

# **CENTROS DE APOYO MUTUO: AN EMERGENT DECOLONIAL PEDAGOGY OF RELATION?**

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Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content.

—Franz Fanon<sup>1</sup>

*We frame this work as a series of questions, an emergence into the possibility of the work of Centros de Apoyo Mutuo (CAMs) as revealing a decolonial pedagogy of relation.*

As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang remind us, decolonization—particularly its role in education broadly conceived—cannot become a metaphor for other efforts.<sup>2</sup> It must maintain a conceptual integrity of the moves, methods, and imaginaries that “brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life. It is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools.”<sup>3</sup> In this spirit, our interest in possibilities of the Centros de Apoyo Mutuo (CAMs) in Puerto Rico as sites of an emergent decolonial pedagogy of relation is not in order to create a metaphor to be extracted and applied to other places. It is through place- and land-based work by Boricuas, on the island and in the diaspora, that this question of the practices necessary to support the various stages of decolonization will be answered.

What follows is a transcript of a presentation and conversation that took place at the Latin American Philosophy of Education Society (LAPES) conference in Philadelphia in 2018 between myself and Kique Cubero

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1 → Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox, (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 2.

2 → Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40.

3 → Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization,” 1.

García, a member of the organization Centro de Desarrollo Politico, Educativo y Cultural (Center for Political, Educational and Cultural Development) (CDPEC) and one of a group of organizers of the CAM in Caguas, Puerto Rico. The CDPEC is an organization supporting the development of these mutual support systems. In an effort not to speak for those working in the CAMs, I will relate to Kique's words through questions he asked me at the conference, briefly link the work of the CAMs to Edouard Glissant's concept of opacity,<sup>4</sup> and explore how the CAMs may present us with an emergent decolonial pedagogy of relation important for Boricuas engaged in learning to decolonize.

—Ariana González Stokas

*Kique Cubero García:* The development of the CAMs after Hurricanes Maria and Irma were not a relief effort but putting into practice what CDPEC had been working for. We had begun to practice the ideals of mutual support and to use space and place to make visible possible worlds through the Comedores Sociales, a project which set out to: 1) feed hungry students and 2) visualize hunger in the University of Puerto Rico. The Comedores began around 2012 during one of the university strikes in response to U.S.-imposed austerity measures which were upheld by then Governor Luis Fortuño. What the hurricane allowed was an opportunity to seize the moment to continue the work of practicing and making visible places where new modes of relating might arise. In the process of working toward the realization of these ideas, there were tensions in the movement. In the beginning there was a tendency to recruit people to ideologies. A few people realized that the recruitment of people to work—and for activists to listen rather than to recruit others to ideologies—was needed in the foreground. From this tension the Comedores Sociales were born. The main feature of the Comedores is a three-way contribution system of sustainability where people receive a plate of food in exchange for: 1) volunteer work hours; 2) supplies or food;

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4 → Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

3) a monetary donation. It is important to stress that this model of contribution was created from the participation of people in the Comedores. It is a system not only of bringing support, but also of integrating new people to a political practice rather than an ideology. Work and money and materials are all resources of equal value in the Comedores Sociales, and this practice and this philosophy were brought to the CAMs. The CAMs were created not to recruit people to CDPEC, not to be the vanguard, but to inspire others to invent places where mutual support might be realized. CDPEC offered a place and information and ways of understanding how to organize vulnerable people. Now there are ten CAMs.

*Ariana González Stokas:* Kique stressed the centrality of men “shutting up” and listening, especially to women in the Caguas CAM and Comedores Sociales. The function is to make places available where the processes of learning what people already know can be shared and seen as sources of strength in the struggle against U.S. oppression. Sharing how to handle the truth and the cause. Managing together gender violence through a transformative justice approach. Kique describes that the Caguas CAM and Comedores were influenced by the “serve the people” practices of the Young Lords and the Black Panther Party. These practices sought to reimagine the use of spaces, such as churches, hospitals and storefronts, through occupying them and instituting services that met the needs of Black and Puerto Rican communities while simultaneously practicing a form of spatial politics. The CAM in Caguas, like many of the CAMs across the island, take ownership of abandoned public buildings and repurpose them for direct support that serves the people with health care, food security, arts and cultural programming, and healing. The Caguas CAM has retained squatter rights to an abandoned social security building since late 2017. The connection between the spatial political practices by the Young Lords, the Black Panther Party, and the CAMs reveal a genealogy of design practices in the service of transforming spaces for modes of living and interacting that allow for *autogestión*, or the exercise of a self-determined existence.

*Kique:* The CAMs practice a new politics--listening. It is not new because it hasn't been practiced; it is new because of the political context and the way

that Puerto Rico has historically functioned through U.S. colonialism. The aim of the CAMs is not to negotiate a political space with the state. We are interested in working with people, with the political subjects, the people who will make a revolution. In attempts to take the power of the state, many have forgotten about people. *Desde abajo* (from below). You have to allow for people to create themselves in order to build a new society, not the other way. So we focus on transforming our relations as human beings. We decided to work with the knowledge people have to self-organize. We work with the survival abilities of the people who have been living the challenge. We seek attentiveness in our activism to the way that people have been self-organizing, not bringing in a theory to implant.

## QUESTION N° 1

*Kique:* What do you think the CAMs are doing?

*Ariana:* While decolonized modes of relation and the practice of *autogestión*—understood here as the practice of self-determination—are instructive and a possible process for those not only in Puerto Rico or Puerto Ricans to engage in, this is a project decidedly focused on how Boricuas, *de allá y de acá* [there and here], can learn new modes of interaction, new ways of relating to the self to one another, to our history and to the land beyond the behaviors inscribed by colonialism. It is a project to wander into the modes of healing essential to a rematriation of indigenous land, life, imaginaries and self, beyond the confines of the U.S. colonial systems—both in the continental U.S. and on the island—that have perpetrated epistemic, physical, psychological and environmental violence. The aim here is not to “grasp” what the CAMs are engaged in, but rather aim toward the kind of relation that Glissant directs us toward in his book *Poetics of Relation*. How we approach the other is not to try and become them or enclose them--demand transparency and veracity or to appropriate their ways of life--but rather to, as Glissant suggests, “be able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for her. To feel in solidarity with her or to build with her or to like what she does, it is not necessary for me to grasp her. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other)

nor to ‘make’ her in my image.”<sup>5</sup> I am learning from what the CAMs are doing. For me, the CAMs are clearing a space for a manner of thinking and relation that emerges, even if just as a glimpse, when self-managed existence is struggled for in daily mundane activity. Painting a mural, cooking a meal, standing in line for food, holding an acupuncture clinic, creating an intergenerational summer camp. The work, as I come to it, places healing and being together, invention and rematriation of property, land, history and food at the center of what it means to provide “support.” This support is not a formula of dependency and extraction, but rather a source of invention, healing, and planting seeds to reveal the possibility of self-managed existence. The work of the CAMs articulates modes of self-determination integral to realizing a decolonial project. The CAMs highlight that listening to and making place with those who have been pushed to the margins is an off-ramp from continuing to re-produce imperialism, environmental racism, anti-blackness, misogyny, transphobia, non-consensual social and political relations, and violence.

## QUESTION N°2

*Kique:* Why do you see the CAMs as potentially “decolonial” and decolonizing?

*Ariana:* The work of the CAMs has the potential to be decolonizing work particularly because of the role of taking back—taking over—land and place, as well as the participatory focus. It is through the participation of people in the community where the CAM is located that makes for its existence. So participation permits existence. The place is co-created through the participation of many different people within the community. I will say that this is an important point to pay attention to in the evolution of the CAMs. What they will become—if they are to continue emerging in the direction of being places for the practice and education of decolonization—depends on the continued participation and attentiveness to the local and the participatory in order to become places instructive in decolonial practices.

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5 → Glissant, *Poetics*, 193.

The needs of the most marginalized must always be put first in the work. The commitment to clearing space for the practice of *autogestión* encourages moves to change how we relate and step beyond the bounds of legal permissions and policies, which is something that the identity formation of Boricuas has been tethered to. We are waiting to be allowed to exist or we are hoping not to disappear. The CAMs are beginning to, I believe, illuminate the kinds of de-linking moves Boricuas need to see.<sup>6</sup> They delink, by collectivization, the occupation of space, the separation from the state and from the need to ask permission for being, the historicizing through encouraging intergenerational transmission of knowledge--for identity, for everyday modes of managing life. They potentially show those of us in the diaspora how collective determinations arise from below and from within our own communities. It clears a space to practice *autogestión* and see what arises, such as a Comedores Sociales, a summer camp, a community healing clinic, from its practice.

### QUESTION N°3

*Kique*: What kind of “pedagogy” do you see occurring?

*Ariana*: The CAMs seem to be moving, as Fanon identifies in the quote I shared at the beginning, to assist in the discernment of the historical form and content of the colonization/decolonization project in Puerto Rico and in the United States. Since many of the CAMs talk about being influenced by the work of the Young Lords, we can see a historical resonance across diasporic locations with place-making, using place to visualize possible worlds as central.

We are in a creolized moment of the confluence of the colonial empire with natural disasters, meaning what happened before is happening again--disguised in a slightly different form. The hurricanes of the early colony, San Ciraco (1899) and San Ciprian (1932) are an early warning system for post-María. After both of these hurricanes, the United States (in partnership with

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6 → Editors' Note: For more on de-linking, the reader is encouraged to consult Walter Dignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

the sugar cane industry and others) engineered massive land grabs leaving many Puerto Ricans, including my grandparents, landless. These “historical presents” are instructive in the significance of what has been described as place-based approaches: of attending to the locale--its historical layers and how this attentive responsiveness to the present, the flow of history within it, fosters what is needed and identifies and takes care of the sources of nourishment essential to enabling further growth and resilience in our communities. The centrality of healing a relationship to land, to collective ownership and care, cannot be underestimated as part of this pedagogy. In Borinquen and in the diaspora we have a great deal to learn from First Nations Communities across Turtle Island and Abya Yala. The CAMs are struggling toward articulating new modes of existence that are not dependent upon extraction from the island, from the land, but rather co-existence. These are some of the ways the CAMS are revealing an emergent decolonial pedagogy.

#### **QUESTION N° 4**

*Kique:* What does all this mean for the Diasporicans?

*Ariana:* As a diasporican, or more specifically a Nuyorican, after the hurricanes I had to come to a reconciliation with myself. Although I was raised both *allá y acá*, on the island and in New York, I am not of *La Isla* in the same way that those who live the daily reality of the colony are. So what was I to do? How might we support our people? Our families? These were the questions so many of us were asking. We supported, we fundraised, we sent goods. People chartered planes, we created brigades. We practiced a kind of mutual aid. I looked for the political militancy. We collectively saw how strange it is to be Boricua and live within the United States. Then many, I think, began to sense that it was decolonization practices that they were searching for, although many do not necessarily have clarity on how to describe what such a practice in everyday life looks like.

The daily reality of life in the colony must be acknowledged as distinctly different than those of us in the Diaspora. However, we must also begin to attend to the similarities, such as the rates of incarceration, pay, or



educational attainment that correlate with how Black of a Boricua you are. In my family alone, the darker you are, the poorer you are, and the more likely you are to have ended up in prison at one point in life. The generational poverty and environmental racism of the South Bronx, the stronghold of many descendants of the early waves of Boricua forced migrations, holds an echo of the twenty-three superfund sites on the island. Mine, and other Diasporicans, is a daily life where social death is a reality, where invisibility is regularized, where there has been little acceptance here or there. To be part of the diaspora of Puerto Rico is to be in the dark belly of the colonizing beast on the brink of epistemic extinction because you are often alone, dispossessed from the land that serves as remembrance. How to decolonize from within the empire, as a dispossessed Boricua on occupied indigenous lands, holds its own special contradictions. The invention of possible worlds through the occupation of space and place holds promise as a method for learning decolonization in the everyday. We must examine deeply what we carry when we move back and forth from the island into the empire.