Life After Disaster: A Visual Ethnography of Life, Family and Homes After Flooding in Peru

I am walking down a dusty dirt road. The only things that distinguish the road from the surrounding landscape are the tire tracks and the presence of fewer rocks than the surrounding area. The place I am in has been severely devastated by flooding from an El Niño event 2 months ago. Previously there were houses where all I see now is vast empty space with rocks and dirt. There is, however, one large building that continually draws my attention. It survived much of the destruction because it is made of brick and cement with steel rods through it for reinforcement.

My task is to map this area to see what remains now. As I go farther and farther away from the gathering area the amount of devastation and destruction permeates my soul and I am filled with so much gratitude for what I have. I also feel incredible amounts of grief and appreciation for what this group of people has gone through and what they still must be going through.

This community is a unique one. It is a group of 42 families that have come together after the El Niño flooding that occurred in Northern Peru during March and April of 2017. Most of their physical possessions were lost; some families even lost their home though others still have houses to live in. In the immediate gathering area three houses remain standing, each with varying levels of erosion. There are also other houses in the farther surrounding area. Other families were not so fortunate and they lost everything but the clothes on their backs. These 42 families came together to establish an olla común or ‘communal pot’ to share their meals every day.

The community is a 10-minute drive north of Trujillo, Peru, a dry flat desert coastal area nestled between the ocean and the mountains. On one of our visits, I was surprised to see there is a whole range of mountains in the distance. On 7 of our 8 visits, the smog that lingers in the air on a regular basis hid the mountain range and only allowed me to see the one mountain that is close to the area.

I visited the olla común eight times over the course of five weeks and took pictures of occurrences of everyday life. I wanted to capture what it is like to live in a place after a natural disaster. One of the eight times that I went was with Martha, the
teaching assistant for our class, to take family pictures for some members of the community. The family pictures embedded in this ethnography are accompanied by a small summary of each person, a description of their role in the community and as an informant, and insight to what they value and how these values differ within families.

In addition to taking photographs, I also helped conduct a needs assessment with this community. This exercise helped us to identify both the immediate and long-term needs of the community. I also assisted with conducting some asset questionnaires to find out what the people in the community had. We asked about the physical assets, but we also asked about the skill sets of each person to help them begin thinking about the things they may be able to do to move forward.

**Figure 1:** As we conduct needs assessments one of the most common concerns that are expressed is electricity. In this photo, it illustrates that there are no streetlights in this area. In the area just north of me there are, but not here. The members of the *olla común* have experienced robbery and theft because of the darkness that engulfs them at night.
Figure 2: During my first visit to this community, Rafael, a Peruvian anthropologist and cultural liaison to our group, took us on a walk to show us the massive amounts of destruction that occurred. The empty space here was once filled with homes. They were completely washed away by the flooding that came down from the mountains in March 2017. One of the members of the *olla común* split off from the group and began walking across the terrain to her home. She crosses through this area twice daily to get her food from the *olla común*. 
Figure 3: This is the main gathering area where food is prepared and cooked daily. A blue tarp is attached to poles to create an enclosure. Bricks are stacked on the ground in two columns, two high with space in the middle for firewood as a functioning stove to cook all the food for the community. These ladies are removing a very large pot full of chicken from the fire. Each member of the *olla común* is allotted one piece of chicken in their bowl accompanied by beans and rice. The beans are scooped from the clear bucket with the red lid and the rice is in the large black pot on the ground.
One day when we went to the *olla común* during lunch time, my colleague Gavin decided to jump in and help dish up the food. The women were confused and questioned why a man was helping them do kitchen work. Since he was willing they assigned him the task of serving chicken. He recalls that he was only allowed to give each member one piece of chicken, even if that piece was only a foot. A member from each household would come and get food for their family and then take it back to their home. Each member was intrigued that a man was helping dish up their food, some even poked fun at him. I noticed that the men in the community were not in the kitchen area except to get food. They were usually building or fixing something.

The houses that are gone were only made of what the residents call squatter material or adobe bricks that were never baked. Once their house was built the residents covered the outside with a layer of cement and painted it to make it look nice. When the floods came the bricks washed away and melted back into the ground as if they were never formed. The roofs were made of the tin that is shown in the picture below. Much of the tin was also washed away in the floods and now people are using whatever material they can get their hands on. The three houses that I referred to before that are still standing
were able to do so because of the foresight of their owners. They stacked sandbags around their houses to keep them from washing away.

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*Figure 5:* This is the home of Nedra and Jeffry. The doorway was affected by the flooding. You can see the cement has broken off and exposed the adobe bricks. The house is mostly empty, but they still manage to have pictures on the wall. There is a light bulb hanging from the beam that is holding up roof material. A bucket of clean water sits under the window. The community receives clean water and portions it out in buckets for everyone to use. Along the bottom portion of the wall, there is a brown stripe indicating how deep the water was when it came rushing through.

While it is compelling to see the devastation that occurred, the more compelling pieces to me are the people that make up the *olla común*. I want to capture some of the families so Martha and I decide to go on an excursion together. The object of the excursion is similar for both of us. I want to take family pictures to document some of the main characters of our research. I also want to give back for all their generosity, so I

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1 Names changed to protect the members of the Olla Común.
take the pictures with the intention of printing them off for them to have as well.

Martha is also doing a photo project and would like pictures of the same families I do.

We are driving from our place in Huanchaco to the community we work with just north of Trujillo. I’m sitting in the back seat of a Volvo that looks to be 25+ years old but well taken care of. Rafael [my local research assistant] is taking time out of his Saturday to take Martha and me to our field location to take pictures of a few of the residents we work with. As the wind whips through the window I begin to smell the all too familiar scent of waste. It is a pungent smell and even though I have made this trip 6 other times I still have to cover my nose through various parts of the trip. The road is lined with piles of garbage and probably human waste. The last stretch of road is the part that takes the longest since it has more loose dirt and rocks than the other roads we travel on. Rafael snakes the car back and forth to avoid the larger rocks.

We pull into the olla común and are greeted by our friends. First, we see two of the women already getting lunch cooked up for everyone. Then Rosita greets us. We talk for a moment and then discuss what each of us needs on this trip to help us with our projects. I conclude that I would like pictures of Pam, Nedra and their family and Rosita, Brad and their family. We go over and talk to Pam for a moment and let her know that we would like a picture with her and Nedra (her daughter) and Nedra’s husband. Pam then asks if her husband can be in the photo with them as well. Martha and I both adamantly reassure her that is exactly what we want. On our way back over to Rosita’s house, Martha asks me, “Did you know that Pam had a husband?” to which I replied, “I had an inkling, but I wasn’t positive.”

Before we start talking with Rosita again Rafael lets us know that he is leaving, but will be back in an hour. We ask Rosita when Brad will be home and if we can get a picture of them and of the rest of her family that is there today. She said Brad will not be back until 12:30, but we can take pictures of them when he returns from work. We meander back over to Pam’s house and talk for a while as she, Jesus and Jeffry continue processing their food. They are removing the kernels from dry cobs of corn with their thumbs and putting them into a huge blue tub. Martha talks with them for a minute about how and where they want their pictures taken. They come to the consensus that the pictures should be taken in the back yard with their trees as the backdrop. As we make our way into the shared backyard of Pam and Nedra we observe who is married to whom as they pair up and are ready for us to take their pictures. We are both absolutely shocked to find out that Jesus and Pam are an item and Nedra and Jeffry are an item. We mistakenly thought it was the other way around. It just goes to show that even after 4 weeks of working with people there are still things to learn.
I asked, “Why did you come here in the first place?”
To which Nedra replied, “I met my husband.”
Jeffry responded, “It’s cheaper here.”
“What do you value most?”
Nedra replied, “Unity, more than family.”
Jeffry said, “Social connections, family, and friends.”
Nedra is the one that organized the *olla común*. She is recognized as a leader in the community. I look to her for a lot of information on each of my visits to the area. We also learned that she has many skills, she hopes to open a cevichería one day. Jeffry is great at construction work, but would one day like to be a taxi driver.
Figure 7: Pam and Jesus.
I asked, “Why did you move here in the first place?”
Pam responded, “I bought a store and wanted a house.”
Jesus said, “To study.”
“What do you value most?”
Pam replied, “God and physical health”
Jesus responded, “Community, to get along with everyone in case you are in need one day.”
Pam is Nedra’s mother and they currently work together doing craft painting to make their living. Objects include tea boxes, phone holders, and jewelry boxes. Jesus has worked in construction his whole life and wants to learn more about mechanics.
“Why did you move here in the first place?” I asked.
Tony said, “It’s expensive where I lived before.”
Rosita responded, “My husband works here.”
Brad replied, “To work, I moved from Lima for my sisters and better environment.”
“What do you value most?”
Tony replied, “Finish studies and have my own career.”
Rosita said, “Spiritual and mental health.”
Brad said, “Family and personal health and to get ahead with family after this crisis.”
Pictured here is the family of Rosita and Brad. I only know three of the people in this picture, because most of the girls have come to the community in the last week. From left to right there is Tony (Rosita’s nephew), three girls that are Rosita’s cousins, Rosita, Brad (her husband) and Brad’s sister. Tony is one of the people that talks to the group the most. He is very helpful in teaching us many things particularly about plants in the area. The olla común is attached to the front of Rosita’s house. She graciously allows her space to be utilized for the good of the community.
Rosita, Brad and Tony all want to open their own restaurant. They enjoy cooking very much. Rosita and Brad’s restaurant would consist of foods of the jungle since that is where they came from.
“Why did you move here in the first place?”
“I have a house here,” she replies.
I asked, “What do you value most?”
Phoebe said, “My kids are the most important thing to me.”
Phoebe is one of the single mothers in the community. She often helps with the cooking. Each time I come she talks with one of my colleagues or me and answers any questions we may have. Her best skills are dancing and supporting the community. One day she would like to be a nurse.
The aforementioned stories highlight the uniqueness of each family. I notice that the women find value in family, spirituality, health, and unity. The men find value in family, social connection, education, and community. I am not surprised that the things they expressly value are intangible. I was curious to see if anyone valued tangible assets over intangible, but with these particular families, it was not that way.

I have not asked any follow-up questions to understand better why they said something is valued. I know that Brad’s answer is affected by the flooding, but I wonder if all of them have been or if other answers would have been the same regardless. I suddenly regret not following up with more questions. Questions I may have asked are: Why is (insert answer here) what you value most? Is this a new development, or is this what you valued previous to the flooding here? How did this become valuable to you?

The expressed values may also be different in the future. I think that people’s values may fluctuate depending on where they are at in life. In my research, I didn’t find anything talking about what people value in different phases of life. This would be a great topic of research for the future.

For our last visit to the olla común, I printed off some of the photos I took so I could give them out. I want to give something back to the community since they have been so willing to help me with my project. I feel like photos of the community members would be one way to do that.

As I pass out photos I quickly realize that I have made an error. There are some people who don’t have a photo. One lady asks one of my colleagues where her photo is. My colleague asks me if I have one for her and my heart drops. I immediately decide to take more pictures with the intention of sending prints back to the community members that didn’t receive one.
Figure 10: These are many of the members of the *olla común* in the main gathering area in front of Rosita’s house. The two women in the foreground wearing red pants and a red shirt are Phoebe and Selma. Both of them are single mothers that have become very good friends. They support and help one another. The men in the back along the wall are from 3 different households. They are often joking and talking to one another. The other women pictured here help with the cooking and building sense of community. Here at the *olla común*, the sense of community is almost tangible. Many of these people didn’t know each other before the flooding event but have come together to create a safe space. These are our last moments with the members of the *olla común*, as we say goodbye to them for the last time.

Working in this community, collecting data, and conducting interviews have been an eye-opening experience for me. I have learned for myself what life can be like after a natural disaster. This community is so welcoming and kind to us, which has been a welcome surprise. Even though they lost everything they continue to share what they can. Most of what they shared with us was a part of themselves. That small part of their lives and identity that was shared will be my greatest treasure.
Works Cited


