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## Organizing for Here and There: Exploring the Grassroots Organizing of the Puerto Rican Diaspora in the Tampa Bay Area

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Organizing for Here and There: Exploring the Grassroots Organizing of the Puerto Rican  
Diaspora in the Tampa Bay Area

by

Dominique Rivera

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
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Below.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Drawing upon participant observations and semi-structure interviews with 10 Puerto Rican grassroots organizers from the Tampa Bay area of Florida, this project examines the processes by which Puerto Rican diaspora members build, maintain, and utilize social and symbolic ties as resources for organizing and executing grassroots projects and campaigns with a dual focus on the Puerto Rican community in the Tampa Bay area and in Puerto Rico. Complex webs of interlocking social and symbolic ties that transcend region of origin and regions of destination constitute a transnational social field, within which exchanges of ideas, practices, and resources are organized among families, groups, and networks, and networks of networks (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992a; 1992b; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Through thematic analysis, this study unpacks the ways social and symbolic ties with Puerto Rico have shaped participants' reactions and responses to Hurricane *María* in Puerto Rico. While participants with strong social and symbolic ties to Puerto Rico tended to focus on grassroots responses that had direct impacts in Puerto Rico, participants who held only strong symbolic ties to Puerto Rico tended to engage in local grassroots responses to the influx of evacuees from the Island arriving in the Tampa Bay area. Moreover, social and symbolic ties that constitute transnational social fields also served as channels through which concerns about disasters in the homeland were manifested, decisions to help those affected were made, exchanges of resources to those in need were organized, and long-term responses were developed.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### **La Lucha Continúa, the Struggle Continues**

[S]ocial and political realities have not changed for Puerto Ricans since 1971, when I was twenty-one years old and saw the need to be part of the [Puerto Rican] movement. No matter what, I will keep in mind that our children need to be taught their history, and that *la lucha continúa*, the struggle continues (Carmen Vivian Rivera 1998:209).

As the opening quote from a former New York-based Puerto Rican organizer suggests, grassroots organizing of Puerto Rican diaspora members is not a new phenomenon. In the early 1970s, political education programs and voter registration campaigns were just a few of the organizing strategies of radical political activist groups. At that time, organizations such as the Young Lords Party of Philadelphia promoted both the political representation of Puerto Ricans in the continental U.S. and self-determination for Puerto Rico (Torres and Velázquez 1998).

*La lucha continúa* in the late 1990s and early 2000s as well, when Puerto Rican diaspora members played a key role in the larger coalition of Latinxs in the U.S. that mobilized the successful campaign to expel the U.S. Navy from the Puerto Rican island of Vieques in 2003 (Hestres 2004). Today, in 2022, amid a highly polarized U.S. populace, during a global pandemic, and following years of economic crisis, several hurricanes, and earthquake swarms that have led to a massive influx of outmigration (over half a million) from Puerto Rico, *la lucha continúa* (Mora, Dávila and Rodríguez 2018).

Yet unlike the experiences of Carmen Vivian Rivera (1998) detailed in the opening quote, Puerto Rican-led or focused grassroots organizing was not at the forefront of my mind when I was twenty-one years old. In truth, I am abashed to admit that I was a Puerto Rican child born in the continental U.S. who was not taught our history. I was always interested in my Puerto

Rican-ness, but my cultural knowledge was limited to what I could pick up from local family and friends in Lowell, Massachusetts, where I spent my formative years. As a young person, I often felt confused about my ethno-racial identity, being bi-ethnic, having white skin with non-white facial characteristics, and barely speaking Spanish. At times, I felt alienated from the Puerto Rican community. In college, I sought cultural affirmation through education, taking on sociology of migration as a special area of interest, studying abroad in Spain to increase my fluency in Spanish, and voraciously consuming literature on Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans. In doing so, I was confronted with the legacy of colonization of Puerto Rico, by both Spain and the U.S., which set the foundations of social, political, and economic marginality of both the archipelago of Puerto Rico, and Puerto Ricans themselves (Grosfoguel 2003).

When Hurricane *María* hit Puerto Rico in 2017, I found myself consumed by news stories, research articles, and Facebook posts related to the devastation wrought not only by the unprecedented hurricane, but also by the delayed and insufficient responses of FEMA, the Puerto Rican government, and the U.S. government. I looked for ways to get involved in some way with relief efforts, and in 2019 I began volunteering with Puerto Rican grassroots organizations in Tampa, Florida, where I was attending graduate school. I packed donations with *Boricuas de Corazón Inc.*, a Puerto Rican woman-led nonprofit established to provide disaster relief to Puerto Rico and other communities affected by natural disasters. I attended public forums co-hosted by *Alianza for Progress*, an Orlando-based nonprofit that seeks to organize and mobilize Florida's Puerto Rican and Latinx communities, and *Puerto Rico Connect*, a Puerto Rican-led nonprofit that connects Puerto Rican and Latinx community members of Pinellas and Hillsborough counties to vital service agencies and organizations (Alianza for Progress 2018). I sat in on meetings of *LULAC Pinellas*, a Puerto Rican-led chapter of the national organization League of United Latin American Citizens, which has advocated for the economic, educational, civil, and political advancement of Latinx Americans for nearly 100 years. I was invited to attend retreats of *La Mesa Boricua*, a coalition of Puerto Rican grassroots



organizers from across the state of Florida whose goals are to strengthen the political, economic, and cultural power of Puerto Ricans everywhere. With my acceptance into these organizations, I began to identify as a Puerto Rican grassroots organizer myself, and I realized that *la lucha* that Carmen Vivian Rivera speaks of had become my struggle to continue.

I tell you this autobiographical account both to contextualize the study at hand, and to situate my positionality as the researcher. This project emerged from my lived experiences as a Puerto Rican woman, born and raised in the continental U.S., and galvanized by a disaster in the homeland to begin working with Puerto Rican-led or focused Puerto Ricans grassroots organizations in the Tampa Bay area. The study examines how Puerto Ricans in the Tampa Bay area build, maintain, and utilize social and symbolic ties, within both Puerto Rico and the Tampa Bay area, as resources for organizing and executing grassroots projects and campaigns that impact the Puerto Rican community in both locales. “Grassroots organizing” in this project can be understood as non-elite, common people working together in self-organized or voluntary groups and networks interested in social, economic, and/or political change in their communities (Padilla 2001). While examining grassroots organizing of diasporas is not new (Torres and Velázquez 1998), what is new about this project is that it takes a perspective of transnationalism<sup>1</sup> to approach grassroots organizing of Puerto Rican diaspora members as processes that are situated within a “transnational social field,” or complex webs of interlocking social and symbolic ties that transcend borders of nations and through which ideas, practices,

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<sup>1</sup> Scholarly debate exists surrounding the use of the transnational paradigm in the case of Puerto Rican migrants to and from the continental U.S. (Meléndez 2015; Vargas-Ramos 2015; Duany 2002;2011). Their exclusion from comparative analyses of major scholars using the transnational perspective is likely linked to a priori assumption that transnational processes transcend the geographically bounds of sovereign nation-states (Glick Schiller et al. 1992a; 1992b; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). While U.S. citizenship does shape their migration experiences differently from other purported transnational migrants (i.e., Mexican migrants), aspects of Puerto Rican migration do resemble a transnational migration (Meléndez 2015; 2017). Several scholars, including Duany (2002, 2011), Perez (2004), and Aranda (2007), argue that even though Puerto Rico is not a sovereign nation-state, and Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, the Puerto Rican experience should be studied as a transnational case of migration because Puerto Ricans cross significant cultural, linguistic, racial, colonial, and political borders when they migrate between Puerto Rico and the continental U.S. While the theoretical orientation of this project follows the latter argument, the purpose of this project is not to address *who* is transnational, but rather to zero in on a specific process that occurs at the transnational level among individuals who maintain links or ties that transcend region of origin and region of destination.

and resources are organized, transformed, and exchanged (Glick Schiller et al. 1992a; 1992b; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). While “social ties” here refer to “continuing series of interpersonal transactions to which participants attach shared interests, obligations, expectations and norms” (Faist 2000:8), “symbolic ties” refer to, “perceived bonds, both face-to-face and indirect, to which participants attach shared meanings, memories, future expectations and representations” (Faist 2000:9). Through the formation and maintenance of social and symbolic ties, migrants, individuals in their region of origin, and individuals of different ethnic backgrounds in their region of destination can contribute to the organization, exchange, and transformation of ideas, practices, and resources within a transnational social field (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004).

Through qualitative methods, including participant observations, semi-structure interviews with 10 Puerto Rican grassroots organizers from the Tampa Bay area of Florida, and thematic analysis, this project examines the processes by which Puerto Rican diaspora members build, maintain, and utilize both social ties with Puerto Ricans and symbolic ties with Puerto Rico as resources for organizing and executing grassroots projects and campaigns. While previous literature has emphasized the effects of migrants’ grassroots activities on their region of origin (Glick Schiller et al. 1992a; Mahler 1998), this study centers grassroots campaigns and projects that impact the Puerto Rican community in both region of origin and destination. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) In what ways do Puerto Rican diaspora members in the Tampa Bay area collaborate in grassroots organizing as a bottom-up strategy to influence political, economic, and/or social conditions of existence for Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico and the Tampa Bay area? (2) In what ways do social and symbolic ties with Puerto Rico and other Puerto Ricans motivate their local and cross-border grassroots actions? (3) In what ways do these diaspora members draw upon resources within transnational social fields to progress the goals of their grassroots organizing?

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERITURE REVIEW

From providing direct aid in disaster-stricken homelands, to fundraising and establishing support networks for new arrivals in regions of destination, studies have well documented the many ways diaspora communities react and respond to disasters through grassroots transnational efforts (Rehman and Kalra 2005; Esnard and Sapat 2011; Shivakoti 2019; Parajulee, Shneiderman and Shrestha 2020). The social effects of a disaster in a region of origin not only impact those who experience the disaster from within the homeland. They also have social effects on those who have migrated to regions of destinations and experience the disaster from afar (Aranda, Blackwell and Rosa 2021). This is because diaspora and other transnational communities forge and maintain transnational social fields through social and symbolic ties that transcend region of origin and regions of destinations. Social life cuts across borders as life experiences, from the mundane to the disastrous, are embedded within these multi-layered transnational social fields (Glick Schiller et al. 1992a).

The concepts “diaspora” and “transnationalism” are prominent analytical lenses for examining social formations that transcend borders of nations, such as grassroots efforts to respond to disasters from within regions of destination. As a conceptual frame, *diaspora* can be broadly understood as a group of individuals that has experienced dispersion from their homeland yet remain oriented toward it and engaged in boundary-maintenance *vis-à-vis* the society of destination (Brubaker 2005; Cohen 2008). On the other hand, *transnationalism* refers to a perceptual lens for investigating systems of interconnected networks and institutions that transcends borders (Vertovec 1999; Brubaker 2005; Faist 2010). Within this project, diaspora is used to describe individuals of Puerto Rican descent dispersed in the continental U.S., meaning the 50 incorporated U.S. states. Furthermore, transnationalism serves as the lens

for examining the role cross-border ties play in local and transnational mobilizations of resources and support by grassroots organizers within the Puerto Rican diaspora. Still, the overlapping and inconsistent use of diaspora and transnationalism across disciplines can be confusing and requires further discussion. While overly broad interpretations risk essentializing these concepts to catch-all categorizations of migrant communities (Safran 1991), overly narrow interpretations also risk attenuating these concepts to sets of putative, ethnocultural or nation-state bound categorization (Brubaker 2005).

## **Diaspora**

The word diaspora comes from the Greek “διασπορά,” meaning to scatter seeds widely (Cohen 2008). Within early Greek translations of Hebrew Scriptures, the notion of diaspora was introduced as a paradigm attached to the historic experiences of Jewish exiles, an exemplar rather than a concept (Sheffer 2003). That is to say, the case of the Jewish diaspora presented a paradigmatic case; *illustrating* the Jewish diaspora was *defining* the notion of diaspora (Brubaker 2005). Since the 1970’s, contemporary scholars have revived the concept of diaspora in both academic and political discourses. Some have returned to the paradigmatic case (Shepperson 1966; Armstrong 1976; Alpers 2001; Edwards 2001), while others have called for a new direction defined by consistent models and parameters for what groups are and aren’t considered diasporas (Safran 1991; Clifford 1994; Cohen 2008).

Interdisciplinary scholars have drawn several frameworks outlining the core criteria constituting diaspora. Many, including sociologist Roger Brubaker (2005), point to three core criteria that are generally understood as constitutive of diaspora. These include (1) dispersion, (2) homeland orientation, and (3) boundary-maintenance. Geographic dispersion from the homeland is the most widely accepted criterion of diaspora and is related to causes of migration and geographic dispersal. Older notions of diaspora confined this characteristic to forced displacement, while newer notions also include migration under pressure or what some scholars

consider voluntary migration (Brubaker 2005; Faist 2010). However, not all migrations away from a region of origin immediately, or necessarily, constitute a diaspora (Grossman 2019).

The second criterion of diaspora is homeland orientation that links experiences in regions of destinations to symbols and values of the region of origin. Whether conceptually or territorially bound, homeland orientation connects the diaspora group to the region of origin as a source of culture, identity, and loyalty (Brubaker 2005). Scholars who pose homeland orientation 'centered' models of diaspora, such as that of political scientist William Safran (1991), suggest that diaspora groups maintain multiple, active, and durable orientations to the region of origin that imply the ideal of eventual return to that region. However, such approaches can limit diaspora to those who maintain ties to the region of origin for the purpose of eventual returning. They also can obscure patterns of circular migration and exclude those who participate in a society of origin from within regions of destination without intent to return (Faist 2010). On the other hand, homeland decentered models, such as that of James Clifford (1994), highlight the benefits of forging and maintaining multiple lateral connections within and across both region of origin and regions of destination. New applications of diaspora often follow the latter trend, replacing emphasis on return with circulation and transnationalism as discussed in the following section (Duany 2002; Bruneau 2008; Faist 2010; Grossman 2019).

The third broadly accepted criterion of diaspora is boundary-maintenance that serves to maintain a distinct group identity vis-a-vis the majority group within regions of destination. Boundary-maintenance and group identity are the most difficult diaspora criteria to approach both conceptually and analytically (Brubaker 2005). Older notions of diaspora implied an active resistance to assimilation that is contradicted by newer critical approaches that argue boundary-maintenance is an unintended consequence of discrimination and social exclusion of the diaspora group (Brubaker 2005; Faist 2010). Other scholars highlight the benefits of group identity and community membership, providing a sense of social cohesion and group agency (Grossman 2019). While some scholars view the coalescence of community organizations,

advocacy networks, cultural and educational programs, social clubs, political lobbies, and hometown associations as an indicator of the boundary-maintenance of diaspora groups, transnational approaches view the emergence of such networks and institutions as constitutive of transnational social fields (Brubaker 2005; Faist 2010; Faist and Bilecen 2017).

### **Transnationalism**

In both academic and political discourses, diaspora and transnationalism are often intertwined. Although a much older concept, diaspora can be subsumed under the conceptual umbrella of transnationalism, yet not all persons or groups that engage in transnational social fields are diasporas (Faist 2010; Grossman 2019). Like diaspora, the concept of transnationalism is concerned with cross-border ties that span region of origin and regions of destination (Glick Schiller, et al. 1992a). However, diaspora is a static concept that is often used to describe a group of individuals whose ties connect them to a region of origin and regions of destination. Transnationalism is a dynamic concept that captures actions and processes and highlights many types of social formations that transcend borders (Faist 2010). For example, activities of businesspersons and social movements can be approached within a transnational frame (Smith, Chatfield and Pagnucco 1997; Portes, Escobar and Radford 2007), yet they do not constitute diaspora unless the individuals involved can be characterized by the core elements of diaspora previously discussed (Faist 2010).

The perspective of “transnationalism” across disciplines broadly captures processes in which multiple ties link people or institutions to two or more nations (Vertovec 1999). Within migration studies, the concept of transnationalism developed by Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, refers to “the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement” (Glick Schiller et al. 1992a:4). A social field, as defined by Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller, is “a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and

resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed” (2004:9). For Glick Schiller and her colleagues, migrants forge and maintain an array of familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political ties within social fields that transcend borders (Glick Schiller et al. 1992a; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). These “transnational social fields” are complex webs of links or ties that span region of origin and regions of destination (Glick Schiller et al. 1992a; 1992b; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). For contemporary migrants, social life transcends borders, as everyday activities, decisions, concerns, and identities are embedded within multi-layered transnational social fields (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007; Skaptadóttir 2019).

Within a transnational social field, exchanges of ideas, practices, and resources are organized among migrants’ families, groups, and networks, and networks of networks (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Yet, transnational social field is a more encompassing term than group or network because it focuses researchers’ attention on “human interaction and situations of personal social relationship” (Glick Schiller and Fouron 1999:344). While several studies have shown that only a small, yet significant, number of migrants regularly engage in activities within transnational social fields (Portes, Haller, and Guarnizo 2002; Guarnizo, Portes, and Haller 2003; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004), they’ve also revealed that many more individuals engage periodic, or selectively in transnational social fields at different stages across the lifecycle (Glick Schiller and Fouron 2002; Levitt 2002; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Smith 2002).

Furthermore, focusing on transnational social fields allows researchers to look beyond the direct experiences of migrants into domains of social interactions in which social exchanges occur among migrants, individuals born in their region of origin who have never migrated, and individuals in their region of settlement of different ethnic backgrounds (Glick Schiller and Fouron 1999; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004).

Transnational social fields are multi-dimensional and dynamic social processes, wherein resources can be accumulated, maintained, and mobilized. Several migration scholars have drawn upon sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1983) concept of social capital to explicate

transnational social fields by arguing that resources are inherent to the production and maintenance of ties to both region of origin and regions of destination (Faist 1998; 2000; Saksela-Bergholm, Toivanen and Wahlbeck 2019). Within this strand of academia, social capital refers to the set of resources that are inherent in or transmitted through social and symbolic ties, providing a mechanism of integration, and allowing individuals to cooperate in organizations and networks (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Faist 1998; 2000; Skaptadóttir 2019). Both social and symbolic ties between individuals and groups carry social capital as resources important to group integration (Faist 1998; 2000).

Social ties refer to “continuing series of interpersonal transactions to which participants attach shared interests, obligations, expectations and norms” (Faist 2000:8). They constitute sequences of bounded communications between two or more individuals and can be distinguished according to strength. Strong social ties, such as those often found within households, kinship groups, and community organizations, have been characterized by intensive and enduring interpersonal exchanges between members (Boissevian 1974; Faist 2000). Weak social ties have been characterized by indirect relations, such as ‘friends of friends’ (Boissevian 1974; Faist 2000). Both strong and weak social ties can carry social resources that can also be used to access other types of resources. This is because resources available to one individual are often contingent on the resources available to others socially tied to that individual (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Faist 1998; 2000; Saksela-Bergholm et al. 2019).

Unlike social ties, symbolic ties do not necessarily constitute series of interpersonal transactions. Symbolic ties are “perceived bonds, both face-to-face and indirect, to which participants attach shared meanings, memories, future expectations and representations” (Faist 2000:9). One of the main functions of symbolic ties is to integrate groups based upon presumed likeness, for example via religious belief, language, nationality, or ethnic group (Faist 1998). Symbolic ties can also be mobilized without prior direct contact, for example within ‘imagined communities’ such as nations (Anderson 1993) or online affinity groups. In such cases, strong



symbolic ties can enable solidarity, an expressive form of social action, which is based in collective representation and emotional connection, among groups even in the absence of strong social ties (Faist 2000).

An early distinction concerning level of analysis of transnational phenomena that continues to thrive within discourses is that of Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and Michael Peter Smith (1998). For these scholars, transnationalism can be differentiated as processes from above and from below. The notion of “transnationalism from above” refers to global level transnational social fields, such as the ties of multinational corporations, international non-governmental organizations, global media platforms, and political institutions whose activities and power transcend borders of nation-states (Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Mahler 1998; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). Nation-states also engage in transnationalism from above, for example, through government supported migration programs (Goldring, Henders, and Vandergeest 2003), and in other instances of political, social, and economic engagement of countries of origin with their nationals abroad (Gamlen 2006; Padilla 2011). On the other hand, “transnationalism from below” refers to grassroots level transnational social fields, ties between individuals, families, groups, organizations, and networks whose actions serve as resistance, opposition, and countercurrents to global power structures (Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Mahler 1998).

The notion of transnationalism from below is a useful perspective in this study for viewing grassroots organizing as a process of actuating human agency. It positions transnational social fields as processes of resource and information exchange intended on building capacities to resist or accommodate oppressive economic, political, and social forces that shape the everyday experiences of people in regions of origin and regions of destination (Guarnizo and Smith 1998). At least one study has previously focused on a disaster in the homeland to empirically illustrate transnationalism from below. In 2005, sociologist Shams Rehman and Virinder S. Kalra utilized interview and participant observation techniques to examine the

transnational fundraising efforts of British Kashmiris following major earthquakes in Kashmir. Their case study empirically described the grassroots mobilization of diaspora members in response to a disaster in the homeland to argue that the grassroots disaster responses of diaspora members can be understood to illustrate transnationalism from below (Rehman and Kalra 2005).

In another approach to analyzing transnational phenomena, sociologists Thomas Faist and Başak Bilecen (2017) differentiate transnational social fields according to degree of formalizations. Unlike other prominent typologies of transnational activities, such as that of Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt (1999), Faist and Bilecen's focus on transnational social fields draws attention to internal characteristics of group organization and the extent to which individuals and groups share common values and symbols. Following Faist and Bilecen, transnational communities and organizations are the most highly formalized social formations of transnational social fields, having "an inherent potential for a relatively long life-span" (Faist and Bilecen 2017:11). "Transnational organizations" exhibit the highest level of formalized internal structure, hierarchy, and control, including for example, the Red Cross and Amnesty International. Conversely, "transnational communities," such as diaspora groups, exhibit the highest level of symbolic formalizations, through "dense and continuous sets of social and symbolic ties, characterized by a high degree of intimacy, emotional depth, moral obligation and sometimes even social cohesion" (Faist and Bilecen 2017:11).

Within Faist and Bilecen's (2017) perspective, "issue networks" fall below communities and organizations in degree of formalization. Issue networks, such as advocacy and business networks, are less internally formalized than transnational organizations in the sense that they exhibit no formal membership characteristics (Keck and Sikkink 1999; Faist and Bilecen 2017). Yet like transnational communities, the notion of an issue network is concerned with ties of actors and groups motivated by common values and goals (Kadirbeyoğlu 2016). Much empirical work exists on the extensivity, intensity, pattern, and impact of transnational issue networks,

such as environmental activists (Wapner 1995) and human rights advocates (Sikkink 1993), who mobilize information outside official channels to pressure more powerful organizations and governments into action (Keck and Sikkink 1999). For example, media and society scholar Fieke Jansen (2010) looked at digital grassroots activism and found that the Tunisian diaspora has forged issue networks online with the goal of impacting human rights in their region of origin. Jansen's is one of many examples of diaspora members organizing a grassroots campaign to influence politics and development in a region of origin, a transnational phenomenon that has been documented among other diaspora groups by numerous scholars (Haney and Vanderbush 1999; Wayland 2004; Smith 2006; Smith and Stares 2007; Smith and Bakker 2007; Landolt 2008; Fitzgerald 2009; Bermudez 2011). However, few transnational approaches have examined the grassroots organizing of diaspora members around issues in regions of destinations as a similar or related phenomenon, as this project seeks to explore.

### **Transnational Approaches to the Puerto Rican Diaspora**

Within Puerto Rican studies, many approaches to examining the experiences of Puerto Ricans in the continental U.S. have drawn upon both the concepts of diaspora and transnationalism. Diaspora is often used to describe Puerto Ricans as a group, distinguishing those living in the continental U.S. from those living in the Island<sup>2</sup>. In these applications, diaspora generally refers to “deterritorialized communities of Puerto Ricans in the US—an outcome of their colonial conditions and U.S. citizenship” (Acosta-Belen and Santiago 2018). On the other hand, transnationalism is used as an analytical lens for viewing processes that transcends regions of destination in the continental U.S. and regions of origin in Puerto Rico (Glick Schiller et al. 1992a; 1992b; Alicea 1997; Pérez 2004; Aranda 2007). Grassroots

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<sup>2</sup> Geographically speaking, Puerto Rico is an archipelago, a group of 143 small islands. Like many other scholarly works, in this project I use “the Island” as a colloquialism meaning the archipelago of Puerto Rico. I chose to capitalize this colloquial phrase to formalize the distinction.

organizing is acknowledged by many scholars who focus their work on Puerto Ricans in the continental U.S., such as that of Whalen (2005), Duany (2002), and Pérez (2004) discussed below. Yet few scholars make conceptual connections between the grassroots organizing of diaspora members around issues in both region of origin and regions of destination within a perspective of transnationalism. Questions remain about how grassroots organizing of Puerto Rican diaspora members as a strategy to influence political, economic, and social conditions of existence in their region of origin and region of destination could reflect and contribute to the maintenance of a transnational social field (Whalen 1998).

Approaches to examining the experiences of Puerto Ricans in the continental U.S. that draw upon the concept of diaspora tend to historically document diaspora community development and the emergence of community-based grassroots organizations without situating these processes within the context of transnational social fields. For example, historian and Latinx studies scholar Carmen Teresa Whalen (2005) approached the Puerto Rican diaspora as a migrant community developed through coerced practices, including U.S. colonization, economic restructuring of Puerto Rico, and the extension of contract labor programs supported by both the U.S. and Puerto Rican governments throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to these factors, Whalen argues that social networks that connect Puerto Rican communities across the continental U.S. and Puerto Rico have also facilitated the dispersion of Puerto Rican migrants and their descendants to regions of destination across the U.S. Northeast and Midwest (Whalen 2005). While these conclusions suggest that transnational ties play a role in diaspora community development, her work lacks a conceptual framework that outlines the criteria of diaspora, including transnationalism, as previously discussed. As a result, social networks, community organizations, and political activism of Puerto Rican diaspora members are treated by Whalen as responses to conditions encountered in, and bound to, regions of destinations, rather than as transnational phenomena.

Other approaches that integrate the concept of diaspora within a transnational framework also tend to lack a conceptual approach to diaspora yet recognize that social networks and community organizations exist within a transnational social field. For example, anthropologist Jorge Duany's (2002; 2010) work conceptualizes transnationalism to argue that social formations, such as collective identity, occur within transnational social fields, which are shaped by the circulation of people, resources, and ideas between Island and continental U.S. Puerto Rican communities. These social fields are transnational in that they transcend the geographic, linguistic, cultural, and political borders that divide region of origin and regions of destination (Duany 2002; Faist 2010). However, while Duany finds that voluntary associations and community organizations helped to formalize social fields between the diaspora and Islanders, his discussion of such associations is limited to the resources and support they have provided to Puerto Ricans in regions of destinations. This conclusion runs contrary to transnational perspectives of such associations and organizations that tend to focus on how diaspora members support their region of origin (Mahler 1998), for example through community development projects (Orozco 2006) or human rights advocacy (Jansen 2010). While seemingly contradictory, these findings collectively contribute the inkling that transnational social fields provide resources for grassroots organizing of diaspora members around issues that exist in regions of destinations, as well as in regions of origin.

Transnational approaches, such as those of sociologists Marixsa Alicea (1997), Gina Pérez (2004), Elizabeth Aranda (2003; 2007), in addition to Duany (2010), often employ critical lenses to highlight transnationalism as a way Puerto Ricans resist and accommodate for the negative economic, political, and social forces that shape their experiences in the continental U.S. In separate multi-sited ethnographies of Puerto Ricans in regions of origin and regions of destinations, Alicea (1997) and Pérez (2004) conclude that, as Puerto Ricans maintain migration networks and social relations between the two regions, transnational social fields are forged. Both Pérez and Alicea also employ a gendered perspective, concluding that women play a key

role in creating, sustaining, and reproducing these transnational social fields through their kinship and subsistence work (Alicea 1997; Pérez 2004), a phenomenon that has also been noted within other Puerto Rican communities by Aranda (2003; 2007) and within other migrant communities as well (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Mahler and Pessar 2001; Parreñas 2001). Moreover, for Aranda (2007) and Duany (2010), the historical-structural analysis of sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel (2003) provides a critical frame for examining adverse experiences in region of origin and regions of destination, global divisions of labor, and international political hierarchies that shape everyday life of Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean migrants from above and from below.

### **Theories of Coloniality and Racialization**

While Grosfoguel (2003) does not engage with transnationalism as a central concept, his work provides important links between social processes that occur at the global level but are experienced at the local level, in regions of origin and regions of destination. In his historical-structural analysis, Grosfoguel compares Puerto Rican migration to the continental U.S. to that of other Caribbean migrants to their European metropolises, or rather their ‘former’ colonizers. In doing so, he argues that modes of reception are based upon the economic, political, and social structures of regions of destination, which exist within the modern world capitalist system. For Grosfoguel (2003) it is the modern world capitalist system that preserves colonial relations, which not only continue to drive migration between ‘former’ colonies and colonizers, but also continue to inform social structures, specifically racial and ethnic hierarchies, within regions of destination. This continuation of colonial relations is conceptualized by Grosfoguel (2003) as the “coloniality of power” to address persistent colonial forms of exploitation and domination, including social, economic, and political oppression of Puerto Ricans even in the absence of a formal colonial administration. First conceptualized by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano (1991; 2008), the notion of coloniality is that of a power dynamic, initiated by Spanish

conquistadors, reified by U.S. colonialism, and perpetuated today in the colonial relations that exist between modern Puerto Rico and the U.S. (Grosfoguel 2004). While these colonial relations are most salient for Islanders, colonial subjugation is not simply bound to the geographic location of Puerto Rico, but rather experienced by Puerto Ricans themselves, whether in the Island or in the continental U.S. (Grosfoguel 2003).

Diverging from Omi and Winant's prominent conceptualization of "racial formation" (1986), Grosfoguel opts for the use of the concept of "colonial/racial formation" to characterize the shifting meaning and structures that reproduce "colonial/racial subjects" (2004). As defined by Omi and Winant, racial formation is "the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings" (1986:61). They employ the term "racialization" to signify "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group" (Omi and Winant 1986:14). While the racial formation approach is useful in understanding historical shifts in racial meanings, it is unable to adequately address historical continuities, specifically continuities between colonization and coloniality. For Grosfoguel, racialization, "the process through which groups (frequently the dominant ones) use cultural and/or biological features/criteria to construct a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority among collective social actors" (Grosfoguel 2004:326-327), is thus a vestige and driver of colonization. He argues elsewhere that, "Puerto Ricans and African-Americans are not simply marginalized or ethnic groups, but rather, colonial/racialized subjects in the USA" (Grosfoguel 1999:244). Even for those who may be phenotypically categorized as 'white,' Grosfoguel concludes that in the continental U.S., "the moment that person identifies her/himself as Puerto Rican, s/he enters a labyrinth of racial Otherness" (Grosfoguel 1999:245; Aranda and Rebollo-Gil 2004).

Notions of the coloniality (Quijano 1991) and colonial/racial formation (Grosfoguel 2003) provide conceptual foundations for understanding the adverse experiences Puerto Ricans often face, resist, and accommodate for as colonial/racial subject within social, economic, and

political hierarchies of the modern world capitalist system. Within the context of post-Hurricane *María*, political anthropologist and prominent public intellectual Yarimar Bonilla has drawn upon these same ideas to argue that delayed responses of the state, mismanagement of relief and recovery resources, and the forced act of waiting for aid can be understood as racialized neglect (Bonilla 2020). She argues that calls for austerity and resilience in Puerto Rico have been shaped by the coloniality of power and reflect logics of disposability of colonial/racial subjects (Bonilla 2020). Nonetheless, several other scholars, including Alicea (1997), Pérez (2004), and Aranda (2007), have also demonstrated how individual and family migration decisions, subsistence strategies, and identities can serve as countercurrents to similar forms of macro social forces.

### **Puerto Rican Diaspora Grassroots Organizing**

While Puerto Rican studies and migration scholars have at least documented the existence of grassroots organizing within the Puerto Rican diaspora, social movements literature has largely ignored the impacts of the wide range of organizing strategies of Puerto Rican diaspora members and the groups they have organized since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's (Rodríguez-Morazzani 1998). An important contribution to this dearth of literature comes from distinguished Puerto Rican studies scholar Andrés Torres and long-time Puerto Rican organizer and educator José E. Velázquez (1998). Assembling voices of numerous Puerto Rican scholars, organizers, and political activists, Torres and Velázquez's anthology documents the social, cultural, political, economic, and educational activism of the 'Puerto Rican Movement' of the 1970's. The contributors, most of whom worked with the organizations they describe, offer first-hand accounts of the "radical political activism" of eight core groups during this period, including the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (US branch), the Young Lords Party, El Comité-MINP (Puerto National Leftist Movement), and the Puerto Rican Student Union, among others.



Torres and Velázquez's (1998) compilation serves as a point of entry for observing historical constituencies that might exist among key issues around which Puerto Rican diaspora members of the past and present have organized. For the groups discussed by these authors, the causes around which thousands of Puerto Ricans diaspora members were organized include ending the colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S., releasing political prisoners, increasing political representation of people of color, eliminating compulsory military service, desegregating schools and neighborhoods, increasing educational opportunity for students of color, and expanding economic justice for people of color (Torres and Velázquez 1998). However, not all the groups discussed engaged in "day-to-day, grassroots organizing around democratic rights in the United States" (Velázquez 1998). Some, such as the Puerto Rican Social Party focused on self-determination for Puerto Rico, while others, such as the Young Lords Party, progressed a "dual focus," political change for Puerto Rico and the advancement of their local Puerto Rican diaspora communities (Whale 1998).

Despite often encountering tensions over ideologies, priorities, and strategies, the Young Lords serve as an important exemplar of a group of predominantly Puerto Rican diaspora members who engaged in a transnational approach to grassroots organizing. While their existence was short-lived, the agenda of the Young Lords transcended the borders of the Puerto Rican community both in the continental U.S. and in the Island, recognizing that the presence of Puerto Ricans in the continental U.S. reflects a colonial migration, driven by decades of extractive U.S. policies and control over the Island (Acosta-Belén and Santiago 2018). In their continental U.S. communities, the Young Lords effectively organized grassroots communities through their campaigns to create children's breakfast programs and health clinics, to rehabilitate individuals affected by drug addiction, and to pressure local officials to introduce cultural affirmation and bilingual education programs in local schools (Whalen 1998). Through political education and cultural affirmation programs, the Young Lords linked their position against U.S. colonial domination of Puerto Rico and in favor of liberation for Puerto Rico, with

issues affecting the continental U.S. communities within which they lived (Acosta-Belén and Santiago 2018). To this, Whalen argues that this ‘dual focus’ on homeland (region of origin) and barrio (region of destination) issues reflects a transnational approach to Puerto Rican activism during this period (1998).

A more contemporary contribution to scholarship on Puerto Rican grassroots organizing that takes the perspective of transnationalism comes from communications scholars Luis E. Hestres, who looked specifically at the case of efforts to expel the U.S. Navy from the Puerto Rican Island of Vieques. He conceptualizes “transnational activist networks” as “a coalition of organizations and actors characterized by voluntary, reciprocal and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange working towards a common political goal” (Hestres 2004:3). In his analysis, Hestres argues that this transnational activist network, made up of local activists, Puerto Rican diaspora activists, and other multicultural activists outside of Puerto Rico, played a key role in triggering the negotiation process for the eventual removal of the U.S. Navy from Vieques in 2003. Hestres presents an empirically based case study that demonstrates a coalition of continental U.S. diaspora members and Islanders that organized grassroots responses to the exploitation and domination of a region of origin in Puerto Rico. Yet Hestres’s methodology is unable to unlock details on what unites these groups and organizations beyond common political goals.

### **The Puerto Rican Diaspora in Florida**

Scholarly and political attention on the Puerto Rican diaspora in Florida has increased nearly as fast as the population of the Puerto Rican diaspora in Florida has grown. Since the 1960’s, Puerto Ricans have been widely dispersed throughout the continental U.S. (Duany and Matos-Rodriguez 2006). Yet, during the past 30 years, an increasing number of Puerto Ricans have migrated to Florida from both the Island and from other parts of the continental U.S. (Silver and Velez 2017). According to U.S. Census data, the population of the Puerto Rican

diaspora in Florida has experienced unprecedented growth in recent years, mushrooming from 19,535 in 1960, to 247,010 in 1990, and again doubling to over 1.1 million in 2019 (Whalen 2005; Duany and Silver 2010; U.S. Census Bureau 2019). During the same time, traditional regions of destinations such as New York experienced a drastic slowing of population growth, making way for Florida to become the continental U.S. state with the largest Puerto Rican population, surpassing New York since 2017 (see Table 1) (Mora, Dávila and Rodríguez 2018; U.S. Census Bureau 2019).

Table 1. Puerto Rican Population in Florida and New York 1960-2018

	<b>1960</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2019</b>
Florida	19,535	28,166	94,775	247,010	482,027	792,952	1,137,632
New York	642,622	916,608	986,389	1,086,601	1,050,293	1,104,806	1,089,823

Source: Duany and Silver 2010; U.S. Census Bureau 2019

The growth in scholarly attention on the Puerto Rican diaspora in the state of Florida has provided many key findings including magnitude and patterns of migrations, dispersion throughout the state, and transnational ties. Since the turn of the 21st century, many Puerto Ricans have migrated to Florida from traditional settlements in the Northeast and Midwest (Baker 2002; Duany and Matos-Rodríguez 2006; Aranda 2009; García-Ellín 2012; Silver and Velez 2017). Scholars have attributed this “interstate migration” of Puerto Ricans to various factors, including economic restructuring of metropolitan centers in the Northeast and Midwest, economic opportunity and lower cost of living in Florida, and the rapid development of Florida’s Latinx community (Duany and Matos-Rodríguez 2006; Aranda 2009). Migration from Puerto Rico to Florida in recent years has been attributed to two major historical events in the Island, the onset of an economic crisis in 2006 (Silver and Velez 2017), and the devastation wrought by Hurricane María in 2017 (Mora et al. 2018; Hinojosa 2018; Acosta-Belén and Santiago 2018).

Unlike previous waves of large migrations flows of Puerto Ricans to the U.S. Northeast and Midwest, settlement in regions of destinations in Florida are somewhat dispersed. Fourteen counties across the Florida peninsula had Puerto Rican populations of over 20,000 in 2019 (US Census Bureau 2019). Nonetheless, in 2019 over 70% of the state's entire Puerto Rican population was concentrated within three of Florida's twenty-one metropolitan statistical areas (MSA), defined by the U.S. Federal Office of Management and Budget as one or more adjacent counties that share a high degree of social and economic integration, have a total population of at least 100,000 and contain a core city with a population of at least 50,000 (US Census Bureau 1994; U.S. Census Bureau 2019). These three regions of concentration include the Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater Metropolitan Statistical Area (Tampa MSA), the Orlando-Kissimmee-Sanford Metropolitan Statistical Area (Orlando MSA), and the Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach Metropolitan Statistical Area (Miami MSA). In 2019, the Puerto Rican population of the Tampa MSA, comprised of Hernando County, Hillsborough County, Pasco County, and Pinellas County, reached 193,149 an increase of over 45% since 2010. In the Orlando MSA, comprised of Lake County, Orange County, Osceola County, and Seminole County, the Puerto Rican population reached 380,772 in 2019, an increase of nearly 55% since 2010 (US Census Bureau 2019). Finally, in the Miami MSA, comprised of Broward County, Miami-Dade County, and Palm Beach County, the Puerto Rican population reached 234,856 in 2019, an increase of just over 13% since 2010 (See Table 2; US Census Bureau 2019).

A growing number of scholars have examined the experiences of Puerto Rican diaspora members in the Orlando and Miami MSA's, yet considerably less scholarly attention has been paid to the experiences of diaspora members in the Tampa MSA. The Puerto Rican diaspora in this region has experienced one of the fastest population growths in the state since 2000, only surpassed by growth of the diaspora population in the Orlando MSA (Duany and Matos-Rodriguez 2006; U.S. Census Bureau 2019). Puerto Ricans are also the largest Latinx group in

Table 2. Florida Puerto Rican Population Change 2010-2019: MSA & County level

State	Metropolitan Statistical Area	County	Puerto Rican Population		% Increase	
			2010	2019		
Florida			792,952	1,137,632	43.47%	
	Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach		207,686	234,856	13.08%	
			Broward	72,074	88,416	22.67%
			Miami-Dade	100,169	97,755	-2.41%
			Palm Beach	35,443	48,685	37.36%
	Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater			131,981	193,149	46.35%
			Hernando	8,701	14,151	62.64%
			Hillsborough	86,303	118,467	37.27%
			Pasco	16,702	32,506	94.62%
			Pinellas	20,275	28,025	38.22%
	Orlando-Kissimmee-Sanford			245,905	380,772	54.85%
			Lake	12,345	21,314	72.65%
			Orange	139,181	199,936	43.65%
			Osceola	64,654	113,258	75.18%
			Seminole	29,725	46,264	55.64%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau ACS Demographics and Housing Estimates DP05 2010; 2019

the Tampa MSA, surpassing the Cuban population by over 68,000 and the Mexican population by over 76,000 in 2019 (US Census Bureau 2019). The presence of Puerto Ricans, and more specifically Puerto Rican grassroots organizers, in the area that would become the Tampa MSA is also long-standing (Acosta-Belén and Santiago 2018). Most notably, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Puerto Rican feminist labor organizers Luisa Carpetillo and Angel María Dieppa spent time in Tampa’s tobacco industry working and organizing others against capitalistic exploitation of the working class (Acosta-Belén and Santiago 2018).

What all this means for the study at hand is that the Tampa MSA presents the opportunity to explore a context wherein Island-born and diaspora-born Puerto Ricans have the potential to

forge and maintain interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources circulating between the Island and various diaspora communities can be exchanged, organized, and transformed (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). By approaching these processes within a perspective of transnationalism, the dual focus of Puerto Rican diaspora members' grassroots organizing around social, political, and economic advancement for both local and homeland communities can be understood as an integrated process that reflects and contributes to the emergence of transnational social fields (Whalen 1998). This study explores these transnational social fields and the ways in which Puerto Ricans diaspora members build, maintain, and utilize them as resources for organizing and executing grassroots projects and campaigns.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

Employing a perspective of transnationalism, this project examines how Puerto Rican grassroots organizers in the Tampa Bay area build and maintain social and symbolic ties within both regions of origin and destination, which serve as resources for executing projects and campaign that impact the Puerto Rican community in both locales. To collect the data for this project, I used qualitative methods including participant observations and interviews with adults of Puerto Rican ancestry who were active members of Puerto Rican-led or focused grassroots organizations in the Tampa Bay area between 2019 and 2021. With these individuals, I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews that lasted between a half hour and an hour and a half. In addition to interviews, I also conducted 10 participant observations during organizational meetings and related events as a complementary method of data collection. Data collected through participant observations and interviews was analyzed using a mixed inductive and deductive approach to thematic analysis. Data analysis was conducted using NVivo qualitative data analysis computer software.

### **Site and Organizations of Interest**

This study was conducted within the Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater Metropolitan Statistical Area (Tampa MSA), comprised of Pinellas, Hillsborough, Pasco, and Hernando counties. Participants in this study represented 5 Puerto Rican-led or focused grassroots organizations based in the Tampa MSA. This includes 3 members of Boricuas de Corazón Inc., 1 member of Somos Puerto Rico Tampa, 2 members of Puerto Rico Connect, 2 members of Alianza for Progress, and two members of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Tampa Bay. The following paragraph presents a brief overview of these 5 organizations.

Boricuas de Corazón Inc. and Somos Puerto Rico Tampa are both Puerto Rican woman led nonprofit organizations that were established after Hurricane *María* to bring disaster relief supplies to Puerto Ricans in the Island. They have also provided emergency supplies to several communities affected by natural disasters, including the panhandle of Florida after Hurricane Michael, the Bahamas after Hurricane Dorian, and Puerto Rico after the most recent earthquakes. Both also have made concerted efforts to support recent arrivals from Puerto Rico, especially in establishing housing and food assistance. Puerto Rico Connect, is a nonprofit that is led by Puerto Rican men and was also started after Hurricane *María* to connect recently arrived Puerto Ricans, who evaluated or migrated to the Tampa Bay area following Hurricane *María* or the earthquakes, to essential public services, such as housing, food assistance, and school enrollment. Alianza for Progress, is a relatively larger, Orlando-based nonprofit organization that is politically driven, seeking to advance the power of the Puerto Rican and Latinx community of Florida by amplifying community voices and advocating for progressive causes. During the 2020 U.S. election season, Alianza expanded its voter engagement campaign to the Tampa Bay area with a team of staff organizers conducting Spanish language voter outreach to the local Puerto Rican and Latinx community. The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Tampa Bay is a Puerto Rican woman led nonprofit organization that foster's economic growth and development among local Latinx business enterprises. In addition to supporting Hispanic small business owners, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Tampa Bay also supports nonprofit organization leaders, with an objective of facilitating new collaborative opportunities and strengthening bonds between nonprofit and for-profit organizations.

### **Participant Selection**

Initial purposive sampling, followed by snowball sampling, were the methods of sample selection used in this study. Data scientists Steven K. Thompson explains the process of snowball sampling as, “a few identified members of a rare population are asked to identify other



members of the population, those so identified are asked to identify others, and so, for the purpose of obtaining a nonprobability sample” (2002:183). Such applications use the term snowball sampling to refer to a technique for approaching hard-to-reach populations, which are characterized by the lack of an existing sampling frame. In such cases, an initial probability sample is impossible, and a nonprobability sampling technique is needed to initiate the sampling process (Atkinson and Flint 2001; Thompson 2002). My approach to snowball sampling overcomes the lack of an existing sampling frame by engaging in purposive sampling to identify initial participants. Purposive sampling is the deliberate selection of participants based upon qualities they possess that suit the purpose of the study (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim 2015). Based on my previous experiences volunteering with several of these organizations, three leaders from three of the organizations were deliberately selected as initial participants. This first wave of three initial interviewees was then asked to identify other possible interviewees who meet participation guidelines. Then the second wave of interviewees was also asked to identify other possible interviewees, and so on. It should be noted that as a result of the initial nonprobability sampling, the entire sample was also rendered to nonprobability status. While this means findings are also nongeneralizable, the intent here was not to generalize to a larger population. Rather, it was to develop an in-depth analysis of central concepts within the specific context of interest (Atkinson and Flint 2001).

Inclusion was contingent on Puerto Rican ancestry and active membership in one or more Puerto Rican-led or focused grassroots organizations in the Tampa MSA at the time of the study. I defined active membership based on two criteria. First, within the year preceding interviewee selection, active members have participated in at least half of all general meetings of one or more grassroots organizations that are either led by an individual of Puerto Rican ancestry or are focused on issues affecting the Puerto Rican community in either the Tampa MSA or in Puerto Rico. Second, active members also dedicated time outside of general meetings to carrying out activities and responsibilities for the organizations (Padilla 2001). These

activities and responsibilities could include, for example, soliciting or distributing donations for a holiday food drive arranged by the organization, petitioning elected official on the behalf of the organization, or representing the organization at a statewide meeting of grassroots organizations with similar interests.

## **Participants**

The sample was comprised of 10 adults, 7 women and 3 men, who are active members of Puerto Rican-led or focused grassroots organizations. All participants in this study were of Puerto Rican ancestry, meaning they or their parents were born in Puerto Rico to Puerto Rican parents. While 8 participants were born in Puerto Rico, 2 were born in New York and lived in Puerto Rico for a portion of their life. Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 62, with 3 participants under age 30, and the other 7 participants over age 45. The number of years participants have lived in the Tampa MSA ranged from 2 to 40 years, with an average of 19 years. Master's degrees are held by 2 participants; bachelor's degrees are held by 6 participants, and 2 participants have completed some college credits. Volunteer and staff organizers constituted one-half of the sample, while the other 5 participants were leaders of organizations. Extended participant biographies can be found in the appendices (see Appendix A: Participant Biographies).

## **Participant Observation Data Collection**

The broad goal of participant observation in this study was to gain a deep understanding of the research setting, the participants, and their behaviors and interactions. As research methodologist Corrine Glesne suggests, it is important to collect participant observation data in the beginning stages of a project, "because, of its important role in informing you about appropriate areas of investigation and in developing a sound researcher-researched relationship" (2016: 64). Participant observations were carried out between July of 2019 and November of 2020. During observations, I took handwritten notes during both in-person and

virtual events hosted by the previously discussed Puerto Rican-led or focused grassroots organizations. These events included general meetings of the organizations and events hosted by them, such as informational forums, donation drives, and virtual advocacy conferences. Participant observations included notes describing the setting, the participants (age, gender, race, ethnicity, etc.), the acts of participants, the gestures made by participants, my own thoughts, my questions, and my general impressions.

### **Interview Data Collection**

While participant observations played an instrumental role in guiding and grounding the interview process, semi-structured interviews (see Appendices: Interview Guide) were the primary means of data collection in this project. The purpose of interviews was to generate the data that was needed to understand the research questions (Maxwell 2013). While interview questions were related to the research questions, Glesne argues that they should be more contextual and specific to the cultural reality of interviewees (2016). Drawing again upon insights from my previous experiences with Puerto Rican-led and focused grassroots organizations, I organized interview questions into three thematic areas that correspond with central concepts of interest, including grassroots organizing, transnational social and symbolic ties. These thematic areas included transnational ties, collaboration and motivations, and connections. The purpose of transnational ties questions was to explore social and symbolic ties of interviewees that connect them to their region of origin and region of destination. The purpose of collaboration and motivations questions was to explore interviewees' experiences of collaborating with other grassroots organizers, the issues that are most salient for them, and their motivations for engaging in grassroots organizing. The purpose of connection questions was to explore interviewees' feelings of social and symbolic connection to the grassroots organizations of which they are members and to the other members of these organizations.

Interviews were carried out from September through November of 2020. Interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom video/audio conferencing because COVID-19 guidelines prevented in-person interviews at the time. Participation was voluntary and confidential. Prior to beginning interviews, participants were asked to provide verbal informed consent for both their participation in this research project and the audio recording of their interview. Transcripts of verbal informed consent was provided to participants in both English and at least 24 hours prior to being interviewed (see Appendices: Informed Consent for Participation). Interviewees were provided the option of conducting their interview in their preferred language, English or Spanish. Still, the predominant language of facilitation was English, with bits of Spanish words and phrases scattered throughout several participants responses. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. However, pseudonyms were used for participants and for other individuals named during the interviews to protect the identity of all involved parties.

### **Data Analysis**

Data collected through participant observations and interviews was analyzed using a mixed inductive and deductive approach to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method of data analysis in which themes, or patterns of meaning, across a data set are systematically identified and organized, allowing shared experiences and collective meanings to emerge (Braun and Clarke 2012). The goal of thematic analysis is to arrive at a nuanced understanding of a social phenomenon by identifying commonalities in the way a phenomenon is talked about, revealing intricacies of the processes that constitute that phenomenon (Braun and Clarke 2012; Glesne 2016). An inductive approach to thematic analysis is a bottom-up approach to data coding and analysis that is driven by “what is in the data” (Braun and Clarke 2012:58). In contrast, a deductive approach to thematic analysis is a top-down approach to coding and analysis wherein “the researcher brings to the data a series of concepts, ideas, or topics that they

use to code and interpret the data” (Braun and Clarke 2012:58). For this project, I took a predominantly inductive, data-driven approach to coding and analysis, which was inevitably influenced by my theoretical orientation and methodological approach. As qualitative researchers Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke argue, “It is impossible to be purely inductive, as we always bring something to the data when we analyze it” (2012:58).

It is Braun and Clarke’s (2006; 2012) approach to thematic analysis that I primarily followed in this analysis. To prepare transcribed data for thematic analysis, electronically transcribed interview and participant observation data was uploaded to NVivo. The first phase of thematic analysis involved familiarizing myself with the data set by reading and rereading all transcripts of interviews and participant observations several times. The purpose of this first step was to gain an intimate familiarity with the data set for the purpose of beginning to notice items that might be relevant to the research questions (Braun and Clarke 2012). During the first reading of the transcripts, I refrained from taking any notes, focusing on reading “actively, analytically, and critically” (Braun and Clarke 2012). In subsequent readings, I took brief notes to highlight pieces of the data set that were potentially relevant to the research questions.

The second step of thematic analysis was generating codes, an iterative process of identifying and labeling potentially relevant pieces of data. Within qualitative research, a code is a word or short phrase that assigns a symbolic attribute to a piece of collected data (Saldaña 2009). An initial code might describe the semantics of a piece of data or interpret latent meaning in a piece of data. Some code labels might reflect language or concepts found within a piece of data, while others might reflect concepts of the theoretical frameworks previously discussed (Braun and Clarke 2012). I followed Glesne (2016) suggestion to thinking about code labels in terms of gerunds, words that describe processes or activities by ending in -ing. Every time a piece of the data set seemed to shed some light on the research questions, it was highlighted in NVivo and given a rudimentary code. The next time a piece of data was identified as potentially relevant to the research questions, a decision was made about whether the first

code could capture the meaning of the second piece of data, or if a new code needed to be created (Braun and Clarke 2012). As this process was repeated for the entire data set, multiple pieces of data were coded under each code label, which, at times, necessitated modification to the code label to integrate the new pieces of data. As Braun and Clarke suggest, this process was repeated on the data set multiple times until the data was fully coded, meaning enough codes were generated to “capture both the diversity, and the patterns, within the data” (2012:63).

The third phase of thematic analysis was generating initial themes, shifting from codes to rudimentary categorizations of clusters of codes that shared some unifying characteristic (Braun and Clarke 2012). A theme identifies and describes explicit or implicit patterns of response or meaning across the coded data set (Braun and Clarke 2006; Guest, Macqueen, and Namey 2014). This step of thematic analysis involved reviewing coded data, identifying overlaps or similarities between codes, and generating themes or subthemes. Qualitative methodologist Johnny Saldaña (2009) describes one approach to this phase as “codeweaving,” threading together multiple codes in a way that expresses the patterns, relationships, and interrelationships present. The purpose of generating initial themes was to look for relationships among codes, to make comparisons, to begin to form explanations, and to build models of the data (Glesne 2016; Gibbs 2007). Braun and Clarke argue that good themes should “work together in telling an overall story about the data...Good themes are distinctive and, to some extent, stand alone, but they also need to work together as a whole” (2012:64). The process of generating initial themes was continued until all codes were either collapsed under one or more themes or discarded because they no longer fit the overall analysis beginning to form.

To review for potential themes, the fourth phase of thematic analysis, it was helpful to begin by displaying the data in a thematic map. A thematic map is an outline of initial themes and their associated codes, in addition to a collated copy of coded data extracts that corresponds with each provisional theme. The purpose of reviewing for potential themes was to further interrogate each developing theme in relation to the coded data set (Braun and Clarke 2012).

Questions such as, ‘is this theme useful in revealing a pattern among coded data?’ and ‘are there enough pieces of coded data to support this theme?’ were asked of each initial theme. As a result, several initial themes were collapsed into a potential theme, and an initial theme was split into several, more specific potential themes. A final reread of the entire data set was necessary to assure that potential themes were able to “capture the most important and relevant elements of the data, and the overall tone of the data” in relation to the researcher questions (Braun and Clarke 2012:66).

The fifth phase of thematic analysis involved selecting the final themes and pieces of coded data that would be interpreted in the final analysis. This was an integrated process that connects extracted data and developed themes to the research questions for the purpose of illustrating, through vividly compelling examples, the analytic points being made (Braun and Clarke 2012). Final themes have “clear focus, scope, and purpose; each in turn builds on and develops the previous theme(s); and together the themes provide a coherent overall story about the data” (Braun and Clarke 2012:66). Together, final themes and data extracts selected formed the foundations of the analysis. Each final theme will be illustrated through multiple data extracts and quotes from across the data set, which demonstrate in “rich and evocative detail” the meaning and relevance of each theme (Braun and Clarke 2012:67).

The final phase of thematic analysis, forming a final analysis, involved logically and meaningfully connecting final themes and data extracts to “tell a coherent story about the data” (Braun and Clarke 2012:69). The final analysis reflects descriptive themes that illustrate the data, and conceptual and interpretive themes that convey latent meanings, connecting themes to the concepts embedded in the research questions. It was important to not only logically convey themes and to present enough data extracts to support the theme, but also to balance the analysis with thick interpretations of the themes and extracted data. Final themes, extracted data, and interpretations form the conclusions related to research questions that are presented as research findings in the following chapters of this study.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

While participants identified multiple motivations for their involvement in Puerto Rican-led or focused grassroots organizing, responding to disasters in the homeland remained salient. Major disasters in a region of origin have social effects not only on those who remain in the homeland. They also have social effects on those who have migrated to regions of destination (Aranda, Blackwell and Rosa 2021). Social life cuts across borders as life experiences are embedded within multi-layered transnational social fields, which transnational communities forge and maintain through social and symbolic ties that transcend region of origin and regions of destinations (Glick Schiller et al. 1992a; 1992b; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). These social and symbolic ties play key roles in reactions and responses to disasters in the homeland, as well as political, economic, and social issues in region of destination. Moreover, the reactions and responses of participants to Hurricane *María* took many forms, reflecting and contributing to the nature and strength of respondents' social and symbolic ties with Puerto Rico.

In this analysis, I unpack the ways respondents' reactions and responses to a disaster in their homeland were shaped by the dimensions of the transnational social field they are, or became, embedded within. To varying degrees, all participants expressed social and symbolic ties that link them to their region of origin in Puerto Rico. While participants with strong social and symbolic ties to Puerto Rico tended to initially focus on transnational grassroots responses that had direct impacts in Puerto Rico, participants who held only strong symbolic ties to Puerto Rico tended to engage in local grassroots responses to the influx of evacuees from the Island arriving in the Tampa Bay area. Moreover, I argue that the social and symbolic ties that constitute transnational social fields served as channels through which concerns about disasters



in the homeland were manifested, decisions to help those affected were made, exchanges of resources to those in need were organized, and long-term responses were developed.

### **Strong Social Ties: Motivation and Obligation**

As participants discussed their motivations for getting involved in Puerto Rican-led or focused grassroots organizing, several participants identified the effects of Hurricane *María* on family in the Island, which played a key role in motivating their decisions to organize grassroots responses to assist Islanders suffering from the direct effects of the disaster. These participants relied primarily upon their existent social ties in Puerto Rico, and the effects of the hurricane on these social ties, to explain their motivations for getting involved in transnational grassroots actions. For example, when asked exactly what triggered her participation in grassroots organizing, Tasha explained:

I was on the phone with my mother the whole time the hurricane was happening. She had a landline, and we had communication. [sic] She lives on the 11th floor, and I heard when her window smashed. I heard everything. I heard the wind howling. And the last thing I heard from my mother was, “Oh my god! The apartment complex is moving! It’s swaying side to side. This is going to fall. Please tell my grandchildren I love them.” And we lost communication. At that moment, there was no way of communicating with anyone in Puerto Rico. We were trying and trying and trying. And I had two choices, I was either going to go crazy, not knowing if the apartment complex had fallen [sic] or help and try to do something.  
(Tasha)

For several participants like Tasha, loss of communication with loved ones in Puerto Rico and concern for their well-being served as the primary catalyst of their involvement in grassroots strategies to provide aid directly to Islanders. As previous research suggests, familial social ties in the homeland play a key role in diaspora members’ responses to disasters in their region of origin (Rehman and Kalra 2005; Esnard and Sapat 2011). Social ties again refer to “continuing

series of interpersonal transactions to which participants attach shared interests, obligations, expectations and norms” (Faist 2000:8). Familial social ties specifically constitute strong and affective social ties, characterized by intensive and enduring social exchanges among members of a kin group (Boissevain 1974; Faist 2000). They denote shared obligations, expectations, interests, and norms that are forged and maintained through continuing series of interpersonal exchanges between two or more individuals across a lifetime (Faist 2000). Tasha, who is quoted above, regularly engages in social exchanges with her family in Puerto Rico from her home in the Tampa Bay area, for example through daily phone conversations, social media posts, and trips to the Island every few months. Continued social exchanges such as these are the mechanisms through which strong social ties contribute to the maintenance of transnational social fields spanning region of origin and regions of destination.

For weeks following the hurricane, the inability to establish any means of communicating with Islanders rendered emotional reactions from participants with strong social ties in Puerto Rico. These effects were exemplified in Tasha’s reaction to the hurricane; the loss of communication with her mother and the inability to confirm her mother’s safety left Tasha feeling as though she had two options, ‘go crazy’ or ‘try to do something about it.’ Several other participants also described social effects of Hurricane *María* on family in Puerto Rico to explain their motivations for joining or forming grassroots groups focused on providing aid to Islanders. Some participants, all of whom were women, explained emotional reactions to the specific loss of communication with their mothers as a catalyst for getting involved in transnational grassroots activities. Like Tasha, Luz revealed that the drastic interruption in communication with her mother also brought on a sense of desperation that pushed her into action. Luz explained:

In that, that kind of desperation that people have, when we were not able to connect with our loved one in the Island, especially me, it took three weeks to connect with my mother. So that desperation tells you, “hey, you have to work hard, hard, hard every day ...” And it’s

because, as you know, when you don't hear from your loved one, in two days, you get desperate. In a week, you get agitated, and in three weeks, it's a little bit more aggravated.

(Luz)

Concerns for the wellbeing of family members, especially their mothers, following Hurricane *María* reflect participants' feelings of obligation among familial ties, which are rooted in strong affective connections. Following literature on transnational social fields, such obligation can also be understood as a resource of social capital, based upon accumulations of past social exchanges among strong social ties (Faist 2000). As the eldest children, Luz, Tasha, and several other participants described feeling obligated to check-in with family members regularly, especially seniors living in Puerto Rico, to confirm their wellbeing. Unable to fulfill this obligation as a social effect of the hurricane, participants described emotional responses that motivated their involvement in organizing grassroots strategies to bring aid direct to the Island. Tasha explained she felt as though she might go crazy if she did not act; Luz described feeling desperation and agitation until she acted. While both Tasha and Luz's mothers survived the storm, they and several other participants spent weeks, if not months, without knowing what had happened to their loved ones in Puerto Rico.

As participants made decisions to form or join groups interested in providing aid to those affected by the hurricane, they laid the foundations of new Puerto Rican-led or focused grassroots organizations in the Tampa Bay area. Within and among these groups, strong social ties and obligations rooted in affective connections among group members, or organizers, also played a key role in motivating participants' continued involvement. As organizers collaborated within and across groups to plan and carry out an array of grassroots actions, they engaged in series of interpersonal exchanges within and among these newly formed groups, which reflect and contribute to the strength of social ties among group members (Faist 2000). When asked about their ties to other organizers, participants described strong and affective social ties, not unlike those that characterize familial social ties, such as shared interests, obligations, and

expectations, as well as intensive and enduring social exchanges (Boissevain 1974; Faist 2000). For example, when asked about her connections with other organizers within and across organizations, Adrianna explained:

We are literally a family.... we know everything about each other. One of my organizers is literally always in my house. I trust them with my entire life. One of the other regional organizers is coming to Tampa and staying at my place tonight. We're very close. We've become a family. And not only in the organizing area, but the entire staff, and same with the other organizations. I can say I'm very close to people from For Our Future and Bring It Home [other grassroots organizations]. I feel like we all have the same purpose, and we all have the same goal [sic]. So, through that purpose, and through that goal, we really connect with one another. (Adrianna)

Through common interests, mutual obligations, and shared expectations, strong social ties among organizers contributed to several participants continued involvement in Puerto Rican-led and focused organizations. Yet, this is not to say that symbolic ties played no role in motivating these and other participants' actions. On the contrary, symbolic ties with Puerto Rico contributed to all participants motivations for joining or forming Puerto Rican-led or focused grassroots organizations in the Tampa Bay area.

### **Symbolic Ties: Solidarity and Trauma**

While familial social ties played a key role in motivating some participants to get involved in organizing grassroots campaigns that directly impacted individuals in need in Puerto Rico, symbolic ties with Puerto Rico played a key role in motivating participants involvement in organizing local grassroots responses to the influx of evacuees from the Island into the Tampa Bay area. The latter was especially true for those participants who held few or weak social ties<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Weak social ties are characterized by superficial or indirect personal relations, such as extended family or 'friends of friends' (Boissevain 1974; Faist 2000). Weak social ties they are useful primarily for diffusion of information among groups or networks (Faist 2000).

to Islanders. Symbolic ties refer to, “perceived bonds, both face-to-face and indirect, to which participants attach shared meanings, memories, future expectations and representations” (Faist 2000:9). Unlike social ties, symbolic ties can be mobilized without prior direct social exchange, based upon presumed likeness, for example via religious belief, language, nationality, or ethnic group (Faist 1998; 2000). Strong symbolic ties among a transnational community enable solidarity, an expressive form of social action based upon collective representation. At the core of solidarity is the ability to empathize or sympathize among symbolically tied individuals. It is emotional identification with others and the willingness to act in collective interest, even in the absence of social ties (Faist 2000). This was the case for Edwardo, who migrated to the continental U.S. as a child over 50 years ago and maintains few social ties to Islanders today. Even so, Edwardo co-founded a Puerto Rican focused grassroots organization in the Tampa Bay area following Hurricane *María*, which connected new migrants from Puerto Rico with resources already existent in the Tampa Bay community. When explaining his motivations for doing so, Edwardo relied primarily upon symbolic ties with Puerto Rico and laid strong claim to his Puerto Rican identity. He explained:

we became [a group] because of the individuals that that were coming, our brothers and sisters if I can say that, from Puerto Rico, who have never come here to the mainland ... we have to take care of our own, and I thank God for my father because he took that initiative to tell us, “This is part of who you are.” Some people struggle through life, through an identity crisis, “Who am I,” you know? I don't believe that I've struggled with [that]. Yeah, I'm a U.S. citizen. Yeah, you know, American, if you would, but my heritage, my descendance is that I'm Puerto Rican. I was born in Puerto Rico, and I'll die Puerto Rican. (Edwardo)

Symbolic ties, such as those described by Edwardo, are socially mediated, and grounded in social formations such as collective identities, representations, expectations, and memories (Duany 2002; Faist 2000). These shared meanings among symbolically tied collectives are transmitted through interpersonal, and especially intergenerational, cultural socialization.

Continued symbolic exchanges, such as those described by Edwardo in the previous and following excerpt, are the mechanisms through which strong symbolic ties contribute to the maintenance of transnational social fields. As he notes, Edwardo credits his father for transmitting symbolic aspects of Puerto Rican identity and heritage to him. When asked to elaborate on his ties with Puerto Rico, Edwardo continued to describe collective representation and symbolic ties that he, like his father, has transmitted to his children. Edwardo explained:

You know, the history of Puerto Rico, the culture of Puerto Rico, and the traditions. And when I was being raised, my father felt that at school, you learn English, you educate yourself. At home, we're still Puerto Rican [sic] and we're going to speak Spanish at home ... all *lo típico* of being *puertorriqueños*, which I pass it down to my sons too even though, one was born in Massachusetts and one here [in Florida]. They can identify with themselves that they come from an island, an island that came about, especially in our heritage, from *Taíno* Indians. And what happened? And how Puerto Rico became Puerto Rico. I think that the culture and the traditions are very important. (Edwardo)

Like Edwardo, several participants mentioned their indigenous *Taíno* heritage when discussing symbolic ties with Puerto Rico. However, Yuri is the only participant who discussed actively participating in the *Taíno* community of Puerto Rico and the Tampa Bay area, and the only participant who explicitly described *Taíno* as an identity. While Yuri maintains multiple strong social ties in Puerto Rico, the collective representation of 'being *Taíno*,' and other symbolic ties to her *Taíno* heritage also contributed to her willingness to practice solidarity with other Puerto Ricans. She explained,

I've always been *Taíno*, before I even knew it, I acted like it [laughs]. Yeah, so, and my grandmother has roots that are very, very clear. And we were educated as kids about it... *Taínos*, their culture was very, very based on hospitality and kindness. And they were not afraid. But they were kind. It's not that, "I'm afraid of you, so let me give you this." No, it's, "I have it, I'll give it to you." So, I think that runs deep. (Yuri)

Like Edwardo, Yuri identified a familial social tie who transmitted *Taíno* identity to her through social exchanges that amount to intergenerational cultural socialization. Several other participants described symbolic ties that were transmitted through familial social ties as well, which contributed to motivating their involvement in local grassroots organizing. For example, Camila connected her upbringing in the Island to her Puerto Rican and *Boricua*<sup>4</sup> identity, and this identity to her willingness to practice solidarity.

I have it in my *sangre*. I have it in my blood. [sic] So, I take it everywhere I go. And I think that that's kind of what people feel when they meet me, you know, they feel the warm spirit and the warm heart and wanting to help and I think we have that, as Puerto Ricans [sic] and we want to help, and we want to be involved and we just want to support others and bring people together. And that's kind of where I come from [sic] I'm a proud *Boricua*. I'm a proud Puerto Rican ... Of course, you know, being born and raised in Puerto Rico, you get a lot of that, again, like that heart and the wanting to give and help others. But again, it comes from your upbringing as well, right, your parents, and how they were raised and how you were raised. (Camila)

While Camila spent her formative years in Puerto Rico, she credits her symbolic ties with Puerto Rico to her parents and their way of upbringing in both locales. Like Edwardo, she maintains only weak social ties to Islanders, and relied upon her symbolic ties to explain her motivations for engaging in grassroots organizing. Following literature on transnational social fields, solidarity among symbolically tied collectives can be understood as a resource of social capital (Faist 2000). While maintaining dense and continuous sets of both social and symbolic ties has been characterized by a high degree of solidarity and obligation among transnational community members, strong symbolic ties that do not necessitate direct relations can also enable solidarity (Faist and Bilecen 2017). Moreover, in lieu of strong social ties with individuals

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<sup>4</sup> *Boricua* literally refers to a native of Borinquén—the Taíno name for the contemporary archipelago of Puerto Rico. It can be used to sign both inclusion and exclusion from the transnational community. Camila and other participants use the term to signal inclusion.

in the region of origin, participants such as Eduardo and Camila tended to actuate their solidarity through local grassroots actions, such as organizing Puerto Rican-focused events, programs, and networks for sharing resources and information in Tampa Bay area.

In addition to solidarity based upon symbolic ties, such as culture, language, and identity, participants also described solidarity based upon common experiences of trauma related to their migration journey. For these participants, common understandings of migration under pressure and racialization in regions of destination, in addition to collective representation, contributed to the emergence of solidarity, which motivated their involvement in grassroots organizations. For example, Nolo described how his personal traumas of migration not only motivated, but also prepared him to offer guidance to new arrivals.

As a person with problems, in the past, with issues, I can stand up to a person who is crying, “oh I’m homeless.” Me too. I slept in my car ... if I can do it, you can do it. Because now you’ve got people with knowledge and resources to help you ... we saying to people, “Hey, I know your pride. Stop playing. Let me help you. Can I help you [so you can] stand up and help another? So [inaudible] that’s what we do. [inaudible] We help them. (Nolo)

Like Nolo, Yuri connected her own negative experiences of migration to the experiences of evacuees following Hurricane *María*. Yuri explained:

Right now, I know Puerto Ricans, even the ones who are here, are going through a lot of trauma. I understand how difficult it was for me to come from that top of the mountain, by myself, with a view of rivers and oceans, to a concrete jungle in the Bronx, and not knowing any English ... the shock, culture shock, but to leave because you lost everything, to see everything being destroyed and things like that, that’s a whole different kind of trauma.

(Yuri)

For participants like Nolo and Yuri, common experiences of traumas served as another symbolic tie that contributed to participants’ ability to empathize with evacuees, and to their motivations to practice solidarity through their involvement in Puerto Rican-led or focused grassroots



organizations. While Nolo and Yuri maintain many social ties with family and friends in Puerto Rico, as well as symbolic ties such as collective identity, the common experience of trauma related to migration under pressure also contributed to their motivation for getting involved with grassroots efforts to provide aid to evacuees from Puerto Rico following Hurricane *María*.

### **Transnational Social Fields and Gateways to Support**

As participants formed groups based upon social and symbolic ties that constitute transnational social fields, they laid the groundwork for Puerto Rican-led and focused grassroots organizations that engage in projects and actions with a dual focus on improving the conditions of existence for Puerto Ricans in both region of origin and region of destination. Yet, transnational social fields are not only spaces in which diaspora members make decisions about providing aid to those in need. They are also spaces in which grassroots aid and support are organized and exchanged by utilizing resources inherent to social and symbolic ties of group members (Boissevain 1974; Faist 2000; Rehman and Kalra 2005). As with obligation and solidarity, resources of social capital can arise among socially and symbolically tied individuals, providing mechanisms of integration in groups and networks that participants utilized in a variety of ways to pursue their goals, and the goals of their newly formed grassroots organizations.

For several participants, symbolic ties with Puerto Rico, such as language and culture, served as resources that participants utilized to build rapport with previously unknown individuals in the Tampa Bay area. This leveraging of transnational social fields as a resource for connecting with community members was observed when participants discussed their engagement in local strategies of grassroots outreach, such as phone-banking<sup>5</sup>, to Latinx community members in the Tampa Bay area. Lacking previous social ties with the individuals

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<sup>5</sup> Phone-banking is a campaign strategy (political or nonpolitical) in which representatives of a campaign reach out to community members through phone calls and conversations. Internally or externally sourced databases of contact information can be utilized in this way to deliver information or invitations, identify or persuade campaign support, fundraise, and recruit volunteers.

they were reaching out to, participants such as Adrianna described relying primarily upon symbolic ties with Puerto Rico to signal commonality with these community members. Specifically, Adrianna described utilizing culturally appropriate language and messaging to build rapport while phone-banking, knowledge which is rooted in the recognition of resources embedded within transnational social fields.

I don't follow the script.... I'm just, "Hi, how are you? *Mi nombre [es] Adrianna!*" I just talk in Spanish and then we end up having a long conversation about whatever is happening in the Island or whatever is happening here. And it always ends with "*que dios te bendiga,*" you know, "*bendiciones a tu familia*" and I don't know this person. And yeah, they're still blessing me and stuff like that. So, I feel like yeah, my connection to Puerto Rico definitely helps with my organizing, (Adrianna)

Like Adriana, Luz described the importance of culturally appropriate language and messaging while using phone-banking strategies. She argues that being able to match a community member's preferred language builds rapport and trust necessary to convey information effectively.

we were doing that connection with them in their [emphasis] language because it's very important if you speak English, or you speak my language, for how you can feel more loyalty and more interested in what I am telling you. (Luz)

As participants like Adrianna and Luz utilized culturally appropriate language while engaged in phone-banking strategies with multicultural community members, they leveraged symbolic ties to signal commonality and trust both intra- and inter-ethnically. Instances in which participants engaged with Latinx community members who are socially and symbolically tied to regions of origin other than Puerto Rico demonstrate transnational social fields overlapping. Leading theorizations of transnational social fields contend that boundaries of social fields are fluid, often intersecting and overlapping (Mahler 1998; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Language, among other symbolic ties common among Latinx community members can be understood as

mechanisms of mobilization that convey likeness in the absence of social ties and can enable inter-ethnic solidarity (Faist 2000).

When asked about utilizing social ties as resources during their organizing efforts, other participants discussed extending aid and support to individuals in need via their existing social ties. In such instances, participants discussed both their connections within and outside of the Puerto Rican and Latinx community of the Tampa Bay area, which they used as tools to connect community members with resources available to residents of the area. In essence, participants described social capital inherent to social relationships; resources available to one individual are often contingent on the resources available to others socially tied to that individual (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Faist 1998; 2000; Saksela-Bergholm et al. 2019). For example, Tasha discussed utilizing social ties to connect Hurricane *María* evacuees in the Tampa Bay area to already existent aid offered by service agencies, non-profits, and federal assistance programs. By forging social ties with individuals who administer such aid, participants situated themselves as gateways between those in need of aid and highly formalized organizations offering aid. Tasha explained:

There are so many resources in the counties, but people don't know about them because they're not advertised. People don't know they exist, people don't know. So, I decided to start studying what resources were there and kind of looking around and calling these places and what do they offer? And how do they offer? What are the qualifications? And little by little, I started getting to know people from different agencies, and being on the loop of what's out there...you give a family, I call it a warm referral. For example, if I have made a contact, and if I have made a connection with a certain agency, and I have a key person, I can call and say, "Look, I have a family, these are the struggles. They know me they know the work I do." So, it's very important to have that connection with the people in the community as well"

(Tasha)

Like Tasha, Camila also described serving as a gateway to resources on an individual basis, as community members often reach out to her for help accessing existing services in the community. In such instances, participants leveraged social capital to connect community members in need to aid and support offered by other organizations. For Camila, forming many social ties outside of the Puerto Rican community has prepared her to help others access community services in this way, such as first-time home buyer's programs and small business grants. She explained:

I feel at times that I could be a resource center. A lot of people do contact me for questions, and I love it, you know, I and I don't mind. I personally just, been able to connect and build relationships with a lot of people in the Tampa Bay community, that if you may ask me for something, I should be able to guide you, or maybe direct you to someone that can help. Right. And I think that's very important... [inaudible] you can still guide someone and help them in a way. So, with my other connections and relationships that I've been able to build, it's just that, being able to make a quick phone call and say, "Hey, you know, do you know someone that able to help me with this? Or, hey, where can I find this? Or are you able to assist with this? (Camila)

Social ties of participants within the Puerto Rican and Latinx community of Tampa Bay also served as important resources for collecting donations, recruiting volunteers, and building collective capacities of participants' organizations. For example, Luz and Tasha both utilized their many local social ties to call for donations, especially nonmonetary donations, for Islanders and evacuees following Hurricane *María* and the earthquakes in Puerto Rico that started in 2019. Luz explained:

we always try to do the best that we can, with the resources that we have. If we don't have it, we ask in the community, because we want to make sure that if someone out there has something that you need, and people are not connected. So, we could be that connection. (Luz)

Adrianna described how she utilized her many social ties across the state of Florida to recruit volunteers to support the protest actions of other organizers in her group. She explains:

I feel like I know everybody in this state. Because I've definitely had friends be like, [sic] "Oh, I need help with making this protest." And [they're] doing it in a county that I've never heard of, but I know people there and I'm like, "Oh, yeah, I know, people." So, first of all, having those resources and those people that could help us, create more events and just talk to other people. ... you know, get advice and stuff like that, and just help each other out is really good.

(Adrianna)

Moreover, social ties were also utilized as collective resources within and across groups to increase access to resources for entire groups. Building off the notion that resources available to an individual are contingent on resources available to their social ties, collective resources available to a group are also often contingent on the resources available to group members' social ties (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Faist 1998; 2000; Saksela-Bergholm et al. 2019). For example, Luz described how she and seventeen other Puerto Ricans in the Tampa Bay area collected hundreds of tons of donated hurricane relief supplies and delivered them directly to the Island. Luz's husband, who is a transporter, made it possible to move entire shipping containers of donations from a community collection site to the Tampa Bay shipping docks. She also explained that another organizer in her group used his military connections to secure a cargo ship in the bay to transport donations to Puerto Rico. Reflecting literature on transnational social fields, both strong (familial) and weak (friend-of-friend) social ties played vital roles in this group's ability to access resources for completing their goal of distribute donations from the Tampa Bay area to Islanders in need, without any support from the U.S. government or other governmental agencies. Luz described how several Puerto Rican organizers from her group also drew upon both strong and weak social ties in Puerto Rico to delivered donations to Islanders directly.

we were able to achieve almost seventy-eight [shipping] containers delivered to Puerto Rico. And not only getting them to Puerto Rico but delivering them by us. From the group of seventeen, about seven of us went to Puerto Rico and we deliver containers directly to our families, to friends, to schools, through mayors in different cities, and directly to people in need, not to the government, people in need. (Luz)

By delivering donations to Puerto Ricans in the Island directly, participants such as Luz rejected the authority of federal and local administrations to lead aid and relief efforts. Instead, they leveraged resources embedded in transnational social ties to transport and distribute donations directly to their social ties in the Island, who were connected to existing networks of community members that could further distribute donations amongst those in need. In doing so, participants such as Luz forged transnational grassroots networks through which aid from a region of destination could be channeled directly into Island communities. Luz further described these transnational grassroots networks:

we were creating a coalition with other nonprofits that were in Puerto Rico, from Puerto Rico and from the outside, like the solar panel [providers], like companies that were working on the water treatment, people that created [water] filters, people that would say, “You know what, we want to lend a hand to this community” ....I met a lot of other people in here [in Tampa], that were in Puerto Rico at that time and we partner. We said, “If something happens again to Puerto Rico, we need to form a coalition and we all can go into Puerto Rico more prepared.” And not competing, no, we're not competing. We're collaborating, and we go in there as a coalition. (Luz)

Bottom-up strategies such as forging transnational grassroots networks exemplify ‘transnationalism from below’ (Guarnizo and Smith 1998) by recognizing the role of state systems and power structures in producing and neglecting the social effects of disasters in the homeland. Moreover, they demonstrate a transnational community actuating collective agency to accommodate oppressive economic, political, and social forces that shape their everyday

experiences in region of origin and regions of destination (Guarnizo and Smith 1998), especially following a disaster in the homeland.

### **Exercising Power “from Below”**

As coalitions of everyday people think and live transnationally, they exercise power that transcends borders and challenges both local and global power structures (Mahler 1998). This is Smith’s (1994) vision of transnationalism from below, exhibited through the everyday practices of ordinary individuals, in recognition of, and resistance to an understanding of their own conditions of existence, and the conditions of existence of their transnational community (Smith 1994; Mahler 1998). Nearly all participants in this study acknowledged some form of oppressive conditions of existence for Puerto Ricans in the Island or after migrating to the Tampa Bay area. They also often advanced that the grassroots campaigns and actions they organized were rooted in resistance to these political, economic, or social forces, reflecting Smith’s democratic and empowering vision of transnationalism from below. Luz’s previous description of forging a coalition of grassroots organizations in the Tampa Bay area, which was prepared to react to another disaster in Puerto Rico, is the best exemplar of transnationalism from below discussed by participants. This transnational network of grassroots organizations also functioned well as a mechanism for channeling resources from the Tampa Bay area to Puerto Rico in December of 2019, when an earthquake swarm began in the southern part of Puerto Rico, causing social effects that included widespread dislocations. Unable to return to their homes, many dislocated individuals and families set up makeshift camps along *Carretera-10* (Highway-10) in Puerto Rico. In response, Luz’s coalition of Tampa-based organizations converged at *Carretera-10* and collaborated with Puerto Rico-based grassroots organizations to construct showers, two mini-schools, and a medical/mental health service site along *Carretera-10* near Ponce for displaced families.

Luz's recount of the *Carretera-10* project is reminiscent of other transnational studies that tend to emphasize the effects of migrants' transnational practices vis-à-vis their region of origin, such as the projects hometown associations organize and fund from regions of destination (Glick Schiller 1992a; Smith 2006). As Mahler (1998) argues, these studies tend to pay little attention to the role migrants play in transforming regions of destination from below. Yet, as participants discussed organizing grassroots campaigns and projects that targeted the Puerto Rican community in the Tampa Bay area, they often acknowledged that their local actions were equally rooted in resistance to oppressive conditions of existence for Puerto Ricans after migrating to the Tampa Bay area. For example, Carla, who often served as a gateway to economic resources for Puerto Rican individuals and families in the Tampa Bay area, described her awareness of ethno-racial discrimination in local hiring practices, and how she helped Puerto Ricans navigate these social forces.

We have a lot of professionals, well-educated Puerto Ricans coming to the Tampa Bay area. It is very difficult for them to find a job. And it's a matter of prejudices, its racist. It has all those scary, not fair names. You're Puerto Rican, you have a master's [degree], a doctor's [degree], you've worked for this amazing Fortune 1000 [sic] company. And you're asking for a job, and they still want to give you a job, but they want to pay you less than what you're doing, or what you're worth, and what the market is worth. And that is really difficult. I've seen it, I've lived through it. I still see it. Many people come to me to advice. (Carla)

A recent report from the Economic Policy Institute affirms Carla's assertions. Puerto Ricans in the continental U.S. continue to earn lower wages and have a higher level of unemployment than their white counterparts (Mora and Dávila 2018). Carla is keenly aware of these disparities and utilizes knowledge of the market she has gained while living in the Tampa Bay area, as well as social ties, to help Puerto Ricans navigate ethno-racial discrimination in local hiring practices. By guiding Puerto Ricans in the Tampa Bay area toward employment opportunities where she knows they will be hired, treated, and paid equitably, Carla plays a small role in improving



economic conditions for Puerto Ricans in the Tampa Bay area. While this aspect of her grassroots actions does focus on improving conditions of existence in a region of destination, Carla's actions equally reflect a bottom-up strategies of transformation, serving as a countercurrent to ethno-racism experienced by transnational community members while residing in a region of destination (Mahler 1998; Faist 2000).

Other participants also described bottom-up political strategies that, like Smith's vision of transnationalism from bellow, challenged local and global power structures. At the time of our interviews, Adrianna and Glorimar were conducting voter outreach to the Puerto Rican and Latinx community in the Tampa Bay area in the months leading up to the 2020 elections. Adrianna explained the following three goals of their outreach: (1) educating community members on their voting rights, (2) encouraging them to register and vote either by mail or in-person, and (3) advocating for voting in ways that benefit the Puerto Rican community in Florida and Puerto Rico. While their voter outreach was non-partisan, Glorimar specifically discussed advocating against voting for the incumbent President Trump, who's administration and presidential campaign they saw as detrimental to recovery efforts in Puerto Rico. For Glorimar, encouraging Puerto Ricans in the Tampa Bay area to vote in ways that benefit Puerto Rico was a bottom-up political strategy that came in direct response to the Trump administration's top-down political strategy of withholding aid from Puerto Rico following Hurricane *María*.

Everything that was happening, especially, within this [Trump] administration. Too many things that happened in Puerto Rico weren't being really addressed how I feel this country should have responded to it, specifically with *María*. And knowing that there were people that didn't have any water or power for months at a time, didn't get little to no help. And I was like, "why isn't this more of an outrage that people that are American citizens aren't getting the care that they needed in the wake of a natural disaster?" So that's really what catapulted me into doing that [voter outreach], and then after visiting the Island last year [in

2019]. [sic] And, you know, they don't even get to vote. So that says, if I'm here, the very least, that I could do is advocate for the issues that affect my family back home. (Glorimar)

Unlike most other migrant groups in the U.S., Puerto Ricans hold birth right American citizenship, including full voting rights when residing in the continental U.S. Yet, because Puerto Rico is an unincorporated U.S. territory, Island residents do not have voting representation in the U.S. Congress, nor are they entitled to electoral votes for president. In addition to other ongoing political strategies, mobilizing the local Puerto Rican and Latinx community to vote in ways that benefit Islanders was a political strategy participants utilized to circumvent Islanders' lack of political representation. While these actions occurred within the region of destination, they exemplify a bottom-up strategies of political transformation, serving as a countercurrent to racialized neglect experienced by transnational community members who continued to reside in the region of origin following Hurricane *María* (Mahler 1998; Faist 2000; Bonilla 2020). When asked how her voter outreach impacted Puerto Rico, Glorimar responded,

it does affect [Puerto Rico] because I rather have somebody in office that has a plan, especially when it's not even like the infrastructure or the money anymore. It's also when you think back on climate change, here you have a U.S. territory directly being affected by climate change, and you have a president [Trump] that denies it. So, even that little switch makes all the difference in how you handle things for Puerto Rico going forward. So, I think that, yeah, overall, my work did create an impact (Glorimar)

When discussing grassroots political strategies, participants like Glorimar tended to focus on the democratic and empowering nature of these strategies. While these actions often served as countercurrents to oppressive economic, political, and social forces that shape the everyday experiences of individuals in the regions of origin and destination, in some ways they also reaffirmed traditional power relations. Herin lies a contradiction of Smith's concept of transnationalism from below noted by Mahler (1998). Among other critiques, Mahler argues that "determining whether such activities reaffirm and/or reconfigure "traditional" relations of

power and privilege” has not been sufficiently addressed in literature to date (Mahler 1998:87). Reflecting upon Glorimar’s narrative, she affirms that her participation in the voter outreach campaign contributed to the replacement of the Trump administration with President Biden and his administration, which led to billions of delayed disaster relief funding being released to Puerto Rico. But did changing of the players change the game? I would argue both yes and no. Although recovery funds have finally been released under the Biden administration, little has been done to deal with underlying political issues. Neither Puerto Rico’s status nor Island residents’ lack of representation within the U.S. federal government have been addresses. Moreover, this political strategy relied upon transnational community members participating in the political process of the region of destination, which in-turn relied upon the birth right U.S. citizenship of Puerto Ricans. Leveraging citizenship in this way threatens to reaffirm establish relationships of asymmetric power and privilege, such as the U.S. government vis-à-vis the government of Puerto Rico, diaspora members vis-à-vis Islanders, and citizens vis-à-vis non-citizens.

### **Developing Long-Term Strategies**

In the aftermath of Hurricane *María*, many forms of grassroots actions were utilized by Puerto Rican-led and focused organizations in the Tampa Bay to resist and accommodate for the social effects of the disaster, as well as the everyday oppressive social forces that shape the lives of these transnational community members. Transnational social fields have played critical roles in providing diaspora members motivations and resources for these actions, which have continued in both region of origin and destination in the years following the hurricane. Moving forward, participants described several areas of grassroots actions that they, and their transnational grassroots networks, have collaboratively identified as long-term development strategies. These strategies include creating spaces for cultural affirmation and increasing

political representation in the region of destination, in addition to continuing to forge and maintain transnational grassroots networks as previously discussed.

While a diasporic perspective might suggest that the foundation of Puerto Rican centers of cultural affirmation in the Tampa Bay area would signal boundary-maintenance, the transnational perspective highlights the benefits these institutions might hold for the maintenance of transnational social fields (Brubaker 2005; Faist 2010; Faist and Bilecen 2017). These benefits were noted by several participants. For Edwardo, whose grassroots activities have been focused on improving conditions of existence for Puerto Ricans in the Tampa Bay area, the long-term strategy of establishing a local center of Puerto Rican culture holds many benefits, including creating a physical place to promote social exchanges among socially and symbolically tied individuals. Edwardo explained,

where I was raised there is a Puerto Rican center. There is a *Centro Boricua*. There is a place where people come together to advance and seek goals, you know. And sure, there's organizations around the United States that help with these things but there's nothing here locally, especially in Pinellas County. And there is a big population of *Puertorriqueños* and Latinos across the board, you know. And so, when I sat down with Jesus, one of our goals was to have a *centro*, you know, to have a *Boricua* Cultural Center. And so, it's what we can accomplish and do with this center. And one of the things that [sic] I want to see is a *dominós* club, because that's simple. That's part of our culture [sic]. It's something that brings the community together. [sic] it's a good place for people to vent also, as they play this game, you know. And some of us need to find a place to vent, you know. So, I'm looking forward to that *dominós* club. (Edwardo)

As a long-term strategy of grassroots organizing, establishing cultural centers in diaspora communities could provide physical places for transnational social fields to be maintained and utilized as a resource. By establishing locations for individuals connected through symbolic ties with Puerto Rico to convene, new social ties centered on solidarity and resistance to oppressive

social forces could emerge. Focusing on a dominos club within a cultural center, Edwardo pointed out that such places could also provide spaces for individuals to “vent” about problems encountered in the region of destination, such as navigating health, education, and legal systems, ethno-racism, and language barriers. Likewise, establishing new centers of cultural affirmation in homeland communities could similarly provide physical places for transnational community members to forge, maintain, and exchange social and symbolic ties. This was the case for Yuri, who described her role in the long-term strategy of establishing a center of Taíno culture in Puerto Rico with *Taíno*-led and focused grassroots organizations. Yuri explained,

part of what we want to do is buy land, so that the people [visit] but they have to follow the *Taíno* way, which is the way of kindness. You know, it's kindness, no violence. It's about community. [sic] little places that people can come and stay and learn, and just enjoy, and they'll help support the whole thing. We want to make a place where you can recharge, because there's so much trauma and pain and stuff. So, you can go there and just get away. [sic] So yeah, that's the idea. Especially organizations that are helping over here. It's like, come on, you guys get a week to come and stay with us. And you know, breathe, walk barefoot on the grass. (Yuri)

Like Edwardo, Yuri described the benefits of the long-term strategy of establishing a physical center of *Taíno* culture in Puerto Rico, where transnational community members could forge new social and symbolic ties centered on solidarity and resistance. She described a place in which transnational community members could come to stay or live, where the land and its resources are shared among all. She described grassroots subsistence strategies, and like Edwardo, she noted community members working through traumas, collectively. Although Edwardo and Yuri's visions of centers of cultural affirmation differ significantly in physical form, both participants pointed out benefits that could contribute to the maintenance and longevity of transnational social fields.

While the creation of new Puerto Rican and *Taíno* centers of cultural affirmation is a long-term strategy that participants described actively work toward, increasing political representation with a dual focus on Island and diaspora communities is a long-term strategy that participants have already begun to employ, during the 2020 U.S. election cycles as previously noted. As research has extensively shown, diaspora members often play key roles in influencing homeland politics and development (Haney and Vanderbush 1999; Wayland 2004; Smith 2006; Smith and Stares 2007; Smith and Bakker 2007; Landolt 2008; Fitzgerald 2009; Bermudez 2011). As Adrianna discussed the grassroots political organization she belongs to, she laid out several political issues affecting Puerto Rico that her Florida-based organization seeks to challenge through increased political representation of the Puerto Rican community in the Tampa Bay area.

Latinx organizations that were in Florida were all really focused on one thing, which was mostly immigration, and a lot of the Latinx communities, especially Puerto Ricans, we're U.S. citizens. So, we felt like our voice and our needs weren't really being met. [sic] there's also a lot of other issues, issues with Hurricane *María*, issues with our [political] status, the Jones Act. So, we wanted [sic] to be the ones who made that organization focused on the Puerto Rican community. And not only that, but really push progressive ideals in our Latinx communities, and also make sure that we know that we have a voice. (Adrianna)

In addition to organizing voter outreach campaigns, participants discussed several local political campaigns and actions, which in turn had both local and transnational impacts. These actions included organizing local voter registration and education campaigns, communicating directly with local elected officials for the purpose of influencing legislative actions, and training and supporting local political candidates from within the Puerto Rican community. Two participants, Jesus and Nolo, have previously run for local and state elected positions, supported by networks of transnational grassroots organizers. For these participants, increasing political representation by electing Puerto Ricans to key local offices serves as a long-term strategy with a

dual focus on improving conditions of existence for Puerto Ricans in both regions of origin and destination. For example, Nolo explained his goals for running as a local political candidate in the past, as well as his continued support of other Puerto Rican candidates, especially those who advocate for equal rights of Puerto Rican locally and in the Island.

My goal is to show to the people who live in the state of Florida that Puerto Ricans we are people with more values. So, you know, I'd like to show them that we are the same, that if we live in our little island, we [should] have the same benefits because we are American citizens (Nolo).

While neither Nolo nor Jesus's campaigns ended in their election to local political offices, the number of Democratic Puerto Rican elected officials in Florida has risen from 6 in 2010 to 26 by 2020, according to a precinct-level analysis of the 2020 election results in central Florida (Vilchez Santiago 2021). These gains are significant to Puerto Rican grassroots organizers in the Tampa Bay area because they've increased political representation of Puerto Ricans both in the state of Florida and in the Island. For example, Democratic Congressman Darren Soto, elected Florida's first Puerto Rican Member of Congress in 2016, has been an outspoken advocate for self-determination in rectifying Puerto Rico's political status as an unincorporated territory of the U.S. These campaigns, and their support by transnational networks of grassroots organizers, including participants, demonstrate that Puerto Rican grassroots organizers in the Tampa Bay area acknowledge that increasing political representation in regions of destination has long-term benefits on the entire transnational community. In the final thoughts of his interview, Jesus concluded,

it is extremely clear that [sic] as *puertorriqueño*, in the state of Florida, we have the power. We have the power ... the power is in your hands to choose how not just this county is going to go, but the state of Florida and the nation. And in the power that you did not have before to vote for a senator, to vote for a congressman [sic], because you lived in Puerto Rico, and you did not have the representation. But now you do...And this is where organizing the

community comes into play. This is where running for political office comes into play. I am part of that awakening. And once we are aware, good things will happen in our society [sic]. And so, by promoting that I promote the well-being for all. [pauses] That's it. (Jesus)



## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

### **Only the People Would or Could Save the People**

Activists' efforts in the wake of *María* drew from and amplified grassroots organizing that predated the storm. This organizing was already focused on supporting individuals and communities in the face of prolonged economic and social crisis. The notion that only the people would or could save the people—that the state could not meaningfully improve the lives of Puerto Ricans under the current political or economic structure—was already guiding the work of many activists and organizations ... These grassroots efforts have taken on a new urgency and necessity after Hurricane *María*...Puerto Ricans on the island and in the diaspora are drawing from a rich history of resistance to construct a Puerto Rico for Puerto Ricans (Bonilla and LeBrón 2020:9-10).

As Bonilla and LeBrón suggest in the above excerpt, grassroots activism of Puerto Ricans following Hurricane *María* built upon a long history of resistance to the economic, political, and social conditions of existence of Puerto Ricans. While Bonilla and LeBrón's work largely focused on voices of Puerto Ricans in the Island, the project at hand has focused on the voices of Puerto Rican diaspora members, who equally found a new sense of urgency and need to organize grassroots response to Hurricane *María*. From their narratives, historical continuities can be seen between the wide range of bottom-up strategies used by participants in this study and Puerto Rican grassroots organizers of the Civil Rights Movement (Whalen 1998; Torres and Velázquez 1998). Like the Young Lords at the turn of the 1970's, several of the groups described by participants held a dual focus on conditions in both the Island and in the Tampa Bay area, while others focused predominantly on the local community and new arrivals to the Tampa Bay

community. Although participants discussed multiple motivations for their involvement in these grassroots organizations, responding to the social effects of Hurricane *María* remained salient. Like other transnational communities, the social effects of a disasters in a region of origin are often felt by those who have migrated to regions of destination (Rehman and Kalra 2005). For these transnational community members, everyday life experiences, decisions, concerns, and identities are often embedded within multi-layered transnational social fields, which are forged and maintained through social and symbolic ties that transcend region of origin and regions of destination (Glick Schiller et al. 1992a; 1992b; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). As this project has shown, these social and symbolic ties played key roles in participants' reactions and responses to a disaster in the homeland, as well as political, economic, and social issues in their region of destination.

In the analysis of this study, I have described in detail, a variety of ways Puerto Rican diaspora members in the Tampa Bay area have collaborated in grassroots organizing as a bottom-up strategy to influence political, economic, and social conditions of existence for Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico or the Tampa Bay area. Participants described organizing massive donation drives in the Tampa Bay area, and distributed donations to Islanders directly. They also organized donation drives for evacuees in the Tampa Bay area, as well as created events where evacuees and other community members in need could access social services and other resources available in the Tampa Bay area. In addition to creating a variety of events focused on accessing nutrition, education, healthcare, housing, and employment, participants also discussed serving as a gateway to support on a more individual basis, such as connecting individuals or families with existing social services in Tampa Bay and helping others navigate ethno-racism within employment opportunities. When the earthquakes began in Puerto Rico, some participants returned to the Island to help build temporary communities where displaced families could access hygiene, education, medical and mental health services. Back in the Tampa Bay area, participants organized political campaigns in the months leading up to the 2020 U.S.

federal elections. They advocated for voting in ways that would benefit the Puerto Rican community both locally and in the Island. Other participants also described increasing political representation by running for local political office or supporting other Puerto Ricans running for political office in their region of destination. In addition to increasing political representation of the Puerto Rican community, increasing access to places of cultural affirmation through the formation of cultural centers was a long-term strategy that participants continue to work toward today. These are just a few of the numerous bottom-up strategies that participants described utilizing to respond to political, economic, and social conditions of existence of Puerto Ricans in the Island or in the Tampa Bay area in the months and years following the disaster.

While some of these bottom-up strategies focused on improving the conditions of existence for Puerto Ricans in the Island, other strategies were intended to benefit Puerto Ricans in Tampa Bay area, and yet other strategies were intended to have dual foci. No matter the physical location of the intended outcomes, the grassroots actions discussed by participants were often motivated by the social effect of a disaster in the region of origin. Participants reactions to these social effects were also shaped by the dimensions of the transnational social field they were, or became, embedded within. Participants who maintained strong social and symbolic ties to Puerto Rico tended to initially organize transnational responses to disasters in the region of origin, in addition to organizing local responses in their region of destination as well. In such cases, familial social ties, and obligation to family in Puerto Rico, played key roles in motivating participants' actions. Participants who predominantly maintained strong symbolic ties to Puerto Rico tended to focus their energy predominantly on organizing local responses to disasters in the region of origin from within in their region of destination. In these cases, symbolic ties with Puerto Rico formed the foundations of solidarity that played a key role in motivating participants to offer support to evacuees.

Beyond motivating their actions, social and symbolic ties with Puerto Rico and other Puerto Ricans also played key roles in participants' processes of organizing and executing grassroots actions and campaigns in either locale. Transnational social fields are multi-dimensional and dynamic social processes, wherein resources of social capital, inherent in or transmitted through transnational social fields, can be accumulated, maintained, and mobilized (Faist 1998; 2000; Saksela-Bergholm et al. 2019; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Participants described leveraging transnational social fields to achieve a variety of goals. For example, to collect and deliver donations, recruit volunteers, collect and disseminate information, build rapport with community members, connect community members to resources already existent in the Tampa Bay area, and increase collective resources available to their grassroots organizations.

While examining grassroots organizing of diasporas is not new (Torres and Velázquez 1998), what was new about this project was that it took the perspective of transnationalism to approach grassroots organizing of Puerto Rican diaspora members as processes that are situated within a transnational social field, which transcends region of origin and regions of destination. In doing so, the grassroots actions described by participants can be understood as being mediated by a dual focus on the Puerto Rican community in the Island and in the Tampa Bay area. Although previous research has emphasized the role diaspora members often play in influencing homeland politics and development (Haney and Vanderbush 1999; Wayland 2004; Smith 2006; Smith and Stares 2007; Smith and Bakker 2007; Landolt 2008; Fitzgerald 2009; Bermudez 2011), this project has demonstrated that Puerto Rican diaspora members also play powerful roles in influencing politics and development in a region of destination as well. Furthermore, this project has described the many ways diaspora members leverage resources embedded within a transnational social field to execute grassroots actions, with implication in the region of origin, region of destination, or both. Puerto Ricans in the diaspora have drawing upon a rich history of solidarity and resistance not only to contribute to the reconstruct of “a

Puerto Rico for Puerto Ricans” (Bonilla and LeBrón 2020), but also to progress the social, political, and economic conditions of existence of the entire transnational community.

### **Limitations, Future Directions, and Policy Implications**

When I began this project in January of 2019, the major limitation to research had not yet begun. The COVID-19 pandemic began as I set out on interview data collection in 2020 and caused an array of issues for data collection. As noted in the methods section, interview data collection was conducted via Zoom video/audio conferencing because COVID-19 guidelines at the time prevented in-person interviews. As a result, technical difficulties impacted the quality of several interviews. Instances in which participants’ responses were partially inaudible were documented throughout interview data, and one interview was significantly impacted by this inaudibility. Participant observation data collection was also impacted by the pandemic. As participants shifted their efforts from in-person to virtual events, I was also forced to shift my data collection techniques to accommodate these changes.

Although I limited interview data collection to 10 semi-structured interviews, future research would benefit from a larger sample size. This project was also geographically limited to the Tampa Bay area. Throughout my research and work with Puerto Rican-led and focused grassroots organizations, it became clear that not only are Puerto Ricans in this region of destination social and symbolically tied to the region of origin. They are also socially and symbolically tied to other regions of destination, across the state of Florida and across the continental U.S. Future research could additionally benefit from utilizing multi-sited methods that incorporate the voices of Puerto Ricans from within various regions of destination and region of origin.

Conflicting policy implications can be drawn from this research depending upon the perspective from which it is read. Proponents of privatization and of shifting the responsibility and cost of disasters away from the federal government and onto communities might argue that

when disasters arise, nonprofit, charity and grassroots organizations can sufficiently aid those in need. Thus, demonstrating that the federal government need not play a key role in funding or mobilizing responses. On the contrary, I would argue that communities and grassroots organizations *can* effectively mobilize in response to a disaster *because* publicly accessible disaster relief and aid exists through highly formalized organizations. Many of the resources disseminated by the individuals and organizations I have described in this project were contingent upon existent programs administered through FEMA, the CDC, HUD, USDA, and the American Red Cross to name a few. Strategic partnerships like these, which marry bottom-up and top-down approaches, offer highly formalized organizations direct channels through which federal aid can be effectively distributed amongst communities in need. These strategic partnerships should be understood by policy makers as a community-centered approaches to top-down aid dissemination, in which communities and grassroots organizations play an integral role, rather than a suitable alternative to federally funded aid programs.

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**APPENDIX A:**  
**PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES**

**Glorimar**

Glorimar (age 24) was ten years old when her family migrated from San Germán, Puerto Rico to Brooklyn, New York. After enduring a few New England winters, her parents moved their family to warmer weather in Kissimmee, Florida, where Glorimar completed high school and enrolled at a local community college. In her early 20's, she moved herself to the Tampa Bay area to complete a bachelor's degree at a local university. During her time in college, Glorimar became an active member of a progressive advocacy and political action organization and volunteered with the Democratic Party. Tasked with voter engagement through English language phone banking, she soon became aware that her efforts had little impact on the Puerto Rican or Latinx community. This was 2019, two years after Hurricane *María* had devastated Puerto Rico, and Glorimar was outraged by the U.S. government's insufficient response of to the disaster. Through a friend, she learned about an organization that was utilizing online and on-the-ground strategies to mobilize Puerto Rican and Latinx voters. What resonated with Glorimar about this organization was its progressive policy advocacy and voter engagement strategies targeting Puerto Rican and Latinx voters along Florida's 'I-4 corridor,' which runs from the Orlando area where her family lives, to the Tampa Bay area where she has lived for three years. In the six months leading up to the 2020 election, Glorimar served as a staff organizer for this organization, conducting Spanish language voter outreach to the Puerto Rican and Latinx community in the Tampa Bay area. During these conversations, Glorimar often found herself informing people who had recently migrated from Puerto Rico that their residency in Florida

permits them to vote in the presidential election, a right that is withheld from residents of Puerto Rico.

### **Adrianna**

Adrianna (age 22) was born in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico and spent her formative years in the San Juan area of Puerto Rico. She attended a small military academy nearby from kindergarten through high school graduation. In addition to her family in the Island, she also keeps in close contact with friends from the academy, whom she spent 13 years of school with. She first came to the Tampa Bay area in 2016 to pursue a degree in political science at a local university. During college, Adrianna served as a field organizer for the Democratic Party, conducting voter engagement and registration in the Tampa Bay area. It was through this experiences that she learned about a Puerto Rican-led and focused organization that was mobilizing the Latinx community along the I-4 corridor. Like Glorimar, what drew Adrianna to this organization was its progressive policy advocacy, but also its specific focus on mobilizing the Puerto Rican community. Adrianna is passionate about increasing Puerto Rican representation in the U.S. Congress, and about increasing political engagement of the Puerto Rican and Latinx community. In 2019, she became an active member of this organization, volunteering as a field organizer before becoming a staff member as a regional outreach coordinator. In the six months leading up to the 2020 election, Adrianna led the team of organizers that Glorimar served with, conducting voter engagement to the Puerto Rican and Latinx community in the Tampa Bay area.

### **Carla**

Carla (age 51) was born in Brooklyn, New York to Puerto Rican parents. Around age five in the early 1970's, Carla's parents decided to move their family back to Puerto Rico. She remembers her first few years in Carolina, Puerto Rico as difficult, barely speaking Spanish at the time. Carla graduated high school in the Island and earned a BA in marketing in 2010. Around that same time, her sister moved to the Tampa Bay area, and Carla began to consider the possibility of relocating to Tampa Bay as well. As luck would have it, in 2015 the company that Carla was

working for offered her the opportunity to transfer to a position based in the Tampa Bay area. She eagerly accepted, only to become unemployed within the year. Even though she maintained a residence in Puerto Rico, Carla wanted to stick it out here in the Tampa Bay area. She enjoyed her new lifestyle in Florida and recognized that the economy in the Tampa Bay area was booming. After several years of volunteering with a local Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, a nonprofit organization that seeks to foster economic growth and development among local Latinx business enterprises, Carla was elected to serve on the executive staff. As the first Puerto Rican leader of this chamber in many years, Carla has advanced network building among Puerto Rican-led organizations and service providers. This formal network is composed of both nonprofit and for-profit organization members, and spans Florida and Puerto Rico.

### **Camila**

Camila (age 29) was thirteen years old when her mother decided to move her and her siblings from their native Bayamón, Puerto Rico, to Ocala, Florida. She remembers this move as very emotional, having to leave behind her Island and her father. Camila, her mother, and siblings stayed in Ocala for only a year before then moving to the Tampa Bay area where Camila has lived for fifteen years. In 2009 she graduated from high school in the Tampa Bay area and gave birth to a son as a single mother. In 2015, she graduated from a local community college and two years later she graduated from a local university with a degree in communications. Camila's first career after college was in the banking industry, where she gained an interest in credit and finances. She soon became a credit specialist and was involved in the company's programs to give back to the community. In the Tampa Bay area, she has served as a volunteer for several difference organizations and initiatives, most of which are not Puerto Rican-led or focused. However, through this company program, she also served on a team of bilingual financial advisors who flew to San Juan to hold two-days of community seminars focused on building credit and money management. As a credit specialist, Camila also formed connections with professionals from the real estate industry and gained an interest in changing career to real

estate. During this time of expanding her network, Camila made two major moves toward grassroots organizing. First, through connections she made with real estate agents and mortgage brokers, Camila became connected to the Hispanic chamber of commerce that Carla leads, and eventually became a volunteer board member. Second, while Camila was building her connections at networking events, she felt a sense of discomfort being a young Latinx woman. Realizing that there was a need for a professional Latina's networking group in the Tampa Bay area, she decided to start her own organization, focused on creating spaces in which established and aspiring Latina businesswomen can build connections and networks that promote professional growth, leadership, and social change within the community.

### **Nolo**

Nolo (age 46) was raised in a large family in Caguas, Puerto Rico, one of eight children. Growing up in public housing, his first introduction to grassroots organizing came in the form of programs for at-risk youth that he participated in. At age 17, Nolo became involved in political organizing, advocating for the election of Governor Pedro Rosselló of the New Progressive Party with a small group of young people in Caguas. He earned a GED in 1992 and a few years later his volunteer political organizing led to a job as a driver of several politicians in the Island. Nolo took courses in business administration, emergency medical response, and search and rescue. In addition to political organizing, he also trained and served as a volunteer paramedic, and on a search and rescue team in Puerto Rico. Around the age of 24, Nolo came to Florida to care for his father who was gravely ill. A month later his father passed on, and Nolo went through a long bureaucratic process to claim his father's remains. There was a language barrier, he didn't have economic support, and he didn't have the right documentation. In the end, Nolo decided to stay in the Tampa Bay area, and his first job here in 1999 was cleaning toilets at the airport. In the Tampa Bay area, Nolo experienced discrimination and racism, as well as periods of homelessness and incarceration. In 2004, he sought to improve his situation, and became involved with the local chapter of the Democratic Party, but never felt welcomed. So, he decided

to run for local elected positions in 2012 and 2015; his grassroots campaigns were defeated each time. After Hurricane *María* hit the island in 2017, Nolo refocused his organizing skills into disaster relief. He revitalized his involvement on a volunteer search and rescue team in Puerto Rico and became a certified Red Cross volunteer to help with recovery in the Island. Back in the Tampa Bay area, he became an active member of a Puerto Rican woman led grassroots organization that emerged after the hurricane, focusing on helping evacuees from the Island. He participated in organizing collection drives and often would deliver goods directly to evacuated families in need. He is a board member of a local democratic Caribbean caucus chapter, and an active member of a coalition of Puerto Rican-led or focused grassroots organizations across the state of Florida, which seeks to build connectivity, coherence, and capacity among existing Puerto Rican focused organizations and activists across the state.

### **Luz**

Luz (age 52) was born in “la ciudad de Roberto Clemente,” Carolina, Puerto Rico. During grade school, her parents struggled to afford sending Luz and her two siblings to private school, and they transferred between public and private schools several times. Her parents divorced before Luz graduated high school in 1985. She enrolled at a university in Puerto Rico, studying education, communications, and finance. After completing her degree, Luz began her first career in banking, and in 1996 she took advantage of an opportunity to transfer to the Tampa Bay area, working in several areas of financial services. During the U.S. housing crisis in the late 2000’s, Luz’s job shifted toward connecting Spanish speaking mortgagers at risk of foreclosure with financial solutions. At age 45, she retired from the banking industry and set out to reinvent herself. She hit the road with her husband, a transporter who drove an eighteen-wheeler across the country. Together, they traveled to 48 states, and every place they went they sought to connect with the Latinx community. They reconnected with old friends and made new ones, all along documenting the economic needs of the Latinx community not being address by local or federal officials. So, Luz decided she needed to do something about it; she began taking coursed

offered by FEMA and became a certified Red Cross volunteer. When Hurricane *María* hit Puerto Rico in 2017, Luz spent weeks unable to connect with her mother in the Island. Out of distress for her family and homeland, Luz was compelled to use her skills and resources to help her native Puerto Rico. She and seventeen other Puerto Ricans in the Tampa Bay area got together and organized a massive grassroots level donation drive with the purpose of sending disaster relief supplies to Puerto Rico. Luz oversaw the nearly 1500 multicultural volunteers who packed these donations in the Tampa Bay area. In the 45 days following the hurricane, they filled 78 commercial shipping containers with emergency relief supplies to be distributed to family, friends, schools, and mayors in different cities across the Island by seven of the group members, including Luz. After returning from several such missions, Luz refocused her attention on those who had evacuated from Puerto Rico to Florida following the hurricane. She and a group of six friends decided to create a nonprofit organization that would directly respond to people's needs after natural disasters. Under Luz's leadership, the organizations collaborated with other nongovernmental organizations providing evacuees relief in the Tampa, Miami, and Orlando area, many of which had also emerged in response to the hurricane. They reached out to local community members for donations and collaborated with for-profit businesses, FEMA, the Red Cross, and other government agencies to provide evacuees with food, clothing, housing vouchers, furniture, and other relocation services in Florida. In 2020, when an earthquake swarm caused widespread dislocations in Puerto Rico, Luz returned to the Island. She toured makeshift tent camps set up by dislocated Islanders to better understand their needs. At a camp along a highway, Luz collaborated with organizations in Puerto Rico to construct showers, two mini-schools, and a medical/mental health services site. She partnered with Nolo's search and rescue team, and he became an important member in her organization. Knowing that many parts of the Island continued to be at risk of experiencing earthquakes and dislocations, Luz collaborating with the Red Cross and twenty-six other Puerto Rican-led or focused organizations in Florida and one in New Jersey to train volunteers in Puerto Rico to create backpack for



emergency evacuations. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced Luz into quarantine in the Tampa Bay area, she shifted gears again, providing donation-based food assistance and financial support to the local community while complying with CDC safety guidelines. While travel to the Island has become more difficult since the start of the pandemic, Luz continues to collaborate with Island-based and Florida-based organizations to provide vital resources to those most seriously impacted by disasters in both locales.

### **Jesus**

Jesus (age 62) was in the first grade when his parents decided to migrate from the Bronx, New York, where he was born, back to their native Puerto Rico. Throughout grade school, his family moved several times between the Island, New York, and Massachusetts. During the years that Jesus lived in the continental US, he and several of his cousins continued to return to the Island to spend the summers with his uncles near San Juan. He remembers growing up in the Island surrounded by his many cousins with great nostalgia, but also recounts his discomfort with never feeling as though he belonged, a sentiment that he also experienced in New York and Massachusetts. At age 17, Jesus graduated high school in Massachusetts and became an emancipated minor to join the military, following in his father's footsteps. After four years of service in Vietnam, he moved to the Tampa Bay area. He enrolled at a local university and served two years in the Florida National Guard before becoming employed in a civilian role by a law enforcement agency. After 31 years at the agency, he retired and in 2012 enrolled in an MBA program abroad. After completing his studies and returning to the Tampa Bay area, Jesus became active in local politics. He became an active member of several local chapters of civil rights organizations and campaigned for a local elected position, running on a platform of multiculturalism and family values. Jesus sees himself as the patriarch of his family, maintaining connections with many close and distant relatives in Florida, Puerto Rico, and several other continental U.S. states, through social media and yearly travel. In late 2017, after Hurricane *María* hit Puerto Rico and thousands of evacuees began arriving in his local area,

Jesus shifted his attention toward helping those new arrivals. He and a close relative created a new organization, focused on connecting newly arrived Puerto Ricans with the services they needed to establish themselves within the Tampa Bay community. They organized food drives with culturally appropriate meals and served as translators assisting families in accessing services already existing in the community, such as free medical care. Through his political ties, Jesus advocated for increased access to assistance for displaced families in the local area, and for increased aid for Puerto Rico at the national level. To increase his capacity to serve the community, Jesus began collaborating with other Puerto Rican focused organizations. Collaborating with Luz's organization, he set up secondary locations for events so their efforts could cover a wider area. In 2020, when earthquakes plagued the Island, Jesus volunteered with Luz's organization in Puerto Rico, helping to distribute donations to affected communities. He became an early and an active member of a coalition of Puerto Rican focused grassroots organizations across the state, which seeks to increase Puerto Rican participation in elected position. Jesus campaigned twice for local elected positions in 2020. Defeated in both, he refocused his efforts on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, organizing PPE distribution and drive-through food distribution under CDC guidelines.

### **Edwardo**

Edwardo (age 62) was three years old when his parents decided to migrate to from Adjuntas, Puerto Rico to the boroughs of New York City. Coming of age during the 1970's in New York, Edwardo was sent to live with family in Massachusetts to avoid gang violence in his early teens, and the rest of his family soon followed. Around age 15, Edwardo began a summer job with the local neighborhood youth corps to help supplement his parents' income, when he was approached by the leader of a local Latinx led and focused organization. This was the first Puerto Rican-led and Latinx focused organization in the area, which advocated for better housing, employment, educational, and cultural rights, and Jesus soon became the president of their youth group. In his 20's, Edwardo served for a brief period as a community law enforcement

officer, before relocating to the Tampa Bay area in 1989, where he enrolled at a local university. He became a pastor and serves his community through spiritual teachings to this day. Around the same time, he began to serve as an outreach coordinator for a local community center, primarily servicing low-income Puerto Rican community members. He rose to a leadership position at that same community center, and retired in the early 2000's. When Hurricane *María* hit Puerto Rico, Eduardo, along with Jesus, formed a grassroots organization that would focus on connecting newly arrived Puerto Ricans into existing services, as well as integrating them into the existing Puerto Rican and Latinx community. Eduardo is passionate about his Puerto Rican roots and continuing Puerto Rican culture in the diaspora, even though he holds relatively few social ties to Islands. Through their organizations, Eduardo worked one-on-one with new arrivals, referring them to existing service providers, guiding them through bureaucratic systems, and connecting them to other Puerto Rican focused organizations that could meet their needs. He is an active member of a coalition of Puerto Rican focused organizations across the state, and his long-term goal is to establish a Puerto Rican cultural center in the Tampa Bay area.

### **Yuri**

Yuri (age 56) was twelve years old when her mother decided they had to leave rural Río Piedras, Puerto Rico for the Bronx, New York. A few years later, they again relocated to Allentown, Pennsylvania. Yuri began college in Pennsylvania and volunteered with a local organization that focused on empowering community members through literacy and education. While living in the continental US, Yuri longed to be back in the mountains of Puerto Rico, and at 19, she returned to the Island to finish her bachelor's degree. At the time, there was a shortage of English teachers in the Island, and as a result, college students like Yuri were allowed to take the teacher's exam. She passed the exam and began teaching English at an elementary school. Yuri then completed a master's degree in education in Puerto Rico and has served as an educator for over 30 years. In the early 90's, she moved from Puerto Rico to the Orlando area. A year later,

she relocated to the Tampa Bay area, and much of her family from the Island followed. In addition to working as a traditional classroom teacher in the Tampa Bay area, Yuri helped to organize a local anti-drug use organization where she served as the youth coordinator for several years. Around 2015 Yuri retired from the classroom and began participating in Puerto Rican focused grassroots organizations. She became an active volunteer with Luz's organization, volunteering to help run local events and traveling to the state capitol to advocate for the local Puerto Rican community as a representative of the organization. During this time, Yuri also became involved in Taíno cultural grassroots organizations, which seeks to build cultural knowledge and spiritual connections among descendants of Taíno, indigenous people of the Caribbean. From 2015 to 2017, Yuri has traveled several times to Puerto Rico to participate in events hosted by Taíno organizations. She sees her role in these organizations as a student, learning and preparing to pass on the knowledge elders share with her. Since the hurricane, the earthquakes, and the pandemic, it has been difficult for Yuri to travel to the Island to participate in events, however she maintains close connections with Taíno elders and other members through weekly phone calls and social media. Since 2017, she has also been running a small online business to raise funds for her next venture. Yuri has been collaborating with Taíno elders in the Island in search of land in Puerto Rico that can be purchased by Yuri and other members. Their plan is to build a Taíno reserve, a place in which member of the Taíno community can practice and teach the 'Taíno way' of kindness and nonviolence, community and shared responsibility, and stewardship of the earth and water. Her long-term goal is to live out her retirement on the Taíno reserve as a cultural and spiritual guide for other members, pilgrims, and visitors.

### **Tasha**

Tasha (age 50) was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico. In 1988 when she graduated high school, Tasha moved to the Tampa Bay area to live with her aunt. When her aunt moved back to Puerto Rico a few years later, Tasha decided to stay. She lived in Georgia for a short while in the early

90's before settling in the Tampa Bay area and raising a family. For years, she traveled often to the Island with her immediate family, frequently visiting relatives in the Island, especially her mother. In 2017 after Hurricane *María* was ravaging the Island, Tasha was devastated by the failure of communications systems. She began reaching out through social media to local friends, family, and other community members, asking for donations and volunteers. Under Tasha's guidance, they shipped nearly four tons of emergency relief supplies to Puerto Rico following the hurricane. However, recognizing that shipping goods to the Island during this time was unreliable, Tasha decided to switch gears and focused on those who had evacuated to Florida. She began storing donations, then visiting hotels where FEMA was housing displaced families, and distributing donations directly to those individuals. In those first few months, Tasha helped hundreds of evacuees navigate complicated government systems to access food, housing, and medical assistance. She collaborated with existing religious organizations to increase access to housing assistance, and she advocated for increased housing assistance from the federal government through media channels. In 2018, Tasha began working at a government funded family resource center in the Tampa Bay area, which increased her knowledge about and connections to existing services available to local community members. That same year, she officially formed her grassroots organization, continuing to distribute donations and helping newly arrived Puerto Rican and Latinx individuals access local and federal assistance programs. In 2020, when hundreds of schools closed in Puerto Rico due to structural damage caused by the earthquakes, Tasha traveled to Guánica to distribute donations and to help organize the constructions of a makeshift school, which made it possible for ninety-six high school seniors to graduate and move on to college. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Tasha has continued to serve the local Puerto Rican and Latinx community by connecting them to assistance programs and through food donations drives, many of which have specifically targeted seniors.

Table 3. Participant Overview

<b>Pseudo- nym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Birth- place</b>	<b>Age at Migr- ation</b>	<b>Other Places Lived (chronolog- ical order)</b>	<b>Years in Tampa MSA</b>	<b>Visits Puerto Rico</b>	<b>Edu</b>
Glorimar	Woman	24	San German, PR	10	Brooklyn, NY; Kissimmee, FL	2	Yearly	BA
Adrianna	Woman	22	Guaynabo, PR	18	San Juan, PR	4	Yearly	BA
Carla	Woman	51	Bronx, NY	5	Carolina, PR	5	Twice a year	BA
Camila	Woman	29	Bayamon, PR	13	Ocala, FL	14	Every other year	BA
Nolo	Man	46	Caguas, PR	24	N/A	22	Twice a year	GED /HS
Luz	Woman	52	Carolina, PR	28	N/A	26	Every few months	BA
Yuri	Woman	56	Rio Piedras, PR	12	Bronx, NY; Allentown, PA; Carolina, PR; Orlando, FL	29	Yearly	MA
Edwardo	Man	62	Adjuntas, PR	3	Unspecified, NY; Unspecified, MA	31	Not often	BA
Tasha	Woman	50	San Juan, PR	18	Unspecified, GA	32	Every few months	GED /HS
Jesus	Man	62	Bronx, NY	6	Unspecified, PR; Unspecified NY; Unspecified, MA; Unspecified, South Korea; Unspecified, Oklahoma; Junction City, Kansas; Madrid, Spain	40	Every other year	MA

Table 3. Participant Overview (Continued.)

<b>Pseudo-nym</b>	<b>Organizational Ties</b>	<b>Org. Role</b>
Glorimar	Alianza; Democratic Party; Next Gen America	Staff/ Volunteer
Adrianna	Alianza; Democratic Party; Organizing Corps 2020; Respeta Mi Gente; For Our Future PAC; Bring it Home Florida; Florida Immigration Coalition; Power 4 Puerto Rico Coalition	Staff/ Volunteer
Carla	Hispanic Chamber of Commerce; Helen Gordon Davis Centre for Women, Inc	Leader
Camila	Hispanic Chamber of Commerce; Latinas on the Go	Staff/ Volunteer
Nolo	New Progressive Party of Puerto Rico; Democratic Party; Boondocks Search and Rescue; Red Cross; Boricuas de Corazon Inc.; Puerto Rico Connect Inc.; Caribbean Democratic Caucus; La Mesa Boricua de Florida	Staff/ Volunteer
Luz	FEMA; Red Cross; Boricuas de Corazon Inc; Puerto Rico Connect Inc.; Boondocks Search and Rescue; Hispanic Federation; Giselle Marie Foundation; La Mesa Boricua de Florida; Coalition for PR Earthquake; Feeding Tampa Bay; Workers United; Alianza; CHISPA; Iniciativa Acción Puertorriqueña; Course of Action Foundation	Leader
Yuri	Indigenous Caribbean Network; Boricuas De Corazon Inc.; Puerto Rio Connect Inc.; La Mesa Boricua	Staff/ Volunteer
Edwardo	Puerto Rico Connect Inc.; La Mesa Boricua; Alianza; League of United Latin American Citizens	Leader
Tasha	Somos Puerto Rico Tampa; Intercultural Advocacy Institute; Course of Action Foundation; Children's Board Family Resource Centers	Leader
Jesus	Puerto Rico Connect Inc.; La Mesa Boricua; Alianza; CHISPA; Iniciativa Acción Puertorriqueña; Hispanic Federation; Boricuas de Corazon Inc.; League of United Women Voters; League of United Latin American Citizens; Faith in Florida; Foundation for a Healthy St. Petersburg	Leader

## **APPENDIX B: DATA COLLECTION TOOLS**

### **Interview Guides**

#### Interview Screening Questions

1. Are you 18 years old or older?
2. Were you, your parents, or your grandparents (etc.) born in Puerto Rican?
3. Within the past year, have you attended at least half of all general meeting of an organization that is focused on issues affecting the Puerto Rican community or led by a Puerto Rican person?
4. Outside of these meetings, have you dedicated time to other activities or responsibilities for this organizations?

#### Interview Guide

1. Demographics:
  - What is your name?
  - What is your age?
  - What is your gender?
  - Where were you born?
    - Where did you grow up?
  - Where else have you lived?
    - How long have you lived in the Tampa Bay area?
  - Where have you attended school?
    - Until what grade did you attend school?
  - Do you work?
    - What do you do?
2. Transnational Ties:
  - In what ways do you feel connected to Puerto Rico?
  - Have you ever lived in Puerto Rico? OR When did you live in Puerto Rico?
    - How long did you live in Puerto Rico?
    - Do you plan on ever living in Puerto Rico [again]?
  - How often do you travel to Puerto Rico?
    - What is the purpose of your travel?
    - How long do you stay?
  - How often do you communicate often with family, friends, or work associates in Puerto Rico?
3. Collaboration and Motivations
  - When did you start participating in grassroots organizing?
  - What led you to first join a grassroots organization?
    - Do you remember a specific event that pushed you to become involved?
  - What grassroots organizations are you currently a member of?
    - How long have you been an active member?
  - What is/are the objectives of this/these organization[s]?
    - What is it that you do with this/these organization[s]?
  - What do you want to achieve through your participation in this/these organization[s]?
  - What are some issues affecting the Puerto Rican community in the Tampa Bay area that are important to you?



In what ways have you organized around these issues?  
What are some issues affecting the Puerto Rican community in Puerto Rico that are important to you?

#### 4. Connections

In what ways do you feel connected to other people in this/these organizations?  
How have connections with this/these people been important or impactful for you?  
How has your connection to this/these people been useful in your organizing?  
Are any of your family and/or friends also members of this/these organization[s]?  
Would you say you have become close friends with other organizers through your organizing together?  
How are those close ties to other organizers useful in your organizing?  
You mentioned before the ways in which you feel connected to Puerto Rico.  
How has feeling connected to Puerto Rico been important or impactful for you?  
How has your connection to Puerto Rico been useful in your organizing?  
In what ways do you feel connected to the Tampa Bay area?  
How has feeling connected to the Tampa Bay area been important or impactful for you?  
How has your connection to the Tampa Bay area been useful in your organizing?  
Would you like to add anything about topic we haven't covered or expand more upon any of your previous responses?

### **Informed Consent for Participation**

#### **INTERVIEW CONSENT (English)**

**Overview:** You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this document should help you to decide if you would like to participate.

Study Staff: This study is being led by Dominique “Nikki” Rivera who is a graduate student in the University of South Florida’s Department of Sociology. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Beatriz Padilla, Professor of Sociology at the University of South Florida.

Study Details: The purpose of this study is to better understand how and why Puerto Ricans in the Tampa Bay area organize around issues in either Puerto Rico or the Tampa Bay area. During a one-hour recorded interview, you will be asked a series of questions about your background and your organizing experiences.

Participants: You are being asked to take part because you are 1) Puerto Rican, 2) a member of an organization that is Puerto Rican-led, or Puerto Rican focused, and 3) you regularly attend meeting and events held by this organization.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to participate and may stop your participation at any time. There will be no penalties if you do not participate or decide to stop once you start.

Confidentiality: Even if the findings of this study are published, your information will be kept private, confidential, and anonymous. Anyone with the authority to look at your records must keep them confidential.

Questions, concerns, or complaints: If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call Dominique “Nikki” Rivera at (978) 552-8810. If you have questions

about your rights, complaints, or issues as a person taking part in this study, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at [RSCH-IRB@usf.edu](mailto:RSCH-IRB@usf.edu).

**Consent to Take Part in Research:**

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in this research study. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

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Signature of Person Taking Part in Study

Date

---

Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

**Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent and Research Authorization:**

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in their primary language. This research subject has provided legally effective informed consent.

---

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Date

---

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

**CONSENTIMIENTO DE ENTREVISTA (Español)**

**Resumen:** Se le ha solicitado que participe en un estudio de investigación. La información de este documento le ayudará a decidir si desea participar.

Personal del estudio: Este estudio está dirigido por Dominique “Nikki” Rivera que es una alumna de posgrado en el departamento de sociología de la Universidad de Florida Sur. Ella está siendo orientada en esta investigación por Dr. Beatriz Padilla, de sociología de la Universidad del Sur de la Florida.

Detalles del estudio: El propósito de este estudio es comprender mejor cómo y por qué los puertorriqueños en el área de Tampa Bay se organizan alrededor de problemas en Puerto Rico o el área de Tampa Bay. Durante una entrevista grabada de una hora, se le harán una serie de preguntas sobre sus antecedentes y sus experiencias de organización.

Participantes: Se le está pidiendo que participe porque está 1) puertorriqueño, 2) un miembro de una organización que es liderada por puertorriqueños, o enfocada en puertorriqueños, y 3) usted asiste regularmente reuniones y eventos organizados por esta organización.

**Participación voluntaria:** Su participación es voluntaria. Usted no está obligado a participar y puede finalizar su participación en cualquier momento. No sufrirá penalizaciones por no participar o por abandonar su participación una vez que haya comenzado.

**Confidencialidad:** Incluso si se publican los hallazgos de este estudio, su información se mantendrá privada, confidencial, y anónimo. Cualquier persona con la autoridad para consultar sus registros deberá mantener la confidencialidad de los mismos.

**Consultas, dudas o reclamos:** Si usted tiene alguna consulta, duda o reclamos acerca de este estudio, llame Dominique “Nikki” Rivera al (978) 552-8810. Si tiene alguna duda acerca de sus derechos, queja o problema como persona que participa de este estudio, llame al IRB de la USD al (813) 974-5638 o comuníquese por correo electrónico a [RSCH-IRB@usf.edu](mailto:RSCH-IRB@usf.edu).

**Consentimiento para participar en la investigación:**

Otorgo mi consentimiento por propia voluntad para participar en este de investigación. Entiendo que al firmar este formulario estoy aceptando participar en esta investigación. He recibido una copia de este formulario para llevarme.

---

Firma de la persona que participará en este estudio

Fecha

---

Nombre de la persona que participará en este estudio, en letra de imprenta

**Declaración de la persona que ha obtenido el consentimiento informado y la autorización para la investigación:**

He explicado cuidadosamente a la persona que participará en el estudio qué puede esperar de su participación. Confirmando que este sujeto de la investigación se comunica en el idioma utilizado para explicarle esta investigación y que está recibiendo un formulario de consentimiento informado en su idioma nativo. Este sujeto de la investigación ha provisto su consentimiento informado de valor legal.

---

Firma de la persona que ha obtenido el consentimiento informado

Fecha

---

Nombre de la persona que ha obtenido el consentimiento informado, en letra de imprenta

*IRB Exemption Determination*

September 9, 2020

Dominique Rivera  
5202 Pine Mill Ct Tampa, FL  
33617

Dear Dominique Rivera:

On 9/9/2020, the IRB reviewed and approved the following protocol:

Application Type:	Initial Study
IRB ID:	STUDY001099
Review Type:	Exempt(2)
Title:	Organizing for Here and There: Exploring the Grassroots Organizing of the Puerto Rican Diaspora in the Tampa Bay Area within a Perspective of Transnationalism
Funding:	None
Protocol:	• Dominique Rivera Protocol HRP-503_Clean

The IRB determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review.

In conducting this protocol, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Please note, as per USF policy, once the exempt determination is made, the application is closed in BullsIRB. This does not limit your ability to conduct the research. Any proposed or anticipated change to the study design that was previously declared exempt from IRB oversight must be submitted to the IRB as a new study prior to initiation of the change. However, administrative changes, including changes in research personnel, do not warrant a modification or new application.

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination.

Sincerely,  
Katrina Johnson

IRB Research Compliance Administrator

---

**Institutional Review Boards / Research Integrity & Compliance**

FWA No. 00001669

University of South Florida / 3702 Spectrum Blvd., Suite 165 / Tampa, FL 33612 /

813974-5638