Los hijos ausentes: Citizenship, Activism, and Recovery in Post-Hurricane Maria Orlando

JULIE TORRES

ABSTRACT
Drawing on ethnographic research, this essay examines constructions of citizenship among Puerto Rican activists in Orlando, Florida. By foregrounding organizational and grassroots activism after Hurricane Maria, I examine how “worthiness” and belonging are articulated in a post-disaster diasporic context. Additionally, this essay draws attention to the transnational dimensions of activism and citizenship. I ultimately argue that, for Puerto Ricans in Orlando, activism provides an avenue to prove their worthiness in relation to the U.S. nation state, as well as stake belonging to a larger transnational Puerto Rican community. [Keywords: Puerto Ricans, Orlando, Hurricane Maria, activism, citizenship, transnationalism]
Introduction

On February 8, 2019, an article appeared on the online version of the Spanish language newspaper *El Nuevo Día* with the headline “Boricuas que migraron a Florida tras el huracán María sintieron discrímen de sus compatriotas” (“Puerto Ricans who migrated to Orlando after Hurricane Maria felt discriminated against by their fellow Puerto Ricans”) (J. J. Pérez 2019). The article referred to a study conducted by the University of Miami’s Miller School of Medicine, which found that Puerto Rican evacuees in Orlando experienced more difficulties when it came to housing, employment, and transportation than their counterparts in Miami. The study also found that evacuees in Orlando encountered more “hostility” from other Puerto Ricans in the area (Scaramutti et al. 2019). The article quickly circulated on social media and was posted to the “Boricuas en Orlando” Facebook page, attracting a number of comments. While some posters suggested that evacuees should have been better prepared to make the move to Orlando, others, like the following poster, expressed their disappointment about how Puerto Ricans were being received by other Boricuas:

*Wow! Eso si esta triste!* That is a damn shame. It saddens me and shames me that my fellow Puerto Ricans that have been here 10 or 20 plus years would react with hostility and forget how hostile Central Florida was for us 20 or so years ago. How far we have come since then here.

As I continued to scroll through the comments section, I was reminded of a conversation I had with a nurse named Eduardo, who had left Puerto Rico nearly three decades ago.¹ As we sat in the lobby of the hospital where he worked, I asked him about his relationships with other Latinx in the area. Eduardo explained:

This is something that you probably already heard before, but one thing that I don’t like from, if I can call my people, from Puerto Rico, we don’t help each other and it's very clear to me. Yes, the person that helped me to move here was my friend [who] is Puerto Rican, but that’s because I knew him from the time I was a child. Otherwise, I don’t see that the Puerto Rican people get together like other people do to help each other. I see Cubans get together and they move the planet if they have to. Sometimes Dominicans,
they get together. Venezuelans, they get together. Puerto Ricans, very hardly you see that. They are always fighting for something. They fight among each other... Sometimes you don’t feel the support from them. It’s unfortunate.

Eduardo was right about one thing—I had heard this before. In fact, several Puerto Ricans I spoke with both formally and informally suggested that Puerto Ricans were the first to “cut each other down” or look the other way. These discursive constructions of Puerto Ricans as hostile or unsupportive function as yet another iteration of “delinquency” (Ramos-Zayas 2004). According to Ramos-Zayas (2004), Puerto Ricans experience “delinquent citizenship” and must continually prove their worthiness in relation to the U.S. nation-state, despite their identity as true citizens. However, I open with the vignette above in order to demonstrate how delinquency and, conversely, worth may also be positioned against broader ideas of a Puerto Rican nation.

Both before and after Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017, as a category 4 storm, Puerto Ricans in Orlando had been “fighting for something,” although not in the way that Eduardo meant. By foregrounding organizational and grassroots relief efforts, this paper demonstrates not only the importance of the diaspora in Orlando to post-Maria recovery, but also to scholarly understandings of citizenship and belonging within the context of disaster. How is citizenship configured and articulated by Puerto Rican activists in the post-Maria moment? On the one hand, I find that Puerto Rican activists in Orlando engage in what Ramos-Zayas refers to as the “politics of worthiness,” that is, “the tacit and explicit insistence that Puerto Ricans, and the Puerto Rican poor in particular, must prove their deservingness of US citizenship in order to be legitimately entitled to civil rights and social benefits that other—particularly white male—populations can assume as inalienable” (Ramos-Zayas 2003, 10). But on the other hand, I argue that activism also functions as a mechanism to assert worthiness and belonging, not only in relation to the U.S. nation-state, but to a larger transnational Puerto Rican community.

The data for this essay is grounded in two years of ethnographic research conducted in the Orlando metropolitan area between January 2016 and January 2018. This includes traditional anthropological methods, such as participant observation of protests, meetings, and cultural events, as well
as 48 semi- and unstructured interviews with Puerto Rican activists and Orlando residents. It is part of a larger research project that engages with the intersections of activism, crisis, and diaspora.

I begin by providing a brief overview of the many layers (Yuval-Davis 1999) of citizenship, with an emphasis on transnational and neoliberal citizenship. Secondly, I examine how the concept of worthiness takes on added meaning as Puerto Ricans struggle to not only assert citizenship in the U.S. nation state, but also prove their deservingness of disaster relief. I pay particular attention to how the deployment of worthiness sometimes serves to reinforce neoliberal logic. Lastly, I introduce the grassroots efforts of one group of Puerto Rican women who established Adopta Un Pueblo, an “adopt a town” initiative that sought to provide solar light bulbs to Puerto Ricans on the archipelago. Their efforts reveal how transnational renderings of el pueblo or “community” shape the contours of activism and belonging.

On Citizenship, Worth, and Belonging

Although not mutually exclusive of legal status, citizenship has been conceived of in various forms, from social inclusion to rights and membership (Bosniak 2000; Caldwell et al. 2009; Flores and Benmayor 1997; Oboler 2006; Rocco 2014; Somers 2008). But social events, such as disasters, coupled with mounting anti-immigrant sentiment, force us to re-confront the question: What does it mean to be a citizen when “even those who are legal residents and citizens are being re-imagined as less deserving members of the community” (Chávez 2003, 423)? In her ethnographic work on constructions of nationalism in Chicago’s Humboldt Park, Ramos-Zayas (2004; 2003) finds that the concept of worthiness is configured around involvement in the military, which is viewed as a mechanism of achieving self-worth. Similarly, Gina Pérez argues that, for its largely Puerto Rican and Latinx participants, the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) becomes a way to prove that “they are good, positive leaders among their peers, and worthy of dignity” (Pérez 2015, 148).

While these studies bring to the fore how Puerto Ricans contest their own racialization through social practices and discourses that facilitate a deliberate inclusion in American society, they do so within the confines of the nation-state. As Clifford (1994) suggests through the metaphor of routes
and routes, diaspora not only implies travel, but also dwelling—the constructions of communities both real and imagined (Anderson 1983). A “nation on the move” (Duany 2002), Puerto Ricans maintain attachments through processes of migration, exodus, and displacement that serve to challenge notions of citizenship tied to a singular nation-state (Appadurai 1996; Basch et al. 1994; Bosniak 2000; Ong 1999; Smith 2003). In this paper, I advocate for a transnational approach to citizenship that recognizes the porosity of belonging and calls to question the relationship between subjects and states (Bauböck 1994; Berg and Rodríguez 2013; Fox 2005; Stokes 2004).

Hurricane Maria was far from a centralized disaster. Its effects were devastating and far-reaching, as hundreds of thousands evacuated to places like Central Florida and those in the diaspora mobilized to play a hand in the archipelago’s recovery and assert their worth.

The concept of diasporic citizenship is particularly analytically productive to the case at hand. Drawing on the idea of cultural citizenship (Flores and Benmayor 1997; Rosaldo 1994), Lok Siu (2005) argues that belonging is shaped not only by the relationship individuals have to their nation of residence, but also by their relationship to their “ethnic homeland” and the larger United States. The idea of “worthiness” among Puerto Rican activists in Orlando must also be configured in the same way. Their activism is rhizomatically connected, rooted by familial, economic, socio-political, and emotional attachments to Puerto Rico (Aranda 2007; Duany 2011; Pérez 2004). Hurricane Maria was far from a centralized disaster. Its effects were devastating and far-reaching, as hundreds of thousands evacuated to places like Central Florida and those in the diaspora mobilized to play a hand in the archipelago’s recovery and assert their worth.

But ideas of transnational citizenship, as Berg and Rodríguez argue, also “must be understood as an outcome of sovereignty differentials between states and transnational contestations between states and subjects (both citizen and non-citizen)” (2013, 7). Central to this is an understanding of how structural forces, such as neoliberalism, also converge to shape
emergent forms of citizenship (Berg and Rodríguez 2013). Neoliberalism is defined as a “theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” (Harvey 2005, 2). In addition to the ways that neoliberalism is reproduced and sustained by phenomena like disaster capitalism (Bonilla 2017; Bonilla and LeBrón 2019; Klein 2018; Klein 2007), neoliberalism also functions discursively. As I discuss in the following section through the discourses of mobility and resiliency, neoliberalism circulates transnationally to determine ideas of worth and shape activist claims to belonging. These notions of citizenship as transnational and neoliberal, although not mutually exclusive, are equally important to understanding how citizenship is being configured by activists in the Orlando metropolitan area.

**Neoliberal Citizenship: “A hand up, not a handout”**

The context of disaster adds another dimension to questions of worthiness and belonging. Following Hurricane Maria, Puerto Ricans were faced with the task of not only having to prove their worthiness of U.S. citizenship, but also prove their deservingness of U.S. aid in relation to other U.S. citizens. While there are several examples of this after Maria, perhaps none is clearer than the U.S. government’s initial refusal to suspend the Jones Act. Under the cabotage provisions of the 1920 Merchant Marine Act, commonly referred to as the Jones Act, all goods transported between U.S. ports must be carried by U.S. vessels owned and operated by U.S. citizens. This policy prohibited foreign boats from delivering food, fuel, and other much needed emergency supplies to Puerto Rico in the critical days that followed the hurricane. In contrast, the Department of Homeland Security suspended the Jones Act in Texas and Florida almost immediately following hurricanes Harvey and Irma, respectively. While the Jones Act was eventually temporarily suspended in Puerto Rico for ten days, it was not until a full week after Hurricane Maria made landfall. Such actions not only render Puerto Ricans as less deserving of aid than their U.S. counterparts, but also demonstrate how Puerto Rico’s colonial relationship with the United States continues to constitute who is deserving of protection and aid.
Moreover, many of the activists and community leaders I spoke with were hyperaware of the stigmatization of Puerto Ricans both prior to and following Hurricane Maria. As one community leader told a room of reporters: “I remember when I was a kid in New York, Puerto Ricans got a bad name and they’re trying to do the same thing here. And I always quote the saying, ‘Puerto Ricans want a hand up, not a handout.”’ The speaker was referring to the racialization of Puerto Ricans that is well documented in traditional diasporic sites, such as New York and Chicago (Fernández 2012; Findlay 2012; Padilla 1987; Rúa 2010; Sanchez-Korrol 1989). Hurricane Maria ushered in yet another surge of “culture of poverty” (Lewis 1966) narratives, which were directly reflected by the words of a U.S. president who believes that Puerto Ricans “want everything to be done for them” (@realDonaldTrump 2017). The idea of a “hand up,” in contrast, denotes upwards mobility, which becomes characteristic of “good” citizenship in the current neoliberal moment. In their attempts to prove worth and resist culture of poverty ideas, activists, politicians, and other allies, at times, reinforced neoliberal ideas of citizenship.

A “hand up” was precisely the message delivered during a press conference held by the Orlando-arm of Power 4 Puerto Rico, a nation-wide coalition of organizations launched under the Latino Victory Project (LVP), whose goal was to put pressure on the federal government to address the catastrophic effects of Hurricane Maria through legislative action. According to an organizational pamphlet, Power 4 Puerto Rico calls on states’ and local governments to “welcome their fellow Americans” by investing resources in local schools, Medicare, and housing through FEMA’s Transitional Sheltering Assistance (TSA) program. Among their specific demands were that Congress waive FEMA’s cost-sharing requirements and that the disbursement of funding not depend on the votes of the Fiscal Oversight and Management Board.

It was exactly two months after Hurricane Maria swept through the archipelago. I arrived at Acacia’s Centro Borinqueno, a hub for Puerto Rican events in the community, and took a seat in the crowd among community members, organizers, and a small group of reporters who had gathered for the press conference. Mariana, a local activist originally from New York, welcomed the audience and began to explain the purpose of their initiative:
Central Florida is receiving the vast majority of migrants coming through this exodus, despite our shortage of affordable housing options, among other gaps. As we come upon Thanksgiving, a day where you give thanks, you unite with your family, we should think about the millions of people that have been displaced—that still don’t have power, that still don’t have food, that they will not be able to convene with their families and have a traditional Thanksgiving. Instead, Congress has taken a longer break and has not taken action on Puerto Rico. Again, we need to make sure that they hear us loud and clear and that Florida comes to the table as an important factor here.

Mariana’s words emphasize the plight not only of those on the archipelago, but also of the estimated 56,000 Puerto Ricans who arrived in Florida in the six months after the storm (Hinojosa et al. 2018). While Maria undoubtedly contributed to the recent demographic growth of the region, Puerto Rican migration to Florida did not start, nor will it end, with Maria. Prior to the hurricane, over a million Puerto Ricans were already residing in the state—a migration that was historically facilitated by a number of factors, including military involvement, labor recruitment, and the opening of Walt Disney’s theme park (Duany and Silver 2010; Silver 2010). In recent decades, a major push factor has been the economic instability of Puerto Rico, which is experiencing an approximately $74 billion debt and crippling austerity measures.

But Mariana’s statement does more than point to the importance of Orlando as a site for the diaspora. With Thanksgiving just a few days away, her evocation of this quintessential American holiday was both timely and significant. As Siskand notes:

\begin{quote}
In every household that considers itself American or desires to become American, Thanksgiving brings family members back home, ritually strengthening attenuated ties of kinship and investing the set of meanings incorporated in being an American with the emotional intensity and significance of family. (1992, 168)
\end{quote}

In Orlando, Americanness is oftentimes discursively associated with whiteness, facilitating the othering of black and brown bodies (Delerme 2013). By positioning the Puerto Rican family as the American family, Mariana inserts Puerto Ricans into this racialized landscape. Her emotional appeal that, without action, Puerto Ricans would not be able to partake
in a traditional Thanksgiving is an attempt to humanize and bring Puerto Ricans to the literal and figurative table.

During the press conference, Congressman Darren Soto, the first person of Puerto Rican descent to represent Florida’s 9th Congressional District in Congress, took the analogy a step further, saying:

You know 400 years ago Pilgrims arrived in the United States in America seeking an opportunity, but they faced great struggle, they faced death and their communities faced near starvation, but they came together during that time, during that struggle and went on to flourish. I look at that as what we need to do now here both in Puerto Rico and in Central Florida in our communities.

Congressman Soto’s words demonstrate that while neoliberalism is a set of political economic practices that are characterized by deregulation, privatization, and decreased social spending, it also refers to a “commonsense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey 2007, 23). His emphasis on hard work and resilience reflect the neoliberal values that undergird state policies and constructions of “good” (neoliberal) citizenship (Collins et al. 2008; Duggan 2003; Ramos-Zayas 2012).

The pervasive post-disaster discourse of resilience functions to shift the onus of recovery away from the state and onto the individual (Adams 2013; Bonilla 2019; Tierney 2015). As Neocleous argues, “Neoliberal citizenship is nothing if not a training in resilience as the new technology of the self: a training to withstand whatever crisis capital underdoes and whatever political measures the state carries out to save it” (2013, 5). A “hand up” and the oft-heard catch phrase that emerged following the storm, “Puerto Rico se levanta” (“Puerto Rico rises”), are two sides of the same coin, namely, the idea that the good citizen is the equivalent of the resilient citizen who goes on to flourish in the wake of devastation.

“Adopta Un Pueblo”
When she heard the news about Hurricane Maria, Yolanda was lying in a hospital bed in Orlando recovering from a medical condition. A 9/11 first responder, retired police officer, and social worker, Yolanda was all too familiar with the aftermath of the crisis and the bureaucratic aspects of relief. She
explained her reservations about the immediate call for donations from other activists in the community, the “usual suspects,” as she called them:15

You can’t blindly send stuff. You can’t trust that it’s going to be given the way you want it given... You heard the stories, the containers were sitting there unopened while FEMA decided they were going to do for the sake of fairness, for whatever reason, they were going to go through everything in them and then hand it out... And then there’s FEMA food. We don’t eat Jello pudding cups in Puerto Rico. Sorry. We don’t eat beef jerky, but that’s what went out.

Yolanda’s criticisms were not unfounded. Following the hurricane, images quickly circulated on social media of the food allegedly being delivered by FEMA to Puerto Rico. The packages contained Vienna sausages, Cheez-It crackers, candy, and other “junk food,” leading many to question the nutritional value of the food being distributed. FEMA also awarded a $156 million contract to an Atlanta-based contracting company to supply thirty million meals to Puerto Rico, but only 50,000 were delivered.16 The following year, in February 2018, news broke that a rat infestation had contaminated boxes of donations stored in the PRFAA building in Kissimmee, Florida—the food items were never sent to the archipelago (Padró-Ocasio 2018).17 More recently, in January 2020, after a series of earthquakes rocked the archipelago, Puerto Rican residents discovered a warehouse in Ponce with emergency supplies from 2017 that were never distributed.

Concerned with the mismanagement of supplies and what she described as a lack of cultural awareness, Yolanda decided not to focus on perishable goods. Instead, she brainstormed what she considered to be long-term solutions. Upon learning that Hurricane Maria had severely damaged Puerto Rico’s power grid and that it would take anywhere between six months to a year to restore power, Yolanda considered the mental effects of darkness:18

All I kept thinking of was light. Light or lack of. It affects your mood and it’s only a matter of time before depression sets in, because you rise to the occasion when there’s an emergency but your sense of staying at that level of function only lasts for so long. And we didn’t know how long... So solar seemed to catch my attention. So Adopta Un Pueblo was initially about focusing on one area at a time, not focusing on the whole
island, because you could go with a truckload of stuff, but that’s not going to do much for the whole island. But if you focus on one specific town or community, they’re strong and they can help the guys next door.

When her friend Mónica, a local entrepreneur who provided cultural competency training for companies and organizations in the area, returned home from a business trip, Yolanda shared her idea for providing solar-pow-
ered lightbulbs and lanterns one municipality at a time. Mónica immediately jumped on board, and the two decided to pilot the program in Mónica’s hometown of Ciales.

What was perhaps most integral to the success of the project was the building and strengthening of social networks both on the archipelago and in the United States. For instance, Mónica was able to get in touch with an old friend who was now a pastor in Ciales and had a network of over a hundred churches at her disposal to serve as potential distribution sites. Mónica’s sister also joined the project and was able to connect with a teacher in Ciales, who agreed to do an on-the-ground assessment of the needs of her community. “You always go back to your roots,” Monica said, as she described the network-based activism that helped Adopta Un Pueblo come to fruition.

These networks also extended across the diaspora with the help of social media. Mónica explained:

Here on the mainland, it’s making connections using Facebook with people that are from Ciales... even though we don’t know each other. It’s been crazy. We’ve made such a great friendship with this woman that lives in Austin and she’s been collecting all of this stuff and she messengers us, it’s like a group of 35 people, “Hi, here are pictures of all the stuff I have, I just don’t have money to ship it” through el correo to the P.O. Box to the pastor... And so she opens up a PayPal account and we just put money, everybody chips in, and she receives it and then she sends pictures of the receipts from the post office. It’s been nothing short of like a trust network. The foundation of the whole freaking thing has been trust—trusting in your fellow Latinos. And that’s why we call it “los hijos ausentes dicen presente” because even though we’re not en la Isla and we don’t live in the same town, it’s like we have Ciales here in the U.S.

As Mónica indicates, a majority of the group’s communication and recruitment were conducted through Facebook Messenger or the group’s Facebook page, where calls for supplies and instructions on how to adopt a town were posted. There, they also shared videos of volunteers making the trip to Puerto Rico to distribute lightbulbs. These virtual spaces play an important role in the circulation of information, ideas, and narratives, bearing implications for both collective action and the fostering of national identities (Castells 1996; Wilson and Peterson 2002).
The establishment of these trust networks also reveals something about the contours of Puerto Rican nationalism and citizenship. In his seminal work *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that the nation is an “imagined political community” in which “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (1983, 49). The idea of an imagined community is manifest in the interactions Mónica describes with the woman in Austin and with other volunteers in Puerto Rico and across the diaspora, many of whom have not met, but all share a common attachment to the archipelago.

The allusion to fictive kin, in the case of Adopta Un Pueblo, is symbolic of ethnic, familial, moral, and other bonds that adhere individuals to Puerto Rico and each other.

The organization’s slogan, “*los hijos ausentes dicen presente*” (“the absent children say present”), is a form of “long-distance nationalism” (Anderson 1998) that is at once a driving force of their grassroots activism and a claim of belonging. Both Yolanda and Mónica were born in New York, although Mónica spent the majority of her childhood living in Puerto Rico before migrating to the United States as a young adult. Despite their absence from Puerto Rico, Yolanda and Mónica claim their place within a larger Puerto Rican community by drawing on the discourse of kinship. Nowhere is this clearer than in the reference to the return of “absent children” or in the act of “adopting” a town. In anthropology, kinship is traditionally a central component of the study of the organization of society based on biological relationships (Eriksen and Nielsen 2001; Evans-Pritchard 1951; Morgan 1871). But other scholars have contested and expanded classic notions of kinship to extend beyond blood and include other modes of belonging (Collier et al. 1982; Rodríguez 2009; Schneider 1972). The allusion to fictive kin, in the case of Adopta Un Pueblo, is symbolic of ethnic, familial, moral, and other bonds that adhere individuals to Puerto Rico and each other. It is a reminder that, while citizenship is politicized in terms of legality and “illegality,” in its broadest sense, it also denotes “belonging to a community,
imagined or otherwise” (Castaneda 2006, 144). On the one level, Adopta Un Pueblo represents that “more focused response” that Yolanda hoped to achieve, but, on the other, it reveals how Puerto Ricans in the diaspora are “related” or may configure their own notions of belonging—like the act of trying to create “Ciales here in the U.S.”

**Conclusion: A Hot Summer’s Day**

On July 24, 2019, I watched with anticipation from my living room in Orlando as Puerto Rico’s governor, Ricardo Rosselló, announced his resignation in a pre-filmed video that lasted approximately fourteen minutes. This came after nearly 900-pages of Telegram app chat messages between Rosselló and eleven other government officials containing misogynistic, homophobic, violent, and derogatory comments were leaked to the public by Puerto Rico’s Centro de Periodismo Investigativo (Center for Investigative Journalism). The scandal, which became known as “Rickyleaks,” sparked nearly two weeks of intense protest in Puerto Rico, as half a million Puerto Ricans from across the archipelago gathered to call for Rosselló’s resignation. The protests brought together people from all walks of life—young, old,
Black, white, LGBTQ+, straight—who marched through the narrow streets of Old San Juan and seized La Fortaleza (the governor’s mansion).22

Across the diaspora, protests were held in solidarity—the threads tethering Puerto Ricans in the United States to the archipelago also captured by the hashtag #RickyRenuncia. In Central Florida, Puerto Ricans gathered outside the Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration office in Orlando, on the lawn of Lake Eola Park, and on the sidewalks outside of La Terraza Sports Bar in Kissimmee to wave their flags, play their instruments and sing patriotic hymns of liberation. During one of these protests, I made my way through the crowd and noticed a parked car with the words written in white paint: “Ricky renuncia por los que queremos regresar” (“Ricky, resign for those of us who wish to return). As LeBrón (2019) explains, the protests were ultimately about much more than chat messages—they were about “structural violence, degradation, and exploitation that mark contemporary Puerto Rican society.” But they were also about claims to belonging and to human dignity that take up space and overflow across borders.

At the close of the Summer 2019 protests, I was reminded of an earlier conversation with Yolanda, who evoked the “spirit” of the Young Lords and the historical memory of social movements in other U.S. cities.

“So do you see that happening here, like the New York or Chicago movements?” I asked.

“Not right now,” she replied. “We need a good hot summer day where people are bored because they can’t get a job and they’re sick and tired of the same run around. It could be a police shooting, it could be somebody gets hit by a car—just a spark.”

In retrospect, her words seem almost prophetic. Perhaps we have already seen glimpses of that spark. Perhaps there are other hot summer days on the horizon. But in order to see through the glare, we must also recognize that, as Berg and Rodriguez (2013) claim, “the state is no longer the exclusive arena for the practice of citizenship.” As Puerto Ricans in the diaspora struggle against inequality, ideas of citizenship are redefined and transformed. In this paper, I have expanded notions of citizenship and worth through a discussion of Hurricane Maria relief efforts in Orlando. I have argued that activism becomes a way for Puerto Rican activists in Orlando to demand and claim belonging both in relation to the U.S. nation-state and to a transnational
Puerto Rican community. These assertions are at times reflective of neoliberal models of citizenship and deservingness and, at others, indicative of a deliberate inclusion that contests racialized notions of citizenship. Ultimately, Puerto Ricans are located at the borderlands of citizenship, not only in the juridical sense as colonial subjects, but also in the ways that modes of belonging span across multiple spaces and take various forms.
NOTES

1 All names are pseudonyms, except in the case of politicians or other public figures.
2 This, in part, was mediated by the struggle for support and resources among Puerto Rican activists and organizations in the city.
3 Ramos-Zayas (2004) draws a parallel between “delinquent citizenship” and the status of “illegality” that other Latinxs experience.
4 This resonates with the work of historian Lorrin Thomas, who found that Puerto Ricans in twentieth-century New York were in search of dignity and “recognition beyond citizenship” (2010, 250).
5 Following Ong, I consider transnationalism to describe a process of “dismembering from a set of localized relations in the homeland nation and re-embedding in new overlapping networks that cut across borders” (2003, 7).
6 Renato Rosaldo defines cultural citizenship as the “right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense... even when such differences as race, religion, class, gender, or sexual orientation potentially could be used to make certain people less equal or inferior to others” (1994, 402).
7 Klein (2007) argues that the free market depends on the “power of shock”—that is, the disorientation and chaos following disaster—in order to promote neoliberal ideals of deregulation, privatization, and cuts to social spending.
8 In this paper, I refer to the Jones Act of 1920, not to be confused with the Jones Act of 1917, which imposed U.S. citizenship on all Puerto Ricans.
9 For an analysis of racialization in Orlando, see Delerme (2013) and Silver (2013).
10 The concept of “culture of poverty,” as coined by anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1966), supposes that intergenerational poverty is a result of shared cultural values and behaviors, such as dependency and feelings of unworthiness.
11 The Fiscal Oversight and Management Board (FOMB), known colloquially as “la junta” (“the board”), was established under the provisions of the 2016 Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) to oversee the archipelago’s debt. Puerto Ricans have no voting power on the board.
12 Whether this insertion signifies a browning of the holiday or conversely positions Puerto Ricans as closer to whiteness is up for debate.
13 This was in addition to advancing the settler colonial myth of Thanksgiving and providing a disconcerting parallel between pilgrims and Puerto Ricans—the colonizer and the colonized.
14 As Bonilla (2019) suggests, the phrase “Puerto Rico se levanta” took on added meaning during the summer 2019 protests, as Puerto Ricans rose up to demand the resignation of Governor Ricardo Rosselló.
15 Other organizations, such as Coordinadora de Apoyo, Solidaridad y Ayuda (CASA), focused their efforts on collecting water, food, personal hygiene items, and linens to send to Puerto Rico.
16 This is an example of how disaster capitalism operates on the archipelago. FEMA eventually terminated the contract on October 19, 2017.
Although PRFFA officials denied allegations of an infestation, the area’s only regional office closed its doors, later re-opening in Orlando.

We now know that it did take nearly a year to restore power to the majority of Puerto Rico’s residents.

On November 16, 2017, the women held a fundraiser at a local pub and collected over $3,500 to invest in solar lightbulbs. Members of the organization also made several trips to Puerto Rico to distribute lightbulbs and other goods to towns they have “adopted.” By December 2017, Mónica had filed the paperwork to have the organization become a 501(c)(3), with the hopes of creating an umbrella organization with the mission to “aid individuals, families and communities impacted by adversity and hardship due to natural disasters, personal loss or discrimination by amplifying philanthropic collaborative initiatives that bring positive social change.”

His resignation was effective August 2, 2019.

On July 13, 2019, the Centro de Periodismo Investigativo published the full chat, which can be found at <http://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2019/07/las-889-paginas-de-telegram-entre-rossello-nevar-es-y-sus-allegados/>. See also Bonilla (2019) and LeBrón (2019).

For a critical analysis of the summer 2019 protests and the events leading up to them, see the co-edited online forum “The Decolonial Geographies of Puerto Rico’s 2019 Summer Protests: A Forum” (Villanueva and LeBrón 2020).

REFERENCES


