

COLORED CREOLE

COLOR CONFLICT
AND CONFUSION
IN NEW ORLEANS

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November 1, 1987

Identifying ones self is a life long process of collective experiences due to ones gender, position in the family, hair and color, race, religion, family status, station in life and more.

Discovering my own identity, as a child, was a natural fun loving exciting progression until I found out that I was a Negro, which I could not accept, especially since Negroes were subjected to a life of perpetrated hate, limitations, alienation, segregation and discrimination. We lived in an ugly climate which turned some of us into the hater, as well as the hated of both Blacks and Caucasians.

My family, along with other Creole families, lived in a kind of Limbo, excluded from the white race and refused to include other Negroes into the Creole culture. We were part of a system that divided and conquered and we succumbed. We helped to perpetuate this system that divided and weakened us as a strong race, some of us continue to this day, because many of us lack knowledge of our Afrikan heritage and history.

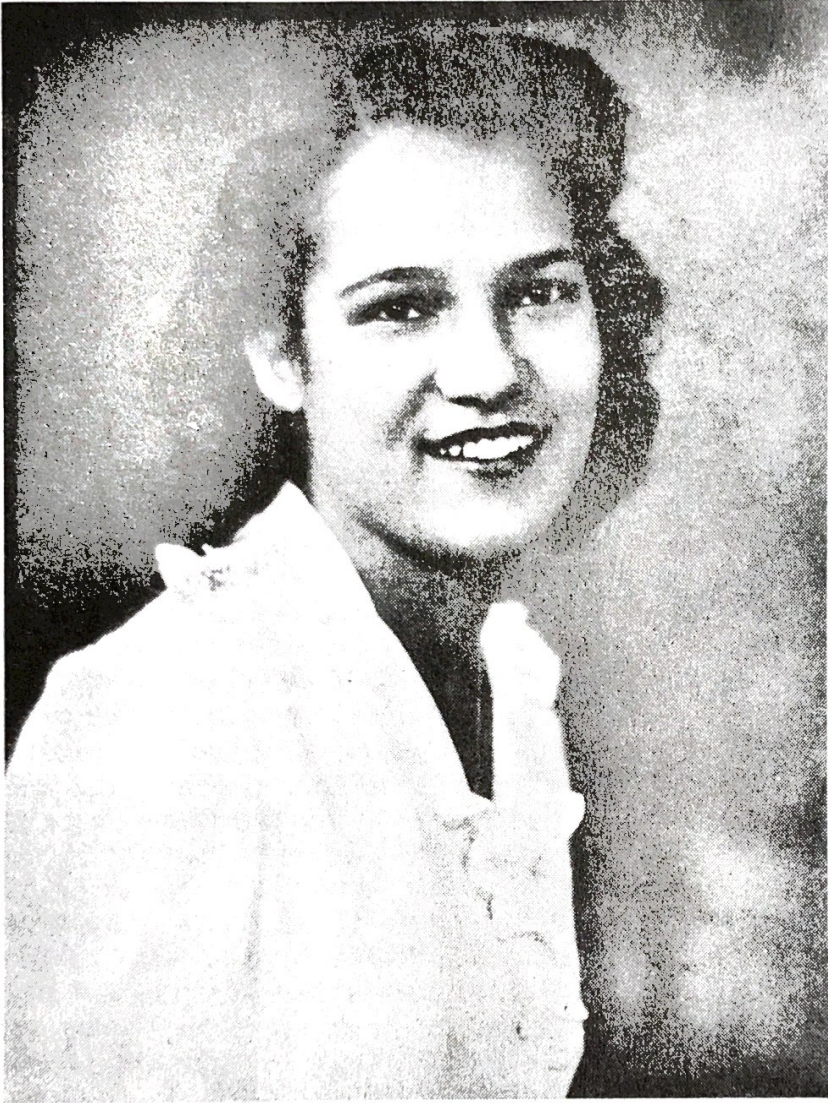
Knowing Afrikan History does not negate that other part of us that is not Afrikan, or the contributions we have made, as a class, in artistry, music, literature, education, politics, and the military. These should be recognized only in addition to the greatest contribution, original Jazz and Gospel music, that Afro-Americans gave to this country and the world, a gift born of an experience.

To accept acclaim as a group further separated us as a whole, as a race. Creoles can not continue to be a race within a race.

Colored Creoles was originally an article, "Colored Creoles of New Orleans," published about 1972 in "Freeing the Spirit," a quarterly magazine sponsored by the National Office of Black Catholics. Two years later, it was published in book form as a fund-raiser for Ahidiana Work/Study Center, a non-profit pre-school establishment for the educators of Black children in the Pan-Afrikan ideology.

There are two people, Gertrude Morris and Kalamu Ya Salaam, who are responsible for the publication of the writer's efforts and courageous revelations which sheds light on a touchy subject. She was editor of "Freeing the Spirit" during the early seventies and he, a prolific local writer and poet, was editor of the Black Collegian magazine based here in New Orleans.

Thank you so much, Gert and Kalamu. Your encouragement and support will always be appreciated.



ALINE ST. JULIEN (1944)

Aline St. Julien

**My mother says I am Creole.
My teacher said I am Negro.
Some Europeans say I am Colored
and others call me "nigger."
Who am I?**

COLORED CREOLE

by Aline St. Julien

My mother says I am Creole. My teacher said I am Negro. Some Europeans say I am Colored and others call me "nigger." Who am I? Am I white or Black? I cannot be either because I am both, if I am Creole. Or should I say, like most escapists, that I am a human being. Mr. Webster says, "a Creole is a person descended from the original French settlers in Louisiana, especially of the New Orleans area, a person descended from the original Spanish settlers in the Gulf States, especially Texas, a person of mixed Creole and Negro descent (French as spoken by Creoles especially in the New Orleans area), loosely, anyone from Louisiana." This is a very broad definition which makes it hard to distinguish one Louisianian from another. In the Old South one drop of Negro blood made us Negro. Nevertheless, there is a distinct class of Creoles in the New Orleans area with a unique culture who have experienced this identity crisis during their lifetime.

When I was a child, my parents, like their parents, never told us that we were Negroes. But it didn't take us very long to discern the differences in white and Black worlds. My brothers and sisters were not as persistent as I in trying to know of our identity. I have been struggling toward that end ever since elementary school. When I finally got my mother to answer that inevitable question which most parents of our class dreaded and evaded for as long as possible, I was told that I was a Creole. My mother really believes that we are not Negroes. I can still remember how angry Mama was the day I came home from school with a questionnaire asking my parents, "When was the first time you told your child she is a Negro." Negroes were preconceived to be the lowest people and were degraded daily, so this was an insult to my parents. Many of us wanted to be white, but since Negroes had the worse time of it, we felt lucky to be Creole.

I was blissfully happy until a history teacher explained to us that Creoles were people of mixed French and Spanish decent. When I proudly stated to the whole class that I am a Creole, my teacher said what my mother would never say — "you are a Negro." I was crushed. I guess Mama wanted to shield me from hurt. I began to rationalize that if I am Negro, I am still mixed with French and Spanish so that should make me a Creole

Negro. Right? White folks would use the words, "nice colored people," when referring to us light-skinned Negroes. This, of course, was part of the game to make us feel superior to our darker brothers and sisters. I suppose this made me a Colored Creole Negro, eh?

Creole ranged in color from white to dark brown with a lot of yellow and "teasing tans" in between. Hair texture, if straight, is described as "good hair" and kinky hair is considered "bad hair." A dark child in a Creole family is "better off" with straight hair, which means he is more acceptable. If he has kinky hair and dark skin, he is usually the butt of family jokes, like, "where did you get that one from" or "someone must have slept in the woodshed with a nigger." Sometimes the older people would talk in French so that we children couldn't understand, but we knew they were talking about the "odd ball" of the family. Most of these children grew up with much more self-hate than their lighter sisters and brothers. They usually chose the lightest friends and quite frequently married that type also. Fair skin and kinky hair was the lesser of the two evils, because then one could pass for white with a hat on the head. Many boasted about it, especially when they were called "brique" which was commonly used for those of us with reddish or blonde kinky hair. Many in my family were apt to be called "brique" type people. But the worse thing a person could call me was "nappy head." That really hit my weak spot. We were so ashamed of our kinky hair that we would use a hot comb secretly and would never admit straightening our hair. The children with "good hair" would tell us that they were glad they didn't have to "fry" their hair. Of course, we would deny it anyway. We only "pressed" our hair on special occasions in the privacy of our own homes. We would take more ribbing when we had to run out of the rain or cover our head so it don't "go back."

These were terrible changes for young people to go through. I often think of the Northern Blacks who never had these customs even though many look like Creoles. Locale has spared them such hang-ups. But then there are some, "uptown Negroes" here with the same physical appearances as us. I wonder if their self-hatred was as great as ours? Was there a booming business in bleach creams and powder, in the North, like here in New Orleans? Some old people would look like "white roaches" with their faces covered with powder, long sleeve gloves covering their not so white hands, stockings on the legs and a high neck black dress. They would usually sit right behind the driver on our segregated buses looking as if they had a stiff neck. They were dead give-aways, if I can use that expression. They told on themselves.

I attended Xavier Preparatory School, manned by the Blessed Sacrament Sisters. I was the only one of five children who attended a Catholic school because we were poor as "bees's wax." My brothers who were in the armed services paid my tuition. The only other Catholic school for Blacks, at the time, was

St. Mary's Academy, an all-girl school, administered by the Sisters of the Holy Family, who were mostly Creole. The student bodies of both schools were predominately Creole, also, which made this the primary consideration of most parents who enrolled their children, the rationale being that we would be with our "own kind." Quotes such as "birds of a feather flock together" or "you tell me who you go with, I tell you who you are" were repeated by our elders many times to keep us in our class. The schools reinforced the narrow Catholic teachings we already had by making us feel special and grateful that the nuns were sacrificing their lives to save us. Favoritism was shown to light-skinned students especially those with long straight hair. Most of us knew better than to bring a dark friend home from school. We were told to be nice to "them" but always choose friends you bring home, which meant other Creoles. We got in trouble with our parents more in public school because we had more dark children to befriend, but the situation was different at Catholic schools.

One of the few dark girls at Xavier became my friend, and I was instrumental in converting her to Catholicism. Mama was upset when I brought her home even though she was a nice person with high values who was about to become a Catholic. She had been boarding with a Catholic family who wanted her to become a Catholic of her own free will, without them pushing in any way. They must have made a wonderful impression on her, because all she needed from me was an invitation to join our church. I was thrilled when she asked me to be her godmother. This was my first convert after an unsuccessful attempt in conversions. Mama was Catholic enough to let me be godmother, but not Christian enough to welcome her in our home. She was too dark.

This concept of beauty was instilled in us when we received that first little blonde blue-eyed doll; reinforced by the church with the white Christ who resembled our doll, grown up; and imprinted in our minds when we attended school and saw white images not only in books, but in the appearances of our own Negro teachers, in catholic and public schools.

By the time we reached the social age, with such continual indoctrination, we were ready to choose a spouse who met all the requirements of the typical Creole family. Usually parents would have to know the family "pedigree" of your intended. His Spanish or French name would bring the first signs of approval. Most parents felt that the best place to meet the ideal partner was in church or at church functions, especially at Corpus Christi where the most "beautiful Creoles" worshipped. One of my brothers looked forward to Sunday Mass at Corpus Christi. It is located in the Seventh Ward ("Creole Land") about three blocks from one of the most exclusive Creole social clubs of my day, the Autocrat Club. For most Creoles in that area, social life was between Corpus Christi and the Autocrat. Corpus attracted many of us at their popular festivals. It was the ultimate in prestige and other parishes rivaled her. But St. Peter Claver,

which was my original parish, was noted for its musical concerts, old folk concerts and plays. We had many talented people, especially in dramatics and singing. It was wonderful to see your fellow parishioners as actors and actresses in a live play on stage. For those Creoles who preferred dancing at the exclusive clubs, there was a choice of the Jeunes Amis Hall (Young Friends) or the Roof Garden. Like the Autocrat Social and Pleasure Club, they too did not allow dark people. One had to be light enough to pass the "brown paper bag test." Their membership was made up mostly of relatives and close friends, many of whom were "passe blancs," (passing for white). There was also a parading club called the Creole Fiesta Club which marched annually. Most of the above-mentioned people belonged. This club still exists today, but the participants and membership, like the Autocrat, have changed. They have darker colors now.

We were too sheltered to go to many places other than church activities. My uncle used to give Saturday night suppers for the area people. We danced by the juke box music of the big bands. The neighborhood fish-fry was popular. My older sister went to house parties, but I, being the youngest, looked forward to the annual summer picnics at Bay Saint Louis, Pass Christian or Waveland. Many Creole families would gather at these private events. Cupid struck his bow and arrow during many of the picnics it seemed, because this was an ideal place for match-making. The older people were not afraid to tell us when choosing a spouse to think of our children. This affected me, because I certainly didn't want my little monkeys to have kinky hair like me. Therefore my husband just had to have straight hair. Who ever heard of choosing a partner for the rest of your life on *that* basis? But because of our ignorance, we did. Of course economics and good character were considered, but appearance took priority for most of us. I did disregard the old folk's suggestion to "put a little cream in your coffee," because my husband is darker than a brown paper bag. I was warned by one of my relatives that I could have a child as dark as the darkest member of his family and with my "bad hair." But the only thing I couldn't understand was why would this handsome man want to marry a kinky head woman like me. I even asked my mother why I was so ugly with brown skin and kinky hair. She consoled me by telling me that I had sharp features. So you see the havoc this kind of living can play on a person. Were "fine features" my only asset in attracting a husband?

If, by chance, a Creole really married someone out of his or her class, reaction could vary. You might be ostracized, because you would surely have "little nigger" babies. You could be alienated from family socials and special events that occurred. I don't know of anyone being banished completely, except in the case of a pregnancy out of wedlock, because that was the most unpardonable sin against your parents. This not only broke their hearts, but shattered their most prominent dream of a virgin marching up the aisle in white, inside and out, with Prince Charm-

ing. This was the pinnacle of success. Many parents spent money they never had for the wedding day, paying for it years afterwards. Many girls went to the altar in "family way" (pregnant), frightened, miserable and sometimes sick, but knowing that this show must go on. Some parents fulfilled their ultimate goal of presenting their own little Virgin Mary knowing that their daughter was already a Blessed Mother. One's greatest aim was to please one's parents by making it to the altar and when one did, it was with a sigh of relief. Most of us made it through fear of family alienation, loss of reputation, shame of one's self and parents and fear of never being worthy of a good man. I wish we had been taught the right reasons for being pure which is first love of self, parents and God. The sins of impurities were impressed upon us at an early age. So in my child's mind, theft, lying and even murder seemed secondary. We stayed children for so long.

Dark persons who broke our class structure might be accepted if he or she had straight hair and sharp features, and/or education. The latter of which we had little of because we were so absorbed in the hair/color bit, putting value on the wrong things. Education is the one thing we really needed. I have observed the parents of a few dark families training or indoctrinating their children, like we were, into marrying Creoles. Most of their friends are light-skinned bourgeois Negroes or Creoles. Since integration they have included whites. But they too have excluded dark members of our race in their close circle of friends. Makes no difference what color you are when the disease of prejudice hits you. What a contagious thing prejudice is. The pity of it is that when the "man" gave us the "white fever," it was part of the game to divide and weaken us.

Some of our "passe blancs" married into the white race, sometimes crossing the color line completely. This divided brothers and sisters who sometimes remained separated for as long as they lived. They married in white churches, sent their children to white schools, and worked as white, sometimes never letting out the secret of their true identity to spouse or children.

There were two, supposedly, white prize fighters who were making a name for themselves, but the secret got out that they were "colored," or had Black ancestry. It ruined their careers. A court case was pending to determine their identity, but I don't remember if they ever settled it. Some inheritance settlement cases developed, also, and many so-called "whites" were found out to be Black and they lost out. But one Creole woman whose very successful father had been living as white in another state, sued for her share of his will after death, and won a sizeable amount. Many of these renegades died in secrecy. Their very private funerals were the saddest. Many other Creoles went to Los Angeles to escape discrimination, they said, but ended up "passing" over there, too. They tried to keep the old customs by living in the same area and attending the same Catholic Church. New Orleans visitors would come back home

saying that there is another Corpus Christi Church in Los Angeles. No matter how far Creoles go they stay clanish. Some Creoles are still "passing" in California to this day.

I know now that most Creoles are Catholic because way back when our ancestors were ashamed of belonging to the Black race, and being confused freemen of color without a race, like half breeds, we turned to the white church. The elaborate church wedding with the brides looking like Snow White or Cinderella at the ball, is the greatest "Imitation of (white) Life." I have seen only two Afro-American church weddings, thus far, and one happened to be in our immediate family. I saw a very large double wedding with two sisters of one family marrying two brothers of another family. Cousins, not related, married each other, also. My husband and I have the same first cousins and yet we were not related. His uncle by blood is my uncle by law, and my aunt by blood is his aunt by law. So the children from their marriage are related to both of us.

Even though there are remarkable changes in our customs today, intermarriage of Creole families kept this unique culture going for a long time. On the other hand, Creoles who intermarried with whites took on the white image even to the extent of becoming avowed segregationists themselves. But their greatest fear was that one of their offspring would be dark. You can imagine the embarrassing situations this created. Come to think of it, we played the same game as segregationists, only we had to stay in our own ball park, don't you see. Some of our women just went and lived with white men, degrading themselves and verifying a fact of self-hate. Even today you see signs of self-hate among Black people who wear blond wigs, the darkest ones being the most conspicuous.

Well, I came to a point in my life where I was not proud to be Creole, I wanted so much to belong to a race, instead of a class. I found myself constantly thinking about my identity. I thought about those old shameful tales of why some of us looked different, such as the raping of slave women by the master. I suppose, from such unions the mulatto woman originated. She, in time, for survival reasons, pruned or prepared her daughter to become the mistress of the French or Spanish settler, thereby negotiating with him for food, shelter and a better way of life as their housekeeper. The main priority of the product, in this transaction, was virginity. I heard about the Quadroon Balls where the interested parties would meet. I think some of us colored Creoles were born out of this arrangement. The male products of a guilt-ridden slave master sometimes would be freed and, thus, called Free Jacks. Black and white blood was mixing to the white man's self-satisfaction. Consequently, as the story goes, a prominent white man who knew that he had Black blood burned the courthouse down to destroy the records. Color was an important thing in those days, wouldn't you say?

I am so glad I am not white, now. But when I decided to step out of that "Creole bag," I became a Negro. No more writing

"Colored" next to COLOR on applications. I even realized that my kinky hair was good hair and that only sick hair is bad hair. When I took the permanent out, it was like taking off a mask. I sensed freedom for the first time. I gave freedom to myself. It was like saying to everyone, this is the real me. Now when someone compliments me on how pretty my hair looks, I know they mean my real hair. One of my aunts could never understand me because I let my hair go natural even before it was stylish. I did it because we were going on a weekend trip to the Astrodome with the CYO (Christian Youth Organization). Since we were going to use the swimming facilities at the motel, I felt it would be easier to deal with hair cut short and natural. I never did like setting hair because bobby pins were painful for me. It was more convenient to leave the rollers home, and I was lazy about pampering my hair. I wore the bush after the trip. I guess I was before the times because negative responses coming from relatives and friends were surprising and appalling. My aunt tried to make me feel ashamed by calling me Afrikan, but to no avail. As I danced around like the Hollywood Afrikan, making all kinds of gyrations she got so angry that she called me a "M----- F-----." The impact of her anger frightened me. I realized how deep-seated self-hate was and that many of us will never overcome it. Hair is still the topic of discussion to this day. I have been accused of influencing others in the family to let their hair "go."

Afrikan culture was far removed, from our lives. We were turned off by spirituals and even though some of our own Creoles were Jazz greats, we were trying to develop a taste for Bach and Beethoven, the latter we later learned happened to have Black blood. So much is hidden in closets. We were deep into emulating the movie stars. But for devout Catholics our models were the white priests and nuns. Every Black Catholic Church is a mission church in New Orleans and they were steadily raking us in. Those of us who were born into Catholicism became more white than Black. We missed most of the Black Experience. We were not very Christian, either, because we looked upon Baptist people as loud mouths who shouted during worship because "they lost control of their senses." Of course our religion was the most controlled of all, but I didn't realize then that we were becoming as sterile as the white man who considers emotions a sign of weakness. Because the European frowns on emotion, we suppressed our natural inclinations and instead imitated him. We had the audacity to be ashamed of our darker brothers and sisters for being real. What a confusing existence. How in the world can one know his identity when one comes from a Creole background, is recognized as colored, indoctrinated in the white Catholic Church, taught in Negro schools the cultures of every race but one's own and performs in concerts as Irishmen, Dutchmen, Spaniards and Russians, etc. I was never an Afrikan Queen.

After marriage, as the children came along, I decided it would be different for them. They would not be as ignorant and biased

as I was. They would know that they are descendants of Black people, as well as their Creole background. As I look back, I was not proud to speak of my Afrikan heritage because I only knew what the white history books said about Afrika. I tried to set an example by not describing our people's physical characteristics as "American type" which meant dark with coarse features, or the "brique type" meaning reddish or blond kinky hair and light in color or say "he is just like white," which of course was and is a definite compliment to most Creoles. The change came gradually, but it most certainly did come.

The slogan, "Black Power," was shouted by Stokley when the children were small. It was easy for me to explain the new pride and dignity those words brought to our people as they grew older. Creoles were just as confused and fearful as the European. Black Power, seemingly, was a threat to the white man's way of life. The Civil Rights demonstrators were just a bunch of trouble makers. We were not participants in the marches, because we were always taught to "be nice," which meant don't upset "Mr. Charlie." But many benefits derived by the struggles of our darker people were enjoyed, first, by Creoles who stood on the sidelines calling them "black niggers." The "man" took his good time employing our most visible people. That word, black, still divides us. Many Creoles cannot, even to this day, recognize the fact that when it is used to acknowledge race, it connotes dignity and self-pride in one's characteristics, which comes from his Afrikan heritage, and has nothing to do with color as in the old day. Some people are still awkward in using Black instead of Colored or Negro in conversation.

I believe that is why the National Office of Black Catholics was not generally accepted by New Orleans Creole Catholics (This organization was formed by the Black clergy, nuns and laymen whose main purpose is self-determination in policies relating to the Black membership of the Catholic Church). The National Office of "Colored" Catholics might have made it. Colored Catholics just don't join organizations with the militant sound of Black in its name. NOBC could be strengthened with an influx of young people, but so many have left the institutional church. They couldn't care less about the hypocritical church, or the customs and traditions of the Creole culture. They are marrying darker people, because they love them. They are trying to shed the white image by wearing their bushes and creating their own lifestyles. Granted some do wear the bush purely for style, and some are still living the past with their parents, holding on to tradition like the diehard segregationist, but their numbers are decreasing.

Creoles must realize that as far as Europeans are concerned, we are all Negroes, because that is what they made us. A few years back, a Creole professor at a well-known Catholic university was roughed up by a young white rookie cop who over-reacted before he got the facts of the matter straight. A case was brought against the policeman, and later it was dropped. A man

of his caliber was publicly abused even though he was a member of the Mayor's Human Relations Committee, the Bishop's Human Relations Commission, and only God knows what other integrated organization he belong to, at the time. Maybe he settled out of court, but he could have gotten a public apology from the mayor, at least. A couple of our political officials were harassed by the police, also. So you see, Black people are all in the same boat. We have to integrate, but with each other.

Let us take the lessons our children are giving, by accepting a person as is, and negating the bias taught by elders. I taught my children to look within a person, because "beauty is skin deep," and they believe that. I was Mr. Integration's guinea pig, so I know that integration with whites will not solve our problems, only theirs. They have used it like everything else, to their own advantage. The so-called liberals I have met in bi-racial organizations, with few exceptions, are opportunists, status seekers, limelight lovers, guilt sufferers, hobby hunters and business or political people who find it expedient to belong. I believe it is necessary to separate ourselves from these mixed self-appointed-do-gooders and straighten ourselves out. God knows we have tried integration.

Now it is time to close the gaps educationally, economically and racially among ourselves, whether we be Creoles, Colored, Negro or Black. We must be one if we are to progress as a whole. Individual accomplishment will make us a first nigger, but will not strengthen us as a race. Bourgeois Negroes running to the suburbs to forget the past are fooling no one but themselves. Black talent should be where it is needed the most, in our own urban communities. The real shame is a good Black teacher in a predominantly white school or the Black doctor getting rich on poor people, or the Black lawyer who is too busy to give free counseling to those who can't afford it. Acquiring status symbols is a waste of time and money. But pooling our resources, starting co-ops is a whole new cooperative way of living, caring and loving each other which will make us a strong people.

I believe, sincerely, that sitting on bi-racial human relations committees has not changed this racist society very much. It is a waste of time talking to whites about conditions that are ancient history. We are only included when we are safe Negroes. I was a safe Negro, and an ignorant Creole not knowing who I was. But being a Colored Creole-Catholic Negro-Afro-American has brought me through the struggle of finding my true identity. All of these, race, class and religion has made me Black. Thank you, God. Salaam!



**ALINE ST. JULIEN
(WITH HUSBAND) 1974**

Creoles and Creoles

Light skinned Creoles
with kinky hair —
bad hair
called “brique”
put on a hat
to be alright —
white
ignored the signs

Dark skinned Creoles
with straight hair —
good hair
coal black hair
were Spanish, Mexican, Indian
anything but Negro
took their chances

White skinned Creoles
blonde hair, blue eyes
cherished among us all
destined to go far
crossed the line
permanently
white people never knew

Not-so-light skinned Creoles
with curly hair
greenish or
light brown eyes —
cat eyes
city or country folks
knew
they were not negroes

“Yellow” skinned Creoles
with not-so-straight hair
made it in the shade
wore hats

peacock bleach cream
used umbrellas
to be the right color

Creoles who “looked white”
encouraged to
“passé blanc”
by conductors who
insisted
they sit up front
screen behind them
objected
white faces turned red

Obviously dark skinned Creoles
hair not straight
may speak Creole
separated themselves
from Negroes
“nigger”
flew out
often as other Creoles

Dark skinned Negroes
not Creoles
alienated themselves
from other Blacks
collected
light skinned friends
who accepted them

What a confusion
how ridiculous
all surface stuff
Black people caught
in a self-hate bag
an identity crisis
that denied
our Black Heritage

04/16/06

To Christe,

"The sun is always rising
we cannot hold back the day."

Salaam,

Ms H. J. J. J.