Recent scholarship highlighting the importance of visual representation in shaping perceptions of the jazz tradition declares that photographs “can be effective tools in understanding and contextualizing the lives and music of jazz performers,” especially when detached from “use as a visual rhetoric to the construction of jazz icons” (Heyman 2014–15, 120). In retrospect, some depictions stray so far from heroic narratives that it is hard to see them as anything but demeaning and shameful. Included in a 1920 photograph of the New Orleans Police Department Minstrels are two jazz musicians: Sicilian American banjoist Dominic Barocco, on the right, and behind him clarinetist Alcide “Yellow” Nunez, an Isleño (a Canary Islander—thus the nickname, because canaries are yellow), but he does not look very yellow here because he is in blackface. In his book *Blackface, White Noise*, Michael Paul Rogin uses the term “racial cross-dressing” to describe a process by which Jewish immigrants like Al Jolson were “Americanized” through an initiation into “whiteness” via blackface, and one is tempted to interpret the intent of the Sicilian and Isleño, both of whom could be considered “non-white” at the time, according to that theory (Rogin 1996, 4). Yet there may be more to the story in this case, given the arcane proclivities that are often associated with New Orleans masquerade culture. The convergence of Carnival masking and obsessive racial fetish in New Orleans offers a lens for exploring and decoding jazz musician behaviors through photographic representations. How race and class were performed by jazz musicians depended to a large extent on the functional imperatives that governed the marketing of their services, in conjunction with the opportunities that racial ambiguity deriving from creolization in New Orleans provided under apartheid. Relevant New Orleans eccentricities would include Carnival and its concomitant masquerade culture (such as Black Indians masking on St. Joseph’s Day), interracial sex (institutionalized in both the nineteenth-century practice of *plaçage* and subsequently in the brothels of Storyville), and the “ratty,” underclass music that came to be known as jazz. Accordingly, this chapter follows the “localizing whiteness” path established in such works as *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, edited by Ruth Frankenburg, factoring in the special features attributable to creolization in New Orleans (Thompson 2001, 232–266). The intent of this chapter, therefore, is to view the first wave of seminal New Orleans jazz musicians who traveled beyond the region not as icons but as musical entrepreneurs seeking advantage in markets that were often unreceptive and alien to them and to use photographs to understand those experiences.
In a city that has grown ever more dependent on tourism, marketing has become increasingly critical for survival. Within the jazz community that emerged there in the early twentieth century, the correlation of masquerade, marketing, and *Créolité* invited manipulation of racial categorizations, substituting “blackness” for “whiteness” as a dominant paradigm (indeed, this became synonymous with selling “authenticity,” as with Leo Dejan’s Black Diamond Jazz Band in the 1920s) and generating a “trick bag” of tropes for a much broader range of “spiritual miscegenation” than Rogin covers in his study. Cases in point: the African American cornetist King Oliver consistently used the term “Creole” to describe his bands—under what mandate? How was *passe blanc* (passing for white) used by New Orleans jazz musicians: both intentionally, as with the Afro-French clarinetist Achille Baquet in various bands, and tacitly, as with Jelly Roll Morton’s 1923 recordings with the New Orleans Rhythm Kings? Why was Louis Prima, a Sicilian American, fired at Leon and Eddie’s on 52nd Street in 1934 under the suspicion that he was *passe blanc*?

Jazz emerged during a time of racial reconfiguration, driven largely by black agency and imagination. Taking their cue from black vaudeville, a black marching club called the Tramps insinuated King Zulu’s blacks in blackface into the city’s Carnival establishment in the years 1910–1923. Zulu masking could be read as subservience or as heritage, an ambiguity that enabled black penetration of “whites only” public space (Smith 2013, 22–35). The years of Zulu’s rise also witnessed the waning of Creole culture and identity. In *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), a suit brought by a New Orleans Creole who initially expected to win on the grounds that he was not “black,” the Supreme Court sanctioned the implementation of segregation, thus finalizing an American assault on Creole privilege dating from 1803 and exacerbated during Reconstruction. From the American perspective, Creoles had hitherto occupied the penumbra between white and black: part African, part European, but culturally French and free. Segregation eradicated Creole privilege, and Creole exoticism was transmuted into a marketing trope. The term became an ethnically detached signifier used to sell hair products, food, and musical entertainment to consumers with refined tastes.

King Oliver’s Creole Band was photographed in underclass vaudeville drag outside of the Pergola Dance Pavilion in San Francisco, probably in mid-June 1921. Honore Dutrey and James Palao were Creoles; the rest of the band was African American. The title of this chapter derives from a confrontation that occurred at the California Theater in San Francisco in September 1921, by which time Warren “Baby” Dodds had replaced Minor “Ram” Hall on drums. In Larry Gara’s *The Baby Dodds Story*, Dodds tells what happened:

In Frisco we had some trouble and the local union hated to take us in. We were booked at the California Theater as King Oliver’s Creole Band. When the band went on for a matinee some little smart guy in the audience said, “I thought you said those guys were Creoles. Those guys are no Creoles. Those are niggers!” Of the whole band only Joe Oliver and Dutrey could talk Creole fluently, so they began to speak it very fast. The people just stared and that ended the episode, but afterwards the theater was no good. Meanwhile the Pergola dance date, which was supposed to be a long booking, had also fallen through.

*(Gara 1992, 34; Anderson 1994, 294)*

The incident effectively scuttled Oliver’s chances for success on the West Coast, and by April 1922 he was stranded in Los Angeles, sitting in with Jelly Roll Morton’s band at Wayside Park and the Grand Hotel, bereft of a band. Returning to Chicago, Oliver enticed Louis Armstrong to join him in August, and then a reunited Creole Jazz Band, with the Dodds brothers, Dutrey, and Hardin back in the fold and Bill Johnson on bass and banjo, embarked on a series of recordings
in 1923 that led to success. Yet the California Theater incident is worth pondering because of the questions it raises. Why did Oliver insist on representing his bands as “Creole,” given the fact that he was the son of a Baptist preacher from rural Louisiana with no discernable Afro-French heritage, and how did a white heckler in the Bay Area know enough about what the term meant to challenge Oliver’s authority to use it?

Clearly, the antagonist’s perception of the term was racial. In his mind, Oliver was too dark-skinned to be a Creole. In fact, reports of “brown paper bag” tests notwithstanding, Creole identity was too diverse ethnically and culturally to be predicated on race alone—the Creole preference was to see the term as a cultural and linguistic signifier—yet even before Plessy, control of the image was slipping away. In *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music, 1889–1895*, Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff track Sam T. Jack’s Creole Burlesque Company of African American performers beginning in 1891, whose success led to an over-saturation of competitors by 1895. Jack, a white theatrical entrepreneur from Pennsylvania, conceived of the name after a trip to South Louisiana and provided a show that combined burlesque with what the authors describe as “a blurry amalgam of farce comedy and the theatrical display of shapely women in elaborate, revealing costumes” (Abbott and Seroff 2002, 151). Not surprisingly, the implicit suggestion of sex in Jack’s promotional strategy was rendered explicit in New Orleans, but with a twist. Alecia Long’s investigation of prostitution in Storyville has shown that white women represented themselves as Creole “octoroons” and Latinas in order to charge more for their services. Despite its definition as “black” after 1896, “Creole” remained a racially ambiguous hinge mask that could swing both ways because this is what the white men who patronized The District desired— forbidden sex with women who were legally “black” but looked “white.” They wanted a racial masquerade, but as Long points out, it was not always the one they expected (Long 2004, 205, 218). Like Zulu’s blackface, Creole became a mask that could simultaneously reinforce or subvert racial imaginaries, and jazz musicians were quick to pick up on these implications.

But Oliver’s Creole posture was about cultural immersion, not race, and understanding it requires familiarity with his experience as a musician in New Orleans. Before coming to the city in 1900, he was raised in the rural hinterland outside of Donaldsonville, Louisiana, where French speaking was common—thus, his fluency in Creole dialect. More importantly, the band-leaders who hired and trained him in New Orleans were all Creoles. Cornetist Manuel Perez was a French-speaking Creole of Mexican heritage—a Latino who, along with the Tio family, was among the most revered music educators in the downtown Seventh Ward. From 1904 he was the leader of the Onward Brass Band—an amalgam of Creoles, Latinos, and African Americans. Perez was a legitimate, reading musician, but Paul Barbarin, whose father Isidore played in the Onward, credits him for moving the band in a “ratty” direction: Perez understood the need to adapt to a changing market driven by the rising popularity of intuitive jazz musicians such as Buddy Bolden.

Oliver, who was still pretty “ratty” despite some rudimentary reading skills, joined the Onward about 1913. Clarinetist Albert Nicholas appreciated the significance of adding a “get off” man: “Brass bands were mixed bands. Creole and uptown [meaning ‘black’] in a brass band—they were solid. They were one, Joe Oliver and Manuel Perez, see?” (Chilton 1987, 18). Indeed, Oliver’s widow, Stella, described the relationship as “quite chummy” (Oliver, 1959, reel I, 9). In 1914 Oliver replaced Freddy Keppard in violinist Armand Piron’s Olympia Band and in 1917 he joined trombonist Edward “Kid” Ory’s Creole Jazz Band. Observers described Oliver as peaking with Ory, using mutes to achieve “hot” freak effects, as with *I’m Not Rough*, a blues showcase for “talking horn.” But apartheid soon intervened. On June 19, 1918, the fun came to an abrupt halt. A police raid at the Winter Garden on Gravier Street put Ory and Oliver in jail for “disturbing the peace,” and as his wife Stella recalled, “Joe thought it was awful that a man who was making an honest living could be taken to jail like that, so he went to Chicago” (Oliver 1959, reel I, 3).
In fact, this was Oliver’s second incarceration for “disturbing the peace”: on June 1, 1917, he had been arrested with Armand Piron, Billy Mack, and some unspecified women from Storyville at a private residence on Palmyra Street.

Oliver left New Orleans in August 1918 as a result of the arrests and at the invitation of two groups of transplanted New Orleans musicians in Chicago. Bill Johnson, erstwhile bassist and leader of the Original Creole Orchestra (not actually a Creole, even though he employed some), and Lawrence Duhé, a “country” Creole, from Lafayette, Louisiana, took turns hiring him. By October 1919 he had supplanted Duhé as leader of the band at the Dreamland Café and began the arduous process of upgrading personnel. Although one can argue that the Creole trademark applied to his California band could have come from his residual association with Bill Johnson, it is clear that his interest in 

Créolité

was in place before his relocation to Chicago. Oliver had shared a lot with the Creoles—including police harassment—but it was especially evident in a standard of excellence that became intrinsic to his self-image, which included performing in tuxedos, another form of masquerade designed to meet the expectations of upscale white patrons seeking illicit thrills under Prohibition. As a brand, “Creole” conveyed not only an explicit connection to New Orleans, but deriving from that, it was a marker of jazz “authenticity” at a time when ersatz versions were proliferating. Oliver’s intent was much the same as Nick LaRocca’s in the naming of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, only more viable. Indeed, this is essentially the argument that Ernest Borneman made for jazz as a product of 

Créolité


Yet, one must inquire into the racial implications of Oliver’s actions. Following the mass desertion of the members of the Creole Jazz Band by early 1924, Oliver recruited Albert Nicholas, Paul Barbarin, Barney Bigard, and Luis Russell (three New Orleans Creoles and a Latino from Panama) for his new band, the Dixie Syncopators, which name denotes a somewhat mysterious departure from Creole representation. Indeed, one might consider the reference to Dixie as problematic, given its “Old South” associations. Did Oliver recruit these Creoles primarily for their musical skills, or was he also attempting to implement an ethnic “upgrade” and “lightening” of the band’s image leveraging 

Créolité?

Nicholas remembered how self-conscious Oliver was about his “blackness” and how the Creoles would tease him about it:

Joe Oliver was sensitive about his flat feet and his black color. During one of Oliver’s solos [at the Plantation] Jelly Roll Morton passed and said, “Hi, Blondie.” Once Barney Bigard drew a foot and put it on Joe Oliver’s music rack. Oliver was mad and said if he found out who had drawn the foot, he would fire the person, but he never found out. Morton liked to kid and would always have the last word. Oliver and Morton were close friends.

(Nicholas, 1972, reel II, 3)

Some scholars have used Morton’s teasing of Oliver as proof that Jelly was a racist, but as Nicholas confirms, such remarks were typical of the kind of playfulness that passes between good friends, apropos of “the dozens,” a form of African American verbal sparring. The duets on King Porter Stomp and Tom Cat Blues recorded by Oliver and Morton in December 1924 and their frequent covering of each other’s compositions on recordings provide a very different perspective, revealing an intimacy based on sincere appreciation and mutual respect. Yet given Oliver’s purported sensitivity about race, and the concomitant suggestion that his adaptation of Creole branding could have been a product of shame, was the psychic impact of apartheid a factor in such representations? In fact, it seems unlikely based on the expressive power that is evident on his early Creole Jazz Band recordings, before failing health took its toll in the latter 1920s. Oliver’s cultivation of a marketable image with the terms “King,” “New Orleans,” “Creole,” or “Jazz” was essentially pragmatic, based on direct references to his past experience and associations. It was
designed to yield a competitive advantage in the market. His use of Creole representations should therefore not be interpreted as an attempt to circumvent his racial heritage. When the white heckler made his remarks in San Francisco in 1921, the last thing he expected was for Oliver to answer in French. In defending himself, Oliver fought race with culture, just as Creoles had been doing for years until their ethnic identity was obliterated by apartheid in 1896.

Accordingly, some Creoles engaged in “racial cross-dressing” to adapt to segregation by passing for white. Was this behavior a product of racial shame? Since most Creoles differentiated themselves from all Americans, including blacks, it cannot be characterized so simply without embracing the standard bi-chromatic racial paradigm. One scholar has described clarinetist Achille Baquet as “fooling” the white bandleader Jack Laine in the Reliance Band, but the reality was undoubtedly more complicated (Peretti 1997, 43; Sudhalter 1999, 12, 752, Gushee 2005, 16, 38–42, 142). Achille’s father, Theogene, was not only the leader of the Excelsior, a prominent Creole marching band, but also the president of Local 242, the first “black” American Federation of Musicians union in New Orleans, established in 1902, so it seems unlikely that Laine would not have known about the family. What mattered to Laine were the skills as a performer and educator that the clarinetist had to offer to his band. Baquet later worked for the white trombonist Happy Schilling and then went to New York City, where he and the trumpeter Frank Christian performed with Jimmy Durante. Meanwhile his brother George, another clarinetist, toured with Bill Johnson’s Creole Band and eventually settled in Philadelphia, living as a black man. Given simplistic racial categories based on the bi-chromatic strictures of “whiteness,” some Creoles simply thought of “white” as the more appropriate category, *Plessy v. Ferguson* notwithstanding, and yet others did not, so households divided on the issue. The tragedy is that Creoles were forced to choose, since an identity based on Créolité was no longer an option. Perhaps this is why identity as a jazz musician—a creative professional judged by merit—mattered so much on both sides of the color line.

Ferdinand LaMothe was another Creole who embraced masquerade to advance his musical career. The name change from Mouton (his step-father’s surname) to Morton was a capitulation to Anglophilia, masking francophone heritage. The nickname “Jelly Roll” (sexual slang for genitalia) drew upon his experiences in Storyville and black vaudeville, taking him about as far away from Creole propriety as he could go, but it was an effective marketing tool. There is a photograph of Morton in blackface with Rosa Brown taken in Texas around 1914 during his time in vaudeville, but I don’t think we should interpret it as proof of George C. Wolfe’s characterization of him as a self-loathing black man denying his heritage in the Broadway musical “Jelly’s Last Jam,” an indictment that has also found its way into the scholarly literature (Lomax 2001, preface, and Gushee, afterward, Peretti 1997, 21). Another image of Morton, this time in a tuxedo conducting a tutorial with the members of his Red Hot Peppers in 1926, is closer to the Creole mark in terms of conventional expectations, but the contrast reminds us of how New Orleans jazz musicians used various forms of masquerade according to the needs of the moment. In fact, tuxedos were another form of masquerade for New Orleans jazz musicians, often deployed to cater to the pretensions of affluent white audiences that equated jazz with the allure of forbidden thrills in speakeasies, but such apparel was also recognized within the black community as an affirmation of the cultural potency of jazz as an art form worthy of respect. This was a process that unfolded gradually. Photographs of New Orleans jazz bands at home before 1920 never depict them in formal attire; the Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band and New Orleans Rhythm Kings portraits from 1923 thus illustrate a shift in marketing strategy reflecting the enhanced market value that derived from such representations. Trombonist William “Bébé” Ridgley recounted the change in fortunes experienced by his Original Tuxedo Jazz Orchestra, originally named after the Tuxedo Dance Hall in Storyville, when the band began wearing tuxedos for performances at the suggestion of Sims Black, a member of New Orleans’s uptown white society. The pay went from $1.50 a night per member in 1915 to $15 per man and $25 for the leaders by 1925 (Ridgley 1959, reel I, 3–7, reel III, 21–23).
Of course, with or without tuxedos, the color line did not evaporate when these musicians traveled to northern cities, as seen in Jelly Roll Morton's July 1923 collaboration with the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, a white band, for Gennett records in Richmond, Indiana. The Ku Klux Klan was politically ascendant in Indiana in the 1920s, and Gennett made promotional records for the Klan, so a racially mixed recording session was potentially risky business (Kennedy 1994, 76). Trombonist George Brunies recalled how the New Orleans musicians closed ranks on the issue, utilizing racial ambiguity to defend Morton:

Husk O'Hare arranged to have us make the Gennett records. [Paul] Mares had run into Jelly Roll Morton, and we worked out his Mr. Jelly Lord and Milneburg Joys, which we recorded with him. We thought it best to say that he was a Cuban, so that's what we did. (Erskine 1962, 23)

When questioned about it, the band members pointed out the diamond inlay in Morton's front tooth, which was accepted as proof positive—a vindication by ethnic stereotype. This vicarious passe blanc demonstrated how a shared musical language rooted in a somewhat attenuated communal experience could still foster spontaneous connection among strangers, despite segregation. Under the auspices of “whiteness,” a “white” man could hardly imagine a worse fate than being perceived as “black,” but in the jazz community it was considered to be a badge of honor by the late 1930s, as when Marshall Stearns portrayed the New Orleans Rhythm Kings as an “authentic” derivative of black precursors in a series for Downbeat in 1936. Decades later, Gilbert Erskine's highest praise for the New Orleans Rhythm Kings in his article on George Brunies in the May 10, 1962 issue of Downbeat was that they could swing “like a black band” (Erskine 1962, 23). Under segregation, Sicilians, Jews, and Latinos could be perceived as marginally “non-white.” Growing up in one of New Orleans’s “crazy quilt” neighborhoods such as Tremé or the Seventh Ward furthered the process and exacerbated such perceptions by coupling parochial cultural eccentricity with racial ambiguity. As we have seen, New Orleans jazz musicians used racial, ethnic, and class stereotypes to dramatize or enhance a musical performance, but in some cases the stereotypes were imposed upon them. The career of Sicilian American trumpeter Louis Prima, whose interaction with Creole and “black” musicians began when he was a child in Tremé, illustrates the point. According to conventional accounts, Prima's playing style was influenced by tuition from his elder brother Leon, but he also took lessons from trumpeters Henry “Kid” Rena (Creole) and Lee Collins (African American), transgressing the color line in the process (Lewis 1968; Father Al Lewis 1972). The concentration of so many Sicilians in the downtown areas of Tremé and the lower French Quarter, areas governed by “crazy quilt” demographics, meant that their exposure to “black” music was intensive and perpetual, especially given the amount of music to be found on the street.

In 1934 Guy Lombardo got Prima his first job in New York City, at Leon and Eddie's on Fifty-Second Street, but he was fired before he could take the stage because the proprietor refused to believe that he was “white.” As Lombardo described it: “Eddie Davis on first seeing olive-skinned and swarthy Louis Prima and knowing that he came from New Orleans, had simply assumed he was a black man” (Lombardo 1975, 218–220). Prima had absorbed the Afrocentric culture of his natural habitat completely, and it showed. No wonder he was one of the most popular “white” bandleaders to perform at the Apollo Theater in Harlem (five times in the 1940s), and he became notorious for the extent of his interaction with “black” musicians in New York and Hollywood (Boulard 1989, 61–62). From the 1940s on, he used his “New Orleansness” and his Sicilianità as trademarks, expanding his repertoire beyond jazz by purveying Italianesque tunes such as Angelina, Oh, Marie! and Zooma Zooma (a super-charged remake of the highly suggestive C'è la luna mezz'o mare), delivered with a blistering New Orleans shuffle beat.
“That Ain’t No Creole, It’s a . . .!”

Image 4.1 Piron and Williams vaudeville troupe, with (standing, left to right) Clarence Williams, Ernest Trepagnier, Jimmie Noone, John Lindsay, and William Ridgley; (seated, left to right) Oscar Celestin, Tom Benton, Armand Piron, and Johnny St. Cyr (circa 1916).

Photograph by Arthur P. Bedou, courtesy of the Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.

Prima’s masquerade may have been in the eye of the beholder, but New Orleans musicians had routinely used stereotypes in the early dissemination phase as part of a broader marketing strategy to engage northern audiences, pandering to their prejudices in amusing and sometimes controversial ways. In addition to business cards that read “Music for All Occasions” and “What You Want, I Got It,” they cross-dressed as “rubes” and “hillbillies,” as policemen and street urchins, as hobo and roustabouts, and as plantation and prison field hands, crossing class, ethnic, and racial borders with impunity at times for the sake of performance. Throughout his long career, Louis Armstrong actively exploited the contradictions inherent in bi-chromatic visions of race, donning “whiteface” (or something like it) for black vaudeville audiences when he was a teenager, satisfying “white” expectations of blackface in films and stage productions during his rise to stardom in the early 1930s, and “blacking up” to be honored for getting beyond blackface, as when he masked as King Zulu on Mardi Gras Day 1949, even if it meant there would be hell to pay for it later back in Harlem (Raeburn 2013–14, 58–72; Abbott and Stewart 1994, 16; Nose 1949, 20; Armstrong 1952, 6).

Seen through the lens of classist or racist assumptions, these stereotypes were demeaning and about as far from heroic iconography as one can imagine. But from the perspective of New Orleans musicians, they could be viewed as fun—just like masking for Carnival, except you got paid for it. For them, pretty much everything outside of New Orleans was terra incognita anyway, so risks were inevitable. Their cultural comfort zone was a matrix of masking, racial ambiguity, and self-promotion,
and they drew upon it to bring their music to the world stage, by which time they were performing as artists in tuxedos. While the potential subversion of racial boundaries implicit in such behavior may have briefly disrupted American apartheid on occasion, the motives of New Orleans jazz musicians were usually less politically ambitious or tendentious. More often than not, they simply desired the freedom to play what they wanted with whomever they pleased as frequently as possible, and to “pass a good time” while doing it: a utopian dream to which jazz musicians still aspire.

References