Black, White, Light, and Bright: A Narrative of Creole Color

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Abstract

Much of the world of life is made real through the symbolic application of color, shade, hue, and other features of visual meaning to the physical matter around us. This interplay of light and dark gives shape to form and place to space. This same mode also works discursively allowing forms and spaces to be recognized not only physically but culturally as representations of the social construction of reality. This paper explores this issue by seeing color both in fact and symbol in the development of the Creole cultures of New Orleans. A city steeped in multiple traditions, New Orleans is a spectrum of colors which act out the tensions of past and present. At the root is a conflict between that which is Creole and that which is not. The archaeology here is a story about this story.
Race cannot allow ambiguity, fluidity, or mixture, for it then ceases to refer to something pure, something distinct. The absolute strength of mestizaje is the power it has – by its even being able to be thought – of dissolving race and everything associated with it, ultimately dissolving even itself.

Rainier Spencer, Race and Mixed-Race: A Personal Tour

**Introduction: race and color**

The discussion of color is simultaneously at the heart of American historical archaeology and left out altogether. Without doubt archaeologies of race and racism, of cultures of alterity framed by these social issues, and the relatively new yet established sub-field of African-American Archaeology are a center of concern and productivity for the field. It goes without saying that these archaeologies are concerned with exploring the dimensions of social life driven by color and the implied social and cultural differences that existed among past people. It is also agreed that because color continues to elicit deep social significance in contemporary society that the search through archaeology for its constructions and expressions carries some extra special resonance for archaeology today.

I contend, however, that historical archaeologists have yet to reveal the depth of meaning behind color differences that their subjects, collaborators, colleagues, institutions, and living social formations represent, struggle with and against, and perhaps too quickly assume. The historical archaeology of race and racism in particular has yet to explicitly consider how race becomes identity, choosing instead to employ racial identities as givens and produce archaeologies of their expression rather than their
construction. To work against this, we must not produce archaeologies about race which assume its existence, but archaeologies that explain the material of racing and the materialities of racism (see also Orser 1998, Mullins 1999, Epperson 1999, Matthews et al n.d.).

While this perspective challenges the agenda of African-American archaeology, I find that it also offers something for all archaeologists to consider. This work asks us to look beyond blackness and whiteness (cf. Roediger 1991, Frankenberg 1993, Ignatiev 1995) to see once again, and at the same time, black and white (Dominguez 1986). In other words, we need to avoid leaping to social essence without also seeing the materiality of the color that in part represents that essence. It is notable that archaeologists are specifically trained to employ the very intellectual tools that make this effort to skirt racial essentializing easier. Archaeological interpretation is the translation of such basic material realities as color, texture, form, and location into socially and culturally meaningful statements and (if we’re as lucky as the Stanford Narratives conference hopes we are) narratives of substance. But to write ‘narratives that count’ regarding race, we also need to recognize that the potentials of an archeological discourse or perspective on racing and racism derive from the ability of everyone to turn mundane realities such as color into exotic narratives of social significance such as race; an ability, that is, of everyone, for better or worse, to act like an archaeologist.

In order to relate this work to my interpretative efforts I want to draw from the media of contemporary New Orleans a selection from the diversity of pasts which have a bearing on how I came to know the objects I recovered in excavations there. I will be relying in particular on a unique New Orleanian cultural expression known as the Mardi
Gras Indians whose self-conscious Creolization of cultural traditions provides insight into (if not clear understanding of) what race in New Orleans is.

**Racing ceramics**

The main effort of this paper is to work a small amount of Native American ceramics recovered from 18th-century sites in New Orleans into a narrative about race that counts. (Figures 1 & 2) From a diversity of “European” sites in New Orleans, excavations show that it is common to recover Native American ceramics. These artifacts are provocative because they suggest a Native American presence at these Europeans sites, however, historic records do not indicate resident Indians making possible the alternative that the ceramics were acquired through trade (Maduell 1972, Hall 1992).

Several characteristics of the ceramics support this notion. First, the proportion of Native to European ceramics is very low (Table 1). The presence of Indians living at the site would have produced higher proportions such as those found at early Spanish sites in the Caribbean and Florida where Indians were known to have lived (Table 2). The more than 15 ceramic types also varies from the pattern at Spanish sites where Native ceramics tend to be dominated by only one or two local types (e.g., Deagan 1983, King 1984, McEwan 1986, Vernon 1988, Avery 1995). This finding suggest that the likely non-Indian users of aboriginal ceramics in New Orleans were not as particular about which types of pottery they had.

These patterns may be explained by considering the local political context of French colonial New Orleans. After starting with high hopes for a new agricultural
empire along the Mississippi, French Louisiana devolved into a disorganized, poorly managed outpost (Usner 1992, Berlin 1998). The key transformation came in 1729 when the White Apple settlement was attacked and destroyed by Natchez Indians in cooperation with the village’s African slaves. All 235 settlers, or one-eighth of the European population living along the Mississippi River at the time, were killed (McGowen 1976). The attack was explained by the former colonial Governor Bienville as an effect of a new colonial policy that cut back on exchange between the French and the surrounding Native population, a policy intended to rationalize economic production in Louisiana which had since its inception been overly influenced by the Indian trade (McGowen 1976). This attempted rationalization, however, cut the Indian allies of the French out of a loop of cultural relations that had come to define politics in southeastern North America. Intercultural exchange had created and maintained allies in the Southeast since before the arrival of Europeans who then used this practice to fit into the social order even as they came to dominate it. Over time Indians came to rely on European trade goods as they vied with one another to maintain an upper hand as their world was increasingly being redefined in European terms (Usner 1992, Galloway 1995, Merrell 1989, Sider 1994). The restriction of trade by the new French authorities left the Natchez with little recourse but to attempt to eliminate the European presence in their district so as to restrict the influence of European culture on local political relations.

The effect of the 1729 massacre in New Orleans was a French cultural retreat. Citing unstable local politics, the Company of Indies who had been privately running the colony returned control to the French monarchy (Giraud 1987). The lack of confidence by the Company, however, did not inspire the royal house to invest much in their
Louisiana holding. For the next 30 years they maintained the colony solely to secure their claim to the Mississippi River, ceding it to Spain in 1763 just prior to losing the Seven-Years’ War with England. For those that lived in New Orleans this period was a time without a strong dominant authority and thus a time of mostly local control. Settlers thus revived the Indian trade both for profit and as an effort to maintain peace (McGowen 1976). Under these conditions, a new cultural order emerged in Louisiana that forged its Creole tradition.

Archaeological evidence that this era was a time of Creole emergence in Louisiana is found in a change in vessel forms in the Native produced ceramics recovered from the French settlements near Mobile, Alabama. Greg Waselkov (1991, Waselkov and Sylvia 1995) and Diane Silvia (1998) show from early-period settlements at Mobile that Native American ceramics include a good number of “copy-wares,” or ceramics that mimic European vessel forms (Figure 3). These copy-wares, however, were replaced by traditional Native vessel forms after the French decline. The ceramics from New Orleans are entirely traditional Native forms suggesting that they all date to the post-1729 era. In fact, no Indian ceramics have been recovered in New Orleans from deposits dating to before the Natchez attack at all. This pattern suggests that the Indian presence prior to 1729 was more restricted likely due to a European effort to create a socio-spatial distance between cultures when the city was founded in 1718. The return to native vessel forms reflects the collapse in the ability of the French in this way to dictate what culture was going to be and perhaps that Native people revived traditional intercultural habits in their dealings with Europeans. Certainly Indians gained in the French decline, but I suggest their gain was most pronounced in the transformation of culture via exchange.
Pre-contact trade among southeastern Native Americans was not through a market but through the exchange of gifts (Usner 1992, 1998). European explorers and settlers consistently related the need to provide Native people with material goods in order to gain their good will. The French explorer La Salle, for example, wrote that in his dealings with Native people along the Mississippi “presents are so necessary . . . that if words are not accompanied by gifts and not related to them, they are considered meaningless” (Allain 1988:76). Gift exchange has been shown by many writers to be related to the extension of the exchange process through time in the form of a social debt incurred with the gift (Mauss 1976, Hyde 1979, Gregory 1982, Appadurai 1986). The key to the process is that debt accumulation and resolution provide a basis for ongoing social relations. Gift exchange thus differs from commodity exchange in that the process is thoroughly implicated in the social conditions of its production. Commodities ideally are solely marketable goods exchanged in the vacuum of a ‘segregated’ economy presumably undetermined by the social conditions of its existence.3

It is very possible that the copy-ware pots traded by Natives to the French in Mobile approximated the condition of commodities since they were forms foreign to Native cultures being produced solely for trade. These pots and the short term of their production only emphasized that Indians and Europeans were of different worlds. As much as the return to traditional forms after the French decline was also a return to the traditional mode of gift exchange, Natives gained not only European goods but also social debts. I believe that this process in particular wore on the means of differentiation that distinguished Europeans, Indians, and Africans. Through what became a Creole
exchange these representations of difference collapsed as the multiple cultures together
defined a new mode of production.

The exchange of social debts manipulated norms in favor of Indian traditions and
thus drew what were now natives, settlers, and slaves into a realm of exchange framed
less by cultural difference than by the positions each group could claim within a new
cultural order. Native ceramics recovered from European sites in New Orleans show the
Creolization of local culture by illustrating how people shed differences as they engaged
in a common struggle for social production. For Europeans, Indians and Africans
remained sources of labor and necessary goods created in conditions of inequality, but in
terms of their representation each was more a part of the whole of society than they had
ever been. By 1763, after 30 years of relative isolation, Louisiana was no longer a
European colony but a Creole one.

Culture to Race

During this era of Creolization, however, the undoing of Louisiana’s Creole
culture was literally born. Issued from the union of natives, settlers, and slaves, “mixed-
race” children were regularly born in New Orleans after 1730. Their numbers were not
large and to be sure they were not always planned, chosen, nor welcome. Nevertheless,
throughout the 18th century their population grew with each decade (Hanger 1997, Bell
1997). A growing population, however, was not their problem. Rather, new influences
emerged in Louisiana towards the end of the century that challenged the Creole tradition
by redefining Creole in the terms of race.
This redefinition was spurred by the development of a yet another mode of production in Louisiana. With the return of political stability in North America after the American Revolution, the lower Mississippi Valley was identified as an untapped resource exceptionally suited for plantation-based commodity production. In order to legitimize colonization, aspects of “Louisiana” culture were highlighted as the reason why Louisiana had so far failed to reach its potential (Clark 1970, Ingersoll 1990). It was proposed that a culture that allowed mixed-race people to be legally free, to make claims to the estates of their white parents, and to be landowners was inherently flawed. Their color, so it was argued, made a difference and many began to wonder whether people of color of any sort should or even could live as whites (Bell 1997, Dominguez 1986).

This was not the question in the Creole era, rather this was a question of the modern era and a revival of the pre-Creole belief in the deep significance of color. Color before the decline was a basis for cultural understanding because as much as anything else color identified someone as Indian, European, or African. In the Creole era, these meaning of color were relaxed. Differences between groups remained but the culture changed to incorporate each within it. In a sense Creoles of this sort were not as color blind as they were ‘culture blind’ for direct interaction with those who appeared different became the best way to improve conditions. Such interactions deconstructed cultural difference by drawing “others” in. With the arrival of the modern plantation, however, color became the essence of social difference and identity. Modern plantation society re-emphasized that people of different colors were people of different cultures. And, further, plantation society employed these presumed cultural differences as the basis of
an ideology of human difference that placed whites above people of color. As much as color was natural, in this mindset, so was social difference and inequality.

**Playing with color**

Playing with color thus created several Louisiana’s over the course of the 18th century. Its representations and actualities shifted over time creating through the lens of color stronger and weaker meanings of difference. To summarize, Indians, Europeans, and Africans became natives, settlers, and slaves who then became reds, whites, and blacks.

To further illustrate this process I turn now to the Mardi Gras Indians. I have chosen to bring them to this discussion because they represent to me that playing with color is a habit that continues in New Orleans. While the story I have related shows the movement of meaning around the field of color from culture to race, I want to emphasize that as much as the stopping points matter so do the moments of change. In the beginning culture was color and in the end color was culture, but for the majority of the 18th century in New Orleans color and culture Creolized. Though barriers to social equality remained, Creole New Orleans was an extended moment of change when the foundations of difference were unsettled and malleable. This period gave those in New Orleans an unusual perspective when the time came for color to mean race. For 50 years they learned that the social meaning of color can change and that it may exist in a Creole form indefinitely. When a new voice attempted to fix a new meaning they knew in the back of their minds that this too would likely pass. It was their job to retain the ability to see through arbitrary color meanings to the fluid plane where those meanings are
constructed. The reason I cite the Mardi Gras Indians here is that I believe they are among the guardians of this perspective in New Orleans today. In other words, their traditions reside not only in a racially colored present but also in the space where meanings of color remain unfixed awaiting production. So, who are they?

Every year several groups of African-American New Orleanians mask as Mardi Gras Indians (Figures 4, 5, & 6. Images of Mardi Gras Indians in New Orleans taken at the 1998 and 1999 Super Sunday celebrations). The gangs have names such as the White Eagles, the Yellow Pocahontos, the Golden Star Hunters, and the Guardians of the Flame. The costumes they make are intricate and beautiful arrangements of feathers and beads that engulf individuals in their carnival identity. They draw ideas from the dress of North American Plains Indian tribes and invoke Plains Indian images in their beadwork. The gangs make new costumes every year designed in a distinct color which, significantly, changes every year and is kept secret until the final moment before they join the parade.

The Indians parade each Spring in the heart of New Orleans’ African-American community (on Mardi Gras day and Super Sunday after St. Joseph’s Day). The parade provides a formal stage for the gangs to show off the year’s work. A part of the effort is an informal competition to be the “prettiest,” a rank which allows the craftsmanship of costume production to determine who is the strongest and most powerful of the gangs. To become pretty Indians rely on the support of family and neighbors throughout the year to sew their designs into reality. Indian households are consumed by the costumes both spatially as the varied pieces are assembled in every room of the house and financially in order to obtain the thousands of beads and feathers used to create them. Because the competition is informal, there is no prize or other material reward for the victors. Rather,
the Indians take with them only the pride of knowing their creativity and labor went the furthest that year.

I invoke the Mardi Gras Indians here because I believe that their masking illustrates the survival of a non-commodity sensibility essential to the interpretation of the New Orleans Creole tradition. Almost every aspect of the Mardi Gras Indians represents and works against the notion of a segregated economic sphere undetermined by the social conditions of its existence. Moreover, the Indians do not accept any unitary identity that modern commodity cultures seek to impose. In the production of themselves as Indians, these African Americans challenge, in particular, the foundations of modern racial identities. Instead, they produce an alternative to commodity culture through the process of intercultural exchange represented by the movement of persons *between* identities.

The basis of any Creole designation is the incomplete and perhaps impossible transformation of one thing into another that leaves the Creole caught in the middle. In modernity, Creole has a great deal to do with race. But instead of a fixed racial designation, Creole provides a means to fashion a critical alternative. Within the realm of racial coloring, that is, being/playing Creole is an important way for people to play with color (Spencer 1997, Brunner 1997, hooks and West 1991, Lancaster 1997). From this perspective I believe we can learn a great deal from the Mardi Gras Indians who are experts at playing with color both in terms of race and its costumes and thus offer a window into the critical Creole process that has been sustained in New Orleans for the past 200 years. Allow me then to learn from the Indians.
I conclude by employing this Creole critique of color to produce a narrative interpretation of a particular ceramic sherd (Figure 7. Red-slipped Native American ceramic from the St. Augustine site inscribed with the European letters X and Y). Recovered from the site of a mid-18th-century plantation manor house, this rim sherd bears the handwritten letters X and Y running across the interior of what would have been a small bowl. The letters are clearly a European script and are likely part of an alphabet that was inscribed on the bowl after it arrived at the site via trade. I imagine this inscription being done by a child living at the house who found a common object from the kitchen which they could mark on and thereby claim. That they chose a Native produced bowl indicates how this pot was incorporated into the European household. It was not an exotic. For an artifact from another culture to exist as such requires that the ‘otherness’ of the other culture be minimized or overlooked. Thus, if I am correct, this pot and the ones like it represent the mundane Creole existence of the Indian in this ‘European’ household as neither Indian nor European. Rather than an exotic object from another culture, this bowl was part of the practical construction of a Creole culture that was turning the exotic into the everyday by allowing former difference to be outweighed by new forms of social production. This sherd thus shows that the Creole identity emerged and existed at the interstices of race where living (being human) confronted and redefined representation (being a specific kind of human). That we may learn from this sherd how to do the same as archaeologists and social beings has been the point of this work.
Tables

Table 1. Proportion of Aboriginal Ceramics and Colonial-era New Orleans Sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SITE</th>
<th>Number of Aboriginal ceramics</th>
<th>Number of European ceramics</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Aboriginal ceramics as percentage of total ceramics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cabildo (Yakubik and Franks 1997: Appendix 1)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>529</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madame John’s Legacy (Dawdy 1998: Appendix C)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>479</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tremé Plantation (Matthews 1999)</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>1,434</td>
<td>1,668</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>2,422</td>
<td>2,712</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Comparison of Ceramic Ratios between New Orleans and Spanish Sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SITE</th>
<th>Number of Non-European ceramics*</th>
<th>Number of European ceramics</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Aboriginal ceramics as percentage of total ceramics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>St. Augustine, Florida (Hoffman 1997: Table 2)</td>
<td>13,302</td>
<td>9,390</td>
<td>22,692</td>
<td>58.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Real, Haiti (Deagan 1995:Table 13.3)</td>
<td>25,303</td>
<td>27,975</td>
<td>52,278</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans (See Table 1)</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>2,422</td>
<td>2,712</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* these counts include both local and non-local American ceramics following the methods employed by the Spanish site archaeologists
**Figures**

Figure 1. 18th-Century Native American Ceramics recovered from the St. Augustine Site.

Figure 2. 18th-Century Native American Ceramics Recovered from Madame John’s Legacy. Photo by Shannon Dawdy

Figure 3. Colono ware pitcher recovered at Old Mobile (after Sylvia 1998: 23). Considered a copy-ware pot because of the flat base and handle which are not Native American ceramic traits.


Figure 7. Red-slipped Native American Rim Sherd with the letters ‘X Y’ inscribed on the interior. Drawn by Don Graff, Scale 2:1.
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Notes

1 The sites include the Cabildo (Yakubik and Franks 1997), the Durel Cottage (Yakubik pers. comm.), Madame John’s Legacy (Dawdy 1998), and the Tremé Plantation (Matthews 1999).

2 I need to shift the focus to Mobile because the French settlements there date to the period of the initial French colonization of the lower Mississippi valley (1690s). As these first settlements pre-date the occupation of New Orleans (1718), they are not directly comparable to any sites in New Orleans, however, later occupations in Mobile were contemporary and thus are comparable. The archaeological record of Mobile has been more thoroughly analyzed than that of New Orleans thanks to the extensive research and excavations directed by Greg Waselkov of the University of Southern Alabama.

3 A more thorough discussion of this process as it relates to this study may be found in Matthews n.d.

4 The essence of play being evoked here has (at least) two meanings. First, I mean to imply playing as with toying around, like a child with her toys, or working through something in practice, like playing with an idea. The second meaning which is not really able to be fully severed from the first, is playing as in role-playing or acting. Here the roles are being tried out (played) like putting on a Carnival mask. The significance of the racialized story of the Mardi Gras Indians and other Creole traditions in New Orleans, however, is that as the racial roles are played with they begin to dissolve (see opening quote by Spencer). This is because these are not staged productions. Their existence may be realized and even produced in a carnival atmosphere, but being an Indian (Mardi Gras or otherwise) is something that persists well beyond Ash Wednesday. As the identity extends it becomes embedded in the “real” (non-play) identities of the “actors” themselves, and thus carry a substance that no ‘played’ role ever could (this is the point of Roger Lancaster’s [1997] superb consideration of gendered identities).