

Oral History After Disaster: Amplifying Life Stories From Puerto Rico

Ricia Anne Chansky

Ricia Anne Chansky is a professor in the Department of English at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez where she also directs the Oral History Lab, a centre for social and climate justice.

The new Oral History Lab (OHL) at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez (UPRM) brings together three on-campus humanities-based assets to create a space for storytelling as social justice: the English Department, University Library, and Film Certificate program. The OHL has a special focus on climate justice and understanding the stratified disasters that have impacted the archipelago over the last seven years, including hurricanes, earthquakes, the global pandemic, an economic crisis, and the impact of intergenerational colonisation and systemic racism. Our research model allows us to conceptualise our work from project design through recording, archiving, and disseminating narratives from the Puerto Rican archipelago. This model situates our repository and the life stories it contains as a living history that has the potential to impact internal and external communities of both those on the frontline of climate change and those working to respond to and mitigate disaster.

Consider, for example, the narrative of Miliana Montañez León in which she recounts that ‘rats were going crazy after [Hurricane María]. We could see them everywhere – on our patio, in our house, in the streets’. Her mother became sick shortly after that and ‘went to the hospital because she’d been vomiting and had diarrhea. Her symptoms were intense...Despite this, the hospital staff sent her home’. Unfortunately, Miliana’s mother passed away the morning after she was released from the hospital. Miliana explains that she later learned that ‘a lot of people here had leptospirosis...a disease caused by bacteria in the urine of rats. It’s carried by water. Humans in contact with

rat urine can get symptoms of vomiting and diarrhea – like a strong flu or virus. It can end in organ failure and can be fatal if it isn't discovered in time'.¹

Miliana shares her family's experience with a public health crisis that may have been averted if more information about common post-disaster communicable diseases was available both within communities at a local level and to public health officials charged with implementing effective responses to disaster. Situating our larger collection as a resource for the circulation of essential information contained in eyewitness testimonies that can serve as qualitative, community-based datasets, affords us the opportunity to offer witness to survivors through testimonial transactions while providing tangible resources for our home communities. Positioning our repository in this way, however, also has the potential to impact those similarly located in spaces of vulnerability on the frontlines of environmental racism and the climate crisis. In this way, the narratives can become informational sources for those who are working in some capacity with scientific and/or policymaking communities that craft and implement responder strategies.

It is important to note that the work of the lab is grounded in decolonial and antiracist methodologies and trauma-informed approaches. Our code of ethics for working in the aftermath of disasters can be found on our website.² Among other points, this mandate means that we position ourselves as narrative facilitators, recognising that storytellers are the owners of their own stories. Our policies include a commitment to narrators making decisions about their narratives – including post-custodial archiving practices – a bilingual metadata schema, extensive informed consent, and revisiting narrators for additional permissions each time we would like to disseminate their oral histories in new ways.

In the case of Miliana's narrative, her brother Marco worked with us to record the narrative, also overseeing both the transcript and the translation of the work. The siblings decided – together with additional family members – to record this story and

1 See Miliana Ivalisse Montañez León, in Ricia Anne Chansky and Marci Denesiuk (eds), *Mi María: Puerto Rico after the Hurricane, Voices from Puerto Rico* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), 259–268.

2 Please see the 'Ethics Statement' on our website at <https://www.uprm.edu/ohl/ethics-statement/>.

include it in a published collection as a means of both memorialising their mother and seeking justice for her and others in similar post-disaster situations while raising awareness of the failures in disaster response.

Another fundamental part of the OHL structure is the affiliated oral history and documentary filmmaking courses in which students are taught how to ethically record, edit, and disseminate stories from the Puerto Rican archipelago. Students are encouraged to select stories for their classroom projects that are relevant to their own lives and to work with the people and communities that are important to them.

One of our recent documentary films, for instance, began as a long-form oral history interview with UPRM Psychology Professor Eduardo Lugo Hernández. A student majoring in psychology chose to interview him for the final project for one of our oral history courses. The interview focused on Lugo Hernández's unique way of teaching socio-emotional learning by bringing his students to the underserved neighbourhood of Barrio Rucio in the town of Peñuelas. The resultant film, *Todavía Estamos Aquí*, studies the Aula en la Montaña mutual aid organisation that grew from Lugo Hernández's university-community project. Crafted by students in one of our documentary filmmaking courses – under the direction of faculty member and professional filmmaker Raisa Bonnet Ocasio – this award-winning film has been shown at film festivals internationally.

The OHL also leads community seminars for mutual aid organisations, citizen scientist groups, and cultural centres on developing and conducting onsite oral history for social justice projects. We are currently working with four mutual aid organisations – Centro de Apoyo Mutuo de Jíbaro (CAMJI) en la Montaña (serving communities in the mountains of Adjuntas, Lares and Yauco), CAMJI Lares Pueblo, Colectivo PerlArte, and Fundación de Culebra – to record site-specific life stories related to climate justice.

In the PerlArte project, for example, residents of the contested La Perla neighbourhood of San Juan will work to undermine external narratives of apathy and neglect. In a blatant act of disaster capitalism, several real estate investors have attempted to evict locals after back-to-back Hurricanes Irma and María. As PerlArte coordinator Lorel Cubano Santiago explains in her oral history, 'Nobody is going to help our

community because La Perla is also coveted now. This is prime real estate'.³ Residents have successfully evaded these efforts and this oral history project will create a record of local histories tied to a quick response code (QRC) walking tour that will demonstrate the relationship between individuals and this historic neighbourhood.⁴

Our work is amplified through partnerships with other organisations, such as the Archivo de Respuestas Emergencias (AREPR) and the Humanities Action Lab (HAL). AREPR is a collaborative project between Michigan State University, UPRM, UPR-Río Piedras, and the Digital Library of the Caribbean, which is funded by the Presidential Stream of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The Archivo documents some of the post-disaster responses of mutual aid organisations across the archipelago, working to place these organisations in conversation with each other and within the wider community of both those on the frontlines of disaster and those responding to disasters globally. HAL is a trans-local community of approximately 40 local hubs that come together to discuss individual and interconnected issues related to environmental racism and climate justice. The centre is located at Rutgers University-Newark and is funded by a grant from the Higher Learning stream of the Mellon Foundation. UPRM has made significant contributions to the HAL exhibition, *Climates of Inequality*.

The OHL maintains physical space in the library, including an interview room and four film editing rooms. The work of the lab has also focused on creating bilingual digital archives that use the Dublin Core metadata schema, online exhibitions, and data visualisation tools. The inception of the lab was funded by a Digital Humanities Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The project grew from two earlier oral history projects: 'Mi María: Puerto Rico after the Hurricane' and 'Sheltered in Place: Storytelling and Stratified Disasters'.⁵ For more information, visit our website: <http://www.uprm.edu/ohl>.

3 See Lorel Cubano Santiago, in *Mi María*, 151–169.

4 This work is supported by a Digital Justice Grant from the American Council for Learned Societies funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and an Assembling Voices Fellowship from the Interdisciplinary Center for Innovative Theory and Empirics (INCITE) at Columbia University, also funded by the Mellon Foundation.

5 These projects were generously supported by Voice of Witness, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Humanities Action Lab, the Modern Language Association, the Canada Council for the Arts/Conseil des arts du Canada, the Oral History Association, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.