

Tourism and Language in Vieques: An Ethnography of the Post-Navy Period.

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Luis Galanes Valldejuli uncovers the conflicts inherent in tourism by sharing the voices of tourists and their hosts in his study of the island of Vieques. Vieques “is an island municipality” on an island that is part of Puerto Rico, “an unincorporated territory of the United States” (p. ix). It was occupied by the navy as a bombing ground from 1941 to 2003. In this book, Galanes describes the local consequences of the shift to a tourism-based economy in the domains of language, culture, race, and land ownership. By analyzing his interlocutors’ words, the author asks us to rethink how we distinguish tourist from local, citizen from foreigner, and resident from nonresident.

A central question of the book is: What happens when an intensifying power struggle results in a loss of referential meaning and the ability or will to hear the other? Galanes provides illustrative transcripts of interview responses by Viequenses and North Americans, allowing readers to hear how interested parties frame the conflicts that have arisen from increasing residential tourism. Galanes depicts their negotiations as a product of a *différend* (*The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Jean François Lyotard, University of Minnesota Press, 1988). This is a space between two discursive themes or tropes that cannot be bridged. The discursive battle has become so pitched that lexical items like “*vago*” (lazy), “justice,” and “work” have become “floating signifiers” (p. 69)—forms that have lost their content. Meaning is contested.

Citing Gayatri Spivak (“*Can the Subaltern Speak?*,” *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., Columbia University Press, 1994) on the inability of the subaltern to speak, Galanes argues that Viequenses who are losing access to land and jobs must speak, but they will be unheard by those in power. Their words will not mean anything. Despite this, their “voice of complaint” is polyvocal, emergent, and complex (see *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Mikhail Bakhtin, University of Texas Press, 1981)—and the last tactic in fighting the consequences of the post-navy period.

Chapter 1, “Tourism,” provides an overview of US naval operations on the island and the tourist industry. This chapter also introduces how “residential tourism” on Vieques challenges the usual dichotomy between host and guest. Residential tourists are both at home and away, together with and separate from Viequenses. This chapter thus lays the groundwork for the tensions that are subsequently discussed.

Chapter 2, “Land,” documents conflicts over access to place, including land speculation that increased land values up to 3,000% and local land recovery movements. The chapter deals with the complications around getting a secure land title, which can be very difficult if one is not a wealthy mainlander. Access to land and the ability to hold on to it and use it is one of the most crucial areas of tension.

Chapter 3, “Work,” introduces us to heteroglossic discourses about whether Viequenses are *vagos* (lazy), and whether the ideal of *pasarla bien* (having a good time) supersedes the Protestant work ethic of mainlanders. Some white employers see this as a cultural (read: racial) difference rather than a moral deficiency, which is often how laziness is coded in capitalist systems. They, and some Viequenses, locate this laziness in the state welfare islanders have received. Some Viequenses agree they are lazy because of a historical lack of jobs. However, some Viequenses feel that they are not lazy, and that work can provide a way to reach a good life based in happiness rather than “earnings” (p. 51)—Galanes documents a living entrepreneurial spirit. The confident ways that Viequenses speak and organize around local issues contradicts those accusations of laziness quite handily (e.g., pp. xiii, 68–69). The ethnographic interlude Galanes features at the end of the chapter about a party at El Cayo beach that ends with a fire makes this clear: when one operates with the idea that life is to be enjoyed, work should be fit into one’s life, not vice versa (pp. 52–59).

Chapter 4, “Language, the Imagination, and Tourism,” is an invaluable chapter for people who are interested in tourism research, especially around essentialism and “authenticity,” and about how tourism functions as an agent of change (pp. 78–81). Galanes describes four types of tourists on Vieques through time. The last two—tourism investors and North American/European temporary tourism workers—have created upheaval that becomes racialized.

Galanes also discusses creole or pidgin development, stating that as Caribbean people, Viequesenses speak a patois or creole (pp. 85–88). To speak a pidgin or creole is to lack rationality associated with a “real” Western language. Simultaneously, citing Edouard Glissant (*Caribbean Discourses: Selected Essays [Le discours antillais]*, University of Virginia Press, 1981), Galanes describes the genre of complaint as essentially a *contre poétique* (counter-poetic), the right to be opaque (p. 86). As Galanes notes, one of the more significant features of the deployment of opacity, counter-poetics, or complaint is that the process of ignoring and silencing becomes visible.

Chapter 5, “Race,” distinguishes between categorizing phenotypic difference and discursive blackening, whereby forms of talk change one’s position on the black-white binary. Simultaneously, racializing talk exposes the fiction that this is a binary. Galanes also describes “two types of gringo”: the old ones and the new ones. The latter are the disruptive ones, while the former may speak of solidarity with Viequesenses (pp. 95–102). Racializing talk materially impacts land development and business. This is borne out in a discussion about the fire teased earlier, which destroyed a food cart called Danny’s Burgers (p. 105). This incident distills the interrelation of the conflicts around tourism and how speech reflects people’s understandings of race as a signifier.

Chapter 6, “Decontamination, Reparations, Health, and Crime,” explores the effects of living in the polluted environment left after naval activities and rising crime as a side effect of increased drug trafficking. In his discussion of seeking reparations for the catastrophic health effects of pollution, Galanes demonstrates that even when Puerto Rican scientists can make clear arguments linking disease to pollution, that the larger scientific and legal domains cannot hear the evidence. Even scientific or legal authority is not enough to change one’s subaltern status (e.g., pp. 120–121).

In chapter 7, “The Future of Vieques,” Galanes notes that “the future already exists on paper” (p. 125) via plans for large resorts requiring massive amounts of resources. This is particularly true of water, which does not exist on Vieques in amounts that will sustain the planned growth. This leads Galanes to ask how long Vieques will remain pristine, understanding that term is one that already belies reality.

In the conclusion, Galanes writes that Viequesenses will continue speaking because they must. But what about ethnographers? As he notes, we often comfort ourselves that we are amplifying unheard voices. But what if no one else is listening? This is an important question for us to answer in the current moment. Galanes suggests that we do this because we must. What happens on Vieques is a “rehearsal of what’s going to happen (and perhaps what is already happening) in broader Puerto Rico” (p. 135). The turning away from complaints and requests for help in the post-Hurricane Maria period has demonstrated this to be true. However, the future is uncertain, as Galanes notes: only time will tell whether anyone takes notice of their (and his own) voicing of complaint. The conclusion speaks to a sense I have that those of us who are oriented in critical perspectives are often not critical because we are cynical, but because we are motivated to criticism by necessity and hope.

I concur with Galanes’s conclusion that the conflicts he describes in each chapter are bound up with conflicts over meaning, or specifically, the ability to define the terms by which conflict is voiced. The main critique I offer draws on an Americanist linguistic anthropological concern with indexicality along with Bakhtinian polyvocality (e.g., Jane Hill, “The Voices of Don Gabriel: Responsibility and Self in a Modern Mexican Narrative,” *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*, Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim, eds., University of Illinois Press, 1995). I hear echoes of Hill’s analysis of Don Gabriel’s storytelling in the way Galanes’s interlocutors voice characters and relations to land, economy, and belonging. Galanes points to a reduction in the power of referential and generic specification. What perhaps might be increasing are meanings associated with positionality and indexicality. Indexicality points across the *différend* and makes explicit the ways discourse (and meaning) is connected to the categories of person Galanes depicts. Galanes arguably gives referentiality too much weight, which serves to imply that lexical items like *vago* are inherently stable in meaning. By suggesting that meaning is more variable and context-dependent, I do not diminish Galanes’s essential argument that contestations around meaning and access to hearable genres are products of intense conflicts over power. I am in complete agreement that subaltern complaints are necessary and vital, and that we must listen when others speak.