

Pedagogy and Activism in Vieques, Puerto Rico: An Interview with Ismael Guadalupe

Edgar Iván Gutiérrez

Vieques, a small island off the eastern coast of Puerto Rico, has for many years attracted international notice for its controversial role as target practice in U.S. military operations. This attention reached fever pitch in 2003, when residents' long-standing campaign against the Navy's presence on the island succeeded in removing all military operations and facilities. Despite the significant interest generated by their unprecedented achievement, there is much about the history of the struggle of the people of Vieques that remains untold. When confronting the forces of colonialism and militarization, and challenging the narratives that buttressed them, the Vieques activists recognized the need to transform traditional models of popular political organizing. From the 1960s onward, Vieques activists began empowering themselves by creating alternative spaces and means of political action. One particularly successful strategy was the use of life stories and community history as a tool for popular education. This popular-education strategy proved important in maintaining common political goals and understandings in the fight against militarization across several generations. It also served as inspiration for other social movements in Puerto Rico.

Ismael Guadalupe is a sixty-three-year-old Vieques activist who has been an integral part of his community's antimilitary struggle from its early beginnings. His life story offers a unique perspective on the creation and evolution of the struggle

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against the military presence in Vieques. After graduating from the University of Puerto Rico, he became involved in the pro-independence movement through his community activism, and later he became a member of the Central Committee of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party. For several years he was a drama teacher in the Puerto Rican public school system and worked as an active labor movement organizer. As a leader of the Vieques movement since 1964, Guadalupe was jailed on several occasions in U.S. federal prisons, including a six-month stint in a federal penitentiary in Pennsylvania in 1979.¹ He would later become deeply interested in environmental politics when he discovered that years of military maneuvers had left behind massive amounts of toxic by-products that heavily contaminated the island and detrimentally affected the health of islanders. Fresh from his hard-won successes against the Navy, Guadalupe is now actively engaged in new struggles against land speculation and working to pressure the Navy to clean up the environmental mess it left behind.

The longtime Puerto Rican activist and professor of history at Riverside City College Edgar Iván Gutiérrez conducted this interview on December 1, 2007.

Edgar Iván Gutiérrez: *What do you understand popular education to mean?*

Ismael Guadalupe: Popular education is the form and the way in which we, members of the community, work to provide a new counternarrative to the traditional education that people get in schools and in the media. Let me give you a concrete example. In organizing citizens to struggle against the Navy, we faced the fact that the written record, the books that had been published on Vieques, did little more than reproduce the official narrative that actively supported the Navy's presence. We then began the task of becoming involved with other community members, talking and listening to those who had lived through the Navy's arrival and installation, but whose voices had not been recovered. We began reminding them of that history and educating them, because their history had been excluded from the official version.

For me popular pedagogy is the pedagogy that empowers people, through their experiences, to begin the process of transforming society. This is very different from traditional education, which supports the authorities.

Was there a history of popular education in Vieques before you started with the struggle?

Today, popular education is being used in other fronts besides the struggle against the Navy. For example, here in Vieques, and in other places in Puerto Rico, movements for the protection of the environment and for land conservation have employed popular education. We are witnessing how people now understand that the beaches

are ours, that the beaches are not private. This is a slow process of changing people's perception that things were not the way they have been portrayed. But we are beginning to succeed.

Popular education requires a bold effort. Bold in the sense that is a new model, different from the traditional or official one. When the people begin appropriating their own history, it becomes theirs, it begins producing changes in the way they think, and community action follows.

Besides being bold, isn't it also confrontational?

Naturally, you confront. You push back against official narratives. These days I am frequently invited to university forums where academics have discussed our model of education side by side to that of [Paulo] Freire. I have spoken at the University of Puerto Rico and the Inter-American University about how communities, little by little, have taken control of their own struggles. They take control because they begin to understand and comprehend their own history.

Now that you have talked about the history of popular pedagogy in Vieques, how do you begin mobilizing the people?

You begin when people gain awareness. Let's take the case of my mother. The official version in Vieques was that the Navy had bought the people's land. The fact is that my mother's land was expropriated. By the time I was born in 1944, the Navy had already expropriated the majority of land. The official history, promoted by authorities and individuals like Governor Luis Muñoz Marín, became that Viequenses voluntarily sold their land.

When I began asking community members about it, I began gaining consciousness. When my mother said that her land was expropriated, I asked her, what is expropriation? I learned expropriation happens when someone or something takes what was yours. Although they gave you a trifle for it, they took it away. Good grief, I thought to myself, this is another history. It is not the one the government is disseminating. It is not the one you read in the books. It is a different history, told by those who were there and suffered the expropriation process. When you begin talking to the people about it, you begin the process of creating two histories: the official one, and then the one of the people in the community.

"It did not happen like that," people I spoke with told me. "The government expelled us." "They destroyed our homes, our farms." "We were thrown into the streets, our animals got lost." Then you begin witnessing how, by remembering and retelling, history changes. You begin spreading it to others who were not involved in that process. People little by little begin gaining awareness. It takes time, but they begin to feel free to work to expel the Navy.

That is why people kept asking: why, after sixty-odd years of occupation,

did people in Vieques decide to kick the Navy out? It is because a new generation emerges. We begin to understand, and our discourse expands. New people arrive with more receptivity; things begin to change. New organizations are created. Above all, this education is disseminated in a different way. It is not the traditional setup of you, the teacher, standing in front of a student. All of us are students: “the student” is the community. The way to transmit that message is different too.

Naturally, the new generation responds immediately to the message because it is not being educated under that old pedagogy.

Exactly, exactly.

What are the methods that you have utilized? Once you mentioned that you used radio and leafleting. Can you elaborate on this process?

We began to use leaflets because we had to confront books. In Vieques, there was no other way. We created some bulletins narrating the history of the situation and what was still taking place.

Then the bulletin was used as a small book, a pamphlet?

That was at the beginning, around the 1970s. The schools—I can attest to this because I was a schoolteacher then—bought into the official history. So did institutions such as the church, the police, and civic organizations like the Lions Club. When you challenged that mold you had problems.

I was a drama teacher. I utilized my space, the classroom, to challenge the official history that was being taught to us. Simple things. Let me give you two examples. Once I remember preparing a program for television where I had to use a map of Vieques. I showed the map of Vieques as it really was, with the divisions that existed: in the center the community, and on the two extremes I wrote “U.S. Navy,” “U.S. Navy.” A school official, the superintendent, called me in and told me: “You have to take that map down. You cannot present that map.” I answered that it was the map of what existed, and we clashed. They wanted to hide the truth. “This is the truth,” I responded to him. “You are the ones that are lying.” He responded that it was “politics.” I told him: “This is not politics; this is the map of Vieques.” We were lucky because he was interested in making sure that Vieques and the school’s name appeared on television, so he was forced to agree to my position.

That is one example. The other example happened when I had to develop a series of skits with the drama students. One of them was an exercise in memory. Actors had to learn a script, and they had to stand up and rehearse it. There was a poem that I always assigned to my students in order for them to practice, entitled “Do Not Give Your Land to Strangers.”² I think you know this poem.

The poem was hidden from students in Vieques because it would awaken them to the reality in which we were living. When I assigned it, I was often called to the principal's office by parents complaining that I was indoctrinating their children. They prohibited me from assigning it to the students. I responded that the poem was in the textbook and it was appropriate as a memory exercise in the drama class. They had to memorize some scripts, and I used it as an exercise. You know how the poem reads, "Do not sell your land to strangers, even if they pay you well / that the one who sells his land is selling the country as well." I kept with it and the problems continued, but I never relented. I continued to have clashes because the school and other institutions were tied to the official position.

I did not go along with the history that was being taught in the schools; that was not the true history. We went another way in order to provide a counterhistory. We had to bring a new form of education, something different. At the time, I was not aware of Paulo Freire and other educational theorists. But when students become aware of this new history, and they find out they have been lied to, then they take decisions. With this renewed energy they continue to struggle. Any struggle that I am aware of would not progress if the individuals who make up that movement do not know their history, the true history.

With regards to radio, can you give some concrete examples of how you utilized methods of popular pedagogy?

I had my own radio programs and also did radio as a news reporter. I was able to get a news program at WMDD radio station in the city of Fajardo.³ I then utilized it to promote issues about Vieques that were not heard before. You had to remember, there was a moment in Vieques when everything was very quiet, nobody protested, nobody knew anything; this place was like the peace you experience in a tomb. I used that radio program to send comunicués, prepare and deliver the news, so it would be heard both inside and outside of the island.

Then you also utilized the radio as an informational tool?

An informational tool, not only addressed to the people of Vieques, but also outside of Vieques. I am going to give you an example of a very peculiar incident that took place around the 1960s — 1965 or 1966. In Vieques there was a dentist, who has since died, Dr. Pablo Rivera. He created a community organization called Committee for Land Titles of Montesanto, Santa María, and Martínó. These three barrios were the areas that people were relocated after the Navy expelled them from their lands. Remember, the expulsions happened in the 1940s, and the people were never given land titles to their new homes. Of course, it was known that the Navy's plan was to expel everybody from Vieques, and therefore they never issued land titles. Dr. Rivera launched a movement in order for the people to obtain their land titles, so they could request loans and feel more secure.

He started a very unique program. He had a tape recorder and loudspeakers. He would record programs in his office, and I would occasionally help him to tape news. Remember, there was no radio station in Vieques. Well, there was one, but it was a Christian station, and they had no popular programming. We then would go to a steep hill and with his tape recorder deliver the news, the schedule of future events, meetings and what had taken place in them, and how the struggle was progressing. It was a method, very rudimentary, but basically people would listen to it. Remember, it was the 1960s.

Sort of a radio on wheels?

Exactly. A radio on wheels; it was a creation of that dentist. However, since he belonged to the Puerto Rican pro-independence movement and was considered a threat, the authorities found a way to get him out of Vieques.

How have these pedagogical processes impacted activists and people in general?

This is a long process, like any other process. Remember, I was involved with reeducating my students in the classroom, and I had no clue that the work was going to lead to an awakening. Later in this process, when I was sent to jail, I met with some individuals who had been my students. They told me that it was in my classroom where they heard this new information, and they liked it. I believe we were breaking down walls and constructing a new Vieques.

And a new consciousness, Ismael!

A new consciousness for a new generation. It took us a long time. People would tell us: "Good grief, sixty years!" Naturally, it was a slow process. Our communities had to begin to learn the new history, deconstruct the old paradigms, and replace them with a new one. That is not developed from one day to the next. It takes time. You are also deconstructing their fears, and you begin educating them. You teach them that leaders do not necessarily have to be the official ones; that you don't need an official seal on your forehead to act; that the people have to assume their own responsibilities. It is from their own communities that new futures will emerge.

How do you perceive the struggle of the Puerto Rican communities, their utilization of these pedagogical processes that you talked about, and the future of their struggles?

It is in these communities that we are witnessing the accomplishment and successes in Puerto Rico today. We have witnessed struggles in favor of recovering our coasts, the environment, and for basic services. Communities have been organizing without the assistance or presence of political parties. If we look back in time, we rarely see incidents of community organizing. Political demonstrations were just an action of a

few. Nobody would dare hold a picket sign, only pro-independence forces. But things began changing; people in the communities now have their own voices. Sometimes they organize themselves. But we have to link these community issues to a more in-depth problem, that of ideology. Why are these things happening? Why are we losing our beaches? Who are the ones acquiring the beaches? Who are the ones buying these hills? The poor? No. They are the rich. Look at what is happening with the Caribbean Walkway (Paseo del Caribe) in Puerto Rico,⁴ where developers are violating all sorts of laws. When the communities through their struggle begin analyzing in more depth what is at the root of the issue, they will understand it better. Then we can take a giant leap to a greater transformation, and the political parties will have to take notice.

Notes

1. Guadalupe's powerful speech of 1979, a retelling of the struggle of the people of Vieques, landed him in prison. See Howard Zinn and Anthony Arnove, *Voices of a People's History of the United States* (New York: Seven Stories, 2004), 521–23.
2. The title of the poem is "No des tu tierra al extraño," by Virgilio Dávila (1869–1943).
3. Fajardo is the urban center in mainland Puerto Rico that is closest to Vieques.
4. This is a reference to a controversial luxury condominium complex that began to be built on a parcel of land that is part of five-hundred-year-old fort, currently under the management of the U.S. National Park Service. The project was stopped largely due to the actions of environmental activists who went to the site and occupied it, disrupting construction operations. The awareness created by the activist actions led to a popular outcry at the permitting process—which violated established laws—and at local political leaders who had supported the project. As a result, the local government has temporarily halted the construction and placed the project under review. Activists continue to occupy the site.

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