyphenation, and multiculturalism. His assimilation mode is the old-style conformism to the core that has gone out of fashion. In its earliest days, however, Alexander explains that assimilation was a welcome alternative to persecution and harsh exclusion. But that inclusion came at a high price: the assimilated must renounce those aspects of herself that made her distinctive. The hyphenated mode of incorporation is an improvement over the somewhat soul-killing nature of assimilation. Here, the minority person and group are able to embrace being both American and ethnic. But, Alexander argues, this form of incorporation also falls short of real and satisfying inclusion because the ethnic characteristics *themselves* have not been fully purified. They may be simply tolerated by the core but still quietly denigrated, seen as second best. It is not until the multicultural mode of incorporation that the ethnic or cultural characteristics that distinguished the group from the core are redeemed or purified and seen as good in and of themselves that the formally excluded group can be said to be fully incorporated into the core on equal footing with those who were already there. It is also in this mode that the formerly denigrated characteristics may actually be reinterpreted as desirable and worthy of emulation by the majority. This is where my caveat for the definition becomes important, for in contrast to old-style assimilation, becoming part of the mainstream does *not* require that racial or cultural characteristics decline in significance. Instead, it may be the case that those same

characteristics or practices are embraced by the majority. When this occurs, in the language of Alba and Nee, we witness the "remaking of the mainstream."

While Alexander's multicultural mode is important and useful, he does not offer a systematic analysis of how cultural denigration is linked—often dialectically—to structural processes and outcomes. In this sense, the analysis shares a weakness with Alba and Nee's discussion of the "new" assimilation. Again, the work Omi and Winant's racial projects do in linking cultural representation and structural processes is crucial. In this way, the definition of the mainstream offered above combines the strengths of the three strands of theory discussed above, and where one strand is weak, it is strengthened by insights from the others.

With all of this in mind, what can we learn from Louisiana about the process of broadening the cultural and racial mainstream? What lessons does it have for us as we continue to welcome steady streams of immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean? Louisiana is a useful historical case study because its migration experience in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries better resembles what is happening in the U.S. today than other well-studied historical migrations in different parts of the country. The major historical cases scholars have considered involve the migration of various European groups to the United States. But these European migrations posed very different issues than the current migration of people of color from Latin America and the Caribbean. While it is true that many European immigrants had to endure discrimination and struggled to become "white," it is also the case that their lighter skin color eased their gradual transition into whiteness. This is an advantage that current immigrants of color do not have. For this reason, past European migration yields limited benefits when used as a reference point for understanding the social and political implications of current migrations.

In contrast, the immigrants who went to Louisiana in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were from different racial backgrounds. They also came from racialized colonial systems—albeit systems that differed greatly from that of the United States—and so were accustomed to navigating a racial system that held out the potential for privilege or disadvantage depending on how one positioned oneself. For these reasons, examining the experience of these migrants and their descendants gives us some idea of what we might experience today with immigrants of color coming from across the Americas.

The case to be made for using Louisiana as a touchstone for current thinking about immigration, race, and cultural difference in the U.S. is bolstered when we consider what the immigration picture looks like today. Fifty three percent of immigrants to the U.S. today come from Latin America and the Caribbean.[13] Similar to what occurred in Louisiana's early nineteenth century migrations, today's immigrants come with racial and cultural understandings that are quite different from what is found in much of the United States. Recent migration also tends to be concentrated in certain states: California has 25.8% of immigrants, Texas has 14.2%, Florida 13% and New

York 10.2%.[14] These are the states where the encounter between local and immigrant racial and cultural frameworks is likely to be most intense. These issues are intensified when we look at the city level. In Los Angeles 39.6% of all residents are foreign-born and in Miami the figure is 58.1% foreign-born.[15] Many of the immigrants in both areas are from Latin America or the Caribbean. These numbers sketch an immigration portrait that has many resonances with what occurred in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Louisiana. We turn now to that case study.

Negotiating Different Racial and Cultural Frameworks in Nineteenth Century Louisiana

Louisiana received several waves of refugees who fled the revolution in the colony of St. Domingue which began in 1791 and ended with the establishment of an independent Haiti in 1804. Many of these refugees fled to surrounding colonies including Jamaica to the south and Cuba to the west. The group of refugees who fled to Cuba during the revolution settled there, many establishing new businesses and plantations. All too soon, however, they were forced to flee again as a result of political tensions between France and Spain. When Napoleon Bonaparte placed his brother on the Spanish throne, he plunged France into a brutal war with Spain. For the French-identified St. Domingue refugees, this meant that their welcome in Spanish Cuba had worn out. As they sought a place to go quickly, many set their sights on Louisiana with its French colonial and cultural heritage.

Between 1809 and 1810 nearly ten thousand St. Domingue refugees fled Cuba and went to New Orleans, Louisiana. In order to get a sense of how upsetting this migration was for many in Louisiana, we have to set the migration into demographic context. First let us consider the total population numbers for Orleans Parish in 1806. The 17,001 total is for urban New Orleans combined with surrounding areas. The urban population of New Orleans proper, however, was only about ten thousand in number. This is significant because the vast majority of the 9,059 immigrants who fled to Louisiana from 1809-1810 settled in urban New Orleans. This means that the city's population was nearly doubled by the migration.

Table 1. St. Domingue Refugee Impact on New Orleans[16]

	Whites	*FPC*	*Slaves*	*Total*
Orleans Parish, 1806	6,311	2,312	8,378	17,001 *(urban abt. 10K)*
Refugees, 1809	2,731	3,102	3,226	9,059
Orleans Parish, 1810	8,001	5,727	10,824	24,552

The migration also had great racial and cultural significance. The area had just been bought from France in 1803, part of the historic Louisiana Purchase. Anglo-Americans had taken over the administration of the territory and were preparing it for statehood. In addition to political preparation, the Anglo-Americans were also interested in the cultural Anglicization of Louisiana. This process had scarcely gotten underway when the virtual flood of refugees arrived in 1809. While this threw a wrench into the cultural project of Americanization, the racial implications were even more upsetting for white Louisiana residents. Two thirds of the new residents were people of African descent. Included among them was the socially ambiguous and politically problematic category of free people of color. This was an in-between racial grouping that did not have a clear parallel in the Anglo-American U.S. experience. The free people of color from St. Domingue were often well-educated, cultured, wealthy, and in some cases had slaves of their own. Anglo-Americans did not know quite what to make of them but were certainly not comfortable with their increased presence. As Table 1 shows, the population of free people of color in New Orleans was more than doubled by the 1809-1810 migration.

In order to better understand the clash of race and culture between the refugees and the Anglo-Americans, we must sketch out the differences between Creoles and Americans. While the term Creole has a somewhat complex and often contentious history, for the purposes of this discussion, Creole is best defined as the peoples or cultures present in Louisiana before the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. These people and cultures would have been described as "Creole" rather than "American" in early nineteenth century Louisiana. When I say "American" I am referring to the people and cultures that fit within the Anglo social and cultural framework of nineteenth century Louisiana. Although the St. Domingue refugees technically entered Louisiana after the Purchase, they had strong social and cultural affinities with the Louisiana Creoles who were there before the Purchase. For this reason, when I discuss Creoles I am also including these refugees and their descendants.

Creoles and Americans had very different ways of operating. Some of these differences are illustrated by their very different approaches to New Orleans' Congo Square. Figure 2 below is a sketch of slaves dancing in Congo Square. This was an area where slaves would congregate to sell garden crops or other wares, to dance and play the drums. Because Louisiana was a relatively poor colony, owners allowed their slaves some freedom to move around in order to provide for themselves economically. But this mobility also allowed slaves to maintain cultural practices that would likely have died out were they under more intense supervision. When the Americans began streaming into Louisiana they were flummoxed by the license Creole slaves were given. In his article on Congo Square, Jerah Johnson describes the reaction of traveller Benjamin Latrobe:

> Benjamin Latrobe's reaction was typical...he betrayed his amazement and apprehension at the sight of five or six hundred unsupervised slaves

assembled for dancing when he added, in a tone of relief, 'there was not the least disorder among the crowd, nor do I learn on enquiry, that these weekly meetings of negroes have ever produced any mischief.'[17]

Figure 2.

Latrobe and others were also greatly troubled by the cultural practices of French-speaking Catholics.   In another passage from his Congo Square essay, Johnson describes the reactions of English-speaking Protestant Americans:

> They had never seen anything like it...the way French, Catholic New Orleans observed the Sabbath. After going to mass on Sunday morning, the Creoles made the rest of the day a festival, indulging themselves in public entertainments, going on outings and excursions, enjoying picnics and barbecues, shopping the street markets, and, on Sunday evenings, drinking and dancing. It struck the newcomers, mostly Anglo-Protestants accustomed to taking Sundays as days of grim abstinence and pious reflection, as near blasphemy. [18]

These cultural differences were compounded by different ways of organizing race. While the Creoles were accustomed to a continuum of racial categories that included the mediating group of free people of color, the Americans were most comfortable with a dichotomous black/white racial ordering. And while it is certainly the case that white men from both Creole and American backgrounds fathered children with women of

color, Creoles were more comfortable acknowledging this fact publicly by legally recognizing their mixed-race offspring and providing for their education and financial security. Finally, white Creoles were accustomed to being surrounded by free people of color who were in positions of wealth and power. The Americans felt threatened by this reality.[19]

So how did Creoles and Americans negotiate these different racial and cultural frameworks? In the book I am writing I will consider how this worked out historically and then show how echoes of those historical negotiations continue to be felt today among the people I have encountered in my interviews and fieldwork. Because I will not have time in today's talk to discuss this historical work, in the sections below I provide a glimpse of that material by sharing from some of my interviewees whose stories help us to see how the traces of that history continue to be visible in the present.[20]

Path 1: The Dominant Framework Prevails

As they confronted the racial and cultural terrain in Louisiana, many immigrants and their descendants adapted themselves, if slowly and painfully, to the dominant framework prevailing in the United States. For Creoles of color this meant becoming black or white in the traditional U.S. fashion.   Two hundred years after the St. Domingue migration, the pressure to be "black" continues to be an issue for many Creoles of color. In her interview, L.R. discusses how she came to terms with being Creole. She explains:

> Now I'm very comfortable with the label Creole. In the 60s I was not. I fought against it. I thought it meant a pride in being light skinned and privileged because it had no historical connection. I had no source, no academic source, to clearly define what it meant in cultural terms....[My parents] were taught that they were Creole and that they were separate and they tended to live apart. They tended to co-marry, co-mingle or intermarry with others of that culture. And so I didn't like the prejudice that I saw....So I believed that I had to show my black ethnicity through my dress and my hair and that's when I stopped using permanents and straightening my hair and....I wore an afro there all through graduate school. So I think I went around the block to get across the street. Now I'm comfortable.

L.R.'s struggle is representative of what many other Creoles of color have undergone over the course of many generations in Louisiana. Many of the descendants have become black in the American sense and so would be indistinguishable from non-Creole African Americans today.

For those with light enough skin, another option within this first path was to pass as white. This was done by distancing oneself both physically and emotionally from

darker-skinned family members and melding into the white American community. M.R. learned about this history first hand in a quite unexpected way. He explains his discovery as follows:

> When my father died in 2005…I discovered a secret past which was that my family traced back to Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez who was born in Louisiana in 1823 and subsequently became a famous civil rights leader in 19th century Louisiana….
>
> …I was stunned to learn that indeed I came from a Creole past in New Orleans. And that at least at that point I understood that my great great grandfather was mixed race. He was black and white, he was Creole and *Afro*-Creole.   And so all of a sudden questions in my mind started bubbling about well, what does that make me?
>
> …I was raised white, and my father was raised white.   But in understanding that my grandfather was listed on his birth certificate as colored and his father as "C" or colored, and Louis Charles Roudanez of course mixed race, I began to realize that the world isn't just black and white. And that all of a sudden there was this middle ground, this Creole middle ground that had existed in Louisiana that I came out of. So basically what happened is that my grandfather disappeared into the white race. And my family disappeared into the white race in the early 20th century.

M.R.'s experience is similar to that of many other people, including some of my other interviewees who have only recently learned that their families passed as white a generation or two ago. Those who took the option to pass as white reinforced the dominant racial system in a soul-wrenching way that required the near total abnegation of who they had been.

Path 2: Preserving an Alternative Framework

In contrast to those who chose Path 1, the people who took the second path managed to maintain Creole cultural institutions and practices, often right up to the present. In her interview, V.F. describes what it was like for her growing up in New Orleans' Creole community:

> The area where I grew up it was 95% Creole. The New Orleans neighborhoods were not segregated then. They didn't have that many black people in the city like they have now. See nothing was segregated.

You had blacks, you had Creoles and you had white. It was actually a three class system.... This was all we knew and there was a lot of prejudice, oh lord....I was born in 1940 so we are talking all the way through the 50s, and then people started to move, but mainly the Creoles because they were tired of the segregation, ended up being in the middle. The thing came up with the black power and it's like, I don't really fit in with that and yet you did not fit on the white side. We had our own thing. We had our own schools, our own shows....The blacks didn't like us at all. I mean they had a whole different view of what we were like and what we thought and what we were about so we were really caught in the middle. The blacks didn't want to be bothered with you. The whites didn't want to be bothered with you. It wasn't a major problem growing up because we had such a large community. We were fine. We had that insulation.

In contrast to L.R. above who initially succumbed to pressure to be black in the typical American sense, V.F. describes how she rejected this option when "the thing came up with the black power." Seeing this as a kind of foreign imposition, she and others retreat to the comfort of Creole social circles and identity.

M.F., an older retired woman of color, also describes the distinctiveness of the Creole community. In her discussion we see how the terms "Creole" and "American" continued to be used in Louisiana many generations removed from the early nineteenth century. M.F. explains:

I remember when I started going out with the person I actually married...his family is very dark skinned, but he said his parents came from rural parishes. He said his grandparents were French speaking and his father could understand French, but they didn't look Creole. I remember my aunt asking me if he cooked American or Creole and that's the distinction they made if they talked about other black people...that generation the way they distinguished verbally or descriptively, the way they distinguished Creole of color from other colored people was either they were American or they were Creole, so what's now African American. I don't think we ever thought of ourselves as African American.

In addition to not seeing herself as African American, M.F. goes even further to explain that being "American" never fully seemed to fit her experience. She says:

...I really don't think of myself as American. I think it's the American part that even now I realized I think we have never considered ourselves American for some reason....We grew up calling ourselves French and Spanish....I just don't identify with the rest of the country especially when

you think of there was Louisiana, there was south Louisiana and New Orleans developing, all of these things happening and then there was the rest of the country parallel and so much of what is considered American starting with the Independence, the thirteen states, that to me is foreign. And Louisiana is really, I feel more of a connection to France, to the French Revolution than to this Revolution. I know it's ridiculous. It's a very emotional thing.

M.F.'s identification with the French and with the French Revolution rather than the American Revolution resonates with the experience of many nineteenth century Creoles of color–particularly those who were descended from St. Domingue/Haiti. Many of the Louisiana Creoles of color of that time who were active in fighting for civil rights for black Americans invoked the legacy of the French Revolution–as well as the Haitian Revolution–and were immersed in a larger Francophone public sphere that traversed the Atlantic. During the Civil War, many pointed to how the French had emancipated and enfranchised blacks in their territories following the 1848 revolutions. They argued vigorously for the same outcome in the United States. In this sense, whether or not she is aware of it, M.F. continues to live the legacy of these Creole forebears.

Path 3: Situational Shifting Between Frameworks

Micro-passing is the best way to describe how this happened among Creoles of color in Louisiana before the demise of legalized segregation. With this path, rather than passing as white full time and separating from friends and family, Creoles of color maintained their identities as Creoles in intimate circles but passed as white in certain public situations. Some did this passing in a whimsical way, for example getting into the white section of movie theaters. Others, however, passed in a more serious way in order, for instance, to gain access to better employment opportunities. Here M.F., the same woman who was described in the section above, describes her mother's experience with micro-passing. She says:

> My mother passed as white to work as a seamstress....When she was 14 went to work as a seamstress at a dress shop on St. Charles Avenue. And her older brother at that time was attending Xavier Prep a black school and had a car and he would drop her off at her white job on his way to his black school and this was typical....you went out during the day to make a living, you came back evenings and weekends and you spent time with your family and you went back and forth.

This very practical strategy was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it allowed very light skinned people of color to work the system to their individual advantage. On the

other hand, however, it helped to sustain the very system that was set up to cheat them in the first place. The most satisfying way to gain access is to broaden the mainstream so that all people of color have fair access to such opportunities. It was, of course, no easy task to achieve this broadening. As we see in the next section, this access was most effectively achieved by white Creoles.

Path 4: Broadening the Mainstream

The broadening of the mainstream in Louisiana occurred both structurally and culturally. Structurally, white Creoles were able over time to separate themselves from the suspicion of racial taint that hung over them in American Louisiana. Because of their greater comfort with racial mixing and with Creoles of color, Americans often assumed that even those Creoles who claimed to be white had some racial mixture in their own backgrounds. The issue reached its climax with the publication of the novel *The Grandissimes* by George Washington Cable in 1880. Cable was a native New Orleanian of Anglo-American heritage. As he looked out at his Creole co-residents, he was critical of what he considered to be their hypocritical approach to racial issues. He observed racial domination of people of color by white Creoles even though these same white Creoles had relatives who were of African descent but who were not acknowledged as family members.[21] Cable, who was equal parts activist and novelist, went after the white Creoles with the might of his pen.

In *The Grandissimes* he created a family with two men named Honoré de Grandissime—one white, and one of color. The two Honorés shared the same father but different mothers. Cable writes the novel in such a way that it's quite difficult to know just what is going on racially. He has, for instance, a section titled "Family Tree"—but the reader, at least this reader, emerges more confused after reading it than before. It is not until halfway through the novel that we are told there are actually *two* Honoré de Grandissimes and that one is white and one is of color. Before that time, every time the reader encounters Honoré, she assumes they are the same person. Cable adopts a purposely confusing structure for the novel because he wants to make the point that the bloodlines of Creole families are complicated and, in some cases, mixed. This, as one might imagine, was not taken well by white Creoles. The community closed ranks against Cable and he was eventually driven out of Louisiana. Over the next few decades, many white Creoles would vociferously make clear their "pure" whiteness. Entry to the mainstream was also facilitated by increased rates of inter-marriage between white Creoles and white Americans. As the nineteenth century came to a close, explicit Creole identification among white Creoles declined precipitously. The group had effectively blended into the white American community.

Even as Creole identification declined among white Creoles, and as increasing numbers of Creoles of color pursued Path 1 and made the choice to become "black" or pass as "white", another phenomenon was occurring within Louisiana culture. While

Creole identification declined as an ethnicity, Creole cultural practices gained ascendancy within the mainstream. One of the prime examples of this is the Mardi Gras season. Mardi Gras was brought to Louisiana by the French. It was suppressed, however, during the Spanish and early American periods. Nevertheless, it managed to achieve a resurgence over the course of the nineteenth century. Thus, just as Creole ethnicity went into decline this Creole cultural practice flourished.   The Mardi Gras season is accompanied by what might be called secular church time across many parts of Louisiana. The Carnival season begins with Epiphany on January 6th and culminates on the day before Ash Wednesday. During this time, it is the custom in many social gatherings and even at work places to bring and to eat King Cake. This is a circular cake which encloses a little doll that represents baby Jesus. Here we have the Catholic church season between Christmas and Lent shaping the lifestyles and practices of non-Catholics throughout Louisiana. This is a prime example of a broadened cultural mainstream.

This brief discussion of how the four paths were chosen among various individuals and groups in Louisiana tells us something about how contrasting racial and cultural frameworks might be negotiated today with immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean. I turn in the next section to consider the social and political implications the Louisiana case has for what we are facing today.

Immigration, Race, and Cultural Difference Today

If the past is any indication of what may happen with our current wave of immigrants, Paths 1 and 4 are likely to be chosen most often. Path 1 is the path of least resistance. The classic cases today would be the dark skinned Hispanic or West Indian immigrant who identifies with African Americans contrasted with the light skinned immigrant of similar cultural background who marries a white American and identifies as white on the U.S. census. The difference for the latter today is that this choice to blend into the white mainstream does not require that one renounce all ties to family members of color.

Path 4 is the immigrant story common to wave after wave of European immigrants. Today, however, the broadening of the mainstream for immigrants of color may happen in a slightly different way.   One possibility that resembles the older European model is that many Latin American and Caribbean migrants may gradually become "white" or may be granted what Bonilla-Silva calls "honorary white" status. If this occurs, Bonilla-Silva suggests that what may emerge over the long term is a tripartite division divided into white, honorary white, and collective black. In this scenario most groups are granted "whiteness" or near whiteness, but a significant group of mainly dark skinned and lower class people are left out of the mainstream.[22]   Another potential incarnation of Path 4 is a black/non-black division. This option effectively lowers the bar for inclusion in the mainstream. So long as one is not "black," one has access to all that the mainstream has to offer.[23] While each of these paths does indeed broaden the

mainstream compared to what we have today, they are not ultimately acceptable in the long term if our concern is racial and cultural justice. We may very well be on our way to one of these futures, however, if we do not work diligently for a different outcome.

But what can be done to encourage a different outcome? Here is where we turn to the less travelled directions: Paths 2 and 3. I think of these as being unsettled and unsettling sites, places that are maintained with constant tension between marginalized racial and cultural frameworks and the dominant versions. With some strategic thinking and practice, it may be possible to use these unsettled locations as spaces for dialogue and negotiation so that we can work together to push for a broadened mainstream for everyone, rather than for small portions of excluded groups. But in order for this to happen, real differences between various groups must be worked through and bridged.

The unsettled locations described in the two intermediate paths are still inhabited by many Creoles of color today in Louisiana. They refuse to be identified solely as African American. Some identify only as Creole while others see themselves as both Creole and African American. For their part, non-Creole African Americans—not fully understanding the history of the group or the complex and diverse ways of identifying within that group—tend to dismiss all of them as anti-Black. These are the kinds of tensions arising from the maintenance of Creole identities and institutions within the context of hegemonic "blackness" and "whiteness."

Nevertheless, with some work these unsettled locations may be used to encourage the exploration of different positions and to foster dialogue between them. We might consider here some of the strategies proposed by various theorists concerned with bridging lines of difference within and across race. Stuart Hall, for example, proposes bridging differences in the African diaspora by thinking in terms of "identification" rather than "identity."[24] While identification is not a perfect concept, it allows greater openness to difference within potentially unified action. Hall describes identification as contingent rather than settled, as strategic rather than essentialist, a project always in negotiation across lines of difference. Paul Gilroy gets at this when he speaks in terms of "diaspora conversations" carried on across the black Atlantic.[25] He proposes that we accept openness in the shifting category of "blackness" and deal with the difficulty of coping with this difference through the practice of constructive politics. And finally, Danielle Allen proposes that we bring a set of carefully cultivated habits to the work of *Talking to Strangers*.[26] Her work provides insights for bridging both intra-racial and inter-racial differences. She proposes ways to lessen enmity by cultivating habits that generate trust across lines of difference.

I believe that these strategies of identification, conversation, and trust generation are a necessary part of the work required to break down exclusionary imaginaries, exclusionary discourses, and exclusionary practices in order to expand the boundaries of the mainstream. I think we can see how in need we are of these strategies in the following exchange between Creoles of color from a Yahoo Group called the Cajun

Creole List. The exchanges are presented as an unbroken dialogue in order to retain the conversational rhythm that emerged on the site.[27]

> <u>Thu Apr 1, 2004 1:25 am by "QN33" <qn33@...></u>
> We're very clear about what Creole culture is. However, we've also never been taught that we were other than African American/Black. We identify with being African Americans whose culture is the Creole culture inclusive of the language, food and traditions. It seems that some of those who have posted messages within the last two weeks define Creole as separate from being Black or another ethnicity. My family and I see ourselves and African Americans whose culture is Creole. Just wanted to share my perspective with you and continue the discourse.

> <u>Thu Apr 1, 2004 10:07 am by <misspettynoir@...</u>
> I find that the creole part of MY family does not consider themselves african-american but creole- american. They unfortunately, see themselves ABOVE those that are black but aren't creole. Even I, only being half creole, get discrimenated against. Thats why when I plan to go out to Alexandria or New Orleans I rarely spend time with relatives. The reason I joined this list was in hopes of making bonds to be shown around the area by someone other than my family and their down cast eyes. They speak french to my grandmother and talk smack. Then of course, she translates it for me later.. Anyway, thats my little whiny session..

> <u>Fri Apr 2, 2004 5:24 pm by <tova30003000@...></u>
> As Deborah said, there will always be haters, always, we can't worry about it. I used to and when I think back on the many times I said nothing or lied just to be accepted ... I just don't want that to go on anymore....I no longer apologize for my color,I had nothing to do with it. If it's wrong to hate people based on color or hair texture or any other superflous thing, then it's wrong to hate me just because I am Creole and that goes for everyone.

These brief exchanges highlight the emotional difficulties and misconceptions standing between Creole and non-Creole African Americans. Recriminations from a hundred years ago continue to cast a shadow over relations between people of color in Louisiana today. In much the same way, some of these issues play out between African Americans and immigrants of color from Latin American and the Caribbean. Mary Waters has captured this nicely in her book *Black Identities* where she explores relationships between African Americans and West Indian immigrants.[28] The historical

experience in Louisiana shows us that these tensions and the way they are handled influence the micro- and macro-politics that determine how cultural and racial boundaries will be drawn in the future. My hope is that by cultivating a new kind of vision for racial and cultural justice, and by developing safe places for dialogue along with habits and practices that can help us to realize that vision, we can work toward broadening the mainstream in the most inclusive way possible.

ENDNOTES

1. Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity*, (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

2. Michael Walzer, *What it Means to Be an American: Essays on the American Experience*, (New York: Marsilio, 1996).

3. Jerah Johnson, *Congo Square in New Orleans*, (New Orleans, LA: Louisiana Landmarks Society, 1995), 1—Originally published as "New Orleans's Congo Square: An Urban Setting for Early Afro-American Culture Formation" *Louisiana History* (1991): 117-157.

4. Henry Miller, *The Air Conditioned Nightmare*, (New York, NY: New Directions), 105.

5. A Gumbo of Pleasures in America's Most Un-American City: The French Quarter, http://away.com/features/excerpts/1000-places-new-orleans-french-quarter.html, (January 2012).

6. http://nationalatlas.gov/printable/territorialacquisition.html, (February 16, 2012).

7. These four paths emerged from the Louisiana case study that will be presented in the following pages. They have also, however, been checked against the experience of other immigrant groups and with the work of various authors who study and theorize racial and ethnic boundary work. While the paths I identify here are not the same as the boundary work categories identified by other authors, a review of that work found that the four pathways I identify incorporate the major boundary choices offered by other authors. The difference in what I present here has to do with the analytic use I seek to make of these pathways. I have framed the pathways so that they can be of use in determining the normative implications associated with choosing different paths. Other kinds of boundary delineations are chosen for different purposes as, for example, when the author is interested in theorizing why certain paths are chosen by some actors rather than others in order to create a general theory of boundary work. Some of the scholarship on boundaries consulted include: Aihwa Ong, "Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States," *Current Anthropology* 37 (December 1996): 737-762; Aristide Zolberg and Long Litt Woon, "Why Islam is Like Spanish: Cultural Incorporation in Europe and the United States," *Politics and Society* 27 (March 1999): 5-38; Andreas Wimmer, "The Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries: A Multilevel Process

Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 113:4 (January 2008): 970-1022; Andreas Wimmer, "Elementary Strategies of Ethnic Boundary Making," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31:6 (September 2008): 1025-1055.

8. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994).

9. Omi and Winant (1994) p. 56, emphasis in the original.

10. Richard Alba and Victor Nee, *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

11. Ibid., p. 12.

12. Jeffrey Alexander, *The Civil Sphere* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006).

13. US Census 2010 American Community Survey.

14. These figures come from an American Community Survey Brief by Yesenia D. Acosta and G. Patricia de la Cruz, "The Foreign Born from Latin America and the Caribbean: 2010" September 2011.

15. US Census Quick Facts 2011, http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/index.html, Retrieved February 5, 2012.

16. Paul La Chance, "The 1809 Immigration of Saint-Domingue Refugees to New Orleans: Reception, Integration, and Impact" in Carl A. Brasseaux and Glenn R. Conrad, eds., *The Road to Louisiana: The Saint-Domingue Refugees 1792-1809* (Lafayette, LA: The Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1992), p. 247.

17. Johnson, p. 36.

18. Johnson, p. 36.

19. It must be acknowledged, however, that while white Creoles were more accustomed to this reality, this did not always mean that they liked it. In colonial St. Domingue, for instance, there were tensions between petty bourgeois whites and free people of color because they sometimes competed for the same occupational positions as overseers on plantations. In addition, as free people of color grew in wealth and prominence in St. Domingue, white Creoles grew more resentful of their success. Despite these issues, however, it is still fair to say that white Creoles were less shocked and horrified by the presence and flourishing of free people of color than were the Americans who had no

experience dealing with such a group of racially subordinate yet socially and economically empowered people.

20. In addition to doing ethnographic work with Creole genealogy and cultural organizations, I have forty in-depth interviews with descendants of the St. Domingue migration to Louisiana. Approximately half of these are white and the other half people of color.

21. One does not necessarily have to be passing as white or be non-white to have family members of color. There were often different branches of one family with one branch mixed-race and another not. Rather than keeping this possibility distinct in their minds, Americans tended to combine all Creoles together into one big mixed-race pot.

22. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "We are all Americans!: The Latin Americanization of racial stratification in the USA," *Race and Society* 5 (2002): 3-16.

23. For more on this see Helen B. Marrow, "New immigrant destinations and the American colour line," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 32 (July 2009): 1037-1057.

24. Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?" *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Hall and Paul Du Gay. (London: Sage, 1996) pp. 3-17.

25. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

26. Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

27. Errors in spelling, capitalization and grammar are retained in the postings in order to present them as they appeared to list readers.

28. Mary C. Waters, *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).