

***Finding Uncle Cesar***

Methodology Essay

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## 1. About

“Finding Uncle Cesar” is a radio documentary that tells the story of how Cesar Irizarry’s decades-long alienation from his family led to his burial on New York’s Hart Island, the city’s potter’s field, during a period of heightened burials due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how the lifelong search for him by his nephew, Angel Irizarry, came to a close after I discovered that he had been buried there. By putting forth the intertwining stories of Cesar and Angel, it seeks to show the humanity possessed by, and care held for, people buried on Hart Island from the perspective of someone buried there. Additionally, it portrays how the island, a cemetery for over 1.2 million people, has been mismanaged. From the unearthing of skeletal remains following Hurricane Sandy, to the crumbling buildings and visitation policies that have failed to provide mourners an adequate means to grieve their losses, it is important to consider that no matter the background of the people buried on Hart Island, be they homeless, impoverished, or alienated from their families, they are still people and deserve to be buried in a place that is taken care of with dignity, and who are allowed to be visited by anyone who wishes to take the ferry ride.

I conducted two sit-down interviews using an oral historical methodology with my lone narrator, Angel, and a field interview at the gravesites of his grandparents and Cesar. Previous to the COVID-19 pandemic, the City had been known to not inform families of the death of their loved one due to a lack of contact information. This persisted through the pandemic; with refrigerated trucks full of bodies waiting for burial on the island, families were left unaware of the death of their loved one, or their subsequent burial there. Utilizing research on COVID-19 and the island itself put forth by New York City, local journalism outlets, and oral history

projects, I have sought to portray the realities of Hart Island by putting forth historical and statistical data relevant to, and alongside of the story of how Angel came to find out about Cesar's burial there.

## 2. Background

Before the shelter in place order was put into effect in March 2020, I had already moved out of my apartment in Queens for my much smaller hometown. While I felt safer, my desire to be back in the City was very high. I felt that my four years living in New York had shown me that it had become my home, and so I felt conflicted as I watched from my couch as it and its people suffered due to high case counts and deaths.

This experience led to a heightened interest in historically understanding New York's place within the COVID-19 pandemic. I saw an opportunity to return to the City through pursuing graduate school, and was immediately drawn to Columbia University's Oral History Master of Arts (OHMA) program. I applied to the program on the recommendation of a professor, Judith Greenburg, from my time as an undergraduate; I had completed a project for her class that collected letters from "impoverished mourners" in response to Roland Barthes' *Mourning Diary*. I saw his prolonged concentration on the loss of his mother to only be possible because of his wealth, and knew from personal experience, and those of my contributors, that this was simply not possible for the working class. These letters detailed the experience of people who continued to work in pursuit of a living wage in the immediate aftermath of the death of a loved one, and the silent suffering inherent in improperly mourning one's loss. Oral history, I realized, allowed for the activation of stories such as those to pursue understanding, comradery,

and change. Once accepted into OHMA, I made it my mission to learn more about what the city had been through, and what was still going on.

I became an intern with the MISSING THEM project in August 2021. MISSING THEM was founded in the months following the onset of the COVID pandemic as a collaboration between the nonprofit independent newsroom, THE CITY, and Columbia University School of Journalism's Stabile Center. The project seeks to provide free obituaries to the tens of thousands of COVID victims who lived in New York City at the time of their death, as a means to both memorialize those lost, and to bridge the gap in representation in the obituary sections of newspapers and funeral home bulletins; highly in demand obituaries during the onset of COVID were mainly written for the well-off, as those already experiencing financial precarity faced enhanced uncertainty. Additionally, as part of THE CITY's newsroom, MISSING THEM engages in what is known as accountability journalism, producing articles centered on a range of ongoing issues related to COVID in an effort to expose issues in governance, bring to light concerns and practices that negatively impact subsets of the population, and bring people together to discuss their lives and how all of that which I have just stated personally impacts them. I was excited to begin work, as I felt that the project I curated on death and socioeconomic precarity aligned with MISSING THEM's ideology, and furthered my curiosity about the ways that oral history could be utilized in the development of stories, both journalistic in nature and not, centered on the experiences inherent in life in a city, resulting perhaps in the betterment of conditions or practices.

In my first days on the project, I perused the articles that had been published up to that point. One of the headlines said that one in ten people who died to COVID in New York City were buried on Hart Island. I had seen the television footage of mass burials, but now had a name

for the place where they happened. This inspired me to research the island, and also be vigilant for any submissions that sounded like they may have had a connection to it.

A few months later, I was contacted by Angel to begin work on an obituary for his uncle, Cesar. His submission lacked details about Cesar's life, just stating that he was a "lone wolf." Going into the interview, I had a list of general questions that I planned would lead to more specific questions and answers. Instead, Angel had very little details to offer. He had not had a relationship with his uncle, nor had anyone else in the family. I asked him where he was buried, and he did not know.

At that moment I had a gut feeling that Cesar had been one of the 3000 COVID victims buried on Hart Island in 2020. I told Angel that I thought that this was a possibility, and would check on it after the call concluded. Once we hung up, I immediately went to the [Hart Island Lookup Service](#), typed in his name, and found him buried in plot 412. I called Angel back to let him know, and he expressed his gratitude. I told him it was no problem, and that I was happy to be able to help. I told him that I wanted to speak at another time about the possibility of working together on a story about his relationship with Uncle Cesar, and what led to him being buried on the island. This project is the culmination of the meetings and conversations I have had with Angel since our initial phone call.

### 3. Interview Methodology

To prepare for the half hour interviews used to write a 250-word obituary for the MISSING THEM project, I was instructed to ask questions relevant to central elements of everyday people's lives; families, jobs, interests, immigration stories, etc. These pursuits were made easier by the inclusion of detailed information in the obituary submission. Such instances

allowed for my questions to be catered specifically to the person, as opposed to a general list that I would have to update along the way. It was imperative to secure as specific information as possible, down to names of businesses they were employed by or the name of the house of faith that they practiced at.

The oral historical interviewing methodology I used in this documentary differs greatly from that I used while working for *MISSING THEM*, mainly due to the fact that I was not taking a general life history for this project, and that I no longer had to work within the confines of 250-word pieces. I was able to shift my focus away from the broader biographical elements of Cesar's life, and pay closer attention to both the specific aspects that ultimately led to him being buried at Hart Island, and Angel's experience looking for, and ultimately finding him.

I prepared a list of questions that covered a range of topics regarding Angel's life, his family history, and asked for as much as he could share about Cesar and the experiences he has had since finding out about his death. My intention was to keep the interview conversational, as I felt that that would be the best approach given the subject matter being so intimate for Angel. Bouncing some of the prepared questions off of him, followed by questions specifically tailored to his responses, I felt Angel would feel more at ease than he would if I had peppered him with questions that did not feel natural to the flow of our talk, resulting in a more honest, open dialogue.

My training within the field has shown me that interviewing methodology is project-specific, making flexibility a necessity. The conversational approach that I utilized may not be possible in a project with 45 narrators that seeks very specific information, ultimately to be archived in a university library. Additionally, the conversational approach is one that I have found to be my default. So, keeping in mind the curatorial ends I sought to achieve within this

project, ones that sought to extend an air of relatability, transformation, honor, and forgiveness, deciding to be conversational as opposed to structured felt the right way to conduct the interviews.

#### 4. Narrative

I began to develop the narrative for the story in the phone calls I had with Angel that led up to ultimately agreeing to work together, as detailed in the next section. Listening to Angel's approach to talking about Cesar's alienation, his own response to his absence over the years, and ultimately the manner in which he finally found him, convinced me that this story had to begin in Angel's childhood leading into adulthood, giving us personal background, then go back in time to before he was born to introduce the dispute that Cesar had with his father, ultimately resulting in the present, where the result of that dispute is his burial on Hart Island. I felt it important to center listeners within the context of Hart Island before getting into Angel's story, and so planned to precede Angel's narrative with a historical focus on the island's ownership, uses, practices, and controversies. These sections contrast greatly, one analytical and the other unscripted and emotional, but serve each other well in constructing a narrative about a reality that many New Yorkers face, and that exposes the frigidity in the city's approach to ensuring a respectful burial and gravesite visitation for family and friends.

I begin the dialogue between Angel and I asking him, knowing he is not from there, why he chose to live in Fredericksburg, Virginia. This allowed me to then ask him to share background information about himself, where he came from, what growing up was like, and ultimately an analysis of his family life. Doing this allowed me to understand his family, and his place within their dynamic. This is important as it sets up the tension between them and himself

when analyzing the dispute that alienated Cesar from the family, and getting into a conversation on his death and burial. Angel and his father appeared to be the only people interested in having Cesar around or simply in their lives.

I included talks about the deaths of his grandfather, Miguel, and father-in-law, as I felt it would not only illustrate the impact of COVID on the Irizarry's, but also highlight the difference between how Miguel, Cesar's father and the other party involved in the dispute, was treated in death compared to Cesar.

Then, I chronologically ordered the trip to St. Raymond's Cemetery and Hart Island. Instead of working in themes, I felt portraying the trip naturally would be better not only for the story itself, but also in illustrating the emotional difference in visiting such contrasting gravesites.

In both locations, the father and son did physical work to clean up the plot. On Hart Island, Angel wrote a message "Forgiven and Loved, Cesar Irizarry" for passersby to know that it was him who was buried there. Angel Sr. cleared weeds from his parents' grave, and made a cross from loose twigs, sticks, and rocks found along the road we had just ridden on, directly under which Cesar is buried. Including this was important for me; as I watched, I considered embodiment and the emotionality inherent in that physical work. Creating a sound effect for the dirt-writing served as, in my opinion, a good point of reflection, that I hope leads listeners to consider the embodiment of an experience such as this.

In the closing moments, Angel declares "[Cesar is] no longer lost." This line inspired the project's name, which was originally going to be "Found." Considering the lack of a gravestone for Cesar, and therefore the lack of naming for him and the million others buried there, I felt it important to name him.

## 5. Process

I felt it important that Angel and I work together on crafting what the story would become. One of the most thought-provoking elements of OHMA's curriculum, for me, is the debate over ownership, in literal and philosophical senses, of a story. In the collaborative spirit of oral history, it is important to be transparent about the goals we pursue in utilizing the stories of our narrators, and ensuring that the curated result is one that a narrator feels comfortable with. Personally, I feel in a project such as this where there is one central story, if someone is generous enough to entrust me with their incredibly personal story, it is imperative to repay that trust by ensuring that whatever I make is something that is true to the narrator's story and specific desires, and that brings about a sense of pride for having taken part in its creation. And so, it felt natural to have conversations about what it is that I wanted, what it was that he wanted, and our vision for the final product throughout the entire project.

While we did not discuss the research elements that would make up the opening narration, we both agreed on what was important to accomplish in sharing Cesar's story. In gathering the biographical elements of his, his uncle's, and his family's history, Angel made it known to me that he did not want to identify or talk to any meaningful level of specificity about his family members, as they would not have consented to participation in the project, nor would they have appreciated their privacy being infringed upon. Additionally, he set strict boundaries on what he felt comfortable sharing on a personal level, and asked that I update my questions to adhere to these specific requests. I was understanding of this, but worried that this would not allow for a complete presentation of the conflict that arose between Cesar and the Irizarry's, sans Angel. An oral history methodology implicitly includes steadfast respect for and allegiance to the

wishes of narrators relative to privacy and narrative edits, and so this meant I had to adjust how I was to ask my questions, and how I told of the dispute. In constructing the narrative, I was happy to find that the details of the dispute itself were not as important as the results, and so this did not actually pose any issue at all. I maintained a level of privacy that Angel felt comfortable with, and was able to put together a description of the event that achieved what I felt was necessary in the grander context of the family's relationships.

So, after discussing the goals of the project, coming to an understanding of his privacy concerns, and figuring out the necessary travel preparation that we would both respectively need in order to come together, we started planning the dates that I would fly, ride the Amtrak, and Uber to Fredericksburg for our sit-down interviews, and those that he would drive to New York to visit the gravesites of both his grandparents' and uncle. We quickly settled on early May for our sit-down interviews, and May 22nd, 2022 for our trip to Hart Island.

A few days before I left for Fredericksburg, MISSING THEM editor Anjali Tsui and I met for lunch in Harlem, where she told me she had been contacted by an executive producer for Radio Diaries, an NPR-affiliated podcast, about their search for a COVID-related story about Hart Island. Knowing my plan, she felt this would be a good opportunity for me and so, after confirming my interest, set up a meeting with the producers so that I could pitch them the story. They felt that it was a compelling story, and were interested in taking it on, but wanted to hear the recordings before any agreement was put into place. They made it clear that this was first and foremost my thesis, and that they did not want me to change my approach for them. I appreciated this, and felt confident that I could accomplish my own objectives while providing tape that they could work with.

While I did not change my approach to the sit-down interviews, I altered how I approached the field interviews at the cemetery and Hart Island. I decided to approach this session in a manner inspired by Radio Diaries episodes that I had listened to. One such episode, *Quarantine in the Pizzeria*, was about a young daughter who spent part of lockdown in her father's pizzeria. I felt that the lack of interviewer intervention did well to create an intimate moment of reflection between the two, and wished to bring that about at the gravesites. I thought about how while I would be recording their reactions, Angel and his father would be dealing with emotions that I simply could not relate to, and so felt that the decent thing to do would be act as a fly on the wall while they had their experience, only becoming involved for specific details or questions requested in a way that felt germane to the moment. It is important to note that this technique is oral historical in nature, centering the experience of the grieving duo ahead of anything to do with my production.

For my sit-down interviews, I used a Zoom F6 recorder with an Acacia Hypercardioid Shotgun mic on a mic stand. I opted not to use a mic for my own questions, and instead re-recorded my questions at a later date. We recorded in Angel's basement, where he has a spare room that he says he had previously recorded vocals for rap songs he had made. We listened to some of them as he drove me from my hotel to his house, and they were surprisingly good. During the field interviews, I used the same recorder and mic, but used a pistol grip to capture the conversations between Angel and his father, and the sounds of the cemetery and our surroundings on the ferry and Hart Island.

## 6. Challenges

There were a number of challenges that I faced throughout the interviewing and curation process. These mostly have to do with the practice of recording in the field; relative to getting approval to record on Hart Island, and managing to properly aim the pistol grip while holding the recorder as still as possible, and ultimately making the necessary corrections in editing.

With the transition of Hart Island's jurisdiction from the New York City Corrections Department to the Department of Parks and Recreation, there have been noticeable improvements in giving families and friends access to their loved ones' graves. A concern I had early on was that this would not have been the case, but I found the process of reserving a spot on the ferry to be relatively smooth. In getting permission to record on the island, I asked for approval in writing to ensure that I would not face any issues, but was denied and told that every worker on the island is aware of the new rules regarding recording, and that I would not face any problems. When we arrived at the dock, I was informed by the guides, which were either police or park security, that I would not be able to record. Panicked, I mentioned the name of the representative I had been in contact with, and told them what he had told me, but they did not relent. Angel's father pointed out that it was just audio recording that I was doing and that it was for a family project, at which point they finally allowed me to record. They said that the rules forbade filming, but not recording audio, and that they had thought I was filming.

Capturing audio while utilizing a pistol grip posed some concerns about post-production; my Zoom F6 recorder is a small box-shaped device that has a rolling slot at the top to attach to a camera. The Zoom F6 is meant to be a tabletop or tripod recorder, and so carrying it caused the rolling slot at the top to make noises throughout recording. While editing this out was not hard, I do see the need to expand my kit to include a recorder meant specifically for field interviews that require movement.

## 7. Research

The majority of this documentary is not based on Hart Island research, rather, it is centered around the interviews that captured the story of Angel and Cesar. I did not take inspiration from any other radio documentary in terms of editing style, instead, I cultivated my own.

I used three general sources; journalistic stories published by local and national news media entities, statistical data gathered and published by the government of New York City, and oral history projects and publications based on the efforts of local families and groups for the betterment of Hart Island visitation and maintenance, and proper memorialization of their family members and friends buried there.

The opening minutes of the documentary consist of both personal reflection and research. I reflected on my experience being away from New York, resulting in my heightened interest in the experience of New York/ers during the pandemic, and ultimately how the story came about. This leads into a concentration on the history of Hart Island, and the social perception it has in New York society.

Key to my research and preparation were the interactions I had with the editors I worked with at MISSING THEM, and several OHMA alumni who had previously done work in podcasting and on Hart Island. Additionally, the historical and journalistic framing provided by MISSING THEM's accountability journalism articles illustrated to me the benefits of community engagement, research, and collaborativity in activating stories such as this to achieve palpable change. These articles, covering the unprecedented burials on Hart Island during the

pandemic, and the status of island maintenance and memorialization work, are some of the richest available.

Former MISSING THEM editor Dean Russell was instrumental in helping me figure out in the early days of this work what it is that I wanted to focus on accomplishing in the narrative, balancing putting forth the intended level of humanity for Cesar within a larger narrative that encapsulates all of those buried alongside him. Additionally, he and current editor, Anjali Tsui, have been incredibly helpful in guiding me through the process of working with Radio Diaries, and the expectation of reporting and co-producing for a broadcasted podcast. Our conversations focused on contractual issues and expectations, collaborating with a show or team that may not share the same outlook on curatorial objectives, and creating and maintaining a network of contacts, both relative to narrators and industry professionals, that will be of use to me in all of my future work. Without them, I would not be able to share, or even imagine sharing, this story across such a large audience as that offered by NPR airwaves.

Additionally, the writings supplied to me by OHMA-alum Leyla Vural, and The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project's Potters Field Campaign, were crucial in providing me an idea of what confronting Hart Island as a mourner looks and feels like. I was introduced to the project through reading its eponymous zine before attending a workshop with Lynn Lewis, and was compelled by how it portrayed the realities of those who have family or friends buried on Hart Island, and those who face burial there. Further, the short film listed on the project's website, *Journey Towards Freedom*, is a testament to the efforts made by homeless people to seek visitation rights, respect, and dignity for those buried there. The film follows a group of homeless individuals going to Hart Island to pay their respects. Throughout, they talk about what the island represents, the impact that social marginalization has had on their lives, and their

desires for a more humane Hart Island. One of the narrators, Rogers, after explaining the group's goals just outside the dock, offers a poignant statement:

“We’re looking to have, you know, due respect paid to them. Because the fact that we’re homeless, you know... I could be in there next month. And my pastor won't be allowed to come into the island to say farewell to me. My friends won't be allowed to... I mean I could be there next month. This is the experience of... as we go through the shelter system this is our experience.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the group was denied access to the island. Citing a prison-like atmosphere, the film concludes with member Charlie Heck animatedly stating his demands for a better island. In his message, you can hear the weight Hart Island holds within the people present.

## 8. Questions Raised and Relevance to the Field of Oral History

In creating this story, and considering its place within the field of oral history, there are two distinct takeaways. The first; oral history interviewing methods and rapport building are fundamental to the construction of open and honest dialogue, resulting in a fuller narrative with which there are a lot of options and wiggle room to curate. The second; stories like this could be fundamental in naming, memorializing, and community building around issues of memorialization. How can we properly activate these stories to achieve such ends?

It is clear that societal problems such as those posed by the operations at Hart Island can result in community pushback and action; we can see this through the successes of the Hart

Island Project and the varying organizations and publications that work towards similar ends. I believe that stories such as this can do well to illustrate to the public the needs for change and proper humanization of those buried on Hart Island and those that go there to visit. The ability to consider Hart Island with the addition of biographical narratives of one or two or however many people possible that are buried there, can perhaps change the perception of the island to a more peaceful and respectful one, as opposed to one based on the othering of those buried there. To present humanity makes it next to impossible to deny. The highly intimate, engaged, and emotional nature of oral history interviews makes the methodology perfect for these types of stories.

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