**Working Papers in Critical Disaster Studies**

Series 1: Historical Approaches to Covid-19

No. 1

# Silence in the Oral Archive: Power, Disaster, and Oral History

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*Working Papers in Critical Disaster Studies* is published by the Initiative for Critical Disaster Studies at New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study. Jacob A.C. Remes directs the Initiative and is the General Editor of the working paper series.

Series 1, on Historical Approaches to Covid-19, was organized under the auspices of the Historical Approaches to Covid-19 Working Group, which was supported by the National Science Foundation-funded Social Science Extreme Events Research (SSEER) Network and the CONVERGE facility at the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado Boulder (NSF Award #1841338). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NSF, SSEER, or CONVERGE.

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# Silence in the Oral Archive: Power, Disaster, and Oral History

Michael Menor Salgarolo

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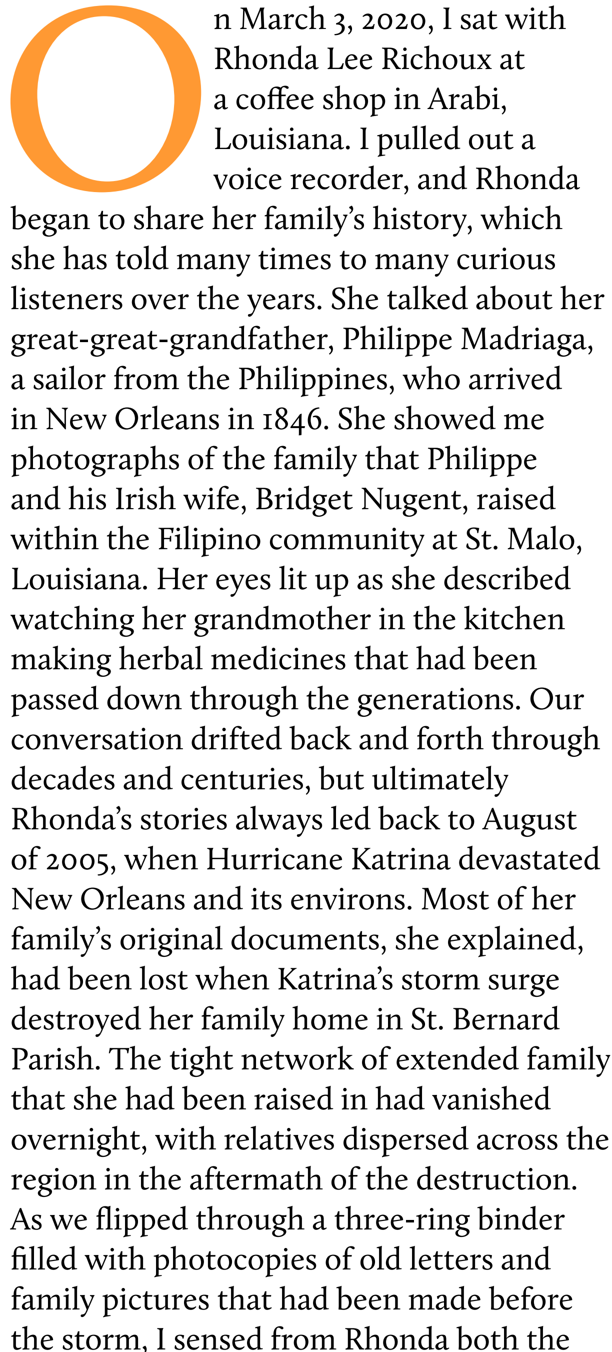
**Abstract**

This essay uses the author's personal experiences attempting to gather oral histories of the Filipino community in Louisiana in early March 2020 to consider how the "incalculable loss" of life during the COVID-19 pandemic will impact the survival of oral traditions. Using New Orleans as a case study, the paper argues that the deaths of tens of thousands of Americans, disproportionately poor, elderly, and Black, should be understood as the creation of an archival "silence," one of the many ways in which the contours of the historical archive are shaped by configurations of political power.



On March 3, 2020, I sat with Rhonda Lee Richoux at a coffee shop in Arabi, Louisiana. I pulled out a voice recorder, and Rhonda began to share her family's history, which she has told many times to many curious listeners over the years. She talked about her great-great-grandfather, Philippe Madriaga, a sailor from the Philippines, who arrived in New Orleans in 1846. She showed me photographs of the family that Philippe and his Irish wife, Bridget Nugent, raised within the Filipino community at St. Malo, Louisiana. Her eyes lit up as she described watching her grandmother in the kitchen making herbal medicines that had been passed down through the generations. Our conversation drifted back and forth through decades and centuries, but ultimately Rhonda's stories always led back to August of 2005, when Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and its environs. Most of her family's original documents, she explained, had been lost when Katrina's storm surge destroyed her family home in St. Bernard Parish. The tight network of extended family that she had been raised in had vanished overnight, with relatives dispersed across the region in the aftermath of the destruction. As we flipped through a three-ring binder filled with photocopies of old letters and family pictures that had been made before the storm, I sensed from Rhonda both the joy of preserving and retelling her family's stories and a feeling of irreparable loss.[1]

As we spoke, we did not yet comprehend the scale of the Covid-19 pandemic that would soon ravage Louisiana and the rest of the United States. I had come to New Orleans to conduct interviews with descendants of Louisiana's historic Filipino communities, which, like Rhonda's, date back to the mid-nineteenth century. My trip ended abruptly a few days later, as the spread of Covid-19 made it unsafe to conduct in-person interviews, particularly with elderly individuals. As I began to question the ethics of conducting oral history interviews during a growing pandemic, I developed a new perspective on what it means to do oral historical research, as well as how the process of historical research and writing is being impacted by the coronavirus pandemic.[2]

Disasters have a way of shaping not only the course of history but also the contours of the historical archive itself. As we mourn the passing of hundreds of thousands of Americans, disproportionately of whom were elderly, impoverished, and Black, we should also consider the incalculable loss of their stories. America's rising coronavirus death count represents mass the destruction of an oral archive filled with stories of migration, social movements, war, family struggles, and community life. Much like Katrina, the

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1 Rhonda Lee Richoux, interview by Michael Salgarolo, March 3, 2020. The oral history research cited and discussed in this essay was supported by a Global South Research Grant from the New Orleans Center for the Gulf South at Tulane University. Portions of this essay have appeared previously as Michael Salgarolo, "Conducting Oral Histories Amid the COVID Pandemic in Louisiana," *Southern Historical Association Blog*, last modified July 15, 2020, accessed July 15, 2020, https://www.thesha.org/index.php?option=com_dailyplanetblog&view=entry&year=2020&month=07&day=14&id=7:conducting-oral-histories-amid-the-covid-pandemic-in-louisiana.

2 On the dilemmas and possibilities of oral history amid Covid-19, see David Caruso, Abigail Perkiss, and Janneken Smucker, eds. "COVID-19 in Oral History," special section, *Oral History Review* 47, no. 2 (2020): 193-268.

Covid-19 pandemic is a historical event that will alter the terms upon which we produce history in its aftermath. As the death toll rises, the collective memories of America's most marginalized communities are being replaced by historical silence.

"History is the fruit of power," writes the Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot. In his brilliant *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Trouillot challenges historians to understand the production of history as a constantly evolving process wherein political power dictates the terms upon which history is written rather than the uncovering of empirical facts buried in the archive. The distribution of power determines which people and events are *mentioned* and which are *silenced* in historical sources and archives, and power also determines how historians and others craft these sources into narratives. History, then, is a series of dialogues: between power in the past and power in the present, and between historical mentions and historical silences.[3]

Oral history often serves as a way of contesting historical silences. Rather than poring through primary sources housed in a conventional institutional archive, oral historians create their primary sources by conducting interviews with people directly connected to the historical events in question. Oral historians often seek out the marginalized historical actors most likely to be written out of conventional works of history. Not only can this practice challenge the silencing and erasure of marginalized historical actors, but it also presents them in an entirely new context. Beyond merely traces or names in historical documents, oral history interviews can allow subjects to arrive in the historical record as three-dimensional human beings. To an extent unimaginable in most conventional archives, oral history interviewees become narrators of their own story.

Disasters do not impact all sectors of a society equally, nor do they impact all archives equally. Most oral histories are not stored in highly surveilled, military-grade archival compounds, nor are they stored in frigid reading rooms on the top floors of university libraries. Most oral histories reside in the consciousness of the people who tell them, historical actors living in a specific time and place. While oral histories can counteract the erasure of marginalized voices in conventional archives, the creation and survival of oral histories are often rendered precarious by the same imbalances of power that necessitated their creation in the first place. When disasters strike, the oral histories of marginalized communities are at risk of destruction.

I was not the first person to interview Rhonda Richoux and her family to hear the stories they told about their forebears. Starting in the 1970s, a University of New Orleans librarian named Marina Espina turned recording the history of Louisiana's Filipino communities into her life's work. Espina was born in Cebu, a coastal city in the central Philippines, and immigrated to New Orleans in 1967. She was part of a larger wave of Filipino professionals who came to the United States in the aftermath

3 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), xxiii, 1–30.

of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act, which removed the racial quotas that had previously barred immigrants from Asia. Her husband was a diplomat who worked at the Philippine Consulate in New Orleans. It was at events and gatherings organized by the consulate that Espina began to meet Louisiana families with long-standing Filipino roots.[4]

Armed with ambition and a tape recorder, Espina would spend the next twenty years recording the stories of Filipino Louisiana. "At first, some of the older Filipino inhabitants were reticent about sharing their knowledge with someone who, to them, was a stranger," Espina wrote, "but through persistence and persuasion, their confidence was finally gained."[5] The result was an outpouring of stories and testimonies that had seldom been heard outside the community. The Borabad sisters shared their experiences competing in the "queen contests" that Filipino community organizations would hold during Mardi Gras in the 1940s.[6] Jacinto Esmele told her how he greeted Philippine Commonwealth President Manuel Quezon when he visited New Orleans in 1933.[7] In 1981, she interviewed a 103-year-old fisherman named Manuel Oasay, who had been fishing and trapping in the bayous of lower Louisiana for over 60 years.[8]

Espina's findings attracted attention throughout the United States and the Philippines. Despite a popular fascination with Louisiana's "Manilamen"--the name given to Filipino sailors who traversed the globe working on merchant shipping vessels in the nineteenth century-- Espina's work gained limited institutional recognition. Much of her research was self-funded, including a trip to Mexico where she investigated Louisiana's connections to the Spanish galleon trade.[9] Her book, *Filipinos in Louisiana*, was published in 1988 by A.F. Laborde & Sons, a small commercial printer that operated out of a storefront on Frenchmen Street in New Orleans.[10] When the National Parks Service commissioned an "ethnohistory" of Louisiana's Filipino community in 1982, they rejected Espina's application in favor of a historical research firm, R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates. Espina's expansive collection of original documents, photographs, and interview tapes were not stored in an institutional archive, such as the Earl K. Long Library at the University of New Orleans, where she

4 Marina Espina, undated interview, transcript, Crossing East Oral Histories, Interviews, and Transcripts, http://www.crossingeast.org/crossingeastarchive/2017/03/26/marina-espina/; Belinda C. Lum, "Immigration Acts," in *Asian American Society: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Mary Y. Danico (Thousand Oaks, Ca: SAGE Publications, 2014), 497–502.

5 Marina Espina, "Filipinos in Louisiana: The Untapped Resource," Marina Espina Vertical File, 1980, National Pinoy Archives, Seattle, WA.

6 Marina Espina, *Filipinos in Louisiana* (New Orleans: A.F. Laborde, 1988), 19–33.

7 Marina E. Espina, *Jacinto E. Esmele: Profile of a Successful Filipino in the US* (New Orleans: A.F. Laborde, 1980), 1–6.

8 Marina Espina, "Oldest Living Filipino in New Orleans," Marina Espina Vertical File, 1981, National Pinoy Archives, Seattle, WA.

9 Fred Cordova, "Foreword for Marina Espina," Marina Espina Vertical File, n.d., National Pinoy Archives, Seattle, WA.

10 Hunter Oatman-Stanford, "Cache of Historic Newspapers Unveils the Mystery of Old New Orleans," *Collectors Weekly*, last modified October 16, 2014, accessed September 28, 2020, https://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/cache-of-historic-newspapers-unveils-the-mysteries-of-old-new-orleans/.

worked for over three decades. Instead, she kept them three blocks away, in her home in the residential neighborhood of Gentilly.

When Hurricane Katrina made landfall, the waters of Lake Ponchartrain rose rapidly, submerging Espina's home in eleven feet of water. Decades' worth of collected documents, photographs, and other research materials were destroyed in an instant. "The story of the Manilamen and their descendants has almost become my entire life," a devastated Espina told a reporter after the storm, lamenting that "my life is being thrown away with every material thing." Espina's loss reverberated across the nation through email lists and community newspapers. An official statement from the Filipino American National Historical Society read: "We as Filipino-Americans share her loss. Espina's research was the foundation of Filipino-American history."[11]

By March 8, my second week in New Orleans, Covid-19 cases were already spiking in New York, where I live and go to school. Many of my friends and colleagues had already been told to work from home, and I got constant, alarming updates about the spread of the virus in Europe and China. Interviewees and their family members did not seem too concerned, at least not initially. One man that I met on Facebook encouraged me to get in touch with his grandmother, a ninety-six-year-old woman who had grown up around Manila Village and married a Filipino American shrimper. When I asked if I could have her phone number to set up an appointment, he told me to "just pull in" to her house in the town of Lafitte. "She gets visitors all the time," he assured me, adding, "she'll talk all day long." Oral historians frequently discuss the protocols for ethically conducting oral histories, asking, for example, how to obtain permission from subjects to publish interviews or how to avoid re-traumatizing subjects who have been through painful experiences. I had never read anything about the ethics of potentially exposing interviewees to a deadly virus.

I thought about the precautions I'd need to take if I were to conduct the oral interviews I had planned. Perhaps I could keep my distance, sit on the other side of the room, use sanitizer, and politely decline to shake hands. My thoughts ultimately drifted toward a worst-case scenario: How much blame would I place on myself if I inadvertently infected an interviewee? I shuddered just thinking about the possibility. I decided to cancel all my interviews, and then, shortly after, to end the research trip and go home. My interviewees agreed that it was the right decision.

On March 18, I returned to New York, a city that was fully in the grips of the pandemic's initial onslaught. Newspaper headlines informed me that I had gone from one Covid-19 epicenter to another: New York led the nation in the number of total cases, while New Orleans had one of the highest infection rates on the planet. Commentators were quick to place the blame for Louisiana's high case numbers on Mardi Gras celebrations in late February

11 Lydia Lum, "A Life's Work Washed Away," *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, last modified September 7, 2006, accessed September 28, 2020, https://diverseeducation.com/article/6321/.

and an informal folk culture that valued intimate personal contact.[12] Missing from much of the analysis of outbreaks on the state or city level were discussions of which groups within these localities were suffering most from the virus: Black and brown communities.

Louisiana was one of the first states to release data on Covid-19 infections organized by race, and the results were horrific. As of April 2020, African Americans accounted for 70% of Louisiana's Covid-19 deaths while making up 33 percent of the population, a result of unequal access to housing, jobs, and healthcare.[13] Black New Orleanians, researchers found, were more likely to be living in large, multigenerational households in segregated working-class neighborhoods. They were more likely to be working low-wage jobs in the tourism and hospitality industry, where they were more likely to be exposed to the virus.[14] Racial disparities did not end with these pre-existing inequalities: a ProPublica report found that privately managed Ochsner hospitals prematurely stopped treatment on many elderly Black Covid-19 patients, sending them home to die, often against the wishes of their family members.[15]

Many scholars, journalists, and community members have drawn comparisons between Covid-19 and Hurricane Katrina. Scholar Kristen Buras, for example, notes that in both events, "governmental inaction and racism have been most responsible for the disproportionate harms experienced by communities of color."[16] Moreover, many of the preconditions for the devastating spread of Covid-19 among Black communities were the result of policies created in the aftermath of Katrina. The destruction wrought by the storm gave way to what Cedric Johnson has called the "neoliberal deluge," as corporate leaders and government policymakers moved swiftly to privatize public services and undermine organized labor.[17] Government funds for rebuilding the city were distributed through no-bid contracts to private developers. Seemingly overnight, the state of Louisiana disbanded the Orleans Parish School Board, which operated New Orleans's public schools, replacing it with a system of private-run charter schools and a non-unionized teacher workforce.[18] And most importantly,

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12 Katy Reckdahl, Campbell Robertson, and Richard Fausset, "New Orleans Faces a Virus Nightmare, and Mardi Gras May Be Why," *New York Times*, March 26, 2020.

13 Linda Villarosa, "'A Terrible Price:' The Deadly Racial Disparities of Covid-19 in America," *New York Times Magazine*, April 29, 2020.

14 Katy Reckdahl, "How Housing Patterns May Partly Explain Coronavirus's Outsized Impact on Black Louisianans," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, August 15, 2020.

15 Annie Waldman and Joshua Kaplan, "Sent Home to Die," *ProPublica*, last modified September 2, 2020, accessed September 30, 2020, https://www.propublica.org/article/sent-home-to-die.

16 Kristen L. Buras, *From Katrina to COVID-19: How Disaster, Federal Neglect, and the Market Compound Racial Inequities* (National Education Policy Center, 2020).

17 Cedric Johnson, "Introduction: The Neoliberal Deluge," in The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, *Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans*, ed. Cedric Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xvii–l.

18 Adrienne Denise Dixson, "Whose Choice?: A Critical Race Perspective on Charter Schools," in *The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 130–151; Kristen Buras, "Race, Charter Schools, and Conscious Capitalism: On the Spatial Politics of Whiteness as Property (and the Unconscionable Assault on Black New Orleans)," *Harvard Educational Review* 81, no. 2 (June 1, 2011): 296–331.

for understanding the roots of the severity of the city's Covid-19 outbreak, city and state officials shuttered Charity Hospital, one of the state's last remaining public medical facilities.[19] There is perhaps no better example of how desperately New Orleans lacks public health infrastructure than the scene an LA Times reporter witnessed in March: the National Guard treating Covid-19 patients in makeshift medical tents set up in the parking lot of the abandoned Charity Hospital.[20]

There is truth in the aphorism that "history repeats itself." The devastation of Black communities in New Orleans amid Katrina and Covid-19 is a prime example: both calamities brought on by government inaction and deeply entrenched inequalities. If knowing that "history repeats itself" helps us to explain how structures of power create similar outcomes for disparate historical events, it tells us little about how these same structures of power shape the telling of history itself. The Covid-19 pandemic that has left working-class communities of color most vulnerable to infection and death has thus also placed the survival of their stories in jeopardy. The virus has, for example, ravaged the members of the Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club, a Black Mardi Gras Krewe that dates back to 1909.[21] It is difficult to comprehend just how much history is lost when 200,000 Americans lose their lives in a global pandemic, but it is possible to know which communities' histories are most at risk.

Comparing the loss of lives due to Covid-19 and the destruction of a homemade archive during Katrina may appear to be an imprecise analogy. Unlike an archive that purports to preserve artifacts for eternity, human memories are certain to be lost through the body's expiration at some point in the future. While archives are often able to retain remnants of the human experience beyond the lifetimes of those who created them, they remain exposed to the slings and arrows of fortune and the icy neglect of bureaucrats and policymakers. In 2018, for example, Brazil's chronically underfunded National Museum went up in flames, leaving a "lobotomy in Brazilian memory."[22] The increased vulnerability of informal, community-based archives such as that of Marina Espina underscores the fact that any archive's claim to permanence is at best, an aspiration. Archives, like human lives, are ephemeral.

In 2017, the Louisiana Historical Association convened a meeting of the state's librarians, archivists, and historic preservation specialists. With urgency, the group declared that Louisiana's archives were in a "state of emergency." Cultural institutions, it seems, had not been spared from post-Katrina austerity measures. The group reported that the state's archives were

19 Thomas J. Adams and Cedric Johnson, "Austerity Is Fueling the COVID-19 Pandemic in New Orleans, Not Mardi Gras Culture," *Jacobin*, last modified April 2, 2020, accessed September 28, 2020, https://jacobinmag.com/2020/4/new-orleans-coronavirus-crisis-health-care-privatization.

20 Molly Hennessy-Fiske, "In Louisiana, Death Comes Before Coronavirus Test Results," *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 2020.

21 Villarosa, "'A Terrible Price:' The Deadly Racial Disparities of Covid-19 in America."

22 Ed Yong, "What Was Lost in Brazil's Devastating Museum Fire," *The Atlantic*, last modified September 4, 2018, accessed October 16, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/09/brazil-rio-de-janeiro-museum-fire/569299/.

not only dangerously underfunded but were also threatened by floods and hurricanes that were becoming increasingly intense due to climate change. "We all love history, and we're trying to protect it," said one archivist. "This is a call to arms."[23]

Most marginalized communities do not keep their histories neatly filed in institutional archives. Their stories lie within the communities themselves, transmitted through stories and traditions shared in living rooms and community gatherings. These oral histories do not consist of empirical data to be mined by curious outsider historians; they constitute the very identities of the people who share and listen to them. Due to the pandemic, these oral archives, too, are in a state of emergency. Across the globe, human repositories of culture and tradition are being destroyed at an astounding rate. As the death toll rises, we are witnessing the creation of an ever-expanding silence in the archives.

23 Lex Talamo, "Louisiana's Archives in 'State of Emergency,' Historians Say," *Shreveport Times*, March 21, 2017.

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