

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Brackish Bayou Blood: Weaving Mixed-Blood Indian-Creole Identity Outside the Written Record

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0zj2094w>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 32(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Cranford-Gomez, L.

Publication Date

2008-03-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Brackish Bayou Blood: Weaving Mixed-Blood Indian-Creole Identity Outside the Written Record

L. RAIN CRANFORD-GOMEZ

We weave baskets of pine straw. We weave baskets of cane. Grandfather moves in pattern, flowing ever outward, claws offering earthen memory. And we dive and rise continuously from waters pushed from the Gulf of Mexico into the interior deltas. Our inherited blood brackish as these bayous . . . neither fresh nor sea-salt; yet natural in its inherent Louisiana topography.

—L. Rain Cranford-Gomez, “Old Crawdad the Fisherman”¹

As a child on the Gulf of Mexico, evacuation to higher ground for floods, hurricanes, and tornado warnings were common. It was a part of life, as much as getting up before school with my mother and father to fish for mullet and sheepshead for our evening dinner. The water was our sustenance, but we respected it and knew as quickly as it gave it could take. At the end of August 2005, Hurricane Katrina ravaged the homelands of my father and grandfather in Louisiana. Hundreds of miles of wetlands, already threatened, were turned to open water; vital brackish waters were flooded with seawater, thus damaging the delicate balance between fresh and salt that many plants and animals need for their habitats. Vital records and historic documents were flooded, damaged, besieged with mold, and lost to the ravages of wind and water. However, these records do not tell the only stories in Louisiana. In the wake of the devastation that has impacted Louisiana communities, in particular Creole and Indian communities, it makes other forms of record keeping, such as historic oral narratives and material culture, vitally important as we

L. Rain Cranford-Gomez is the area co-chair of Native/Indigenous Studies at the SW/TX Popular Culture Conference, and editor-in-chief of the forthcoming *Eame'ha*, a digital media journal presented by Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers. Her master's and postgraduate work focus on American studies, American Indian studies, and post- and para-colonial theory. Her poetry has been published in various journals and most recently in *To Topos Poetry International: Ahani: Indigenous American Poetry*. She is preparing to return to graduate school in Southern California where she resides with her husband.

seek to preserve our histories as Indians, Louisiana Creoles, and uniquely mixed-blood people in Louisiana.

This article is taken from a greater conversation, a work in progress. The text that follows should be read as a story and a conversation that seeks to open possible dialogues and interaction, shared histories, narratives, and cooperation between Louisiana Indians and Louisiana Creoles as manifested in shared material culture practices and mixed racial-cultural inheritance. By revisiting the racial mixing of Creole identity from a *métis/mestizo* perspective, “reading” Indian and Creole basketry as a material culture source that speaks for a people (that is, tells a story), and sharing personal reflections, I hope to illustrate converging narratives and dialogues further rooting Louisiana Creoles in an indigenous history; a *métis/mestizo* people separate but linked to their indigenous land and kin ties.² I urge other scholars to explore further the indigenous connections between Louisiana Creoles and Louisiana Indians with a particular focus on those of both Louisiana Indian and Creole descent.

This article speaks with the other pieces in this journal. However, rather than focusing on specific situations surrounding Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Rita, hurricane phenomena, and specific Louisiana tribal communities, it seeks to speak to the repercussions of record loss due to hurricanes and inaccurate record keeping. This article dialogues with alternative ways of keeping community, cultural, and historic narratives present within state and historic written records in an environment that has sought to erase Creole, Indian, black-Indian and other multiracial community narratives. These alternative methods of record keeping of historic community narratives include material culture ways and oral traditions. Using these methods also counteracts the impact of written records that have been damaged due to hurricanes, molds, and flooding. In this article I focus on the basket as a potential story that relates historic and familial narrative. Oral histories and baskets form a basis for illuminating cultural intermarriage as manifested in material culture, literature and language, and nonalphanumeric record keeping. For us to really understand how geography and shared tribal ties play into the ways baskets are made among Louisiana Indian and Creole communities is to uncover histories not in the written record.

Western history and contemporary societies have linked the historic record-making and meaning-making system to alphanumeric writing. Material culture and oral narrative/history have been primary sources of information keeping not only for family and community but also for a majority of culture systems for longer than alphanumeric written-language systems have been in operation. How we define text, as both a word and potential object to be “read,” is vitally important in the Americas and in indigenous communities, as well as in academic programs. How we read histories of peoples, and therefore our ability to make knowledge of a people, is contingent on how we define text. As Julie Cruikshank points out in “Oral Tradition and Material Culture: Multiplying Meanings of ‘Words’ and ‘Things’”: “Analyses of spoken words and of material objects have usually been compartmentalized. Yet there are a surprising number of parallels: both were originally treated as *objects* to

be collected; then attention shifted to viewing words and things in *context*; recently they have been discussed as aspects of cultural *performance*, just as now they are often referred to as cultural *symbols* or as cultural *property*.”³ This takes on new meaning when we begin to look at the processes of meaning making as we examine our relationships to oral histories and material culture and their place or lack of place within academia and the grand historic narrative of the Americas. Rather than separate the product, image, icon, or story from the maker, history, and community, we need to link story/orality, cultures, and maker. Oral tradition is linked to a community, a history of a people; likewise, material culture is created and influenced by the history and geography of the maker. This links an object to the historic narrative, survival, and negotiation of the people from which the maker or crafter belongs.

Material culture and oral narrative are valuable resources for understanding the histories and relationships of Louisiana Indian and Creole peoples, particularly in a post-Katrina environment. The written record is not absolute; it does not account for the histories of complex silenced peoples, and, like the wetlands, it is in danger of being lost to the wind and rain.

Story 1

I cannot separate the story of my father from the story of Louisiana Choctaw, Creole and Muskoke anymore than I can separate the story of my father from the Gulf of Mexico . . . all are braided up in the veins and arteries of his countenance. Salt in the blood. From the gulf to the Mississippi delta, into his flesh, traveling into the Canadian Sioux Irish womb of my mother, salt in the blood; tributaries pushing into the river of my life.

—L. Rain Cranford-Gomez, “The Cast Net”⁴

I enter this story, this text, from the South. I know this is not a traditional way of entrance for any tribe I can think of, but it has meaning and purpose for this story. I was born on the Florida Gulf of Mexico coast. All along the eastern coastal waters of the Gulf of Mexico were once Mvskogean homelands. My father was primarily raised in his father’s home state of Louisiana. My paternal grandpa’s people are of Mvskogean (Choctaw, Creek) and Louisiana Creole descent. And so from the South I enter. Three cultures, Choctaw, Creek, and Louisiana Creole, were woven into my grandfather. Three is a sacred number for us. We have three sisters. Three worlds. Three is the number of strands it takes to weave, like the three waters of Louisiana: seawater, fresh water, and brackish water. It takes a mixture to make brack water, the water of bayou marsh wetland, where so much wildlife lives, its own ecosystems in balance, woven in harmony to land and water. My father and grandfathers fished these waters, and like the brackish wetlands, we fight for survival; both neither pure, but mixed, uniquely Louisiana. From the South I enter, this story of Louisiana. . . .

The story of my father’s family reads with sounds of water, smells of gumbo and smoked mullet, cornbread, and sassafras tea. It is a story of documents true and false, stories told and retold; some are hidden, some whispered, and some are just done the way they have always been done. Growing up in

a mixed-blood household with two mixed-blood parents, I was raised to be human, a good human. My responsibility to helping humanity, the people, was always taught; not to be a good Choctaw, a good Canadian métis of Sioux descent, Creole, or Irish American, I was just taught to be human. It was the most indigenous lesson I could have learned. I always saw him as this great brown fisherman who became a military man, only to return to fishing. I never connected Creole *or* Cajun culture in Louisiana with a history of racial passing, segregation, violence, and survival.⁵ And no one ever talked about the black in our family, even though I was called “high yella” and people called my grandpa’s hair “nappy.” It was not until I was older and wondered why I was not tribally enrolled that I began to investigate this complex, jambalaya mix that was my grandfather’s family tree.

The radically changed racial laws of Louisiana, on a state and federal level, have dramatically impacted the relationships of Louisiana Indian and Creole communities. This is reflected in the civil and state records, the state laws, and written narrative in Louisiana.⁶ In some cases there is no racial designation for some people; in others a racial designation may say white or black, mulatto rogue, or griff; but another record such as a baptism record will say something different, such as baptism of an Indian. Understanding race means not just looking at one record, but looking at multiple records, histories, geographies, family histories, family names, and communities.

In my own family the records are filled with Jemimas, and Bazillas, baptism of an Indian, children born on wrong sides of the blanket carrying different racial designations depending on the town, and blanks where mothers of fathers’ names should be. Some people made it onto Indian rolls, some didn’t, and some are listed in places as two or more races.⁷ Being mixed race and surviving with changing racial laws and maintaining culture was not an easy task; some passed as white, some were designated black, from which there was no becoming white or Indian, and others still drifted in limbo from white to Indian to Louisiana Creole. While this is not necessarily a story about my familial record, the histories and complex racial documentation experienced in my own family history are similar tales to those of other families of Louisiana Indian and/or Louisiana Creole descent. In reality, there were not only state laws, but also federal laws and ever-changing societal constraints and pressures, in a state where the color line had been fuzzy at best until Jim Crow came.

The political pressure for folks of mixed Indian descent today can be overwhelming; those of us with historic records and family ties sometimes feel as if we carry them like badges of proof rather than carrying them in honor. Yet the work our ancestors did maintaining culture, ties, and the records we carry are guidebooks for survival as Indian Creole mixed-bloods in the twenty-first century.

GATHERING MIXED-BLOOD MATERIALS: COMPLEXITY OF BLACK INDIAN MISCEGENATION

“The idea of mixed blood came to the Americas with Europeans and to a large degree has been imposed on Native peoples by Europeans.”⁸ Europeans

had many designations for the various admixtures that resulted from contact, trade, and intermarriage with Native peoples, including those of Afro-Indian or black descent. Historic texts are lined with terminology such as *métis* and *mestizo*, still in common use, and terms such as *half-breed*, *griff*, and *mulatto rogue*.⁹ In their work “‘Indian Blood’: Reflections on the Reckoning and Refiguring of Native North American Identity,” Pauline Strong and Varrick Van Winkle ask the question “Who is Indian?” By examining contemporary American Indian art and literature, Strong and Van Winkle show racial philosophies to be woven throughout the federal and political history of American Indians, creating an “edifice of racism embodied in ‘Indian Blood’.” Declaring it is not simply a matter of “exposing its essentialism and discarding its associated policies, but a more delicate and complicated task; that is acknowledging ‘Indian Blood’ as a discourse of conquest with manifold and contradictory effects.”¹⁰ One of the “edifices of racism” that is embroiled in the history of mixed-bloods is the African or black admixture, and this influences how Creole indigeneity has been written out of the historic record.

The concept of race in black and white is tied to slavery; the closer one gets to the institution the more “degraded” blackness becomes. Distancing oneself from blackness is to align oneself with whiteness and therefore prosperity.¹¹ “Whiteness is the absence of black forbearers, assuming no other non-white forebears, or the absence of non-white forebears. And blackness is the presence of one or more black forebears, depending on how far back” one investigates.¹² In *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana*, Virginia Dominguez investigates the historic underpinnings and policies that contributed to racial stratifications between whites and blacks in Louisiana. Louisiana was known for being multiracial and having one of the highest interracial populations of both Indian and African admixtures (particularly pre-statehood).¹³ Paradoxically, this state has suffered from a distinct preoccupation with racial stratification since the Louisiana Purchase and in particular after Jim Crow. Dominguez’s text, which has become a primary source for academics, focuses on the changing nature and definition of the term *creole* (as defined by French admixtures with colonists) and its constructions of racial identity with the *gen de couleur* or black Louisiana Creoles by using state and civil law cases and state record-keeping systems.¹⁴ She concludes that in the case of the Louisiana racial divide, that Louisianans “manipulate their and other peoples identities by playing with available labels, subject to their current meanings.”¹⁵ That is to say that racial construction, the fine line between how white or black one is, is subject to how close the current histories and philosophies of the time are to current sociopolitical constructions, fears, or policies held in vogue. What makes the white/black binary so problematic is that it leaves no space for Indianness; it does not allow for a mutable or new space for “redness.” This is particularly problematic when we attempt to define Creole identity. Any Indian admixture with African (black) or European (white) becomes the deciding factor further supported with the white/black binary phenotype and pigment stereotypes.

There is no one image of Indian people. For centuries Natives have been intertribal and interracial; the assumption of race based on physical

appearance or phenotype is outdated. "In reality Indian people exhibit the physical variation typical of any population with skin colors ranging from dark to light, hair from black to blond and straight to kinky."¹⁶ What is decidedly absent in Dominquez's work on Louisiana Creoles is the presence of Indian blood, most likely due to preconceived notions of physical appearance.¹⁷ Louisiana's history of racial mixing has given rise to specific indigenous-descended communities. There has been much confusion over defining the Creole community of Louisiana, especially in relation to the later French European populations, and other "mestizo" or creolized/mixed-blood populations. In *Louisiana Creoles: Cultural Recovery and Mixed-Race Native American Identity*, Andrew Jolivet takes on the task of defining Creole identity as it specifically relates to American Indian descent and inheritance. According to the Creole heritage center in Louisiana, Louisiana Creoles are defined as peoples of mixed American Indian, African (Black/West Indies), French, and Spanish ancestry who reside in or have familial ties to Louisiana.¹⁸ Further complicating the scenario are the children of Louisiana Creoles and Louisiana Indians. Jolivet asserts that influences of Jim Crow allowed a fear of black "taint of the tar brush" mentality to "disenfranchise" generations of Creole-Indians. Louisiana Creoles as mixed-bloods were threatening; Creole-Indians, people with ties to both the mixed-blood Creole community and Indian community, were even more of a threat.¹⁹ Rather than support the white/black binary beginning with Jim Crow and continuing to the mid-twentieth century, Jolivet uses familial and community definitions of Creoleness that are founded on their roots within an indigenous Louisiana Gulf south by indigenous blood, land, and kin ties.

Moving or removing blackness and asserting either whiteness or Indianness, as a result of lingering ramifications over government policy, is a theme in many mixed-blood writings and family histories and is evidenced in conflicted historic documents. White passing, for Indians and Louisiana Creoles, has afforded some people of mixed race the ability to escape the worst aspects of racism, even if they are not fully included into white communities. Issues of passing and/or racial shame are found within my own family history and with such prominent mixed-blood writers as W. S. Penn and Alison Hedge Coke. In his introduction, Andrew Jolivet addresses the "passing" of his father's own Louisiana Creole and Indian family, stating that many of them passed as white up until the late 1980s and early 1990s.²⁰ There is and was a generation left in limbo by parents who either had to pass outside their homes and communities for survival or, conversely, who were labeled as black without recognition for their Indian or white inheritance. Jolivet argues that Louisiana Creoles (and I would add other mixed-bloods) "who passed for white during the 1920–1940 period (in family/community/birth records) were really forced to do so."²¹ The racial disenfranchisement of Indians and blacks, not to mention policies favoring Removal, Jim Crow, and racism, placed many mixed-blood and red-black peoples in delicate positions.

The years and histories of racial mixing have led Louisiana Creoles to form a specific culture that combines blood, kin, and historic and geographic ties to Louisiana Indian communities, including Louisiana Choctaws, Houmas,

Chitimachas, Tunica-Biloxi, and Koasatis. The result is a racial weaving, a distinct indigenous-based and -descended culture that is neither white nor black nor strictly Indian. Like the Canadian *métis*, it is based in a specific region, with French-language extraction and intermarriage among French and Indians, as well as other races. The Louisiana Creoles are geographically and culturally based (or have familial ties to) the Louisiana Gulf, combining indigenous blood, kin, and geographic ties in Louisiana with European (French and Spanish) and African bloodlines and culture. Historically the French language has been the base language from which Creole French (and Cajun French) is derived; the language reflects influence from indigenous and African cultures. Louisiana was both a French and Spanish colony, and many early settlers were of mixed French Indian and/or Spanish Indian ancestry, a phenomenon not unlike that which occurred in the Canadian great lakes and Red River Valley. It should be noted that historically the words *mestizo* (Spanish) and *métis* (French) are and have been used to refer to the offspring of Europeans and Indians within Louisiana. Jennifer S. H. Brown and Jacqueline Peterson, in their work on the Métis/*métis* of Canada caution the use of the word, as there are strong language and geographic ties.²² They also suggest that a broader use of the term is the result of historic pasts and geographic implications of French and Indian mixings.²³ The historic mixing of French language and culture with Indian, African, and later Spanish influence gave rise to Creole culture. Despite the later Spanish presence, the primary language for Louisiana Creoles, and in use among many Natives in Louisiana including Houmas and Choctaws, is Creole French (or Cajun French). The result is a *métis*. The word *métis* is rooted in Greek and means to craft a new indigenously based people, a *métis* or mestizo people, Creole peoples. This intercultural crafting or weaving, the sharing of mixed-race culture and blood, is apparent in the language, food, music, and basketry.

Story 2

I always envy the skills with which traditional artisans tell histories and stories. Indigenous artisans and craftsmen use their art in a way that negotiates colonization, moving from shell and quill to beadwork and reclaiming traditions with new artistic materials. I admire how a single carving, or weaving, tells not only where the item comes from, but also a history of the maker, and therefore a people. The survival and modifications made to endure. Native people adapted, resisted and negotiated, were not swallowed up by the western systems of indoctrination; rather, we learned to modify and navigate their waters. Art ways that went to sleep, woke up, and returned, and while most people no longer harvest cane with tools of river cane and bone, they still make split river-cane baskets and pine needle baskets. These materials meet and mingle, roll about shared histories; pine needle and cane meets sweetgrass and weaves together narratives of shared Indian and Creole histories.

The first weavings I made were mats made of palm fronds or cattails. The palms would soak, and we wove them; the cattails soaked even longer, because stripping them without proper soaking caused some nasty itching.

I remember one time, not long ago, during a gathering feast, we ran out of plates around the cook fire. My sister sat down and began weaving plates out of cornhusks and thick grasses. I thought, she will keep this tradition our father's people had for weaving, and though far from the south, she will keep this tradition, alongside her beading and her dancing.

The first basket I made was a pine needle basket. It was so small and lopsided it resembled a misshapen thimble. My basket making has yet to achieve the skill of my ribbon work, my drawing, or the ease of my poetry. In fact, I started a basket two years ago and have yet to finish. But I remember how to move my hands. And on my wrist I have three fires tattooed: one fire for my Mvskogean blood, one for my mother's Siouan blood, and one for my other indigenous blood . . . the unrecognized *métis* of Louisiana Creole. Three is a sacred number for us. We need three to weave . . . and I will finish my basket.

BASKET WEAVING: NATURAL MATERIALS AND RACIAL INHERITANCE

The act of creating text is story building; it builds and adds onto Indian narrative tradition.²⁴ Julie Cruikshank claims that “storytelling may be a universal human activity, but the concepts communicated in stories depends on close attention to local metaphor and local narrative conventions.”²⁵ In the art of basketry, these “local metaphor” and “narrative conventions” depend on geography, tribal affiliation, family inheritance, and natural materials to create and tell a story and to talk cross-culturally from one basket and basket maker to another. “Baskets can speak for a culture. Changes in basketry tradition, like changes in language, have meaning, for they reflect cultural change.”²⁶ Stories we see in, for example, a pine needle and sweetgrass basket made by a Creole basket maker, call on the viewer to become an active participant in the story. Reading the basket calls into history the narrative of the geographic story and racial weaving of Creole experience and identity as indigenous-descended peoples, hence coming to see the use and placement of the indigenous materials in a new way. Its story is connected yet is totally its own, separate from the story of a pine needle basket made by a Koasati Indian. The process of creating and viewing material culture and basketry is kinetic; it is active, not static; it requires movement and making processes on both the maker and the “reader.” What I mean by this process is that makers are precise; their movements are a calculated time worked and practiced, from generation to generation, by gathering, processing, and weaving materials in set patterns that tell of both geographic and cultural inheritance. Weaving is active. As viewers we should read the baskets actively, seeking to view the historic cultural and geographic inheritance behind the materials and patterns that the weaver/maker has selected in creating the basket. This means that reading or viewing a basket is not static; it requires thought and research, implementing knowledge making and learning practices—not the solitary viewing and dismissing of an object but rather placing the basket within a greater context that addresses a historic cultural dialogue within a set geographic space.

Baskets speak. They speak of the lands, materials, their makers, what they do, traditions, and who came together to help teach the makers the ways in

which to construct these baskets. Baskets tell stories. Basket weavers blend cultural tradition with a knowledge of the natural world that is both extensive and intimate. "A traditional basket embodies carefully selected materials taken from the local environment, including specific vegetal elements . . . or mineral (pigments or oxides) components, all combined with technical skills and aesthetic sensibilities passed from generation to generation. The result is a distinctive cultural product that will not be exactly duplicated by any other people in any other place."²⁷ Baskets tell stories, they hold histories, they are a form of text that incorporates tribalography, which pulls together all elements of a storyteller's tribe, land, and culture and holds within them materials of the people, of the geographic place and setting of those materials, and of the makers.²⁸ As kinetic active listeners to the baskets we need to listen to the multiplicities in the storytelling of these baskets.

The materials for basket making most prevalent among Louisiana tribal groups—including the Choctaws, Chitimacha, and Koasati—are mosses, pine needles, palm fronds and leaves, wire grass, sweetgrass, and river cane.²⁹ Archaeological evidence of basketry more than eight thousand years old is found within the Red River Valley of Louisiana.³⁰ Boiled walnuts yield black or brownish black pigment, boiled cane and sassafras root yield reddish orange, and dandelion can make yellow. The Tunica-Biloxi of Louisiana and other tribes are known to use maple bark to make yellow pigment.³¹ One of the most prolific and heralded river-cane basket-making tribes of the Southeast is the Chitimacha of Southern Louisiana. Located in Charenton (St. Mary Parish), Louisiana, the Chitimacha are heralded for their retention of weaving tradition and basket durability along with a double weaving style.

Chitimacha basketry has been collected and studied since the turn of the nineteenth century. Because the Chitimacha are the most well-known basket makers of Louisiana and have retained a number of traditional pattern names, we will begin our basketry reading by using Chitimacha river-cane baskets as a template to understanding Choctaw, Koasati, and Creole basket patterns. In examining some patterns and materials we see how these patterns manifest in both the Indian and Creole communities, exploring the ways in which geography and intermarriage have imprinted baskets across both Indian and Creole communities.

Common patterns pervade basketry; these motifs sometimes move from basketry to pottery to ribbon work and beadwork between southeastern Louisianan tribes and into the Creole communities of Louisiana.³² Basket-specific patterns include Alligator Entrails, which is used specifically among the Chitimacha most likely for the complexity of its weaving, symbolism, and presence both geographically and within Chitimacha narrative. The pattern consists of an initial rectangle that is continued by a linked series of open-ended rectangles; this portion of the design has equally spaced dark diamonds peeking through the lighter color base design of the connected rectangles. A common pattern, the diamond with the dot in the center, is known as Blackbird's Eye, which is either a weave of light or dark cane formed in the shape of a diamond with a contrasting light or dark dot in the center of the diamond.³³ The other most prominent pattern that almost always

accompanies major patterns as a leitmotif is that of Broken Braids, which is an angular weave reminiscent of twisted rope or a braid of hair made with only two strands. Other geometric shapes such as the triangle, diamond, and cross patterns prevalent in Mvskogean (Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole) regalia are often found in Choctaw, Chitimacha, and Koasati basketry. These patterns reappear in basketry throughout the area; the Broken Braids, Blackbird's Eye, and geometric patterns are common in Choctaw, Houma, and Chitimacha basketry. Likewise, it is important to note that Creole baskets made of split river cane often exhibit similar dyeing techniques, along with Broken Braids, Blackbird's Eye, and Mvskogean geometric patterns. Furthermore, the latter three are used by specific tribes, made of specific materials, and dyed using specific processes. These patterns, dyes, and processes help link tribes, families, intermarriage, and geography in dialogues between Indian and Creole communities that show shared processes of basket making as inherited cultural practices and pattern uses in southern indigenous-descended communities. Moving beyond comparative patterns, materials, and processes to oral narratives and the sharing of familial experience will be the next step in this ongoing academic, yet personal, research project, promoting the understanding of the relationship between Louisiana Indian and Louisiana Creoles as separate but related indigenous communities.

Although many basket collectors and museums consider Chitimacha river-cane basketry highly collectible, Choctaw river-cane baskets are becoming equally collected and sold nationwide. Louisiana Choctaws (including the Jena and Clifton Bands of Louisiana Choctaw) are prolific basket makers, reviving the art across the Choctaw diaspora.³⁴ There has also been a notable increase of interest in pine needle basketry as it has been highlighted in many Louisiana folklife art festivals since the 1990s. Pine needle basketry is another art form where we see cross-cultural speaking, or a sharing of cultural materials, from Southeast Indian cultures (Koasati pine needle basketry) to Creole basket making (Creole sweetgrass baskets). The Koasati, a Mvskogean tribe, are located primarily in Elton (Allen Parish), Louisiana. Koasati basketry is known for its use of pine needles and wire grass, although wire grass is harder to find these days.³⁵ Pine needles are soaked in room-temperature water and then woven by using raffia or sinew in a sewing action. The same process is used with bayou mosses, although the moss is not soaked but kept damp. Creole basket makers also use these materials in much the same manner, often combining these pine needles with sweetgrass. Creole basket makers have been using sweetgrass to make baskets for generations, an activity traced to African lineage. In recent decades more Koasati and Choctaw baskets show evidence of the use of sweetgrass, while Louisiana Creole baskets show evidence of a mix of sweetgrass with pine needles, moss, and split cane.

Moss, pine needle, and sweetgrass baskets are found cross-tribally and within the Creole community. The materials are harvested and processed in similar ways. Patterns that emerge in Creole basketry often reflect Louisiana Indian patterns, including Broken Braids, Blackbird's Eye, and the stylized diamond and triangle patterns of the Southeast. I would like to suggest that kin ties, intermarriage, and culture exchange resulting from blending

bloodlines reflect the similarities in the choices and processes of natural resources and basket patterns. The similarities found among materials, collection processes, and weaving patterns are suggestive of culture sharing among peoples for whom basketry is not only a tribal but also a family tradition (including specific patterns and material processing). In doing so we also learn to understand the effects of modernity on geography and natural materials. It is time we listen to both the stories these objects and these communities tell; we should look to them as viable histories of survival.

This recognition of inheritance and permeability of cultural exchange is found when we look to the stories baskets tell within the Louisiana folk arts community. At the yearly Louisiana Folklife Festival, Louisiana Indian and Creole sweetgrass, pine needle, and split-cane baskets are exhibited side by side on display tables along with other admixtures discussed in this article.³⁶ The Louisiana Folklife Program seeks “to assist even more communities to document more thoroughly their folk traditions and to empower those communities that have not yet made such efforts to document their unique folk cultures.”³⁷ Many “little races,” “tri-racial isolate,” or mixed-blood peoples (referring for example to Louisiana Creoles, Cajuns, Cajun Creoles, and Redbones), as they were once called, are more actively exploring and embracing their Indian heritage and culture ways, as evidenced in recent pleadings for separate racial designations. Likewise, many prominent Indian authors and musicians are acknowledging their African ancestry. Indianness is ever more complicated. At the annual Louisiana Folklife Festival the majority of crafts and artways displayed are of Indian, Creole, or black origin. The interrelationships of African American, Creole, and Southeast Indians have had lasting effects, which not only manifest in material culture but also in civil rights and government dealings with Indians and mixed-blood/métis/mestizo peoples.

The increased interest and living-story process of basket making in Louisiana was the focus of “The First Gathering of Southeastern Indian Basketweavers” in May 2002 at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, Louisiana. Dr. Dayna Bowker Lee (Louisiana Regional Folk Life Program), Dr. H. F. Pete Gregory (Department of Social Sciences), and the Williamson Museum coordinated the event. This endeavor brought weavers and tribal administrators from throughout Louisiana and other southern states together to speak about ways that communities might preserve traditional basketry. “It also gave the artisans an opportunity to exchange ideas, to reconnect with old friends, and to make new ones.”³⁸ The Louisiana Regional Folk Life Program runs in conjunction with state universities and is participating in a movie and photo project to document the art of Choctaw split-cane basketry in Louisiana with the Jena Band of Choctaw.

WEAVING BRACKISH BAYOU BLOOD

“Baskets can speak for a culture. Changes in basketry tradition, like changes in language, have meaning, for they reflect cultural change.”³⁹ In the art of basketry, these “local metaphor” and “narrative conventions” depend on

geography, tribal affiliation, family narrative, and natural materials to create and tell a story and to talk cross-culturally from one basket and basket maker to another. Material cultures and oral narratives speak of Louisiana Indian and Louisiana Creole histories not in the written record. When the state of Louisiana was hit by Hurricane Katrina and later Hurricane Rita, vital records and historic documents were flooded, damaged with mold, and lost to the violent wind and water. Although these records are important and have a multilayered history, they do not tell the only history of Louisiana. The devastation that has impacted Louisiana communities, in particular Creole and Indian communities, makes historic oral narratives and material culture vitally important as we seek to preserve our histories as Indians, Louisiana Creoles, and uniquely mixed-blood people from Louisiana.

I would like to suggest the possibility that Louisiana Creoles as an indigenous people defined as *métis/mestizo* can be better understood by using material culture and oral narratives as a voice, a history for the ways in which we examine and define indigenous interrelationships between Louisiana Creoles and Louisiana Indians. Louisiana Creoles, a people not Indian, not white, but indigenously separate; a people not politically sovereign but culturally defined by their descent through blood and continued culture ties to their land and indigenous heritage within Louisiana. By continuing this work from both personal and academic standpoints, and by moving beyond comparative basket patterns, materials, and making processes to oral narratives and sharing of familial inheritance, I hope eventually to continue and initiate a dialogue that promotes an understanding of the relationship between Louisiana Indian and Louisiana Creoles as separate but related indigenous communities. In doing so the written history of Louisiana becomes a richer, more complicated tapestry; the lost narratives, whether lost to natural disasters past or future or lost by the policies of the state or federal government, are challenged by voices, communities, and texts that tell stories outside the alphanumeric written record.

Story 3

Read me like brail, keyloided Red/Black. Map of river deltas, words with no sound; the topography of my flesh. I am made of gulf water, seasalt, brackish bayou blood—Flowed into the delta where my mother danced jigs on buffalo hunted high plains.

—L. Rain Cranford-Gomez, "Topography"⁴⁰

I was born to poor parents. My dad was a welder and ex-Navy man who was going to school on the G.I. Bill and mom was a part-time teacher's assistant in a preschool. My parents sacrificed so my sister and I could have. We lived on a poor side of town, in a house complete with cockroaches no amount of cleaning or pesticide could get rid of, with fishing as our primary means of sustenance. I was surrounded by many races of people: black, white, Indian, latino, Asian and every mix in between. As a multiracial person I was at home in this environment. I never realized we were poor; I never saw us as racially inferior. As a child on the Gulf of Mexico, my family and I lived mainly off the

ocean, rising early in the morning to catch mullet and sheepshead. Even at the age of five I worked as part of a unit, a team: my dad casting his net from the jetty, me carrying the heads from the fish he cleaned in a plastic beach bucket down to my mother, who would wade in the shallows using the heads as bait to catch crabs. My baby sister would be placed in an inner tube tied around mom's waist. We worked together. This memory stays with me in my academic career and influences how I approach not only my responsibility to my work, but the foundations of my intellectual inquiries.

As a woman of Mvskogean and Creole descent, I feel a responsibility to acknowledge the histories of oppression and survival that brought about both the unique blending of cultures and silences in the written historic record. Louisiana's wetlands are a vital ecosystem; the delicate balance of seawater and fresh water that make the brackish water is a gentle weaving of nature. And like this weaving that houses specific habitats and shelters animals, Louisiana gives rise to a weaving of culture only it can claim and sustain, within its uniquely interracial history. We are tied to those waters, pushed from the oceans our ancestors fished into the deltas; onto the banks we rise, salt in our blood, neither fresh nor seawater, but bayou brackish waters, and no matter how far our fathers travel, we or our children travel, there is bayou in the blood. We, like all indigenous peoples, are part of the land.

NOTES

1. L. Rain Cranford-Gomez, "Old Crowdad the Fisherman," *To Topos Poetry International: Ahani: Indigenous American Poetry*, vol. 9 (Corvallis, OR: Poetry Enterprises, 2007), 288.

2. There is both a social and historical difference between *Métis communities* capitalized and *métis communities* lowercased. This difference is differentiated by use of the capital "M" versus the lowercase "m" when writing about Metis/métis communities and peoples. A deeper explanation of these related but separate communities follows in this article.

3. Julie Cruikshank, "Oral Tradition and Material Culture: Multiplying Meanings of 'Words' and 'Things'," *Anthropology Today* 8, no. 3 (June 1992): 5.

4. L. Rain Cranford-Gomez, "The Cast Net," *Smoked Mullet and Cornbread for a Bayou Be'be': Collected Poems* (forthcoming).

5. For more information on the complexities of race in regards to Cajuns, Creoles, and Indians in the Gulf south please see Sylvie Dubois and Barbrea M. Horvath, "Creoles and Cajuns: A Portrait in Black and White," in *American Speech* 78 (Summer 2003): 192-207; Patricia Waak, *My Bones Are Red: A Spiritual Journey with a Triracial People in the Americas* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005); Carl A. Brasseaux, *Creoles of Color in Bayou Country* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1996); Jacqueline Matte, *They Say the Wind Is Red: The Alabama Choctaw-Lost in Their Own Land* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Press, 2002). The story/history of passing white, persecution, and violence is not a story particular to my father's family but rather a common narrative among metis/mestizo races in the American South.

6. Louisiana has a problematic history of racial stratification, one played out by conflicting census, familial, and church records. Father George Herbert wrote on

the early families, settlements, and stratification in southwest Louisiana. His research has been used as a starting point for both genealogical and early census record taking. Herbert's work has since been both cited and responded to by contemporary mixed-race academics.

7. Ancestors/relations have been documented as Choctaw and Creek, as well as "Creole family" in genealogical records. Some family members have been listed as white or as "mulatto in servitude" in census and conversely listed as "baptismal of an Indian" in church records.

8. Susan Applegate Krouse, "Kinship and Identity: Mixed Bloods in Urban Indian Communities," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 23, no. 2 (1999): 74.

9. There have been several book and article narratives addressing the racial names and categorization of mixed-race persons as "tri-racial isolates" or "little races." For more information or introductory study please see A. R. Dunlap and C. A. Weslager, "Trends in the Naming of Tri-Racial Mixed-Blood Groups in the Eastern United States," *American Speech* 22, no. 2 (April 1947): 81-87; Brewton Berry, *Almost White: A Study of Certain Racial Hybrids in the Eastern United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1963).

10. Pauline Strong and Varrick Van Winkle, "'Indian Blood': Reflections on the Reckoning and Refiguring of Native North American Identity," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 4 (1995): 565.

11. Naomi Zack, *Race and Mixed Race* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 22-25.

12. *Ibid.*, 11.

13. See Daniel Usner, *Settlers and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992) and Gwendolyn Mildred Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1992).

14. *Gens de couleur* is French for "people of color," also seen as *gens de couleur libres* or "free people of color." The term began in Haiti and was later imported to Louisiana. The *gens de couleur* in Louisiana incorporated the offspring of French men (or Spanish men) and black slave women and later referenced the descendants of these couplings as well as offspring from French/Spanish men and Creole or mulatto/quadroon women kept in *plaçage*. *Plaçage* was a form of commitment somewhere between common law marriage and the keeping of a mistress. The children were often educated overseas, were provided for, and kept a social status and lifestyle in a manner above the "pure" black or Indian. Please see Sybil Kein, *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2000).

15. Virginia R. Dominguez, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 265.

16. Krouse, "Kinship and Identity," 77.

17. In her text *White by Definition*, Virginia Dominquez does not directly address a discussion of Indianness within Creole identity. She does, however, mention that some Louisiana Creoles in Louisiana or mixed-race/tri-racial isolates (referred to as "little races") and other "so-called Indians" of the region, referring to specific mixed-bloods such as the Redbones and the Houmas, saying that they "claim Indian" blood and heritage (204). The latter of which is now a state-recognized tribe. If mixed-race indigenous peoples such as Louisiana Creoles are seen only in binary opposition as white/black it negates culture and understanding other multiethnic mixed-bloods

with indigenous culture ways (see Andrew Jolivet, *Louisiana Creoles: Cultural Recovery and Mixed-Race Native American Identity* [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007], 99).

18. Andrew Jolivet, *Louisiana Creoles*, 6.

19. *Ibid.*, 96.

20. *Ibid.*, 1.

21. *Ibid.*, 66–67.

22. There is a difference in Métis/métis designation historically. The word *Métis* with a capital “M” denotes particular sociocultural heritage and an ethnic self-identification that is not only racially based but also is tied to specific historic Métis communities, primarily (usually) the government-recognized communities originating in the Red River Valley. The word *métis* with a lowercase “m” denotes those who are of mixed First Nation and other ancestry and is usually a racial definition. However, descendants who can show métis/First Nation script (land grants or money during land negotiations with Aboriginal peoples) are sometimes tied to specific First Nation and/or métis communities.

23. Jennifer S. H. Brown and Jacqueline Peterson, *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1992), 5.

24. Here I would like to remind readers that text is anything created/authored we can read and make meaning from, be it written, visual art, or material culture.

25. Julie Cruikshank, “Oral History,” 4.

26. William A. Turnbaugh and Sarah Peabody Turnbaugh, *Basket Tales of the Grandmothers: American Indian Baskets in Myth and Legend* (Peace Dale, RI: Thornbrook Publishing, 1999), 3.

27. *Ibid.*, 51.

28. See LeAnne Howe’s definitions and discussion of tribalography in “The Story of America: A Tribalography,” in *Clearing a Path: Theorizing the Past in Native American Studies*, ed. Nancy Shoemaker (New York: Routledge, 2001), 42.

29. American river cane belongs to the bamboo family and was used throughout the Southeast by indigenous peoples. River cane was used for hunting tools and for making baskets, dwellings, mats, knives, and blowguns. It is and was a natural resource primary to the livelihood and culture of Gulf Coast and southeastern Indian peoples. Due to environment encroachment and development, river-cane breaks are harder to come by.

30. Ashley J. Sibley Jr., *Louisiana’s Ancients of Man: A Study of Changing Characteristics of Louisiana Indian Cultures* (Baton Rouge, LA: Claitor’s Publishing, 1967), 110.

31. Turnbaugh and Turnbaugh, *Basket Tales of the Grandmothers*, 61.

32. In the writing of this article I had hoped to include illustrations from basket patterns. Unfortunately due to unforeseen circumstances, I was unable to finish permissions or my own charcoal illustrations. I have attempted to describe the patterns as best as possible. I use visuals in my discussions and presentations and am working on a set of artists and photographic sketches for the larger project from which this article is drawn. Readers can access a number of the baskets that illustrate the patterns discussed in this article by using the Louisiana Folk Life Web site or the Ashley Sibley text (see n. 30).

33. Sibley, *Louisiana’s Ancients of Man*, 186.

34. For more information on the general history and evolution of Choctaws in the state of Louisiana, including the state and federally recognized Clifton and Jena

bands, as well as more diasporic Choctaws in Louisiana, please see Fred B. Kniffen, Hiram F. Gregory, and George A. Stokes, *The Historic Indian Tribes of Louisiana from 1542 to the Present* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

35. Louisiana Folk Life, <http://www.louisianafolklife.org/FOLKLIFEimagebase/> (accessed 15 November 2007).

36. Split-cane/sweetgrass admixture is a basket combining both materials and is a dual medium that is found commonly in Creole communities in the nineteenth century through the Common Era. It is also seen with increasing frequency in Louisiana Indian communities such as the Houma and Choctaw.

37. Louisiana Folk Life, <http://www.louisianafolklife.org/FOLKLIFEimagebase/> (accessed 15 November 2007).

38. Ibid.

39. Turnbaugh and Turnbaugh, *Basket Tales of the Grandmothers*, 3.

40. L. Rain Cranford-Gomez, "Topography," *Smoked Mullet and Cornbread for a Bayou Be`be`*: *Collected Poems* (forthcoming).