

Puerto Rico in the Wake of Crisis: Towards a Just (After)life of Disaster

November 30 – December 1, 2018

The University of Texas at Austin

Roundtable: **Puerto Rican Futures in the Making: Art and Activism**

Paper: *Colectivo Ilé: Cooking the Future, and Seasoning Social Activism in Puerto Rico*

Author: Bárbara I. Abadía-Rexach, Ph.D.

SLIDE 1

In 2012, I attended an event that took place at the Art Museum of the autonomous municipality of Caguas. It was the celebration of the International Day of Afro-Latin American, Afro-Caribbean, and Diaspora women. In addition to the "Afrolatinos" exhibition showcased at the museum, Colectivo Ilé had a very special participation. In their collective performance, in which the members wore spectacular attire and turbans in African fabrics, they exalted the Afro-descendant culture in Puerto Rico. Although I knew part of the Collective's work, like *Africa en piel*, *África en mi ser* and its educational campaign of racial affirmation facing the 2010 Census, I had not had the opportunity to talk with any of its members. I remember approaching María Reinat Pumarejo and Mariluz Franco Ortiz and asking them: "What do I have to do to be in the Ilé Collective?". In unison, they answered: "To be!". In that month of July, I made the decision to return to Austin, Texas to complete the doctorate I had started years ago. It was not the time to "be" in Colectivo Ilé. However, I followed their footsteps.

Upon my return to Puerto Rico in 2015, I began to attend the *Junte de Saber Antirracista*. To my surprise, six years after my inquiry of how to be part of the Collective, in July of this year, I received an invitation to be part of the Advisory Committee of Colectivo Ilé. So, since 2012 my role in Colectivo Ilé has been simmering. Today, I will explain, as spokesperson of Colectivo Ilé, what my *compañeras* have

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accomplished and how they have strengthened their social community and political activism efforts in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria.

SLIDE 2

Colectivo Ilé is a non-profit organization, founded in 1992, whose mission is to educate, organize, and provide research, to strengthen anti-racism and decolonization work in and outside of Puerto Rico for at-risk communities. It is a community-based organization that has created alliances with other entities in order to achieve concrete and viable projects that benefit the country. Throughout the years, their work has stood out for being organic and attached to ancestral spirituality.

SLIDE 3

After Hurricane Maria, Colectivo Ilé incorporated another way to reach the most vulnerable communities of the archipelago, and contribute to the restoration of the country. Emulating the concept "Think Tank", as an incubator and generator of ideas, began to develop the project called *Caldero de Ideas*. For Kimberly Figueroa Calderón, member of the collective, el Caldero is a specially focused process to collectively analyze important aspects of our reality, and to generate alternative solutions to impact community organization efforts, civic action, and to lead the struggle towards an integral transformation. So, in the post-Maria conjuncture, the anti-racism and decolonization work has taken a new turn. It is worth noting that in June, a *Junte de Saber Antirracista: Spaces, belonging, identity and redesign of Puerto Rico post-Maria* was held. However, through the "calderos" that have been carried out, the realities of the

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communities violated and racialized by the State institutions, (before, during and after Hurricane Maria) have been uncovered. There is no blue FEMA tent to make invisible their state of survival.

In “los Calderos”, the communities are asked to identify their most pressing needs, and necessities based on the current human and material resources they have, in order to design projects that are achievable in the short term for survival and of high impact to sustain the community in the future. Above all, it is intended that the plans be self-administered without dependence on any government institution, for these agencies that have turned their backs on communities. From March 2018 until today, Calderos have been carried out in: **SLIDES 4 -19** San Juan, Guayama, Mayagüez, Yabucoa, Peñuelas, Vieques, Aguada, Carolina, Loíza and San Sebastián. In fact, in a week, we will be having our last Caldero in the town of Aibonito.

In most of the occasions, city leaders have invited us to their communities. For example, we made a Caldero in Río Piedras at the request of the LGBTTQIA + community. At all Calderos, participants have confessed that it is the first time, sometimes more than a year after the devastation associated with Hurricane Maria, the infrastructure vulnerability and the insular economic crisis, that they speak publicly about how they felt after September 20, 2017. The dynamics of the Caldero are as follows:

1. Presentation of Colectivo Ilé
2. Explain the purposes of the Caldero de ideas

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3. Collectively highlight the strengths that participants found in themselves and developed during and after the hurricane
4. In small groups, identify the needs and resources of the communities and outline strategies for the creation of community projects
5. Collectively, discuss the findings of each group

SLIDES 20

FORTALEZAS	NECESIDADES	PROYECTOS
Adaptación	Acceso a servicios de salud	Centros de Servicios de Salud
Afirmación	Atención a la salud mental	Clínicas de Salud Mental
Apego a la familia	Agua potable	Uso agua de lluvia
Compromiso	Energía eléctrica	Energía solar
Coraje	Transportación	Servicios de transporte
Desapego de la tecnología	Alimentación (sustentabilidad alimentaria)	Agricultura urbana (huertos comunitarios)
Determinación	Vivienda	Viviendas para viejxs
Fuerza	Espacios de socialización comunitaria	Centros Comunales
Hermanidad	Rescatar espacios	Escuelas comunitarias
Organización	Evitar el aburguesamiento	Creación ONG's
Paciencia	Empoderamiento de las comunidades	Incubadoras de empresas
Perseverancia	Alianzas comunitarias	Centros de acopio
Resiliencia	Actividades para personas viejas y niñxs	Talleres educativos
Solidaridad	Fiscalización comunitaria no gubernamental	Autosuficiencia
Valentía	Deportes para jóvenes	Restaurar canchas

Personally, I participated in three Calderos: Vieques, LBTTQIA + and Loíza. In all, there have been cries, laughter, and hugs between known and unknown empowered

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women. We have recognized ourselves intergenerationally. Each Caldero, has ratified me the multiple capacities and the empowerment of our women and non cisheteronormatives communities. I must confess that the Calderos, contradictorily, sharpen the feeling of helplessness before so many systematic and normalized abuses that our women survive; at the same time, they take root in supporting networks and encouraging collective work.

Although Colectivo Ilé has demonstrated its activism, and there is no doubt that we are facilitators of processes, it is urgent to recognize the artistic capacities and activism that are born daily in Puerto Rico. The participants echoed when they talked about reinventing themselves, taking in those in need, creating communal kitchens, and recognizing their capacity for self-sufficiency. In February 2019, in the Junte Nacional de Mujeres, thanks to the Maria Fund, Colectivo Ilé will subsidize five projects that have been cooked in different communities for the reinvention and redesign of the nation.

Women are the ones who are cooking the future and seasoning a social and political activism in the archipelago. The Puerto Rican women are what make the Calderos of ideas healing spaces and nourish the hope of an anti-racist, antisexist, decolonized Puerto Rico that is resistant to natural and human hurricanes. What an honor to be a part of Colectivo Ilé!

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