
‘Her Mother...Was Half French, Half Spanish’: Rewriting the Creole Legacy in Lydia Maria Child’s A Romance of the Republic

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Abstract

In Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), several chapters are devoted to the story of Cassy, Simon Legree’s long-suffering mixed-race mistress. Quadroon daughter to a rich white man, given a white girl’s convent upbringing but sold into slavery upon her father’s death, Cassy’s appears to be the typical “tragic mulatta” tale. Yet Stowe reshapes the genre to allow Cassy to live, revenge herself on Legree, escape slavery, and reenter domestic life. Cassy flees from Legree’s plantation “dressed in the manner of the Creole Spanish ladies” (460). According to Carolyn Berman, Cassy’s “Creole background ...functions to harness the rebellious image of successful West Indian slave revolts to a wife’s desire for flight and vengeance”; Cassy, writes Berman, offers “a kind of voodoo version of the influence a domestic woman was supposed to have” (“Creole Family Politics,” 340). Berman argues that the Creole presence in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a threatening allusion to the dangerous example of Haiti—a successful slave rebellion. Cassy’s vengeful presence is used as a terrifying example to push readers to embrace Stowe’s back-to-Africa solution to the problem of slavery; embittered, intelligent, and dangerous slaves like Cassy deserve freedom, but not on American soil. Berman notes that “Creoles occupied a moral and geographical frontier” (329), and Catherine Savage Brosman agrees: the term “Creole” in the nineteenth century was an “ambiguous” one “because, referring to either white or black, colonizer or colonized, it is a nexus of differences, fraught with ultimate undecidability” (*Louisiana Creole Literature*, 6). For Stowe, the racial ambiguities of the Creole were a dangerous, negative element that needed to be contained. Child, by contrast, uses the “undecidability” of Creole identity as a way to question the very existence of racial difference and as a means to advocate for “amalgamation” of American peoples through marriage. Addressing directly pro-slavery advocates’ fear that abolition would result in miscegenation (mixed-race marriages), Child wrote in an 1862 letter to the editor of the *New York Tribune* that “amalgamation would take place legally, as it now does illegally, if the slaves were freed.” In *A Romance of the Republic* (1867), she draws upon New Orleans’ Creole history and culture to normalize white-black relationships. Creole identity, in Child’s novel, becomes a positive, healing force. In this post-slavery novel set in pre-slavery times, Child rewrites the “tragic mulatta” tale. Unlike Stowe’s treatment of Cassy or Child’s own entry into the genre, “*The Quadroons*” (1842), the octoroon heroines of *A Romance of the Republic* neither run mad nor die when they discover that their mother was of French, Spanish, and African origins and that they are considered “property” in the liquidation of their white father’s estate. Child portrays Rosa and Flora in ways that align with positive period understandings of the Creole, like this newspaper article on “Creole Women”: “There live no lovelier girls than those one meets in

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Creole society in New Orleans....Creole women are artistic by nature; they paint and play and sing....They usually speak several languages....Who can condemn the heart that is taken captive by the bewitching beauty of la Belle creole?" (The Chautauquan, June 1892). Rosa's voice and Flora's handiwork, the "artistic" endowments credited to Creoles, allow the women to escape their enslavement. Drawing on popular songs of the day, adding lush garden and floral imagery, Child taps Creole culture to make her white-black heroines both familiar and appealing to Southern readers, exotic and appealing to Northern ones, repeating the techniques of abolitionists who paraded beautiful light-skinned children to arouse audience ire at their enslavement. Child's identification of her heroines as Creole is effective in that it draws white readers to sympathize with them, although modern readers have found the technique problematic in that it renders the protagonists more aligned with white culture than with black. Yet, with reference to the "tragic mulatta" figure, Eve Allegra Raimon asks, "Indeed, how better could an antislavery writer reach her or his audience than through a figure that, according to the prevailing racial logic of the day, embodied the one-drop rule?" (The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited, 27). I wish to ask this question more specifically by tracing carefully Child's purposeful and positive use of the figure of the Creole in her fiction, offering a new way of placing *A Romance of the Republic* in its historical and cultural context.