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Oral history interview with Edgardo Miranda Rodríguez, March 7, 2025

Publisher	Oral History Lab (OHL)
Download date	2025-05-19 12:40:29
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11801/7306

ORAL HISTORY LAB (OHL)

University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Edgardo Miranda Rodríguez, author of the graphic novel *La Boriqueña*. The interview was conducted by Dr. Ricia A. Chansky Sancinito, a faculty member of the Department of English at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus, on March 7, 2025. Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Interviewer: Ricia A. Chansky Sancinito

Interviewee: Edgardo Miranda Rodríguez

Date: March 7, 2015

Transcription

[Ricia Chansky]

So, an oral history interview is a little bit different than a journalistic interview in the sense that what I'm most interested in are your stories. And where a journalist might want more factual information or you to move to a point that's publishable, what we want to hear is some of your stories and some of your memories.

[Edgardo Miranda Rodriguez]

Okay.

[Ricia Chansky]

So, I'm going to start the interview now.

[Edgardo Miranda Rodriguez]

Sure thing.

[Ricia Chansky]

Great. So, this is Ricia Chansky and I'm at the Fundación de Humanidades in San Juan and I'm lucky enough to be here today with Edgardo Miranda Rodríguez who is the author of *La Borinqueña*. He is an artist, a writer, he is a philanthropist, and he is an organizer who has committed a lot of time to organizing the diaspora in support of Puerto Rico.

This interview is being recorded. I do not have a permission sheet with me today because I wanted to talk to Sonia if they wanted to make a copy of this interview available as part of the exhibition. So, permission sheet will be followed.

[Edgardo Miranda Rodriguez]

Sure thing.

[Ricia Chansky]

We will happily give you a copy of the interview afterwards for your use. We will preserve the interview in the digital repository at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez and we will gift a copy to the Fundación.

And so, I wanted to start out today by asking you, could you tell me what your first memory of Puerto Rico is?

[Edgardo Miranda Rodriguez]

My first memories of Puerto Rico come from the stories that my mother would tell me. My mother was a child of the first massive migration of Puertorriqueños to the diaspora under the part of Operation Bootstrap. She was the daughter of Emilio Rodriguez and Laura Bello Rodriguez from Santurce, Puerto Rico, from Barrio Obrero, which is the neighborhood in San Juan that historically is known as the laborers community but also a very rich Afro-Puerto Rican community, which possibly explains why many of my aunts and uncles married Afro-Puerto Ricans because that was the neighborhood they grew up in.

My mother came in the 1950s and she was part of that wave that lasted between the 40s and 60s, Operation Bootstrap. So the stories about Puerto Rico were paved with gold. In my mind, the Adoquines were these solid gold bricks like the Yellow Brick Road in Wizard of Oz.

It was a very romanticized, storytelling, visually magical interpretation of Puerto Rico. And of course, because it came from the memory of a child, because she lived here as a child and she came here just under the age of nine to the United States, to New York, I wouldn't make my very first trip to Puerto Rico until I was about 13. It was the middle of my spring semester in middle school, and it was an abrupt move.

It was an abrupt shift in my life because I was a child that was what the school system would refer to as gifted and talented. But I was also an introvert who really poured myself into my studies, who really loved academically excelling. And the act of being completely usurped from my school with no plan as to where I was going to go next, where I was going to live, with these aspirations of going to either an art school in New York City or a science school, as I was grounded as a student in the humanities and the arts and sciences and in visual arts.

I had so many options and I was so excited. What many may not know about New York City public schools is that the high schools are practically set up as colleges because they're all specialized high schools. You don't go to the school in your neighborhood.

You go to the school that you are a perfect fit for. And this can be academically, or this can come from your talent set. And I had so many options, but I was pulled away from any of that.

We moved to Puerto Rico and the first town I lived in was San Lorenzo. But it wasn't just San Lorenzo, it was rural San Lorenzo. And I lived in an area where there was only about two other houses and a lot of land with cows in between us.

And the home I lived in was that of my younger sister's aunts and uncles and grandmother. So, I was literally the stepchild. I was a Cinderella.

I literally slept in a pantry. I had a cot that was behind a shelf filled with dry goods. That was the first time I saw a can of oatmeal infused with cinnamon, *arena con canela*, and I ended up loving it.

Never had that in New York. But it was not only a culture shock, but it was a shock to my self-esteem. I felt immediately invalidated.

I felt immediately shunned, ignored, and ridiculed. Everything that I loved as a child in school was mocked by this family. My love for academics, my love for reading, my love for drawing, why?

Why do you care about that? Just get a job right now. The men in that family worked in a, you really have to refer to it as a plantation.

It was just down the hill for just measly earnings that they would use to just hang out at the local bar because they lived in their mother's house. And these were all men in their 20s with no long-term life goals. They were just living in the moment, loving their youth.

And here I was really lost. Like, why am I here? And that would lead to me really not loving anything about being Puerto Rican or being in Puerto Rico, let alone any of these magical stories that my mother told me about Puerto Rico.

Like, where is this? And I had to figure out a way to find my own Puerto Rico. And I had a small dog, and I would go on long walks with him and disappear.

And I forget the name of the river, the river in San Lorenzo. It actually has a Taino name to it. And I would spend my afternoons in this river by myself.

I was very much an introvert. I was also very much a timid, shy, and scary cat. So, I wasn't a swimmer.

I would just go, like, ankle to knee-high water and just go there to find peace, solace, and a way to find my way to connect to this beautiful, enchanted land and disassociate myself from this family. And as time progressed, living in this place as traumatic and as uncomfortable and as terrible made me feel, there were moments that I had that were filled with a little bit of bliss, listening to rock music. There was an era where these compilation cassettes were coming out called "*Llena tu cabeza de Rock*."

And I found it hilarious because they were just, like, pop songs from the U.S. that I had already heard, like, maybe a half year or a year ago. And they were being released as, like, brand-new collections of pop music. This was before the internet, so it took a little while before computer media was distributed.

And so, there was one night, we were woken. "*Mira, con permiso. ¿Por ahí vive María Monserrate Rodríguez? Miren, discúlpennme, somos la familia de Maria Monserrate Rodríguez.*" And everyone comes out of the house kind of, like, you know, in a very kind of, like, annoyed energy because they're being woken up in the middle of the night. And we

come out, and we see who my first introduction to my late uncle would be, Mario, Afro-Puerto Rican man, towering over six feet, towering over these men, these very skinny, very, like, thin men.

And here's Mario with his kind of, like, larger-than-life persona. He looked like a luchador with his beautiful Afro dark brown skin and his guayabera, but a beautiful kind of, like, teddy bear warm energy. And at that moment, I guess my mother and her boyfriend were on the outs, and she was like, let's go.

We packed up our things immediately, piled up into Mario's station wagon, which was already crammed with my Aunt Ruthie, my cousin Laura, my Cousin Ruth, my Cousin Noel, and my Cousin Pucho. It was like, how did we all fit in there? And, you know, this is before people realized that we needed seatbelts.

So, there was, like, this kind of, like, backseat, flap seat that flapped backwards. So, when you sat in the back of the station wagon, you literally were staring onto oncoming traffic, you know. And so there I was sitting in the back flap with two of these other cousins that were with me for the first time.

And I was the youngest one, and then there was my sister, Marisol, who was an infant at the time. And then that would be the next chapter of my life. I was now living in Las Piedras, in this incredibly modest house, mostly wood, hybrid wood, concrete, with the corrugated aluminum rooftops, even though we used to call it zinc.

And when the rain would fall, you'd hear the pitter-patter, pitter-patter, pitter-patter, and that would just kind of lull you to sleep. An incredibly modest home filled with so many people and so much love. And Mario infused me with this love of Puerto Rico, with this love of family, and just took a liking to me immediately.

And this was a family that struggled financially. I would later learn that because of his health issues, he struggled with asthma. He wasn't able to go down a job for some time.

So, they were literally living off of his good name. And we would go to these marquetas to pick up our groceries, and he never exchanged money. Most of the time, people were just like, this is fine.

And he had, you know, como dicen acá, encontraba sus compras fiao' y nunca, nunca pagaba, nunca estaba pagando. Funny story, I remember one time he introduced me to this snack, and I was like, what is that? And he was like, "bowl testicles?" And I was like, "hard pass!"

And another time, he was trying to teach me how to drive, but this was like a Lincoln Continental station wagon with a hood that felt like it was usually like five feet deep. And, you know, Las Piedras were pretty hillish, so I was barely pushing five feet tall at 13, you know. And I recall barely seeing over the hood where we were driving, and he was like, okay, this lesson is over.

We're not going to finish this driver's lesson. And I took immediately to my older cousins. A lot of different energy.

My cousin Noel, may he rest in peace, was a very kind of athletic, kind of like competitive boy energy. His older brother Pucho would later become an evangelist, very devout to the Pentecostal religion. Ruth was a kind of like a wild spirit.

She didn't know if she wanted to be there, or she wanted to kind of like follow the love of her life. And Laura was just kind of like closer to me in age and was kind of like just barely like an older sister, always kind of looked out for me. And it was an incredible time living with them.

Funny stories. I love this story. They had a shower that was pretty much just a corner with a pipe sticking out with a wood door.

So the door had no doorknob. It may have at one point, but there was just this little kind of like space where a doorknob used to be. Now, I lived in this house with my two older cousins, right?

Laura had very short hair. I mean, Ruth had very short hair. So, I knew it wasn't her.

But Laura had beautiful, long brown hair. And there's this wad of hair in this little kind of like space. And I'm like, geez, that's so gross.

They just probably cleaned out a brush and stuck the hair in there. So, I grabbed this wad of hair and I walked towards my aunt, who was in the back of the house, kind of like washing clothing on a washboard, right? And in a big, you know, basin.

And I'm like, "mira tía, mira lo que dejaron en la puerta." And I opened my hand slowly and it was a tarantula. And I went, "what!?"

And I slammed it immediately on the ground. And like, I don't know what her ninja skills, I don't know where she pulled this broom, but this broom came out of like a portal or something. And she whacked that tarantula into oblivion.

You know, I guess sent them to another dimension because I didn't see anything after that. She was done whacking the ground with that broom. And I recall also living in that home, falling in love with Lucha Libre.

And the entire kind of like over-the-top testosterone scene, testosterone-infused scene of wrestling. And my favorite hero was Carlito Colon, this self-mutilating Afro-Puerto Rican wrestler. And I say that because he was notorious for having razor blades hidden so he could literally lacerate himself to make his performances more dramatic.

So, he constantly lacerated himself and his entire forehead was scarred, but he would lacerate himself. So, in his battle performance, make it look so much more graphic and so much more entertaining. And that was kind of like an interesting space because there was also a show that brought in these WWF wrestlers like Hulk Hogan and many others that were big in the U.S. I was like, "I know these guys." They're messing with our Puerto Rican heroes and such. And then eventually we moved to a new home because my Uncle Joaquin said, "you know what, Maria, Marisol, and Edgardo, or Eggie as they called me, they're too much of a financial burden so let them stay with us." "Let them stay with us."

And there was a part of my life in Puerto Rico that was a very short live. During my time in San Lorenzo where we did get a house, like a flat, in Caguas, and I recall it was like one of these houses on stilts because right behind us was the river, but that was a very brief stay, maybe just a few weeks. So, while we were in Las Piedras, Joaquin and my Aunt Diana, another Afro-Puerto Rican, my family just married into this beautifully diverse world and that was natural to our family.

And my Uncle Joaquin, my Aunt Diana, my two cousins, Jonathan and Francis, are there at Mario's home. And Mario really wanted us to stay, but he really understood financially it was just too much of a burden. And it was with tears and hugs that we would move in with my Uncle Joaquin.

And Joaquin was my mother's older brother. And he was a Seventh-day Adventist, a vegan, which was trippy in the 80s to be in the home of a family that was already kind of like exploring this. He deviated from our family's Pentecostal foundation of religion to kind of like find his own way of spirituality.

He also communed a lot with nature. He had a small plot of land on his home in Ceiba where he grew panapén, aguacate. He had a little chicken coop where his chicken's made eggs, you know, like harvested his eggs.

Harvested eggs? I don't know, hatched eggs, right? They weren't for eating.

The eggs were, but not the chickens, right? And what always reminds me and always tell me that it was our responsibility to protect the earth. And when he said the earth, he wasn't just talking about Puerto Rico.

He meant everything. He was telling me, "Stick your hands in the earth, stick your hands in it, feel that." And the earth was terracotta in Ceiba.

Beautiful, rich terracotta, reddish-orange hues and with a clay texture. I loved it. The tactile experiencing of the experience of holding the earth in my hands.

My uncle was also a very talented barber, so he used to give me the nicest haircuts all the time. This is the first time where I was the elder cousin, so now I was the big brother to Jonathan and Francis. And we all took a liking to each other as siblings.

And my mother and my, well, her boyfriend, I would call him a stepfather, but they were never actually married. They reconciled and left. And they moved to Redding, Pennsylvania with my sister and left me behind, abandoned me.

And I pretty much was like, okay, good riddance. Because my mother, to this day, struggles with a lot of mental health issues. And it was very unstable.

I will share, including this time in Puerto Rico, I lived in 22 different places by the time I was 18. I was literally the new kid my entire childhood. The trauma of being the new kid, the intimidation of being the new kid, the pressure of being the new kid.

Is this new kid going to be cool? Is this new kid going to be a nuisance? And eventually found that my ability to draw, to storytell, my academic natural ability to just excel kind of helped me fit in or at least stand out a little bit.

But not in a kind of like over cocky way, just kind of like to fit in. So, my time at Ceiba was very beautiful. I learned how to skateboard.

I used to watch my favorite TV show, Mazinger, which inspired me to create this robot character that's part of my exhibition here. And it's like 40 years later, this character is inspired by this character, Vejigante, which is inspired by the folkloric masks of Ponce, particularly because of the horns, right? But also, was inspired by this cartoon that I used to watch 40 years ago.

In Puerto Rico in the 1980s was a TV show called Mazinger. Mazinger Z was the first Japanese imported cartoon. There were no words like manga or anime in this era, but that's exactly what Mazinger was.

It was manga. It was anime. And the weirdo that I was when I watched this cartoon and I saw the robot heads, they all had horns.

I'm like, goodness, they all look like Vejigantes. No one sees this? No one?

Seriously? No one sees this? So fast forward decades later when I'm making La Borinqueña about 10 years ago, some of the ideas that I was developing before La Borinqueña became a comic book was Vejigante.

And I recall one of my editors telling me, why a giant robot? And I was like, why not? Giant robots are cool.

There doesn't need to be a reason for a giant robot. They just are cool. And I shelved the idea of Vejigante.

And so in 2020 when I was developing my third graphic novel during the pandemic, I wanted to revisit the script and redo the ending, which originally was a very dark ending. And I told my two sons, we're going to create a new superhero team for La Borinqueña. And my nine-year-old son created Oro, El Coquito Dorado, which was actually inspired by Vejigante masks from Loiza that was gifted to us by Corporación Piñones Se Integra, one of our grantees.

Another character which we don't have a figure for is Iguaca, which was inspired by my older son, who's a junior in college, or at least at the time of this recording. He's a junior at Connecticut College studying environmental sciences. And another one of our superheroes is Luz, La Luminosa, who my wife pretty much asked to give her the unfortunate disease of endometriosis.

Endometriosis is a real disease that affects one in 10 women, including my wife and partner, Kyung Jeon-Miranda. So, these characters came out of my imagination, but are kind of like tethered to my childhood in Puerto Rico. So, living in Ceiba, I watched Mazinger, I watched the translated version of the 1960s Adam West Batman TV show, Baticlub.

And my favorite sitcom at the time was Barrio Cuatro Calles. It was a TV show about two rival families. One was a native Puerto Rican family, one was a family from New York City, but they both owned competitive bakeries.

And I, to this day, remember the theme song: "En el barrio cuatro calles, lo sencillo se complica, pica, pica, y multiplica." And one of the characters, who was actually the owner of the bakery, the family that were native to Puerto Rico, used to have these daydreams and delusions that he was actually a superhero.

And this was around the time when E.T., Steven Stewart's movie came out. So, in his daydreams, he became Super Pan. And his call to action, kind of like his mantra was, levadura, levadura, dame musculatura.

And this very thin man, right, gaunt, wore this hilariously oversized, padded muscle suit from the waist up. So, his legs were still fixed, and he had this massive muscle suit with a bread logo in place of the S, right? And his guru was T.E., not E.T., T.E. So that was like my childhood. I was infused with all of this pop culture that stayed with me. Inevitably, my mother did raise up money and told my uncle "he's coming home," which shocked me, because at that point, we were trying to figure out how to acclimate me to school.

I had been going months without being in school, which was really affecting me psychologically, because here is something that was so important to me, and I was spending more of my time watching TV than actually being in class. And when my aunt Diana and uncle Joaquin were working, I would stay with Diana's mother, Paquita, watching chickens flying. And I was like, chickens can fly.

They don't fly high, but they can fly from one side of the house to the other. And that experience, that time living in Puerto Rico, stayed with me many, many, many years later. And then about, I would say, maybe a decade after that trip, I would become, after college, an activist in New York City, and would help organize what would become New York City's first Puerto Rican news conference, "Muévete."

And that was in 1993. And that was an opportunity for me to connect to being Puerto Rican as someone who was a part of the diaspora. And that work went into my day job, where I worked as an activist in Williamsburg and this non-profit called El Puente.

I was involved with the National Congress of Puerto Rican Rights under my mentor, the late Richie Perez. Prior to that, I worked on a production with my mentor to this day, Iris Morales, a documentary called "Pa'lante Siempre Pa'lante," which is a documentary about the Young Lords Party, a group of activists that existed in New York City from 1969 to about 1971. And these experiences, both as part of a professional production of a documentary, to organizing a youth conference, to being part of a citywide group of activists under the leadership of Richie Perez, that all infused in me a sense of my identity, of being Puertorriqueño, of being Boricua, even though I wasn't physically in the archipelago.

And giving me this connection to my culture laid the groundwork for decades later when I would develop La Borinquena. And that honestly was and is what defines me as being Puertorriqueño. Over time, I've completely moved away from being self-identified as

Nuyorican, because I recognize that I am part of nine million Puertorriqueños in the diaspora.

Across the islands of Puerto Rico, across the United States, across Canada, across Europe, even the moon, right? We're everywhere. And I recognize there's more power in recognizing ourselves as just Puertorriqueños.

And there are different identities of the Puerto Rican. There's the identity of literally living here in the Caribbean. But then there's the ethnic cultural identity when you live abroad that defines us, that empowers us in the face of white supremacy, in the face of bigotry, in the realization that we oftentimes are part of and are these marginalized communities across the United States.

And recognizing what that also means when you look at issues related to the environment, well, across the United States, Puerto Ricans overwhelmingly, particularly, are affected by the environmental issues like pollution because we have the highest rates of asthma. And this is all data that I infuse into the creation of my characters in my work. And so, when I look at La Borinqueña and where I am today with this project, nine years later going into 10 years soon, it's an evolution of my identity.

It's an evolution of myself as an artist, as a storyteller, as the son of Maria, as the cousin of Jonathan, Francis, Ruth, Noel, Pucho, Laura, el sobrino de Mario, de Ruth, de Diana, de Joaquin. And I am here because of them. And I continue to be here because of the support of so many people who have infused me with this love of my heritage, with this love of my identity.

And I find a way in my own unique manner to share that with the rest of the world. I think one of the goals I have had with my project, especially when I project this work globally, is to humanize the Puerto Rican identity so that others not only learn about us through these stories, through these characters, but that they see themselves in us, that they share our struggles, that they share our battles, that they share our passions, our laughter, our tears. And in doing so, see our shared humanity.

And when children are studying La Borinqueña because the publishers of textbooks from France are introducing them, and these books are distributed internationally, or if Fast Company interviews me and publishes my story in Turkey, or if I get the opportunity to be an envoy for the U.S. Department of State and I get to teach workshops to artists and students in Venezuela and Bolivia, I know that I'm bringing my culture with me everywhere I go.

And I'm bringing that child that struggled to find his own Puerto Rico that lived in that pantry and in the face of that ridicule and discomfort, I still found a way to find my way.

[Ricia Chansky]

So you are the best interview ever because you answered so many of the questions I had all in that. And I know that you answered this other question by what you said, but I just want to put a name to it. Can you define in your own terms patria and what patria means to you?

[Edgardo Miranda Rodriguez]

When I hear patria, I hear, I think of two things. I think of a friend of mine named Patria Rodriguez who was like, you know, one of my best friends in my early 20s, early to late 20s. We worked on Pa'lante Siempre Pa'lante together with my friend Vanessa Roman.

We were this little corrido of young Puerto Ricans that were mentored under Iris Morales, and we became her production company. When I hear the word patria, I think of Ruben Blades who was actually like my hero, this Panamanian who wrote, composed, and performed incredibly beautifully progressive stories about the human experience that I was introduced to his music while living in Puerto Rico. I remember one of my favorite albums was "Buscando America," and that album estaba pegado ese verano cuando yo vivía acá en Puerto Rico y de vez en cuando salía en la emisora (sings) "El padre Antonio y su moranguillo, Andres" pero suenan las, no, suenan las campanas otra vez Oh, para el padre Antonio y su moranguillo Andres Loved, loved that album and everything that it represented and I got the chance to meet Ruben when I was in my early 20s when he was shooting this terrible movie called Devil's Own Whip, Brad Pitt It's a terrible movie and then fast forward, I got to meet him again when I started working on La Borinqueña because he reached out to me through his management like I want to meet this guy and he invites me and I bring Kyung, my wife and partner to hang out with me and Ruben was being honored at this event and I hung out with Ruben and Kyung the entire night in his VIP room He doesn't drink, we don't drink so we just talked comic books all night I had no idea that Ruben was a comic book collector and a comic book nerd A huge, and not only that he collected original comic book art and as we were talking and having this exchange he shared some of the pieces he had and one of those artists that he loved was Alex Schomburg but he didn't know that Alex Schomburg was originally Alejandro de Chavez Schomburg from Aguadilla, Puerto Rico who along with his brothers came to the United States to New York City to open their own studio in the late 30s, early 40s and he goes "Esperate, tú me estas diciendo a mi que Alex Schomburg es boricua and I'm like "yeah bro él es boricua, you literally have Puerto Rican art in your comic book collection" and he was just blown away so when I think of patria it's infused with my friendships with music with art and it's a part of my core Yo cargo mi patria a donde voy everywhere I go Puerto Rico esta dentro de mi I remember the Young Lords had the little button and it used to say "Tengo Puerto Rico en mi corazón" and it's true and I recall when we debuted "Reconstruction" which today is our number one selling book when it was first premiered it was number one in pre-orders for four months straight on Amazon, the number one bestseller and out the gate raised hundreds of thousands of dollars which is why, Kyung, my partner decided we should start a philanthropic project which is our La Borinqueña Grant Awards and we've awarded over \$200,000 in grants over the last nine years when we debuted Reconstruction I said "we're going to do it in Puerto Rico" in fact we're going to debut it in Puerto Rico Puertorriqueños are going to be the first ones to hold this book before anyone else on the planet and we debuted it at the Puerto Rico Comic Con not too far from here at Centro de Convenciones in Miramar and over and over and over people told me, who lined up those three days of Comic Con and would not leave until they had a moment with me they would say, "Gracias Gracias por poner a Puerto Rico en alto" and that stayed with me, stays with me that I was being thanked for uplifting Puerto Rico and I would just share pero Puerto Rico siempre me ha puesto a mi en alto you know and it doesn't matter where I'm from and this is me getting into my little hip hop like Rakim used to say "it ain't where you're from, it's where you're at" and it's true and I always carry that patria in me so to me patria means not only the love of my motherland but my commitment

as an artist and as a storyteller to always celebrate and recognize and do my part to uplift the narrative related to my fatherland

[Ricia Chansky]

Beautiful, beautiful, thank you very much. Um, what do you think art offers the future of Puerto Rico?

[Edgardo Miranda Rodriguez]

Art has the power and always has had the power to be transformative, to be universal to be multilingual, to reach into the core of all of us particularly visual art, right and I play with that even with my graphic novels because it's a hybrid of the word and the visual that is really in the hands of the observer, the interpreter, the reader, to find their own way in and out of the world and that's what is the power of art. All of us come in through different viewpoints, different intersections to art, we have different takeaways, some of us see things that others don't. Some of us are able to connect in a way that others don't and yet we all enjoy the same piece and that's the power of the arts that nothing else can replicate and the other thing that's important to know about the arts is that it's always there especially in the darkest times and it's always there to comfort us, to inspire us to distract us and to uplift us after a hard day of work you get in your car, you pop in your favorite music, that's art. After a long week, you make a trek to the museum to sit in front of your favorite painting, that's art; at the end of the night, after a meal you sit down to watch your favorite show, that's art; you pick up your comic book, you add your favorite action figure to the shelf, you pose them a little bit, that's art; that's the magic and the power of art and as artists most of us create with this understanding with this responsibility, not to say all of us do, some of us create just because we just have this unquenchable desire of constantly feeling the need to express ourselves but then there are those of us like me who feel the need to find a way to translate everything that's happening in the world in a digestible manner so that it can uplift us so that it can empower us and more importantly so that it can reconnect us

[Ricia Chansky]

The Oral History Lab is dedicated to social justice and I think you've talked a lot about social justice but one of our special interests is climate justice and you talked about environmental racism and how communities both in Puerto Rico and in the U.S. are facing more of a burden so when I look at La Borinqueña, I see her as a climate justice hero and I know that this was not necessarily conceptualized as a post-hurricane María project but for me it really has become one and when I teach La Borinqueña, I teach it as part of the text that talk about María and talk about climate justice equity, dignity and I was wondering can you tell us a little bit about how you see La Borinqueña as a hero and with the environment with climate, with social justice

[Edgardo Miranda Rodriguez]

When I initially developed the idea of creating La Borinqueña, truly she was inspired by my need to see the response to the economic crisis that afflicted the 3.75 million Puertorriqueños at the time because after tax code 936 was repealed under President Clinton's administration and a 10 year phase out occurred by 2009 we started seeing a massive migration of Puerto Ricans not unlike anything that we have seen when my mother came in through the 40s and 60s, three decades only came up to close to a quarter of a

million but in the span of what is now just under two decades we've seen close to three quarters of a million Puerto Ricans move throughout the diaspora and my initial response for this project or rather my impetus was to address that but I didn't want that to be the sole focus of the film, understanding that my protagonist was a woman, I didn't want to introduce a supervillain. I immediately critiqued popular culture and the narrative form for constantly positioning a woman's narrative centered around the need for a relationship, romantic or dysfunctional, so I avoided that. I saw her even introducing a supervillain as a dysfunctional relationship and I had a conversation with Kyung, my partner about this and one of the things she says, "well, you know Puerto Ricans are always facing natural disasters, maybe that's the focal point of your narrative" and I took that idea, I did some research, I learned of the work of Dr. Jose Molina who I felt for some time was the chicken little of the science world saying "the sky is falling, there's an imminent hurricane that will hit Puerto Rico not unlike anything we've seen in over a century." He was right. GermanWatch, this consortium of German scientists had a study that they'd been developing for years and when they finally released this report, page after page after page of their studies repeatedly pointed to Puerto Rico being ground zero for climate related disasters and I saw this as the perfect place my graphic novel, that is, to bring this into the narrative but in an organic way. I never wanted to have a character that monologued, over explained. I wanted the narrative to be organic. In the first few pages of the first graphic novel, she's trying to find a group of Tingalpa that are lost, these little black sea turtles, but why are they lost?

Because of coastal erosion they literally lost their natural habitat to hatch their eggs but I didn't have to say all of that. She's just in there, she finds them, her light is on from her star, she guides them to another beach, those two or three pages literally were addressing a major part of climate change. When the actual hurricane does come to Puerto Rico in the story that was honestly hyperbolic storytelling from the perspective of someone who writes speculative Afro-Taino fiction. It just couldn't be a little storm, it had to be a storm that knocked out the power for the entire island. So, for me the character organically, in my research, in my writing embraced a narrative centered around climate justice because when you look at the mythologies of the Taíno's, these cemís are all tethered to the elements. Huracán is literally the spirit of the Tainos of the storms, it's the hurricane, we literally created the word hurricane, so a lot of that organically for me fit into the narrative of this character and I did follow the atypical formula of superheroes meaning that they're inspired by pre-existing mythologies. Kal-El's Superman is Moses came from the Bible, obviously Thor is Norse mythology and so many others, Batman is Hades, right. In another way of looking at it, because come on, let's be real do we really live in a reality where a billionaire is actually going to be fighting for justice, maybe three crimes in an over exaggerated violent way but La Borinquena's narratives have always, for me organically been tethered to climate justice because as people of color, we are connected to this climate struggle. It directly affects our humanity, our habitats, our livelihoods, it affects us holistically and for La Borinquena, I feel that it is an integral part of what defines her as a character, her connection to these stories that are centered around climate justice.

[Ricia Chansky]

Beautiful, thank you so much. I have just one more question I had the pleasure last night at the event to open this building and this exhibition to meet your son, Enyo and I was able to purchase one of his comic books and so, my question is what you hope that your

commitment to artwork, culture, humanity, Puerto Rico, justice. What do you hope that leaves your own children but also the children of Puerto Rico?

[Edgardo Miranda Rodriguez]

I'm just going to put it out there, it's a dream that I've been recently sharing. My long term dream is to one day have a space here in Puerto Rico that is a multidisciplinary space, a children's museum, a space for learning, a space for international exchange with other children and students who want to come to Puerto Rico be they of Puerto Rican heritage or not, but if they sincerely express an interest to want to come to work, either to create art or any other work related to what La Borinqueña stands for, that's my dream. I would love to have a place here in Puerto Rico that will continue to grow and provide a place for stories like these for our characters long after I'm gone, you know, I don't want to have Skywalker Ranch or I don't want to have Disney World or you know. I want to have something that gives back through the arts that allows children and families to see the magic in themselves when they see my characters and in seeing that magic in themselves, recognize that innate superpower that's always been there and that's my dream you know. It's like this group Chuwi, they have this beautiful song "Tierra". I want to have; I want to have a piece of tierra for myself and that's my hope.

I come from a very humble beginning, struggled with poverty. The entirety of my childhood and young adulthood. I'm a working-class artist. The optics make me feel and appear to be a lot larger than life but I'm a working class artist who sees the power of charity not because I have to find a way to write off something in my income taxes, no, I really do see that philanthropy is my, kind of like grown up way as a 54 year old man to be and continue to be an activist. So, my dream is to one day have my own piece of tierra for my family, for my sons for myself, and Kyung so that we can make art, have our studios here and have a space so that other families can have their dreams continue to grow.