Classrooms + Communities = Public Humanities?

Classrooms plus communities equals public humanities? Question mark. I'm Ricia Chansky, the Director of the Oral History Lab at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez, and I want to talk to you today about co-creation through participatory design, what went wrong, and what we learned. This conversation will focus on one particular public humanities project that we did, and I want to clarify that when we talk about participatory design, what we're talking about is the idea that your institutional partner may leverage the assets of the university or other institution for the benefit of the community, but the community takes the lead on designing the products that represent them and their stories.

It's important that we understand that the Oral History Lab is a process-based crisis oral history lab. What that means is that we are dedicated to following, studying, understanding, and theorizing the processes of storytelling, and that includes the steps of interviewing, preserving, and disseminating oral histories. Furthermore, we say that we are a crisis oral history lab because we understand that the Puerto Rican archipelago has been in crisis for, and we can point to, first, the instance of the rapid succession landfalls of hurricanes Irma and María in 2017, followed by the ongoing earthquake swarm that began in December of 2019, and then was followed quickly with the global pandemic of COVID-19, which was declared a global pandemic in March of 2020.

And so we understand that the Puerto Rican archipelago has been in a state of chronic crisis because of these stratified disasters, or disasters that are laid one on top of each other, as opposed to following each other. But we can also understand that these situations take place within the context of ongoing and intergenerational colonial practices and systemic racism that, of course, manifests as environmental racism as well as systemic racism, because systemic racism impacts all of the statements. And so, in order to respond to this need, all of our projects are trauma-informed projects, and so when we interview, we interview through a lens of trauma-informed practices, and that extends to both the ways in which we preserve stories and how we disseminate them.

In order to maintain an ethical framework as we are working in a state of chronic crisis and enacting trauma-informed projects, we have developed a code of ethics for working in the aftermath of disaster and for approaching our projects as ones that are created within chronic crisis. I've added a QRC here to our lab, and you can find our code of ethics there.

What I'm going to be talking about today is a digital justice development grant that the Oral History Lab received from the American Council of Learned Societies. One of our public humanities projects, or public-facing outputs from that project, was a very good match for the work that we do with our partner, the Humanities Action Lab, and so the Humanities Action Lab co-sponsored the particular public humanities project that I'm going to be talking about today. At the Oral History Lab, we have affiliated courses that are offered at the undergraduate level on our campus, and in addition to students who participate in those courses, all of whom do a social justice-oriented oral history project, we also have student fellows at the lab. We have a number of both undergraduate and graduate research assistants at the lab.

Those students act as liaisons, media mentors, interviewers, filmmakers, writers, artists, designers, transcribers, translators, archivists, editors, advisors, and friends, both within the lab and with our community partners. It is very important to us for this project that we build community storytelling and archiving projects, and we did that at four different community sites in the Puerto Rican archipelago, and when we talk about community storytelling and community archiving, what we are discussing is community-led projects that are supported by the university. Our objective was to create on-site archives, so what that means is that people's stories would stay in their communities, and that storytellers would have the dignity of access for their work.

We did this on, we created these on-site archives with a digital mirror collection in the OHL digital repository, so what that means is that an exact replica of what stays in the community is also available online. So in this way, we think about how do we first and always first serve the community that we partner with, but how do we then maintain global access through digital preservation to anyone who wants to engage with these stories, and these are again climate and social justice-focused story. The two points of this project that are particularly relevant to this presentation are that we wanted to co-create with our community partners public-facing outputs that would link local and global audiences to the archives.

We very firmly believe that climate stories are essential in the fight against the climate emergency, but if people don't know that these stories exist, and these stories oftentimes have qualitative data that are essential for multiple stakeholder audiences, if those stakeholder audiences don't know that these materials exist, they can't use them and they cannot function as contributions to this fight against climate change in the Anthropocene era. So we wanted to create materials that would raise awareness of what was in the link back to the archive, and we did that by developing integrated high-tech, low-tech, and no-tech public-facing outputs that would serve these multiple audiences. Oftentimes, and it's kind of funny to think about this within the framework of a digital project, but oftentimes members of our communities don't have access to digital projects.

That can be because there is not high-speed internet. That can be because there is not stable electricity. It can also be a lack of awareness, but then in multiple scenarios, people don't feel comfortable accessing materials hosted by a university, whether that's online or in person.

And so we wanted to, one, build awareness of what materials were preserved, but two, we also wanted to create links and pathways to the materials. That's especially important because we don't want to replicate extractive colonial practices in which an external agent comes to a community and says, “Whoa, you have something cool.” I should take it in order to preserve it.

And so we wanted to make sure that our archival practices were decolonial archival practices in that it is always people first. We don't own anything. We serve communities in the ways in which communities would like us to serve them.

And so what I'm going to be talking to you about today is one of our four partners, the CAMJI in Lares, or the Center for Mutual Aid in the community of Lares. And the storytelling project that our partners in Lares wanted to tell was to achieve a couple of different things, and I'll tell you that in just a moment. I'll explain that a little bit more.

But what they wanted was something, what they wanted as the public-facing output was something that the members of their community could hold in their hand. And so we said, "Fantastic, we can help you to produce a zine." And this is something that we had done with the Humanities Action Lab and Climates of Inequality in a previous incarnation of that project.

And so we had skilled student fellows in the labs who had received training on zines and had created zines. In particular, Dorita Sanchez-Silva is a highly trained designer who had contributed to the first zine, and Brian Ramos-Romero as well with the writing. And so those two student fellows had created a beautiful zine on food insecurity.

And so we knew that this was something we were capable of doing. And when our community partners in the needs assessment and asset mapping interviews that happened before the project said to us, "Oh, we want something that our community members can hold in their hand," this seemed like a great idea, except it was not a great idea. And the reason why it was not a great idea is because the word zine was a very unfamiliar term to our community partners.

And when we explained to our community partners that zine is short for magazine, and so these are miniature magazines that are oftentimes created as a form of political protest, they explained to us that it was not a word that they could use in their community because there was not understanding of the word. And so at the very first stage of these pre-interviews that we conduct before we start the actual project in which we do needs assessment and asset mapping, we learned that *cartilla* is the appropriate word or was the appropriate word for this project with our community partners. A cartilla is a term in Spanish that indicates a primer or a brochure that has an educational connotation.

And so we started thinking from the very beginning of this project that there are idiomatic differences between academics who want to do community-based projects that engage participatory design and the community members we work with. And so it's important that we remember that naming is the right of the person who is telling us their story. And so in this case, a community partner was sharing or organizing community stories.

And so we had to make sure that the name of the public-facing output was the correct name for the project. And with this cartilla, the CAMJI wanted to talk about Indigenous land rights, eco-agriculture, and cultural heritage. And those were the stories that they wanted to record in their community.

They explained to us that there were a number of elders in the community, and they were concerned that some of the stories and information that had been passed down intergenerationally would disappear when those elders passed. And so the stories that were recorded were about the land in the area of Lares that the center is in, eco-agriculture, and eco-agriculture in the sense of land rights and the need for all people to have access to land, to grow food and medicinal herbs, and to access a cultural heritage that is related to the land. And so that's what the community storytelling and archiving project was about. And the cartilla was the public humanities project that was created to bring attention to the recorded stories and to link to the recorded stories.

And in this project, students worked as liaisons. And so the way in which this community project functioned is that we began with the needs assessment and asset mapping interviews. Those interviews helped us to design individual technology kits for each of our four partners. They helped us design the projects with each of the community partners, identify what the public-facing outputs would be, and then design a series of what we called modules. And those modules trained community members in ethical trauma-informed oral history interviewing, recording, transcribing, preserving, and amplifying.

Oral historians and metadata librarians at our university work with the communities, but then we also had more informal sessions that our student partners ran. And those informal sessions could be, hypothetically, workshops. So, one community partner wanted to create a playlist, a music playlist, that had excerpts from interviews in it.

And so the digital editing was done through a media mentorship with a student as an informal liaison. Our students also worked as artists, designers, interviewers. Some community members needed additional help because of the number of interviews that they wanted to complete during this process.

Transcribers, translators, and media mentors. One of the first issues that we encountered with this zine was when we were working on the aesthetic feel of the zine. And so we had an interview with members of the CAMJI-Lares about what they wanted in the zine.

And they described a color palette. And this is a very interesting part of participatory design for me. When you read about participatory design, there are many suggestions on how you can take a back seat and ask guiding questions to your partners that will help you make sure that the design is emergent from the community and not from the university.

However, we had had a previous experience in which a small website was going to be the public-facing output from the project we had done. And this was a project on food insecurity that we did with another community partner. And when we had sat down with the community partner and done all of the things that we were trained to do in terms of not injecting our opinions on what that website should look like, the only piece of feedback we received was what color the website should be.

And we realized that if we're leveraging the assets and the skills that we have at the university, sometimes it's good to offer choices as a foundation for the conversation. Because if somebody is not trained in web development, it can be hard for them to conceptualize what a website would look like. And so, based upon that prior experience, I wanted to offer some examples.

And so, we received some very early feedback on a color palette for the zine with the CAMJI. And we were asked to consider earth tones and the tones, the different colors of the land that is the community farm at the CAMJI Center. And so, we worked with a student artist.

She has since, sadly, graduated and sad in the sense that I don't get to work with her as much anymore. But Dorita Sanchez-Silva is our wonderful zine artist. And so, we talked to Dorita about the colors that the CAMJI had referenced.

And she made this beautiful work of graphic art as a sample to show the CAMJI. And we had a couple pages that we brought to the CAMJI that she had designed. And in the conversation, we came to realize that the CAMJI already had an aesthetic that they wanted to use.

They had a series of murals that were painted on their building. And these murals engaged with Taíno, Indigenous petroglyphs. And that was what they were conceptualizing.

And what I think happened in this situation is that we asked the wrong question. Because we were thinking that we would leverage the skills that a member of our team had as a designer, we didn't ask if the CAMJI already had designs. We asked about a color palette for sure, but we did not ask the question, "Do you have a design in mind?" And so, this is something we've really taken to heart that while I am very, very attracted to these designs that Dorita makes that encompass, I'm going to say, a contemporary street art feeling to them.

And I don't know if that's how Dorita would define it, but that's how I define it. Whereas the CAMJI is extremely tied to Indigenous ancestry and had already developed that visual demarcation through the murals on their building. And so, that is something that we really took to heart, thinking that this is something that we now need to add into our needs assessment and asset mapping.

Do you have designs in mind? And this is not something that every community will say, "Oh yes, absolutely, I have this design in mind." But this particular community did, and it's our job to make sure that we ask that.

And so, I'm going to talk to you now about two content areas of the zine. One of the things that we really wanted to do, as I mentioned in the beginning of this presentation, is build connections between community members and the on-site archives. And so, something that this zine had to do was build connections between the internal audience of the people in Lares and in other rural agricultural communities in Puerto Rico. And so, we had to do things in the zine. We had to do something in the zine that would build a connection with the local audience for the zine.

And so, the first person included in the zine is Álida Rivera Rodríguez, who is also known as Doña Ali and as the "flower grower." And we included her story as the first story in the zine because she is a known herbal healer. When you visit her home, her home is filled, the outside and the inside are filled with plants.

And each of these plants is a medicinal plant that has a herbal remedy. And she knows not only the names and how to identify each of the plants, but she knows how to grow them, how to prepare them, how to preserve them, how to cook them if they need to be somehow cooked, and what remedy they offer. And she says in her interview, "I am very pleased to share my knowledge and for many people to benefit from it so that they know the medicinal plants. Sometimes we have them at home, and we don't know what they're for, but they can learn this knowledge and also practice what I told them." It's also important to note that we included recipes and preparation instructions in the zine.

And so, what we did by including Doña Ali as the first person in the zine is that we included a recognizable local figure who is known throughout the community by nicknames indicating a positive and friendly relationship with Doña Ali.

She has hyperlocal information on herbal medicine. She says that many people have medicinal plants growing in their own yards, but they don't know what they're for. So, these are local medicinal plants that are easily recognizable and widely accessible.

Somebody reading the zine could use the zine to identify a herb and use that herb. She has easy-to-follow recipes and guides to using hyperlocal medicinal plants. So, she is an in-group member who is known throughout the community, and she's talking about plants that may in fact be in a reader's yard at that moment.

The second thing that we wanted to do, or the second thing that we decided to do in the zine, was build connections with the community through linguistic representation. And so, the second person that we included in the zine emphasizes Jíbaro identity. The Jíbaro is the heroic rural figure of Puerto Rico.

Historically, the Jíbaro was used in media to indicate a romanticization of rural Puerto Rico prior to the U.S. annexing Puerto Rico in 1898 at the conclusion of the Spanish-American War. But it's important to understand that the Jíbaro is a figure from the rural mountainous interior of the main island of Puerto Rico. And that's the space that was also sacred to the Taíno indigenous community of Puerto Rico and the wider Caribbean.

But it's also the space in which enslaved peoples fled to when they fled a plantation, a sugarcane plantation. And so, the Jíbaro figure, at least in this context, is the heroic rural peasant but is also ancestry from the Taíno community and the Afro-Diasporic community.

And so, Papo Kamuy is the second elder featured in this zine. And Papo Kamuy talks quite a bit about what does it mean to be a Jíbaro and what does it mean to entwine the heroic rural with the indigenous and with the Afro-Diasporic. And we helped the CAMJI with the transcription of these two interviews. And when we returned to the CAMJI very proud and said, “Here we have the transcript of Papo Kamuy's interview,” the leaders at the CAMJI said, “Let's revisit the transcription.”

And what they pointed out to us is that Papo Kamuy did not say “pues”; he said “pueh.” He did not say “los montes”; he said “loh monteh.” And it became apparent that for the CAMJI, the exact transcription was much more important because the “s” in the coda position at the end of each word is dropped in Puerto Rican Spanish and present throughout the Hispanophone Caribbean in pronunciation variations.

And so, what we had done is we had transcribed the interview to academic Spanish. As people at the university, we had listened and we had made corrections without even processing that we were doing so. And that erased the linguistic identity of Papo Kamuy as a representative of the Jíbaro.

And we really had to stop and talk about our objectives here because the cartilla is a teaching tool, but who is its main audience? Its main audience are people in this community, people in sister communities throughout the archipelago. Academics are not the main audience.

And so, if this zine is a tool to connect people in this community with the on-site archive, we have to think about language as part of the identity that we are sharing. And we want people

to see Papo Kamuy as a representative, as a relatable figure who represents an identity and will connect to the stories. We hope that academics everywhere look at the zine, but we have to remember the primary audience is always the community from which the stories emerge.

And so a couple things that we learned here that we hope are useful to you as you're thinking about possibly a zine, but any public humanities project that you are co-creating through participatory design with a community partner. Names matter, and I think that we're all comfortable with the idea that when somebody shares their story with us, how they want to be named, including anonymity, is their decision. But we're a little less comfortable, perhaps, with saying to our community partners, “How would you like to name this project?” And that's not title, that's different than title. The title is obviously their choice, but how do we name what it is that we are creating?

Where is the aesthetic inspiration coming from? And not everybody has the luxury of time to do pre-project interviews that assess needs and map assets, but at some point it's very helpful, it can be very helpful to ask, “Do you have any images in mind for inspiration?” And I'm thinking about inspiration boards, and that can be time-consuming; that can be challenging, but it can be helpful beyond a color palette to ask for an image. Content as connection is another way to build community rootedness. Oftentimes when we do storytelling projects, we have a number of stories to select from for our public humanities projects.

In this case, we wanted the zine to act as a bridge to the on-site archive. On-site archives are becoming more common, but they're still not common, and so we needed to spark curiosity. We needed to inspire people to say, “Where is this? How can I get there? What can I see?” And so community rootedness was very important, and we accomplished that through two highly recognizable figures in the community, one of whom is referencing plants that are also highly recognizable, and the other who has had his interview transcribed for linguistic representation, understanding that language is identity or part of how we construct identities.

And the other part of this discussion is the identification of target audiences that are both internal within the community and external outside of the community. And as academics, I think that from my perspective, we are quite well-trained to think about external audiences. How is what I am writing? How is what I am producing connecting to an external audience? And for any project that we do with the community, we have to position the internal audience, or the audience of community members, as primary, and that is something that we identify at multiple different parts of the project.

But I will say, from my perspective, that's something that we also run the risk of losing sight of at multiple points in the project. And the reason for that is that we are well trained at the university. We are trained to do the things that we are doing.

And if that training includes sharing your work or circulating your work through academic publication, then we are trained for one specific audience to speak with one specific audience. And when we do community work, it can be very challenging to maintain sight of that. And in future incarnations of projects like these, I have built in checkpoints to say, “OK, let's take a breath and let's say, have we centered the community?” And I feel very satisfied with the way that I did that at the needs assessment part of this project, which did last an entire semester because we were building the tech packages, because we were building the projects,

because we were building the public-facing outputs, and because we were building the modules themselves based upon the needs and the desires that were stated in these interviews.

And so that's a place where we developed co-authored fluid memos of understanding between ourselves and the community partners in terms of, one, how we would treat each other with respect and how we would follow through on our plans, but two, what were we identifying as the outputs at different stages that were desired by the community and by the lab. And so it's something that was very ingrained in the beginning of the process. But as processes continue and as deadlines loom, and as you very joyfully engage in the work you do, sometimes you lose sight of the fact that there is the risk of slipping into this idea that academics are speaking to academics as opposed to academics are working to facilitate community needs and community desires so that communities can speak to communities.

And I'm showing you the cover of the zine itself here, and you can see that I have a link there, and I will also show you a QRC in just a moment. But we did create a digital version of the zine, so the zine is readable online. It is an exact replica of the paper version. And after we completed the Spanish version, the lab is fully bilingual, and all of our public-facing outputs are available in both Spanish and English.

And so after, it was important for the reasons that I had just shared that the first version was created in Spanish with the community. We did translate that version into English, and we worked with members of the community to make sure that the English version was also appropriately representational of the community and the work. And so if you would like a copy of this zine or cartilla, here's a QRC where you can go to read it online.

And as with any project, a large number of people helped to create both the storytelling and community archiving project at the CAMJI-Lares and the public humanities project of the zine. So thank you to every member of the CAMJI-Lares, and thank you in particular to the leadership on this project at the CAMJI-Lares. Thank you to our narrators, and thank you to the members of the Oral History Lab who worked with the CAMJI-Lares and who worked on the entire ACLS digital justice project.

And then thank you very much to our funders, the American Council of Learned Societies and the Humanities Action Lab. And thank you also to the university who always supports the projects of the lab.