

## Studying African American History in the United States as a Japanese Student

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My academic journey began when I was an undergraduate student in Dr. Kawashima Masaki's seminar at Nanzan University. During my junior year, as an exchange student at Dickinson College, I visited southern Louisiana as a volunteer worker after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. When I returned from the United States, Dr. Kawashima suggested that I study the history of New Orleans. Soon I became interested in how race has shaped the history of the city. His advice was the starting point of my research on New Orleans and African American history.

I am currently enrolled in a Ph.D. program in history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. My specialty is race and ethnic relations in the post-Civil War American South. My dissertation explores the African American struggle for equal access to public facilities in post-Civil War New Orleans. After the war, New Orleans became one of the most radicalized cities in the South where African Americans defined and pursued their own freedom by securing access to public spaces, such as public schools and transportation, that had been exclusive to whites in the antebellum period. In particular, Creoles of color, a group of francophone interracial free people of color, shaped the course of the post-Civil War freedom struggles in New Orleans. Their desegregation activism culminated in a legal attempt to nullify the 1890 Louisiana separate train car act by bringing the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case to the United States Supreme Court. The *Plessy* decision of 1896 is widely known as the case that codified legal segregation. However, it is equally important to acknowledge that the case was brought to the court by a group of Creoles of color, known as les Comité des Citoyens, as the culmination of their continuing efforts for equality of access after the Civil War. My dissertation examines the community dynamics among Creoles of color and how their complex social, cultural and political relations with the city's other ethno-racial populations shaped their post-emancipation activism. I have just completed my fifth year and am currently completing archival research in

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Louisiana. I am one of many Japanese students who pursue a Ph.D. degree at an American higher educational institution, but I am one of a few Japanese students who study pre-twentieth century African American history.

With this academic and personal background in mind, this paper first discusses some challenges I have experienced in studying African American history in the United States; 1) a sense of legitimacy in studying African American history as an international student and 2) a gap between academia and African American communities. Second, this paper explains how I have attempted to deal with these challenges by incorporating interdisciplinary practices such as digital humanities and public history.

Studying African American history in the United States as an international student constantly pushes me to justify that my academic interest is well suited to my passion and my career in American academia. I am always asked to explain why I study African American history, and in many cases the question derives from a pure interest of my work. However, it was a surprise to me that some American scholars also have recommended incorporating my Japanese background into my studies. Unsurprisingly, I am not the only Japanese student to whom changing the topic of study has been proposed. This has been suggested to me while applying to graduate school and also at an academic conference. What I have learned from these experiences is that some American scholars assess international students' future marketability only within the United States, and they consider the recent trends in global and trans-Pacific history in American studies as a means to appeal to the job market. Since I moved to the United States, I have felt pressure to prove that I could develop my own research career as a Japanese scholar.

Second, while studying African American history at a white majority institution such as Carolina, it is always challenging to cross the bridge between academia and African American communities. As a graduate student, my task is to study African American history and write a dissertation that will make historiographical contributions to understanding the American experience. However, observing the increasing demands for a fair criminal justice system and social equity among African Americans throughout the early 2010s, I decided to go beyond pure scholarly endeavor to reach out to people who want to understand the historical background of contemporary issues. In order to pursue this secondary goal, I incorporated work in digital humanities and public history into my course of study.

Digital humanities are a burgeoning field in the United States that deploys digital tools to produce new understanding of topics in the humanities. There are many aspects of digital humanities, however, one of the key features of this field is that it is "a social undertaking," as Matthew Kirschenbaum states.<sup>1</sup> Digital

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1. Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, "What is Digital Humanities and What's it Doing in

humanities offer the possibility of a collaborative and interactive research project that traditional historical research does not. In this regard, digital humanities also shares interests with public history. The field of public history in the United States began as part of the National Park Service and government efforts to preserve American natural and historical landscapes. However, its focus on public engagement in the late twentieth century has enabled scholars to collaborate with various stakeholders from casual museum visitors to federal agencies.<sup>2</sup>

These new approaches to history permitted me to launch a digital history project titled, “The Fillmore Boys School in 1877: Racial Integration, Creoles of Color and the End of Reconstruction in New Orleans.”<sup>3</sup> During Reconstruction, New Orleans experienced radical attempts to desegregate public schools. Through the extensive efforts of radical black Republicans, the 1868 Louisiana constitution prohibited the establishment of public schools exclusive to one race. Furthermore, thanks to a range of political, grassroots and legal activism, from 1871 to 1877, about one-third of the public schools admitted both white and black students.<sup>4</sup> Despite the significant achievement of African American communities in New Orleans, this piece of history has often been dismissed as an irregular accomplishment due to the unique characteristics of New Orleans as a cosmopolitan interracial city. Moreover, the lack of Reconstruction school records hindered further examination of the conditions under which individual desegregated schools were operated. My project attempted to overcome these historiographical issues by deploying methods in digital humanities such as geo-spatial analysis and revealed the process of desegregation and resegregation at the Fillmore School at the end of Reconstruction. More importantly, this project created a digitized historical map of the Fillmore students’ residences from 1877 by using ArcGIS software and provided the information online to a public audience online.<sup>5</sup>

Originally established as a white school in the 1850s, the Fillmore School was a highly mixed school in the early 1870s.<sup>6</sup> Located in New Marigny, a

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English Departments?” in *Debates in Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2012), 5.

2. Denise D. Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), xxiv.

3. Yamanaka Mishio, 2016. The Fillmore Boys School in 1877: Racial Integration, Creoles of Color and the End of Reconstruction in New Orleans. <http://fillmoreschool.web.unc.edu> (accessed June 1, 2016).

4. Louis R. Harlan, “Desegregation in New Orleans Public Schools during Reconstruction,” *The American Historical Review*, 67 (1962): 663–675; Roger A. Fischer, *The Segregation Struggle in Louisiana, 1862–1877* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974).

5. For this project, I used “Robinson’s Atlas of the City of New Orleans, 1883,” <http://www.oreanscivilclerk.com/robinson/> (accessed June 1, 2016).

6. John Blassingame, *Black New Orleans, 1860–1880* (Chicago: University of Chicago

predominantly francophone Catholic neighborhood, many children of African descent were Creole children of color. The Orleans Parish School Board Collection at the University of New Orleans holds the Fillmore School register that records student admission information from 1877 to 1884. In particular, the 1877 register contains information for 658 individual students including name, age, birthplace, address, date of admission, parent's name, and parent's occupation. While the register does not list race, some students were noted as "transferred to colored school." This is because the school board decided to resegregate this school as a white one two months before the 1877 school year began. These brief notes led me to hypothesize that many black parents counterattacked resegregation by sending their children to this school in 1877. In order to delve into how each student and family committed to desegregation, I transcribed the 1877 school register and studied each student and family in conjunction with reviewing the 1870 and 1880 census. I combined this data with the address data from the admission list and visualized students' information on a digitized historical map of New Orleans. As a result, the project visualized 556 student records online.

The data review and analysis revealed the complex racial identities of Fillmore School students. The register contains at least 35 students of African descent who entered this school within three days of the school opening in October 1877. Among them, only 16 were noted as "transferred to colored school" in the school register. Others were classified as mulatto in the census records. Of those who remained, the school administrator might have failed to leave a note on each student. Or some students might have crossed the color line because of their light skin color. Despite possible cases of racial passing, it is safe to say that many families were committed to maintaining desegregation without crossing the color line. Among transferred students and families, three parents of the Fillmore School even filed a court case to halt the School Board's resegregation plan. One of the court cases was filed by Paul Trévigne, who helped edit the *Crusader*, the official organ of les Comité des Citoyens which organized the *Plessy* case in the 1890s. While none of the cases won, continuing resistance slowed the school administration's efforts to complete resegregation. For instance, my research identified at least seven additional Creole children who were admitted from November 1877 to April 1878. Overall, this project revealed a considerable level of desegregation at the Fillmore School and demonstrated how Creoles of color sustained their commitment to maintaining racially mixed schools and equal access to public facilities.

As a Japanese student, I wanted to build an exchange with the New Orleans community. The Fillmore School project not only contributes to the history of education in New Orleans, but it also opened up my field of research in various

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Press, 1973), 120.

ways. First, the study of individual students made it possible for me to work with local genealogists. As Creoles of color are often unidentifiable in statistical records due to their ambiguous racial and ethnic characteristics, this collaborative work enabled me to find more students of African descent in the Fillmore School register. Second, this project made me aware that descendants of these students still live in the city. I was able to share a piece of their history in New Orleans.

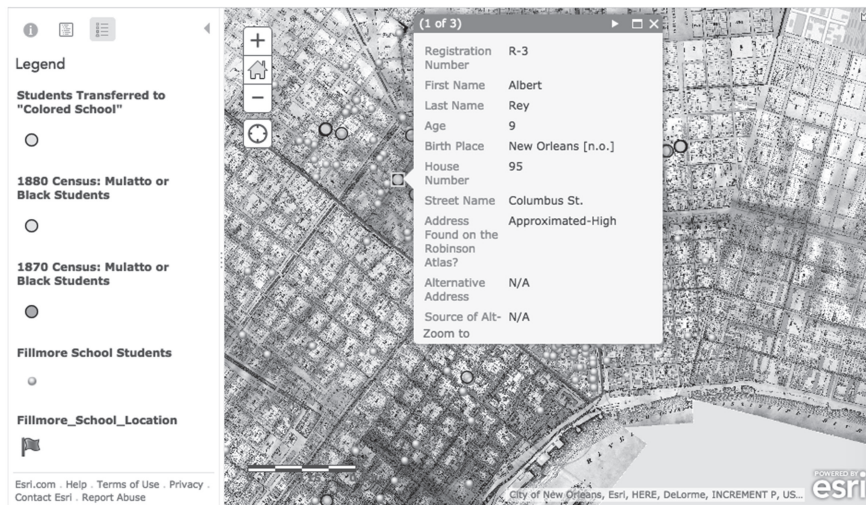


Fig 1. The Fillmore School Student Residential Map (ArcGIS Online)

In particular, the digital map has an interactive feature that visualizes and shares students’ individual information online. For instance, each dot of the map represents student’s residence and contains his information from the census and register. Third, the Fillmore School project led me to think about the historical roots of contemporary social issues that the African American community faces in New Orleans today such as the post-Katrina charter school system and the gentrification of the New Marigny neighborhood.

Last year, I presented this project at a public history conference in New Orleans. The first question I received from the audience is how Reconstruction struggles are related to the issues of charter schools. To place this issue in context, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Louisiana state legislature took over 107 schools from the Orleans Parish School Board and put them into the state-controlled Recovery School District. The state then gave charters to many private organizations to run these schools. This decision significantly reduced the power of the local school board, and accelerated the privatization of public schools. Last year, around 90 percent of the students in New Orleans studied in charter schools.<sup>7</sup>

7. Thomas Toch, “The Big Easy’s Grand Experiment: Hurricane Katrina Wiped Out New Orleans Public Schools. Here’s How Charters Have Fared 10 Years On,” *U.S. News & World*

While the charter school system reported that it has improved students' overall performance, African American families face many challenges in coping with the changes.<sup>8</sup> For instance, the charter school system caused the massive dismissal of experienced local teachers—most of whom were African Americans—from the city public schools immediately after Katrina. Many charter schools hired new teachers from outside the neighborhoods in which students live. In addition, charter schools often have an independent and unelected board that does not allow parents to voice their opinions. Some research shows that academic competition and selection among charter schools limited African American parents' choice of schools due to complicated application processes.<sup>9</sup> These various factors have made it difficult for parents and community members to actively engage with schools. Of course, there are many dots to connect between Reconstruction struggles and the twenty-first century charter school debate. Nonetheless, this case shows how African American parents' voices have been neglected in school politics throughout history.



Fig 2. Former McDonogh No. 16 School Building Photograph  
Courtesy of the author

The Fillmore School project also is a reminder of how gentrification has affected the public memory of New Orleans. The Fillmore School is one of the

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*Report*, August 18, 2015, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/knowledge-bank/2015/08/18/lessons-from-new-orleans-post-katrina-charter-school-experiment> (accessed June 1, 2016).

8. Della Hasselle, "New Orleans Schools Show 'Dramatic' Improvement since Hurricane Katrina, Report Finds," *New Orleans Advocate*, June 17, 2015, [http://www.theadvocate.com/new-orleans/news/education/article\\_fd0038f5-a150-59b3-a8a5-7d1d5cf54c1e.html](http://www.theadvocate.com/new-orleans/news/education/article_fd0038f5-a150-59b3-a8a5-7d1d5cf54c1e.html) (accessed June 20, 2016).

9. Adrienne Dixon, "Whose Choice? A Critical Race Perspective on Charter Schools," in *The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans*, ed. Cedric Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

few schools that experienced desegregation attempts both in Reconstruction and in the 1960s. To briefly explain the history of this school after 1877, Fillmore was renamed as McDonogh No. 16 in 1883. The new school building was built in 1908. The school was operated as a white school until 1962 when two black students were admitted as part of the desegregation plan laid out by the Orleans Parish School Board. However, within five years, the school became predominantly black due to massive white flight. The school was closed in 1978 because of a budget crisis. Following the closing, the school board used the building as an adult education center. Yet, once Hurricane Katrina devastated the building, the school board completely abandoned it.

In the meantime, post-Katrina New Orleans experienced the influx of new developers and migrants into once-predominantly black neighborhoods adjacent to the French Quarter, including the New Marigny neighborhood. At the height of gentrification, the Orleans Parish School Board sold the McDonogh No. 16 school building and lot to a developer. Now the building is completely remodeled as a residence for the aged.<sup>10</sup> The school site still displays the sign of the adult education center. However, there is no trace of the complicated history of race and public education in New Orleans in this former school lot. As a Japanese scholar of African American history, bringing this piece of history back to the city is not only personally important, but also a step toward creating a new understanding of American history among the New Orleans community.

To conclude, there are many challenges for Japanese students in pursuing African American history in the United States. Being part of the international community at a U.S. higher educational institution has made me aware that it is crucial to decide how one wants to define and reflects one's national identity in a career. It is equally important to consider what kinds of intellectual ties one wants to build as a scholar and find methodologies that will achieve this. This can be achieved not only by incorporating one's national identity into one's research, but also by learning new methodologies and disciplines. In my case, the Fillmore School project enabled me to develop my academic career while making new connections with the New Orleans public. This experience has made it easier to explain why and how I want to pursue my career in African American history as a Japanese scholar. This endeavor is an ongoing process, but it has proved so far that challenges are not necessarily barriers.

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10. Andrew Vanacore, "School Board Sells Off on Camp, St. Claude—Auction Raised Almost 690,000," *The Times-Picayune*, July 31, 2011; Katherine Sayre, "N.O. Schools Sell Off Sites—Developers Keep Mum About Plans," *The Times-Picayune*, August 23, 2013.

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