

Charlton Oral History Research Grant, Baylor Institute for Oral History
Joselyn Takacs, PhD Candidate, University of Southern California

Polluted Purifiers: An Oral History of Southeast Louisiana's Oyster Farmers in the Wake of the
Deepwater Horizon Environmental Disaster

Project Description

Background and Purpose of the Research

Five years after the Deepwater Horizon explosion and 3.19 million gallons of oil spilled in the Gulf of Mexico¹, one of the worst environmental disasters in U.S. history has largely faded from the headlines. Some coverage of the spill persists on anniversaries and as the Criminal Court Case against British Petroleum winds down. As I write this, the court's decision is weeks away, but for those affected, the legal dispute and ensuing appeals process appears interminable. According to BP senior vice president Geoff Morrell, "There is nothing to suggest other than that the Gulf is a resilient body of water that has bounced back strongly. The Gulf has not been damaged anywhere near the degree some people feared it would have in the midst of the spill."² Yet, contrary to BP officials' narrative, the spill's environmental impact in the Gulf of Mexico remains uncertain and may take decades to fully ascertain³. Among those in limbo are Louisiana's oyster farmers and fishermen. Of all its commercial fisheries, Louisiana's oyster industry remains the hardest hit by the spill. The oystermen wait to see if their industry will survive.

My oral history project will be a comparative study of four critical oyster-producing Louisiana parishes: St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Lafourche, and Terrebonne parishes. The interviews will chronicle oyster farmers' experiences during and in the years following the environmental disaster. The interviews will document not only how oysters were affected, but also how the largest environmental disaster in US history was handled and its impact on coastal communities whose livelihood depend on Gulf aquaculture and tourism. Many oystermen worked for BP as a part of the Vessels of Opportunity program and had an insiders' perspective on the clean-up process. Some oystermen have been compensated for their losses through the BP Claims Facilities, while others have not. This comparative study will also shed light on coastal communities' historical relationship with the oil industry and explore broader, complex issues, such as the intersection of race, class and development in the respective parishes as it relates to the narrators' personal experiences during the spill and claims process.

The spill has affected oystermen in each parish differently, depending on how much oil and dispersants contaminated the waters of their oyster leases. In the year after the spill, Nick

¹ Larino, Jennifer. "Feds Appeal Ruling Limiting BP's Oil Spill Fine to \$13.7 Billion." *The Times-Picayune*. NOLA.com, 16 Mar. 2015. Web. 27 Apr. 2015. <http://www.nola.com/business/index.ssf/2015/03/feds_appeal_bp_oil_spill_size.html>.

² Elliott, Debbie. "5 Years After BP Oil Spill, Effects Linger And Recovery Is Slow." *NPR*. NPR, 20 Apr. 2015. Web. 27 Apr. 2015. <<http://www.npr.org/2015/04/20/400374744/5-years-after-bp-oil-spill-effects-linger-and-recovery-is-slow>>.

³ Ibid.

Collins, co-owner of the ninety-year-old Collins Oyster Company in Lafourche Parish, lost eighty-five percent of his oysters. Nine of his oyster crops died. When I interviewed Nick Collings in August, 2014, he said, “Everything we sold this winter has just basically carried us through.” Waters east of the Mississippi are the most ravaged with the oyster catch in 2013 seventy percent lower than pre-spill averages⁴. Though oysters demand a higher price per pound than before the 2010 oil spill, statewide, the oysters’ spatfall has been consistently below average⁵, and it remains unclear if and how the spatfall⁶ will recover.

My project was conceived in the spirit of the tradition of oral history in America, which began with early accounts collected by the WPA Federal Writers Project in the 1930s and 1940s to realize “oral history’s potential for restoring to the record the voices of the historiographically—if not historically—silent”⁷. The national narrative of the oil spill and the following years has been skewed by the fact that British Petroleum was placed in charge of the oil spill’s clean-up, and as a result, controlled much of the information released to the press. While there has been great investigative reporting contrary to BP’s narrative—covering the lingering effects of the spill, the uncompensated workers in the commercial fisheries, and the health of these communities now that the news trucks have departed—my oral comparative oral history project would provide a more in-depth reflection of the disaster, allowing us to look past the statistical summaries, census data, government reports, and on-going scientific studies of the disaster, and see through the voices of those directly affected the industry’s struggle to survive.

Previous Research on the Topic and Planned Arrangements for the Interviews

I have been researching and writing on this topic for over a year as part of my work on a novel set in Southeast Louisiana during the BP Oil Spill, based on extensive research on the oyster industry, the oil industry’s history in Louisiana, and the changing demographics of Southeast Louisiana. In December 2014, I completed a research paper on the nineteenth century roots of the oyster industry in Plaquemines, Terrebonne, and Lafourche Parishes that I am currently revising for publication. Crucial to my understanding of the region has been studying its transnational heritage and geographic situation in the Gulf of Mexico, which is responsible for the complex racial, multilingual, and ethnic dynamic as it varies in each parish. As Dr. John Lowe writes in “Creole Cultures and National Identity After Katrina”:

Yes, the Mississippi is the South’s greatest waterway, but it is also its essential link to the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean, the Panama Canal and the Pacific, the Western Hemisphere and world trade. In concurring with Edouard Glissant (“The Caribbean Sea is not an American lake. It is an estuary of the Americas” [139]), we by implication make a central case for Louisiana as hub and

⁴ Alexander-Bloch, Benjamin. “BP Oil Spill: In Hard-hit Oyster Areas, Concrete Mountains Rise 5 Years after Disaster.” *The Times-Picayune*. NOLA.com, 20 Apr. 2015. Web. 27 Apr. 2015. <http://www.nola.com/environment/index.ssf/2015/04/bp_oil_spill_oyster_5_years_co.html>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ **Spatfall** refers to the process which occurs when a young oyster seed, or spat, attaches itself to the hard substrate that constitutes an oyster reef.

⁷ Linda Shopes, “Making Sense of Oral History,” *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*, <<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/>>, February 2002.

generator of a new cultural configuration, but one with a rich, hybrid, and varied past—more Caribbean, European, and African than virtually any other place in the nation—and a counter narrative to the national script.⁸

In August 2014, I attended the Louisiana Oyster Task Force Meeting as the guest of Dr. John Supan, Professor at Louisiana State University and Director of LSU's Oyster Research Center in Grand Isle, Louisiana, where I was introduced to the leading oystermen in the industry. At that meeting, I made my initial connections in the industry and have made arrangements to interview ten representatives. While I was in Louisiana for just a few days that August, I interviewed Dr. Supan and spent two days interviewing the Collins family of Collins Oyster Company in Lafourche Parish.

Below you'll see a list of the potential narrators for my project. Many of these oystermen and oyster dealers are members of the Louisiana Oyster Task Force and representatives for their parish. As mentioned, I have already made arrangements to interview ten of these oystermen, and I hope to meet and interview more narrators through these contacts.

Shane Bagala— Southwest Pass Oyster Lease Representative
Wilbert Collins— Louisiana Oyster Dealers and Growers; Lafourche Parish Representative
Nick Collins— Co-owner of Collins Oyster Company, Lafourche Parish
Dr. John Supan— Professor at Louisiana State University and Director of LSU's Oyster Research Center in Grand Isle, Louisiana
Dan Coulon— Vice Chairman and Louisiana Farm Bureau Federation Representative; Oyster farmer from Plaquemines Parish
Wade White— Oyster Farmer from St. Bernard Parish
Marti Melerine— Oyster Farmer from Hopedale, Louisiana in St. Bernard Parish
Byron Encalade— Louisiana Oystermen Association Representative; Plaquemines Parish
Jakov Jurisic— Plaquemine Oyster Association Representative
Ralph "Buddy" Pausina— Louisiana Oyster Dealers and Growers Representative
Brad Robin— United Commercial Fisherman Representative; Robin's Seafood Company; St. Bernard Parish
Brandt Lafrance— United Commercial Fishermen Representative
Al Sunseri— Louisiana Oyster Dealers; Jefferson Parish Representative
Patrick Banks— Biologist and Manager of Wildlife and Fisheries Department's Oyster Program
John Tesvich— Chairman and Plaquemines Oyster Association Representative
Sam Slavich— Louisiana Oyster Dealers and Growers Representative
Peter Vujnovich Jr. — Delta Commercial Fishermen Representative

While media focus on the oil spill has been widespread, in recent years this coverage has dwindled. The Louisiana Oyster Industry, in general, has been vastly under-studied, as there are no books dedicated solely to the topic, and no comparative studies on the oyster industry in the wake of the spill. NOAA's Voices of the Fisheries Project, which compiled a number of interviews with Louisianans in 2010 and 2011, only included one interview with a member of the

⁸ Lowe, John, 1945. "Creole Cultures and National Identity After Katrina." Louisiana Culture from the Colonial Era to Katrina. Ed. John Lowe 1945. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008. 1-21. Web.

oyster industry, Al Sunseri, Co-Owner of P & J's Oysters, the historic oyster distributor in New Orleans. However, they did not include a single oyster farmer. Similarly, The Southern Foodways Alliance compiled thirteen interviews of Lafourche Parish Residents a year-and-a-half after the spill, and the alliance included one oyster farmer, Nick Collins of Collins Oyster Company. My project would be the first of its kind.

Proposed Outcomes

This June and next winter, I will return to Louisiana to continue my research and interviews. During this period, I intend to travel throughout the four oyster-producing parishes in Southeast Louisiana most affected by the spill: St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Lafourche, and Terrebonne. In addition to the paper I will present at the 2016 Oral History Association convention, there are two intended projects for these interviews. Firstly, the interviews supported by Charlton Oral History Research Grant will inform my novel research.

My novel-in-progress is a family saga, following a family in Southeast Louisiana that has been in the oyster industry for four generations. Set during the 2010 BP Oil Spill, the book follows the family in the spill's wake. My novel traces the effects of the environmental disaster not only on the oyster industry and coastal communities but also the toll it takes on interfamilial relationships and personal lives. At the heart of the novel, for me, is the question: how do we, as individuals, come to terms with sudden and irreparable injustice in our lives?

In addition, with the interviews supported by the oral history grant, I intend to design an interactive website where the oral histories will be available, allowing the public to access the interviews on a map which couples the oyster harvest statistics for each parish, locations of freshwater diversions, and documented oil contamination. The website would make Louisiana oystermen's narratives easily accessible to the public and present them in a visual, interactive medium. I feel this is integral to spreading awareness about the under-documented effects of the spill on the oyster industry. The narrators' stories, in their own words, are key to understanding what is in danger of being lost.

