La Nouvelle-Orléans: Une ville créole / New Orleans: A Creole City

Hello everyone, thank you so much for coming out this morning. My name is Torrey Smith, and I’m incredibly excited to share my work with you today. This presentation, entitled “La Nouvelle-Orléans: Une ville créole / New Orleans: A Creole City,” is a synopsis of my French senior thesis I completed based on the independent research I performed this past summer in New Orleans, Louisiana. I will be focusing today on the evolution of New Orleans into a Creole city, and I sincerely hope that you find it as fascinating as I have.

First off, I’d like to mention that this presentation would not be possible without the support of the Chandler Senior Experience Fund and the Richard A. Harrison Award. These grants made my dream of spending a summer researching in New Orleans possible, and I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity. I would also like to give a special thanks to Lifongo Vetinde, for nominating my paper for this symposium, and Robert Williams, for all of his help and support in making this project a reality.

I would now like to start off with a little audience participation. How many of you have been to New Orleans? How would you describe it to someone who has never visited? (Leave a minute or two to take answers.) Some of the most common things that seem to come up whenever talking about New Orleans with others are music (and more specifically, jazz), the food, Cajuns, Creoles, Mardi Gras, and the overall sense that the city seems to have been taken from France and placed in the middle of Louisiana. This feeling might come
from the architecture of columns and wrought iron, or the street signs indicating long, French names, or the overall laid-back, *laissez-les-bons-temps-rouler* feeling you get when strolling around the streets and interacting with the locals.

Having visited New Orleans once before during my senior year of high school, it was these aspects of the city that I recalled most vividly in my memories when thinking of French-related summer internships I could apply for last spring. With the music of Sidney Bechet and a craving for beignets in mind, I reached out to l’Alliance Française de la Nouvelle-Orléans, a French cultural center located in the Garden District, and asked if they had any need of a summer intern. Fortunately, they said yes, and I promptly packed up my bags and drove from Indianapolis to the Crescent City.

As my internship with l’Alliance Française was only part-time, I dedicated the free portions of my week to researching New Orleans culture, whose complexity sparked my interest. I wanted to explore the relationship between this foreign-seeming city and its location in the United States, as well as understand more about the people themselves who lived in such a unique place. I undertook this effort by visiting the local libraries and museums, visiting plantations, talking with coworkers and Uber drivers, as well as visiting some of the smaller towns an hour or so beyond the outskirts of New Orleans itself. As I began to dive into the rich culture and history of the city, I relied on my time at l’Alliance Française to provide an understanding of the current importance of New Orleans French culture, as the town's French heritage seemed to be pervasive and prominent everywhere I went.

After a few weeks into my stay, however, I began to notice a disconnect between my experiences at l’Alliance Française and my time exploring the city. I found that the
population I encountered at the French cultural center were primarily white, and belonged to the upper-, or upper-middle classes. Knowing that, in 2010, 33% of New Orleans’ population was white, while 60.2% of the population was black, and 5.2% of the population was Hispanic, the homogeneity at l’Alliance Française contrasted sharply with the large diversity of people I encountered day-to-day on the streets. I became curious as to why this cultural center, a symbol of French heritage in the city, did not attract a wider variety of the local population. After all, I had been led to believe that this heritage was one of the unifying factors of the city—that its uniqueness in American society came from the fact that it was originally a French colony. I wondered why this seemingly shared heritage did not include everyone, and began to research some possible explanations.

As I poured over books at the New Orleans Public Library and the Historic New Orleans Collection downtown in an attempt to figure out this clash of cultures I seemed to be witnessing, I kept coming across references to the term “Creole,” whether referring to the “Creoles of New Orleans,” or to “Creole culture,” or even the “Creole language” found in the city. Having been born and raised in the Midwest, my only knowledge of the word “Creole” was in relation to the Creole language spoken in Haiti. Aside from that, and I was at a loss. It was in reading the essay, “Éloge de la Créolité / In Praise of Creoleness,” by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant that I was able to comprehend the importance of the term “Creole” in New Orleans society. According to the text, “A Creole is someone who is born and raised in the Americas, whose ancestors did not originate from the New World, such as the American Indians.” So a Creole is someone who can trace their lineage back to the colonial days of New Orleans, but whose ancestors hailed from elsewhere, such as Europe or Africa. Written by three Martiniquan intellectuals, “Éloge de la Créolité”
primarily discusses the position of Creoleness in the Antilles, though I was particularly struck by their explanation of the word, “Creoleness,” which seemed to apply to New Orleans society, as well.

According to the authors, “Creoleness” refers to a double-process where there is first the adaptation of Europeans, Africans, and Asians to the New World, followed by the confrontation of these populations in the same geographic area, leading to the creation of a syncretic culture, or a creole culture. To reiterate, a creole culture forms when there is forced interaction between foreign populations in the Americas. It is not simply a question of diversity, which only refers to the presence of these different groups in the same space, but rather indicates a sense of action in the amalgamation of these diverse ideas and customs over time.

With this discovery, I realized that I had found the answer to the perplexing problem as to why the reclamation of French heritage in New Orleans was so homogenous. Even if the city was originally created in the image of France as a colony, it had to incorporate a mixture of influences from its first diverse populations in order to survive. This cultural syncretism, shown in the development of the local food and language, underlines that New Orleans was a Creole city from its origins, rather than simply a French city. In order to illustrate this double process of Creoleness as it appeared in New Orleans, I will begin by focusing on how the first populations of Africans and Europeans in Louisiana adapted to their new environment. I will then go on to show how these groups combined aspects of their food and language to create the culture we know in the Crescent City today.

It is important to note that, while those with American Indian ancestry do not fall under the category of Creole, these native populations served as the foundation that cultivated
Louisiana’s Creole culture. Without the American Indians, the Louisiana colony would have failed entirely.

At the end of the 17th century, two Canadian explorers, Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d’Iberville, and his younger brother, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, landed on the swampy banks of the Mississippi River and claimed the territory in the name of the French crown. This was to be the birth of Louisiana, France’s second attempt at a profitable colony on the American continent after Canada had failed to produce desirable revenues. In 1718, the Sieur de Bienville established the port of New Orleans, and soon after, many *coureurs-de-bois*, or Canadian fur trappers, migrated south with the prospect of new trading ventures. Due to the harsh climate and unforgiving landscape, the French crown had a difficult time persuading its own citizens to cross the Atlantic and populate the infant colony, and began a policy of sending its undesirables to Louisiana. Military deserters, smugglers, prostitutes, vagabonds—all were sent to populate the new town of New Orleans. Unfortunately, neither these colorful French nor the *coureurs-de-bois* knew how to farm the unforgiving landscape, and relied on the neighboring American Indian tribes for sustenance and, during more severe times of famine, shelter. This necessity to survive in the harsh environment, as well as this close dependence on the native populations forced the French colonists to adapt their behaviors and lifestyles once in the New World. Living as they once had back in Europe was no longer an option.

As the Europeans began to assimilate themselves into their new landscape, they began to import African slaves in order to build the infrastructure needed to produce a thriving colonial city. Under French colonial rule, shipments of slaves arrived from 1719 until 1731, predominantly from the Senegambia region in West Africa, and the majority belonging to
the Bambara ethnicity. It was these slaves who performed the backbreaking work of clearing the swampland and physically building the necessary infrastructure for the colonial town. As most of the slaves hailed from the same region in Africa, a sense of solidarity permeated the entire slave community, as even those from different regions became part of the familial slave network, and over time, this solidarity developed into resilience. Slaves would flee their horrendous conditions to live with the neighboring American Indians and would adopt their customs, or they would develop their own maroon societies in the marshy bayou, all the while maintaining relations with the Africans still in slavery back in New Orleans. The cultural cohesion that formed within the slave population, as well as the strength of their familial ties, created a space in colonial society for this inclusive African culture, especially compared to the segmentation and lack of unification seen among the European colonists. So while the French never had a focused sense of French-ness to hold onto, the African community developed and expanded their sense of African identity, while both populations relied on the American Indians in order to learn how to survive in the New World.

After the process of adaptation came the process of synthesizing these foreign cultures with each other in order to produce one that was amalgamated, or creole. Of the many manifestations of a culture, such as architecture, language, religion, and cuisine, the food and language in New Orleans were the most apparently creole, to my eyes. On a personal note, this was perhaps my favorite aspect to research, as it involved frequenting many different restaurants, to make sure I truly had an in-depth understanding of Creole cuisine. In between bites of red beans and rice and crawfish étouffée, I would read about the origins of these dishes so synonymous with New Orleans life today. Returning to the image of a
colony struggling to sustain itself due to a lack of agriculture, it was in these moments that the French turned to the American Indians for help. Green beans, lima beans, bell peppers, potatoes, sweet potatoes, red beans, white beans, peanuts, and tomatoes are all examples of the produce provided by the native populations to the colonists.

Along with this incorporation of native crops in New Orleans cuisine came the inclusion of traditional African methods of food preparation. Colonists depended on female slaves to prepare meals for the entire household, as well as the slaves working on the plantation. This left the cooks to rely on preparation methods they learned in their West African hometowns, where traditionally, these women produced large plates of rice to be topped with meat and a sauce filled with vegetables and spices. This was an effective method to cook meals for a large number of people at once, and as the colonists did not cook their own meals, they also ate this African cuisine filled with local crops. Over time, this blending of customs and ingredients became the predominant type of food eaten by all New Orleans residents, and is now known as Creole cuisine.

While not as apparent in the cultural landscape as the food, the Creole language of New Orleans also demonstrates the interesting blending of cultures that occurred in colonial times. When the French began to settle in Louisiana, most spoke varying regional languages, instead of the unified French language so predominant in the world today. As the colony was incredibly under-populated and lacking in resources, there was no effort to build a university or institution to guarantee the education of standardized French for New Orleans citizens. The African slaves, on the other hand, needed to learn French rapidly once arriving in the New World in order to communicate with their masters. Coupled with the desire to communicate with other Africans of different ethnicities, the slave population of
New Orleans began to create a version of the French language that included words and phrases from the various ethnic languages of Africa. Over time, the Creole language developed and spread among the French colonists themselves. Once the Spanish government took control of Louisiana in 1762, there was a unification movement by the colonists to protect and sustain their Creole heritage and their Creole French language. Even with the threat of erasure of French politics and traditions with the introduction of Louisiana into the United States in 1803, the French-speaking population held fast to their Creole language, which appears in small phrases and proverbs spoken by locals even today. This is not simply a story of a city with a diversity of languages, but rather speaks to how these incredibly different languages converged to create a symbol of mixed and shared identity that is still present today.

This double process of creolization in New Orleans continued long after the end of French colonial rule, as each new population that arrived simply added their contributions to the culture, rather than remaining as their own separate identity. You can see mark of the Spanish in the architecture within the French Quarter, hear the Zydeco music of the Acadian immigrants whose Louisiana descendants became Cajuns, and experience America's contribution when speaking in English to city locals on the streets. Despite its history of interwoven cultures, however, New Orleans still faces enormous challenges with divisions along racial and socioeconomic lines. My time at l’Alliance Française highlighted this theme, as well as indicated how the grander attempt to reclaim the city's French origins did not seem to ameliorate these tensions.

So what might be a more inclusive approach? I suggest the example of Arnaudville, Louisiana. With a population of about 1,000, this little town collectively decided to label
itself as a Creole town, embracing its citizens with ancestors from France, Africa, America, and everywhere in between. During my weekend visit to Arnaudville, I talked to the locals, who were proud of their “Table française,” or French Table, where “Tout le français, c’est le bon français,” or where “All French is good French.” Exchange students even visit the town to learn local customs such as fishing and making pralines (PRAH-leens) in Creole French. While there were still two churches, one historically for a white congregation and the other historically for a black congregation, I attended mass with a diverse group of individuals and saw churchgoers of all races greet each other in their Creole French. While one weekend is not nearly enough time to conduct an accurate study of race and socioeconomic relations in the town of Arnaudville, it was striking to see a town focused enough on the theme of cultural inclusion that, for even a moment or two, differences in skin color were a celebrated part of a community’s heritage.

Though Arnaudville is not a perfect model for New Orleans due to a grand difference in size and demographics, the embrasure of the Crescent City’s Creoleness might allow all its citizens to participate in a shared identity where everyone is an integral part to the larger whole. From its beginnings, French Louisiana was formed by its interactions with the local American Indians, who aided and fed the colonists, and the Africans who were forced to traverse an entire ocean to work in slavery. Each population had to adapt to its new environment and to each other in order to survive, and each population synthesized its customs, such as language and food, with each other in order to create an entirely new and unique culture that captures the imaginations and minds of tourists every year. In the increasingly connected and globally conscious world we live in today, there is a growing need to understand and celebrate such cultural complexity. For New Orleans, with its rich
history and heritage, it seems necessary to begin to understand its own cultural roots to determine how best to move forward as a collective community. Perhaps this process starts with the recognition of New Orleans as not just an American city with French heritage, but as a true Creole city.