

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

Panel: **Re-orienting Puerto Rican Scholarship in the Wake of Crisis**

Paper: **In the Wake of Maria's Aftermath: The Fighting of a Colonized Body and Being an Adjunct Professor in Puerto Rico**

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

SLIDE 1

SLIDE 2

Being an Adjunct Professor in Puerto Rico

To talk about how my academic work was disrupted after Hurricane Maria, I have to put the crisis in context before the crisis. The atmospheric phenomenon hit an archipelago and its state University in crisis. I will give you a brief account, in first person, about me before, during and after Hurricane Maria.

When I finished my doctorate here at The University of Texas at Austin in 2015, I decided to return to Puerto Rico. It was necessary to go home. Although I returned to my people, my sea, my hot sun, my air and my Puerto Rican diet; also, I was returning to a bankrupt country. The fiscal crisis that affected the country affected the University of Puerto Rico and its contracting methods. For example, after my return, I started with a part-time contract, and, after a year, in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of the School of Social Sciences, I was offered a full-time contract. Contrary to the USA where the lecturers are dedicated to teaching, in the UPR, it is necessary to fulfill the responsibilities of teaching four or more courses per semester, service and research. Each academic year, from August to May, I have a salary and a health insurance. During the summer, as my contract expires, I am unemployed, without medical coverage and without access to the parking lot of professors and the Library System.

On April 5, 2017, in a student assembly, a systemic strike was decreed at the University of Puerto Rico. The students repudiated the \$ 512 million proposed cut to the public university system by the Fiscal Oversight Board, approved under the PROMESA Law of the US Congress. In the Río Piedras Campus, classes were resumed on June 12. Already, I felt depressed by an unnatural disaster. The feeling of helplessness enveloped me. Several students did not return to my classroom. I felt that I was running out of university, without the university of the people, without the university that prepared me to survive victorious in the doctorate process. I did what I could to retake the courses where I had left them two months before, and I did not abandon my research projects.

SLIDE 3

Hurricane María, a Natural Disaster

After spending a summer in classrooms, the new semester began the first week of September. That same week, there was an academic break because Hurricane Irma was approaching. That September 6, 2017, although forecasts that warned that the passage of hurricane category 5 was imminent, I have recorded in memory. I live in San Juan, on the #15 floor of a condominium. Although the hurricane was diverted, the winds were deafening, and Puerto Rico remained in darkness for several weeks. Even so, on September 11 I was back in the classroom. Seven days later, Hurricane Maria threatened us. Again, I had to prepare for a hurricane. This time I would not risk staying at home and decided to go to Fajardo with my family.

On September 19 at 11:30 at night, the power went out. At that moment, the rain and the wind began. The house seemed to move. The water passed through the doors and

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windows. They were twelve consecutive hours of rain and wind. At noon on Wednesday, September 20, I only saw devastation in my surroundings. A hearthbreaking panorama.

When I finally got out of Fajardo because they had enabled the passage, I arrived at my house in San Juan. My apartment on the 15th floor was flooded and there were broken glass in the living room. I had to clean, pick up a couple of pieces of clothing and return to Fajardo. The 45-minute route was extended by impassable roads. I arrived in Fajardo violating the curfew.

On October 5, from an area of San Juan, I sent a very brief email to my students: "I hope you are well within the circumstances. ¡Fuerza!"

SLIDE 4

In the article: *More than a Natural Disaster: Puerto Rico in the Aftermath of History's Storm*¹, (2017) the Caribbeanist historian Blake C. Scott and I pointed out:

September 20, 2017 is now part of the collective memory of the Puerto Rican people, both on and off the island. For 12 straight hours, each of the 78 municipalities that make up the archipelago endured catastrophic winds and relentless rain. Today we speak of a Puerto Rico *before-and-after* Hurricane María. Despite all the warnings of potential disaster, there was no way to prepare (in the short-term) for the fury of a Category 4 hurricane, with winds surpassing 150 miles per hour. Modern Puerto Rico was not built, or maintained, to withstand it. The storm's devastation exposed entire communities to the elements. The island's electrical, water, and telecommunications services – as the hurricane-chasing media reported – collapsed. María revealed the fragility of the commonwealth's government, laying bare its lack of organization and resources. It also revived long-running debates about the status of the island: Is Puerto Rico a colony of the United States? Or, are Puerto Ricans really U.S. citizens with all the rights that should entail?

SLIDE 5

In the Wake of Maria's Aftermath

On October 8, 2017, I had the privilege of leaving the island to Houston, Texas. The airport was full. On my flight from San Juan to Dallas, where I made a stop, there were 22 people in wheelchairs. I arrived in Houston to connect to the internet to buy batteries and lamps by Amazon. To my father, I sent him a package by mail with the hope that it would arrive promptly. The box arrived in Fajardo almost a month later. While in Houston, I dedicated myself to completing FEMA applications for members of my family and friends. Those days I could read the emails and listen to the voice messages sent to me by family and friends outside of Puerto Rico. Even, I had the opportunity of returning to this campus to the *Foro Urgente: Unnatural Disaster: Puerto Rico & the Caribbean after Hurricanes Irma and Maria*.

¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/more-than-a-natural-disaster-puerto-rico-in-the-aftermath_us_5a2bf00de4b04e0bc8f3b4e9

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Here, I thought of my 69 year old father, my 85 year old grandmother, the youngest of the family who was barely a month old when the hurricane attacked us, in my friends, and in my more than 100 students ... I already knew how to survive daily in Puerto Rico. That's why I was anguished to know that I was going to return and I was going to find the same scenario that I left behind. I had to return to the classroom on Monday, October 30.

On the plane, I lost consciousness. I woke up dazed, with the flight attendants placing a mask with oxygen, a paramedic saying that he did not feel my pulse and a Puerto Rican doctor interrogating me. I left the plane escorted. I went straight to the Medical Center of Río Piedras. There, I suffered another episode of loss of consciousness. A couple of friends took me to U.S. Comfort, which was anchored in Old San Juan. Under a tent full of people waiting to be seen, a soldier told me he did not know if there was a specialist in neurology. I had to wait my turn like the rest of the patients who had been there for many hours. I ended up in a private hospital. I had to warn my students that there would be no class the next day. I never knew clinically what happened to me; however, I can assure that my body was turned off and did a "reset".

SLIDE 6

The Fighting of a Colonized Body

I spent two weeks in Houston and a week in Charleston, South Carolina. I tried to recharge my batteries to return to the classroom and my *bateyes de bomba*. In those three weeks, my sense of helplessness deepened, I felt vulnerable. Frustration dominated me. Courage took hold of me. I thought of the images of Donald Trump throwing rolls of paper, the MRE food bags, the militarized country, the long lines, the Jones Act, the lack of water and power, the deaths...

Anyone who knew that I am Puerto Rican, immediately, asked if I had passed the hurricane on the island. They told me that they were very sorry for what we were going through, that the images were devastating. I was even receiving hugs by unknown people. They added: "Are you going back to Puerto Rico?" Yes, I have to go back to the colony. Yes, I have to return to the University devastated since before the hurricane. There were those who asked me: "Puerto Ricans want to be part of America/U.S.?"

Without a doubt, my self-identification and interpellation as a woman-Black-Puerto Rican and the experiences lived in recent years have shaped my research interests. I started studying racialization in Puerto Rico through music, with the analysis of popular songs and interviews with black Puerto Rican musicians. I continued working on racialization from the contemporary Puerto Rican bomba music and its intersections of: race, nation, culture, class and gender. Today, I continue to research Puerto Rican music as bomba and plena, but with a feminist-intersectional approach of gender and race. I am observing *Ausuba* and *Plena Combativa* groups and their political, feminist and decolonizing musical proposals.

Fourteen months after Hurricane Maria, I reaffirm the need to contribute to the discipline of Anthropology in Puerto Rico with academic works that make visible the most vulnerable people by state institutions. It is urgent to exhibit the realities of Puerto

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Rican women. I continue to question how the discourses on Negritude in Puerto Rico are constructed, how racialization operates on the island, and how the gender variable redraws this imaginary in a racist and cisheteronormative country. I see feminist bomba and plena as scenarios to unveil new forms of reappropriation and revolution.

The *bombeadoras* and *pleneras* are doing music as a rebellious project against gender violence. They have found in bomba and plena spaces of female empowerment. Personal needs turn out to be the same at the collective level. A week ago, on November 23 in the *Plantón Feminista contra la Violencia Machista*, the *pleneras* and *bombeadoras* said present. The women - of all ages - played *plena* and danced *bomba*. Those hands that beat the tambourines and those dancing bodies seemed to be in a cathartic trance.

SLIDE 7

In *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Christina Sharpe says:

For, if we are lucky, we live in the knowledge that the wake has positioned us as no-citizen. If we are lucky, the knowledge of this positioning avails us particular ways of re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world. And we might use these ways of being in the wake in our responses to terror and the varied and various ways that our Black lives are lived under occupation. I want *In the Wake* to declare that we are Black peoples in the wake with no state or nation to protect us, with no citizenship bound to be respected, and to position us in the modalities of Black life lived in, as, under, despite Black death: to think and be and act from there. It is my particular hope that the praxis of the wake and wake work, the theory and performance of the wake and wake work, as modes of attending to Black life and Black suffering, are imagined and performed here with enough specificity to attend to the direness of the multiple and overlapping presents that we face; it is also my hope that the praxis of the wake and wake work might have enough capaciousness to travel and do work that I have not here been able to imagine or anticipate (p. 22).

SLIDE 8-11

Before, during and after Hurricane Maria, women have not stopped composing, playing, singing and dancing in Puerto Rico. Nor have they stopped being victims of multiple forms of violence. I have not stopped thinking or stopped writing and denouncing. Little by little, I am becoming a sociocultural, feminist, activist and fugitive anthropologist. So the hurricane, without abandoning my central theme -racialization in Puerto Rico- has allowed me to sharpen the course of my academic work. The colonized female bodies follow -in the wake- giving battle and overcoming natural and non-natural hurricanes with the certainty that we will build another life.

SLIDE 12-13