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TOXIC HERITAGE AND REPARATIONS: ACTIVATING MEMORY FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE JUSTICE

Liz Ševčenko

Introduction

November 2022 marked a critical moment for heritage in the global effort to confront the climate crisis. The nations gathered at COP27 summit centered their discussions on “loss and damage,” or how generations of emissions by the countries in the global north are now negatively impacting countries in the global south, and how that history should guide where money is invested. Vulnerable nations had been advocating for this historical approach for decades; but global north countries had consistently avoided facing their past, fearing the liability that would require them to assume (Pardikar 2021). At the 11th hour, the US – which has emitted more CO₂ over time than any other country in the world – was the last COP member to concede to a “loss and damage” fund through which countries responsible for the most cumulative emissions would pay for the harms they caused.

If we understand the climate crisis as a problem of history and memory, then heritage work is central to environmental and climate justice. This chapter considers climate denial as a form of historical denial, largely driven by the US, rooted in this country’s deep culture of refusing to acknowledge and assume accountability for its global leadership in structural racism. It explores the potential of participatory public memory to combat that denial, through the experience of teams of students, frontline environmental justice organizers, and community members, who came together across 20 cities to create public histories of environmental justice in their localities. Their experience suggests the potential for participatory public memory to support more than “loss and damage” claims, but to bring about a broader view of reparations, imagined, in the words of philosopher Olúfẹ̀mi Táíwò as “a historically informed view of distributive justice, serving a larger and broader worldmaking project.” (Táíwò 2022b, 74)

Climate as a Problem of History and Memory

Climate denial is often understood as a denial of science. But it is equally a denial of history: of generations of past human actions and the toll they have taken on the environment and people. As environmental justice scholars have long argued, the environmental destruction that produced the climate crisis is rooted in a larger history of global racial capitalism, one that extracted and expended both people and natural resources. Thus the histories of slavery and Indigenous genocide are inextricably linked to climate change (Principles of Environmental Justice 1991; Melosi 2005; Táíwò 2022a, 2022b).

As I have argued elsewhere, the US state's refusal to account for these historical harms has supported a culture of climate denial (Ševčenko 2022, Ch. 11). For nearly three centuries, despite consistent demands from generations of advocates, the US federal government refused to consider reparations to people who had been enslaved and their descendants or even officially apologize for this historical harm (Araujo 2017). It should come as no surprise, then, that while the US has historically contributed the most emissions that cause climate change, it leads the world in climate denial. In 2019, a poll across 23 nations found, only Saudi Arabia and Indonesia had a greater percentage of respondents denying climate change and human responsibility for it (Milman and Harvey 2019). This popular culture supports a US climate policy driven by historical denial, part of a pattern of refusing to officially reckon with past harms. Barack Obama came to power with a pledge to close Guantanamo, but rejected calls to officially account for the torture and abuse that took place there, arguing Americans should “look forward as opposed to looking backwards” (Johnston and Savage 2009). He also refused to assume responsibility for America's disproportionate historical role in the emissions that caused climate change, famously instructing his emissary to the 2011 Durban climate negotiations to reject any agreement that held the US to account for past actions (Klinsky and Brankovic 2018). As many climate policy analysts have noted, this refusal to reckon with the past has crippled global efforts to fight climate change, becoming the major block for countries like China and India, whose emissions are skyrocketing now but were tiny in the past, to agree to emissions restrictions (Klinsky and Brankovic 2018; Sengupta 2021; Táíwò 2022a, 2022b).

Historical denial has also shaped, and curtailed, the efforts of American environmentalists to stop climate change. Academic environmental historians initially focused on white scientists and activists as the main actors in the story of the environmental movement, erasing people of color from official history (Melosi 2005). The mainstream climate change movement was dominated for decades by affluent white activists who remained silent on the racist history of the environmental movement from which it emerged. Founding conservationists also supported eugenics, as part of an integrated vision of national purity (Purdy 2015). The post-war environmental movement cast overpopulation, especially of poor people of color, as its main enemy; strong factions within the Sierra Club's membership organized against immigration (Hopkins 2018). Labeling immigrants and people of color as

threats to environmental purity denies the long traditions of environmental organizing and voting, sustainable practices, and resistance to environmental damage that many of these communities brought and developed, while wealthier white Americans radically expanded their consumption and waste. As a 2009 report on the state of the climate movement observed,

most climate activists are primarily concerned with addressing the technological challenges of climate change. They frame climate change in terms of a scientific problem They tend to overlook the ways in which climate change is linked to historical exploitation and injustice.

(Park 2009, 11)

By contrast, the environmental justice (EJ) movement, which emerged from civil rights struggles led by people of color, and formally coalesced in the First People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991, clearly framed both environmental and climate destruction as issues of historical justice. The EJ movement analyzed housing segregation, labor abuses, air and water contamination, and fossil fuel extraction as interrelated harms caused by larger systems of exploitation. Its approach to the climate crisis foregrounded history, articulating climate change as a historical process inextricably intertwined with centuries-long histories of racism, colonialism, and other structural inequalities (Murdock 2020).

By framing the climate crisis as a result of historical harms, the EJ movement made reckoning and repairing those harms central to confronting the crisis. The principles established at the 1991 Summit, recognized and referred to across the movement from then on, include that “Environmental Justice protects the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages.” (Principles of Environmental Justice 1991) But the EJ movement’s calls for reparation are not limited to environmental reparations, but are grounded in a much more expansive vision of historical accountability, one that understands environmental racism as one prong of structural racism. The Indigenous Environmental Network, for instance, calls for “redressing past harms and creating new relationships of power for the future through reparations (Indigenous Environmental Network n.d.)” For the groups assembled in the Climate Justice Alliance, a Just Transition requires “reparations for land that has been stolen and/or destroyed by capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, genocide and slavery.” Here all historical harms from white supremacy undergird environmental harms; all reparations are environmental reparations. Building on this formulation, philosopher Olúfẹmi Táíwò argues that a just path through the climate crisis requires not only reparations for environmental harms but for the broader systems that caused them, recovering the anti-colonial vision of reparations as “central to the expansive project of building a more just world, not just as a material or symbolic mechanism of redress for past harms” (Táíwò 2022a, 3).

By 2020, mainstream environmental organizations with histories of white supremacy began to recognize broader racial reparations as necessary for their

mission. That year the Sierra Club came out in support of HR 40, the federal bill to study reparations, explaining the organization now “believes it is impossible to create a healthy, safe, and sustainable future for all without acknowledging and materially addressing the past and present economic, cultural, psychological and spiritual impacts of racism” (Sierra Club 2020). The League of Conservation Voters signed on a year later, arguing, “an environmentally sustainable future can only stand on a foundation that dismantles the historical and contemporary legacies of racial oppression that the United States was built on” (Hinkson 2022).

So how should historical reparations that confront the climate crisis be achieved? Legal advocates have tried to adapt existing tools to force accountability for climate change: from charges of “loss and damage” to human rights abuse. But legal tools alone have proven insufficient for winning redress for environmental harms. Instead, legal advocates have begun arguing for a more interdisciplinary approach, where memory work plays a critical role. At the international level, where climate negotiations have been blocked by the US’s refusal to assume responsibility for its historical emissions, some policy advocates turned to the idea of a climate truth commission, a space for people to share histories – both individual and structural – of climate impact. In return for public acknowledgment of responsibility and some form of symbolic reparations, polluters would be free from a legal or financial penalty (Klinsky and Brankovic 2018). At the local level, as legal scholar Catherine Millas Kaiman outlines, US legal tools are not equipped to address the needs of EJ communities, where the harms are most severe. Instead, she argues for a multi-pronged approach to environmental reparations that includes recognition and responsibility, driven through activities such as sharing memories of historical harm, as well as material reparations mandated through legislation (Kaiman 2016).

If we recognize that climate change is an accumulation of historical harms; that the world’s inability to meaningfully confront the climate crisis is rooted in the refusal of the Global North – led by the US – to acknowledge and redress these harms; then saving the planet requires facing, and fixing, history. This places people who work with history and heritage at the center of climate solutions. But it requires them to use their tools in different ways than they traditionally do, and apply them to different contexts than they traditionally work in. Movements for material reparations require a combination of historical research and legal advocacy; oral history and organizing. They present a unique challenge to heritage and public memory workers to develop new practices and work with new partners.

Applying EJ Principles to Heritage Work: Participatory Public Memory for Climate Justice

In October 2017, nearly 50 historians, local environmental justice advocates, and public history faculty from 30 cities in the US, Latin America, and Europe came together to design a public history project – and process – to pursue climate justice. *Climates of Inequality: Stories of Environmental Justice* was the third project of the

Humanities Action Lab (HAL), a coalition of universities, issue organizations, and public spaces around the country that develops collective public memory projects around social justice issues. We gathered at the Rutgers University campus in Newark, NJ, HAL's home base, a city whose post-war history was forged from environmental racism and local resistance to it. Over the next three years, universities and community organizations in each city developed courses through which students and frontline community members dug into the history of environmental justice in their locality, and how it shaped local experiences of the climate crisis.

Local teams each co-created one “chapter” of a collective traveling exhibit and web platform integrating stories from all participating cities, which local teams then took turns hosting in public libraries, museums, or community organization offices, with public dialogues and actions connecting their local issues to shared experiences (Figure 17.1). Along the way, through virtual exchanges and convenings in person, participants grappled with how the project could promote a frame for discourse and



FIGURE 17.1 The *Climates of Inequality* traveling exhibit brought together all 21 local teams' environmental justice stories in a single installation, that included “nooks” about each locality, virtual reality “visits” to local sites, oral history interviews on l pads, and interactive elements. As the exhibit traveled to each community that created it, community members could see their own stories and learn about others. Credit: Shelley Kusnetz.

action on the climate crisis grounded in the terms, concerns, spaces, and histories of communities disproportionately affected by it.

The project was created through participatory public memory: a process that applies the logic and modes of social movements to the ways we deal with the past. HAL's participatory public memory projects mobilize thousands of people from disparate locations and perspectives to research and exchange their local histories, then grapple with the collective implications – and identify collective demands – together. These projects invite all participants to serve simultaneously as authors and audience, researching and interpreting history through collaborations among students, community organizers, and faculty, continuously teaching and learning from each other while building a community around shared social change goals. These projects do not underestimate the power of historical denial. While they surface and circulate historical truths that have been suppressed, by doing research and sharing it in exhibits, they do not assume that stating historical truths more loudly or widely than those who would deny them, or legitimizing them in government truth commissions, can alone bring acceptance of those truths. Instead, they approach public history as an ongoing process of organizing, more analogous to movement building than to didactic education. In this way, they activate memory as a way both to establish claims and mobilize people to come together to make them.

The collaboration among EJ organizers and public historians suggested possibilities for a framework of public memory for climate justice that integrated movement organizing and memory work. EJ leaders' approaches were grounded in the Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing, a foundational framework established in 1996. One is to “Let people speak for themselves” (Jemez Principles 1996). Applied to public memory, to ensure stories of frontline communities are more widely disseminated and understood, they should not be mediated by heritage professionals or students outside of frontline communities.

Another commitment EJ organizers introduced was that the relationships among people in the project should prefigure the ones in the world participants hoped to bring about. Moving the world from an extractive to a regenerative economy required moving from extractive to regenerative relationships. To apply this principle to a collaborative public memory project requires resisting exploitative structures and practices that remain entrenched in heritage and public history. For instance, despite public history programs' strong rhetorical support for “sharing authority” or “community collaboration,” the vast majority of students are trained to “get stories” by conducting one-way interviews with directly impacted people and using them in a project, with no further involvement with the interviewees, their organizations, or their communities. A regenerative heritage practice would involve partners designing a project collaboratively for mutual benefit, which could include mutual interviewing that engaged both partners' relationship to the history being explored. The collaboration between IUPUI and Kheprw Institute in Indianapolis, for instance, taught students to read their city's social infrastructure; such that “as much as infrastructure and ecology are integral to the city's ecosystem,

so too are the social relationships of its communities” (Kryder-Reid, Holzman, Nadaraj, and Humphrey 2022, 210).

The EJ commitment to relationships undergirded a theory of change that also challenges traditional heritage practice, even practice pursuing social justice. Most public history work designed to tell “untold” or “underrepresented” stories sought to raise awareness among people outside of directly impacted communities, with an unstated presumption that change would come when stories were told to those who had not listened for them before. But after decades of climate denial and environmental racism driven by white affluent voters, whose way of life depended on overconsumption and fossil fuels, EJ organizers did not put much stock in those constituencies as effective routes to change. Instead, participants in the *Climates of Inequality* project prioritized exchanging stories within environmental justice communities, to ground people in shared histories of both racism and resistance, and mobilize them to build a different future. For participants in the IUPUI/Kheprw Institute collaboration, “participants in the project came to new understandings of their own lived experience and positionality within the city’s ecosystem” (Kryder-Reid, Holzman, Nadaraj, and Humphrey 2022, 210–211).

The EJ movement has long recognized that nation-states would not save the planet and would not advocate for the welfare of poor communities of color. Nor could local communities make a global change by working alone. Many groups have therefore organized translocally, bringing diverse local communities together into coalitions that highlighted their distinct experiences, while connecting them to common structural problems and mobilizing them into campaigns around shared goals for change (Baptista 2019, Mendez 2020). A participatory public memory project for climate justice must similarly work translocally, highlighting the specific histories of frontline communities while linking them together into the larger structural phenomena of which they are all a part. This translocal work can also link local claims for reparation into a national, or global, campaign, in at least two ways. First, it can provide solidarity and support across communities, and leverage national recognition to pressure local authorities. But perhaps more importantly, linking local experiences to shared national and global histories strengthens the basis for reparations claims, by demonstrating that current inequality is not the fault of individuals, nor a fluke of a single place or time, but rather rooted in structural racism of global capitalism.

Guided by EJ organizers, teams of students in frontline communities across the US dug into their communities’ histories of environmental racism and how it was shaping their current and future experience of climate change. Connecting this history with their own memories, they created multimedia projects to share their stories with other communities who had distinct, but linked, historical experiences, and identify shared visions for the future.

Newark

In the fall 2018 *Climates of Inequality* class at Rutgers University–Newark, which focused on the city’s Ironbound neighborhood, student after student spoke about

asthma. One held up her pump; another showed a slide with all the paraphernalia she and her family used; another shared how in her middle school, “I remember before gym all the kids from the Ironbound would run to the nurse to go and get their inhalers.” That semester, 1 in 4 residents of the Ironbound had asthma, three times the average rate in the rest of the state (USEPA 2015). For generations, the neighborhood’s immigrant and Black residents were burdened with the toxic underbellies of systems the larger region enjoyed. From tanneries and breweries, to distribution of goods from the port through trucks spewing exhaust, to incinerating New York City’s trash into plumes of pink poison gas, Newark’s central role in production and waste brought myriad toxins to its air, soil, and water. Perhaps the most egregious is the Diamond Alkali company’s manufacture of Agent Orange in the 1950s and 1960s – the chemical specially designed to decimate green landscapes in the Vietnam War – and its dumping of dioxin into the nearby Passaic river, causing cancer rates to skyrocket.

Students were in middle school when Superstorm Sandy tore through New Jersey in 2012. The storm churned up masses of toxic waste from generations of sediment that flooded streets, playgrounds, and living rooms. Climate change, by bringing higher water levels and increased chance and frequency of flooding, has brought the neighborhood’s poisoned history into the present. Co-instructors Maria Lopez-Nuñez of the Ironbound Community Corporation (ICC) and filmmaker Julie Winokur of Talking Eyes Media recognized the need to connect students to the knowledge and experience they already possessed, or were in their own communities. One strategy was through a “Toxic Tour”, a central practice of EJ organizers in Newark and other EJ communities, which ICC leader and environmental justice scholar Ana Baptista analyzes in Chapter 9 (Baptista, this volume) (Figure 17.2).

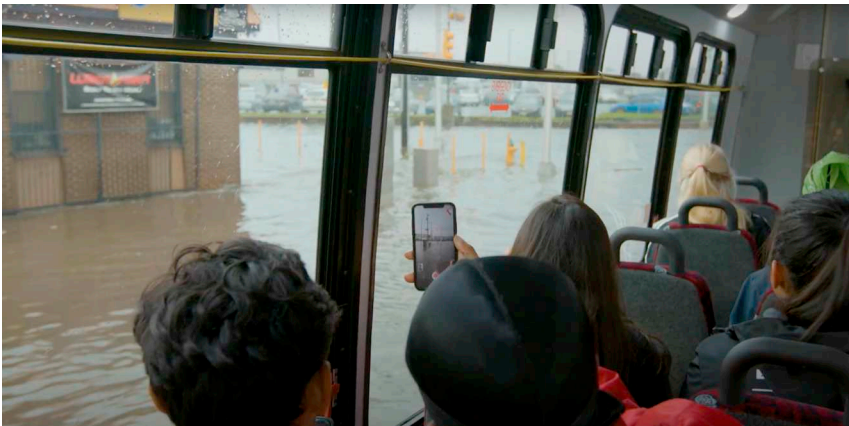


FIGURE 17.2 Rutgers-Newark students on a “Toxic Tour” given by the Ironbound Community Corporation, where a routine rain-storm caused severe flooding. Credit: Talking Eyes Media.

During this bus tour of sites like the incinerator and the superfund site, a heavy but not unusual rain, having drained fine elsewhere in the city, created miniature lakes on the route that rose higher than the bus door. As the bus plowed through, the brown water flooded in. “People think you need a hurricane to do this,” explained Lopez-Nunez, who was giving the tour. “We don’t. We just need a day full of rain. This is a problem. And not everyone lives this way, ok?” (HAL 2018) “This is the most craziest field trip I ever went on,” one student later remembered. “That was my awakening moment” (HAL 2018).

The students in this class had almost all grown up in Greater Newark, many of them in the Ironbound, and literally bore its history in their bodies. Most students reported being unaware of the environmental hazards they had grown up with. And when asked at the outset of the class what environmental justice meant to them, students suggested recycling, changing light bulbs, and other acts of individual consumers. Despite growing up in an environmental justice community – characterized by extraordinary activism in response to egregious environmental burdens – the power of mainstream environmental discourse was such that it dominated students’ framework, even as it was barely relevant to their own lives. To support students in building a new framework for understanding their own experiences, Lopez-Nuñez introduced students to generations of ICC activists in the Ironbound. Over the past 50 years, ICC had driven investigation and acknowledgment of the Diamond Alkali dioxin contamination; designation of a superfund site; and a lawsuit against the Covanta incinerator for spewing toxic iodine into the air, among many other fights. It also created an urban farm, a network of childcare, and other community resources (Baptista, this volume). After interviewing activists of different ages who fought and won these changes in the neighborhood, students then took water and soil samples from the places where they conducted the interviews, and sent them to a Rutgers-Newark lab to analyze lead levels. On this one metric alone, the levels far exceeded legal limits.

Connections with activists reframed students’ own histories and potential futures. One student remembered that growing up in the Ironbound, “I was like I gotta get out of here. When I talked to [the activist she interviewed] it really opened my eyes because he was like I wanna go back in. That was the point when I stepped back and said we do need to be part of it to make a change.” For another, conversations with activists “helped me realize that there needs to be change at a systematic level. We matter and if we continue to demand more we’ll have better conclusions” (HAL 2018).

New Orleans

Shannon Rainey welcomed four University of New Orleans students lugging video equipment into her beautifully appointed home in Gordon Plaza, to explain how she came to lead a movement to abandon it. When she first learned of Gordon Plaza, a federally-subsidized development built in 1981 in New Orleans’ upper

9th ward and marketed to Black families as an affordable path to homeownership, it seemed like a dream come true: “I was excited to find out that I was able to purchase one, so I did,” she recounted to Lones Gagnard, Vickie Lacoste, Ella McIntire, and Daniel Lamplugh. What the outreach and advertising for Gordon Plaza didn’t mention, and none of the majority Black residents knew, is that Gordon Plaza had been built on top of a toxic landfill. The ground beneath the tidy new houses consisted of over a half-century of the city’s garbage, as well as its medical and industrial waste, covered with an additional layer of pesticide spray. “Things was going fine until we started digging in the yard,” Rainey remembered. “We wound up digging up canisters with skeleton heads on it ... we found out as time went on that we were living on a toxic landfill” (Gagnard et al. 2019).

After immediate advocacy by residents, a few years after the site opened the EPA began testing soil, and, Rainey explained, “they found like 150 chemicals that was back here that could cause us to die.” (Gagnard et al. 2019) Indeed, decades after the first residents moved in, the census tract containing Gordon Plaza had the second-highest cancer rate in Louisiana (Maniscalco et al. 2019). Years after the soil samples revealed known carcinogens, in 1994 the area was declared a superfund site. The EPA’s clean-up consisted of adding a layer of new soil on top of any exposed ground, separating the clean and contaminated soil with a porous mat.

Like in Newark’s Ironbound, Gordon Plaza’s layers of toxic history formed the foundation of its experience with climate change. When Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005 and the levees broke, massive floods devastated Gordon Plaza homes, and inundated the thin layer of topsoil the EPA had added. While the EPA came and tested for lead and found levels within legal limits, the residents’ environmental scientist technical consultant found that groundwater leached through the topsoil and was exposing residents to a multitude of carcinogens.

Shannon Rainey was president of Residents of Gordon Plaza. For nearly four decades and over a half dozen mayoral administrations, multiple generations of residents have been fighting for the city to relocate them to homes that fulfill Gordon Plaza’s original promise. Starting from the first class action lawsuit in 1994, residents launched multiple legal actions to claim restitution from the city. Nearly all have forced some acknowledgment of the horrific harm and secured minimal cash payments; but none yet has won the ultimate goal of a fully funded, just relocation (Figure 17.3).

The students interviewing Shannon Rainey didn’t grow up in Gordon Plaza; but her story helped them understand their own. Lones Gagnard’s father died of lung cancer after exposure to asbestos at the Avondale Shipyard, whose directors were later discovered to have been well aware of the toxic levels and their effects on human beings. Vickie Lacoste shared that she grew up two blocks from a paper mill in rural Louisiana, where “The sounds of toxic flares and transport trains mobilizing during the night were a common soundscape in my early growth years,” but “I never gave much thought to the dangers that existed from living so near an industrial plant” (HAL 2019). If the students had resonant experiences with contamination, they had not grown up with exposure to community organizing around



FIGURE 17.3 University of New Orleans students interviewing Shannon Rainey in her Gordon Plaza home. Credit: Ella McIntire.

it. When the students met Rainey and other Gordon Plaza activists, they were in the process of a major public awareness and political action campaign, which students wound up supporting, participating in actions like RISE for Cancer Alley, a rally connecting the histories and activist communities of Gordon Plaza residents with black homeowners living near the petrochemical plants constructed on former plantations along the Mississippi River.

Rainey was already a prominent spokesperson for the movement in the press; but students hoped to make the stories she told part of New Orleans' public history. Students integrated Rainey's video interview and contextual research on Gordon Plaza's history and current struggles into the New Orleans Historical app of digital city walking tours, and in the Humanities Action Lab's *Climates of Inequality* nationally traveling exhibit (New Orleans Historical and The Midlo Center for New Orleans Studies at the University of New Orleans n.d.; HAL 2019).

Puerto Rico

After Hurricane Maria tore through Puerto Rico in September of 2017, Ricia Ann Chansky, a professor at the University of Puerto Rico Mayagüez, spent the semester feeding her students and neighbors on a propane tank by candlelight, while opening a space for people to share stories, survival tips, and emotional support. The immediate physical damage was severe enough; but the deeper harm came from the total collapse of the island's infrastructure. The electrical grid was almost completely destroyed, leaving

the majority of the island without power. Less than half had tap water; sewage treatment plants were out; cell service was gone; only a few radio stations could broadcast; fuel shortages grounded people in place; and there was a run on banks. The situation lasted for not days or even weeks but months, with deaths growing exponentially with each day the government failed to respond, and the psychological trauma growing deeper and deeper. But in this total vacuum of official support, communities constructed an extraordinary infrastructure of care, information, and resources.

Both the crumbling of the government grid and the emergence of the civic/communal infrastructure that replaced it were rooted in Puerto Rico's long history. Maria hit an island that was already ravaged by centuries of colonialism that left its government weak and under-resourced. The last decade had left it particularly vulnerable: a recent change in the tax system, compounded by the 2008 economic recession, created a debt crisis to which the Puerto Rican government responded with severe economic austerity measures. By 2017, the island's public infrastructure was little more than a house of cards. Maria exposed how the US had written off the entire island as a "sacrifice zone," a term coined to describe particular neighborhoods, almost always low-income communities of color, damaged by environmental harms or disinvestment. President Trump's denial of climate change, let alone climate inequality, included supporting the government of Puerto Rico in an erasure of the thousands of people who lost their lives in this disaster: while the island government insisted the death toll was no more than 64, after massive pressure from activists and research from investigative journalists, a year later the government officially revised the number to nearly 3000 (Klein 2018).

The government's total abandonment of its citizens was both physically and physiologically devastating. As predictable and consistent with history as this abandonment may have been, it was still deeply traumatizing. But citizens had another tradition to build on: one of organizing protest and communal care in crisis, by what University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez students called "citizen responders". One initiative that emerged from the wreckage was "Mi María", a disaster response based on sharing stories. Chansky brought together over 150 UPR students to interview people in their home communities. Where Newark students grew up with slow violence all around them, students at UPR were struggling for immediate survival after the sudden destruction of their homes and neighborhoods. Both struggled with the revelation or the confirmation that the state was not there for them, even in the direst circumstances. The Mi María project gave students agency and community as "citizen responders" using the unique tool of storytelling (Figure 17.4).

By inviting people to exchange and record what they had seen and experienced – including the students themselves – the project provided a multi-layered resource including healing from trauma; circulating vital information for survival; citizen science documentation of impacts and needs; and organizing to demand justice. Students exposed an abandoned warehouse of donations that had never been distributed; created and circulated information booklets; and began building a multi-media archive of stories of survival (Chansky and Denesiuk 2021).



FIGURE 17.4 University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez student interviewing a shop owner about his experience trying to support his community in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. “The merchandise started to run out, since we were the only open business,” he remembered. Credit: Talking Eyes Media.

Conclusion

If the climate crisis is in large part driven by historical harms, and their denial, then those who work historically – who understand confronting history as a precondition for building a just future – stand at the center of the fight against climate change. This is not to say that those named as history or heritage professionals have an exclusive role or responsibility. Rather, activating heritage to combat climate change requires people working in every sector to grapple with their pasts. History and heritage professionals can seek collaborations with advocates, scientists, policymakers, and others to connect people with their historical experiences and mobilize to redress their legacies. This vision of reparations includes material and legal restitution, as well as the acknowledgment, healing, and education at the core of public memory work. Connecting communities and their granular local histories in participatory public memory can build a dynamic, national understanding of the historical harms that need to be righted for a Just Transition.

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