CAJUN OR COONASS? EXPLORING ETHNIC LABELS IN FRENCH LOUISIANA REGIONAL DISCOURSE[1]

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This article explores the evolution of the label "coonass," debates over its meaning, and recent patterns of use of the term in French Louisiana regional discourse. Coonass has been associated with the Cajun French for at least 70 years. The term became more widely used in the 1970s and 1980s as it was socially, politically, and economically commodified in conjunction with French Louisiana regional promotions and Cajun ethnic revival. Use of coonass has been opposed by some Cajun individuals and Cajun ethnic organizations. Some scholars have posited divergent meanings of coonass versus Cajun/Acadian. However, coonass is commonly accepted and used by Cajuns, with patterns of use linked to degree of involvement in ethnic organizations, social class, gender, and context. (Coonass, Cajun, ethnic labels, French Louisiana, regional discourse)

In 1989, the Board of Directors of the Cajun French Music Association, a grassroots ethnic revival organization, expressed the desire that the term "Cajun" be used in identifying French culture in Louisiana. The Board voiced strong opposition to the term "coonass," which, it said, "is unfortunately still being used by some people, [and] should be discouraged" (CFMA 1989). When the author conducted dissertation field research in southwest Louisiana during the early 1990s, he lived next door to an elderly Cajun-French couple. One day, his neighbors' household was in an uproar. A son-in-law had just returned to the community after he and fellow Cajun crew members of an oil rig on the Texas/Louisiana border walked off the job, in part because an Anglo-American supervisor had called them "a bunch of damn coonasses" during a work-related dispute. Upon hearing about the incident, the family patriarch angrily asserted, "We're coonasses, but we're not damn coonasses!" These conflicting narratives suggest that coonass is an ambiguous, problematic, ethnic label that requires an explanation.

This essay discusses the evolution of the term, varying attitudes toward it, and the ways it has been used in the past and at present. It analyzes the use of coonass in regional discourse, including correspondences and commentaries by Cajun activists and ethnic organizations, speech events, interviews, ethnographic observation, print media, film, song lyrics, and the internet. A central theme here is that coonass represents an ongoing, multifaceted process of ethnic labelization

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involving various forms of commodification of the term. The result is variation in attitudes toward the use of coonass in regional discourse, with patterns of usage linked to factors such as social class, gender, and involvement in ethnic organizations.

FOREGROUNDING ETHNIC LABELIZATION

A recent journal article on a lawsuit over the use of coonass noted that "[a]ny analysis of a word or phrase in use requires a careful consideration of social information about both the speaker and hearer, including age, gender, race, ethnicity, education, profession, geographical background, and location" (Wray and Staczek 2005:7). Of equal importance, broader social, economic, and historical processes must be considered to understand the many possible meanings that an ethnic label carries through time in terms of both ascription and self-ascription.

Ethnic labels are often coined ascriptively and as "stigmatizing label[s] rather than a neutral means of social categorization" (Oboler 1995:vi). But, labels "can take on a life of their own beyond the control of those who coin them or to whom they are applied" (Oboler 1995:vii). The manner by which initially ascriptive and negative labels change in meaning can be linked to processes where they sometimes come to be economically, politically, or socially commodified; that is, treated as forms of linguistic or iconic "currency" that benefits the speaker or group in particular contexts. Considering forms of commodification and potential ambiguities and conflicts within these processes is key to understanding ethnic labelization.

As some authors have discussed for "traditional" societies that have become marketed commodities through cultural tourism, commodification of local culture as an economically driven process is a common occurence (see Appadurai 1986; Bunten 2008). As the following examples indicate, ethnic labels are often central to any given commodification process since they provide often colorful "brand names" that may facilitate perceived uniformity on what may actually be diverse populations (see Anderson 1983). Accordingly, the label "Cajun" has been central to the creation of a contemporary, imagined, white French-Louisiana community (see Sexton 1999).

Kanak is an example of political commodification. It is an indigenous word meaning "man" that was ascribed to nineteenth-century Melanesians by European colonists (Moore 1985). Kanak was gallicized into *Canaque* by French colonists and used pejoratively for the multi-lingual native populations of New Caledonia and New Hebrides. New Caledonians later de-gallicized Canaque into Kanak as part of a twentieth-century native political-independence movement (Ammann 1997). The term's meaning was rehabilitated and used to articulate a

native/colonist political dichotomy (Linnekin and Poyer 1990). Kanak represents what Oboler (1995) calls the "homogenizing nature" of ethnic labels. With Kanak, homogenization occurred with the political commodification of a label that had created broad "us" and "them" categories. However, little is known about how Kanak has been accepted at the individual level or how it is or is not used in other levels of regional discourse, a nagging question about any formerly negative label.

Multiple forms of commodification of a label are apparent in the term "nigger," as evident in Kennedy's (2002) book. He stated there that according to some African-Americans, "equity earned through oppression grants cultural ownership rights: having been made to suffer being called 'nigger' all these years . . . blacks should now be able to monopolize the slur's peculiar cultural capital" (Kennedy 2002:3). Specifically, there is the perspective that nigger is a part of privileged intragroup daily speech, with highly negative reactions to non-African American use of the term, no matter the circumstances. This form of monopolization indicates social commodification.

An economic commodification of nigger is evident in its frequent use in commercially recorded rap music lyrics, professional comedy routines by African-Americans, and the speech used by African-American actors in some films. It is interesting to note that such performances, while benefitting African-American performers through economic reward and celebrity status, are often marketed well beyond African-American audiences. Non-African Americans are thus allowed to participate in this discourse, but only as passive consumers.

There is often a lack of consensus about potentially negative terms, and ethnic labels can "simultaneously create and divide communities" given that intragroup debate over such labels can occur (Kennedy 2002:49). Kennedy (2002) identified varying African-American positions on nigger, including ambiguity toward the term and/or perceptions that it is unacceptable under any circumstances. In particular, there seems to be a common belief that the term should not be used in formal contexts, such as political discourse, even in instances when the speaker views it as acceptable in other contexts. The recent controversy over Jesse Jackson's recorded off-camera comments on a Fox TV News show, when he referred to then presidential candidate Barack Obama as a "nigger," reflects this perspective.

"Redneck" represents commodification in the mainstream white-American experience. There are various suggested origins for the term, including the perspective that it was linked to the sun-reddened necks of lower-class farmers who provided their own labor rather than depending on slave or hired labor, as was common among the wealthier agriculturalists (Boney 1989). Certainly by the early twentieth century, the term was negatively ascribed to poor rural white southerners. (Huber 1995). The term became economically commodified as

rustic elements of working-class American life well beyond strictly rural contexts were glorified in popular culture in the late twentieth century. For example, in 1973, the country song "Rednecks, White Socks, and Blue Ribbon Beer" was nominated for a Grammy award. Redneck was widely popularized in a positive sense in the early-to-mid 1990s by the comedian Jeff Foxworthy, a native of Georgia, who released comedy albums with titles such as "You Might Be a Redneck If . . ." and "Games Rednecks Play." More recently, the song "Redneck Woman" articulated various features of the redneck life, including drinking beer in taverns and honky tonks or on the tailgate of a pickup truck, patronizing Wal-Mart, and being an avid fan of country artists such as Tanya Tucker, George Strait, and Hank Williams, Jr. The term has become socially commodified as a "particular class-positioned way of being white" in daily discourse with associated rustic cultural features (Fox 2004:25). Although the term retains some regional connotations, redneck has gone beyond its southern origins and become virtually a nationwide phenomenon that subsumes regional nuances. For example, the co-writer and performer of the song "Redneck Woman" is from Illinois. At the same time, the term retains utility as a "crude putdown," often for those not enamored of some or all of the beliefs and behaviors associated with the term (Boney 1989).

Various forms of commodification are also evident in the evolution of the term coonass. Although associated with the Louisiana Cajun/Acadian population, coonass is an apparent latecomer to the regional discourse compared to related ethnic labels like Acadian and Cajun. Acadian (*Acadien*) originated for seventeenth-century French colonists in present-day Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (*Acadie*/Acadia). Many Acadians who were exiled by the British during the Seven Years' War (1755–1763) resettled in Louisiana. Louisiana Acadians were culturally influenced by African, Creole, Native American, and Anglo-American culture, at the same time that they intermarried with various white neighbors (Brasseaux 1992; Sexton 1996).

"Cadien," an abbreviation of Acadien, was anglicized into Cajun and commonly used by Anglo-Americans by the late nineteenth century for the large, increasingly diverse, rural lower-class Louisiana Francophone population (Brasseaux 1992; Henry 1998). Among Anglo-Americans and upper-class Louisiana French, Cajun acquired an often negative connotation of uneducated, rural Francophones (Spitzer 1986; Sexton 1999; Bernard 2003; Gutierrez 1992). Henry (1998) has argued that the ascription of Cajun as an abbreviated form of Acadian represented labelization that semantically "pulled Cajuns away from their Acadian ancestry by the dawn of the twentieth century" (Henry 1998:39). This ethnic labeling process had clear class dimensions. Upper-class people of Acadian descent (referred to as "Genteel Acadians" by some scholars) maintained the more prestigious Acadien. On the other hand, Creole was used for

non-Acadian Francophones, sometimes including Afro-French (Brasseaux 1992). By the mid-twentieth century, Cajuns were in the midst of an Americanization that included culture change, stigmatization of the French language, and language shift (Gold 1979; Sexton 2000). Coonass emerged during this period in relation to the Cajun population.

ORIGINS OF COONASS

Various theories for the origin of coonass have contributed to differing attitudes toward the term and its meaning(s). One narrative reported by Ancelet (n.d.) claims that Cajun volunteer forces at the Battle of New Orleans (1814) wore coonskin caps, including the animals' tails, and were subsequently labeled accordingly. However, there is no evidence that such hats were ever commonly worn by Cajuns, or any other nineteenth-century Americans for that matter, despite popular culture images to the contrary.

Coonass as an initially ascriptive play on the racial epithet "coon" has been suggested. Bernard (2003) posits that coonass originated as a means to portray Cajuns as lower in status than African-Americans. As another example of the perceived racial significance of the "coon" component of coonass, following his 1998 presentation on the term coonass at a regional conference, the author was approached by an audience member (a male in his 60s and an Anglo-American native of east Texas) who stated that he was raised with the belief that coonass suggested racial mixing between Cajuns and African-Americans. Race-linked explanations for the origin of coonass cannot be substantiated. However, the notion of Cajuns as a perceived quasi-white group rooted in an environment and multi-racial milieu that seemed exotic to Anglo-American latecomers to the region may have added to the appeal of coonass as an ascriptive label (Sexton and Guidry 2000).

The most widely circulated theory for coonass references the standard French slang word *conasse* which means a stupid person, a bungling prostitute, or an unhealthy prostitute (Domengeaux 1986). It was allegedly used in World War II by continental French soldiers for Cajuns serving in France, who they viewed as bumpkin Francophone cousins. Conasse was supposedly then heard and repeated as coonass by Anglo-American soldiers, and the term spread to Louisiana where it became popular among non-Cajuns as an unflattering label for Cajuns.

If coonass derived from conasse, then one might assume that some use of the actual term conasse might appear in the Cajun French language, but this is not the case. For example, a survey of three large collections of traditional Cajun-French music song texts did not reveal the use of conasse (or "coonass," for that matter) in post-World War II French lyrics (Francois 1990; Savoy 1984; Oster 1959). Furthermore, in 20 years of monitoring Cajun-French language radio

broadcasts and daily Cajun-French language discourse in general, the author has never heard conasse used. The author did hear the term *Tchou de Chaoui*, the literal Cajun-French translation of coonass, used very rarely in English speech among fellow elementary-school students in southwest Louisiana in the early 1970s. However, he has rarely heard the term since in English conversation and has never heard it in Cajun-French speech. This suggests direct translation of coonass as a pre-existing English term into Cajun French, which in turn appears very rarely in local English speech.

The conasse theory is further weakened by the apparently common use of coonass before Cajuns ever served in France during World War II, which would have been after the Normandy invasion in June 1944. Bernard (2003) cites a Cajun informant who recalled being called coonass in a joking manner by another Cajun during a visit to east Texas in 1937. As another example, a Cajun writer recounts being repeatedly called coonass in a derogatory manner by an Anglo-American comrade in Texas while in the Navy in 1942 (Homepages.go.com). More convincingly, Bernard's (2003) book includes a photograph taken in the South Pacific in 1943 that shows a military plane, piloted by a Cajun officer, with "Cajun" and "Coonass" prominently painted on its side. Both positive and negative interpretations of the term coonass by Cajuns suggest a theme of ambiguity at an early date.

THE RISE OF COONASS IN REGIONAL DISCOURSE

Despite its murky origins, coonass became common enough to be included in a 1954 glossary of regional (Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana) oilfield slang (Robertson 1954, cited in Bernard 2003). Throughout the late twentieth century, penetration of the label, coonass, into all levels of regional discourse occurred as often unintended secondary consequences of Francophone linguistic and cultural development, regional promotions, and Cajun ethnic revival.

Early Francophone interest groups in Louisiana were not representative of the Cajun population. For example, Esman (1983) identifies an "old elite" of upper-class Louisiana French planters and merchants that included white Creoles and Genteel Acadians. In 1951, representatives of this population formed *France-Amerique de la Louisiane Acadienne*, which emphasized higher formal education, standard French language, and cultural connections with Francophone nations (Esman 1983).

A state-wide effort at French-language revitalization in Louisiana was initiated by white socioeconomic elites (often of non-Acadian descent) in 1968 with the founding of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL). CODOFIL's primary purpose was to develop, preserve, and promote French in Louisiana for cultural and economic benefits. Like

France-Amerique de la Louisiane Acadienne, it sought to forge links with various Francophone nations. CODOFIL went much further in terms of linguistic development by organizing programs for the teaching of standard French in public schools.

Elite-led organizations emphasized the label Acadian, often as a historicized, romanticized image of eighteenth-century Continental French-speaking peasants as portrayed in Longfellow's Evangeline. While also integrating Cajun into discourse, this selective, retrospective approach to cultural representations often overlooked contemporary elements of Cajun culture that were viewed by non-Cajuns and Louisiana French elites as unsophisticated. These elements included, for example, accordion-led Cajun music, the rowdy rural Mardi Gras celebration, and Cajun humorists who played upon ethnic stereotypes (Fontenot 2006; Sexton 1999, 2006). In fact, many cultural elements associated with Cajuns were not necessarily of Acadian origin and had developed as creolized pan-Louisiana French traditions during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Sexton 1999, 2006). Nonetheless, Trépanier (1991) has argued that during the racial upheaval of the Civil Rights era, promotion of a sanitized version of Cajun-ness with a linkage to romanticized Acadian imagery assured a respectable white identity for the region despite elite misgivings about Cajun culture. Regional Cajunization was codified in 1972 when the 22 southernmost parishes (counties) in Louisiana were officially designated as "Acadiana" by the state legislature.

By the 1970s and 1980s, elite-led cultural development was merged with the grassroots efforts of a new Cajun middle class that Esman (1982) suggests had emerged out of the flourishing oil industry. Elements of this group joined the traditional small population of rural and small-town, middle-class Cajun merchants who had served as mediators between lower-class Cajuns and local Francophone elites and Anglo-Americans (Gold 1979; Sexton 2006). Cultural-preservation minded working-class Cajuns also became involved in these efforts in growing numbers (Sexton 2006). In contrast to those preoccupied with the historicized Acadian origins of Cajun culture, grassroots Cajun revivalists objectified and promoted those elements of contemporary local Louisiana French culture that they considered to be endangered, often the very elements disparaged by some elitists (Gold 1979; Sexton 1999). Also, young Cajun activists pressured CODOFIL to provide more support for Cajun music and Cajun language, and many Cajuns eventually entered key positions in the organization (Ancelet 1984). Furthermore, by the 1980s, several formal Cajun ethnic associations like the Acadian Task Force, Cajun French Music Association (CFMA), and Acadian Heritage and Culture Foundation had been formed, sometimes in response to the perceived ineffectiveness of CODOFIL in pursuing Cajun-oriented interests (Sexton 2006).

Cultural promotion/revival went hand-in-hand with ethnic tourism that later assumed greater importance when the Gulf Coast oil industry, long an economic mainstay, began to decline in the early 1980s (Sexton 1999). The terms Acadian and Cajun, which had been present in aspects of regional discourse, came to be even more widely used in reference to products marketed to tourists, for example, "Honorary Cajun" certificates, cultural sites, and restaurants featuring local cuisine. The Cajun label was also soon attached to a wide range of goods and services, including those not linked to Cajun culture, offered to non-Cajuns and Cajuns alike. Examples of these products include Cajun Egg Rolls, Cajun Bass Boats, and even "K-Jon" portable toilets (Ancelet 1996). Regional promotions of "Cajun Country" and associated products in conjunction with the official Acadiana designation were successful to the point that the bulk of the white Louisiana-French population has become characterized as Cajun, regardless of ancestry or individual self-ascription of alternative identities (Henry 1998; Trépanier 1991; Sexton 1999). In contrast, "Creole" has been largely appropriated by the Afro-French within their own cultural revival and promotion efforts (Dormon 1996; Sexton 1999).

Popularization of things Cajun had a secondary effect of promoting the use of coonass as a parallel label. Some assert that coonass was also "rehabilitated," as the meaning of the term was inverted from one which had encapsulated all the negative stereotypes and stigmatized cultural elements associated with Cajuns by the mid-twentieth century. The label then quickly gained more popularity and visibility (Gutierrez 1992). For example, coonass became a political commodity in the early 1970s when Edwin Edwards injected the term coonass into his speeches to Cajun audiences to capitalize on his Cajun identity during his gubernatorial campaign (Bernard 2003).

As with Acadian and Cajun, economic commodification of coonass occurred, albeit in more limited scope. As one such instance, ARCO Distributors, Inc. was founded in Plaquemine, Louisiana in 1983 by Louisiana natives to market, among other things, "promotional" products (Jopel.com). Its inventory included baseball caps decorated with the logo of a raccoon with its tail raised and the acronym RCA followed by "Registered Coonass," for which ARCO received a trademark in 1986. Other businesses offered coonass bumper stickers, window decals, T-shirts, and even "Honorary Coonass" certificates that were given to tourists and other visitors (Bernard 2003). These icons frequently identified the bearer as "a proud coonass." It is interesting to note that, as a point of departure from the use of "Cajun" to market local culture and goods to tourists, coonass merchandise often consisted primarily of marketing the term itself to Cajuns. Furthermore, the use of coonass as a marketing tool for local culture never became accepted in state-sponsored regional promotions, and coonass

merchandise does not seem to have been marketed at state-sponsored tourist sites to any extent.

In part because of its economic commodification and increased visibility, coonass was cultivated as a positive exotic label that carried a certain shock value in conveying otherness during interactions with outsiders such as tourists (Dormon 1984; Gutierez 1992). Unlike commodification like ethnic tourism that is directly driven by economic processes, commodification of coonass did not always have a strong economic basis. Manipulation of the label also included social commodification and monopolization of the term, as it was sometimes portrayed as a term that Cajuns could use for themselves in local daily discourse but was taboo for outsiders, a perspective by many that persists into the present. For some Cajuns, the term coonass held primary social currency as a means to demonstrate otherness from non-Cajuns, rather than being adopted as an economic strategy to market oneself or one's culture to tourists. One graphic example of such social commodification appeared in a 1990 *National Geographic* article on Cajuns which included a picture of a young Cajun fisherman with "100% Coonass" tattooed on his arm (Smith 1990).

INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL OPPOSITION TO COONASS

In conjunction with the growing visiblity of coonass in regional discourse, the use of the term was increasingly opposed by some Cajuns who viewed the label as vulgar and demeaning. Public opposition to the use of coonass in the early 1970s came from James Domengeaux (of non-Acadian upper-class white French Louisiana ancestry) who had been a driving force behind the formation of CODOFIL. Domengeaux pioneered the use of the conasse theory to identify coonass as an ethnic slur (Bernard 2003). In his position as director of CODOFIL, Domengeaux criticized Edwin Edward's use of coonass in political discourse (Bernard 2003). Domengeaux also condemned the use of "coonie," a polite variant of coonass, when it appeared in the title and text of a locally recorded song (Bernard 2003).

Formal opposition to coonass eventually extended beyond the efforts of CODOFIL. In 1977, a Cajun successfully filed a lawsuit against his employer after he was terminated for repeatedly protesting an Anglo-American supervisor's use of coonass (Brasseaux 1987). Spurred by the lawsuit, and the urging of activists like Domengeaux, the Louisiana State Senate passed a resolution in 1981 to "condemn the use of the term 'coonass' and to condemn the sale or promotion of any items containing that term" (Louisiana State Senate 1981). The resolution, however, carried no legal coercive power.

Inspired by the anti-coonass stance of CODOFIL, the lawsuit over coonass, and the state legislature's action, several Cajun-centered ethnic associations

attacked the use of coonass starting in the mid-to-late 1980s. They generally embraced all aspects of traditional Cajun culture, but tended to reject the use of coonass in association with it. Like their counterparts in CODOFIL, Cajun organizations believed that use of coonass was incompatible with a respectable regional image (CFMA 1989). Cajun activists also often referred to the conasse theory to illustrate the vulgarity of the term. They portrayed coonass as an ethnic slur comparable to nigger and, inspired by the state legislature's anti-coonass resolution, implied that use of it could result in legal or economic sanctions (W. P. to M. C. 1998). Three examples of sometimes overlapping action by Cajun organizations against the use of coonass by Cajuns and non-Cajuns alike are summarized below.

The Acadian Task Force circulated a memorandum urging its members to combat the exhibition of coonass bumper stickers by tracing vehicle owners through their license plates and then writing them letters "pleading our cause" (E. P. G. 1986). It also encouraged protesting businesses that marketed coonass merchandise (E. P. G. 1986). Furthermore, an Acadian Task Force member and head of Cajun French language/music programming at a large southwest Louisiana radio station sent warning letters to several Cajun musicians (all men) who used coonass during concert performances (P. B. to Z. R. 1986). He consequently "banned" the music of one group from airplay when they ignored his warnings (P. B. to C. F. 1986).

The CFMA also opposed the use of coonass. For instance, a representative of the organization who was familiar with the anti-coonass letter campaign initiated against Cajun musicians by the Acadian Task Force, sent the same artists a less confrontational appeal. It stated, "In many cases, individuals may not take offense at the term 'Coon-Ass', but collectively, don't you agree it would be most beneficial to all of us to simply be Cajun?" (V. F. to Z. R. 1986).

The CFMA sought to eliminate coonass from radio and television. The association complained when a popular non-Cajun radio personality in Baton Rouge used coonass on the air. Representatives of the organization protested in writing to a local television station in the southwestern Louisiana hub city, Lafayette, because one of its reporters had used the term coonass during a broadcast. It stated, "Having your newsman . . . identify himself as a 'certified coonass,' an offensive term, is definitely not conducive to the image of the Cajun people" (M. C. and P. B. to General Manager KATC TV 1991). The station subsequently issued a written apology, aired an apology, and temporarily suspended the reporter without pay (CFMA 1991).

The Acadian Heritage and Culture Foundation directed far-ranging protests against the use of coonass. The group's chairman, a prominent local lawyer, wrote a letter to the commander of the 159th Tactical Fighter Group, Louisiana Air National Guard, protesting the unit's nickname "The Coonass Militia" (W. P.

to K. L. R. 1992). The result was to discontinue the use of that designation, at least in official correspondence (K. L. R. to W. P. 1992). In his later additional capacity as director of CODOFIL, the chairman of the Acadian Heritage and Culture Foundation sent similar letters to individuals and businesses resulting in a number of them removing all merchandise "referring to Cajuns as 'coonasses'" (W. P. to G. M. 1992).

Opposition to the use of coonass has also occurred outside of Louisiana, with one such conflict assuming racial dimensions. In 1997, an African-American in Washington D.C. successfully sued her employer after she was given a "Temporary Coonass Certificate" by a supervisor who had acquired a supply of them during a much earlier visit to Louisiana (Wray and Staczek 2005). In this instance, emphasis was placed on the negative racial connotation of the "coon" aspect of coonass to African-Americans, rather than its actual meaning as a white ethnic term.

There also have been local public reactions to the use of coonass outside of Louisiana. In 2007 there was an outcry, including public criticism by CODOFIL, over the use of coonass by Lou Saban (a non-Cajun), a former highly successful football coach at Louisiana State University (USA Today). Saban had left the university a few years prior in order to take a position in professional football, but later returned to coaching at the University of Alabama, an LSU rival. In a subsequently well-publicized conversation with reporters in Alabama, Saban used the term coonass as part of an anecdote to illustrate Cajun LSU fans' negative reactions to his taking the position at Alabama. Saban subsequently issued an apology for his comments, while protesting that he had only used the term to repeat an anecdote previously heard elsewhere.

CONTESTING ANTI-COONASS EFFORTS

There has not been a consensus among cultural activists about the origin of the term coonass, its suitability in public discourse, or strategies for combating its use. One cultural activist opposed to usage of coonass has even criticized the use of conasse for the origin of coonass, claiming that it is a myth created by James Domengeaux (D. M. to W. P. 1996).

Efforts at censoring coonass in Louisiana were sometimes met with opposition. As one example, the vice-president of a local broadcasting company received a protest letter from the Acadian Heritage and Culture Foundation because the term coonass was used by a performer at an event sponsored by the company. The vice-president wrote a response referring to "politically correct nonsense" and noted that coonass "certainly has never had any ill meaning to me, or any other of my friends who are of French descent. . . . I can't even count the number of Cajun jokes and conversations with the very people you claim to

represent, in which they use and are proud of the term 'coonass'" (D. K. J. to W. P. 1994). In another instance, Zachary Richard, considered one of the more radical Cajun activists, had also been criticized for using coonass during his concert performances. Richard eventually founded the Cajun language preservation group *Action 'Cadien* (P. B. to 1986).

As a reflection of ambiguity by some activists about coonass, in the 1970s a Cajun comedy album subtitled "For Koonasses Only" was released by a comedian under the pseudonym Nonc Helaire. Spelling coonass with a "K" may represent an effort to avoid association of the word with the racial epithet used for African-Americans. Helaire was actually the late Revon Reed, an early pioneer grassroots Cajun activist in southwestern Louisiana. When asked by the author about the album title, an elderly Cajun who had known Reed stated, "I seem to remember his disapproval of the use of the term, but I think he was also realistic about its fairly common use."

DIFFERING SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES ON COONASS

Lack of consensus among Cajuns about coonass is paralleled by differences among scholars regarding interpreting the term. Some writers have discussed coonass as simply an earthy parallel to Cajun (Guiterrez 1992). On the other hand, the noted Cajun folklorist and cultural activist Barry Ancelet (n.d.) views coonass as demeaning and has sharply criticized its use by Cajuns and non-Cajuns alike. There are also assertions by some scholars that coonass has assumed meanings and patterns of usage toward the end of the twentieth century that make it distinct from Cajun. Dormon (1984) suggested that (circa 1980) coonass was used primarily by young working class Cajun males with a "vague sort of identification with the traditions and symbols of Cajun culture" and as an assertion of "earthy pungent masculinity" (1984:11). Dormon also suggested that use of coonass represented opposition to elitist cultural activists who emphasized Cajun or Acadian as the only proper ethnic labels.

Walton (1994, 2003), working well over a decade after Dormon, also identified coonass as a young blue-collar male phenomenon and as resistance to perceived elitism in Cajun cultural revival. Going beyond Dormon, Walton (2003) emphasized coonass as representing opposition to sanitization of the label Cajun and the economic commodification of the label Cajun and of Cajun culture for ethnic tourism. Walton specified divergent themes on what coonass specifically indexes. In one perspective he suggested:

> While Cajun has been at least partially drained [sanitized] of its historical meaning of poor, backward, and working class, coonass has retained those connotations. Willingness to embrace these potentially negative aspects of coonass is, in a sense, an affirmation of the earlier, more traditional cultural meanings of being Cajun. [Some Cajuns] embrace all aspects of traditional

> Cajunness, even those that outsiders (or even activists) deem negative. And if "Cajun" no longer evokes those qualities, then they choose a label [coonass] that does. (Walton 2002:44–45)

As another theme, Walton (2003) asserted that people use coonass to "draw distinct lines and construct a meaning that stresses authenticity and racial [white] alignment, but . . . not traditional Acadian values, occupations, and class status" (2003:46). This process is portrayed as generational, since young Cajun men use coonass to distance themselves from their parents and grandparents who personify traditional (i.e., "real") Cajun/Acadian practices rooted in rural Francophone agrarian or subsistence lifestyles. Thus, coonass is a "side link" to Acadian/Cajun ethnicity that represents a sort of ethnicized version of redneck, but differs in specific meaning from Acadian and Cajun.

CONTEXTS OF USAGE OF COONASS

Given opposition to the use of coonass and differences of opinion in interpreting the term, an intriguing question is the extent to which the term has been used in regional discourse over the past generation and its meanings in different contexts.

Movies

There are several examples of the use of coonass in reference to Cajuns in films like *The Drowning Pool* (1975) and *Southern Comfort* (1971) that seem to have coincided with the earliest use of the term in local popular discourse. As one instance, coonass was used by non-Cajuns in negative references to a swamp-dwelling female Cajun in the 1974 movie *Gator Bait*. Coonass was later used in the 1993 film *Perfect World*, set in Texas, where Kevin Costner's non-Cajun character mentioned "Coonass Waltz" in favorable reference to Cajun music.

Music

Coonass or its variant, "coonie," has appeared in at least three English language songs written and recorded in Louisiana. "Coonie Moon" (criticized by James Domengeaux) was released in 1971 and included the lyrics, "In this land of happy Cajuns/Keep on shining coonie moon" (Bernard 2003). In "Coonass Man," a southeast Louisiana hit in the 1980s, a young Cajun male expounded on various aspects of local lifestyle (often those associated with Cajuns) that makes him unique (Walton 1994). More recently, the song "T-Neg" tells of an upwardly mobile young female Cajun schoolteacher seeking to abandon her

ethnic heritage, her motivation being "I won't be no low-class coonass farmer's daughter serving up the rice and gravy [a Cajun staple]" (Broussard n.d.).

Use of coonass occurred in the nationally marketed country song "Trudy," released by the Charlie Daniels Band in 1975. In it, a young Cajun male, en route to Louisiana after six months of working away from home, stops off in Dallas, Texas for some entertainment. He subsequently becomes involved in a barroom brawl that requires "half the cops in Dallas County, just to put one coonass boy in jail" (Daniels 1975).

Literary Fiction

The first apparent use of coonass in a literary work is found in a 1960 short story where, interestingly enough, "coonass bastards" was directed by whites (apparently Anglo-Americans) toward a group of African-American Civil Rights protestors in northern (non-French) Louisiana (Ansell 1980). This connection of the term coonass to African-Americans, in this instance by a non-Cajun author, is an oddity.

More recently, coonass has been regularly used in reference to Cajuns in books set in Louisiana, even by authors lacking familiarity with the region (see, e.g., Lochte 1992). The term has also been used by native writers. As just one example, James Lee Burke is famous for a series of fiction novels that feature the Cajun detective David Robicheaux. Speaking through Robicheaux's character, Burke utilizes coonass as a general referent for Cajuns and alternates it with Acadian and Cajun. He frequently uses coonass in neutral reference to poor and working class Cajuns, but also when discussing members of a wealthy Cajun family, and even a prominent Cajun judge in other instances (see, e.g., Burke 1993).

Merchandise

Ancelet (n.d.) claims that opposition to coonass has resulted in items like coonass bumper stickers and decals becoming increasingly rare in south Louisiana. However, coonass bumper stickers are still regularly seen on vehicles by the author. Other coonass merchandise remains available despite past successes by activists at halting such sales for some businesses. For example, in southwest Louisiana in the spring of 2008, the author visited two convenience stores that offered coonass shot-glasses, T-shirts, and novelty license plates that urged the viewer to "party like a real coonass." In addition, the Krazy Kajun Purchase Apparel and Merchandise outlet offers a wide range of items that tells the buyer to "Show your Cajun pride with one of our Proud Coonass Designs." Other advertisements display "Proud to be Coonass T-shirts" and "Flaming Coonass

Hot Sauce" (CafePress.com). It is interesting to note, however, that marketing of coonass icons, or even the use of coonass in reference to retail goods and services, remains absent from state-sponsored tourist and educational sites, such as Acadian/Cajun cultural centers found throughout French Louisiana.

The Internet

Coonass is ubiquitous to internet discourse, especially since most coonass-themed merchandise is now marketed online. Furthermore, a cursory survey of email addresses currently in use revealed designations like "coonass," "real-coonass," and "Coonass1" through "Coonass6." The term is frequently utilized in internet discussions of Cajun culture in general, including a number of personal websites with commentary about coonass. These sites range from offering explanations for the origin of coonass to articulating personal perspectives supporting or condemning use of the label (see, e.g., EricaLucci.com; Coonass.com). Use of coonass has also become prominent on YouTube, including, for instance, footage of the 2008 2nd Annual Cajun/Coonass Crawfish Boil (YouTube.com).

Radio and Television

Use of coonass on TV and radio was common enough to attract the previously mentioned ire of ethnic organizations. The use of coonass by media personalities, especially on television, now seems to be very rare. The author has occasionally heard coonass used on the radio well after the anti-coonass campaigns were initiated. For example, in the late 1990s, a disk jockey on a "mainstream" music station was heard to ask "How many coonasses in the house?" after playing a song by the Cajun accordionist Wayne Toups. Toups is noted for shouting out this question to the audience during live performances in south Louisiana. In another instance during the same period, the author heard an on-air non-Cajun caller to a country-music radio station proudly identify his Cajun wife as a coonass.

Speech Events Involving Coonass

The author recorded unsolicited speech events (outside of interview settings) incorporating coonass during summer participant observation field research and during several brief visits to Louisiana from 2000 to 2002. Most were recorded throughout southwest Louisiana, but several were recorded during the summer of 2002 in the southeastern Louisiana town of Houma. Thirty-two speech events were collected from 20 men ranging in age from 25 to 80, and 10 speech events were collected from 9 women ranging in age from 30 to 60. All speakers whose

economic status could be ascertained would be considered working class. Men used coonass specifically in reference to Cajun men 15 times, in reference to Cajun culture or Cajuns in general on 15 occasions, and twice in reference to Cajun females. Specific examples of each form of usage include:

1. While at his home in rural southwest Louisiana, a 40-year-old Cajun was describing his son's traditional country Mardi Gras costume to the author and a younger Cajun male. He closed by asserting that the costume was "as coonass as it gets."
2. A 58-year-old Cajun resident of southwest Louisiana, upon greeting a 22-year-old Cajun woman guest in his home who spoke with a very pronounced Cajun accent, remarked, "That's a coonass!"
3. When announcing his violin player, the son of a noted Cajun singer, to the audience during a festival performance in southwest Louisiana, a 45-year-old Cajun band leader stated, "Now that's a coonass."

Among women, coonass was used in reference to other Cajun women four times, Cajun men twice, and four times for Cajuns in general or aspects of Cajun culture. Specific speech events included:

1. A 38-year-old Cajun female in southeast Louisiana was discussing her turbulent relationship with her mother during a conversation with the author. She ended her narrative by wryly noting, "coonass women," as though the term encapsulated the spirited nature of her family.
2. Two Cajun women in their mid-40s in a southwest Louisiana bar were telling the author about an upcoming free supper at the establishment. One listed various Cajun dishes that would be served. Her friend then added, "Good Coonass food."
3. During a conversation at her home in rural southwest Louisiana, a 40-year-old Cajun resident mentioned a male friend who is an accomplished outdoorsman. She paused to note, "You should meet [him]. Coonass! That's a Coonass to the max!"

Age does not appear to be a determining variable in the use of coonass, given the wide age-range represented in the speech events, at least among adults. This pattern has been borne out during years of ethnographic research by the author, which revealed the utilization of coonass by elderly Cajuns as frequently as among middle-aged and younger Cajuns.

As the speech events suggest, and following Dormon's (1984) and Walton's (1994) findings, coonass is more commonly used by men than women, and men appear more likely to use coonass in public discourse. In fact, all of the criticisms by ethnic organizations appear to have been directed against men, although the term was generally directed toward Cajuns in general. Furthermore, in some homes where the author stayed for extended periods, Cajun men used coonass regularly, often in the presence of their wives and other women. Their spouses,

on the other hand, rarely if ever used the term. In other households, however, both spouses regularly use coonass, or women may utilize the polite variant coonie. Speech events, and numerous field observations by the author, suggest that female use of coonass is more prevalent in informal contexts like bars and one-on-one conversations with men with whom they are well acquainted.

As speech events suggested, men and women evoke coonass in association with traits linked to Cajun ethnicity or those who demonstrate Cajun cultural competence. Cultural competence includes, for example, speaking Cajun French, speaking English with a pronounced Cajun accent, cooking Cajun food, hunting and fishing, involvement in the rural Mardi Gras celebration, or playing Cajun music. On numerous occasions during two decades of research in south Louisiana, the author has heard those (male or female) who demonstrate Cajun cultural competence called "real," "pure," "100 percent coonass," or "coonass to the core," just as readily as these modifiers are used in conjunction with Cajun.

Beyond recorded speech events, coonass is commonly found in other aspects of local discourse. The author has heard coonass used interchangeably with Cajun in ethnic jokes, for instance, those that articulate regional/cultural rivalries such as the genre of the Cajun/Coonass vs. the Texan/Aggie. In such narratives, one can hear different speakers or the same speaker alternating the use of coonass and Cajun from story to story or even in the same narrative.

CONTEMPORARY VARIATION IN ATTITUDES TOWARD COONASS

It seems clear that coonass can be utilized unconsciously in casual conversation among Cajuns and/or as an overt articulation of ethnicity in interactions with non-Cajuns. Given the tension between anti-coonass perspectives and the reality of continued presence of coonass in multiple levels of regional discourse, it is necessary to consider how people within the broader Cajun population articulate differing attitudes toward the suitability of the use of coonass.

The reports on two recently conducted, small "unscientific" polls directed toward Cajuns can shed some light on popular opinions of the use of coonass. The first poll was initiated by the southwest Louisiana publication, *The Daily Advertiser*. Of 100 people polled, 60 said they were not offended by the term coonass, while 40 claimed to be offended (Asteur.org). Asteur.org, a website devoted to Cajun language and culture, launched a survey of attitudes regarding the term coonass on its site and another Cajun-oriented site. Out of a combined 315 respondents, 61 percent stated they were not offended at all by coonass, 35.9 percent said they were highly offended, 2.1 percent claimed to be moderately offended, and 1 percent did not care (Asteur.org).

Asking individual Cajuns about the term elicits equally diverse responses. One Cajun male in his early 30s noted to the author that use of coonass "depends

on who says it," with the perspective that it is not a problem when the label is used in a favorable manner by another Cajun. On the other hand, a 60-year-old Cajun male, when questioned about the acceptability of using coonass, responded matter-of-factly that its utilization by non-Cajuns and Cajuns alike is not an issue because "that's what we are."

While participation in ethnic organizations by some Cajuns is linked to their opposition to the use of coonass, it is not always shared with members of their family. For example, the author knows a Cajun who is a retired educator, large landholder, and a founding member of the Cajun French Music Association. He opposes use of the term coonass, and in years of interacting with the gentleman, he has never been heard to use the term. However, several of his sons have only high-school educations and are only marginally involved with the CFMA. One of them, an oil field worker, frequently uses the term coonass.

There may be regional variation in Cajun attitudes about coonass. Walton (1994), for example, referenced a southeast Louisiana resident who stated that Cajuns in southwest Louisiana are more sensitive about the use of Coonass. This attitude extends to some other inhabitants of southeast Louisiana. For instance, during an interview with a middle-aged male who was a CFMA official at the time, the author asked his opinion about using coonass. He voiced indifference about its use, and considered that utilization of coonass is much less of an issue in southeast Louisiana than "out west" (i.e., southwestern Louisiana). There, in his opinion, using the term, especially by non-Cajuns, is less acceptable and may elicit violent responses. However, in 20 years of ethnographic research concentrated mostly in southwest Louisiana, the author has never witnessed Cajuns respond with hostility or physical violence upon hearing a Cajun or non-Cajun use coonass in their presence. The author has seen a few instances of brief, uncomfortable silences resulting from unknown non-Cajuns using the term. On the other hand, the author has witnessed numerous episodes in southwest Louisiana where non-Cajuns, especially acculturated Anglo-American residents of the area, used coonass in conversations with Cajun acquaintances, friends, and relatives without incident.

A clear regional dichotomy in attitudes toward coonass is suspect, considering the documented uses of coonass in speech events in southwest Louisiana, and southwest Louisiana-based polls indicating a modest majority of people who are not opposed to it. The perception of some southeastern Louisiana Cajuns that coonass is universally viewed as negative in southwest Louisiana may be influenced by recognition that ethnic revival is based primarily in southwest Louisiana. There, the most organized and publicized criticisms of the label have been initiated.

CONCLUSION

The origin of the term coonass remains unverified. The conasse theory, despite its shaky foundations, has taken root as the most commonly cited "origin myth," at least in part because it most effectively serves the purpose of those most opposed to coonass. As a likely initially ascriptive label, the term may have become popular because it encapsulated perspectives that Cajuns, as an exotic "other" emerging out of a multiracial, multicultural milieu, were quasi-white compared to Anglo-Americans. As a parallel to Henry's (1998) assertion about the emergence of the term Cajun in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ascription of coonass may have also represented semantically distancing Cajuns even further from their Acadian origins by the late twentieth century.

It seems that common utilization of coonass as part of intragroup discourse and in interaction with non-Cajuns preceded ethnic revival. It is apparent, however, that coonass has become more widely used through time, perhaps as an unintended consequence of ethnic revival in conjunction with regional promotions. Although impossible to quantify, coonass seems to have peaked in popularity in the 1970s and 1980s in terms of permeating all levels of regional discourse before widespread, organized opposition to it fully developed.

Economic commodification of the term, both externally and internally driven, has been a common process, as reflected in marketing of coonass merchandise like bumper stickers and T-shirts, and the use of coonass in books, movies, and song. These processes have moved the use of coonass from a primarily verbal realm to a visual one as well. However, this commodification is more limited in scope than the economic commodification of Cajun, as it is far more common to market the term coonass to Cajuns as an icon in and of itself. Some merchandise such as Temporary/Honorary Coonass certificates and Coonass Hot Sauce are exceptions to this rule, as they are marketed as novelty items to non-Cajuns. Furthermore, the contexts where coonass merchandise is offered are more limited compared to the marketing of Cajun.

Marketing has also contributed to facilitating positive attitudes toward coonass usage in non-economic contexts. In particular, social commodification of coonass occurred as it became a term that many Cajuns increasingly displayed as an ethnic icon, used in casual intragroup conversations, and used in non-economic oriented encounters with outsiders. The common, but far from universal, notion that coonass is only acceptable when used by Cajuns indicates the extent to which it has become social currency beyond economic contexts.

In contrast to other forms of commodification, political manipulation of coonass has been rare. Apart from Edwin Edward's well-criticized use of the term, coonass has not been visible in state level political discourse. In contrast,

politicians will freely evoke their Cajun identity and fluency in Cajun-French in the course of political campaigns.

Growing visibility of coonass sparked backlash by those who did not like the term and who preferred more respectable labels like Cajun or Acadian. Organizational opposition to coonass was bolstered by legal and legislative condemnation of the term. While coonass has been strongly opposed by some individuals, it is clear that outright censoring of it has been most effective when opposition came from formal organizations that used real and implied threats of various legal, economic, and social sanctions to achieve their goals.

Anti-coonass efforts have apparently reduced use of the term in some aspects of regional discourse beyond political discourse, for example, as among radio and television personalities. Some organizations and activists have claimed that such efforts have adversely affected marketing of coonass merchandise, although regular sales of coonass icons continue. In addition, the rise of the internet has opened new frontiers for the largely unregulated use of coonass.

Use of coonass has moved beyond the regional discourse and created additional controversy. The circulation of coonass materials outside of Louisiana has resulted in a major lawsuit alleging racial discrimination against African-Americans, a process extending beyond the controversy over use of the term in relation to whites in Louisiana. The debate over Coach Nick Saban's use of coonass is another example of debate that transcends the French Louisiana culture region, but is in keeping with traditional conflicts over the term.

Polls and clear evidence of popular usage of coonass by Cajuns indicate the limits of opposition to the term. But there are often complex patterns of utilization of coonass linked to class, gender, context, and involvement in ethnic organizations, although there is no consensus of opinion within any particular group. It is clear that coonass is most often used by adult Cajun men, especially working class men. There are several explanations for widespread use of coonass within the working class. Acceptance of coonass, or at least lack of overt opposition to its usage in the past and at present, suggests the same process of internalization of an unsavory label term that can be found in other ethnic groups when many members are not in a position to contest it because of low minority status.

As Dormon (1984) suggests, reveling in the use of coonass by blue-collar Cajuns may also serve as conscious resistance to the effort of revivalists that are interpreted as elitism by some working class Cajuns. In fact, an unintended consequence of discourse against coonass may have been the creation of even greater resolve by some to continue using the term in association with Cajun French ethnicity. Likewise, following Walton (2003), their perspectives could also be viewed as asserting coonass as an alternative to Cajun because the latter label is viewed by some as having been sanitized and co-opted for ethnic tourism

and commercial benefit. But it is difficult to describe use of coonass as simply a reaction to commercialization of local culture when the term has achieved part of its high visibility through processes similar to those which economically commodified Cajun and Acadian.

The speech events and other data suggest that self-ascription of coonass goes beyond men. Coonass and its variant, coonie, are commonly used by adult women of all ages, although to a lesser extent than men. It seems that frequent gender-based self-censorship does not necessarily indicate a rejection of the meaning of the term as a reference to Cajun and Cajun culture, but rather suggests a reluctance to depart from polite female speech in mixed company and in formal public settings.

Age is not a limiting variable in terms of the use of coonass. In particular, elderly Cajuns who are the parents and grandparents of the young working-class men discussed by Dormon and Walton utilize coonass regularly. The issue of younger people of Cajun descent using coonass to semantically distance themselves from their "real Cajun" parents and grandparents has been raised by Walton. However, the older Cajun/Acadian tradition bearers from whom, it has been asserted, younger people feel distanced, actually share in the coonass discourse in both ascription and self-ascription. From a generational perspective, it is difficult to disentangle the meaning of coonass from Cajun, although Walton's (2003) study hinted at a nascent trend in the use of coonass to illustrate being "less French" than older Cajuns in southeast Louisiana. Again, this echoes Henry's (1998) discussion of Cajun being used to semantically separate some French Louisiana people from their Acadian origins. In the case of coonass, however, this distancing may be occurring through the agency of younger Cajuns who perceive such differences.

Clearly some Cajuns are opposed to use of coonass by anyone, but especially by non-Cajuns, with the most visible opposition coming from middle- and upper-class activists. But neither is there unanimity among working class Cajuns about the acceptability of coonass, even when it is viewed as a label parallel to Cajun. In this case, opposition to its use by some in the lower classes can be viewed as both influenced by the ideology of formal organizations, grassroots resistance, or simply traditional individual opposition to what they have always perceived as being negative, externally imposed labelization.

There are indications that use of coonass, even by non-Cajuns, is not as problematic as some propose, considering the comments by many Cajuns and numerous instances of such usage witnessed by the author. Furthermore, the popularity of items like "Honorary Coonass Certificates" suggest a willingness by some Cajuns to permit non-Cajuns to partially participate in the discourse of coonass as active consumers of the label. This is in clear contrast with the term

nigger, in which only passive consumption of the term by non-African Americans is tolerated.

It is interesting to consider that some negative reaction by Cajuns to the use of coonass by non-Cajuns may be less a response to the term than a reaction to negative modifiers, such as the "damn coonasses" comment cited earlier. In some instances, use of the term by non-Cajuns seems to be commonly tolerated even by those who oppose its use. Therefore, social commodification and monopolization of coonass may be perceived as following a logic similar to that noted by Kennedy for nigger. But there are limits to this process since, unlike nigger, coonass is not universally taboo to non-Cajuns and reactions to it are less virulent.

The greatest point of distinction between coonass and other controversial labels lays in its literal meaning. Many derogatory labels evolved as such because they were imbued with negativity not inherent in the word. For example, nigger's root meaning in Latin is "black" and it was originally used as a neutral physical descriptor for Sub-Saharan Africans (Kennedy 2002). However, it became derogatory as used by whites during the colonial-era racialization of slavery and post-slavery discrimination. "Kanak" represents a similar example of the process by which an initially neutral native term becomes negatively charged when linked by Europeans to stigmatized native societies. Both nigger and kanak were later transformed into labels with differing meanings and values in intragroup discourse and were commodified and monopolized in various ways.

Likewise, the term redneck is not inherently negative, but came to be viewed as such when it encapsulated the rural poor and working class and associated cultural elements. Its meaning has been inverted as the label was economically and socially commodified in the course of glorifying particular rustic ways of being white. However, redneck retains ambiguities since the label can still be used as an epithet to portray someone as less educated, less intelligent, and unsophisticated, albeit often based simply on the fact that they do not share the same regional or class background or cultural aesthetics as the speaker.

Neither does Cajun have a literal negative meaning, as it simply represents de-gallicization of Acadien/'Cadien that was often used negatively to distinguish lower class Francophones of perceived dubious racial and ethnic origin from Anglo-Americans and higher class Acadians and Creole (Henry 1998). Cajun was only later transformed into a universally positive ethnic label through processes that rehabilitated the term and used it to impose homogeneity on the theme of an imagined community, and on a historically and regionally diverse population. Coonass appears to have ridden on the coattails of Cajun in terms of entering the regional discourse, albeit sometimes as an unwanted passenger, as a superficially homogenizing label. However, in contrast to Cajun and other previously discussed examples of evolution of ethnic labels, coonass

is a contradiction. It both encapsulates elements of traditional culture that are now valued by many, while also representing an extreme in labelization because its literal meaning is both vulgar and similar to the epithet, coon. Thus, it is impossible to fully sanitize the term, although coonie represents some attempt at rendering the term more polite.

A significant finding here is that the evolution of coonass has not been a simple uniform and linear process in terms of meaning and usage, and there is little agreement about its precise meaning or suitability in regional discourse. Therefore, at the macro-level, a label such as coonass, like many other terms, can be a homogenizing "brand name" for a historically diverse population, but this process is fraught with ambiguity and conflict when one looks below the linguistic veneer. To paraphrase Kennedy's (2002) assessment of the term nigger, coonass can be viewed as simultaneously helping to construct a contemporary Cajun community while also dividing it with dissent over the label that articulates diversity within the group. Given the continued controversy over the use of coonass and the potential for litigation resulting from use of the term, better understanding of the various nuances in meaning of coonass and the manner that they may change through time and in different contexts is needed.

This study can serve as a basis for further research on coonass. For example, the speech events used here were derived from mostly adult male speech contexts or small group male/female interaction. It would be interesting to explore patterns in utilization of the term in exclusively female speech domains. On a related note, if some young male Cajuns do in fact use coonass as a marker of generational distinction from older Cajuns, or as resistance to the sanitization and economic commodification of Cajun as posited by Walton (2003), then what is the preferred label for younger women who share these perspectives while opposing the use of coonass?

Age is another issue. Data for this article were drawn from mature adult speech. More study is needed of how the term coonass is used by very young adults or children, and whether their attitudes toward it differ from their elders. Such inquiries would be important for identifying future trends in the use of the term. Class is yet another issue that merits further exploration. It seems clear that many in the middle and upper classes who are involved with ethnic organizations are officially opposed to the use of coonass. It would be interesting to explore the extent to which the term may be utilized by these individuals in informal discourse outside of ethnic organization-oriented contexts. Use of coonass by middle- and upper-class Cajuns not involved in ethnic organizations is another potential avenue of investigation. Last, it appears that coonass is a pan-French Louisiana phenomenon with essentially the same meaning as Cajun at the macro-level. However, there may be regional nuances in perspectives on Cajun versus coonass that invite further study.

NOTE

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