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Clearly, the cultural history of French Louisiana and its people is complex. Through time there has been a trend toward homogenization, real and imagined, within Louisiana's French populations into a broad Cajun/Creole dichotomy. With the white French, this transformation began with nineteenth-century interaction and intermarriage among the various white French ethnic groups, combined with socioeconomic processes that began to compress this amalgam into a nascent Cajun population. The process became more pronounced during the late-twentieth-century ethnic revival, when both internal and external forces, under the guise of preserving Cajun culture, actually used the label as a leveler of diversity while viewing it as representative of a unique cultural pattern replicated through time. This is because the cultural practices to be preserved and promoted often reflected a widespread generic Louisiana French culture. Within this context, an important group, the Afro-- French, was not fully recognized. This population underwent its own set of transformations as the social boundaries, and to some extent the racial boundaries, between the descendants of free people of color and the descendants of gallicized slaves became blurred. The process roughly paralleled that of Cajunization except that Afro-French ethnic revival, and the emergence of the label Creole as an organization of diversity, developed later.

Country Mardi Gras as both a cultural element and complex of traits reflects this process. The celebration belongs to a broader cross-cultural tradition. Despite its diverse origins and influences within Louisiana, the celebration was treated as an element of Cajun culture by Cajuns, scholars, and popular-culture media alike, especially during the ethnic revival. This Cajunization of Mardi Gras involved the two related processes of cultural objectification and symbolic appropriation in which cultural elements are reified into things that a group can lay claim to, at the same time that they are ascribed to that group by external sources. Much of this is symbolic in that cultural elements may have value to other groups who are in less of a position to articulate their claims to cultural property.

Among the white Louisiana French, cultural objectification and symbolic appropriation were facilitated by a subsuming of cultural diversity under the label Cajun, with Mardi Gras as simultaneously an object and collection of objects to be manipulated in the articulation and promotion of this identity. The incorporation of Mardi Gras into ethnic festivals resulted in a public stage in which large numbers of the diverse Cajun population celebrate an imagined community that levels socioeconomic difference. The process includes symbolic appropriation, as country Mardi Gras was once common

to the Afro-French and until recently the annual Mardi Gras run was staged by them in numerous communities. But because of unequal power relations in the past, and the tardy emergence of a Creole ethnic movement, the Afro-- French have had little voice in laying equal claim to the tradition as well as to most other elements of generic Louisiana culture; i.e., the elements forming the constituent parts of Mardi Gras. However, symbolic appropriation is also facilitated by the fact that a cultural object is disappearing, or has disappeared, from one group even as another group claims the tradition as its own cultural property. This is true of the Creole Mardi Gras, which has never recovered from the same decline that had endangered Cajun traditions earlier this century. This is because the outmigration from the countryside by Creoles has resulted in much less of a rural population base for Creole Mardi Gras runs. Furthermore, Mardi Gras has declined so sharply that few Creoles may immediately recognize it as worthy of reclaiming, given the recent high priority placed on other cultural elements. Nonetheless, the Creole ethnic movement has in recent years arisen in response to the Cajun ethnic movement that claims, and is associated with by others, generic Louisiana French culture. The Creole movement as a rallying point for a diverse population has recently challenged the symbolic appropriation of cultural elements that are equally meaningful to the Afro-French. Thus far, Afro-French revival has centered upon Creole-controlled events which ensure that Zydeco music is firmly associated with Creole identity, and events like the Creole Crawfish Festival that objectify foodways and claim them as Creole, or at least propose co-ownership of this valued cultural property. As part of the same process, Creoles have acquired a voice in the overall promotion of cultural tourism and have sought to portray local culture as a commodity that can also be exploited by Creoles. Thus, the discourse of Louisiana French culture has become multivocal in recent years. Whether the new Creole voice will speak of reviving rural Mardi Gras as a means of contesting the objectification and symbolic appropriation of the tradition by the Cajun-French remains to be seen.

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