

1. My thoughts on Being Young and Creole

By Christie Melonson

Often times, looks can be deceiving, especially when an individual seeks to classify and “understand” another based on his or her assumed identity. Deep within the closets of America’s past lie the tales of forbidden love, inappropriate liaisons, and acts of violence in the form of rape between people of color and those of Caucasian descent. The Americas seem to have been mysteriously populated in this way, by the unions between the more privileged wealthy land owners from distant lands overseas who already had wives and children, the natives, and the slaves who were uprooted and replanted on the farms of the American South.

My birth certificate says that I am Black. The older people in my culture say that I am colored. The people of Middle Eastern descent that I come in contact with all agree that I look Lebanese or North African. While living and traveling in Europe the Italians thought I was Italian, the Germans spoke German to me, and the French didn’t seem to care about my race. When I lived in Houston, young people would approach me in school and ask, “What are you?” Now that I live in San Antonio, Texas, many assume that I am Mexican-American or Hispanic, and many speak Spanish to me if I don’t answer them fast enough in English.

Explaining to friends and co-workers of all races that I am not necessarily what I appear to be has not been an easy task to carry out. In my current position I work in a university with students who are largely of Hispanic or Latino heritage. Many of them ask, “What is your ethnic background?” and I feel obliged to give them the “Creole” speech. They usually look at me funny and don’t bring it up again. I have endured many awkward silences after proclaiming and claiming my cultural heritage. I have stuttered my way through it, suffered heart palpitations, and waited for the curious looks of surprise or even confusion.

My white skin betrays me in this way...it does not reveal the African or Native American ancestry that flows through my veins. My skin does not speak of the fact that my parents and their siblings were obligated to attend school in the time of segregation and to face discrimination from both Black and White alike. My skin does not reveal the awkwardness I face when hardly anyone can identify my ethnicity so they assume I am a member of their ethnic group.

Yes we are all human, but my culture and/or race are not necessarily the same as those around me. My history is not the same. My values are not the same. What I eat with my family during the holidays is not the same. This concept of identity goes well beyond the skin color of an individual...it is imbibed in every little thing that one does, says, and believes. And although identity encompasses more than cultural heritage, it is my opinion that the foundations of a person’s culture set the stage for the rest of his or her development. Cultural values and mores provide a basic mold that may be adapted if the individual so chooses.

What a betrayal it is for me to walk down the street and for my cultural story not to be evident!!! I am not bitter, just honest. Why does the man on the corner assume that I speak a certain language in my home or that my values mirror his! What arrogance, safety, and comfort we find in stereotyping people and assuming we know exactly who they are!!! We limit ourselves as we limit others.

And I am guilty of doing the same exact thing. Maybe we all are. The saddest part is that we do not question our assumptions in hopes of truly understanding our neighbors. We cling to what we are told is true and we hold on for dear life. What is so terrible about looking below the surface and seeing what is actually there? Why is it so hard for the people I meet to know that I am CREOLE and remember the word? Why do they think I am Cajun when I never said the word? Why is being a white-skinned person of African–American descent such a taboo!!! And why do I emphasize that Black part of me that is so many times left unseen by the naked eye?

For me there is a great admiration for the Africans in my blood line who were taken from their homeland and forced to serve in the fields and in the houses of wealthy white landowners. Why? Because they survived, that’s why. They were strong under the most horrible conditions, they kept their traditions even though they couldn’t keep their names, and they found ways to fight the master without him even knowing it. What about the Native Americans in my bloodline whose tribe we cannot identify due to lack of records, but whose healing traditions are sometimes still used and whose facial features are evident in select “members” of Club Creole? Who can look into my eyes and see the dying tribes who once thrived off the land around the Mississippi? Where are the rites of passage and the respect for Mother Earth that represented the consciousness of those who roamed the land freely without the white Europeans’ disease??? Who can see this when they look at me?

By the same token, who can see the hope of the Frenchman who left his beloved France where the wine flowed freely in order to journey to the new promised land which later became the United States? Who can look at me and feel his fear as he sailed the seas for what seemed like an endless voyage...or the frustration that led him to relieve his urges with a slave girl who would never tell and later on, the loneliness that led him to the quadroom balls in New Orleans in order to make acquaintance with a beautiful, almost white woman of color. Many relations ended in making children whose skin color would tell what happened, much to the chagrin of once happy African slaves awaiting the arrival of what they believed to be their own biological children.

Who can look into my eyes and see the pain of the white children, who after years of not knowing, finally realized that the slave children they grew up playing with were actually their brothers and sisters? Betrayal, resentment, rape, rage, repression, regret.....these are only a few words that come to mind. Why was it such a crime to be a person of color? Why did one race have to overpower another? Why do people romanticize the relations between Black women and White slave owners by saying that the African was simply a queen to her king, and that true love is why they had so many children together? Where is the proof of this? I could argue that the Frenchman freed his biological children following the Napoleonic code but really out of human guilt! How easy is it to communicate with someone who speaks a completely different language? Why do people romanticize the conception of my culture? I shudder when I think of what I know deep inside really happened.

I speak only of the beginning, of course. I am grateful to be alive and to have a unique culture to celebrate. This is not to say that romantic liaisons did not exist between white and black and people of different races and ethnicities. Anything is possible. But what was likely still is likely and will continue to be likely as long as U.S. citizens continue to choose to regard matters of race, color, ethnicity, etc... Biases are surely to exist, along with a strong dose of paranoia as people of different races merge and become one.

Gumbo, meatpies, family reunions, eating boxes of crawfish for hours on end, going to church together, saying those French words when its time to go like “allons”...I am thankful for all of this. I love having a “rainbow” of relatives to reflect the

shades of who I am. I love to play the "Cornbread" song and watch my mom break out in dance. I love the fact that I took the time to learn French and learn about my European roots. I have been able to harness a piece of my linguistic heritage that most will let fall by the wayside.

Speaking of falling... I have some advice for those of you who are so proud to be French-Creole...focus on the young people! Don't simply dwell on genealogy and the definition of what constitutes Creole. Be proud but be open to other cultures. Open your minds to what the young people are doing. Try to focus on how their culture has shaped their education and their life choices. Let's work to leave a *living* legacy and not simply a book of history that will be forgotten if the young are forgotten. Stop dressing up like dead historical figures and start being yourselves! Stop getting mixed up in the politics and the profit of being Creole. Let's focus on who we are and what we can contribute to the world. Thanks for listening to a young person.