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Literature and Scholarship in Times of Crisis

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Literature and Scholarship in Times of Crisis

Abstract

When I was asked to talk about research, and about my own research, I thought it was important to recognize that much of my work I owe, first, to Research and Professional Development Grants that I have been fortunate to receive at Gettysburg, and also to the people, resources, and institutions that opened their doors to me during the time that I've spent doing research in Puerto Rico, including at the University of Puerto Rico and at the National Archives of Theater and Film. Today I would like to speak briefly not only about doing research in Puerto Rico, but about the challenges that scholars on the island and on the mainland face as they try to keep up their much-needed work in the six months after hurricane María, and also about the creative ways in which scholars of Puerto Rico are subverting traditional publishing practices in the aftermath of a combination of natural, economic, and geopolitical crises. (*excerpt*)

Keywords

Musselman Library, scholarly publishing, Puerto Rico, Hurricane Maria

Disciplines

Latin American Studies | Scholarly Communication | Scholarly Publishing

Comments

This is the text of Professor Rangalova's remarks at Musselman Library's 2017 College Authors Reception held on March 23, 2018.

Literature and Scholarship in Times of Crisis

Radi Rangelova

Associate Professor and Chair
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Thank you! First, I would like to thank Janelle and the Musselman Library for inviting me to give these remarks. It is an honor.

When I was asked to talk about research, and about my own research, I thought it was important to recognize that much of my work I owe, first, to Research and Professional Development Grants that I have been fortunate to receive at Gettysburg, and also to the people, resources, and institutions that opened their doors to me during the time that I've spent doing research in Puerto Rico, including at the University of Puerto Rico and at the National Archives of Theater and Film. Today I would like to speak briefly not only about doing research in Puerto Rico, but about the challenges that scholars on the island and on the mainland face as they try to keep up their much-needed work in the six months after hurricane María, and also about the creative ways in which scholars of Puerto Rico are subverting traditional publishing practices in the aftermath of a combination of natural, economic, and geopolitical crises.

Doing research on and in Puerto Rico after the devastation caused by hurricane María is not the same as before that tragic and terrifying event. Many people have been displaced and, six months later, 10% of the island is still without electricity. The University of Puerto Rico was closed from late September to late January, the main archives still operate intermittently, and there is widespread damage to libraries across the island. The changes in people's lives and in the spaces that they inhabit have been

traumatic and many, arguably, irreversible. In this context, we who work on Puerto Rican Studies are in the process of rethinking much of what we do and how we do it.

Among the important changes that I have noticed have been the focus of the research that is being produced after María, the means for its circulation, and the definition of what it means to be an engaged intellectual and scholar. Colleagues at El Centro – the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College, for example, have been some of the leaders in the production and the free and open dissemination of the new research on Puerto Ricans who have migrated to the mainland U.S. in the last six months. They are using data from FEMA and from school enrollments in the US to maintain and constantly update a database on Puerto Rican post-María relocation by state. Importantly, they are making this research available openly to those who are interested in analyzing the data, at a time when such analysis is so urgently needed for its potential to make palpable differences in terms of appropriate social policies and support services that states could offer to people who continue to arrive.

Many of us in the humanities have also adjusted the direction of our research, and are now even more intentional in discussing issues of power, voice, invisibility, access, of the meaning of inclusion, resistance, and agency. In my own work, I have started to focus on new forms of cultural and artistic expression that are thriving in spite of the everyday challenges of life on the island. Many scholars who previously published in journals that stayed behind paywalls are now intersecting scholarship with public intellectual work, and publishing in venues like *80 Grados* or *Revista Cruce* that are again freely available and widely read online.

Every year a group of Puerto Rican writers and literary scholars organize el Festival de la Palabra, a major literary festival and academic conference that brings

together Spanish-language authors and scholars from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and the United States for several days of book presentations, talks, panels and round tables. In Fall 2017, shortly after hurricane María, when it became clear that transportation and infrastructure would make it impossible for people to fly in, and when the lives of Puerto Rican writers and scholars got upended, the Festival's organizers decided that, instead of canceling the event, they would invite those writers and scholars who were able to participate in an alternative series of activities. They started visiting shelters and organizing literary readings and workshops for children and adults who had lost their homes. Now, as schools have started to reopen, these events continue in classrooms around Puerto Rico. It has been a kind of engagement that bridges scholarship, creativity, and community involvement, pushing the limits of what we know and recognize as scholarship. Importantly, in times of crisis, when reading, thinking, or writing about literature might seem trivial, it reminds us of how our work is meaningful in people's lives, and reaffirms the value of arts, literature, and scholarship for rebuilding community.

Thank you.