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A New / Novel American Identity and Proto-Feminism in Sidonie de La Houssaye's "Cinq sous: Nouvelle Américaine"

Nathan D. Brown
Furman University

New Orleans and Louisiana inherited from their French (and Spanish) colonial past an exoticism that remains with it today. In the popular imagination New Orleans evokes images of *mardi gras*, the French quarter, beignets and jazz. With its local color and unique history, New Orleans is, and was, a place of familiar alterity—a geographical and cultural Other. Daniel Usner goes further, suggesting in his article "Between Creoles and Yankees," that during the nineteenth century, "New Orleans allure[d] [. . .] visitors and outsiders seeking an un-American destination still located inside the United States" (1). By the term "un-American" Usner means to underline the "foreignness" of New Orleans, marked, as it was, by its particular cultural and linguistic influences.

With their Latinate-influenced culture and Roman Catholic populations, nineteenth-century New Orleans and Louisiana were, indeed, foils to Puritanical New England. As Grace King, a late nineteenth and early twentieth-century chronicler of Louisiana life, wrote, "New Orleans is not a Puritan Mother, nor a hardy Western pioneeress, if the term be permitted. She is, on the contrary, simply a Parisian, who came two centuries ago to the banks of the Mississippi" (quoted in Usner 13). Neither Puritan nor Pioneer, the female personification of New Orleans seems to defy the binary spirit of Americanness, as King understood it. As such, New Orleans and Louisiana, more generally, fit poorly within the grand narrative of the United States as the story of Protestant Anglo-Americans' march westward, following their "Manifest Destiny." In short, Louisiana and

New Orleans represent a challenge to the traditional historiographical explanations of the development of American national identity.¹

In fact, in the decades following the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, White Louisianan Creoles like Sidonie de La Houssaye did reaffirm their Americanness within the nascent nation—but on their own terms. By exploiting the tensions between foreignness and Americanness, Franco-Creole authors advocated for an open, multivalent notion of nationality. As historian Fertel Rien suggests in *Imagining the Creole City*, the flurry of Francophone journals created in the 1820s led to the development of a “cosmopolitan Creole elite” (4) who strove to create “a Creole consciousness” (7) within the American Republic. Rien argues that White Franco-Louisianans were perhaps the first consciously bicultural Americans as they “petitioned for the right to be citizens of the United States, while at the same time advocating the idea that they were uncommon Americans” (6). In other words, they were new or novel Americans who were bilingual, often Catholic, and of French, or sometimes Spanish, stock. Given this reality, how should scholars account for Louisiana within the development of national identity? How might a reevaluation of this population’s tensions of identity (i.e. the intersection of “Creole consciousness” with Americanness) disrupt Anglo-centric narratives of United States nationalism?

With these larger historiographical questions as our frame, this study offers an analysis of the late-nineteenth-century Franco-Louisianan writer Sidonie de La Houssaye and her short story “Cinq sous: Nouvelle Américaine.” Originally printed in 1890 in Paris in the *Journal des Demoiselles*, the story was republished for the first time by Tintamarre in the 2006 anthology *Contes et récits de la Louisiana créole*. Like much of de La Houssaye’s *oeuvre* the story has yet to receive critical scholarly attention.² This is a shame because, as Christian Hommel notes in his 2004 introduction to de La Houssaye’s

¹ I am thinking specifically of classic theses on America’s national character as proposed by scholars like Frederick Turner in *The Frontier in American History* (1893) and Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905).

² While her male peers, like the doctor and poet Alfred Mercier, are widely known in the field, Houssaye’s work remains understudied. Although there are a few unpublished dissertations, Hommel’s 2004 edition of *Les Quarteronnes* is the only book length study of her work. Moreover, a cursory search reveals less than a dozen scholarly articles about her work in the last fifty years. None of these studies focus on de La Houssaye’s short stories.

massive *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, de La Houssaye may be the only female Francophone novelist in the United States in the nineteenth century (19). As such, her work stands as one of the few testaments to the White female Franco-Creole experience of nineteenth-century Louisiana. Obviously, in order to understand fully the tensions of identity among Franco-Creoles, we must account for women’s voices. Therefore, in what follows I offer a close reading of her story “Cinq sous” in order to explore de La Houssaye’s depiction of female “Creole consciousness” and nationality. This study argues that de La Houssaye’s story gives voice to a somewhat conservative, proto-feminist vision of female Creole nationalism. Ultimately, this story complicates the Anglo-centric historiography of national identity.

Because de La Houssaye remains relatively unknown, it will be helpful to contextualize her work historically. De La Houssaye (née Perret) began life in a rather privileged milieu. Born in 1820 in Saint-John the Baptist parish, Louisiana, to wealthy sugar planters, de La Houssaye was married off at the age of thirteen to Louis Pelletier Delahoussaye who was twice her age. Perhaps unsurprisingly, her marriage seems to have been rather unhappy. Her husband also badly mismanaged their finances. To help support her family financially, de La Houssaye opened the Young Ladies Academy, a finishing school, in Franklin, Louisiana in 1849. Unfortunately, the school was shuttered in the wake of the Civil War. By 1875 de La Houssaye’s only daughter died leaving de La Houssaye—who, by then, was already widowed and with limited financial means—in charge of eight children. At this point, de La Houssaye decided to try and publish her *esquisses louisianaises*, on which she appears to have been working as a hobby for some time, as a way to support her family. She published her first story at the age of 63.

Encouraged, perhaps, by her relationship with George Washington Cable, whose own lurid tales of Louisiana caused some consternation among Creoles, de La Houssaye often indulges and feeds in her texts the licentious expectations of Northern readers vis-à-vis Louisiana. During the era of Reconstruction, tales of the mysterious, pre-war, South captivated Northern audiences. As Hommel suggests, “au XIXe siècle, les États du Sud sont pour ceux du Nord un autre *Orient*” (23). Since de La Houssaye lived by her pen, she astutely responded to the market’s tastes in order to sell her work. We see the orientalist bent of de La Houssaye’s work most clearly in her series of novels entitled *Les*

Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans. Published during the 1890s in serial form, these novels tell the story of New Orleans Quadroons, or mixed-race women. Espousing racist stereotypes, de La Houssaye's novels portray the Quadroons as overly sexualized women who use their erotic appeal to ensnare and ruin white men. De La Houssaye herself calls these women "lepers" in an 1887 letter to Cable. Nonetheless, as she comments about her tales, "c'est licencieux, immoral, demi-monde, mais c'est magnifique" (Letter to Cable March 29, 1887, cited in Hommel 28). With such a sales pitch, it is perhaps unsurprising that *Les Quarteronnes* have received the totality of the limited contemporary scholarly discussion about de La Houssaye's works. However, de La Houssaye was a prolific writer, producing a twenty-one-tome collection, currently housed at the Hill Memorial Library at Louisiana State University. While fascinating, her serialized novels about mixed-race courtesans are only a part of her literary legacy. Her abundant short stories have yet to draw scholarly attention. Hopefully, recent republication of her works, such as Jonathan Vidrine 2007 anthology of several of de La Houssaye's short stories, *Contes d'une grand-mère lousianaise*, will encourage scholars to reassess and (re)discover de La Houssaye's work. This study hopes to begin to fill in this gap in scholarship.

The lack of scholarly attention to de La Houssaye's short stories may be due to the seemingly normative blush of most of them. In his introduction to de La Houssaye's short stories, Vidrine characterizes them as "profondément moralistes" (23). Indeed, "Cinq sous," like de La Houssaye's other stories, lacks the licentiousness and racial complexities of *Les Quarteronnes*. At first glance, the story also seems extraordinarily traditional. At its most basic level, "Cinq sous" is a retelling of the Cinderella tale, with the notable twist that the tale is set in antebellum New Orleans and is told from the perspective of the male suitor. The story itself can be quickly summarized. It is the tale of Charles Morin, a New Orleans lawyer who falls in love with a mysterious woman he meets on the trolley. Their meeting occurs as Charles boards the streetcar to escape a torrential downpour. He has forgotten his wallet and must rely on the kindness of a stranger—a beautiful veiled woman—to pay his five-cent passage. Forgetting her gloves, the woman leaves the trolley without speaking to Charles. Immediately, Charles retrieves the lost gloves and keeps them, bent on finding their charming owner. Meanwhile, Charles meets a lovely

woman named Laure Belmont at a gala. This Laure Belmont is, in fact, the owner of the brown gloves. Not wanting to hurt Charles's pride—being rescued by a woman would seemingly have been emasculating—Laure remains silent, leaving Charles to obsess over, and fetishize, her gloves. Once Laure helps the mystery come to a close, Laure and Charles marry and quickly produce a male heir to the Morin name. The child's nickname is "cinq sous" in honor of the couple's serendipitous meeting.

Despite the hetero-normative plot elements and *dénouement*, the tale has important subtexts dealing with Franco-American power in New Orleans and the articulation of a proto-feminist femininity. The depictions of New Orleans—although limited—provide a compelling vision of the "Creole city" and its people. Although "Cinq sous" never explicitly tells the reader when its events were meant to have happened, the first trolley line in New Orleans was established in 1835 on Saint Charles Street. Presumably, the story takes place in time after that year. Hommel argues that this lack of temporal specificity was intentional on de la Houssaye's part. As he suggests:

Par nostalgie, apparemment, Sidonie de la Houssaye laisse tous ces événements historiques dans l'ombre et donne vie à une société qui se veut à l'abri de ces changements économiques. Cette occultation de la vente de la Louisiane et de son américanisation, qui ne sont pas directement mentionnées, nous laisse croire à une certaine volonté chez de la Houssaye de camper son récit dans un temps mythique [. . .] lorsque les blancs contrôlaient l'éducation, l'économie et la loi. (13, 21)

While "Cinq sous" does correspond generally to a nostalgic vision of New Orleans dominated by Franco-Creoles, it does not represent a rejection of modernity, as Hommel suggests. On the contrary, the trolley—a technological and economic wonder of the day—plays an essential role in the story as one of social mixing and flattening. As Charles searches desperately for a friendly face to lend him the five-cent passage on the trolley, he describes the democratic demographics of the trolley: "[A]u fond, deux cuisinières, panier au bras [. . .] Là, une petite miss, allant à l'école [. . .] tandis que deux plâtriers, couverts de chaux, se tenaient assis vis-à-vis l'un de l'autre à la porte d'entrée" (157). Although subtle, this says something profound about the supposed class harmony of Francophone New Orleans. Charles, the

lawyer, is taking the same mode of transportation as cooks and masons, schoolgirls and beautifully veiled women. In this way, the trolley stands in for New Orleans writ large as a place unburdened by classist divisions. All it takes is five cents to ride. As such, the only person who is threatened with expulsion is the upper-class lawyer—Charles—who lacks the fare. If we push the analysis further, the tale suggests that being Franco-Creole was not inherently based on class and that it was compatible with progress and economic success, as the trolley and Charles's profession suggest.

While Hommel's general observation that de La Houssaye's never confronts Americanization explicitly within the text is true, this tale does, nonetheless, directly claim the title of American. As the subtitle suggests, this is a "Nouvelle Américaine." Yet how should we understand this ambiguous subtitle? Most obviously, the term "Nouvelle Américaine" might refer to the genre of the story. Certainly, this is an "American novella." Nevertheless, the subtitle also gestures towards a "new American" or a "novel American." Clearly the choice to capitalize the word *Américaine* suggests a reference to nationality. But, who is this "new American?" A reasonable answer might be that the title refers to "Cinq sous," the sobriquet for Laure and Charles's son. Still, the feminine form of *Américaine* fits awkwardly if it is meant as a reference to a baby boy.

Instead, I would suggest that the "Nouvelle Américaine" is, in fact, Laure. She is a novel or new American woman who speaks French and claims her agency in the romantic relationship, but does so without upsetting the societal order. As this study will show below, de La Houssaye's text signals the compatibility of femininity and proto-feminism in Francophone New Orleans. By the same token, the tale's subtitle, and the fact that it is written in French, also suggest the compatibility of Franco-Louisianan Creolity and American national identity. In this way, the tale subtly draws the reader's attention to a novel type of "Creole consciousness."

The place of initial publication—Paris, France—is also important to note in terms of establishing the relationship between this text and the notion of American "Creole consciousness." By publishing her tale in Paris with the subtitle of *Nouvelle Américaine*, de La Houssaye positions her work as an American story for a French public. She could have easily have called this story *Nouvelle Creole*, thereby blurring the lines between American and French identity. But, she does not.

Therefore, her story defies the "dualistic postcolonial sel[f]" (4) that Rien suggests is characteristic of Franco-Creole writers of the time, torn, as Rien supposes, between Paris and New Orleans. Fundamentally, "Cinq sous" is the story of a couple living a fairy tale existence in America—and in French. Rather than an exotic, "un-American" story—to play with Usner's observation about New Orleans' exoticism—de La Houssaye has created the story of *un Américain*. As such, the story is part of a larger aesthetic and discursive trend among nationalistic Franco-Creoles in late nineteenth-century Louisiana. The goals of this movement, as Rien argues, were to "cemen[t] the idea of white Creole racial purity, while solidifying the redefinition of New Orleans as a Creole city, built by Creoles and dominated by Creole history, culture, and thought" (5). By considering de La Houssaye work within this wider context, the contemporary reader realizes the true stakes of the tale. This is not only—or not primarily—a derivative copy of Cinderella, but rather part of a larger nationalistic project.

Furthermore, the tale's conventional and normative values may have been a way for de La Houssaye to counter the licentious stereotypes of Creoles in Paris—stereotypes that de La Houssaye herself had a hand in promulgating. In other words, her tale might be a way of communicating to Parisians what it means to be a "true" White Franco-American in Louisiana. As Grace King wrote in the decades after de La Houssaye,

[New Orleans] has had her detractors, indeed calumniators, with their whispers and sneers about houses of correction—deportation—but, it may be said, those who know her care too little for such gossip to resent it; those who know her not, know as little of the class to which they attribute her origin." (King quoted in Bond 13)

Surely, de La Houssaye was aware of these detractors' comments as well. Seen in this light, her tale's seeming conventionality may counter such prejudices. Despite these observations, the tale is not quite as traditionalist as the reader might assume upon a cursory reading. Rather, a subtle proto-feminist subtext pervades the tale, suggesting that such values are key to de La Houssaye's conception of female "Creole consciousness."

One way in which the story cultivates this subtext is by establishing and then immediately challenging gender roles. The reader clearly sees

this process in the depiction of Charles. In the opening lines of the story, the narrative voice takes pains to portray Charles as the epitome of roughneck masculinity. He is “fort bourru” and “désagréable” (155). He moves “brusquement” (156). Untouched by the sentimentality of women, “aucun amour n’avait encore troublé [s]a vie” (156). Seeing himself as the patriarch of the family—his father died when Charles was still a boy—he does not dance and has no time for fancy galas. Moreover, he despises the local dilettantes, “deux vieilles filles” (156) by the name of Lablanche, who throw the *bals* of the Creole upper crust. He cultivates a brooding, serious manner and considers himself a “vieux garçon” at the ripe old age of 28.

Beyond his personality traits, Charles also refuses any signifier that may detract from his masculinity. He rushes aboard the trolley without his wallet because he refused to carry an umbrella, despite the threat of imminent rain. The umbrella is simply not manly. As he states, “[J]e repoussais [le parapluie] avec une sorte d’horreur; il faut bien l’avouer, un jeune homme avec un parapluie ouvert au-dessus de sa tête ou tenant un éventail à la main, est pour moi le comble du ridicule” (156). A hand fan and an umbrella overhead are clearly markers of femininity for Charles. A man carrying such accessories would be “ridiculous” and would represent a transgression against gender, a “horror” which he cannot stand. Although subtle, Charles fears what Marjorie Garber famously called a “category crisis” in her work *Vested Interests*. By this term she means, “[the] disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances” (16) through the appropriation of gender-defying clothing and accessories. Charles must keep his gender categories separate and clearly delineated. As such, he prefers being drenched to threatening his masculinity with a “feminine” umbrella.

Having clearly established Charles as the pinnacle of masculinity, the narrative arch then forces him to defy his sense of manliness when he enters the trolley. Without means of paying his fare, Charles contemplates making “une retraite ignominieuse” (157), but at the last moment Charles accepts help from a stranger. However, this is not just any stranger. His benefactor is a beautiful woman. This is potentially humiliating and emasculating for a man who calls himself “le chef de la famille” (156) and who takes pride as the financial bedrock of his family: “[S]eul, je dirigeais le placement de notre fortune” (156). The scene, thus, is particularly striking as it contrasts starkly with the portrayal the text provides of Charles. The first contact between Laure

and Charles is one of gender reversal. The tale inverts the “damsel in distress” motif as Laure comes to Charles’s rescue and not *vice versa*. Therefore, the story establishes in their initial meeting the first plank of the proto-feminist subtext. Although not the protagonist, Laure is the real hero of the tale.

This first moment of gender transgression feeds into a knowledge imbalance in the story that favors Laure. When they meet later at the ball, she knows immediately that she was the one to save Charles, while he does not. Moreover, her reaction to meeting Charles officially represents a textual wink to the reader who easily realizes that this Laure must be the “mystérieuse bienfaitrice” (158). As Charles describes her at their first meeting, “[L]e charmant visage de Laure Belmont était couvert de rougeur et [d’] une sorte d’embarras” (159). While the reader surmises the cause of Laure’s blushing embarrassment, Charles is incapable of doing so. By establishing this dramatic irony, the text highlights how this knowledge gives Laure power in the relationship. While Charles is obsessing over his “belle inconnue” (158), she is able to watch him closely while also keeping a socially safe distance. Upon befriending Charles’s sister Estelle, Laure is able to spend time at Charles’s house without attracting his attention. As Charles says about Laure’s presence at their house, “Je me répétais continuellement qu’elle m’était tout à fait indifférente” (160). In this way, Laure is able to infiltrate the family sphere and determine if he is a worthy mate. In a time when the interactions between unmarried men and women were highly regulated and scrutinized, she has found a way to flout the system. With Estelle as her excuse, Laure can “passer la journée” (160) and stay overnight—“[Estelle] la gardait souvent à coucher” (160)—at the Morin home. She gets close to a potential husband without the danger of vicious rumors that might ruin her reputation if their relationship were of an explicitly romantic nature.

Once she has become certain of his suitability, she leads him to the revelation that she was the one whom he met on the trolley. Her disclosure provokes a marriage proposal. In this way, she is pulling all the strings from behind the scenes. Her power is implicit, soft, and subtle. She never explicitly references the episode with Charles. However, she does eventually don the same outfit she was wearing on the trolley to an outing with Estelle, Charles’s sister. Laure then complains about the loss of her gloves within earshot of Charles. Immediately, Charles’s eyes are open and he admits that he “avai[t] dû

être aveugle pour n'avoir pas reconnu à première vue cette taille gracieuse, ces mains sans pareilles et cette démarche élégante" (161). As this suggests, Laure is the one who solves the mystery for Charles, but she manufactures the solution in a way that allows him to save face. Yet it is clear that her actions are determinant in their relationship. In this way, Laure is the White foil to the "demi-monde," mixed-race women of de La Houssaye's *Quarteronnes*. Laure does enjoy a power imbalance in the relationship and is surely using her seductive power—just like the Quadroon women. Nonetheless, she is not sexually aggressive or overtly demanding like the mixed-race women of de La Houssaye's novels. Therefore, Laure represents the ways in which women, at least of a certain class and race, could find agency within the framework of the Franco-Louisianan patriarchy.

Although modest herself, Laure's agency comes largely from the sexual suggestiveness of her gloves and the Whiteness of her hands. In the story, Charles becomes distracted on the trolley by the nude hands of the mysterious women. As Laure slips a five-piece coin to Charles, he notices only her small hands, "dégantées, blanches et potelées" (157). The gloves she "accidentally" leaves behind on the trolley become an object of obsession and fetishism for Charles. Rolling the gloves—his "deux petits bijoux"—in his hand, Charles fantasizes about his "belle inconnue" with "ses petites mains nues" (158). As this description suggests, the gloves are both sensual and sexual. Ungloved hands are already a form of nakedness with sexual connotations similar to the ankle in nineteenth-century culture. Indeed, we will remember that the term "nue comme la main" was a phrase that connoted complete nakedness as opposed to the nudity of the negligee or slip. Moreover, the gloves are penetrated by the hand, suggesting clearly the sexual act.

As Charles obsesses over the gloves, these objects become more important than Laure, the woman. Charles does, in fact, meet Laure almost immediately after he finds the gloves, but she does not turn him away from his infatuation. As he states upon meeting Laure, "Je dois avouer que si je l'avais rencontrée la veille, j'en serais probablement devenu amoureux; mais aujourd'hui je ne voulais être amoureux que de mes petits gants bruns" (160). Clearly, the real Laure cannot compete with the idealized, symbolic representation. She is no match for the "petits gants bruns" and the imagined woman who wore them. Even though he does not know what his "charmante inconnue" looks like,

through her gloves he imagines her with "un cœur bon et délicat" (159) and her form as "gracieuse" and "élégante" (158). "Élégante" is the essential word as it allows a revealing homophone: *elle est gant*—she is the glove.

By associating Laure so closely with the glove through this wordplay, the text safely confines Laure's sexual power to a representation. Thus, Laure's modesty and innocence are never directly placed in question. Charles sexualizes the gloves and becomes captivated by them, not by Laure herself. In this way, erotic desire goes to the representation, while the real Laure retains her chaste uprightness. Once she helps Charles discover the mystery of the gloves, his concerns turn immediately to marriage. Thus, the gloves sublimate his erotic desire towards more noble and normative cultural structures. This seems to me to be part of the vision of powerful, proto-feminist femininity that de La Houssaye's text favors. According to this reading, female traces and the "feminine mystique" is the proper path to female agency.

Laure's agency, of course, also implicates Charles and his fetishizing of the gloves, which follow Freudian patterns. In his 1929 article entitled "Fetishism" Freud suggested that the fetish is "a substitute for the penis" and that it is "precisely designed to preserve it from extinction" (152). Laure's gloves, of course, fulfill this role. Within the logic of the story, when Charles accepts help from the mysterious woman on the trolley, he undergoes a type of metaphorical emasculation. In this way, the gloves become a substitute or replacement for his manliness, which was somewhat overemphasized in the text's opening paragraphs. From the moment he finds the gloves, his demeanor begins to change. As he says, "[J]e fus hanté par la pensée de ma mystérieuse bienfaitrice" (158) and begins to think that "j'allais devenir amoureux d'une étrangère, moi qui le matin même avais décrété que je n'étais rien qu'un vieux garçon fort bourru et désagréable" (159). He starts the morning a surly bachelor but is lovesick by the afternoon, lusting after a stranger's gloves. Seen in this light, the gloves reveal a symbolic shift of power. The gloves enchant him; they *penetrate* his gruff exterior and utterly transform him. To continue with Freudian imagery, Laure's metaphorical "penis"—her gloves—signals female domination in the relationship.

With this shift in power, the text's message about Charles' masculinity comes into focus. Charles' gruff, cold, serious masculinity,

and his disinterest in love and romance are merely a façade. The flash of a hand or the trace of a beautiful woman are enough to strip away the mask from this Franco-Creole man. The text seems to suggest that a romantic lies just beneath the surface of man and a little female *je ne sais quoi* is all it takes to reveal it. Again, female power relies heavily on femininity. In this way, the tale is profoundly proto-feminist in that it highlights female agency. At the same time, the tale valorizes traditional femininity and the notion that female power must be veiled. Men must be made to feel that they are proverbially on top, even when the women are actually making the decisions.

Charles's narrative voice reinforces this moral by breaking the narrative fourth wall. At two points in the text he speaks directly to the extra-textual reader, calling them "*amies lectrices*" (156, 162). By addressing the female audience in this way, the text clearly indicates that the tale is for women. The reader imagines herself in direct conversation with Charles who is explaining how his wife attracted him. The text uses Charles's call to the reader to give male—and thus "legitimate"—credence to the story's moral about the importance of femininity in female agency. Subtly, Charles suggests that his tale is one that can be replicated. In short, Charles's narrative voice tells the female reader that if she wants to marry a rich lawyer, she should make use of her feminine wiles, within the context of proper decorum.

In sum, de la Houssaye is obviously not a feminist icon like Sojourner Truth or even the more conservative Susan B. Anthony. However, her text does show a form of female agency that marries femininity and evolving views of womanhood in a novel way. In this way she links together the notion of proto-feminism with female "Creole consciousness."

Ultimately, thus, this tale speaks to what it means to be a French-speaking American woman in nineteenth-century Louisiana. De la Houssaye's tale's claim to American identity is especially poignant given the changing demographics of Louisiana in the nineteenth century. Between 1810 and 1870, the population of New Orleans increased tenfold, from 17,000 to 170,000, thanks to immigration and Anglo-American expansion. These changes rapidly diluted the number and power of French-speakers. As one metropolitan French visitor pessimistically noted at the time, the French had suffered "the fate of a conquered race," and their civilization was being "effac[ed] with a rapidity and thoroughness [. . .] much greater than that which the

Romans transformed the people who submitted to their arms" (quoted in Tregle 161). The metaphor is clear: Anglo-America is the Roman assimilator and the French are the hordes to be assimilated.

Despite these challenges, de La Houssaye refuses to efface her French language and Creole culture. In fact, her writing in French is in itself a political act. However, she does not use her pen to resist the notion of American identity outright. Instead, she proposes the idea of a "New American," in the character of Laure. Laure is happy. She is living a Cinderella existence—in nineteenth-century Louisiana and in French. De la Houssaye thereby embraces a version of American identity where one can be American and speak French.

Of course, it is premature to draw an over-arching conclusion about de La Houssaye's political and discursive stance based on one story. Nonetheless, Sidonie de la Houssaye represents an important voice in larger discourses about "Creole consciousness," especially for women, and its intersection with American national identity in the late nineteenth-century. Her work also sheds interesting light on the development of a conservative strand of proto-feminism in the American South and also problematizes the Anglo-centric historiography of America. Importantly, she gives voice to the idea that American identity has always been multicultural and multilingual. On this point, her tale has resonance in the contemporary political climate when language has again become a cultural wedge-issue. De La Houssaye's story correctly suggests that the language you speak and your ethnic background do not determine whether you are worthy of the title of American. This may give hope to those today who claim their American identity in Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, and even French.

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Caribbean Women in the Theory and Fiction of Émeline Pierre

Jeremy Patterson

Bob Jones University

Émeline Pierre, a francophone writer and professor who lives in Montreal but is from the Caribbean, was born in Guadeloupe in 1980 to a father from Haiti and a mother from Dominica. She thus represents a transnational cross section of the Americas and brings this markedly Caribbean perspective to her work, identifying in particular with Guadeloupean literature and culture. Although Pierre has published only three works to date, her *œuvre* already spans both literary theory and fiction. In her first book, *Le caractère subversif de la femme antillaise dans un contexte (post)colonial* (2008), she lays out her theoretical position in regard to postcolonialism and feminism as she examines the role of women in French Caribbean novels, arguing for a fuller role for women in society. This theoretical work echoes many themes from other recent work on women's literature such as Myriam Chancy's *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women* (1997), which also seeks to establish the richness and variety of women's experience in the Caribbean. In *Bleu d'orange* (2010), a collection of short stories (which, along with Pierre's collection for children, *Les découvertes de Papille au Bénin* [2013], constitutes her literary output thus far in her career), Pierre develops primarily female protagonists who show the contradictions and difficulties of their position in society. Pierre is thus part of a new generation of Caribbean writers that explore the role of women in society, benefitting and extending what Renée Laurier in *Francophone Women Writers of Africa and the Caribbean* (2000) has called "the women's literary explosion in francophone Africa and the Caribbean" (4).

Given that a young writer like Pierre has produced both theoretical and literary work, one might ask to what extent the one influences the other. In other words, in Pierre's theoretical description, what exactly is