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## The Effects of Forced Migration on the Houma of Louisiana

Jessica R. Parfait

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# **THE EFFECTS OF FORCED MIGRATION ON THE HOUMA OF LOUISIANA**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the degree of  
Masters of Anthropology

in

The Department of Geography and Anthropology

by  
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B.A., Louisiana State University 2014  
December 2019

## **Acknowledgments**

I am writing this, having buried 3 tribal and family members in a single year during this process, not a single one over the age of 55, one as young as 29. I dedicate this work in their honor. To my family members and to all those tribal members before them who passed too soon, those of us who remain carry your memories and the memories of all the others we have lost before you.

To my mom, dad, and brother. We don't always agree and in fact seldom do, but your fierce and adamant support of me in all of my wild endeavors and protest that run counter to your careers is a testament to your love for me. This work would not have been possible without your support and our debates have shaped the way I write and who I am. I love you and thank you.

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## **Preface: The River, the Giver**

The southern most portion of what colonizers named Louisiana owes its existence to the Mississippi River. Once allowed to flow freely, traveling back and forth, with seasonal flooding depositing sediment, it would eventually build the Mississippi River Delta and the land my ancestors would come to inhabit. We have been here since time immemorial. Though miles now separate my community from the River, I am eternally grateful for the beautiful landscape filled with abundance that it left behind for my people. The towering cypress trees provided medicine and raw materials for *pirogues* to help us navigate the waters. Even in their premature deaths, caused by salt-water intrusion, the lifeless remains of these once beautiful trees continue to provide, as nesting sites for eagles. The sprawling oaks helped the Indigenous inhabitants of this land identify high ground on which to build our communities and provided shelter from the storms. Those that have died leave behind stale remains, the grey ghosts as we call them, and serve as reminders of what was once a lush landscape. No plant is more synonymous with my tribe than palmetto. Palmetto, which grows in abundance in the swamps, provides everything from medicine, basket materials, to building materials for our homes. Palmetto cabins were once scattered across the landscape and were used as homes well into the 1930s. Easy to repair and water tight, a well-constructed palmetto roof could last for years. When we cut palmetto for baskets, we take only the heart, ensuring the survival of the rest of the plant.

We owe everything to the River, the means of creation but also a powerful means of devastation. My ancestors lived in harmony with the river, building on high ground, which was often nearest to it. Perhaps we knew long ago what modern people, with centuries of knowledge have yet to figure out; efforts to control it cannot last. Once a giver of life, the river has been constricted, its nutrient-rich sediment wasted in the Gulf of Mexico, littered with agricultural run

off from the rest of the country creating a hypoxic “dead zone” in the gulf where nothing can survive. In Louisiana, one sections of the river is so densely polluted with chemical plants it has earned the name Cancer Alley and poisons historically Black communities that were founded after the Emancipation Proclamation. The descendants of those who once found refuge along the River are now poisoned with some of the highest cancer rates in the country. The River also provides drainage for 40% of the continental United States, from the Appalachia to the Rocky Mountains. Places that aren’t even directly adjacent to it benefit from its strength. Clearly we need to do better, not just for the Houma, not just for Cancer Alley residents, and not just for Louisiana, but for the River. The River makes our life possible and it’s time we give it consideration.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis seeks to understand the effects of multiple forced migrations on the Indigenous Houma of southern Louisiana. The causes of these migrations have taken many forms such as the dispossession of land and relocating for access to resources. Through ethnographic interviews and historic research, I seek to critically engage the past to understand how it has molded the present and the lives of tribal citizens. I evaluate the power dynamics enacted upon the Houma who have recorded contact with Europeans dating to 1686 but have never been recognized as a sovereign entity by the United States.



## **Introduction**

The United Houma Nation is a Louisiana state recognized Indigenous tribe whose members reside predominantly in 6 of the coastal parishes of the state. Despite having recorded contact with European colonizers dating back to 1686, the tribe has yet to obtain federal recognition from the United States government. The government's failure to recognize the Houma as Indigenous is especially paradoxical considering the tribe faced legal and state sanctioned discrimination as Indigenous people from the very same government until 1963, when tribal children were finally allowed to attend public school. While the federal recognition process is in desperate need of reform, such a critique is beyond the scope of this work. The tribe's lack of federal recognition is discussed only in the context of how it currently affects tribal citizens who are forced to maintain their customs and traditions without a reservation to maintain community and without resources made available to federally recognized tribes including health care and educational opportunities, albeit even those are few. Though the reservation system is profoundly flawed like many of the United States' policies pertaining to Indigenous people, they do offer tribes a chance to develop enterprises that can aid tribal citizens. The stereotypical images of "Indian Casinos" are often more than for-profit establishments, and can provide revenue sharing among tribal citizens and afford resources not available to the Houma citizens.

Despite a lack of recognition from the government that would provide tribal sovereignty, The United Houma Nation has thrived in what is now Louisiana for hundreds of years. They have faced multiple forced migrations from their initial encounter with the French explorers and have survived four subsequent colonizing powers including France, Spain, England, and eventually the United States of America. Houma tribal members are a strong people, but with the

State of Louisiana's 2017 Coastal Master Plan projecting significant land loss and flooding across traditional Houma land in the best of scenarios, this thesis aims to understand what this means for Houma culture in light of the profound effects of past migrations.

I was employed by the tribe for a number of years and built the tribal archive before beginning the process of writing this thesis. I began this process to create a comprehensive tribal history that includes the present because thus far, it has been fragmented across a number of sources including dissertations, newspaper articles, and oral histories, among others. As a member of the Houma, I engage in native anthropology as pioneered by Zora Neale Hurston for this thesis. I begin with tribal history as written by the early colonizers of this land to decolonize it by using it to both understand the role it played in creating present circumstances and critiquing the narrative it presents. In doing so, I use Foucauldian discourse analysis to understand the many ways in which power has been used to colonize the Houma and their land. To better understand these dynamics in their current context, I conducted multiple ethnographic interviews with members of the tribe. I then analyze the information gathered from the interviews within greater historic context and by borrowing from multiple theoretical approaches. I use pseudonyms for everyone I interviewed to protect anonymity.

I choose to use the word Indigenous through out this thesis because I oppose the hyphenated identity of the country's first inhabitants. The term Native American forces Indigenous people to identify themselves with the name of their colonizers and there is a discernable irony in forcing only 2 races of people to legally identify themselves with hyphenated names, descendants of the first inhabitants and of those who were bought here forcibly. While race is an artificial construct, racial categories outlined by the United States Census Bureau continue to be used and race continues to have real implications. Globally,

hyphenated identities are commonly reserved for immigrants and when applied to Indigenous peoples in occupied lands they can be used as a means of “reconciling conflicting discourse” (Hammack 2010:368). However, as I am fortunate enough to live in a time and place in which I am free to describe myself and other tribal members with the words I choose, I choose to use that privilege to use “Indigenous” as a means of internationalizing the Houma’s experiences, connecting it with the struggles of other colonized people around the world (Smith 1999:7). Further, I intentionally refrain from the use of the word ‘resilient’ not because I do not think the Houma are resilient, but because in societal context the word is rooted in racism and has historically been used to ignore the reasons for which people had to be resilient.

## **Chapter 1. European Encounters**

The Houma were first contacted by Europeans in 1686, at a time in which they did not have written language and traditions were passed on orally. This custom still persists among many tribal members and storytellers hold a significant place in tribal culture, but early accounts written by European explorers provide the only written record of tribal ways of life before 1900. This section is not intended to merely recount the past but to engage it critically, philosophically, and to decolonize it. Decolonizing history does not dismiss the writings of these colonizers but instead centers Indigenous views to understand their literature from our own perspective (Smith 1999:41). In doing so, I attempt to use history “as a tool for analyzing what’s going on now, and to change it,” as suggested by French philosopher Michel Foucault (Dreyfus 1982:236). During the period of European occupation of tribal lands, the Houma were forced from their lands for the first, but not last time in documented history. As the coast of Louisiana is eroding, tribal members will soon be forced to migrate yet again. Though past conditions were different and do not necessarily offer solutions for current circumstances, Foucault’s approach to history can provide a new perspective on the current problem (Dreyfus 1982:257).

### **The French Find Louisiana**

The forced migration of the Houma began shortly after their initial contact with Europeans. In 1682 René-Robert Cavelier Sieur de LaSalle claimed the entire Louisiana territory for France naming it in honor of King Louis the XIV and although he mentioned the presence of the Houma, he did not actually contact the tribe. The Houma first encountered Europeans when Henri de Tonti visited the tribe in 1686. Tonti spoke of the tribe’s bravery and generosity, writing,

Forty leagues away, we found in the country a nation which had escaped us in our first descent. It was that of the Houmas, the bravest of all savages (*sauvages*). As soon as they saw us, they were struck with astonishment mixed with respect, which disarmed all their ferocity and which obliged them to promise us a perfect supply (*fourniffion*). They gave us fresh refreshments and offered us all that was in their power (Tonti 1734:145).

Though the word *sauvages* has been commonly translated as “savage”, meaning barbaric in the English context, it is possible Tonti used this word with the French definition, meaning wild, as English speakers would describe a native plant. These early encounters occurred on the brink of the French enlightenment when philosophers like Voltaire began questioning the narrative of the savagery of Indigenous people writing, “The people of American and Africa are free, and our savages do not even have the slightest notion of liberty” (261). This initial encounter is believed to have taken place near present day Tunica Hills in southern Mississippi, well over 100 miles north of the city that now bears the tribe’s name, and where they eventually came to settle.

The next encounter with the French would not come for over a decade in 1699 when Pierre Le Moyne D’Iberville visited the tribe, his journals providing one of the most detailed descriptions of Houma culture at the time. Describing traditional dress and ceremony he wrote,

At 4 o’clock in the evening they gave a formal ball for us in the middle of the square, where the entire village was assembled. They brought into the midst of the assembly drums [and] *chychycouchy* (Houma word), which are gourds, in where there are dry seeds, and with sticks for holding them; they make a little noise and serve to mark the time. A short time afterward there came 20 young people of from 20 to 30 years old, and 15 of the prettiest young girls magnificently adorned after their manner, entirely naked, having only their breechcloths on, which they wore above a kind of belt a foot broad, made of feathers and skin or hair painted red, yellow, and white, the face and the body daubed or painted with different colors, bearing feathers in their hands, which served them as fans or to keep time, their hair neatly plaited with bunches of feathers (Swanton 1911:285-286).

The colors described by Iberville are still used by the Houma today and comprise the colors of the official tribal flag. The colors represent the 4 directions and are used by many different Indigenous tribes throughout North America. The dance described by Iberville has also survived and is the ceremonial first dance of the United Houma Nation's annual Pow Wow. Now called Gourd Dancing, this is performed at the tribe's Pow Wow, even before Grand Entry, when all the other dancers enter the arena.

When Iberville visited the tribe, they were still located north of what is currently Baton Rouge, near Tunica Hills and Angola State Prison. Judging by his writing, this seems to have been a relatively large settlement, "This village is on a hill, where there are 140 cabins: there may be 350 men there at most, and many children. All the cabins are on the edge of the hill, in a double row in places, and arranged in a circle. There is a square 200 paces across, very neat. The cornfields are in the valleys and on the other hills in the neighborhood," (Swanton 1911:286). According to the early explorers, the Houma cultivated many crops including maize, hominy, beans, and squash and the number of cabins signify a permanent, or at least seminomadic lifestyle.

To the southern border of the Houma's hunting grounds was the *iti ouma* or, as the French named it, *baton rouge*, a literal red stick that separated the hunting grounds of the Houma and the Bayougoula, that would eventually become the namesake for Louisiana's capital. However, this fact is often excluded from the narrative surrounding the capital's history, which centers the French history of the state and perpetuates the erasure of Indigenous peoples. Even on the city's official website, the history of Baton Rouge is written as if the French merely fabricated the name and gives no credit to its Indigenous history, "Named by French explorers

as "the Red Stick City," Baton Rouge is where Louisiana's capital, flagship university, and distinctive Cajun and Creole cultures all come together" (2019).

Upon Iberville's return in 1700, only one year after this initial meeting, he wrote that half of the tribe had been decimated by what he called "an abdominal flux." Today, this is believed to have been dysentery, likely caused by diseases brought over from Europe with deadly effects on the Indigenous population, who had no immunity to these new diseases. Many of these diseases originated in animals and spread to humans via domesticated animals that were used for milk, meat, and hides (Ramenofsky, Wilbur, & Stone 2003:243). These diseases had already swept through Europe with the survivors of the outbreaks developing immunity but because Indigenous peoples did not domesticate livestock as the Europeans did, they had no such immunity (Nunn & Qian 2010:165). The Center for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that 6 out of every 10 infectious disease is spread from animals to humans and even worse the "unnecessary" over utilization of antibiotics used in "food" animals is breeding antibiotic resistant viruses that can spread to humans (Center for Disease Control [CDC] 2013:31) with devastating effects. As a country, we still rely heavily on farm animals despite the adverse effects of diseases caused by them. The large-scale agriculture needed to feed these animals produces toxic runoff that is causing a hypoxic "dead zone" in the Gulf of Mexico (Davis 2017:161-164) that affects Houma fisherman today. While agriculture is often considered an advancement to society because of its ability to feed larger populations, archaeologists have determined it is often accompanied by declining nutrition and shorter life spans (Brumfiel 2003:213). The continued reliance on an industry that is clearly detrimental to our health and environment can be perhaps best understood through Ian Hodder's theory of entanglement. Hodder argues that humans become entrapped by the very things meant to make our lives better, ever trying to protect our initial investments until

the entanglements proliferate to the point of necessity (2016:31). European cultivation of domestic livestock would not be the last time the Houma suffer collateral damage in a colonialist entanglement.

Iberville's account of the Houma, much like Tonti's, spoke of the tribe's generosity, civility, and his writings depicted a respect and appreciation for tribal culture (Swanton 1911:286). Upon seeing the Houma and Bayougoula in conflict with each other, Iberville even went so far as to broker peace between the two tribes by distributing gifts and negotiating the release of prisoners of war. Establishing alliances with the Indigenous peoples of Louisiana would have been beneficial to the French because, as one Frenchman states, "With the disappearance of the Indian (who, even if he/she is not an ally of the French, might at least not be an ally of the British or the Spanish), France's hold of the vast Louisiana territory would weaken, and the far-flung colony would become an even easier conquest for any other white power that might decide to take it" (Bienvenu 1995:277). Though these early relations can be seen as merely a strategy undertaken by the French to maintain control of their new territory, they succeeded in establishing an alliance with the Houma that has persisted to this day.

When Iberville returned to the Houma, he did so accompanied by the Jesuit Father Paul Du Ru who immediately set about getting the Houma to abandon their religion and those customs that he deemed as "crude" (Du Ru 1934:28) and introducing them to Catholicism. At the time, the Houma mourned their dead by drinking a tonic, known as black drink, that induced vomiting and Du Ru explained the Great Spirit forbade this behavior (Du Ru 1935:29). While this may have led to less suffering in the name of the deceased, it also establishes this colonizer as an intermediary between tribal people and this new true God. Subsequently, the Jesuit convinced the tribe to abandon sun worship saying, "As near as I can make out, their whole cult



and religion is limited to the performance of their duties to their dead. This can easily be corrected by a little instruction,” (Du Ru 1934:29). There is a long history of Christian missionaries misunderstanding Indigenous forms of worship. The differences between cults and religion are abstruse and given the conditions of this scenario, the only thing giving Catholicism prominence over sun worship is ethnocentrism.

While Du Ru repeatedly uses seemingly derogatory language to describe the Houma, when the Houma insisted that they be taken at their word Du Ru wrote, “it appears that the Savages are less savage than some nations of Europe,” ((Du Ru 1934:31). Identifying “admirable” attributes was a common theme in the writings of the early colonizers “so that European counterparts may be shamed by comparison” (Bienvenu 1995:278). However, in recognizing that the Houma are not as barbaric as some of the people of Europe who had Catholicism for hundreds of years up to that point, it would seem that the introduction of the new religion may have done little to actually civilize the tribe, as was often the stated intended goal. Instead, the introduction of Catholicism can be seen as a tool of the eventual colonization of the people and the land, which places less value on appreciating nature and all that it provides and more emphasis on subservience, labor, and acting to appease an invisible but omnipresent God. Du Ru’s tactics did not exert disciplinary power over the Houma but rather what Foucault would describe as a much more effective normalizing power in which tribal members will watch each other, even in his absence. Du Ru also expressed concern for the women of the Houma in dealing with the French, writing, “May God be pleased to convert them and make the road to their village impracticable for certain French libertines” (Swanton 1911:289). It is clear from his writings that the Houma exhibited at least the social aspects of what Europeans would have considered civilized, yet they continued on their quest to convert them.

Du Ru then further states, “The most difficult thing will be, as always happens, to persuade the women, but I believe the men here are unusually difficult to reform, being naturally more indolent and more idle” (Du Ru 1935:29). In pointing out what Du Ru perceives as poor work ethic and not any type of immorality, the forced conversion of the Houma can be compared to the Protestant imperialism in South Africa in which people were converted because, as John and Jean Comaroff argue, labor and money are essential to colonialism. To shift ideologies, ultimately making colonization possible, the early French missionaries among the Houma introduced the same concepts utilized by missionaries upon the Tshidi of South Africa, labor as value and time as a means of measuring human labor. The Comaroffs write of South Africa, what could describe verbatim the French conversion of the Houma, “in the name of protecting the natives, was to prepare them for their eventual subordination” (Comaroffs 1987:195). This subordination is further evidenced by Du Ru making the Houma promise to construct a church in the center of the village upon his departure. Father Gravier later confirmed the construction of this chapel, making it the first documented Catholic house of worship in the lower Mississippi Valley. The church, now called Friends of St. Paul Church, has since been reconstructed on the same site of the original, and the Pastor there takes pride in the fact that it is one of the few houses of worship in the region that has never been segregated.

Father Gravier who, as previously mentioned, visited the Houma just after Father Du Ru, had similar experiences witnessing the civility of the tribe writing, “They are not cruel and far from putting to death any slaves whom they may capture, as soon as the latter enter the village the women weep over them, pity them for having been taken, and afterward treat them better than their own children” (Swanton 1911:289). While these early missionary priest clearly see the Houma as what Māori iwi scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes as a, “higher-order savage

who deserved salvation,” a category created by Christianity, their comments exemplify a white savior complex among a people who clearly did not need to be taught compassion or civility.

### **The First of Many Forced Migrations**

With the British also encroaching into the Mississippi River valley, the different occupying European groups began manipulating the tribes who chose to ally with them, often to the tribes' detriment. Quarrels with the English-allied Tunica and Yazoo led to the Houma eventually being forced to abandon their Tunica-Angola settlement in 1706. The tribe embarked on what would be the first of many forced southward migrations settling in several villages in the southern portion of Ascension Parish and sprawling as far east as Bayou St. John in New Orleans. The primary villages were known as the Grand Oumas on the east bank of the Mississippi River and the Petit Oumas on the west bank of the Mississippi River (Guevin 1985:128). The Grand Houmas village was located atop a natural levee directly behind the aptly named Houmas House plantation that now sits on top of what was once a mound, in what is now the town of Darrow, Louisiana.

Afterwards, the French continued their colonization of Louisiana and Jean-Baptiste le Moyne Sieur de Bienville, the brother of Iberville, established New Orleans, or as the Indigenous people called the city, Bulbancha (Wright 1880:71), as the new capital of the colony. Bienville was responsible for immediately establishing The Code Noir in Bulbancha, which dictated the rights and abilities of slaves and Jewish people living in the Louisiana territory through a number of articles. Article 38 states that if a slave ran away, he would be branded on one shoulder with a fleur de lis, then on the opposite shoulder on the second offense, before being put to death on the third (1724). In an astonishing turn of events, the city has since come to embrace the fleur de lis,

even using the symbol as the logo of the New Orleans Saints football team, further disregarding the city's racist past and embracing symbols of oppression.

The Houma entered into a formal alliance with the French in 1717 in what was the first "mark of colonial recognition" of the Houma as an Indigenous tribe (Duthu 1997:421). As long time French allies, the Houma were not asked to fight the French in the Natchez War of 1729, sparing them from its worst effects, though they could not be spared the effects of the colonizing forces fighting each other. The battle between France and England resulted in the French and Indian War (1754-1763) and pitted allies of each colony against each other. France's loss resulted in the forced surrender of the Louisiana territory, with portions east of the Mississippi River going to England and land west of the river going to Spain with the exception of the Isle of Orleans, which was to remain under French control during the transition. Finding this new alignment difficult to understand the Houma met with the French Governor in charge of the transition who advised them to maintain a good relationship with the new colonizing powers. To avoid British rule, the Houma moved their main settlement on the east side of the river to the west bank, though some tribal members stayed behind. However, the damage of conflicting colonizing powers was done and factions of Houma tribal leaders emerged.

In 1774, one of the chiefs of the Houma, sold the settlement they abandoned on the east side of the river to Maurice Conway and Alexander Latil for \$150 in goods in what the tour guides of the Houmas House Plantation like to call "the deal of the century." The question of the legality of this sale led to two congressional investigations and legal battles that lasted for nearly a century. The final decision on the land came from the fourth and final colonizing power of Louisiana, and the only that still does not recognize the Houma as a tribal entity to present day; the United States Government.

Through a series of colonizing powers the Houma maintained their sense of identity, which has survived to present day. While colonizing forces did not completely eradicate tribal identity, early tribal history marks the beginning of the descent into eventual forced assimilation and the entanglement of the Houma into colonial systems. This period also began the first, though not last, forced migration of the Houma at the hands of Europeans. However, tribal history is more than a culmination of events that have led to the present. As Michel Foucault would suggest, this section uses history to critically engage with the present, questioning even the most rudimentary aspects of Louisiana culture, like the *fleur de lis*. There is no record of early Europeans being directly violent with the Houma but the power they asserted over tribal members is a type of ‘normalizing power’ derived from hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment (Foucault 1975:179). Through these methods, Europeans deployed an effective strategy of control that gradually invaded Houma territory. The importance of critically engaging with history cannot be understated in a location that enthusiastically places southern Civil War generals and presidents who have committed genocides upon pedestals, while simultaneously denying the history of Indigenous people.

## Chapter 2. This is America

*We often rush to remake these places. But in our boundless desire to do good, to get past all of our mistakes, to build places that hold possibility, we often maintain a blissful ignorance of a landscape filled with a very long trail of broken promises and squelched dreams. We are building on top of brokenness. Is it any wonder that the foundations cannot hold?*

*Liz Ogbu  
NPR*

This section again employs the framework proposed by Foucault, using history to critically engage the present, but within the context of the United States of America. This section is intended to challenge the curriculum of elementary and high schools in the U.S. that teach the country's history as a heroic story of triumph over the tyranny of the British Empire (Ngafook 2006). This romanticized version of U.S history often fails to mention that the British abolished slavery over thirty years before the U.S. did, and did not have to have a country-splitting war to do so. Additionally, despite learning everything about United States history beginning with who signed the Declaration of Independence, students in the region learn very little about Indigenous people and are often surprised to learn that we even exist in the state (Walton & Regis n.d.). Further, in historical context, this era marked the beginning of Houma history and customs that most people are familiar with today, after the migration into the communities that we still inhabit today.

### **The Third President and Fourth Colonizing Power**

Shortly after the Houma migrated from their settlement in Burnside, the colonizing power shifted in North America yet again. The thirteen original American colonies defeated Great Britain and created The United States of America in 1776. In the newly found country's Declaration of Independence, future President Thomas Jefferson proclaimed, "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator

with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” The hypocrisy of such a statement being written by a slave owner is itself enough to discredit his belief in his own words but within the same document he refers to the Indigenous peoples of this land as “merciless Indian savages”. A controversial historical figure, Jefferson considered himself influenced by the Enlightenment and, as such, was a proponent for the separation of church and state. While the Enlightenment is often referred to as the era of ‘modernity’ it created a positionality among not only types of knowledge but also among so-called races (Smith 1999:61). Enlightenment thinkers like Immanuel Kant claimed, “Have courage to use your own understanding,” as the motto of the Enlightenment stressing empiricism and reason (Kant 1784). However, Kant also subscribed to the understanding of race as a biological fact, going so far as to rate the different races in superiority. This is especially paradoxical given Kant’s core philosophical concept, the categorical imperative, which demands unconditional moral obligations, regardless of the circumstance. With some of the greatest writers of the Enlightenment, including Kant and Voltaire, falling short of extending their philosophies of justice and morality to people of color, it is no wonder then that Jefferson did the same. Jefferson’s own writings show he believed slavery was morally wrong, going so far as to call it a “moral depravity” (letter to Thomas Cooper, September 1814) but he only openly opposed the expansion of slavery into the north west states, objecting to the north interfering with southern slavery in 1820 (Magnis 1999:492). Jefferson did, however, sign a bill banning the importation of slaves in 1807, but that did not free those already in bondage, nor children born into bondage, and the new laws were only loosely enforced. Ever willing to be a challenging political figure, Jefferson was handed the chance to nearly double the size of the young nation by purchasing the vast Louisiana territory from the French.

In 1801 Spain returned Louisiana to the French in a secret treaty, and the Houma were, once again, under French rule, though this was about to change quickly yet again. The Haitian Revolution against the French was the first slave uprising in history that resulted in the creation of a new nation, and it may have influenced Napoleon to want to rid France of territory in the Americas. Having lost its most important possession and a crucial part of its economy, facing war with Great Britain, and already suffering from economic problems following the French revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte decided to sell the vast Louisiana territory to President Jefferson (Trouillot 1995:100). Though there was opposition and a great number of unanswered questions, including the constitutionality of the purchase and whether or not people living in the territory would be granted citizenship, President Jefferson purchased Louisiana in 1803 for \$15 million, nearly doubling the size of the young country and placing the Houma under the control of a fourth colonizing power and the only one with which they had no previous relationship.

Article 6 of the Louisiana Purchase Agreement stated that the United States had to abide by any treaties between Indigenous peoples and the French or Spanish. Having relied on ceremonial agreements, the Houma lacked formal written agreement with the previous occupying powers. Even more damaging to Houma history, President Jefferson appointed John Sibley as the Louisiana Indian agent. Sibley quickly settled in Louisiana but did not visit the swamplands and instead, falsely identified a smaller Houma village near Bayou Manchac as the primary village, writing that the Houma “hardly existed as a tribe” (United Houma Nation [UHN] 1985:33). With no written agreements and relying solely on Sibley’s unverified account, the United States was free to do as they pleased with the Houma.



## **The Good Earth**

Tribal history after the move from the Burnside settlement is disputed and has implications that have lasted until present day. However, this section will focus on the narratives of the events by the United Houma Nation and its citizens'. In the interest of acknowledging the existence of the United State's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) counterargument to the events that transpired after the move from Burnside, the BIA claims the Houma settled independent satellite locations along the bayous of Terrebonne and Lafourche after leaving the Burnside area (BIA 1994:7). The BIA claims these locations were not socially continuous between 1840 and 1880 but did exhibit social cohesion by 1880. The findings do not consider the impacts of events that occurred during this time period, including the Civil War, or the hurricane of 1856, one of the deadliest in Louisiana history that was so severe it split one of the barrier islands (*Isle Dernier*) in half. Nor does it consider that the distances between these communities is extensive when traveling by roads but are much closer when traveling by boat. The BIA's denial of the Houma has also been heavily criticized by the anthropologist who conducted research for the tribe's original petition, Dr. Jack Campisi. Campisi has identified multiple deficiencies in the research conducted by the BIA (Campisi & Starna, 2004). However, a critique of the Federal Recognition process is beyond the scope of this work as the Houma's petition for Federal Recognition is currently ongoing.

After leaving the Burnside area roughly around the time of the sale in 1774, the Houma traveled southward and settled Terrebonne and Lafourche Parishes. Land that was once considered uninhabitable by settlers, these swamp lands protected the Houma from forced removal policies. While documentary evidence of Spanish land grants have never been found, what has been confirmed from land records is that a Houma man named Louis Sauvage received

permission from the Spanish government to settle Bayou Terrebonne (Duthu 1997:423). Houma oral tradition confirms this narrative and has always maintained that tribal tradition necessitated verbal, rather than written agreements. Upon the death of Louis Sauvage, his land passed to the descendants of his sister Marianne, the wife of a Houma called Courteau (Duthu 1997:224). The best known of Marianne's children is Rosalie Courteau, who is considered the last matriarch of the tribe. Houma oral tradition asserts that Rosalie Courteau did possess a lot of land in present day Terrebonne parish, "Rosalie Courteau owned the land in Terrebonne Parish and she lived in Bayou Cane and there was a bayou called Whiskey Bayou and that was her private bayou and she also owned the Houma Lake" said one interviewee. As settlers began to realize the usefulness of this land formerly deemed to be uninhabitable, they began encroaching in on Rosalie's land. In a particularly violent escalation after the War of 1812, Rosalie's home on Bayou Terrebonne at the location of the present day Houma courthouse, was torched by armed settlers who forced her and the tribe to migrate, yet again (Bowman & Curry 1982: 30).

In 1859 Rosalie Courteau purchased swampland for her people on Bayou Barre, even further south than her previous residence, in Terrebonne Parish. Terrebonne is a French name meaning "good earth" and, living up to its name, the area provided an abundance of wildlife for the tribe. The Houma adapted to their new environment by practicing hunting, trapping, fishing and trawling, rather than a lifestyle based on agriculture such as before, developing an adaptation that would persist to modern day (Speck 1939:139). These adaptations consistently provided for the tribe, allowing them to thrive despite the trying times that would challenge the rest of the country during the economic downturn of the Great Depression. The benefit of their remoteness was that the tribe was able to live unbothered by settlers for decades; however, this unfortunately also meant that there was little mention of them in the written record (UHN 1985:39). Rosalie

Courteau's place in Houma history is unrivaled; she was a fierce leader, and loving provider for her people and her death marked the end of that security.

When Rosalie was alive, the land she purchased for the tribe was secure in its title (UHN 1985:40). However, after her death the tribe would never again have a single leader under whom they could live communally. Settlers began again encroaching on Houma territory, but this time they did not need guns. They had a new more powerful weapon to utilize: the law. The state of Louisiana employed many different strategies in dispossessing Indigenous people of their lands. Tribes in the east faced forced removal policies, tribes in the west experienced incentivized bounty hunting, and when the tactics were not outright violent, they were fought in court (UHN 1985:40). An anthropologist for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) wrote to Dr. Frank Speck in 1938, "The Indians (Houma) have been robbed of their property by entirely legal procedure, hard to upset in court" (Speck 1976:6). There were two primary ways in which the Houma were dispossessed of their land: the first being the banning of 'bastards' inheriting land. By law, 'bastards' were any individuals born to parents who were not married and although many tribal parents were together, their marriage customs were not recognized in the eyes of the law. Another legal way of dispossessing tribal people of their land was by the introduction of taxes, which if unpaid, could result in the seizure of land. In one such case, a Houma man persistently paid his taxes to Terrebonne Parish, only to find out his land had been assessed under someone else's name in Lafourche Parish (UHN 1985:40). This unscrupulous person knowingly had the land appraised in their name and had not paid their taxes resulting in repossession. Despite going to trial, the Houma man did not regain ownership of his land, and adding insult to injury, the person who stole it kept the profits of the resulting tax-sale. Of this problem, Speck wrote, "Because of neglecting written procedure required by the white man's law of which they knew

nothing, they lost title to land for which their ancestors once had a perfectly good patent” (Speck 1976:6).

When the anthropologist John Swanton visited the tribe in 1907 he noted that the Houma lived primarily in six settlements along the Bayous of Terrebonne and Lafourche Parishes including Point au Barrée (Point Barre), Lower Point au Chien, Champs Charles (Isle de Jean Charles), Lower Bayou Lafourche (Golden Meadow), Bayou Dularge, and Bayou Salé. Most of these communities still exist and maintain high tribal populations, though Pointe au Barrée is no longer inhabited and Isle de Jean Charles residents are currently in the process of being relocated. The coming decades would introduce new means of exclusion, dispossession, and social stressors.

### **Exclusion**

*They have persisted through the most serious adversities of ethnic, economic, and social oppression, through crises as severe as any which mankind has had to face, from times of first contact with Europeans down to the present.*

*Dr. Frank Speck*

With the migration of white settlers in Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes came public schooling, but the Houma were excluded from these schools through racist Jim Crow laws that solidified after the Supreme Court case Plessy vs. Ferguson in 1892 that upheld racial segregation. Different from the Black Codes introduced by Bienville, Jim Crow laws were endorsed by the U.S. Supreme Court based on pseudo-scientific ideas about white supremacy and racial inferiority of all other populations (Baker 1998:23). In the early 1900s, parishes were tri-racially segregated, but schools were only provided for Blacks and Whites. Being neither, the Houma were not allowed to attend public schools until nearly a decade after Brown vs. Board of

Education (1954), despite court battles to obtain education and the adamant support of Dr. Frank Speck. “Indian” schools were to come later.

One of the tribe’s most powerful adversaries was Terrebonne Parish’s superintendent H. L. Bourgeois. For his 1938 master’s thesis at LSU, Bourgeois discussed public education of Terrebonne Parish from 1890-1930. One chapter discusses the Houma as the “So-Called Indians” in which he claims, “They are the descendants of that union the Indian and the free *gens de couleur* of many generations back, with large infusions of white blood. They are pariahs. They disdain contact with the Negroes, and they find the doors of the whites closed against them. Consequently they thrust themselves into an imaginary racial zone standings midway between the whites and the blacks” (Bourgeois 1938:69-70). It is worth noting that H.L. Bourgeois High School in Terrebonne Parish was named for Bourgeois and currently has a Braves (Indigenous) mascot, and the school is commonly referred to as “The Reservation” not just in everyday vernacular, as the school is literally addressed on Reservation Court, and its dance team is called “The Rain Dancers.”

Without adequate access to an education, the Houma were left with no choice but to rely on the environment for subsistence and income. While the swamps of Louisiana provide abundance, seasonal changes can be swift and create hardships. Further, the skills utilized in fishing and trapping in the swamps would not be useful outside of such an environment and because the Houma were not allowed to attend school, their only means of generating income, including fishing, hunting, and trapping, also isolated them (Roy 1958:31). Without access to formal education and having to face racial discrimination in the very town that was named for them, these occupations carried on through generations with few alternatives. Even when other

employment opportunities presented themselves, tribal members continued to fish and hunt seasonally, as these activities became an essential part of their identity (Walton & Regis, n.d.).

Before desegregation in Terrebonne and Lafourche Parish's history, tribal students attended schools meant strictly for Indigenous students, as part of a tri-racially segregated system. However, even if a student was able to attend one of these schools, their educational opportunity discontinued after the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade (Ngafook 2006: 125). As a result, many tribal members were forced to relocate to neighboring parishes and other cities where they were allowed to attend school. As one interviewee, Angelica, recalled, "One of my cousins moved over there [New Orleans] because of the school. Him and his brothers were all born, were all raised in New Orleans and went to school, because they *could* go to school over there." While Houma tribal members found safety and educational opportunities in the city, New Orleans was also a place of intense segregation and racial tension in the era of Jim Crow laws. Most of the animosity emanated from economic problems, including white laborers losing their jobs to Black laborers who tended to accept lower wages and harsh working conditions (Hair 1976:137). The problems in the city culminated into multiple race riots in 1900. However, the idea of New Orleans being a haven from segregation for the Houma, was reiterated by other interviewees. Aaron said he and his wife moved to New Orleans in the 1950s and when asked if they faced the same type of segregation there he said, "No, I didn't have a problem at all. There was nothing. There was nothing to worry about." When asked what was the deciding factor in relocating he said, "You couldn't do nothing here. That bastard wouldn't teach you a damn thing. No! What made it break the circle [of segregation]? The federal government." Even worse, beyond education, this segregation also extended to medical treatment. As one interviewee George, explained, the only hospital in Houma would not treat him for a broken arm, and his family was

forced to drive over 50 miles away, to Charity Hospital in New Orleans, “ It took over 3 hours to get there from Houma, Highway 90 was a gravel road then...They took care of you, they didn’t ask you for no kind of money, no salary, nothing. They just went in the emergency room and took care of you.” This lack of access to necessities became another in a long list of stressors forcing the Houma to migrate. The causes of migration took many forms as tribal member Monique Verdin explained, “Armantine [her great grandmother] moved east to the banks of Bayou Terre aux Boeufs in search of a “better life.” They were able to find work and buy property and were granted the right to vote. My father was allowed to go to public school,” (Verdin, 2013:24). Though the reasons for migration were different, the end result was all the same, a fragmented tribe, driven apart to inhabit places where they could find acceptance.

There was one school in the Houma community of Point Barre that allowed Indigenous students to attend, but fell out of use in 1910 (Bowman & Curry 1982: 34). Houma children were not allowed to attend school again until 1932, when two Methodist sisters, Ella and Wilhelmina Hooper, purchased property in Dulac to open a school they funded themselves. Far from the types of settlement schools that Indigenous people across the country were forced to attend, this school did not force attendance, though many came. Miss Hooper stated in an article for a Methodist publication, “We expected only a few children that first year. But we had 76 to start. They ranged in age from 6 to 18, and we had one 42-year old. None had been to school before, none could speak English” (Mission on the Bayou, September 1964). The school was not officially part of the Methodist Missions and therefore received no funding from the larger religious organization until 1950. With the recognition of the Methodist mission work, they soon opened the Dulac Community Center in 1960, an indispensable part of the Dulac community, even today. Recently, tribal members have used the community center as a gathering space for

community meetings, tribal youth camps, and Bayou Rising, a gathering of people from all the southern states and Puerto Rico focused on the impact of climate change and working towards climate justice.

The Dulac Community Center served a central role in the life of tribal citizens and is remembered fondly by those who grew up there. As Angelica recalled, “The community center was our safe haven because anything we wanted to do it was there. We were ourselves. We didn’t have to worry about being discriminated against, we didn’t have to worry about anything.” The Community Center hosted events for tribal children who were not welcomed in other social spheres. The roots of racism in the town of Houma ran deep, and while the Community Center shielded children from the enmity of the outside as Angelica reminisced, “It was so much fun, it was such a beautiful time in our lives, growing up in all this nice environment and then everything got convoluted, and we started getting discriminated against, maybe my parents and all of them were getting discriminated against and they were hiding it from us or not letting us see it.” That shelter provided by the community center and her parents were eventually lost as Angelica recalled an incident where she experienced racism in her community. After being invited to the birthday party of a childhood friend and purchasing a gift to attend the party, Angelica’s mother received a phone call, “The mother called her and said she was calling to let my mom know that I was *not* invited to that birthday party and she was calling to un-invite me,” (2018). Angelica’s story suggests that even while young children were not racist, their parents were. Another interviewee, Aaron reiterated this belief saying, “A child is not segregated, he didn't know what that is and it’s the grown ups that's bad” (2018). This informal social exclusion, enforced by parents, was widespread and augmented formal, legal forms of exclusion. The Dulac Community Center mitigated some of these harms for children by providing them programming



that would have otherwise been inaccessible. In addition to children's programming that included a Girl Scout's troop, Christmas plays, and Halloween parties, the Community Center also offered different trainings in an effort to assist tribal members in attaining employment outside of fishing. In an article published by the Methodist church, one organizer said, "We are trying to bring up social standards, to help the French-Indian people to help themselves. We want to help them bring up their own community level, to gain acceptance in Terrebonne Parish." While the organizer is naïve in believing that inadequate skill sets and not their race were the reasons for the Houma's marginalization, the Community Center strived to empower tribal members. Additionally, although the Community Center was run by Methodists, it did not require participants to undergo religious learning or conversion (Speck 1939: 218).

Soon after the Methodists opened a church, so did the Catholics and Baptists. Houma tribal members attended these churches despite racism and enforcing optional policies of segregation. However, oral histories suggest that some churches discriminated less than others. Angelica attended St. Eloi in Dularge exclusively, after an incident at Holy Family Catholic Church, "The usher was telling my mom and dad where to sit and he touched my mom on the shoulder and in the arm and said you'll have to sit here and my mom turned around and she finally spoke her piece and said you don't have to tell me where I can sit in a church and she went to that church, she went to that mass that day but she never went back to that church," (2018). As she explained to me specifically where in the church she was forced to sit I came to the jarring realization that I sat in that same place growing up in Holy Family Church. Following my grandmother, who attended Holy Family since childhood, she continued to sit in the same place where she was forced to as a child, where bars once separated Indigenous people from the rest. The church wanted to include Houma people but only as a means of competing for their

loyalty against other religious organizations in the area and optionally reinforcing inequality. This form of inclusive exclusion (Ophir, Givoni, & Hanafi, 2009) perpetuated a conditional, fragmented acceptance that became the norm. Its success is evident in the number of Houma who still attend this church despite its voluntary policy of segregation in living memory.

Predictably, and as evident by the opposition faced by Black students such as Ruby Bridges during de-segregation in New Orleans in 1960, four years before Terrebonne Parish complied with the Supreme Court ruling, the de-segregation of Terrebonne Parish's all white schools was not without tribulations. Tribal students who were previously isolated both by geography and sometimes by their inability to even speak the same language as other children their age, were suddenly thrust into schools with other students who were unaware of the unique culture thriving so close to their communities. In 1921, the state of Louisiana banned the use of French in classrooms and tribal students were faced with the added hurdle of being forced to learn English (Austin, Coelho, Gardner, Higgins, & McGuire 2002:65). As one researcher found, tribal students often intentionally spoke French as a means of resistance but were ultimately punished, either being hit on the fingers or forced to kneel on rice (Ngafook, 2006:149). The transition was difficult, as Paul explained, "Now the teachers, like you say, we didn't understand them, they didn't understand us. They had a curriculum they wanted to teach us. Some of us, myself, I got to know all my teachers on a first-name basis. I got to know the principal on a first-name basis. It's who we were and what we were at the time." Fights were a common occurrence and punishments were disproportionately handed to Indigenous students. These near constant conflicts with other students and teachers led to many Houma children dropping out of school (Ngafook 2006:158). After one such fight that broke out on a school bus, one interviewee, Paul, recalled, "The next day, the driver wouldn't let us on the bus, so we had to

start riding our bikes to school. They (the people who initiated the fight) got to ride the bus and we had to ride our bikes,” (2018). Tribal customs were also discouraged in school. Many elder Houma speak French as a first language but even within “Indian” schools, speaking French was strictly discouraged as George recalled, “All I spoke was French then. And every time they asked me a question, I answered in French. I tell ya, I got hit with a paddle or a stick. I remember one teacher had a shoe, and the other teacher, she had a branch from a tree, about like this. Hit you with it. The teacher would hit my head with the paddle. That shoe paddle? I went home that afternoon with a bad headache, and I told daddy what happened” (2018). The abuse George endured is echoed by others, including my grandmother, who has told me she was hit for speaking French. White Cajuns in southern Louisiana had the same experience when speaking French in school (Austin et al., 2002:65) indicating the strict desire for conformity was about more than race within the American educational system. While these forms of punishment were disciplinary, Foucault would argue their purposes were not merely focused on the physical body but on social domination. Discipline for speaking French “was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements,” (Foucault 1975:138). Whatever the stated purpose for the 1921 ban of French in the classroom, the ultimate goal was conformity.

Tribal students faced additional hurdles in their educational endeavors, and the legacy of that can arguably still be felt today. According to the U.S. Department of Education, first generation students enroll in college at rates significantly lower than students whose parents earned a bachelor’s degree. Even worse, first-generation college students are also less likely to obtain a degree, even once beginning college, than their peers with educated parents. In my own experience as a first-generation college student, I’ve experienced the additional hurdles associated with the legacy of racism my family has had to endure. I began college after

graduating from Ellender Memorial High but was unprepared both educationally and financially for academia. According to the Louisiana Department of Education, Ellender Memorial High School, which has the highest percentage of nonwhite students of all the schools in the parish, also consistently ranks the overall worst based on assessments, in preparing students for the ACT, graduation rates, and the strength of their diploma (Terrebonne Parish School District 2018). On a 100-point scale, Ellender ranks 10 points below the second lowest scoring school, and has the lowest graduation rate. Though my success in obtaining a Bachelor's degree and my acceptance in a graduate program are a testament to possibility, I recognize it is also a privilege denied to many and denied to People of Color and Houma tribal members at disproportionate rates. I am also simply lucky to have been born at a time where I was presented with options, however weighted against me they were, while generations before me were caught and remain entangled in whatever employment they were able to attain, often at the subsistence level. While fishing provided a means of income for a long time, a more lucrative and destructive opportunity presented itself to tribal members with limited access to education, beginning in the decades following desegregation.

### **Intrusion**

Oil and gas exploration did not begin in Terrebonne Parish until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the laws allowing it to expand rapidly were put in place over 50 years earlier. The Swamp Lands Acts of 1850 and 1860 transferred federal ownership of swamps and marshlands to large landowners in an attempt to generate the revenue needed to fund levees (Theriot 2014: 8). These lands, considered uninhabitable, were seen as valuable only for the abundant natural resources that could be extracted from them and consequently, many remain privately owned despite state law that "navigable water bottoms" be owned by the state.

Before oil and gas exploration began, the swamplands were desirable for the virgin cypress forest they contained. Cypress trees averaging four to six hundred years old were cut down en masse and dragged out of the swamps by pullboats leaving scars on the landscape that can still be seen today (Hurst 2005:15). By the time logging declined, more than 1.6 million acres of cypress bottomlands were harvested (Davis 2010:465), sparing only one virgin cypress tree in the entire state that is believed to be over fifteen hundred years old. Laws were eventually put in place to protect cypress trees and harvesting cypress from state owned land now requires a special permit but this came far too late for the oldest trees. As a result, making cypress basketry and *pirogues*, crafts once practiced by the Houma, have mostly ceased. Yet, the same companies who decimated entire forest were able to continue to exploit their private land further with the production of hydrocarbons (Davis 2010:476). Private land ownership is one of the most powerful tools of colonization and excludes Indigenous ways of knowing (Smith 2012). The reclassification of these swamp lands have disregarded the Indigenous inhabitants residing in this “uninhabitable” land to whom it had value far greater than only what could be extracted from it. Smith argues that the reclassification of land was a form of punishment not imposed upon the body but as Foucault would describe as ‘formula for domination’ (Smith 2012:71).

When oil and gas exploration began in Terrebonne Parish in 1917, the demand for this land increased with little regard to for people who already inhabited it. Dispossession was swift and left the Houma confused and angry. As previously discussed, the state of Louisiana had legal ways of dispossessing Houma people of their land. However, the oil and gas industry had even more dubious means of acquiring desirable land. Though not part of the dominant narrative when discussing the benefits of oil and gas, Houma tribal members have a shared knowledge that, even with the law already in favor of oil and gas industries, the industry still resorted to illegal

practices to acquire land. One such common practice was asking Houma people, who were denied an education and were consequently illiterate in many cases, to sign a “lease” which was actually a quitclaim deed, a document intended to transfer ownership of property. Theft was not uncommon as Norman Billiot<sup>1</sup> explained, “My family owned 187,000 acres of swampland west of the Mississippi. I still have the titles. It was stolen in 1927 by the Louisiana Land and Exploration Corporation with the help of corrupt people, corporations, and Louisiana politicians who will sell their mothers’ eyes while they’re still living.” Houma oral history also tells of Homer and Levest Molinere, brothers who resided on Wonder Lake in Terrebonne Parish, being approached about selling their land by Humble Oil in 1939, a company that would eventually be consolidated into Exxon (Sterling & Kilman 2007:256). A few years later when the family refused to leave, Humble dug a canal 100 feet wide, splitting Pointe Barre, a historic tribal community in half, piling the dirt as close to the Molinere property as possible. When that also failed to force the Molinere’s off their property, Humble dug a well and asked the family to leave for one day because any open flames they might use could ignite a large fire. Upon their return, they discovered oil covering their property, their fence had been broken releasing their chickens, and the canal brought in salt water, destroying the once fresh water Wonder Lake. The company then promptly abandoned the well and the Molinere’s never rebuilt (Dardar 2014: 48-50).

I interviewed two tribal members who were familiar with the history of Wonder Lake, who visited the area as children, seeing it erode in their lifetime. We traveled to the lake, that was once surrounded by land but is not accessible only by boat. Before we departed on the boat, we stopped at the home of their friend James, in order to use his dock. Expecting to just stop by,

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Norman Billiot is part of “*Entre yakni et oké: United Houma Nation*” oral history project in partnership with the Neighborhood Story Project and Side by Side Community Projects with grant funding from the Greater New Orleans Foundation.

I was instead welcomed into his home in true Houma fashion, with friendly demeanors and an insistence that I sit down; I was treated like an old friend, despite our only having just met. I was welcomed into James' kitchen where his father and wife sat and took a seat at their table and after explaining my interest in the lake, I was treated to stories and local knowledge. Together, everyone recalled when they could drive to Pointe Barre and told me that although there is still a road that travels to a part of it, it has been closed off by the unnamed oil and gas company, blocking access to the boat dock located at the end of the road. They told me of an oil rig located in the lake that exploded some time ago and how the company left behind the scraps, sticking out of the water which have since caused accidents and even deaths a few years ago. Despite the deadly accident, when we went out on the boat, we found the heaping pile of metal, still in the water, which would be hidden with only a slightly higher tide. James exclaimed,

“That’s what we fight about, they made the ruts with the big rigs, they made the salt water come in, all the cypress trees in Wonder Lake died after that. Everything started corroding and all the animals just died and moved further up and everything, and the biggest part about it is we wanted them to close the canal back, put our levee back, make it a private pond like it used to be, they left everything open. When you pass by the plants, all them pipes sticking up! They don’t clean nothing up! They come, they make their money, and they took off. Didn’t bother cleaning up their mess.”

Sitting in the kitchen with us was an elderly Houma gentleman sitting off to the side of the table, James' father, who had been quiet up to this point, though silently nodding in agreement to what was being said. We began talking about the ways in which tribal people were dispossessed of their land and then he shared with me that in one case he knew of, a tribal member “signed” away his land two years after his death. We all share a sentiment, a knowing

that things this nefarious seem impossible, but we know they happened. They explained more, eager to share in the hopes of documenting this knowledge. I listened as they told me what they've witnessed in their lifetime, the way the land changed, how dredging created spoil banks halting natural flows, how the land has sunk, and how fresh water became salt water. They told me things that previously took me countless hours of research and talking with experts on the coast to understand, these people know from a lifetime on the water, a testament to how irreplaceable learning from experience is. James then expresses a sentiment I know all too well, "When I went to school, the kids looked down on us because we were down da bayou but what we have is so rich. Those same kids today are trying to buy our land to build camps to go have fun, where we live!"

Growing up in Houma there are two sides of town, the east side and the west side. Separated by either a tunnel, or one of three bridges, and the east side of town is commonly looked down upon. The east side of town is where all of the bayou communities are, and consequently where a lot of tribal members reside. Even when Houma members aren't physically distinguishable by stereotypical Indigenous characteristics, our French names often give us away. I've personally experienced discrimination based on my name alone and I know what James means when he talks about the land being purchased by wealthier people. This is our own version of what I've been calling Bayou Gentrification with "camps" going up in our communities, most worth more than the average local home, our places of refuge are being overrun with weekend getaways often distinguishable by their cookie cutter clusters that are raised higher than many residents can afford to build, with multiple boats docked under them, in a landscape otherwise dotted with industry and modest homes.



Shortly afterwards we left James' home, but not before being assured that I would always be welcomed back. We traveled by airboat through Humble Canal, named for the very company who destroyed Wonder Lake and surrounding land, adding insult to injury. We travel first to Pointe Barre, one of the tribal communities identified by the anthropologist John Swanton in 1907. At the time, an informant to Swanton estimated there were twenty-eight homes and one hundred sixty-five people living at Pointe Barre (Swanton 1911:291). On the day I visited there were no homes and there is no longer a road. A few plank boards raised above the surrounding marsh are all that remain to serve as a reminder of what was once a community. The once fresh water lake now appears to be open water. This strategic history is visible only if you know what to look for. No doubt many fishers could pass by without knowing they are crossing over someone's former home. We fly over open water, that I know from historic United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) imagery was once land or at least prairie marsh (Figure 1).



Figure 1. USDA aerial imagery of Wonder Lake from 1941 and current conditions.

On the boat, we arrived at the spot where Phillip and Elizabeth once visited, when they were both younger. They were debating about where the home was actually located because neither one of them had been there in years and as anyone who has lived on the coast long enough can tell you, things can quickly change beyond recognition. We pulled into a small canal and right off of the it was an almost perfectly round cut in the marsh with very obvious wood posts sticking up out of the water, they both confirmed that this is where the house stood and that wood once held up the plank bridge that crossed the marsh to the house. We turned behind us to see an area that was once a road but has since been submerged and Elizabeth told me about how that road once came all the way to where we are standing. I look at it now and it's nothing but water with tall grass on either side of a long straight path of more water. It's obvious something was once there but it's gone. We sat in this spot and they reflected on coming here as children and how angry the people they visited were when they were forced to leave this place because of the rising tide and lack of road. They joke that these people are looking down from heaven, angry at them for having returned, but they both agree that it's good that they did. They both keep saying that one day they're going to tell this story.

We go down the canal a little further and they recognize that this entire stretch of marsh we're traveling along but where it meets the pipeline canal, we find a small downed white sign. Property of Louisiana Land and Exploration Company. I recognize the name immediately, as the company still own a large amount of land in the area. We dock near it and step out of the boat. It's not marsh, it's solid land and I suspect a lot of the surrounding area once was. Most of it is gone now. There are gaping canals where land once stood and grey ghosts of dead oak trees all around us but here, on this land where we stand, are live oaks and way too many poisonous buckmoth caterpillars. Regardless of the hostility of these furry pests, it's clear to see why their

tribal members settled in this place. Even after years of unchecked industrial use this spot remained high and dry. Today, this is a ten-minute airboat ride from the nearest road, this is marked as marsh on any modern map, and here we were standing on it. It requires a few steps upward to get up onto, as it's raised above the surrounding water. We were not just standing, but we actually had to climb up to it. Elizabeth and Phillip reflect here, stare out at the land and turn to point out the first oil well that destroyed everything around it. They decide we'll call it well number one.

Across the very straight canal I can see high ground on the other side, once attached to the piece I now stand on but separated by the canal dredged by Humble Oil in 1945. Elizabeth and Phillip take a moment to reflect on the pain they feel being here but both thank me for giving them a reason to come. I share their sadness and until they thanked me, I felt guilt for asking them to return to this place, a concern that I was exploiting their pain. In that way, native research is difficult but I knew visiting this place would evoke a much richer narrative than simply sitting in a home talking about the place. This sort of ethnographic traversing engages myself and Elizabeth and Phillip with the environment, their narrative fostering a "co-imaging" as I envision their memories on the surrounding landscape to better understand (Moretti 2017:100). I can sense their attachment to this place, however painful the memories. They are still here, the trees are still here, life is still here, despite every attempt to kill it.

## Chapter 3. Life on the Edge

### Entanglement

The people I interviewed came from different backgrounds with varying levels of formal education, various careers, and various paths they chose to pursue in life, yet all told me, with a sense of nostalgia, about growing up in tribal communities. I interviewed Aaron in his home in Houma, Louisiana. Accompanied by his relative and friend of mine, Aaron welcomed me into the home he shares with his wife. We sat at the kitchen table and he offered me a beer; I politely decline. I explain what my research is about and what I am interested in learning from him, but also state that I am interested in anything he wants to discuss, regardless if I explicitly ask. After the initial “Who’s your momma, who’s your dad?” line of questioning common to southern Louisiana, Aaron began by recalling the small tribal community he grew up in, “They’re the most strangest streets in the world. The most beautiful thing in the world, you could hide easily. All you have to do is dig in the grass,” (2018). Though he does not elaborate and has at this point already half jokingly scolded me for attempting to interrupt his story with questions, I sense that he remembers the community fondly. He continues to try to explain to me where the house he grew up in was located and gets frustrated when I cannot name nearby things I am familiar with to let him know I understand. Judging from what I know of the area surrounding his childhood home, my inability to mentally pinpoint the location comes from the fact that not just the neighborhood but also the land it was on, no longer exists. He tells me the home where he grew up with his family was on the grounds of a former plantation. He told me the man who owned the plantation, who he only referred to as the “big man” also owned slaves at one point, but that was not the case when his family lived there. His father worked for the man, doing “odds and end” jobs and maintaining the yard. His family kept a garden on the property and he keeps a

garden now despite leaving his community decades ago. He spoke to me angrily about how his crops are not staying alive as he is unable to tend to them as much as they need and he is not going to deal with it anymore, but his relative jokes that he always says that, but he always replants.

Exclusion and tri-racial segregation forced the Houma to create small sanctuaries within the cities that rejected them. When people left the bayou communities, often for opportunities in the more financially prosperous parts of town, many tended to move to predominately Indigenous neighborhoods within larger towns to recreate the safe space provided by bayou communities. George recalled when he moved to Houma from Isle de Jean Charles when he was only 5 years old, “Only one family in the whole subdivision wasn’t related to us,” and his family also kept a garden. They also continued to harvest plants in this community and practiced tribal medicine. When he purchased his own home, he kept another garden despite having to replant it multiple times due to flooding and hurricanes. He told me any excess he harvested, he shared with the community saying, “Anybody wanted, I had extra, you can have it” (2018).

Another of these relocated communities, located on the east side of Houma, was mentioned by Paul, “They used to tie their boats up in Bayou Terrebonne right there in the back. So, they'd have their fishing boat, oyster boat and everything right behind their house. They were still connected to the water” (2018). People moved from the bayou communities into Houma for economic opportunity, there being little outside of fishing available on the bayous but maintained their ways of life. It is worth mentioning that the community Paul grew up in now falls in the Ellender School district despite travel time to Terrebonne High being shorter. Moreover, the community in which he purchased his first home, which remains predominantly a community of color is also in Ellender’s school district despite being closer in time and distance to South

Terrebonne High School, the predominantly white high school. Even moving far from where his father resided on Isle de Jean Charles, Paul grew up visiting the island and his family who remained there. When he visited the island he would go fishing without concern for trespassing, as he explained, “You didn’t have to worry about hunting and fishing, if you were on somebody’s lease or not because it’s all family” (2018). Trespassing is a common and confusing concern in Louisiana because land can be privately owned despite being open, navigable water, and landowners having no legal mandate to post a sign indicating ownership. While natural and publicly constructed navigable waterways are public, those built with private funds on private land are considered private (Wilkins, Pace, Daigle, Caffey, Heaton, Ducote, & Whitmeyer 2018:3). However, the differences are nuanced and difficult to discern. Private ownership of waterways is a vehemently contested issue in the state that has resulted in vast areas of dual claim lands, where both private landowners and the state claim to own the land. In my experience, tribal members tend to focus on the term “navigable” and concede that if a boat can pass, it is public, knowing well they may have to ask for forgiveness later.

The island was once much larger than it is in its current deteriorating state and Paul told me many people in his family had gardens, others fished, and they would trade their goods. “They weren’t being regulated, they weren’t being taxed, they weren’t going through—I guess the word is colonialism. I guess, Uncle Sam figured he wasn’t getting a share. They shut them all down. The oyster fishing—they still sell to a factory and a shop but they can’t—like you and I, we can’t go buy it. The people from New Orleans, they can’t drive down there anymore and just purchase it directly from the fishermen” (2018). Many fisherman and tribal citizens complain about the overregulation of the seafood industry. Being forced to operate within the constraints of abundant amount of legislation imposed on them, the Houma’s traditions, their fishing and

harvesting practices, and their passing on of knowledge are disturbed (Billiot 2017: 116).

Regulations interrupting Indigenous harvesting practice is a common occurrence in many areas that have been described as “an ongoing colonial entanglement of disruption,” (Menzies 2010:215).

In Gitxaala territory, in what is now British Columbia, Canada, the harvesting of bilhaa (albalone) has been banned since 1990 due to over harvesting by non-aboriginal dive fishers. This ban deprives the Gitxaala of a critical component of their culture and has since placed them under intense monitoring by Canada’s fishing regulatory agency, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), who focus on them, rather than on the illegal dive fishermen (Menzies 2010:215-218). Some tribes have successfully fought for concessions to harvest fish, such as the Indigenous Yurok tribe of California. In 1933 California closed fisheries to the tribe claiming the Yurok were responsible for overfishing, ignoring the impact of commercial trawlers and the impact of a dam constructed on the Klamath River that prevented the fish from reaching their spawning grounds (Most, 2007:17). However, this decision was overruled in 1973 by the Supreme Court who decided the Yurok tribe had the right to fish salmon (Most 2007:20). Among both the Gitxaala and Yurok tribes, regulatory agencies shift blame away from exploitative practices to Indigenous peoples, disregarding their ways of knowing as a justification to exert disciplinary power.

This sort of blame shifting is also happening on the Louisiana coast. One of the most contested regulations is the requirement of Turtle Exclusion Devices (TEDs) that fishermen claim can cause as much as a 40% reduction in their catch. Though the TEDs intended to reduce harm to sea turtles, the fishermen claim to have hardly caught turtles before their use. One interviewee believes the implementation of TEDs are a means of placing blame on shrimpers

because regulatory agencies are looking for a scapegoat to appear proactive about the decline in sea turtle populations. However, the BP oil spill alone killed as many as 7,600 adult sea turtles and countless other juveniles and hatchlings (Hale, Maung-Douglass, Sempier, Skelton, & Wilson 2017). From that one spill, the biggest but far from the only one, it is clear that sea turtle population decline is not exclusively the fault of fishermen, and addressing one concern while ignoring the impacts of another disproportionately places blame on some while absolving the guilt of others. With heavy regulation, cheap imports, and inflation all minimizing profits it is unsurprising that many of the younger generations in Louisiana are leaving this way of life.

Another factor contributing to younger generations leaving career fishing is the fact that the rate of inflation has not coincided with an increase in the price of seafood and while inflation affects everyone it is especially hard on individuals who invest thousand and sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars of their own money into equipment and boats and fuel. “The big shrimp a few years back [sold for] 6...7...8 dollars a pound and now you got a hard time to get \$3 and the fuel was 15 cents or a dime a gallon,” said one interviewee. When land erodes, inshore conditions become rough and shrimp is less abundant. To compensate for these changes, some fishermen are forced to purchase larger boats that can hold more shrimp for longer periods of time and can tolerate the rough waters, allowing them to harvest shrimp further from the shore. However, these boats require a large upfront investment and many people simply cannot afford it.

Yet, another common problem expressed by fishermen is the cheap price of imported seafood diminishing the price of local seafood. I attended the 2018 Louisiana Shrimp Association meeting in Houma where I listened to multiple fisherman complain about how difficult it is to compete with the price of imports. An estimated 90% of the shrimp Americans



consume are imported, and regulations on how those shrimp are produced are scarce, at best (Mine, Chen, Shelton, Lowe 2016). According to *Consumer Reports*, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is only able to test 0.7 percent of imported shrimp. When they conducted their own independent study, they found that 60% of imports tested positive for bacteria and 11 of the 342 samples tested positive for illegal antibiotics known to cause cancer. In addition to potential food poisoning or toxicity, another cause for concern is the leading cause of mangrove forest loss is their conversion to aquaculture (United Nations Environment Programme 2006:9). Mangroves are one of the world's rarest ecosystems and provide shoreline protection, absorbing as much as 90% of the energy of wind generated waves. Fisherman have used them as protection from storms. Much like the communities on the coast of Louisiana, environmental degradation leads to coastal communities feeling greater impacts from storms, as their mangroves are destroyed or harvested for profits. Furthermore, the shrimp industry in Thailand, which is the fourth largest seafood exporter in the world, has been found to use slave labor and trafficked people to produce its products and dead bodies often turn up near shrimp farms. The use of slave labor persist due in part to a loophole in Thai law that recognizes forced labor as illegal only if the victim were trafficked (Human Rights Watch 2018:8). Yet discontinuing fishing as a livelihood does not mean tribal members no longer fish at all. To the contrary, many continue fishing and shrimping to this day, though very few have kept up with trapping. This transition creates a sense of melancholy in Paul, and a sense of shared responsibility for the damages caused by multibillion-dollar industries, in which he had but a very small role. When I asked him if he has seen significant land loss caused by dredging he responded "Oh, yeah. There's a lot of it that's open. In fact, Dog Lake is a good prime area where you see [land loss]" (2018). Mentioning that one lake in particular gave me the indication that perhaps he worked there and

so I asked and he responded, “I was part of that. Yes, I have to admit that we were part of—that’s why we got paid, that was our work. And that’s why I say, we didn’t understand environmental issues” (2018). There are a number of ways dredging causes land loss both direct and indirectly. Directly, dredging removes materials, be it land or floating marsh and in the past this removed material was placed directly adjacent to the canal being dredged, forming a continuous line similar to a levee, that acts as a tourniquet inhibiting natural water flow. Indirectly, dredging connects bodies of water that are not naturally connected, allowing a direct path for salt-water intrusion. Conservative estimates suggest that canals are responsible for thirty nine percent of total land loss in Louisiana while others suggest that it may be as high as sixty-nine percent (Scaife, Turner, Costanza, 1983). This sense of almost equal blame is undoubtedly a testament to the success of the oil and gas industry’s multiple strategies to downplay their role in the destruction of the coast and shift blame among residents of Louisiana. This denial takes many forms such as shifting blame for the ill health of the people who live in Louisiana’s Cancer Alley onto individuals for making poor “lifestyle choices” and producing calendars that depict oil rigs as natural environmental features alongside pelicans and cypress trees (Singer, 2011:149). This exaggerated sense of agency is meant to diminish the structural vulnerability faced by communities of color. Structural vulnerability describes the increased risk for certain diseases and poor outcomes, influenced by social forces (Stonington, Holmes, Hansen, Greene, Wailoo, Malina, Morrissey, Farmer, Marmot, 2018). Societies ability to impact health has influenced some researchers to suggest that medical care should extend beyond the clinical encounter to influencing change in social structures (Stonington et al., 2018).

The state of Louisiana has long put the interests of industries before the health risk of its citizens. The Louisiana Stream Control Commission (SCC) formed in 1940 was the first

regulatory agency responsible for water in the state. The SCC biologist responsible for measuring the toxicity of refinery waste was funded by the Louisiana Petroleum Refiners Waste Control Council (Colten, 2006:616). Then in the 1970s Louisiana's Governor Edwin Edwards promoted southern Louisiana for hazardous waste disposal (Austin, 2006:684). In 1980 Congress amended waste laws to exclude waste "associated with the exploration, development, and production of crude oil and natural gas," from regulation as hazardous waste, regardless of their chemical composition, giving states the authority to decide how to handle it (Austin 2006:684). In addition to waste sites, the stretch of highway between New Orleans and Baton Rouge is filled with over 100 plants and refiners and has earned the nickname Cancer Alley. Louisiana currently has the seventh highest rate of cancer in the country, admittedly an improvement from the second place spot the state held in 2001, though reports commissioned by Shell found rates of cancer in Cancer Alley were not higher than the state average (Taylor 2014:21). However, there are higher rates of cancer in Black men and women in the state (Singer 2011:147) and a study conducted by Dr. Scott Hemmerling found rural communities of color are more likely to be exposed to oil and gas hazards (2007:351). For these reasons, we should consider the root of disease as socially influenced, after all health is impacted by access to healthcare, the food we eat, the water we drink, and the air we breath (Holtz, Holmes, Stonington, & Eisenberg 2006:1665).

Perhaps the most powerful strategy the oil and gas industry has deployed is controlling the narrative around the causes of coastal erosion through lobbying. In 2013 when the South Louisiana Flood Protection and Levee Authority (SLPFA) filed suit against 97 oil and gas companies for damages to the coast below New Orleans, then governor Bobby Jindal issued an immediate press release condemning the suit and SLPFA proclaiming he was "not going to allow a single levee board that had been hijacked by a group of trial lawyers to determine flood

protection,” (Houck, 2015: 186-187). In 2014 Jindal signed Senate Bill 649 to kill the lawsuit, a bill lobbied for by the oil and gas industry who were even present when he signed it. Journalists and political scientists have long remarked on the disproportionate influence of the oil and gas industry on Louisiana Politics including Judge Perez, who was eventually impeached for misconduct and the infamous Huey P. Long. Corporate influence, often channeled through lobbyists and outsized campaign contributions, distort the democratic process, shifting the electoral politics from one person one vote. This has been dramatically intensified through the 2010 Citizens United Supreme Court Decision. While this affects every state in the U.S., Louisiana may be even more dramatically affected due to its economic dependence on two major industries, oil and gas and tourism.

### **The Edge Effect**

The reality of who is to blame is difficult to navigate. I personally feel a deep guilt about my level of complacency in the problems that are manifesting on the coast, even with the knowledge that such feelings are often engineered, not unlike the ways Coca-Cola founded Keep America Beautiful to shift the debate around the U.S.’s litter problem from the producers to the individuals. Blame shifting is a powerful tool exercised by those in power to create what Foucault would describe as a ‘normative power’ by changing the narrative of what is acceptable and who is to blame, there is no need for less effective repressive power because people will exert power over and control each other.

It is the reality of a dual existence, on the one hand tribal members are aware we exist both within and outside of dominant Louisiana culture. That said, we are not innocent in the destruction of our coastal lands, no one is, but our guilt does not negate the sorrow we feel from personally experiencing the loss. Everyone has varying levels of complicity in the destruction of

the coast and the environmental racism occurring here. I seek to further explain what Indigenous people commonly refer to as “walking in two worlds” by borrowing a theory from ecology known as the edge effect. The edge effect explains the abundant biodiversity found where two different ecosystems meet, these “edges” host plants and animals from both ecosystems and create more biodiversity than any singular ecosystem in the world. In much the same way, we are living on the metaphorical edge of societal acceptance and the literal edge of the state. With greater societal acceptance, and through years of personal social and political activism, we have developed interpersonal relationships with people beyond our own tribe. These relationships have been found to result in higher levels of creativity in individuals (Lu, Hafenbrack, Eastwick, Wang, Maddux, & Galinsky, 2017: 1103) and have aided us in our ability to adapt to our ever changing environment.

Tribal members have been forced to adapt to environmental and human induced stressors and how we have done so has taken many forms, making it difficult to make broad generalizations to define what exactly our culture is now. It is so many things and we have so many conflicting identities. It is for this reason that I’ve approached this work as an ‘ethnography of the particular’ as suggested by Lila Abu-Lughod, writing about what I have identified as culture without making broad generalizations. I recognize my position as both a researcher and a tribal member and it has helped me to think of these somewhat conflicting identities as ‘threads of a culturally tangled identity,’ and I recognize and try to express in my writing that my informants lives and opinions are just as complex as my own (Narayan, 1993:673). Though I recognize the power dynamic inherent in being a college-educated researcher, I hold the knowledge of tribal elders in high regard and truly approached my

interviews as a process of learning. After all, in many Indigenous communities, research is a dirty word (Smith 1999).

Lacking federal recognition, the Houma do not have a reservation but we've still managed to maintain a sense of community. Those who left the bayou communities moved further inland to other predominantly tribal communities but many of those communities have since dissipated. Though we are not always neighbors anymore I still see and experience the sense of tribal community. I see it in the people who bring gumbo to my grandmother who lives alone and cannot cook for herself, I see it in the fishermen who share their catches, I see it in tribal members who advocate and organize even though many of us have so little ourselves, I see it in the lifetime commitments some people have made to better the tribe, even when it is thankless work. It is difficult to make generalizations about tribal members because as a member of the community I know that no one statement encompasses all tribal members. We have many different identities and no one statement encompasses all of who we are, no one statement except, we are Houma.

Regardless, I know migration is already underway and so far many coastal communities engage in local-scale mobility that has been key to cultural survival (Colten, Simms, Grismore, Hemmerling, 2018). I know this well, as my family moved only a few miles away from my first home that was decimated by Hurricane Andrew in 1992 but in some communities, and I expect more in the near future, land loss is beginning to outpace the rate at which people can adapt (Bethel, 2010).

## Chapter 5. Conclusions

*Do the best you can. Then when you know better, do better.*

Maya Angelou

### Survival as a Way of Life

South Louisiana's land loss is as inevitable and as constant as the flow of the river that built it in the first place. Louisiana's Coastal Master Plan predicts significant land loss in historic tribal communities in the best of scenarios, we are on the front lines of coastal erosion and climate change. The barrier islands were once the speed bumps that protected us from storm surge and with the loss of those islands, our communities are now those speed bumps. What was the "worst case scenario" in the 2012 Coastal Master Plan is now the "best case scenario" in the most recent 2017 Coastal Master Plan. We *will* have to move but the Houma are no strangers to forced migration. We've done it before but foreknowing does nothing to diminish the pain we feel about this inevitable loss. A lifetime of loss has prepared us for the ferocity with which we will experience storms but not for watching our communities drown. It's difficult every single time it happens and we carry the memories with us. Yet the fact that we have done it so many times and we have been changed gives me hope that we will continue to do so into the future. We are in the sacrificial zones of human caused climate change but I know we will also be part of the solution. As former Principle Chief Thomas Dardar once said, "We'll have to migrate and bring our culture with us." Though much of tribal culture is tied to water and the resources it provides as many of my interviewees and others have stated, leaving the bayou communities does not mean you stop identifying with those places. Perhaps this is best explained by First Nation scholar Charles Menzie, "To be a person in Gitzaała society is to know one's history, to

whom one is related, and from where one comes. This sense of place and belonging is rooted in a living oral knowledge,” (214).

I began this thesis with the intention of identifying what aspects of tribal culture the Houma have lost through multiple forced migrations expecting to be able to describe my findings in a quantitative way, to be able to describe the loss in a few words. What I have found is Houma culture is much more intrinsic than that. It is not just about pottery and baskets, tribal culture is also a relationship to the land and to each other. I pessimistically thought I would find nothing but loss, not considering the ways in which what was lost was replaced or simply altered, and will continue to do so. The ability to adapt is not reserved only for Westerners, Indigenous culture is changing and dynamic and the more it changes the more variations it will create, this is why I have attempted to write against generalizations of Houma culture. There is so much variation of how people express culture within my own family that I know it would be impossible to say anything applies to all tribal members. This work has also used history to evaluate current circumstances and critically engage both history and the present as a method for writing against cultural generalizations (Abu-Lughod 2014:392). I subscribe to the idea of culture as a process, rather than a static or symbolic thing because I envision it changing as much as our landscape in coastal Louisiana.

Instead of looking to the past for components of culture that have been lost, I use framework proposed by philosopher Michel Foucault, using history to critically engage with the present, looking specifically at the ways in which power has been exerted and how that has manifested into our current state of affairs. For this purpose, I have utilized many historic sources written by Europeans, not to simply state a linear progression of history in their words, but to critique it with an Indigenous lens.



It is my hope that this literature will contribute to an understanding of the dynamic ways of life on the Louisiana coast. This thesis will contribute to academic literature that uses history to understand how loss and change affect Houma tribal members, such as tribal member Dr. Shanondorah Billiot's dissertation and future works, and to present an alternative narrative to works that have slandered the Houma, such as H.L. Bourgeois'. This work also expands upon my own work conducted as part of a research team that included Louisiana Sea Grant and UNO Chart on a project funded by the National Academy of Science. The research project titled Multidisciplinary Knowledge Integration to Support Louisiana's Coastal Indigenous Communities' Response to Natural and Technological Disasters and Adaptions to Climate Change sought to understand how the tribe has adapted to chronic and acute stressors that were both natural and human caused in the hopes that this understanding can aid the tribe in the future; this thesis adds a deeper analysis of the past to that work. Further, I see this work as an extension of the work done by early anthropologists who have studied the tribe including Dr. John Swanton and Dr. Frank Speck. This work expands on their work by bringing the narrative of the Houma to the present and with those decades of new changes and wisdom, reevaluating the understanding of tribal history. It is my hope that this thesis will contribute to the decolonization of historic research by Indigenous scholars, especially among those along the gulf coast. During this process, I have learned how it is often difficult to navigate archives and historic sources for valuable information. In the future, I plan to continue to build on this work and the work I did as the tribal archivist to make tribal history more accessible to tribal citizens. This thesis contributes to scholarship on ethnography of the particular, native anthropology, and critical approaches to history.

In the process of interviewing tribal members and transcribing the interviews, I have gained a deeper understand tribal history that I have shared, including the tribulations of desegregation. I also learned and shared how, even after moving from small bayou communities, tribal members tended to move into communities where other tribal members resided, maintaining a sense of community, even though it was not on the land their ancestors inhabited, an important realization moving in the future with land loss predictions. Future research could look specifically at the communities along the bayous that have already been lost and map the migration of tribal members who have left their communities and identify the forces that influenced them to do so. Further, future research can consider a greater number of tribal perspectives of this loss and how they foresee changes in the future.

Look at the desert we made  
Where money sucks everything dry  
Where culture is liquid and currently in short supply  
Where what we once called a community suddenly gets monetized  
And once again soil is tilled on our backs  
Just when we thought we were out  
When picking cotton becomes cottonmouth  
Look at the desert they called it a drought but

Look at the desert we made  
And everybody knows it, nowhere else to go  
So it's home

Excerpt from *Something in the Water*  
By Daveed Diggs (2018)

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## Vita

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