Houma Nation: Place of Many Tongues

Monique Verdin

Abstract*: Monique Verdin is a daughter of southeast Louisiana's Houma Nation. In this conversation with Pradnya Garud, Pushpendra Johar and Noel Didla she discusses the complex interconnectedness of environment, economics, culture, climate and change that have inspired her to intimately document Houma relatives and their lifeways at the ends of the bayous, as they endure the realities of restoration and adaptation in the heart of America's Mississippi River Delta.*

Pushpendra: **For people who are not familiar with the American administrative context, what does a non-federally recognized Native American tribe mean in the U.S. context? Perhaps you can start by telling us about the history of your Houma nation.**

Monique: There's actually a town called Houma, about an hour away from New Orleans. In the Muscogee language of this territory, it means red. And the delta of the Mississippi River, where the modern Houma have been pushed to, essentially, since colonial times, is territory where many different nations found refuge during colonial unrest. But the historical Houma were found about 100-150 miles north of modern New Orleans.

This territory where New Orleans is found, the Choctaw called this place Bulbancha, or sometimes Bvlbancha. That means "place where many languages are spoken" or "place of many tongues," and that's because this has been a place where many different kinds of people traveled through and traded—a place of exchange, long before the colonizers arrived. So within about a 100-mile radius of New Orleans, up to seven or more languages were spoken. The Choctaw and the Chitimacha were the bigger tribes, and there were many smaller bands and tribes/nations. So the modern Houma are really a mix of a number of different nations.

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When the Americans came in, with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, at that time people were coming from all over: the indigenous population, African populations coming from West Africa, the French, the Creole, even Filipinos, Italians, and the Irish came later. There's always been this mixing here. When the Louisiana Purchase happened, our elders were petitioning for land rights that were promised in colonial negotiations, and of course the Americans say, "We know of no law where Indians own land." This identifying of nation versus tribe, I think that language is very much the colonizers' language.

Pushpendra: How did the relationship with the Federal government evolve from there?

Monique: In the 1830s, Andrew Jackson started moving people off traditional lands to west of the Mississippi. The Houma were lucky: they were able to dodge the Trail of Tears by being able to go to the ends of the bayous. They were still connected by this web of waterways and had the bounty of an estuary system. So if somebody's trying to move you out, you can just hide.

After the civil war, everything becomes black and white. You're either white, or if you're not white, you're black. And if you're indigenous, you're put into the black category, and treated like a person of color. We have this reign of terror that happens with the sugar planters. The Houma were able to find a sense of sovereignty, but not by asserting to anyone, because they were in fear of their lives, but more from the repercussions of standing up for one's rights.

From that time until the 1960s and the Civil Rights Movement, the Houma people were just trying to survive. In the Sixties we saw a resurgence, which was really of women—we are a matriarchal society, it was women who were organizing, specifically for education rights. That really brought people together. And that's when we again start petitioning for recognition by the federal government. We've been in that conversation and that fight ever since, and also have had oil and gas lobbying against us.

I personally refer to my relatives as the Houma nation. There is the official United Houma Nation, which is the umbrella under which we have been petitioning collectively to the United States government. There are 562 federally recognized tribes in the US, and many more that are not federally recognized. But if you're federally recognized, then you're essentially a ward of the state. There's a sense of sovereignty, but you're under the US government. The Department of the Interior was created during the Indian removals, and the Department of the Interior is in control of all of the minerals, all the national parks, all the land and resources there.

If you're petitioning the government to be federally recognized, there are two ways to go about it. One way is to go through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which is under the Department of the Interior. Combine that with being in south Louisiana, which is like a black oil and gas gold mine and you have Shell oil or whoever petitioning and lobbying against you. The other way you can go is through Congress—to have it be an act of Congress to be federally recognized.

It was only in the Nineties that we were finally able to get our petition for federal recognition, because it is such a legal battle, you have to have all this paper trail. I mean, my grandmother did not read or write and she barely spoke English, you know? And her generation in the early 1900s was when oil and gas was found here. The modern Houma territory is in what is called the Yakni Chitto, which means big land or big country. These wetlands between the Mississippi and the Atchafalaya, were some of the first places where they started to pull oil out of.

Pushpendra: How did that shape your family's story, and particularly your grandmother's life and how it came to shape yours?

Monique: Our marshes were literally in my elders' backyard, and they didn't know what was going on. These were lands that were undesirable until oil was found, and there's this history, again, of rights being stolen. They'd give people 20 dollars and have somebody sign X to the paperwork, and that fast they would lose their land rights. My grandparents saw that happen and felt the repercussions—they no longer had land rights, and they were trappers and fishermen.

So, in the Forties they migrated to where I was born, which is still in the Delta, but on the East

side of the Mississippi River. It wasn't like moving across the country, but in their minds, it was a totally different world to be in St. Bernard Parish. But they were able to find work, they were able to buy property, they were able to pass at least.

People in South Louisiana are all kind of brown, all mixed up, but with a last name like Verdin, or a Dardar or a Billiot or a Hotard in Terrebonne or Lafourche Parish, in the Yakni Chitto where my grandparents came from, they knew you were an Indian, and a Houma, and you were treated as such. My grandmother said that in church the white people, as she would call them, or Cajuns, would sit in the front, then black Creoles would be in the middle, and our people would always be in the back. That was how the hierarchy worked, or how she understood it to be. By moving to St. Bernard Parish, my aunts, uncles, and father were allowed to go to public schools without the discrimination they faced in Terrebonne. My grandparents were eventually able to vote, which didn't happen in Terrebonne until the 1960s.

Pushpendra: You mentioned this modern usage of tribe and nation, in contradiction with this idea of the federal government itself being a nation state. What does it mean in that framework to use the word 'nation' by its various stripes in America? Is it recognized by any government institutions? And what kind of purpose does it serve?

Monique: The way I think about it, when you say "nation", there is sovereignty there, and self-determination, or communal determination that is not under the umbrella of the U.S. government. It's not being a ward of the state, but having authority over territories and self-governance.

Honestly, it has been so many years that our traditional ways have been disconnected—our relationship to the natural world, our traditions and ceremonies—by this assimilation that has been forced by the colonial experiment. I see it with the modern United Houma Nation. I was sitting on the tribal council for a couple of years. It is frustrating that in order for our government to be taken seriously, the only way that the federal government will recognize us is if we design our system like their system. We have to have a President, and a Vice President, and this structure that is built upon their design. That was frustrating for me because it didn't feel authentic. It felt as if we were playing pretend, these puppet roles, in order to be validated.

I have a dear friend, a Houma historian named Michael Dardar. He says that we have to recognize our own sovereignty—that in order for us to be able to really keep our nation and keep our people and keep our territories healthy and intact, that there is this recognition of the fact that we don't need them to validate us. That we are because we are, you know? And until we get there, until we reclaim that, and kind of deprogram the colonized mind… I was working with Houma youth not long ago, and all these stereotypes that they had of themselves as being indigenous kids were taken from Hollywood. It's like no, you're not that kind of Indian. Which is also, hold on, let's talk about this "Indian" word, too, what is that?

The kids don't know that Houma means red, and how much power that holds. If you know that you can tie that to Oklahoma, and it starts opening up little hidden codes of the past that are all around us. Pensacola, Mobile, Biloxi, all these places, I knew the names my whole life—but I was a 30-year-old woman before I realized. And I'm an indigenous woman, too! It goes back to erasure, how the history that we get has been written by those in power, the white supremacists that don't want us to really know the history.

Pushpendra: You used another interesting word, "sovereign," and where we are, we don't associate that word with America because it is a country that is busy undermining everyone's sovereignty in the world. What does it mean for somebody who lives in that country, and asserting that sovereign existence from within?

Monique: The undermining of our sovereignty, I think, has been this strategic disconnection from natural resources. For us, that legacy goes back to clearcutting of forests in the 17th century, through the plantation economy to the corporate stranglehold that the oil and gas industry has on our economy, our environment, and our culture at this point in time.

Many of my cousins who are Houma will work part-time as welders offshore or in the oil fields, and they work the other part of the year as shrimpers. They ride the boom and bust—like right now, oil is low, so people are trying to go back to traditional fishing, crabbing, oystering or shrimping. We've been under such assault—forced off the high ground, then forced off the low ground because of what's underneath—that we've been in a very reactionary space. And now we

have these unprecedented events of historic flooding, and the strongest storms that have ever been recorded in this part of the world.

I think that to be sovereign would be, to be able to protect the land and the waters that have been promised to us, and that have been our birthright. That is at the core of sovereignty—the ability to protect the land, the water, and the living beings that inhabit those spaces. When you start thinking about government, nations, and authority and all of that, it gets really murky. I don't think of South Louisiana, really, as being part of the United States in my head. I think of it as being an "other," and it's treated in this very other kind of way.

The United Houma Nation is not federally recognized, but is recognized by the state of Louisiana. Why, I'm not sure. I think partly it's because we couldn't be denied, because we've been in the history books since the state started. We can't be denied but we can't be recognized, which is confusing. Prior to the Obama administration, in the matrix of requirements for Federal recognition, blood quantum was a big one: what percentage of indigenous blood do you have? So it's back to this paper trail, they wanted everyone's birth certificates, or baptismal certificates; but we're really not paper people, and we have hurricanes all the time. And documents held in the courthouse would just disappear—that was strategic and tied to white supremacy and segregation.

Pushpendra: **Tribe is another invention. People don't think of themselves as tribes, they think of themselves as people, and then someone from outside says you are a tribe or an ethnic group. Having acknowledged that, what does it mean to be a tribe in the US today? You just said to prove this tribal identity puts the burden on the people.**

Monique: Going back to the word Indian or tribe in common language, a lot of Houma people would use those words and not think about where they come from, what they mean, or how maybe it's not good to use them. I think they're attached to them in this very prideful way: "I'm from the Houma tribe." We've been conditioned to think that's normal. When I think about what the word tribe should mean, or what the word nation should mean, really, it's that there is this interconnected community, interdependent, that we may not always be standing next to each other, but we are always bound to each other and in solidarity and safekeeping.

My grandmother would tell me about her life, but she never would say tribe. There are indigenous nations in the U.S. that do identify as being a tribe, and maybe that's just an archaic thing that they've held on to. Some have changed to nation, some haven't. It means different things to different people. In the colonizer's mind, if you call people a "nation," that means they have some sort of sovereignty, but if you call them a tribe, they're an organized body, but they're savage.

Pushpendra: You have been talking about various policy decisions, and corporations in your region. Do you see an impact of policy decisions and corporate activities on family life, on health, and overall well-being of people in Louisiana, as a whole, but also specifically in your community?

Monique: It goes back to flood control. In 1927, there was the great Mississippi flood. After that, levees and dams were built to channel the Mississippi River so that it follows a direct path, or a contained path. Since that time, the river has been disconnected from the wetlands. The delta life force has to be connected to the river or it will die—it will collapse, literally. That was a big policy decision, the US Army Corps of Engineers deciding to install this infrastructure, combined with over 10,000, miles of canals dredged through our lands since the 1930s. Then the extraction of the material from those territories, and on top of that, over 2000 active leases in the Gulf of Mexico where they're drilling for deep-water oil and gas, contributing to climate change.

I want to say most of the refineries in the U.S. are here in South Louisiana. Between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, they call that territory Cancer Alley. Some of the worst air quality in the country is right here. Where I live, in St. Bernard Parish, there are two major oil refineries. We have super high sulfur dioxide levels, we just can't meet air quality standards. The Trump Administration's rollbacks of regulations just made us more vulnerable. On top of that we have all these pipelines that crisscross our state and infrastructure that was put in a very long time ago. Some pipelines go back to the 1950s.

And we're in a territory that is losing land at one of the fastest rates on the planet. The statistic is that every 100 minutes, a football field of land disappears from South Louisiana. I think that's a simplified way of looking at it. They have only been monitoring that since the 1930s. We have a state agency that tries to come up with a coastal master plan every few years. The worst-case scenario from the previous plan ends up being the best-case scenario in the new plan, because sea level rise is happening at a rate they were not anticipating.

Because the Houma are at the ends of the bayous, we're like the front line. We're the speed bump, as they say, to slow the storm down before it hits further inland, as marshes decrease storm surge. Those marshes not being there, those lands getting eaten away, make us very vulnerable. And with every storm, communities seem to break a little more. Those family units that were crucial for survival, and the relationship with the land and with the water, the ability to feed your family, that's slowly being broken as families are moving inland where they can get flood insurance and where it is not flooding every other year. And how you maintain cultural cohesion in times of adaptation is a big question.

Pradnya: In 2005 when Hurricane Katrina happened, most of that narrative was about Black communities suffering. I never read about impacts on indigenous communities. How do you see the link, and what were the impacts then, and how is it activated now?

Monique: With each wave of disaster there's this knowledge growth. Before Katrina hit in 2005, from the late 1990s to that moment, for me, I always felt like I was in a crash course of why are we losing land so fast? What are the corporations? What is the family history here? My grandmother always said they stole our land, but what does that really mean?

Katrina really felt like the apocalypse hit. All our worst nightmares came true. I had been activated to do photo documentary and video work because my Houma relatives lived in a place called Grand Bois where they have toxic waste pits because of oil and gas byproducts. I wanted folks to know those stories because it seemed so uncivilized, because we lived in the modern world, and I realized that that happens all the time, all over the place. We're not special, which doesn't make me feel good, but was a real wake up to all the factors at play.

When the storm happened, it connected the infrastructure, the legacy of extraction and degradation, the social inequities. Poverty has always been here, but we cannot ignore it now. The systemic racism showed its ugly face in the moment and after, with gentrification and the rebuild and the raising of taxes on peoples' houses. And five years later we had the BP drilling disaster, and all my relatives who were fisherfolk were out of work and putting oil booms on their crab boats to go out and mop up the oil. They all went on the boats and did that work.

When I look back at Katrina in the moment of Covid-19, it feels similar in that all these problems have always been here, but now we cannot deny them. The oil field has crashed, so people are pretty broke, and also the tourism industry. How did we get here, the tourist economy or the oil field, these are our options? How did we get so far from who and what we are? The more disconnected from the land and water, the more disconnected we are from each other.

The world is a little bit dark right now in general, but I think that especially for my generation and younger, things are so upside down and inside out and it is hard to make sense of where we go from here. I am working with my own little plot of land, and trying to work with other women who want to cultivate medicine and food, and that feels right.

Pradnya: Because you mentioned food, I wanted to ask how you relate growing food and sovereignty? How do you make that connection?

Monique: Food security has been the key to our sovereignty. Even though the Houma have not been federally recognized, we were able to maintain a sense of sovereignty because, as my grandmother would say, she had everything she needed. They would walk outside and have crabs or kill some ducks or eat fish. The bounty of the Delta provided everything that they needed. Now, our communities are being faced with, do you lift your house 20 feet in the sky, or do you relocate to higher ground? I struggle with the fact that I know that if you take my cousins off the bayou, you are taking them away from their place of business. It is like their church. It is their living room. It is the meeting place. And it is literally how they are feeding themselves. You bring them 30 miles inland, they don't have that direct connection, and they don't have that freedom from having to go to the Walmart.

Pushpendra: Could you explain the state of land ownership amongst Houma in your region? And also it will be good to know the demography of the people there.

Monique: The official United Houma Nation has a population of about 20,000. But there are other smaller tribes, nations that are our relatives. These smaller bands—the Point-au-Chien Indian Tribe, the Biloxi Chitimacha Choctaw Confederation of Muscogee Band of Isle de Jean Charles, there's also a Montegut band—have kind of gone their own way. As for our modern territory, we claim the six coastal parishes of the Atchafalaya River—that pretty much goes from the middle of the state almost to the southeastern toe. Those parishes are where most of our citizens reside. There is no reservation land, officially.

Louisiana also is operating under Napoleonic law—we are under this old French law, which is tied to community property rights, which complicates things in regards to inheritance. Where a number of my relatives live in Point aux Chiens, it is owned by all the family, and the clear title, I don't know if they all exist, because it can go for generations that someone can have rights to a piece of property as it gets split down the line. So it really is quite complicated, and also goes back to how Napoleonic law was used to steal land rights.

Most of the land that is held, is through families holding on to whatever rights they can. The big territory, which is southern Terrebonne and Lafourche Parishes, which our ancestors would say was their land, is now held by Apache Oil and whatever other companies. It's a little offensive that it's called Apache, another indigenous nation from the west.

Pushpendra: How have Federal laws impacted the matriarchal system of inheritance, if they have?

Monique: I think the patriarchal system has tried to dismantle that tradition. When I think about my grandmother and her ways, it was like, she was the final say on things. But the quiet one. She wasn't the one to be like telling everyone what to do, but she had her way of holding things. Whereas I see in my uncles, their generation was taught that the man is the man of the house. I wouldn't say everyone is, but this kind of resistance to a woman's right to have say of what is going on in the house, and be that moral compass for the family.

And that is the strength of our women, being able to ground the family in going back to what we value, and how we take care of each other, and how we do that in a way that makes sure that you aren't going to eat everything in the pot. My grandmother played that role for us. She would have never called herself a matriarch in any way or seen herself in a role of power, it wasn't about that. But holding responsibility, caring for the network and community.

Pushpendra: Why did you feel the need to bring your family into your art, whether it's photography or film making? Was it primarily artistic decisions, or something else?

Monique: The reason I started making art or doing documentary work is because I wanted my family to be able to not be poisoned. That was my primary intention—to make it stop, to raise awareness. I also think that they have been my teachers. Whether it is the kids who led me into the woods, or my cousin who took me out to watch the sunrise and pull in a shrimp net, or my grandmother cleaning ducks on her back porch. Those experiences have taught me more than I ever learned in university, and continue to teach me. So I wanted to tell their story.

I wanted the story of the Houma and the injustices going back to when I started, which was my grandmother's land being taken from her as a child. But in wanting to tell that story, you get to what is behind it, which is that there's this colonial experiment that we are still in the middle of, and how corporations control the fate of so many in ways that we don't always connect. It is strange to put your personal life out there and to share people's intimate lives, but, as my grandmother would say, it's for real!

Noel: One of the commitments that you've been working on is the land memory bank and seed exchange. Can you share with us a work of native seed preservation you are engaged in particularly in the context of the Houma community's experience in land loss and access to continuing Houma ways of building families and kinship?

Monique: A few years back, the past principal chief of the United Houma Nation—a distant cousin of mine, Brenda Dardar Robichaux—invited myself, my grandmother, and other Houma women to come together for an afternoon to talk about plant medicine. Her father, Whitney Dardar, his own father was a treater, he knew plant medicine and prayers, and was known as a healer. Mr. Whitney would never call himself a healer, but he knew a lot of the plants and had been cultivating them in his yard, way down the bayou. They had been moving the plants from

the lower part of bayou to higher ground on her property. This day that we spent together, we talked about the plants; and we were all gifted little seedlings to take home. I think my keeping of medicine plants started that day, and thinking about how, as our territories are disappearing the plants are going as well. Being able to be in relationship with the plants, and to be able to identify them, was the first step.

I have been working with an amazing woman named Tammy Greer, a Houma woman, who teaches at USM. She has been cultivating medicine plants for years. Her and I and some others started a small medicine garden—taking plants from her big medicine garden and putting them in this small garden in a public space at a cultural center not far from our house. But it is not the safest place, because the parish comes in and they'll spray our plants with poison. I have also been tending to a little wild garden on my grandmother's land where my studio space is. I have been really dedicated to the pollinators, lots of sunflowers, and there is a wild passion fruit called maypop; you can eat

the flowers, and it makes a really beautiful fruit, the leaves and the stems are used as an anti-anxiety medicine. So yes, I am learning.

I have been keeping seeds for the pollinators and some medicine plants, and trying to distribute those, with other Houma and other indigenous women here. I have been invited to schools to do demonstrations and show the seeds, and I am trying to go to another level, especially in the time of Covid. What is inspiring is to see all these indigenous women who have been in their gardens. There is this spirit that I think survival is in our DNA, to put our hands in the dirt.

Noel: What are some efforts that indigenous communities are engaged in to preserve and sustain the memory of the place, and its indigenous people, such as the use of its native name? What other forms of resistance and affirmations are happening?

Monique: A few years ago in Dulac, in Terrebonne Parish, I was invited by this sweet couple, the Solets, who are Houma, to go onto land adjacent to their property, where there is this giant mound. The Houma are part of the mound-building cultures along the Mississippi. Why were indigenous people building mounds? There is a lot of speculation, but they were significant sites. Many mounds in the delta are washing away. So we ended up on this massive mound where there are trees that are over 100 years old. We were with some young folks, and it was this moment where we were all like, this is ours. The land is owned by people who probably swindled it way back in the day, but ancestrally, we all knew that it was a significant place for us, for our people and history. It is a sacred site and should not be owned by these guys who don't care and aren't keeping the trash off it. They have no respect for that place.

There is a remembering that has been happening, with young people trying to understand how we got here, and working hard to connect with the authenticity in their DNA. Especially, with some of these younger women, like Hali Dardar and Colleen Billiot who started the Houma Language Project. They are trying to not only find the most authentic Houma language remnants, but also recognize that we are modern people, contemporary people, not caricatures of this past sense that I think Houma or indigenous people sometimes want to fit themselves into. It is so complex and layered. We and our elders are speaking 17th-century French mixed with Muscogee trade jargon sentence structure. Why? Because we adapted to the trade language of the times, which stayed with us. My grandmother's first language was this Houma French, but it is not our Houma language. What is interesting is this trying to look way back, but also into the future: how do these old ways help us reimagine and build a better, safer world for ourselves.

Pradnya: There can be an ecological romanticism of the past, you know? Especially when we talk about traditional ways of growing food, or traditional ways of being, because it is so hard to understand. It requires a lot of resources to even dig into that understanding of past ways of living. In terms of food sovereignty, how do you envision bringing back the traditional knowledge into the current scenario?

Monique: For me, it is about the land, but equally about the water. We are very water people. Because everything is so different now, we can't use the same techniques, so I've been fascinated with thinking about sustainable seafood harvest and farming; thinking about ways that you farm oysters, you are not only going to get high protein, but you're also purifying the water. So how do we help restore and heal, and also provide food for ourselves.

I don't have a really clear answer, but it's again being able to recognize the indigenous and Native foods that are around us that we just don't know anymore. Whether that be the black cherry tree, or persimmons, or pecans, the nuts. It's reintroducing so many people to the fact that you think that this a weed, but actually, you can eat; and this is medicinal. We are hoping that this fall there is a network of gardens that women are caring for, and trying to figure out a way that we can support each other through tool sharing, skill sharing, seed swaps, and plants.

Noel: **Does your art help you to think about healing for yourself and your family and your community? I am thinking about your relationship to your people, your relationship to your place, and how there is love and resistance, and knowledge production that connects across generations.**

Monique: I think that I'm the one who says the things that others don't. That can put me in a complicated place, sometimes. In some worlds of activism, people see me in a way of like, oh, her work is whatever. Whereas my family says: "Are you still trying to save the world? What are you doing? People bring you to universities, and you just talk?"

Part of the responsibility that I have felt is to be a witness, and to create a record. I have thought of myself as more record maker than artist. I had a grandmother who had a story that nobody would have ever known. It is an important personal story for me, but in the global situation, her very small story connects to many stories. Art-making has just been part of my education. The constant putting a frame around something and overanalyzing sometimes, but with the intention of trying to expose a truth. When I was younger, I came without a critical mind. As I grow older, I am recognizing the power of how far a story can go. And also recognizing how not everything gets put into the story, always, and trying to be as authentic and honest as one can be.

Part of my story is that a lot of my work has been very focused on my Houma history and heritage and reality. To not complicate the story, I haven't put in the fact that my mom comes from the total opposite, the settler colonial population that was basically on the other side of the story in South Louisiana. And that that is inside of me, this complicated, layered unrest that I

think my work is trying to make sense of. And how do we recognize and reckon with so much in a time when our environment is in such a vulnerable place.

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