

An Island in Raw Skin: Vieques and the Transnational Activist Challenge to Puerto Rico's Colonial Invisibility

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...I could not have imagined that this town, the neglected stone in the Puerto Rican edifice, would become the cornerstone of such an impressive pan-Puerto Rican movement.

—Amílcar Barreto (2002, xv)

The 20th century ended with a “bang” in Puerto Rico, producing one of the most powerful and decisive massive demonstrations that the young 21st century first saw. Broadly, this paper will focus on the meaning and repercussions of the activism that took place in relation to Vieques. Specifically, I will outline the battle against the US Navy undertaken by Viequesenses, Puerto Ricans, and activists in the United States and around the world after 4/19/1999—the fateful date when a stray bomb during the Navy’s training exercises on the island killed David Sanes, a civilian security guard working at the base.¹ In essence, this paper articulates and highlights aspects of the struggle between a small island-municipality in the middle of the Caribbean Sea and the biggest military power on the face of the Earth, in order to extrapolate the lessons offered by the massive transnational social movement that emerged in support of Vieques.

Using content analysis of primary documents (i.e., newspaper articles and documentaries) and secondary texts (i.e., scholarly work done by anthropologists, historians, and sociologists), this essay uses a sociological approach to the analysis of social movements in order to delve into the nuances of the Vieques case and the movement that liberated the small island (Vieques is known in Spanish as the “Isla Nena”) from the clutches of the US Navy. The lessons learned from the Vieques movement will be useful for understanding the changing nature of 21st century social movements mobilizing against militarization, war, and imperialism, and how they are being shaped by new global and transnational interconnections and forms of activism.

The Colony of a Colony: Brief History of the Navy in Vieques

Vieques is a 20 miles long by 6 miles wide small island located about

8 miles off the East coast of Puerto Rico, in the northeastern part of the Caribbean Sea, which has “made this islet a coveted strategic locale” for centuries (Barreto 2002, 1). Politically, as one of Puerto Rico’s 78 municipalities, Vieques residents are also US citizens. As part of Puerto Rico, Vieques has been under US jurisdiction since 1898, and, because of its strategic position, the islet was under the total control of the US Navy for more than six decades. In 1941 the Navy appropriated roughly two thirds of Vieques’ land, building an ammunitions depot on the western side of the island and a military practice range on the eastern side. From 1941 to 2003, then, the US Navy (and on numerous occasions its NATO allies) continuously used Vieques for military exercises. A population of about 9,000 residents (known in Puerto Rico as Viequenses) was sandwiched between the depot and the range. This peculiar “arrangement” along with the material consequences derived from it (as I will discuss in detail below), have led Viequenses to “often refer to themselves as the “colonia de la colonia [the colony of a colony]” (Barreto 2002, 2). Activist Alba Encarnación further dramatizes this description by explaining that Viequenses “are prisoners of the Navy and slaves of Puerto Rico” (Barreto 2002, 40). She continues: “We are the lamb that has been sacrificed so that the big island [can live] comfortably” (Barreto 2002, 40). These statements are particularly meaningful if one understands colonial configurations as invisible configurations in today’s political landscape, since articulations such as “the colony of a colony” and “a sacrificial lamb” imply two levels of invisibility. That is to say, if colonies are invisible political structures in today’s “postcolonial world,” a colony’s colony is perhaps even less likely to be seen: in this case, two times less likely, to be precise.

Vieques indeed can be seen as a colony of a colony because there has never been another single area in Puerto Rico that has been treated the way Vieques was treated for over sixty years by the US military. Though the US military has been highly present in Puerto Rico, no other island community has actually suffered the multifaceted effects of relentless militarization of their land the way Vieques did for six decades. As Amílcar Barreto (2002) explains: “Out of the seventy-eight municipalities in Puerto Rico, this was where U.S. colonialism disclosed itself in its most naked form” (88).

This essay will provide a brief review of the history of the relationship between Vieques and the US Navy, outlining its consequences and the ensuing social protest movement that emerged at the end of the millennium. It is not aimed at providing an exhaustive historical account of Vieques, its relationship with the US Navy or the massive movement that developed after 4/19/99. Rather, this essay will outline the contours

of Vieques' predicament and the tangible legacy of the Navy's presence on the islet, in order to underscore the importance of social movements and activism in making the invisible visible.

The history of the US military in Vieques dates back to World War II. According to Barreto (2002), "[r]esponding to [the] looming global conflict, Franklin Roosevelt's administration planned to build a Caribbean base on the order of Pearl Harbor in eastern Puerto Rico" (21). That is how the Roosevelt Roads base in Ceiba, Puerto Rico was envisioned, a military installation that "would encompass portions of Ceiba on the main island, and portions of the island municipalities of Culebra and Vieques" (Barreto 2002, 21). Roosevelt Roads "would eventually become one of the largest naval facilities in the world, encompassing more than 100 miles of paved roads and more than 30 tenant commands" (Global Security.org 2005). This is a remarkable fact, given that the main island of Puerto Rico itself is only 100 miles long. During its peak, Roosevelt Roads was home to 7,000 personnel (Global Security.org 2005). While developing this base, the Navy expropriated a total of 25,440 acres of Vieques' land during the 1940s, and by 1972, the US Navy owned 72.8% of its territory, becoming the largest landowner on the islet (Barreto 2002; García-Passalacqua and Collado Schwarz 2002). As a result, thousands of people in Vieques became landless. In fact, "military sources estimated that their [land] acquisitions forced the relocation of anywhere between 4,350 and 5,000 residents, or 40 to 50 percent of Vieques's population" (Barreto 2002, 23). Since then, civilians in Vieques lived in the center of the island, sandwiched "between [the] ammunition depot and [the] maneuver area" (McCaffrey 2002, 3). Katherine McCaffrey (2002) cleverly described Vieques as "an inhabited island doubling as an international theater of war" (2).

However, the US Navy's control of Vieques was not the only complication in the daily lives of Viequenses. Even though Viequenses had lived concentrated in the middle of their islet for more than sixty years, they also had to endure the constant thundering of war games (including the interruption of classes and the cracking of the foundations of many homes), and live with the fear that a bomb could potentially end up in the middle of their downtown square at any moment, those were not the worst consequences of the Navy's presence. As McCaffrey (2002) points out the socioeconomic conditions that developed in Vieques after the Navy took possession of most of its land, had left 73% of its population living below the poverty line by the end of the 1990s. Vieques was, without a doubt, the poorest municipality in Puerto Rico and one of the leading causes of this abject poverty was precisely the unemployment caused by the presence of the US Navy. In fact, before the Navy left Vieques in

2003, the islet had one of the highest unemployment rates in Puerto Rico, with almost half its adult population formally unemployed (McCaffrey 2002). To complicate matters, Viequenses seemed to suffer from a myriad of physical and mental ailments at rates astonishingly higher than in any other part of Puerto Rico or the United States. One particular controversy that drew media attention after the 4/19/99 event was the high incidence of cancer among Viequenses. According to reports, Vieques has shown higher cancer rates than any other part of Puerto Rico or the United States. In 1991 the cancer rate in Vieques was almost 27% higher than in the rest of Puerto Rico (Associated Press 1999; Mullenneaux 2000; Barreto 2002). Similarly, Vieques' death rate from cancer exceeded the US rate by 20 percent (Mullenneaux 2000). Also, residents of Vieques were at a 269% higher risk of developing cancer than residents of Puerto Rico, 73% more likely to develop heart problems, 64% more likely to develop hypertension, and 58% more likely to develop diabetes.

Needless to say, the relationship between the US Navy and Viequenses was full of tension during the second half of the 20th century. At different points in time, the pressure exerted by this tension escalated and found different outlets. For instance, after the Navy took over the land in Vieques, fishing became one of the biggest sources of employment for the residents. However, as McCaffrey (2002) explains:

By the late 1970s the navy's intensified maneuvers in Vieques created particular hardship for the island's fishermen. Not only did bombing cause great damage to coral reefs and fish in an already fragile marine environment, but as ship traffic increased, navy boats frequently severed buoy lines from the traps they marked, effectively destroying fishing gear and the financial investment the traps represented (75-76).

Thus, already fed up with the apparent indifference of the Navy to their predicament, in 1978, fishermen in Vieques openly (and physically) took action with "a contingent of eighteen-foot fishing boats" that were used to halt "NATO warships off the coast of Vieques" (McCaffrey 2002, 76). The flotilla of fishing boats was led by Santiago Meléndez and had about 95 men determined to fight the Navy (Mullenneaux 2000). As McCaffrey (2002) describes:

The U.S. Navy had organized an international training program, bringing together the navies of several countries to engage in amphibious exercises, electronic warfare, missile firing, and mock invasions. The planned training program would prevent local fishermen from fishing for thirty days of

scheduled war games. The fishermen instead blocked the navy (76-77).

This kind of action, McCaffrey (2002) explains, was a response to the fishermen's perceptions that "not only were they prevented from entering the most fertile fishing grounds by maneuvers, but [the Navy seemed to have] a callous disregard for their way of livelihood" (79). Ironically, fishing was the way of livelihood that the Navy itself in inadvertently imposed on them when it appropriated the land.

A year later, as a way of commemorating the valiant act of the fishermen, 150 protestors decided to "invade the invader" by trespassing into Playa Allende on the south shore of the target area in the early hours of the day (Mullenneaux 2000). The counter-invasions persisted for several months, until May 19, 1979 "when 21 trespassers were arrested by federal marshals, 12 of them sentenced to six-month prison terms" (Mullenneaux 2000, 31). As a response to these counter-invasions, in 1980 the Navy created a "community action plan" for Vieques that included "to prosecute all trespassers to the full extent of the law" (Mullenneaux 2000, 36). The plan also noted that somebody needed to:

[P]oint out to the Governor that if the Navy does not have ground targets in Puerto Rico, the value of Roosevelt Roads to the Navy, Puerto Rico to Defense, and Puerto Rico to the U.S. diminishes significantly. Therefore, economic support of Puerto Rico by the U.S. is not as strongly justified and Puerto Rico statehood would have less support (Mullenneaux 2000, 36).

The two acts described above are important insofar as they set precedents for how activists, the US Federal government, and the Puerto Rican administration dealt with the events that unfolded after 4/19/1999: activism pushed both the local administration and the federal government, while the federal government pushed back with threats to the security of Puerto Ricans, and the local administration tried to play defense or offense, depending on the governor's political proclivities. In this case, the blackmailing was not able to persuade Viequenses, since fishermen and Puerto Rico's then Governor Carlos Romero Barceló filed a lawsuit in a US District Court (Mullenneaux 2000). The lawsuit was dropped when Governor Romero Barceló and then US Navy Secretary James Goodrich reached an agreement described in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) of 1983. The MOU promised "to increase safety, reduce bombing, protect endangered species, and create jobs" (Mullenneaux 2000, 8). According to Mullenneaux (2000), "[t]he MOU diffuse[d] the anti-military movement for [several years]"

(8). But, in 1989, two hundred families in Vieques seized 800 acres of land under the Navy's jurisdiction and built a settlement (McCaffrey 2002). The situation seemed to calm down for a few more years, until Mother's Day of 1997, when once again fishermen "clashed with navy battleships anchored off the island during international maneuvers" (McCaffrey 2002, 194). As they did before, the fishermen claimed that Navy boats were destroying their fishing gear.

Thus, Vieques residents developed a history with the Navy; a history that was full of physical altercations between the civilian population and US military personnel, as documented by the encounters between the fishermen and the Navy at sea, land re-appropriations, and reports filed by the Vieques police regarding clashes between civilians and military soldiers. One of the most gruesome reports was that of Julián Felipe Francis, a 70 year old store keeper, who on April 4, 1953 was beaten to death when he refused to sell more rum to eight Marines (Mullenneaux 2000).

Because of the outspokenness of many Viequenses throughout the decades, representatives from the Navy and US Congress have argued repeatedly that Puerto Ricans in general and Viequenses in particular, are not good American citizens. That in fact they are selfish because they want to be treated differently from other US citizens who allegedly endure similar conditions for the sake of national security. However, a study published by Puerto Rico's newspaper *The San Juan Star* showed that of twelve training grounds held by the US Navy, Vieques was the only one that was actually inhabited, and the only one receiving the maximum level of bombardment established by the US government (Alsina-Orozco and Cintrón-Aguilú 2002, 57). Interestingly, US officials never seemed persuaded by these facts and systematically claimed that anything related to Vieques was a matter of national security. In fact, at different points in time US government and military officials had pointed out that Vieques had unique qualities that made it indispensable for military readiness. In the words of Captain Jim Stark in 1999: "The beauty of Vieques is you can have Marines charging ashore, submarines trying to sink you, surface ships firing, airplanes dropping bombs, SEALs on the ground directing stuff like this, tanks maneuvering ashore, artillery in the air and it can all be happening at once" (Associated Press 1999b). Such statements only confirmed the Navy's overt disregard for the welfare of the people of Vieques.

Stressing the necessity for the Navy to keep control of Vieques, in 2001, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld "insisted that live-fire training on Vieques was vital to U.S. national security interests" (Barreto 2002, 68). Also in 2001 U.S. Representative James Hansen (R-Utah), Chair of the House Committee on Resources warned that

Congress would not address Puerto Rico's status question until the Vieques issue was resolved, and "threatened to use his influence to cut federal funds to Puerto Rico to assure the military's continued operations in Vieques" (Barreto 2002, 69). At the time, , then Secretary of Defense William H. Cohen sent a letter to then Resident Commissioner Carlos Romero Barceló stating that "the wellbeing of US troops is more important than the health of Vieques's residents" (Figueroa-Lugo 2002, 66). As I will discuss below, the threats against Puerto Ricans and total disregard for the wellbeing of Viequenses, all culminated in an event that sparked one of the first transnational social movements of the 21st century.

April 19, 1999: The Death of David Sanes in Context

On April 19, 1999, while training for the Kosovo conflict, two US Navy FA-18 Hornet airplanes were cleared to take off from the USS John F. Kennedy, which was conducting war exercises off the Coast of Vieques. At 6:49 pm the pilots were cleared to drop two Mark-82, 500 pound bombs. The Hornets were actually a mile and a half off target and dropped the two bombs on an observation post, killing David Sanes, a civilian security guard, and injuring four other people. One of the bombs left a twelve foot deep crater on the ground, the other started a brush fire (Mullenneaux 2000). The Navy limited their explanations to calling the incident a regrettable accident. In the words of Navy Secretary Richard Danzig: "Although we had an extremely regrettable accident on the range, it was on the range and it was a Navy employee. That is, in my standpoint, an important reassurance" (US Department of the Navy Press Briefing 1999).

Even though Sanes worked for the Navy, his death materialized for many residents old fears about the dangerous living conditions they had to endure daily since 1941. The fact that the Navy was bombing the island for 180 days of the year and renting out the target zone to as many as sixteen other countries the rest of the year, supported the residents' claim that they were living in a "war zone" (Mullenneaux 2000). The outrage of Viequenses increased further when six months later, in a report released by the Navy, the military organization admitted that "over the years, there have been many close calls. Ordinance has been mistakenly dropped on OP1, on the maneuvering areas west of OP1, and into the surrounding waters of the LIA" [Live Impact Area] (Mullenneaux 2000). The Navy, however, reiterated its position that David Sanes had been the only casualty resulting from a military miscalculation. Nonetheless, Sanes' death was not the first casualty caused by the Navy, , given that dozens of Viequenses die of cancer each year, and that "a viequense was killed in the early 1940s when he touched an

explosive lying on the ground” (Barreto 2002, 41).

After 4/19/1999, the Navy seemed erratic in the statements it released, making Viequenses and Puerto Ricans fear that the US military was not being forthright with them. For instance, the Navy first denied and then admitted on May 27, 1999 that back in February “it had fired ammunition tipped with depleted uranium at least once” (Mullenneaux 2000). Navy Public Affairs Officer Bob Nelson stated that 263 shells were fired “by a Harriet pilot” and that the “Navy had recovered only 57” (Mullenneaux 2000, 57). In a similar move, the Navy first denied and then accepted that they had used dangerous chemical substances in Vieques, napalm being one of them (Barreto 2002; Mullenneaux 2000). On July 1999, officials from the Marine Corps also admitted they had dropped napalm on Vieques back in 1992 (Barreto 2002, 48). In the documentary *Vieques: Paradise Lost?*, Yale University risk analysis Professor John Wargo explains that in addition to napalm and depleted uranium components of ordinance fired in Vieques included: lead, arsenic, agent orange, mercury, aluminum, and chromium. The documentary adds that Vieques has also been affected by high concentrations of white phosphorous, radiation, RDX/HMX, Chaff and dioxins. It is important to point out that even after admitting the use of these dangerous substances, Navy officials kept insisting that there was no evidence linking the use of any of them to the multiple ailments experienced by Viequenses, including the high cancer rates (Barreto 2002).

The additive effect of decades of living in a war zone, made people in Vieques spring to action after David Sanes was killed. His death mobilized people beyond Vieques, as many Puerto Ricans on the island, and in the United States also began to express their opposition to the Navy's presence in Vieques. In an unparalleled act of consensus, Puerto Ricans everywhere finally demanded that the Navy leave Vieques. According to Mullenneaux (2000), “Vieques was a stage on which Puerto Ricans were acting out their historic need for dignity...” (74). Víctor M. Rodríguez (2005) points out that Viequenses and Puerto Ricans were able to finally sustain a long-term resistance against the Navy, while simultaneously building “a pro-liberation majority among the island's residents,” federal repression and surveillance notwithstanding (197-198).

Not One More Bomb: A Non-Violent Revolution is Born

Under the “not one more bomb” slogan, hundreds of organizations and hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans protested the actions of the US Navy, and pressured the military organization to leave the island municipality of Vieques. As Alsina-Orozco and Cintrón-Aguilú (2002) point out: “Between 1999 and 2001, we witnessed alliances that up to

that point had seemed impossible, between groups that in the past had been antagonistic with each other” (32; my translation). The highlight of this situation, according to the authors, was the fact that political parties subordinated themselves to an “active civil society” (Alsina-Orozco and Cintrón-Aguilú 2002, 32). Rodríguez (2005) agrees adding that “[u]nlike any previous Puerto Rican liberation movement [the movement for Vieques] was able to help the coalescence of civil society in support of its goals” (171). Sanes’ death was able to unite an entire people who asked for two specific things: the immediate cease of the bombing in Vieques, and the exit of the Navy from the islet (Alsina-Orozco and Cintrón-Aguilú 2002).

Local Resistance: The Struggle for Vieques in Puerto Rico

Resistance in Vieques was all-encompassing. By the end of 1999, there were ten permanent camps with protestors in U.S. Navy grounds and by May 2000, a total of fourteen camps had been set up. With the slogan “que se vayan” (get them out—in reference to Navy personnel), the camps challenged the Navy in “its” territory (Mullenneaux 2000). However, the local resistance was broader and extended beyond the camps. It integrated people and groups from the entire political landscape, including (at least at the beginning of the struggle) pro-statehood advocates, who have historically praised unconditionally the US government and its military. This was evident in the strong “not one more bomb” position taken by then pro-statehood governor of Puerto Rico Pedro Rosselló González. The governor defended his position in several occasions to President Clinton and the US Congress. In fact, in a press conference six months after David Sanes’ death, Rosselló stated that the conversations he had been having with President Clinton were not negotiations, but rather, his way of establishing the position of his government vis-à-vis Vieques (Figueroa-Lugo 2002). Rosselló elaborated that the position of his administration included “two points: first the Navy must go eventually, and second, bombing exercises must not continue. That is non-negotiable” (Figueroa-Lugo 2002, 65; my translation). Moreover, after stating that human rights are simply non-negotiable, Governor Rosselló was seemingly defiant in a hearing held by the Senate’s Commission on the Armed Forces in October 1999. For instance, when Sen. James M. Inhofe (R-Oklahoma) claimed that Puerto Ricans were just bad citizens “who want to be treated different from the American citizens” who live close to other military practice areas, Rosselló’s response was swift and to the point:

I ask [Inhofe] to show me a community that has been bombed for 58 years, that its cancer rate is 27% above the rest

of the population, that has a higher infant mortality rate, that has a higher rate of psychological disorders than the rest of the population, that has an unemployment rate four times higher than the rest of the population, and that shows a merciless destruction of its natural environment. If he can find a community in the United States that is exposed to this kind of damage, I would then—perhaps—listen to what he has to say, but there is no community in the United States enduring such level of destruction (Figueroa-Lugo 2002, 61; my translation).

During the time people and groups were asking for the hasty exit of the Navy from Vieques, US officials kept arguing that, in a post-9/11 world, the islet was a matter of national security. Puerto Ricans, in turn, continued arguing for the Navy's withdrawal as a matter of human rights and staged some of the biggest civil demonstrations in the island's history. One example was the "Marcha por la Paz en Vieques" [March for Peace in Vieques] in February 2000, which attracted more than 85,000 Puerto Ricans (Lizardi-Ortiz 2002). Another example was the "Todo Puerto Rico con Vieques" rally [All Puerto Rico with Vieques], which was held on July 4, 2001 attracting 50,000 supporters (Barreto 2002). The support for Vieques was all-encompassing, done at different levels by different constituencies. Even celebrities who had managed to remain apolitical up to that point, began making public statements of solidarity with Vieques. One of such celebrities was Ricky Martin, who "publicly proclaimed: "Vieques I am with you" in the 1999 Billboard Music Awards (Barreto 2002, 83).

Demonstrations of solidarity toward Vieques were at times met with State repression. The biggest manifestation of this repression happened on May 4, 2000, when more than three hundred federal authorities arrived in Vieques to arrest several hundred protestors. McCaffrey (2002) relates a heart-drenching account of the situation the demonstrators lived that day:

For more than a year, demonstrators had lived in tents and little wooden houses on the bombing range. They blocked the gates to the navy base with church pews and held nightly prayer vigils by candlelight. They covered the chain-link fence to the base with white ribbons, a petition for peace and to end the bombing. They set up makeshift kitchens under burlap tarps and dished out rice and beans for hundreds of visitors who came to support the effort. For more than a year, demonstrators halted military maneuvers on this small, inhabited island, blocking the planet's most powerful armed forces. [But on May 4, 2000]

the marshals came in the early morning darkness, wearing bullet-proof vests and black helmets, heavily armed with automatic weaponry. They handcuffed teachers, fishermen, housewives, politicians, artists, and Catholic priests (1).

All fourteen camps were dismantled that day, and the Navy resumed its war games, including the bombing of Vieques four days later, on May 8 (Rodríguez-Martínez and Olivencia-Emeric 2002). In June 2000, as the Navy bunkered itself in a denial involving the health effects of constant bombing for the population of Vieques, a group of Puerto Rican medical doctors “Médicos Con Una Misión” [Doctors with a Mission] decided to go to the restricted area to advise everyone in there of the dangers of contamination (Rodríguez-Martínez and Olivencia-Emeric 2002). Also in June, President Clinton summoned a meeting with leaders from the three major political parties on the island to begin searching for answers to the island’s political status. The meeting took a different turn when both Governor Pedro Roselló and Rubén Berríos (leader of the pro-independence party) linked the situation in Vieques with the political status of Puerto Rico (Oliveras-Ortiz 2002). The Fourth of July that year was observed on the island with two main protests against the Navy: one outside the federal penitentiary in Guaynabo, where those arrested in May were being held, and the other in Ponce (on the South shore of Puerto Rico).

In October, 2000, activist Ismael Guadalupe urged people to keep the struggle going by exerting pressure, organizing more marches, and continuing civil disobedience activities for “the only thing the US Navy and the President respect is action,” even if it meant incarceration (my translation, Oliveras-Ortiz 2002,145). Also in October 2000, the Congreso Nacional Hostosiano (CNH) urged that Viequenses be put in the list of endangered species. This statement was made in response to the Navy’s dismissal of a few protestors still in the fire range, after resuming their war games. According to the CNH, the US Navy had stopped fire before when a horse or a cow had wandered into the practice range. Not doing so for protestors now, the CNH argued, indicated that the lives of Viequenses were valued less than those of livestock (Oliveras-Ortiz 2002).

Solidarity within the US and Abroad: The Struggle for Vieques Goes International

Solidarity with Vieques in the United States came from different fronts. According to Barreto (2002), the spread of solidarity toward Vieques was especially troubling for “Washington.” given that from the perspective of the US government, “these nationalists were living among them.” As Barreto (2002) points out, it was easy for Puerto Ricans in the

barrio in New York to support Vieques, because they had “the ability to analogize from Vieques to the inner-city barrio” (82).

Support for Vieques was manifested through different venues in New York, including The Vieques Solidarity Network, and “Todo Nueva York con Vieques” [All of New York with Vieques]. In addition, already existing groups such as the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund (PRLDEF) took on the cause of Vieques. Many of these groups became unstopably vocal about Vieques’ predicament. In many occasions, their activism put them in the line of fire. For instance, on December 7, 1999 ten people were arrested in an anti-Navy protest outside the headquarters of the United Nations when “Todo Nueva York con Vieques” sponsored a full day of civil disobedience. It should be noted that among those arrested were Panamanian singer and actor Rubén Blades and ex-world boxing champ José “Chegüi” Torres. A month later, on January 6, 2000 seven more people (all women) were also arrested in front of the United Nations (Mullenneaux 2000). Actress Rosie Pérez was one of the women arrested that day “in solidarity with the plight of Vieques” (Barreto 2002, 83). In addition, the organizers of the 2000 Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York provided a forum for Puerto Ricans to express their views on Vieques during the well-known celebration.

Puerto Rican politicians in the United States also aligned themselves with Vieques. For instance, Congressman José Serrano (D-New York) was one of the first politicians to express his views on the situation after the 4/19/99 event. On a news release dated on April 20, 1999 he informed the media that “during 60 years the residents of Vieques have had to suffer the consequences of these military practices with explosives” (Associated Press 1999a). Moreover, Congressman Luis Gutiérrez (D-Illinois) was incarcerated for trespassing on federal land while participating in demonstrations in Vieques. But Puerto Ricans were not the only ones expressing their solidarity with Vieques, as other stateside political figures also showed their support and concern for Vieques in different ways. For instance, Reverend Jesse Jackson arrived in Puerto Rico in early July, 1999 and visited Vieques, where he expressed his unwavering solidarity to the people, and promised to intercede on their behalf with President Clinton (Alsina-Orozco and Cintrón-Aguilú 2002). A few months later, in a visit made to New York in November 1999, Hillary Rodham Clinton, who was getting ready to run for office in the state of New York, stated a concern about the ecological damage caused by the Navy in Vieques. Other prominent figures of the US political landscape were actually willing to take chances. Specifically, environmental lawyer Robert Kennedy Jr., and political activist Reverend Al Sharpton were incarcerated for trespassing on federal land while partic-

icipating in demonstrations in Vieques in 2001 (McCaffrey 2002, 5). As a result of their arrests, Kennedy spent thirty days in jail, and Sharpston spent ninety days.

Some activities were coordinated among the different groups in the mainland and the island. For instance, in July 2000, when Puerto Ricans on the island were simultaneously protesting the incarceration of protestors both in front of the federal penitentiary in San Juan and in Ponce, hundreds of Puerto Ricans also demonstrated in New York City (Barreto 2002). More protests took place in October when NATO and US Navy troops organized war games off Vieques (Barreto 2002). On October 10, Robert Kennedy Jr. challenged the Navy in court (Barreto 2002) on behalf of his clients (i.e., Vieques Pro-Rescue and Development Committee, the Vieques Women's Alliance, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Water Keeper Alliance, Horsemen for Peace, the Vieques Water Keeper, the Professional Technical Support, and the Vieques Sustainable Development Group). Kennedy filed a case against the Navy with the US District Court in Puerto Rico seeking to end the bombing in Vieques (Perl 2001). Eight months later, in June 2000, Kennedy filed a petition with the U.S. First Circuit Court of Appeals in Boston seeking an injunction to end the bombing scheduled for June 13 (Perl 2001).

The fight for Vieques was also monitored internationally and, in many cases, international organizations got involved in the fight. On July 2000, a forum titled "Racism and the Struggle of the People in Vieques Against the U.S. Navy" included the participation of delegates from fourteen countries (Oliveras-Ortiz 2002). Around the same time, Attorney Raúl Maxwell, member of "Iniciativa Latinoamericana para el Desarme Nuclear" [Latin American Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament] stated to a major newspaper on the island that:

Vieques is the best forum in the world for a triumph of anti-war activism...Vieques may seem small until one stops to think carefully and realize that there are many places in a similar situation, needing a victory in Vieques so they can continue forward with their own struggles" (Oliveras-Ortiz 2002, 138; my translation).

Also, Vieques was one of the themes discussed in the 2001 World Conference held in South Africa, which included delegates from fifty countries (Oliveras-Ortiz 2002). It was also reported that international figures like Guatemalan Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú and the late Pope John Paul II expressed their solidarity with the people of Vieques (González 2002). Viequenses and Puerto Ricans were all too

aware of these transnational expressions of solidarity.

At every opportunity, Puerto Ricans took their plight for peace in Vieques outside Puerto Rico and the United States at every opportunity and using any appropriate venue they found. For instance, “while gathering in the Vatican to celebrate the beatification of the first Puerto Rican, hundreds of Puerto Ricans were heard shouting “Paz para Vieques” [Peace for Vieques] (Barreto 2002, 70). Celebrities also made their cases internationally. Soon after being crowned Miss Universe in 2001, Puerto Rican contestant Denise Quiñones expressed her wish for peace for Vieques (Barreto 2002). Also in 2001, when Félix (Tito) Trinidad won the world middleweight boxing title, he too expressed a similar wish (Barreto 2002). Perhaps the boldest and most puzzling move made by any Puerto Rican came from former Governor Rosselló who paid a visit to the United Nations asking for the island to be included in the list of colonial territories developed by the Decolonization Committee (Alsina-Orozco and Cintrón-Aguilú 2002). The multiple ways in which Puerto Ricans and their allies articulated their petitions about the US Navy’s presence in Vieques demonstrate that they were relentless in making those wishes visible and were equally determined to carry them out.

A “Magnificent Range”: Vieques and the US Congress

Six months after David Sanes died, on October 19, 1999, the US Senate Armed Services Committee held a hearing on Vieques (Federal Document Clearing House 1999). In his opening remarks, Senator John Warner (R-VA), Chairman of the committee stated that Congress (and even the entire nation) faced two fundamental issues: 1) “How will the Navy be able to ensure adequate training without the use of this magnificent range [Vieques]?” and 2) “If the Navy is to continue operations, what accommodations should be reached with the residents to minimize any negative impact on those training operations and to above all ensure the safety of the citizens?” (Federal Document Clearing House 1999). The second issue identified by Warner was not discussed by those testifying before the Commission, nor was it addressed by any of the 20 senators present in the hearing. On the other hand, the first issue was transformed into that of troops’ readiness and was the topic that consumed the discussion in the 64-page transcript. The issue involving the role of Vieques for military readiness had been invoked by a study released by the Navy on July 15 of that year entitled, “The National Security Needs for Vieques” (Mullenneaux 2000). The report was commissioned by then Secretary of the Navy Richard Danzig and authored by Vice Admiral William Fallon and Lieutenant General Peter Pace. Echoing the sentiment expressed by

US military and governmental officials since 4/19/1999, the report “concluded that the live-fire target zone on Vieques was the cornerstone of combat training and readiness for Atlantic naval forces and that it was ‘irreplaceable’” (Mullenneaux 2000, 75).

In the hearing, Warner himself stated during his opening remarks that “at a time when our military’s being asked to engage in an unprecedented number of operations around the world, the Department of Defense must ensure that the men and women who are being sent into harm’s way are as well trained and ready as possible” (Federal Document Clearing House 1999). After calling Viequenses “un-American,” Senator James Inhofe (R-Oklahoma) also addressed this issue in his opening remarks, by arguing that “[w]hen you take the combination of the limitation on airspace, and the amphibious opportunities that are there, there is no place else that we can do the same” (Federal Document Clearing House 1999). Senator Strom Thurmond (R-South Carolina) also offered his opinion on the matter by stating that “although we must be sensitive to the concerns of the citizens of Puerto Rico, our responsibility mandates that we ensure that our forces have the services to train and maintain their readiness to meet the challenges of an uncertain world” (Federal Document Clearing House, 1999). The statements made by Warner and Thurmond are remarkable considering they were made before September 11, 2001. Francis M. Rush, Chairman of the Special Presidential Panel on Military Operations in Vieques, followed suit by stating that according to the conclusions of the panel:

[T]oday there is a valid requirement for the Navy to conduct combined arms exercises at Vieques in order to provide combat-ready forces. In our judgment, Vieques is the only place which currently provides the capability of all elements of the East Coast-based Naval Expeditionary Force to conduct such exercises (Federal Document Clearing House 1999).

The hearing was revealing in two counts: first, after reading the transcripts, it is obvious that Senators were more interested in stating their views about Vieques than in exploring alternatives; second, it seemed to escape the Senator’s minds that the matter of Vieques was a matter of domestic safety, insofar as the US government should protect all citizens, and in this case, the 10,000 US citizens of Vieques.

After the hearing, it became clear to Congressmen that, different from other Americans, Puerto Ricans were not going to waver on their convictions by being labeled un-American. Thus, some Congressmen decided to use the status as a tool to force Puerto Ricans to change their views. For instance, in November 2000, James Hansen warned that if the

government of Puerto Rico is not willing to assume its responsibility in relation to national security, "Congress will take measures conducive to unilaterally granting independence to the island" (Oliveras-Ortiz 2002). A few days later, Senator Larry Craig followed suit by stating that is the Commonwealth administration maintained its belligerent and confrontational position with regards to Vieques, it "may result in a unilateral action from the Federal government to force Puerto Rico to decide whether they want to be part of the American family or an independent nation" (Oliveras-Ortiz 2002).

War Games Resume: Bombing and the Racism of Invisibility

In his State of Puerto Rico address of January 31, 2000, Governor Pedro Rosselló announced to the country that his administration had "reached a deal with the White House that would 'ensure peace for Vieques'" (Mullenneaux 2000, 89). Mostly in shock, Puerto Ricans heard Governor Rosselló say that "under the terms of the agreement, Puerto Rico would let the Navy resume training with dummy bombs in March" (Mullenneaux 2000, 89). The agreement also allowed for practice for ninety three days out the year and it established that the Navy would leave the island permanently after three years (Pérez-Viera 2002). Many saw Rosselló's deal with the White House not as a deal ensuring peace for Vieques, but as a selling out position, for he backed from his initial "not one more bomb" position. Two months later, on March 9, 2000, the Defense Secretary "warned" that the Pentagon might close Roosevelt Roads Naval Station, an important source of jobs and revenue, if it was not allowed to resume their training practices March (Mullenneaux 2000, 83). As a result of the agreement and the power wielded by the US military and government officials, bombing resumed in Vieques on May 8, 2000. By August, Governor Rosselló was pleased with the way the Navy was operating in Vieques and had claimed that the conflict was over (Oliveras-Ortiz 2002). The Navy, however, had a different vision, expressed very eloquently by Captain Craig Langman: "The final goal is to return to live ammunition" (Oliveras-Ortiz 2002). This dissonance of opinion characterized US-Puerto Rico relations with regards to Vieques from beginning to end.

For many analysts and politicians, there is no doubt that military officials were able to treat Vieques the way they did (both before and after 4/19/1999) because of racism and social class, issues that are, to a certain extent, tightly linked to Puerto Rico's colonial status. According to Rodríguez, "the struggle in Vieques had a double character" from which Viequenses waged both an anti-colonialist struggle and an anti-racist one as well (2005 175). Vieques residents were, of course, aware of this

situation, and many adamantly pointed to racism as an explanation for the way Vieques had been treated since 1941. For instance, Vieques resident and activist Iván Meléndez expressed to McCaffrey (2002) that the situation in Vieques “is in part racism and in part environmental racism” (6). In its simplicity, Meléndez’s statement captures an interesting dichotomy in which the United States is able to be both racist to the people and also racist to the environment by virtue of the people who inhabit it. In several instances, Governor Pedro Rosselló also alluded to Vieques’ racial makeup and economic background as a reason for the Navy’s intransigence. According to him, “if this were happening in Manhattan, or if this were happening in Martha’s Vineyard, certainly the delegations from those states would make certain that this would not continue” (McCaffrey 2002, 6). In this case, the Governor used two US localities that are largely white and middle class to explain that the situation in Vieques is related to race, class, and the political status of Puerto Rico, which lacks representation in Congress.

The hearing held by the US Senate Armed Services Committee in October 1999 (discussed above) made palpable to many Puerto Ricans their racialization by US officials, provoking major reactions. Former Mayor of Vieques Manuela Santiago argued that Senator Inhofe’s statement about Viequenses not being good Americans were the comments of “a racist, irrational person” (Figueroa-Lugo 2002, 70). Similarly, Viequense activist Ismael Guadalupe stated that the Senator behaved as “a disturbed person who feels pressured by well-defined interests and who is racist and anti-Puerto Rican” (Figueroa-Lugo 2002, 70). Even then Resident Commissioner Carlos Romero Barceló (who, given his pro-statehood ideas had adopted a rather conservative and non-combative approach toward the US government throughout the conflict) concluded that Sen. Inhofe is just “an ugly American” (Figueroa-Lugo 2002, 70).

The Navy’s Exit and the Lingering Colonial Status: Lessons from the Movement

As a result of the agreement made by President Clinton and Governor Rosselló, “eight thousand acres of land under military jurisdiction were returned to civilian authorities in June 2001” (McCaffrey 2002, ix). In fact, most of the land held by the US Navy for more than six decades was transferred to the US Fish and Wildlife Services (Rodríguez 2005, 172). The Navy also finally left Vieques on May 2003, after President Bush stated in 2001 that since “they” do not want “us” there, the Navy ought to find somewhere else to conduct its exercises” (Editorial 2001). And, as Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld had warned Puerto Ricans, the Roosevelt Roads Naval Base closed shortly thereafter. Though promising develop-

ments, the exit of the Navy from the island of Vieques only made the devastation even more apparent. It also, in the end, let the Navy off the hook a little too soon. After all, the Navy did what Puerto Ricans wanted: it got out of the island. Or, to put in words carried through our popular culture: it got voted off the island. As activist Nilda Medina-Díaz stated: "The Navy is not leaving because it wants to, but because the people have kicked it out" (Associated Press 2003).

A Navy-less Vieques now had to grapple with questions about environmental pollution, contamination, and clean up, with restoration of natural habitats, including coral reefs, and, perhaps more pressing, with physical and mental health issues that did not go away with the Navy's departure. As activist Myrna Pagán states so eloquently in the 2003 documentary by Marika Hoffmann *Vieques Paradise Lost?*: "The Navy has stopped the bombing, but the illness is [still] here, the contamination is [still] here..." This is an important lesson to be learned by activists around the world: achieving the short term goal of getting the Navy out of Vieques was not a sufficient to claim the effectiveness of the movement. Although the main objective was to stop the daily torment of the 9,000 US citizens of Vieques, and the bombing was the main cause of this ordeal, the long-term conditions to alleviate the situation of Viequenses (e.g., medical care for ailing citizens, environmental cleanup, etc.) were neglected in the process.

The conflict over Vieques gave the island the strategic visibility it needed in order to successfully challenge the Navy. The national and transnational social movement that developed around getting the US Navy out of Vieques (only partially discussed in this essay) proved that Goliath can still be defeated by David. Sanes' first name should have been an omen for the US military, no doubt. After all, the Navy did leave Vieques, and from statements made by different representatives of the US government, we know that it would not have been done without the pressure exerted by the different social agents involved in the movement. Strategic visibility notwithstanding, Vieques, and by extension, Puerto Rico, still lack the political power to fundamentally change the living conditions of Viequenses specifically, and Puerto Ricans more generally. In the words of McCaffrey (2002): "Vieques's position as an inhabited bombing range [was] fundamentally an expression of Puerto Rico's position as a colony lacking political power, representation, and voice over its own destiny" (7). To this day, the future of Vieques as well as the future of Puerto Rico are, still uncertain, and in the case of Vieques, its future is profoundly informed (if not determined) by the upshot of sixty years of incessant military bombing. The Navy left, but colonialism remains in Puerto Rico.

The mobilization produced by the murder of David Sanes was, ultimately, a response to colonialism, militarism, and the constant violation of human rights. According to Barreto (2002): “Vieques marks a new chapter in Puerto Rican history—the ascent of a more fervent cultural nationalism and ethnic identity” (2). Thus, he concludes, “[u]nknowingly, the U.S. armed forces became a major player in the evolution of Puerto Rican identity” (98). I agree with Barreto that the death of David Sanes fostered (or re-awakened) among Puerto Ricans a more fervent and assertive kind of cultural nationalism. However, I see this “strain” of nationalism as a means to an end: it ultimately was and continues to be about cultural survival. That is to say, the cultural nationalism that Puerto Ricans developed after 4/19/99 was one that would foreground the basic survival of an important aspect of their national community. As McCaffrey (2002) correctly points out, different from what the US government may think, the battle over Vieques was not a battle of national security versus anti-American radicals (or Puerto Rican nationalists), but rather a matter of material conditions (involving economic and health issues) versus US claims of national security. Today, Vieques is Navy free, but not free from the multiple side effects of Puerto Rico’s colonial condition. Vieques is Navy free but not free from environmental degradation; the specter of militarization, human rights violations, and a bleak economy are lingering alongside a colonial political status that allowed Viequenses’ pleas for help to remain unheard and their deteriorating human and natural resources remain invisible for over forty years.

Still, regardless of the bittersweet ending of getting the US Navy out of Vieques, it would be appropriate to finish this essay by spelling out the main lessons we can learn from this struggle. First, the battle for the liberation of Vieques showed Puerto Ricans that resisting the forces of colonialism and empire can transcend traditional partisan politics which, in Puerto Rico’s case, have narrowly operated around a single issue: the island’s political status. Second, the battle for Vieques taught Puerto Ricans that even the most just of causes needs the help of allies, and the more people advocating for a cause, the more visible it becomes. As Rodríguez (2005) notes: “the Viequense social movement developed a series of collective tactics, alliances and collective memory of the experience of colonial oppression and resistance that aided the movement in capturing the imagination of thousands of people all over the world” (171). Third, Vieques illustrates that, when it comes to activism, there is no such thing as too many venues through which to get your points across, or too many allies willing to be vocal and to take risks. The Vieques movement also shows that given the world of hyper-connectivity in which we live, multilateral, transnational, and consistent activist

LUGO-LUGO | AN ISLAND IN RAW SKIN: VIEQUES AND THE TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVIST CHALLENGE
TO PUERTO RICO'S COLONIAL INVISIBILITY

efforts are playing a key role in galvanizing social and political movements. Fourth, Vieques taught anyone who was paying attention that immediate, short-term goals are important (in this case, getting the US Navy to stop the bombing and leave the island), but so are long-term goals, such as getting the Navy to pay reparations to Viequenses and clean up the affected areas before they left. The Vieques movement focused primarily on short-term goals, and now Viequenses are dealing with the consequences of a movement that was weaker on long-term goals. Fifth, Vieques is a formidable example of how a small locality with a small population can challenge the monster of imperialism when all international eyes are focused on it, suggesting that sometimes a cliché such as “against all odds” proves useful when infused with new meaning and agency. Its struggle against military aggression through collective action, stands as a source of inspiration and hope for a better future; whether it is for Puerto Rico, or any other country in the future facing military aggression. That, perhaps, is the biggest lesson Vieques can teach the world. Applying the lessons learned from Vieques to other contexts where militarism or any other manifestations of imperialist practices are still being fought is, in my view, an effective way of advancing struggles for social justice.

Finally, these lessons also can be applied (at least in theory) to the current political status of Puerto Rico. That is to say, until the political status of Puerto Rico is made visible, and until the pertinent branch of the US federal government (i.e., the US Congress) is pressured to assume responsibility for evading the unresolved politically charged issue of the island's colonial status and the multiple socioeconomic consequences derived from it, Puerto Rico will remain a colony of the United States. If Vieques' struggle is any indication, visibility and transnational alliances are among the most effective tools. In the end, Puerto Ricans do not need an external power to govern (over) them, but they can benefit from dedicated allies willing to help them achieve the long-term goal of decolonization.

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Notes

¹ For a detailed account of the 4/19/99 tragic event and its aftermath, I recommend Amílcar Barreto's *Vieques, the Navy and Puerto Rican Politics* (2002). For the readers who understand written Spanish, I also recommend Edgardo Pérez-Viera's *Victoria de un pueblo: Crónicas del Grito de Vieques* (2002). For a thoughtful account of Vieques post 4/19/99 and Viequense

perspectives on the situation, see Katherine T. McCaffrey's *Military Power and Popular Protest* (2002).

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LUGO-LUGO | AN ISLAND IN RAW SKIN: VIEQUES AND THE TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVIST CHALLENGE
TO PUERTO RICO'S COLONIAL INVISIBILITY

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