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Ethnicity in the Nineteenth-Century Louisianian Novel

How can we define ethnicity? Strictly speaking, the word “ethnicity” is not included in the *Trésor de la langue française* published in the nineteenth century by the Institut National de la langue française. The concept was first introduced by Georges Vacher de Lapouge in 1896 in order to distinguish ethnicity from race. He defined an ethnic group as a population with a racial basis that remained unchanged despite linguistic changes or demographic splits. In France at the end of the nineteenth century, the term *ethnie* was used in the context of European domination to refer to all people outside the “European race.” But in contrast to the United States, where the concept of ethnicity is commonly accepted, it remains problematic in France, a nation that extolls the republican values of *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*.

In a census survey of the Franco-American population in the 1980s, the instructions alongside the question “What is this person’s heritage?” specified that “ethnicity (or heritage) can be taken to mean a person’s national group, ‘lineage,’ or the country where he/she or his/her parents or more distant ancestors were born before coming to the United States.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Theoretically, therefore, an individual may have several different ethnicities and claim membership of several different ethnic groups based on identification with various criteria including culture, history, nationality, or language. This essay will examine four literary texts set in nineteenth-century Louisiana in order to understand how the concept of ethnicity operates in each of them. Some of the works chosen are by Louisianian authors while others are by French authors and provide a representation of Louisiana society as seen from the outside. As Mathé Allain emphasizes in his introduction to *l’Anthologie de la littérature louisianaise d’expression française de 1682 à nos jours*, Louisianian literature is above all “a repositioning of European values in a new environment.”

The first of our texts, Chateaubriand’s *Atala*, is an example of a European representation of nineteenth-century Louisianian society. Chateaubriand never actually crossed the Mississippi, and his fictional portrayal of Louisianian society blends material borrowed from numerous accounts with a desire to glorify Christianity. The novel, published in 1802, tells the story of Chactas, a Native American brought up as a European, who falls in love with Atala, a young Native American woman of mixed Native and Spanish ancestry. Atala’s mother had converted to Christianity and raised her daughter as a Christian. Chactas, who wants to reconnect with his ethnic heritage, decides to live like “un sauvage.” The love between Chactas and Atala is ultimately doomed because of a religious vow the young woman had made to her mother. The two characters meet Père Aubry, a hermit priest who has founded a peaceful, utopian community of Native American converts, and who plays an important role in the growth of Chactas’s new faith. The novel ends with Atala’s suicide and the murder of Chactas and his family by whites, while Père Aubry and his flock are killed by Cherokees. Although Chateaubriand’s novel is primarily a depiction of a utopian society seen through the prism of Christianity, it also addresses several issues relating to ethnicity. In his desire to reconnect with a life outside civilization, Chactas claims membership of a culture with which he is unfamiliar but in which he recognizes himself. The contours of that culture are only vaguely defined, but Chateaubriand tries hard to portray his characters’ hybrid ethnicities, all of which have been transformed in some way by the arrival of Europeans: Chactas was raised as a European, Atala is the daughter of a Spaniard and a Native American woman, and Père Aubry, who decides to live among the Native Americans in order to convert them to Christianity, is also affected by this transformation in that his death is part of the history of the genocide of the Native Americans. Mathé Allain argues that Louisianian literature, which is above all the expression of European values transposed to a new environment, “reveals neither the indigenous mentality nor a blend of cultures.”[[2]](#footnote-2) On that basis, should the concept of ethnicity in *Atala* be seen as strictly symbolic? Regardless, it is important not to overlook Chateaubriand’s attempt to give the Native Americans an ethnic identity, even if the identity he described was not necessarily an accurate representation of reality.

Camille Lebrun’s novel *Amitié et dévouement*, published in 1845, presents a separatist vision of the relationship between blacks and whites. Like Chateaubriand, Lebrun never went to Louisiana. A prolific author of books aimed at children, she primarily wrote adventure novels for young Catholic girls. *Amitié et dévouement* narrates the friendship between two young girls, Hortense and Valentine, who have recently returned to Louisiana from Europe after a long absence. Over the course of a series of unpleasant incidents, Valentine learns of her true heritage: she is mixed-race. Nevertheless, friendship and love triumph in the end. Valentine marries Hortense’s brother and returns to Europe to live in a more tolerant society. Lebrun’s novel aims to represent all the ethnic groups in nineteenth-century Louisiana: black, white, creole, and mixed-race. Nevertheless, the story is more interested in the concept of race, which is explored through Valentine, than that of ethnicity. Race is used here in the sense it most commonly had throughout the nineteenth century, when it referred to skin color. Despite being mixed-race, Valentine is seen predominantly as black and thus ostracized from separatist white society. Valentine, who is unaware of her own heritage and was raised in France, cannot identify with a group whose culture is unfamiliar to her. Louisianian society places great importance on her ethnic background, and she finds out about her racial ethnicity from others. According to JL Amselle’s proposed definition, ethnicity can be defined as a form of awareness of belonging to the same group based on criteria like language, dress, values, geographical area, name, or ancestry. Lebrun’s novel illustrates the complexity of ethnic identity: Valentine feels an attachment to Louisiana—despite not understanding its social codes—but grew up in France, a country that does not officially recognize the concept of ethnicity.

Victor Séjour’s *Le Mulâtre*, published in 1837, presents an even more clear-cut view of racial ethnicity. Alfred, a white planter in Louisiana, is the secret father of Georges, a young mixed-race man. Georges was conceived after Alfred forced Laïsa, a young mixed-race woman, to become his mistress. Alfred now lusts after his son’s wife, Zélie, who rejects him. Alfred has her executed out of anger and spite and Georges runs away to join a secret Maroon community.[[3]](#footnote-3) Several years later, after Alfred has married and had a child, Georges takes revenge. He poisons Alfred’s wife and then murders him with an axe. Before he dies, Alfred manages to tell Georges that he is his father. Overcome by shock, Georges kills himself. *Le Mulâtre* deals with questions of racial ethnicity in the context of slavery and in an environment dominated by the universe of the plantation. In contrast to Chateaubriand, who portrays a world where different ethnic groups coexist, Séjour depicts a world of irreconcilable differences between two ethnic groups defined by race: white and black. Georges’s special position as a young mixed-race man and the son of a plantation owner does not give him any kind of privileged status within the slavery system. His story differs in that respect from that of Valentine in *Amitié et dévouement*: although she does suffer segregation, she is tolerated to a certain extent and is able to choose her own ethnicity at the end of the novel. Georges temporarily joins a different social group that lives according to its own rules when he goes to live with the Maroons, but he remains a prisoner of his identity as a slave.

Alfred Mercier’s *L’habitation Saint-Ybars* is undoubtedly the only novel in which we can glimpse the outlines of a multiethnic society. Pélasge, a young white man from Europe, is employed in the Saint-Ybars household as a tutor to the young Démon. Various romantic intrigues develop: Nogolka, a young female tutor, loves Pélasge but is desired by the master of Saint-Ybars; the Duc de Lauzen, a mixed-race former slave, harasses Titia, a young slave girl; and Pélasge himself falls in love with Chant-d’oisel, the daughter of the master. Démon is sent to Europe to finish his education and escape the violence of the master of Saint-Ybars. Years later, he returns to Louisiana after the Civil War and discovers a changed country and a family decimated by death and war. Démon falls in love with Blanchette, but their love is doomed because she is mixed-race. Death strikes the family once more: Chant-d’Oisel dies of a disease, Démon and Blanchette commit suicide, and Pélasge is left alone. Hope is reborn right at the end when Pélasge receives an invitation from Nogolka and her husband to go to Europe and defend his ideals by becoming a writer. Mercier’s story, which depicts a mosaic of ethnic groups living alongside one another, is a far cry from Victor Séjour’s separatist vision of plantation life. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that Mercier wrote his novel in 1881, after the abolition of slavery. This is undoubtedly the novel that features creole linguistic heritage most prominently: slaves and masters—particularly Démon—share the same linguistic ethnicity, in other words a language-based source of cohesion in the face of a rapid assimilation process that privileged the English language over French. In Mercier’s view, there are certain cultural convergences between whites and blacks, and so also a common heritage. The Native Americans, on the other hand, are portrayed as an ethnic group that is on the decline, almost destined to disappear. The evolution of the plot emphasizes the Americanization of Louisiana society after the Civil War and the loss of identity that accompanied it. This is particularly clear in the figure of Duc de Lauzun, who claims to have forgotten French and to be able to speak only English. *L’habitation Saint-Ybars* expresses Mercier’s fear of a society where one culture supplants another and is thereby assimilated.

In conclusion, these literary representations show that historical events have shaped the identities of Louisiana’s various ethnic groups, and that these identities were fluid even through ethnic groups were still primarily defined in racial terms in nineteenth century American discourse. The Civil War and then Americanization blurred the boundaries between whites and blacks. Although the sale of Louisiana did not give rise to a fully multiracial society, the new historical and social circumstances did manage to create a sense of identity and belonging that was based around the French language rather than racial criteria. The originality of Louisianian literature—neither fully French nor fully American—lies precisely in its expression of the hybrid ethnicity of Louisiana.

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2. Allain, Mathé. “Introduction.” *Anthologie de la littérature louisianaise d’expression française de 1682 à nos jours*, edited by Mathé Allain et al. Editions Prise de Parole, University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Maroon” was the term used to refer to fugitive slaves who escaped from their plantation masters and took refuge in a secluded, inaccessible place. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)