



Episode 702, Story 3: Creole Poems

Gwen: our last story explores a subversive piece of literature, from Antebellum New Orleans. Especially in the years just before the civil war, the United States was a nation brutally divided by race. Out of a population of 12 million – a third were slaves, consigned by the color of their skin to a life of oppression and harsh labor. Yet in the port of New Orleans, a community of mixed-race people had carved out a unique place for themselves, owning businesses, traveling overseas and publishing their own newspapers. A faded manuscript has recently been unearthed that may shed light on how this extraordinary community grew, prospered and eventually helped challenge the cruelties of slavery. The heirloom belongs to Charlie Martinez of Chicago, Illinois.

Charlie: This manuscript has been in my family for ages, perhaps a 150 years, but no one knows the story behind it.

Gwen: I'm starting my investigation with a few questions for Charlie. So Charlie, what do you have to show me?

Charlie: I've got a manuscript, Gwen, that's been in our family for a very long time.

Gwen: Well, it is old. It's all written in French isn't it?

Charlie: Yes. I can't read French so I don't know what's in it.

Gwen: Well, I can, but it will be hard to read some of this. They're very faint. Do you know anything else about this?

Charlie: My brother had seen it in my grandmother's dresser. And then, when she died, my father gave it to my brother. They seem to be poems and songs

Gwen: One name in the manuscript caught Charlie's eye... a female, Sylvanie Duplessis.

Charlie: You'll see Duplessis in the margin right here.



Gwen: Although his family tree includes a “Duplesses” clan several generations ago – there’s no mention of a female named Sylvanie. Do you know anything else about this early family?

Charlie: They all lived in New Orleans. All of them were listed as either black or mulatto, which means they were mixed race, which was very common in New Orleans at that time.

Gwen: Charlie, tell me what you’d like for me to find out about this manuscript.

Charlie: Well, we’d like to know what is this manuscript?

Gwen: I’ll have to take both of these with me, but I’ll be very careful with them. The paper itself seems to be very high quality, which suggests it was made before the civil war when the quality of paper went down as it was mass produced. There’s 70 pages, bound together with a simple string binding. I would say probably hand made. It’s very difficult to read. Much of it appears to be romantic-era poetry. One poem is called “Au Bord du Lac,” which translates as “Beside the Lake.” This is smudged I would say this is...

“come oh my loved one
the breeze has calmed
the day ends . . . “

Gwen: The ink is fairly faded light brown ink. Every few pages there’s something in either blue or red ink. They seem to be corrections of spelling and changes in the words. Then there’s this sweet little doodle of a flower and something else. Looks almost childlike. I’ve never heard of any of these poets. So the first thing for me to do is to find out more about these writers. I’m searching the names and several appear in a book titled, *Creole Echoes*. Here’s Dalcour. A free man of color, born in New Orleans. Free Creoles of color. Hmm. Here’s this phrase again. Liatou is a Creole of color. What does this “Creole of color” mean? “Creole”, yes. But I’ve never heard that expression. Here’s the distinction. “Creole” first meant “native-born,” then mixed-race. One group, concentrated in Louisiana called themselves “Creoles of color” to describe the offspring of unions between white men and women of color... most of whom were free. Charlie said his ancestors were mixed-race, or mulatto, from New Orleans. Some of these poets also had mixed ancestry. I



sent digital images of the manuscript to Brooklyn College literature professor, Regine Latortue, who studies the French-speaking African Diaspora.

Regine: I feel like I'm handling a precious document.

Gwen: Creoles of color were a unique community in Louisiana in the 19th century.

Regine: They wanted to be looked at and viewed as a separate group, you know, not white and not black, but quite distinct from them.

Gwen: Until the US purchase of Louisiana in 1803 – New Orleans had been a French, and then a Spanish colonial city.¹ Regine explains that its Creole population was inspired by the radical ideas of the French revolution, and of the slave uprising in the French colony of Haiti.

Regine: A lot of people traveled back and forth you know, from Haiti to Louisiana, to France, that produced that very special class and group of people at the turn of the century.

Gwen: The Creoles of color in Louisiana carved out a special niche for themselves. They enjoyed rights and social privileges unheard of anywhere else in the south. They could own businesses, travel, and even possess slaves. But, like all people of color in America, they could not vote, attend public schools, hold public office, or marry whites.

Regine: They sort of felt entrapped, in an English-speaking country, where their gifts were not appreciated.

Gwen: Regine doesn't know what our manuscript is and she can't account for its odd markings. But she has made an important discovery.

Regine: This is a translation of the 1845 publication of *Les Cenelles*. As you see it's a collection of poems by Creole writers of the early 19th century...

¹ Per Charles, until the US purchase of Louisiana in 1803 – New Orleans had been a French colonial city
In 1762, France had ceded Louisiana to Spain www.gatewayno.com/history/lapurchase.html



Gwen: She explains that, in 1845, a Creole of color named Armand Lanusse had published *Les Cenelles*. The first anthology of poetry by writers of color in the US. *Au Bord du Lac*. That's one of the poems in our manuscript.

Regine: It is one of five poems that I've identified, both in the manuscript that you brought, and the 1845 publication of *Les Cenelles*.

Gwen: So you're suggesting there could be some direct connection between our manuscript and *Les Cenelles*?

Regine: There is a definite connection. It is extremely exciting that they are in both versions.

Gwen: So there are five cases where the same poet's work appears in both manuscripts... including Lanusse, Dalcour, Liatou...all Creoles of color. Regine suggests I head to New Orleans, where the historic "New Orleans collection" houses the world's largest body of French Creole writing. I sent the manuscript on ahead to historian Dana Kress for evaluation.

Gwen: Very nice to meet you. So what do you think?

Dana: Gwen, you've brought me a manuscript that's very rare and very special.

Gwen: Rare in what sense?

Dana: It's very rare to have any collection written by creoles of color from this period.

Gwen: He's made a significant discovery. Along with the romantic era poetry, he's identified some radical writings.

Dana: In fact some of them could be considered almost revolutionary at the time. *Le Negrier* – that means "The Slave Ship." And it's a work that would have been dangerous to possess in New Orleans pre-civil war.



Gwen: It was written in the early 1800s by a white Frenchman. I'm certainly surprised to see it here. Regine had told me that, throughout the Antebellum south, it was illegal to publish anything that might incite a slave rebellion.

Dana: It begins... he was stolen away from the shores of Guinea in Africa. He comes to Louisiana and in Louisiana he waters the ground with his tears and his sweat and he refuses to eat. And one day he refuses to work anymore. And the master comes in and says "go work" and he says "no, I choose to be a free man and I'd rather die as a free man than live as a slave."

Gwen: That's very powerful during those years. I thought it was illegal.

Dana: It was absolutely illegal, because this was considered to be the sort of document that could lead to slave revolt. So whoever was responsible for putting this book together was really going out on a limb at the period. There was a whole group of Creole writers and men of letters who did take those chances and who did stand up to the abuse of power that you had. Now I have had the library here bring out a manuscript because it reminds me very much of the manuscript that you have found. This is a collection of poetry by a man named pierce Aristide Desdunes .the writing is very similar to what you see in the manuscript that you've brought me.

Gwen: The Desdunes manuscript also includes romantic poems, and other more radical writings.

Dana: Within this document there are many, many references to revolution and revolutionary thought.

Gwen: Dana explains that the author of this manuscript had attended a private school in New Orleans – the Couvent School.

Dana: The Couvent School was a very special place. It was a school for orphans of color and also for any of the Creoles of color who wanted to give a very good education to their children. There are writings in both works by the Creole intelligencia of the period and there are so many connections that everything leads to that school.

Gwen: I'm on my way to see a local historian Molly Michell who has researched and written about



the Couvent School. It shut down in the early 1900s, so I'm meeting her at the Ursuline Convent, where the school's archives are held. So how was this school founded?

Molly: Well the free people of color in New Orleans were actually very committed to education in the Antebellum period. And one woman in particular, a wealthy free woman of color named Marie Couvent, left money and property in her will for the establishment of a school for free children of color who were poor or orphans.

Gwen: Molly says when the Couvent School opened in 1848; it was the first of its kind – providing an education for Creoles of color – both orphans and children of wealthy families.

Molly: There was no tuition if you couldn't afford to pay. But if you could afford to pay, you would pay a certain of tuition. You had French speaking children, English speaking children, girls, boys, Catholics, non-Catholics. They were educated in French and in English. And there seems to have been an emphasis on writing, composition ...the literary arts.

Gwen: I tell Molly about our manuscript. She explains that Armand Lanusse... the editor of the collection *Les Cenelles*, in which so many of our poems appear... was also the long-time principal at the Couvent School.

Molly: Armand Lanusse was committed really to the ideals of the revolutionary era, to notions of political equality. Things that weren't available to them as free people of color before the civil war.

Gwen: Molly thinks our manuscript could be a copy book from the school, used to practice good spelling and penmanship.

Molly: There seems to be some corrections in some places. A teacher might have made those corrections. Here you see some doodling in the margins, little flowers. Younger sibling could have gotten a hold of it.

Gwen: Now here on page 5 is very faintly, Duplessis and later on there's Rouzan. How can I find out if they were students at the Couvent School?



Molly: Well students who were being considered for admission into the school would sometimes appear in the minutes of the board of directors. So we might try there first. Here are some of the record books from the school. You can start going through these.

Gwen: Okay, I'll take the top two. The school minutes span some thirty years between 1850 and 1880. Unfortunately, there's no index. It seems like we've been searching for hours when Molly comes across a lead.

Molly: I think I found something... here's a Duplessis, his name is Sylvain, he was 9 years old. His mother was petitioning for his admission to the Couvent School in 1857.

Gwen: The boy's name is very close. But the name in Charlie's manuscript is female - Sylvanie Duplessis. I'm checking some online census records to see if I can figure this out... hmm, this is intriguing. I may be on to something. Back with Charlie, I tell him his manuscript includes 19th century romantic – era poems first published in *Les Cenelles* – and other poems which could have gotten the person who copied them in a lot of trouble.

Charlie: There's chills going up and down my spine.

Gwen: I tell Charlie we'd found a nine year old boy in the school records whose name was almost identical to the girl in his manuscript. I was really frustrated - the name was so close to Sylvanie but not the same. And then I discovered a census record from 1850. A Duplessis family with two children Sylvain and Sylvanie, a brother and sister two years apart. if it's a coincidence, it's a good one. That may well be the Sylvanie Duplessis who wrote her name in your manuscript.

Charlie: That's terrific.

Gwen: It's also possible that the two of them both wrote in this book because children would often share these books. The paper was expensive and they would work closely together.

Charlie: I'm impressed, very impressed with this.

Gwen: Charlie's family heirloom is almost certainly a rare copy book from the historic Couvent



School – showing the range of literature and radical ideas taught to the students.

Charlie: This is altogether different from what I expected. I expected it to be just some poems and stuff somebody copied out of a French book, and it turns out it's much more important than that, much more real. I can imagine that the discussions in class, you can only wonder about, which they could not have outside the class with anybody else, how could they establish such a school at that time.

Gwen: We can't be sure how this Duplessis family is related to Charlies' family. But since he knows this New Orleans Duplessis ancestors were Creoles of color, there's a strong likelihood they too were connected to the Couvent School. So what do you think you'll do with this manuscript now?

Charlie: I think I know what's going to happen. My brother will be very excited about this, and he's talked about donating it to the university down in New Orleans, but I think we have to look in to it more.