



University of
St Andrews

**‘Lâche pas la patate’: Language and Identity in
Cajun French Poetry
(Zachary Richard and Jean Arceneaux)**



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Pour mes grands-parents et mes arrière-grands-parents :
On parle toujours français ici.



(Left) Ave Lee David Vining (1929-2019), a ‘prairie Cajun’ whose first language was French.

(Right) Woodzay ‘Woody’ Joseph Vining (1929-2020), a ‘bayou Cajun’ whose parents spoke French fluently.



Rudolph Vining photographed by his son, Woodzay ‘Woody’ Vining during a crab-trapping trip along the Atchafalaya River in Louisiana during the mid-1980s.

Abstract

‘Lâche pas la patate’: a Cajun French expression meaning ‘don’t give up’, is used in reference to preserving French in Louisiana. In 1980, the first collection of poetry written in Louisiana French was published by a group of young Louisianans who wanted to prove that their French was a language of poetry and creation. Two of these authors, Zachary Richard and Jean Arceneaux, would later become the first two ‘Poètes lauréats de la Louisiane française’. Using post-structuralist theories of language, dwelling, and identity, this dissertation will analyse Richard and Arceneaux’s poetic corpus in three levels of approach: *la poésie d’antérieur*, *la poésie d’intérieur*, and *la poésie pour les à-venir*.

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To those in Louisiana who inspired me and selflessly gave of their time, energy, and knowledge: Warren Perrin, Barry Ancelet, Ron Bodin, Nathalie Dajko, Marlene Breaux, and Le Cercle Francophone in Thibodeaux.

To Zachary Richard and Jean Arceneaux: Your poetry is a gift and a rallying cry for those of us wanting to connect to our heritage and preserve it for generations to come.

To my family and friends: Writing a dissertation is not a linear process and so I appreciate the love and support you have shown me throughout the twists and turns. To my friends, you fill me with joy every single day. To Mom and Dad, thank you for providing me with the strength, courage, and bravement to see this to the end. To Aunt Tammy, thank you for providing me with our family photographs. You are a custodian of our history and I hope this dissertation does some measure of justice to the Vinings and the Davids.

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Introduction

There is madness in trying to preserve a language against the forces of nature, politics, and disinterest. And yet...

In 1980, Zachary Richard and Jean Arceneaux, along with six other young Louisianans, came together to put to paper their language and identity in a collection of poems called *Cris sur le Bayou: naissance d'une poésie acadienne en Louisiane*.¹ And like birth, the poetry's cry was a sign of life. A sign that French, in all its variations in Louisiana, had survived the forces of exile, of Americanization, of dispossession, and that there were those that would use the language to create. Almost forty years after a Louisiana State Constitution change mandated English as the language of instruction in public schools, effectively elinguating the native French speakers of the region, these poets aimed to prove 'que le français-cajun pouvait être une langue écrite si l'on voulait bien se donner la peine de l'écrire'.² Jean Arceneaux, the literary persona of the Louisianan academic Barry Ancelet, is according to Jean-François Caparroy, 'le réseau complexe d'une identité qui, se elle a enfin droit de cité dans l'espace poétique'.³ Zachary Richard and Jean Arceneaux would go on to become the first two 'Poètes lauréats de la Louisiane française' when the prize was established in 2014.⁴ Their subsequent and respective collections, *Faire Récolte*⁵, and *Suite du Loup*⁶, further developed the themes of *Cris sur le Bayou* while simultaneously establishing their own voice and self-identification in Cajun French. By juxtaposing Richard and Arceneaux in this dissertation, the poetic milieu becomes a meeting ground, a site of exile and creation, and a reflection of the other in the writing of the self.

¹ Jean Arceneaux and others, *Cris sur le bayou : naissance d'une poésie acadienne en Louisiane* (Les Editions Intermède Inc, 1980) <<http://archive.org/details/crissurlebayouna0000unse>> (Here after referenced as *Cris*).

² David Cheramie, 'La Nouvelle Littérature de la Louisiane française', *Francophonies: création et réalité d'expression française* Acte II, (1993), p. 304 [currently unavailable] as cited by Dianne Guenin-Lelle, 'The Birth of Cajun Poetry: An Analysis of Cris Sur Le Bayou: Naissance d'une Poésie Acadienne En Louisiane', *The French Review*, 70.3 (1997), 439–51.

³ Jean-François Caparroy, *Poésie Francophone de Louisiane à la fin du XXe siècle: complexité linguistique et clandestinité dans les oeuvres de Arceneaux, Cheramie et Clifton* (Here after: *Poésie Francophone de Louisiane à la fin du XXe siècle*), (Peter Lang, 2017), p. 137.

⁴ LEHNEWS, 'Interview: Dana Kress on French-Language Poet Laureate Zachary Richard', *A Blog from the Staff of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities*, (2014) <<https://lehnews.wordpress.com/2014/03/11/interview-dana-kress-on-french-language-poet-laureate-zachary-richard/>> [accessed 14 February 2024].

⁵ Zachary Richard, *Faire Récolte* (Les Éditions Perce-Neige, 1997). <<http://archive.org/details/fairerecolte0000rich>> [accessed 28 January 2024].

⁶ Jean Arceneaux, *Suite du Loup* (Les Editions Perce-Neige, 1998) (Here after referenced as *Suite*).

Analysing these three texts, this dissertation will look at how Richard and Arceneaux use poetry to construct their Cajun French identity from a disparate linguistic and cultural past and present, and simultaneously create a point of return for future readers. The analysis will consist of three levels of approach: *la poésie d'antérieur*, *la poésie d'intérieur*, and *la poésie pour les à-venirs*. These approaches will be used to structure the sections around content, language, and audience, respectively. Firstly, Friederich Nietzsche and Giorgio Agamben's considerations of 'le contemporain' are employed in *la poésie d'antérieur* to consider the content of Richard and Arceneaux's poems, such as territorial and linguistic dispossession. Secondly, in *la poésie d'intérieur*, the relation between language and identity is deconstructed using Jacques Derrida's, *Monolinguisme de l'Autre*. Then the notion of a poem as a site of exile and creation is proposed to support how Richard and Arceneaux go about writing in Cajun French, which was primarily an oral language. The final section, *la poésie pour les à-venirs*, assesses the intended audience for Richard and Arceneaux's poetry by asking the questions: Who are they writing for? And has this audience already arrived?

Before unpacking these three notions, a brief contextualization of French in Louisiana is needed to appreciate the task with which Zachary Richard and Jean Arceneaux were presented in writing their poetry. French in Louisiana does not exist as a homogenous language any more than there exists a standard French spoken throughout all of the Francophone world. Carl Brasseaux and Joseph Dunn identified no fewer than twenty-three distinct Francophone groups to have settled in Louisiana in the 18th, 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.⁷ However in popular culture, the three major French-speaking communities of Louisiana are considered to be the Cajuns, the Louisiana Creoles of colour, and American Indians, such as the Houma.⁸ This delineation between the French varieties, the term 'Cajun French' is not without its issues. Cajun French, which is spoken predominately in Southern Louisiana, is neither a creole nor a pidgin, but rather a distinctive French variety which has been influenced at the lexical level by English and other varieties of

⁷ Nathan Rabalais, 'Acadie(s) Divergente(s) : Langue, Identité et Poésie En Louisiane et Au Canada Maritime', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 21.4 (2017), 431–39.

<<https://doi.org/10.1080/17409292.2017.1432335>> [accessed 7 January 2024], p. 433-434.

⁸ Mathilde Köstler, *Cajun Literature and Cajun Collective Memory* (Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2023)

<<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110772715>> [accessed 7 January 2024], p. 10.

French.⁹ Nathan Rabalais critiques the French movement in Louisiana, particularly during the ‘Cajun Renaissance’, as having galvanised around the concept of a homogenous, ethno-racial identity of ‘Cajun’.¹⁰ The danger of using language to codify an ethno-racial identity is that it forces homogeneity where there is in fact multiplicity. Even amongst Cajun French speakers, the two main camps being Bayou and Prarie, there exists great variety in vocabulary, accent, and oral tradition. Therefore, the perceived homogeneity of Cajun French in Louisiana poses an analytical challenge for a dissertation intending to explore the construction of identity in poetry written in ‘Cajun French’. However, because Zachary Richard and Jean Arceneaux both write in French and self-identify as ‘Cajun’, albeit using distinctive orthographies of the ethnonym, the term ‘Cajun French’ is employed. The use of the quantifier ‘Cajun French’ is not to propose that the Cajun identity as a whole is inherently linked to a static language or specific cultural/historical legacy. Rather, the aim of this dissertation is to elucidate the inherent complexity of identity and the role which language plays in the constant negotiation of self-hood as seen in Richard and Arceneaux’s poetry. The diversity of French spoken and written in Louisiana reflects a rich cultural and linguistic history which should be protected. As Barry Ancelet said, ‘On perd seulement quand on soustrait, jamais quand on ajoute’.¹¹

La poésie d’antérieur

During Giorgio Agamben’s inaugural lesson on Theoretical Philosophy given at the Università Iuav di Venezia, he posed the question: ‘Qu’est ce que le contemporain?’.¹² For Agamben’s contemporary, ‘le présent n’est rien d’autre que la part de non-vécu dans tout vécu, ce qui empêche l’accès au présent est précisément la masse de ce que, pour une raison ou pour une autre (son caractère traumatique, sa trop grande proximité) nous n’avons pas réussi à vivre en lui’.¹³ Here Agamben distinguishes between the past and the present, the lived and the non-lived experience for which the contemporary, in being cognizant of both, can inhabit neither. The duality of the

⁹ Sylvie Dubois and Megan Melancon, ‘Cajun Is Dead - Long Live Cajun: Shifting from a Linguistic to a Cultural Community’, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 1.1 (1997), p. 65; Köstler, p. 7.

¹⁰ Rabalais, p. 432.

¹¹ Barry Ancelet, ‘Valoriser la variabilité pour préserver une identité linguistique’, *Francophonies d’Amérique*, 26, 2008, 135–48 <https://doi.org/10.7202/037979ar> [accessed 13 February 2024], p. 143.

¹² Giorgio Agamben, *Qu’est-ce que le contemporain?*, trans. by Maxime Rovere, (Dijon-Quetigny: Darantiere, 2008).

¹³ Agamben, pp. 35-36.

contemporary poet is possible because the poem is a ‘non lieu’, a liminal space of deconstruction of temporality and construction of the self in relation to the other and to the past. In ‘Larguer nos paroles’, Arceneaux exemplifies his role as a contemporary in lamenting: ‘Détaché, détaché de moi-même, je pouvais nous regarder, comme si j’avais pour un moment été accordé deux vies à la fois’.¹⁴ This ‘first’ life could be that of the present where Richard and Arceneaux reference each other in their poetry: ‘on a mêlé nos encres dans une même plume/pour écrire un texte hors du temps et de l’espace’.¹⁵ Here Arceneaux establishes the concept of a ‘non lieu poétique’ because the text of the poem can exist outwith the work’s respective time and place.

The ‘second’ life is the identity which the poets construct in relation to the past. Two defining events from which both authors pull a collective memory of trauma are Le Grand Dérangement of the Acadians in 1755 and the linguistic dispossession of the Cajun community in Louisiana. On the eve of what would be known as the Seven Years War, the British illegally ordered the deportation of the Acadians from what is modern-day Nova Scotia. Between 1764 and 1786, thousands of exiled Acadians established settlements in Louisiana.¹⁶ In referencing this event in ‘Je suis Cadien’, Arceneaux demonstrates his inability to ‘prendre pied dans son entour, faute d’avoir reconstruit une temporalité, une mémoire où trouver place’.¹⁷ Arceneaux traces his ‘Cadien’ identity through four distinct time periods by first establishing his French heritage, ‘Longtemps passé, j’étais Français’, then positioning himself as a contemporary to Le Grand Dérangement, ‘Je suis devenu Acadien’, then as an exile in Louisiana, ‘Je suis devenu Cadien’, then as a victim of forced assimilation, ‘je suis devenu un coonass’.¹⁸ Finally, in the present, Arceneaux affirms his identity: ‘Je suis Cadien’.¹⁹ Similarly in ‘Réveille’, Richard fractures temporality by writing about Le Grand Dérangement in both the present and past tenses. At first he implores the ‘hommes Acadien’ to ‘Réveille Réveille’, then he recounts how, ‘J’ai vu ma belle

¹⁴ Arceneaux, ‘Larguer nos paroles’, *Suite*, p. 41.

¹⁵ Arceneaux, ‘Larguer nos paroles’, *Suite*, p. 41.

¹⁶ Adeline Vasquez-Parra, ‘Le Grand Dérangement | Patrimoines Partagés - France Amériques’, *Bibliothèque Nationale de France Amériques*, May 2021 <<https://heritage.bnf.fr/france-ameriques/fr/grand-derangement-article>> [accessed 31 March 2024].

¹⁷ Caparroy, p. 220.

¹⁸ ‘Coonass’: (anglais) injure vulgaire employée par les Américains pour désigner les Acadiens; signifie ‘cul de raton laveur’ *Cris*, p. 141.

¹⁹ Bertille Beaulieu, ‘Affirmation de l’identité dans la littérature cadienne’, *Francophonies d’Amérique*, 6, (1996) <<https://doi.org/10.7202/1004631ar>>, p. 146; Arceneaux, ‘Je suis Cadien’, *Suite*, pp. 93-104.

maison,/était mise aux flammes,/Et moi j'su resté orphelin/Orphelin de l'Acadie'.²⁰ Richard as 'le contemporain' exists in both time periods simultaneously and so uses the 'non lieu poétique' to define himself, 'Orphelin de l'Acadie', in relation to the territorial dispossession of his ancestors.

The 'English-Only laws', including the 1921 change to the Louisiana State constitution, provide a clear example of the linguistic dispossession of the Cajun French speaker. Section 12 established: 'The general exercises in the public schools shall be conducted in the English language'.²¹ In practice this modification placed a tangible interdiction on Cajun French and children who spoke French at school. Richard and Arceneaux's identification in relation to this linguistic loss recalls Nietzsche's second consideration on the contemporary as 'l'inactuelle', elaborating: 'qu'elle cherche à comprendre comme un mal, un dommage et une carence quelque chose dont notre époque tire justement orgueil, à savoir sa culture historique'.²² Like the physical exile from territory of Acadia, the school ground became a site of linguistic exile for children punished by writing 'ces sacrées lignes. I will not speak French on the school grounds'.²³ The cultural trauma of the exile of the Acadians and the English-Only laws was further exacerbated by the accompanying forced assimilation of subsequent generations. As Dianne Guenin-Lelle explains, 'Assimilation, then, is by no means a peaceful, natural occurrence, but rather a deliberate act of aggression, a forced entry into the most private recesses of the oppressed culture'.²⁴ Arceneaux's 'Ouragan I' illustrates this violent entry into the intimate linguistic space of the Cajun French speaker: 'Le père est tourmenté par la brutalité/De l'attaque sur le foyer qu'il essaie de préserver'.²⁵ The weight of 'brutalité' and 'attaque' contrasts with intimacy of the 'foyer' and the associated connotations of safety.

Returning to 'le contemporain', Agamben proposes a second definition: 'le contemporain est celui qui fixe le regard sur son temps pour en percevoir non les lumières, mais l'obscurité'.²⁶ What Richard and Arceneaux uniquely bring to *la poésie d'antérieur* as contemporaries to the past is the

²⁰ Richard, 'Réveille', *Cris*, p. 113.

²¹ Louisiana, Constitution of the State of Louisiana : Adopted in Convention at the City of Baton Rouge, June 18, 1921, 1921 <<http://archive.org/details/cu31924030492163>> [accessed 24 January 2024], p. 93.

²² Arceneaux, 'Je suis Cadien', *Suite*, pp. 93-104; Agamben, p. 9.

²³ Arceneaux, *ibid.*, p. 96.

²⁴ Guenin-Lelle, p. 446.

²⁵ Arceneaux, 'Ouragan I', *Suite*, p. 45.

²⁶ Agamben, p. 19.

illumination of the ‘obscurité’ of the linguistic ‘génosucide’ by their own community. In ‘La Vérité va peut-être te faire du mal’, Richard reveals that Cajuns were ‘[v]ictimes de nous-mêmes/étranglés à nos propres mains’.²⁷ The English-Only laws which were implemented in schools were only possible as a result of this génosucide: ‘Les school boards étaient composés/ De Babineaux, d’Arceneaux et de Leblanc/ C’est-tu des noms Américains, ça?’.²⁸ By revealing this ‘obscurité’, the final two lines of ‘Réveille’ take on new meaning. Rather than refer to the initial ‘récolte’ which Richard implores the Acadians to save; instead, the verses state: ‘Réveille Réveille hommes Acadiens/Pour sauver l’héritage’, conveying that it is in fact the cultural heritage of the French language which Richard wishes his ancestors had preserved. Moreover, Richard interjects the English, ‘goddams’, in the French verses of ‘Réveille’, thus making it unclear if Richard is referring solely to the British soldiers of the late 1700s or to the Americanized Cajuns who betrayed their language.

To a certain extent, by writing their poems in Cajun French Richard and Arceneaux are absolved of the guilt of this ‘génosucide’ because they are preserving the language. However, Richard and Arceneaux self-identify as the enemy, specifically using the imagery of the mirror: ‘Regardant dans le miroir,/(pardon, je veux dire ‘glace!’)/j’ai vu l’ennemi’.²⁹ Though Richard is not intending to betray the language, one social consequence of the ‘English Only’ laws and forced assimilation more generally, is that children cannot speak to their grandparents in French.³⁰ Richard must force himself to use Old French terms of his grandmother’s ‘langue du roi’ rather than standard French because he too is a ‘[v]ictime de nous-mêmes’. If the mirror for Richard revealed the face of the enemy who had ‘lâcher la patate’ of Cajun French, the mirror for Arceneaux is a challenge to those of the past. In *Suite du loup*, Arceneaux explores the wolf as a metaphor for the linguistic schizophrenia of a French speaker in an Americanized Louisiana: ‘Le loup s’est coupé la patte/Sur un morceau de miroir cassé [...] The son of a bitch is dangerous now. He’s seen himself change. He knows’.³¹ The shift from French to English in the poem reflects his transformation and the duality of the Cajun identity in an Americanized Louisiana. Having cut himself on the mirror which

²⁷ Richard, ‘La Vérité va peut-être te faire du mal’, *Faire Récolte*, p. 115.

²⁸ Arceneaux, ‘Colonihilisme’, *Cris*, p. 26.

²⁹ Zachary Richard, ‘Tétu’, *Faire Récolte*, p. 67.

³⁰ Guenin-Lelle, p. 445.

³¹ Arceneaux, ‘XIV (La nuit le sang est noir)’, *Suite*, p. 26.

revealed the inner enemy, the wolf has seen himself change. The wolf moves ‘à travers le temps’ fully cognizant of what he has lost and what has been denied to him. In this sense, the metaphor of the wolf who is caught between times references the folkloric *loup-garou*, who is caught between day and night, human and animal. Applying Giorgio Agamben and Freiderich Nietzsche’s considerations on ‘le contemporain’ to *la poésie d’antérieur* further nuances the themes of assimilation, oppression, and linguistic fragility identified by Rabelais.³² Cajun French reveals not only assimilation, but *forced* assimilation. An assimilation which is both external and internal as well: ‘Il y a rien de plus dégoûtant que du/colonialisme/Qui vient de l’intérieur même de la/colonie’.³³ Though the poets preserve Cajun French by writing their poems in the language, they also self-identify in *la poésie d’antérieur* as the enemy. This nuance between language and identity will be further developed in *la poésie d’intérieur*.

La poésie d’intérieur

In *la poésie d’antérieur*, the overarching theme was the overt violence of forced assimilation and dispossession, but *la poésie d’intérieur* reveals the latent ‘violence’ that accompanies lacking the means of self-expression. As Michel Serres states: ‘Nous ne pourrions pas exister sans le langage. Il nous fabrique. Dans la vie quotidienne, nous ne pouvons exister que si nous nous racontons à nous-mêmes qui nous sommes et ce que nous faisons’.³⁴ Jacques Derrida first presented his elucidations on the nature of language and identity, later written as *Monolinguisme de l’Autre l’autre ou la prothèse d’origine*, during the symposium, “Echoes from Elsewhere/Renvois d’ailleurs,” organized at Louisiana State University in 1992.³⁵ He questioned whether, ‘on peut aimer, jouir, prier, crever de douleur ou crever tout court dans une autre langue’.³⁶ Derrida in fact exemplifies the title of the symposium because he echoes Arceneaux’s ‘Schizophrénie linguistique’, written ten years before Derrida’s seminal work. In the poem, Arceneaux asks how to exist when the language of identity is not assured: ‘Mais quand on doit rire, c’est en quelle langue qu’on rit?/ Et pour pleurer, c’est en quelle langue qu’on pleure?/Et pour crier?/Et chanter?’

³² Rabelais, p. 431.

³³ Arceneaux, ‘Colonihilisme’, *Cris*, p. 26.

³⁴ Michel Serres and Michel Polacco, *Du bonheur aujourd’hui*, (Paris: Éditions le Pommier, 2015), p. 212.

³⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l’autre ou la prothèse d’origine*, (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2016), p.

³⁶ Derrida, p. 14.

Et aimer? Et vivre?'.³⁷ In *Monolinguisme de l'autre*, Jacques Derrida proposes that an identity is never given, received, or attained. Instead, what exists is the process of *identification*. This process is contingent on the constitution of the self, which he argues, begins with the person who is writing already knowing how to say *I*. The act of writing *I* can be considered *la modalité identificatrice*, and it is conditional on being 'déjà ou désormais assurée: assurée de la langue et dans sa langue'.³⁸ The Cajun French language problematizes access to this *modalité identificatrice* in two ways. Firstly, the *act* of writing betrays the Cajun identity, thus complicating the ability to be 'assurée de la langue'. As Cajun French was predominantly an oral language, the poets had to make a choice of how to faithfully express the language in a written form. Secondly, Cajun French speakers, in having suffered attempts to dispossess them of their language, are also not 'assurée dans sa langue'. In exploring the tension between language and identity, the site of the poem is revealed to be both a site of conflict/exile and connection/creation. Suffering from this dual interdict towards *la modalité identificatrice*, the poem becomes a site of conflict as the poets attempt to write an 'inscription de soi dans la langue défendue — défendue pour moi, à moi, mais aussi par moi'.³⁹

Exile

The poem as a site of exile is categorised by the inherent conflict of self-identifying textually in Cajun French, a historically oral language. Zachary Richard explains the title of his poetic collection, *Faire Récolte*, is an attempt to legitimise himself amongst his farmer neighbours.⁴⁰ Despite owning the land and managing to extract some *récolte*, Richard is alienated from his neighbours because they 'ne peuvent pas lire le français' and he is writing in French.⁴¹ He further de-identifies from his Cajun identity to the extent that he claims: 'les Cadiens sont en majeure partie illétrés dans leur langue'.⁴² Similarly in the introduction to *Cris sur le Bayou*, Barry Ancelet writes that for Cajuns: 'leur langue maternelle orale, c'est bien le français, mais leur langue maternelle écrite, c'est l'anglais'.⁴³ The inclusion in both collections of a glossary of Cajun French

³⁷ Arceneaux, 'Schizophrénie Linguistique', *Cris*, p. 17.

³⁸ Derrida, p. 53.

³⁹ Derrida, p. 60.

⁴⁰ Richard, *Faire Récolte*, p. 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Ancelet, *Cris*, p. 11.

terms, ‘au bénéfice des étrangers’⁴⁴, exemplifies the complicated relation of the poets to the language and their community. An oral Cajun audience would not need definitions of the terms because the lexic which defines their variety of French is already known to them. However, an audience who can read French will likely not be Cajun and thus will be an outsider to this lexic. In choosing to write in Cajun French, particularly about topics which define their Cajun identity as seen in *la poésie d’antérieur*, the poets alienate themselves from their own community. To this extent, the act of writing confirms the complexity of trying to use Cajun French as a *modalité identificatrice* because ‘les vrais’ Cajuns, ‘Ils disent rien, eux’.⁴⁵

The second obstruction of using Cajun French as a *modalité identificatrice* is the ability to be ‘assurée dans sa langue’. Recalling Nietzsche’s second consideration of the contemporary from *la poésie d’antérieur*, the injustices of *l’antérieur* are characterised as an ‘orgueil’ of the present in the ‘schizophrénie linguistique’ of the Cajun French speaker. Richard laments this condition: ‘Devenu étranger à ma propre langue,/Parler français, parler anglais, caméléon de culture’.⁴⁶ Equally, Arceneaux’s complicated relationship to the *modalité identificatrice* is summarised in the verse: ‘Aujourd’hui je ne suis qu’un je de mots’.⁴⁷ Playing on the homophone ‘je’ and ‘jeu’, Arceneaux relays the experience of the Cajun French speaker who must engage in a negotiation of their ipseity in a language not fully accessible to them. In order to establish themselves and their connection to the language, the poets turn to the ‘non-lieu’ of the poem which knows no linguistic statutes, like the English-Only laws, or ‘internal frontiers’⁴⁸ of forced assimilation. However, in doing so, the poem becomes a site of exile because the written language is as of yet inaccessible to most other Cajun French speakers. For both authors, the act of writing is both an attempt to dwell *assurée dans leur langue* and an obstruction in fully accessing their identity, thus constituting the poem as a site of exile.

⁴⁴ Richard, *Faire Récolte*, p. 7.

⁴⁵ Arceneaux, ‘Réaction’, *Cris*, p. 19.

⁴⁶ Richard, ‘Poème Pour La Défense De La Culture’, *Cris*, p. 115.

⁴⁷ Arceneaux, ‘Interludes’, *Suite*, p. 48.

⁴⁸ Arceneaux, ‘Je suis Cadien’, *Suite*, p. 97.

Creation

The other Derridan concept which is relevant to this discussion is his exploration of memory and identity, and how one creates the other. Derrida draws from his own experience as a French speaker in Algeria, asking: ‘comment dire un ‘je me rappelle’ qui vaille quand il faut inventer et sa langue et son *je*, les inventer en même temps?’.⁴⁹ *La poésie d’intérieur* links to *la poésie d’antérieur* through Derrida’s injunction of ‘je me rappelle’ which requires both the language and the *je* to be created at the same time. The *je-me*, Derrida contends, never precedes a language; *je* is instead formed in a situation ‘introuvable, renvoyant toujours ailleurs, à autre chose, à une autre langue, à l’autre en général’.⁵⁰ For Cajun French, the act of writing reflects Derrida’s ‘other’ in three senses: firstly, the Cajun author’s ‘refus d’imiter le français d’ailleurs garantit à la langue littéraire son originalité et son authenticité’.⁵¹ Though the poet seemingly frees himself from the ‘other’ through the refusal to imitate standard French, the act of rejection itself maintains the tie. The verse: ‘I have chosen to destroy/The images of those who/Have come before me, Amon/Ré de l’Égypte de la/Crypte de l’ancien mal’⁵² encapsulates the paradox of extricating oneself from this ‘other’. Richard portends to destroy ‘l’ancien mal’, here interpreted as those who from *la poésie d’antérieur*; however, he writes in English, the language of the very colonisers he is trying to disentangle himself from. The *je-me* of the Cajun French writer in *la poésie d’intérieur* is therefore inherently linked to the content of *la poésie d’antérieur*.

Secondly, the orthography of the ethnonym ‘Cajun’ is itself indicative of *la poésie d’intérieur*. The mainstream theory on the origin of the term ‘Cajun’ is that it was first codified in the early 1880s as mispronunciation of ‘Acadien’ by Americans. This slight by the American ‘other’ which then defined the community reflects a long history of marginalisation, ostracization, and shame of a language, culture, and identity.⁵³ Though both poets identify as Cajun, their respective orthography reveals their relationship with the ‘problem language’ of Cajun French. Richard’s ‘brailleur ‘Cajin’⁵⁴ and his more anglophone orthography of the spoken ethnonym reflects that he learned

⁴⁹ Derrida, p. 54.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁵¹ Beaulieu, p. 143.

⁵² Richard, ‘Fin-Goodbye-O.K.’, *Faire Récolte*, p. 33.

⁵³ Jacques Henry, ‘From “Acadien” to “Cajun” to “Cadien”’: Ethnic Labelization and Construction of Identity’, *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 17.4 (1998), p. 56.

⁵⁴ Richard, ‘Poème Pour La Défense De La Culture’, *Cris*, p. 115.

French from speaking to his grandparents and therefore never learned to write it in school.⁵⁵ Conversely, Barry Ancelet rejects ‘Cajun’ arguing: ‘l’écrit peut et droit représenter notre spécificité linguistique, notre identité, pour qu’on ne se trouve pas aliéné dans notre propre langue’.⁵⁶ Because Jean Arceneaux is the literary persona of Barry Ancelet, he favours the term ‘cadien’, as seen in ‘Je suis Cadien’.⁵⁷ The poetic and political choice of the poets in their respective orthography of the ethnonym Cajun assures that their identity in the language by protecting their oral language from forced conformity to standard French or English structures.

Finally, despite alienating themselves from their contemporary French-illiterate community, Richard and Arceneaux remain connected to their ancestry through the act of memory. This self-identification through the act of memory is conveyed in the ‘non lieu poétique’ which encapsulates the fluidity of history by fracturing any supposed temporality. In ‘Je suis Cadien’, Arceneaux writes: ‘Mais j’ai une mémoire d’un autre temps,/Un temps que les vieux m’ont raconté,/Un temps qui n’est pas dans les livres,/Et je rêve’.⁵⁸ Here, Arceneaux constructs his *moi-je* in two ways: firstly, through the orthography of the ethnonym and secondly, through the act of memory itself. His ‘mémoire d’un autre temps’ is not his own memory but one passed down through the generations via an oral history, or what Derrida calls, ‘une aveugle pulsion généalogique’.⁵⁹ Similarly, Richard draws a link to French as his heritage language: ‘Ma grand-mère parlait/la langue du roi’.⁶⁰ By tracing their connection back to their ancestors who spoke French as their maternal language, Richard and Arceneaux lay an historical claim to their Cajun identity and French-speaking heritage. Therefore the answer to Derrida’s question, ‘comment dire un ‘je me rappelle’ qui vaille quand il faut inventer et sa langue et son *je*, les inventer en même temps?’⁶¹ is that writing allows for the creation of both language and the *je-me* by virtue defining the *je* in relation to act of *rappelle*. Poetry thus becomes the site of creation for a poet who disrupts temporal continuity by turning his gaze to the past in order to reassert his own identity in the present.

⁵⁵ Köstler, p. 117.

⁵⁶ Ancelet, ‘Valoriser’, p. 146.

⁵⁷ Arceneaux, ‘Je suis Cadien’, p. 93.

⁵⁸ Arceneaux, ‘Je suis Cadien’, *Suite*, p. 97.

⁵⁹ Derrida, p. 22.

⁶⁰ Zachary Richard, ‘Tétu’, *Faire Récolte*, p. 67.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

La poésie pour les à-venirs

The final approach to Zachary Richard and Jean Arceneaux's poetry, *la poésie pour les-à venirs* poses two questions: firstly, who are they writing for? and secondly, has this audience already arrived? As established in *la poésie d'antérieur*, there is a disconnect between Richard and Arceneaux's poetic corpora, which solidifies their identity by linking Cajun French to the generations of the past, and an audience which cannot read the language, much less make use of the *modalité identificatrice* which they have developed in *la poésie d'intérieur*. Be that as it may, Ancelet proposes that: "en Louisiane, écrire en français, c'est parier sur l'avenir".⁶² Such is why the poetry of Richard and Arceneaux can be understood as intended for an audience of *les à-venirs*. The world 'à venir' is one whose structure and nature itself is determined by 'le venir ou la venue'.⁶³ The 'venir' are to the 'pas encore' what the 'venue' are to the 'non plus'. Giorgio Agamben's claim: 'il a toujours la forme d'une insaisissable frontière entre le 'pas encore' et le 'non plus',⁶⁴ is echoed by Jean-Luc Nancy's elucidation of the Derridean concept of 'à venir'. Within the poetry of Richard and Arceneaux, the 'non-plus' can be understood as those who define *la poésie d'antérieur*: the Acadians from Le Grand Dérangement, the perpetrators of génosucide, the Americanized Cajuns, and the enemy in the mirror. Between these 'non plus' and the 'pas encore' stands the form of 'une insaisissable frontière': that of a language of identity which is inaccessible. The unnamed speaker in 'Je suis Cadien' claims teaching English to the children means there will be 'No danger of internal frontiers'.⁶⁵ However, by not teaching children the language, the 'insaisissable frontière' was constructed between the 'non plus' and the possibility of the 'pas encore' who could connect to their cultural and linguistic past. Arceneaux confronts this 'insaisissable frontière' in questioning the apparent madness of writing Cajun French poetry: 'Pourquoi écrire./Personne va lire. [...] La poésie, c'est grand,/Pas pour les enfants,/Ni les illettrés,/Ni les acculturés'.⁶⁶ However, the title of the poem, 'Combustion spontanée', references the phenomenon of hay spontaneously combusting if it is wet. In the introduction to *Faire Récolte*, Richard expands on his metaphor of farming being 'symbolique [...] de la création poétique' by

⁶²Barry-Jean Ancelet, 'L'émergence de l'écrit dans le contexte de la Louisiane', *Port Acadie*, 16–17, 2010, 81–86 <<https://doi.org/10.7202/045132ar>>, p. 85.

⁶³ Jean-Luc Nancy, 'L'indépendance de l'Algérie et l'indépendance de Derrida', *Cités*, 30.2 (2007), 65–70 <https://doi.org/10.3917/cite.030.0065>, p. 25.

⁶⁴ Agamben, p. 29.

⁶⁵ Arceneaux, 'Je Suis Cadien', *Suite*, p. 97.

⁶⁶ Arceneaux, 'Combustion spontanée', *Cris*, p. 33.

saying: ‘avec la poésie comme l’agriculture, on est engagé dans une collaboration avec des forces qui peuvent devenir, selon les conditions, soit des adversaires, soit des alliées’.⁶⁷ The poets cannot control whether their poetry will have an effect on Cajun French in Louisiana and generations to come just like the farmer cannot control the forces of nature. However, Richard and Arceneaux’s poetry is like hay ‘dans la grange’ and the act of writing is ‘la pluie’ which can cause a spontaneous combustion of creation.⁶⁸

In *On the Way to Language*, Martin Heidegger extrapolates: ‘The dialogue of thinking with poetry aims to call forth to the nature of language, so that mortals may learn again to live within language’.⁶⁹ Richard echoes Heidegger’s claim of living *within* a language by asserting: ‘le message de notre sauvegarde/était énigmé dans une langue/Inconnue, perdue des anciens temps’.⁷⁰ By writing in Cajun French, Richard and Arceneaux found this ‘langue [...] perdue des anciens temps’. To expand upon the concept of *la poésie pour les à-venirs* is to introduce the possibility that not only are Richard and Arceneaux creating a point of return *à demeure* in the language for future readers, but actively creating a future readership and authorship. In collaboration with forces outwith their control, Richard and Arceneaux have contributed to creating a future authorship of poetry in Louisiana. In 2020, Kirby Jambon succeeded the two poets as the ‘Poète lauréat de la Louisiane française’ and in 2024, David Cheramie was announced as the fourth recipient.⁷¹ When asked about the importance of the prize in Louisiana of today, Jambon responded: ‘C’est une validation de deux réalités : que la Louisiane française existe et qu’on a notre propre littérature. [...] Le français est une langue du présent et de l’avenir en Louisiane.’⁷²

⁶⁷ Richard, *Faire Récolte*, p. 7.

⁶⁸ Arceneaux, ‘Combustion spontanée’, Suite, p. 33.

⁶⁹ Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 161.

⁷⁰ Richard, ‘Têtu’, *Faire Récolte*, p. 69.

⁷¹ Rachel Doherty, ‘David Cheramie Named Poet Laureate of French Louisiana’, *Le Louisianais*, 2024 <<https://louisianais.com/en/news/2024/04/11/david-cheramie-named-poet-laureate-of-french-louisiana/>> [accessed 12 April 2024].

⁷² CREACTIONETS, ‘Trois questions pour Kirby Jambon, poète lauréat de la Louisiane française’, *Les Carnets Nord/Sud*, 2021 <<https://lescarnetsnordsud.blog/2021/06/14/trois-questions-pour-kirby-jambon-poete-laureat-de-la-louisiane-francaise/>> [accessed 7 April 2024].

Conclusion

Summarised by David Barry, ‘To write is therefore an assurance of the continuity of the past, an individual voyage in the bosom of traditions and an uninterrupted starting point for the future’.⁷³ In *Poésie francophone de Louisiane à la fin du XXe siècle*, Jean-François Caparroy echoes Jean Arceneaux’s sentiment of hope in ‘Dis-moi pas impossible’ in saying: ‘le constat d’une inscription du *soi* réussie dans la langue réinventée et la découverte d’une projection du *nous* dans l’intertextualité naissante, laissent à penser que l’avenir de cette poésie demeure, sinon assurée, du moins possible’.⁷⁴ Through *la poésie d’antérieur*, Richard and Arceneaux preserve the history of exile, forced assimilation, dispossession as lived by them and their ancestors. Within *la poésie d’intérieur*, they forge a *modalité identificatrice* which both recalls this past and creates a written language of self-identification in Cajun French. Finally, *la poésie pour les à-venirs* both professes the hope for a future audience able to resonate with this shared history and language and actively contributes to the cultivation of an audience who will ‘lâche pas la patate’.

⁷³ David Barry, ‘A French Literary Renaissance in Louisiana: Cultural Reflections’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 23.1 (1989), p. 56.

⁷⁴ Caparroy, p. 450.

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