

V.1. “Lâche pas la patate”: French Language Cultures in Louisiana

Daniel Paul Sampey

Entrepreneur Jennifer Ledet (2011) describes the resiliency represented in the old Louisiana French adage “Lâche pas la patate” (Don’t drop the potato), or as she translates it “‘Hang in there!’ or ‘Finish strong!’”¹ The idea of perseverance under seemingly impossible conditions has resonated throughout Louisiana for centuries through challenges including social and economic upheaval, floods and hurricanes as well as man-made environmental disasters such as oil spills. This text will sketch out a few details about the development of French cultures and language in Louisiana, featuring the 20th-century schism between what has been called “Cajun” and “Creole,” and, finally, the possibilities entailed in the narrative of Louisiana Créolité, which problematizes several periphery / center binaries.

A gumbo with hundreds of ingredients

Carl A. Brasseaux refers to the “cultural landscape” of Louisiana as “one of the most complex, if not the most complex, in rural North America [with] at least eighteen distinct groups, each with subgroups.” (Brasseaux, 2008: 1-2) When in 1536 the Spanish first reached (what came to be called) the Mississippi River where it meets the Gulf of Mexico, people had already been living there for at least 10,000 years. Archeological excavations show “an enormous trading network [built] with impressive engineering skills” among “mound-building cultures [which] existed as early as 4,500 BCE.” As European colonization began in earnest in the early 1700s, an indigenous population of approximately 14,000 people were living throughout the territory of present-day Louisiana, with the many tribes, notably the Houma, Choctaw and Tunica-Biloxi, communicating among themselves using 22 or more languages. (National Park Service)² From 1719 until 1820, chattel slaves were imported into Louisiana, mostly directly from West Africa (“listed as *brut* in French or *bozal* in Spanish”), but also from French and Spanish colonies in the Caribbean. (Louisiana Slave Database 2000) Further, Brasseaux lists some of the numerous immigrant groups that have flavored the gumbo of life in Louisiana over the centuries:

les voyageurs; the 1699 Canadian settlers; voluntary immigrants of the John Law era; forced immigrants of the early eighteenth century; *les filles à la cassette*; French military personnel (many of whom opted to remain in the colony); Alsatian religious exiles; Acadian exiles; Saint-Domingue refugees; refugees from the French Revolution; Bonapartist exiles; waves of nineteenth-century French (known within Louisiana’s Francophone community as *les français étrangers*); Belgian and Swiss immigrants seeking economic opportunity; French Jews fleeing religious persecution in provinces along the German border;

¹ This “*appel à la persévérance*” was also the title of a well-known song from 1976 on the La Louisiane record label by Jimmy C. Newman (Jimmy Yves Newman, the “C” stands for “Cajun”). The upbeat recording also became popular across French Canada, earning “gold” status by selling 40,000 units.

² The United Houma Nation was consolidated during the 19th century from several different tribes, with the French language as one unifying factor: “Between 1830 and 1860 women in the new Houma community intermarried extensively with French speaking men of the region, and it appears that the group’s principal language became Cajun French as a result of exogamy during this period.” Brasseaux has documented how the Houma played a unique role in preserving the French language in Louisiana due to “the group’s increasing marginalization in local society” beginning in the mid-19th century as well as the legal denial of the right to attend “white educational facilities” in the early 20th century. (Brasseaux, 2008: 125-128) The irony should not be lost on us that, in this respect, discrimination and racism (certainly not only against the Houma) served as a factor in preserving French in Louisiana at a time when pressures were increasingly being placed on all residents to “Americanize” to English in the first decades on the 20th century.

French, Belgian, and Canadian Catholic missionaries; Alsatian and Lorrainer refugees from the 1870 Franco-Prussian War; Lebanese Christian immigrants; twentieth-century French and Belgian war brides; European and French-Canadian teachers in the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana's bilingual programs; and Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees fleeing the communist takeover in their homelands. (Brasseaux, 2008: 2-3)

Articles and books have been published on many of these groups within the disciplines of Louisiana Studies,³ Creole Studies and Francophone Studies as well as other academic fields such as ethnography and comparative linguistics. As pointed out by Barry Jean Ancelet (Ancelet, 2007: 1248-1249), retired director of the *Centre de folklore acadien et créole* at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, “[t]he development of the Francophone Studies program has been naturally interdisciplinary from the beginning.” All of the diverse populations listed above were acculturated to the French language in Louisiana.⁴ In fact, this cultural environment was the very reason that over the centuries many immigrant populations chose Louisiana instead of, for example, a(nother) place in the new nation of the United States. (Ancelet, 2013: 320-322) This was the case even as late as the second half of the 20th century in the case of refugees from former colonies in Southeast Asia, as Louisiana had a “French influence, a similar climate, and a fishing industry.” (Donato, Hakimzadeh, 2006)

Ancelet (2007: 1237-1238) marks out “three main currents” of the French language before the US Civil War: the “colonial French” of the original settlers beginning in 1699; the Creole French of the descendants of settlers, indigenous peoples and African slaves; and the Cajun French of the descendants of exiled Acadians (1753) and other later immigrant populations.⁵

By the end of the 19th century, the majority view is that the first group above was largely assimilated either into the second two groups or into the mainstream English-speaking culture of Louisiana. Regarding the second two linguistic currents, a claim can be made that their populations and culture overlap(ped) so much that a strict differentiation between them did not come about until after Louisiana was purchased by the United States, when an English-speaking population with a widely different language, culture and worldview began to show more and more influence in the region.⁶ Today there are many “white” Louisianans who speak variations of what linguists call Creole French (kréyòl la Lwizyàn), and many Louisianans that identify as “Black” use Cajun French (français de la Louisiane) (Valdman et al., 2010: xii).⁷ While in

³ Established in 1973, the discipline of “Louisiana Studies involves issues relating to researching and preserving those aspects of Louisiana that speak to our cultural, economic, geographical, biological, sociological, artistic and historical contexts [including] the local, regional and global realms with many potential social, educational, economic and policy implications.” (University of Louisiana at Lafayette 2022)

⁴ The Spanish colonial period (1762-1801) of the entire Louisiana territory should not be underestimated in terms of influence on the cuisine and architecture (for instance in the “French Quarter” of New Orleans, largely rebuilt after the great fires of 1788 and 1794). French culture continued to dominate, although the Spanish seemed to tolerate this, perhaps due to their similar Romance language-based *Weltanschauung*. (Gregory, 2002) This is in huge contrast to the cultural misunderstandings and clashes that occurred as economic speculators and, eventually, permanent settlers from the United States began to trickle into the area following the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, by which the size of the new country was increased by a full one-third. (Ancelet, 2007: 1237-1241, *passim*; Bernard, 2003: xvii-xxi, *passim*; Blyth in Valdman (ed.), 1997: 26-28, 31-33)

⁵ Cécyle Trépanier (Trépanier, 1991: 161) designates “at least four major French subcultures”: white Creoles, black Creoles, “French-speaking Indians,” and “descendants of the Acadians.”

⁶ Numerous fiction and nonfiction writers have detailed the conflicts in Louisiana between the basic features of a pragmatist Protestant worldview (e.g. Weber) versus the strong Catholicism — including syncretic elements of mysticism — that was predominant in Louisiana until the mid-20th century. (King, 1921: 164-176; Brasseaux, 1992: 84-85; Bernard, 2003: 38-41).

⁷ Notably, the title of the source cited here is *Dictionary of Louisiana French As Spoken in Cajun, Creole, and American Indian Communities* (Valdman et al. (ed.), 2010), i.e. in the entries section no distinction is made among

this text the distinction between Creole and Cajun French will be maintained, in practice the situation is much more complicated, as French-based language is used in Louisiana in dozens of interconnected regiolects. Speakers among the language variations can generally understand each other with no difficulty (Klinger et al., in: Valdman (ed.), 1997: 173-177; Ancelet, 2007: 1237-1238).

The colonial period until the Civil War

Before and after European and North American women arrived, the original groups of settlers — mainly fur trappers, later farmers and ranchers — mixed considerably with Indians and African slaves. During the first decades of colonization, the children born in Louisiana and their descendants came to be called Créoles (from Spanish *Criollo* or Portuguese *Crioulo*) simply to distinguish them from those not born there. (Spitzer 1985) One subsection of the original population eventually developed into the affluent planter class who used the “Colonial French” language current listed above. This landed wealthy included many families of *gens de couleur libres* (free people of color), groups of mixed race descendants of the original settlers, indigenous peoples and slaves who lived throughout Louisiana (Brasseaux, 2005: 12-16; Ancelet, 2007: 1238-1240).

The Créoles created poetry and belles lettres which can be closely related to trends in France of the period. This gentry class was able to secure private instruction for their children based on materials and pedagogy from France (Peknik, 2019: 172), or in rare cases even send their sons and daughters to France to be educated, as was the case for young Marie Hachard in 1726. (in: Robenstine, 1992: 199) They also appreciated opera at Théâtre St. Pierre (opened in 1792) and several other opera houses in New Orleans, often experiencing the latest works from France and elsewhere in Europe before New Yorkers or Philadelphians had the chance. (Belsom, 2006) Many *gens de couleur libres* also owned “slaves and extensive landholdings” on plantations which their slaves worked. This *gens* population “enjoy[ed] most of the legal rights but few of the social privileges of whites [and] modeled their existences upon the lives of Louisiana’s white Creole elite.” (Brasseaux, 2005: 12-16) This period is today often idealized by contemporary residents of Louisiana as one during which race was not the divisive issue it became after the initial mass influx of *les Américains* and especially following the US Civil War.

The Civil War also threw black Creole society into an uproar that would last at least for the better part of a century. The complexity within the black French-speaking community was in effect eliminated by the same laws that freed the slaves. After Reconstruction, one was simply white or not. The descendants of landed, educated, and cultured *gens de couleur libres* suddenly found themselves legally below the lowest whites, including many subsistence-farming Cajuns. The tensions that understandably developed strained the cultural and social exchange that had previously characterized the relationship between Cajuns and yeoman black Creoles, who after all shared a common language and similar economic conditions. (Ancelet, 2007: 1239-1240)

the many varieties of French used in the area. In the Preface, however, the editorial team of the dictionary does make this clarification: “The presence of Louisiana Creole adds to the complexity of the linguistic situation of South Louisiana. Although much of its vocabulary overlaps with that of Louisiana French, major differences in grammatical structure make it an autonomous language.” (xii) Among other experts, Sylvie DuBois acknowledges the existence of the “extreme position [...] that there is no real distinction between CF [Cajun French] and LC [Louisiana Creole], just an artificial classification based on race.” (Valdman (ed.), 1997: 54)

In the last decades of the 20th century, invoking the unique legacy of the “free people of color,” or simply the “free people,” a population came to reclaim the term “Creole” for themselves as a distinct cultural marker. This will be briefly discussed below (Dominguez, 1997: 23-25, 135-136, *passim*; Hall, 1992: 257-270, *passim*; Brasseaux, 2005: 13).

A landmark narrative of wide-spread notoriety outside of Louisiana is that of the *Grand Dérangement*, literally the great “upheaval” or “disturbance,” but which is usually translated as “Expulsion” or “Deportation of the Acadians.” This series of events became valorized by a population who became known as “Cajuns” (derived from “Acadians”).⁸ In 1753 approximately 11,500 French colonists were brutally forced from their homes by the British and deported from the Port-Royal area on present-day Nova Scotia.⁹ Over the next few years half of this population died, many at sea, less of starvation and disease. Some were scattered throughout British-American and French colonies and a few were sold into bondage, including children (Bernard, in: Breaux, 2011b). Some returned to France for good and others left France again. By 1800 about 4,000 members or descendants of the original population (and their new families) had arrived in Louisiana, generally moving into rural areas to continue their traditional subsistence farming and fur trapping (Faragher, 2005, *passim*; Bernard, 2003: xvii-xviii, 50-53; Ancelet, 2007: 1235-1236).

The *Dérangement* narrative, which features French heroes and victims along with cruel British villains, has taken on elements of legend among lay residents of Louisiana, with many details over the centuries simplified, ignored or forgotten. It does not diminish this etiological narrative (nor the possibilities for storytelling and merchandizing) to admit that it marginalizes every other group who immigrated to or was brought to Louisiana before and after. When the Acadians arrived, Louisiana was a Spanish colony where the French and Spanish mixed freely with few conflicts, united by the Catholic religion. When the Louisiana Purchase was completed and even after the tiny boot at the end was made a US state in 1812, nothing much changed in the region for decades. Nevertheless, as the 19th century progressed, the Romance-based culture of Louisiana became a source of frustration for *les Américains* as the newcomers gradually began to assume political and economic power (Dessens, 2015: 174-174, *passim*; King, 1921, *passim*; Hubbs, 2021: 619-620).

The French cultures of Louisiana continued to prosper for 60 years after the US purchase of the territory in 1803. Yet a separation steadily began to form, with English used for official, legal and commercial activities, “French for family, entertainment and cultural purposes” (Heylen, 1993). It seems that the French in New Orleans looked somewhat bemusedly upon the uncultured strangers, for instance taking advantage of the language barrier to gently ridicule the values and customs of the newcomers from the United States, itself a nation only a few decades old (Hubbs, 2021: 619-621; King, 1921: 250-252).

The contemporary written literary output of post-colonial Louisiana in French represented a thriving culture of verse, journalism, nonfiction and, by the late 19th century, a bit of fiction, all derivative of European models. Perhaps a sample of “Afro-Creole” poetry from a New Orleans newspaper of the mid-1800s would demonstrate one popular style, which as we can see exudes an ebullient Romantic idealism not unlike works of the period in other literary fields:

⁸ As a bit of anecdotal perspective, the author of the present text is himself from Louisiana, with 100% Louisiana French ancestry on both his mother’s and father’s sides of the family. I do not remember any of my family ever identifying themselves as “Cajun.” I recently (2022) discussed this issue with my 80-year old father, both of whose parents spoke French as their first language and who has himself been fluent in French his entire life. My father identifies simply as “French.” He has no animus towards the “Cajun” trope, but does not use that term to describe himself. The commodification of the marker “Cajun” will be touched upon below.

⁹ Award-winning musician and poet Zachary Richard calls these events “largest ethnic cleansing in the history of North America” (in: Cross, 2017).

“Poésie! Vox Dei!”
 N’entends-tu pas sonner à l’horloge lointaine
 L’heure de tant d’espoirs, l’heure sainte et certaine
 De la pure Fraternité?
 N’entends-tu pas vibrer ces voix mystérieuses
 Qui passent en courbant ces têtes sérieuses,
 Ces voix fortes de Liberté?

(Lélia D. [Adolphe Duhart] in: Bruce trans. 2020)¹⁰

In English nuanced by French influence, Local Color fiction of the period, for example that of George Washington Cable and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, portrays in fine detail the language *négociations* (not to mention those of class, race, and gender) unfolding in late-19th century New Orleans:

[Q]uotation marks and phonetic spellings representing speakers’ French accents mark out their occasional English exclamations; otherwise, English is provided by the stories’ third-person narrators, who translate characters’ words and thoughts from French. When Creoles blast English as “a vile tongue,” [from Cable’s “Madame Délicieuse”] they almost never voice their condemnation in English. (Hubbs, 2021: 619)

Written literary production and reception in French on a significant scale would not be created in Louisiana again until the 1970s, when a major attempt at the formal codification of French grammar and vocabulary was undertaken (Barry, 1989: 47). Outside of (literary and literate) urban areas, throughout the 19th century there was practically no contact at all between native Louisianans and the new merchant and investor class that represented the first Anglo-Americans who ventured into the newly declared state. For centuries rural Louisianans had maintained a healthy French oral literary culture of folk tales, nursery rhymes, songs and games passed down through the generations (Ancelet, 1988a: 36-39; Brasseaux, 1992: 29-30, 115; Peknik, 2019: 1-21, *passim*). Here is a verse from a traditional folksong, versions of which were made into popular recordings throughout the 20th century. The song is still performed today, sometimes by a male singer, sometimes by a female:

Jolie blonde, tu croyais qu’il y avait juste toi,
 Il y a pas juste toi dans le pays pour m’aïmer.
 Je peux trouver juste une autre jolie blonde,
 Bon Dieu sait, moi, j’en ai un tas.¹¹

(“Cleoma Breaux and her brothers” recorded 1929, in: Peknik 2019, 48)

While culturally (including linguistically) the situation for most of Louisiana had barely changed in the six decades since it was incorporated into the United States, a major inflection point came with US Civil War, as it did for the entire country not yet one century old. Even after the occupation by Federal troops was officially ended in 1877, pressures remained upon

¹⁰ From *Afro-Creole Poetry in French from Louisiana’s Radical Civil War-Era Newspapers. A Bilingual Edition* (Bruce trans. 2020).

“Poetry! Vox Dei!”/ Do you not hear, distantly ringing, the chime/ Of the hour of hopes, the sure and sacred time
 Of purest Fraternity?/ Do you not hear these enigmatic voices/ That speak to heads weighed down with serious
 choices./The forceful voices of Liberty?/

¹¹ Pretty blonde, you thought you were the only one/ That you were the only one I could ever love/ I can find
 another pretty blonde/ The good Lord knows, I’ve got plenty. (Peknik, 2019: 48. Trans. Peknik)

the French-speaking population towards total acculturation to the customs, values and language of the United States. These efforts would culminate in Federal and State educational initiatives in the early 20th century (Ancelet, 2008: 1240-1242).

These transitions from French to “American” are depicted in literary works in several genres, including belles lettres as well as the Local Color of writers like Cable and Dunbar-Nelson as mentioned above. (Hubbs, 2021: *passim*). Nearly all regional French-language newspapers such as *Le Pionnier De L’assomption*, *La Sentinelle De Thibodaux* and *Le Louisianais* folded during the Civil War or Reconstruction periods. (Library of Congress) By the end of the 19th century there was much less space or patience in the new, progressive ethos of Realism for the difference once brought by Louisiana French cultures.

“I must not speak French on the school grounds.”

In several of the contributions to this book it has been documented how during the era of colonialism a particular Romance language in an area was privileged to the detriment of local languages and cultures. The Romance language and European ethos associated with it often came to dominate educational systems to form an elite class of administrators who accumulated cultural and economic capital. In the mid-20th century, as colonialism waned and the English language gradually began to dominate internationally, with Anglo-American mass cultural products (including literature) penetrating so many markets around the world, new layers of periphery/center relationships began to develop. New negotiations had to be made among local languages, the Romance language of the former colonizer, and English, often resulting, on the one hand, in homogenization according to Anglo-American models, and on the other, the emergence of sometimes provocative hybrid cultural artifacts incorporating influences from multiple streams. These moves can be related to what has been called “Janus-headed Postmodernism” (Jansen, 2016) — the desperate loss of “truth” versus the playful creation of new models. The evolving status of French in Louisiana reflects these types of complex negotiations in potentially surprising ways. In contrast to the colonial (mis)uses of French, in Africa for example, in Louisiana it is the Romance language that was and remains under threat of absorption and even annihilation.

David Barry (in Breaux, 2011a) points to three factors that heavily influenced French in Louisiana in the 20th century: the discovery of oil in 1901, the legal imposition of English as the only language of school education in 1921, and the experiences of French-speaking Louisianans serving abroad during World War Two. We will now briefly explore the first two negative influences on Louisiana French, followed by the third factor, which is positive.

As outlined above, after Louisiana became the 18th state in 1812, the increased economic activity of large cities like New Orleans, Baton Rouge and Shreveport created a strong incentive for residents to incorporate features of the largely Protestant-based culture of the United States, including the English language, into their lives (Brasseaux, 2005: 75-76; Ancelet, 2007: 1236-1240). Large populations who did not speak French became a major part of the population, eventually dominating sections of urban areas such as new neighborhoods west of Canal Street in New Orleans, in contrast to the older sections of the city such as the Vieux Carré, (Faubourg) Tremé, and Faubourg Marigny. In rural areas, however, the oral French culture continued to dominate, with music and food serving as two primary ways of transmitting the language from generation to generation (Brasseaux, in: Bernard, 1996: xvii-xviii; Gutierrez, 1992: 121-138; Peknik, 2019: 68, 94). As fiddle-player and *chanteur* Marc Savoy has commented, “Music is the glue [*le coll*] that holds the culture together.”¹² (in: Lomax, 1991)

¹² Dozens of books have been written exploring the traditions and development of music in Louisiana over the centuries. Shane Bernard deals with influences on and from Rhythm and Blues in *Swamp Pop* (1996), and a fine recent work overviews the 20th and early 21st century is Patricia Peknik’s *French Louisiana Music and Its Patrons* (2019). Two prominent categorizations can be identified. Zydeco (after the song “Les haricots sont pas

In the first decades of the 20th century, several educational initiatives were introduced to more closely acculturate the monolingual and largely illiterate residents of rural Louisiana into the United States (Ancelet, 1988a: 35-40). One of the first of these projects was the institution of mandatory school attendance in 1916 for children until the age of fifteen for females and sixteen for males (Harris, 1916: 96).¹³ This was difficult to accept for subsistence farming and trapping communities in which the seasonal labor of sons and daughters was vital to providing basic food needs. As Ancelet describes, children and adolescents “regularly were kept home to help with plowing, planting, hoeing, and harvesting.” In terms of preconceptions about school education itself, “traditional societies such as that of the Cajuns often considered formal education outside the home to be threatening to the natural transmission of information from one generation to the next” (Ancelet, 2007: 1240).

Further feeding the qualms of the local residents, in 1921 the Louisiana State Constitution was amended to impose English as the only language of school education. The pupils, many of whom had never used English before or even heard it spoken, were now not allowed to use any other language.

Several generations of young Cajun and black Creole first-graders, forced to wet their pants at school because they could not ask permission to go to the rest room, soon associated their native language and culture with social stigmatization. Those who could joined the headlong rush toward the language of the future. Soon speaking French was considered not unlike picking your nose: it was something well-raised people did not do in public. (Ancelet, 2007: 1240)

At school children were chastised and even beaten for speaking French. These tales of whippings, kneeling on rice and rapping on knuckles became legendary. Still, most of these stories seem a bit exaggerated, with the heavier corporal punishment coming mostly from *enseignants américains* who themselves could not understand this “foreign” language. Pupils who were caught speaking French were generally punished in less violent ways, for instance they were made to write the line one-thousand times “I must not speak French on the school grounds.” (Breux, 2011b)

Children who used their native language at school were also stigmatized in other ways such as labeling with epithets such as “coonass.” This pejorative signified the working-class

salés”) features the accordion and rhythm instruments (*vest frotoir*, etc.), incorporating Afro-Caribbean and blues influences. Cajun music is marked by ballads and songs of exile, and in the classic version uses no percussion instruments. Music for fast and slow dancing is also fundamental in both streams. As with everything else in Louisiana, all the musical styles have always flowed into and out of each other. Since the incorporation of non-acoustic instruments in the 20th century, the music has been influenced by other Francophone cultures as well as by genres such as rock, jazz, reggae and hip-hop (Peknik, 2019: 1-3; Bernard, 1996: 75-95).

¹³ In the context of “Americanizing the American Indian,” Katherine Jensen (1984: 155, *passim*) has defined certain dialectical processes involved in the imposition of school education and literacy on a colonized population. The initial stages of education (are planned to) acculturate the target population (periphery) to the norms and values of the colonizer (center), leading to the formation of new elites linked to the system and its advantages. Eventually the tools of literacy provide individuals and groups among the population the means to absorb and communicate more advanced knowledge, which they share among themselves as well as with other subjugated populations, i.e. within their own periphery and among other peripheries. This accumulation of perspectives facilitates the recognition by the target population of problems and issues (for example, exploitation of local resources) associated with the colonizer, leading to unrest, rebellion and, sometimes, revolution. In several chapters of the present book this paradigm has been explored, for example *Négritude* and the movements that it inspired around the world.

population — low education, lazy, intractable — equating Cajuns¹⁴ with American stereotypes of French- and Spanish-based cultures. The term was applied to members of the local population to indicate their lower economic and social status as compared to those who wholeheartedly personified and accepted the values and the superiority of the culture of the United States (Ancelet, 2007: 1241). The coonass was assigned a similar or even a lower status than that of Blacks in Jim Crow-era Louisiana (Bernard, 1997).¹⁵ This stigmatization was similar to the derogation imposed on Irish and other immigrant groups, for example in metropolitan areas across the United States in the mid-19th to early 20th-century. The difference is that in Louisiana the target was a population who had thrived in the area for centuries before the existence of the legal authority instigating the acculturation, the United States Federal Government. Parallels with other colonizing efforts around the world can easily be drawn.

Today such a legal prohibition of language might sound draconian, but the truth is that for all but a few *couillons*,¹⁶ this and other policies only encoded the attitude of inferiority that many Louisianans already felt. The anti-French mentality was internalized and reified by native Louisiana teachers, many of whom also spoke only French at home with their own families (Ancelet, 2008: 139-140; Blyth, in: Valdman (ed.), 1997: 31-32). Until the 1960s, speaking and especially reading and writing French was seen as useless in a school system based on the classic pragmatism of John Dewey. In other words, as was the case all over the United States, children were to be educated simply to get the best job at the highest possible wages and to otherwise serve the economic system. French was simply not a part of that equation. Brasseaux points out how “Louisiana’s French-speaking communities were almost entirely forgotten in state histories and historical textbooks” (Brasseaux, 2005: 132). Many Louisiana natives resented this attitude and instinctively rebelled against it, for example through Cajun and Zydeco music, as outlined in note 12 above. Jean Arceneaux voiced his *Schizophrénie linguistique* in a poem, this version from 1978:

On a pas réellement besoin de parler français quand même.
 C’est les États-Unis ici,
 Land of the Free.
 On restera toujours rien que des poor coonasses.
 I will not speak French on the school grounds.
 I will not speak French on the school grounds.

Coonass, non, non, ça gêne pas.
 C’est juste un petit nom.
 Ça veut rien dire.
 C’est pour s’amuser, ça gêne pas.
 On aime ça, c’est cute.
 Ça nous fait pas fâchés.
 Ça nous fait rire,

¹⁴ For the next few pages the term “Cajun” will be used as shorthand for the entire population. The educational measures and especially the employment opportunities later provided by the oil industry as described below were possible only to those who were white or could pass as white, in the vernacular “passé blanc” (Cazabat, 2012; Hobbs, 2014: 151, *passim*). As a side note, primary and secondary education for all in the state, notably including Blacks, was strongly supported (and in some areas created) by the administrations of Governor (1928-1932) and later US Senator (1932-1935) Huey P. Long, a controversial figure in Louisiana and US history. The educational vision of Long, however, did not include French in the curriculum (Jeansonne, 1992: 266-267).

¹⁵ “[Barry Jean Ancelet] has suggested that the word [...] derived from the belief that Cajuns frequently ate raccoons. He has also proposed that the term contains a negative racial connotation: namely, that Cajuns were ‘beneath’ or ‘under’ blacks (or coons, as blacks were often called by racists).” (Bernard, 1997)

¹⁶ “1. imbecile; fool. 2. crazy person. 3. funny person. (adj.) 1. foolish. 2. crazy. 3. funny.” (Le Fleur 2005)

Mais quand on doit rire, c'est en quelle langue qu'on rit?
Et pour pleurer, c'est en quelle langue qu'on pleure?
Et pour crier?
Et chanter?
Et aimer?
Et vivre? (Arceneaux, in : Hamilton et al., 1987: 251-252)¹⁷

Regarding the discovery of oil in Jennings in 1901, while this event happened earlier than the mandate against French in schools, the full influence on Louisiana was felt only decades later. David Barry (in: Breaux, 2011a) outlines two effects of the burgeoning oil business on French in Louisiana. First, there were gradually more and more *Américains* in the area who were speaking English in the local communities. Many of those working in management and engineering remained in the area to start families by finding a local wife, thus themselves were acculturated to Louisiana culture since their children used French at home with their mother. The second effect — or, rather, incentive — was economic. Suddenly the mostly rural population had an opportunity to earn large salaries by working in the oil fields. Many were ready to leave their traditional lifestyle of seafood, trapping, farming if they could afford the materials to build a comfortable house (with the help of their neighbors), purchase a car, or by the post-WWII period even take holidays outside of Louisiana (Ancelet, 2007: 1241; Brasseaux, 2008: 76).

It is vital to keep in mind that the first decades of the 20th century was also the period of Nativism, for example Theodore Roosevelt's "Hyphenated American" speech delivered at the 1915 national meeting of the Knights of Columbus — a national Catholic organization. Nevertheless, while the possibility of becoming a "non-hyphenated" American does not seem to have persuaded the Cajuns and Creoles in Louisiana to acculturate, with all the oil money now available, economic interests finally came to dominate (Ancelet, 2007: 1237-1239). The oil and gas industry finished the job of Americanization-modernization on rural Louisiana that the Civil War had started.

According to Professor Barry, however, the seminal impetus for the eventual revival of French language and culture was the travels of Louisiana soldiers during World War Two. A total of 25,000 French-speaking Louisianans served in Europe, North Africa and the Pacific theater. When the young men at one recruiting center were asked if they could speak a foreign language, the lowly private Bernie LeJeune responded that he could speak French. The recruiter assured him that bastardized Louisiana French "would be of no benefit to the US Army" (Kube, 1994: 345). Once abroad, however, it was soon clear that the Louisianans could communicate with French soldiers and French-speaking populations, which became extremely useful in several environments (Hamilton et al., 1987: 383). In Casablanca, for example, when the United States and French commanders were having a dispute, LeJeune overheard French being spoken. LeJeune inquired about the situation, and was immediately called in to aid in communication. One French soldier later approached LeJeune to ask "Where did you learn to speak English?" (Kube, 1994: 346). The language that the soldiers had been punished for speaking at home became an important asset abroad in the war.

When the Louisiana troops came home, they returned with a new respect for their native French language. They also sought "comfort in 'old-time' music," as the joyous accordion

¹⁷ "We don't really need to speak French anyway./ It's the United States here./ Land of the Free./ We will always be nothing but poor coonasses. I will not speak French on the school grounds./ I will not speak French on the school grounds./ I will not speak French on the school grounds./ Coonass, no, no, it's okay./ It's just a nickname./ It does not mean anything./ It's for fun, don't bother./ We like it, it's cute./ It doesn't make us angry./ It makes us laugh/ But when you have to laugh, what language do you laugh in?/ And to cry, what language do we cry in?/ And to shout?/ And sing?/ And love?/ And live?"

began to dominate over the (at times) plaintive fiddle (Bernard, 1996: 44-45). The veterans explained — in French — to their family and friends how their language skills were valuable in a world where not everybody speaks English (Kube, 1994: *passim*). The people were surprised that “*notre mauvais français*” would have any value outside their own family and community. Still, throughout the 1950s and much of the 1960s a nonchalant attitude regarding their own language and culture remained the norm for most of the population, thus “serious efforts would be necessary” if the language was to be preserved (Ancelet, 1988b: 345).

Renaissance

By the mid-1960s, as dissatisfaction with consumerist and militaristic values came to prevail in much of the Western world, Louisianans – especially the younger generations – began to recognize that something they already had at home could represent an apposite response to the dominant culture. The enthusiastic reception of a performance by a group of Cajuns at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival in Rhode Island led the musicians as well as those back in Louisiana to realize that there was commercial potential in sharing their cultural artefacts outside of the region (Bernard, 1996: 75-77). Brasseaux marks the year of 1968 as “the beginning of the Cajun cultural renaissance” (Brasseaux, 2005: 132). Anything in French, but especially folklore and music, could satiate the need for authenticity in reaction to modern industrial society, and a multi-generational movement developed to revive various forms. This was also a direct “reaction to the Anglo-conformism of previous times” (Bernard, 2003: 87). All of the money to be made in the oil fields could not satisfy the yearning to nurture and celebrate the connection to nature that folk cultures represent.¹⁸

The evolution of the term “coonass” can be taken as a sign of the changes in self-perception of the Louisiana French-speaking population during this period. Once a derogative label othering Cajuns as outsiders to mainstream US society, by the 1960s the term was reclaimed as one of pride, including the use of the French language. The sociolinguistics concept of William Labov “covert prestige” can be applied here, i.e. “the positive social significance lies in the local culture of social relations.” (Green, in: Finegan and Rickford (ed.), 2004: 71) The rehabilitation of the term echoes the reclamation of formerly pejorative indicators by other marginalized identity groups based on sexual and gender orientation, socioeconomic status, ethnicity and race, etc. for example, “Wop,” “Mick,” more recently “nigga” and “queer” (Brontsema, 2004). By the 1970s, the self-label “coonass” began to be taken by certain Louisiana residents as a marker of defiance against a perceived center of American English, consumerist values, and the post-WWII homogenization of culture by mass media, all of which seek to eliminate difference. This was also the height of the era of white flight to the suburbs and the destruction of urban ethnic neighborhoods – with traditional Catholic and other religious communities especially decimated, including neighborhoods in New Orleans and Baton Rouge (Jones, 2004: 555-557, *passim*). As we will see below, later this period also saw the revival of the term “Creole.”

This is when the colorful figure of James “Jimmy” Domengeaux emerges. A lawyer and politician from the city of Lafayette, Domengeaux’s Wikipedia page also calls him a “cultural activist,” and indeed for decades he battled to promulgate the French language culture of southwest Louisiana (Wikipedia, “James R. Domengeaux”). In 1968, the Governor of Louisiana formed CODOFIL, the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (*Conseil pour le développement du français en Louisiane*), appointing Domengeaux as its president. Until his death in 1988, Domengeaux dominated the organization, initially with an approach based on so-called “French French” from the metropolis. The obvious implication was that the

¹⁸ By the late 1960s similar “roots” reactions were occurring all over the United States, for example the revival of traditional acoustic blues instead of commercial RnB, folk music over rock and roll, the reemergence of bluegrass in reaction to mainstream pop country music (Cohen, 2002: 16-20; Escott, 2003: 56-57).

French spoken in Louisiana was peripheral at best, embarrassing at worst. Teachers from France, Belgium and Quebec were recruited and brought to Louisiana to teach the French language. Louisiana teachers were sent abroad to “learn” French and pedagogy. A backlash soon came from parents and others that Louisiana French was not being preserved, but replaced. Calls for the localization of language instruction began (Ancelet, 2008: 138-144). This brought a standard response from CODOFIL spokespersons: “Why should we perpetuate illiteracy in the classroom by teaching Cajun French? It’s an oral language. It doesn’t have a grammar. It doesn’t have a written form.” (Ancelet, 1988b: 347)

While the president of CODOFIL Jimmy Domengeaux’s first language was French and he had fought for decades to preserve Louisiana French language and culture, he was also interested in bringing business and financial capital to the state. The old fields hit their peak of production in 1969, and by the 1980s tax revenue (and thousands of jobs) were being lost when production was curtailed (Austin et al., 2013: 37-65). The funding for CODOFIL was threatened. Budgetary sources for the programs were shifted from the Louisiana Department of Education to the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism. Today it is telling that CODOFIL is officially administered under Culture, Recreation and Tourism, although “it acts as a partner to the Department of Education” (Wikipedia, “CODOFIL”).

The underlying intent of CODOFIL and Domengeaux was positive, but the initial solution of basing language education on variants of French from outside of Louisiana was potentially dangerous, threatening to substitute the periphery of the local languages with some center – be it Paris or Montreal. On the other hand, the public felt a sense of unity with other French-speaking peripheries, conveyed especially in a gestures of solidarity with some features of *Révolution tranquille* in French Canada. The most famous of these expressions was the song of defiance “Réveille” by Zachary Richard. As Richard performed this “Acadian national anthem” at the 1975 Louisiana Festival de Musique Acadienne “he and the members of his band waved a flag and held their fists in the air.” As Bernard (2003) describes, in the hymnal “Réveille,” Richard “transferred his militancy from protesting the Vietnam War to saving Cajun French culture.” In the text, allusions to the *Grand Dérangement* of 200 years earlier can be mapped onto the contemporary situation of the domination of the United States / English center over the Louisiana / French periphery.

C’est les goddams
qui viennent
Voler les enfants.
Réveille! Réveille!
Hommes acadiens
Pour sauver l’héritage.
(in: Bernard, 2003: 72)¹⁹

The 1975 performance of “Réveille” and the response to it attracted the attention “of the rest of the French-speaking world, especially in Quebec and the Acadian Maritimes where politics and culture were deeply intertwined” (Ancelet, 2007: 1252-53).²⁰

¹⁹ “The goddamns (nickname for British soldiers who carried out the Great Expulsion in the 1750s)/ Are coming To steal your children./ Wake up! Wake up!/ Acadian men/ To save our heritage.”

²⁰ Domengeaux, on the other hand, was angered at this display of political and cultural rebellion, which might frighten commercial interests from investing in Louisiana and CODOFIL. Richard was banned from performing at all CODOFIL-related events for 20 years. Since CODOFIL was financially affiliated with nearly all of the French cultural and music festivals in Louisiana, this ban effectively prevented Richard from reaching a broader Louisiana audience, although the global resurgence of French-speaking cultures created a fair market for his music and writing around the world (Bernard, 2003: 72). In 1995 Richard made a triumphant return to the Festival de Musique Acadienne to perform “Réveille” again, this time in a commemorative atmosphere (Ancelet, 2007: 1252).

c'est quoi, quoi c'est ça
la culture.

...

Dans toutes les langues
Du monde, tout l'monde
Criant d'une seule voix
"J'su que j'su."
Fin de la tyrannie.
Délivrance à la paix.²²

(Poème Pour La Défense De La Culture, in: *Cris sur le Bayou*, 1980: 45)

Gradually the local language varieties — codified as Cajun French — became taught in schools. In the mid-1980s Domengeaux oversaw the institution of immersion education, through which all subjects are taught in French. In addition, from 1985-1993 CODOFIL and Louisiana Public Broadcasting produced the weekly television program *En Français*, a series “entirely in French [which] highlighted the culture of Francophone Louisiana” (LMDA, 2018). Though this multivalent approach remained successful for decades in terms of attracting national and international attention (including tourism), students gradually began to show less interest in learning the language in schools (Lindner, 2013: 461; Trépanier, 1991: 169-170).

Efforts continue to be made locally and with global partners to support French education in Louisiana. Formed by a plan established through the cooperation of the French government Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, CODOFIL as well as other partners, in 2022 a program was announced by which teachers from France can live in Louisiana for as long as two years “to teach the French language or their subject in French.” Thus far, 41 French teachers have been recruited under this program for positions in immersion schools (France Éducation international, 2022).

The commoditization of “Cajun” and a challenge to it

Scholars have reacted in various ways to what Pascale Casanova (2004) has termed a globalized “World Republic of Letters.” Taking a longer view, however, there has always been a tug-of-war of influence between putative centers and peripheries even before the ages of colonialism and globalization. And as Pierre Bourdieu (2002) has outlined, it is not only financial capital that is exchanged in sets of power relations, but also social, symbolic and cultural capital, for instance through the commoditization of artefacts. These types of negotiations represent a recurrent theme in several chapters of this book.

During the late 1980s it was Cajun culture’s turn to be commodified, including “[n]iche marketing, the structuring of recreation around the modern work week, and the establishment of personal identity through the purchase of symbolically rich commodities” (Bankston, 2000; Henry, 2000: 377). Suddenly rural south Louisiana “Cajun Country” became a popular tourist destination as an addendum to a holiday in urban New Orleans (Ware, 2003: 160). Even today thousands of products and services (books, toys, restaurants, food items, sports teams, mass media products) that bear the name “Cajun” are ubiquitous throughout Louisiana. It can be safely said that a significant percentage of these artefacts have little to do with French Louisiana culture (Bankston, 2000; Henry, 2000: 385-387, 393-400). Corporate fast food chains such as McDonald’s and Pizza Hut created “Cajun” or “Cajun Spice” versions of their products, along with national and international marketing campaigns promoting them. Hollywood movies with

²² “Having become a stranger to my own language,/ To speak English, to speak French,/ A cultural chameleon,/ It’s what, what is / Culture?/ In all the languages/ of the world, of all the world,/ Crying out as a single voice,/ “I am, I am.”/ The end of tyranny./ Deliverance and peace.” (Trans. by the poet)

large budgets (*The Big Easy*, McBride 1986) as well as smaller, independent films (*Southern Comfort*, Hill 1981) featured Louisiana settings and characters, with locals often ridiculing the actors' attempts at regional accents. Cajuns were marketed as either Rousseau's pure noble savage, or as wild, violent killers of anyone who intruded into their territory. The reification of these stereotypes and the homogenization of the complex layers of Louisiana culture into a simplified image of "Cajun" frustrated some local activists and made a number of local entrepreneurs rich (Ancelet, 2007: 1242-1244).

But the Cajuns were not the only Louisianans to be dismayed by this commoditization (or what we might call "centering") of Cajun French culture. By the 1980s a challenge to Cajun French had emerged from a population identifying itself as "Creole" who began to more widely project their own French-based culture as distinctive and worth celebrating and preserving (Istre, 2018: 209). By the mid-20th century the term Creole had moved towards a cultural marker of racial differentiation in opposition to the category of "Cajun," with the latter "white" group marked as variously inferior (to the often "mixed" traditional landed class who had spoken a more refined "Créole" French based more closely on European models), or superior (to "Black" speakers of the hybrid of French, Native American, Spanish, and West African languages which became known as "Louisiana Creole") (Brasseaux, 2005: 90; Valdman et al., 2010: xii).²³

CODOFIL now came under harsh criticism because of the lack of linguistic diversity in their language programs, in which the codified Cajun French was valorized to the exclusion of what was positioned as Creole French. In the same way as the first generation of Louisiana French educators had to deal with the issue of "whose French?" by standardizing the language to create new learning materials, those identifying as Creole began to create their own language education and outreach programs (Dawdy, 2000: 109; Valdman et al., 2010: xii). In fact, today it might be said that in terms of free open source online language materials and courses, more Louisiana Creole resources can be found than Cajun ones, for example the downloadable textbook *Ti Liv Kréyòl* (Guillory-Chatman et al., 2020), which is complete with lessons featuring sound recordings, grammar, and glossaries. On the other hand, in terms of mass consumer products, popular books, etc. the marker "Cajun" still dominates, especially in tourist areas.

Designed in 1987, the official Louisiana Creole flag represents some of the diverse influences claimed by the movement (Bondurand, 2001). The upper left section features a white *fleur de lis* on a blue field, representing Louisiana's French heritage. West Africa is symbolized by the Mali Republic national flag in the lower left corner, the Senegal Republic national flag in the upper right. The Spanish colonial period is signified by the Tower of Castille on the lower right. In 1987 the non-profit C.R.E.O.L.E. Inc. (Cultural, Resourceful, Educational Opportunities, and Linguistic Enrichment Incorporated) was established with: "the mission [...] to develop and perpetuate the Creole language and culture as it exists in the State of Louisiana." Their various activities include participation in "international festivals, exchange programs, and cultural and educational programs," including language, music, art, dance, food, architecture, and literature. The focus is international: "to provide opportunities for a global sharing of multicultural experiences within the Creole community" (C.R.E.O.L.E. Inc., 2022).

In response to what is perceived as the socially constructed Cajun / Creole binary that has held fast for more than 100 years in Louisiana, in the 2010s a new program began to emerge offering the narrative of Louisiana Créolité, "a movement against the idea of race as the deciding feature of a population" (Landry, 2005). Christophe Landry, "a 10th generation Louisiana Creole, linguistic activist, and historian" contextualizes the movement:

²³ Similar migrations of the meaning of the term "creole" occurred in other Romance-language contexts in the 20th century, for example in the Portuguese-language context of Angola and Mozambique – see in this book III.10.

Placing Louisiana Créolité in this context, obsessing over the etymology of the word Creole itself has three effects. First, it impedes looking at Creole Louisiana for what it has been and currently is. Second, it is a way to continually disclaim a shared genealogical and cultural relationship with people of opposite “races.” Third, constantly discussing the etymology of Louisiana Créolité, permits the speaker to couch Cajunité (Cajunness) and Créolité in some “pure racial” idea. In the pure race world, inhabitants do not mix, borrow from one another, live among one another, or share common ancestors. Because Americans (and now Americanized Creoles) associate race-mixing with Creole, it becomes essential to stress the “original use” of Creole. (Landry, 2022)

In the 2005 documentary *Spirit of a Culture: Cane River Creoles* (2005) novelist John Sarpy personalizes the point and puts it even more plainly:

I’m not black, I’m not white. I’m in between, I’m a Creole. When you start trying to say that or explain it, ninety-nine percent of America just does not buy it. This multiracial thing to me is at the heart of my concept of being Creole, all right? It was at the heart of the concept of my grandparents and great grandparents and great parents before them of being Creole. [Today] all you will see is white history and black history. There is nothing in between. [...] But where there is any element of a mixture of white and black, then that the mixture has to disappear into black. [...] It’s a man-made divider. (in: Rodman, 2005)

In response to this de facto segregation, Louisiana Créolité represents a celebration of difference through the recognition that dissimilarities are often only superficial — especially in a place with such a unique history and so many diverse cultural influences. The explicit intention of the Louisiana Créolité movement is to overcome racial, ethnic, language and other divisions toward their resolutions, not excluding spiritual elements. The mutual intelligibility of the assorted varieties of French-based language serves as a connection among the various populations across Louisiana as well as in other parts of the United States — notably communities in Texas and California. The knowledge of French has also created numerous opportunities for cultural and educational exchanges not only with the centers of France and Quebec, but also in French-speaking areas around the world in Africa and Southeast Asia (C.R.E.O.L.E. Inc., 2022; Landry, 2022).

By way of conclusion: Is Louisiana a part of the South?

The main points of this text can be summarized by tracing several periphery / center binaries²⁴ which can help describe cultural associations in Louisiana – then and now:

periphery / center
French / American English
“Louisiana French” / “French”
kréyòl la Lwizyàn (Creole) / français de la Louisiane (Cajun)

Besides these, other dichotomies may be explored, such as Louisiana / “the South.” As the binaries listed above flow into each other as determined in and by various situations, so does

²⁴ Perhaps it would be useful here to remind readers that, while we may generalize regarding one side or another of the periphery / center binary throughout certain time periods and geographical regions, finally influences are more meaningfully traced within particular cultural artefacts or oeuvres.

this one. In the 19th century, many Louisiana citizens — especially in regions where French still dominated — wanted no part of the US Civil War. When they were conscripted into Confederate (or to a lesser extent, Union) armies, large numbers of recruits deserted and fled to the swamps and the deep woods where they could not be found by Federal or Confederate officials, neither groups of whom knew the geography of the territory (Sacher, 2007: 152-163). The Louisiana state legal system is also totally unique in the United States, administrated as it is through Catholic-based parishes instead of counties. Further, since 1804 the state government has been based on the Napoleonic Code in which all laws are strictly codified as opposed to the other state governments and the US Federal government, which are based more or less on the English common law system of judicial precedents (Engber, 2005).

On the other hand, since the end of the 19th century Louisiana can certainly be called a part of “the South.” Many of its citizens possess many positive stereotypical features such as warm hospitality, distinctive cuisine, entertaining folklore as well as respect for traditional cultures and values. Still, it cannot be denied that various governments, groups and individuals in Louisiana have perpetrated some of the worst discrimination and violence in the history of the United States, for example the 1939 brutal beating and maiming of the Black Creole Amédé Ardoin, a “forerunner of both zydeco and Cajun music” (Sandmel, 2022).

As shown above, many scholars from Louisiana and elsewhere have documented the slowly accumulating influence of the United States beginning in the 19th century, gaining force after the US Civil War, and finally becoming dominant at the beginning of the 20th century. Since this time the French-language cultural-complex of Louisiana has become the periphery in the region in which it was the hegemonic center, a periphery which can be defined in contrast to both “the South” as well as the United States as a whole. From about 1970 to the year 2000 or so a Renaissance of Louisiana French language and culture took place which had great effects within the state as well as nationally and internationally. In 1990 about 250,000 Louisianans indicated that “French was the main language spoken at home.”²⁵ Still, today it seems like the younger population has less interest in preserving it (Mamone, 2021; Lindner: 2013, 461: Trépanier, 1991: 169-170). As of 2010, the number of native speakers of Louisiana French was reported at 115,183, with a per capita rate lower than that of native French speakers in California and New York (American Community Survey 2006-2010)

Despite decreasing overall numbers of French speakers in Louisiana, those who call themselves Cajun, Creole or simply “French” continue to feel strongly about their heritage, and are working to keep alive the traditions of food, music, literature, folklore and art in the various regions. Tourism to Acadiana, including sightseeing tours and excursions, remains a strong economic boon, and online communities of interest maintain close contacts around the world with other French speakers. Bachelor’s and master’s study programs in French and Francophone Studies are offered at several colleges, with doctoral programs available at three universities, including a unique interdisciplinary PhD program at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (2020). As exemplified in the narrative of Louisiana Créolité, the emphasis is on commonalities, not differences. International cooperation with Francophone centers like Quebec and France as well as the Antilles and Haiti, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian Ocean, the Maghreb, and the Mediterranean has helped French speakers in Louisiana to continue and fortify their efforts *Lâche pas la patate*.

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²⁵ “D’après le recensement de 1990, à peu près 250,000 louisianais ont répondu que le français était la langue principale parlée chez eux.” (Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, 2022)

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