

Dreaming With Our Hands:



**On Autonomy, In(ter)dependence,
and the Regaining of the commons.**

RICCHI

“It was like an atomic bomb went off” a local Boricua, as people born in Puerto Rico are often called, is saying about the view of the mountains the day after Maria passed. “Every branch, and every tree, was torn apart and broken, and scattered everywhere. Every green area was gray and brown.” The view now, almost three months after las tormentas, is eerie. The greenery is back, but the forests are very bare compared to how they were. Things can appear to be normal, except for the 60 foot telephone pole hanging over the edge of a cliff here, or leaned over at 45 degree angles onto a building there. As long as they still carry power to their destinations they’re left alone, even doubled over, to triage the other downed poles that are actually causing disruptions in the grid. These remnants of devastation can be seen everywhere, and everywhere there are people getting by and adapting to the changes Irma and Maria left behind with whatever limited tools are at their disposal.

I, a Brooklyn born Puerto Rican, arrive in Puerto Rico, or as the native Taíno people call it, Boriké, and meet up with a small team of two traveling partners. Our visits to Caguas on my first week were breathtaking, getting to know people, and watching the amazing projects that communities here are putting together. The town itself is very old, largely abandoned and magnificently beautiful. The streets in the pueblo are narrow and the buildings made of cement, painted bright pastel colors, with old Spanish architectures. Everywhere lay murals with sayings of hope, independence and resistance. In our short visits, we were able to glimpse how people here have begun rebuilding their lives, coming together to reimagine the kind of world they want to create.

Since before the hurricanes, the downtown neighborhoods were losing their small shops and local markets to the incurring large chain stores that sprouted up less than a mile away. Still, one immediately gets the sense that this town is full of cultural life and spirit much different from that felt in wealthier neighborhoods, like the gated community in Guaynabo we stayed in. In traveling to different parts of the island, we can see houses on the coast of Aguadilla that were cut in half by mini landslides, and traffic lights and highway signs stashed beside the roads with the piles of detritus and branches.



Puerto Rico: Main Island

We're on the northwestern part of the main highway that encircles the island now, and traffic comes to a halt for a half hour. It was raining for only 20 minutes, but it left a 4 foot deep puddle along a large stretch of the often overcrowded road. As we finally reach the end of the bottleneck, we see the flooding is being manually fixed by a single worker in swamp boots unclogging the drainage holes with a broomstick. I get the sense this is an example of how the municipalities in Puerto Rico aren't equipped to properly handle the crisis.

In speaking with people, it comes as no surprise to them either that the government isn't doing much to resolve the problems here. As many non-Boricuas are only now discovering, the island's government has been suffocated with public debts, issued and purchased by predatory Wall Street hedge funds. Aligning with what has now become a global custom with these kinds of debts, Puerto Rico's creditors are forcing

The island's government to enact austerity measures on the population, with help from the US and its Fiscal Oversight and Management Board. This Board is an unelected entity established by the US Congress to decide how Puerto Rico spends the tax revenue collected from its people.

"They don't serve the interests of Puerto Ricans," Maritza, a local community organizer says, "They serve the interests of Wall Street." She explains how the Board members assign themselves their own salaries. "The chair of the Board decided to make \$625k this year, and overall the Board costs \$300 million to operate, paid for by Puerto Rican tax dollars." It's their job to make sure Wall Street hedge funds can keep getting payments from Puerto Rico's unquenchable debt, and in the process, ensure that Puerto Rico never has a prosperous and self-sufficient economy. By gutting funding for healthcare, education, food assistance, public sector jobs and critical infrastructure development, this policy instead ensures a continually collapsing economy. Maritza describes the Board as wanting "to keep us like a banana republic, a place with only low-wage jobs for corporations to profit off of," and I believe her. FEMA and the Puerto Rican government failed in meeting people's basic needs after the storms, but in their absence, I'm told old and new community organizations took the lead and saved many lives.

Our first week in Puerto Rico we stayed in that gated community in Guaynabo. The way the area is handling the disaster speaks volumes to the effects of class on local relationships and the impulse to innovate. Our host doesn't have power, but comparably he has plenty of food in his kitchen. Though by the looks of it, the food is not eaten at all from the beginning to the end of our weeklong stay. The story of that uneaten food is that going out to eat is a luxury of the wealthy. There is a noise pervading the entire neighborhood, it's humming at night with the whir and smell of gas generators. There are full and empty 12oz water bottles everywhere and, a Brita filter jug in the back of the fridge. I rescue it from disuse and fill my gallon water bottles from the tap. Our host doesn't have his own generator, he's renting use of one from a neighbor with stipulations: only at night, and only a single extension cord for \$100 a week. That's quite a steep energy bill.

These days, he's a busy guy working for the utilities. On one of those rare occasions that we run into him during our stay, he gets to telling us about how the ocean waters around San Juan are being dumped with sewage overflows from the city. He says there are videos of people finding streams of completely black water flowing down and out towards the ocean. He warns us against swimming anywhere near San Juan because, the first two months after Maria, people got viral infections and other illnesses from swimming in the contamination. I swam in the waters anyway, and now I've developed skin rashes across my body. A doctor I consulted says my symptoms don't seem severe. Not the wisest choice, but I have no regrets.

The beauty of watching the sunrise over the ocean on that morning I swam in the San Juan waters, is like my experience our first night in Caguas. It is a welcome change from the buzzing of Guaynabo. Locals from an art collective, called Urbe Apie, guide us through a store they've reclaimed that has nothing but soil and vines growing on the ground, and hanging from the gaping holes in the roof. Out back, there's a field of several dozen rows of soil and plants. This garden was started some eight months ago, but just three months ago Maria's winds turned it back into a pile of rubble, with scattered bricks dropped from the crumbling abandoned buildings that surround it.

The space is being called Huerto Feliz, or Happy Garden, and I'm told it's everybody's garden, and anyone can work in and eat from it. Corn, beans, squash and herbs, banana and coconut trees are growing, a compost heap is being turned, and there's lines of little starts, peeking out of recycled plastic cups along the edges of the garden. I ask a local gardener how I can help, and he says, "take a look at the plants, where they're growing, and plant these starts anywhere you feel would be best." As I look around at the landscaped rows and growing things I overhear another gardener say, "It's important for us to connect and live together with Mother Nature." I find starts for squash and beans, and I till up little holes for them to live in next to the corn stalks. I listen to the rustling of leaves and look up to see the sun break just over the empty buildings. I am in awe of the beautiful thing they're creating here.

Night falls and the locals show us to a large abandoned building. We climb up a handmade ladder to a landing where we enter in through a window. We are surrounded by dust, broken concrete and dry-wall; it could've been a decade since this place was last taken care of. Using flashlights, we make it to the roof, and from there we can see the mountains and city lights. A local med student points out into the distance, showing me where a new Walmart supermarket opened, and then over to where the neighborhood grocery store sits, out of business. This building we're standing on might be the site of a nascent project called Casa Diaspora. Like many other abandoned buildings here, it has long been in use as a place to sleep by houseless people in the city. Negotiations for space are in the works. If not this one there are still many abandoned and broken buildings in Caguas, any one of which could be used to create the project. They'd need to be cleaned, and fixed up, but the aim is eventually to house Puerto Ricans from the diaspora, and allies, to engage with resiliency and self-sufficiency through the many community projects Urbe Apie, and other groups, have started here.

A soccer ball is being kicked around on the roof, and we decide to climb out of the building and make our way to the main Plaza. There's people up socializing all around, police patrolling constantly, young folks are riding bicycles, popping wheelies, and food vendors stand chatting over their perches. We play for hours in the Plaza. I join a group of young kids playing volleyball, then I and a traveling partner climb one of the two gigantic trees in the center of the Plaza. All of the branches of these ancient trees were broken off during Maria. They've been cut cleanly so they could hopefully grow again in the Caribbean sun. The sights and feelings of that night couldn't be more clear: Puerto Rico, Boriké, is alive, living vibrantly and surviving in brilliant, myriad ways, not only in the aftermath of two disastrous storms, but centuries of colonization, and decades of neoliberal economic policy.

Many activists and news agencies in the US tend to remind people that Puerto Rico is part of the US, calling the 50 States the mainland, and calling the island a territory. I've also done this. "Puerto Ricans are US citizens!" some say, as part of their plea to engage the non-Puerto Rican's empathy with the struggles of Boricuas. Yet other

times, the association comes from an ignorance and denial to Puerto Rico's status as a modern day colony. This ignorance and denial is not held by locals I've met here. They refer to the 50 States as the US – they recognize it as a separate entity, which has more of an abusive relationship with the island than anything else.

The US Jones Act for instance, is an almost century-old law which has set in place an awful economic relationship between the US and the island. It's primarily protecting the US's shipbuilding industry, and the corporate monopoly on trade for the island, making it so Boricuas pay double shipping costs for the goods they need. In some cases, like with the infamous pharmaceutical industry, products that are manufactured in Puerto Rico get shipped to Jacksonville, Florida first, only to get shipped back to the island for locals to buy. Plainly, it bars Boricuas from accessing goods at competitive prices, and mandates that US ships and companies are employed to service all of the island's trade.

Almost everything costs more, and, almost every job pays less here than the same would in the US. "It should be [seen as] a moral imperative of the United States to not have colonies, it's like slavery or child labor. It should be a moral imperative for the United States to recognize its responsibility to Puerto Rico, because yes the storms devastated the island, but what they did has only exacerbated the harm the US has been doing here since its colonization of Puerto Rico," says Maritza. And during a very late night turned early morning car ride with another local, I'm told "the total yearly value of jobs, and price reductions in goods, that could benefit the island's economy with the Jones Act removed is billions of dollars per year. We could wipe out the entire debt with that alone." Just ball-parking the numbers, he's right. Studies done by the University of Puerto Rico and other organizations have said just that. They found that the island is worse off with the Jones Act in effect, and that without the law the enormous debt wouldn't have developed. In other words, the debt is being manufactured.

Creditors tend to blame debtors for being in debt, but the reality is that savvy debt obligations that never go away are big business, and

these creditors are in that very business. Boricuas are not alone in bearing this kind of imprisoning weight. Puerto Rico is just one economy, in a vast global sea of economies, that are put into the red by inequitable economic relationships. It's one part of the general economic practice of turning people themselves into commodities. As only pieces in a labor force, people can be managed over in exploitative ways because access to their basic needs are controlled through the need to make money first. Money is a human need in the same way that a window in a prison cell is. And people can be forced to do all sorts of things against their will and interests, if offered a breath of fresh air in suffocating conditions.

When money is scarce, and food, water and other human needs are only available at a price, then money can be that breath of fresh air. But this is called coercion, and it turns whole communities into markets, used to cheaply produce for a global demand without regard to local needs or sustainable development. After the storms, the regular flow of imports and exports was put on halt. With global supply being largely inaccessible, people here started doing what makes sense: meeting local needs with local supply.

We meet up with another local through our friends in Caguas. He's part of a group called Coconut Revolution. He teaches a class about just that: how people can use the abundant coconut plants on the island to meet almost every basic human need: Food from its meat, water from its juices, shelter under its leaves and woody trunks, and fire with its husks. His class is called "Cuando los barcos no vienen," or "When the ships don't come." From talking with people here, the same skills he teaches were used just after the storms, when water and food were suddenly in short supply everywhere. He tells us, "you can survive a pretty long time just eating coconut meat, and drinking the water. But eventually, you'll need some other proteins and vitamins." After showing us around to wild edibles, and medicinal plants, we come to the edge of a mangrove forest and a river. Along the bank of the river, an endless stream of crabs emerge from the water and then crawl into the roots. He tells us how important these mangroves are to the ecology of the region, but also that much of them were killed after Maria. "The effects of their deaths are being

studied now. We know it's because of their protection that our neighborhood survived the storms."

We say goodbye and make our way back to town. As we bike down a main avenue in Caguas, we meet a lady chillin' in her front yard with her dogs and husband. We get to talking about how people on the island socialize more than in the US. She says, "Even so, before the storm we didn't know our neighbors, but now we do. We don't have power here but they do across the street," pointing to one of two houses on the block with lights on, "and I have gas for my stove. I'd cook for maybe 18, 20 people, the guys in the autoshop over there too, and they'd bring over ice and we'd eat together," with a big smile across her face. The crisis is really forging a vigorous sense of community, and it's a recurring sentiment we've heard in our conversations here, in smaller, poorer towns especially.

There's also an excited support here for the spontaneous social centers being put together and operated by locals all over the island. Neighbors are collectivizing the means of survival and building for future resiliency. Many of these community centers are known as Centros de Apoyo Mutuo (CAMs), or Mutual-Aid Centers. The CAM in Caguas has reclaimed an abandoned Social Security office just around the block from Huerto Feliz, and they've begun major renovations. Almost every day, people from Caguas, people from across the island, and visitors, are seen fixing holes in walls, painting, and reinstalling water and electric systems to the building. When finished, community members will serve breakfast and lunch at least three times a week, run a wellness clinic for the whole neighborhood, and there are even plans for a radio station to be started there. This network of projects is truly inspiring and vital.

All of this is being done still with major shortages of supplies. There's this one staple Puerto Rican dish made with fried platanos. They are squished along with pork or chicken, then formed into a cake shape. It's called mofongo. "We can't make mofongo because there's no platanos. No platanos, no mofongo," a restaurant owner in Caguas says to a patron. Many local supply chains were cut by the hurricanes, and 80% of crops on the island were destroyed. That's

why a small, locally-sourced restaurant might not have access to these bananas, but the Walmart a mile away is fully stocked and back to normal. Much like the other problems on the island, those with money might not feel the differences left behind by the storms in the way those without do. The water from people's faucets is contaminated, or not flowing at all, but those who can afford the daily tax of buying water, might not feel the fear of dehydration. They might not feel the fear of hunger from not being able to cook rice and beans, because there is no water or it isn't clean.

No one seems to think drinking from the tap without filters is safe, especially since the water from the faucets was completely black in many places just several weeks ago. But still people need to drink water, and in Guaynabo, I saw people filling up their water bottles from an exposed spigot in the space left behind by a fallen building. The reality is that for many poor communities and mountain towns away from city centers, the only water available to drink, is questionable at best.

I'm told, the scene here in Caguas just days after Maria passed was surreal and scary. Hundreds of people without food and water lining up outside of a hastily constructed community kitchen to eat. The CAMs, many other organizations, like Urbe Apie, and community members throughout the island, have taken on the work of cooking, or offering their spaces for large meals to be made for neighbors several days a week, sometimes several times a day. Those who can, when they can, seem to have made bringing food, clean water and tools to each other a regular part of everyday life. The organizing of these Boricuas is essential for so many in the vacuum of care and ability from the government. But still, huge gaps are left for people to fill in order to figure out a new normal that meets all their basic needs.

One such gap is power. Within three days after both Irma and Maria, most of the perishable food in people's fridges was rotten. The municipal pumps that move water from reservoirs to people even slightly uphill were useless, as was most of the Internet and telephone service infrastructure. Authorities were assuring people

that the outages and breaks in the grid would only take six months to fix. There is a mass of people who don't think that's acceptable, and who don't want to remain dependent on the dilapidated service of the island's primary energy company, it's growing, and we got to meet some of them.

In early December, our team of three arrives at an office building, in Guaynabo, where a conference on DIY solar power generators is about to be held. The conference was announced just 36 hours prior, but there is an astounding one hundred people who show up and pack themselves into a small room. The presenter is Jehu Garcia, a person who's responded to Maria by making instructional videos on YouTube describing how people can use new, and recycled, materials to construct their own battery packs and solar generators.

Many at the conference seem well on their way to building their own DIY solar devices, to power their homes, workplaces, and even local schools. There is so much desire to work cooperatively in this space. Spontaneously people bring food and water to share, and exchange contact information and resources. The event lasts for five hours, and a healthy mix of people ask a slew of exhaustively technical questions. The network remains connected via a Facebook group with dozens of questions being asked, problems being solved, and group purchases being made. The sense is that this network is motivated and excited about DIY solutions for off-grid solar, and for goodreason.

The island receives powerful, near constant sunshine. With the complete blackout situation as it was, not being able to utilize the abundant power all around was, and still is, a deadly injustice. Power to hospitals, clinics and other critical infrastructure were downed across the island in one day. With this, solar combined with off-grid storage may be the most viable option for decentralized power generation.

Connecting solar panels to the power grid of municipalities comes with drawbacks that some do not anticipate. Many who had already purchased solar panels for their homes and businesses here, were

connected to the grid. In normal conditions, this can be a benefit, because residents could sell their excess power back to the energy company. But what the disasters have revealed is that, many of these systems that companies offer aren't designed to continue working if the rest of the grid goes offline. And that's exactly what happened. Grid-tie systems like these might be quite common, but they should be seen as another example of how standard infrastructure isn't up to the task of viability in unstable times. Dependence on corporations and the government, despite their inability to ensure access to life-critical services to most Boricuas, has proven to be a risky and deadly reality here.

Even people with fully functioning solar panels on their roofs, still aren't able to power their houses or businesses. And there's a growing movement looking to DIY, off-grid solar as the way forward for Puerto Ricans to meet their power needs. How are people able to go off-grid? With powerwalls. The systems consist of a piece of recycled hardware called an Uninterruptible Power Source (UPS), which serves as an inverter, connected to huge collections of recycled 18650 lithium-ion cells, which are in almost every portable battery device these days, then to a solar charge controller, which then can be hooked up to their solar panels. This is a promising part of the island's growing DIY attitude that this small, but enthusiastic, group of Boricuas is innovating in the context of resilience and disaster recovery.

The shortcomings of dependence we are witnessing here brings up questions of independence. There is plenty of talk, and symbolism, of Puerto Rican independence scattered across much of the island, in graffiti, in poetry, and in philosophical proclamations at the end of rowdy celebrations. The conversations about independence are complicated and complex though. I can feel the trauma of the repression of the Puerto Rican independence movement in our conversations with people here. After the Spanish rule of the island was repelled in 1898, Puerto Rico was autonomous for only six months before the US claimed the island as part of the Treaty of Paris, which concluded the Spanish-American War. Activists here share the stories of leaders and participants in the movement for

independence being assassinated, in the 19th century, and throughout the 20th century.

I got to visit the grave of Pedro Albizu Campos, head of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, who uncovered deadly, premeditated medical experiments being done on Puerto Ricans by US doctors, but specifically a physician working with the Rockefeller Institute, named Dr. Cornelius P. Rhoads. Albizu uncovered Rhoads' letter to a colleague then published and sent it to many representatives in the United Nations. The letter described, how by transplanting cancer cells into and killing patients, he was playing his role to "further the process of extermination" of the population, and making the island "livable." Albizu was arrested many times for his participation in the movement for independence. But the final time he was arrested, he had the misfortune of having Rhoads as his medical examiner while in prison. He, and other prisoners, reported being exposed to intense radiation while serving time. Their stories were corroborated by an outside medical examiner who diagnosed his sores and other symptoms as consistent with extreme radiation exposure. He was released and pardoned by the Governor, in very ill health, shortly before his death.

Independence can mean many things. It seems the host of problems being faced by people on the island after the storms, are being solved locally, by Boricuas working together in community, and allies from all over listening to their leadership and requests. The amount of work getting done everyday, to rebuild, and to survive, is testament to locals' ability to handle the challenges facing the island, even with very little to work with. Given access to the right tools, resources, and autonomy, there's no doubt that Boricuas can rebuild the island, and account for any hardships, even without "help" from the island's government.

That's exactly what many communities were doing directly after the storms, before the storms, and it's what they continue to do. The Puerto Rican government can't properly fund programs to provide access to basic needs, let alone sustainably rebuilding in ways that

plan for the island's prosperity, and resiliency to future climate-change fueled disasters. It is largely bound by the decisions of the US, and its Fiscal Oversight and Management Board. But independent communities in Boriké are not bound by those same restrictions. They do the work they view as necessary with the resources they have available. It's as difficult, and as simple, as that.

I'd say the crisis has reawakened the importance of the commons within many Boricuas, an idea already not too unfamiliar to Puerto Rican culture as I've experienced it. In the sudden absence of basic supplies, people have found their means of survival in each other, and in the resources and land at their disposal. Many are seeing unused and abandoned spaces as potential community centers; food, water and shelter as human rights, to be shared to anyone in need, from anyone in possession. As well, people are expressing re-energized relationships with time and labor, ones that view them as most importantly shared in mutual service, and as part of the well-being of the collective: themselves, their families, their neighbors, and the island as a whole. "I know that I need a job, but I'm spending all of my time taking care of my friends," a local artist in Caguas tells me. There are many things that money can't buy, especially in the midst of a regional crisis, when resources themselves are scarce, and not just money.

Despite the US's abusive and extractive treatment of Puerto Rico as a financial and military colony, people don't seem focused so much on the island's government declaring independence. Instead, they seem to be focused on building their own independence, through interdependence within their communities. Autonomy is what I see the people here practicing; autonomy from the control, inequity, and corruption of governments and corporations alike. And in these chaotic months, it doesn't seem like the government, or corporations, are exercising their prerogative to take it away from these Boricuas by force. The real, tangible, and inevitable truths about life as a colony, have only been made more clear by these storms, particularly to outsiders.

The infrastructure here, and across the globe, is intimately tied to the petrol world. But the petrol world is dying, its infrastructure is crumbling, and so too is the world's current system of societal organization. This decay of modern capitalism has turned people's lives here into a daily toil, that is at the same time imaginative and full of energy. We are all grappling with these chains of the past, and they still violently attach themselves to the body and minds of many Puerto Ricans. But a growing minority here is aiming to inspire people to remove those chains; and, they're collectively self-managing the kinds of local decisions necessary to care for their fellow Boricuas. And this may be one of the most salient truths about the legacy of the old world: it's not that people in revolutionary struggles need to be fighting for their own flag, as much as, they find their emancipation in the compassion and dignity of self-determination and collective direct action.

Boricuas, and communities worldwide, should absolutely be free from the burdens of producing resources, and wealth, for the empires of the world. Being free from life as a colony does require taking risks, though. The resistance struggles we've seen here are taking risks. They're acting imaginatively. They're showing us what it's like to experience the freedom of constructing new ways of life, ones that aim to provide for the dreams and aspirations of all people, and at the very least, for their survival and health.

In my time here, I often recall a motto for resistance – “If they don't let us dream, then we won't let them sleep,” – which has been passed around between movements, generations, and regions. Although Boricuas in struggle aren't getting much sleep these days either, in this moment, for them, I don't think it's about bringing the alarm bells of revolution to the doorsteps of the powerful. It looks like people have decided to dream with their hands, with everything they have, towards the immediate and tangible goals of activated, empowered and resilient communities. They're doing so by organizing for their self-determination, and overtaking organized coercion with collective disobedience when necessary. We can all learn a great deal by their examples of survival and recovery from this modern mix of natural and human-made disasters.

Being here, I feel a sense of wonder and magic, like I've returned, but to a place I've never been. This is the island of my ancestors. I come after a most powerful series of storms, to learn both my history and my future, in this moment of recovery. It is, after all, from the native Taíno word huracán that the word Hurricane is derived. Here, I am reminded of the cycling of the flows of time, and the cycling winds of the hurricanes Irma and Maria.

Those storms have swept by, and they've destroyed many things. By knocking out the energy grid, and cutting access to food and water, they left the island of Boriké dark. But in that darkness countless Boricuas have awoke, and they stay awake late and get up early again, doing the work of reproducing life.