To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of MICHELLE Y. FIEDLER find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincere gratitude goes to the people of Louisiana who participated in this research project. I am sincerely grateful to the people who consented to be interviewed. You were all a joy with which to talk, and your opinions and perceptions have been an invaluable part of this paper. Thank you all! A special “Thank You” goes to the Louisiana Sportsman Magazine for granting me permission to use their copyrighted Sportsman Fleur-de-lis logo in this dissertation.

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I have been blessed with new and amazing friends throughout this process. Misty Luminais, thanks for asking me to go get coffee – I look forward to many more cups. Sarah Neitzel, thank you for making that momentous pact with me, now it’s your turn! Olivia Olivier, thank you for being you and for being there at the right moment. I think the magic wand did the trick!

To my parents, Ellen Robinson and Gene Wisdom, thank you for giving me stories to tell. You made me confident to question everything, and instilled in me the desire to learn. Uncle Richard, you are an amazing man and I am proud to call you
“uncle.” Aunt Geneva, thank you for telling me stories and for sharing your life with me. I could not have done this without the love, understanding, and support of my entire family.

My husband, Aaren Fiedler, has my deepest gratitude. Thank you for hearing out my arguments (even when they didn’t make sense), for wearing headphones so I could work, for going away when you were annoying, for making the best cup of coffee a girl could hope for, and for taking such great care of us.
THE CAJUN IDEOLOGY: NEGOTIATING IDENTITY
IN SOUTHERN LOUISIANA

Abstract

by Michelle Y. Fiedler, Ph.D.
Washington State University
MAY 2011

Chair: Nancy P. McKee

The Cajuns are an American ethnic group founded primarily on the ideology of a shared history and language. Their history begins with the expulsion of the Acadian peoples from Nova Scotia in 1755 and continues into modernity with the Cajuns of Louisiana. The goals of this paper are to present an updated ethnographic account of Cajuns in Louisiana, as well as to present an example of how ideology and rhetoric may be utilized in the social sciences to explore and present ethnographic research. The data presented are based on first-hand observations and interviews conducted in the field in and around Lafayette, Louisiana, during a 2008-2009 field season.

I argue that identity is based in a cognition-social-discourse model of ideology. Cognition encompasses shared memories, such as history; social refers to the elements of culture; and discourse aids in the negotiation and maintenance of ideology and identity, in large part due to rhetoric. Participant interviews are utilized to explore the ways in which individuals express their personal identities and their cultural ideologies. An Acadian ancestry and the Cajun French language appear to be the primary

v
boundaries under negotiation in the Cajun ideology. Other cultural elements, such as
food, music, and personality traits, are also part of the Cajun ideology and identity, and
are used as symbolic rhetoric to validate membership in the Cajun culture. While the
overall Cajun ideology has not changed substantially since published accounts in the
1980s, the extremes of the negotiated boundaries, as well as the mechanisms of
reproduction and maintenance, have changed. Academia, tourism, and the Internet are
offered as contemporary mechanisms through which the Cajun ideology is negotiated,
reproduced, and maintained.

This project adds a renewed perspective to the Cajun academic literature by
presenting data collected through first hand interviews and observations, as well as
addressing contemporary ways in which individuals navigate and maintain their
identities within a Cajun ideology. Furthermore, this project explores the ways in which a
theory of ideology may be utilized in anthropology to present ethnographic data for a
multidisciplinary approach to culture, identity, and ethnicity.
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Dedication

To Dr. Thomas John Hudak

Thank you for being my friend and mentor.
CHAPTER 1
SOUTHERN LOUISIANA AND THE CAJUNS

Introduction

The Cajuns of Southern Louisiana are one of many groups to call the United States home. They are primarily the descendents of French colonizers who arrived in Louisiana in the 1780s after being expelled, by the British, from Nova Scotia during what would become known as *Le Grand Dérangement*, or the Great Deportation (Brasseaux 1987, 2005). Louisiana has been settled by a variety of other ethnicities and colonizers, including its indigenous groups, African and Caribbean Creoles, Spanish, Vietnamese and Laotians, Germans, French, and Anglo-Americans (Bernard 2003; Brasseaux 2005). Despite these outside forces and influences, the Cajun culture has maintained a distinct identity that is widely recognized today.

The people who claim a Cajun heritage are typically white, middle-class working Americans, yet they also hold an ethnic status. This ethnicity is the result, in part, of early literature describing a stereotypically backward, rural Frenchman who held a class status similar to their plantation slave counterparts. As America grew and ideologies shifted, an interest in individual cultures created a surge in tourism and academic research into Cajun life, particularly surrounding what was seen as a looming cultural and linguistic death. Increased contact with outside groups created a need for increased negotiation of boundaries both across and within the Cajun cultural identity.

The research presented here intends to demonstrate how identities are formed, negotiated, and maintained. This paper has two primary objectives: 1) to explore how
rhetoric and ideology can be used in ethnographic research, data analysis, and presentation of cultural identities; and, 2) to provide a (somewhat) updated ethnographic account of the Cajun ethnicity which, in turn, leads to the presentation of a proposed “Cajun ideology.”

**Acadiana**

In 1971, the Louisiana State Legislator officially established a cultural region in Louisiana they called “The Heart of Acadiana”. This 22-parish area is now referred to simply as Acadiana, which is “a combination of Acadia and Louisiana” (Henry and Bankston 2002: 3). Although Acadiana (Figure 1) is considered the center of Cajun Country, Cajuns occupy other regions in Louisiana, as well as the neighboring states of Texas and Mississippi. Acadiana is part of the Gulf Coast and is generally subtropical, with plentiful rain and humidity, creating a variety of environmental settings.

Malcolm Comeaux (1983) argued there exists “four distinct environments in South Louisiana” that have Cajun populations (109). These environments are the levee lands, the swamp, the flat prairie lands, and the marshlands. There is overlap between

---

1. *Acadian* is the Anglicized version of the French term *Acadien*, which is the name given to the French who originally settled in Nova Scotia. This is part of an area originally named Arcadia by the 16th century explorer Verrazzano, and later called Acadie by the French immigrants. Once in Louisiana, this culture group eventually became known as *Cajun* (Henry and Bankston 2002). Throughout this paper, the term *Cajun* will to refer to the contemporary people in Louisiana, and the term *Acadian* will refer to the people of or from Nova Scotia, except where others make a distinction. The Anglicized spelling *Acadian* will also be used, except where it is a title, name, or pronounced as such.
Figure 1: The State of Louisiana. “Acadiana” is highlighted in red.

Figure 2: The four environmental areas of Southern Louisiana. Not to scale. (Adapted from Comeaux 1983: 110).
each of these environments; for example, the levee lands intersect with the swamps and marshes, the prairie lands merge into the marshes and swamps, and there are ample bayous present in all four environments (Figure 2).

Each environment required a different skill set for living, creating a variety of subsistence patterns among the people settling in each area. The levee lands are built primarily along the Mississippi River and are a fertile farmland that historically held sugar plantations (Figure 3). Wealthy, English-speaking colonists generally owned these plantations and grew mostly sugar cane and cotton. The Cajuns who did settle in the area were assimilated into the Anglo lifestyle as farm workers and tradesmen (Comeaux 1983). Today, sugar cane crops dominate this area and the few remaining plantation homes are mostly museums. The swamp areas, on the other hand, were not

![Figure 3: Sugarcane field in levee land with Evangeline Oak (River Road).]
as suitable for farming and the Cajuns who settled there learned to fish and hunt and sold their surplus (Figure 4) (Comeaux 1983). Today this area is still home to many, despite the building of additional levees and continuing environmental changes. The Cajuns still living in these areas not only sell their surplus catch, but also participate in the growing tourist industry.

![Swampland near Lake Martin.](image)

**Figure 4: Swampland near Lake Martin.**

The prairie lands in southwestern Louisiana are flat, grassy areas broken by small strips of woods and bayous (Figure 5). The Cajuns who settled this area farmed the land with cotton and rice and raised cattle (Comeaux 1983). Today, farmers still raise these crops and cattle, along with a growing crawfish farm industry (Figure 6).

The marshlands along the Louisiana coast receive national attention today because of rapid coastal erosion, but historically, a few Cajuns and other settlers made
Figure 5: Prairie land area near Elton, Louisiana.

Figure 6: Crawfish field south of Rayne, Louisiana.
a living by grazing cattle on small, natural ridges. This area is under water much of the year, and although farming and hunting are still possible, not many people have settled in this area (Comeaux 1983). Along the roads in the marshes, piers have been erected in turnouts for people to fish and crab (Figure 7).

![Figure 7: Fishing Pier on Highway 35 to Pecan Island.](image)

The oil industry has been a strong presence in Louisiana since the 1930s, with much of the drilling being done offshore (Bernard 2003; Brasseaux 2005). By the late 1960s, tourism began to be a lucrative trade in Louisiana, in part due to efforts to bring attention to the Cajun and Creole cultures in the area (Bernard 2003). Today, however, Louisiana is not that different in its economic endeavors than the rest of the United States in that the urban areas are centered primarily on business, tourism, and education.
Despite these seemingly difficult environmental conditions, the Cajun community grew and is well established in the United States today. According to the 2000 U.S. Census (2000d), roughly 4.5 million people live in Louisiana (the 2000 U.S. Census data are used because the 2010 U.S. Census counts were not yet available). Of those, almost 45,000 claim Acadian/Cajun ancestry, although that number is likely closer to 500,000 because the data from the 2000 U.S. Census has been the source of controversy in Louisiana. The 1990 U.S. Census declared nearly 400,000 people claimed the Cajun/Acadian ancestry, yet ten years later this number was only 45,000 (Bernard 2003; Henry and Bankston 2002). I argue that inconsistencies in coding the write-in ethnicity section of the 2000 U.S. Census, as well as changes in how the question was worded, caused the number of Cajuns reported to be unreliably low. If we consider the combined number of people claiming Acadian/Cajun, French Canadian, and French ancestry in Louisiana, the total comes to over 700,000 (U.S. Census 2000e, 2000f, 2000g). I believe it is reasonable to argue the number of Cajuns in Louisiana today is closer to 500,000. It will be interesting to see if the 2010 Census numbers balance out this discrepancy.

**Preliminary Investigations**

The focus of my initial research conducted in Louisiana during the summer of 2005 was on evolutionary approaches to language loss in the Cajun culture, which was presented in a 2006 Master’s thesis. I spent approximately three months in Lafayette, Louisiana, observing and interviewing people, both formally and informally. I did not find
the culture in danger of disappearing that I had anticipated, but instead a dynamic
culture engaged actively in “being Cajun.” Despite this fact, most people expressed
concerns about losing their culture, particularly in regards to the Cajun French
language. I found this disjoint between what people believed and what they did to be
interesting, but did not take steps toward further exploration at that time. I was
captivated by the linguistic implications of the learning and use of Cajun French.

In the summer of 2006, with my focus still on the French language in Louisiana, I
completed a five-week immersion program in Nova Scotia in order to learn French for
my doctoral research, as well as to explore the geographic area that is often considered
the Cajun homeland. Nearly 1/3 of the students in attendance at Sainte Anne’s were
from Louisiana, as were many of the instructors. Again, I noticed there was a fear of
impending cultural death among the Cajun participants, yet these Louisianaans were
doing their best to promote their culture while learning more about their history. I
determined that the disjoint between what people thought and how people behaved
deserved examination.

Methods and Fieldwork

The methods of this research project were intended to be traditional socio-
cultural approaches to culture, language, and ethnicity, utilizing participant and non-
participant observation, informal interviews, and formal interviews to gather
ethnographic information. I spent 18 months in the field with my husband, living in a
mobile home park outside of Lafayette, Louisiana, from mid-June 2008 to the end of
December 2009 (Figure 8). I selected the Lafayette area because of its central location to what is considered Cajun Country, its urban foundations, and the fact that I was already familiar with the area from a three-month field season in 2005. I conducted interviews in locations other than Lafayette, from Houma, Louisiana to Eastern Texas.

![Figure 8: Our home in Louisiana, winter 2008, after a rare snow.](image)

I spent the first several months in the field attending public meetings, going to festivals, and exploring museums and libraries. I spent time speaking informally with a wide variety of people and establishing relationships before I began asking for interviews. I visited with family who live in the area, met with friends from the French immersion program in Nova Scotia, drove around the area, went to flea markets and museums, and generally tried to stay in the air conditioning. The contacts I made during this time would prove invaluable in setting up formal interviews.
In late August, hurricane season came to the Gulf Coast in the form of Hurricane Gustav, and we evacuated to the Houston area (Figure 9). This was a new experience for me and not one I want to have again, mostly because a normally three hour drive took over nine hours to complete (although this was a relatively short evacuation). We decided to stay in our mobile home when Hurricane Ike came ashore a couple of weeks later in order to avoid the lack of conveniences on the road, such as food, water, and restrooms. I was grateful after this storm that we had decided to make Lafayette our home for field work, and not the more southern parts of the state, as they were under water and suffered extensive damage from both storms.

Figure 9: Hurricane Gustav Evacuation, Texas Highway 105 near Sour Lake.

There are numerous festivals, dance halls, educational activities, cultural centers and museums, and family gatherings to choose from for entertainment in Louisiana. In
the time I lived and worked in Lafayette, I attended nine festivals, four jam sessions, four fundraisers (Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Goodwill, and a Louisiana archive organization), several Mardi Gras parades, informal Cajun French classes, a movie premier, and went to listen to dozens of musicians in small bars, dancehalls, and outdoor venues. I volunteered at two festivals and at one fundraiser, where I sold tickets and beer. I attended several meetings with a group young people who were contributing to a statewide bid for Louisiana to host the 2014 Congrès Mondial Acadien (Acadian World Congress). This festival, centered on Acadian history and culture, is held over a two-week period every five years and draws people from around the world. Although the 2014 Congrès went to another bidding town, the group has continued to meet to discuss ways in which to engage the younger generations of Louisiana in their Acadian (and Cajun) heritage.

My family is from Louisiana, of arguably Cajun heritage, and I have extended family living throughout southern Louisiana and southeast Texas. I was able to attend a family reunion in Lake Charles, as well as join in numerous gatherings for birthdays and holidays. I also met with my great aunt and her friend for weekly card games. I “played tourist” by going on a swamp tour, taking the Tabasco plant tour, and three trips to New Orleans.

Additionally, I attended numerous celebrations at Vermilionville, such as Old Time Christmas and Celtic Day, and went to Noel Acadian au Village at Acadian Village for the Christmas lights display. Vermilionville and Acadian Village are living heritage museums in the Lafayette area.
One local morning news program (KATC) proved to be a useful source of information regarding local activities and stories, and I watched it from 5 am to 7 am on a regular Monday thru Friday basis. Additionally, I listened to two local radio stations, KBON (101.1 FM) and KRVS (88.7 FM). KBON is a Louisiana-owned station based in Eunice that focuses on playing Louisiana music. They have regular French-only broadcasts aimed at the general Cajun population in the surrounding area. KRVS is a public radio station run by the University of Louisiana at Lafayette that also has regular French programming that is geared toward the larger Francophone population, and includes world music and news.

Although most festivals, classes, and other gatherings are widely publicized on television and radio, in the newspaper, and via flyers around town, I learned of several through informal conversation with people and through invitations. For instance, I learned of the meetings of the Congrès Mondial group from a friend who attended the French immersion program in Nova Scotia at the same time I attended. Through this meeting, I learned of other gatherings, jam sessions, and festivals. I made several contacts at this meeting that would eventually lead to formal interviews. I made many contacts at the Cajun French classes I attended in Scott (a small town outside of Lafayette) that led to interviews, as well as an invitation to the premier of a locally produced documentary film.

Festival season in Louisiana is a big deal. It begins in earnest shortly after Easter, with Festival Internationale in Lafayette, and remains steady until Festivals Acadiens et Creoles in October, when the activity calendar explodes with multiple
festivals every weekend. The festivals celebrate everything – frogs, rice, cattle, yams, crawfish, gumbo, boudin, and the Cajun heritage, to name but a few. One website (http://www.louisiana-festivals.com) listed nearly 500 festivals for the 2008-2009 season. In addition to festivals, music and dancing are an important part of life in Louisiana (Figure 10). There is a running joke that one can always find something to do in Acadiana, and that is true until Lent begins.

Figure 10: Dancing and music at The Blue Moon Saloon and Guesthouse in Lafayette, Louisiana.

Mardi Gras [Fat Tuesday] was perhaps my busiest time, with parades, parties, and several formal interviews. There are multiple places to dance, eat, drink, and watch the parade routes through Lafayette, as well as other Mardi Gras festivities in the surrounding towns. I participated in two Mardi Gras parties with my family, both
centered on watching Lafayette parades. I also participated in the Scott Mardi Gras Day festivities, which included a parade and jam session. I attended the boucherie [slaughter and preparation of a hog] and Mardi Gras festival in Eunice, Louisiana. I welcomed the much-needed time of rest and reflection that Lent offered following Mardi Gras, as well as found more people had the time to be interviewed.

**Participant Interviews**

Informal interviews consisted of conversations about activities in the area, places to eat, peoples’ opinions on current events, and putting out “feelers” for formal interviews. In general, people were interested in my research and were willing to be interviewed, although this interest rarely led to a formal interview. I concluded my field season with 46 formal interviews, although only 44 are included in the final analysis.

Despite attending functions and conducting interviews throughout southern Louisiana and in Texas, I found 21 of the people I interviewed were related to one another (Table 1). Eight of the formal interviews were conducted with members of my immediate and extended family and are included in the chart below. The remaining 23 participants knew at least one other participant in the research. Some of this was a function of using a snowball sampling method (in which I asked participants for recommendations of people to contact for interviews), but not always. There were three times I interviewed one person only to find out later they had a connection to someone else in my participant list (such as a best friend, a roommate, or an old high school
friend). I repeatedly came across the same core group of people at events, fundraisers, and festivals, particularly those involving music and Cajun cultural heritage.

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<td>125</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>spouse of 243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>143</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>spouse of 153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>145</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>sibling of 330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>153</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>spouse of 143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>174</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>child of 265; parent of 198; cousin of 318; ex-spouse of 297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>198</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>child of 174 &amp; 297; grandchild of 265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>208</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>sibling of 318; spouse of 230; parent of 110 &amp; 263; niece/nephew of 265; cousin of 174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>221</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>child of 233 &amp; 292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>230</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>spouse of 208; parent of 110 &amp; 263</td>
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<td>233</td>
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<td>265</td>
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<td>parent of 174; grandparent of 198; aunt/uncle of 318</td>
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<td>sibling of 245</td>
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<td>297</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>parent of 198; ex-spouse of 174</td>
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<td>318</td>
<td>61</td>
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<tr>
<td>330</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>sibling of 145; spouse of 344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>344</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>spouse of 330</td>
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Table 1: Participant Kinship Ties

Two formal interviews were not utilized in the analysis due to difficulties with the collection of data. The first was removed because I was not able to complete the interview schedule during two hours of conversation. The participant discussed Creole musical history almost exclusively, although I was able to ask the participant the first three questions (describe yourself, where are you from, and with what culture do you associate yourself). While the participant provided valuable information on the Creole
culture, it was not appropriately applicable to the current research project.

The second interview removed was disjointed and difficult to conduct from the beginning. I felt as though the participant did not understand that I was conducting a formal interview for research purposes because the participant’s answers were often off topic and meandering. After the interview, I was informed that this participant has suffered at least four strokes in the past several years. I believe this participant was not capable of giving informed consent and therefore removed the interview from this study.

After conducting the first five formal interviews, I transcribed each verbatim and assessed the interview schedule. A few minor adjustments to the questions were necessary to ensure elaborated and expansive answers, as well as improve the consistency in which questions were asked, although they were not carried out mechanically. Additional prompts were given if a participant did not understand a question as asked, or if I wanted to explore a topic in more detail with a participant. The interview schedule used in this project was designed to ascertain how people identify the Cajun ethnicity, the boundaries they set for defining the Cajun culture, and to analyze the language used in discussing identity and culture (see Appendix A for the complete interview schedule).

The 44 formal interviews I conducted took place in a variety of locations. I was invited to several peoples’ homes to conduct interviews, as well as conducting a few in my own home. I also interviewed at two local heritage museums and centers, as well as local coffee shops and restaurants. Interviews took an average of 36 minutes, with the longest interview lasting 80 minutes and the shortest taking 17 minutes. This project
received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Washington State University (WSU IRB# 10083-01 and 10083-004). Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form and were not compensated for their time.

**Initial Analysis**

Formal interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim. Pauses, intonations, vocalisms, and dialect markers were not indicated in the typed transcriptions, except where necessary for clarification. The purpose of the transcriptions was to code them as text for discourse analysis, as well as to gather data for basic descriptive statistical analysis. Two programs, the Text Analysis Markup System (TAMS Analyzer) and Microsoft Excel, were used for these purposes and are discussed in more detail below.

The interview schedule (Appendix A) begins with the question “please describe yourself in one sentence or less” to determine how people think of their personal identity. This is the first question because I did not want to taint answers by priming people to the idea of being Cajun, although this was not always avoidable. The next two questions were designed to determine if the participant did consider himself or herself Cajun. If the response was that the person was from Louisiana, but they did not indicate an association with a culture group in Louisiana, I asked directly “Are you Cajun?” The remaining questions in the interview schedule were designed to elicit definitions of and boundaries associated with the Cajun identity. Finally, information regarding age, income, and education were asked in order to classify participants and
their answers, as well as to determine possible biases in sampling.

Data were coded first based upon questions in the interview schedule that required yes/no answers, or ranked information, such as income and class (Appendix B). Data were then entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to provide basic descriptive statistics regarding participants (Appendix C). The 24 female and 20 male participants ranged in age from 21 years old to 88 years old, with a mean age of 44.

Of the 36 individuals who identified themselves as Cajun, ten stated they were Cajun in response to the first question “please describe yourself in one sentence or less”. When asked about membership in a particular culture group in Louisiana, an additional 18 identified as Cajun. The remaining eight Cajun participants had to be asked directly about their identity. The eight participants who did not identify as Cajun all reside in Louisiana presently, and five are originally from Louisiana. The remaining three are from Florida, Washington State, and Arizona; one of them is married to a Cajun and considers her children to be Cajun. One of the non-Cajun participants (not from Louisiana) did claim an “Honorary Cajun” status.

The mean income range for participants is $25,000 to $50,000 per year (n=19). Only three persons make less than $10,000 per year, and four make more than $100,000 per year. Two persons identified their social class as lower, and three identified theirs as upper class. All others designated lower middle, middle, or upper middle class (n=35). Four people did not indicate social class and two did not indicate income level.

One participant did not complete high school, and the majority (n=28) had at
least some post-high school education, with 19 of those having a bachelor’s degree and four having a graduate level degree. One participant did not indicate educational level. There is a recognized potential for sample bias because 72.7% of participants have a post-high school education and 77.3% have a middle class income range. This could be interpreted as the Cajun population being primarily made up of the educated middle class. It could also mean that my sample does not accurately reflect the general Cajun population of Louisiana. I had difficulty interviewing people who worked in minimum wage positions, and rarely saw them at the gatherings I attended. The few times someone consented to a formal interview, they cancelled because of being called into work or the need to care for a child so someone else could work. I found the participants who had a college education were not only more excited by the research, but were more willing (and able) to make the time to be interviewed.

The participants in this research project were asked point blank “What religion are you?” The majority claimed Catholic (Roman Catholic) or having been raised Catholic. Of the 36 Cajuns in the research, 72% (n=26) stated they were practicing Catholics, 19% (n=7) claimed to be non-practicing Catholics, and 8% (n=3) were not and had never been Catholic (two of these were Methodist and one was non-denominational Christian). Of the non-practicing Catholics, three had converted to another religion (Baptist, Methodist, and non-denominational Christian). Of the non-Cajun participants, only one was raised Catholic.
Text Analysis

This research project has taken advantage of a computer program designed by anthropologist Matthew Weinstein (Kent State University). The Text Analysis Markup System, also known as TAMS, is an open source (and free) program that allows for the transcription, coding, and analysis of any written text. Weinstein designed TAMS to analyze ethnographic data, such as that found in interviews and field notes. For this project, TAMS was used to code transcribed text and extract common themes regarding identity.

Grounded theory is the primary method employed to determine the codes used in analyzing the transcribed interviews. According to H. Russell Bernard and Gery W. Ryan (1998), “[g]rounded theory is a set of techniques that: (1) brings the researcher close to informant’s experiences; (2) provides rigorous and detailed method for identifying categories and concepts that emerge from text; and (3) helps the researcher link the concepts into substantive and formal theories” (608). Grounded theory has been used in this project as a way to extract patterns of thought and discourse that relate to the Cajun identity.

Bernard and Ryan (1998) explain that “[t]he mechanics of grounded theory are deceptively simple” (608). First, interviews are transcribed verbatim and an initial read-through of a small sample is conducted and generalized themes are identified. Exemplars of themes are pulled and compared. As the researcher becomes more “grounded” in the data, clearer, more relevant categories will emerge and theories may be tested and refined until a model emerges that can be tested against the data.
collected. Grounded theory has been used in this project as a method of determining 1) the boundaries associated with the Cajun identity, and 2) the rhetoric with which people discuss their personal and cultural identities.

The overall design of TAMS is conducive to a grounded theory approach in that it allows for the layering of categories to be coded. For instance, the code “Cajun” can be broken down into several smaller categories indicating how people define Cajun (Cajun>defined), the boundaries people associate with being Cajun (Cajun>boundaries), and what Cajun stereotypes people perceive (Cajun>stereotypes). TAMS allows specific text to be extracted and analyzed across all 44 participants. A complete, final list of codes considered for this project is presented in Appendix D. The following is a sample of coded text to illustrate how coding appears in TAMS:

{Caj>Yes}{Gen>Female}{Cajun>defined}{Cajun>first} I think it’s a person who grew up here … mostly in poverty.{/Cajun>first} Not … {Class>relations} there were some people who were well-heeled, that were either plantation owners, or at least politicians, but I think that the Cajuns are the people who were thrown out of their homes and had to come here to survive.{/Class>relations}{Characteristics>general} {Heritage} We’re just a people who learned to survive wherever we landed. And I think that’s the Cajun heritage{/Heritage}.{/Characteristics>general} {/Cajun>defined} {/Caj>Yes}{/Gen>Female}

In this paragraph, I have coded the participant as ethnically Cajun and female. i have coded the entire paragraph as this participant’s answer to the question to define Cajun, which is:

I think it’s a person who grew up here … mostly in poverty. Not … there were some people who were well-heeled, that were either plantation owners, or at least politicians, but I think that the Cajuns are the people who were thrown out of their homes and had to come here to survive.
We’re just a people who learned to survive wherever we landed. And I think that’s the Cajun heritage.

Furthermore, she has also given the first indication of how she thinks about Cajun with the statement “I think it’s a person who grew up here … mostly in poverty.” She also reflects on her opinions regarding class relations in Louisiana: “there were some people who were well-heeled, that were either plantation owners, or at least politicians, but I think that the Cajuns are the people who were thrown out of their homes and had to come here to survive.” She also talks about the survival personality trait of the Cajuns (“We’re just a people who learned to survive wherever we landed”) and uses the word “heritage” in her answer.

TAMS has allowed for accurate and speedy access to specific interviews for the presentation of themes and participant quotations throughout the remainder of this paper. TAMS allows researchers to extract information in numerous ways. For instance, I am able to look at every use of a specific word or phrase, such as “Cajun”, in context. Or, I can look for how people of a particular ethnicity or gender define the term “Cajun”. Quotations concerning specific topics may be organized by individual codes or groups of codes, such as grouping female and heritage, or non-Cajun and dancing.

Information extracted from interviews will be presented as the example below. Participants will be identified by a pseudonym, their Cajun ethnic identity, and age. Pseudonyms have been used to protect anonymity. Where additional information is necessary for context, brackets [ ] will be used. When identifying information, such as names or places are used, a blank ( _____ ) will be inserted to protect the identities of
the participants. While vocalizations and pauses are not indicated in the transcriptions, grammar and pronunciation are not altered, except were necessary to ensure clarity.

I think it’s [being Cajun] through bloodlines and 100% of my ancestry is French Canadian and French. We trace everyone back to France. I’m sure there is some intermarrying going on in there, but in that way I’m a Cajun. But also, culturally I’m part of the lifestyle and everybody’s accent. Although, I don’t have the accent – very discouraging. Going into high school, it was a great concern. Going to school [at a private Catholic high school] it was very click-ish and so, you are an outsider, but no one ever picked up that I was from _____ because I didn’t sound it.

Patrick, Cajun, age 25

The results of the remaining interview questions will be explored in further detail in the chapters that follow.

Chapter Descriptions

Chapter 2, “Ethnography, Ideology, and Ethnic Boundaries”, presents the theoretical framework for this dissertation. This chapter outlines how the formulation, negotiation, and maintenance of ethnic boundaries and identity can be examined in anthropology through ethnographic analysis, a theory of ideology, and rhetoric. The foundation for exploring participant interviews, as well as for modeling the Cajun ideology, is presented in this chapter.

Chapter 3, “Cajun Narratives”, will summarize the history of the peoples who would become the Cajuns in the United States. This chapter includes not only the history of the Cajuns and other French colonists that traveled to Louisiana, but also the history of the academic pursuits surrounding the Cajuns and other cultures in Southern
Louisiana. A brief introduction to the Cajun identity, including ethnographic information published to date, will be included in this chapter.

Presentation of the ethnographic data collected in this research project begins with Chapter 4, “Born and Raised Here: Cajun Heritage and Family.” The focus of this chapter is on the ancestry boundary as described by participants. While Cajuns negotiate this primary marker with outside groups, such as Anglo-Americans and Creoles, the majority of negotiation occurs within the group over disagreements regarding who can and cannot claim to be Cajun. The importance of the shared Acadian history, family ties, kinship, names, and endogamy are discussed.

Chapter 5, “Losing and Learning Cajun French”, discusses the modern boundaries surrounding speaking Cajun French. Historical boundaries between French and English, modern boundaries among the varieties of French spoken in Louisiana, and how the generational differences impact the contemporary perception of language are explored. The intent of this chapter is not to present a descriptive account of the languages people speak in Southern Louisiana, but rather to discuss how they are utilizing language to reify their identities as Cajuns.

In Chapter 6, “Cultural Lagniappe: The Other “Stuff” of Being Cajun”, we will explore the ways in which participants are negotiating the “stuff” they consider part of being Cajun, as well as how they are displaying those characteristics. Value traits, Cajun cuisine, Cajun music and dance, and festivals are discussed in light of historical circumstances, together with the ways that Cajuns persuade insiders and outsiders alike of their identities.
Chapter 7, "Contemporary Cajun Boundaries" explores the differences between the Cajun written about in academic literature to date and the Cajun of the current research project. The primary differences noted are in how the community is negotiating and reproducing its ideologies. The impact of academia, tourism, and the Internet are discussed, as well as how each is utilized by Cajuns to navigate their cultural landscapes.

Chapter 8, "The Cajun Ideology", explores how the theory of ideology may be utilized in anthropological and ethnographic research. The ways in which the Cajun ideology informs Cajun identity is demonstrated through examination of two participant interviews. Other examples of how ideology and rhetoric may be used to explore issues in the Cajun culture, as well as in the United States are presented. Ultimately, the conclusion is that there is a Cajun ideology based in a shared history that is being maintained through individual and group identities.
CHAPTER 2
ETHNOGRAPHY, IDEOLOGY, AND ETHNIC BOUNDARIES

The Anthropological Lens

Anthropology is a diverse field of academic and applied pursuits that endeavors to be holistic in its approach to understanding the human condition (Peacock 2001). While anthropologists draw from a wide variety of methods, theories, and research, the primary focus remains on the study of human behavior within the context of culture. This is evidenced by the fact that anthropology employs a four-field approach in which archaeology, biology, language, and culture each contribute to the collective understanding of culture and behavior (Peacock 2001). Furthermore, within each subfield there are various ways to study a particular topic. In recent years, emphasis has been placed on interdisciplinary research in order to further the holistic goal of anthropology (Peacock 2001). The result is a rich supply of academic literature and applied methods that allow the anthropologist a full tool box from which to pull in order to better understand “that complex whole” described by Sir Edward Tylor in 1871.

The collection of research, theory, methods, and literature in anthropology and its related fields may seem overwhelming in its entirety, as we consider what questions to ask and how to answer each. To what extent do we consider the individual and the group? Do we concern ourselves only with behavior, or do we delve deeper into the psyche in order to understand what is being done and why? Do we stick with descriptive analysis of language and ritual, or do we speculate on meaning? And, before we reflect on any of these, do we wish to look at material evidence of culture,
biological imperatives of behavior, or modern cultural representations of life?

My answers to these questions began with a socio-linguistic approach to culture, focused on the Cajun communities in Southern Louisiana. I come to this project with a multidisciplinary approach to understanding how culture change occurs, drawing on a mixture of theories and methods. My goal in this chapter is to demonstrate how cultural boundaries, rhetoric and ideology work together in the formation, negotiation, and maintenance of identity in order to establish a foundation for investigating the contemporary Cajun ideology.

**Ethnographic Exploration**

Ethnography is central to cultural anthropology. According to Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul (1999), “[e]thnography is an approach to learning about the social and cultural life of communities, institutions, and other settings” that explores, in a scientific manner, what people say they do and what they actually do (1). Ethnography is both the process of collecting data through fieldwork (interviews, surveys, observations, etc.), and the product of the fieldwork in which observations and analysis are presented as ways to identify problems, solve those problems, or formulate cultural theories (LeCompte and Schensul 1999).

Bronsilaw Malinowski (1922) wrote in his introduction to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* that the ethnographer should keep as his final goal “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world” (25). To do this, Malinowski (1922) explains that the researcher must observe, record, and present
as detailed information as possible regarding the people being studied. Peacock (2001) echoes Malinowski’s (1922) argument by stating that anthropologists must do more than just “hang around or get absorbed” in their fieldwork; they “must also record, describe, analyze and, eventually, formulate” (69-70). The end result is an ethnographic account that attempts to produce generalizations about human behavior by presenting systematically collected data alongside meaningful interpretations of what happened in the field (Peacock 2001). Ethnography is intended produce “explanations of how people think, believe, and behave ... in local time and space” (LeCompte and Schensul 1999: 8).

Part of presenting ethnographic information is acknowledging and understanding the ways in which the researcher’s own bias can and will influence the final product. DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) discuss “ethnographer bias” in their book on participant observation (80). They point out factors that will impact ethnographic interpretations, including length of time spent in the field, researcher training, and traits of the ethnographer, such as age, gender, and ethnicity (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). Researchers who utilize multiple methods of data collection and verification, rather than relying on single sources of information, such as observations or interviews, are less likely to report faulty data (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). Furthermore, such researchers are more likely to report potentially negative behaviors observed. Their final point is that, while total objectivity may not be possible, ethnographers can address those facts that may bias their ethnographic reporting and employ methods that can further ensure the accuracy of their analysis (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002).
Peacock (2001) argues that anthropologists can overcome bias by implementing systematic ways of collecting and analyzing data and/or by exploring any biases held by the researcher. We can systemize our collection of data, record notes, and use recognized analytical tools, but there will still be the human element to the collection of data dealing with human behavior (Peacock 2001). Simple outside forces, such as rain, a car driving by, or even the presence of the researcher, can create a difference in the thoughts or actions of an observed individual; emotional states and past experiences can affect how an observer interprets the data collected (Peacock 2001). What an observer notices and records may vary from person to person. With this in mind, we formulate our data collection carefully. We design interview schedules containing questions that will be asked (hopefully) in the same way in each interview. We record every detail we possibly can in field notes. We attempt to create a logical, repeatable research project and make note of any exceptions that may have occurred. Even with these measures in place, there is still potential for bias (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002; Peacock 2001).

The most difficult issue to overcome may be the personal history we bring to the collection and presentation of our data. We are also human. We have opinions, moods, interests, and roles that we favor. We may even have political agendas, religious attitudes, and theoretical perspectives that are in conflict with the people we are researching. Peacock (2001) points out that creating a balance between explaining enough of this bias to the reader and over-sharing is challenging. The danger lies in the author becoming the subject of the research rather than the people observed. Some
anthropologists and ethnographers have turned to the discipline of rhetoric in an attempt to overcome these personal biases in ethnographic writing.

Rhetoric

_Rhetoric_, as defined by Aristotle, is “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (McKeon 2001: 1329). This research is based, in part, in the classical sense of rhetoric in that it is concerned with two ways the art of persuasion is used: 1) how academics, researchers, and other writers formulate their arguments concerning the people and cultures about which they write, and 2) the ways in which people convince others (and themselves) of their individual and group identities. Aristotle states “…to a certain extent all men attempt to discuss statements and to maintain them, to defend themselves and to attack others. Ordinary people do this either at random or through practice and from acquired habit” (McKeon 2001:1325). In other words, people have opinions and beliefs with which they want others to agree. We work to convince people to see the world our way, even if we are not consciously aware of our arguments.

Aristotle goes on to explain that the study of rhetoric is primarily concerned with “modes of persuasion” which lead people to formulate, and alter, opinions and beliefs (McKeon 2001: 1327). The first is dependent on the “personal character of the speaker”; the second on the speaker’s ability to put “the audience into a certain frame of mind”; and the third on providing “proof, or apparent proof” (McKeon 2001: 1329). Aristotle argues the three types of persuasion are “determined by the three classes of
listeners to speeches ... speaker, subject, and person addressed – it is the last one, the hearer, who determines the speech’s end and object” (McKeon 2001: 1335). The listener, then, is the final “judge” of the arguments made. In the case of ethnography, the ethnographer is the speaker and the reader is the listener. The reader may be someone who will determine future actions based on judgments of the data presented, such as whether or not to support a public policy or fund a grant proposal. The reader may also be another scholar comparing current cultural elements to those in the past, or may even be someone simply deciding whether or not the written text is worthy of publishing or citation. The point here is that the ethnographer is writing to multiple levels of readers and his or her rhetoric will likely reflect this fact. This brings us to the first way in which rhetoric is used in this paper, which is to consider how academic texts impact their readers and, possibly, the cultures about which they are written.

The way in which ethnographers present the data collected on a culture is of significance because “constructing the ethnographic account is a rhetorical activity” (Herndl 1991: 321). Researchers endeavor to convince their readers the information presented is valid by demonstrating how the researcher has, in fact, researched, analyzed, and written appropriately about a topic. This is accomplished “not by the power of factual description but by employing the narrative structures, textual tropes, and argumentative topoi developed by the ethnographic genre” (Herndl 1991: 321). These rhetorical tactics include, but are not limited to, convincing the reader of the researcher’s authenticity, the plausibility of the researcher’s analysis, and critically discussing previously held notions regarding a particular culture or group (Golden-
Biddle and Locke 1993).

Authenticity is achieved much in the way Aristotle envisioned, by promoting the credibility of the speaker and proving the validity of the data gathered (Golden-Biddle and Locke 1993; McKeon 2001). This may be accomplished in a variety of ways, including calling upon the researcher’s reputation, convincing the reader the data collected in a systematic manner, and even through the use of passive voice (Golden-Biddle and Locke 1993). Plausibility involves having the reader “make sense” of the text by conveying “to readers a sense of familiarity and relevance as well as a sense of distinction and innovation” (Golden-Biddle and Locke 1993: 600). In essence, the reader must connect in some way to the subject, such as emotionally or intellectually, much as Aristotle stated the listener must be in the correct “frame of mind” (McKeon 2001:1329). According to Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993), criticality means that preconceived ideas about a topic are challenged through presentations of new and different ways of thinking about a topic that may add to “existing knowledge in the field” (600).

Aristotle warns of the power the reputation of the speaker can wield, as well as the power of an emotionally charged argument, in part because people defer to those they perceive as experts: “... people are likely to assent to the views held by those who have made a study of these things, e.g. on a question of medicine they will agree with the doctor, and on a question of geometry with the geometrician; and likewise also in other cases” (McKeon 2001:196). These arguments Aristotle makes regarding authority and power are important for the researcher to bear in mind, particularly during data
collection, as the researcher may be considered an expert and given too much power over the people observed.

Adler and Adler (2008) argue that the “politics and rhetoric” of ethnographers and other researchers in the human sciences began to be called into question in the 1980s and 1990s (1). Conflicts between the observed and the observer in interpretation, “problems of voice,” and possible inequalities in privilege due to class, race, or other statuses should be noted when establishing the validity of ethnographic data (Adler and Adler 2008: 1). Herndl (1991) points out that we can think of “ethnography as the way we organize and control knowledge and social power” (323). As ethnographers, we must consider the impact our rhetorical strategies can have on the reader. Often, the researcher is seen as an authority on a particular subject and should take care not only in the writing of results, but also in the gathering of data.

As a result of these potential power, control, and privilege issues, anthropologists are concerned with minimizing the impact of the researcher on the topic by acknowledging potential biases, considering the influences we have on the observed, and generally being aware of the potential issues in our presentation of data. For instance, the rhetorical devices in this paper are as expected for an ethnographic account of anthropological fieldwork, and have been put into play from the beginning. I have attempted to add validity to my research by showing that I am knowledgeable about anthropology generally and Cajun culture specifically. I will show, repeatedly, evidence of my time spent in the field. I will establish the plausibility of my arguments and interpretations with participants’ quotes and anecdotes from the field. In Chapter 4 I
explain my potential biases and connections to the Cajun culture. I have attempted, however, to minimize the emotional language in presentation of my arguments and data collected, without rendering the text dull and unreadable. Furthermore, I will call into question previously held beliefs and ask the reader to reconsider his or her own preconceived notions about Cajun identity, as well as to consider how rhetoric in previous scholarship has impacted the identity and the voice of the contemporary Cajun individual. These are, however, only part of the roles of rhetoric in this project. Additionally, we will consider rhetoric in the sense of studying how it is used to form, negotiate, and maintain identity.

Kenneth Burke (1969) explains rhetoric as “the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents” (41). Although Burke (1969) argues for anthropologists to “recognize the factor of rhetoric in their own field,” much as we have discussed above, he also explains that rhetoric is “an essential function of language itself” and that it is “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (Burke 1969: 43). In essence, we can study, analyze, and comment on human behavior by exploring how humans use symbols, such as language, in a rhetorical manner.

Ralph Cintron (1997) states that “…the discipline of rhetoric is interested in the structured contentiousness that organizes, albeit fleetingly, a community or culture” (x). Rhetoric encompasses more than just the words people use, but also their body language and artifacts, such as hairstyles, clothes, and cars (Cintron 1997). Cintron (1997) demonstrates this kind of rhetoric by describing one of his participants, Manuel,
a young man who has a “thumper” car [one that plays loud, thumping music] and is dressed to show-off his body-builder physique. Cintron (1997) explains that, in Manuel’s world, “the body was a visual space to be meticulously controlled” (115). As with the display of the body, the thumper car has the “ability to create respect under conditions of little or no respect,” but has the additional ability to “cover more public space in less time than the body” (Cintron 1997: 115). Manuel is using his body, his dress, and his car as rhetorical devices to convince his listeners of his personal character. Manual is not acting for the public audience alone, however. He does these things privately, in his “innerscape,” to make himself feel respectable (Cintron 1997: 116). In fact, the innerscape and outerscape are paired and “loosely structured around certain social conditions” (Cintron 1997: 116). I will refer to the innerscape and outerscape in terms of the self (innerscape) and public (outerscape) in the remainder of this paper.

These uses of rhetoric are what Cintron (1997) refers to as “rhetoric of public culture” and are used to blend traditional, anthropological ethnographic fieldwork with that of the “cultural critique” familiar to ethnographers and rhetoricians (xi). Exploring this type of rhetoric can show how seemingly small things, such as how we make sense of the names we give to roads, can influence how we think, speak, and behave. For example, a neighborhood in Angelstown, where Cintron (1997) conducts his fieldwork, has street names such as “Queens Gate,” “Greenbriar”, and “Windemere Ct.” that are “devoid of both local history and local landscape,” yet are used to elicit an emotional response and connection to the neighborhood in order to sell houses and to create a
specific mental image of the neighborhood (Cintron 1997: 20).

The main purpose of rhetoric in this paper will be to explore how individual and group persuasion is executed in order to build and maintain the Cajun identity and ideology. Rhetoric will also be employed in order to see how academic writings may or may not have impacted the rhetoric of the individual. Finally, rhetoric will be explored in terms of how it interacts with and is evidence of group and individual ideologies.

**Ideology**

_Ideology_ will be used in this paper to refer to all the beliefs, knowledge, and rhetoric used to make and maintain identity. Ideology is treated as a cognitive artifact supported by cultural transmission and discourse (including rhetoric), following the works of Teun A. van Dijk (2000), which will be discussed in more detail below.

According to Raymond Williams (1983), the term _ideology_ was first used in 1796 as a way to describe “the philosophy of mind” as an “epistemology and linguistic theory” (153-154). Ideology later became a pejorative term used in arguing against the ideals of the “Other”, thanks to Napoleon Bonapart (Williams 1983).

With the works of Karl Marx and Freidrich Engles, ideology gained usage in philosophical writings. Marx and Engles attempted to outline the underlying structures of human thought and action in order to understand what they perceived as gross inequalities caused by capitalism (Marx 1906). These inequalities existed because the elite few (bourgeoisie) exploited the labor of the vast working class (proletariat). Ideology was the force keeping the proletariat in their oppressed state and the solution
would be to create a change in that ideology, through awareness, in order to overthrow the capitalist regime (Marx 1906).

While Marx and Engles did not define ideology explicitly, they used the word to refer to a false consciousness created by the bourgeoisie, intended to keep the proletariat uninformed and working to benefit the bourgeoisie. Marx and Engles (1998) explain in *The German Ideology*: “[t]he history of nature, called natural science, does not concern us here; but we will have to examine the history of men, since almost the whole ideology amounts either to a distorted conception of this history or to a complete abstraction from it” (34). Ideology is pejorative term used to refer to those collective beliefs that are maintained, but should be overcome. This is a limited explanation of the Marxist doctrine, intended only to give a brief history of the use of ideology as a way to define systems of belief. The concept of ideology as presented by Marx and Engles is limited by its negative connotations in that it only allows for those ideologies of the “Other” to oppress the “Us” and does not account for a possible positive ideology (van Dijk 2000). This, among other limitations, led to other explorations of Marxian ideology.

Antonio Gramsci (1971), for instance, introduced the concept of *hegemony* in his *Prison Notebooks*. He argued that there existed an unwritten collective agreement regarding social order, regardless of class status. The argument is that the classes are each a part of their ideologies and that there is not necessarily an intentional oppression on the part of the bourgeoisie, but, more likely, a consensual relationship between the classes. Each has its role to play and does so in a way that logically allows for a (sometimes) meaningful existence to the people living it (Gramsci, Hoare, and Smith
Louis Althusser (1971) takes these arguments further with a model that demonstrates how the circumstances of our birth determine what our ideologies will be, although he rejected the deterministic elements of Marxist theory. For Althusser (1971), ideology is what shapes human consciousness through social forces which cannot be escaped. He further argues that institutions such as education, government, and family are what maintain and transmit the ideologies governing our lives. Because of this, it is the institutions that need to be observed in order to determine the ideology of a group (Althusser 1971).

Building on these and other theoretical approaches, scholars continue to debate ideology, culture, and behavior. In an attempt at a multidisciplinary, contemporary study of ideology, van Dijk (2000) criticizes many of these approaches as being limited by their philosophical nature and proposes a theory of ideology that requires a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the relationships between “cognition, society, and discourse” (5). This “triangle” van Dijk (2000) describes thus creates a way to systematically analyze behaviors and the underlying thought processes involved by acknowledging and utilizing the three components:

1) **Cognition**: ideologies are “some kind of ‘system of belief’, and hence belong to the symbolic field of thought and belief”(5). This is based on the idea that the mind is more than just a set of biological processes, but is also how humans store, access, interpret, and use ideas. This leg of the triangle includes knowledge, beliefs, judgments, opinions, memory, and emotions;
2) **Social**: the social aspect of ideology is that they are “often (though not always) associated with group interests, conflicts or struggle” (5). This leg of the triangle includes memory, beliefs, knowledge, and opinions. The concept of human culture is useful for understanding how ideologies are maintained, transmitted, and changed over generations;

3) **Discourse**: language is an instrument of the reproduction and maintenance of ideology, though not necessarily the only instrument. Rhetoric is used as part of discourse as a way to investigate how people think and talk about their ideologies.

van Dijk (2000) argues that ideology is not the “false consciousness” of Marx and Engles, but rather an “interface between fundamental properties (e.g. interests, goals) of social groups and the shared, social cognitions of their members” (313). He presents a complex theoretical approach to determining ideologies, along with a complicated definition of ideology (van Dijk 2000). He does, however, define ideologies as being both mental and social, with “properties [that] are socially acquired, shared and changed,” much like culture (van Dijk 2000: 313). The aspects of van Dijk’s (2000) proposed theory of ideology that are pertinent to anthropology, ethnographic research, and the current project are outlined as follows:

1) Ideologies are “socially shared, general beliefs” that include, but are not limited to knowledge, attitudes, norms, values, etc., that have a distinction made between personal and social beliefs (32);

2) Ideologies are made up of identity schemas that organize how we think
about our social identities and include categories, such as membership (who we are, where we are from), activities (what we do), goals (why we do), values or norms (what we value, how we evaluate ourselves), position and group relations (who is the same, who is different), and our resources; these categorizations can create structures that are polarized (ie Us versus Them) and eventually lead to what we call culture;

3) Ideologies are not always used consciously or coherently;

4) Ideologies do not belong only to those with dominant social positions, although they are often subject to differential power relations, as there are people with a “symbolic elite” status, such as “writers, thinkers, politicians, scholars, journalists, etc.” that will have more potential impact on ideologies (315-316). This does not assume that ideologies will be used only to dominate or oppress, but can also be used to cooperate, to compete, and to resist or affect change.

5) Ideology requires discourse and rhetoric in order to formed, reproduced, maintained, and altered because mental models (schemas) are mapped on to discourse and may be expressed through a variety of speech acts, which allows for the discovery and analysis of those schema.

It is with this understanding of ideology as a mental and social construct that this research will consider Cajuns in contemporary America through analysis of ethnographic data collected. Furthermore, we will explore the ways in which individual ideologies differ, through examples of the Cajun culture and identity. Before we can fully address the contemporary Cajun ideology, however, we must
first explore what is meant by *identity* and *ethnicity*.

**Identity, Ethnicity, and the Negotiation of Boundaries**

Identity and ethnicity in cultural studies are complex and complicated areas of inquiry. Erik Erikson (1980) used *identity* to explain the development of personal perceptions of ego. He argues that personal identity is a “conscious feeling ... based on two simultaneous observations: the immediate perception of one’s selfsameness and continuity in time; and the simultaneous perception of the fact that others recognize one’s sameness and continuity” (Erikson 1980: 22). Identity is used to mean how we see ourselves in relation to others, with a mindfulness of how others see us as well. van Dijk (2000) explains identity as a mental schema of the individual and the group that is a fundamental part of ideology. These are broad generalizations to explain all the different roles individuals may play, as well as the categories in which they identify themselves. Often, other concepts and terms are used to further the exploration of group and individual identities, such as *ethnicity*.

Raymond Williams (1983) explains that the term *ethnic* comes from the Greek *ethnikos* (heathen) and eventually used to refer to immigrant groups in the United States that were generally held to be inferior (ie Jews, Italians, Irish). Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2002), states that ethnicity has been a focus of research in Western academics since the 1960s, and is one of the many forms of “collective identity,” such as gender, race, and class (1). He later defines *ethnicity* “as a social identity ... characterized by metaphoric or fictive kinship” (Eriksen 2002: 13). Identity has political and symbolic
aspects that help individuals and groups organize and navigate their relationships with other individuals and groups (Eriksen 2002).

Although there is a great deal of scholarship (and debate) surrounding ethnicity and ethnic research, the focus of this paper is on that which applies to the study of the Cajun (white) ethnic identity. Alba (1990) explains that ethnicity is fluid and that “[s]uch a conception must derive from a recognition that ethnic identity may be a subtle matter for many whites, sometimes present but often not, and possibly quite variable in its form” (25). Alba (1990) concludes that ethnicity, at least for European Americans, varies greatly in the intensity that is felt, is expressed through a variety of experiences (ie ancestry, food, or festivals), is tied to the notion of family, and is “not typically anchored in strongly ethnic social structures” (ie marriage within the group, membership in ethnic organizations) (301). Of course, this is not meant as a blanket statement to encompass all ethnic groups in the United States. The Cajun identity involved in this research echoes these statements in that there is variation in how people perceive and practice their ethnic identities. In order to further explore these variations, we will turn to Fredrik Barth’s (1998) thoughts on ethnic boundaries.

Barth (1998) argues “[t]o the extent that actors use ethnic identities to categorize themselves and others for purposes of interaction, they form ethnic groups in this organizational sense” (13-14). Barth (1998) argues for a shift in the focus of studying ethnic identities as isolated cultures to one of investigating how ethnic boundaries are formed, negotiated, and maintained between ethnic groups. The key to understanding ethnic identity is in determining how people identify themselves, how outsiders identify
them, and how they interact across those boundaries of identification (Barth 1998).

Ethnic boundaries are fluid and in constant flux, as they are negotiated within and between groups. Without neighboring groups, an ethnic identity does not exist – one cannot know they are different without something to use in comparison (Barth 1998).

Barth (1998) states that boundaries become “criteria of membership” in an ethnic group and that these boundaries are not hard and fast rules of identity, but are rather dynamic and under constant negotiation by members and outsiders alike (38). Furthermore, with the focus on these fluid criteria, it is “the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses... If a group maintains its identity when members interact with others, this entails criteria for determining membership and ways of signaling membership and exclusion” (Barth 1998: 15). Keep in mind “stuff” is still important here, even though it should not be the entire focus of drawing the boundaries of identity. Through negotiation of criteria, the boundaries between groups may change over time. Barth’s (1998) idea of an ethnic boundary can also be applied to identity and ideology, as each are built, negotiated, and maintained in similar ways. The terms 

*ethnicity* and *identity* will be used somewhat interchangeably throughout this paper in the sense that ethnicity is a type of identity. When the terms are used as “Cajun ethnicity” and “Cajun identity,” they are used to mean the same phenomena of perceived identities.

*Ideology* and *identity*, however, are not always interchangeable. Individuals may have several identities and ideologies under which they make decisions of self (van Dijk 2000). Groups also have multiple identities and ideologies. Ideologies are how we
know what to say and how to behave within the agreed upon parameters of group membership. Identity is how we decide to express our ideologies both to the outside world and to ourselves. So how do we distinguish the differences between ideology and identity?

Identities inform and are informed by ideologies. For instance, I have chosen the identities of wife and Texan, among others. Each of these identities has a larger, overarching ideology associated with them of which I am (mostly) consciously aware. I share these ideologies with other people who have chosen to identify as wife, Texan, or both. We all have a shared memory and opinion of what these ideologies mean, but I also have a personal memory and opinion of what the identities mean to me as an individual. As “wife” I hold a certain set of values that are informed by my ideological belief system that includes being committed to my spouse, having a partnership in finances, and having an emotional connection. While there are others who agree with this ideology, these are not the only “wife” ideologies around the world.

Another aspect of this is that I may meet certain criteria of an ideology and yet not associate myself with that identity. For instance, I have chosen the identity “Texan” over that of “Cajun,” although I meet criteria for membership in both. My mother, however, argues that I should choose the “Cajun” identity first. Although we share many of the same beliefs of a Cajun ideology, I do not feel as though I meet enough of the criteria to call myself Cajun. This does not mean I am not able to function within the Cajun ideology, or that there are not activities that make me feel Cajun, such as eating crawfish. I understand much of the schema of being Cajun, and not just from an
academic standpoint. I am able to speak appropriately (most of the time) and act appropriately in social situations, although some of this is due to the overlap among Cajun, Texan, Southern, and American ideologies. I choose to not express membership in the Cajun identity.

Identity and ethnicity are part of the larger ideology of a group. This is where the individual negotiates their personal identity and figures out how that identity fits into the larger schema of the group. This allows for constant negotiation, reproduction, and maintenance of boundaries, both group and individual.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the theoretical framework for the remainder of this paper. A number of key concepts have been discussed: ethnography is an excellent tool, both for the organization of fieldwork, but also for the presentation of data gathered in the course of research. It allows for exploration and analysis of collected information in the pursuit of understanding culture and human behavior. Rhetoric plays an important role in ethnographic presentation, as the ways in which arguments are presented can indicate not only participant beliefs, but also can reveal (and temper) researcher bias. Ideologies are socially shared schemas that organize our personal and group selves, are impacted by our social status and position, and can be accessed through discourse and rhetoric. Identity is how we see ourselves and how others see us, while ethnicity is a part of our identities that is made up of collective perceptions of a shared history, shared activities, and negotiated, agreed upon
boundaries.

There are a number of overlapping and repeating elements in this chapter that will be more fully explored in the remaining chapters. For instance, Barth’s (1998) concept of cultural stuff is echoed in the arguments Cintron (1997) makes wherein “cultural stuff” is a part of the rhetoric of maintaining ethnic identity and boundaries. While we cannot count on the inventories of “stuff” to remain the same, we can look at how they are being used to signal inclusion or exclusion in a group. These rhetorical artifacts are part of the persuasive process described by Aristotle and are tools used to formulate, negotiate, and maintain identity, ethnicity, and ideology.

I further argue here that the term ideology may be used to encompass all of that which makes up an identity, including ethnic boundaries, membership criteria, and the rhetoric used to maintain this identity. In this sense, ideology can enhance the consideration of identity as it has been used in the past to talk about individual and group social characteristics because we can see group identities in light of their overarching ideologies. The remainder of this paper will attempt to demonstrate that the concept of ideology is appropriate to the understanding of cultural identity through an exploration of ethnographic data to demonstrate the Cajun ideology that exists in contemporary America.
The history and language of the Cajuns is well researched and documented (see for example Brasseaux 1987, 1992, 2005; Bernard 2003, 2008; Conrad 1983a; Post 1962; Trépanier 1991). The information presented in this chapter is intended to establish the background of the Cajun people, to provide an introduction to the peoples that have influenced the Cajun identity, and to serve as the foundation for the arguments and data presented in subsequent chapters.

The Acadians

The widely accepted account of how the Cajuns came to Louisiana begins in the western provinces of France. In the late 1500s, Huguenot (French Calvinist Protestant) merchants and explorers sought to establish colonies in the New World. By 1610, a marginally successful fur trade and French colony existed in the Canadian Maritimes at Port Royal, Nova Scotia (Brasseaux 2005). Civil strife and religious warfare in France at this time meant the colony was not well supported, and, by 1629, the dwindling settlement at Port Royal was taken over by Scottish Protestants. Although their numbers were small, a few Protestant French remained on the eastern coast of Nova Scotia, now known as Acadie, as fur traders, fishermen, and farmers (Brasseaux 2005).

In 1632, the French regained control of Nova Scotia. The now Catholic crown encouraged colonization of the New World and sent 300 Catholic French settlers, primarily from the western provinces of France, to force out the Scottish and regain
control of Port Royal. The Acadians, as these Roman Catholic French settlers were now called, adapted to their new environment, with assistance from the indigenous Micmac tribes and the sparse number of remaining Scottish and French Protestants. They lived as laborers, farmers, and fishers on the Acadian coast (Brasseaux 2005).

Due in large part to rapidly shifting political control (the colony had ten changes in power between 1604 and 1713), the Acadians developed an independent, neutral stance with the French and the British alike (Brasseaux 2005). In 1713, the British were granted rule of the colony and demanded the Acadians swear an oath of allegiance to the British crown (Brasseaux 2005). After repeatedly refusing the demand because they could not be guaranteed neutrality in future conflicts, the Acadians were deported from Nova Scotia in 1755. *Le Grand Dérangement*, as this expulsion and the consequential diaspora came to be known, sent the Acadians to internment camps along the eastern seaboard of the United States, the Caribbean, and even to Britain. A few Acadians remained imprisoned in Nova Scotia and were eventually released to their homes along the Acadian Coast (Brasseaux 2005).

Between 1766 and 1769, many of the exiles from the eastern seaboard escaped the internment camps and made their way to New Orleans, in the hopes of receiving aid from the established French government. Instead, they met with a corrupt and bankrupt colony, and eventually established settlements outside of New Orleans along Bayou Teche (Brasseaux 2005). By 1785, nearly 1,600 more Acadian deportees arrived and settled with their brethren (Brasseaux 2005).
The French in Louisiana

During the Acadian settlement of Nova Scotia, the French were also colonizing the Gulf Coast, primarily as a military stronghold. French exploration and colonization of the New World began in earnest in 1534 with the voyages of Jacques Cartier (Bailey 2008). By 1783, nearly 70,000 French settlers had come to North America, spreading from Louisiana to the Mississippi Valley, as well as in the Great Lakes area and Canada (Bailey 2008). In 1682, René-Robert Cavelier, sieur de LaSalle, claimed the Mississippi River Valley for France, naming the area Louisiana, after the French King Louis XIV (Campenella 2002). The French developed a strategic port in the area that would become New Orleans, and maintained an unstable presence until 1763 when the Treaty of Paris divided the Louisiana lands among France, Spain, and Great Britain (Brasseaux 2005).

Although the majority of French settlers in Louisiana were military, other groups also immigrated to the colony, such as nobility who received governmental incentives to go to the colonies, refugees from the French Revolution, Belgian and Swiss immigrants, French Jews seeking religious freedom, Catholic missionaries from France, Belgium, and Canada, and numerous others (Brasseaux 2005). The result was that by 1785, when the Acadians arrived, there were already established French settlements in Louisiana (Brasseaux 2005).

Louisiana’s Indigenous Peoples

Prior to 1699, Louisiana had at least 20 indigenous tribes who lived along the
banks of the Mississippi River and its tributaries, as well as along the Gulf Coast (Brasseaux 2005; Forêt 1998; Read 1931; Swanton 1911). The tribes represented five different linguistic groups - Natchez, Muskogean, Tunican, Chitimachan, and Atakapan – and included the Houma, Chitimacha, Chakchiuma, Choctaw, Creek, Atakapa, and Natchez tribes (Read 1931; Swanton 1911). By 1699, when the French built small, strategic settlements along the Mississippi River, the indigenous populations of Louisiana had nearly 150 years of European contact, and had become dependent upon European trade goods (Forêt 1998; Swanton 1911). Unfortunately, their already small numbers diminished greatly due to war (both with the Europeans and with other tribes) and diseases brought in by the European settlers (Forêt 1998; Swanton 1911).

The French settlements in Louisiana were small and fragile because the French crown did not offer financial or political support (Brasseaux 2005; Forêt 1998). As a result, their outposts appeared to pose no threat to the indigenous communities, yet offered trade goods to the local tribes in exchange for deer skins. The early French colonists would not have been able to survive without the aid of the local peoples, primarily the Creek and Choctaw, not only to provide food, but also in fighting the British (Brasseaux 2005; Forêt 1998). The French also forged alliances with the indigenous groups under the leadership of Pierre le Moyne d'Iberville, following the practices of the French in Canada (Forêt 1998). In 1729, however, two ruthless French officers decided to forcibly build a plantation on the site of the Natchez Grand Village (Forêt 1998).

The Natchez fought back and killed 289 French settlers in a single day. The French then spent the next three years retaliating; reducing the Natchez numbers
enough to force them to seek refuge with the Chickasaw tribes (Forêt 1998). After the Natchez Uprising, the French attempted to place leaders in frontier settlements who were diplomatic and friendly to the indigenous, in order to maintain relations and trade (Forêt 1998). Despite overall friendly dealings with the tribes, the French did have conflicts with multiple groups, such as the Chitimacha and Chakchiuma, whom they enslaved (with help from other tribes). The majority of these slaves were women, as men were generally killed, and were often taken as concubines and wives (DuVal 2008). Indigenous women were also used to maintain trade alliances in what became known as trade marriages, although not a common practice (DuVal 2008).

The French also worked to keep the Chocktaw and the Chickasaw at war with one another, in order to prevent a Chocktaw-Chickasaw alliance, which would allow the British to gain trade access to the region. By the mid-1700s, the Chickasaw were nearly extinct (Forêt 1998). By 1803, the Atakapas, rumored to be ritual cannibals, were nearly extinct as well (Butler 1970). The Houma were almost destroyed by other tribes in the early 1700s due to their strong alliance with the French. When the Acadians arrived in Louisiana in 1765, many of the indigenous tribes were so small in number they were merging together to stay alive (Brasseaux 2005; Swanton 1911). The Houma were hostile toward the Acadian settlers, often stealing their corn and hogs, until a smallpox outbreak in 1788 forced the Houma leave their homes (Brasseaux 2005).

The Houma have yet to be granted federal recognition as a tribe because of a gap in their historical record following the smallpox outbreak (Brasseaux 2005). They appear to have widely dispersed and intermarried with other indigenous groups, as well
as the Acadians and the French (Brasseaux 2005). The loss of their native language, together with the dispersal of their political organization, has kept the tribe from gaining official recognition today. The Houma argue that their native tongue is, in fact, Cajun French, and that the few remaining families did come back together in the 1850s to reform the Houma tribe, known today as the Houma Nation (Brasseaux 2005).

Swanton (1911) explains that by the time he arrived in Louisiana in 1907 to research the indigenous populations, there were only “200 mixed bloods” in Louisiana, aside from the newly formed Houma and Choctaw (Chickasaw) tribes (45). According to the Governor’s Office of Indian Affairs (N.d.), Louisiana has four federally recognized tribes (the Chitimacha, the Coushatta, the Jena Band of Choctaws, and the Tunica/Biloxi), ten state recognized tribes (including the Caddo, Biloxi-Chitimacha, Choctaw, Choctaw-Apache, United Houma Nation, and Point-Au-Chien), and four “other” tribes (Talimali Band Apache, Atakapa-Ishak, Chocktaw Turtle, and Chahta). In addition to the complex history of the indigenous populations of Louisiana, the story of the Cajuns would not be complete without an exploration of the various meanings of Creole.

**Creole Peoples in Louisiana**

The term *creole* has multiple meanings in Louisiana. It is thought to come from the French word *créole*, which in turn is from the Spanish *criollo*, which originally referred “to persons born of European parents in the islands as well as to locally born blacks” (Domínguez 1977: 591). Dubois and Melançon (2000) state there are five
dictionary definitions of *creole* that deal with identity, and all five relate to Europeans born in the New World colonies, to black slaves born in the Americas, or to persons born of “mixed” European and black heritage. These definitions mean that in Louisiana, almost everyone could refer to themselves as *creole* because “[c]reole identity could refer to descendants of the original European colonists in Louisiana – White or Black, slave or free” (Dubois and Melançon 2000: 238). The term *creole* also refers to a language type, which will be discussed in more detail in the section “The French Language in Louisiana” below.

The early French colonists to come to Louisiana were from various class and political statuses, including military personnel and nobility (Brasseaux 2005). According to Domínguez (1977), the French did not use “Creole” to refer to themselves until the arrival of Haitian refugees in the 1790s, who used the term to refer to people native born in the colonies. By the time Louisiana became an American state in 1812, Creole was synonymous with French (Domínguez 1977). As more Americans moved into the area and cultural conflicts between the French Creoles and the Americans grew, Creole came to mean more than just locally born (Domínguez 1977). By 1929, the word was widely used to denote elite, white French speakers in Louisiana, although they were not the only ones to claim a Creole status (Domínguez 1977).

Dubois and Melançon (2000) point out that Creole was also used at this time to describe “the *gens de couleur libres*, or the free people of color or ‘colored Creoles’ who were considered the ‘elite’ class of mixed ancestry in New Orleans for several generations” (238). Creole further referred to the offspring of African and Caribbean
slaves born locally (Dubois and Melançon 2000). When emancipation freed all slaves, there were class struggles between the Creoles of color and the freed slaves, who came to be known as Creole blacks (Domínguez 1977).

Up until the late 1800s, there were three distinct groups of creoles in Louisiana – White, Colored, and Black (Dubois and Melançon 2000). The main lines of distinction were drawn at class and heritage – the white Creoles were upper class French speakers of European (French or Spanish) heritage, colored Creoles were upper class French speakers of mixed heritage, and black Creoles were lower class creole French speakers of African or Caribbean slave heritage (Dubois and Melançon 2000). In the late 1800s, the white Creoles began to push to make this a binary system of white versus black, due in large part to the fear of economic and political competition from the colored Creoles (Dubois and Melançon 2000).

In 1898, the State of Louisiana passed its seventh constitution since being ratified as a state in 1812. New legislation required voters to pass a literacy test in order to vote (Dubois and Melançon 2000). Only the elite of the colored Creoles could meet this requirement, which left blacks effectively out of the political process in Louisiana (Dubois and Melançon 2000). This constitution also rendered marriages between mixed races illegal, which further damaged the colored Creole status because they were forced to choose between black and white (Dubois and Melançon 2000). Furthermore, if a Creole claimed the white ancestry, they had to prove their racial purity back at least five generations, in effect creating a “one-drop” law in that any non-European heritage was seen as enough to classify a person as a black Creole. This one-drop law
backfired against the white Creoles, however, because Anglo-Americans also questioned the white Creole heritage, stating that because they were called Creole, they certainly must have a “touch of the tarbrush” themselves (Dubois and Melançon 2000: 243).

During all of this, Brasseaux (2005) points out that the Acadians, while technically able to call themselves Creole as well, did not adopt use of the term. This highlights one of the early historical ethnic boundaries being negotiated in which the Acadians did not wish to align themselves with the white French speakers coming out of New Orleans because they perceived them to be elitist (Brasseaux 2005). By the 1950s, damage done by segregation and the Depression were taking their toll on racial relations in Louisiana. By the time of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 70s, blacks in Louisiana were taking pride in their heritage and culture and claiming the Creole title (Dubois and Melançon 2000). Although early in Louisianan history, the white Creole and the Acadian did not want to be confused with the other, by the 1970s many white Creoles began to associate themselves with the Cajun name due to racial tensions (Brasseaux 2005).

**Americanization and the Emergence of the Cajun Identity**

The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 brought the Anglo-Saxon culture of America to the people of Louisiana. When statehood was ratified in 1812, Louisiana was allowed to keep many of its French systems of government, particularly in the court system, including the use of the French language in an official capacity (Ward 1997). This
allowed, in part, for the people in Louisiana to remain isolated from other Americans until the Second World War, when the attack on American soil pushed Cajuns into the military (Bernard 2003). Nearly 24,000 Cajun men were drafted or volunteered and sent overseas, in addition to the many thousands who joined the ranks at home to help the war efforts (Bernard 2003).

According to Bernard (2003), the Americanization of the Cajun people gained speed after WWII because of television, the Civil Rights Movement, a spreading national patriotism, and an awareness of the Cajun culture in mainstream America due to contact from the war, tourism, and popular media. Bernard (2003) argues that the Cajuns went from a stereotyped backward bumpkin to an exotic ethic group that has been assimilated into mainstream America.

The emphasis in the 1960s on defining ethnicity and identity in non-Anglo-American groups also had an impact on the various cultures in Louisiana. Just as the Hispanics, Jews, and Native peoples were exploring their histories and defining their cultural boundaries in relationship to white America and to one another, so too the Cajuns embraced their roots. Before white American culture moved into Louisiana, the Cajun really only had other marginalized groups, such as the various Creole identities, to compare itself against. The Cajun identity developed, in part, from the ancestral Acadian desire to remain separate from the white Creole elite. Henry and Bankston (2002) point out that the Cajun identity also stems from American and French outsider perceptions.

Henry and Bankston (2002) analyze published accounts of Louisiana and its
French populations from 1765 to 1907 in order to trace the terms used to refer to the Acadian people. They make note of both the French and English spellings of the terms used in 51 different publications. Their findings show a clear preference for the terms Acadien/Acadian throughout the literature. Cadien (truncated version of Acadien) first appears in 1771, but is not seen again until 1877. Cajun (Anglicized version of cadien, spelled “Cagians”) is used for the first time in 1868 and steadily gains popularity of use (although the spelling varies greatly). The terms Creole and French are also used in this literature in reference to the Acadian/Cajun people, but only until the late 1800s (Henry and Bankston 2002). By 1886, there was a clear distinction of Creole as “the white elite of European descent” (Henry and Bankston 2002: 39). Thus, the people from Acadia were termed Acadian or Cajun. Henry and Bankston (2002) argue that there existed a class distinction between the two.

Acadians were a small group of the educated upper class who were quickly being assimilated by their Anglo neighbors (Henry and Bankston 2002). The Cajuns were a largely uneducated lower class group. The use of the two terms also varied in that Acadian was used when discussing the positive aspects (moral, honorable, faithful) of the Cajun people and the term Cajun was used to denote the negative traits (lazy, uneducated) (Henry and Bankston 2002). The Acadians and Cajuns became disconnected – “Acadians are lauded and studied, Cajuns are derided and stereotyped” (Henry and Bankston 2002: 42). By the 1950s, the term Cajun was used almost exclusively by outsiders in a pejorative way and “it was avoided or used carefully by insiders” (Henry and Bankston 2002: 43).
By 1966, however, a shift in how people thought about the word *Cajun* had occurred, marked by the suggestion that the New Orleans’ NFL team should be named the Louisiana Cajuns. Although the NFL team became the New Orleans Saints, “*Cajun* no longer carried the stigma with which it had been associated” (Henry and Bankston 2002: 44). There was an increase in the use of *Cajun* in business names and in advertising beginning in the mid 1960s that continues today (Henry and Bankston 2002). There still remained a stigma attached to the use of the English spelling of *Cajun*, but this time it was by educated insiders debating the merits of using the French spellings to denote their Acadian Francophone ancestry (Henry and Bankston 2002). These issues of ancestral background and class designation have led one researcher to call for a more racialized distinction of the Cajun ethnicity.

In his book on Cajun music, Ryan Brasseaux (2009) argues that the Cajun people had become a racialized group by the mid-20th century. Brasseaux (2009) calls for using the term “off-white” to bring attention to the stigma of the Cajun being a blackened ethnicity due to early 20th century ideologies on class and whiteness. He argues that, much like the Jewish and Irish in America, Cajuns have had to struggle to be taken seriously as citizens in the United States. Brasseaux (2009) goes on to hint that the whitening process of dominant groups was born out of the practices of white businessmen who feared having their economic livelihoods negatively impacted by immigrants and outsiders. In effect, any undesirable or unacceptable behaviors where considered “not white”, even if they were simply behaviors of the lower classes; “[h]ence pervasive poverty substantiated the sociocultural blackening process Cajuns
encountered” (Brasseaux 2009:136).

To overcome this off-white “other” status, Cajuns (musicians in particular) began to adopt what they saw as “white” behaviors (Brasseaux 2009). The strategy entailed changing behaviors to meet respectability standards of the “white elite”:

Respectability entailed cleanliness, orderliness, style and fashion, familiarity with popular trends, and, most important, economic independence. ... The culture of respectability conformed to regional social, linguistic, and cultural idiosyncrasies. Cajun swingers exaggerated their bodily comportment and fashion, abandoned their native patois for proper English grammar and diction, and discounted local wisdom and egalitarianism in favor of education and the metropolitan attitudes validating class structures based on the upper classes in their milieu. Their strategy successfully aimed at the economic benefits afforded to whites (Brasseaux 2009: 137).

Brasseaux (2009) goes on to argue that the Cajuns are still in the mindset that they have to overcome this stigma of being off-white and continue to educate themselves and attempt to overcome linguistic barriers. These arguments highlight the complicated language issues in the Cajun culture, as people attempted to become more “white,” they lost their ancestral language.

**French Language in Louisiana**

One reason Louisiana remained relatively isolated from the rest of the United States was the fact that many of its people did not conform to the expectations of their English-speaking Anglo neighbors (Bernard 2003; Natsis 1999; Post 1962). French was an official language of Louisiana until changes in the state constitution in 1921 decreed “English only” schools and legislation (Natsis 1999; Ward 1997). In effect, this created a hostile environment in Louisiana that most indigenous and immigrant
populations also faced in the early twentieth century in the United States under the governmental push for assimilation. Students were punished for using French in school, both in and out of the classroom (Bernard 2003). Many of these students in turn refused to teach their own children to speak French, and the end result was a significant decrease in spoken French in Louisiana (Bernard 2003).

The demise of French in the public school system was the first of the coming tide of assaults against French in Louisiana. WWII forced Cajun GIs and other patriots to learn to speak English in order to function in the military and communicate with others (Bernard 2003). On the flip side, WWII also introduced the Cajuns to the world as French speakers, as many Cajun GIs went to France and Belgium to act as translators. Furthermore, the economy in Louisiana had been devastatingly poor until the oil boom of the 1930s, when the men of Louisiana left the family farm in search of employment in the oil fields. Again, they found themselves having to learn to speak English to make a living (Bernard 2003; Brasseaux 2005). As the Civil Rights Movement crept into Louisiana in the 1960s and 70s, a revival of cultural awareness spawned academic interest and non-profit involvement in matters of language and cultural preservation. Groups such as the Center for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) were formed with the intent to preserve all varieties of French spoken in Louisiana.

At this point, it is necessary to present a brief explanation of the varieties of French in Louisiana. This is not intended to be a comprehensive exploration, but rather a simplified presentation to serve as a reference point on the languages used in Louisiana. We will consider the definitions and usages of Colonial French,
Standardized (Continental) French, Louisiana Creole (also Creole French), Cajun French, and Cajun English. *Colonial French* is generally considered the French spoken by white creoles in New Orleans who are the descendants of the French and Spanish colonizers of Louisiana. Colonial French has largely been replaced with English, although a few families in New Orleans may remain that speak this variety of French (Rottet 2001). It is important to note that it would have historically been a standard form of continental French brought to the colonies (Rottet 2001). *Standardized (Continental) French* is used to refer to the French taught in most American schools and spoken by those persons who immigrate or visit from France today. This French is the result of efforts by the French crown and The Royal Academy of France to standardize the grammar and lexicon of the French language in 1633 (Tisch 1959).

*Louisiana Creole* refers to the French spoken originally by black Creoles, although there are Cajuns who speak it as well. Creole languages are widely accepted as being the result of culture contact. When two or more groups, which speak different languages, come into contact with one another, the need to communicate generates what is known as a *pidgin* language. Pidgins are often referred to as languages of business, although they are often how oppressed peoples communicated with their oppressors, and are characterized by simplified grammars and syntax, as well as shifts in lexicon (Aitchison 2001). A creole is a “pidgin which has become the mother tongue of a speech community” (Aitchison 2001: 228). While this is a gross simplification of the creolization process of languages, there are common attributes in most creoles that are present in Louisiana Creole. French creole languages, for instance, often have a switch
in personal pronouns, so that the first person pronoun *je* becomes *mo*. There are arguably enough differences between Louisiana Creole and Standard French to deem it “a language in its own right” and not just a dialect of French (Valdman, Klingler, Marshall, and Rottett 1998:18).

*Cajun French*, on the other hand, is a dialect which predates the 1633 standardization process. This is not to say that Cajun French has not changed in the past 375 years, only that it retains some of the grammatical, syntactical, and phonetic features of relatively archaic French. Rottet (2001) argues that Cajun French is actually a “cluster of closely related dialects” of French and differs most notably in its lexicon, pronunciation, and grammar. Not surprisingly, it does share some elements with the French spoken in the Maritime Provinces in Canada, as well as with the rural areas of Western France (Rottet 2001).

*Cajun English* is a term used mostly in academic circles to denote the linguistic features of Cajun French that have carried over to the English spoken by Cajuns, including pronunciation and grammar. Dubois and Horvath (1998) argue that it is not just bilingual speakers of French and English that exhibit traits such as nasalized vowels, a trilled /r/, unaspirated stops, or a dropped word initial /h/. Even English-only speakers that have grown up around speakers of Cajun English and Cajun French will exhibit some of these traits (Dubois and Horvath 1998).

Although there had been a few treatments of Cajun French and Creole French in academic circles prior to the 1960s, such as William A. Read’s (1931) book, *Louisiana-French*, most were descriptive lexicons aimed at documenting the seemingly odd variety
of French spoken in the southern United States. Read (1931) was an English professor at Louisiana State University and published this book to show how contact influenced the French spoken in Louisiana. He found that numerous languages (indigenous, Spanish, German, Italian, and African) had all left their mark on Louisiana dialects of French for place names, plants, animals, and foods (Read 1931).

In comparison, French professor Kevin J. Rottet (2001) published a detailed descriptive and sociohistorical account of language shift in Louisiana. He argued that “(t)he French-speaking communities of southern Louisiana are in a period of significant transition, both linguistically and culturally” (Rottet 2001: 263). He explores the linguistic and social aspects of language contact and assimilation by mapping changes between generations of French speakers and finds that there are still some characteristics of Cajun French remaining in the population, but that it is not likely Cajun French will again be spoken as a first language (Rottet 2001). In 70 years of academic pursuits, there is a shift in academic focus from description to analysis that has created a wide variety of research and publication on Cajun French.

Cajun French was exclusively a spoken language until Reverend Jules O. Daigle self-published the first Cajun language dictionary in 1984. He begins the Introduction with, “(t)his dictionary was written for the purpose of preserving the Cajun language as it was spoken before it began to deteriorate after World War I” (Daigle 2002: v). The first dozen or so pages of the book are dedicated to a brief history of the Cajuns, and to dispelling misconceptions and myths about the Cajun language. Reverend Daigle (2002) is adamant that the Cajun version of the French language should be taken
seriously as a unique entity and that it is not just a dialect of French, but rather that the French of Louisiana is historically rich and borrows from the many languages the Acadians and Cajuns came into contact with over the years (Daigle 2002). He is also firm in his argument that Cajun French is not bad French and further argues that language is not stagnant, but rather a living thing that changes over time and with contact (Daigle 2002). These later comments and arguments about language change are often overlooked by other scholars and the general public in favor of a fatalistic rhetoric that insists death of the Cajun French would necessarily mean the death of the Cajun culture.

The belief that language death equals cultural death is not only argued in academic sources. There are repeated examples in the literature suggesting that the Cajun people themselves are concerned over the death of their culture because of the death of their language (Dorman 1983a; Esman 1985; Dubois and Melançon 1997). Marjorie Esman (1985) points out that “(e)lderly Cajuns ... maintain that the loss of their traditional language signals the loss of a cultural system” (128). Dubois and Melançon (1997) report that language use and identity are intimately tied in the Cajun community. In a survey of 925 Cajuns, 56% stated that people had to speak some form of French to consider themselves Cajun (Dubois and Melançon 1997). Coupled with the idea that there have been a plummeting number of people using French in Louisiana, this ideology of language and culture loss in the community is understandable (Bernard 2003).

Beginning around the turn of the 21st century, a shift occurs in the literature from
producing descriptive linguistic tomes and arguing that language loss means culture loss to an argument that language change and cultural change are both parts of a natural process. Dominique Ryon (2002), for instance, argues that we should not always consider language death as the final blow to a culture group where the primary language is no longer spoken, but rather think of cultures in the light of language assimilation and linguistic shifts. She argues that socioeconomic considerations for speaking English over French in Louisiana have not been fully explored and states that until we change our overarching ideology of how academia approaches language, as well as that of issues of power, we will not be able to fully grasp the implications of language change (Ryon 2002). She does not argue that language death never results in cultural death, but that in the case of Louisiana French, it is a case of shifting identities, economics, and power (Ryon 2002).

As academics moved into the late 20th century, the focus on Cajun language began to turn to a focus on other cultural indicators as well. Some of this is in an attempt to document all aspects of Cajun life for preservation, but there was also the shift in the belief that language equals culture that created a desire to better understand other aspects of Cajun culture, ethnicity, and identity.

**Review of Key Academic Literature on Cajun Identity**

Music, food, dance, religion, festivals, and other markers that define the boundary of Cajun identity have been researched and published. Books published by small, local companies and self-published works are not uncommon in Louisiana.
bookstores (see for example Angers 2005; Boudreaux 2002; Daigle 2002; LaFleur 1999). These range in topic from humorous storybooks to serious academic treatises on language and culture. More common are the articles and books published by Louisiana universities and major publishing companies. These numerous works have emerged from several disciplines, such as history, biology, geography, linguistics, environmental studies, sociology, and anthropology. Of particular interest to this research are those concerning the language, culture, and identity of the Cajuns. The literature on these and other culturally relevant topics is too sizeable to discuss in the current work, but a few notable pieces are crucial to the remainder of this paper.

Professor of Geography Lauren C. Post (1962) wrote a book based on data collected in the 1930s regarding the Cajun people living in the prairie lands in southwest Louisiana. In typical ethnographic style, Post (1962) presents the history and life ways of the Cajun. He does not recognize a difference between the terms *Acadian* and *Cajun*, but does note that there is a distinction between them and the Americans (Post 1962). Based on personal observations from growing up in Acadia Parish, as well as information gathered from interviews, he concludes that Cajuns are a rural, agrarian, simple people. Post (1962) admits that the information he is presenting in 1962 is outdated, but that there are still many “old features” of the Cajun life (200). His concluding statement is both nostalgic and fatalistic regarding the Cajun culture: “Let us hope that the rest is recorded soon, for when it is all replaced, we can truthfully say that an important and pleasant part of the American way of life will have been lost” (Post 1962: 200).
In 1983, historian James H. Dormon, wrote an ethnohistory aimed at the general public and academic alike. He details the revival of the Cajun ethnic identity from 1950 to the time of publication. Dormon (1983a) utilizes interviews, observations, and personal life experiences from living in Louisiana. This work is theoretically grounded in Barth (1998), in which the boundaries of identity are negotiated between the Cajun and his American neighbor. Dormon (1983a) presents a comprehensive history of the Cajun from France to Louisiana, describes the boundaries of the Cajun identity in light of its “Anglo-bourgeois” oppressors, and explores the politically charged revitalization movements of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s.

He concludes that Cajun ethnicity “has been essentially processual; that is to say, it has been in constant process of change, reshaping and reforming and assuming different dimensions of consequence and significance as it has responded to the shaping forces both within and without the group” (Dorman 1983a: 90). In other words, ethnicity is not something that can be precisely defined because it is under constant negotiation by members and non-members alike. Limited only by the fact that this book is now dated, Dormon (1983a) presents a well-rounded look at the Cajun of Southern Louisiana.

Marjorie R. Esman (1985) wrote the first ethnographic account of a Cajun community from an expressly anthropological perspective. Centered around the families of the Henderson, Louisiana area, Esman (1985) details the typical ethnographic markers of subsistence practices, family life and kinship, religion, social activities, food, politics, leisure, and outsider contact. This is a straightforward treatment
of the changing Cajun identity, with an emphasis on the maintenance of that identity within the confines of assimilation into the larger American culture. Esman (1985) addresses the fears of the Cajun that they are losing their culture along with their language and makes an argument for the understanding that change does not equal eradication.

As with Dormon (1983a), she uses a Barthian model of group identity maintenance, in that an ethnic identity can be maintained even when cultural changes occur. As long as people say they are Cajun, the identity remains intact. Despite this fact, Esman (1985) states there is still a prevailing ideology that language death equates to culture death and that the Cajun people express fear over losing their identity. She argues that ethnic identity is being expressed in part through symbols of Cajun culture, such as music, food, and dance (Esman 1985). She argues that tourism is one possible vehicle for identity maintenance in that “[i]t can contribute to a resurgence in ethnic pride by bringing in visitors willing to pay to witness native culture” (Esman 1985: 129). She states that tourism cannot preserve all aspects of Cajun culture, as there are private things that only an insider knows, such as the fact that neighbors are likely kin (Esman 1985). The ways people think about their lives, their jobs, their family, etc., can only be discerned through insider information (Esman 1985).

In 1983, Glenn R. Conrad pulled together articles written by academics from several disciplines and produced an edited volume outlining various aspects of Cajun culture and identity and how they impacted the then-current ethnic climate in Louisiana. The book is an updated and expanded exploration of the Cajun identity, similar to the
work by Post (1962). Chapters include discussions on the history of the Acadians and Cajuns, including information regarding migration from France, Nova Scotia, and Louisiana (Baker 1983; Conrad 1983b; Debien 1983; Voorhies 1983); explorations of the differences in architecture of the family home, based largely on the demands of the environment and the needs of the family (Robison 1983); the differences in subsistence practices of the differing environmental landscapes settled by the Cajuns (Comeaux 1983); presentation of the characteristics of Cajun French, Creole French, and Colonial French (Phillips 1983); discussions of the histories and influences of Cajun music, education, and religion on the Cajun identity (Brasseaux 1983; Rickels 1983; Sigor 1983); and a historical look at political leanings and movements in Louisiana were driven by and impacted Cajuns (Howard 1983). The overarching focus is on defining the Cajun culture, preserving its important aspects, and increasing awareness to prevent language and cultural death. This work is limited only by the fact that it is nearly 30 years old.

Jacques M. Henry is a French anthropologist whose work focuses primarily on language and culture in Louisiana. He has published widely on issues of language use and loss, ethnicity and economics, as well as issues of working in the field in anthropology. In 2003, Henry contributed to and co-edited a volume on fieldwork in Louisiana. Compiled with academic researchers in mind, this is a post-colonial perspective on how to do fieldwork in general and how to handle issues in Louisiana specifically (Henry and LeMenestrel 2003). Interestingly, the authors who contributed to this work are either Francophones themselves, or are actually from Louisiana. The
chapters focus on post-colonial issues for anthropology (LeMenestral and Henry 2003); the inclusion of self in research (Lindahl 2003); the identity of the field, including physical boundaries and events and actions (Henry 2003), identity as an insider versus an outsider (M. David 2003; Trépanier and Louder 2003); and consideration of the “natives” use and reaction to the research (Clifton 2003; D. David 2003). In addition, there are insights into aspects of the Cajun culture such as its folklore, language and folk medicine (Henry and LeMenestrel 2003).

Jacques M. Henry co-wrote another pivotal book with sociologist Carl L. Bankston III. Published in 2002, this book takes a mostly sociological approach to explore how the economy in Louisiana has impacted Cajun ethnicity. Henry and Bankston (2002) discuss not only subsistence and income patterns, but also ways in which cultural ideologies, such as endogamy (marriage within the group), help to maintain the Cajun culture and identity. This research relies heavily on archival and survey data and does not include many first-hand accounts and interviews, but does provide a wide variety of demographic information regarding the Cajun household in Louisiana. Henry and Bankston (2002) argue that the Cajun identity is relatively stable and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future, although this does not mean there will not be changes. Their arguments that Cajuns have a common ancestry, a common language, and other shared features are based on Census data, surveys, literature reviews, and a handful of interviews (Henry and Bankston 2002).

It should be noted that Henry and Bankston have published many articles together, separately, and with other scholars. Their collective works cover a wide
variety of topics on ethnicity, language, and culture, though they tend to focus on issues of symbolic ethnicity (Henry 1998; Henry and Bankston 2001) and the economic factors contributing to culture change and maintenance (Bankston and Henry 1998, 1999; Henry and Bankston 1999). This increasing attention to Cajuns and their life ways has led to and come out of an increase in Cajun interest in their own culture.

In a more recent work, Maria Hebert-Leiter (2009) concludes that Cajun is a place between Acadian and American that has come to be a strong, independent culture within the United States today. Her book is an analysis of the literature by and about Cajuns since Longfellow, who popularized the Cajun cause in his epic 1847 poem, *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie*. Hebert-Leiter (2009) includes primarily popular media sources and concludes that the Cajun identity has become what it is by being in the “interstitial spaces” described by Homi Bhabha (1994). Hebert-Leiter (2009) explains that the Cajuns’ “...interstitial place, between an Acadian past and an American present, allows them to hold on to a unique ethnic identity while also taking pride in their American history and cultural ways” (7). The Cajuns have thus moved from Acadian to Cajun to Cajun American as a way to maintain their identity in contemporary America (Hebert-Leiter 2009).

The history of the Cajun people is complex. They began as French Catholic colonizers of the Acadian Coast of Nova Scotia. After deportation by the British, many of these Acadians made their way to the shores of New Orleans, in search of aid from their French cousins. Met with political and financial strife, the Acadians moved into the bayous, swamps, marshes, and prairies of Louisiana and settled in alongside a variety
of peoples, including indigenous populations, black Creoles, white Creoles, and others. Eventually, Anglo-Protestant Americans would take their place in the story of the Cajun culture. Each of these groups played a part in the evolving identity of the Cajun, as the ethnicity moved from being rural, agrarian Acadians to stereotyped, backward Cajuns to modern, savvy Cajuns. This history and contact have created a few distinct characteristics that are common among most Cajuns today.

The literature presented in this chapter makes several arguments regarding how or why the Cajun came to the place they occupy today. Overall, Acadian ancestry and the French language are often mentioned as being the prominent markers of Cajun ethnicity. Other traits that are discussed include family bonds and other cultural traits, such as food, music, and holidays. The following chapters attempt to provide an updated ethnographic account of the Cajuns in Louisiana today by discussing the critical aspects of identity discussed by the participants in this research, as well as those criteria observed while in the field.
CHAPTER 4

BORN AND RAISED HERE: CAJUN HERITAGE AND FAMILY

Cultures are investigated in anthropology based largely on markers that are readily observed. These markers tend to be measurable units that allow discussion, in quantifiable terms, of what is or is not part of a culture, such as the foods we eat, the dances we dance, the songs we sing, and the gods we worship. These are elements that people can talk about and point to as definitive ways to recognize “Us” versus “Other”. These are the items that make for interesting ethnographic explorations and for engaging discussions in the classroom. While these markers may be discussed in black and white terms, there is middle ground where even group members may disagree. This is the case in Cajun Louisiana. Most people can agree on who is not Cajun, but there is a great deal of disagreement on who is (or can be) Cajun.

Initially, the goal of this research was to understand and define the contemporary Cajun identity. I was interested in the ideology and the rhetoric that has shaped the perception of what is Cajun. I wanted to know if academia, tourism, and Americanization had an impact on the Cajun people and their individual, as well as group, identities. I intended to explore the boundaries that surround the Cajun identity, as well as the rhetoric used to maintain and reproduce the ideologies of those boundaries.

It is at this point that my own identity should come into question. Following the ideology prevalent in social-cultural anthropology that the researcher impacts the research, a brief presentation of my position is necessary to the understanding of my
potential biases and my choices in what I present here. My intent is not to produce an autobiographical ethnography and pull attention away from the Cajun culture on which I am focused, but simply to recognize my potential biases.

I am a Texan at heart. I was born in Dallas and grew up in small towns in the Panhandle of Texas because my father is a Methodist minister and we moved regularly. My mother stayed home with me until I started to school, at which point she attended college. I grew up in a Christian home, in middle class neighborhoods. My best guess is that we were a fairly typical white Southern family in that we went to church twice on Sundays, once on Wednesdays, and took part in the local town festivals and school events. I attended church camps and, as I got older, I actively took part in both church and school youth activities.

We generally took a summer vacation in which my parents and I spent a few weeks a year visiting family in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Both of my parents were raised in southern Louisiana, and many people in my family consider themselves Cajun. I grew up being vaguely aware of the Cajun culture, even though I did not recognize it as such at the time. I noticed that some people spoke differently in Louisiana and we ate foods there that we did not eat in Texas. Some of the roads were paved with shell and my cousins got holidays off from school that I did not.

Whenever possible, my parents would bring Gulf shrimp, and sometimes sausage or other Louisiana treats, home with us. When I was about 12, my mother offered a seven course “Cajun Dinner” as an auction item for the local firefighters’ annual fundraiser in Tahoka, Texas. She made gumbo and cornbread, with crawfish pie
and blackberry cobbler, among other items, for the winning bidder. I remember thinking how weird it was that someone would pay so much money for stuff my mother made at home.

It was not until adulthood that I came to better understand the significance of the Cajun roots in my family. Today, I enjoy the large gatherings and plentiful food, as well as the music and festivities. Despite this French heritage and the fact that I do participate in many of the “typical” Cajun activities, such as preparing Cajun food, using Cajun phrases, and having a tight knit family, I do not consider myself to be Cajun because I did not grow up in the state of Louisiana, nor was I immersed in Cajun culture until I was an adult. What does all this matter to the research presented here?

My personal background and beliefs may impact how I think about the world around me, even while trying my best to be an objective observer. It is not possible for me to simply sit back and report the events that are happening around me. I will notice certain things more than others, if I see everything that happens at all. Those things people say or do that strike me as important may not be the same as what someone else will pick out. I have done my best to follow a strict methodology in my research in the hopes of adding authority to my analysis and arguments, but I must recognize there may be a nostalgic element to my reporting because of my familial connection to the observed.

I do, however, believe that I am in a distinctive position for researching the Cajuns. I am familiar with the Cajun culture, yet I am not embedded in it. This fringe position is useful because I have an underlying understanding of the identity, but I am
also able to present myself in an objective position necessary to anthropology. I do
suffer from a desire to place the Cajun culture in a positive light so as to not hurt the
people about whom I care, but I will not intentionally neglect details simply because they
may be uncomfortable.

The chapters that follow are a presentation of ethnographic information gathered
in the field from interviews and participant observation in 2008-2009 that will allow
insight into the boundaries, ideology, and rhetoric of the Cajun identity as it exists at the
beginning of the 21st century. Heritage, language, food, and other markers of Cajun
identity will be introduced and explored, utilizing past publications and present
interviews. Eventually, a bigger picture emerges of how boundaries, ethnicity, and
rhetoric combine to clarify the contemporary Cajun identity. This chapter explores the
importance of heritage and ancestry to the Cajun ideology.

“I’m A Cajun”

The interview questions asked during this research project were designed to
ascertain the contemporary definition of “Cajun”, as well as to understand how
individuals perceive their own identity and how they “fit” into their definition. The first
question of the interview schedule (please describe yourself in one sentence) was
designed to determine if people think of themselves in terms of “Cajun” or something
else. Nine participants used the word “Cajun” in direct reference to themselves in their
one sentence description:

I’m a Cajun.

Marshall, Cajun, age 29
Wow. This is difficult. A culturally ambitious, open-minded, Cajun.

Andrew, Cajun, age 31
An artist that focuses on his Cajun culture, and Acadian, culture.

Damien, Cajun, age 31

I am a Cajun girl from a small town Louisiana town that somehow moved to the big city and misses home every minute.

Kathy, Cajun, age 32

I’m a descendant of Canada, Nova Scotia of Acadian, Cajun descent ...

Beau, Cajun, age 65

The most Cajun not being completely Cajun.

Edward, Cajun, age 21

I’m a teacher, a mom, an American, a Cajun, and that pretty much sums it up.

Victoria, Cajun, age 61

Crazy Cajun.

Gary, Cajun, age 52

I’m just a Cajun girl who moved to Texas.

Crystal, Cajun, age 23

Another three people used the word “Cajun” indirectly in describing themselves:

How about one word? Fier which means proud in Cajun French – standard French also.

Emily, Cajun, age 28

I’m a true lover of the Cajun culture and heritage of Louisiana.

George, Cajun, age 29

I have been called, by other people, an ambassador for the Cajun culture because I’m very seldom politically correct, but I’m straight forward. I would have to say I’m an ambassador to our culture.

Marie, Cajun, age 51

One participant did say “no” when asked to describe herself (Cajun, age 49) in one
sentence. Her answer was followed by a smile and a laugh, and I am certain of her humorous intent, but she did not give another answer to the question. Instead of stating “Please describe yourself in one sentence,” I asked her, “Can you please describe yourself in one sentence”? Although I am unsure as to the reason I deviated from the schedule, this is a person I have known most of my life and respect deeply and I reverted to polite language for this interview. This demonstrates not only the power of personal bias in fieldwork, but also the importance wording in interviews.

One participant was not sure of how to answer this question, and after asking me several clarifying questions, such as “just physically describe myself?”, he simply stated his first and last names (Cajun, age 27). Another gentlemen paused and thought for a moment and finally explained: “That's one I'm not good at, starting on myself” (Cajun, age 88). Most participants defined themselves in terms of descriptors, such as age, occupation, and other roles, as well as personality traits:

I am a 30-year-old mom of 2 children; I'm single mom with 2 kids.  
**Elizabeth, Non-Cajun, age 31**

I am a mature, grey-headed chubby man that's absolutely free.  
**Ronald, Cajun, age 58**

I’m an artist born and raised in Louisiana.  
**Margaret, Non-Cajun, age 58**

I’ll have to go simply by – daughter, wife, mother, grandmother, sister.  
**Sophie, Cajun, age 64**

I would say that I am a loving, caring mother of four wonderful boys and very self-less.  
**Linda, Cajun, age 29**
Loud, funny, and outgoing

Isaac, Cajun, age 26

Very outspoken

Matthew, Cajun, age 28

I am very creative, free-spirited, and love life person – type of person

Lisa, Cajun, age 57

It makes you think. I think I'm a- like a genuine, modest, outgoing guy trying to live a healthy quality of lifestyle.

Jason, Cajun, age 31

I'm a multi-faceted individual

James, Cajun, age 28

I would have to say that I'm very friendly and willing to help anybody in need. I don't [know] if that would be a sentence – and just well, you know, just willing to help others.

Amee, Non-Cajun, age 29

I'm a patient woman

Lorraine, Cajun, age 72

Three participants described themselves in relation to their spirituality:

I think if I was still of the age where speed dating was part of my stomping grounds that I would have a better answer to that. I'm a music loving, somewhat contrary, human trying to have an experience. Hopefully figuring out that I'm a spirit having a human experience. We'll see.

Paul, Non-Cajun, age 60

I'm an amazing human being made in the image of God who's done as much as she can to live a good life, to be a good mother, a good wife, a good sister, a good friend, and a good daughter. Amen!

Lucy, Cajun, age 60

I'm very philosophical so, I am a- I am the human embodiment of the love of God.

Claudia, Cajun, age 62

In all, 27% (n=12) participants did use the term “Cajun” in their self-description.
Each of the 12 had some prior knowledge regarding the nature of this research project that may have influenced their answers. Other aspects, such as age, income, or education do not appear to be a factor. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 88. Their incomes ranged from none to $100,000 plus. Seven have college degrees and the other five have graduated high school. It is interesting to note that nine of the twelve participants are actively involved in tourism, education, or preservation efforts, either occupationally or in their free time. The remaining three are all originally from Louisiana, but have been transplanted to other regions of the United States.

The wide variety of descriptive answers to this question is not surprising. Nearly every participant took time to think about their answer and most hesitated and had false starts before giving a final answer. I think some of this hesitation is due to an emphasis in Western societies on being humble. One participant stated that she was “afraid what I think – that it’ll sound like I’m pompous or something” (Cajun, age 86). I think there is an underlying fear of being judged by others, particularly in the formalized situation of a recorded interview.

Next, participants were asked to define “Cajun,” followed by a series of open-ended questions designed to understand the boundaries associated with the Cajun identity. Participants were asked their opinions on non-Cajun perceptions, how their own ideas of “Cajun” had changed over time, as well as what made them feel Cajun, or what they did on a daily basis that they considered to be Cajun. While answers included such descriptors as having a love for life, being hard workers, having a close family, and enjoying food, the emphasis was on heritage and ancestry.
Cajun Ancestry and Heritage

Every story has a beginning, and the Cajun narrative is no exception. The families who were expelled from Nova Scotia and arrived in Louisiana are traceable to their roots in France and Scotland, and perhaps even farther back than that (Dormon 1983a). Dormon (1983b) admits that starting the Cajun history with the colony in Nova Scotia is an arbitrary point, but a required one because “[i]n some cases it is necessary to look back far into the past to find a point from which to begin the examination of process, but the precise point of origin is rarely explicit” (233). Acadie has become the accepted starting point for Cajun history and identity. The participants in this research are mindful of this connection to a Cajun homeland.

In 57% (n=25) of participant interviews, an Acadian or French ancestry is mentioned as part of the definition of Cajun:

That’s a bit hard because Cajun is a mixture, it’s a blend of all the different cultures that were here before us. When I say I’m Cajun, I’m a mixture of a little bit of the French, Spanish, I’m going to say the Acadian – it’s a mixture of the Germans – they were all here before us, so I’m a mixture of all of that. That’s what makes a Cajun.

Marie, Cajun, age 51

For me it’s the people that came from Nova Scotia, the Acadians [sic]. They came from- actually they were forced out weren’t they? Then they came into Louisiana through the south, through the east and settled in the area. They were given the grants to the worst land possible by the Spanairds and here they are.

Walter, Non-Cajun, age 61

I don’t know if Cajun is a definition, it’s a heritage.

Peter, Cajun, age 53

Cajun to me is having old roots in Acadiana, using some French here and there at home, doing Cajun things, like cooking with your family,
fishing/crabbing, dancing, telling stories and jokes, knowing how to have a good time, not being uptight, having no doubt that family is first.

*Kathy, Cajun, age 32*

For me I guess it’s someone of Acadian descent, or French descent or Indian descent, who ended up in Louisiana and sort of mixed with everyone else in here – and I would also include Creole with that.

*Emily, Cajun, age 28*

Someone of Acadian descent that lives in south Louisiana and grew up with all the Cajun food and – Mardi Gras and French – some French language

*Victoria, Cajun, age 61*

Interestingly, Cajun descent is the first marker mentioned by 64% (n=28) of participants, not only as part of the definition of Cajun, but also prior to being asked to define Cajun:

Interviewer: Would you consider yourself a Cajun, then?
Participant: Oh, yes, all my ancestors come from French name. As far back as you can check

*Homer, Cajun, age 88*

There’s the literal Cajun, meaning the descendants from the Acadians, arriving from the Grand Derangement to Louisiana

*Edward, Cajun, age 21*

Interviewer: With all of the cultural influences in Louisiana, do you consider yourself a part of any particular one?
Participant: ... I’ve done some genealogy work and, you know, my ancestors were some of the Acadians that originally came over

*James, Cajun, age 28*

Interviewer: You wouldn’t consider yourself Cajun?
Participant: My family has not one drop of French blood

*Vivian, Non-Cajun, age 55*

I define Cajun as – the ancestors of the Acadians from Nova Scotia. However, with the influence of the other people, the other cultures, of the other people that are here in Louisiana, so like with their influence, so it’s a little gray because sometimes those people can also be Cajun because they are part of that culture and also I would define Cajun as something
unique to southwest Louisiana. They are someone that doesn’t originate from anywhere else. You can be a Cajun somewhere else, but Cajun started in Louisiana and that Cajun and Acadian are not the same thing.

*Clare, Cajun, age 31*

In all, 77% (n=34) of participants at least mentioned, if not discussed in detail, the connection between bloodlines and Cajun identity at some point during their interview. Ancestry is therefore a primary ethnic boundary for the Cajun identity. The rhetoric associated with the Acadian heritage is on one extreme strict in nature:

A Cajun would be anyone who has an Acadian last name; had their ancestors expelled from Nova Scotia. They have to have an Acadian last name. ... That's a requirement. Definitely agree that Cajuns are the Acadians that got exiled to Louisiana. So if your family did not get exiled from Nova Scotia to Louisiana then you're not Cajun.

*Jason, Cajun, age 31*

And more relaxed on the other extreme:

I think I would have to describe a Cajun as a person that was definitely raised here, not necessarily born here.

*Andrew, Cajun, age 31*

I think there are some people who really stress the genealogy; I think it’s important to them, for us it’s more the foundation of who we are now.

*Jack, Cajun, age 35*

I don't know of anybody who is pure Cajun blood.

*Claudia, Cajun, age 62*

With variations in between:

... they started the Cajun, you know, say around the 40s. Before that we didn't call ourselves Cajun, we were just French, French descent, but then they started all up with all the writing about the Cajun, you know, and they came up about the people that left Nova Scotia and France and all that and came over here and just started ... they called us Cajun because we came from Acadian parish in Nova Scotia ...

*Homer, Cajun, age 88*
I define Cajun as the culture that originated in French Canada. That moved and migrated down here and became a very strong culture, independent of others.

*Claudia, Cajun, age 62*

I don’t think there’s such a thing as a pure bred Cajun. Most Cajuns are mutts.

*Joel, Cajun, age 33*

Occasionally, the stance of the participant began as a hard ethnic boundary involving Acadian descent and eventually softened to include other backgrounds:

**Interviewer:** Can you please define Cajun?

**Participant:** A Cajun would be anyone who has an Acadian last name that had their ancestors expelled from Nova Scotia. They have to have an Acadian last name. Who grew up in South Louisiana would be Cajun.

**Interviewer:** Do they absolutely have to have the Acadian name?

**Participant:** That’s my opinion. That’s a requirement. Definitely agree that Cajuns are the Acadians that got exiled to Louisiana. So if your family did not get exiled from Nova Scotia to Louisiana then you're not Cajun.

**Interviewer:** What do you think about families that don't have that tie, that say they are Cajuns?

**Participant:** I guess there could be a loophole for that. If their family's been here for I don't know how many years, I guess since the early 1800s, if they've been here that long and grew up living the Acadian lifestyle, I guess they could be considered a Cajun.

*Jason, Cajun, age 31*

**Interviewer:** Can you please define Cajun?

**Participant:** I think it’s through bloodlines and 100% of my ancestry is French Canadian and French. We trace everyone back to France. I'm sure there is some intermarrying going on in there, but, in that way I am in Cajun ...

**Interviewer:** Is being of a particular descent a requirement for being Cajun?

**Participant:** I think it is a bloodline. When you say I'm from here, obviously people can move here and become embedded in the culture and definitely be okay to marry Cajuns, but then, that's not ... if they trace back their genealogy they are...
German or Irish, that's a distinction. I don't think it makes a big difference, you know, around here everybody's family whether you are family or not and if you live here and you soak up enough of it, you ... really do become Cajun, especially in the cultural sense. I think the best example is ______ [the wife of a prominent musician in the area who is not from Louisiana and does not have the bloodline, but she is embedded in and part of the culture] ... I think she's in [she can be Cajun]. Not that I have any authority!

Patrick, Cajun, age 25

In some instances, the participants appeared to be negotiating heritage boundaries during the interviews, both with themselves and with me. As they spoke, they worked their way through some of the issues in Cajun history. They used words such as “probably” and “I think”, as well as other hedging utterances.

Interviewer: Do you have to be a descendant of Acadian to be Cajun?
Participant: Well, probably yeah. Or grow up being born in a Cajun family

Gertrude, Cajun, age 76

Cajun is – this is a question I struggle with all the time – you can get down to the things, well, a Cajun is someone, is a descendant of Acadians, um, that came from Nova Scotia here, ah, uh, after the Grand Derangement. But, I don't like- there are some people out there that feel, and they're a small minority, but they feel like, unless you have an Acadian name or blood that, um, you cannot be Cajun. And I don't feel that way at all. I think that, if you grew up in south Louisiana, and you, you just, you sort of automatically become Cajun in a way – your family would have to be, uh, in my mind, a family that still kind of does the traditional, kind of holds to the traditions, even if it would be, uh, whether it'd be farming, uh kind of living, uh uh, maybe a more agrarian way, um, you still, um, there's some French being spoken in your family. Um, and even not, and even as I'm saying these things, I'm thinking, ah, that's not necessarily true ...

Damien, Cajun, age 31

Having an Acadian ancestry alone, however, is not enough to claim the Cajun identity. People must also have been born and/or raised in Louisiana.
I think I would have to describe a Cajun as a person that was definitely raised here, not necessarily born here ... Just because you’re- have a French last name, and yet you were born and raised in California, I don’t think that allows you to be considered Cajun. Because of the fact that you are not living in the culture.

Andrew, Cajun, age 31

... it can be a bloodline, where you are of Cajun descent, or it can be what we call you come through the back door. You can have been just born here and raised here and ... once you eat the food and dancing to the music, the joie de vivre [joy of life] that we have, that makes you Cajun also.

Marie, Cajun, age 51

While some people argue for a pure Cajun lineage, other participants brought up the impact of intermarriage and cultural contact and expressed the idea that Cajuns are a mixture of backgrounds centered on an Acadian heritage:

I like to define Cajun in the very broad sense of anybody of Acadian descent through bloodline is Cajun because that’s how we became the Acadians to Cajuns. I do not see the fact that some of these people, they trying to sell Cajun as anybody coming in here and living here for a few weeks becoming a Cajun. I also- to that extent too, there are also Cajuns through blood that – the French that came directly from France, like the Fontenots and all those. Now, they are Cajun now because they intermarried into Acadian blood, so they became what I consider Cajun.

Beau, Cajun, age 65

I don’t know of anybody who is pure Cajun blood.

Claudia, Cajun, age 62

... if I go to Spain or Germany or China and I put on the traditional dress of the area and even learn to speak the language, I don’t believe that by any means makes me Chinese. If I marry into their culture and I produce children, then they have the right to say they are Chinese. Their children have the right to say they are Chinese. I don’t believe I do. Many of these other cultures are living here, whether they be Spanish or German, have married into Acadian or Acadian has married into Spanish or German, or the Creoles intermarrying. That’s why we are Cajun, we have intermingled our cultures. But I don’t think the average John Smith from Ohio moves here, then he is still John Smith from Ohio. If it’s four generations down
the line of John Smith’s with Jane Smiths, then, no, they’d still be Smiths who live like Cajuns. But, if they marry into these people I think have a lot to do with the people. It’s the bloodline.

_Marshall, Cajun, age 29_

As a part of this concern with having a Cajun ancestry, most participants seemed to be aware of their own genealogy and readily provided family names and the connections (or lack thereof) to Acadian and French families.

**Cajun Surnames**

Growing up in small Texas towns, I noticed there were always one or two popular family names that everyone knew. In Tahoka, Texas, it was the Wells’ and the Pemberton’s. These were founding families who had married amongst themselves often. This was not an uncommon practice in early settlements throughout the United States. Likewise, in southern Louisiana, “What’s your name? (Who’s your daddy? Who’s your mamma?)” are fairly common questions, but they are not limited to the small, individual towns or parishes. People ask this question wherever you go. Indeed, family names were often the focus of informal interviews, and helped to start more than one conversation with a stranger.

Participants were often quick to share family names with me during interviews, both formal and informal (identifying information has purposefully been left off of the following participant statements to protect anonymity):

I would definitely say I am of the Cajun ancestry. Our descendants are from Nova Scotia—we actually have descendants from NS, I’m a Richard and so we have a lot of people that came down and I would say I’m definitely Cajun at heart.
... because my family name is Comeaux.

I kind of in a way am interested to know how much of my blood comes from Acadie and I have- my great-grandmother was a Savoy and my grandmother is a Dupuis, which is both Acadian names – I can't go back too, too far. All the other names are French names, but they're not Acadian names. Guillory. Fontenot. Fontenot is really interesting, I can trace back, every Fontenot can trace back their lineage to this one Sergeant in the French army in 1750 who was stationed at, I believe, Mobile, Alabama.

...my mother was a Guidry and my daddy was a Doré.

My momma was a Boudreaux, my daddy was Guidry!

I am a Landry of Landry and Broussard descent. My father was a Landry. I'm a Landry. My mother was a Broussard, both being Acadian names.

In interviews, participants refer to their own genealogical pursuits. Some are concentrated efforts that family members or they themselves have taken on, while others just “know” that their family is from Nova Scotia (Acadie).

I can trace my family all the way back to Nova Scotia.

*Matthew, Cajun, age 28*

We found out that those are not Cajun names, they are actually French names.

*Lucy, Cajun, age 60*

Oh! I'm a 10th generation Acadian. I can track my 10 generations back to Portier France.

*Gertrude, Cajun, age 76*

Members of my family have traced our genealogies back several generations. There are books of pictures and documents with family names laid out neatly in family trees. I can remember being asked at a young age about family names and this was no different during both fieldwork seasons in 2005 and in 2008-2009. Often being able to
explain that my mother’s side had Bonvillain and my father’s side had Fontenot added validity to my being in Louisiana, and opened several people to the idea of being interviewed.

I had traveled to several heritage centers and museums during my initial fieldwork in 2005, and was confronted with the opinion that without an Acadian name, one cannot be Cajun. At the time, I looked up the family names I knew in a roster provided by the heritage center, only to find that none of them were Acadian. The center docent informed me that, sadly, my family was French, not Cajun. Initially, I was irritated because, in my opinion, my family is Cajun. Participants commented on their feelings about this strict boundary of ancestry:

I don’t like- there are some people out there that feel, and they’re a small minority, but they feel like, um, unless you have an Acadian name or blood that, um, you cannot be Cajun. And I don’t feel that way at all – I had this discussion with this lady, who I would call an elitist Cajun, and she was telling me how it is great how so many people want to be Cajun, but not everyone is Cajun unless you have Acadian last name and Acadian blood and then your not – you not Cajun. And I kind of argued with her on that. And she said “____, well and that's not, that's not Acadian.” I said it was French and she said “well do you have any Acadian names in your family” and I had to think. And, yes I do, so I wanted to say, shut up lady. Because I think it doesn't really matter. It's such a non-issue, but I did go back and ask my parents to try to get some help to see if they could remember last names and, apparently me and my wife are making our family tree go farther and farther back as far as it can go, because it is, I find it interesting. Maybe I'm a nerd that way, but- I find it interesting.

Damien, Cajun, age 31

I find this participant’s need to validate his own ancestry while commenting that he disagrees with the strict boundary to be a fairly common practice when talking about Cajun heritage. Most people defend their ties to the Cajun lineage, even when they
claim that strict lines of ancestry are not necessary.

Interviewer: Please define “Cajun”.
Participant: That’s a bit hard because Cajun is a mixture, it’s a blend of all the different cultures that were here before us. When I say I’m Cajun, I’m a mixture of a little bit of the French, Spanish, I’m going to say the Acadian, it’s a mixture of the Germans – they were all here before us, so I’m a mixture of all of that. That’s what makes a Cajun.

... 

Interviewer: What makes you a Cajun?
Participant: I’m lucky. I have the bloodline. That’s what makes me Cajun.

Marie, Cajun, age 51

The ability to trace family names appears to be an important factor in establishing Cajun roots. This becomes an issue for some Cajuns because not all surnames are originally from Acadie. As one participant points out, the Cajun culture has appropriated names from several other culture groups, such as the Germans, the Spanish, and even the English:

Louisiana is a melting pot of many nationalities, many different heritages. Any of these nationalities that live the lifestyle of what you see in Acadiana today would consider themself, most likely, Cajun. Therefore, Cajuns have become French Creoles, like the Baltas and the Michots. They have become German settlers like the Huvels and the Zaunbrechers. They have become Spanish settlers like the Ortegos and the Nunezes and the Romeros and of course they are the Acadians, like the Broussards and the Landrys. And English names like Smith and Reed and so on and so forth have adapted to the culture here and become Cajun.

Marshall, Cajun, age 29

The belief that people must have a name from one of the original Acadians who arrived in Louisiana appears to be limited. I think there may be an element of resistance to American culture in this boundary negotiation out of a desire to narrowly define the difference between Cajun and non-Cajun. None of the participants of this research
stated that to be Cajun, people must have an original Acadian name without eventually acknowledging there could be exceptions. This does not decrease the emphasis on having kinship ties that continue the Cajun heritage.

**Cajun Kinship and Family**

Dormon (1983a) discusses early Acadian kinship in terms of it “featuring multi-generational residential units for convenience and security through teamwork” (11). He further argues that this extended kinship system is what allowed the Cajun population to thrive and maintain its isolated ethnicity well into the 20th century. He argues that the ability of Cajuns to marry outsiders and assimilate them into the Cajun lifestyle was due in large part to the close-knit characteristic of the Cajun family (Dormon 1983a). Esman (1985) notes that as families grew, so did their communities, with kin groups typically living on adjacent property. Cousin marriage historically was common and kept the property within the families, while later creating modern towns that are occupied by large numbers of related individuals (Esman 1985).

Overall, Cajuns appear to be neolocal, in that married couples move into residences separate from their extended families. There may be some historical patterns of ambilocality, however, in which the young couple would live in close proximity to either the bride’s family or the groom’s, depending on individual circumstances. Driving around the countryside in southern Louisiana, there are noticeable groupings of houses in the rural areas. On closer examination, one will usually notice that there are one or two older, established homes with smaller homes or,
more likely, mobile homes on adjacent property, typically with a shared driveway (Figure 11).

Historically, young married couples would have resided with the parents until their own house was built. One Cajun participant still lived in the house that her husband and his family built for her on the outskirts Lafayette when they married in the 1950s. On the property are a total of five houses – the yellow, shotgun house that was the original family home, plus four houses designed for each of the four children and their families (Figure 12). Today, this participant’s child and grandchildren reside in the original house. Two of the houses are still occupied by the original couples for which

![Figure 11: Grouping of Four Family Homes on Adjacent Properties near Kaplan, Louisiana.]
they were built. The widow of one brother occupies the third house and a widowed sister occupies the fourth house.

The perception that Cajuns have “tight knit” families is based on the fact that so few people move away and when they do, it is often short term. Most of the Cajun participants in this project lived within easy driving distance of other family members. In fact, one older woman had bought out her siblings’ share of the family home after their parents’ deaths. According to her sister, she regularly held breakfast on the weekends for the family:

So she [my sister] wanted to preserve that house because it’s a gem. Well-built, weathered I don’t know how many hurricanes since 1949. So she is still there and she started a tradition – every Friday morning she would make couche-couche [hot cornmeal cereal], and anybody who showed up would have couche-couche. And mostly it’s just a table full,
maybe six, sometimes eight or ten people ...

Lucy, Cajun, age 60

These two sisters are the children of a woman who was interviewed in the 1980s by Marjorie Esman (1985) for her ethnographic research.

Three Cajun participants did not live in Louisiana at the time of the interviews. One has since returned to live with other family in Texas. One was attending school out-of-state because of scholarships and had plans to return to Louisiana when he graduated. The third lived in New York, but returned home at least four times a year for holidays and other special occasions. She also talked about the fact that she associates with other “Cajun Ex-Pat” friends in New York.

The importance of extended family groups has led to large family gatherings for holidays and special occasions. Participants often cite the importance of family ties and of having a tight knit family:

I stay with my family as much as possible. You know, you've got to be close to your family to be Cajun and my family all grew up next to each other. My grandparents and my uncles all lived in a big circle basically.

Isaac, Cajun, age 26

They're very tight knit with their family. People don’t move away. Cajuns stick together.

Rachel, Non-Cajun, age 31

As far as the lifestyle –[it's] very family oriented, we have- every thing’s done with your kids and at your house.

Linda, Cajun, age 29

Having no doubt that family is first.

Kathy, Cajun, age 32

That feeling of family. That feeling of we’re all in this together, let’s help
each other.

*Claudia, Cajun, age 62*

In my initial research in 2005, one participant noted that his family had to hold family celebrations at Christmas and Easter in shifts until they were able to shore up and replace the floor in his grandparents’ home. Two participants in the current research explained that their families regularly have large gatherings:

They made life what it is here, now by sticking together. The family stuck together, they cooked together, they always gathered together and that’s what it is now. Like my family’s big – my dad is one of seven. I’m one of four, so the extended family is rather large so when we get together, you’re talking 60-70 people for birthdays, Christmas, Easter, whatever it may be.

*Jack, Cajun, age 35*

Like for New Year’s, we do a kind of intimate family reunion and it’s like 75 people. And, that’s a big thing. And, I’m horrible at – remembering people and every year there’s new people – like, they had four babies this year!

*Patrick, Cajun, age 25*

I had the privilege of being invited, by the host, to participate in a large holiday gathering known as “Pie Day,” an Easter tradition in Scott, Louisiana. The party takes place in the old bank building on the corner and everyone in Scott is invited to come by on Good Friday to have a piece of pie and a cup of coffee or some juice, all served on a real plate, with real silverware, cups and glasses. Everyone is greeted with smiles and welcoming conversation. Pies litter the tables and it is expected that everyone will eat at least one slice, if not several. The tiny kitchen is filled with family members constantly washing dishes, brewing coffee, and serving the hundreds of pies that have been baked over the past week just for this day.

An important observation to note about Pie Day is that everybody knows if “you
aren’t from around here” because so many attendees are related to one another. The gentleman who invited me to the party turned out to be the uncle of two people I interviewed (who also happened to be brothers, but I did not get that information until well after the interviews had been conducted). This high level of relatedness may be due in part to high levels of endogamy within the Cajun community.

While participants did not directly discuss endogamy (the practice of marrying within one’s group), it is a topic that has been briefly discussed in the Cajun scholarly literature. In a cultural milieu such as the United States, endogamy can help to maintain a cultural identity, probably because both parents will agree what ethnic identity to pass to their children (Alba 1990). Dormon (1983a) mentions endogamy as one of the causes of cultural isolation among early Cajuns in Louisiana, but also recognizes there were marriages between the Acadians and the white Creoles. However, “… the Cajun ethnic culture prevailed in such unions, as was the case with so many other groups marrying into Cajun families” (Dormon 1983a: 46). Early in the Acadian history, geographic isolation, as well as the social stigma surrounding being Cajun, probably reinforced the high rates of endogamy.

Henry and Bankston (2002) present a case for high levels of endogamy among Cajuns, but caution this could simply be an artifact of living in the same geographical area, however unlikely (Henry and Bankston 2002). Based on information collected from the 1990 Census Bureau’s Public Use Microdata Area (PUMA) database, they found that in areas that are occupied by large numbers of Cajuns, endogamy rates are as high as 75%-86%. Even in areas, such as Shreveport, Louisiana, that are lacking in
Cajun residents, the endogamy rate among Cajuns is 25%. This means that in Shreveport, Cajuns “have one chance out of four to be married to a co-ethnic when statistically their chances should be about one in a hundred” (Henry and Bankston 2002: 129). Their conclusion was that, “Cajuns overwhelmingly marry other Cajuns” (Henry and Bankston 2002: 130).

Participants in this research were not asked directly if they had married another Cajun, but many offered the information:

She’s lived here long enough to pick up on a lot of it [being Cajun]. She wasn’t born here ... She can pass as a Cajun, but as far as a real, dyed in the wool, no.

*James, Cajun, age 28*

He picked up a lot of French words around here ... once he was assimilated, and he had to learn French with my siblings, especially my brothers because they’re incorrigible, the whole bunch of them, they thought nothing of teasing him in French.

*Lucy, Cajun, age 60*

Of the 44 participants, 16% (n=7) did not give sufficient information to know if they were married at all, and 25% (n=11) had never been married. Another 25% (n=11) of participants were in “mixed” marriages between Cajun and non-Cajun. The remaining 34% (n=15) were endogamously married Cajuns. Interestingly, three of these participants had been married multiple times, all endogamously. On the surface, endogamy would appear to be more common among the older participants (age 49 and up), however, the data may be skewed because, of the 25% of participants who had never been married, all were under the age of 33. This means that the majority of the younger generations interviewed in this research have not yet chosen to marry.
The ancestry boundary of the Cajun identity appears to be maintained, at least in part, by family and kinship. Large family groups, geographic proximity, and endogamy all play a role in maintaining the perception of a shared history and heritage. The participants in this study are clear that the boundary between Cajun and non-Cajun lies primarily in Cajun ancestry. I think part of this is because this boundary is one that is not easy to fake. People either have the right names, or they do not. Outsiders cannot come in and claim to be Cajun just because they eat the foods or dance the dances.

**The Ancestry Boundary**

One of the primary boundaries in both the historical and the contemporary Cajun identity is that of ancestry and heritage. While no participants insisted people must be Acadian to be Cajun, 77% (n=34) of the participants discussed the connections between being Cajun and having an Acadian background. The boundary of ancestry would mean that people have to be able to trace their family name back to the original settlers from Nova Scotia in its strictest sense:

A Cajun would be anyone who has an Acadian last name; had their ancestors expelled from Nova Scotia. They have to have an Acadian last name. Who grew up in South Louisiana would be Cajun.

*Jason, Cajun, age 31*

At the most lenient end of the spectrum, the boundary allows for there to be little or no Acadian heritage, but agrees that people must be born and raised in the culture:

...it can be a bloodline, where you are of Cajun descent, or it can be what we call you come through the back door. You can have been just born here and raised here and ... once you eat the food and dancing to the music, the *joie de vivre* that we have, that makes you Cajun also.

*Marie, Cajun, age 51*
The middle ground of either having some Acadian ancestry, or at the least multiple generations of family born in Louisiana, will likely be the boundary most often maintained well into the 21st century:

I think that is a touchy subject. I would say by and large you do have to have Acadian descent to be Cajun, but there are exceptions and usually those exceptions are through marriage. I guess I would say you have to have some Acadian descent. Like a Cajun might marry someone who’s not Cajun and their child could still be part of the Cajun culture, but the non-Cajun in the relationship would still be non-Cajun.

_Clare, Cajun, age 31_

The strictest sense of this boundary is too exclusionary and too difficult to prove, especially in light of generations of intermarriage with other cultures. The most lenient boundary will not likely be accepted either, because it will allow for even Jane and John Smith to come in and claim a Cajun heritage. While this may be acceptable someday, it is highly unlikely to happen soon, as the Cajun community is aware of their shared history.

This history will likely be reproduced and maintained much as it has been for generations, through perceived familial ties, close geographical proximity, and endogamy. Of the 36 Cajun participants, 16% (n=6) did not reside in Louisiana. One lives in New York, but comes home several times a year for festivals and holidays. The other five live in east Texas and go to Louisiana on regular visits to see family, eat at favorite places, and to take part in festivals and holiday celebrations. The importance of family is often discussed – 66% (n=29) of participants made comments about family helping one another, staying close, being tight knit, and the center of the Cajun lifestyle:

I’m big on family. We live and die for them. That even includes my wife,
who’s not even Cajun. And truthfully, that’s what’s most important.  
*Jack, Cajun, age 35*

Endogamy is another way that Cajuns are able to maintain and reproduce the ancestry boundary. Of the participants in this research, 34% were in endogamous marriages, though the majority of those were aged 49 and older. If the younger generations of Cajuns maintain a high level of endogamy, the heritage will be reproduced and maintained as well. It will be interesting to see if the historical assimilation of the non-Cajun spouse will continue in contemporary non-endogamous marriages.

Cajun names and an interest in genealogy may be another path to boundary and identity maintenance. The act of asking questions like “Who’s your momma?” will further aide in the maintenance of the Cajun heritage because of the focus on family ties and names. Names are often easily recognizable and have often been gallicized [to cause to switch to a French form] if they are not originally French. For instance, Domingeaux is a name that was originally Spanish (Dominguez), and was altered to accommodate the French language.

Taken as a whole, the shared history of the Cajuns, their perceived ancestry, and their family ties are primary markers of the Cajun identity, despite boundary negotiations. Closely tied to the ancestry boundary are the boundaries surrounding the Cajun French dialect. Participants discussed the French language nearly as often as they discussed issues of heritage, and often in connection with one another.
CHAPTER 5

LOSING AND LEARNING CAJUN FRENCH

Group and individual identities are intrinsically tied to language, as the language we speak can be a marker of place, status, education, belief, and/or politics (Joseph 2004). Although we can learn languages, there are certain words, phrases, or intonations that are difficult to mimic that may give us away as non-native speakers. This characteristic of language increases its symbolic importance to group identity, as it aids in recognition of insider versus outsider (Joseph 2004). As a result, language can become paramount to a group identity, much as the feelings of national identity in the United States are based on the English language as a symbol of “American,” (Joseph 2004). The Cajuns of Louisiana are similar in this regard, as the Cajun French language is vital to being Cajun. This chapter explores the importance of the French language to the Cajun identity, discusses the impact of preservation efforts, and looks to how Cajuns are learning and using French in their daily lives.

The Importance of Speaking French

Academic literature repeatedly argues that Cajun French is a dying language, as discussed in Chapter 3. Certainly, there are few, if any, people remaining who speak only French, with slightly few more who spoke French as their first language (Bernard 2003). Bernard (2003) argues that U.S. Census data show the percentage of speakers of French as a first language dropped from 80% in 1905 to 8% in 1985, with 95% of this
taking place following World War II\(^2\). This means “only about 3 percent of Cajuns born after 1980 speak French as their first language” (Bernard 2003: 148). Data from the 2000 U.S. Census shows that there are nearly 200,000 speakers of French over the age of five in Louisiana (U.S. Census 2000b). This includes all dialects of French reported on the 2000 Census. Of the 40,000 persons reporting a Cajun/Acadian heritage, 14,800 say they speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census 2000e). Despite these low numbers of French speakers, participants readily discuss the significance of language on the Cajun identity.

Ten participants (23%) discussed Cajun French or having a Cajun accent when they defined Cajun:

Cajuns are French speaking, white people.  
*Vivian, Non-Cajun, age 55*

Someone of Acadian descent that lives in south Louisiana and grew up with all the Cajun food and – Mardi Gras and French – some French language, not much for me.  
*Victoria, Cajun, age 61*

French heritage. French speaking. Certainly for me personally, I grew up sort of isolated here from the rest of the world because of circumstances and family was very important and religion and our French heritage.  
*Sophie, Cajun, age 64*

Born and raised in the Cajun culture. Granddaddy and grandma couldn’t speak English; daddy and momma spoke French; if we wanted to know what they talked about we had to learn to speak French because they would say what they didn’t want us to hear, to understand, in French.  
*Gary, Cajun, age 52*

Cajun to me is having old roots in Acadiana, Using some French here and

\(^2\) Bernard (2003) basis his analysis on the 1990 U.S. Census data due to issues with data collection in the 2000 U.S. Census regarding ethnic identities, as discussed in Chapter 1.
there at home, doing Cajun things like cooking with your family, fishing/crabbing, dancing, telling stories and jokes, knowing how to have a good time, not being uptight, having no doubt that family is first.

*Kathy, Cajun, age 32*

There’s the literal Cajun, meaning the descendants from the Acadians, arriving from the Grand Derangement to Louisiana – then, Cajun as in the cultural sense, dancing the Cajun dances, doing my best to learn the French since nobody thought anything about teaching it to me, not that they were ashamed of it, it just didn’t cross anybody’s mind to tell my babysitter or anybody around me to speak French to me.

*Edward, Cajun, age 21*

Strong family background with the Cajun French influence and – a lot of traditions.

*Linda, Cajun, age 29*

That’s hard – I define Cajun as a lifestyle where people tend to listen to – Cajun music, it’s an accent, it’s also different – I think they communicate differently. They don’t apologize. Food. Obviously.

*Elizabeth, Non-Cajun, age 31*

I think it’s through bloodlines and 100% of my ancestry is French Canadian and French. We trace everyone back to France. I’m sure there is some intermarrying going on in there, but – in that way I am in Cajun. But also, culturally I’m part of the lifestyle and – everybody’s accent.

*Patrick, Cajun, age 25*

Interviewer: How important is the French language and the accent to being Cajun?
Participant: That’s what it is. That’s the heart and soul.

*Melba, Cajun, age 61*

One young woman drew on her knowledge of Cajun French in her self-description:

How about one word? *Fier* which means proud in Cajun French – standard French also.

*Emily, Cajun, age 28*

Twenty-five participants (57%) discussed the ways in which language is a part of the Cajun identity throughout their interviews:
I know we were Cajun because my grandmother just barely spoke English and mostly spoke French and she had to learn English to speak to us. We were the only English-speaking grandchildren.

*Barbara, Cajun, age 50*

I actively try to speak Cajun French because I think learning French would be – is a great thing, but I want to know how to speak Cajun French because it is my culture.

*Damien, Cajun, age 31*

Because it [Cajun French] is who we are. It is the main identifier. If you speak English, you could be just like everybody else. But if you know French, you know where they are from.

*Bobby, Cajun, age 27*

I think French gives it [Cajun culture] a uniqueness and without the French it will be very easy to forget about it. It will be very easy to forget about the basis and where we came from without French. I think it would be very hard to do it without French. But, does it necessarily have to be French? I don’t know.

*Joel, Cajun, age 33*

The culture is so vibrant, you know, just reading street signs you get language lessons.

*Paul, Non-Cajun, age 60*

It’s having the French roots. Having the ancestors that spoke French. That’s what makes you Cajun.

*Melba, Cajun, age 61*

That Cajun talk – that's how I think of Cajuns

*Amee, Non-Cajun, age 29*

Participants often discussed generational differences, such as the shame perceived by older Cajuns regarding speaking French and not English, the fact that this shame led them to not teach their children, creating a “lost generation,” and the sadness over the perceived loss of the Cajun culture. Participants told stories of how Cajun French has been lost to the younger generations and the impact that has on the culture:
One or two of the kids may have taken it [French in high school], but they don’t speak it. Mawmaw and Pawpaw spoke it, but only when they didn’t want us kids to know what they were talking about – they wouldn’t even teach Mom. It was taboo back then.

*Ronald, Cajun, age 58*

I heard it growing up. Both my grandparents and my parents. Everyone in Lafayette spoke French. It was everywhere. It was in our houses, in our friends’ houses. I was in that generation that they didn’t speak it with us. They spoke French to each other and English to us. ... My son speaks French, he can speak French, but only when he goes to France or with other French people. Mine is a mess, a mix of Cajun of what I remember and am pulling up now and living in France and then going to school and learning words. I understand it better than I speak it.

*Claudia, Cajun, age 62*

The people – the generation, I call it the lost generation, the one whose parents spoke French but didn’t teach them, now they have children of their own, now they realize that they want to go back and learn about the French and the Cajun ... It’s just that they kept telling us we didn’t need French.

*Beau, Cajun, age 65*

And we’re losing it in my children’s generation. Your going to see it in mine and older.

*Melba, Cajun, age 61*

Sadly there’s a generation that the state and federal government tried to beat the French out of them and so it just really went away, except for their name.

*Paul, Non-Cajun, age 60*

[My father’s mother] did not speak English until she was in her 30s. But, the kids went to Catholic school and it was discouraged. They were smacked on the knuckles with rulers if they spoke French, so they didn’t pass that on to their kids.

*Theresa, Cajun, age 49*

But – the Cajuns have changed because with – not only with education, but with the loss of the language through education – we weren’t allowed to speak French anymore, you know, when we went to school and when the oil companies came in and Cajun men who were living at home most of the year, working in the fields or fishing and hunting and what ever they
did during the seasons were sent away from home and they were not present anymore, as the fathers were gone, the older sons were gone and I think that changed the Cajuns a lot. And not necessarily for the better. I think the education was good, except that we weren’t allowed to celebrate our native language – the language we were born into and that makes me sad, still. I was thinking about that just recently.

Lucy, Cajun, age 60

Perceptions of language and cultural loss in the Francophone communities in Louisiana led to efforts to preserve and revitalize French in the state in the mid-20th century.

Francophone Preservation

Language preservation is something many of the participants had thought about prior to this interview. One young man in particular had a solid understanding of the socioeconomic and status issues that caused the loss of French, and believed he had the key to bringing the Cajuns back to a bilingual state:

I believe that the best way to solve a cultural crisis is the same way it was destroyed and that is starting a cancer amongst it. In 1927 and the president saw the French-speaking people and said this is a shame, these poor ignorant people who cannot converse in English, they’re not good, they’re stupid – he started a – stigma on the people and it spread like a cancer. So, the only way to reverse that is to start the opposite and go out and speak it in the street and in the restaurants. ... So when you go to Wal-Mart and you see the lady at the check out and you saw her last week at the French Table, talk to her in French. And more likely than not, someone else will hear it and understand it. And, it will be more acceptable and people won’t complain and they will say that is very beautiful. And they’ll only feel threatened if they feel they don’t have a choice. ... It’s not that it’s our only language and we can’t converse in English, it’s just that we don’t do it in French at all. We find ways for business owners to tell people – let’s say you have a boudin and cracklin’ stand where the owner speaks French and you have someone who doesn’t and you say if you can come and order your boudin and cracklin’ from me in French, I’ll give you 10% off your order. Well, first of all, your supporting something that needs to be done because it’s a beautiful language, you are promoting them to do something they don’t typical
would do, that’s go outside their house and speak French and, chances are, they’re going to go and speak French for 10% off. And what is going to happen is that this guy who doesn’t speak French isn’t going to lose his business because he doesn’t speak French – he’s gonna learn, or hire somebody who speaks it, and he’s going to compete. What that competition does is not take something out, it just continually spreads the cancer to speak French.

Marshall, Cajun, age 29

Language preservation in Louisiana is a politically and economically charged topic. Policies and practices involving commerce and education changed rapidly during the 20th century, and English became the dominant language in Louisiana. Dormon (1983a) discusses the social stigma attached to French that began in the mid-1800s because “French monolingualism came increasingly to represent a severe handicap to Cajun status elevation,” as English became the primary language used in both business and in law. It is interesting to note that this stigma continued until the 1960s, when preservation efforts began. Henry and Bankston (2002) point out that older generations have held on to this stigma. Participants were aware of this as well:

But, again, that was at the time that they were kind of not passing it on. The older people – there was such a stigma with the older people with being Cajun and speaking French – you were an illiterate person, they weren’t educated and they didn’t want that stigma on their children so they didn’t teach them and – they didn’t want them to go and have to live with that same ridicule and so – but, really that’s it.

George, Cajun, age 29

Social movements to preserve the Cajun culture were instituted in the late 1960s in order to retain what little French remained in Louisiana. Organizations were founded and immersion programs were developed with the sole purpose of preserving and, hopefully, bringing back French as a language readily heard in Louisiana. Campaigns
to encourage the speaking of French (any French, not just that of the Cajuns and Creoles) brought about public displays, such as signs that proclaim “Ici on est fier de parler Français” [We proudly speak French here] (Figure 13) and bilingual street signs (Figure 14). The state even erects “Welcome to Louisiana” signs in both French and English (Figure 15). Further development of these programs is ongoing – for example, a local translation company, Infiné, has contracted with local businesses to print menus and door placards in both French and English. If you see the “é” pin, table display, or sign on the door, you know the establishment has French in print, and possibly has servers who are bilingual (Figure 16).

One specific program, The Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) was founded in 1968, with legislative changes that removed discrimination
Figure 14: Downtown Lafayette Street Signs Are Bilingual.

Figure 15: Most Border Signs into Louisiana are Bilingual as well.
Figure 16: The Infiné organization "é" door sticker indicates this business should have bilingual menus and staff.

against French in law and education, and provided for increasing instruction on French language, history, and culture in the public school system (Dormon 1983a). The purposes of CODOFIL were to create a bilingual Louisiana, with an emphasis on immersion education and language preservation efforts (Dormon 1983a). Their efforts, however, were to introduce Standardized International French, and not Cajun or Creole French specifically (Dormon 1983a). This is not to say that classes in each are not offered, but that they are not the focus of learning. Dormon (1983a) points out that the purpose of CODOFIL was never to preserve the individual ethnic identities of French speakers in Louisiana, but rather to create a bilingual state capable of conducting international business with other Francophones.
An unintentional side effect of the CODOFIL objectives has been a demarcation of the Cajun identity along class lines. CODOFIL is often talked about in terms of being an elitist entity, only interested in pursuing its objective to teach standard French. Although its creation was not intended to preserve a specific ethnicity in Louisiana, there were those in the Cajun “population who believed that the goal of ethnic revitalization should be the preservation of the local French dialects” (Dormon 1983a: 84). And, conversely, that the goals of preserving the French languages in Louisiana should also be to preserve the local ethnicities. This comes back to the idea that language and group identities are intrinsically tied up in highly emotional states (Joseph 2004). The result was a rift in the Cajun community between the “elitist” CODOFIL members and the “everyday” Cajun that manifests itself much like class divisions between upper and lower classes.

These fractures between what Rickels (1983) terms “Genteel Acadians” and “Just Plain Coonasses” (229) were only further exacerbated by the fact that CODOFIL mandated “only outsider mother-tongue French-speakers/teachers should be employed in teaching” in the immersion schools (Dormon 1983a: 84). While Dormon (1983a) argues that CODOFIL only initially undermined the Cajun ethnicity, harsh feelings still exist, as people believe CODOFIL and its supporters are elitists with undeserved attitudes of superiority.

Understandably, Dormon’s (1983a) participants requested to remain anonymous

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3 Consideration of the term coonass is a separate topic and will be discussed in Chapter 7.
on this topic. Many of my own interviewees would gloss over the topic of CODOFIL and other elitist Cajuns while being recorded, only to make mention of these issues “off-record.” Several participants pointed out their disappointment with the programming CODOFIL organizes and funds, as well as anger over the use of foreign French speakers as teachers. Only one participant chose to say something negative about CODOFIL while being recorded:

... you have, I guess what people would call elitist Cajuns, like intellectual Cajuns, and you know intellectual being said in a kind of pejorative way, and those are usually the people associated with CODOFIL.

*Damien, Cajun, age 31*

Other participants recognized the work that CODOFIL is trying to accomplish:

It was such a shame for them, they were punished and all growing up and it has all but died out. There is a move, between CODOFIL and – there is actually a growing group of young Cajuns that get together to learn French and speak French. I think it’s worth preserving. I think it’s an important part of our culture

*James, Cajun, age 28*

The point of this discussion on CODOFIL is not to undermine the work the organization does, but rather to illustrate the types of preservation efforts in Louisiana and the issues surrounding those efforts. CODOFIL is clear in its objectives and encourages and supports many efforts to maintain and preserve the French language, in all its varieties, in Louisiana.

**Language Use and Learning**

Interestingly, all Cajun participants (n=36) either used French during the interview, or said they use French phrases regularly, even though ten Cajun participants
initially stated they speak no French at all. Three of the eight non-Cajun participants said they speak French, and five of the eight stated they use some French phrases.

I miss the dialect. I don’t speak with a dialect, I wish I did. That got educated out of me. My parents had it. And, I lived in France for a while and the thing I missed the most – I loved it – but the thing I could not wait was to get back home and hear Cajuns talking all around me.

Claudia, Cajun, age 62

You know what stores you can go into where they are going to be speaking French.

Theresa, Cajun, age 49

I know the parler vous Francais [Do you speak French?] or ça fais chaud [It’s hot out!] and a few cuss words. Mais yeah [but yes]! Not anymore ...

Ronald, Cajun, age 58

I definitely use many Cajun phrases. I live in New York City and I find it very hard to express myself sometimes because I have to hold back otherwise I wouldn’t be understood. I have a set of "Cajun Ex-pat" friends here in NYC that I see about once a week, and I every time I get with them I feel like I’m letting out a tick—saying everything that comes to mind in a Cajun way. Phrases I use often: Cher [term of endearment, pronounced “sha”], 'Tit [slang for petite, which means little], Ay-yai-yai [a vocalization used in excitement or sadness], Mais-là [but yeah] ... Coullion [idiot] ... Lache-pas la patate [don’t give up; literally: don’t drop the potato], Fais do-do [community gathering; [literally: to go to sleep], Faites-attention [pay attention, give me your attention], Cannaille [mischief], Boudé [pout; angry], Quelle honte [What a shame!], Boeuf [ox], Va-t-en-vient [comings and goings, hubbub], Envie [longing; hunger; inclination] ... I have probably misspelled some of these, since I only learned them spoken. [Spellings have been corrected for clarity where possible.]

Kathy, Cajun, age 32

It’s almost nostalgic that people still talk the way they talk and still have their accent and use Cajun English, rather than a standard, grammatical English. And I think a lot times that Cajuns will try to disguise that or code switch when they are talking to other people because they don’t necessarily want that other person to know that they’re Cajun. But, the second that they get at a crawfish boil or a family reunion – the same happens with me – I guess I do sound a little different in academia and my culture – like a lot of my friends, especially when I was in _____, because I
was so far removed, even though it is only a two hour drive from here to there, it’s a completely different world. So, when I would just be out and my mom would call, the second I’d get on the phone with my Mamma, I’d start talking like I talk, like I grew up, and my friends would all look at me and go “whoa, where did that come from” – because they didn’t know me in that context and they didn’t understand that.

*Emily, Cajun, age 28*

He [participant’s father-in-law] don’t speak French or eat Cajun food for weeks at a time, but the minute he comes here and walks in the door, he’s talking French with you, so it’s in him, it’s just a part of him.

*Gary, Cajun, age 52*

There’s some little phrases I use that I picked up just being around here. But, I don’t speak it fluently. Like maybe expressing something, I will express it using some common little Cajun terms. I try to greet people in French. *Bon matin* [good afternoon], *bon jour* [good morning/hello] and *bon soir* [good evening]. And that is just me doing my best to keep it alive.

*Joel, Cajun, age 33*

All Cajun participants (n=36) stated they have family who do or did speak French. It appears that, while Cajun French is no longer the first language spoken, it is still actively spoken and a part of the Cajun identity. There is the understanding that if people do not continue to use the language, it will continue to disappear:

Then they are just like “why don’t we just speak English – it’s a whole bunch easier” ... my grandmother for that reason, when my dad asked, why don't you speak French to me and my sister, she said, well, one it's just easier for them to understand what I'm saying and I want them to get off and quit jumping on the couch, I just want them to quit jumping on the couch. And two, she never, she really didn't see the value of us knowing French. That particular grandmother really bought into the fact that, we're Americans, we should do as Americans do, speaking English very well will give you a lot more advantages in your life than being able to speak French and English and it’s kind of sad, but that's how she felt. And, she's not atypical of a lot of people around here.

*Damien, Cajun, age 31*
I'm out of practice and sometimes I forget my language, my first tongue, and it makes me sad that it may die.

*Sophie, Cajun, age 64*

We try to teach my kids because they are young, so we teach them a few words.

*Linda, Cajun, age 29*

The younger generation understands the importance of at least trying to learn to speak French:

I probably forgotten a lot of it just because my generation didn't speak as much – they weren't really taught. And, so it's starting to fade, so, I actually took Cajun French at LSU. There were professors there, from around here, that are trying to bring it back – which I think is awesome.

*George, Cajun, age 29*

I just remember my great-grandma teaching me certain words and whenever I would eat, just as far as I could remember, she'd- I'd be eating her food and she'd say “C'est bon [Is it good?]?” and she'd tell me what to say – she'd say, “now you gotta say ‘oui cest bon’ [Yes, it's good!]!” But, there's a lot of words – when I was little, my great grandma and grandma – we wouldn't call a cucumber a cucumber, it's a *cocombre* or a *tomate* [tomato] – or *de gumbo* [soup-like dish; literally: okra] or whatever, you know, I wouldn't- Like if I talked about a sheep, it was *mouton* – like a toad frog was *un crapaud* ... There's even some words, like nowadays, that I don't know what they are in English – like certain birds – a *poule d'eau* [a coot; literally: water hen]. I know what a *poule d'eau* looks like and I know what it is, but I don't know what you call it in English. Or a *bec croche* [ibis; literally: crooked beak]? Or a *gros bec* [night heron; literally: big beak]? I don't know what the English word for all that is – I can look out and see one and say that's a *bec croche* ...

*Matthew, Cajun, age 28*

I got a great present of Daigle's [Cajun French] dictionary. I would go out to Prairieville and meet with a group out there – I also audited a Cajun French class at LSU because I could. ... I think the music is the best. I took Spanish because I thought the rest of the world is going to speak Spanish and not French, but now I realize what I was missing out on. It's like an obligation, like I should be able to do it.

*Patrick, Cajun, age 25*
Many of the younger people in the sample have actively sought to learn French, and more specifically Cajun French. Of the 44 people interviewed, 16% (n=7) had been or were going to Nova Scotia for the five-week French Immersion program. Four had already been and three were registered for the summer session following the interview. All seven were under the age of 35. Additionally, one participant’s younger brother had attended the program the previous summer. A total of 15 (34%) participants stated that they currently attend or have attended French or Cajun French classes, or regularly participated in language specific activities aimed at learning and preserving Cajun French. Of these participants, four were over the age of 31 and participated in teacher or organizer roles, as all four spoke French as a first language. Not everyone felt these types of activities were useful, however:

And that’s what I can’t understand today – we have get-togethers to keep the old things going and you get there and nobody speaks French – they all speaking English! Now, what’s the meeting for?

_Homer, Cajun, age 88_

Late in the field season, I attended a free, weekly Cajun French class. This informal gathering drew about a dozen participants each week, from various linguistic backgrounds. There was usually a wide range of ages present, with the youngest attendees being in elementary school and the oldest being in their 80s. Many of the older attendees spoke Cajun French as a first language and were eager to help in teaching those who had a desire to learn to speak French, although there were a few fluent speakers in their 30s who attended as well. Often, the goal of the evening was to learn the words to popular Cajun French songs, to learn to play Cajun games, or to
listen to folk stories being told in Cajun French. Every week the focus was on speaking only French when possible, although people would have to be reminded of this often. Classes such as this, as well as other gatherings directed toward speaking French, are not uncommon in Louisiana. Spoken French can be found in places throughout the Cajun and Creole communities.

The use of French and Cajun French is prevalent in both southern Louisiana and eastern Texas. And it is not just the language and the phrases that are important, but also the pronunciation of names and the use of other key sayings. At a small dinner gathering, two young men teased me because I had pronounced the name *Lagneaux* as /lænjo/ instead of /lɔnjo/. Interestingly, these two young men were from the Eunice, Louisiana area, and I had been told by Lafayette residents the /lænjo/ pronunciation was correct.

I had two participants who taught me the meanings of Cajun English sayings that are based in the original French. “Pass by” means to go see someone for a visit, or to stop somewhere, such as “I’m going to pass by the store on my way home, do you need anything?” Another common use of “pass” would be to say, “pass the vacuum” to mean “to vacuum.”

One Cajun phrase would be “get down”. Like you'd say “get down from the car”. Most people don't understand what it means, but it's like get out of the car. Another thing we say is “save” – save your clothes, save the dishes. It means put it away. Another thing we say is “come see” which means come here.

*Jason, Cajun, age 31*

Some people use these Cajun phrases and sayings without the awareness that
the phrases are not used by other English-speakers (although “come see” is used in other parts of the South and is likely a shortened “come and see”). I remember when I still lived at home and my mother wanted me to hurry up (or if I was in trouble) she would tell me to do something “toot sweet”. It was not until I studied French in college that I realized she was saying *tout de suite* [hurry; literally: all at once].

Other sources of French in southern Louisiana include local news and radio stations. The morning news program I watched regularly (KATC TV-3 in Lafayette) often aired segments regarding weather, crime tips, and local calendar events in both French and English. At least two local radio stations had all-French broadcasts weekly (KBON 101.1FM in Eunice and KRVS 88.9 FM in Lafayette). This programming is aimed primarily at the French populations in Louisiana, although the radio station run by the university (KRVS) has programming aimed at a wider Francophone audience.

Another key to understanding the importance of the French language in Louisiana is the use of French in daily interactions. It is not unusual to see signs and stickers saying “Geaux Green,” “Geaux USA” (Figure 17), or “Geaux Cajuns” (Figure 18). The –*eaux* ending on words to represent the “o” sound is popular (Figure 19). On a rare snow day, cars with the word “Sneaux,” instead of “Snow,” written in the snow on windows were popular. The Cajun French and Standard French word for snow is *neige*. These playful uses of French spelling draw attention to the Cajun and Creole cultures in Louisiana. They also speak to the fact that it is an educated population who appreciates this humor and marketing strategy because literacy in Cajun French is uncommon (Henry and Bankston 2002).
Figure 17: "Geaux [Go] USA" Window Decal at the Vermilionville Visitor's Center, Lafayette, Louisiana.

Figure 18: "Geaux [Go] Cajuns" Sign at Olde Tyme Grocery, Lafayette, Louisiana.
Figure 19: Billboard on Congress Avenue, Lafayette, Louisiana, advertising a new "Bistreaux" [Bistro] and Bar

Business is occasionally conducted in French, not only spoken, but also with signs posted in French and English. I overheard conversations in local stores and restaurants simple phrases, such as Comment ça va? [How are you?]. Participants stated they often spoke in French with older family members and friends in order to practice and maintain their ability to speak French. Two participants even used this as a way to learn the differences between the French they had learned through formalized education and Cajun French:

But when I came back, I noticed I spoke like a foreigner, like a Belgian. Whenev- I started changing my French to get rid of that ...

Bobby, Cajun, age 27

I started it in high school, but that was the Standard French, the book French as I call it. Then along with the learning of the book French, I was
able to start learning the Cajun French. I would go home and say “Papi, *comment dit ça* [how do you say this]? How do you say this in Cajun French, and I would learn it that way. And, knowing the book French helped me remember the Cajun French. I still do that to this day.

*Edward, Cajun, age 21*

Every time I see my grandmother, even if we don't speak our whole conversation in French, we always throw it in there. All day long, I throw something in there.

*Isaac, Cajun, age 26*

**Linguistic Boundaries**

The boundaries concerning language and the Cajun identity are complex. First, there is a primary boundary between Cajun and American that manifests itself, in part, as the boundary between French and English. This boundary has been negotiated since at least the early 1800s, when Louisiana became part of the United States. Historical circumstances allowed the early Cajuns to remain fairly isolated and to resist assimilation into the English-speaking world until the early 20th century, when federal- and state-mandated changes in legislation and education, together with economic opportunities, pressed English into the life of the Cajun. The result was a generation of French speakers who did not teach their children Cajun French because they were uncertain of and ashamed of their first language. This boundary today is more about knowing the history of language loss in the Cajun culture than it is about speaking or not speaking French.

The second language boundary is focused on the various Francophone groups in Louisiana – who speaks Cajun French and who speaks Creole French. The overlap of cultures between Cajun and Creole created something of an overlap in languages as
well. Two participants pointed out that the lines between Cajun and Creole are not always linguistic, contrary to popular belief:

Participant: I spoke French, cause I spoke Creole French, so then, that was another stigma.
Interviewer: So, you didn't speak Cajun French, you spoke Creole French.
Participant: No, right. And that was from Henderson.

... 

Participant: And speaking French wasn't good and then – being white and speaking Creole French really wasn't good and people just made fun of you. I quit speaking French for 20 years.

Lisa, Cajun, age 57

Participant: Because it used to be that a creole was a descendant of people from France who spoke French. Those are creoles. It didn't matter what color they were. But, nowadays they tend to say you are Cajun because you are white and you speak French. Your Creole because you are black and you speak French or Creole ... Because it used to be that a creole was a descendant of people from France who spoke French. Those are creoles. It didn't matter what color they were. But, nowadays they tend to say you are Cajun because you are white and you speak French. You're Creole because you are black and you speak French or Creole.

... 

Interviewer: So you really feel you are more creole than Cajun?
Participant: But I say Cajun just because it's easier to get by with. Cajun is marketable.
Interviewer: Are all Cajuns and Creoles the same throughout Louisiana?
Participant: French-wise or – because there are Creoles that speak Louisiana Creole and then there are Creoles that speak more of a – Louisiana Regional French. I don't like to call it Cajun French, although it is easier to say that than Louisiana Regional French. But, you know, not everybody who speaks it is Cajun. Because over here we have Indians that speak French. It's more likely that they learned their French from the French settlers than the Acadians who came later. Because the French were here before the Acadians.

Bobby, Cajun, age 27
The long held belief that Cajuns are white French speakers and Creoles are black French speakers is too simple an analysis, although more detailed analyses are generally left to academic pursuits. This boundary is maintained as an issue of black and white in the general public.

The third boundary being negotiated within the Cajun culture concerns the attitude of how necessary Cajun French is to the Cajun identity. Participants were on one extreme strict, much as we saw with the ancestry boundary:

Interviewer: Do you have to be able to speak French to be Cajun?
Participant: I think so. I think so – that's what we associate it with.

*Florence, Cajun, age 86*

That’s one of my missions is to study the culture to preserve it completely. In its entirety and that includes every idiom in the Cajun language. You can’t have the culture without the language.

*Edward, Cajun, age 21*

On the other extreme, however, even the most lenient attitudes about speaking French still acknowledged its importance to the Cajun identity:

I think French gives it a uniqueness and without the French it will be very easy to forget about it. It will be very easy to forget about the basis and where we came from without French. I think it would be very hard to do it without French. But, does it necessarily have to be French? I don’t know.

*Joel, Cajun, age 33*

I ask myself this often because I don’t necessarily agree with the fact that you have to speak French in order to be Cajun or you have to be total 100% heritage.

*Claudia, Cajun, age 62*

This continual, multi-level boundary negotiation creates a variety of methods for reproduction and maintenance. On a group level, preservation efforts not only reproduce and maintain the ideologies about language in Louisiana, they often act as an
expert voice in negotiation of the boundaries. The link for “Louisiana’s French Language” on the CODOFIL website, for instance, states:

Louisiana French is a rich tapestry of the French that was spoken in the 18th Century by Acadian and French immigrants and the French and African Creoles who came to Louisiana from the West Indies. Add some Spanish, a few words from the local Native American tribes, a little African vocabulary and some English, and the result is the Louisiana French that is spoken by the majority of Francophones in this state.

As with all living languages that continue to evolve, the accent and expressions of Louisiana French are unique, but the same thing can be said of the French spoken in places like Quebec, Dakar, and even Paris. (CODOFIL N.d.).

The site then directs the reader to examples of Louisiana French:

Below are a few examples of Louisiana French. To hear for yourself Louisiana's Cajun French, check out the MP3 audio file listed at right.

... For a more extensive glossary of Cajun French terms, click on the links to your right ... (CODOFIL N.d.).

The issue here is that Louisiana French and Cajun French are taken to be the same, and there is no mention of other varieties of French on this page, although the overall CODOFIL website does have links to Creole and Native American information on other pages, as well as Creole, French, and English versions of the website.

On an individual level, reproduction and maintenance take place through education (both formal and informal) and daily activities, such as discussion with friends or the decision to speak or learn French. Individual rhetoric includes strategies for showing expertise (I know French, my family speaks French, I heard it growing up) and legitimizing (telling stories of French loss or punishment of family members for speaking French). This rhetoric is used to prove the individual’s authority to discuss opinions on
linguistic boundaries as they pertain to the Cajun identity. The boundary is no longer about the ability to speak Cajun French as much as it is about how well a person can recite the history, cite examples of loss, and prove their efforts to learn the language or even to teach their own children. Cajun French is becoming a souvenir language in which only easily recognizable phrases are utilized.

I am, however, particularly taken with the explanation given by one younger participant regarding her cultural identity as a Cajun. She explains the linguistic boundary negotiation in light of her generation (emphasis added):

There is one academic, again, who, his definition of Cajun is that you have to speak French and he will point blank say if you don’t speak French, you aren’t Cajun, which I don’t agree with for a number of reasons ... people would ask if I speak French and I would say that I don’t speak French, but actually that is part of my culture. The fact that I don’t speak French is part of my culture because there has been a progression where on my grandparents were French speaking first and then they were spanked in school for it, so then they stopped and thought it shameful and thought no way are we going to teach this to our children, so the kids didn’t learn to speak it, but – and then my generation didn’t even get the opportunity to learn it at all by and large – that’s what I would say when I was in college, but now it is also a part of my culture because I am trying to learn it – it is part of what defines the culturally Cajun people in our age group, the Generation X-Y group, is that we are trying to get back and learn more and learn to speak French.

Clare, Cajun, age 31

Language is a recognizable boundary for identity. The Cajun ethnicity is no exception, yet the boundary is under constant negotiation. The participants of this research overwhelmingly utilize French on a regular basis, if only in minor ways, yet acknowledge that speaking Cajun French fluently is no longer a requirement for membership in the Cajun community. Those who speak Cajun French hold a certain
level of status among their peers, and learning the language is certainly considered a
noble effort. This boundary will continue to be negotiated as native speakers die and
the desire for a bilingual community changes. Cajun French will become used mostly
for nostalgic reasons and, as this happens, the boundary for Cajun French will become
looser. It will be interesting to see if other markers of Cajun ethnicity will become more
prominent to replace that of language.
CHAPTER 6
CULTURAL LAGNIAPPE: THE OTHER “STUFF” OF BEING CAJUN

In Louisiana, *lagniappe* is a little something extra you get for nothing. Historically, storeowners gave customers lagniappe at checkout – an extra scoop of sugar or an extra piece of candy – to keep people returning to do business. Today, the word is used to mean a small surprise or a little something extra. This chapter is going to focus on the extra “stuff” which adds to the Cajun identity – the cultural lagniappe – such as food ways, music, dance, festivals, and hard to measure characteristics, such as having a joie de vivre, working hard (and playing hard), and having a sense of humor.

The boundary negotiations surrounding cultural lagniappe will seem more variable than the boundaries of ancestry and language. With ancestry, a person either is or is not of French heritage. The negotiations are more about how closely related to the original Acadian immigrants a person has to be in order to be considered Cajun. Negotiations concerning language are more lenient than those boundaries of ancestry because so few people speak French. Despite the push to learn French and the recognition of family connections to the language, the language still must be French, as opposed to Spanish, German, or English. The traits discussed in this chapter are more about how people outwardly express their identities to themselves and to others.

Cintron (1997) argues that the rhetoric of public culture is comprised of the ways in which people convince themselves and others of their identities. Just as Cintron (1997) explained how a car and clothing are utilized by one of his participants, Manuel,
to assert his identity and gain respect, so too are outward rhetorical symbols a way for Cajuns to build and maintain their identity, both for the individual and the outside audience. In other words, elements such as food and music become ways to prove membership in the Cajun identity. Furthermore, these symbols become embedded in the Cajun ideology, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 8.

These elements have variations based on a number of factors, such as geographical location within the state of Louisiana, whether or not the person is from a rural or urban area, and even age. Most are rooted in some historical features, and are likely to remain part of the symbolic rhetoric of Cajun identity. It is important to note that each of these, taken alone, is not enough to prove membership in the Cajun identity. Anyone can eat Cajun food or dance to Cajun music. It is the combination of Cajun temperaments, Cajun cuisine, and Cajun celebrations, anchored by French heritage and language, which compose the Cajun identity.

**Qualities of the Cajun Character**

Participants in this research often cited examples of character values as part of the Cajun identity, or in answer to the question of what made them Cajun. Eleven participants (25%), for instance, cited a joie de vivre or a love of life as part of the Cajun personality. Another 12 (27%) participants talked about happiness and being happy as opposed to depression. Other examples included living a simple life, being friendly and helpful, working hard, and having a sense of humor. Henry and Bankston (2001) discuss elements of personality such as these as being a part of the symbolic imagery.
used to maintain a cultural identity. They explore the historical circumstances behind each characteristic and conclude that both insider and outsider views of a culture group impact the creation of identity markers such as these (Henry and Bankston 2001).

Below, I briefly outline some of the historical and social grounds for these traits being associated with the Cajun culture.

Joie d’vivre

Eleven participants (25%) stated that the love for life they exhibit are what make them Cajun. Others also talked about happiness as a part of the Cajun personality.

I would describe [Cajuns] in one word – wild. And not in a bad way, just, they like to live life, definitely.

Melissa, Non-Cajun, age 31

The attitude to life has a lot to do with the Cajun. You don't find too many Cajun that gets depressed. That's the way they live, I think that's a lot to do with that. Seems to be happy and make a go at whatever you get into.

Homer, Cajun, age 88

The joy of life that Cajuns seem to show.

Victoria, Cajun, age 61

How do you define Cajun? Joie d’vivre! We have that joie de vivre. We work hard, we love hard and we play hard.

Gertrude, Cajun, age 76

What do I do in my daily life that makes me Cajun? I go through my day with, with – what's the word I'm looking for? An exhilaration, a happiness, a joy, you know, it takes a lot to get me down. And I find that a lot of people I know from around here have that same mentality. I mean, you have to understand, it happened a long time ago, but that is still in our blood. The you know, the trials and tribulations that our ancestors went through, yes, it didn't happen to me, it didn't happen to my parents, it didn't happen to their parents, but going through an experience like that does change your persona and the make-up and that gets passed down from generation to generation. So, I think, you know, just my attitude and my
general outlook on life, I guess would answer the question, what do I do in my everyday life that makes me Cajun? It's the way I look at things.

James, Cajun, age 28

Happy-go-lucky, enjoying life. Yakking.

Gary, Cajun, age 52

Along with this joy and happiness comes a vision of the Cajun as a fun-loving person, someone who knows how to “pass a good time”.

Another thing would be that we enjoy life – that we like to have a good time, that's one thing that should be well known about the Cajuns – we definitely like to enjoy life to the fullest.

Jason, Cajun, age 31

To me, they had more fun. They were really frivolous, free people. They loved music, they loved their family, they enjoyed life and just wanted to savor everything.

Margaret, Non-Cajun, age 58

You know, that perception of this party atmosphere, they’re really friendly people. It’s friendly, close knit families, where you stay and you party and you have a good time and you let things roll off your back and – you know, we like to dance – there’s that perception, which is the positive.

Rachel, Non-Cajun, age 31

Esman (1985) argues these ideas of Cajuns being happy and fun-loving probably come out of the fact that Cajuns had so little free time; when they did manage to relax and throw a party, it was a huge affair and everyone in the community participated.

Henry and Bankston (2001) argue similarly that the Cajun was stereotyped early on by journalists as a people who love music, dancing, and drinking. The Cajuns then took this stereotype and internalized it as part of their cultural identity (Henry and Bankston 2001). The notion that Cajuns live a “simple” life was often cited as well.
Simplicity

Thirteen participants (30%) used the words “simple” or “simplicity” to talk about the Cajun way of life.

The Cajuns are kind of more simple.

*Elizabeth, Non-Cajun, age 31*

So there was a point in time where in living the traditional simple life, having your own family, your own little farm ...

*Joel, Cajun, age 33*

I just- I live a simple life.

*Beau, Cajun, age 65*

One participant explained this simplicity was part of his Cajun connection to the Native American cultures in Louisiana:

My dad raised me in the Boy Scouts and we hunted and fished a lot, well hunted, we weren’t big fishermen. I was pretty much raised in the woods as a kid. That was my greatest influence. Most of the time that my father and I spent together was either in the woods hunting, camping with the Boy Scouts, or fixing cars. That was kind of how we bonded. So, in my heart I really appreciate a Native American lifestyle. I really do appreciate – my heart longs for that simplicity. I recognize myself as an Acadian and being from that line of people because every time I hear a fiddle it just does something to the inside of me and the fiddle is what does it for me. Whenever I hear music with fiddle, my feet just start dancing, as soon as I hear a fiddle. I can’t help but being influenced by modern America. As much as I try to think that I’m not, it’s hard because I am. There is the roots of simplicity that were carried down, but it has a lot to do with humanity too, and individuals.

*Joel, Cajun, age 33*

I argue this concept of a simple life comes from the collective history of the Cajuns. Many people, if they did not grow up this way themselves, at least heard stories of parents and grandparents who grew their own vegetables and hunted for their meat, family gatherings were the center of celebrations, and no one really moved far
from home. Today, however, as Henry and Bankston (2001) point out, more people live in urban communities and work white-collar and blue-collar jobs. The life of the “simple” farmer, hunter, or fisher is led by only 4% of the population of Louisiana today (Henry and Bankston 2001). One participant equates this idea of Cajun simplicity to the fact that it is seemingly opposite of what is happening in the rest of America:

I think there’s been some level of trend – I think there is just a general thing that people want whatever the opposite is, so since America is so well off and has so many things that are manufactured and you can pretty much, you know that life can be pretty complicated, that the idea of a simple life is charming, so they embrace that simple viewpoint, the fun viewpoint ...

Clare, Cajun, age 31

People are also embracing ideas that maintain what they consider to be commendable traits as part of the Cajun identity, such as being nice or hospitable.

“Never Met a Stranger”

Being helpful and friendly are important to the Cajun identity. The word “friendly” is used 52 times in 44 interviews to describe the typical Cajun. The words “help” and “helpful” are used 49 times.

All Cajun people are good, down-to-earth people and there is definitely an associated Southern hospitality because you’ll experience it here in Louisiana.

Matthew, Cajun, age 28

A positive view of a Southern hospitality with friendly people who are very outgoing, so that’s a good reputation to have.

Patrick, Cajun, age 25

Seven Cajun participants (19%) stated they had “never met a stranger.” Even one non-Cajun participant used similar terminology in explaining how genuinely friendly he
believed the Cajun culture to be (emphasis added):

The other part of it [Cajun culture] is the strength of family, the real friendship – at least to a point, but it’s a pretty far point – that people extend to a stranger. When I came visiting here, before I moved, it wasn’t uncommon to be at a festival or some other event and people would ask where you’re from and ask “where you staying?” and I’d say the Motel 6 or whatever it was and they would say “oh, you’ve got to stay with us next time!” And, naturally, I was skeptical, thinking they were just being polite, but they really mean it, there are no strangers, you know

*Paul, Non-Cajun, age 60*

Friendliness is deemed important because of the perception that being nice is so uncommon elsewhere. Participants explained how in other places, stopping to talk to your neighbor, or even to strangers, was not the norm. New York and New Orleans were both given as examples of this lack of friendliness.

Characteristic of a Cajun is to stop and smell the flowers, to stop and visit and to be helpful and lend a hand and be friendly. I think that would define a Cajun as someone who’d wave at you as you pass on the bayou in your boat. That they’d pull over and introduce themselves and talk to you – I think that’s the friendly. When I moved to Lafayette, one thing I noticed was that people – the older people – would stop and talk to you. “Whose your daddy?” That’s the- they want to know. They don’t wave at you and say bye, they wave at you and say hi. And, they want to get know you.

*Ronald, Cajun, age 58*

The outlook on life. That buoyant personality more or less. Um, the love of food, the easy going nature and the ability to converse with people. I find that in other places I’ve gone that’s kind of missing. You bump into somebody at Wal-Mart, you might not even know them, you're going to have a 20 minute conversation with them. You know, in other parts of the country don't do that. You know, you pass somebody in the street and you tell them hello. In other parts of the country, they look at you as if you've lost your mind. It's like – “you're saying hi. I don't understand.”

*James, Cajun, age 28*

Just being nice. Walking down the sidewalk and telling everybody hello. You know, in New York nobody would tell you hello back, but here people
are going to respond back.

Melba, Cajun, age 61

As opposed to like, say New Orleans, I find that New Orleans is more, not to talk bad about New Orleans, but they're not as friendly, you know, if you hit somebody when you are walking down the road, they are more likely to say, you know, why'd you do that or excuse me really loud and ugly, whereas here it's, you bump into them and it's I'm sorry and you move on. Yeah. It's no big deal I would say.

Amee, Non-Cajun, age 29

I often had strangers strike up conversations in the grocery store checkout line or say hello on the street, but more often, they did not. I am not convinced this is a trait unique to Cajuns, however, because it is a fairly common occurrence throughout the South, as well as other parts of the United States in which I have lived. Henry and Bankston (2001) make the argument that this perceived friendliness is a response to early media regarding Cajuns because in many cases, the only positive aspect of the Cajun people mentioned would be their hospitality. Esman (1985) states it is part of the cultural code to be hospitable and welcoming to guests. She explains that it is the norm be offered a meal, or at least coffee, when invited into someone’s home (Esman 1985). I found this to be true in the interviews I conducted in other people’s homes; there was not a single place in which I was not offered at least coffee before I was fully in the house.

Another reason for this helpful and friendly attitude is that people depended on one another for support in daily activities (Esman 1985). Large projects, such as building a house or raising a barn, would require the help of neighbors and family (Esman 1985).
I built five homes. Five times. I helped my son and my wife and ... That's a big job to build a home part time will take you three and four months, like what we did. I had friends – they would help me and I would help them.

We'd help each other.

_Homer, Cajun, age 88_

Life in Louisiana has seemingly always been difficult and has required a group effort in order to survive (Esman 1985). Another side effect of being happy and living a hard life is arguably the Cajun sense of humor.

_Humor_

The telling of jokes, as well as playing practical jokes, is an important quality of being Cajun. My favorite example of this underlying humor was from a participant who works for AFLAC Insurance, whose television commercials feature a duck. It was not until I transcribed the interview and read through it that I “got” the joke he made during the interview. This is his response to the question “What do you do in your daily life that makes you Cajun?” (emphasis added):

_I wake up in the morning and I make my coffee. I only use Community Coffee. I use sugar raised in the cane field by my house because I only use Stein sugar and stuff like that. I try to stay as Louisiana as possible in everything I do in my life. If Abita weren't made in Abita Springs, I'd drink Abita beer, but I don't like it too much. I cook every night, I cook for my family friends, I try to have a good time, I listen to KBON – I listen to that religiously, it's probably my favorite radio station, I listen to it; I try to keep up my French, I speak it with other people; I stay with my family as much as possible. You know, you've got to be close to your family to be Cajun and my family all grew up next to each other. My grandparents and my uncles all lived in a big circle basically. I don't know. I'm just so used to it, I guess I don't know what makes me Cajun. People say “oh, you're so Cajun”. I don't know what that means. I sell insurance for AFLAC – I_
incorporate my Cajun life into that. I put duck in my gumbo! I don’t know.

Isaac, Cajun, age 26

Along with telling jokes comes the playing of pranks. When I was growing up, a favorite second cousin told me stories about the gorilla he had living in his backyard. This was a safe bet joke for him because we rarely went to Lafayette where he lived. He would embellish about the pink bows in her hair and how much fun it was to have her in the backyard. By the time I hit puberty, I had figured out he did not really have a gorilla in the backyard, but I still loved the stories. My father, my uncles, and most of the people I know who are from Louisiana enjoy good pranks, even if they are just silly stories. Some people take the pranks a bit farther, though.

For better or worse, I made the decision to drive down to Houma to interview a participant on April Fool’s Day. When I knocked on the door, the person I expected to see answered, but had a perplexed look on his face. I just assumed he had forgotten about our appointment and gently reminded him who I was. The confused look on his face got deeper and he shook his head. He explained he did not know who I was, told me his name was something else, and asked what I wanted. I reminded him about the interview and was met with a lengthy explanation of how he was the twin brother of the person I was looking for and that he had been tragically killed in a car accident the day before. I knew this was a joke and played along, as was expected. I gave my condolences, said something about it being a shame, and excused myself. I was stopped with a great deal of laughter before I made it off the porch.

In addition to the need to be completely believable in the playing of pranks, being
able to affect the “Cajun accent” is a large part of joke telling and playing pranks. While in the field, one young Cajun male became an Internet sensation because of his video showing a prank played on the OnStar® call center. This young man called OnStar® from the vehicle in which he was a passenger and asked for directions to a particular store he knew about in the area. The young man explained they were in Rockefeller, Louisiana at the Refuge and were looking for a particular road. He affected the “old timer” Cajun accent by using intonations and other markers, such as /dæt for [θæt]. There was a short “Who’s on First” type of exchange when the OnStar® operator (a patient young man) asked if the caller was in Louisiana, and the caller responded /wæ/ (the Cajun pronunciation of oui [yes]), but the operator took this to mean “where?”

Perhaps the most famous portion of the video is when the caller appears to try and be helpful and tells the operator that the road they are looking for is near “Boot’s” store. The operator clarifies by repeating the word “Boots” and the caller says “Boots – B-o-o-t-h-comma to da top-s – boots” (Booth’s). The phrase comma-to-da-top has been used to refer to an apostrophe, as well as accents over letters, since this video was posted on July 12, 2009 (as of December 16, 2010, it has been viewed 748,000 times). The video is about seven minutes in total length; the rest of the prank continues in a similar fashion.

This video did meet with negativity; a local news station reported a viewer’s rant that pointed out this type of humor fuels the negative stereotypes that Cajuns are trying to overcome. Others complained that the four passengers appeared to be drinking (although the driver did not have an open container), and this was a waste of resources,
especially those of OnStar®. For a time, the website www.commatodatop.com sold hats and t-shirts with the “Cajun En Star” logo (Figure 20) and posted other, related videos, but as of this writing, the website no longer exists.

Figure 20: The Cajun “On Star” logo.

Participants are clear about the fact that the Cajun sense of humor includes laughing at themselves:

I think one of the great things about our culture is that we are very happy to laugh at our own selves. Um, and, we're, I think that we're very happy, who like to have fun, and as long as no one is meaning it in a really mean way, we get the joke.

Damien, Cajun, age 31

Intelligence and Educational Values

Participants defended the intelligence of the Cajun people, as well as emphasized the importance of education. This is not to be taken to mean a formalized education per se, but rather an interest in gathering knowledge, together with a reverence for those with a formal education, particularly published Cajun scholars. This emphasis on education came out in three ways during interviews: 1) people referred to Cajuns directly as “intelligent” or “not stupid,” 2) they referred directly to academic works or to the fact they were learning about Cajun culture, and 3) they deferred expertise to academics, including me.

Participants referred to the intellect of Cajuns, whether directly discussing how
smart a Cajun is or simply explaining that being dumb is a stereotype that is not founded in truth:

Not to say they were not intelligent and they lived by their wits and their brawn.

*Lucy, Cajun, age 60*

Used to be you’d see a Cajun as just a dumb cluck that came from the swamp, yeah.

*Homer, Cajun, age 88*

But, in general, they are very intelligent people and don’t give a shit whether you realize they are intelligent or not – you know when you get somebody who’s really smart – that are smarter than most people are they think the less they have to work. The typical Cajun works his butt off and still uses his head – it means you make a good living

*Peter, Cajun, age 53*

I think we are as intelligent as anybody.

*Marshall, Cajun, age 29*

...like back in the day that they were dumb and dirty and couldn’t speak English.

*Barbara, Cajun, age 50*

There is a cultural thing about being Cajun, that most weren’t highly educated and there is this perception that they are not real smart and I totally disagree and I have to – I wish people would get over that – because they are very wise.

*Claudia, Cajun, age 62*

I think that we’re perceived as stupid.

*Rachel, Non-Cajun, age 31*

The majority of people I spoke with in both formal and informal interviews took pride in their educations. People were also proud of the fact that they read and write about Cajun culture and discuss it with others and that they attend educational events. They also referred to historical or cultural facts they had learned in their reading:
I do go to festivals a lot, I go to a few lectures on *traiteurs* [folk healers] or other kinds of historical activities.

*Paul, Non-Cajun, age 60*

I wouldn't say my views of my Cajun identity have changed over the years, I just know more now, obviously, than I did then.

*Jason, Cajun, age 31*

[In response to “Please define Cajun”] See, I know all the textbook definitions – I don’t know – I know all my textbook definitions.

*Bobby, Cajun, age 27*

I haven’t done very much research yet. ... I still need to do that [study the culture] to preserve the culture. I need to study. That’s one of my missions is to study the culture to preserve it completely.

*Edward, Cajun, age 21*

I found there was also an understanding among the participants of the fact that all cultures share similar features, so what makes the Cajun culture different are the specific details and combination of factors.

But every – community out there kind of has that. Especially if it’s a rural community – a Spanish community, a Latino community, that would – there’s more and more of- they have their own music, dances, language – everything like that, so I think that more defines – any culture, so it’s not terribly descriptive of what Cajun culture is.

*Damien, Cajun, age 31*

Most of the festivals around here I would say is a Cajun thing. Not that festivals are a Cajun thing in general, but the festivals down here are gatherings where people are dancing and enjoying each other, you know, enjoying time.

*Jason, Cajun, age 31*

The food, the music and the social aspect. I think that's a big identity of the culture is the social aspect of those things combined because again, all other cultures do the same. Other cultures are sociable too, but when you mix the specific identity of Cajun music and Cajun food and Cajun humor, Cajun comedy and also the history of individual families. You know a bunch of people interact and talk about their past and what they did when they were growing up and I- I don’t think there is anything
specific that anybody can say “I woke up and did this and it is Cajun”. I don’t believe that.

Andrew, Cajun, age 31

Participants often referred to recently published works or to particular individuals in academic circles, perhaps to add validity to their personal beliefs about Cajun culture. There were times when individuals would defer to me on matters of history or language simply because I was believed to be better read or better educated than the person with whom I was speaking.

The argument that these emic self-descriptions are readily understandable in light of historical portrayals of the Cajun people, as well as past activities, makes sense. It is easy to see how a focus on education and intelligence can come out of the struggle against stereotypes of being dumb and backward, as well as being a response to manual labor; the more educated one becomes, the less likely they are to have to work on the family farm. What is interesting is how these responses overlap and even contradict one another. For instance, there is pride in being highly educated so one does not have to live the hard life of a farmer, and yet there is a nostalgia for the “simple” life that has been seemingly left behind. The reconciliation of these contradictions is in the appropriation of each of these personality traits, as well as other cultural norms, into the overall Cajun identity. Though they are perceived as important factors in the Cajun ideology, I would argue they are not as boundary driven as other factors, such as food.
“Cajuns always go back to food”

I clearly remember learning to make roux for gumbo. It was probably a Saturday morning and I was about 15 or 16 years old. My mother called me away from the television into the kitchen and told me to stir the pot while she went to do something quick in the back of the house. If the roux turned the color of a Hershey bar, I needed to turn off the heat and call her. But, I was not to worry, because she would be right back. I stirred the odd concoction of oil and flour in her Magnalite® pot with a wooden spoon, but she did not return quickly. I yelled to the back of the house and she yelled back she’d be there soon.

The roux finally reached the desired color and I yelled to her again. She came walking out of the back room, smiling. I had spent about 30 minutes (although I would swear it was hours) “learning” to make my first roux. When I complained about how mean she was, she told me to be quiet because it was about time I learned how to make a gumbo. I do not remember any other part of the cooking lesson, but I do make gumbo on a regular basis today.

Many of my childhood memories center on those foods from the Cajun culture – cornbread and milk, rice and eggs, gumbo, sausage, boudin [rice dressing stuffed in sausage casings; literally: black pudding in Standard French], and shrimp cooked every way imaginable. When we traveled to Lake Charles, Louisiana, for our visits, one of the biggest treats was the drive to Breaux Bridge to eat at Mulate’s and listen to the music. I always ordered the fried crawfish appetizer. Although there were other fun treats, such as going to Borden’s for a scoop of ice cream or eating a fried egg burger at Cotten’s in
Lake Charles, Mulate’s was the most special because it was so far away and I was allowed to get crawfish. Even today, our family gatherings often include (or focus on) food.

Published discussions on Cajun cuisine tend to be organized as cookbooks or scholarly pursuits that spotlight the historical development of the particular foods. Cajun food is recognized as “one of the most important aspects of Cajun life,” and is at the heart of discussions about cultural contact, historical changes, and commercialization of the Cajun culture (Rickels 1983: 226). These discussions are relatively short, however, unless they are part of a recipe book.

Dormon (1983a) uses food to explain that cultural diffusion renders some elements of culture unreliable for determining ethnic boundaries. He argues that gumbo, although ascribed to the Cajuns “as early as 1803 ... did not come to Louisiana with the Acadian immigrants as part of their cultural baggage” (Dormon 1983a: 37). The Cajun variety of gumbo came out of a combination of contact with other culture groups and available food resources. Dormon (1983a) also argues the foods which became associated with the Cajun culture were born of a reliance on personal crops and hunting, as well as a need to make scarce resources go farther.

Bernard (2003) points out that after World War II, the commercialization of Cajun foods began to affect changes in what people “considered standard Cajun fare” (48-49). What had once been considered traditional foods were changing as restaurants experimented with ingredients, and grocery stores made a wider variety of items available to the housewife (Bernard 2003; Dormon 1983a; Esman 1985). Cookbooks
furthered the commercialization of Cajun cuisine, as the demand for Cajun recipes grew throughout Louisiana and the United States (Bernard 2003).

Esman (1985) does take a few sentences to explain the importance of food to the Cajun culture. She points out that visitors are always offered at least a cup of coffee, and usually something to eat. “Cajuns are proud of their food, and this is a sentiment that children learn very early in life” (Esman 1985: 52). She does note that the Cajuns in Lafayette and other larger cities use food as “a self-conscious statement about ethnic identity” (Esman 1985: 53). In other words, food is used purposefully to argue membership in the Cajun community.

Esman (1985) also notes that the availability of more ingredients at local grocery stores has led to more experimentation with food in the home, and that while traditional meals are still prepared, people are just as likely to prepare non-traditional foods, such as pasta dishes or American fare. The participants of this research echoed some of these statements about Cajun cuisine by talking about convenience items, such as jarred roux, or by discussing other foods they like to eat.

When I cook roux, it’s probably a little too dark – I was thinking about that the other day – it’s like- it’s dark. I make it dark. I put way more than what they tell you to put on the jar. Maybe like not quite twice as much but close.

Clare, Cajun, age 31

It's very easy to go to the store and buy Americanized food, cereal or whatever, but I think there is very few Cajun people that still eat what people used to eat 80 years ago every day.

Andrew, Cajun, age 31

I tell you this past year I haven’t cooked at all, I don’t know if that’s important. Salads and pasta and French bread. It’s also, I don’t eat as
much food as I did, I'm not as active as I used to be. It’s [Cajun food] pretty heavy.

*Claudia, Cajun, age 62*

In the participant interviews, food was regularly discussed as an important aspect of the Cajun culture and identity.

Of course, Cajuns always go back to food.

*James, Cajun, age 28*

That’s one of the best parts of the culture is the food.

*Claudia, Cajun, age 62*

While the interview schedule did include a direct question about cuisine, 75% (n=33) of people talked about food before being asked directly about it. The food most often mentioned first by 33% of the Cajun participants is gumbo (n=12), but 75% of the non-Cajun participants overwhelmingly stated crawfish first (n=6). Table 2 shows the top ten Cajun foods mentioned by participants, with three sets of dishes being tied (noted by italics). Appendix E has the complete list of foods mentioned in all interviews, in order of popularity.

A few of these dishes need some explanation. The descriptions that follow are in no way meant to be all-inclusive and are based solely on my experiences in eating and preparing these foods. I recognize there are as many ways to make each of these dishes, as there are people who cook them (and ways to spell them). This is intended to be a basic introduction for those who are not familiar with Cajun cuisine.

A *gumbo* [derived from the Bantu word for okra] is a soup-like dish, served over rice, which is generally made in large portions and is easy to make “go farther”. I often
run into the problem that all the meat and vegetables are eaten, but I still have “juice” left over. It is not uncommon to simply add more ingredients and let it simmer again before serving. Gumbo is based on a roux [literally: reddish brown], which is made of cooking flour and fat (usually oil, but butter is not uncommon). Roux is generally used to thicken sauces, but in the case of gumbo and many of the dishes below, it is cooked until darkened to add flavor to the dish as well.

The basic ingredients in a gumbo begin with the “trinity” (onion, celery, bell pepper, and sometimes garlic) and some type of meat. Chicken, smoked sausage, fresh sausage, duck, and seafood are all popular. Local variations include poaching eggs in the gumbo before serving or soaking peeled, hard-boiled eggs in the gumbo as it simmers. Some people serve it with a dollop of potato salad.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME OF FOOD</th>
<th>CAJUN</th>
<th>NON-CAJUN</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gumbo (seafood, chicken &amp; sausage)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Étouffée (crawfish, shrimp)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crawfish (boiled, stew, étouffée, fried)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fricasse (chicken)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice and Gravy</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boudin</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jambalaya</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sauce piquant (turtle, squirrel, chicken, fish; also: Red Gravy)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtboillion (catfish)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cracklings (or graton)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice (not with gravy)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maquecheaux (stewed corn)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoked Sausage</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Top Ten Cajun Foods as Noted by Participants.
Étouffée [from étouffer: to smother, suffocate, or choke] is a dish that is usually associated with crawfish, but can also be made with chicken, shrimp, or vegetables. It is thicker than gumbo and is similar to a stew. This dish has many variations, including whether or not to use tomato in the sauce, whether any roux is necessary, and, if it is, how dark it should be. A fricassée [from fricasser: to cook meat in its own juice] is made with a roux base that is lighter in color and thicker than gumbo or étouffée. This is generally made of chicken and is sometimes called a stew, although some would argue that a stew uses less and lighter roux, and is made with meatballs or some other meat. Sauce piquante [literally: sharp/stinging sauce] is a roux-based tomato sauce that is sometimes called a red gravy and is served with a variety of meats, including turtle, squirrel, chicken, and seafood. A courtbouillon [literally: short broth] is also a roux and tomato based dish, but is more stew-like in consistency and is generally cooked with fish.

Rice is a fundamental part of most Cajun dishes and is served either under the above dishes or as a side dish with gravy. One of my favorite meals is pot roast with rice and gravy and green beans cooked in bacon grease with bacon chunks, onion, and garlic. Jambalaya is a rice dish that is similar to a casserole or rice dressing, and includes the trinity and meat such as chicken, sausage, or seafood. The variations are based on personal tastes and availability of ingredients. Boudin is seasoned rice dressing made with pork that is stuffed into a sausage casing. It is then boiled, steamed, grilled, or smoked before serving. It can be a main course, a side dish, and even breakfast. Often sold with boudin is a delicacy known as gratons [cracklings].
Cracklings are seasoned, deep fried pork skins (Figure 21).

![Image of people cooking cracklings](image)

**Figure 21: Cracklings being fried, Eunice, Louisiana Boucherie and Mardi Gras Festival.**

Many of these dishes are based in historically significant processes, and participants are aware of their beginnings. Boudin and cracklings, as well as hogshead cheese, were often associated with communal processing of a pig, known as a *boucherie* [literally: slaughter] (Bienvenu, Brasseaux, and Brasseaux 2005). Additionally, foods were often cooked seasonally based on availability of produce and meats. Making food go as far as possible was a concern because families were large and poor.

> When I was young, Daddy would raise us that we would butcher hogs to feed us and you just didn’t waste anything. We ate every part of the hog from the feet we pickled to the head we’d make hog head cheese. It was just the way we was raised ... We eat everything that we catch. You don’t catch it or kill it unless you are going to eat it.

*Gary, Cajun, age 52*
We raised pigs for the meat and had boucheries and all that stuff. And, we always had a garden. We grew up on fresh food. And they grew up on fresh food. They were dirt poor, but they always had fresh food. They always had chickens, fresh eggs, fresh beans, fresh corn, squash, whatever we could plant there – my parents raised ten kids in a three room house, not bedrooms, three room house. It was just a little shotgun. And, they always had extras. There was never a time when they had just the kids to take care of.

*Lucy, Cajun, age 60*

And then, when you grow up and realize – poor Mom, she was in this kitchen preparing a meal for ten to fourteen people, three meals a day, three meals not done from packaging, not hardly any canned foods. She couldn’t get out of this kitchen! And, she did it to the last. She had a stool right there when she was too feeble. She still cooked on her stool. That was her way of nurturing us and loving us, I guess – we were eight boys and four girls here ...

*Sophie, Cajun, age 64*

The fricassées, the chicken stew, the stews, long gravies. You had to make a lot of long gravies if you had a lot of children and feed them rice and gravy.

*Gertrude, Cajun, age 76*

Basically the Cajuns do this: they got this, they got a big pot of crawfish, they make something with crawfish, you got shrimp, you make something with shrimp. Whatever you got, whatever it may be, beer, whatever – whatever you can get your hands on.

*Isaac, Cajun, age 26*

The Cajun participants in this research had an understanding of the fact that Cajun foods are not necessarily unique to their culture. There is awareness that gumbo is a soup, étouffée is a stew, and so on.

I don’t think there are things that are truly unique that some other culture don’t have a variation of.

*Marshall, Cajun, age 29*

I ate some Indian food the other day, it tasted like sauce piquant. It came with rice – it wasn't white rice, it was some kind of stained rice, but I ate it
like a sauce piquant.  
Isaac, Cajun, age 26

I guess chicken fricassee – they probably make that somewhere else, but I guess it wouldn’t have a roux in there – like we do.
Edward, Cajun, age 21

The non-Cajun participants, however, pointed to dishes that they believed were unique to the Cajun culture:

I never heard of rice and gravy until I moved here. Gumbo to me, I guess you could say it’s Cajun, to me it’s not really food, it just tastes so over [cooked].
Melissa, Non-Cajun, age 31

I did not even boil crawfish until I was 19 years old. I did not have a gumbo, an étouffée, a jambalaya – my mother said “oh the crawfish is what the poor people eat!” Not anymore!
Vivian, Non-Cajun, age 55

I have been in the company of vegetarians sometimes when I’m down here and – I guess I kind of take it as a – not quite a uniquely Cajun trait, but it’s a minefield to try to construct a meat-free meal at a restaurant or anyplace else ... I remember being with a person who ate fish, but not meat or poultry, so we went to a fairly nice seafood place and she ordered her fish and it came with two sides and she said I’ll have the green beans and I’ll have the – whatever – and of course the green beans were about half bacon, so there’s- it almost seems like meat in every dish and I don’t know if that’s a Cajun thing- and there’s things that I just haven’t tried that people eat. You know, I’ve tried alligator, but I mean there’s people still probably eat nutria [a semi-aquatic rodent] and squirrel.
Paul, Non-Cajun, age 60

There is an awareness of food influences from other cultures, as well as differences between them. For instance, Creole dishes are often associated with tomato:

I’m not talking about New Orleans gumbo that's red, I'm talking about real gumbo, it's brown.
Isaac, Cajun, age 26

Then you’ve got to identify what is Cajun because a lot that has an
American impact passed along to us.

*Joel, Cajun, age 33*

The gumbo can’t have tomato in it because that is Creole and not Cajun.

*Elizabeth, Non-Cajun, age 31*

Outsider perceptions of Cajun food were also a regular topic among participants. Esman (1985) states, “Cajun cuisine is generally highly seasoned” (34). She argues that Cajuns have a “penchant for cayenne pepper” and that restaurant owners often tone-down the seasoning of their fare for tourists (34). The participants in this research disagree with Esman’s (1985) assessment of Cajun spices and seasonings. They claim that it is a myth that to be Cajun, food has to be spicy; it is the seasoning of Cajun dishes by using onion, celery, bell pepper, and garlic that sets it apart. One Cajun participant pointed out that her husband “thinks my perfume is *Eau d’ bacon and onions.* Because it goes in every vegetable I cook.”

[Cajun food is] misperceived too as far as people thinking everything has to be spicy to where you can’t taste the food.

*Andrew, Cajun, age 31*

My son was in the Navy ... and every time they go somewhere, there’s a Cajun restaurant. Every time they leave, and they go and it’s not Cajun. That’s not just what Cajun cooking is. It’s the seasoning – some of the seasoning but not like that. That was HOT and that’s just not what it is.

*Lisa, Cajun, age 57*

I cook with a lot of spice – that's another myth. Cajun food does not have to be hot. People think you dump too much pepper in it and call it Cajun. That's not true.

*James, Cajun, age 28*

Especially the way we season. The seasoning – we put a lot more seasoning, as in pepper wise, but also as in flavor to our food. Such as, we put the onions, the garlic, the bell peppers, and celery.

*Edward, Cajun, age 21*
Bienvenu, Brasseaux, and Brasseaux (2005) point out in their book on the history of Cajun foods that Cajuns unconsciously use “ethnic dishes as tools for establishing and maintaining community boundaries” (109). I argue Cajun cuisine is symbolic rhetoric because food is used as a way to prove membership. It is part of the Cajun ideology to prepare and eat particular foods, although the boundaries as to what is acceptable may vary. Not every Cajun is going to eat turtle or squirrel sauce piquante, but most will recognize the dish as being a valid, Cajun food. Just like the qualities of the Cajun personality explored above, eating and preparing the foods are not enough to be considered Cajun, there are other factors involved, such as Cajun music and dance.

**Cajun Music, Dancing, and Festival Season**

Although Cajun music has a unique history, has evolved like any other genre of music, and has specific criteria that must be met in order to be considered Cajun, whether or not listening to music is a negotiable boundary is difficult to ascertain. What is pertinent to this research is how people express their feelings toward Cajun music and how it is part of what makes them Cajun. There is an ounce of shame when someone admits to not caring for Cajun music, but I do not believe listening to it regularly is a requirement for membership, although it is recognized for its importance to the Cajun culture. Dancing, on the other hand, can be considered symbolic rhetoric because the Cajun dance style is unique. The problem, however, is that many outsiders have come in and learned to dance in this style, as well as have learned how to play...
Cajun music. The boundary then comes back to what other traits are exhibited in order to claim Cajun identity.

While music and dance cannot be markers of Cajun identity in and of themselves, 77% (n=34) of participants stated they listen to Cajun music on a regular basis and 61% (n=27) said they Cajun dance. Many people mentioned listening to Saturday morning radio programs in particular, mostly because grandparents or parents listened every Saturday morning to the Cajun broadcast.

I like to go anywheres where they have French music being played.

*Matthew, Cajun, age 28*

I probably listen to Cajun music every day, whether it's recorded or I'm at my friend's house. I have this great luxury of practically all of my friends are Cajun musicians. So, I'm in a unique situation that way. But, in this area it is still very, very easy to hear – inadvertently hear – Cajun music just about anywhere.

*Damien, Cajun, age 31*

Yes. Probably once a week. On Saturday mornings that's mostly what's playing around here.

*Linda, Cajun, age 29*

Absolutely. KBON. All the way, unless there's some Zydeco music on there that I don't care for – I listen to the oldies – KRVS from 5 to 7 every morning for the French 2 hours. 960 AM has a Louisiana deal – because it's not all in French ...

*Edward, Cajun, age 21*

Daily basis! KBON. CDs in the truck. [My son] plays accordion every night. 105 out of Eunice. KRVS. Not only Cajun, also Swamp Pop...

*Gary, Cajun, age 52*

Yes. Every Saturday for sure. It comes on in the morning – it doesn't feel like Saturday until we get the- Every since I've known [my husband], every Saturday morning that radio came on that Cajun station and it's not Saturday morning until I hear the music come on

*Barbara, Cajun, age 50*
Interviewer: Do you listen to Cajun music?
Participant: Yes. Probably once a month or so. Or, if I catch it on the radio I'll leave it on because it's familiar and fun.

_Elizabeth, Non-Cajun, age 31_

Esmann (1985) explains that music and dance started as festivals and back porch activities that eventually moved into community dancehalls as populations grew. The fais do do was a weekend gathering that the entire family attended. Dancehalls had small back rooms set up for the smaller children to be put to bed while parent's enjoyed a night out (Esmann 1985). As dancehalls died out, fais do do was used to refer to any community gathering centered on music and dancing (Esmann 1985). Participants are also aware of this history:

I think it's worth noting, especially like if a travel writer comes, I mean not like when every single tourist comes needs to know this – that certain traditions that if left unchecked, people would think that “oh, this goes back hundreds of years” do not. Like the concept of a dancehall where you eat and dance. That's not old. That's new. The festivals are old, not new, but rather that it was the first of that kind of place because they had the old dancehalls before, but it wasn’t this eating and dancing combo experience, so that’s a relatively new concept – and it is a part of our culture, it is a part of the evolution of our culture, but it’s not a part of our culture that goes back to 1765.

_Clare, Cajun, age 31_

Today, there are restaurants such as Mulate’s and Randall’s that have dance floors and small stages for Cajun and Zydeco bands:

I discovered the Cajun culture at Randall’s. I started Cajun dancing and from there I went to every music event I could possibly find.

_Vivian, Non-Cajun, age 55_

A handful of dancehalls remain, such as La Pouissier’s in Breaux Bridge or Grant Street in Lafayette (Figure 22). There are also numerous bars in the area that offer a dance
floor, such as The Blue Moon Saloon in Lafayette. But, the best places to go for a 
variety of music, dancing, and food are still the local festivals.

Figure 22: Grant Street Dancehall, Lafayette, Louisiana.

Festivals are a point of interest because they are one of the major places today 
that people are able to dance and hear a variety of music. Some festivals are based 
entirely on music or dancing, such as Festivals Acadiens et Creoles, The Black Pot 
Festival (although this one is based in music and food), and Festivals International. 
Some festivals go so far as to set up portable wood dance floors under pavilions 
because “It's hard to dance in the grass” (Isaac, Cajun, age 26), although that does not 
stop people (Figure 23).

While festivals are relatively common in the United States and around the world, it is the degree to which festival season is taken in southern Louisiana that makes it
worth noting. While in the field, I found a company which produced a yearly festival calendar for purchase, with regular updates posted on their website. They had over 500 festivals listed each year for both 2008 and 2009. While many festivals are based in the religious calendar of the Catholic Church, such as Mardi Gras, others appear to be harvest-type festivals that are common in farming communities in the United States.

Most festivals follow a similar pattern in that there are Cajun bands on hand to dance to, plenty of local foods to enjoy, and even some shopping available, provided by local merchants. Often a King and Queen are crowned, along with multiple entertainments provided by the local school bands, dancers, and athletes. The smaller towns have their own festivals, such as the Rayne Frog Festival, the Crowley Rice Festival, the Opelousas Yambilee (yam festival), and the Breaux Bridge Crawfish
Festival. Cook-offs are another popular form of festival, such as the New Iberia Gumbo Cook-off (Figure 24) and the Jennings BBQ Festival, in which participants pay to cook their best foods and have them judged by local officials.

![Image of food vendors participating in cook-off competitions](image)

**Figure 24: One of five rows of food vendors participating in three days of cook-off competitions. New Iberia Gumbo Cook-Off, Louisiana.**

Festivals are generally one to two day events held on weekends, although a few do last as long as a week. The constant access to music, dancing, entertainment, and food appears to be central to the Cajun culture today. The family friendly atmosphere of the festivals is a draw for many people:

My family comes every year for Festival International and for Festival Acadian ... when I first came here, my parents loved Louisiana – the biggest thing was that it’s just such a family oriented culture. They were like “This is amazing. In how many states can you go where you go downtown and there’s a function every weekend and it’s family friendly?” They still drink, but it’s family friendly and it’s safe and it keeps unity
together in the family.

_Melissa, Non-Cajun, age 31_

That’s one of the nice things, there’s always a festival. It’s fun to kind of put notches on your belt to go to [the different festivals].

_Paul, Non-Cajun, age 60_

One day I was talking to my dad and it was during festival time, I forget which one, but it was at the point where I was picking and choosing between the different festivals what I was going to do and I looked over at him and said “yeah, I wonder what all the other Americans are doing this weekend?” You know, like I kind of feel bad for them. You know, it's like, watch MTV a little bit and go to the mall and um, that's a very flip way of thinking about it, but you know it's very much in jest, but, there's just so much to do around here culturally and we do have all the American stuff, but we do have our own little neat things, too.

_Damien, Cajun, age 31_

**Cultural Lagniappe**

This chapter has been concerned with two elements of identity that contribute to the larger Cajun ideology. First, we have looked at what Cintron (1997) calls everyday practices that have become rhetorical performances, which are used to validate membership in the Cajun ethnicity. These are the acts that people believe are part of the Cajun identity and that allow people to outwardly show they are Cajun, while at the same time “feeling” Cajun. Second, this chapter has considered additional boundaries of the Cajun identity that are under negotiation and being maintained.

Let us consider the example of Cajun cuisine. Esman (1985) argues that food is involved in a self-conscious effort to reinforce ethnic identity, but Bienvenu, Brasseaux, and Brasseaux (2005) state food is used unconsciously to reify identity. Both are correct. There is a conscious effort to show the Cajun identity in displays of rhetorical performance by preparing and eating particular foods. There are foods people eat
simply because they like them or they are nostalgic about them. Rice and gravy is a
good example of this. Many participants stated they ate rice and gravy on a regular
basis:

Moving to Texas and having friends over to eat and, they were – “you put
gravy in your rice?” And we have rice every meal ...

Crystal, Cajun, age 23

Have to have rice and gravy at least once a week.

Theresa, Cajun, age 49

I cooked rice and gravy every day for 25 years.

Lisa, Cajun, age 57

We’d go to my grandmother’s every Sunday and she’d make a roast with
rice and brown gravy.

Patrick, Cajun, age 25

Rice and gravy, that’s a daily thing.

Linda, Cajun, age 29

I do not think participants prepare and eat rice and gravy on a regular basis, in the
privacy of their homes, to show the outside world they are Cajun. They eat it because
that is what they ate growing up and it is simply a part of who they are. It makes them
feel Cajun.

In my daily life I don’t really feel very Cajun. I don’t really think about that.
I live in Texas, so I guess that- when I cook I feel Cajun and I cook every
night – because I cook with onions and always trying to make my food feel
Cajun.

Heather, Cajun, age 26

On the other hand, I do think there is a conscious “showing off” where food is
concerned, much as Esman (1985) discussed. Participants would generally start by
naming the foods commonly associated with being Cajun, such as gumbo, étouffée,
boudin, and rice and gravy. Several, however, would get to the ends of their lists and share some of the less common foods. I believe this was done to prove expertise in the Cajun culture:

We’ll do what people call in this area is a *bouilli* [Cowboy Stew; literally: boiled] – it’s spleen and heart and liver. It’s basically all the scraps that’s left over. You can buy it at the butcher shops here, because the older people that, that’s a delicacy. Used to be that’s all that people had. The Cajuns literally ate everything. They were poor, so whatever they could make. In this area, a *bouillie* [literally: cereal; the spelling is different, though they are pronounced the same] is different. It is also a dessert in some parts of Louisiana, like, a cream pie. I’m not sure exactly.

*George, Cajun, age 29*

Food is not the only area in which people are performing rhetorically. The value traits, such as being friendly, happy, and funny, are also a part of this behavior. People do behave in these ways in public, as well as in their homes. These are difficult traits to document, but there are numerous fundraising activities throughout the year, and people are genuinely willing to help others. These traits could be quantified with outward appearances such as comedy shows or fundraisers, but were not a part of this research. Finally, music and dance are at the heart of the rhetoric of public culture in Louisiana. The local popularity of Cajun music is evident by the numerous jam sessions each week, the plentiful venues for bands, and the numbers of bands as well.

Boundary negotiation is another important element in these cultural traits. As we saw with language issues in the previous chapter, the boundary negotiations in this chapter are complex. They are concerned with multiple groups and are the consequence of historical circumstances. The boundaries being negotiated are between the Cajun culture and the larger American culture, between the Cajun culture
and its neighbors in Louisiana, and within the Cajun culture itself.

The personality traits discussed by participants are arguably in response to outsider stereotypes and early Acadian values. For instance, the emphasis on being a hard worker could be in response to outsider stereotypes of a lazy Cajun, just as much as it could be in response to a subsistence lifestyle centered on manual labor. As discussed previously, it is not the individual traits themselves that are being negotiated, but rather their presence or absence as part of the Cajun identity. Cajuns attempt to diffuse the negative stereotypes and reinforce the positive ones.

The boundaries surrounding food and music that are being negotiated are more likely to deal with the differences between what is and what is not Cajun. For instance, Cajun gumbo and Creole gumbo are similar, but Cajun gumbo does not include tomatoes, but Creole gumbo does. There are distinct differences between Cajun music styles and that of the Creole Zydeco musical style. The dividing line is becoming narrower, however, as bands evolve and a fusion of the two styles come together. Participants turn to discussions of historical facts in their negotiations on both topics. It is knowledge about their culture that sets them apart from the tourists and people who have moved to Louisiana:

Now I think one thing that everyone is going to think is easy to name is gumbo, which is actually a Creole dish, but has really come into the Cajun society and its as Cajun as anything else.

_Damien, Cajun, age 31_

Gumbo is actually not Cajun, but they don’t cook it anywhere else in the U.S. that I know of.

_Edward, Cajun, age 21_
The music has evolved from the old Cajun, which I call chank-a-chank, to Zydeco, which is more of a black – it’s the black intrusion into the Cajun music – which I like better, and most people do.

Peter, Cajun, age 53

I know the difference between Cajun, Creole and Zydeco and most of the tourists that come down they don’t know the difference between the Cajun and the Zydeco music.

Beau, Cajun, age 65

Cintron (1997) argues that the rhetoric of public culture is built out of those behaviors people use to in the making of their identities, as well as in their struggles for power. In this way, everyday practices become rhetorical performances that are used to convince others of our identities and our social positions (Cintron 1997). This chapter demonstrated some of the ways in which Cajuns are performing rhetorically in order to negotiate, reproduce, and maintain the boundaries of the Cajun identity. Personality traits, such as being helpful, happy, and smart, are responses to historical power struggles. They are one way people have found to negate unpleasant stereotypes and embrace positive ones.

The preparation and consumption of Cajun foods is an everyday practice that may be considered part of the rhetorical symbols Cajuns employ to set themselves apart as Cajun. Cajun food includes dishes that are arguably a part of the Cajun past, and continue to be easily recognizable features of the Cajun present. Playing and listening to Cajun music, dancing Cajun dances, and attending festivals are other ways to outwardly express the Cajun identity. This is not to say these are the only rhetorical performances that Cajuns produce, they are meant only as examples. These symbolically rhetorical arguments, combined with boundaries about ancestry and
language, work together as parts of the Cajun ideology, which we will explore in the final chapter.
CHAPTER 7
CONTEMPORARY CAJUN BOUNDARIES

The ethnographic accounts of the Cajun culture published in the 1980s describe a culture rooted in its history and its language. The Cajuns are often depicted in academic literature as being Roman Catholic, Acadian-French descendants who speak a dying dialect of French. They were historically agrarian, but moved later into the oil business. As the importance of education increased, their modes of subsistence became more industrialized, following in the footsteps of most of the American population. In spite of growing Americanization, Cajuns still held to the importance of a tight knit family and enjoyed good food, good music, good dancing, and throwing a party. By the early 1980s, academia had started to take a serious interest in the Cajun culture, the activist movements from the 1960s were beginning to take root and grow, and tourism was bringing in outsiders in larger numbers. The overall opinion of academics and activists was that the culture was declining and likely moribund; therefore, it was in need of revival and preservation if it intended to survive into the 21st century (Bernard 2003; Dormon 1983a; Esman 1985; Henry and Bankston 2002).

Nearly 25 years later, this research project found much the same ethnographic data: people are concerned with their ancestry and language, they still focus on food, music, dance, and celebrations, they have tight knit families, are largely Catholic, and are constantly negotiating identity boundaries both inside and outside cultural lines. The difference today is that academia and tourism have had time to have a greater impact on the Cajun community. Additionally, the Internet is a new tool that allows for faster
Academia and the Academic Celebrity

The literature review of key works on the Cajun culture in Chapter 3 outlines the academic interest in the Cajun people since the 1930s. There were numerous other literary accounts prior to this time, as well as research, but the bulk of the published accounts are from the 1960s to the present. This academic interest coincided with the preservation efforts discussed in the previous chapter, as well as the beginnings of focused state marketing to tourists. The result has been that, especially since the 1980s, academics are increasingly treated as the experts on Cajun identity and culture. Many of them are Cajun themselves and take on activist roles within the community by hosting or creating programs designed to bring the Cajun culture to the general public, as well as to bring awareness of the history and culture outside of Louisiana.

As we have seen with the boundaries of the Cajun identity, the participants in this research responded in extremes to this academic ideology present in their community. On the one extreme, academics are considered to be experts and held in high regard, to the point of celebrity. Before several of the interviews I held, I would have to work at convincing the participant that I was genuinely interested in what they had to share and to talk about. More than once, I was told things like “I don’t know what I can tell you that you don’t already know.” I would also have to tell people regularly that I wanted to know
what they thought, not what they had read in a book. One participant clarified this point with me when I asked him to define Cajun for me:

Participant: You want the definition of a Cajun or my definition of a Cajun?
Interviewer: Yours!
Participant: Anyone who want to live the community life. It's everybody helping everybody, you know, everybody getting together to do things, you know, living as a family not in a family. If you treat your family as family, whether they are or not, it's the way I see it. …. They are not out there trying to be something they're not.

Isaac, Cajun, age 26

Another young man got hung up on the fact that I was interested in what he had to say. He found it hard to believe that someone doing academic research would want to know what he thought about the Cajun definition, as opposed to what the books had to say:

Interviewer: How do you define Cajun?
Participant: See, I think that question’s harder than the first one. How do I define it? See, I know all the textbook definitions. I don’t know – I know all my textbook definitions.
Interviewer: Okay. Then which ones do you like and not like and why?
Participant: I like – the descendants of the Acadians, that all makes sense, but I don’t like that they use it to define any white Francophone in Louisiana.

Bobby, Cajun, age 27

There are a handful of academics and other intellectuals who are common household names, such as Barry Ancelet (folklorist), Carl Brasseaux (historian), Warren Perrin (attorney and cultural activist), and Ryan Brasseaux (anthropologist and son of Carl Brasseaux). One participant mentioned some of these academics by name during his interview, though I heard these names repeatedly in informal discussions with people:
... And the further south I got, the less liver there was, and I was speaking to someone about that and, they mentioned how Barry Ancelet had mentioned, a similar trend where they further south you go, the less smoked sausage you'll come across ...

... That's a really interesting question, and I was talking about this the other day, and I think Carl and Ryan Brasseaux have a book out about the origins of Cajun cooking ... [this book was first-authored by Marcelle Bienvenu as well]

... I was interested to read Carl Brasseaux's book *Acadian to Cajun* that typically the Cajun men kind of just did their own thing, they didn't really go to church, you know, the women were there to teach catechism and to raise their kids in the church, and it was the women that were the keepers of the religion ...

_Damien, Cajun, age 31_

It is not just the expertise of the individual academics that participants talked about, but also specific books or information from published accounts:

Interviewer: So, what religion are you?  
Participant: The three questions of Cajuns – “whose your mamma, are you Catholic and can you make a roux?” [This is also the title of a popular book by Marcel Bienvenu]

_James, Cajun, age 28_

Academic research is often published in formats that are easily accessible to the general public. There are open lectures on various topics that are historically and culturally relevant to Cajuns, Creoles, and others in Louisiana. There are two living history museums in Lafayette – Vermilionville and Acadian Village. The Lafayette newspaper, The Advertiser runs a regular column on page 2 by Jim Bradshaw, journalist and self-made historian. His column generally explores parts of the history of the peoples in southern Louisiana, with the main focus on the Cajuns. The particulars of Cajun history are easy to access, and participants openly discussed many of them,
I find, of course there’s migratory patterns in place over all this time [historically in Louisiana], but Cajuns were originally the folks that settled in the eight-parish region known as Acadiana [22-parish]. And, I think if you can trace your roots to back here, there are certain, no matter where you go or what you do, there are certain customs and mannerisms that you carry with you.

*James, Cajun, age 28*

I consider the word Cajun to be an Americanized description of Southern Louisiana or the 22 Acadiana Parishes. [Participant is drawing Bernard (2003) *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People.*]

*Andrew, Cajun, age 31*

We get into the aspect of Cajun and Creole, by definition, the Cajuns are creoles also.

*Beau, Cajun, age 65*

I do all traditions – I go to the boucherie, I go to the *veillées*, which are the evening visits with the older people ... [This description is similar to that of Brasseaux (2005): “These institutions, together with the *veillées*, or regular evening visits with neighbors and relatives ...” (77).]

*Edward, Cajun, age 21*

The most obvious illustrations of the Cajun belief in academia came out of the question “Are all Cajuns the same throughout Louisiana?” Of the 36 Cajun participants, 94% (n=34) stated that Cajuns were not the same and cited many examples of how they differ. Thirteen (38%) of these respondents explained the differences were based on types of Cajuns, such as Bayou Cajuns, Prairie Cajuns, elitist/intellectual Cajuns, and everyday Cajuns. This is significant because there are several publications from the 1980s that use this terminology to describe the various lifestyles of the Cajuns in southern Louisiana. I discussed one of these works (Comeaux 1983a) in Chapter 1 because his work lays out the differences in subsistence patterns among the Prairie
Cajuns, the Swamp Cajuns, the Marsh Cajuns, and the Bayou Cajuns. In Dormon’s (1984) article, he calls for distinguishing five types of Cajuns: 1) the CODOFIL “elite”; 2) “Genteel Acadians”; 3) “Plain Cajuns”; 4) “activist cultural nationalists”; and 5) “Coonass” (1055). These are an extension of Rickels’ (1983) distinctions between a “Genteel Acadian” and plain “Cajuns” (251). Participants echo these terms in their interviews:

Then there’s I guess a whole ‘nother group that in pop culture, or in uh, you know, in recent times, modern culture, you have I guess what people would call elitists Cajuns, like intellectual Cajuns and you know intellectual being said in a kind of pejorative way, and those are usually the people associated with CODOFIL, the government sanctioned groups, the people who teach at university level, and there’s- I guess sort of just your- and actually this is something like an Everyday Cajun

*Damien, Cajun, age 31*

This particular area is considered the Prairie and the Cajuns from this area are considered Prairie Cajuns.

*George, Cajun, age 29*

Prairie Cajuns and the Bayou Cajuns and there is a big distinction because their lifestyles are different and then they were isolated so long that the accents were different.

*Patrick, Cajun, age 25*

The two broadest differences are the Prairie Cajuns and the Bayou Cajuns, but there are also different ways of life from parish to parish.

*Emily, Cajun, age 28*

Then I would say you have geographic distinctions as well, so you would have Cajuns that- City Cajuns versus Rural, you would have Prairie - and then, I don’t see this distinction as much now, mostly because our society has gone more to the middle class, at least Louisiana has, but in your old times you would also have your distinction between your poor Acadians and the gentile Acadian.

*Clare, Cajun, age 31*

Whether or not it is the academic reporting labels expressed by Cajuns or the
participants picking up on these labels is not determinable. I argue that it is likely the early Cajuns recognized differences such as Prairie Cajun or Bayou Cajun or Swamp Cajun, but that it was the academic labeling that brought in terms such as elite, gentile, or plain to refer to types of Cajuns.

One extreme to the academic celebrity is the belief that academics are elitist intellectuals with no concern for the everyday Cajun:

Let me say it this way, it’s people like Warren Perrin that have given me the thought of – how can I say it? It’s what I don’t like about it, when you try to narrow it down and people like, the announcer at the Liberty Theatre, Barry Ancelet, it’s the outspoken. I don’t like people like that that are critical of people that question stuff about it. I love Cajun people, but I don’t like people like that that think they’re [better than] let it be. Let it – enjoy it, but, to try to make it something that it’s not or to make it something that they want to make it or get notoriety from it, I don’t like that. I noticed that change, it’s subtle, but I don’t like it.

*Ronald, Cajun, age 58*

Several participants would talk about “that academic” in reference to a particularly well-known person in the community, but would not mention the name on tape because they disagreed with his ideology and were afraid of repercussions for verbalizing their opinions on tape. One participant discussed this academic’s attitudes about Cajun culture, but did not once name him while being taped. Only after the interview was officially over was I informed to whom this participant was referring. All identifying information has been removed from the following quote to protect the participant.

There is one academic, again, who, his definition of Cajun is that you have to speak French and he will point blank say if you don’t speak French, you aren’t Cajun, which I don’t agree with for a number of reasons ... There is a thought process that I’ve heard, and I understand it, which is if there’s this great authentic deli that has bread pudding every afternoon at two and that’s something that we all know and we all go there and it’s part of our
culture to experience this, if we put it in a tourism guide and a tour bus pulls up, the next thing you know the [deli] that we love is no longer ours, it becomes something else, so we lose our culture to the tourism. So, I understand that argument, but I think it’s giving it a little more power than actual- we are pretty much begging people to come – then he furthers the argument – not in print, just in person – by saying “let’s send them to Prejean’s and Randall’s so we can keep [our deli]”. And, there are places designed to capture tourists, so this may be a reasonable argument to make, but to say that tourism in and of itself corrupts the culture itself I think is wrong.

There is a genuine discomfort with the idea of potentially angering these academic celebrities, or even being perceived as disagreeing with them. This is, however, an *extreme* attitude. Most common is a middle ground in which the general population takes what they like from academia and ignores the rest. One participant had these words of wisdom on the topic:

> When you talk to the ones [Cajuns] like 50-55 and under, they give you facts and information and history. Whereas when you talk to those that are 55 and up, they give you their experience. And they are not necessarily even interested in that other stuff as much. They’re interested, and this goes back to how academics affect it and how tourism affects it – they’re interested in a sense that “you don’t believe me, go over there to that university and they’ll tell you that my French is good”, but they’re not interested in knowing *how* their French is good. They use it as a validation of what they have believed all along. But they’re not interested in explaining to someone how their French is actually.
> 
> *Clare, Cajun, age 31*

The true value in academia is that it has, for the most part, made the details of Cajun history and language in Louisiana accessible to anyone who wants to learn about it. The problem is when academics take themselves too seriously at the expense of the opinions of the “Everyday Cajun.” A similar factor in the contemporary Cajun life is the impact of the tourist trade.
Consuming Cajun Country

Esman (1985) argued that tourism was a healthy pursuit for the Cajun people, as it encouraged behaviors associated with the Cajun ethnicity, such as speaking French. By 1991, Trépanier (1991) argued against tourism, stating that this created a non-authentic Cajun culture that was already completely assimilated by the Anglo-American culture. Henry and Bankston (2002) argued that while the Cajun festival and cuisine have become commodified aspects of Cajun ethnicity, tourism should be seen in light of Sara LeMenestral’s (1999) argument that tourism creates a dual mechanism of culture – one of heritage and one of consumerism.

Tourism allows the Cajun culture to continually negotiate and reproduce its cultural features, not only for the endurance of the culture, itself, but also for the economic benefit the Cajun people derive from the sale of those features (Henry and Bankston 2002). Henry and Bankston (2002) see tourism as part of the changing ethnic landscape of the United States, in that most ethnicities are living within the shared American culture, but hold on to some elements of their ethnic pasts through consumption of ethnic goods, perpetuation of ethnic practices, and maintenance of shared ethnic memory.

I think this would be a fair assessment except for the fact that many of the participants in this research discuss the things they do on a regular basis that are not based in consumption or tourism. Many people regularly go to camps to hunt or fish. They still participate in boucheries and other community activities. Just because these are not the norm does not mean people do not do them at all. I think the fact that Henry
and Bankston (2002) and other academics dismiss these activities as consumerism or a way to relive the past is simplistic. This is not to say that there is no element of commodification and consumerism.

I argue that people are using some elements of tourism and consumerism as part of a rhetoric of public culture. They display artifacts, such as bumper stickers and t-shirts, to prove their membership in the Cajun culture. The back window of the pickup truck in Figure 25 has three window decals that give insight into the owner's identity.

![Figure 25: Rhetoric of Public Culture – Window Decals.](image)

The first sticker on the left is the Louisiana Ducks Unlimited decal. Ducks Unlimited is a national duck hunter’s association that is concerned with hunting and conservation of species and their natural habitats. The middle decal is the Sportsman’s
fleur-de-lis from the Louisiana Sportsman Magazine (Figure 26) that is made up of a duck head, a fish head, and a buck head. The sticker on the truck is camouflaged, whereas the sticker in Figure 26 is printed in the colors of the Louisiana State University football team (purple and gold). The final decal is for the Registered Coonass Association, or RCA (Figure 27). The controversial nature of the term *coonass* has not prevented people from proudly displaying these stickers (see the section “Acadien to Coonass in 250 Years” below for a discussion on the term).

Figure 26: Sportsman Fleur-de-Lis Window Decal (used with permission from Louisiana Sportsman Magazine, Louisiana Publishing).
This rhetoric of public culture is not reserved just for the back of trucks. Cafe Ahnvee (Figure 28) is a play on the French phrase *envie* [a feeling of longing, desire, or hunger]. The City of Lafayette expresses its connection to the French community with large fleur-de-lys in the brick outside of the city courthouses (Figure 29). Even the portable toilet industry displays rhetoric of the Cajun and French cultures in Louisiana by sporting the name K-Jon, with the *j* dotted by a fleur-de-lis (Figure 30).

Overall, though many people expressed no opinion, favorable or otherwise, 45% (*n=20*) of participants stated that tourism was a good thing because 1) it brings in money to the state, 2) it teaches outsiders about the Cajun culture and Louisiana,
Figure 28: Cafe Ahnvee [En Vie] Sign, Lafayette, Louisiana.

Figure 29: Fleur-de-lys in Brick Outside Lafayette City Courthouse.
3) it has reaffirmed the Cajun identity and instilled a sense of pride that was lost in the first half of the 20th century, and 4) it has allowed Cajuns to make a living being Cajuns, even if they sometimes became caricatures of themselves in the process.

It has brought a lot more to the limelight, I guess – into, you know, cultures that would have never heard of Cajuns before or would have never given it a second thought. And, for the most part, it's good, but it is taking away a lot of the traditions.

Lisa, Cajun, age 57

As the years went by and I had all these people coming over here to see how the Cajun live and how they cook, kind of made you feel better. You know, toward yourself, by all these people curious about how you live.

Homer, Cajun, age 88

One interesting side effect of tourism has been in the marketing of an extremely diverse population to the outside world. Tourism in Louisiana is not just about spending
a drunken night on Bourbon Street in New Orleans anymore. The state cultural and
tourism organizations have done a good job of getting word out to not only the United
States, but to other countries as well. Much of the tourism in southern Louisiana seems
to be focused on experiencing Cajun history and modern life. Many times the tourists
are Canadian or French, coming to see their Francophone cousins in Louisiana.

Tourism, however, tends to create a clumping together of the different cultures,
so that Cajuns are associated with New Orleans, and to some degree Creoles have
been short changed. And none of this mentions the Native American groups in the
region (although some are profiting from the casino business). One participant
discussed the marketing of the Cajun lifestyle:

Louisiana made a big push to start calling anything that takes place in
Louisiana, Cajun, but people in New Orleans been screaming for years
that they’re not Cajuns, and they’re not, they’re Creole. New Orleans is
it’s own entity and you go just outside of New Orleans, west and south and
you will find, you know, true Cajun culture. Very, quite easily, and certainly
people in north Louisiana

   Damien, Cajun, age 31

I think it’s been misled and misinterpreted horribly because the movies
take place in New Orleans, which is not Cajun at all.

   Ronald, Cajun, age 58

So the tourism, it’s kind of, I think that’s what helped bring back the pride
in being Cajun. On the other hand, you have the tourists and Mardi Gras
season, which has turned Mardi Gras into this total aberration of –
debauchery, where it has thrown it out of balance.

   Joel, Cajun, age 33

Perhaps Esman’s (1985) vision of cultural revitalization through tourism has come partly
true. I do not believe, however, that tourism can generate enough need for people to
speak French in order to get the language much past a “reduced” status (Henry and
Tourism has done more than simply turned Cajuns into a commodity to be consumed. I argue that tourism has allowed for an enhanced outsider understanding of the Cajun culture, as well as allowing people to make money at being Cajun and restoring pride in the Cajun identity. Tourism has also pushed the limits of the boundaries of identity. More people are aware of their Cajun identities and are actively negotiating boundaries as they learn more, as well as actively reproducing their cultural ideologies through tourism. Coupled with the empowerment of knowledge gained through academia, the everyday Cajun has become well versed in their own culture enough to spread the word themselves through tools such as the Internet.

The Internet

I did not recognize the full impact of the Internet on Cajun culture until the end of my field season. I did not ask participants about the use of the Internet, or their opinions about how others use the Web. I knew about government, educational, and privately sponsored programs that use websites and email lists to promote their programs, such as The Center for Cultural and Eco-Tourism (CODOFIL). I was also aware of Cajuns who sell their wares and advertise tourist venues, such as swamp tours. I have even come across blogs and discussion boards where people discuss the Cajun culture and language, learn Cajun French, and talk about being homesick. Bernard (2003) noted that he had entered the term Cajun into a Google.com search and returned 588,000 positive hits (done on October 7, 2001). As of February 26, 2011, the same term
entered into a Google.com search generated 17,800,000 results.

The first two of these results are for a Wikipedia.com entry, which is a relatively well-written and documented entry. The first page also includes results for Cajun restaurants, Acadian-Cajun genealogy sites, festival information websites, and Cajun and Creole recipes. The Internet is being used not only to reproduce the contemporary Cajun identity, but also to negotiate boundaries. People use their blogs and discussion boards to argue out points of contention, such as just how related to the original Acadians one has to be, what foods are really Cajun and which are Creole (or something else), what places are really Cajun and which are not. Another use for the Internet that was brought to my attention was to petition people to claim their Cajun identities on the 2010 U.S. Census.

The World Studies Institute, a non-profit organization based in Lafayette, concerned with global interactions among Francophones, initiated a grassroots movement for Creoles and Cajuns to enter their ethnic identity on Question #8 on the 2010 U.S. Census short-form questionnaire. Their argument was that in order for government funding to reach Louisiana, the Cajun and Creole cultures must take a stand to be heard and to be counted (Pierce 2010). The social networking site, facebook©, housed a page (“U.S. Census 2010: Write-in Cajun and Louisiana Creole”)4 which called for people to write in “Louisiana Creole” and “Cajun” for the question: “Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?” The options include a write-in answer

4 It is interesting to note that the facebook© page and one associated website, latinlouisiana.com, are no longer available on the Internet.
of “Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin.” The argument was that in order to be heard, Creoles and Cajuns needed to come together and claim their ethnic identities. The 1980, 1990, and 2000 Census questionnaires all had options for people to write in their ancestral backgrounds. The 2010 Census did not. I do not claim to understand the full reasoning behind this grassroots movement, other than the argument that any representation of the Creole and Cajun cultures is better than no representation.

The primary problem, however, is that Cajuns and Creoles are not Hispanic. There were arguments on facebook® that Creoles could claim a Latino background simply on the grounds that the Creole ethnicity is a mixture of many cultures in Louisiana, including Hispanic. This argument could conceivably be used for the Cajuns too, but the logic is extreme. As the 2010 U.S. Census drew to a close, so too did the facebook® page. The moderator of the page posted this statement on May 2, 2010: “This group will be closing in a month. Remember to continue writing Louisiana Creole and Cajun wherever a line exists on government forms. It must be consistent.” The facebook® page is no longer available at www.facebook.com.

One concern was that Cajuns and Creoles could be reported in much smaller numbers than they actually exist if not enough people participate in this write-in. The facebook® page also had discussions of U.S. Census workers refusing to write-in those terms during in-home follow-ups. While the final numbers are not yet published for the 2010 Census, initial reports do show a 78.7% increase in the Hispanic population in the State of Louisiana, although Hispanics make up 4.2% of the 4,533,372 people of Louisiana. I left the field before this issue arose, so I do not have participant feedback.
on the topic, although it was a participant from this project that alerted me to its existence.

As a living database that most people have access to, the Internet is powerful. The average person can access academic research and publications, they can research their personal genealogy, read about Cajun history, learn Cajun French, or search for Cajun recipes and dance moves. Anyone can write a blog or design a website to share their personal view of “Cajun” with the world. Cajun ideologies and boundaries are under constant negotiation through academia, tourism, and the Internet. One example of this is how the terms used to designate the Cajun culture have changed since the Acadians arrived in Louisiana in 1755.

**Acadien to Coonass in 250 Years**

In Chapter 3, I briefly discussed the historical transitions in what Cajuns have been called, and who they have been, since they arrived in Louisiana in 1755. Historically, there were the original Acadiens (French spelling) in and from Nova Scotia who were expelled by the British. Then, once they arrived in Louisiana, they were lumped together in travelogues and other literature as French or Creole. By the late 1800s, stereotypes associated with the Acadian settlers had created a distinction between other French settlers and the Acadians (Anglo spelling) and the Cajuns (Anglo pronunciation of *Cadien*).

At this point, the Acadians were a small group of educated elite and the Cajuns were the agrarian peasants (Henry and Bankston 2002). Acadian became the term...
associated with positive characteristics of the main identity and Cajun was relegated to
the stereotypical, negative behaviors – the backwards, lazy, poor Cajun. By the 1950s,
this had shifted and the term Acadian was all but left behind and Cajun had become the
term of choice. I argue that today, due to academia and tourism, the term Acadian
refers to the modern peoples still residing in Nova Scotia, or the original settlers from
there, the term Cajun is used to denote the contemporary peoples, and the term
coonass has replaced Cajun to denote those who still embody the old stereotypes.
While these are not the only uses of these terms, they are arguably the primary uses of
the participants in this research.

At this point, I need to give an explanation of coonass. The origins of the word
are unknown, though some academics speculate its use goes back at least to World
War II (Bernard 2003). There are numerous academic speculations about its
beginnings. One popular theory is that it was the Anglo bastardization of the Standard
French slang, conasse [stupid person], heard during contact with French and Cajun
soldiers in WWII (Sexton 2009). Another has the term being used because Cajuns
fighting at the Battle of New Orleans in 1814 wore coonskin caps (Sexton 2009). Yet
another states it is a racial epitaph meant to put Cajuns in a lower status than their black
neighbors by Texans in the oilfields in the 1930s (Bernard 2003; Sexton 2009).

In Louisiana, there have been several activist groups who have attempted to
remove the use of coonass from the general publics’ lexicon. The Cajun French Music
Association (CFMA) came out against the term in 1989 (Sexton 2009). CODOFIL has
repeatedly railed against the use of the term. In 1981, the Louisiana State Legislator
passed a ruling condemning the use of the word and discouraging the sale of any product with the term, but not rendering it illegal as such (Sexton 2009). This condemnation has not stopped the sale of products (I purchased the RCA sticker in Chapter 6 at a gas station in Sulphur, Louisiana, in December 2007). These types of products are not likely to be found in state-funded venues.

Participants were asked what other terms they knew of or used to refer to Cajuns. Twelve Cajun participants cited “Acadian” and four cited “Cadien.” Twenty-seven Cajun participants said “coonass,” while another three alluded to the word, but did not say it outright. Four of the non-Cajun participants said “coonass” and one alluded to it by saying only “C-A.” They did not all agree on whether or not the term was acceptable to use. Twelve participants, including two non-Cajuns, used the word in the natural course of language during the interview.

I'm kind of Internet dumb, but I can – you know, the coonasses don't know how to work all that high-tech shit!

Matthew, Cajun, age 28

Well, I know when I went to Texas they'd call us names that wasn't too proper, you know, that I didn't agree with, that had a little disagreement about that, you know. I remember one time I was working for Texaco in the boilermakers and had one little guy especially was always picking on me. So one day, we were building a tank and one day, I jumped – I was on the scaffolding – I jumped off and I started running at him and I caught him in my- and I choked him. So the next day whenever we had to meet at the shop to be scheduled to go to work, so the next we go to work and they say ”if you call old _____ a coonass, you better show your teeth.”

Homer, Cajun, age 88

It has, you know the festivals that we have and the crowds that come get to experience first hand what the real Cajuns are about. What native Acadians, you know, the way they act, they see that we're not just a bunch of dumb drunk coonasses partying like there's no tomorrow, they see that,
you know, there are different facets of culture within our culture.

James, Cajun, age 28

Interviewer: How do you define Cajun?
Participant: Well, growing up in Louisiana – in Northern Louisiana – the state is very divided. You had your Coonass Cajuns in southern Louisiana and you had the northerners ...

Margaret, Non-Cajun, age 58

I’ve had some really lively discussions about this [the impact of education on the Cajuns] with some of my really, really coonass friends. [Earlier, this participant had said she does not use the term] It’s funny – when I say coonass I mean the real – like when I used it just now, I used it naturally because I was thinking of this one person in particular that is a very strong Cajun, with the accent, that is not educated, that is not even interested in that, but lives a life so – close to probably how they were living a hundred years ago and seems to be happy. But, I did use that word. He’s very colorful. Outspoken.

Claudia, Cajun, age 62

When participants cited the term coonass as another word for Cajun, I asked for their definition of the word:

I don't know – a real Cajun.

Crystal, Cajun, age 23

I- there is some sort of, there is a sense of, I may be “Boss Closs” low class, but that's who I am and I'm proud of it, and I work the fields and I work really hard and a play really hard and I'm loud and I drink too much and I make no excuses for it and that's kind of, that kind of attitude is used when someone describes themselves as a coonass.

Damien, Cajun, age 31

A coonass – if there had to be a definition of it, would be someone who lived along the bayou. You know, somebody who lived down in the country, down on bayou.

Jason, Cajun, age 31

A beer in the hand. Drinking beer. Always, I guess, I would say always having big parties, having family over, get-togethers all the time, hanging out outside barbequing – having a good time, a fun jump.

Amee, Non-Cajun, age 29
A coonass is somebody who drives an old pickup with a bunch of junk hanging out the back and just, you know, listens to Cajun music, drinks, doesn’t care, has a thick accent.

Elizabeth, Non-Cajun, age 31

You’re a coonass was just sort of, you know, you hunted raccoons, you joked, you stayed on the bayous, just – you a coonass! And, I don’t think they are insulted by the term. At least, I don’t mean it that way.

Margaret, Non-Cajun, age 58

Normally, we’d consider a coonass is a crazy Cajun.

Linda, Cajun, age 29

There’s the coonass that used to be an old term that the oil field used to use for their, as more of a derogatory term, because they come from the backwoods. I don’t use the term. There are people that call themselves – if you see the stickers riding around on people’s cars, the RCA, Registered Coonass, but that’s – they put themselves into that. That’s the more- not shady, but rough, backwoods or country people. Don’t get me wrong. I’m Cajun to the core, I’ll go walking in the crawfish ponds and pick up the traps or crawl in the mud to hunt those ducks, but I just have a different way of going about things than those people do.

Edward, Cajun, age 21

It’s a way of saying the Cajuns. It’s just the crazy ones like, I guess you might say. It’s a little form of Cajuns.

Gary, Cajun, age 52

Coonass is more like a dummy. Like someone is that naive and doesn’t understand the situation.

Patrick, Cajun, age 25

A Cajun that loves life and embraces who they are and don’t care what other people think.

Victoria, Cajun, age 61

This is not to say that everyone agreed the term should be used at all:

Well, I hate to say, but coonass. I don’t think that’s very nice.

Florence, Cajun, age 86

I never did – I never figured out what that was about, so I never did use
that term and I don’t really know what it means. I sensed that it was derogatory.

_Lucy, Cajun, age 60_

It’s ugly.

_Lorraine, Cajun, age 72_

The point here is not to play out the controversy over the term coonass, but rather to illustrate the stereotypical behaviors associated with the term, as well as to give a foundation on the meanings and origins of the word, so we may further explore the impacts of academia, tourism, and the Internet on the Cajun culture. The overall beliefs of the participants show that they have an understanding of Cajun history and ethnic issues. They demonstrate in their interviews that Acadians are the ancestral people, as well as those who still reside in Nova Scotia; Cajuns are the contemporary, status driven identity; and coonasses are people who behave in the stereotypical Cajun manner. One person, for instance, can have Acadian ancestors, be a Cajun, and act like a coonass all at once. In my family, the term is often used when someone does or says something that is considered socially inappropriate. I argue these beliefs are founded, in part, on academic research, activist movements, and government policymaking.

A coonass, the way, the way my interpretation came about, you know black people are called the ‘n’ word? Well, that was the word that other people gave to Cajuns whenever they wanted to talk bad about them, but we kind of adopted it and took it over.

_Matthew, Cajun, age 28_

The backwards Cajuns – we don’t use that word anymore. Well, that word that was banned from us – the coon-, the coon-a. There are still people that call themselves that, but we try to avoid that. But you don’t see that
too much anymore.

Beau, Cajun, age 65

Well, there was the derogatory term, coonass. They’re not sure of where it came from. At one time they thought it was a name, a German word, given by the Germans. In WWII there was actually – I watched a documentary by Pat Mire, and the word coonass was written on one of these planes. That one was, they thought that the word came later than that. I want to say it was a German word that it came from, but when they saw this photograph with coonass on it, they said, well, it’s much older than that. It actually used to be a derogatory term – now, you don’t necessarily have to be a Cajun to be a coonass, because a lot of people consider anybody whose, if you have, you wear your rubber boots to church and you cook outside and use the bathroom inside – that’s a coonass.

George, Cajun, age 29

I think it’s one of those words that is a trigger point for a lot of people here, especially academics who don’t really – not that they don’t understand, but because of the negative, the past negative connotation of the word, they just kind of want to omit it completely, but the word has been reappropriated. A word means what you make it to mean, and I don’t really think that the word they have in their head is the same word that people say when they call each other coonass. They are not using it in a derogatory manner – it’s coonass!

Emily, Cajun, age 28

I am very comfortable with it. Years ago, as a child, I just thought that was what we all were. Anyone who could speak French and understand the music and cook the food and, you were automatically a Cajun coonass. And, we would claim that proudly. We were proud to be that. Then I find out from other people, folklore, not in a book, but in folklore, that supposedly it came from the Texans giving us a derogatory name. And I thought, well, that’s not so bad. That goes to show what Cajun coonasses can do. You take something bad and turn it into something great and we plaster it on everything. T-shirts, license plates, caps. We plaster it!

Marie, Cajun, age 51

Well, like coonass. It’s fine. I’ve heard stories that back in the oil days, Texas would use – it’s been derogatory and it’s been symbol of a kind. I have a friend that has a RCA, a registered coonass sticker. I don’t hate it. I think that even we would use it in a derogatory way – he’s such a coonass – it has a little bit of a slant on it. But, you can use it in a joking
manner and it's not horrid.

*Patrick, Cajun, age 25*

There was one that was – we were called coonass at one time and that has been passed through Legislature that Louisiana cannot be consider the Coonass State because of the derogatory meaning of it ... because now there is a state law where they are not allowed to put it on anything and that's only been the last 18 years or whatever

*Gertrude, Cajun, age 76*

Well, that's [to sell products with coonass printed on them] not allowed anymore, it's all against the law now.

*Matthew, Cajun, age 28*

I don’t agree with Edwin Edwards proclamation that it could never be used in public because that’s- I think that’s a violation of people’s free speech, but if someone wants to identify themselves in that manner, then that’s fine, that’s how they feel and how they want to describe themselves. But, if other people wanted to come in and call a person of Cajun descent a coonass – that’s not appropriate. What are some of the other terms? We’ve got coonass – we were talking about this the other day – the term emerged during the Civil War.

*Clare, Cajun, age 31*

These statements show the power of the activist and academic efforts to abolish the use of the term. Participants often cite the origins of the word as if it is fact, when in reality it is only speculation. Participants explain that coonass is against the law, when it was only condemned by the legislature. And, Edwin Edwards, one-time (corrupt) governor of Louisiana, used the word often in public (Bernard 2003).

Academia has accomplished a great deal in explaining the stereotypes against Cajuns, offered historical evidence for why those stereotypes exist and offered ample proof that they should not. Tourism has taught outsiders new things about Cajuns, so that the status of Cajun has been elevated above the stereotypes. Despite academia
and tourism, however, these stereotypes still exist and there are people who are actually “like that”:

My in-laws and cousins and uncles, I would think would be more typical, maybe stereotypical Cajuns. They're craftsmen in their own way. I have a carpenter, a welder, a car mechanic, an electrician, and a farmer, and offshore. These people they really hunt, they fish, they love being outdoors. They love cooking, camping, drinking, dancing, having a good time. I find that to be very much a typical Cajun.

_Damien, Cajun, age 31_

The hard drinking, hard partying, you know, don't give a care about tomorrow, we're living for today. I really, I can't bring myself to be part of that mind set.

_James, Cajun, age 28_

My mom came to visit one time [out of state] and met one [Cajun man] who was friends with my brother-in-law and he lived there, but was raised right here in _____ Parish and mom said in French, she said – that was a big, dumb man. And I said yeah, and he brags to everyone he meets that he’s from Louisiana. So, I said, this is the reason why they all think we’re stupid.

_Sophie, Cajun, age 64_

This elevation in status of Cajuns created a need to explain the stereotypical behaviors that still existed. Coonass is one way this has been accomplished.

Educational pursuits also helped the general public understand the history of the Cajuns and to distinguish between the different cultures in Louisiana:

_Almost all Cajuns are Acadian, but not all Acadians are Cajun._

_Clare, Cajun, age 31_

I think you could use the word Acadian interchangeably okay, in certain, especially if you’re talking academics, but, the way I really do define Cajun as people from south Louisiana and Acadians from you know, Acadie.

_Damien, Cajun, age 31_

Sexton (2009) points out that technology plays a small role in the perpetuation of
coonass with websites that sell coonass products or attempt to explain the term. There are also plenty of sites that simply use the term – there were 99,600 hits on a Google search for coonass as of February 26, 2011. There has been a shift in thinking so that today a Cajun is the status-driven identity and coonass is the low-class status. People are aware of the differences in Acadians and Cajuns and point them out readily.

The Cajun identity has not changed drastically overall in that there is a shared history that begins in Nova Scotia with the Acadians, there is an emphasis on the Cajun French language, people share food ways, music, dance, and folklore, and they find ways to perpetuate a set of shared values. What is changing in the overall Cajun ideology is not the underlying belief system, but rather the ways in which people are negotiating and maintaining their boundaries.

Academia has led to an informed community, who takes what they want from the published accounts of Cajun history and uses it to add validation to their arguments regarding their Cajun identity. Tourism educates the outside world about Cajun culture, while creating some issues of overlap with other cultures that Cajuns strive to overcome. The Internet is a useful instrument that people use to research and express their identities. One example has been the changes in the definitions of and uses of the terms Acadien, Acadian, Cajun, and coonass. The people called Cajuns went from being the original Acadiens of Nova Scotia to the Anglicized Acadian of Louisiana, with the derogatory term Cajun used to denote the stereotypical bumpkin of the culture. Today, this has shifted again so that Acadian now refers to the people living in the ancestral home of the Cajun, the Cajun is now the status identity and the coonass is a
stereotyped Cajun. We can now take these types of shifts in thinking about the Cajun identity and consider them as a part of the Cajun ideology.
CHAPTER 8

THE CAJUN IDEOLOGY

I began this research project with the idea that Cajun culture has changed enough since the ethnographic accounts published in the 1980s that an updated study was warranted. By the time I am writing this, I have changed some of this opinion. I no longer believe the culture has changed substantially from how it was presented in academic literature thirty years ago. The overarching ideology has remained much the same; it is more the mechanisms and expressions of the identities that have changed. This chapter explores previous treatments of Cajun identity and presents an argument for a Cajun ideology.

Ideology, as it is used in this paper, is the collection of beliefs and knowledge that are used to negotiate, reproduce, and maintain social groups and individual identity. Ideologies are designed to adapt to inside and outside forces. Discussing ideology is more inclusive than just picking out pieces of a culture to record; it entails understanding underlying reasons behind decisions people make regarding their identities, as well as discovering the mechanisms used to reproduce and maintain those decisions. van Dijk (2000) argues that a theory of ideology should be viewed as a triangle of cognition, society, and discourse.

_Cognition_ is used as the place where individuals navigate their social identities. Memories, shared and personal, are vital to this side of the triangle, as they are historical, as well as modern, matters that hold meaning for group membership and individual identity. _Society_ equates to what anthropologists consider culture and its
artifacts, such as food, music, dance, and language, as well as humans and their interactions. Society is both a locus of and a mechanism of negotiation, reproduction, and maintenance of ideology and identity. *Discourse* is concerned with the ways in which individuals and groups express and reproduce their ideology. It is not only the words people say, but also the other symbols people use to prove and maintain identity, consciously and unconsciously, for the self and the Other.

The theory of ideology presented by van Dijk (2000) is designed to be multidisciplinary. In the present research, my primary focus has been on anthropological approaches. I have utilized an ethnographic framework for collecting data in the field, as well as for presentation. I have used techniques from grounded theory to discover and understand common themes in interviews and field notes. I have drawn on rhetoric to explore ways in which individuals talk about their culture and identity both from a classical Aristotelian viewpoint, but also by incorporating Cintron’s (1997) idea of a rhetoric of public culture to explore internal and external expressions of identity. Barth’s (1998) concept of ethnic boundaries between and within culture groups has furthered the understanding of the limits of inclusion and exclusion in the Cajun identity. The purpose of this chapter is to bring these elements together and present the Cajun ideology.

**Cognition-Society-Discourse**

Scientist and philosopher Thomas Kuhn (1970) states, “[a] paradigm is what the members of a scientific community share, *and*, conversely, a scientific community
consists of men who share a paradigm. Not all circularities are vicious...but this one is a source of real difficulties” (176). Kuhn (1970) uses the word paradigm to encompass the shared beliefs, knowledge, and techniques of scientists, but his comment is applicable to ideologies as well. Ideologies are difficult to pinpoint because we simultaneously build, change, reproduce, and maintain their boundaries, creating a feedback loop. We have an ideology in many cases because we share an ideology with others. The Cajun identity exists because it is made up of people who share the ideology of being Cajun. van Dijk’s (2000) model of ideology can help us to unravel some of this feedback loop.

The cognitive arm of van Dijk’s (2000) ideological triangle, for the purposes of this paper, is primarily concerned with the mental schemas under which we think and behave; ideology is what guides us in how we should speak, act, and react in relation to others who share this ideology, and with those who do not (van Dijk 2000). In the case of the Cajuns, cognition is concerned with the social memories that create a shared history, and therefore an ethnicity, as well as with personal memories that create the individual’s own sense of identity within the larger ideological schema. Alba (1990) argues that ethnic identity is based largely on the perception of a shared history. Barth (1998) argues that ethnic boundaries are collectively and individually negotiated and usually center on a group history.

Although a relatively arbitrary beginning, according to Dormon (1983a), the Cajun ideology starts with the expulsion of French Acadians from Nova Scotia in the mid-1600s. Roughly 1,600 deported Acadians settled in the southern portion Louisiana.
Their descendants would eventually become Cajuns, and this heritage is what is often cited first as a necessary boundary of the Cajun ethnicity. Tied closely to this is the history of the French language in Louisiana, including not only Cajun French, but Creole and Colonial French as well, which centers largely around the damage done to native speakers in the mid-20th century through English-only education and the process of assimilation into American ideology.

The social aspect of ideology is what anthropologists generally consider to be the “stuff” of culture. The ethnographic approach to this research means that the majority of this paper is concerned with the social side of the ideological triangle. These are the outward artifacts, such as cuisine and music, that people have chosen to maintain in order to prove membership in the Cajun identity, both to the self and to the Other. This is where the majority of the boundary negotiations take place, as people argue over and make decisions about where in the spectrum of the ideology their own identities will fall. For instance, how related to an Acadian ancestor must people be in order to be considered Cajun? One extreme states there must be at least one ancestor straight from Nova Scotia, the other extreme states there simply needs to be some French connection with several generations born and raised in Louisiana. The ideology here is that of ancestry, the identity is where an individual decides their place resides.

The third leg of the ideological triangle is concerned with discourse and rhetoric. The arguments for the Cajun ideology are made in ways that make sense to people and are made by those whom most people accept as experts, such as academics and scholars. The cultural boundaries are being researched and commented upon by those
who have the means and access to education, resources, and time. But, this is only a surface assessment. Participant interviews show that academic works are utilized in informing the opinions of individuals, but in the end they are taking what they want from the texts and formulating their own opinions about what the Cajun ideology and identity should be.

The rhetoric of public culture presented throughout this paper is important to discourse as well. The symbols of Cajun identity that people use to prove their membership in the community, both to themselves and to others, include cuisine, music, dance, personality traits, and activities. There is an element of commodification in that people both sell and buy what they consider to be Cajun. Rhetoric also plays a role in the ways that people formulate their arguments regarding their Cajun identity. The notion of a Cajun ideology creates an understanding of what is acceptable proof of Cajun identity, such as the ability to discuss historical accounts of Cajun life or the citation of personal experience (or by extension, familial experience) of language loss.

Each of these elements of the triangle van Dijk (2000) models is a piece of the larger puzzle of identity and culture. This research project is not a complete exploration of van Dijk’s (2000) theory of ideology, however. It is an example of the strength of this theory in exploring ethnographic data. van Dijk (2000) points out that his theory of ideology is “a complex project, or rather a vast paradigm for research, of which one scholar can only design the general outline and study some smaller fragments” (7). This project is one such “smaller fragment.”
Cajun Ideology

Being Cajun in America today is a choice, but it is not one that is available to just anyone. The Cajun ideology centers on a shared history, and therefore heritage and ancestry are primary boundaries. They are at one extreme strict (one must have an Acadian ancestry that can be pinpointed on paper) and flexible on the other (any French heritage is acceptable because of the wide variety of cultures in Louisiana’s past). This is the most difficult boundary to overcome. Any person can be born and raised in Louisiana, eat the foods, listen to the music, and partake in every aspect of the Cajun culture, but one cannot acceptably claim the Cajun name without some tie to the French and Acadian past, although there may be loopholes, such as multiple generations being raised in the proper geographical area. Conversely, one cannot have just the Cajun lineage – they must also have been raised in the culture itself, again within the geographical boundaries of southern Louisiana (although there may be some leniency here as well).

Entwined with this perception of an Acadian past is the Cajun French language. This boundary is less about the ability to speak French today than it is about the facts centered on the history of the language. People are acutely aware of the causes of what they consider to be the loss of their mother tongue. They are nostalgic about the language. While historically, Cajun French is what most readily set someone apart as being Cajun, today it is more about what a person is doing to learn or preserve the language than it is about fluently speaking it. On the one extreme, people talk about the necessity of Cajun French to the identity, but on the other extreme, there is the
understanding that fluent use of the language is simply not possible for most people today. Instead, the ideology manifests itself in stories of language loss, feelings of sadness over the loss, and active pursuits to revive and preserve the language.

Outside of the two primary concepts of ancestry and language, the Cajun ideology is laden with symbolic markers to display Cajun identity. These elements of symbolic capital are probably the most easily, and rapidly, negotiated of the boundaries. Cajun foods have changed rapidly in the past 50 years, as commodification of the culture has brought the dinner table from the farm to the restaurant. Boiled (whole) crawfish, once a poor person’s food, is now available in restaurants and crawfish huts for as much as $17.99 for three pounds. Cajun music is constantly evolving, moving from the old style “chank-a-chank” to modern interpretations that incorporate elements of Zydeco, or even hip hop. Personality traits and their perceptions will likely continue to shift in importance as stereotypes and outsider perceptions change, so that today the Cajun declares the importance of hard work, a love of life, and simplicity, but tomorrow may decide that a different set of traits describe the typical Cajun.

These histories and the symbolic rhetoric in which they are couched and elaborated are regularly reproduced not only through social interactions among those who know the history, but also through public and private education, academic research, tourism, and popular media, such as Internet, radio, television, and movies. Education, both formal and informal, is revered in the Cajun culture. Learning about and teaching all aspects of being Cajun is a part of the Cajun ideology. This in turn continues the negotiation, reproduction, and maintenance of the identity.
Another aspect of the Cajun ideology is the understanding of who is *not* allowed to claim this identity. Participants were clear that outsiders are welcomed and treated like family, but they are not Cajun. Even people with the Acadian heritage are not likely to be fully accepted as Cajuns if they did not grow up immersed in the culture of Southern Louisiana. For every “Honorary Cajun” souvenir, there is an “Authentic Cajun” equivalent. Even if someone comes into Louisiana and adopts every aspect of the Cajun culture, lives every moment as any other Cajun, marries a Cajun, and has Cajun children, that person still is not Cajun (although their children possibly could be).

The Cajun ideology, then, is a combination of perceived histories and mental models shared and maintained by the Cajun people. The Cajun identity is how individuals express their understanding of the Cajun ideology. A point of pride in the Cajun community is just how much a person knows about his or her own background. A deeper understanding of the Cajun community and history is almost a necessity today. One must have a genealogy, or at least be in the process of discovering it. Being well-read and well-informed on Cajun issues is a status symbol. Being able to discuss points of contention about the Cajun identity is itself a marker of the identity. Knowing the literature, both scholastic and popular, is admired.

These elements do create arguments about ethnic boundaries and the edges of those boundaries. Nearly everyone agrees that a Cajun is from southern Louisiana, speaks (or at least knows about) Cajun French, eats Cajun foods, has a tight knit family, listens to Cajun music, goes to festivals and dances (or is ashamed about not going), is likely Catholic (or at least Christian), and has a work hard, play hard attitude about life.
What people do not agree on are the details about each of these items. By way of example, I present below portions of interviews from two participants. Both share an understanding of the Cajun ideology, but have quite different Cajun identities.

**Edward and Lorraine**

I have presented the interviews below with similar questions seated next to each other, so that they are straightforward. This may mean, however, that there are some blanks on one side or the other. In the first two questions, for instance, Edward told me he was a Cajun in his self-description, but I had to ask more questions to get ethnic identity information from Lorraine. Additionally, I have added my comments in bold under each question. It is interesting to note throughout these interviews that there is a common knowledge understanding of the Cajun ideology, but the individual Cajun identities between Edward and Lorraine are quite different. Some of these distinctions are likely due to other variables in their identities, such as gender, age, and educational levels. These two people were born and raised in the same town outside of Lafayette, Louisiana, nearly 50 years apart and have no known relationship to one another.

The interview on the left is with Edward, a 21-year-old Cajun. Edward has never been married and is currently a student at a local university. He attended private schools through high school and when I asked about his socioeconomic class his response was: “I really don’t know the complete lines of-, I would say upper middle class. We make it easy enough – we don’t have to work too hard to save the money, but of course we do because that’s what you do.” He still lives at home with his parents while he attends school. In his words “my parents never made me work so I could just
concentrate on school and keep up my grade point average. I help out on the family business, the farm, and with Mom, doing stuff around the house.” I asked about family names and he explained that his family is half Spanish and half Cajun. The names that are Cajun he believes are tied to Acadie.

The interview on the right is with Lorraine, a 72-year-old Cajun. She quit school in 8th grade to work (babysitting) because she “wasn’t learning” and did not want to continue to waste her parents’ money. She babysat until she married and has worked as a dishwasher, crawfish peeler, and baker. She is a widow who was married to a Cajun and has four children and numerous grandchildren, great grandchildren, and one great, great grandchild. She sees them all on a regular basis. She lives on Social Security benefits and did not understand my question about socioeconomic class. She also gave family names – some are known Acadian names, although she did not understand what I was asking when I questioned her about possible ties to Nova Scotia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Edward</th>
<th>Lorraine</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer: Please describe yourself in roughly one sentence.</td>
<td>Interviewer: Please describe yourself in roughly one sentence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward: The most Cajun not being completely Cajun.</td>
<td>Lorraine: I’m a patient woman.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviewer: With the wide variety of influences in Louisiana, do you associate yourself with any particular group?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lorraine: No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviewer: Are you from Southern Louisiana?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lorraine: Yes.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Interviewer: Would you consider yourself Cajun?

Lorraine: [pause] Yes.

Note that Lorraine’s identity rests on her gender and a personal value, whereas Edward’s rests entirely in his Cajun identity (at least in this interview with me). Lorraine still equates herself with being Cajun, but has to be asked directly about it. We can assume they both have an understanding of what is “Cajun,” and therefore the ideology of Cajun.

Interviewer: How do you define Cajun?

Edward: There’s the literal Cajun, meaning the descendants from the Acadians, arriving from the Grand Derangement to Louisiana, which the part that is Cajun, I believe, is Bertrand, I’ve never done the serious look into that. Then, Cajun as in the cultural sense, dancing the Cajun dances, doing my best to learn the French since nobody thought anything about teaching it to me, not that they were ashamed of it, it just didn’t cross anybody’s mind to tell my babysitter or anybody around me to speak French to me. So I’m doing my best to preserve that language and to learn it to be more Cajun. Of course, I’m Catholic, which adds to my Cajunnness. I do all traditions – I go to the boucherie, I go to the veillée, which are the evening visits with the older people, or just anybody... we pass a good time and either dance or just sit around and talk. Talk about what’s going on. I can cook, I can cook the Cajun food – the sauce piquante,

Interviewer: How do you define Cajun?

Lorraine: I don’t know. I haven’t really thought about it. Really and truly I’ve never thought about it.

Interviewer: Do you use the word Cajun?

Lorraine: No, not really.

Interviewer: If you saw someone walking down the street, would you think “Oh he’s Cajun”?

Lorraine: No. They’re just people.

Interviewer: What makes you a Cajun?

Lorraine: French descendant.

Interviewer: Is that it? Is there anything else you do that is Cajun that nobody else does?

Lorraine: No. I’m just plain me.
especially ... the turtle sauce piquante is probably my favorite. What I cook the most is probably the coon ... the way it worked in my family is that if you killed it, you cooked it.

Again, they both have an understanding of the Cajun ideology, although Lorraine states she’s never thought about it. She knows that Cajuns are supposed to be French descendants, but her personal identity rests with being “just plain me.” Edward, on the other hand, demonstrates in detail his understanding of the Cajun ideology and offers several lines of proof of his identity as a Cajun as well, such as dancing, eating Cajun foods, and learning French.

Interviewer: Are all Cajuns the same throughout Louisiana?
Edward: No. They’re as different as their dialects are. They have their own little tweaks of their own particular culture that are as different as the French is from Eunice to Cecilia, they’re cousins are a little bit different. A specific example, I know where they come from is completely different. Other than the language, I don’t know – but their practices and then, I can’t give a specific example. But, there are differences.

Interviewer: Are all Cajuns the same throughout Louisiana?
Lorraine: Not really. Well, some can be Cajun, but they don’t talk French, which is normal.

Interviewer: Do you have to speak French to be Cajun?
Lorraine: No, not really

Interviewer: What other differences?
Lorraine: I really don’t go out that much to notice any difference.

It is interesting that both participants discuss language issues when they think of differences among Cajuns. I argue they both have a deep understanding of the Cajun
ideology association with the French language, as well as an understanding of the loss of French in the Cajun community.

Interviewer: What do you call people who are not Cajun (that live in Louisiana)?

Edward: Well, anything north of Acadiana we tease them and call them Yankees – of course it’s not in a negative way, it’s just a joke. I am a very accepting person. I don’t care if they are from the South Pole, they’re family. I never meet a stranger. To me that’s part of being Cajun – you talk to anybody. Especially if they speak French!

Interviewer: Are there other terms used to refer to Cajuns?

Edward: [sigh] There’s the coonass that used to be an old term that the oil field used to use for their- as more of a derogatory term, because they come from the backwoods. I don’t use the term. There are people that call themselves – if you see the stickers riding around on people’s cars, the RCA, Registered Coonass, but that’s, they put themselves into that. That’s the more, not shady, but rough, backwoods or country people.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m Cajun to the core, I’ll go walking in the crawfish ponds and pick up the traps or crawl in the mud to hunt those ducks, but I just have a different way of going about things than those people do.

Interviewer: Any other terms?

Edward: Cadien – that’s the first word I say. I don’t say Cajun. That’s the only ones I’ve heard of. I haven’t done very much research yet. I still need to do that to preserve the culture. I need to study.

Interviewer: What do you call people who are not Cajun (that live in Louisiana)?

Lorraine: To me people are people.

Interviewer: Are there other terms used to refer to Cajuns?

Lorraine: Creoles. Well sometimes they call them coonasses.

Interviewer: What do you think about that word?

Lorraine: It’s ugly.

Interviewer: You don’t use it?

Lorraine: No.

Interviewer: What would you think if somebody called you one?

Lorraine: I wouldn’t think nothing of it. I would just ignore it.
That's one of my missions is to study the culture to preserve it completely. In its entirety and that includes every idiom in the Cajun language. You can't have the culture without the language.

Here both participants are aware, not only of the Cajun ideology, but of the ideologies of others as well. Edward has an understanding of the stereotypes employed in what is likely an American, or at the very least Texan, ideology. He has taken these aspects and used them for his own identity in that he has a need to study and preserve what is Cajun. This need is also a way he proves to me that he is Cajun. Lorraine also understands that there are ideologies she disagrees with, evidenced by her use of “they” when referring to coonass. Her identity thinks of people as people.

Interviewer: How do you think non-Cajuns see Cajuns?

Edward: I know in the past they saw them as the coonass, the people that didn’t care about the American way, they did their own way, they are self-sustaining, especially in the community since – the boucherie that’s all that was, community sharing. They saw them as, not necessarily no good, but maybe in a sense worthless. But because they wouldn’t contribute to their [Anglo American] society, of course, they were contributing to their own society. They were mad at them for not assimilating. That’s the whole thing. Now, I think more people are aware, since everybody – the English was trying to get the Cajuns to be like them, we lost a whole bunch of the culture and the language. Then now there’s a lot of

Interviewer: How do you think non-Cajuns see Cajuns?

Lorraine: Some people think Cajuns are uneducated. But that’s not true at all.
revival about that, now whether or not to change the entire public opinion, I’m not sure, but I know there’s a lot more willingness to try to preserve it than there was before.

Both Edward and Lorraine summon American and Cajun ideologies. They refer to the fact that the early American stereotypes are incorrect and employ the Cajun ideology by explaining how those stereotypes are incorrect. They also express their personal identity by knowing these facts.

Interviewer: How do you pass your free time?
Edward: Hunting, fishing, speaking French. Actually, I’ve recently been starting to go, when I have an extra hour or two when I can’t go hunting, especially when hunting season is over, I go to the, my old neighbor’s houses, talk to them about their history, record it for them and for me. I put it in my personal archives. Of course, it’s in French. For them to have a personal history and to make sure it’s recorded. Then, learning French. Doing stuff with the KOC [Knights of Columbus]. I’m big into the KOC. We are the visible arm of the Catholic Church and that is a big part of what I do. Help in the church, and, of course studying and anything to do with family. I say French rosaries.

Interviewer: How do you pass your free time?

The answers to this question are revealing in regards to their individual identities. Lorraine summons only her identity here and not her understanding of the Cajun ideology because her identity does not center on being Cajun. Edward, however,
equates his identity to many aspects of the Cajun ideology. I think this is a rhetorical effort on his part to further convince me that he is, in fact, a Cajun. There is an element of convincing himself that he has the right to chose the Cajun identity, as he is concerned he is only “half” Cajun.

Interviewer: Do you listen to Cajun music?
Edward: Absolutely. KBON. All the way, unless there’s some Zydeco music on there that I don’t care for. I listen to the oldies – KRVS from 5 to 7 every morning for the French two hours. 960 AM has a Louisiana deal because it’s not all in French

Interviewer: Do you listen to Cajun music?
Lorraine: I used to, but I don’t really care for it that much. My preference is country western.

Here again our participants diverge in their identities. Lorraine understands that Cajun music is important to the Cajun ideology, but separates herself from it for her personal identity. Edward again feels the need to convince me (and himself) that he is Cajun because he listens not only to Cajun music, but also French programming, and he can tell me what specific stations to which he listens. This is further proof of his sincerity about learning French, as well as his ability to speak and understand French.

Interviewer: What foods do you consider uniquely Cajun?
Edward: I don’t know many people who eat turtle sauce piquante; I guess catfish wouldn’t be completely Cajun. Gumbo is actually not Cajun, but they don’t cook it anywhere else in the U.S. that I know of, it’s unique here. A lot of things we cook is not unique to here, completely unique to

Interviewer: What foods do you consider uniquely Cajun?
Lorraine: Crawfish étouffée. Macaroni and cheese. Fried fish. [I have] crawfish étouffée once in a great while. It’s the same as about everything else I guess.

Interviewer: Do you cook?
here – but the way we cook it is unique. Especially the way we season. The seasoning – we put a lot more seasoning, as in pepper wise, but also as in flavor to our food. Such as, we put the onions, the garlic, the bell peppers and celery and, depends on what we’re making, everybody has their own way to put whatever they want in there. Then even around here there’s differences in the way you cook – some people brown the chicken before you put it in the gumbo. Some people just put it in the gumbo. The thing that strikes me the most is turtle sauce piquante. But, crawfish is not completely unique, but it mostly comes from here. I guess I grew up on a crawfish farm, so I just have a great need or want for it. Catfish courtbouillon.

Lorraine: No, but I used to.

Interviewer: What were some of your favorite dishes to make?

Lorraine: Chicken fricassee. And potato fricassee. And rice. I made them like every day. Gumbo – quite a bit of it – gumbos and soups. Sausage, chicken, shrimp [gumbo]. Well, I used to eat it every two or three weeks, but now it’s every once in a while. My sister makes it often and sometimes she sends some.

I found this question interesting because they both cite similar foods, demonstrating an understanding of Cajun ideology and identity. Edward adds his understanding of American ideology in that he recognizes Cajun foods as something Americans do not usually eat, particularly turtle. With Lorraine, however, it is not until I ask what she used to cook that she responds with many of the foods other participants cite as uniquely Cajun. I argue that this is because she has not consciously decided to be Cajun, she simply lives within the Cajun ideology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewer: Do you or someone in your family speak French?</th>
<th>Interviewer: Do you or someone in your family speak French?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Edward: My Mom can speak a little bit because she’s a physical therapist – she knows enough to say to raise your arm like this – the basic terms, but she’s not very</td>
<td>Lorraine: A little bit. They say if you don’t use it, you lose it – that’s what’s happening to me. I hardly ever use it, so there’s some phrases I just don’t. They [my</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
proficient. Dad understands enough because, just from being around. He can speak it well enough to get by. Of course, his older brother speaks it much better and understands it. It’s really not that much difference, but it’s obvious the age difference because of the French speaking ability [between my dad and his brother]. When my great uncle and my grandma, they spoke French because their parents spoke French, but mainly because the farm hands only spoke French – their parents didn’t speak French to them that much

Interviewer: What about siblings?

Edward: I have one older brother.

Interviewer: Does he speak French?

Edward: No. Not at all. He’s nine and a half years older than me. He doesn’t speak French. He’s not in the culture at all like I am. He’s really – not the antithesis of me, but he’s quite opposite. The only reason he speaks Italian is because his wife was in the Navy and he had to learn it to work at the job where he was. But, he’s not big into the culture. Of course he doesn’t speak French. He’s just not worried about it. He’s back here because he’s running a truck business, but his wife’s still in the Navy – he’s just here because the trucking is here – all the hot-shoting [transporting people and equipment] with the oil

With this discussion on language, we get a closer look at the difference between ideology and identity. Both understood why I was asking about who speaks French in
their family and told me something of a family genealogy of language. I argue this happens because both know the importance of French to the Cajun ideology. Edward’s responses are even more telling in that he describes a brother who was seemingly raised in much the same environment, although there is an age difference. Both grew up with the Cajun ideology, yet one chooses Cajun as his identity and the other does not.

The difference in volume between these two interviews is worth noting as well. Edmund is quite vocal and expands on his thoughts in contrast to Lorraine, whose answers are generally short and to the point, even when asked questions in an attempt to draw out more information. I found there was a generational difference in how people talked about being Cajun. While there is no measurable difference in how long interviews took to complete, I found that the younger (under 35) participants were more likely to give more involved answers to questions about being Cajun and their thoughts on how they are Cajun. The older generation (over 60) tended to talk in terms of how they had not really thought about the subjects, or that they were only recently Cajun. The middle generation discussed the shift in this thinking by explaining how they used to be French but now they were proud to be Cajun. This generation of Cajun marked the beginning of being called Cajun with changes such as the building of Interstate 10 and increasing tourism.

There is a marked distinction of choice in how people express being Cajun. Initially, if we look at the historical circumstance, the Acadians who became Cajuns were held in an impoverished, low social status as compared to the growing Anglo-
American identity and ideology. But, by the 1960s, the Cajun ideology started to shift from this seemingly inevitable lower status to an acceptable, and desired, ethnic status, in part due to growing contact with the outside world. By the 1980s, Cajuns were beginning to see a way of being taken seriously with the ability to be Cajun without being the stereotypical backward country bumpkin, in part due to increased cultural awareness thanks to the Civil Rights Movement, as well as academic interest and the tourism industry. Thirty years later, Cajun is a choice, but not one that all qualified people will make.

These two interviews allow us insight into both the Cajun ideology and Cajun identity, which are closely tied together. The Cajun ideology was built on a shared history of circumstance and encompasses the schema of how to speak, act, react, and be “Cajun.” This schema is the generalized, larger model that individuals and groups draw upon. Individuals have many ideologies they understand and utilize, although they do not necessarily choose to identify with all ideologies with which they are familiar. Ideology houses the extremes of identities and allows for negotiations of boundaries and helps to maintain any changes that do occur. Ideologies are both conscious and unconscious and identity is made up of conscious and unconscious choices made by individuals based on these ideologies.

Cajun identity is made up of personal memories and narrower schemas. One person may have an understanding of multiple schemas and choose to incorporate them into their personal identity. In our examples above, both participants had an understanding of the Cajun ideology. Both cited heritage and language as part of the
Cajun identity. The degree to which both made choices of self, based on this ideology was different. Lorraine’s identity as a Cajun seems secondary to her identity as a person. Edward’s identity as a Cajun is primary to his identity as a person. He has consciously chosen to study and learn about the Cajun history and is in the process of negotiating where he fits within the boundaries of that ideology. He unconsciously cites his educational pursuits in this interview, both as proof to me and to himself of his identity choice. Edward and Lorraine are representative examples of the range of who is Cajun today.

A popular analogy for the cultures in Louisiana has been that of a “pot of gumbo,” as a resistance to the early American metaphor of a “melting pot.” I have often thought of this analogy as a cliché, thought up only to be cute. I determined somewhere in this research project that it is an appropriate metaphor to use, not only for Louisiana, but also for the United States as a whole. Despite historical attempts at creating that melting pot, where individuals were expected to homogenize into a single culture, most groups have negotiated ethnic and cultural boundaries and maintained elements of their original identities within an “American” framework. Rather than becoming a smooth, creamy pot of American goo, a gumbo allows for each culture group to remain distinct, while successfully navigating competing ideologies. In the isolated communities of the past, Cajuns were “just people,” as Lorraine said. The Cajun sense of identity intensified as Cajuns came into contact with other cultures. They may have paid for their self-awareness with the Cajun French language, but they are far from being absorbed by the American way of life.
GLOSSARY

This glossary is a quick reference resource for the Cajun, French, and Creole words and phrases that appear in this paper. Definitions are designated as Cajun or Standard French when there is a distinction; otherwise, the definitions are the same in both Cajun and Standard French. Literal translations are provided when they differ from the use of the term. Sources utilized to verify and/or clarify definitions are abbreviated as noted below. Terms and phrases are presented as follows:

**word** - definition, Cajun French (*Cj.*), Standard French (*Fr.*), or Creole French (*Cr.*); literal translation(s) [sources utilized to verify or clarify definition]

D Daigle (1993), A Dictionary of the Cajun Language

HC Cousin et al. (2004), Harper Collins Concise French Dictionary

LSU Louisiana State University, Department of French Studies (2011), Online Glossary

OED Harper (2010), Online Etymology Dictionary

**Cajun, French, and Creole Terms and Phrases**

**bec-croche** - *Cj.* white ibis; literally: *croche* - *Cj.* crooked; *bec* - beak, bill, mouth [D, HC]

**boeuf** - ox, beef, meat [D, HC]

**bonjour** - greeting, good morning, hello; literally: good day; also: *bon matin* - good afternoon, *bon soir* - good evening [D, HC]

**boucherie** - *Cj.* commonly used to refer to the communal gathering in which a hog is slaughtered and divided among families; usually associated with the making of
graton, boudin, and hogs head cheese; literally: slaughter, butcher's shop, slaughter house [D, HC]

boudé - pout, sulk; probably from the Fr. bouder – to sulk [D, HC]

boudin - Cj. seasoned rice dressing with pork, stuffed in a sausage casing; Fr. black pudding [D, HC]

canaille - Cj. mischeivious; Fr. scoundrel [D, HC]

c'est bon - it is good [D, HC]

chaud - hot, warm; ça fais chaud – Cj. it is hot [D, HC]

cher - Cj. term of endearment, precious, dear [D]

cocombre - Cj. cucumber (Fr. concombre) [D, HC]

comment - how; comment ça va? – how are you? used as a greeting; comment dit ça? – how do you say? [HC]

conasse - Fr. idiot, stupid, prostitute (Bernard 2003; Sexton 2009)

couche-couche - Cj. hot cornmeal cereal; Fr. layer, stratum [D, HC]

couillon - Cj. idiot, silly, fool, term used in joking manner [D, LSU]

courtbouillon - tomato based stew, cooked with a roux and (usually) fish; literally – short broth [HC]

crapaud - toad [D, HC]

envie - Cj. desire, longing, hunger; Fr. envy [D, HC, LSU]

étouffée - (from Fr. verb étouffer – to suffocate, smother, choke) roux based stew, generally made with crawfish and served over rice, can be tomato based [D, HC]
faïs dodo - community gathering centered on music and dance; street dance;
      literally: to go to sleep [D, Esman 1985]
faïtes attention - pay attention [HC]
fricassée - (from Fr. verb fricasser – to cook meat in its own juice) a thick, meat stew
      made with light colored roux [HC]
graton - Cj. crackling; deep fried pig skin [D]
gros bec - Cj. night heron; literally – big beak [D]
gumbo - (from Bantu ngombo – okra) roux based soup served over rice [OED]
jambalaya - rice casserole similar to rice dressing, made with meat, sausage, or
      seafood [D]
joie de vivre - joy of life [D, HC]
lache-pas la patate - Cj. don’t give up; literally: don’t drop the potato [D, LaFleur 1999]
lagniappe - Cr. a little something extra, a bonus, a surprise [D, OED]
mais - but, used as a flavor word; mais là, mais yeah! – but yes!
maquecheaux - stewed vegetables, usually fresh corn off the cob, cooked in fat [D]
Mardi Gras - the day before Ash Wednesday, a Christian (Catholic) holiday that falls 40
      days before Easter; Mardi Gras season is generally celebrated from January 5
      (Twelfth Night) until Mardi Gras; literally: Fat Tuesday
mouton - sheep, lamb [D, HC]
neige - snow [D, HC]
oui - yes
parler vous Français? - Do you (formal) speak French? [HC]
petit (‘tit) - small, diminutive; un ‘ti peux – a little bit [D, HC]

piquant - hot, spicy; sauce piquant – roux-based tomato sauce usually served with a meat, also called a red gravy [D, HC]

poule d’eau - Cj. coot; Fr. moor hen; literally: water fowl (hen) [D, HC]

quelle honte - What a shame! [D, HC]

roux - cooked fat and flour mixture used to thicken and flavor soups and sauces; literally: red, reddish brown [D, HC]

tomate - tomato [D, HC]

traiteur - Cj. folk healer, one who “treats” illness; Fr. caterer [D, HC]

va-t-en-vient - Cj. comings and goings, the hubbub, also: vat-à-vient, va et vient; Fr. va-et-vient – to and fro [D, HC, LSU]

veillée - visiting with family and neighbors, generally in the evenings [D, HC]

Zydeco - Cr. style of music generally associated with the black Creole culture of Louisiana, thought to be from the Creole pronunciation of les haricots – the beans [OED]
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U.S. Census Bureau

2000b Age by Language Spoken at Home for the Population 5 Years and Over. 110th Congress Sample Data.


APPENDIX A: Interview Schedule

Please describe yourself in roughly one sentence.

Where are you from?

With the wide variety of influences in Louisiana, do you associate yourself with any particular group?

(Are you Cajun?)

How do you define Cajun?

Are all Cajuns the same throughout Louisiana?

What do you call people who are not Cajun (that live in Louisiana)?

Are there other terms used to refer to Cajuns?

How do you think non-Cajuns see Cajuns?

Do you think tourism and popular media has affected the Cajun identity? In what ways?

What makes you a Cajun? (What do you do in your daily life that makes you Cajun/makes you feel Cajun?) What special occasions do you think of as specifically Cajun?

How have your ideas of what is Cajun changed in your lifetime?

Do you go to cultural events and places (ie Acadian Village, Vermilionville)? Do you go to festivals? Which ones? Why those?

How do you pass your free time?

What religion are you (or are you)?

Do you listen to Cajun music? Do you dance? How often?

What foods do you consider uniquely Cajun? *How often do you prepare or eat those foods?

Do you or someone in your family speak French? How much? How often? Do you use Cajun phrases?

Demographics:

What year were you born?
What are your family names? Are any of those tied to Acadie?

Please describe your education.

What do you do for a living?

What economic class do you feel you belong to? What is your range of income – less than $10K, $10K - $25K, $25K - $50K, $50K - $100K, $100 - $200K, more than $200K?

Setting Diagram (this area used to draw/describe place of interview)
### APPENDIX B: Codebook for Demographic Data

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<tr>
<td>GEN</td>
<td>1 = Female; 2 = Male</td>
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| INC  | Yearly Income  
0* = did not answer; 1 = less than 10K; 2 = $10K – 25K; 3 = $25K-50K; 4 = $50K-100K; 5 = $100K+ |
| CLS  | Socio-economic Class  
0* = did not answer; 1 = lower; 2 = lower-middle; 3 = middle; 4 = upper-middle; 5 = upper |
| EDU  | Education/Degree  
1 = less than high school; 2 = High School diploma; 3 = Technical school; 4 = BA/BS/BFA; 5 = Graduate school |
| FRE  | Speaks French  
1 = yes; 2 = no; 3 = some |
| PHR  | Uses French phrases  
1=yes; 2=no |
| FAM  | Family member(s) speak French  
1=yes; 2=no |
| CAJ  | Identifies as Cajun  
1 = yes; 2 = no |
| DEF  | If Cajun, when did identify as such?  
1=self-definition; 2=cultural association; 3=asked directly |
| REL  | Religion  
1 = Catholic (practicing); 2 = Catholic (raised, non-practicing); 3 = other |
| LOU  | From Louisiana  
1 = yes; 2 = no |
| DAN  | Cajun Dancing  
1 = yes; 2 = no; 3=used to |
| MUS  | Listen to Cajun music  
1 = yes; 2 = no; 3=sometimes |
| EVN  | Goes to Cajun festivals & Events  
1 = yes; 2 = no; 3=used to |
| PREP | Prepares Cajun Foods  
1= yes (regularly); 2=no; 3= occasionally; 4=used to |
| CNS  | Use the word coonass  
1 = yes; 2 = no |
| SME  | Cajuns the same in Louisiana  
1 = yes; 2 = no |
## APPENDIX C: Raw Data Table Based on Codebook in Appendix B

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## APPENDIX D: Code Categories and Subcategories Used in TAMS Analysis

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<td>Participant mention of “camps”</td>
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<td>Participant answer to “Do you Cajun dance?”; Comments on dancing.</td>
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<td>Participant answer to “Do you go to festivals or cultural places?”; Comments on festivals.</td>
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<td>Participant discussion on what they consider to be Cajun special occasions.</td>
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<td>Participant answer to “Do you listen to Cajun music?”; Comments on music.</td>
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<td>Participant’s age at which they became aware of being Cajun</td>
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<td>&gt;other</td>
<td>Awareness of outsiders as “other”</td>
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<td>Participant answer to the question “How do you define Cajun?”</td>
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<td>The first trait stated by participant that defines/describes Cajun identity.</td>
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<td>Participant stated examples of taking pride in Cajun identity or culture.</td>
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