Disappearing Acts: the Dramatic Career of Victor Séjour, FMC

Mary Lynn Weiss

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In a 1932 article for the journal *Opportunity*, Charles Hamlin Good acknowledged an earlier “golden age” of African American literature. At the height of the Harlem Renaissance, Good reminded his readers of the writing produced by ante-bellum New Orleans’s Creoles of color. He argued that these writers “deserve more than passing notice for the work they did. In the dark ages of slavery their work foreshadowed the Negro cultural revival of today.” (Good, 79.) Still, it is not widely known that the first anthology of African-American literature was a collection of poetry by francophone Louisiana’s “Free men of color.” *Les Cenelles: choix de poésies indigènes* was published in New Orleans in 1845, the same year in which the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* appeared. And while Douglass’s text is now justly celebrated as an original American masterpiece, *Les Cenelles* has been confined to a rarely visited place in American literary history. And yet this anthology is a remarkable reminder of the varieties of black experience as well as the multilingual origins of multicultural America. Moreover, the volume represents an extraordinarily self-conscious gesture by writers who did not want their work to simply “pass” into anthologies of French literature and our understanding of American literature is incomplete without such texts. Of the numerous anthologies of African-American literature published in the twentieth-century only two included poems from *Les Cenelles.* Langston Hughes translated two poems and included them in *The Langston Hughes Reader.* There is yet another dimension to the invisibility of *Les Cenelles* related to the volume itself and best illustrated through a comparison to Douglass’s *Narrative*. Everyone recognizes the slave narrative as an original American contribution to world literature and we acknowledge that Douglass’s *Narrative*, the extraordinary power of its rhetoric and the remarkable story it relates, has made it the standard and brilliant exemplar of much that we celebrate in African American literature and history. And very unlike Douglass’s *Narrative*, *Les Cenelles* is a volume of poetry inspired by French literary Romanticism. This has led some contemporary critics to conclude that the privileged Creoles of color produced little of interest because they “could not or would not confront the problems that blacks, no matter how elevated, experienced.” (Latortue, xiii.) Implicit here is the
sense that because the 19th-century Creoles of color had not been slaves, and in some cases may have even owned slaves, their lives and work do not qualify as African American, indeed that they are something of an embarrassment. But Les Cenelles is not just another collection of French romantic poetry, it is very explicitly about Creoles of color writing French romantic poetry. And although there are no poems that address the problems of slavery, there are poems highly critical of the consequences of slavery such as the custom of *plaqe* or race-based injustice. It is evident from Armand Lanusse’s introduction that Les Cenelles was intended to be an eloquent critique of the racist ideology to which the United States was committed. Even though we will not find a slave narrative in the writing of the Louisiana Creoles, their work is often infused with and informed by the conflict of race in America. Among the contributors to Les Cenelles was the dramatist Victor Séjour, one of the mid-nineteenth century playwrights popular in Paris.

2 Victor Séjour was born into the Creole of color community of New Orleans in 1817. In the early decades of the 19th century, the flood of refugees from the Haitian Revolution dramatically increased the population of this already prosperous community. By the 1830s, Creoles of color owned cotton and sugar plantations, some owned slaves, others worked as carpenters, printers and iron smiths or entered professions such as medicine or education. Victor Séjour’s father, Louis, was a Haitian immigrant and his mother, Héloïse, was a free woman of color from New Orleans. The Séjour family lived in the Vieux Carré neighborhood where Louis owned a small business. Séjour attended the Saint Barbe Academy where prosperous families of the community sent their children. Like many of his peers, Victor Séjour left New Orleans between 1834 and 1836 to complete his education in Paris; instead he became a remarkably successful playwright (Fabre, 1991, 14-16; Fabre, 2000, 179-207; O’Neill, 1-7). From 1844 to 1875, twenty of Séjour’s twenty-two plays were staged in Paris, the French provinces and New Orleans.

3 Louisiana’s history as a French and then Spanish territory had an important impact on the way slaves and free people of color were perceived and treated. Evidence of this is apparent in the adaptation of the *Code noir*, a set of laws initially outlined to regulate the lives of slaves in the French islands under Louis XIV. The *Code noir*, according to historian Caryn Cossé Bell recognized the “moral personality” of slaves inasmuch as it required that slaves be instructed in the teachings of the Catholic Church and that they be baptized, married and buried in the church. Slaves were also forbidden to work on Sundays and other Catholic holy days (Cossé Bell, 12-13; Roussève, 20-22, 42). Indeed the origins of the racial mixture that came to be known as “Creole of color” are traceable to the early 18th century when French and Spanish colonists often took slave women as mistresses or wives, freed them and recognized and raised their children (Roussève, 25). Louisiana’s Creoles of color were an extraordinary exception to the general condition of free blacks in the antebellum United States. But the community occupied a precarious position white and Anglophone Americans, between black and white, between slave and free. In his first published work and in two plays, Séjour explores the vulnerability of this community through variations on the familiar trope of the “tragic mulatto.”

4 Séjour’s short story “The Mulatto” was first published in 1837 in the *Revue des colonies*, the organ of a radical society of people of color. It was founded by Cyrille Auguste Bissette, an «homme de couleur» from Martinique, was published in Paris and dedicated to social justice and the abolition of slavery (Bongie, 266-268; Sollors, 1997, 164). (The journal’s story was first published in English in 1997 in the *Norton Anthology of African
American Literature). Set in Santo Domingo, now the Republic of Haiti, “The Mulatto” is Séjour’s only work set in the New World. It is the familiar story of the white master fathering a son he refuses to acknowledge. The theme appears repeatedly throughout the 19th century for example, Lydia Maria Child’s “The Quadroons” (1842), William Wells Brown’s *Clotel or: The President’s Daughter* (1853), Dion Boucicault’s *The Octroon* (1859) and Charles Chesnutt’s “The Sheriffs Children” (1899). As far as we know, Séjour’s “The Mulatto” is the first published short story by an American of African descent. The tale is remarkable not only because it appeared so early, but because of the economy and frankness with which it renders the horrors of chattel slavery. Georges, the mulatto of the tale, is the son of a beautiful Senegalese woman and her brutal white master. Georges grows up a slave without ever knowing his father’s identity. Years later, when Alfred attempts to rape Georges’s wife Zélie, she resists and in the process, Alfred is injured. Georges pleads with Alfred to spare Zélie’s life, noting that he had recently saved Alfred’s life. Unmoved Alfred refuses and condemns Zélie to death. Georges escapes, but returns three years later and murders Alfred and his entire family. In the moment before his death, however Alfred confesses that he is Georges’s father. Horrified by his crime, Georges then commits suicide. In nineteenth-century American literature death is the predictable fate of the “tragic mulatto.” But patricide is rare in early representations of this conflict. The patricide and suicide of the mulatto in this story connect the new world themes of slavery and “miscegenation” to the themes of Greek tragedy: complicated family relations, obscure origins, incest and identity, and how these corrupt the family and ultimately society (Sollors, 1986, 296).

It is curious that Séjour chose not to dramatize his short story because the mulatto character, whose exotic origins and status as an outcast with a tragic past and a desire for revenge, was very popular with French audiences. During the 1 840s there were two plays featuring a mulatto character on stage in Paris. Based on the popular novella, *Les Epaves* by Madame Reyboud, Alexis Decomberousse and Benjamin Antier wrote *Le Marché de Saint-Pierre* in 1839 and Eugène Scribe’s adaptation, *Le Code noir* appeared in 1842. But a dramatic rendition of Séjour’s short story, with its raw portrayal of the violence of plantation slavery, would never have gotten past the censors. Instead Séjour continued his exploration through a variation of this theme. In *The Jew of Seville* and later in *The Fortune Teller*, Séjour employs the New World’s trope of the tragic mulatto to critique both Old and New world racism.

In his representation of European anti-Semitism, Séjour employs the familiar themes of nineteenth-century African-American literature such as the idea of passing, the taboo of inter-group love and marriage and the ways in which such a polarized society makes it possible for parents to cause the deaths of their children. Séjour may have seen parallels between black/Creole of color/white America and Jewish/Christian Europe because for much of European history the difference between Jews and Christians was more than simply a matter of faith. Moreover, the similarities between the experience of European Jews and the Creoles of color might have struck Séjour with special force because anti-Semitism had been written into the laws governing his native Louisiana. The first article of the *Code noir* expels Jews from the colony (Code noir, 29-30).

Even though *The Jew of Seville* and *The Fortune Teller* look very unlike abolitionist texts such as Séjour’s “The Mulatto,” the tragic consequences for the offspring of mixed unions are similar. As important, the distance obtained by moving the conflict from the familiar color context of black/Creole/white, enabled Séjour to make visible the social rather than
the supposedly natural construction of difference. By replacing the variable race with religion, Séjour dramatizes a difference that is invisible, as was true of many Creoles of color. For if phenotypical differences cannot be detected, how reliable a measure are they to designate categories of difference? The fear of not being able to tell who is what is the source of the obsession with designations such as mulatto, quadroon and octoroon. Nineteenth century American society and individual identity depended on being able to see the difference between black and white, between free and slave. As important and perhaps unique to Séjour’s work, is the way these plays explore the relationship between Catholic anti-Semitism and a social and legal identity based on blood.

Victor Séjour’s first play, The Jew of Seville was, quite remarkably, accepted by the Comédie-Française (then the Théâtre Français) in 1843 when he was just twenty-six years old. One of the familiar themes Séjour draws upon from “tragic mulatto” literature, is the idea of racial otherness as a form of physical and spiritual pollution. When it is revealed that Inès is the daughter of the Jew Diégaris, Don Juan refuses to marry her because a Jewish wife would dishonor his name and corrupt his soul (act 3, scene 8). Inès’s mother was a Catholic noblewoman, but just as one drop of black blood was enough to make an apparently white person black, Inès’s Jewish blood taints her Spanish blue-blood. A similar theme appears in Dion Boucicault’s extremely popular melodrama The Octoroon (1859). Zoe, the beautiful heroine, reveals to George Payton, her white suitor, why she cannot marry him: “Of the blood that feeds my heart, one drop in eight is black—bright red as the rest may be, that one drop poisons all the flood.... I’m an unclean thing—forbidden by the laws—I’m an Octoroon!”

In Spain the notion of “pure blood” and the possibility of pollution by the Other found its earliest expression in a special statute, Sentencia-Estatuto, adopted in Toledo in 1449. This statute prohibited Jewish conversos from holding public office. Such practices culminated in the limpieza de sangre (purity of blood) statutes in 1556 (Kamen, 29, 46; Netanyahu, 76-85). Marc Shell has argued that these statutes were part of a nation-building process that began with the expulsion of the Jews in 1492 and the Muslims in 1502 (Shell, 26-30). The purity of blood statutes distinguished between “original” Christians and conversos, converts from Judaism or Islam, is based on heredity (Shell, 26-30). These statutes made it as impossible for a Jew or Muslim who had converted to Christianity (or their offspring) to be accepted by the “original” Christians as it was for a person of mixed heritage to be anything but “black.” Séjour seems to have understood this parallel by setting his play in Spain shortly before 1492, the year that links Spain to America and through limpieza de sangre, Jews to the Creoles of color. Séjour may have known that these laws were still in effect as he composed The Jew of Seville; they were not abolished until 1865 (Encyclopedia Judaica, 1022; Roth, 354).

Like a congenital disease, this pollution is transmittable to children even if, like Inès they are not raised Jewish or, like Zoe, it is impossible to detect blackness from her appearance. In fact, Inès has been raised a Christian; indeed at eighteen she has just learned that her father is a Jew. Moreover, according to Mosaic law, Inès is not a Jew because her mother Bianca was not a Jew and according to the laws of the Catholic church, Inès is a Christian. But no matter how white Zoe appears or how many times Inès is baptized, their perceived difference is fundamental to the identity and legitimacy of the dominant culture, and so the contradiction remains unaddressed. How else to explain the legal fiction that for centuries supported the view “that white blood, though it can be
wholly 'blackened' cannot be partly diluted” (Shell, 21). In Sejour’s native Louisiana up until 1970, a person with one thirty-second black ancestry was considered a “Negro.”

After his public humiliation, Diégarias tells his daughter that a Jew is never at home in the Christian world. In rhetoric that could easily describe the position of Séjour’s Creole community, Diégarias warns Inès:

Today, we spoke of country, you And I, and of the noble heroes, through The ages, whom the past bequeaths to us. But why? What folly is it to discuss Such things! Is there a fatherland for those Who have no rights? Tomorrow, if I chose To put aside my pride and, humbly, go Trembling before his Majesty.... Bow low And deep before our Christian King.... Yes him Whom I sustained, defended, life and limb, For many a year.... if I begged, on my knees, Hands clasped in prayer: " O gentle monarch, please, Help me! Many are they who now would seize My wealth, my property.... Who would divest Me of my very life! Pray, save me, lest I die anon!" What think you would result? Ah! How his rogues would mock me and exult To chase away this Jew, so mad with pride, That he knows not he ought be satisfied Merely to live, and who, base citizen Deprived of rights and lowliest of men, Dares to invoke the justice of our laws! So would it be! (act 4, scene 2).

Between 1850-1860, there was a distinct echo of Catholic Spain’s nation-building exclusionist practices in Louisiana vis-à-vis the Creole-of-color. In response to the pressure of the abolitionist movement in the North, Louisiana clung more fiercely to its identity as slave-holding and white; consequently the civil rights of the free people of color were systematically restricted, withheld, and on the eve of the Civil War all but annulled.

Séjour’s representation of the Jew uses themes that have their most popular expression in The Merchant of Venice, particularly in the Jew/Christian relationship. Both Shylock and Diégarias are publicly disgraced by Christians who need their money, both lose their daughters to Christian men, both use their wealth to extract revenge, but here the similarities end.

Unlike Shylock, who is always the social leper, Diégarias conceals his Jewish origins and “passes” into the Christian world where he succeeds magnificently; unlike Shylock, as a converso, Diégarias experiences life as simultaneously an insider and an outsider. The differences are further illustrated in each father’s response to the seduction of his daughter by a Christian. Throughout Shylock’s ranting over Jessica’s flight, he seems to be less wounded by her leaving than by the loss of what she took. When Inès confesses that she has married without his consent, Diégarias already knows that the marriage is a sham but his anger is deflected by her remorse and his determination to punish Don Juan.

Shylock’s famous discourse is a moving appeal for compassion between different peoples, but his archetypal Jewish greed is only surpassed by his hot desire for revenge; he refuses triple his original loan to watch Antonio die. Diégarias’s desire for revenge is no less
heated, but it is mediated by a call for justice that will only come with a revolution of the social order. Indeed when the tocsin initiates the civil war, Diégarias disrespectfully informs the King (in the second-person familiar) that he has betrayed him:

Yes, it is the people that you hear!
The sovereign people, who will persevere
Until, burning with rage, with arms of steel
Entwining you, they crush you, make you feel
Their rightful wrath trample your crown, destroy
Your throne, whose scraps, bits, in a fit of joy,
They will refashion in a coffin for
Your royal bones! Give ear! That mighty roar
You hear.... It is the people, with one voice,
Crying out for a ruler of their choice!
Resign yourself, prince of the blood! A Jew
Has smashed the throne for all who follow you! (act 5, scene 8)

The insertion of this republican rhetoric here (completely out of place in this play) further links The Jew of Seville to the social and political climate back in Louisiana. In the decade before the American Civil War, it alludes to the split between the republican north and the aristocratic south, where slavery, a system based on heredity, was the last vestige of the “old” world and the glaring contradiction at the heart of the Republic. Shylock wants Antonio’s life and only that; Diégarias wants the end of government based on heredity, that is, the end of a social and political system based on race. Shylock remains an outsider, but as an insider/outside (a concept which also characterizes Séjour’s Creole community) Diégarias wishes to make his revenge the catalyst for social and political revolution. Part of the reason for the erosion of the civil rights of the Creoles of color in Louisiana immediately before the Civil War was the fear that they would incite slave revolts and ultimately side with the North.

That Séjour chose to write a play in dramatic verse set in fifteenth-century Spain to explore the racist practices of his native Louisiana points to a poignant irony of which only history seems capable. Spain became a Catholic nation based in part on the purity of blood statutes, and expelled its Jews in the same year that Christopher Columbus discovered the new world—a new world that would later adapt features of those statutes to enslave and subjugate the Africans who had been brought there by force. In both content and form Séjour’s The Jew of Seville revisits the European origins of racist America. At the height of his career, Séjour returned to this theme in his most controversial play, The Fortune Teller.

In the years between the production of The Jew of Seville and The Fortune Teller, Victor Séjour had become a very successful playwright. Between 1844 and 1859 eleven of his plays had been produced. Stylistically he had moved from the classical drama of the Comédie Française to the popular theater of the Boulevard du Temple where some of the city’s best actors, such as Marie Laurent and Frédéric-Lemaître, performed his plays. Reviews of Séjour’s work, written by important critics such as Théophile Gautier and Félix Savard, regularly appeared in the city’s newspapers and theater journals. In 1859, Victor Séjour was in an excellent position to dramatize one of the most notorious instances of anti-Semitism in Italian history.

In June of 1858, the inquisitor of Bologna ordered six-year old Edgardo Mortara removed from his Jewish family. A Christian maid who had worked for the Mortaras claimed that she had baptized the boy some years earlier during an illness from which she believed he
would die. According to the church, Edgardo was now a Catholic and therefore could not be raised in a Jewish home; the church would return the boy only if the family converted to Catholicism. The hierarchy, specifically Pope Pius IX, refused to change or moderate this position throughout the parents’ long campaign to recover their child. Edgardo Mortara was never returned to his family.

In February 2000, the New York Times reported that the Vatican had beatified Pius IX, a step in the process of canonization. The news provoked the Italian Jewish community, who invoked the Mortara Affair, to protest the decision quite vehemently. Even in its own day, the Mortara case prompted an international torrent of protest against the Catholic Church in general and Pope Pius IX in particular. The affair prompted European and American Jewish communities to create civil rights organizations such as Alliance Israélite Universelle, and they flooded their governments with petitions for censure and published and circulated articles on every aspect of the Mortaras’ struggle (Kertzer, 250-52). In France, the Jewish newspapers L’univers Israélite and Archives Israélites petitioned Napoleon III to intervene on behalf of the Mortaras. The French, never overly fond of the Vatican although French troops had enforced papal authority in Italy since the Garibaldi uprising of 1848-49, were appalled that their government was complicit in the whole affair (Kertzer, 83-90, 118-142). Ultimately, the case provided Napoleon III with the opportunity to plan and participate in the 1870 coup d’état that brought a definitive end to papal rule (Kertzer, 87, 261).

There were many literary responses to the Mortara incident. Séjour’s The Fortune Teller was immediately translated into Italian and performed in Bologna in 1860; in the same year, Flerman Moos, an American, published Mortara—or The Pope and His Inquisitor. Riccardo Castelvecchio’s La famiglia ebrea appeared in 1861, and, in 1868, Stirling Coyne’s English rendition of The Fortune Teller entitled The Woman in Red was published. Even Garibaldi worked the Mortara incident into his novel, I mille. More recently, a novel published in 1983, La Carrozzi di San Pietro by Pier Domiano Ori and Giovanni Perich is based on the case (Kertzer, 252-3, 325n2, nl2).

In his 1997 study The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara, David Kertzer argues that The Fortune Teller was the most historically significant of these numerous renditions because Napoleon attended the play’s opening night, signaling the direction of France’s foreign policy. The Fortune Teller differs from other representations of the case in that Séjour makes the kidnapped Jewish infant a girl and moves the action of the play forward by seventeen years.

In the prologue, Marta, a family servant and wet nurse to the infant Noémi renamed Paola, has already turned her over to the church and nervously awaits the return of the parents, Gédéon and Géméa Ben-Meir. Marta is pained by her decision but in a dichotomy that formulates the conflict of the play says: “And if the heart of a mother tells me that I’ve sinned, the heart of a good Christian tells me that I’m forgiven.” (prologue, scene 3).

Unlike the “tragic mulatto” characters, Georges and Inès, both Noémi’s parents are of the same race and faith. And unlike the curse of blood in “The Mulatto” and The Jew of Seville, in this conflict Catholic Bianca will deny the role of blood in the determination of the child’s true identity. Instead she will argue the validity of a ritual in which Jews do not believe to transform Jewish Noémi into Catholic Paola. Just as the name, Bianca (Inès’s mother was also called Bianca) suggests an additional layer of difference, the names Noémi and Paola refer to conversion narratives that are important in Judaism and Christianity.
Noémi refers to Naomi, the Jewish mother-in-law for whose sake Ruth the Moabite converts to Judaism: “Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you: for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people and your God my God.” (Ruth 1:16). And just as Noémi becomes Paola, Saul of Tarsus marks his conversion to Christianity by becoming Paul (Acts 9:1-19, 13:9). But these conversion narratives underscore the difference between the voluntary act of an adult (Ruth and Saul choose their faith) and the abduction of a child, who is then reared in that faith.

When the contest to re-claim her daughter begins, Géméa invokes both God and the natural rights of mothers. “Nature will plead my cause for me! Nature and my God” (act 4, scene 8). So that when Marta tells her that Noémi is now a Christian, Géméa cries, “You can’t tear the religion of our ancestors from a heart, and expect it not to leave its roots!” (prologue, scene 16). The power of Géméa’s rhetoric is such that Bianca is compelled to employ it to argue her side. In the climactic scene, the mothers demand that Noémi/Paola choose between them. Bianca says: “... But I am your mother too!... She gave birth to your flesh, but I gave birth to your soul!” (act 4, scene 9). Géméa counters with the flesh and blood experience of having nursed her near fatally ill infant daughter back to life. In the biblical story to which this scene refers, Solomon decides to divide the contested infant in half to satisfy the rival mothers (I Kings 3:16-28). The battle between Géméa and Bianca similarly tears Noémi/Paola apart. But just as Solomon never really knows who the infant’s mother is, only which of the two women does not want him to die, the battle to decide who has the greater right to the title “mother” is a draw. Indeed, so torn by the pressure to choose between them, Noémi/Paola accuses both mothers of trying to kill her, “Every word you speak kills me! Why can you not see it? Does your love give you the right to torment my sick heart? You would have me choose to reject my God or to betray my mother! How can I? How?” (act 4, scene 3) After this outburst, the young woman descends into madness and this brings about a truce between Bianca and Géméa. Noémi/Paola’s madness only dissipates when she remembers her prayers. Ultimately she returns to Géméa but not to Judaism. In the context of the deep antagonism between the Jewish and Catholic communities, Noémi/Paola’s position seems untenable. This “tragic mulatto” does not die, but it is difficult to imagine her life. Still despite her daughter’s prayers, Géméa has the moral victory. In the end, even Bianca admits to the error of the abduction and begs Géméa’s forgiveness.

In Séjour’s rendering of the Mortara affair, in contrast to historical fact, there is a conspicuous absence of fathers; Gédéon Ben-Meir dies early on and Bianca’s husband, Signore Lomellini, is held hostage by Turkish pirates for the entire play. (Momolo Mortara was the primary force behind the movement to release his son Edgardo from the custody of the church). The absence of the fathers parallels the absence of a criminal justice system to protect Géméa’s maternal rights, because as a Jew she has no civil rights. Structuring the play so that seventeen years have elapsed between the abduction and recovery of the child, eliminates the issue that was central for the Mortaras; their natural rights as parents could not be assured without the protection of a law. Presenting the abducted child as a young woman enabled Séjour to criticize the church for the kidnapping of a six-year old child and simultaneously mitigate that criticism by presenting us with a lovely young woman who has flourished in the Christian home. And that Noémi/Paola is engaged to marry Octavio adds to the drama, for not only must she leave Bianca, but her fiancé too. By shifting the focus of the struggle from the civil rights
of minorities, to the natural rights of mothers, Séjour averted attention from the largely political crisis the Mortara affair ignited.

28 American Jews petitioned President James Buchanan to criticize the pope for the abduction of the Mortara child. Buchanan declined. On the eve of the American Civil War, the President may have been loath to call attention to the hypocrisy such a censure would be. For two hundred and fifty years, slave mothers and fathers had been made to endure the unspeakable sorrow of having their children taken from them, a practice protected by American law (Kertzer, 127). And in 1859, the Mortara affair must have been a stinging reminder of Louisiana’s increasingly cruel laws that by the start of the Civil War had reduced the rights of the free people of color (O’Neill, 53).

29 Victor Séjour’s career had all the elements of an American success story, as remarkable in its way as that of Frederick Douglass. More important, Séjour’s work challenges our ideas about the origins and nature of black American writing. For example, Ellen Frances Watkins Harper’s “The Two Offers” (1859) was thought to be the first African America short-story, but Séjour’s “The Mulatto” was published twenty-two years earlier (Shell & Sollors, 714n2). Moreover, the tale of this tragic mulatto did not conform to the typical abolitionist narratives: its violent oedipal conflict anticipates themes of twentieth-century African American literature such as Charles Chesnutt’s “The Sheriffs Children,” and Claude McKay’s sonnet “The Mulatto”, Langston Hughes’s short-story, “Father and son,” and his play, “Mulatto” (Shell & Sollors, 475n1l). In addition, The Jew of Seville and The Fortune Teller raise concerns echoed in late 19th and early 20th African American literature by and about the “blue vein” black middle-class whose wealth and educational backgrounds were similar to the Creoles of color. This work also speaks to the problem of multiracial identity in a society that remains stubbornly attached to the belief that it is composed of distinct racial groups.

30 The Literature of Louisiana’s Creoles-of-color also worries the definition of American literature as monolingual. In our public debates the multilingual dimension of America’s multicultural origins receives little attention. The absence of linguistic difference as part of this discussion has contributed to an overwhelming emphasis on race and/or ethnicity and the prevalence of identity politics. The literature and history of this group compels us to ask if it is even possible to talk about cultural diversity without discussing language. These Creole voices remind us too that in New Orleans, one of the nation’s most multicultural cities in the 19th century, French was not a foreign language.

31 In 1997, the Norton Anthology of African-American Literature, a monument to a history and literature long denied, was published. In their introduction, the editors Nellie McKay and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., duly acknowledge that Les Cenelles: choix de poésies indigènes was indeed the Anthology’s distinguished ancestor. So it was disappointing not to find a single poem from Les Cenelles in the twenty-six hundred pages that follow. The editors did however include Victor Séjour’s “The Mulatto.” But to include the fiery abolitionist story and ignore the poetry registers a telling ambivalence toward Louisiana’s Creoles-of-color, their history and much of their literature. If, as the editors assert, every anthology defines a canon, it is also true that inscribed in every canon is the larger story of who and what matters in a people’s collective experience. To exclude this poetry and by extension its authors, is to repeat the original sin of omission the Norton now exists to correct. Indeed, according to the Norton’s narrative of the African American literary tradition, the literature and history of the Creoles of color seems to inhabit the place of the “tragic mulatto”: a contradiction in terms, a free floating signifier whose presence troubles the
foundation on which the canon is built. The history of Africans in America is not complete without the plays, fiction and poetry of these writers. These Creole voices are also the voices of Louisiana’s native sons.

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NOTES

7. Victor Séjour, La Tireuse de cartes (Paris: Michel Levy Frères, 1860). Translated by Norman Shapiro as The Fortune Teller with an introduction by M. Lynn Weiss (Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2002). Jean-François-Constant Macquard apparently co-wrote the play with Séjour. Macquard was a minor writer who became the private secretary to Napoleon III. Critics complained that the play would never had made it past the state censors, were it not for this connection to the Emperor. The case was a highly sensitive political affair and most of the media were not permitted to comment on it. See O’Neill, 68-69.

AUTHOR

MARY LYNN WEISS

College of William and Mary