

Transcript – Virginia Thomas, Class of

Narrator: Virginia Thomas

Interviewer: Amanda Knox, Pembroke Center Assistant Archivist

Interview Date: May 12, 2020

Interview Time: 3:00 pm

Location: Zoom

Length: 36:11

Amanda Knox: Good afternoon. My name is Amanda Knox. I am the Assistant Archivist at the Pembroke Center at Brown University. It is Monday, May 11, 2020. It is three o'clock in the afternoon and I am here today with Virginia Thomas. Virginia, would you like to introduce yourself to our listeners, please?

Virginia Thomas: Sure. My name is Virginia, as Amanda said, and I am currently a Visiting Assistant Professor at Brown and the American Studies Department, but I also got my PhD here in American Studies and an MA in Public Humanities. And my work for my dissertation really focused on thinking about the relationship between family photography, particularly white family photography, and lynching photography. And through that, I'm also, [1:00] I'm also really interested in queer family and queer culture and history. And so lately, I've been doing some work here in Providence, doing LGBTQ oral histories working with the Providence Public Library and it's been so great to have the Pembroke Center as a partner in that work. And just kind of yeah, I just have really appreciated you and Mary Murphy, as people to think with on that project. So, yeah.

AK: Thank you so much. It's been a wonderful experience and from what I, the short amount of interaction I've had, the students seem to really love it. So it's so great to be getting more people involved in these oral history projects because as you know, and as our listeners are finding out using these oral histories, it's such a valuable and rich way to document what is going on in people's lives. And to be able to [2:00] do it in a way that, you know, it's accessible to a lot of people to be able to do it, too. So, indeed, and thank you for doing the projects that you're doing.

VT: Yeah.

AK: It's really wonderful. So we're here today to talk a little bit more specifically about the COVID-19 global pandemic that we are all in, which is why we are here on Zoom being socially distanced from each other. And so to that end, I would kind of like to start from the beginning, if you don't mind sharing a little bit about how you first heard about the pandemic and what your thoughts and feelings, or when you first heard about Coronavirus and COVID-19 before it was a pandemic, and what you were kind of thinking and feeling as that was kind of emerging and developing.

VT: Yeah. Well, I certainly remember hearing about it when it seemed to be relatively geographically located and situated in Wuhan [3:00] and hearing about how intense the spread, the impacts, and the, the level of devastation and disruption that it was causing. And then sort of through both, I guess, I used to do a bit more traveling as a public health consultant before graduate school, but also just thinking about my own training in American Studies and thinking about transnational networks I just sort of started to realize how quickly this could travel, but also had, was holding some, I think, you know, denial and, and, I guess, a sense that maybe it would stay in one geographic location. But of course, it spread so, so rapidly. [4:00]

And so yeah, I guess, and it's been really interesting being here in Rhode Island sandwiched between Boston and New York. And I remember hearing about the first case to hit Rhode Island when I was actually in North Carolina visiting my family and being shocked because it was only a few days after there was a, I guess they were calling it, I'm trying to remember the exact term, but the community based transmission in California. There was this period where the government was saying that they had it under control and then there was like this one case in California, where there was no direct travel related transmission. And then only a few days later, it popped up in Rhode Island and I was really like, whoa, okay. And I remember trying [5:00] to find N95 masks in North Carolina where it wasn't, it wasn't even present in North Carolina at the time because my partner here in Rhode Island was like, I have you know, some friends who are immunocompromised, we both have friends who are immunocompromised, my partner's a little immunocompromised. So if you can find some N95 masks in North Carolina, please bring them back with you because we're trying to find them they, and we can't. And in North Carolina, they I couldn't find them anywhere either. So it was all of a sudden, I guess it just went, I just felt like in a very few days, like maybe three to four

days it really became a very urgent issue here.

Yeah, and I've been I live with my partner on the West End here in Providence, and we've been mostly staying at home and I, [6:00] like I said, my partner's immunocompromised so I do the grocery runs and things like that. But we've been trying to support the, making some herbal supplements for frontline workers at a community garden nearby. There's a small group of people who are trying to, in a physically distanced manner, grow and dry herbs to make tinctures that can be immune supports. So that's been something that we've been trying to support and contribute to. So that is one thing that we leave the house to go to that community garden to support, so.

AK: And can I ask you, was there any question in your mind whether you would leave – it was North Carolina [7:00] you were in? Was there any question about whether you would come back to Rhode Island? Had you considered staying in North Carolina? And then what was that travel like for you?

VT: Yeah. The travel was interesting because I think it was still, I wanted to get back to Rhode Island as soon as possible because I felt like it would be a real, I wanted to be, I was with my family, and I knew that they would be okay, pretty much. And I wanted to be with my partner and I didn't want to stick around at a time when, when travel was uncertain. My travel, it seemed like there were some people, there were a few people starting to wear masks, but it was at a time too, when there was a lot of mixed messaging about whether masks were appropriate or not.

AK: Do you remember, you don't have to give like a specific date, but was it like beginning of March or do you have an estimated timeframe? [8:00]

VT: Yeah, it was the beginning of March. Yep. The very beginning of March. I think it was somewhere around the, I yeah, I can't remember exactly when but I know it was the beginning of March. And so there were a few people wearing face masks, but then someone also like coughed, right like on me on the plane and I was like ahh! So I was having this mixed reaction of like being like, okay, I don't feel like I really need a face mask but also like, oh, no, what if that person does have coronavirus? So, yeah, that was, it was very, like a very bizarre time. The

airport was, had less people in it but the plane ride, the plane was pretty full when I came back up here. So yeah,

AK: Were you worried when you arrived home? Did you do any kind of quarantine [9:00] thing or did you just kind of try to go on business as usual?

VT: I just went on business as usual because at the time there was only, there were no cases in North Carolina and there was only one case known in Rhode Island at that exact moment. So I was sort of cautious and careful. And then in the first couple of weeks, I there were a few, I mean, I also have allergies and so my, there were moments where my throat like just felt kind of uncomfortable so I would take my temperature. I definitely went through a period of being like pretty vigilant on trying to see how my symptoms were, but I wasn't doing any formal. Actually, I was, I wasn't doing a formal quarantine per se, but I wasn't seeing any friends, like going out and, and being in public at that point felt not okay even though there [10:00] was only literally like one case in Rhode Island, but I believe that case was also a high school teacher. So it just sort of felt like oh, no. Now this could start to really expand.

AK: Did you start doing any kind of preparations either for yourself or your students and your classes?

VT: Yes, I remember when Brown, it was right before spring break and we were sitting, and I knew that Brown was going to make an announcement about whether or not we'd be moving virtually, but I assumed that that would, that that, that moving virtually meant only for like a couple of weeks. And so I remember sitting in class and the students thinking that Brown was going to make an announcement right as our class began, and it got delayed so it didn't even come out during our class. But they made it clear that this was going to be [11:00] virtually for the rest of the semester and I got really emotional because I really love, I loved this class. The students were, and are amazing. And so it felt like a really important space that we came together to create every week. And so I had to gather myself at the, at the beginning of that class because I was really upset. And that's when it also again, sort of like hit me like, oh, wow, this is going to be a long, a long time and not just like a brief couple of weeks or so. Yeah.

AK: So how was preparing to transition to completely virtual for yourself and for your students? Have you found a change in not only the way you're conducting class, but kind of the responsiveness to it?

VT: Yeah, I would say the students, [12:00] because we had such a good classroom environment before the pandemic – I am so glad that that, that that was the case because I think it helped everyone really commit to making the online experience as positive as possible. I think students really showed up and really, were really active in trying to support one another through creating a positive online classroom space virtually. It felt like they were showing up out of care for one another and for themselves. And so I think that what's, what was interesting was that the final project for the class, and the class was called, is called Querying Oral History, and so it's really about seeing oral [13:00] history as an opportunity to think through not only how to kind of get a very personal sense of, of history and one's feelings and emotions and stories, as larger historical events are unfolding, but also about the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, and how to, especially within LGBTQ history and queer history, there's parent to child most frequently around our stories. And so creating more public outlets for those stories to be passed on is really critical and important for the health and wellness of LGBTQ folks to have that intergenerational connection. So we've spent a lot of time talking about [14:00] how in, in engaging in a LGBTQ or queer oral history, there is a sense of intergenerational connection that can, that can happen there that can be really powerful both for the interviewee and the interviewer, but also for the listeners. Yeah, and just thinking about that act as an act of queer space making and queer history making, and relationship building. So those were some of the sort of themes and topics that we've been talking about. And it was so I think the students were really looking forward to meeting their narrator's in person and being able to actually get to know them and have coffee with them or have a meal with them, and sit down and just talk about their interests and getting to know one another in an embodied you know, physical presence, physically present way. [15:00] So I think there was a real sense of loss and sadness around that for the students.

And on the other hand, the transition to everything being virtual created, at least an opportunity, I mean, on the one hand, LGBTQ folks are hit disproportionately hard, just like every other group that has already experienced histories of oppression. And so on the one hand a

lot of the narrator's were taking up a lot of COVID related activism and already had a lot on their plates, but were engaging even more and trying to uphold their community in this process [16:00] so, and then and/or just being impacted by it in a way that was, that was, you know, impacting their mental health, impacting their loved ones, increasing social isolation, which is already an another issue for LGBTQ people. So there's a way in which asking people to do virtual interviews had the possibility of being bad timing, and that it could be sort of one other thing that folks are being asked to do during a really difficult time. But it also had the potential of creating connection and also talking about yes, talking about COVID related stuff, but also talking about stuff outside of this pandemic, and going back to other times and future and forward in other you know, people's dreams and visions for the future here in Rhode Island. So I think it was a real mix of things [17:00] probably for everyone on, on that spectrum. But I think the class again really showed up in trying to do the best that they could to, to have the, the oral history experience be whatever their narrator needed and wanted it to be.

Yeah, and right now we're working with the Providence public library to create some public programming around – So part of what the class is doing and doing these oral histories is supporting the Providence Public Library's new LGBTQ History Collection that they're just newly beginning. And so we're hoping to, and the students are actively right now creating different kinds of public materials and programming for the Providence Public Library based on the oral histories [18:00] that they've done, to kind of create more community awareness of this archival resource that both they can contribute to if they have things that they want it to be accessible to Providence community members, and Rhode Island community members, and also use as a creative resource and a storytelling resource. So yeah, in a dream world, this would be a resource for public school teachers and, you know, all kinds of folks here in the state. So, yeah, we're trying to let this project be some, a seed that, you know, is being planted and hopefully can grow out and in different ways as needed.

AK: What kinds of technologies were you using to, or were you planning to use to [19:00] capture the interviews before the pandemic, and what technologies did you switch to?

VT: Yeah. We were planning on using audio recorders and there were some folks who are also planning on using their phones and just recording it that way. But we have definitely trained our

class in how to use you know, different kinds of audio recording equipment. There were, are a couple of students, I'm also working with a different student on an independent, independent project who has a lot of radio experience. So we really talked about a lot of different kinds of recording, you know, devices. And then now folks have been using both Zoom, like [20:00] this, and also, Tape A Call, which is an app that you can use on your phone to record a phone conversation.

AK: Oh, cool.

VT: Yeah, if you have a smartphone. So, yes. And, and then as far as creating the transcriptions, there's a lot of different ways that people are doing that based on whatever software's working well for them, but we're, we've talked about Otter there's also just a way to split, to have your computer play the recording more slowly so you could type as you go. Yeah.

AK: Do you think, have you been keeping, when you use Zoom for our listeners who may not have used Zoom, when you download the recording, you have the option to use [21:00] a video and audio or just an audio, have you been keeping everyone to strictly audio and if not, do you think the video component is changing the kinds of stories that they're getting?

VT: Well, I think that the video recording, so we're limiting it to audio, but I think that because it's taking place over Zoom, and people can still see each other even if we're only archiving the audio portion, I think that it's probably, oh, I mean, there's no doubt in my mind that, you know, seeing someone's face and someone's reaction alters the way that someone responds. Whereas a phone call, in some ways, might create a little bit more distance so that someone might feel even a little more comfortable talking on the phone. But also might [22:00] make someone miss certain cues that we take in through people's faces and body posture and all that. So I could also see it, see a phone recording, yeah, kind of taking away that extra information that you get. And obviously in person, you can really feel the energy of someone in that space and in that room, so it's like, obviously, completely different than what it would be like with an in person recording. It's interesting to think about what stories get told, based on the amount of vulnerability that someone feels in the moment. And so in some ways, technology heightens that and in other

ways, it kind of removes, mutes it or removes it. And that's something that we talk a lot about in queer oral history too is like the resonance between listeners and the [23:00] ways in which people feel during an oral history and even the possibility of especially around like queer world history, the real possibility that there may be some element of flirtation or kind of emotional connection that can form. That doesn't, it's not, I'm not saying that it can't also form through phone or Zoom, but that that experience is something that a lot of other areas of oral history tend to kind of ignore or sort of like pretend isn't present, but that a lot of scholars have done really interesting work to think about what happens when we tune into that as part of history making. Yeah.

AK: Thank you for commenting on that. [24:00] I love thinking of the complexities of oral histories and things of that nature. So I'm glad we were able to kind of capture that a little bit.

VT: Yeah.

AK: Can you tell me what has been the most challenging aspect of this moment for you either personally or professionally or both?

VT: I think that there is a lot of uncertainty as far as the future of universities. And I happen to have a two year postdoc after this, and I'm very relieved that I do because I was getting a lot of emails about different searches that were still going on being canceled in the wake of this. And so, and part of that is just grieving for the like [25:00] an already really challenging job market for so many incredible scholars that I know. And so many, yeah, I think there's, there's just, I think it just adds to grief that I've already felt about partially my own trajectory, but very much so like my colleagues and thinking about how this path has gotten more and more difficult over time. And so there's that. I think, so, so yeah.

I think, I think professionally I [26:00] am concerned about the ways that this is going to shape education. I think that there's possibility but I also think that there's a way in which these things lead to people wanting to cut corners even more and create less support for students, less support for and protections for workers, including graduate students and faculty. So I'm concerned about that.

I think on a more personal level. I just really miss my friends. I really miss being able to be with people. I've become much more introverted over my time as a graduate student, but I am more extroverted and so I miss, I miss getting to see people and [27:00] yeah. So.

AK: To the point of universities changing and being in this situation where none of us know what's going to happen, would you like to comment a little bit on what you think the coming semesters are going to look like or what you were hoping they would look like, because those might be two different things?

VT: Yeah. Yeah. I think, well, I think it's definitely hard to know. And I hope what happens is that people continue to pay attention to what's happening and to be willing to alter what may, essentially I think that universities, like I understand and I want them to try to figure things out, but I think there's a lot to be said for [28:00] creating plans within the moment that you're in. And I think, I really hope that universities do what's best for the health of students and workers, including maintenance workers, including janitorial workers, including food workers on campus, which are some of the most exposed and vulnerable populations on campuses. And I think that what I would hope is that universities would make their plans safe for everyone. And I know that the, for example, Rice University, which is where I'm, in Houston, is we're supposed to go in the fall, is planning on creating some sort of hybrid in which there are some students working in person. [29:00] I mean sorry, attending class in person and I'm teaching some students in person while also at the same time teaching online like a live streamed course. And so I think, you know, Rice being in the middle of Houston is really interesting because I think that as much as we may think we can contain certain campuses or a campus space it's obviously quite porous to the rest of what surrounds it. And so I think it'll be really interesting to see how this continues to compound existing inequities in the way universities function. Yeah. [30:00]

AK: Is there one, one, or more than one, positive thing that you think will come out of the pandemic?

VT: I think that, it's interesting. I have a friend who, well, okay, positive, positive. All right.

AK: It doesn't have to be positive. It could be like, a less bad thing that comes out of it.

VT: Right. I think that I, my, I believe that there are some folks who are understanding. I think one positive thing that could come out of it is that folks have a greater understanding of how important social networks are outside of institutions and that institutions [31:00] have their bottom line in mind. And that has to do with financial stability. And I'm not saying that there aren't some institutions who aren't doing great work during this time, but I think that social networks and our ability to show up for one another and care for one another, I'm hopeful that folks come away with a greater sense of the importance of that, and that it helps shift a lot of the conversations around services and policies that previously seemed impossible, like rent relief and things of that nature that previously seemed completely off the table that suddenly there seems to be a dialogue around. [32:00] So yeah, I think those are what I'm hoping are some of the positive byproducts are. I know that I've certainly had a heightened awareness around those things and I'm hopeful that others have too. So

AK: If someone were to listen to this interview tomorrow, what is one thing you would want that person to know? And if someone were to listen, or if someone is listening to this 50 years from now, what is something you would want that person to know?

VT: If someone's listening to this to this tomorrow, I would want them to know that – [33:00] I would want them to know that they're not alone. And if they do feel alone that I'm with you, like right now. And I think if someone were listening to – how far in the future, did you say?

AK: 50 years is good.

VT: 50 years?

AK: Or however many years you'd like.

VT: Yeah. If someone were to listen to this in 50 years, I would hope, or I guess I would want them to know that – [34:00] I think I would want them to know, something similar actually, that

like if they feel I, I think that isolation, social, social isolation and is, is really serious and really hard. And I want them to know that I'm thinking of them and that they aren't alone. And I hope that there are ways that they can connect and plug into collective, more collective forms of engaging with folks. Yeah. And yeah. I think those are the two [35:00] things that I want them to know.

AK: Well, we're coming up on our time here today. So I would like to leave some space for you to share anything else that you were hoping to get into the historical record that I did not ask you about this afternoon.

VT: No, I think, I think that this has covered everything. Thank you so much for your time. And I'm really excited about this project. So.

AK: Great. Well, thank you so much for, for your time to talk to me today about this. And you are not alone either. We are all in this together, which is one thing that I think and I hope that all of our interviews have shown is that we might not be in the exact same boat right now, [36:00] but hopefully we're all supporting each other through whatever storm we're experiencing here. So, thank you so much.

VT: Yes, definitely.

--END--