Re-Visiting the Creole Myth: Race and Ethnicity on the New Orleans Stage

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Scholars who have studied the contested meaning of “creole” in Louisiana have typically maintained that the “Creole myth,” that is the strategic redefinition of the term “creole” to refer to the white descendants of Louisiana’s original French and Spanish settlers, emerged during or shortly after the Civil War. Drawing on a newspaper article and two case studies related to the New Orleans theatre, this essay proposes a new periodization for the emergence of the “Creole myth” and a re-evaluation of the cultural and political work it was doing. I want to suggest that conceiving of the Creole myth as an antebellum phenomenon (rather than examining it in the context of the postbellum era) allows us to see that its creation was not just motivated by French Louisianian concerns about cultural integrity and ethnic survival but also by this population’s anxiety about race and the status and mobility of free people of color. As a rhetorical tool that gained traction in the 1830s, the strategic redefinition of “creole” to exclude all people of African descent operated in tandem with other attempts to curtail the rights of free people of color, preventing their social, economic, and political ascent during the antebellum period.
On 28 October 1831 the *Louisiana Courier* printed the letter of an enraged New Orleans resident, taking to task a self-proclaimed lexicographer who had recently proposed a new definition of the word “creole.” “A most singular, and we think preposterous and absurd definition of this word, is contained in the *Emporium* [newspaper] of Wednesday last,” the letter writer stated, “namely, that none are creoles but such that are born of European parents” (A Creole 1831). Angrily refuting this claim, the letter writer explained:

I have always been called, and so considered myself, a creole, notwithstanding my father and my father’s father were called creoles. We have also called the slaves born in this country creoles, – the horses raised here are also termed creole horses – nay, even the chickens, the cane, the corn and rice of our own production, have so been called, and under that appellation, universally command a higher price in market, than similar articles, the product of other states or countries. [...] The word creole is incorporated in our statute book; its meaning is there clearly defined. Our historians have also used the word, to signify such as have been born in the country, whether white, yellow or black; whether the children of French, Spanish, English or Dutch, or of any other nation. (*ibid.*)

Signed by “a Creole,” this anonymous missive offers insights into a debate on identity, belonging, and the meaning of “creole,” a debate that rapidly gained traction in Louisiana in the mid-nineteenth century. For the letter writer, the term “creole” did not exclusively designate white Louisianians of European descent, but it referred to all people who were native to the state of Louisiana, regardless of their skin color or whether they had any previous connection to Europe. “Creole,” the letter writer reiterated, is the word “by which we have ever been distinguished [*sic*] from those who have emigrated to the state” (*ibid.*). Much more inclusive than the new meaning the lexicographer had put forth, the letter writer’s definition considered Louisianian
birth as the only determining factor for inclusion in the state’s Creole community. The lexicographer, however, was unimpressed with the letter writer’s intervention. He continued to insist on his new definition, “gravely inform[ing]” the public “that he ha[d] investigated the subject, and that the result of his labor proves that creoles are not the colored population, but such alone as have been born of European parents!” (A Creole 1831).

Published in 1831, the letter is remarkable because it describes an early version of what scholars have called the “Creole myth,” that is the strategic redefinition of the term “creole” to only mean the white descendants of Louisiana’s original French and Spanish settlers. Historian Joseph G. Tregle, Jr. and other eminent scholars of Louisiana history have generally argued that the myth emerged sometime around the Civil War, when a group of white francophone Louisianians mobilized their supposed Gallo–Latin ancestry and pure white lineage as a way to resist Anglo-American dominance and cultural extinction (Tregle 1992, 132–140). Explaining how the Creole myth came into being, Tregle writes:

[The] finely articulated arrangement [between indigenous Latin inhabitants and Anglo-American migrants] shattered upon the shoals of civil war and reconstruction, destroying the pattern of certitudes which had prevailed in antebellum days. […] The resultant exacerbating fear and resentment drove creole passions to formulation of a hardened orthodoxy […]: it holds that the word can never be used except to designate a native Louisianian of pure white blood descended from those French and Spanish pioneers who came directly from Europe to colonize the New World. (Tregle 1992, 132)

However, with a publication date that precedes the emergence of the “Creole myth” by over 30 years, the letter published in the Louisiana Courier challenges not only the timing of the myth’s first occurrence, but also the scholarly apparatus seeking to explain it. As they grappled with the various meanings of “creole” in Louisiana, scholars have typically agreed on the following critical narrative, which details three key stages in the development of the term.

In the eighteenth century, “creole” customarily referred to “a person of non–American ancestry, whether African or European, who was born in the Americas” (Hall 1995, 157). After the Louisiana
Purchase, “creole” came to be used as a way to distinguish the “ancienne population,” that is white, black, and mixed-race francophone and hispanophone Louisianians, from the Anglo-Americans who began to settle in Louisiana in growing numbers (Domínguez 1986, 113). Creoles became white after the Civil War, when “allegations of impurity prompted those New Orleanians with stakes in the whiteness of their bloodlines to ‘purify’ the definition of Creole” (Thompson 2009, 12). Before the Civil War, Tregle explains, the division in New Orleans occurred “along ethnic lines – Latin versus Anglo Saxon, native-born against foreigner. […] Color had played no role in the confrontation” because “[u]nchallengeable white supremacy […] had made it possible to accommodate pan-racial creolism” (1992, 172). For this reason, Tregle asserts, “[o]ne simply does not find […] any antebellum insistence in Louisiana on pure whiteness as a condition for acceptance as a creole, there being not the slightest possibility that local birth might be thought to confer political or social status upon the black or colored man” (1992, 139).

This situation supposedly changed after the Civil War, when people of African descent suddenly also had access to positions of power. Feeling threatened by Anglo-Americans and Creoles of color alike, white Creoles now not only wanted to distinguish themselves from Louisiana’s Anglo-American population, but they also became obsessed with dissociating themselves from their non-white counterparts (Tregle 1992, 171–173; Domínguez 1986, 134). They did so, cultural historian Shirley Elizabeth Thompson writes, by insisting on their perceived racial superiority and by claiming that their blood was untainted by miscegenation (2009, 12). From now on, “a Creole was a native solely ‘of European extraction, whose origin was known and whose superior Caucasian blood was never to be assimilated to the baser liquid that ran in the veins of the Indian and the African native’” (Gayarré qtd. in Thompson 2009, 12).

Many scholars of nineteenth-century Louisiana have taken up this critical narrative and continue to work under the assumption that the polarization of “creole” and the subsequent redefinition of the term to include only white people of French and Spanish descent took place in the context of these postwar developments. This is due to the almost complete lack of sources testifying to the existence of the Creole myth prior to the Civil War.³ By dating the emergence of the Creole
myth to the 1860s, scholars have, perhaps inadvertently so, centered ethnicity (francophone Creoles versus anglophone Americans) when studying creoleness in the first half of the nineteenth century and foregrounded race (white Creoles versus Creoles of color) when analyzing Louisiana’s Creole population after the Civil War. This bifurcation has obscured the notion that the pre-myth definition of “creole” includes both an ethnic and a racial element. What happens, then, if we take the 1831 intervention of the self-proclaimed lexicographer seriously and begin to think of the Creole myth not as a Civil War or Reconstruction phenomenon, but as a rhetorical strategy that emerged already in the 1830s?

By examining the emergence of the Creole myth in the context of the 1830s I am able to gauge how Louisiana’s francophone community used the term “creole” not only to distinguish itself from the state’s Anglo-American population but also to negotiate internal fissures that both transcended and cemented racial boundaries. As I investigate these fissures, I am particularly interested in how the redefinition of the term “creole” to only designate the white descendants of the original French and Spanish settlers impacted New Orleans’s free people of color, or gens de couleur libres. I want to suggest that the insistence on the Gallo-Latin character of Louisiana’s Creole community that occurred during the 1831 redefinition was motivated not just by the francophone population’s need to resist Anglo-American encroachment but also by their anxiety about the status and mobility of New Orleans’s free people of color. As a powerful rhetorical tool, the strategic redefinition of “creole” to exclude all people of African descent operated in tandem with other attempts to curtail the rights of New Orleans’s gens de couleur libres. Most notably, these attempts came in the guise of legislative initiatives. They were proposed by local elites and the American state government, working diligently to gradually restrict the freedoms of the state’s Creole of color population. In what follows, I will read these legislative initiatives in conjunction with the emergence of the Creole myth in the 1830s. Presenting two case studies, I explore the fluidity and ambivalences surrounding the term “creole” in the antebellum period, teasing out how two performers, an actress of color named Virginie Gireaudeau and a white actress named Amélie Girardot, embraced, challenged, and reconfigured their status as Creoles.
In June 1826, a theatre ad announced the debut of “a young creole from Louisiana” at the Théâtre d’Orléans, New Orleans’s most prominent theatre (Anon. 1826). Her name was Virginie Gireaudeau, and she was a 19-year-old free mixed-race woman with no previous experience on the big stage. Born in 1807 as the eighth child of Louis-Bruno Gireaudeau, a white Frenchman from Bordeaux, and Adelaïde Lemelle, a free woman of color from New Orleans, Virginie Gireaudeau grew up in a fairly prosperous household in the French Quarter. Louisiana law had prevented Bruno and Adelaïde from marrying legally, but Bruno made Adelaïde his beneficiary and naturalized all his children at their baptisms. After his death in 1811, Adelaïde became the head of an extensive household that included not only her seven surviving children, but also seven enslaved people.

The Gireaudeau–Lemelle family was part of a gens de couleur libres elite that had to navigate a tenuous legal and social position. Situated in between Louisiana’s white and enslaved populations, Creoles of color were denied full equality and important civic rights. Unlike enslaved people, however, they enjoyed some freedoms and were able to obtain a considerable level of prosperity. After the Louisiana Purchase, Louisiana’s community of free people of color had grown steadily and by 1830, constituted just over 25 percent of New Orleans’s population. Their number and relatively elevated status within Louisiana society troubled American lawmakers who wanted to impose the dual racial order reigning elsewhere in the United States. Free people of color were allowed to bear arms, they could testify in court, make wills, and inherit or sell property. Many gens de couleur libres owned plots in the French Quarter and the adjacent suburbs of Tremé and Marigny, where they established their families. They worked in real estate, operated businesses, and dominated the skilled trades. With a literacy rate of 80 percent in 1850, they were extremely well educated, and it was customary for the wealthiest families to send their children to France so they could complete their studies. Not everyone had this opportunity, yet many free persons of color distinguished themselves as doctors, engineers, writers, artists, and musicians. Among the most prominent members of New Orleans’s Creole of color community were businessman and philanthropist Thomy Lafon, the medical professionals Louis and Armand Roudanez, educators Henriette Delisle and Marie Couvent, artist Jules Lion, and the composers
Edmond Dédé, Lucien and Sidney Lambert, and Basile Barès. The playwright Victor Séjour and the poet Camille Thierry attained literary fame, and became well known not only at home, but also in France.7

Well-connected within New Orleans’s black and white Creole societies, the members of the Gireaudeau-Lemelle family were involved in local social, political, and cultural institutions. Attending the theatre was an important part of New Orleans social life, and it is likely that Virginie was exposed to a wide variety of French opera and drama from an early age as the family frequented the Théâtre d’Orléans and other francophone performance venues (Braun 2019, 78–79). She probably came in contact with the theatre’s behind-the-scenes operations through her sister Agathe’s partner Maurice Abat, a white businessman from France who, during his travels to the Metropole was occasionally tasked with the recruitment of new actors for the Théâtre d’Orléans. Abat and John Davis, the theatre’s director, had been doing business together at least since 1811 and it is very possible that Abat first informed Davis of Virginie’s theatrical aspirations (Bentley 2017, 47).

Performers of color were not uncommon in New Orleans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when refugee actors from Saint-Domingue made up about half of the troupe of the city’s first theatre company. Among them were several “quadroon actresses” who were so popular that the Louisiana governor feared that “they might be encouraged to aspire to greater privileges than good custom dictates” (qtd. in Hanger 1997, 144). By 1812, however, actors and actresses of color seem to have been no longer accepted on the stage. This becomes evident in a letter to the mayor of New Orleans, penned by the members of the city’s second theatre company. In this letter, the company members ask the mayor to “give the necessary orders” to prevent the appearance of an actor of color scheduled to be in a production with them. Arguing that this actor’s appearance would “hur[t] the conventions” and could potentially “compromise the tranquility in the theatre,” they announced: “We have refused to accept that individual among us [… and] we would rather renounce the theatre which makes our livelihood than reappear after [him] in this playhouse” (qtd. in Braun 2019, 76). The racial climate also changed in the auditorium, and by 1816 all theatres in New Orleans
were legally segregated. Stagehands of color continued to work behind the scenes and musicians of color regularly played in the theatres’ orchestras, but no performer of color seemed to have appeared on the big stage in New Orleans after 1812 (Bentley 2017, 60; Braun 2019, 21–22, 75–77).

And then came Virginie Giraudieu. John Davis, the director of the Théâtre d’Orléans, must have been well aware that he was planning a debut that was very much out of the ordinary. He had engaged a woman of color, who was not a trained actress, to appear on the stage of New Orleans’s most important theatre, to play the female lead in two well-known classics of the French dramatic repertoire: Voltaire’s 1741 tragedy Mahomet (Le fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophète) and Racine’s 1667 Greek-inspired tragedy Andromaque. In her roles as Palmire and Andromaque, Virginie would be supported by the members of the regular, professionally trained cast of the Théâtre d’Orléans. Allowing Virginie to perform in his theatre was a risk, but in 1826 the Théâtre d’Orléans was in dire straits financially, compelling Davis to find something or someone to turn his season around (L’Écosseur 1826). Davis was a shrewd businessman (Bentley 2017, 30–37), and he knew that the public’s desire to see Virginie perform, and perhaps fail, would guarantee a full house. Well in advance of her intended debut he began to announce Virginie’s appearance in a series of newspaper ads. Interestingly, his advertising strategy differed depending on where the notice appeared. In the French sections of Le Courrier de la Louisiane and La Gazette d’État, Virginie was billed as a “young Creole from Louisiana” and an “amateur,” while the ads appearing in the English sections of these newspapers only mentioned that she was “an amateur.” The signifier “creole,” it seems was either not legible or not important for the theatre’s anglophone patrons. For francophone theatre enthusiasts, by contrast, the insertion of the word “creole” indicated that Virginie was not only local but also a free woman of color. White local artists were typically listed simply as “of this city” (Anon. 1838).

Davis’s calculus worked, and the city’s theatre-going public flocked to the playhouse for Virginie’s debut on 11 June 1826. They saw a young woman who was clearly talented and always immersed in her role. “She does not stop being Palmyre, not even for a moment,” one patron wrote in a letter to L’Argus, praising Virginie’s “animated
gestures, varied facial expression, and great ease on the stage” (Anon. 1826). Another critic emphasized her “pure and flexible voice, graceful movements,” and the “warm and soulful way” in which she delivered her lines (L’Ecosseur 1826). Even those eager to discount Virginie solely on the basis of her race were forced to admit that she possessed all the qualities necessary to become a star: “She has charm, freshness, youth, and even a lot of intelligence,” one newspaper writer noted in an article that was riddled with twisted compliments and revealed its author’s racial bias (Un Gaulois 1826). If she learned not to “abandon herself to the impulses of her genius,” and “with a lot of zealousness, and much study,” he declared, “she will one day be able to earn uncontested merits” (ibid.).

But Virginie’s identity as a Creole of color, and the theatre director’s decision to use that identity as a marketing ploy, opened the door to a barrage of racist and dehumanizing critiques. While some critics praised Virginie’s “alabaster” skin, others denounced her for not being “an exotic production” (Un Gaulois 1826; Euripide 1826). Several articles made disparaging comments about her body, describing how “the roundness of her waist” allegedly prevented Virginie from showing “liveliness and energy in her movements and gestures” (Anon. 1826). She embodied “the creole genre in its perfection,” one particularly vicious reviewer remarked, because of her “slow, sluggish, manner” and the “sickly-sweet way” in which she “reeled off her words” (ibid.).

Affected or at least pretending to be affected by the press’s vicious responses to Virginie’s appearances in Mahomet, Davis changed his advertising strategy. In a swift attempt at damage control, he dropped the term “creole” from all notices advertising Virginie’s upcoming performances. From now on, the ads would emphasize Virginie’s status as an amateur performer, remaining silent on her race. But word was already out. The news of the appearance of a young Creole actress on the stage of the Théâtre d’Orléans had spread even in rural Louisiana, and for the premiere of Andromaque, the playhouse was filled to capacity. Many Creoles of color were also in attendance, but their “tumultuous applause” could not convince Virginie to continue to expose herself to “the venomous spite” of the New Orleans press (Veridicus 1826; Mauvaise Foi 1826). As more articles appeared that denigrated, objectified, and dehumanized the young actress, Davis
announced Virginie’s decision to withdraw from the stage. The “pieces which have appeared in the newspapers,” he said, “did not encourage her to continue” (Davis 1826).

For Virginie, being advertised as a “creole” had proven detrimental. At a time when “creole” was still used to refer to people of all races, the specific context in which this moniker had appeared clearly marked Virginie as a person of color. As a woman of color on a white stage, she was perceived not only as an interloper but also as a veritable threat to the social fabric of New Orleans. By allowing her to appear on the stage, John Davis had not only given Virginie a chance to succeed but also an opportunity to potentially outshine her white colleagues. And Virginie did just that, surpassing, as one newspaper noted, even the Théâtre d’Orléans’s great prima donna Delphine Clozel (Anon. 1826). Virginie’s display of talent, artistry, and refinement on a very public stage inevitably challenged prevalent notions of the supposed inferiority of people of color and called into question existing political, social, and economic inequalities. Newspaper writers consequently attempted to suppress all comparisons between Virginie and Mme Clozel, complaining that it was “indecent to compare a white woman with a quadroon” (Justus 1826). Since the gens de couleur libres “cannot be elevated to the level of the [white class] without compromising the safety of everyone,” another newspaper writer insisted, Virginie and other free men and women of color should know and stay in their place, or repair to “a famous island,” where they would be “better placed” (Bonne Foi 1826). By invoking Haiti, a country that was famously governed by an all-black and mixed-race ruling class, this newspaper writer made clear that ambitious and capable persons of color had no place in the United States. The island in the Caribbean was much better suited for them, the newspaper writer implied, since they were amongst their own people, posing only a marginal threat to the social order in Louisiana.

Virginie’s literal expulsion from the stage, then, and her figural banishment to Haiti can be regarded as an indicator of the changing racial climate in New Orleans and as a precursor to the mounting pressures of the 1830s. In those years, local white elites and the American state government passed a series of restrictive acts designed to preclude the social and economic ascent of free people of color. Marriages between free persons of color and white people had been
banned since 1808, but in 1828, a new provision made it practically impossible to inherit property for children conceived outside a legal marriage (Bell 1997, 76–77). This law would have directly affected Virginie had either of her parents still been alive. In 1830 another series of laws limited the activities of Creoles of color even more. Newcomers of African descent now had to register with the local government, and the state reserved the right to expel any undesirable free person of color, no matter if they were born in Louisiana or new to the state (Bell 1997, 79–80). Another section of the 1830s legislation severely restricted the freedom of expression for men and women of color, threatening to punish everyone who “shall write, print, publish or distribute any thing having a tendency to produce discontent among the free coloured population” with “imprisonment at hard labour for life” or “death” (State of Louisiana 1830, 96). Public discourse “from the bar, the bench, the stage, the pulpit, or [...] any place whatsoever” that was considered similarly objectionable could also be punished by death, “at the discretion of the court” (ibid.). Under these laws, Virginie would have been extremely vulnerable, constituting a prime target for those accusing free men and women of color of producing discontent.

Read against the backdrop of the anti-free people of color legislation of the late 1820s and early 1830s, it becomes evident that the lexicographer’s 1831 attempt to rid the Creole community of any African influences ties in with the state government’s effort to expel people of color from Louisiana and its endeavors to discourage Creoles of color from appearing and speaking in public. While the law’s infringement on free speech sought to prevent and control the personal, creative, and artistic expression of free people of color before it occurred, the lexicographer’s redefinition was designed to retroactively erase the contributions of gens de couleur libres to Louisiana’s Creole community.

In the years that followed, the debate over inclusion in and exclusion from Louisiana’s Creole community heated up further. Thousands of immigrants from Ireland, Germany, and France arrived in the Crescent City, changing the ethnic make-up of New Orleans and unsettling old alliances. While Irish and German newcomers often sided with the city’s Anglo-American population, new immigrants from France naturally gravitated towards the Creole community or
joined earlier francophone migrants from Saint-Domingue (Lachance 1992, 117–120; Tregle 1992, 163–168). Dubbed “foreign French,” these francophone newcomers initially competed with the established Creole population for political, economic, and cultural sway. Over time, however, the growing dominance of the Crescent City’s anglophone population produced an uneasy alliance between the Creoles and the foreign French, leading both groups to collaborate in order to contain Anglo-American influence.

On 1 December 1829, one such foreign French migrant celebrated her debut at the Théâtre d’Orléans. Her name was Amélie Girardot, and even though she was born abroad and only stayed in the Crescent City for eight years, she came to be claimed, by the New Orleans public, as a Creole. Born in Paris in 1804, Amélie traveled to New Orleans from the French port city of Nantes as the only new recruit for the upcoming season (Anon. 1829). Back in France, she had been a member of a traveling company that served small venues in the north, including the playhouses of Soissons, Péronne, and Beauvais. Listed as a “deuxième chanteuse,” she only had minor singing and speaking roles, and it is likely that John Davis lured her to New Orleans with the promise of a higher salary and the prospect of casting her in more prominent roles. The reactions to her New Orleans debut as Andromaque were mixed, however, and for the remainder of her first season in the Crescent City, Amélie found herself again playing only secondary roles (C. H. 1829). In the seasons that followed, Amélie slowly worked her way up. She was increasingly cast in more important roles, and in the summers of 1830 and 1833 she was among the company members selected to represent the Théâtre d’Orléans on its northern tours to New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore (Chevalley 1955, 27–71). Although she only appeared in spoken drama, Amélie became one of New Orleans’s most beloved performers. She played young love interests and old bigots, helpless victims, and strong noblewomen. At times, she even appeared in breeches parts. “No one has shown more zeal and dedication,” one newspaper writer gushed, praising her for her versatility, intelligence, and courage to also take on challenging roles (Anon. 1834).

Perhaps one of her most complex assignments was the part of Marie in a play titled La famille créole (The Creole Family). Performed four times in the spring of 1837, the play tells the story of the Clairvilles, a French planter family that, troubled by the
painful legacy of slavery and the traumatic experiences of the French and Haitian Revolutions, eventually finds refuge and a new home in Louisiana. Marie is the illegitimate daughter of the plantation owner Clairville and an enslaved woman, conceived some 17 years ago because M. Clairville had succumbed to “egotism [and] the maelstrom of pleasure” (Lussan 1837a, 9–10). Marie was raised in the Clairville household, but is never fully accepted by Mme Clairville, who favors her biological daughter Cécile. In the play’s opening act, Marie travels to Paris to marry Adolphe, an esteemed physician and old family friend. This marriage, Marie and her father hope, would provide material stability and protect Marie from several older white men who had previously harassed her (Lussan 1837a, 7–8, 40–44). Upon their arrival in France, however, Marie and her father are imprisoned by associates of the Robespierre regime and only spared from execution because of Adolphe’s intervention. After their dramatic rescue, M. Clairville, Marie, and Adolphe return to New Orleans, where the newlyweds would not only start their own family, but also create and sustain a community of old and new Louisianians (Lussan 1837a, 28).

Written by the foreign French playwright Auguste Lussan, *La famille créole* not only chronicles a family’s journey to a new life, but also offers a pointed commentary on the Creole question. Lussan directly intervenes in the ongoing debate on the definition of “creole” by challenging the assumption, held by the lexicographer and other proponents of the Creole myth, that only the locally born, white descendants of Louisiana’s original French and Spanish settlers could be included in New Orleans’s Creole community. Though titled “The Creole Family,” none of the characters in the play actually fulfill the lexicographer’s 1831 Creole requirement of pure white blood, local, Louisianian birth, and European ancestry: all of the characters in *La famille créole* were born either in France or in Saint-Domingue and would thus have been designated as foreign French, rather than as Creoles by nineteenth-century Louisianians. The least likely character to have been included in the lexicographer’s Creole community would have been Marie, M. Clairville’s mixed-race daughter. Marie, however, is the only figure in the play to be directly referred to as “a Creole” and she is the person around whom Auguste Lussan builds his Creole family (Lussan 1837a, 5).
Marie and Adolphe return to Louisiana as an interracial married couple. They plan to start their new lives together, hoping to one day be remembered as “the mother and the doctor of the unfortunate” (Lussan 1837a, 28). Odd as this self-characterization may be, it foregrounds the couple’s commitment to the creation of an inclusive Louisianian society: as a “doctor” Adolphe will extend medical treatment also to the less fortunate, just like he did in Paris. As a “mother” Marie will be the bearer of Adolphe’s children. In a metaphorical sense, this designation also evokes her biological mother in Saint-Domingue and her difficult relationship with Mme Clairville. Even more, the curious pairing of “mother” and “doctor of the unfortunate” suggests that Marie’s motherhood symbolically extends to Adolphe’s patients. Their future family, then, not only encompasses Marie’s and Adolphe’s blood relations from France and Saint-Domingue, but also includes the much broader community of Louisiana’s poorer residents, comprising, for example, other destitute refugees from Europe and the Caribbean and members of the local enslaved and Creole of color populations. Marie’s and Adolphe’s new beginning in New Orleans, then, marks the foundation of a Creole community that welcomes and integrates people from France, Saint-Domingue, and Louisiana, regardless of their socio-economic background and their skin color. Importantly, this community’s “mother” is the play’s only character of color and the only one to be designated specifically as a “créole” in the script (Lussan 1837a, 5).

By specifically including white people and people of color, as well as immigrants from France and the Caribbean in his “Creole family,” Lussan deliberately ignores the Creole requirement of local birth and the lexicographer’s new criterion of racial purity. In doing so, Lussan expands the conception of “creole” even beyond the broadest existing interpretation of the term, decidedly rejecting the Creole myth. He argues instead for an inclusive definition of “creole” by creating a Louisianian community that foregrounds ethnic and racial plurality.

For Amélie Girardot playing Marie, the biracial founder of a controversial Creole community, was likely not an easy task. To some theatre patrons, Marie represented marital infidelity and racial transgression. Others saw in her a specter of the Haitian Revolution, or an unpleasant reminder of the Robespierre regime. But Marie may also have prompted some spectators to remember the invaluable contributions immigrants
and people of color have made to Louisianian society. As a strong, spirited, and intelligent young woman, Marie was one of the few roles in nineteenth-century drama that did not portray a person of African descent in stereotypical or racist terms. Either way, theatre director John Davis had correctly anticipated the public’s mixed reactions to Lussan’s play. Even though he had been willing to allow an actress of color on his stage in the past, he refrained from doing so in the case of La famille créole. Perhaps the Virginie Gireaudeau debacle still resonated with Davis, leading him to cast fan favorite Amélie Girardot in the role of Marie, rather than engaging another actress of color. It is also possible that casting a white actress in this role was the only way to make the play’s critique of a pure white Creole society palatable to the New Orleans public. After all, the “Creole family” depicted in the piece expanded the contemporary definition “creole” rather than restricting the meaning of the term, and in doing so, openly challenged the lexicographer’s reductive redefinition attempt.

Casting a white actress in the role of the founder of a multi-racial Creole community, then, reveals the mounting pressures on an inclusive conception of “creole.” By 1837, the whitening of the term and the community it described was well under way. It had started in 1831 as a rhetorical maneuver advanced by a self-proclaimed linguist. Six years later, it re-emerged as a performative strategy that was mandated by a theatre director and enacted by a white French actress on the stage of the Théâtre d’Orléans. In both instances, the whitening of “creole” was designed to cover up, supersede, and gradually erase the contributions of people of color from Louisiana’s francophone community. As an actress of color, Virginie Gireaudeau was run off the stage of the Théâtre d’Orléans after only three performances. She disappeared from the annals of the New Orleans theatre and gradually fell into oblivion.24 The white foreign French actress Amélie Girardot, by contrast, acquired her creoleness solely through performance, a performance for which she was celebrated and remembered by white and New Orleanians of color alike.25

Read in conjunction with each other, the stories of Virginie Gireaudeau, Amélie Girardot, and the self-proclaimed lexicographer shed new light on the complicated debate surrounding the meaning and definition of the term “creole” during the antebellum period. They help us to see that the Creole myth emerged already in the
1830s and operated in tandem with other initiatives that restricted, diminished, and erased the activities of New Orleans’s *gens de couleur libres*. Re-situating the creation of the Creole myth in the 1830s rather than the 1860s also reveals that the myth served not only as a means to ensure French Louisianian cultural survival in the face of Anglo-American dominance, but also as a strategy to prevent the social, economic, and political ascent of free people of color during the antebellum period. The Creole myth, then, operated in much the same way before, during, and after the Civil War: While claiming to defend the cultural and ethnic integrity of Louisiana’s francophone population, it was first and foremost driven by anxieties about race.

Notes

1 The term “Creole myth” was coined by historian Joseph G. Tregle, Jr. (1992, 132).
2 Scholars besides Tregle who date the polarization of the term “creole” and the emergence of the myth to the late 1850s or the Civil War era include Virginia Domínguez (1986, 132–148), Rien Fertel (2014, 4–10), Richard Campanella (2008, 164), Shirley E. Thompson (2009, 12), and Dianne Guenin-Lelle (2016, 87–95).
3 Virginia Domínguez, for example, writes about the antebellum period: “I have been unable to find any printed or handwritten evidence of objections by white Creoles to the use of Creole to signify members of the colored communities of southern Louisiana” (1986, 124).
4 Despite their very similar last names, Virginie Gireaudeau and Amélie Girardot were almost certainly not related. Some (later) newspaper writers and theatre chroniclers may have taken Virginie and Amélie as one and the same person, a conflation which would explain some of the contradictory information circulating about Virginie Gireaudeau. To avoid confusion, I will refer to the actresses mostly by their first names.
5 A “jeune créole de la Louisiane”; all translations are my own unless noted otherwise.
6 For the sacramental records of Virginie and her father, see Nolan (1995, 203 and 240). For her father’s succession, see “Successions, Probate G, 1805–1816” (n.d.). For information on Virginie’s mother, see Spear (2009, 151–152); “United States Federal Census for Adelaide Giraudan” (1820); Domingon (1830); “Will of Adelaide Marie Lemelle” (2004).
See for example, La Gazette d’Etat de la Louisiane / The Louisiana State Gazette (6 June 1826) and Le Courrier de la Louisiane / The Louisiana Courier (10 June 1826).

“elle ne cesse pas un moment, d’être Palmyre”; “un jeu de physionomie animé, une expression mobile et variée, dans ses regards et sur sa figure, et une grande aisance sur le théâtre.”

“Mlle Virginie a une physique aimable, sa voix est pure et flexible, ses mouvements ont de la grâce; elle lit les vers avec âme et chaleur.”

“elle a des attraits, de la fraîcheur, de la jeunesse, nous lui accordons même beaucoup d’intelligence.”

“en ne s’abandonnant qu’aux seules impulsions de son génie […]”; “avec beaucoup de zèle, beaucoup d’étude, […] elle peut mériter, un jour des éloges qui ne lui sont plus contestés.”

In the quotation below, the author engages with a different article on Virginie and quotes directly from it in italics: “[Il] n’en est pas moins vrai, pourtant, que les personnes qui l’ont sifflée […] bien loin d’être Gauloises, sont du même pays où reçut le jour ceux qui sur un corps dont les formes mollement arrondies, n’offrent à l’œil de gracieux contours, s’élève, supportée par un cou d’albâtre, une tête d’Hébé, modelée par un artiste Grec. Pourquoi n’avoir pas dit tout simplement qu’elle était très jolie” (Un Gaulois 1826). “[O]n a applaudi dans Mlle Virginie un talent précoce et brillant, […] un talent auquel il ne manque, peut-être pour réunir tous les suffrages, que d’avoir la vénérable sanction du temps, ou d’être une production exotique” (Euripide 1826).

“le genre créole en sa perfection; notre manière lente, trainante, doucereuse de chanter nos paroles, enfin une véritable psalmodie qui détruit l’illusion de la scène. Avec cela, peu de vivacité et d’énergie dans ses mouvements et ses gestes (ce qui provient sans doute de la rotondité de sa taille) […]”

“les applaudissements tumultueux de ses partisans sont loin de prouver à quelques connaisseurs qu’elle ait véritablement réussi”; “le venin de la méchanceté.”

For the presence of a large contingent of patrons of African descent, see for example, Bonne Foi (1826).

“il est indécent de comparer une blanche à une quarteronne.”

“ce sont les indiscrets qui, dans des vues purement personnelles, ont l’indécence de mettre en parallèle deux classes dont l’une ne peut être élevée jusqu’à l’autre, sans compromettre la sûreté de toutes […]”; “une île fameuse où elle serait mieux à sa place.”

Foreign French is a literal translation of “français étrangers” or “français de dehors.” Both terms were used to designate French-speaking immigrants who arrived in New Orleans between the late eighteenth century and the end of the antebellum period. For more on the “foreign French” and the changing dynamics through immigration, see Lachance (1992); Brasseaux (1990–1993); Tregle (1992); and Braun (2019).

See Brasseaux (1990, 241); Barba (1828, 323); R. H. (1829).

“Personne à coup sûr n’a montré, ni plus de zèle, ni plus d’abnégation.”

For a full reading of La famille créole, see Braun (2019, 110–124); Leservot (2012, 40–55).
22 Even immigrants from Saint-Domingue, who would refer to themselves as “creoles of Saint Domingue” on their home island, did not, in Tregle’s words, “carr[y] their creole identity with them into Louisiana” (1992, 138n12).
23 “la mère et le médecin des malheureux!”
24 The Black Creole historian and activist Rodolphe Desdunes mentioned Virginie Gireaudeau in his 1911 community history Nos hommes, notre histoire, but was unable to provide “precise information” on her life and career: “On a beaucoup parlé de Virginie Girodeau, mais il nous manque des renseignements précis à l’égard de cette femme” (1911, 138–139). Virginie Gireaudeau is also mentioned in the following critical studies, none of which provide more details than Desdunes: Braun (2019, 209n127); Davis (2011, 224); Carter (1979, 173).
25 Playwright Auguste Lussan, for example, commemorated Amélie Girardot’s untimely death from yellow fever in August 1837 with a poem, published in the Baton Rouge Gazette on 2 September 1837 (Lussan 1837b). In 1851, more than a decade after Amélie’s death, the homme de couleur writer Camille Thierry penned a poem in Amélie’s honor in which he celebrated her as the “Queen of the Théâtre d’Orléans” (Thierry 1851). The poem titled “Amélie Girardot” was reprinted in his collection Les vagabondes: Poésies américaines (Thierry 1874).

Works cited


