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Synopsis

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*, which was 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. Discourse on the concept of ethnicity developed predominantly in the United States; in France, a nation that extolled the republican values of “Liberté, égalité, fraternité,” it remained an unknown subject. In a census survey of the Franco-American population in the 1980s, the instructions alongside the question “What is this person’s origin?” specified that “l’ethnicité (ou l’origine) peut être considérée comme le groupe national, ‘le lignage’, ou le pays dans lequel la personne ou ses parents ou ses ascendants plus éloignés étaient nés avant leur arrivée aux Etats-Unis.”[[1]](#footnote-1) An individual may, therefore, have several different ethnicities and claim membership of several different ethnic groups based on identification with a number of criteria including culture, history, nationality, or language. We will now analyze the five texts under consideration in order to understand how the concept of ethnicity operates within them.

Chateaubriand’s novel *Atala*, 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 with a Native mother and Spanish father. 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 and utopian community of Native American converts and who will play an important role in the growth of Chactas’s new faith. The novel ends with the suicide of Atala 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 ethnicity, which has been somehow mixed 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 Christianize them, is also affected by this “mixing” in that his fate is part of the history of the genocide of the Native Americans. As Mathé Allain has pointed out, Louisianian literature during the nineteenth century was “un repositionnement des valeurs européennes dans un nouvel environnement” and “ne dévoile ni la mentalité indigène, ni un mélange culturel.”[[2]](#footnote-2) On that basis, should the concept of ethnicity in *Atala* be seen as strictly symbolic? It is important not to overlook Chateaubriand’s attempt to give the Native Americans an ethnic identity, however, 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. The novel 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 of the nineteenth century: black, white, creole, and mixed-race. The story is more interested in the concept of race than that of ethnicity, however, although ethnicity is not entirely ignored. Valentine, who is unaware of her own mixed-race heritage, 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. Lebrun’s novel illustrates the complexity of ethnic identity: even through they have grown up in a country like France, whose national values refute the concept of ethnicity, the two young women have a sense of belonging to Louisianian culture.

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 mulatto. 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. Several years later, when Alfred has got married and had a child, Georges chooses that moment to take revenge. He poisons his wife and then murders Alfred 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 mulatto and 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 ethnic group that lives according to its own rules when he goes to live with the Maroons, but he remains a prisoner of his ethnic identity as 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 mulatto, 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 turns out to be 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 far 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 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 society after the Civil War and the loss of identity that went with it. This is particularly clear in the Duc de Lauzun, who claims to have forgotten French and to only be able to speak English. *L’habitation Saint-Ybars* expresses Mercier’s fear of a society where one culture supplants another and is thereby assimilated.

In *Octavia*, published in 1894, Sidonie de la Houssaye presents a vision similar to Mercier’s of a world where whites and blacks coexist. She tells the story of the relationship between Octavia, a beautiful quadroon, and Alfred. Octavia is in love with Alfred but he cruelly abandons her in favor of his cousin, who he decides to marry. When Octavia realizes that she has never truly been loved and that she has been used like a piece of jewelry, she decides to take revenge by kidnapping the couple’s infant daughter and passing her off as her own by pretending to be in labor. She raises the young Félicie, who she renames Mary, as a quadroon with dissipated morals. After much scheming, Octavia manages to make Léonce, Alfred’s son and so Mary’s real brother, fall in love with his sister. Her revenge is completed when she forces Alfred to witness the incestuous union of his own children. He kills Mary to spare her from dishonor, and Léonce goes permanently mad. In the end, Octavia manages to escape. Whites, slaves, and mixed-race individuals—under the guise of the phantasmal figure of the quadroon—are all depicted in the novel. It is the only story with a mixed-race main character who is given as much narrative space as the white characters. She is represented as a hybrid figure, both because of her mixed white and black heritage but also because of her partial integration into the social fabric of Louisiana society. Race is the only thing that distinguishes Octavia from her peers; it is clear that the notion of racial ethnicity was still predominant in 1894.

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 United States discourse. The Civil War and then American assimilation 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)