

“In the Eye of a Hurricane”: A Narrative Account of the Efforts and Emotions of University Stakeholders Responding to Hurricane Maria

“In the Eye of a Hurricane” is a lyric from the song, “Hurricane” (Miranda, 2015b, track 13).

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Abstract: Despite the physical distance between Puerto Rico and Connecticut, this narrative describes how a multi-stakeholder group supporting Latinx university student initiatives experienced Hurricane Maria and its aftermath from a distance, on their campus at the University of Saint Joseph in Connecticut. Lyrics written by Puerto Rican playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda provide a compelling metaphorical framework for understanding these experiences and coming to terms with the loss facilitated by both natural and man-made disasters. The authors share their experiences of confronting feelings of fear, loss, guilt, and anger even as they focused on mobilizing a campus response to Hurricane Maria, which included relief, activist, and healing work. They share lessons learned about multi-stakeholder collaboration, and they highlight how they responded to the lack of infrastructure at multiple levels.

Keywords: community disaster, Hurricane Maria, multi-stakeholder collaboration, narratives, trauma

Introduction

Beginning on September 16, 2017, each of us at our small New England university were deeply impacted as we witnessed from afar Hurricane Maria’s sweeping devastation of Puerto Rico. People walked in chest-deep waters, houses were left without roofs, and other homes collapsed entirely. The young and the old cried and looked in bewilderment as the community disintegrated. Television images sparked in each of us both a sense of helplessness and an impulse to mobilize our school community.

In this account, we reflect on our individual and collective responses to Hurricane Maria and the relief work we initiated on our campus. As faculty, staff, and student affiliates of the Institute for Latino Community Practice,¹ we partner on campus-wide programs to support Latinx students and related research initiatives. As members of the institute’s internal advisory group (nicknamed the “LOOP”), we meet monthly and have a ritual of starting each gathering with a dedication, which serves as a way to focus our time and to connect our projects to the larger

¹ The mission of the Institute for Latino Community Practice (n.d.) is to “create a community of learners dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and best practices to serve the Latino population.” This is achieved by supporting students, advocating for systemic change, and encouraging research on these topics. The internal advisory group, nicknamed the “LOOP,” is comprised primarily of social workers, but it also includes counselors, nurses, administrators, and student support faculty.

vision for equity, justice, and access to education as a means of power. We share our experiences of confronting feelings of fear, loss, guilt, and anger even as we focused on mobilizing a campus response to Hurricane Maria, which included relief, activist, and healing work.

Lyrics written by Puerto Rican playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda provide a compelling metaphorical framework for understanding these experiences and coming to terms with the loss facilitated by both natural and man-made disasters. Best known for creating two Tony Award-winning musicals—*In the Heights* (Miranda, 2005) and *Hamilton* (Miranda, 2015a)—Miranda has long been vocal about the socio-political conditions which affect Puerto Rico, such as the debt crisis, via newspaper opinion pieces and performing raps written to increase awareness (Miranda, 2016). The incorporation of rap and hip-hop themes into his play further validates the cultural contributions and artistry of Miranda as a Nuyorican/Puerto Rican living in the US (Herrera, 2016). Moreover, his artistic work specifically names and tackles issues affecting Puerto Ricans and other marginalized groups in the US, such as themes of displacement, gentrification, and acculturation. Miranda’s (2015b, track 13) lyric, “I wrote my way out,” from his song, “Hurricane,” which is from the musical *Hamilton* (Miranda, 2015a), underscores that, for us, writing this reflection was a strategy for coping with the tragic loss due to a natural disaster as a means to incite change.² We are writing our way out by sharing this narrative with the expectation that it will educate, affirm, and inspire our colleagues in social work, all helping professionals, and those professionals committed to collaborative healing work.

In the weeks after the hurricane, Miranda emerged as a national advocate for rebuilding the island in the best interests of its residents. Further, his work is infused with a critical optimism that illuminates the contributions of immigrants and people of color to the US.³ Miranda’s artistry serves as a thematic amplifier for our narrative.

Maria, Man-Made Disasters, and Migration

Miranda used his renown to shed light on the tragedy in Puerto Rico in a newspaper opinion piece that he wrote as a call to action (Miranda, 2017b). He talked about Uncle Elvin, who was without electricity for 84 days (Miranda, 2017b). This meant no refrigeration, no lights, and no hot water. Thousands of homes were destroyed, rural residents were isolated, businesses were

² Miranda’s song, “Hurricane” (Miranda, 2015b, track 13), describes how Alexander Hamilton’s home island was destroyed by the hurricane. After writing down his description of the hurricane and its effects, his writing inspired others to fund his emigration to New York (Miranda, 2015b, track 13). Like the 160,000 migrants from this modern economic and natural disaster (Center for Puerto Rican Studies [Centro], 2018), Hamilton’s migration was inextricably linked to the hurricane. Migration related to the natural disaster is a central theme of the musical (Miranda, 2015a), and it parallels the experience of many in Puerto Rico and other under-resourced and marginalized countries and communities.

³ This can be seen in Miranda’s choice to focus on the life of Alexander Hamilton, an immigrant born in Nevis who became a founding father and the nation’s first Secretary for the Treasury (Murray, 2007). In the wake of Hurricane Maria, Miranda helped organize major relief efforts and used Twitter to denounce the inactions of the Trump administration to offer aid, and he then wrote a song specifically to raise funds for survivors of the natural disaster (Coscarelli, 2017).

closed, and migration to the mainland increased.

Unfortunately, his Uncle Elvin’s reality is still the truth for so many Puerto Ricans. The impact of Hurricane Maria was felt worldwide and still is.

Hurricane-related deaths within a year of Hurricane Maria totaled more than 4,000 (Kishore et al., 2018).⁴ Furthermore, reports from the Center for Puerto Rican Studies (Centro, 2018) detailed that 160,000 people have migrated to the US during and since Hurricane Maria—some to our state of Connecticut. The effects of the hurricane extend across time and place. Despite the physical distance between Puerto Rico and Connecticut, this narrative describes how we experienced Hurricane Maria and its aftermath on our campus at the University of Saint Joseph. The lyrics and storyline from *Hamilton* (Miranda, 2015a) and *In the Heights* (Miranda, 2005) frame our reflective narrative, starting with the story of Alexander Hamilton.

Alexander Hamilton’s story is now prototypical due to the combination of man-made and natural disasters that have destroyed less developed areas of our world. Gill (2007) discusses the difference between a natural disaster and a technological/human-related disaster. In the case of Puerto Rico, both types of disasters are present and evident in our reflections. On the one hand, hurricanes are a part of life on the island,⁵ which explains why many families felt prepared for Hurricane Maria, as they had experienced natural disasters in the past. However, the deteriorating infrastructure, the lack of attention to larger planning for electricity and water over decades, and the poor governmental responses contributed to an exacerbation of the consequences of this disaster (similar to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans). The effects of the hurricane were not only felt in Puerto Rico but also reached our classrooms and living rooms in Connecticut. In 2016, we were the sixth state with the most Puerto Ricans (301,182) in the US (Centro, 2016), and we were to then receive 1,449 Hurricane Maria evacuees (Centro, 2018).

We enact and advance a model for multi-stakeholder collaboration in our work supporting the educational attainment of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, and we turned to that model in our support of hurricane survivors and their families. Here we highlight how we responded to a lack of infrastructure at multiple levels. Finally, we reflect on the need for increased activism within social work and other helping professions around U.S. policies that impede aid to Puerto Rico.

“There Is Quiet for Just a Moment” (Miranda, 2015b, track 13)

The song, “Hurricane” (Miranda, 2015b, track 13), from Miranda’s musical, *Hamilton* (Miranda,

⁴ Although other estimates may be lower, this is due to the oftentimes arduous and bureaucratic process of bringing a deceased’s body to Puerto Rico’s capital for an autopsy to confirm the cause of death (Kishore et al., 2018). Additionally, causes of death that are related indirectly to the hurricane, such as difficulty traveling to the doctor or hastened death due to a lack of healthy food and water, do not have a place on the autopsy form and, thus, are harder to quantify (Kishore et al., 2018).

⁵ Almost 120 years ago, Puerto Rico experienced another disastrous hurricane, Hurricane San Ciriaco. There were approximately 3,000 deaths and loss of livelihood as farms were destroyed (Library of Congress, Hispanic Division, 2011).

2015a), speaks to the temporary silence experienced by so many during the most intense part of the storm, the eye. Here, too, we confronted deafening silence as communication was lost with the island; a sense of shock and powerlessness settled upon us. Because we live in an age of immediate access to information via social media, it was terrifying that we had not heard about Puerto Rico. Our fears and worries intensified as we communicated with each other. Each phone call began with, “Have you heard from folks in PR?”

This silence allowed for the expression of emotions in classrooms and public spaces on our campus. For example, when Madeline Perez De Jesus—one of our faculty members of Puerto Rican descent—arrived in her classroom on the first day after the storm, she immediately acknowledged the devastating impact. A student walked in late and immediately apologized for being tardy, and she announced, “I just got the phone call! The call from the shared phone on a mountaintop where there is the only weak cell signal that is usable sometimes during the day. And it was from my aunt . . . My family is struggling but okay.” Students cheered as their peer cried tears of joy and pain. Other students left the room crying.

Michele Maccarone Brophy, one of our academic advisors with a social work background, encountered one of her student advisees shortly after news of the hurricane spread. The advisee came to disclose that she had missed two weeks of classes due to anxiety and worry about her family in Puerto Rico. She lived here with her grandmother, but her parents and siblings were in Puerto Rico. The student shared that she could not think about anything else. She eventually dropped out of college for the semester.

Unlike Madeline’s students who were troubled while in class, Michele’s student was so impacted that she could not even bring herself to school. This had greater implications as the academic trajectory of numerous students with ties to Puerto Rico was forever altered as course withdrawals resulted in the loss of a semester. The feelings of devastation, loss, and anxiety were only some of the emotions surfaced. Our LOOP meeting was dedicated to those impacted by Hurricane Maria, but despite normally being a productive and attentive group, we had trouble staying focused on the agenda. We shared and attempted to process our reactions to the impact of the hurricane. Anthony De Jesus, a faculty member of Puerto Rican descent, felt “survivor’s guilt.” One challenge was in negotiating his own sense of guilt (from being spared through no fault of his own from the devastation), which was soon eclipsed by a sense of helplessness in confronting the lack of information and ability to respond immediately to those in most need.

These feelings resonated with those of us with relatives on the island. The term “survivor guilt” was coined by Lifton (1967), who named the phenomenon as a reference to the relatives of Holocaust survivors who wrestled with the feelings of guilt for outliving loved ones and to those victims themselves who felt guilty because they survived. Our experience of survivor’s guilt extends beyond being present at a traumatic event and surviving it; it also applies to Anthony’s notion of “being spared through no fault of [our] own from the devastation.” We were spared because our families migrated to allow us to live outside of Puerto Rico and have increased access to opportunity. Our reactions manifested in a number of ways. Some of us felt numb. Some of us had difficulty taking showers as we knew that there were loved ones who were not afforded access to water. Madeline realized that she modified a comment that she typically

would make to her toddler while teaching her how to wash her hands: “If my child left the water faucet running too long, I used to say, ‘We need to save the water for the fishies.’ Now we say, ‘We need the water for Puerto Rico.’”

“We Are Powerless” (Miranda, 2008, track 12)

Balancing work/life activities with processing emotions related to the disaster was difficult for professors and students. With the level of emotional upheaval, classes with impacted students (and professors) shifted topics and managed emotions even as they engaged in the curriculum. For example, in one Spanish class, a third of the students had at least one immediate family member living in Puerto Rico. Michele describes how Hurricane Maria was their primary topic of conversation. It helped immensely that the professor opened up discussion about it. The most upsetting thing for the students was the inability to communicate with their family members—not knowing was nerve-wracking. Wanting to help but not knowing how was another frustration that left students feeling helpless and powerless.

As we struggled to process this perfect storm of forces, the compelling refrain, “We are powerless” (Miranda, 2008, track 12), from the song “Blackout” (Miranda, 2008, track 12) in Miranda’s first musical, *In the Heights* (Miranda, 2005), proved prophetically affirming. Those of us who saw this musical recall one critical scene in which the neighborhood residents experience a blackout, which is also replicated for audience members in the performance when all the lights and sound are shut down; audience members wonder if a power outage really occurred. As the characters in the musical try to find each other and seek refuge, they sing about the precipitous blackout.

After multiple bars of song, which express the chaos that has ensued in the blackout, the characters sing that “we are powerless” (Miranda, 2008, track 12). The song—which plays upon the double meaning of people with low economic and political power struggling to survive after losing electricity—serves as a powerful metaphor for Puerto Rican hurricane victims as well as the LOOP. We felt increasingly powerless in our efforts to foster a more inclusive campus that responded to humanitarian needs during a national backdrop of scarce resources and racist anti-immigrant sentiment.

The impact of and response to Hurricane Maria did not only affect the residents of Puerto Rico, but they also generated strong emotion from people all over the world. Hurricane Maria’s wrath came at a time when low-income communities of color in the US were feeling particularly vulnerable, exposed, and targeted as a result of the oppression of the Trump administration. Just a month earlier, we witnessed white supremacists marching with swastikas, Confederate battle flags, and anti-Semitic banners in Charlottesville, Virginia, while anti-racist protesters responded. We heard President Trump declare, “There were very fine people on both sides” (Haberma, 2017, para. 7). Moreover, we continued to feel the impact of immigration policies that separate families and threaten the college aspirations of “dreamers” (Penichet-Paul, 2017, para. 1). Black Lives Matter grew to become an international movement fighting against the systemic racism and violence toward Black people. And we saw a drastically different and proactive response to providing aid to residents impacted by Hurricane Harvey (Texas) and

Hurricane Irma (Florida). President Trump visited Puerto Rico a week after the storm hit, and the trip was memorialized with the surreal images of him throwing rolls of paper towels at the residents of the island. The official post-hurricane death count to this day minimizes the catastrophic nature of this natural and man-made disaster.

The events that occurred during the summer and early fall of 2017 created a daunting emotional and pedagogical burden on our campus and in our social work learning community. In addition, we (faculty) were aware that some on our campus were not outraged by the devastating incivility of the Trump administration which harbored nativist values that see immigrants and migrants as undeserving outsiders.

Efforts

“They Passed around a Plate” (Miranda, 2015b, track 13)

We turn again to the *Hamilton* (Miranda, 2015a) song, “Hurricane” (Miranda, 2015b, track 13), which references how individuals mobilized to assist those in need. As the song says, “they passed around a plate” (Miranda, 2015b, track 13). We did the same. Motivated to help in some way, several individuals and groups at our university began donation campaigns. Although benevolent, the uncoordinated efforts soon developed frustration in us. Departments, including Spanish languages, social work, and our arts center and individual campus leaders were collecting goods, but there was no plan to coordinate them and transition them off campus and into the hands of families. As a result, we organized ourselves to serve as the main point-people to collect and transport donations. For example, Madeline received many emails and calls for efforts to aid Puerto Rico on campus, but she soon realized that the various initiatives were not coordinated. As a social work educator, she tapped into her background as a community organizer and wrote up a master copy of all the efforts that were occurring and began delegating tasks to consolidate those efforts. She first separated the monetary donations from the donation of supplies. Money was collected as they literally “passed around a plate” (Miranda, 2015b, track 13). Steve Raider-Ginsburg, the director of our arts center, made the announcement and collected contributions at each show. Robert Madden, a social work faculty member, did something similar at a community meeting he attended. Together, the LOOP identified a reputable organization to which they could write out a check and send all the funds. This turned out to be the Hispanic Federation.

We established a donation drop spot for each of the departments involved along with a coordinator who would monitor the items. Once those were identified, we wrote a statement for our university communications page, which advertised this effort. In less than a month, the donations were abundant. Then it was time to focus on the more complicated task of working with non-profits and Puerto Rican organizations to which donations would be distributed. Carolina Acosta, the undergraduate student representative on the LOOP, remembers that after two weeks of collection, the donations piled higher and higher. The lobby of the humanities building on campus housed over 50 cases of bottled water and tens of hundreds of canned goods and hygienic items. The mountain of these donations towered above the table they were gathered next to, which was a visible symbol of the support being offered.



There was a sea of organizations that promoted their help toward Hurricane Maria relief efforts, but deciding on one was overwhelming. The search began with the criterion of an organization that would cover the shipping cost of the donation items, and few seemed to do so. Carolina spent hours on the phone, sent over 30 emails, and scoured the internet to find a human to contact about the goods, but this proved to be nearly impossible.

Carolina’s frustrations mirrored those of many of us trying to help. We continuously asked: What can we do? Where can we send what we have gathered without an exorbitant shipping cost? How sure can we be that these donations will get to those in most need? Our university, like many organizations, was unable to cover the cost of shipping. And even if they could contribute, there were the logistical issues with items being shipped to Puerto Rico but being left in the port of San Juan. News stories featured tons of packages arriving to Puerto Rico and being left to rot because there was no plan in place to transport the items from the dock into the hands of the people in the towns. The towns with functional post offices were the towns with less immediate need. Therefore, an informal system developed, which identified trusted people in towns with working post offices who would drive to people who needed the items. In some cases, strangers helped strangers. Further complicating matters was the 100-year-old policy called the Jones Act.⁶ President Trump granted a 10-day waiver of the policy, but the delay in aid had already occurred. We knew that in order to get the items into the hands of people on the island, we needed to identify a community partner who was already planning a chartered flight to Puerto Rico. This information emerged because of Carolina’s attempts to create a distribution plan.

Madeline describes how a grassroots community effort was imperative at this point since we were located in Hartford, Connecticut, where there is an active Puerto Rican community. She called a dozen former students, all Latinas, who obtained their BSW degrees from the University of Saint Joseph as adult learners and asked them specifically who was organizing a chartered flight of goods to send to Puerto Rico. One of the alumni, Paula Ferreira, directed her to the Puerto Rican Society in New Britain, Connecticut. Paula took it a step further by serving as a direct link between Madeline and the president of the organization, and she provided her number for this purpose. Sanctioned by Paula, Madeline called Maggie De Jesus (the president) and told her about our efforts on a Thursday night. She happily agreed to have members of her

⁶ The Jones Act increases shipping costs by requiring that all goods that move between U.S. states and territories do so on ships that are owned and operated by the United States. This puts the burden on Puerto Rico to pay to receive aid while in crisis and is costly even when not in crisis (Isidore & Park, 2017).

organization take the items with them to Puerto Rico. The only challenge was that she was unable to take the bottled water as the weight was more than they could handle. Madeline then organized the LOOP members to meet and load three cars full of supplies to meet Maggie. Within a one-hour lunch break during a marathon session of Saturday classes, the University of Saint Joseph community mobilized to transport the items and load the cars.

Mary Schone, the graduate assistant supporting the LOOP was in charge of the caravan. Mary called the director of the Puerto Rican Society of New Britain to make final arrangements. Once again, the collection campaign met a hurdle. This organization was no longer accepting donations that would be sent to Puerto Rico due to shipping timing and cost but instead would use all remaining donations for families displaced to the US by the natural disaster. We knew that hundreds, possibly thousands, of Puerto Ricans would be arriving in our city due to the displacement of the hurricane, and we realized they needed assistance as well. Therefore, we made peace with the fact that our donations would not make it to Puerto Rico but to recently-arrived Puerto Rican families in our city. We then had to turn our attention to figure out how to transport the donations of bottled water.

Michele read about a car dealership that was arranging for a chaperoned transport of goods to Puerto Rico. She had her car serviced at a sister dealership and communicated with the manager to secure shipment of our water bottles. The water was desperately needed to ensure clean drinking water, but the bottles were so heavy to ship that many organizations were unwilling to do so. Once again, students and professors of the Institute for Latino Community Practice, the Spanish department member, social work colleagues, and Latino students and faculty worked together to get the heavy water bottle packages into our personal vehicles.



The challenge and transportation of donations was juxtaposed with the resolve to get it done. After collecting these donations to meet the immediate needs of survivors in Puerto Rico, time could be focused on the emotional needs of survivors here.

Writing Our Way Out

We also sought to raise awareness about this issue by documenting our story. In Miranda’s (2015a) musical, *Hamilton*, he chronicles the trajectory of Alexander Hamilton from destitute youth, victimized by familial and natural factors, to acclaimed founding father. According to Miranda’s lyrics, Alexander survived his own devastating hurricane, and he “wr[o]te his way out... wr[o]te everything down far as [he] could

see” after his own town was ravished by a hurricane (Miranda, 2015b, track 13). In the spirit of *Hamilton* (Miranda, 2015a), we were attempting to process and survive post-disaster by writing

our way out. It was important for us to document our story and to show the unity among the multiple stakeholders in this effort. Furthermore, as an academic institution, the power of writing is taught and practiced as a way to liberate and raise awareness. We hoped to raise awareness about structural problems in Puerto Rico and elsewhere.

The other reason it was important to write our way out was because it created the conditions for us to be authors in our story. In times of disaster and crisis, the human condition is tested, and individuals who are focused on survival may act in ways other than what is typically socially acceptable. Developing a critical social justice lens allows us to extend compassion for all people pushed up against dire situations. Blodorn and O’Brien’s (2011) analysis of the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans reminds us of the racist ways that the press told different stories about survivorship and trauma. They described two photos. One was of an adult white couple (a man and a woman) who were in chest-deep water with a bag of items—they were labeled as “victims.” The other photo featured an African American male, also with a bag of items immersed in floodwaters—he was described as a “looter.” It is not hard to see how white supremacy shaped the narrative of people, even when they were in the same traumatic situation. White people become “victims.” Black and brown people are “criminals.” In the case of Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, the death count for black and brown people was downplayed and inhumane conditions prevailed and remain.

We began to see this same double standard of media coverage take place with Hurricane Maria. Accounts of theft and dishonesty were shared without the context that the island lacked important frameworks to receive aid. In fact, we view the abusers as the capitalist nation in which we live, which thrives on a supply-and-demand economy even in the face of human tragedy.⁷ We witnessed Federal Express prices quadruple if one was attempting to ship items to Puerto Rico. Airline flights also went sky-high. Even the Sony transistor radio, which was \$20 on Amazon this summer, became a \$50 item post-hurricane. We noticed it, and we are using our voices to call out this injustice and rewrite the story with our own narrative.

“Almost Like Praying” (Miranda, 2017a)

Miranda’s (2017a) song, “Almost like Praying,” was recorded by him and various Latino artists to support relief efforts for Hurricane Maria. The song is special for a number of reasons. One, its lyrics feature the names of every town in Puerto Rico, a small but significant gesture to commemorate residents throughout the island and let them know they are not forgotten. Second, the song features a sample from the show tune “Maria” (Bernstein et al., 1957/2004, track 6) from the musical, *West Side Story* (Bernstein, 1957), which is about star-crossed lovers who are from rival communities—a white community and a Puerto Rican community. Again, “Maria” served a double meaning as it is a popular name in Puerto Rico, a reference to the first musical (Bernstein, 1957) with a featured focus on Puerto Ricans, and it is now the name of the most

⁷ “Disaster capitalism” was a phrase termed by Klein (2007) in her book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. The term fits aptly in this case because disaster capitalism describes “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as excited market opportunities” (Klein, 2007, p. 6).

devastating natural disaster to hit the island in its history. The song “Maria” (Bernstein et al., 2004, track 6) is thus a bittersweet anthem to the fraught relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States and an indication of the second-class citizenship of Puerto Rico.

After getting a handle on the initial grief and devastation of the hurricane, mobilizing to secure both financial aid and personal goods, and reflecting and writing about our experiences, our community still needed healing. We, too, needed a space for emotional release. We also needed to be “almost like praying” (Miranda, 2017a). As part of our commitment to support Latino college completion, the LOOP provides support to a student mutual-aid support group that was created and led by Latina adult learners called the Adelante Circle of Support.⁸ As the holidays approached, Latina students openly expressed their guilt and grief. They wondered aloud how they might focus on enjoying the winter holidays when their loved ones were lacking basic needs. They expressed feeling selfish if they attempted to focus on their studies. In response to student needs, LOOP member Lynnette Colón, also our university campus minister, volunteered to start off the next meeting of the Adelante Circle of Support with a special focus on “hurricanes and holidays.” We created a sacred space and healing community. In describing her preparation and facilitation of the session, it became obvious that some of our students were struggling with keeping balance within the realm of having peace in reality. How does one have peace when their hands are tied from a distance? How does one continue to live their daily routine when their loved ones in Puerto Rico have either lost their lives or their lives have changed forever? This resonated with Lynnette as well. When she arrived at her mother’s home, she saw her hold her face in horror as she watched news reports about the hurricane and cried, “Ay, Mi Isla!” (“Oh! My island!”).

The meditation was an invitation to look within and to know what one has done is enough. It was also an opportunity to see our actions here (i.e., achieving higher education, careers, caring for our families, defending social justice, providing service to the community) as a way to honor our loved ones in Puerto Rico. The meditation allowed for feelings of grief to surface and helped create a community among participants. It was also a chance to validate them in their challenge. Most importantly, it was a way for them to know that there was a way that their hands didn’t have to be tied. What were originally experienced as students’ feelings of selfishness for focusing on their education were reframed as their academic accomplishments being community accomplishments, which would in turn aid their families. The fruits of their work and hearts make a difference no matter the distance.

Lynnette’s work in supporting the emotional healing work of our students shows the link between our hurricane relief work and the mission of our institute. In creating culturally-responsive leaders, we model the importance of self-awareness and self-care, which are expressed by sharing our feelings in a safe space and engaging in reframing as a tool to support student resilience. Lynnette created an individualized meditation for this occasion (see Appendix).

⁸ Adelante is a Spanish word meaning “onward” and is also the name of an undergraduate certificate program for bilingual/bicultural undergraduate students at our university.

Lessons Learned

There were numerous lessons learned from our journey of shared emotions and efforts to support the survivors of Hurricane Maria. These lessons have crucial implications for social work.

It Is Critical to Name and Experience Emotions

As we shared in this reflection, we were faced with the challenge of keeping the class (or meeting) moving during the trauma of Hurricane Maria. Some people might take an all-or-nothing approach to this, but the examples shared in our reflection show facilitators who connected that small group moment to the realities of the outside world while moving forward with the work with compassion. Michele took a pause with a student during an advising meeting. As LOOP members, we gave ourselves permission to go, as some might interpret, “off track” during a challenging meeting. Also, the faculty members compassionately found ways to allow the students to express themselves.

We also highlight that one does not always have to know what to say or have to know the perfect way to facilitate such a sensitive conversation as the answer does not lie with the facilitator serving as the sage on the stage; rather, it is present in the dynamics between the professor and his/her students. Madeline’s strategy of collaborating with students to form agreed-upon classroom community rules served to support the group in digesting the devastating effect of Hurricane Maria as a shared responsibility. The classroom community rules were an example of Sole’s (2006) strategy of shaping small groups (such as a class, but not limited to teaching scenarios) to operate as a concert rather than a performance. Sole (2006), paraphrasing rock superstar Bruce Springsteen explains, “A *performance* is something we do on stage for those in the audience. A concert is something we all do *together*” (p. 816). This philosophy is already a fabric of the LOOP meetings which allowed us to morph into developing creative ways to aid in the aftermath of the hurricane. By already having an orientation that the class is a “concert,” the faculty members were better able to support students (and themselves) with getting through the semester.

The Importance of Collaboration and Social Capital

We have attempted to display a model for multi-stakeholder collaboration and to highlight how we responded to a lack of infrastructure at multiple levels. Our university did not have a central person assigned to work on Hurricane Maria relief, so we had to take leadership and hope people would listen to us as we decided to delegate and make decisions. Thankfully, people did listen to us. However, our multiple challenges in transporting supplies were much bigger than our school. It was important to be informed of these policies and structures, and, with humility, reach other people who may have connections to assist, such as Paula who served as a bridge between us and the local community group.

A Need for Increased Activism

We also recognized a need for increased activism within social work and other helping

professions around U.S. policies that impede aid to Puerto Rico regardless of profession, status, or role. Lin-Manuel Miranda transferred his skill sets for performing arts into skills used for activism; his recent project involves collaborating with the Hispanic Federation to raise money in aid relief (Miranda, 2017b). In that same spirit, we too use our tools for Puerto Rico—teaching, group facilitation, resource mobilization, and writing. We need to continue this work to aid the thousands of Puerto Ricans still on the island and those who are forcibly displaced throughout the United States and our hometown of Hartford, Connecticut.

Lastly, music brings us beauty, which is much needed in such difficult times.

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(Appendix begins on the following page.)

Appendix

Candle Meditation

Written by Lynnette Colón, LPC

In the Spirit of the present, I invite you to light your candles.

Now with the candles lit, I welcome you to look at your candle. See the beauty of this flame. Its movements. Its colors—the yellow, orange, red, blue. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Exhale slowly through your mouth while still looking at your candle. Again, inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Exhale slowly through your mouth while still looking at your candle. Now I invite you to look around and see all the candles here. Notice your candle is not alone. You are not alone.

Now, come back to your candle.

Take a moment to look at it and contemplate its existence. It exists as you do. With this in mind, I invite you to get comfortable in your chairs: feet flat on the ground, hands comfortably laying on your lap. Now close your eyes.

Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Exhale slowly through your mouth.

As you inhale, feel the coolness of your breath.

As you exhale, feel the warmth of your breath.

Continue to slowly inhale and exhale. With each exhale, feel your body more relaxed.

Your shoulders drop.

Your arms feel lighter.

Your legs weigh less.

Now, within the darkness, see your candle. See the light shine brightly.

It moves. It is alive within. Feel its warmth. See it illuminating your inner Self.

Feel its peace. Now, imagine the light of this candle growing and expanding—reaching out to your loved ones who are far away. Toward those whom you miss. Toward those whom you are worried about. See how your light surrounds them. See how these loved ones feel the warmth of your light, how your light moves within them, how your light lives within them, how your light illuminates them. Your light of love, your light of dedication, your light of empowerment, your light of service. The light of all you do reaches them and fills them with joy—EVEN FROM AFAR. Right now, your light for them is enough.

Feelings of guilt, sadness, desperation, anger may come into your presence. If so, that is ok. Acknowledge these feelings, for these feelings come from a place of love. They are parts in your journey. Do not run away from these feelings. Do not push them away. Let them in. Show these parts the light from your candle. Let these parts know there is always hope and that your light is enough and doing what it needs to do in the present. Let these parts feel the warmth. Let them feel your love.

As these parts see your light, let them pass along, weighing less.

Invite peace to enter.

Come, Spirit of Peace, come.

Invite peace to enter knowing your light illuminates and illuminates your loved ones.

Come, Spirit of Peace, come.

What does this peace look like? Is it a shape? Is it a color? Is it in the form of a symbol? Is it a person, a name, or a word? See it clearly—Your peace!

Come, Spirit of Peace, come.

Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Exhale slowly through your mouth. Bring your peace with you, knowing your light shines over your loved ones.

Come, Spirit of Peace, come.

Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Exhale slowly through your mouth. Bring your peace with you, knowing your light shines over your loved ones.

Come, Spirit of Peace, come.

We will inhale and exhale two more times.

Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Exhale slowly through your mouth. Bring your peace with you, knowing your light shines over your loved ones.

Come, Spirit of Peace, come.

As you inhale and exhale this last time, have the image of your peace clearly in your thoughts. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Exhale slowly through your mouth.

Come, Spirit of Peace, Come.

At your pace, slowly open your eyes. See your candle. Take in one large inhale and one large

exhale.

Optional: If you like, when you are ready, you can choose to use a marker or paint brush and write out or draw the image of your peace. There is no perfection. It just is. You can draw it wherever on the paper.