



The Oral History Lab @UPRM: Decolonial Practice On, Across, & Beyond Campus

**Ricia Anne Chansky, Marci Denesiuk,
& José Morales Benítez**

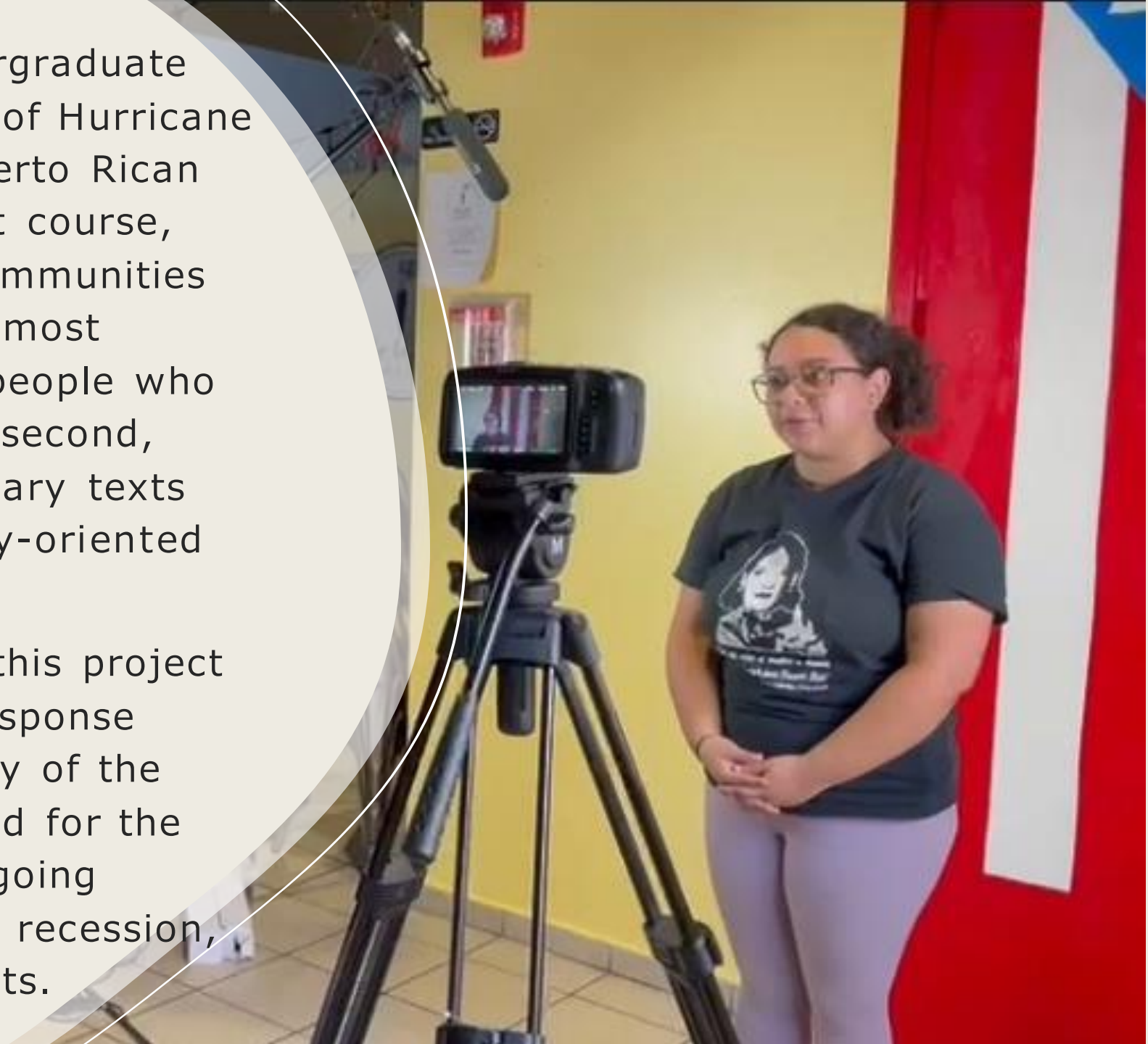
University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez
www.uprm.edu/ohl



The Oral History Lab @UPRM

- Grew from 2 oral history projects: “Mi María: Puerto Rico after the Hurricane” & “Sheltered in Place: Storytelling & Stratified Disaster”
- Brings together 3 humanities-based assets on our campus so that we can dedicate our focus to recording, preserving, & disseminating stories related to social & climate justice.
- Was founded with a Digital Humanities Grant awarded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

- The “Mi María” included 2 undergraduate course taught in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria making landfall in the Puerto Rican archipelago in 2017. In the first course, students entered their home communities to record the stories that were most important to them told by the people who mattered most to them. In the second, they used oral histories as primary texts from which to create community-oriented active learning projects.
- “Sheltered in Place” continued this project with a focus on how disaster response strategies formed in the urgency of the aftermath of María were adapted for the new needs of COVID-19, an ongoing earthquake storm, an economic recession, & additional climatological events.



- The lab brings together 3 of the university's humanities-based assets: the Department of English, University Library, & Film Certificate Program. The lab has a physical space in the library that consists of an interview room, 4 video editing rooms, & a full collection of filmmaking equipment that may be checked out by students in any affiliated courses. This is in addition to our digital repository.
- This holistic integration of the processes of recording, archiving, & disseminating life stories centered in one location, allows us to think about the many ways in which storytelling can be used for social & climate justice, for internal & external communities of stakeholders.



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE
HUMANITIES





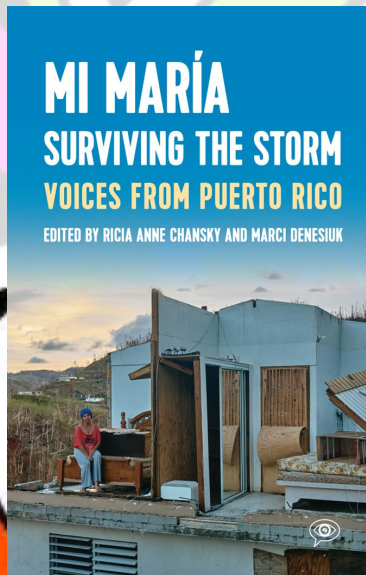
VOICE OF
WITNESS



ORAL HISTORY LAB
Laboratorio de Historia Oral

HUMANITIES
ACTION
LAB

A Focus on Amplifying Stories



Current & Future Projects

- Complete the establishment of the lab
- Further developing our undergraduate course offerings
- Continue our pilot community education & archiving project
- Design mass-listening events at community partner sites across the Puerto Rican archipelago
- Work on curated mutual aid organization Omeka S subsites with the Archivo de Respuestas Emergencias de Puerto Rico
- Develop methodologies to triangulate data from oral histories & create embeddable digital tools for PSAs



Decolonial Practice

- In the classroom
- In the community
- In the archives

IN THE CLASSROOM

This paper focuses on new oral history courses that the Oral History Lab @UPRM has developed as part of the general education program at our Hispanic Serving Institution. With a focus on bilingual academic and creative outputs, these action-oriented courses engage community service and public humanities elements to grapple with disaster and the climate emergency.

Using Oral History in General Education Courses

- UPRM is an Hispanic Serving Institution and STEM-focused public university.
- Students self-identify as English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners.
- Courses using oral history are offered by the English Department.





In Puerto Rico, the hurricane was ultimately responsible for over \$90 billion in damage and for thousands of deaths.



Classes at UPRM resumed five weeks after the storm, when many people—students, staff, and faculty—still did not have power, internet, or running water.

“Agent Héctor Matías-Torres and Agent Ángel Lorenzo-González drowned when their vehicles were caught in floodwaters during Hurricane Maria.”

–Officer Down Memorial Page



OFFICER DOWN MEMORIAL PAGE
REMEMBERING ALL OF LAW ENFORCEMENT'S HEROES

Fallen Officers Report a Fallen Officer K9s Get Involved

[Registration for the 12th Annual Officer Down Memorial Ride is now open](#) – join us worldwide, as we honor fallen heroes, and make a difference

Agent Héctor Luis Matías-Torres

United States | Puerto Rico | Puerto Rico Police Department | Agent Héctor Luis Matías-Torres



Agent Héctor Luis Matías-Torres

Puerto Rico Police Department, Puerto Rico
End of Watch: Thursday, September 21, 2017

ADD TO MY HEROES

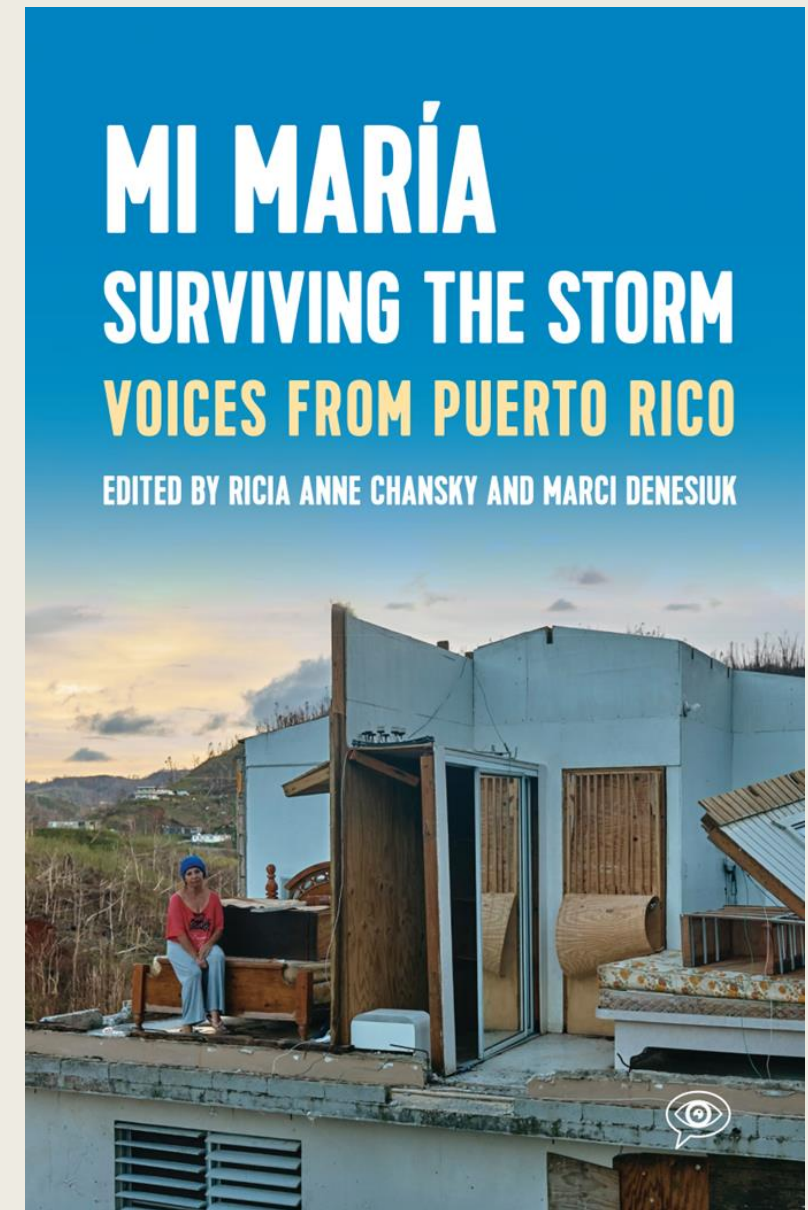


“

Since the hurricane, I've been able to see that there is an incredible emotional need. It's up to us as individuals to try to fulfill this emotional need by listening.

— Félix Serrano Villegas, San Juan

Eight of the seventeen narratives included in the *Mi María* book were based on interviews done by students who were trained in courses at the UPRM.





MILIANA IVELISSE
MONTAÑEZ LEÓN

BORN IN: 1989

LIVES IN: Caguas

Customer Service Representative and Doula

Marco Acosta León interviewed his sister, Miliana Ivelisse Montañez León, about their mother's death.

Her story was one of the student narratives included in the *Mi María* book.

family member who had died three weeks before. Another person was waiting for an autopsy on someone who had died two months before.

We waited a long time and kept repeating our story to various people in different offices until somebody had the honesty to tell us that Forensic Sciences didn't have any obligation to do an autopsy. In my mother's case they decided not to, even though they knew she'd been in the hospital the night before. Many corpses didn't receive autopsies because Forensic Sciences didn't have enough personnel to handle all the cases after María. They were only doing autopsies for cases of suspected murder or if the court ordered it.

I knew an autopsy wasn't going to bring my mom back, but to understand what had happened would help with closure. So then we wanted to request a private autopsy. Someone finally told my dad, "You have to go to this other place." So we drove there, and they said, "You have to go to this other office." At the last office, my dad said, "Are you the person who's finally going to explain to me the process? Because I don't want to repeat myself again." The hardest part of it all was explaining what had happened over and over again. Finally, they said, "If you want a private autopsy, you should call these people." And they gave a list of numbers that covered both sides of four pages.

We started calling. The list was outdated. Some offices had been closed forever. Some people weren't on the island. When we finally got advice about the process, we learned that it might take months, which meant my mom's body would be in a fridge all that time. And after so many months, it would probably be an unclear report that wouldn't give us closure anyway. So, in the end, it wasn't even worth it.

My mom was fifty-four years old when she died. No known preexisting conditions could have caused her death. According to the hospital she only had a virus. The death certificate says my mom died of natural causes. We think that she may have had leptospirosis,

or maybe a massive heart attack, but since an autopsy wasn't done, we won't ever know.

PEOPLE PAID WITH THEIR LIVES

For months after the hurricane the government's official count of deaths caused by María was sixty-four. In August 2018, the official toll was revised to 2,975 people, making María among the deadliest hurricanes in US history.⁷

Our case wasn't isolated. Even months after María, a lot of people were still suffering. Before the hurricane I was aware of the problems Puerto Rico faced, but we're not talking about what we're talking about as a poor county. We're talking about a US colony, "colony," because colonies exist to be exploited. And since the years of *las guácaras*, the times of old. It's the unethical testing of birth control pills on Puerto Ricans. The government isn't there for us; it's there for the tourists.

After the hurricane, both the federal and local governments did a horrible job, especially in their response to the emergency services weren't working. People paid with their lives. We brought in a hospital ship, but it was difficult to get it to the island. Medical offices were closed or destroyed. Some were flooded, or had shattered windows or damaged structure. There are photos of doctors doing surgery in the streets.

"A person is dying in front of you, and you can't do something as basic as connect to the emergency number."

—Miliana Ivelisse Montañez León

7. Research shows that even the revised number for the death toll was underestimated. For more on the death toll, see "Aftermaths" in the book.

8. In the 1950s, biologists from the US mainland who were developing a birth control pill conducted clinical trials in Puerto Rico. Women given the pill were not informed of the potential side effects or even that the drug was experimental. These clinical trials were done in tandem with a government-endorsed sterilization program that left approximately one third of the female population sterilized, the highest rate in the world. For more on these trials, see "Sterilization and Birth Control" in the "Contexts" essay.

The Forensics of Death in Puerto Rico

The precarious situation of the Forensic Science Institute of Puerto Rico before and after Hurricane Maria

In [Latin America](#), [Crime](#), [Puerto Rico](#) and [Hurricane Maria](#)

Published Jul 13, 2018 · 10 min read

Puerto Rico's Institute of Forensic Sciences was chronically understaffed and underfunded, and the problem of backlogged cases only got worse after the hurricane.

U.S. >
Lawmakers investigate Puerto Rico's medical examiner as bodies pile up
JULY 20, 2018 / 8:57 PM / CBS/AP

WORLD • PUERTO RICO
Nearly One Year After Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rican Morgues are Still in a Crisis

Community responses highlight the ingenuity and fortitude of people across the archipelago.



Image: [Alfredo Sosa](#)



Students:

- Are trained in the ethical collection, transcription, translation, and preservation of oral history interviews.
- Develop a work of literary creative nonfiction based on the interview they have conducted with a narrator of their choice.



Narrator:

← Yeandres Rivera
Gonzalez

Student interviewer:

Giovani Bonilla Martinez

Yeandres had his car accident on Jan. 6, 2020, the same day 5.8 magnitude earthquake shook Puerto Rico.

The previous day he'd had an argument with his father about his sexuality.







Narrator:

← Eduardo Lugo Hernández

Student interviewer:

Kiara De Jesús Hernández



Eduardo is in charge of story time today.

Public-facing outputs include:

- *Maxy Survives the Hurricane / Maxy sobrevive el huracán*, by Ricia and her student, Yarelis Marcial Acevedo.
- *Eating through disaster / Comiendo a través del desastre* by students Bryan Ramos Romero and Yaritza Sánchez Silva.





RAFAEL RAMOS DÍAZ

BORN IN: 1966

LIVES IN: Camuy

Police Captain

Bryan Ramos Romero interviewed his father, Rafael Ramos Díaz, about his role as a policeman during the time of Hurricane María.

His story was one of the student narratives included in the *Mi María* book.

Choosing a Narrator

Search for individuals you have easy access to. Family members, friends or other people in your community are all ideal candidates for narrators as you can easily come back to them with follow-up interviews and questions

Creating a **list** of specific interview topics is a great way to narrow down the kind of questions you want to ask and deciding who would be best to interview.





"I never saw myself doing an interview...Now I know I am capable of doing that and more."
—Second-year Industrial Engineering student

IN THE COMMUNITY

This paper discusses the training and mentorship program that the Oral History Lab @UPRM is developing for mutual aid, citizen scientist, cultural sites, and other community partners across the Puerto Rican archipelago. This program is focused on supporting community led storytelling projects.

OHL@UPRM Community Storytelling

[Course](#) [Settings](#) [Participants](#) [Grades](#) [Reports](#) [More](#) ▾

▾ ¡Bienvenidos! / Welcome!

[Collapse all](#)



Welcome to the OHL Community Storytelling Project

[Mark as done](#)

A welcome message from Ricia Anne Chandry, Director of the Oral History Lab @UPRM.



Voces en comunidad / Voices in the community

[Mark as done](#)

Una película corta que presenta el Laboratorio de Historia Oral @UPRM.
A short film introducing the Oral History Lab @UPRM.

▾ Documentos importantes / Important documents



Calendario otoño 2023 / Autumn 2023 Schedule

[Mark as done](#)



Autorización del narrador / Narrator permission slip

[Mark as done](#)

▾ Grabaciones de reuniones / Meeting recordings



Sept. 18, 2023 Reunion: ¡Bienvenido! / Welcome!

[Mark as done](#)



Oct. 2, 2023 Reunion: Ecourses, filmación & previo a la entrevista / Filming & pre-interview

[Mark as done](#)

▾ Historia oral / Oral history



En esta sección encontrarás videotutoriales sobre historia oral, incluyendo una introducción a la historia oral, orientación sobre cómo realizar una entrevista de historia oral e información sobre el trabajo que se realiza después de la entrevista.

In this section you will find video tutorials about oral history, including an introduction to oral history, guidance on how to conduct an oral history interview, and information about the work that is done post interview.



¿Qué es la historia oral? / What is oral history?

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Este video presentará a los espectadores los componentes fundamentales de un proyecto de historia oral, incluyendo las diferentes formas de narrativas de historia oral, brindando al mismo tiempo una breve descripción general de OHL, nuestros proyectos y nuestras prácticas.

This video will introduce viewers to the fundamental components of an oral history project, including the different forms of oral history narratives while also providing a brief overview of the OHL, our projects, and our practices.



Diseño de proyecto / Project design

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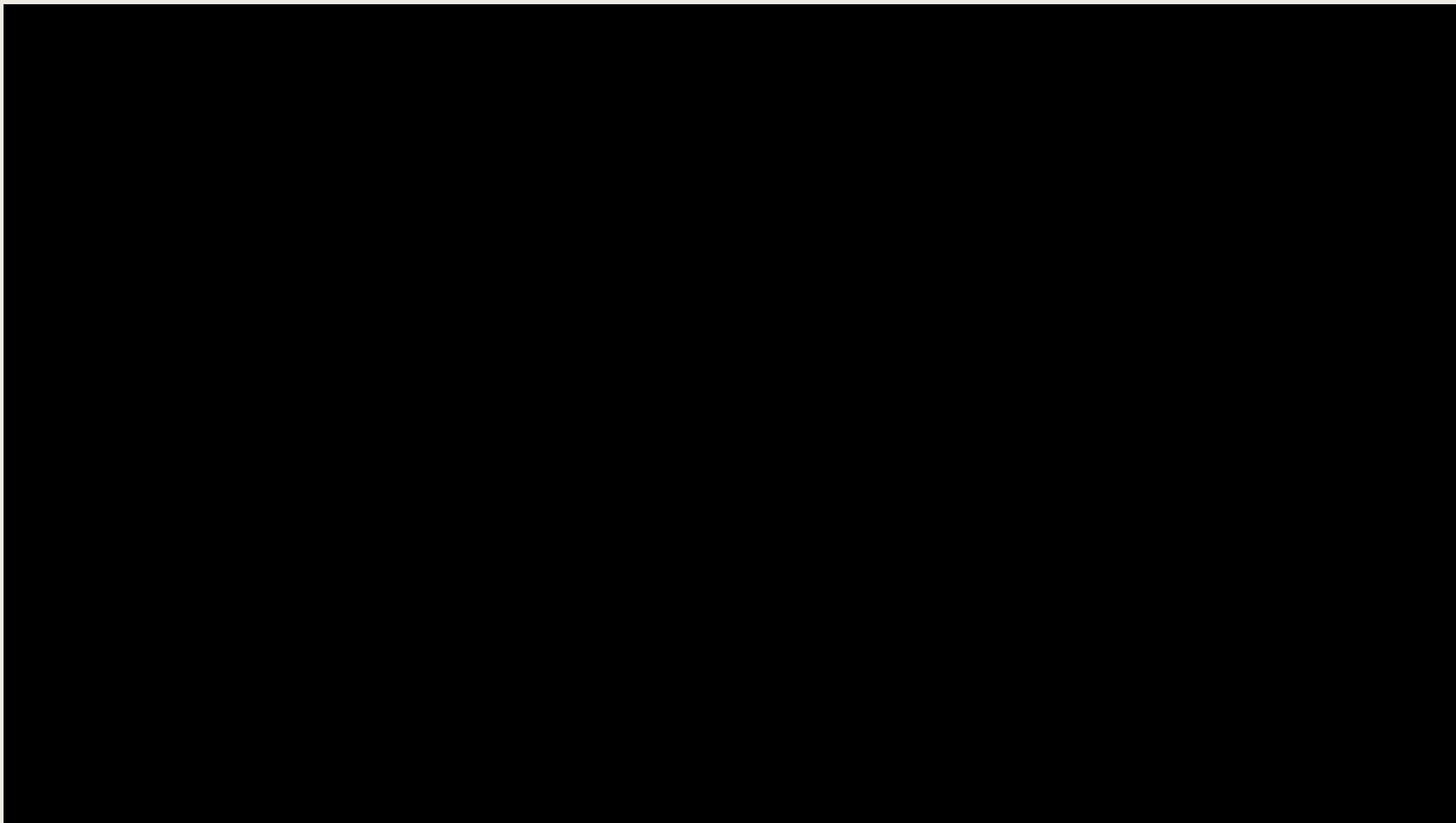
Este video presentará a los espectadores los elementos fundamentales del diseño de un proyecto de historia oral, incluyendo el archivo y el circulamiento del proyecto.

This video will introduce the viewers to fundamental elements of designing an oral history project, including project archiving and dissemination.



Enfoques éticos / Ethical approaches

[Mark as done](#)



IN THE ARCHIVES

This paper describes the workflows and resources developed by the Oral History Lab @UPRM to archive oral histories collected by campus students that feature historical narratives from their communities. It explains how access to these narratives is enhanced through the use of digital platforms and the integration of bilingual metadata. Finally, it describes digital preservation frameworks that are being developed to protect the long-term availability of these records. A major goal of the archiving work conducted by the OHL is centered on positioning students and community partners as producers of new knowledge.



Building the OHL Digital Collection



The OHL's archiving practice centers student work and supports several educational outcomes:

- Students adopt a role as generators of new knowledge and new primary sources.
- They see their work and the stories from their communities as something that has value and that is worthy of being preserved.
- They develop a sense of agency, seeing themselves as people who can impact their communities by applying what they have learned in class in real-life scenarios.

Priorities for the archiving process

- Develop a relatively streamlined intake and processing workflow
- Enhance access and dissemination
- Ethics recognized as a crucial aspect
- Create bilingual metadata records that are rich and consistent
- Digital preservation considerations

- Developed in collaboration with individuals involved with collecting the oral histories
- Helps oral historians know what interview metadata they must record
- Easy for them to submit this metadata
- Metadata stored in tabular format



Two access points to the digital collection

The main storage location for OHL oral histories is the institutional repository, but an Omeka S website was also created as an additional gateway.

Ensuring an ethical archiving practice

Interview participants decide if they want their oral histories included in the OHL collection. They also indicate how they want to be identified or if they wish to remain anonymous.

Thinking about long-term preservation

Digital preservation considerations include the creation of backups, regulating file formats, file naming conventions, and integrity checks.

An example of an OHL oral history record in Scholar@UPRM

Oral history interview with Lucy Serrano Gastón, October 1, 2021



Citations

Lucy Serrano Gastón, founder and lead of the Come Colegial project, talks about her childhood and family life. She describes her deep connection with food as well as strong family bonds which have influenced the project that feeds and cares for the university community. We learn about Lucy's professional development and the people who have supported the experiences she describes in this interview. Ranging from grade school stories, Christmas traditions, university life, and present relationships, this interview largely focuses on human connections. Additional topics in the interview are related to current events in the context of Puerto Rico, including life during COVID, protests and massive power outages.

Lucy Serrano Gastón, fundadora y líder del proyecto Come Colegial, habla sobre su infancia y vida familiar. Describe su profunda conexión con la comida así como fuertes lazos familiares que han influido en el proyecto que alimenta y cuida a la comunidad universitaria. Aprendemos sobre el desarrollo profesional de Lucy y las personas que han apoyado las experiencias que describe en esta entrevista. Desde historias de la escuela primaria, tradiciones navideñas, vida universitaria y relaciones actuales, esta entrevista se enfoca principalmente en las conexiones humanas. Los temas adicionales de la entrevista están relacionados con eventos actuales en el contexto de Puerto Rico, incluyendo la vida durante COVID, protestas y apagones masivos.

Download



[SerranoGastonL_Image_2022.png](#)
(2.017Mb)



[SerranoGastonL_Tscript-es_20211001.pdf](#) (224.7Kb)



[SerranoGastonL_Audio_20211001.wav](#) (989.6Mb)

Fecha

2021-10-01


Autor

Serrano Gastón, Lucy (Narrator)
Betancourt, Natalia (Interviewer)
Estevez, Aleyshka (Interviewer)

URI

<https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11801/3035>

An example of an oral history in Omeka



Name / Nombre	Sofía Pérez Alers
Title / Título	Oral history interview with Sofía Pérez Alers, April 2, 2022
	Entrevista de historia oral con Sofía Pérez Alers, 2 de abril de 2022
Creators / Personas creadoras	Pérez Alers, Sofía (Narrator)
	Derek (Interviewer)
Date / Fecha	2022-04-02
Interview language / Lenguaje de entrevista	Español
Summary / Resumen	<p>en Sofia is a loving person with whom I was able to sit down with and listen to her story, which seemed like a Puerto Rican tragedy. Sofia lived in Barrio Victoria, in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, but currently resides in her daughters' house because her house was not suitable for an elderly person like her. She tells us her story of how she felt before, during, and after Hurricane María. Truly, she is a humble human being who really only cared about two things: the safety of her loved ones and her love of agriculture. She is a strong and independent woman who faced the reality of losing her home and everything in it. Despite this, she lives every day with a smile on her face, providing food to her neighbors and others straight from her yard.</p> <p>es Sofía es una persona amorosa con quien me pude sentar y escuchar su historia, la cual parecía una tragedia puertorriqueña. Sofía vivía en el Barrio Victoria, en Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, pero actualmente reside en la casa de sus hijas debido a que su casa no estaba apta para una persona de tercera edad como ella. Nos cuenta su historia de cómo se sintió antes, durante y después del huracán María. Verdaderamente, es un ser humano humilde a quien realmente solo le importaban dos cosas: la seguridad de sus seres queridos y su amor por la agricultura. Es una mujer fuerte e independiente que se enfrentó a la realidad de perder su casa y todo lo que había dentro. Sin embargo, vive todos los días con una sonrisa en el rostro, brindándole comida a sus vecinos y a otras personas directamente de su patio.</p>



Next steps

The Oral History Lab is currently embarking on a new project where we will collaborate with community organizations and assist them in the creation of their own community archives.

We have created a series of tutorial videos and other educational materials to guide them in this process.

We expect this experience to inform the future development of our archiving practice.