



# DISASTER RISK, CITIZENSHIP

# Puerto Rico

&

# NATIONHOOD



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CENTER OF LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES & INTERNATIONAL CENTER

## PUERTO RICO RESEARCH TUTORIAL PROGRAM



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Above, stands a vulnerable home nearby a Hurricane Maria landslide. Taken at Los Quemados, Lares – credit: Christian Tirado

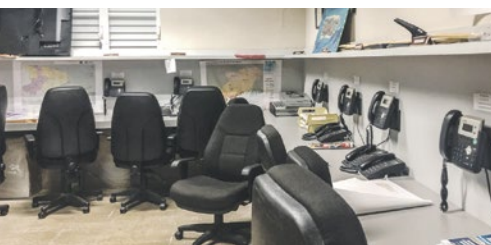


Above, stands a wooden home draped in a blue tarp. Taken at the 'Invasion Corridor' of Galateo, Toa Alta – credit: Christian Tirado



**The central research question that guided this summer program was:  
What do disaster experiences of Hurricane Maria, narrated by those  
in Puerto Rico, reveal about disaster risk, citizenship, and nationhood?**

Photos taken throughout this article—unless otherwise specified—are from in the field and at an Independence March in Old San Juan at the Plaza de Armas – credit: Crystal Felima







In Spring 2019, I applied for a Research Tutorial Research grant to develop and facilitate an undergraduate research program in the Caribbean. Sponsored by the Center of Latin American Studies and the International Center, the research program provided opportunities for faculty to bring undergraduate students to their field sites so that the students could participate in research in Latin America and the Caribbean. The program aimed to offer students an invaluable research experience that could shape their students' perceptions and understanding of the human experience in the Caribbean.

Awarded the grant, the program was originally planned for Haiti due to my research experience on the island. However, due to political demonstrations throughout the country, the U.S. Department of State issued a Level 4 travel warning [Do Not Travel] on April 15, 2019. As a result, the University of Florida cancelled all of their student abroad programs to the country. Luckily, Puerto Rico became an acceptable option! Puerto Rico, a Caribbean island and territory of the United States, is still recovering from Hurricane Maria in 2017. The change from Haiti to Puerto Rico required me to solicit new students' applications for participation in the research program. I sent a call for applications to UF's Puerto Rican student organization. Within 24 hours, I received 15

applications. After brief interviews, I selected three students: Andrea Figueroa, Fernando Romagosa, and Christian Tirado. These students all displayed strong academic qualities and fieldwork potential. In addition, Andrea, Fernando, and Christian have high intermediate to fluent proficiency in Spanish, cultural ties to Puerto Rico, and a social science background in Anthropology, Latin American History, and Political Science.

The central research question that guided this summer program was, What do disaster experiences of Hurricane Maria, narrated by those in Puerto Rico, reveal about disaster risk, citizenship and nationhood? Using anthropological tools and methods, the program explored various themes such as aid and support, criticisms of the State(s), nationhood, and citizenship. To document individual and collective experiences, this research relied on narrative research; the primary methodology of my 12 years of Caribbean disaster research (including fieldwork experience in northern and southern Haiti). During the four-week research program, I conducted research training to provide my students with content on disaster studies, the Caribbean, and Puerto Rico as a field site, and trained students to use tools in digital humanities and anthropological research. Students learned how to use ethnographic methods and digital technology to accomplish three objectives:

1) to identify common themes, categories, and associations regarding disaster risk and structural inequalities; 2) to document the collective discourses and understandings of aid and governance; and 3) to publicly share narratives and visual/audio materials to highlight the human experience and the need for local knowledge.

During the program, we lived in San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico, and we made shorter trips throughout the island to collect data to compare experiences. We interviewed emergency managers in various municipalities and also local survivors of Hurricane Maria. My student researchers found that narrative research contributes to broader socio-cultural understandings of disasters, governance, and nationhood. From their blog posts, students shared how anthropological methods allowed them to engage in critical discussions on the human experience in Puerto Rico. Also, students captured videos, audio, and photos to include in our digital storytelling project. We are currently in the transcription and translation phase of the program and we hope to finish data analysis and the digital project by the end of the Fall 2019 semester. The collaborative digital storytelling project will highlight the narratives and students' experiences. Thus far, students located potential research sites on Google Maps. In addition, students utilized TimelineJS to input key information that correlates to Hurricane Maria.




*Image taken in Utuado – credit: Fernando Romagosa*

Narratives and photos will be embedded in StoryMapJS to showcase the results and the students' efforts.

This program aims to contribute to engaged anthropology and public humanities as it provides a learning experience that speaks to policy, advocacy, and engaged social science. By conducting fieldwork, students learned the intersections of disaster risk, vulnerability, and history of Puerto

Rico and the Caribbean. Engagement in the field required students to be flexible, aware of the complexities of the socio-economic and political contexts of Puerto Rico, and detail-oriented in their approach and methodology. As an applied anthropologist and disaster researcher, I believe it is essential to provide students with opportunities to

explore critical issues facing the human experience. Further, I advocate for digital humanities because it offers students a platform to highlight their experience, research progress, and creativity. As we complete the digital humanities project, I look forward to seeing how my students engage in critical issues and share their insights on our fieldsite of Puerto Rico. Much gratitude is given to the Center of Latin American Studies, the International Center, the George A. Smathers Libraries, and all of our research participants and collaborators in Puerto Rico for supporting this research program and undergraduate students. 





**“This research experience has not only helped me grow as a young researcher, but it has helped me come to terms with the difficult situation Puerto Rico finds itself in. In the past I have been guilty of ignoring the crisis, pretending everything is okay, and believing Puerto Rico is getting back up. I genuinely believe this experience has helped me become a more conscious citizen of Puerto Rico. Educating ourselves about the issues of our island is the first step to resolving its problems. I hope that what comes out of this project will reflect the need to educate the public and that these results can be a tool in doing so.”**

– Andrea Figueroa

**Excerpt below from  
Christian Tirado’s Research Reflections—**

The hope of the people is a pervasive theme in the interviews. A damning colonial status, a decade of economic recession, a plunder by corrupt government, a fleeting, aging population, among even worse symptoms of Puerto Rican terminality, would seem to erode any spirit. And in la Isla del Encanto, I feel it has. Many of our storytellers stated government unpreparedness as cause of the mass casualty, expressing little faith in much changing. They expect better and their patience is waning, understandably.

However, most people do hold unwavering hope in the ability and future of their fellow Islanders. Very few denied Puerto Rico, as a people, would rise to this occasion of the current trials and tribulations facing them all. Although they conceded to government help easing this process of growth, the Puerto Rican we interviewed believed that they, as a collective of individuals, will overcome. Perhaps continued injustice or belief in the unseen strengthen this resilience, but this audacious hope for change is hard to dismiss. And I fully believe in this cure, too.

**“El pueblo – not the government – supported me and others through this trial, as always. We do not need to rise up, because we have never fallen.”**

– Christian Tirado



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