Mass-Listening and the Diaspora: The Year in Puerto Rico

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The Year in Puerto Rico

Ricia Anne Chansky

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

We in Puerto Rico are now over two years from the successive landfalls of Hurricanes Irma and María in September 2017, and we still linger in a fraught aftermath. Looking beyond the sites photographed for glossy tourism campaigns reveals a different reality. Hospitals and schools remain closed, electricity and other utility services are precarious, and lasting instability combined with a dire lack of social services leave many citizens languishing in medical and mental health crises. The relief and rebuilding funds voted into existence by the United States Congress have yet to be fully released, leaving the majority of the $45.2 billion approved for disbursement sitting in an account instead of reaching people in need. In a more publicized aspect of this immoral—if not illegal—process, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, better known as HUD, purposely missed the deadline to initiate the process for distributing billions of dollars’ worth of relief funds earmarked for the archipelago.

As I complete this essay, we are now in the midst of another disaster. An ongoing swarm of over 1,800 earthquakes has been recorded just off the southwestern coast of Puerto Rico, the largest to date registering at a magnitude of 6.4. This seismic activity is causing destruction on land and forcing thousands of Puerto Ricans to flee their homes for the “safety” of cars, streets, and tent cities. Locations far from the southwestern region are experiencing tremors, aftershocks, and power outages. This new disaster comes at a time when we are not yet anywhere near a recovery from the catastrophic hurricane season of 2017. The abysmal lack of government relief in the aftermaths of María has spawned population-wide anxiety, as many know all too well that we cannot rely upon local or national government
agencies for response, relief, or rebuilding. The layers of disaster are numerous and remain interwoven in our life stories—no matter how much time passes from the event—while the ways we narrate, disseminate, and receive life stories of disaster and its aftermaths are complex, nuanced, and endless.

The invitation to contribute to an annual “International Year in Review” of narrated lives is especially helpful when it comes to noting patterns that signify phases of processing collective trauma. In the piece that I contributed to last year’s feature, I explored narratives wrought in the urgency of the immediate aftermath of disaster. In this year’s contribution, I will discuss briefly the production, circulation, and reception of Puerto Rican auto/biographical narratives over the past year in the contexts of what I call mass-listening projects. I define mass-listening projects as those that collect several life narratives related to a single issue or event for the purpose of curating multivoiced assemblages—in any modality or genre—for public dissemination. In other words, they are narrative transactions that have site-specific points for multiple speakers to conduct exchanges with multiple listeners. The reading witness or the act of receiving a disaster narrative is paramount to its function, as these life stories by their nature request forms of response, the most desired of which is action. In order to discuss a shift in diasporic identity constructions that I have observed since the hurricane, I will first examine a post on a Facebook page that I position as exemplary of this type of digital mass-listening project and then comment briefly upon three print anthologies as a means of extending my analysis of some of the ways this form of auto/biographical undertaking reshapes communal identity constructions that integrate home-space (experienced or imagined) with lived-space. I will focus on specific projects within digital and print publications to make larger arguments related to critical disaster studies, including the functions of diasporic communities, modes of narration, and listeners as witnesses to collective trauma.

In the ongoing aftermaths of Hurricane María in Puerto Rico, the rise of mass-listening projects may be in direct correlation to the continued lack of government-level aid and the enduring tangible and intangible signs of destruction that mark places and people. We can conceptualize one of the functions of mass-listening projects under these circumstances, then, as a means of amplifying the voices of those who remain unheard or are actively being silenced. This objective is especially necessary considering that those who are now being most impacted by climate disaster are often those who are the most unheeded. The dissemination of mass-listening projects related to Puerto Rico is an act of making visible lives that have been erased in official documents and the mass media. Such texts have larger implications that are not bound by geographic borders. Puerto Rico is one of the areas on the forefront of the climatological emergencies of the Anthropocene. It would do us well to interrogate what these stories portend for other locations around the globe. What can we learn from them about acting in the wake of disaster, or perhaps even preventing catastrophe before it’s too late?
Although several groups on various social media platforms circulate life stories related to Hurricane María, I will focus on the Facebook group, Primos de Borinken [Puerto Rican Cousins], or PDBPR. The page went live approximately one year after the hurricane struck with the stated objective “to mobilize members of the Puerto Rican Diaspora to meaningfully engage in the revitalization of Puerto Rico” (“About”). The listed page owner, Jeff Moran Morales, explains that the organization’s objectives are to share life stories that raise “awareness for families that still require our service and to highlight those already doing great work” in order to “engage . . . our network of members to volunteer in rebuilding, recovery and economic development projects on the island.” “We are all connected,” Moran Morales explains, “all 8.5 Million of us” on island and in the diaspora. “Todos Somos Primos . . .” [We are all cousins . . .] (“About”).

Though several types of posts appear on this page, including announcements for fundraising events, hurricane-related funding opportunities, and events related to stimulating relief efforts, I am most interested in the illustrated micro-biographies that purposefully request diasporic witnessing and action. An October 15, 2018 post, for example, features an interview with Joaquin Cruz Gimenez of Luquillo and his daughter, Luz Cruz, conducted approximately thirteen months after the initial disaster (“Joaquin”). The post contains all pertinent contact information, including Joaquin’s mailing address, a telephone number, and Luz’s email address. Sharing this logistical information encourages direct contact with the survivor for the purpose of relief efforts and expressions of solidarity. The contact information, however, also functions as a signifier of truth value by suggesting that the facts shared in the narrative can be directly confirmed by the interviewee. This data further acts as a locative anchor for members of the diaspora. Situating Sr. Cruz Gimenez in Luquillo—or any other project participant in their town of residence—not only places an individual face on a disaster narrative, but also ties an overwhelmingly large story of disaster to a single focal point, one that may create an imagined relationship between a member of the diaspora and people in need based upon direct or inherited familial bonds to a named location.

In the interview, Luz and her father explain that his house lost its roof in the hurricane and that it was not until almost three months later that they received a government-issued blue tarp to cover the property. In a quick succession of misfortunes, Joaquin was “assaulted and battered,” fell and broke ribs, had his unprotected house “looted,” lost Luz’s mother to a stroke, and was informed that his request to have the roof of his house replaced was denied because his case file had incorrectly (and irrevocably) been designated “closed.” This section of the narrative swiftly expresses situations related to the climatological event, including destruction wrought by nature, the breakdown of human relations in a time of crisis, and the failure of governmental-level relief efforts. All three of these points invite a reader into the narrative to “fix” or compensate for the multifront collapse that Sr. Cruz Gimenez experienced.
This implied request is clarified by the next section of the narrative that unambiguously asks for aid in the form of roof repair, a new water cistern, a new refrigerator, and the repair of a fence. A link to a GoFundMe page accompanies this list of needs, explicitly weaving into the narrative a method of interceding. Furthermore, the reading witness moved to solidarity and action may be observed directly through the comments section, reactive emoticons, “likes,” funds donated on the GoFundMe page, and the visible and measurable resolution of Sr. Cruz Gimenez’s needs.

The final segments of the narrative focus on Joaquin’s age—emphasizing that he has lived most of his seventy-six years in Puerto Rico, except for a few years in New York in the 1970s—specifics of his ill health, along with a brief statement about his personality, reporting that he “loves talking to people, everybody knows him. He is very well liked in his community” (“Joaquin”). The details regarding Sr. Cruz Gimenez’s brief sojourn to the US echo the migrant community that Moran Morales attempts to mobilize in his relief efforts. Furthermore, the details highlight the subject’s return migration and long-term residency in Puerto Rico, a goal to which many in the diaspora may aspire. Relief aid from the diaspora to the island, in this case, can perform as a metaphorical return migration from the diaspora back to la isla. These closing statements stabilize the image of a valuable member of his community who is in jeopardy and need of external intervention.

While the model for disseminating life narratives as a provocation for social change, relief efforts, charitable contributions, and invitations for mass-witnessing seem commonplace in nonprofit aid organizations, it is perhaps of greater importance to note how in this case the Diasporican network becomes activated in the PDBPR call to action. Moran Morales clearly states that the organization engages “our network of members across the diaspora in recovery and economic development projects on the island of Puerto Rico” (“Home”). Joaquin’s post is therefore presented in both English and Spanish so that it is accessible to all relevant readers.

Initially, PDBPR was able to raise some funds for Sr. Cruz Gimenez, including those needed to purchase a new refrigerator; however, it was not until the original interview was reposted on January 21, 2019 that the larger issue of the destroyed roof was addressed. Just ten days after the repost, on January 31, 2019, another follow-up post was published: “We are over joyed that Joaquin Cruz Gimenez is getting his roof fixed!!!” (“Home”). Three individuals are named in the post—one who resides off-island and two who live on-island—who “were instrumental in getting Hands for God/Manos por Dios involved in this case” (“Home”). Hands for God/Manos por Dios is a nonprofit organization located in Virginia Beach, Virginia that was created after Hurricane María to provide “homes and home repairs to those in need during times of crisis” (“Who We Are”). The more recent PDBPR post further states, “Together we can bring relief to our people on the island!” (“Home”).
This post is followed by one on February 5, 2019 with a snapshot of Sr. Cruz Gimenez posing in front of his house with six other men presumed to be volunteers working on his roof. The picture was reposted from the Hands for God/Manos por Dios page with a caption that reads, “The number of volunteers keeps growing!” (“Home”). The photos from all of the posts (2018–2019) visually track the condition of this turquoise-colored wooden house on stilts, as well as its owner. These images work to mark the tangible difference reading witnesses have made and can make in the life of one man, who is perhaps illustrative of the millions of US citizens in Puerto Rico awaiting aid.

Joaquin’s post is but one of the micronarratives that appear on the PDBPR Facebook page, and the page itself is an example of the many mass-listening digital sites that were created after the hurricane, rose to greater prominence as aid remained stalled, and still remain active to assist both hurricane survivors and now those affected by earthquakes. These aspects of an enhanced affiliation with Puerto Rico among diasporic communities are more apparent in this digital mode, but there are numerous examples of printed and bound mass-listening projects that also demonstrate these attributes. There have been several anthologies of hurricane-related literature published both in Puerto Rico and the United States, and I discuss three of them here that are of particular interest for the ways their editorial intent mirrors to some extent that of the PDBPR page. All three of these collections include various genres of auto/biographical writing, although they are not exclusively committed to life narratives. These books are Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm (Haymarket Books), edited by Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón; Puerto Rico en mi corazón (Anomalous Press), edited by Carina del Valle Schorske, Ricardo Maldonado, Erica Mena, and Raquel Salas Rivera; and Voices from Puerto Rico: Post-Hurricane María/Voces desde Puerto Rico: Pos-huracán María (Red Sugarcane Press), edited by Iris Morales.

The first woman to join the Young Lords, Iris Morales, founded Red Sugarcane Press in 2012 “as an independent press to present the rich culture and history of the Puerto Rican, Latino/Latina and African Diasporas in the Americas” (“About Red Sugarcane”). Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón are both faculty members at universities in the US, and the editorial collective of Puerto Rico en mi corazón includes writers who live both on-island and in the diaspora. Voices/Voces is fully bilingual, with English-language content in the first half of the book and Spanish-language in the second. Puerto Rico en mi corazón is also fully bilingual, with each piece presented in both languages side by side, which the editors explain as a “decision to connect island and diaspora . . . rooted in language” (xiii).4 Aftershocks is an English-only publication, although Haymarket Books is a “radical” social justice press in the US “that contribute[s] to struggles for social and economic justice” (367). I mention these elements of the collections as a means of suggesting that the fluidity of geographic borders and their diasporic post-disaster transgressions are present across genres and modes of dissemination, sustained in both traditional print and digital publications. The bilingual nature of two of these anthologies,
geographic situatedness of their editors, and mission statements of the publishing houses reinforce that their publications were motivated as widespread acts of mass-listening across on- and off-island communities for the purpose of instigating relief efforts and social justice.

Iris Morales situates herself as one of the “hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans living outside of the island,” whose “heart ached as [she] watched television reports about the impact of Hurricanes Irma and María in Puerto Rico” (xv). “[B]y October 4 [2017],” she writes, “I was in San Juan distributing supplies and meeting with local activists doing emergency relief work” (xv). She states that “the book was intended for both Spanish and English language readers interested in Puerto Rico, particularly in the Puerto Rican diaspora. Today, more Puerto Ricans live in the fifty United States than in Puerto Rico and can play an important role in supporting community-based groups and social justice movements on the island” (xvi). The editors of Puerto Rico en mi corazón claim that they “met in cyberspace and in the meta-diaspora made of Puerto Rican poems” (xii). They position their collection as something that could “fly out from us as birds of protest against failed recovery and the policy that proceeded it” (xii). In his foreword to Aftershocks, Arcadio Díaz-Quiñones calls attention to the conference that Bonilla convened at Rutgers University that led to the edited volume. The number of post-disaster related events held throughout the US, he writes, “shows, first, the strength of the ethos of solidarity among diverse diasporic communities and the institutions they have created as well as the moral sensibility of their allies” (ix).

These observations on the visible role of diasporic community members in post-disaster relief efforts—as witnesses and agents capable of action—suggest that mass-listening projects can be understood as instigators of enhanced identity affiliation that may in turn relate to a reinforced understanding of the self as a member of the home community. As material objects, these texts signify a reframed understanding of postnationalism in the wake of, first, the communal trauma of natural and humanmade disaster, and, second, the decline of pluralism in a populist era that underscores the climate and social injustices facing the people of Puerto Rico. As Díaz-Quiñones suggests, “One should . . . take note of a change in the lived experience shared by many in the diaspora and on the island . . . [that] has brought . . . perhaps a new understanding of belonging” (xi; emphasis in original). Post-disaster mass-listening projects, then, impact ideas of diasporic belonging, as the emphasis on shared communal identity constructions undermines differentiations between in-home and out-of-home groups, as individuals become tied together in common efforts to provide disaster-based relief.

Mass-listening projects and the polyphonic narratives that they produce can potentially play necessary roles as mass-listeners can engender forms of mass-witnessing for individual and communal benefit. The auto/biographical textual production of the last year included several examples of mass-listening projects related to Hurricane María and its lingering aftereffects in Puerto Rico, ones that cut across a single calendar year. Engagements with these curated assemblages of
life stories yield larger lessons that surpass geographic boundaries to comment upon the purposefulness of listening as witnessing, the fluidity of diasporic identity constructions, and ideations of humanity in the global climate crisis. In the wake of our manmade disasters and humanitarian crises, for Puerto Rico—and other disenfranchised communities on the frontline of our global climate emergency—mass-listening projects hold the potential to make heard the silenced, while disseminating a gathering of voices that may be too loud to ignore.

Notes

1. The quote in the epigraph is from my own ongoing mass-listening project, “Mi María: Puerto Rico after the Hurricane.” In this public humanities project—situated at the intersections of auto/biography studies, critical disaster studies, and environmental humanities—we use oral history and other biographical methodologies to study the ongoing aftermaths of Hurricane María and their effects on the people of Puerto Rico.

2. It is not necessary, however, that narrative dissemination be a concrete element of the project from its inception. I know of several projects in which the decision to somehow publish the collected narratives was mutually arrived upon in an ethical fashion by participants as the project developed. Therefore, a project may become a mass-listening project based upon my definition even if it is not conceptualized as one in the early planning stages.

3. It is important to note that in Puerto Rico houses have two addresses: a postal address and a physical address. This means that a person who has Sr. Cruz Gimenez’s postal address and is able to send him goods may not necessarily be able to locate his physical home based upon that information.

4. For a beautiful articulation of multilingualism and Puerto Rican identity constructions, see the introduction to Puerto Rico en mi corazón.

Works Cited


