NEITHER BLACK NOR WHITE: LOUISIANA CREELES OF COLOR, SOUTH AFRICAN COLOURED AND THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY, NATIONHOOD, AND BELONGING

By
Griffin Lerner

Senior Honors Thesis
History
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

04/08/2015

Approved:
________________________
Lisa Lindsay, Thesis Advisor

________________________
Kathleen Duval, Reader
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .............................................................................................................. 3

INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................................................... 5

CHAPTER 1 ................................................................................................................................ 13

CHAPTER 2 ................................................................................................................................ 34

CHAPTER 3 ................................................................................................................................ 55

CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................................ 75

WORKS CITED ......................................................................................................................... 77
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis has been by far the most ambitious undertaking of my college career, and I truly could not have done it without the loads of support I received. I would like to sincerely thank Joseph and Ilona Kusa and the Dunlevie family, whose support gave me the ability to travel to Louisiana in the summer of 2014 and begin (attempting) to do my research, and, more importantly, made me feel validated in my project’s early stages and like my thesis was worth something and worth writing.

There is no way I would be writing these acknowledgments without the incredible help of Dr. Lisa Lindsay and Dr. Kathleen Duval. You two have supported me, pushed me farther than I would have liked sometimes, and somehow remained interested in my project despite reading approximately five hundred drafts at all the different stages of the project. I cannot emphasize enough how important you two were to my success. Dr. Lindsay – thank you for finally returning from your sabbatical at just the right time and offering more knowledge and wisdom on African history than I could ever hope to know. Dr. Duval – thank you for being perhaps the most active listener I have ever met in my life. Your guidance in both HIST 398 and with my honors thesis has been immeasurable.

Mom and Dad, I don’t want to make you read through this thesis another time, so I give you permission to stop here. I cannot thank you enough for all the roles you played in this journey, from therapist to editor to accountant. You have shaped my college journey in more ways than you’ll ever know, and I can only hope that one day I am a parent as dedicated, caring, and insightful as you both are.
I would like to thank my girlfriend, Erin Welsh, for always understanding when I needed three days of isolation to finish a draft, never judging me for eschewing showers and eating as deadlines loomed.

I could not go without thanking Sheila Richmond, Loletta Wynder, and Pete Gregory of the Creole Heritage Center. You showed more support for me than I could ever hope to ask, taking me on an inspiring tour of Natchitoches, answering all of my unenlightened questions about Creole identity, and connecting me to other Creole scholars and resources. Thank you to D’Jalma Garnier for introducing me to the wonderful world of Zydeco music and speaking to me about Creole identity from a first-hand perspective.

I am eternally grateful to the Miggel family for graciously hosting me in South Africa and piquing my initial interest in Coloured identity. I must also thank Theo Wilscott for speaking to me so intimately about what it means to be Coloureds in modern South Africa.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone who asked me what my thesis was about and seemed genuinely interested as I gave my speech I’d given a thousand times before. For everyone who asked me questions or followed my progress, thank you for keeping me motivated. I began this project with a faint hope that Creoles of color and Coloureds would be similar enough to write about. In discovering their histories, I learned an unbelievable about the nuance nature of racial identities, and how purposeful and life-altering the societal construction of race has been. I could not possibly capture the mindsets of millions of Creole and Coloureds individuals, but I hope that I can at the very least honor their important, under-recognized places in history.
INTRODUCTION

Wayne Joseph had lived 51 years as a black man. Born in Louisiana, Joseph became an advocate for black rights and culture. Joseph had even written opinion pieces for Newsweek on enduring racial issues. Then, in 2002, 60 Minutes ran a segment on a new DNA test that would allow users to determine their exact ethnic makeup. Figuring it would be a thought-provoking exercise, Joseph took the test and sent off his DNA samples for examination. What he received back a few months later, however, was shockingly unexpected; he was 57 percent Indo-European, 39 percent Native American, 4 percent East Asian – and zero percent African.¹

Michael Joseph had lived his life thinking he was black. He looked black, he believed he was black, and society thought him to be black, yet his DNA indicated he was not “black” at all. If Joseph was not black, then what was he? What exactly determines one’s race? Is it how one personally identifies, how society views you, what your DNA is comprised of, or some combination of the three? The idea of race is so nebulous that Joseph could live 51 years as a black man while somehow never being black at all.

Sandra Laing had lived 10 years as a white person. Born to a wealthy white couple in Eastern Transvaal, Laing had skin slightly darker than her parents, but thought nothing of it. Then, one day at school, her world came crashing down. Uniformed policemen came into her classroom, told her to pack her belongings, and removed her from the room. The headmaster informed her that she had been expelled for having “black, curly hair, and brown skin.”² The school expelled Sandra Laing for being “Coloured” at a “white” school. Two years later, after extensive lobbying, Sandra Laing became “white” again, but the damage had been done –

² Roy Du Pré, Separate but Unequal: The ‘coloured’ People of South Africa, a Political History (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1994), 270.
classmates and neighbors would shun and humiliate her. In the course of two years, a child went from being white to Coloured to white again. Sandra Laing was hardly the only person this happened to in the chaos of apartheid South Africa.

These examples confirm a well-known fact – even in the most segregated societies racial “purity” was often an illusion, and considerable mixing occurred. More importantly, these examples also point to the contradiction that could exist between biologically-mixed ancestry and a more unequivocal social and legal status.

Every ten years, the people of the United States and South Africa complete the Census. Respondents must coalesce family history, ancestry, and personal identity into checking boxes that, for government purposes, will determine what race they are. For many, their designated race vacillates, as millions change their race with every census. Yet people have not always had control over their designated race. In Reconstruction Louisiana and apartheid South Africa, officials could determines people’s race. The stakes of one’s designated race were monumentally high, as fractions of “African blood” or a pencil sticking in one’s hair could be the difference between suffrage and subjugation. While these governments attempted to codify race to the utmost degree, racial identities were never as straightforward as black or white. What of those caught in the middle? Colonial contact in the respective places gave rise to mixed-race populations that could not be pigeonholed into a monolithic identity. In societies that rely on singularity for identity, notions of race and self can quickly become muddled.

Louisiana Creoles of color are generally accepted as people descended from those born in the New World with a mixture of French, Spanish, and African ancestry. South African

---

3 D’vera Cohn, "Millions of Americans Changed Their Racial or Ethnic Identity from One Census to the next," Pew Research Center RSS, May 5, 2014.
“Coloureds” are usually defined as those with a combination European, Asian, and African ancestry that come from colonial contact of Dutch settlers with South East slaves and the native African population. Creoles of color and Coloureds existed as two mixed-race groups neither white nor black in two of the most overtly racist regimes in modern history. Creoles of color and Coloureds represented a paradox of race and belonging – sharing many cultural similarities with whites such as language and religion, yet marginalized from the white-dominated power structure along with blacks. These multiracial people challenged the binary nature of race, and the histories of their racialized marginalization expose the artificial construction of racial categories and the real meanings that people make of them.

This thesis presents a comparative history of two mixed-race groups within Reconstruction Louisiana and apartheid South Africa in order to examine the nature of and agenda behind racial construction. Using existing histories, explorations of racial structures, and personal accounts from Creoles of Color and Coloureds, as well as white Louisianaans and South Africans, this thesis seeks to answer how, why, and to what effect is race socially constructed. In Louisiana, whites, who represented the majority of the population, engaged in lengthy semantic arguments to distance themselves racially from Creoles of color, who were subsequently lumped into the monolithic African-American race despite having limited cultural similarities to freedman. A tri-caste racial system became bifurcated as Creoles of color legally became black minorities. In South Africa, minority Afrikaners asserted their own differences from Coloureds while simultaneously differentiating Coloureds from black Africans as well. While whites controlled the power structure, Coloureds occupied a middle ground between whites and blacks, and many apartheid laws did not affect Coloureds as severely. Whites in South Africa represented less than twenty percent of the population, so they sought to construct a racial system
that would discourage solidarity between non-white groups by affording different privileges to different groups.

During the fall of 2013, I spent five months studying and living in Cape Town, South Africa. My host family was Coloured, and in Cape Town, Coloured people constitute 42.4 percent of the population. I spoke to countless Coloured people who had been marginalized during the apartheid era on account of their racial identity. The summer of 2014, I traveled to New Orleans and Northwest Louisiana, meeting dozens of Creole scholars and musicians, all of whom were fiercely proud of their distinct Creole heritage. I observed the real people that comprised the mixed-race groups caught in the middle of racist governments that attempted to codify race to extreme extents. With these people as my inspiration, I looked towards comparative histories of the U.S. and South Africa, as well as works about Creole and Coloured identities and racial construction in order to delve into the multiracial case studies.

While Creoles of color and Coloureds have been studied before, a comparative history of the two helps to illuminate the specific manners in which race was constructed in the two nations. Two similar multiethnic groups, living in similar periods of racist regimes, felt the codification of racial categories in distinct ways under differing demographic contexts. A comparative history of the two allows us to more fully understand the power-driven agenda behind the construction and enforcement of racial categories, including who becomes “white,” who becomes “black,” and who remains caught in between.

George Frederickson’s *White Supremacy* provided the foundation for a comparative analysis of mixed-race groups within Louisiana and South Africa. Frederickson’s work is highly

---

4 Strategic Development Information and GIS Department, City of Cape Town, *Cape Town Overview – 2011 Census*, Census data supplied by Statistics South Africa.
effective in differentiating the American South and South Africa as nations that applied white supremacy with particular strength, to the extent that race was purposely and systemically made as a qualification for membership in civil society.\(^5\) Frederickson’s analysis, however, focuses on the countries at large, largely ignoring the relatively small Coloured population and not mentioning the Creole population of Louisiana. This thesis uses the overlooked groups of Creoles of color and Coloureds to serve as a microcosm for Frederickson’s larger argument about the malevolent logic behind formation of racial categories as a tool for excluding groups from membership in society at large.

Frederickson’s later work, *Racism*, provided fodder for the comparison as well. Frederickson’s contention that racism is founded upon difference and power is supported and expanded upon by this thesis, which seeks to show exactly how white elites established difference between whites and mixed-race groups and why the preservation of the white position of power played such a large role in the marginalization of Creoles of color and Coloureds under different demographic contexts.\(^6\) This thesis illustrates the different construction of racial categories for Creoles of color and Coloureds, supporting Frederickson’s contention that white elites founded racial construction by upon two main components – promoting difference between whites and the “Other,” and establishing a power structure that entrenches white supremacy above all the “Others.”

Frank Sweet’s *Legal History of the Color Line* helped to illustrate the historical precedent for racial codifications. Sweet, citing historians Theodore Allen, T.H. Breen, and Stephen Innes, posited that the Virginia elite manufactured white race in the mid-seventeenth century in order to

---


promote an indistinguishable difference between white planters and African slaves and suppress solidarity and rebellion among the planting class.\textsuperscript{7} This thesis further explores this divide-and-conquer strategy in the construction and preservation of “whiteness” contending that the high non-white population of South Africa contributed heavily to Coloureds’ categorization as a tier above black Africans within the apartheid racial structure, as white Afrikaners sought to entrench difference between non-white groups in order to subdue unified discontent.

Virginia Dominguez’s \textit{White By Definition} provided imperative insight into the nature of racial identity, exploring the persistent contradiction between self-identification and identification by others.\textsuperscript{8} As Wayne Joseph demonstrated more than a hundred years after Reconstruction, the question of what exactly comprises one’s racial identity endures today. This thesis uses the fluctuating racial statuses of Creoles of color and Coloureds to investigate this contradiction between one’s sense of self and society’s definition of race. In both case studies, how the groups envisioned themselves did not always align with how they were legally defined, presenting a conflict of identity and belonging.

This thesis argues that Louisiana’s Creoles of color and South Africa’s Coloureds faced a similar loss of basic human rights as mixed-race peoples under racist regimes operating under different demographic contexts. Creoles of color, once owners of land and slaves, became lumped into the monolithic African-American racial category, legally indistinguishable from the slaves they had held just decades prior. Coloureds, on the other hand, maintained their racial status in a middling caste, as they were considered superior to black Africans while still

\textsuperscript{7} Frank W. Sweet, \textit{Legal History of the Color Line: The Rise and Triumph of the One-Drop Rule} (Palm Coast, Fla.: Backintyme, 2005), 135-142.
distinctly inferior to white Afrikaners and thus subject to many apartheid laws. It is well-known that race is a social construction, but the case studies of Creoles of color and Coloureds illuminate the power-driven agendas and motives behind racial construction, as even the white groups of Creoles and Afrikaners fought desperately to maintain their racial privilege, often at the expense of their mixed-race companions.

Chapter 1 explores the case of Louisiana Creoles of color, contending that from Louisiana’s earliest history until after the Civil War, Creoles of color occupied a middling tier in the state’s racial structure. With the beginning of Reconstruction, however, this tripartite racial society was consolidated into a dichotomous one, and Creoles of color found themselves grouped with the monolithic African-American race; as a result, Creoles of color helped to lead the early civil rights movement while maintaining their connection to French culture and values.

Chapter 2 examines South African Coloureds’ experiences before and during the early period of apartheid, arguing that similarly to Creoles, Coloureds occupied a racial caste below whites but above black Africans. Thanks to an Afrikaner minority, as well as their historically fragile position of power entering the apartheid era, whites excluded Coloureds from the white race while still affording them rights above black Africans as a product of a divide-and-conquer ruling strategy. Consequently, Coloureds fought apartheid largely on their own terms and did not find common ground with Africans in apartheid’s early stages.

Chapter 3 brings the stories of the two groups together to more fully examine the agendas behind how and why white elites constructed and enforced racial categories within the two places. The chapter posits that the two case studies represent different manifestations of white supremacy within unique demographic contexts. While Creoles of Color and Coloureds both faced a similar erosion of rights, the white majority in Louisiana enabled a larger, more
monolithic “Other” category that included Creoles. In South Africa, whites were a minority and therefore they fragmented the non-white races, aiming to prevent solidarity and revolution.

More indirectly, this thesis will argue for importance of recognizing and appreciating the complex stories of oft-forgotten groups. For the majority of casual readers, the first things to come to mind when thinking about Jim Crow Louisiana or apartheid South Africa are likely not Creoles or Coloureds. In fact, I am sure that many readers may not even know who one or both of those groups are. For many people, Jim Crow Louisiana and apartheid South Africa are stories of racism and a violent black-white struggle. In both my research of and numerous interactions with Creoles of color and Coloureds, I saw both groups bemoan “forgotten.” History exists as the collective stories of billions of people over hundreds of thousands of years, and I hope that this thesis ultimately shows that the lives of Creoles of color and Coloureds are worth knowing about and will not soon be forgotten.
CHAPTER 1 – CASSÉ: CREOLES OF COLOR AND THE NATURE OF RACE AND BELONGING IN RECONSTRUCTION LOUISIANA

In 1839, Metoyer family patriarch, Augustin, drafted his last will and testament, outlining the future of the family’s massive estate. With over 200 slaves held by the family, there were several logistical matters to confront, including the state of the family’s multiple plantations and residences. Yet Augustin’s main focus was not on the minutia of the plantations nor the slaves held by the family; rather, it was his namesake, the Church of St. Augustin, which had been built more than thirty years prior in 1803. Speaking about the church, Augustin declared, “Whites will always be permitted in our church, and [white] outsiders professing our same holy, catholic, apostolic, and Roman religion will have the right to assist at the divine office in the said chapel.”

Augustin Metoyer was a free person of color, un gens de couleur libre, and due to his social status and wealth, he had the privilege of defining whites as outsiders in his church and community. Metoyer demonstrated a fierce pride in his Creole identity; he had a church, community, and culture that was all his own. In the antebellum period, culture, not color, defined the Creole community, and white Creoles and Creoles of color could share their faith together.

Somewhere at the intersection of race, religion, and language stood the Creoles of color in Louisiana, neither black nor white, navigating their way through ever-changing notions of identity, legal rights, and nationhood. Augustin Metoyer lived in an era that afforded him the opportunity to belong – antebellum Louisiana presented a more fluid landscape of race and freedom in which there existed a middle ground between white and black.

---

Yet as the United States evolved after the Civil War, so too did Louisiana, and a once tri-caste society transformed increasingly to ardently binary ideas of race. In mere decades, the proud Creoles of color had been reduced to the self-described “forgotten people of America.”

As Reconstruction led into Jim Crow, Creoles of color faded into “historical obscurity,” as narratives tended to group all African-Americans into a monolithic identity. Despite laws and government policy telling them otherwise, Creoles of color continued to exist as a distinct group in the post-Civil War era, constantly facing political challenges, racial hurdles, and fracturing within the Creole community itself. In writing about the racialized post-Reconstruction society in which Creoles of color found themselves thrust into, W.E.B. DuBois once questioned, “What is the object of writing the history of Reconstruction? Is it to wipe out the disgrace of a people which fought to make slaves of Negroes? …Is it to prove that Negroes were black angels? No, it is simply to establish the Truth, on which Right in the future may be built.”

Creoles of color were neither ruthless oppressors nor victimized angels, neither black nor white, but they were products of a dynamic, evolving society that left them, in many ways, caught in the middle. As a fluid three-caste racial system transitioned into a binary one, the Creole community was fractured, left to identify with a race to which they had never belonged. As several Creoles have phrased it, “There were blacks, Creoles, and whites. Then, after the Americans came in, there were only blacks and whites.”

---

10 James Holloway, "Letter to the Editor," 1 Aug. 1943, *Chicago Tribune*.
11 David Connell Rankin, The Forgotten People: Free People of Color in New Orleans, 1850-1870 (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University, 1976), IV.
Origins of Free People of Color and the Notion of “Creole”

There is no state in the Union, hardly any spot of like size on the globe, where the man of color has lived so intensely, made so much progress, been of such historical importance and yet about whom so comparatively little is known. His history is like the Mardi Gras of the city of New Orleans, beautiful and mysterious and wonderful, but with a serious thought underlying it all. May it be better known to the world someday.\textsuperscript{14}

Louisiana’s distinct social landscape and political realities that emerged in both the early colonial period and the eras succeeding it are deeply connected to the rise and fall of Creoles of color. The mixing of African, Indian, French, and Spanish cultures produced an extremely diverse group of peoples. In 1699, Louisiana was founded as a French colony, and African slaves soon followed. In 1719, one year after the founding of the city of New Orleans, the first slave cargo was brought to Louisiana – 2,083 slaves, mostly from West Africa, were imported from 1719-1723. Around the same time period, 1718-1724, the first of the free black population entered Louisiana as well. Coming from either France or the West Indies, these free black immigrants came as servants to French families.\textsuperscript{15}

Court records show accounts of free people of color living in colonial Louisiana as early as 1722. That year, Laroze, a man of color, was tried and found guilty of stealing, and he was sentenced to six years in prison. After serving his sentence, however, he was not re-enslaved, suggesting that his freedom would not be revoked, despite being a man of color. Two years later, a free man of color, Raphael Bernard sued and won his case against Paulin Cadot, a white man. The earliest records of free people of color suggest that “not only were they free but they held professional positions, had access to the justice of the colonial court and owned property.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} Alice Dunbar-Nelson, “People of Color in Louisiana,” \textit{Journal of Negro History} 2 (1917), 78.
\textsuperscript{15} Mary Gehman, and Lloyd Dennis, \textit{The Free People of Color of New Orleans: An Introduction} (New Orleans, LA: Margaret Media, 1994), 12.
\textsuperscript{16} Gehman, \textit{The Free People of Color of New Orleans}, 13.
Until 1730, the entire population of the Louisiana colony numbered only a few thousand, with the numbers of free people of color in the dozens.\textsuperscript{17} While not afforded the same rights as Europeans, free people of color occupied a niche quite different from that of African slaves – professional opportunities were significantly higher, and the very access to the justice system suggests that free people of color were viewed as being worthy of justice and freedom in the colonial period. From the earliest points of Louisiana’s history, it is clear that a tri-caste racial structure materialized. The three tiers of \textit{white—free person of color—and slave} came to mark politics and society for the next century and a half. Louisiana’s charter generations presented a less racialized society in which people of color had opportunities to be independent and free; French and Spanish culture and society defined race differently from the black-white dichotomy that has long shaped American racial narratives.

During the French period of rule, the 1724 \textit{Code Noir} afforded slaves multiple avenues by which to achieve manumission. Masters could grant freedom to slaves through a last will and testament or for the completion of an agreement between the two parties. As in other slave societies, children’s slave status followed that of the mother, but Frenchmen often manumitted the women who bore their children as well. Under these legal provisions, manumissions became common, and the population of free people of color slowly grew in the French colony. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, free people of color represented 1,355 out of a total 8,050 heads of households in New Orleans.\textsuperscript{18} Once free, the \textit{Code} stated that: “We grant to manumitted slaves the same rights, privileges, and immunities which are enjoyed by free-born persons. It is our pleasure that their merit in having acquired their freedom, shall produce in their favor, not

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Gehman, \textit{The Free People of Color of New Orleans}, 13.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Gehman, \textit{The Free People of Color of New Orleans}, 34.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
only with regard to their persons, but also to their property, the same effects which our other subjects derive from the happy circumstance of their having been born free.”

While unique to colonial North America, Louisiana borrowed its three-tiered system of race from other slave-based colonies in the New World. In Spanish slave societies, authorities referred to people of mixed-race as *castas*, with various subgroups within the classification. The semantics regarding “creole” were extremely fluid linguistically – Webster’s 1976 *New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English language* listed eight definitions of *Creole*. The most commonly accepted definition is “a person of French or Spanish descent born in the Americas,” but that does not address the difference between “white” Creoles and Creoles of color. According to historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, eighteenth-century records indicate that “creole” was used to describe “black slaves born in Louisiana [and] blacks and mixed-bloods born in Louisiana who had been born free or who had been freed during their lifetimes.”

Mixed-race persons and free persons of color were not synonymous, however, in the early Spanish and French rule of Louisiana, mulattoes represented an overwhelming majority of the free persons of color. These mulattoes, or *gens de couleur libre*, many of whom were Francophones, laid the foundation for the middling role that Louisiana Creoles of color would soon play.

---

In Louisiana’s charter generations, a still-growing population allowed people of color to achieve success in a society that did not yet equate skin color with one’s status as a slave or freeman. Multiracial “Creoles” emerged as a class distinct from the African slaves who had increased rights. Creoles could “invest and lend out money, purchase and own slaves, attend French social institutions such as church, the theater, and the opera. They could live and build their houses anywhere they chose . . . and conduct their own dances, balls, and social gatherings.” Creoles simultaneously embraced their own autonomy with French culture, developing a French identity that was not racialized but rather culturally constructed.

Tenets of Creole Identity

The condition of free people of color, who occupied a socially superior status to African slaves demonstrates the French idea of “race” at the time. The French, much like the Spanish at the time, believed firmly in the idea of European superiority over other ethnicities or those of mixed Euro-African blood. In French eyes, however, the presence of French blood was enough to elevate someone above “black” race and move them into the middling caste. It was not their skin color nor their place of birth that granted them the legal rights to property ownership and the full protection of the courts, but rather their French ancestry, assuming the father recognized the child. The social landscape Creoles of color lived in directed them towards ethnic as opposed to racialized belonging. The very existence of French ancestry distinguished Creoles of color from

25 Susan E Dollar, ““Black, White, Or Indifferent”: Race, Identity, and Americanization in Creole Louisiana,” (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas, 2004), 14.
African slaves, and that often led to a connection to the French language and culture, which afforded Creoles social opportunities.

The connection between Creoles of colors and the French language and culture distinguished them from other free persons of color at the time, most of whom were manumitted African slaves. According to historian Eric Foner, “The wealth, social standing, education, and unique history of this community set it apart from most other free persons of color.” After the Louisiana Purchase, Creoles of color continued to identify more with European than American customs, and the wealthier land-owning Creoles often spoke only French and enrolled their children in private French academies for schooling.26 This connection to French language and culture endured through the entirety of the antebellum period – as late at 1865, outside observers remarked that whoever goes to Creole areas will be forced to “teach the children to speak English.”27 By differentiating themselves from blacks, Creoles of color looked to take advantage of Louisiana’s tripartite structure and clearly establish their cultural as well as ethnic differences from other people of color.

In line with their regard for French language, Creoles of color were almost universally Roman Catholic, just as white Creoles were. Meanwhile, by the mid-nineteenth century, most slaves in the region mirrored the majority of white planters and slave owners and were Protestant and English-speaking, further serving to widen the cultural gap between the caste system’s second and third tiers.

Church worship was another avenue by which Creoles of color defined their community. Augustin Metoyer’s reference to “white outsiders” exposes the cultural parallels between white Creoles and Creoles of color while revealing the autonomy and agency afforded to the Metoyers by having their own church. White Creoles and Creoles of color alike attended almost exclusively Catholic schools taught in French, yet they differed on interpretations of certain aspects of Catholicism. For example, Creoles of color exhibited a far greater willingness to leave broken marriages at a time when divorces were rarely seen by Catholics in Louisiana – all seven suits for separation, divorce, and custody of children from 1855 to 1900 in St. Landry Parish involved Creoles of color.\textsuperscript{28} As the United States took control of Louisiana in 1803, Creoles of color saw their middling social status maintained initially, before ultimately ceasing to exist at the end of the Civil War.

\textbf{American Louisiana and the Evolution of Race}

In 1803, Thomas Jefferson purchased the Louisiana territory for $15 million, ushering in the American era of Louisiana’s ownership. At the time of the Louisiana Purchase, the majority of people in New Orleans were of color – 2,775 slaves and 1,335 free people of color. This came as quite a shock to early American rulers; according to historian Mary Gehman, “The first American governor, Virginian W.C.C. Claiborne, was hardly prepared for the assertive community of well to do free people of color, many of whom had never known slavery but rather owned slaves themselves; they wore military uniforms, were armed, and claimed French parentage.”\textsuperscript{29} Despite the fact that this racial structure contradicted the existing mindset of much

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{28} St. Landry Parish, (Civil District Suits 8950, 9408, 9882, 11029, 122298, 14557, 15695) from Carl A. Brasseaux, and Keith P. Fontenot. \textit{Creoles of Color in the Bayou Country} (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 56.
\item\textsuperscript{29} Gehman, \textit{The Free People of Color of New Orleans}, 48.
\end{footnotes}
of the American South, free people of color were too influential, too wealthy, and too well connected for the new American rule to ignore.

For the first several decades of American rule, American authorities maintained the status quo of tri-caste racial divisions. This was evident in the legal system. The 1810 case *Adelle v. Beauregard* took careful note to qualify Creoles as “Colored” as opposed to “Negro.” The court even went so far as to *presume* their freedom, stating, “Persons of color may be descended from Indians on both sides, from a white parent, or mulatto parents in possession of their freedom. Considering how much probability there is in favor of the liberty of these persons, they ought not to be deprived of it upon mere presumption.”30 This presumption of freedom is truly remarkable given the fact that elsewhere in the United States at this time, appearing black was sufficient for the presumption that one was a slave.31

While U.S. law generally supported the free status of Creoles of color, their status distinctly below whites was upheld as well. In early theatres of New Orleans, for example, Creoles of color had a second tier allotted to just them; an 1830 playhouse opened and operated specifically for the “colored population,” while nonetheless admitting whites as well.32 In the 1830s, white leaders championing the Back-to-Africa movement sought to rid the state of its free persons of color. Speaking before an 1831 General Assembly, Charles Gayarré, a white Creole, fervently rebuffed the ill-conceived plan, explaining key cultural differences that would mark the transportation of Creoles of color to Africa as wholly ineffective:

> Your Committee cannot conceive the expectation that a colored man, born in Louisiana, will break so many ties . . . to cross the ocean and settle among men whose origins, whose language, and whose manners are so different from his own. A colored man of French origin, born in Louisiana would not voluntary [sic] go to Liberia even if it had pleased the Almighty to transform that favored spot into a paradise. Africa is a word which will always

sound harsh in his ears and he will shrink from the very utterance of that hateful name. This may sound strange to the stranger but not to a long resident of Louisiana. Given Gayarré’s later outspoken defense of the “whiteness” of the word “creole,” it is notable to see his impassioned recognition of the cultural differences between Creoles of color and Africans. In the antebellum period, cultural, linguistic, and religious solidarity meant that white Creoles and Creoles of color found significant common ground, and thus Creoles of color were viewed as significantly different from African slaves.

Creole poetry published in the antebellum period demonstrates first-hand accounts of the racial prejudice that Creoles of color faced even before the complete implementation of a binary racial system that viewed them as African-Americans. Pierre-Aristide Desdunes, a Creole man of color born in 1824, combined multiple Creole literary achievements into his ledgers; his records, and the influence of previous Creole works upon them, shed important light into the incipient Creole racial identity developing at the turn of the twentieth century. Desdunes’ manuscript consists of several ledgers, the largest of which contains the vast majority of *Les Cenelles*, an 1845 collection of poems compiled by Armund Lanusse. While the poems remained the same from 1845 to 1894, when Desdunes published his manuscripts, the context had changed significantly. In 1845 Creoles of color stood between between white and black, living in a relatively “golden era” before the ultimate proliferation of a binary racial system and the “one-drop rule,” which held that anyone who had even the slightest amount of African ancestry was by law “Colored.” As the legal status of Creoles evolved, so too did Creole poetry, and Desdunes’ ledgers reflect this constantly changing racial identity. Camille Thierry’s “The Sea Captain” (“Le Nautonier”) speaks to prejudice on a largely individual level, bemoaning his beloved's father’s treatment towards him. Thierry writes:

---

If he dares confront me, this old man
You call your father,
My heart will race and my hungry dagger
Will take him down, my dear!
This old man scorned my race
And cursed our marriage
Thus, for this hoary old fool, I’ll erase
Every human care.34

Thierry’s anger seems to be principally directed towards the father’s resentment towards him as an individual. While Thierry does not attack society as a whole, he is nonetheless infuriated by racist attitudes that have impeded him from love, to the extent that he threatens violence upon his beloved’s father. Occupying the second tier above blacks in a tripartite society, Creoles of color were marginalized and ostracized from whites. Still, this relegation was not as systemic as it would become once the Civil War began. In mere decades, the unique niche that Creoles of color possessed would crumble and the monolithic idea of a lesser “Negro” would proliferate throughout not only the state, but the country as well.

Reconstruction of a Nation and the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Race

The close of the Civil War further aggravated the question of classification. White Creoles found themselves out of power, economically decimated, and a numerical minority. Colored Creoles found themselves . . . suddenly legally indistinguishable from the masses of free slaves. The social identity of both was seriously in question.35

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Creoles of color owned property worth an estimated $22 million. As land and slave owners, 41 percent of Creoles of color in New Orleans owned at

least one slave, and Creoles of color occupied the vast majority (about 82 percent) of the skilled labor occupations of free persons of color. A substantial majority of Creoles of color took up arms on behalf of the Confederacy in defense of slavery in order to protect their own economic interests. Yet with the Confederate defeat and the abolition of slavery, whites soon lumped Creoles of color into the category of freedman with the same men and women they had once owned, despite the fact that Creoles of color were free to begin with. Meanwhile, white Creoles were included in the white race. The newly binary racial structure is illustrated here:

Soon, Creoles of color found themselves spearheading the black rights movement while paradoxically not considering themselves to be black. Creoles of color lay at the intersection of ascribed racial singularity and a soon to emerge political agenda that sought to uplift all “Negroes” of Louisiana, yet still dissociated themselves from the other freed blacks.

With the end of the Civil War came tens of thousands of newly freed slaves looking to find a niche in the emerging social order. Having been denied access to education for decades,

---

37 Dominguez, White by Definition, 151.
newly freed slaves were ill-prepared to fight for legal rights in the Reconstruction South. Of the 86,913 newly registered black voters in Louisiana in 1870, 76,612 (88 percent) were illiterate. In comparison, approximately 90 percent of the New Orleans free-colored population in 1860 was literate. Creoles of color and newly freed slaves had led vastly different lives in the antebellum period; in addition to significant religious and linguistic differences, Creoles of color were afforded the opportunity for education and literacy, making them far better prepared for political participation.

The *New Orleans Tribune*, started in 1864 by Creole Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez, pleaded with readers to abandon their self-imposed isolation from the freedmen and join a cause for racial solidarity. White supremacists indiscriminately targeted *all* people of color – Creole and African-American – with aspirations to leadership or prosperity. In 1866, a Creole contributor wrote, “Our future is indissolubly bound up with that of the negro race in this country. We have no rights which we can reckon are safe while the same are denied to the field hands on the sugar plantations.” Another Creole of color echoed the same notion, saying, “We are all tarred by the same stick, knit together by bonds of common sympathy and suffering, and must rise or fall together.” Racial solidarity became the new reality for Creoles of color – the best avenues for their advancement as a people lay with the freed blacks.

While a joint effort towards black rights was in the best interest of both parties, it was hardly a smooth partnership. Creoles of color often refused to send their children to Freedmans’ Bureau schools, fearing the spread of Protestant or secular ideas. In 1874, the Sisters of Mercy wrote an open letter regarding the “government schools,” stating, “We have willingly and

38 Dominguez, *White by Definition*, 134.
cheerfully offered ourselves to second the designs of our good Bishop in the education and religious training of the colored children of his congregation, who, from motives of respect and fidelity to their religion, refuse to attend the often underfunded Government schools.\textsuperscript{40} English-speaking, non-Catholic Schools represented a vast cultural leap from the world that Creoles of color had become accustomed to. Simultaneously, free blacks resented Creoles of color transitioning from slave owners to political leaders with a sense of elitism and superiority over blacks. During the Constitutional Convention, a freedman delegate passionately declared that he did not intend “to have the whip of slavery cracked over us by no [Colored] slaveholder’s son.”\textsuperscript{41}

The political alignment of Creoles of color with free blacks and their aversion to freedmans’ schools were not necessarily mutually exclusive. The Creole push towards a more racialized identity was largely an exogenous issue – American society defined race in binary terms and viewed Creoles of color as “Negroes.” This ascribed racial identity as African-Americans became a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy, as Creoles aligned themselves with the people they would be inevitably tied to regardless.

While the landscape of American racial politics directed Creoles towards aligning themselves with blacks, the intrinsic aspects of Creole culture never faded. Creole society had for centuries directed them towards French language and culture – Catholic Church, private schooling, and the French language had long been central tenets of Creole identity. Franco-Creole culture served as a reminder of their previously elevated status, and as Gary Mills writes, Creoles of color “clung tenaciously . . . to the Creole culture that was for all practical purposes the last remaining tie between their postwar society and the life they had once known.”\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{40} “To the Public,” Sister M. Ignatius, Convent of Mercy, \textit{The People’s Vindicator}, 28 November 1874.
\textsuperscript{41} Foner, \textit{Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution}, 113.
\textsuperscript{42} Mills, \textit{The Forgotten People}, 248.
Rather than allowing their French culture and black racial solidarity to be at odds, Creoles melded the two ideas into one, using the French ideas of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity to promote racial equality. Paul Trévigne, a teacher of Pierre-Aristide Desdunes, began a newspaper, *L’Union*, advocating for racial ideas far more progressive than those of even radical Republicans at the time. In 1862, Trévigne wrote:

Brothers! The hour strikes for us: a new sun, like the one of 89, must soon appear on our horizon: a new sun, let the cry which electrified France in the taking of the Bastille, resound today in our ears. […] Cast a backward glance to the Chamber of 48, when France was a Republic: we see […] celebrated Negroes and mulattoes, also representing their native country. … Ah! France, in proclaiming liberty for Blacks, has not sought to expatriate them, to colonize them in Chiriqui: it has wanted to make them men, and fellow citizens. Nations of America! Whatever may be your systems of government, in the name of Christianity, copy your fundamental principles from those of France, and like it, you will arrive at the heights of civilization!”

Trévigne deftly combines French notions of the equality of man with racial solidarity of “Negroes and mulattoes” alike. Trévigne did not allow Creole exceptionalism to dissuade him from promoting the international black cause; rather, he espouses the sentiment that the “heights of civilization” can be found in universal liberty of man, regardless of race.

Creoles of color demonstrated an attachment to French nationalism in their longing for racial equality, speaking to a growing sense of disillusion regarding Louisiana’s color line. Desdunes’s ledgers suggested that in the antebellum period, whites mistreated Creoles of color due to their race, but the issue was largely personal as opposed to systemic. By 1890, however, Desdunes’s poetry criticizes racism from a far wider national perspective. He wrote the poem “Heartbreak of a man without a country” as a response to the city of Paris erecting a monument in the places where the Bastille had once stood. Three statues stood at the base, representing

---

Liberty, Fraternity, and Equality. In addition, a bronze ten-foot tall lion sat the foot of the statues, guarding an urn symbolizing universal suffrage.\footnote{Dana Kress, "Pierre-Aristide Desdunes, Les Cenelles, and the Challenge of Nineteenth-Century Creole Literature," \textit{Southern Quarterly} 44.3 (2007), 51.} Comparing Paris with his own experience in Louisiana, Desdunes writes, “If only my country had better understood its task And had completed it with a less cowardly heart . . . Cast off these stupid rags of infernal prejudice.”\footnote{P. A. Desdunes and Caryn Cossé Bell, \textit{Rappelez-Vous Concitoyens!: La Poésie de Pierre-Aristide Desdunes : Combattant de la Guerre de Sécession, Artiste Littéraire Romantique et Militant des Droits Civiques} (Shreveport, LA: Éditions Tintamarre, 2010).} Desdunes’s powerful words illustrate not only the increasing dissatisfaction with racial prejudice in both Louisiana and nationally, but also the role of French culture and history in serving as a contrast to the American racial experience. Desdunes displays a bitter wistfulness, pining for his country to honor equality before the law as France had. In seeking to understand the development of Creole racial identity, one must consider national identity as well, as ostracism before the law led many, Desdunes included, to question the very nature of American nationhood, especially when compared to France, the nation that \textit{felt} like his home.

\textbf{Metasemantics and the Nature of “Whiteness”}

As the color line hardened in the newly binary Louisiana, white Creoles urgently began to dissociate themselves from Creoles of color, despite sharing French culture, language, and religion with them. In a state marked by its heterogeneous population, white Creoles could ill-afford to have their non-Anglo-Saxon ancestry place them in the African-American category, subject to the vitriol that blacks and their Creoles of color, faced in Louisiana at the time. Charles Gayarré, the same man who defended Creoles of color during the campaign to send them to Africa, delivered a speech at Tulane University entitled “The Creoles of History and the Creoles
of Romance” in which he made thirty direct references to “the pure white ancestry of the
Louisiana Creoles.” Gayarré was insistently intentional in aims to clarify the “whiteness” of
Creoles, emotionally contending:

In every nation the human language has modified itself in the course of time. The spelling
and pronunciation of words have changed. Their original meaning has frequently become
obscured and misapplied. But few have met the striking transformation of the word
Criollo in Spanish and Creole in French—at least in the United States—if not in any
other part of the world, for it conveys to the immense majority of the Americans of the
Anglo-Saxon origin a meaning that is the very reverse of its primitive signification. . . . It
is impossible to comprehend how so many intelligent people should have so completely
reversed the meaning of the word Creole when every one of the numerous dictionaries
within easy reach could have given them correct information on the subject. What could
have led to such a delusion in the public mind? Whence the source of so strange an error?
. . . It has become high time to establish that the Creoles of Louisiana, whose number
today may be approximately estimated at 250,000 souls, have not, because of the name
they bear, a particle of African blood in their veins, and this is what I believe to have
successfully done.

Gayarré desperately denied Creoles’ non-white origins, attempting to remove beyond any
shadow of a doubt any connection with Creoles to the non-white population. A single drop of
perceived African blood could mean the difference between oppressor and oppressed, so it is
hardly surprising Gayarré defended Creole ancestry as vehemently as he did.

Though less vehement, F.P. Poché defended the semantic origins of Creoles as well,
saying in 1886, “but simple as this origin appears in its passing strange, but equally true, that it is
not generally understood, and that one of the humiliations of the Creoles is to have been at all
times misrepresented as to their origin, their character, their morals and their customs.”
Also in 1886, the Creole Organization of Louisiana released a charter proclaiming the need to

---

46 Dominguez, White by Definition, 142.
47 Dominguez, White by Definition, 144, from clippings at Tulane’s Howard-Tilton Memorial Library.
48 New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 8, 1886.
“disseminate knowledge concerning the true origin and real character, and to promote advancement of the creole race in Louisiana.”

White Creoles actively fought the publication of any work that implied that there were people of color in Louisiana who referred to themselves as Creole. Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes, a Creole of color and brother of Pierre-Aristide Desdunes, had to publish his 1911 book *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire* (Our People and Our History) in Montreal, Canada because “no Louisiana printer would have accepted the job because the book applied the term creole to persons of color.” The preface, written by a white, possibly Canadian, Frenchman, opens with the following: “I love the Creole of color. I love him above all when he is speaking my language. He is then somewhat a cousin of mine. As for his skin color, what does that matter? His father came to this country perhaps from Marseilles or maybe from Bordeaux. My ancestors came from Le Havre: Provence, Guienne, or Normandy—is not all of this France.” Desdunes, in acknowledging and honoring remarkable Creoles, black and white, looked to preserve a Creole identity that had been denied to them by an Americanized society that saw race in binary terms.

White Creoles and Creoles of color shared an important history, but the immense stakes of where one fell on the color line drove Creoles apart, with white Creoles desperately asserting their “whiteness” and Creoles of color attempting to cling to their Creole identities while being placed racially beside African-American freedmen. Creole historian Alice Dunbar-Nelson confronted this issue in her 1916 journal article, in which she states, “the native white Louisianaan will tell you that a Creole is a white man, whose ancestors contain some French or

---

49 Dominguez, *White by Definition*, 147.
50 Dollar, *Black, White, or Indifferent*, 44.
51 Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes, *Our People and Our History; a Tribute to the Creole People of Color in Memory of the Great Men They Have given Us and of the Good Works They Have Accomplished* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), xxvii.
Spanish blood in their veins. . . . The Caucasian will shudder at the idea of including a person of color in the definition, and the person of color will retort with his definition that a Creole is a native of Louisiana, in whose blood runs mixed strains of everything un-American, with the African strain slightly apparent.”52 A black and white racial structure had fractured a once proud Creole heritage and culture, and the two sides were left fighting over the nature of a Creole identity and both trying to distance themselves from blackness.

Conclusion

The tension between individual choice and social norm emerges as something of a false dichotomy, and might be better represented as a continued negotiation by actors of how to interpret the norms. . . . It allows us to see rules not merely as a set of constraints upon people, but as something that people actively manipulate to express a sense of their own position in the social world.53

The story of Louisiana Creoles of color represents the symbolic representation of the intersection and dichotomy of self-identification and how larger society identified them. Creoles of color came into existence as a separate people in a multi-tiered hierarchical society – they were neither white nor black, nor did they envision themselves as either. In fact, if one were to ask a Creole of color who or what they were, answering the question racially would seem preposterous. Creoles of color might answer that they were French or Catholic, land owners or businesspeople. They would never have answered Negro, black, or African-American. Yet with the end of the Civil War and the transition into Reconstruction and Jim Crow, their identities were usurped by fabricated racialized ones that grouped all dark-skinned people into the monolithic idea of “black.”

53 Michael Herzfeld in American Ethnologist, from Domínguez, White by Definition, 1.
Historiography has in many ways mirrored the overly simplistic view that the Creole experience can be lumped into that of other free blacks. Historians have described Creoles of color as anything from “free Negroes” to “freeborn mulattoes,” for many years lacking a nuanced understanding of the racial dynamics and identities in “black” Louisiana.\(^5^4\) As Susan Dollar phrased it, these historians “unknowingly contributed to the much bemoaned monolithic perspective of African-American studies. By using an outdated, never accurate, Jim Crow vocabulary, these writers defined the group as monochromatic from the beginning, as if one drop of African blood really did make them all the same . . . they unknowingly tend to further [racial dichotomies] by allowing skin color, not culture, to define the ‘black experience’ in America. In doing so, historians, using broad brush strokes, paint over a deeply complex reality.”\(^5^5\) Jim Crow thinking permeated the writing of history itself – even a state as heterogeneous as Louisiana supposedly fit the narrative of a black-white struggle. Due to this binary mindset, Creoles of color found their self-identification at sharp odds with how the larger society identified them.

Culture is a shared, dynamic process. According to Eric Wolf, culture is far from a zero-sum exercise. Continued experiences alter existing cultures, shaping them into new ones, constantly constructing, reconstructing, and dismantling “cultural materials in response to identifiable determinants.”\(^5^6\) Creoles epitomize the dynamism of culture, combining French, Spanish, African, and American elements into a fluid people that exist outside the American binary racial structure. If culture is shared and ever-changing, then so too is identity. Creoles of color represent something of an identity paradox – champions of black rights and equality who

---


\(^{5^5}\) Dollar, *Black, White, or Indifferent*, 27.

never considered themselves black at all. Creoles of color, whether pragmatically or idealistically, found increased solidarity with blacks with whom they shared little besides an exogenously ascribed racial identity. Neither black nor white, neither American nor French, Creoles of color navigated their way through generations of competing ideas of race in Louisiana. At the intersection of the dichromatic paradox of identity lay the Creoles of color, constantly adapting to changing notions of race, freedom, and belonging.
CHAPTER 2 – COLOURED BY HISTORY: SOUTH AFRICAN COLOURED S AND THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY

On June 1, 1961, R.E. van der Ross was exasperated. He implored the Coloured people of South Africa to “accept the fact that we are not building for the past, but for the future.” The Cape Times columnist had grown tired of the assimilationist mantra that attempted to placate the ruling white race. The apartheid regime had crippled and marginalized the Coloured people to an extreme degree – the Population Registration Act of 1950 enabled codified racial segregation, the Immorality Amendment Act of 1950 forbade marriage and sex across the color line, and the Group Areas Act forcibly relocated non-whites to the fringes of society, fracturing communities and families. By 1956, the ruling National Party succeeded in its relentless pursuit to remove Coloured voting rights. Yet despite this tyranny of white rule, Coloured desire to assimilate into the hegemonic white race remained strong, and van der Ross was appalled. Van der Ross conceded, “in language, dress, religion, food, legal attitudes, customs, education, to name but a few of the varied patterns of culture in which we live, the Coloured people do share more fully in regard to the past with the Whites than with the Africans.” Nonetheless, Coloureds and black Africans were both burdened by the apartheid regime’s judgment that they were lesser humans than whites and were correspondingly denied human rights.

Much like the Creoles before them, Coloureds found themselves at the intersection of racial solidarity with the oppressed minorities and the desire to integrate into the more familiar culture of the ruling party. Caught in the middle of politics, societal power hierarchies, and culture, Coloureds asserted a distinct identity that often vacillated between the two sides, even

---

58 Du Pré, Separate but Unequal, 128.
59 Van Der Ross, "Common Cause With Africans," Cape Times, June 1, 1961.
going as far as to celebrate racial discrimination when it was perceived to be to their advantage.\textsuperscript{60}

Neither black Africans nor white Afrikaaners, Coloured South Africans were second-class citizens in a four-class system – Whites, Coloureds, Indians, and Natives. Trapped in the margins between a black-white struggle, Coloureds found their cooperative efforts spurned by whites and efforts towards a joint union with black Africans as unattractive or impractical; marginalized and without significant numbers or representation, Coloureds turned to opportunism, working towards incremental improvements in their rights while seizing every chance to reinforce their relative privilege.\textsuperscript{61}

Much like the “forgotten people” of Louisiana, Coloureds proclaimed that they “don’t know our own history and out there in the community and schools there is no information about it because we are not empowered.”\textsuperscript{62} Forgotten by sweeping binary tales of race and history, Coloured South Africans serve as prime examples that race, identity, and politics come in shades of grey.

Roots of Race and Coloured Identity

The origins of the Coloured identity and a distinct Coloured people derive from the colonization of the Cape Colony, when sexual and cultural interactions among natives and imported slaves from Dutch colonies and colonial settlers created the mixed-race group. In

\textsuperscript{60}Mohamed Adhikari. "Let Us Live for Our Children": The Teachers' League of South Africa, 1913-1940 (Rondebosch: UCT Press, 1993), 157.


\textsuperscript{62}Comment from the floor by a young woman who identified herself as Coloured at a seminar, “The Predicament of Marginality: Coloured Identity and Politics in South Africa,” presented by M. Adhikari at All Africa House, University of Cape Town, 12 October 2001 from Adhikari, \textit{Not White Enough, Not Black Enough}, 1.
1652, Jan van Riebeeck and several thousand sailors landed on the southern coast of South Africa, establishing the Cape Colony. Within decades, colonial settlers began importing thousands of slaves from diverse linguistic, social, and religious backgrounds from Mozambique, Madagascar, and South East Asia. In the earliest days of the Cape Colony, however, religion, not race, seemed to provide the foundation for social distinction. A South African report on the Commission of Mixed Marriages Heterogeneous Coloureds stated that, “there does not seem to have been any ‘colour feeling’ on the part of the Europeans at the Cape in the early days, the distinction being rather between ‘Christian’ and ‘Heathen’ than between ‘White’ and ‘Coloured.’”

There certainly was, however, a significant degree of overlap between non-whites and those classified and “Heathens.”

The Khoikhoi, a native pastoralist ethnic group, initially developed commercial relationships with the Dutch settlers, bartering with them for sheep and cattle. Colonial settlers intermarried, as well as raped and kidnapped, the indigenous people, laying the foundation for the mixed-race group that would later be known as “Coloured.” Relations began to sour as Dutch settlement expanded into Khoikhoi communities, and colonizers, with superior arms, established control over Khoikhoi territory. The Khoikhoi lost most of their valuable livestock and became subjugated clients of the Dutch East India Company. The Khoikhoi, and their mixed-race offspring, became a subordinate caste within the colonial society. The Khoikhoi, however, were only one element of the emerging Coloured category, which also included South East Asian slaves and their descendants. Also included were people with any combination of European, Asian, and African ancestry, who generally lived outside of “native” African communities, spoke

---


European languages, and tended to have light brown skin. Different in both appearance and culture from whites and the slaves, the Khoikhoi and other mixed-race groups were nominally free but treated similarly to slaves.65

Interrmarriage within the Cape Colony revealed a sense of “ethnic hierarchy,” if not racial divisions, to the benefit of white settlers. Most of the inter-race unions were between white men and women of mixed-race, and there was a clear preference for those of at least part-white status. White settlers showed preference for Asian ethnic groups over African ones – of the 290 liberated slaves in Cape Colony between 1715 and 1794, 15 were Africans and 275 were Asians.66 With the colony’s growth in the early nineteenth century, ethnic distinctions became more explicit and pronounced; in 1811 Wade’s Vagrancy Law helped to expel the Xhosa people, a black African ethnic group, from certain regions of the colony.67 By the mid-nineteenth century, the Cape franchise of the Cape Colony allowed all men, regardless of race, to vote if they met property requirements of £25 or earned a salary of £50.68 Mixed-race groups, while they did not hold the status of whites, were able own property and consequently vote.

Mixed-race groups like the Khoikhoi, while nonetheless classified similarly to black Africans like the Xhosa, seized the opportunity for social stratification and began to assert a self-claimed separate identity during the population boom of the diamond and gold rush after 1870. The influx of African laborers into the Western Cape encouraged mixed-race people to proclaim a separate identity as “Coloured” people in order to claim a position of relative privilege in

68 Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 64.
relation to Africans due to their closer assimilation to Western culture and partial descendence from European colonists.

A 1901 plague epidemic in Cape Town brought racial and ethnic divisions to a head, promoting a distinct line between Africans and mixed-race groups. Due to exploding numbers of largely unskilled African workers in close quarters in the later part of the nineteenth century, local authorities could easily direct blame for the plague at the Bantu-speaking population of Cape Town. This caused an ethnically-based frenzy, resulting in over 7000 Africans being forcibly relocated from the inner city.\textsuperscript{69} According to historian Ian Goldin, “the unprecedented attack on people defined as Africans dramatically restructured the social hierarchy of the Western Cape. An African identity provided means for subjugation through legislation and rehousing in a prison-like compound. The assertion of a non-European identity provided the means to escape.”\textsuperscript{70} At the turn of the century, it became increasingly advantageous for mixed-race people to distance themselves from the marginalized Bantus. As the 1904 census demonstrates, Coloureds became widely recognized as legally, as well as socially, distinct from Africans beyond the Cape Franchise, where they were already a separate group.

With the 1904 census, “Coloureds” became an officially recognized racial group, as the census spoke to three “clearly defined race groups in this colony: White, Bantu, and Coloured.” This shift in terminology allowed for the Coloured race to be semantically encompassing and flexible, representing “all intermediate shades between the first two.”\textsuperscript{71} Concurrently, social-Darwinism came to govern racial thought during this period as well, as Coloureds were regarded

\textsuperscript{69} Christopher Saunders, \textit{The Creation of Ndabeni: Urban Segregation, Social Control and African Resistance} (Cape Town: [s.n.], 1978), 143.
\textsuperscript{70} Goldin, \textit{Making Race}, 24.
\textsuperscript{71} Cape Colony, \textit{Cape Census} 1904 G19/1905, p. xxi, para. 102.
as the illegitimate offspring of “European purity and African savagery.”  

This claim to European ancestry, however muddied as it may have been, nonetheless placed Coloureds as hierarchically superior to Africans. This middle-caste treatment of Coloureds prevented solidarity between Coloureds and black Africans, as Coloureds were generally satisfied enough with their relative position above Africans to avoid forming allegiances. Coloureds also lived separately from most Bantus and were culturally distinct as well. At this point, Coloured identity was more about what they were not – European or African – than what they were. Social-Darwinist ideology, in conjunction with a divide-and-conquer ruling mentality of the whites, contributed to Coloureds fragile position as second-class people.

In 1910, the British, after defeating Afrikaner forces in the bloody Boer War, amalgamated South Africa into a single union, consolidating minority white control over the state. Louis Botha, the first prime minister, sought to form a single white South African “nation,” coalescing the British and Afrikaners into a monolithic white race. The British could ill-afford to ignore the Afrikaners, as they represented 55 percent of the electorate; looking to unite the two white groups, Botha made English and Afrikaans the official languages of South Africa. White unity in politics, however, did not last long. Afrikaners, who were overwhelmingly working-class, became disenchanted with British mining policies, staging several strikes in the early part of the twentieth century. In addition, Afrikaner nationalists, with cultural ties to Germany, disagreed with South Africa’s role in World Wars I and II, as South Africa conquered the German-controlled South West Africa. Afrikaners became increasingly disgruntled with race relations within South Africa, desiring labor protection from African competition.

---

Concurrently, South Africa began legalizing racist policies, beginning the era of codified racial discrimination, though Coloureds were largely unaffected by early laws. In response to the mining strikes, whites began showing preference for whites over Coloureds and Africans in both the public and private sectors, making it difficult for non-whites to compete. The 1913 Natives Land Act prohibited Africans from purchasing land from non-Africans and set aside more than 80% of the land for whites. This, along with 1923 Native Urban Areas Act, restricted black movement and established designated African locations. These laws did not affect Coloureds, who were concentrated in the Western Cape, but the combination of multiple South African provinces into a single consolidated union debilitated the Cape Franchise, putting Africans on separate rolls in the 1930s. Coloured rights would not be protected for long, however, as the 1948 beginning of apartheid crippled Coloured voting, property, and social rights.

Tenets of Coloured Identity

Coloureds [were people who] spoke Afrikaans, belonged to the Dutch-Reformed church and whose food, dress, and social customs were those of the Afrikaner. To all intents and purposes, they were Afrikaners.

The difficulty in defining what exactly comprised the aspects of Coloured identity speaks to the nebulous nature of race in general, especially in the specific context of South Africa. In being legally cast as an intermediary group, Coloured identity was seemingly shaped more by the differences from the Europeans and Africans than from commonalities within the mixed-race people. Identity and culture, however, grow from shared experiences and social realities, and the

---

74 Thompson, A History of South Africa, 171.
75 Du Pre, Separate but Unequal, 215.
Coloured people have, both as a product of endogenous and exogenous variables, developed some degree of a common culture.

In the Cape Colony, Coloured people developed occupational differences from both whites and blacks. Whereas whites dominated executive, skilled white-collar positions, at the onset of apartheid in 1948 about 70 percent of Coloureds worked within lower-skilled and manual supervisory positions, compared to about 23 percent of whites. The overwhelming majority of black Africans occupied unskilled or semi-skilled positions. Occupational patterns mirrored legal racial distinctions in twentieth century South Africa, and Coloureds occupied a largely blue-collar labor position between whites and Africans within the workforce. Labor served as a foundational structure for Coloured identity as an intermediary racial class – whites cemented themselves as skilled workers and supervisors ideologically worthy of ruling others, while Coloureds found themselves under the rule of whites, yet in a more advantageous position than Africans. Coloureds maintained a close association with whites linguistically, further distinguishing them from Bantu-speaking Africans. From the earliest development of mixed-race distinctions in the nineteenth century, linguistic similarities between mixed-race people and Dutch colonists served as a foundation for the position of relative position they would assert. The overwhelming majority of Coloureds spoke Afrikaans, the Dutch-based language of the white Afrikaaners, as their first language. In fact, due to the significant population of whites of British heritage, in 1960 Coloureds spoke Afrikaans at a higher rate than even whites. Linguistic patterns shaped Coloured identity, as education from the earliest age utilized Afrikaans as the primary language of instruction. Coloured children formed their educational identity and self-

---

concept using Afrikaans as their primary language, thus drawing cultural bridges with white Afrikaaners and discerning themselves from tribal language speaking African peoples.

Religiously, Coloureds found similarities to whites as well. Coloureds principally affiliated with the Dutch Reformed Church, the church of almost all Afrikaaners, while some other Coloureds were members of Anglican churches. Coloureds’ connection to the Dutch Reform Church fostered not only an attachment, but also a subservient attitude towards whites, as most ministers and congregations believed strongly in apartheid after 1948 and white baaskap, or supremacy. White justified racial domination on biblical grounds, and Africans doomed to perpetual servitude as the cursed descendants of Canaan or Ham. In the middle of the twentieth century, only five of the 352 Dutch Reformed Mission Church ministers were Coloured, with the rest being white. Meanwhile, 80 percent of Coloured schoolchildren attended largely Dutch Reformed denominational schools.  

Whites asserted hegemonic baaskap educationally and religiously, fostering a Coloured regard for white supremacy. Culturally, Coloureds identified more with Afrikaners than Africans. Coloureds shared religious practices, the Afrikaans language, and comparatively greater spatial proximity with Afrikaners, and whites reinforced this association through schooling and political rights. Identification with Afrikaner culture represented not only the natural but practical choice as well, as the white government exerted tangible employment preference for Coloureds over Africans in the pre-apartheid era on the basis of their increased similarity to whites.  

The Cape Town Shipwrights Association, for example, stated in 1939 that “this association is of opinion that the unrestricted influx of Native labour into the Cape is, both

---

78 Sheila Patterson, Colour and Culture in South Africa; A Study of the Status of the Cape Coloured People Within the Social Structure of the Union of South Africa (London: Routledge and Paul, 1953), 133.
79 Goldin, Making Race, 68.
from a social and public point of view, undesirable, as in the Association’s view the natural unskilled labour supply is found among the Cape Coloured community who are rate paying citizens.”80 This reification of white influence on Coloured identity would be challenged with apartheid legislation that left Coloureds disenfranchised, homeless, and subjugated under National Party rule.

Racial Distinction and the Psychology of Apartheid

*It is no good saying that the Coloured people speak English or Afrikaans and that they belong to the same churches as Whites. We know that they are different, and that they react differently and that they will always react differently when mixed together with Whites politically.*81 – D.M Carr, National Party Member of Parliament, 1968

In 1948, the Afrikaner-led National Party took control from the British United Party, furthering racially segregationist policies to an extreme. D.F. Malan, the newly elected prime minister, proclaimed, “In the past, we felt like strangers in our own country, but today South Africa belongs to us once more. For the first time since Union, South Africa is our own.”82

Having felt that they were mistreated under British rule, Afrikaners promoted an agenda of acute ethnic solidarity that would benefit Afrikaner interests first and foremost. The National Party’s idea of apartheid, or apartness, built upon the existing system of segregation and framed it in a purely ethnic manner. Afrikaners envisioned themselves as their own volksgrep, or nation, with its own destiny.83 In his 1942 work, *Rasse en Rasvermenging* (Races and Race Mixing), G. Eloff

---

80 Cape Town Chamber of Commerce, Unsorted Archives, Cape Engineers, Founders and Shipwrights Association, Minutes of meeting held in Cape Town, March 1939 from Goldin, *Making Race*, 68.
82 Rand Daily Mail, June 2, 1948.
stressed the biological differences between the races, proclaiming that “the preservation of the pure race of the Boervolk must be protected at all costs.”

The National Party emphasized this idea of “volk” to promote a sense of Afrikaner solidarity that unified Afrikaners of disparate economic classes under the guise of ethnic superiority. These ostensibly superior “volk” could be only White, Afrikaans-speaking Christians, and Afrikaners mobilized in efforts to preserve the purity of an all-white nation. Apartheid ideology contended that each race represented its own “nation,” and nations were best suited for separate development. For Coloureds, the very idea of Boervolk meant that they were excluded from belonging to a group of people with whom they historically had significant cultural connections. Coloureds could inherently not be a part of the Boervolk, but their partial European ancestry equated to a closer association with the Afrikaner nation than Bantu-speaking Africans. In order to assert ethnic unity through the notion of “volk,” and, more importantly, to encode different statuses for different “races,” the National Party had to first define legally who was included and excluded from the various racial groups, and it achieved this through the Population Registration Act of 1950.

The Population Registration Act served as the “foundation-stone to the whole apartheid structure,” allowing the National Party to create clearly defined nations of people. The Act codified race in a tautological manner, defining a white person as “one who is in appearance obviously white and not generally accepted as Coloured or who is generally accepted as White and is not obviously Non-White.”

---

Coloured, with very little criteria given as to what that entailed. Apartheid’s central idea of “volk” relied on separatism and thus the creation of a Coloured “nation” and national identity. Despite sharing many cultural keystones with Afrikaners, Coloureds would be their own nation, even if it was only an ideal to Coloured people at that point in time.\(^\text{88}\) Minister of Transport Paul Sauer recognized whites’ inherent connection to Coloureds but pleaded for segregation, positing:

> There has been a tendency among the Coloured people of late for one section to do its best to become White, while another section has been engaged in taking up by the Natives. A sense of national awareness . . . has not been developed among them . . . and if one wants to stop him from splitting up one can only hope to succeed if one develops that sense of national awareness and that sense of pride in himself and his people.\(^\text{89}\)

It is clear that even the ruling whites grappled with the fit of Coloureds in the new, racially segregated South Africa. Yet while ostensibly showing concern for the Coloured people, Sauer’s logic had the potential to be much more insidious – by discouraging association with neither Whites nor ‘Natives,’ Coloureds would be isolated and less likely to mobilize with other oppressed races against the white regime. In legally codifying racial lines and encouraging dissociation and separate development between them, apartheid leadership looked to divide and conquer the non-white races, marginalizing them while leaving them simultaneously fighting against one another.

While apartheid laws affected Coloureds to a lesser extent than Africans, the racial legislation undoubtedly had a profound impact on the sense of self of Coloureds. One Coloured man said that he recalls “the humiliation of travelling in buses bearing signs that directed me to sit behind a black line.” He recounted his children asking him, “Daddy, why can’t we play on the swings?”; ‘Daddy, why can’t we swim in that pool?’; ‘Daddy, what is a Coloured?’; ‘Daddy,

---


\(^{89}\) *Hansard*, 1951, 75, Col. 5426.
why are we different?” Afrikaners, after having once felt that they were “strangers in their own country,” crafted discriminatory laws that designated all non-white South Africans as lesser human beings, and strangers to equality in apartheid South Africa.

The white regime marginalized non-Europeans through racial laws which segregated non-white South Africans. For example, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act and The Immorality Amendment Act passed in 1949 and 1950 forbade all sexual contact and marriages between members of different races, while the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1953 legalized the racial segregation of all public areas. These laws, in conjunction with the Group Areas Act of 1950, effectively criminalized all meaningful interracial contact. While the apartheid government disenfranchised and subjugated both Coloureds and Africans, they marginalized the two groups into separate racially homogenous townships, thus preventing solidarity among the victims of apartheid. To the white state, undermining non-European unity was a deliberate priority.

Apartheid leadership sought to cement existing differences between Africans and Coloureds – Coloureds were unaffected by pass laws that strangled African movement in requiring them to produce an internal passport in order to move within South Africa. In addition, the National Party replaced 1696 African government employees with 1290 whites and 406 Coloureds within a year of taking power. While apartheid affected all non-Europeans, it impacted people separately and unequally. As a result, Coloureds developed little sympathy for the African cause in the early period of apartheid, and the Coloured anti-apartheid movement was largely centered on gaining rights for Coloureds specifically.

---

90 Du Pre, *Separate but Unequal*, 258.
“Nothing to do with us” – Coloured exceptionalism in the early anti-apartheid movement

Even within the anti-apartheid movement, Coloureds asserted an identity distinct from Africans, though their causes were generally similar. The African National Congress (ANC) represented the primary anti-apartheid organization at the onset of apartheid, but generally ignored Coloureds and focused on pass laws that did not affect the Coloured population. As a result, Coloureds had little investment to the ANC’s cause – their “Defiance of Unjust Laws” campaign received inconsequential support from Coloured areas of the Western Cape.92 Even extreme acts of apartheid violence seemed unable to mobilize the Coloured population. In 1960 in Sharpeville, police shot into the crowd of 20,000 Africans protesting pass laws, killing 69 and wounding 180 more. A staggering 98 percent of the African workforce observed the resulting strike, yet “there were some Coloured workers who openly said: This has nothing to do with us . . . it is a matter for the Africans; we don’t carry passes.”93 Even the loss of dozens of lives at the hands of the apartheid regime was unable to inspire the majority of Coloureds to strike. Centuries of cultural differences between Africans and Coloureds, together with a deliberately malicious divide-and-conquer strategy of the ruling National Party meant that bridges between the marginalized peoples would not be easily forged.

In the early period of apartheid, racial and cultural differences precluded mass collaboration between Coloureds and Africans. Describing the mindset of many Coloureds, Cape Times Coloured columnist R.E. van der Ross wrote, “the African . . . is a different species. He is so different that he cannot be admitted into any form of social or political arrangement on a basis of equality with us.”94 For many Coloureds, Africans were simply too dissimilar to empathize

---

92 Goldin, Making Race, 112.
93 Van der Ross, “Group’s Attitude to Africans”, Cape Times, 7th April 1960.
with. The tripartite narrative of race had permeated Coloureds’ sense of self to an extent where they perhaps did not see themselves as directly involved in the black-white racial struggle. At the 31st annual meeting of the South African Institute of Race Relations, a council that discussed issues regarding race relations and legislation, Coloured participation was negligible. In van der Ross’ view, it appeared that “still too many Coloured people view race relations as matters between Europeans and Africans, and do not see, as Margaret Ballinger once put it, that ‘All South African Affairs are African Affairs’.”\(^95\) Even among Coloureds engaged in the anti-apartheid struggle, Coloured separatism still remained evident. Torch, the newspaper of the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), would appeal to Coloureds specifically for boycotts or activist movements, running headlines such as “Boycott call to Coloured people.”\(^96\) Coloureds largely fought, or did not fight, apartheid on their own terms in the preliminary decades of the struggle.

Even in the imprisonment of anti-apartheid activists, the National Party looked to subvert notions of non-European solidarity. At Robben Island, a prison specifically for political prisoners, prison rules elevated Coloured inmates above African ones in an effort to promote antagonism between the two races. The menu, displayed below, illustrates different portion size

---

\(^95\) Van der Ross, “Those Who Take No Interest”, Cape Times, 26th January 1961.

\(^96\) Adhikari, Not White Enough, 107.
based on the convicts’ racial category.\(^97\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B - Coloureds/Asiatics</th>
<th>C - Bantus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mealie meal 6 oz - breakfast</td>
<td>Mealie meal 12 oz: breakfast - 6 oz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bread: 4 oz lunch &amp; 4 oz supper</td>
<td>Supper - 6 oz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat: 1 oz daily per person</td>
<td>Fat 1 oz per person daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mealie rice or soup.</td>
<td>Mealies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat: 6 oz per person</td>
<td>Meat 5 oz per person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jam/Syrup: 1 oz per person daily</td>
<td>No jam/syrup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar: 2 oz</td>
<td>Sugar 1 oz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee: Breakfast - 6 oz, Supper 6 oz</td>
<td>Coffee: breakfast 12 oz</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The apartheid regime’s efforts to divide the oppressed races were deliberate and far-reaching. From the grandest of levels of differentiated housing and marriages to the minutest details of portion sizes, the white state stressed racial distinction to a hyperbolic extent. Historical experiences and apartheid rule conditioned Coloureds culturally, politically, and socially, that they were indeed vastly different from Africans and should be treated as such. While both Coloureds and Africans were the victims of apartheid, Coloureds often concerned themselves with only Coloured matters, for non-European racial solidarity was for many years an ideal envisioned solely by idealists.

Racial segregation enacted by apartheid grouped all Coloureds in racially homogenous townships. As a result, Coloureds experienced the impact of apartheid with largely other

\(^97\) D. Gordon E. Robertson, photographer, “Menus B and C from Robben Island Prison, South Africa”, photograph, from Wikimedia Commons.
Coloured people. Coloureds developed a collective identity that manifested itself in the wake of racialized discrimination and forced removals, most notably in District Six.

Nostalgia, Loss, and the Nature of Narrative Identity

The Group Areas Act and its tragic consequences provide insight into the nature of apartheid’s impact on Coloured identity and collective identity. Perhaps the most devastating example of the impact of the Group Areas Act is forced removal of those living in District Six. Though the Group Areas Act passed in 1950, it was not until several years later that evictions actually began, as the National Party sought to create racially homogenous neighborhoods throughout Cape Town and elsewhere in South Africa. Whites, predictably, were granted prime real estate near Table Mountain and the coasts, while Coloureds, Africans, and Indians were displaced to the periphery of the city. At the time, Cape Town represented the most diverse city in South Africa, with District Six a shining example of functional, harmonious diversity that the National Party so feared. District Six was a racially heterogeneous neighborhood close to the center of Cape Town that featured large numbers of Coloureds, in addition to Xhosas and whites, living in close proximity to one another. In the words of a former community member, “we were like one family with no divisions between whites, Coloured people, Indians or African. But then the Group divided us all.”

Beginning in 1968 and continuing until 1982, the apartheid regime moved tens of thousands of people into the Cape Flats township on the periphery of the city. The apartheid government destroyed the vast majority of homes in District Six. Moving from the ostensibly idyllic neighborhood to a Coloured township, reactions were varied and often extreme.

---

– two men even committed suicide in response to the expulsion.\textsuperscript{100} The fact that two men preferred death to disposition is a frighteningly profound testament to the impact of apartheid on identity and self-worth itself. For these two men, their identity was so deeply tied to their homes that life became no longer worth living after their evictions. Suicide was not the only death caused by these evictions, another former District Six community member asserted, “You know, my father, he was blind, so when they moved him, chucked him out of Simonstown, they put him in the flats down here [in Ocean View]. It was about a year, he got a stroke, he died! Heartbroken!”\textsuperscript{101}

Much to their chagrin, Coloured people were forcibly removed from their homes across the Cape and placed in racially homogenous townships. Deprived of their former social networks and communities, Coloureds had to create new ties with people the National Party deemed were the same as them. These people, above all else, shared the experience of marginalization and a lack of belonging. The National Party’s intentional attempts to isolate Coloureds from all other races generated a monolithic form of social attachment and contributed to the self-fulfilling prophecy of race.

Out of this isolation emerged a positive feedback loop of collective Coloured memory and identity, as removed persons connected with one another as other removed persons and shaped a narrative history around that common struggle – what Margaret Somers refers to as a “narrative identity.”\textsuperscript{102} This variable, narrative nature of Coloured identity is less explicit than Coloured political organizations or legal action but is nonetheless imperative for understanding

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Trotter100} Trotter, "Trauma and Memory", 51.
\bibitem{Trotter101} Trotter, “Trauma and Memory”, 55.
\end{thebibliography}
what compromised Coloured self-concept in an era where they were simultaneously bombarded with conflicting messages regarding belonging, ethnic solidarity, and the anti-apartheid struggle.

Conclusion

_Whites and their governments, motivated by racism, took ‘brown’ Englishmen, ‘brown’ Afrikaners, ‘brown’ Africans, ‘brown’ anything . . . and lumped them all together on the basis of their ‘browness’. This is the same as creating a group or a nation based on their common features or physical defects. Of course, this would be totally absurd. Even more ridiculous is to expect them to then act with the cohesiveness, solidarity, and common purpose that one would expect of an established nation bound together by culture, language, geography, etc._

Every year in apartheid South Africa, thousands of people applied to the Race Classification Boards to legally change their race. Applicants underwent extensive testing in order to determine their supposed race. Perhaps the most ludicrous test was the pencil test, given to applicants whose race had proven undeterminable by other pseudo-scientific procedures. A pencil was twirled in the hair of the applicant; if the applicant’s hair sprang back when the pencil was removed, the applicants was deemed to be indisputably non-white. To determine if an applicant was “Native” or “Coloured”, a pencil would be pushed into their hair, and the applicant would shake their head. If the pencil fell out, the applicant was determined to be Coloured, whereas if the pencil remained in the hair, the candidate was deemed to be Native or African.

A person’s race, livelihood, future, and homeland were literally determined by a hair’s breadth. A game of inches determined everything from what jobs a person could hold and who they could marry to their portion size at Robben Island. Race became a tragically laughable idea – arbitrarily determined yet unfailingly significant and ultimately life-changing.

---

103 Du Pre, _Separate but Unequal_, 215.
104 Du Pre, _Separate but Unequal_, 69.
It is a fruitless endeavor to exactly define what exactly is a Coloured person and what qualified someone as Coloured during the apartheid era. Chinese in South Africa were regarded as Coloured unless they acquired letters from their consul certifying them to be persons of good standing; Japanese were deemed Coloured but Japanese tourists were treated as whites for 90 day periods. In many ways, the Coloured race was defined more by what one was not—black or white—as opposed to what one was. Genetic studies reveal widely mixed DNA within the Coloured people, pulling from Xhosa, Bantu, Western European, and South Asian ancestries. If Coloured identity cannot be drawn from biological sources, then it was shaped politically and sociologically.

The idea of the “Coloured” race is highly variable, drawn from absurd pseudo-science techniques and heterogeneous ancestry. Yet if the Coloured “race” was an illusion, the resulting racial identity certainly was not. Centuries of cultural differences and a lack of geographical proximity with Africans drew a deeply embedded line between the two people, one that was not bridged in the early apartheid era. The apartheid regime effectively created a system of race that was intentionally multi-tiered so as to divide the oppressed and discourage non-white racial solidarity. Coloureds were victims of white supremacy but also guilty of their own racial discrimination. For much of the early apartheid era, Coloureds simply had no interest in non-European solidarity, as they had a position of relative privilege in relation to Africans as a result of both their intimacy with Afrikaner culture and deliberately insidious efforts by the apartheid regime to divide and conquer the “Other” population. Indoctrinated by apartheid legislation to believe that they truly were different from and superior to Africans, Coloureds shaped a

collective and narrative identity shaped by loss, marginalization, and racially homogeneous lifestyles. Colored by history and culture, South African Coloureds existed as neither white nor black, with their complicated genetics serving as a microcosm for their equally nuanced identity in apartheid South Africa.

It was June 7, 1892 in New Orleans, Louisiana, and Homer Plessy nervously, yet purposefully, awaited his fate. Standing on the train platform, Plessy had intentions different from other travelers that day. Plessy stood at the train station ready to challenge Louisiana’s Separate Car Act, which allowed for “equal, but separate” car accommodations for black and white passengers. Homer Plessy, a Creole, did not consider himself to be black, and Louisiana law would have agreed with him just a few decades prior. Yet Reconstruction and the beginning of the Jim Crow era had changed the racial system in Louisiana to a binary one, and having one-eighth African ancestry was enough to qualify one as “Colored” in the new Louisiana. Plessy boarded with his first-class ticket, dressed in a fine suit, looking as white as any other passenger on the train, all the while knowing he was unlike the other passengers on board that day. Plessy’s great-grandfather’s African roots had destined him to a lifetime of segregation and inequality. Until that time he was “a relatively quiet, ordinary citizen who got involved,” but the law had deemed Plessy’s Creole identity invalid, and he stood ready to take action. Caught in the middle

108 Dr. Boake Plessy, interview by Keith Medley, 1985 as seen in Medley *We as Freeman*, 16,
between black and white, Plessy acknowledged his “Colored” designation and fought for equal rights for all citizens, regardless of race.

It was 1958 in Cape Town, South Africa, and Mohammed Khan nervously and powerlessly awaited his fate. In minutes, a white bureaucrat would place a pencil through his hair – if it fell out, Khan would be classified as white; if it stayed lodged in his hair, Khan would be classified as Coloured, subject to separate amenities, inferior schools, and forced relocation.\(^\text{109}\) For some families, this was a day for which they had prepared for years, cutting and teasing hair during childhood in order to make it appear straighter.\(^\text{110}\) Even with all the preparation in the world, however, Khan’s fate would be determined by the cruel grip of a pencil through several strands of hair. Unlike Plessy, Khan wanted desperately to fall on the “white” side of the color line. Race, identity, and livelihood could be determined by literal inches, and Khan, as well as hundreds of thousands of other South Africans, was powerless to stop it.

In Louisiana and South Africa, Creoles and Coloureds faced similar predicaments. White governments considered their complex racial identities to be quite the opposite and believed their race could be codified by such pseudo-scientific methods as blood fractions and pencil tests. In both contexts, mixed-race groups shared significant cultural connections with white groups and

historical experiences as a class distinct and superior to blacks. Most importantly, in both places, mixed-race people were victims of a severe erosion of rights and loss of suffrage at the hands of white rule; both saw their previous voting and land rights taken from them at the onset of a new regime. Creoles and Coloureds, likely unaware of each other’s existence in their respective eras, did not fit into the common narrative of black-white history that has been retold in the U.S. and South Africa for decades. Their stories are a profound testament to not only the nebulous idea of racial categories but also the human condition, as two groups of people found themselves facing the paradox of their self-identification opposing how society at large identified them.

Creoles of color and Coloureds shared the assertion of white supremacy by the ruling parties and the subsequent segregation faced by those defined as less than white. At its foundation, this proliferation of white supremacy in South Africa and the U.S. emerged from the consolidation of the white race as exceptional and clearly distinct from other races. In the words of historian John Cell, “only when racially conscious groups collide, with the one rationalizing its dominance while the other strives to maintain its identity and integrity, does race become a social and historical factor.”111

Within the contexts of different demographic situations – a white majority in Louisiana as opposed to a heavy black majority in South Africa – whites exerted dominance over mixed-

race and black populations in different manners. In Louisiana, whites lumped all of the non-white population into one “Colored” group, setting extremely broad standards for being an “Other” with one-eighth African ancestry. In South Africa, non-whites were divided into separate castes of relative privilege in order to prevent solidarity among those with partial and full African ancestry. The stories of Creoles and Coloureds illuminate more than simply the social construction of race – they give light to the particular methods of production of race and the power-driven agenda behind it. Via a different process, there was a similar end result – the gross removal of rights from the non-white population, as whites in power framed racial structures to best support white supremacy and marginalize the non-white population in different contexts. The constructed concept of the white race had disastrous effects on the lives of people unable to fit in.

Of Color and Culture: Historical Similarities

Creoles of color and South African Coloureds shared many similar historical experiences, particularly the loss of rights with the consolidation of a white supremacist regime. Despite the fact that Creoles of color and Coloureds shared much in common culturally with white Creoles and Afrikaners, whites lumped them in with the black population to differing extents while eliminating their legal rights. In the case of both Creoles of color and Coloureds, there was a contradiction between how they identified culturally with white groups and how they were viewed legally as undeserving of the same rights as whites. Both groups then, faced the issue of their personal racial identity contradicting their sociologically defined one.
In the colonial periods of Louisiana and South Africa, Creoles of color and Cape Coloureds both asserted separate identities from blacks, using their mixed-race heritage to enjoy relative privilege over black Africans. In eighteenth-century Louisiana, mulattoes, or *gens de couleur libre* represented the overwhelming majority of free persons of color.\(^{112}\) They could purchase and own slaves, live anywhere they chose, and attend French social institutions such as the church and theatre.\(^{113}\) Under both French and Spanish colonial rule, asserting a mixed-race identity allowed for social class distinctions from black Africans. In eighteenth and nineteenth-century South Africa, Dutch colonial rule restricted the black Xhosa right from settling in the colony and severely curbed their ability to find work, before ultimately expelling the Xhosa ethnic group from the colony in 1811. Dutch rulers sought to entrench the differences between mixed-race peoples and the Xhosas, and the part-white people of the Cape Colony gained legal recognition as a special class of protected workers as a product of their difference from the Bantu-speaking Xhosa. From the earliest colonial periods in both Louisiana and South Africa, white rule differentiated mixed-race peoples from African or African-descended slaves, emphasizing the differences between the two groups in the elevated social status of mixed-race groups.

Continuing into the nineteenth century, Creoles of color and Cape Coloureds continued to assert special legal rights due to their mixed heritage, further stressing the legal distinctions between mixed-race and black groups. In recently U.S.-annexed Louisiana, in an era when appearing black was reason for the courts to presume one a slave, the 1810 case *Adelle v. Beauregard* presumed Creoles of color to be free, distinguishing them as “Colored” as opposed

\(^{112}\) Brasseaux, *Creoles of Color in the Bayou Country*, xii.
to “Negro.” In the South African Cape Colony transitioning to British colonization, Ordinance 50 in 1828 and the later Cape Franchise in 1853 made Coloured people nominally equal to whites, granting them freedom of labor and settlement, as well as suffrage rights. In both cases, a transition in dominion, to the U.S. and Great Britain respectively, did not undo Creole and Coloured statuses, but rather cemented them, as new laws emphasized their rights in relation to blacks.

Having had two centuries of social conditioning and legislation asserting their difference from blacks, Creoles of color and Coloureds developed cultural identities in line with whites, as their similarity to whites was in part the reason for their special status. Creoles of color connected culturally with white Creoles of French descent, and wealthier Creoles of color often sent their children to private French schools, where they were educated alongside white French children. Even after the U.S. annexation of Louisiana, many Creoles of color continued to speak exclusively French, maintaining their deep connection to French Louisiana culture. Coloureds exhibited similar linguistic ties to whites – the vast majority spoke Afrikaans as their first language and attended schools that used Afrikaans as the language of instruction in the twentieth century. Language is perhaps one of the most influential markers of social identity, and the shared experiences of common languages with white ethnic groups likely drew Creoles of color and Coloureds into further identifying with their white linguistic counterparts.

In addition to linguistic similarities, Creoles of color and Coloureds also shared religious faiths with white Creoles and Afrikaaners. In line with their reverence for French culture,

---

115 Du Pre, Separate but Unequal, 40.
116 Foner, Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 47
Creoles of color and white Creoles shared the Roman Catholic faith; Augstin Metoyer’s last will and testament explicitly stressed the importance of sharing places of worship with whites.\textsuperscript{118} While African slaves were English-speaking and largely Protestant or non-Christian, white Creoles presented numerous aspects of cultural overlap in the French language and Roman Catholic faith, and Creoles of color envisioned themselves different racially, culturally, and legally from blacks in the antebellum period. Coloureds shared this religious connection with whites, as 97 percent of Coloureds considered themselves Christian in the mid-nineteenth century, as opposed to 59 percent of black Africans.\textsuperscript{119} Coloureds were frequently tied to the Dutch Reformed Church, whose racist sermons further pushed the Coloured desire to assert their difference from Bantu-speaking peoples.\textsuperscript{120}

Creoles of color and Coloureds shared connection to whites’ language and religion, as well as a historically elevated social status on the basis of their biological similarities to whites and notions that whites were intrinsically superior. In regards to Creoles of color, historian Susan Dollar writes, the “French and Spanish shared a basic racial ideology with the Anglo-Americans who followed them into Louisiana, one dependent upon a single given: white superiority. . . . Because the French tended to recognize their mixed offspring as French, the presence of French blood elevated the African sufficiently enough to remove him from the “black” race.”\textsuperscript{121} Dollar emphasizes that the French created an ethnic hierarchy where Creoles of color were simultaneously elevated due to their European ancestry and devalued due to their African roots. Historian Ian Goldin’s words about the South African hierarchy are markedly similar to Dollar’s about Creoles, as he writes, “European blood [was] seen to represent an advance in the

\begin{footnotes}
118 Mills, \textit{The Forgotten People}, 153.  \\
119 Thompson, \textit{A History of South Africa}, 156.  \\
120 Patterson, \textit{Colour and Culture}, 133.  \\
121 Dollar, \textit{Black, White, or Indifferent}, 14.  
\end{footnotes}
evolutionary ladder . . . people branded as ‘mixed-race’ were seen as the physically and mentally
mutant offspring of an illegitimate mixing of European purity and African savagery.
Simultaneously, however, these people were regarded, because of their claim to European blood,
as hierarchically above African people.”¹²²

In both cases, historians write of the intersection of European superiority and African
inferiority, and the ethnic hierarchies that emerged where mixed-race groups were neither white
enough nor black enough to fall into a racial dichotomy. Both linguistically and religiously,
Creoles of color and Coloureds shared deep cultural ties to white ethnic groups. Before the
eventual erosion of the two groups’ rights, Creole and Coloured identities were shaped by both
their own overlap with white culture as well as deliberate white attempts to stress the mixed-race
groups’ difference from blacks of the time.

Binding the early Creole/Coloured experience together is the proliferation of white
supremacy, which created an ostensibly undeniable truth that whites were inherently exceptional
compared to other races and ethnicities. As Louisiana and South Africa moved towards ever
greater segregation, white elites sought to codify who exactly was “white” and what to do with
those that did not fit into the white category. As time passed, Creoles of color and Coloureds
found themselves increasingly on the outside looking in at those defined as white and the
privileges afforded to the white race.

¹²² Goldin, Making Race, 22.
Segregation and the “Purity” of the White Race

The preservation of the pure race tradition of the Boervolk must be protected at all costs in all ways possible as a holy pledge entrusted to us by our ancestors as part of God’s plan with our People. – G. Eloff, Races and Race Mixing, 1942

It has become high time to establish that the Creoles of Louisiana... have not, because of the name they bear, a particle of African blood in their veins. – Charles Gayarré, 1885

Both Creoles of color and Coloureds saw their legal status change dramatically under what historian George Frederickson refers to as “overtly racist regimes.” Before the Civil War, Creoles of color had both culture and caste distinguishing them from African-American slaves; as the war ended and Reconstruction began, however, Creoles of color became legally equivalent to the African Americans many had owned as slaves just years prior. Consequently, Creoles of color were subject to the “black codes” of the early Reconstruction era imposed extreme vagrancy and labor contract laws that often resulted in arrest and forced labor. Coloureds faced a similar transition into marginalization, losing their ability to compete with whites in public service and private industries in 1910 under the British Union of South Africa before ultimately losing their suffrage and housing rights under the radical apartheid government of 1948. Both groups saw their previous positions of relative power ripped away from them by white supremacist rules that enforced a dichotomous power structure, with whites utilizing a color bar to impose and justify inferior positions in society for all non-white people.

In employing radically racist measures to exclude non-white groups from full participation in society, whites of both Louisiana and South Africa looked to justify their own

123 Eloff, Rasse En Rasvermengin, 104.
124 Dominguez, White by Definition, 144.
125 Frederickson, Racism: A Short History, 4.
127 Thompson, History of South Africa, 171-190.
128 Frederickson, White Supremacy, xi.
positions of privilege, while simultaneously espousing the imperativeness of maintaining a “pure” white race, clearly distinct from Creoles of color and Coloureds. While the cultural and physical differences between whites and blacks made for a more easily justified black-white divide, the high degree of cultural overlap between Creoles and Afrikaaners with the mixed-raced Creoles of color and Coloureds presented a more complicated issue of segregation. These cultural similarities, in conjunction with the mixed-race groups’ more ambiguous racial structure, made the attempted defense of the white race a more difficult endeavor.

White Creoles in Louisiana began an extensive defense of their “whiteness,” asserting they were “unblemished by a dash of the tar brush.”\(^{129}\) Before the Civil War, white Creoles rarely if ever explicitly defined “creole”; after, historian Virginia Dominguez explains, “probably the three most prominent Creole intellectuals of the nineteenth century led the outspoken though desperate defense of the Creole. As bright as these men were, they still became engulfed in the reclassification process intent on salvaging white Creole status. Their speeches consequently read more like sympathetic eulogies than historical analyses.”\(^{130}\) Charles Gayarré’s thirty explicit references to the purity of white Creoles’ ancestry provides further support for this desperate defense. Furthermore, in addition to asserting their own whiteness, white Creoles undermined the racial integrity of mixed-race people. An 1873 poem in *Le Carillon*, entitled “Françoése et les Races” wrote of mulattoes:

> Pure Milk is more valuable than that which is mixed!  
> Whites – they’re a real race  
> Blacks – they’re a real race  
> Horses – they’re a real race  
> Cattle – they’re a real race

---

\(^{130}\) Dominguez, *White by Definition*, 143. The three prominent intellectuals Dominguez refers to are Charles Gayarré, F.P. Poché, and Alcée Fortier.
Havana cigars – they’re a real race
But mulattoes – they’re no more a race
Than mules are a race
Or mixed cigars are really a race.\(^{131}\)

In elevating white Creoles while denigrating Creoles of color, white Creoles utilized white supremacist logic that ignored the centuries of cultural, religious, and linguistic connections with Creoles of color in an effort to take a white position of power in the newly binary racial structure.

In South Africa, Coloureds faced similar dissociation from Afrikaners amid calls for the maintenance of racial purity. Beginning in 1948 and continuing into apartheid Afrikaners, facing the same issue that white Creoles faced of cultural links to mixed-race groups, worked to distance themselves from the Coloured people. At the House of Assembly debates in 1968, dozens of National Party Afrikaners spoke to the imperative need for separatism between whites and Coloureds. C.P. Mulder, Minister of Plural Relations and Development, stated: “I reject completely the idea that Coloureds must be regard as brown Afrikaners. There is no such concept. The fact that they use the Afrikaans language or belong to the same creed makes no difference at all. The Germans and the Austrians speak the same language and share the same religious beliefs, but they are certainly not one nation. . . . Let us reject at once this make-believe story that the Coloureds are brown Afrikaners. The Coloreds are a nation of their own, and they must be led in that direction.\(^{132}\) Similar to white Creoles in emphasizing the differences between themselves and mixed-race groups, Afrikaners employed similar rhetoric about maintaining the purity of their white race as well. In a 1971 questionnaire regarding political separatism between whites and Coloureds given to Afrikaner students at universities, one student replied that “the

\(^{131}\) *Le Carillon*, July 13, 1873, p. 4 as seen in Dominguez, *White by Definition*, 140.

result of (Coloureds) being with the Whites will only result in further mixing which will in turn result in a people without pride and standards.\textsuperscript{133}

The transition to “overtly racist regimes” saw remarkably similar dissociation by whites from Creoles of color and Coloureds. In systems founded upon clear-cut black-white racial boundaries, whites nonetheless had to confront the question of mixed-race groups that held more in common with them culturally than the oppressed black groups. Whites of both nations used parallel rhetoric as well, repeating endlessly the inherent differences between mixed-race groups and the ostensibly more refined white race and the subsequent need to protect it from miscegenation and blood-mixing. Whites recognized the fragility of their espoused racial differences from Creoles of color and Coloureds, doing everything in their power to justify and defend the power structure that held them above their culturally similar mixed-race counterparts. In doing so, whites of Louisiana and South Africa defined race as not ethnocultural but rather genetically determined, and subsequently innate and unchangeable.\textsuperscript{134} These actions contribute to some of the most extreme manifestations of white supremacy that the modern world has seen.\textsuperscript{135}

Radical Racism and the Manifestation of White Supremacy

Creoles of color and Coloureds had the unfortunate privilege of living in two of the most radically racist societies of modern history. These societies reified the relatively new idea of the “white” race and regarded those with different ancestries as being inherently inferior. Just two hundred years prior to Reconstruction, Europeans did not consider themselves as white but rather Dutch, British, Catholic, or Spanish, for example. Historians believe that seventeenth-century

\textsuperscript{133} Hugo, \textit{Quislings or Realists}, 690.
\textsuperscript{134} Frederickson, \textit{Racism: A Short History}, 5.
\textsuperscript{135} Cell, \textit{The Highest Stage of White Supremacy}, ix.
Virginia elite created the idea of a unified white race to establish a tri-caste system of white elites—white planters—black slaves, thus discouraging class solidarity between white and black laborers. White laborers accepted this imagined bifurcation between white and black and according to W.E.B. Du Bois, “the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage.” Soon, Enlightenment era pseudoscience defended this purported unity and superiority of the white race. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s 1776 On the Natural Varieties of Mankind, divided the human species into five divisions and posited that “Caucasians” were the first human race from which the others had diverged or degenerated – naturally being “the most handsome and becoming” and having “the most beautiful form of the skull.” Africans, he asserted, were “nearer to apes than other men.”

For years European intellectuals lacked a consensus about race. These pseudoscience tactics allowed Europeans to offer “proof” of their superiority and reason for rule over ostensibly inferior non-Europeans.

Racialized ideas proliferated throughout the American South and South Africa and became the basis for extreme segregation tactics that marginalized Creoles of color and Coloureds. Under this clearly flawed yet predominant mindset, it makes perfect sense why whites went to such great efforts through their speeches, writing, and laws to exclude mixed-race people from inclusion into the white race. If the white race was something inherent and genetically determined, one must wholly reject any notion that ethnoracial difference can be overcome by a culturally similar identity.

---

138 Frederickson, Racism: A Short History, 57.
George Frederickson defines racism as having two components: difference and power. Whites looked to protect the fragility of their superiority and subsequent power by excluding anyone who might muddy the understanding of “whiteness” by appearing different from other whites. Clearly, color, or the seemingly biological determinants of it, could eclipse culture in defining one’s racial identity, especially when whites had something to gain by drawing a color line. Whites denied “the possibility that the racializers and the racialized can coexist in the same society, except perhaps on the basis of domination and subordination.”139 In societies governed by “us vs. them” thinking, “us” became whites while “them” became non-whites, Creoles of color and Coloureds included.

Clearly, Creoles of color and Coloureds had similar experiences in many regards. Both held significant cultural similarities with whites and held relative positions of power within society before having their basic human rights severely degraded by the white supremacist governments that sought to maintain the imagined purity of the white race. With that said, the Creole of color and Coloured experiences and racial identities were not entirely alike. These differences were products of both differing demographic and historical contexts and also illustrate the flexibility of individual racial identity.

Forging Different Paths: Differences in the Creole and Coloured experience

Creoles of color and Coloureds faced numerous similar obstacles to their place in society as equal citizens from white rule. In both their racial classification by whites and their response to it, however, Creoles of color and Coloureds demonstrated different manifestations of mixed-race identity. The groups both looked for belonging in racialized societies as mixed-race peoples,

but their differing responses speak to both the nature of racism and racial construction, as well the unavoidable element of self-determination in racial identity.

Perhaps the most important distinction between the Creole of color and Coloured experience was the roles that they occupied in society after the evolution to white supremacist regimes. In Louisiana, Creoles of color lost their position of privilege above blacks that they had enjoyed since French rule and were lumped legally into the monolithic African-American race as the United States embraced a binary racial society. South African Coloureds, on the other hand, had their rights stripped from them while still being held above black Africans and Indians as a distinct, racially superior people. The multi-caste system that Creoles of color profited from remained intact for Coloureds, as apartheid laws did not debilitate them to the same extent as “Bantus”. Coloureds were not relegated to “native homelands,” nor were they forced to carry internal passports to move around the country. To some degree, as a result of these differing racial structures, Creoles of color and Coloureds responded separately to their respective white supremacist governments – Creoles of color largely aligned with African-Americans in pursuing equal rights for all whereas many Coloureds pursued an anti-apartheid agenda aimed at gaining rights for Coloureds alone.

The differing racial classifications placed upon Creoles of color and Coloureds speaks to the unique methods of the production of race in different countries, eras, and contexts. In Louisiana, as well as the U.S. as a whole, African Americans represented a minority population in an overwhelmingly white nation. Even in nineteenth century Louisiana, where African Americans numbered a significant portion of the population, they comprised less than a quarter of the total population. As a result, Whites would always represent the majority of the

---

140 Frederickson, *White Supremacy*, 256.
population, regardless of how large the African American population was defined as. Whites looked to protect their own position of power by amalgamating the nonwhite population, including Creoles of color, whose mixed-ancestry may have complicated the idea of what it means to be white in the newly binary society. Creoles of color, many of whom owned slaves in the antebellum period, became legally equivalent to African-American freedmen to whom they felt a partial at best racial connection. Whites codified the racial classification of Creoles of color in a manner inconsistent with Creoles’ own beliefs about their identity.

Coloureds encountered a much different racial classification system in apartheid South Africa than the binary system utilized in Louisiana. Rather than transitioning to a twofold racial system, the National Party strictly enforced a caste system that held Coloureds above Africans. The demographics of South Africa differed greatly from those of Louisiana, and whites did not represent the majority; in fact, in 1936 Africans and Coloureds respectively comprised 69 and 8 percent of the population of South Africa, while whites represented only about 21 percent.

Whites could not simply lump all non-whites into a single monolithically oppressed category, for that would represent four-fifths of the total population and endanger the white position of power. The National Party, a ruling minority, divided South Africans into pseudo-nations not for their best interests, as they claimed, but rather as a divide-and-conquer tactic against non-white group, seeking to prevent solidarity and revolution.\(^{141}\) In granting better job opportunities to Coloureds, exempting Coloureds from apartheid pass law restrictions, and even doling out marginally larger portions to Coloureds at Robben Island, whites were intentional about differentiating Coloureds from Africans and encouraging Coloureds to feel superior in comparison. To some extent, this

---

\(^{141}\) Frederickson, *Racism: A Short History*, 137.
technique was effective – Coloured columnist R.E. Van der Ross lamented the fact that many Coloureds felt that the anti-apartheid struggle had nothing to do with them.\(^{142}\)

Another important difference between Creoles of color and Coloureds is the time frame of the most radical aspects of racism and segregation. Racism against Creoles of color during Reconstruction occurred during the height of the popularity of Social Darwinism and biological racism. Using pseudoscientific techniques, it was grounds to declare Blacks as, in the words of scientist Carl Linnaeus, “crafty, indolent, negligent . . . Governed by caprice.”\(^{143}\) By the time of apartheid, however, the world was still reeling from the Holocaust and its role in genetically-founded racism. Hence, the National Party diverged from a straightforward biologically racist justification for apartheid and emphasized the idea of separate development for various “nations” of people. Under apartheid, Coloureds formed their own “nation” asserted an identity as neither Afrikaners nor Bantus. While the National Party still regarded non-whites as inherently inferior, their rhetoric of separate development was intended to soften the explicit racism, framing it as cultural as opposed to racial.

Finally, historians have ascribed different roles in the respective civil rights movements to Creoles of color and Coloureds. Legally equated with blacks, Creoles of color are often credited with spearheading the early civil rights movement. Homer Plessy’s defiant boarding of the first-class section of the train serves as a prime example of how Creoles of color fought for equal rights for all. Conversely, during the early years of apartheid, Coloureds as a whole failed to align themselves with Africans, with less than a four percent Coloured participation in the ANC’s “Defiance of Unjust Laws” campaign.\(^{144}\)

\(^{142}\) Van der Ross, “Group’s Attitude to Africans”, *Cape Times*, 7th April 1960
\(^{143}\) Frederickson, *Racism: A Short History*, 56.
Many historical narratives have indicated that Creoles of color recognized that the best avenue for advancement lay with freed blacks and thus Creoles fought alongside African-Americans for equal rights, while Coloureds differentiated themselves from Africans and fought apartheid in its 40 years on their own terms. These actions, however, are not entirely representative of the Creole or Coloured mindset. N.P. Metoyer, for example, passionately pleaded with his fellow Creoles of color to align themselves with white Democrats, saying:

Remember that we belong to neither the white nor the black race; that we occupy, therefore, a middle ground between those two shades of color, of which we are composed. . . . To whom ought we to appeal for relief? . . . I say without hesitation and in a loud voice, that if we wish to be men, as well as our children in the future, we must, without hesitation, array ourselves on the side of the whites. 145

N.P. Metoyer, a wealthy land and former slave owner, had aligned himself with white Democrats for years, and was unprepared to so simply switch his political and cultural alliances.

In South Africa, on the other hand, the Coloured People’s Congress came together with the ANC and South African Congress of Democrats to draft the 1955 Freedom Charter, which declared that “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people” and “there shall be equal status in the bodies of state, in the courts and in the schools for all national groups and races.”146 Yet, while some Coloureds aligned themselves with Africans, R.E. van der Ross spoke of “the almost childish optimism which had led coloured people since the previous century to believe that their political destiny lay with that of whites.”147

Despite many historical narratives depicting Creoles of color fighting with African-Americans and Coloureds avoiding alignment with Africans, it is clear that the issue is more

---

145 N.P. Metoyer, “Advice of a Colored Man to his Race,” The People’s Vindicator, 1 August 1874 as seen in Dollar, Black, White or Indifferent, 177.
146 Freedom Charter, Congress of the People, 26 June 1955.
147 Du Pre, Separate but Unequal, 155. Du Pre speaks to the same effect in his conclusion, saying that “history has shown that, up to 1976, coloureds had generally stood with whites against Africans.”
nuanced than that. Creole and Coloured decision-making, much like their identities, was not homogenous and hundreds of people fell on both sides of the black-white solidarity issue. The words “Creoles of color” and “Coloured” are just one way to describe millions of different individuals, each with their own stories, influences, identities, and agendas. In attempting to write of Creole of color or Coloured identities, we can only hope to accurately capture to the best of our abilities what many or most of them felt, thought, or did. Just as historical contexts influenced the racial classifications of Creoles and Coloureds, individual contexts play an extremely important role in racial identity as well, which is inherently flexible, dynamic, and self-determined to some extent.

Conclusion

What is an identity? I take the position that social identities do not exist without public affirmation. Social identities are simply not who we are genetically nor how we as individuals think about ourselves. They are, I contend, conceptions of the self, constructed in time and place both epistemologically and socially in opposition to other such selves. What would otherwise explain how an individual could one day be white and the next day black? Or how and why human institutions deliberate proposals to redefine an identity?148 – Virginia Dominguez, White by Definition

In his book The Souls of Black Folk, W.E.B. DuBois describes an interesting conundrum:

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”149 While DuBois used double consciousness to

148 Dominguez, White by Definition, 11.
refer to the struggle between an African heritage and a European upbringing and lifestyle, the
experience of Creoles of color and Coloureds can perhaps be best described by a similar sense of
double consciousness, seeking to reconcile their ascribed racial identity by others with their own
sense of self. Creole of color and Coloureds were neither white nor black and did not imagine
themselves as such – and their mixed-race was simply one aspect of their much more nuanced
identities. Yet, race became the predominant factor in determining the Creoles and Coloureds’
place in society, as they were deemed not white enough to occupy the dominant position of
power, despite sharing linguistic and religious ties with whites.

The American South and South Africa present two of the greatest white-black struggles
of human history. White leaders looked towards simple answers to race – whether by color or
culture, blacks were regarded as inherently inferior to whites, static in their inability to change
their identities to something more than the “Other.” Yet in periods of simple answers, Creoles
and Coloureds presented complicated questions. What makes someone white? Is racial identity
fixed or can it change? Can race be both self-determined and a self-fulfilling prophecy? Issues of
race, identity, and belonging are complex, dynamic, and much like Creoles and Coloureds, not
black and white.
CONCLUSION

In 1892, a well-dressed Homer Plessy boarded a train looking similar to other passengers but having very different intentions. Plessy knew that despite being able to afford a first-class ticket, he would be kicked off the train on account of his slight African ancestry. Just one year later, in 1893, another well-dressed man was kicked off a train in South Africa. Despite purchasing a first-class ticket, he was barred from traveling first-class due to his race. The man’s name was Mohandas K. Gandhi, and he cited this incident as the one that spurred him to stand up against injustice and fight for civil and human rights. Completely unaware of one another’s existence, two men underwent strikingly similar experiences just a year apart. The governments of Louisiana and South Africa had designated race as superseding economic status, and two men used their own experiences with injustice as launching points for greater fights against racism and the denial of human rights.

This thesis argues that Louisiana’s Creoles of color and South Africa’s Coloureds lost basic human rights as mixed-race peoples under white supremacist racist regimes that constructed racial categories to fit their own agenda. Creoles of color, once powerful and influential, became lumped into the monolithic African-American racial category, legally indistinguishable from the slaves they had held just decades prior. Coloureds, on the other hand, maintained their racial status in a middling caste, considered above black Africans while still distinctly below white Afrikaners and thus subject to the loss of their voting, property, and social rights. Race, while socially constructed, played a particularly influential role on not only the legal but personal identities of Creoles of color and Coloureds.

Today, many Creoles of color reject the label “black.” “Black means evil; that’s why we’re not black,” said one Creole. “My soul isn’t black. I’m not black. I’m colored but not black.”
They say that black is beautiful. *Black is beautiful? Yes, when black acts beautifully.*\(^{150}\)

Coloureds remain divided on their own identity. In the post-apartheid era, many people have gone beyond accepting the labels once given to them. Coloureds wrestle “with questions about the extent to which they should express their identity as black, as African, as South African, as Coloured, as Khoisan, as descendants of slaves or whether they should make a stand on the principle of nonracism.”\(^{151}\)

The stories of Creoles of color and Coloureds exist as small yet imperative slivers of the grander issues of the nature of multiracial identity, belonging, white supremacy, and the motives and agenda behind the social construction of race. Creoles of color and Coloureds faced a constant struggle as people actively attempted to exercise autonomous control over who they were while epistemological and institutional systems relentlessly impeded them. It is my hope that this thesis provided a new angle on the complexities of multiracial identities, and challenge our assumptions on what it means to be one race or another.

---

\(^{150}\) Dominguez, *White by Definition*, 163.

PRIMARY SOURCES

*Cape Times*, 11 February 1981.

Cape Town Chamber of Commerce. Unsorted Archives, Cape Engineers, Founders and
Shipwrights Association. Minutes of meeting held in Cape Town, March 1939.


Bloemfontein: Nasionale Pers Bpk, 1941.

Cohn, D'vera. "Millions of Americans Changed Their Racial or Ethnic Identity from One Census

Desdunes, P. A., and Caryn Cossé Bell. *Rappelez-vous Concitoyens!: La Poésie De Pierre-
Aristide Desdunes : Combattant De La Guerre De Sécession, Artiste Littéraire
Romantique Et Militant Des Droits Civiques.* Shreveport, LA: Éditions Tintamarre,
2010.

Desdunes, Rodolphe Lucien. *Our People and Our History; a Tribute to the Creole People of
Color in Memory of the Great Men They Have given Us and of the Good Works They

Eloff, G. *Rasse En Rasvermenging.* Bloemfontein, 1941.


French, B. F. *Historical Collections of Louisiana, Embracing Translations of Many Rare and
Valuable Documents Relating to the Natural, Civil and Political History of That State.*

New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1846.

Gregory, H. F., and Joseph Moran. "*We Know Who We Are*: An Ethnographic Overview of the
Creole Community and Traditions of Isle Brevelle and Cane River, Louisiana. Baton

Holloway, James. "Letter to the Editor." Chicago Tribune, August 1, 1943.

House of Assembly, Hansard Debates, 1950, 71, Col. 2651, D.J. van der Heever.


Ignatius, Sister M. "To the Public." The People's Vindicator, November 28, 1874.


L'Union, Sept. 27. Pct. 18, 1862.

Louisiana legislature, The Separate Car Act, Section 2, Act 111, 1890.

Metoyer, N.P. "Advice of a Colored Man to His Race." The People's Vindicator, August 1, 1874.


Rand Daily Mail, June 2, 1948.

Register of Weekly and Monthly Statistical Reports of Schools (Monthly School Reports),

Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Louisiana (RSEL), Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105, roll 3, National Archives, Washington, DC.


Robertson, D. Gordon E. photographer, “Menus B and C from Robben Island Prison, South Africa”, photograph, from Wikimedia Commons.


Strategic Development Information and GIS Department, City of Cape Town, *Cape Town Overview – 2011 Census*, Census data supplied by Statistics South Africa.


Van Der Ross, R.E. "Group’s Attitude to Africans." *Cape Times*, April 7, 1960.


Van Der Ross, R.E. "Common Cause With Africans." *Cape Times*, June 1, 1961.

**SECONDARY SOURCES**


Kress, Dana. "Pierre-Aristide Desdunes, Les Cenelles, and the Challenge of Nineteenth-Century


Saunders, Christopher C. *The Creation of Ndabeni: Urban Segregation, Social Control and


