

Letter From Louisiana

by Chris Segura

The Peculiar Institution



A selectively historical motion picture about a 19th-century rebellion aboard a cruel Spanish slave ship rakes in megabucks as a result of media hype, including the notation that white production assistants were forbidden to put the stage-chains on the black actors aboard the replica vessel. No one mentioned that the original chains were first put around black ankles and black wrists by black slave-traders or that the leader of the featured revolt is thought by historians to have entered the slave trade himself after his repatriation to Sierra Leone.

The Bush administration threatens to boycott the U.N.-sponsored World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa, because of scheduled consideration of reparations for slavery in the United States, and then walks out because of Arab attempts to define Zionism as racism.

The U.S. government faces mounting global criticism for supporting reparations for victims of Nazi genocide against European Jews and apologizing for internment of Japanese-Americans at home while officially ignoring suits for compensation by former “comfort women” forced into sexual slavery by Japanese occupiers of Asia, all during World War II.

Thumbing their political nose at the United States, the Dutch are building a new international war-crimes court at the Hague to try such defendants as Slobodan Milosevic for ethnic atrocities in the former Yugoslavia. The Bush administration is concerned that the 1998 treaty establishing the court could be used to try U.S. soldiers and governmental officials in foreign courts.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, founded by Martin Luther King, Jr., at the beginning of the U.S. civil-rights movement, announced in August that it is attempting to end racial profiling and seeking reparations for slavery. In panel discussions, members of the group said that blacks still suffer from the

racism of the nation’s past and that they would try to fix the nation’s lingering inequities.

Closer to home—if you live in southwest Louisiana—Cajun attorney and president of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana Warren Perrin continues to petition Queen Elizabeth of England to apologize for the 18th-century deportations of Acadians from what are now the Maritime Provinces of Canada. And yes, at breakfast discussions in bayou-country kitchens, the notion of reparations also surfaces like the snout of an alligator poking through coffee-colored water.

The race card is being played everywhere. Practically no one on the face of the earth is invulnerable to accusations of racially motivated thoughts and actions. History was slanted one way for so long that it is actually dangerous to take a balanced look at any unpleasant moment in the past.

Meanwhile, amidst all of this turmoil, the sleepy little town of St. Martinville, Louisiana, sponsors—of all things—a politically incorrect witness to its own cultural heritage. The African-American Museum, which opened on Bayou Teche this summer, dares to suggest that slavery wasn’t as bad as we have been led to believe—at least not here.

The concept is certain to be debated. If it is even basically true, however, then it suggests that what Barry Goldwater said in 1964—that racism has to be resolved in the human heart—was already being accomplished in a backwater Louisiana bayou town.

At first glance, one might think that the messenger should watch out for concealed ideological weapons. In fact, the reverse is true. The St. Martinville City Council (two of the five council members are black, the mayor is white) unanimously approved the African-American Museum only after carefully scrutinizing the historical facts and deciding that the message would fly in the local political arena.

Initially, according to Mayor Eric Martin, the council members had said, “Are you crazy? The single most sensitive story in the South?” By ignoring this episode of American history, however, we might overlook important evidence of racial harmony. Interracial marriage, for instance, was not uncommon in some of the Gulf South colonies in the earliest years, though Louisiana law and custom forbade the practice. Biracial couples

“jumped the broomstick” (a marriage ceremony of Celtic origin, not African). Evidence refutes the conventional assertion that all of these black/white sexual unions were tantamount to rape.

The Roman Catholic Church kept—and, until recent years, suppressed—baptismal records listing parents of different races, and many blacks in Louisiana have now traced their ancestry back to pre-expulsion Acadia and imperial France. Historically, information at the museum explains, the products of these interracial relationships made up a third class in the local society, a sort of buffer caste between whites and blacks called “Creole.”

The word has many definitions. The Oxford English Dictionary lists its origin as French, derivative of the Spanish *criollo*, meaning “native to the locality; believed to be a colonial corruption of *criadillo*, diminutive *criado*, bred, brought up, reared, domestic.”

The definition in the OED traces the word’s root to the Latin

creare—to create. According to some 18th century writers originally applied by South American Negroes to their own children born in America as distinguished from Negroes freshly imported from Africa.

It is also applied to “Spaniards born in the West Indies,” according to the definition. Farther down, the definition reads:

A person born and naturalized in the country but of European (usually Spanish or French) or of African Negro race: the name having no connotation of color, and its reference to origin being distinguished on the one hand from being born in Europe (or Africa) and on the other hand from aboriginal.

Still farther down, the OED definition states the word “now usually [means] a creole white, a descendant of European settlers, born or naturalized in those colonies or regions, and more or less modified in type by the climate and surroundings.” Near the end, the explanation reads, “now chiefly applied to the native whites in the W. Indies, the native French population in Louisiana, Mauritius, etc.”

The word’s definition is still controversial in Louisiana, but, for the most part, it is used to identify black music and cuisine or people of African derivation who

speak French. “Creole” is also used to define the dialect of French spoken by blacks as opposed to that employed by Cajuns.

St. Martinville was established as a military garrison named Poste des Atakapas, erected as protection against a now-extinct tribe of native cannibals in 1714, four years before the founding of New Orleans by Jean Baptiste LeMoyne, sieur de Bienville. It was Bienville who brought the first black slaves (two young coach servants) to Louisiana in the early 18th century.

Slaves of absentee landlords first settled the area surrounding St. Martinville. Some of these individuals spent their entire adult lives unsupervised, running vast cattle enterprises and raising families in freedom, with their own land as the ultimate reward. Later, royalist refugees of the French Revolution settled on large sugar plantations; French expatriates fleeing slave rebellions in the Greater Antilles did the same. In 1765, famed guerrilla leader Joseph (Beausoleil) Broussard arrived with his extended family after four years fighting the British in Canada following the beginning of the Acadian expulsions in 1755, four years in jail, and two years tragically wandering the Atlantic in search of a new home. Twenty years later, the main body of Acadian expatriates arrived in New Orleans from France and began drifting into the area. Their descendants are now called “Cajuns.”

Everybody brought along black slaves to Louisiana except the Cajuns. It wasn’t until about 1820 that those impoverished exiles finally became affluent enough to own other human beings.

The early experience of slavery in the area was regulated by the French *Code Noir*, which differed greatly from bondage regulations in the predominantly English colonies that became the United States. The code was written for the West Indies in 1685 and reissued for Louisiana in 1724. It was designed first to protect a valuable commodity and then to ensure, as museum curator Danielle Fontenette says, that existence as chattel “wasn’t supposed to last forever.”

The focus of the museum is on the black experience in the Attakapas District on the heel of the Louisiana boot—now all or part of the parishes of Vermilion, St. Martin, West St. Mary, and Cameron. Near the entrance of the museum, information panels note that the captains’ logs of French slave ships indicate that slaves

were brought topside for fresh meals twice daily. Showers were provided twice a week. Hair was cut every two to three weeks. One panel reads, “some ships even had drums [aboard] to accompany the singing.”

Good behavior aboard was rewarded by “watered-down spirits . . . beef and tobacco.” These were not pleasure cruises, of course; most of the time was spent below decks in tight racks of berths. Still, another information panel insists, “French ships had a lower mortality rate than British” vessels. Captains were given bonuses for low death rates and “healthy slaves commanded premium prices.”

After arrival in Louisiana under the *Code Noir*, every slave was given the right to demand a price for his freedom from his owner and the ability to take the owner to court if he refused, says Fontenette. Information panels carefully note that all slaveowners did not uniformly administer the code. Still, many slaves purchased their freedom or had it purchased for them, Fontenette claims, and the museum documents several of these freedmen.

“So you say, ‘If you’re a slave, then how are you going to make money to buy your freedom?’” says Fontenette, anticipating the question. “Well, on Sundays you were allowed to earn money . . . either at the market or hiring yourself out to other plantations . . .” There are records, she adds, of people like one woman who, in her 80’s, managed to buy her freedom, a tremendous testament to the endurance of the human spirit.

Under the *Code Noir*, there were other avenues to freedom that did not exist in the rest of the states. Anyone who could demonstrate European or indigenous ancestry was automatically emancipated, according to Fontenette.

There is documentation of several “free people of color” living in the area before the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. In the Attakapas District in 1850, there were 1,127 free blacks plying a variety of trades, from farming to banking. Alexander Lemelle, for instance, bought land in the area in 1814 and served as a captain of the local militia in the Battle of New Orleans. Between 1817 and 1825, he bought more large tracts of land and slaves. Freed blacks also fought for the Confederacy in the War Between the States. Many of them were slaveowners as well. “They were just protecting their own interests,” Fontenette says.

Still, “there were lynching of blacks,”

Dr. Carl Brasseaux of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette points out, in his office where he heads up the university’s new Center for Cultural and Eco-Tourism. “But there were also lynchings of whites. It was just a violent period. There were a number of lynchings in this state, [but] in the St. Martinville area they were minuscule compared to north Louisiana.”

Northern Louisiana was permanently settled after St. Martinville, predominantly by Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Catholic areas of Louisiana, by comparison, were historically noted for tolerance, especially those parishes of the old Attakapas District. Until the mid-20th century, priests there were drawn from France and Belgium. Even French Catholics of the diocese of Lafayette generally were shocked at the behavior of their brethren from the more fundamentalist Irish Catholic archdiocese of New Orleans (vividly portrayed by John Steinbeck in *Travels With Charlie*), when parochial schools were integrated during the 1960’s.

In his book *Acadian to Cajun: Transformation of a People, 1803-1877* (University Press of Mississippi, 1992) Brasseaux writes:

In the infamous vigilante campaigns of the 1850s, rustlers were rooted out and administered flogging and death as quasi-military and judicial units combed the parishes at night for the reputed criminals—particularly individuals recently acquitted of violent crimes—who, when apprehended, were either banished, flogged, or hanged. Sentences, determined in advance by fifteen-member vigilante judicial councils, were initially administered indiscriminately, and members of each major ethnic group—blacks, Anglo-Americans, French and German immigrants, Creoles and Acadians (even vigilantes’ relatives)—tasted the vigilante lash.

After emancipation, the violence continued. As Brasseaux writes:

Though poor whites and former free persons of color remained frequent targets of vigilante raids, southwestern Louisiana’s postbellum vigilantes increasingly began to attack the recently freed local bondsmen. This redirection of

their activity was the result of forces present before the Civil War and the socioeconomic and political changes wrought by the war [widespread starvation].

As the 1859-60 vigilante campaigns of terror and violence against free people of color in St. Landry Parish and in the Attakapas region indicated, the vigilante-antivigilante struggle had evolved (by the early postbellum period) from a crusade for law and order into a class struggle with strong racial overtones.

Brasseaux concludes that

African-Americans heavily influenced the development of Cajun music, folklore, cuisine, folk medicine and folk religion. In the post-bellum period, however, these cross-cultural contributions were overshadowed by the political ramifications of emancipation for the former servile population.

In other words, race relations got worse, not better, following universal emancipation. But St. Martinville, with its caste-system buffer of Creole blacks, weathered those difficult years better than other areas of the South, according to the museum.

Problems continue along racial lines in St. Martinville today. The members of the city council that approved the museum, descendants of Cajuns and French aristocrats and slaves, have not stood for election for 12 years. The federal government has denied voting rights to the

population of a little more than 7,000—about 66 percent of them black—because of a redistricting order. If the current plan is approved, the election may finally be held next spring.

The disparities in the constantly evolving collective consciousness concerning slavery and its aftermath are only the groundwork for the real message of the museum. It is a herald of hope, a cry for cohesiveness. At the very end of the tour, visitors are told of the cooperation between the races that allowed the culture of the bayou country to flourish. The black experience is particularly linked to that of the Cajun community.

“We’re not saying that it [the Cajun upheaval and resettlement] was the same as slavery,” Fontenette says. “We’re just saying that we were both peoples who were taken from their homes by force and have lived together all these centuries.”

After the expulsions from Canada, many of the Acadian exiles were forced into indentured servitude in the British colonies of the Atlantic seaboard and on Hispaniola. A common practice was the forced removal of children from French-speaking families and their replacement as servants in English-speaking households.

Even today, many Cajuns feel disenfranchised from the American dream, having had their culture and language attacked as un-American and, until the mid-20th century, disparaged as “primitive” and “immoral” in the media. This negative self-concept, some historians and sociopsychologists suggest, both united and separated Cajuns and bayou-country blacks.

Housed in the same building as the African-American exhibit is the Museum of the Acadian Memorial. (The memorial itself is next door.) The last stop on the tour is an introduction to the Cajun experience. A boardwalk along Bayou Teche joins the two buildings.

The Teche, like all bayous, flows slowly with the tides. It remains much the same as it was when Cajuns and slaves were transported on its soft undulations to the fertile land that still nourishes black as well as white. Occasionally, from the boardwalk, the snout of an alligator can be seen surfacing in the coffee-colored water.

Chris Segura, a journalist, novelist, and short-story writer, writes from his hometown of Abbeville, Louisiana.

Letter From Palermo

by Andrei Navrozov

To Get Something Done



“Before I have my coffee, I want a glass of lemon juice,” I say to the barman. He is out of lemons, which apparently can happen even in Sicily. “Oranges?” Out of oranges, but I suppose this, too, can happen. “What can I get then?” He offers me a lemon *granita*, made with crushed ice and sugar, out of his freezer. “Too sweet?” He swears it isn’t, setting before me a small champagne glass that exudes the freshest and most definitive flavor of locally grown lemons I have ever experienced. Yet the fact remains that the concoction in question is meant to be a kind of dessert. It is much too sweet to put in your mouth first thing in the morning.

But, killingly sweet though it is, this one is undeniably the best of the genre, two Michelin stars and worth a special detour. So what is there to say, in the circumstances? Anyway, I eat the whole lot in an hypnotic silence, whereupon, mistaking my qualified admiration for unconditional surrender, the righteous barman begins the morning lesson: “I don’t make it too sweet. Other people make it too sweet, when they shouldn’t. I never do, because I’m careful. You have to be careful with *granita*. Never too sweet. You want to know something? It’s all a matter of how much sugar you put in. If you put in too much, it becomes too sweet. But if you don’t put in enough, it may be too sour.” Humbly, I ask for a big glass of water.

What I sometimes miss, living here, is Aristotelian logic. In the Anglo-American system of cultural values, at least some small portion of the stuff seems to filter through, down to the commonest man, along such admittedly inefficient capillaries as high-school education and white-collar employment, with the result that, when you ask a Manchester banker for a debt-consolidation loan and his bank doesn’t give them, he won’t offer you chocolate kisses, or a gaily decorated wastepaper basket, instead of the money. Nor, still more obviously, will a Philadelphia baker, sold out of the bread rolls you wanted, ply you with perfectly ripe figs

LIBERAL ARTS

HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE THE ISRAELIS?

“The Israeli Vice-Minister of Internal Security, Gedeón Ezra, proposes the liquidation of close relatives of Palestinian suicide bombers in order to dissuade them from committing attacks.

“A would-be suicide bomber should know that his closest relatives could pay for his crimes, and could even be liquidated,” declared the deputy of the Likud party on public television.”

—from a report on Radio TV Portugal (August 20, 2001)