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### Documenting Latinx Communities: Podcasting and Oral History in the Time of COVID-19

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# DOCUMENTING LATINX COMMUNITIES: PODCASTING AND ORAL HISTORY IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

[July 15, 2020](#) [Nelson Santana](#) [On the Ground](#) [Leave a comment](#)

## **Coping with COVID-19**

A question that has been lingering on my mind since March is: How are people coping with COVID-19? Intertwined with this question is, how am I dealing with coronavirus? As a human being I have found it rather impossible to separate my own reality and daily activities (family life, work, grocery shopping, etc.) from the pandemic itself. As an information professional (librarian more specifically), educator, journalist, and oral historian, I find it difficult and flat-out irresponsible not to think about how to document the COVID-19 pandemic that has enveloped our world.

Living through a worldwide pandemic is not easy. As of June 22, 2020, more than 8.8 million cases have been confirmed and more than 465,700 people have died from COVID-19.<sup>[1]</sup> In addition to the people who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and many who have passed away due to the virus, nearly every person on Earth has been affected one way or another via direct or indirect contact with the virus.<sup>[2]</sup> Although some people may never contract the virus, most of humanity has been affected in other ways. Nearly

every person I have communicated with about coronavirus knows at least one person who has the virus or has a relative or acquaintance who knows someone who has died from COVID-19. In addition to the physical harm the virus has caused most people and animals who carry the virus,<sup>[3]</sup> many people who are virus-free nonetheless experience depression, anxiety, and stress, leading some to ponder suicidal thoughts.

## **Experimento ESE Podcast**

In 2009, I co-founded ESENDOM, an online platform to document the Dominican community throughout the world with a focus on Dominicans in the Dominican Republic and the New York Tri-state area, where most of ESENDOM's contributors reside. With the slogan "culture and consciousness" serving as a guide and through this digital platform, we publish articles, videos, listicles,<sup>[7]</sup> podcasts, photo galleries, oral histories, and other digital content that blend the beauty of Dominican culture with current and past social issues that affect the Dominican community today.

Not long after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I began to ponder the creation of an oral history project documenting Dominican and overall Latinx individuals' lives during the coronavirus era. Having an awareness of what oral history entails and understanding that a project of this nature might take months, if not years to be made available to the public due to factors such as funding, transcriptions, and adhering to oral history guidelines, I made the choice to release some interviews ahead of time via podcast.

In February 2018, ESENDOM launched its official podcast—Experimento ESE. After three episodes, the podcast went on hiatus. When the coronavirus pandemic became a worldwide threat, I realized it was time to act and work on a new oral history project with the caveat of releasing some interviews via the Experimento ESE podcast. After reaching out to close friends,<sup>[8]</sup> we agreed to create an oral history repository to document humanity during the COVID-19 era.

Subsequently, the oral history project documenting COVID-19 in Latinx communities has led to the relaunch of the Experimento ESE podcast to further investigate this phenomenon. Experimento ESE aims to address questions pertinent to the Dominican community and we answer these questions both through research and by conducting interviews of people involved with the topic at hand. Since its inception in 2018, Experimento ESE has focused on topics such as Dominican intellectual Juan Pablo Duarte<sup>[4]</sup> and we have interviewed Dominican writers and artists such as the poet Dagoberto López-Coño,<sup>[5]</sup> musician Edilio Paredes and singer Ramón Cordero.<sup>[6]</sup>

## **Documenting Latinx Communities**

Oral narratives are powerful tools that for audiences paint a picture of that person's perception of an event, especially since it is the narrative of the interviewee's unique lived experience that is captured. The COVID-19 oral history project I am currently working on along with the Experimento ESE podcast have allowed my team and me to capture the voices of Latinx people. As I will demonstrate in the following paragraphs, we have captured (and hope to continue capturing) individual stories of how Latin American-descended people are interacting with one another during the era of COVID-19. I will share stories of people who are unable to participate in the most basic cultural practices: religious and spiritual ceremonies and the inability to bid farewell to a loved one without a proper funeral and burial; families that are no longer able to embrace one another through a hug or kiss nor celebrate milestones that often involve emotional affection such as quinceañeras, anniversaries, baby showers, weddings, baptisms, and confirmations. However, even during the trials and tribulations of COVID-19, there are individuals who are making invaluable contributions to society and it is important to document and highlight the work of these human beings. Whether it is the lived experience of someone adversely impacted by COVID-19 or someone contributing to the well-being of another human being, it is essential to capture and disseminate oral narratives of people during the

current coronavirus pandemic, not only for today's generation, but also for those who are yet to be born.

Since storytelling is one of ESENDOM's fortes, we agreed to conduct interviews of people formulated around questions of how people are coping with COVID-19. Not surprisingly, interviewees have shared personal accounts including stories on the loss of loved ones, difficulties obtaining food and medication, limited access to medical facilities, and battles with depression. On the opposite end of the spectrum, we have come across stories of people pushing through COVID-19 while simultaneously making remarkable contributions to society.

Finalizing or publishing an oral history project can take years, therefore, I decided to relaunch the Experimento ESE podcast as a means to make some of the COVID-19-related interviews—especially Dominican-descended people<sup>[9]</sup>—available via the Experimento ESE podcast. To date we have interviewed more than two dozen people as we want to capture as many voices as possible.

In one interview, I spoke with ESENDOM co-founder Emmanuel Espinal, where we discuss his grandfather's passing due to COVID-19 in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Espinal walked us through the journey of his grandfather's passing from the moment his grandfather became sick up to his grandfather's final resting place. Espinal's grandmother is buried in the Dominican Republic. Espinal's grandfather's wish was to be buried alongside his wife. Unfortunately, many of his wishes could not be met during this era of coronavirus—a common theme at this time. The interview detailed many heartbreaking moments one after another. Due to the epidemic, Espinal's family could not bury the family's patriarch with the traditional Dominican funeral: no mass, no casket, no final farewell. When asked by medical staff to identify the body, the family underwent the process via video chat, meaning they were not allowed to see their loved one at the hospital. In-person gatherings meant to honor the deceased after death have been altered entirely as these emotional gatherings where relatives and loved ones embrace and console one another with hugs, kisses, and each other's presence have been replaced with virtual gatherings. The personal has now

become impersonal. Cremation is a major topic of debate among Roman Catholics, including Espinal's family. Amid the chaos brought upon by the coronavirus, the family opted to cremate its patriarch—an act they never considered, since many Christians believe that cremation is among the most sacrilegious act one can commit. Although cremation has been accepted by the Vatican with its ban lifted in 1963, the Vatican updated its guidelines in 2016.<sup>[10]</sup> COVID-19 has altered people's lives—both living and even after death—including how we bury our loved ones as noted in Espinal's interview about his grandfather's passing.

In another interview, we spoke with Merelis Ortiz, a food justice activist who since graduating college has devoted her life to combating food insecurity and leading food justice initiatives such as teaching classes to low-income people of color about healthier eating options, helping them connect with the food of their ancestors. In our exchange, Ortiz discussed several moments of life post-COVID-19 and how the coronavirus had impacted her life as well as the lives of her loved ones. Her parents own the Dominican restaurant Mamá Catalina in Corona, Queens, New York. Although her parents' small business qualified for the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the funds they received for Mamá Catalina Restaurant were not sufficient to realistically sustain the family business. Like many other restaurants, Mamá Catalina remains in business, but similar to other small businesses, the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the daily operations (some staff have been laid off, decrease in earnings, etc). Although the CARES Act has provided some relief, the family believes this economic stimulus is not sufficient, fearing the restaurant will close should the coronavirus woes continue. The most devastating point of the interview came when Ortiz discussed visiting her parents. Due to the nature of their job, Ortiz's parents commute to work. Although Ortiz no longer lives with her parents, she visits them frequently, mostly to do laundry at their home. Due to COVID-19, Ortiz is no longer able to embrace her mother and father with the typical hugs and kisses she is accustomed to as the family is social distancing. Interactions once considered to be the norm alongside amorous actions such as hugging and kissing one's loved ones must now be pondered carefully because standing too close to anyone, including a loved

one, can now be the difference between staying alive or contracting coronavirus with lethal consequences.

In addition to documenting the everyday lives of ordinary people, this oral history project aims to capture the exceptional work of individuals lending a hand to their respective communities. Thus far, we have interviewed people in healthcare, education, non-profit organizations, the arts, and other industries who are currently contributing to initiatives that are providing relief to individuals impacted by COVID-19. Scholar-librarian Dr. Alex Gil (Columbia University) and historian Dr. Lissette Acosta Corniel (Borough of Manhattan Community College of The City University of New York) are two individuals who have stepped up, helping individuals affected by coronavirus.

In the interview with renowned scholar Alex Gil we talk about his role as a volunteer of the COVID Maker Response team. The COVID Maker Response team is comprised of people affiliated with Columbia University (faculty, staff, students) and the companies MakerBot and Tangible Creative. Gil and his partners use 3D printers to manufacture personal protective equipment (PPE) for use by medical staff.<sup>[11]</sup> Spearheaded by librarian Madiha Choksi, the response team initiative has brought together volunteers from a myriad of professions. Volunteers perform a multitude of tasks including transporting PPE to different locations (mostly hospitals), coordinating where to send PPE, and others assemble the equipment. At the time of Gil's interview, the COVID Maker Response team had manufactured more than 13,000 face shields to more than 40 locations (hospitals, clinics, social workers, and first responders).

Similar to Gil, Lissette Acosta Corniel is leading initiatives to help individuals negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. A university professor and president of her own non-profit, in Acosta Corniel's interview, we highlighted her work with her foundation, Alegría Grí Grí in Río San Juan, Dominican Republic, as well as her work in New York.<sup>[12]</sup> More specifically, Alegría Grí Grí provides assistance to people whose employment is dependent on beach-related work, but not necessarily the tourism industry.<sup>[13]</sup> Individuals whose employment have been affected by COVID-19 include people who clean beaches, surf instructors, cooks, and individuals who rent chairs,

among other trades. Although the Dominican government has provided relief to some individuals, many people whose livelihoods depend on the aforementioned occupations do not qualify for government aid. Through its modest fundraising, Alegría Grí Grí is able to provide families in Río San Juan with much-needed monetary assistance. Meanwhile, in New York, Acosta Corniel is part of a collective setting aside time to shop and retrieve medication for elderly New Yorkers and others who are unable to leave their homes. She volunteers her time to visit and speak with lonely New Yorkers, many of whom are dealing with depression as a consequence of COVID-19. According to Acosta Corniel, "Not being able to hug has been very difficult." In her interview, Acosta Corniel notes how the visits serve as a therapy session not only for the people whom she visits, but also for herself as the interactions remind her of her own humanity.

## **Conclusion**

Since the coronavirus outbreak, I have only set foot on my campus once to attend a scheduled LACUNY<sup>[14]</sup> Institute Planning Committee meeting, scheduled months in advance. Fortunately for me, I work at Bronx Community College of The City University of New York (CUNY), and as faculty I am a member of the Professional Staff Congress (PSC-CUNY). I mention my union membership because as a member I am entitled to eight weeks of paid parental leave.<sup>[15]</sup> I was on parental leave when my colleagues made the work-to-home transition once New York Governor Andrew Cuomo issued Executive Order Number 202.13 on March 7, 2020. As per the executive order: Any worker who is employed by the state of New York, shall, if deemed non-essential by their agency shall work from home or shall be able to stay home without charging their accruals until April 16, 2020.<sup>[16]</sup>

Recently, a co-worker shared with me how impressed she is with how I have been handling life amid the coronavirus era. I do not think I am exceptional in any way and simply put, I am doing my job. I never really stopped to think about it, however, now that I ponder it, I find that I have been extremely productive since COVID-19's arrival. I continue tending to my duties as

collection development librarian, which includes evaluating and purchasing resources. Alongside two brilliant colleagues, I also co-facilitate an Open Educational Resources (OER) / Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) workshop for faculty. I continue to tend to reference duties as well and at the moment CUNY libraries are transitioning to a new Library Services Platform (LSP). I participate in internal and external committee work and engage in conference activities both as organizer and spectator, among other contractual obligations typical of academic librarianship. In actuality, there is a method to my madness or that which my colleagues perceive as productivity. My wife gave birth to our son and the little bundle of joy has helped me cope with coronavirus; he is that ray of sunshine that illuminates my life. I have someone special for whom to live whose livelihood depends on me, guiding how I move forward. I am very fortunate. Our son's early birth—I refuse to say the "P" word<sup>[17]</sup>—is a blessing in disguise. On the one hand, my wife and I were very concerned about having a newborn six weeks prior to his scheduled date of delivery. On the other hand, reflecting back on our situation, bringing a child into the world prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic was a much better option than my wife going into labor during the midst of COVID-19.<sup>[18]</sup> There you have it. I owe my life and sanity to my son, with whom I snuggle when I need a moral boost.

### Footnotes:

<sup>[1]</sup> World Health Organization. *Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)*. No. 154. World Trade Organization. 22 Jun. 2020. [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200622-covid-19-sitrep-154.pdf?sfvrsn=d0249d8d\\_2](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200622-covid-19-sitrep-154.pdf?sfvrsn=d0249d8d_2) Accessed 22 Jun. 2020.

<sup>[2]</sup> Myron S. Cohen and Lawrence Corey. "Combination prevention for COVID-19." *Science*, vol. 368, no. 6491, 2020, pp. 551. Doi: 10.1126/science.abc5798.

Similar to the AIDS epidemic during its onset, to combat acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2(SARS-COV-2, which causes COVID-19), many medical

professionals have advised governments to implement behavioral intervention such as requiring the populace to wear masks and “shelter in place.”

[3] “Symptoms.” *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 13 May 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html>. Accessed 10 Jun. 2020. COVID-19 can lead to trouble breathing, persistent pain or pressure in the chest, inability to awake, confusion, and worsening of preexisting conditions.

[4] Experimento ESE: Rebeldía duartiana por una independencia.” *ESENDOM*, 27 Feb 2018, <https://esendom.com/experimento-santana/2018/2/27/experimento-ese-rebelda-duartiana-por-una-independencia>. Accessed 22 Jun 2020.

[5] Santana, Nelson. “Experimento ESE: Charlando con Dagoberto López-Coño.” *ESENDOM*, 6 Feb 2018, <https://esendom.com/experimento-santana/2018/2/6/experimento-ese-entrevista-con-dagoberto-lpez-coo>. Accessed 22 Jun 2020.

[6] Santana, Nelson. “Experimento ESE: Orígenes de la bachata: entrevista con Ramón Cordero y Edilio Paredes.” *ESENDOM*, 6 Mar 2018, <https://esendom.com/experimento-santana/2018/3/6/experimento-ese-orgenes-de-la-bachata-entrevista-con-ramn-cordero-y-edilio-paredes>. Accessed 22 Jun 2020.

[7] A listicle is type of article presented in the form of a list; combining the words “list” and “article” creates a new word: “listicle.” A listicle is thematic writing presented in the form of a list or lists.

[8] I reached out to ESENDOM collaborators John Carrero and Amaury Rodríguez as well as ESENDOM co-founder Emmanuel Espinal and all agreed to participate.

[9] Experimento ESE is an initiative of ESENDOM and is published on ESENDOM.com, a digital platform that documents the Dominican community. Therefore, it is only fitting to publish some of the COVID-19 oral history interviews of Dominican people on the Experimento ESE podcast.

[10] "Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: Instruction *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* Regarding the Burial of the Deceased and the Conservation of the Ashes in the Case of Cremation." *La Santa Sede*, 15 Aug. 2020, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20160815\\_ad-resurgendum-cum-christo\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20160815_ad-resurgendum-cum-christo_en.html). Accessed 13 Jul 2020.

[11] Santana, Nelson. "Experimento ESE: Salvando vidas con impresoras 3D: entrevista con Alex Gil." *ESENDOM*, 29 May 2020, <https://esendom.com/experimento-santana/alex-gil>. Accessed 10 Jun. 2020.

[12] Santana, Nelson. "Experimento ESE: Ayudando a los vulnerables en época del coronavirus: entrevista con Lissette Acosta Corniel." *ESENDOM*, 29 May 2020, <https://esendom.com/experimento-santana/lissette-acosta-corniel>. Accessed 10 Jun. 2020.

[13] Acosta Corniel prefers the term "beach industry" as opposed to "tourism." As she notes, people who work at the beach do tend to domestic and foreign tourists, yet they also work with non-tourists.

[14] Library Association of The City University of New York (LACUNY).

[15] "Updated Paid Parental Leave Agreement." *PSC CUNY*, 10 Dec. 2018, <https://www.psc-cuny.org/updated-paid-parental-leave-agreement>. Accessed 10 June 2020.

[16] New York State, Office of the Governor [Andrew Cuomo]. Executive Order Number 202.13: Continuing Temporary Suspension and Modification of Laws Relating to the Disaster Emergency. 7 Mar.

2020, [https://www.governor.ny.gov/sites/governor.ny.gov/files/atoms/files/E\\_O\\_202.13.pdf](https://www.governor.ny.gov/sites/governor.ny.gov/files/atoms/files/E_O_202.13.pdf).

[17] For those wondering, I am referring to the word premature.

[18] "Symptoms." According to the Centers for Disease and Control Prevention, people with COVID-19 have reported a range of symptoms. Older adults and people with underlying medical conditions (diabetes, heart or lung disease, etc.) appear to be at higher risk for developing more serious complications from COVID-19. Although some people are asymptotic, meaning they do not present any symptoms whatsoever, a combination of symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure including fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath, fatigue, sore throat, nausea, and diarrhea, among several other symptoms.

### **About the author:**

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