HIST 670: Oral History

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**Reflection on My Second Interview:**

**Key moments:**

Originally, I was not planning to interview Madame Trevigne, as I knew she is a New Orleanian from the bottom of her heart. The abrupt schedule change required the reconceptualization of my final project.

There are several key moments in the interview. First, during the interview, she explained her school experience and how her teacher made sure for her to learn about the history of her community. She suggested that segregation created a social space for teachers to develop their own educational curricula based on African American communities’ needs. She recalled that she learned West African folktales, local African American heroes and sang the Negro National Anthem. She compared her educational experience with the present. In some ways, she was implying that integration limited African American teachers to empower their children with history. This frustration resonates well with African American criticism on the New Orleans charter school system.

Second, she also talked about racism that she encountered at Tulane University when she was pursuing her career as a social worker. She heard Tulane professors making racist comments. Madame is a very light skinned Creole. I wondered if her physical appearance affected the ways they made racist remarks. I wanted to go deeper, however, I could not because she kept talking.

Third, she talked about her tignon works. Tignon is headdress commonly worn by African Americans in colonial New Orleans. During the Spanish colonial period, there was a law for “colored women” to wear headdress to differentiate themselves from whites. However, these women wore beautiful headdress with bright colors and patterns and reinterpreted the stigma of tignon. She looked very happy and enthusiastic when she explained her workshop one day with local teenagers. According to her, they found their inner beauty through tignon. Her voice sounds the brightest during this segment of the interview.

Fourth, at the end of the interview, she discussed how her parents attempted to keep her away from racism. This segment sounded very important to me, because her voice weakened as she tried to recall more about her experiences as a child. This was a good lesson for me to learn pausing and silence are not bad in oral interviews.

**What challenges did you encounter?**

The most challenging moment during this interview is when she refused to answer my question about the rural South. While the rural South became no longer a focus of my project, I still wanted to ask about her perception about it. Immediately after I asked this question, she said, “no, just New Orleans.” This segment shows her strong personality and also demonstrates who controls the interview. Of course, I could not ask more.

**What would you do differently next time?**

If I pose a question about the rural South to her again, I would probably ask about specific places or towns. For instance, during the interview, she mentioned places like Lake Catherine or South Carolina. If I have another chance to interview her, I may ask questions as, “You said you spent summer in Lake Catherine, what did it look like?” or “ Which part of South Carolina did you visit for your art show? How did you get there?” I think the rural South was a broad term so I need to narrow it down.

**What did you learn about the past, about memory, about yourself?**

Unlike my first interviewer, Mr. Clarence F. Hebert, Madame Trevigne was quite vocal about her political stance. One thing I learned the most is her mixed feeling about integration. She felt that in many ways African American communities maintained stronger ties before the Civil Rights Movement. She is not satisfied with the ways in which teachers teach history in schools and commented, “You have to have certain curiosity about history, because when history is taught in schools it is not ever accurate. Teachers were only allowed to teach what’s in history books. So people miss a lot of history.” This feeling resonates with comments made by many African American parents I know in New Orleans. They felt that their voice no longer reach because integration meant the integration of African American children with white majority mainstream education. Her implication was very compelling to me considering the decreasing number of African American educational programs since Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

**What kinds of new questions emerged?**

When I have another chance to talk to her, I will ask about difference between her educational experiences in Xavier University and Tulane University. Xavier is a historically black university whereas Tulane just began to desegregate when she became a student. I am interested in learning how higher educations served to African American communities.

In addition, I would like to ask about her neighborhood. At the beginning of the interview, she said that many families in her neighborhoods were moving to New Orleans East, a suburb of New Orleans. She also refers to the gentrification of the Treme and Seventh Ward neighborhoods in post-Katrina New Orleans. As she is a member of Creole family who has lived in the Treme and Seventh Ward areas for more than half a century, I am curious how much has changed and unchanged and what kinds of problems she has encountered so far. Her insight will be important to study what had made these neighborhoods Creole. Related to this question, there is a recently launched project called, “Memories of the Creole 7th Ward.”

**Most interesting or surprising and/or the most problematic or disappointing moments in the interview.**

The most surprising moment of the interview is her experience in doll making. She said that when a small child looked at her dolls, she commented that a black doll was “ugly,” and a doll with a lighter skin tone was “pretty.” It reminded me of the study by Kenneth and Mamie Clark. Then, Trevigne ponders, “ is racism in everything?” She answered, “no,” but she still sees how racism works today. It is shocking to me that her works were appreciation of her cultural heritage, but she still sees racism through her works.

Perhaps the important lesson I learned from this interview is to avoid conducting more than two interviews in one day. Towards the end of the interview, I could hear my voice was very frail and small. I was very tired.