

Sound In and As Disaster Narrative [Transcript]

What are the sounds of disaster? [BING] In this brief audioessay, I want to consider how sound functions both in and as disaster narratives and what roles soundwriting might play as a medium for telling the stories of disaster.

I begin with the story of a sound. A student from the doctoral program in electrical engineering [BING] recently visited my office in the Department of English at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez. He wanted to discuss the possibility [BING] of incorporating oral history methodologies in his dissertation project.

Throughout our conversation, his phone kept make a sound [BING] as if he was receiving text messages. Every time the phone sounded [BING], he checked the screen. As we talked, I found myself growing annoyed at the constant interruptions. Finally, he looked up from the screen and apologized [BING], explaining that he had recently downloaded an app to track the earthquake swarm that has been plaguing Puerto Rico with thousands of large and small earthquakes since December 28. Some of his family in the town of Yauco (near the epicenter) have been made homeless by the quakes [BING], and he wanted to track the seismic activity while he had to be on campus and away from them [BING]. My annoyance shifted to anxiety once I realized that the sound [BING] was an alarm and not a simple text message notification. [BING-BING-BING].

The recognition that this sound [BING] elicited emotion from me—and hopefully from you, the listener—should come as no surprise to those of us who study sound and narrated lives in one way or another. It is, rather, the contexts of this anxiety-making sound that resituates the sound and its relevance. Puerto Rico is one of the places that is on the forefront of the global climate crisis and, while it may not be in the news as much as Australia, Brazil, or California, we

have much to learn about the climate crisis, climate justice, disaster and the aftermaths of disaster, and the communal trauma of disaster from the life stories emergent from this Caribbean archipelago, one that has an extremely fraught relationship with the United States. My question in this presentation is: how might sound facilitate the objectives of storytelling and narrative transactions in the Anthropocene era, a time in which engagement with these narratives of disaster may play a role in subverting climate catastrophe or at the very least help those who are on the verge of experiencing their own disasters?

I am currently leading a large-scale public humanities project, “Mi Maria: Puerto Rico after the Hurricane.” This project uses oral history and other biographical methodologies—contextualized in critical disaster studies and environmental humanities—to study the impact that Hurricane María [INSERT HURRICANE NOISE] and its ongoing aftermaths have had on the people of Puerto Rico. The most easily recognizable facet of soundwriting—or perhaps sound composing is a more appropriate term here—are the hundreds of hours of recordings that we have collected from survivors. [INSERT Rosa Ivelisse Bennazar Alcover CLIP HERE].

"After the hurricane, when I got to meet with my students, they would tell me, “Teacher, I lost my house. Teacher, we have no food.” – Rosa Ivelisse Bennazar Alcover, Ponce [Natalia Torres Negron].

And, while we can easily recognize the very necessary role of sound in gathering oral history recordings, perhaps less apparent is the function of sound in narrative transactions. The invitation to speak and be listened to in the aftermaths of natural disasters—and the very humanmade disasters of failed governmental relief efforts—has the potential to resituate narrators from a disempowered, silenced mass to individuals who are heard and, in this case, the listener becomes witness to testimonio, a functionality that is amplified through different forms

of dissemination, including archiving, public exhibition, and other forms of digital and traditional publication. [INSERT Félix Serrano Villegas CLIP HERE].

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

Even less obvious, though, are the sounds that are interwoven into the background of the interviews. For example, the first interview that I conducted was with a woman who had survived the hurricane by floating on a torn air mattress for over sixteen hours. She believes that her rescuers arrived approximately twenty minutes before she would have drowned. In the recordings of our interviews, listeners can hear in the background first a birthday party and then a dance party. The music *almost* drowns out our conversation. [INSERT CLIP]. We could have met in my office and had a quiet space in which to talk, but both of us were afraid of that silence, it would be too quiet to discuss what we had survived.

This is not to say that aftermaths are silent, only that we could not bear the silence as we discussed tragedy. We recognize that no matter how long the power is out, though, there is still noise. And soundwriting is a means of conveying the sounds of disaster. If I tell you that I was without electricity in my home for ninety-six days, you will conjure one image of that experience in your mind. But if you hear the constant roar of the generators coming to life at suppertime [INSERT GENERATOR SOUNDS AND KEEP IT THROUGHOUT THIS SENTENCE], you will have an entirely different understanding of life off the electric grid. If you hear the first ring of the phone after weeks of no telecommunications [INSERT CELL PHONE RING] you will understand differently what it is to be without the ability to communicate with the outside world,

unable to ask for help. And, in order to understand how unstable the network was for months afterwards, you would have to hear th... [SILENCE].

Sound helps us engage with the lived experiences of others, always an important task, but ever more so at a time in which understanding on some level the experiences of disaster and its aftermaths holds the potential to incite action in listeners who function first as witnesses and then (hopefully) as agents for change with the potential to act both directly through intervention on behalf of those in immediate jeopardy from climatological catastrophe and climate injustices and then indirectly in activities that may mitigate our impending climate emergency.

Failure to respond with compassion and action to the post-hurricane humanitarian crisis of Puerto Rico was one of the reasons why the population on-island and in the diaspora turned out en mass this past summer to call for the resignation of the governor, Ricky Rossello. One of the most salient moments of the #rickyrenuncia movement for me was the cacerolazo, a form of protest in which people bang pots and pans with spoons creating a ruckus that drowns out all other sounds. [INSERT CACEROLAZO THAT BUILDS IN VOLUME FOR A FEW SECONDS]. The cacerolazo—an act of pure sound—functioned as the mass-voicing of a silenced population and hundreds of thousands of protesters understood that sound as a means of undermining their public erasure.

Sound in and as disaster narratives has the potential to convey elusive emotional burdens that can be too complex or nuanced to convey in other modes [BING]. It also has the power to enact narrative transactions that have urgent purposes in the immediate and long-range aftermaths as witnesses first receive testimonios and are then moved to act. Sound also functions as a means of making visible the invisible, as in the cacerolazo and its role in ousting a corrupt governor [SHORT CACEROLAZO]. Sound also, however, has the potential to unify us in times

of need and remind us of what ties us together as members of our communities, bound together in trauma and in resilience. [COQUI SONG BUILDS FROM QUIET TO MEDIUM LEVEL FOR A FEW SECONDS AND THEN FADES OUT].

Acknowledges: I am grateful to Aleyshka Estevez for her production assistance.