

Military legacies and popular struggle in Vieques

KATHERINE T. McCAFFEY

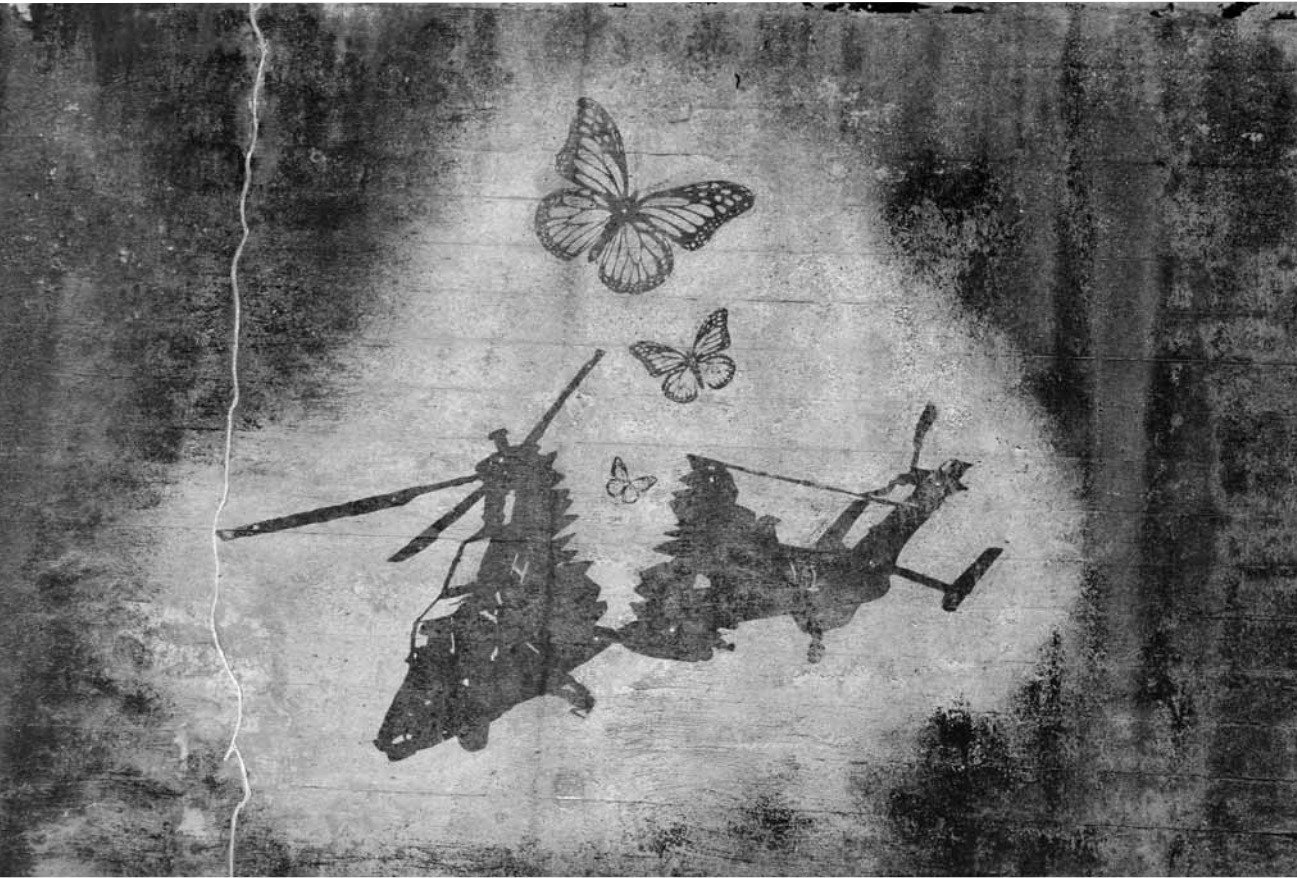


Imagen anti-bélica (Antiwar image). Rafael Trelles. Reprinted, by permission, from Rafael Trelles.

On a brilliant August morning, Rafael Trelles peeled delicate images off the soot-stained walls of abandoned Navy magazines: a dove emerging from the snapped-off nose of a fighter jet; a bouquet of flowers erupting from a fractured tank. Trelles pioneers an experimental form of graphic “street art” he describes as “anti-graffiti.” “My style of work is the total opposite [of graffiti]—instead of depositing pigment on a wall, what I do is remove the dark material (grime and dirt) that covers the wall, and therefore create a design in reverse.” The technique is low in cost and straightforward. Trelles superimposes a stencil on a dirty surface and uses a high-pressure hose to wash the area around it. When the stencil is removed, an image emerges from the dirt. “If you look carefully,” Trelles notes, “you can discover great beauty in the dirty streaks and filth of abandoned places.”

Trelles took his street art to Vieques this past summer, an expression of his enduring commitment to the island's struggles for social justice. "Although the majority of my work is not overtly political, I am an artist involved in the struggle for Puerto Rican independence. For me, art and life, aesthetics and ethics, are profoundly linked," he explained. As a student at the University of Puerto Rico in the late 1970s, Trelles supported Vieques' struggle to evict the Navy; in 2000 he was among a group of artists arrested in the civil disobedience campaign to enter prohibited, military-controlled land. On this day, he rigged a power hose to a small generator on the back of his truck and drove out to western Vieques, where empty magazines cut the hills like heavy boot treads. His canvas was concrete: the stark, grim walls of ammunition storehouses; an abandoned helicopter landing strip. On these walls, the physical embodiment of Vieques' military legacies, Trelles crafted messages of peace, hoping "that these noble people will recuperate their health and succeed in restoring the ecological balance and natural beauty of their land."

Trelles's artwork graces the front and back covers and intersperses the text of this *CENTRO Journal* issue, devoted in part to a discussion of Vieques' military legacies and popular struggle. Trelles' images are testaments to the endurance of beauty, creativity, and the hope for a better future. There is perhaps no better metaphor for Vieques, an island of great natural beauty, marred by human destruction, home to a resilient people who have struggled and continue to struggle for a better future against uncertain odds. There is perhaps no better entry point for this discussion.

This volume presents perspectives on Vieques' history and current reality. The influential role of the U.S. Navy in shaping that reality is a common thread. What is so captivating about Vieques'

story is the stubborn refusal of citizens to accept inequality and injustice; the ability of people to surmount formidable obstacles and forge solidarity; and the remarkable creativity that has informed social action. As these essays make clear, those who continue to struggle for an equitable and sustainable future for Vieques will need to draw on these legacies.

The first essay by César Ayala and José Bolívar presents a fresh examination of a neglected chapter in Vieques' history—the "Cold War expropriations" of island land between 1947 and 1948. While the first round of military expropriations during WWII established the military occupation of Vieques and dislocated thousands of residents, the second wave of expropriations is perhaps more significant because, as Ayala and Bolívar note, "it sealed the island's fate as a military target range."

Ayala and Bolívar detail Vieques' plight in the face of the U.S. military's Cold War expansion, which pushed residents off the most fertile sections of island land, destroyed Vieques' agricultural base, and derailed Puerto Rican government efforts to intervene in Vieques' burgeoning economic crisis. The situation of Vieques' cattle ranchers presents a window into understanding both Vieques' economic deterioration under military occupation and the complexity of colonial politics. The world was "turned on its head," Ayala and Bolívar argue, presenting a fascinating analysis of how the navy, "the ultimate cause of the constriction of the cattle industry of Vieques," emerges as the magnanimous savior of Vieques' cattle ranchers, while the Puerto Rican government, despite its efforts to shore up the island's economy, appears as the villain.

Our second essay, by Ramón López, examines the popular meaning of anti-Navy t-shirts. López, an activist himself, who participated in the struggle to

end the military presence in Vieques, reflects on the hybrid meanings of t-shirts produced and worn in support of the civil disobedience movement. The act of buying and wearing t-shirts was an act of economic support and political solidarity. López argues, however, that Vieques t-shirts, the majority of which were emblazoned with Puerto Rican flags, also acted as popular expressions of Puerto Rican national identity, forged beyond the debates waged by intellectuals and politicians.

At the center of our Vieques section is a photo essay by José Rafael Charrón entitled "Desobedientes." The Vieques movement was backed by hundreds of individuals, many of whom had never before engaged in any other form of political defiance or considered themselves "activists." These protestors acted out of the awareness that the bombing was immoral, and often served lengthy prison sentences for their commitment. In the course of the movement, the term "civil disobedient" was adopted to describe these diverse supporters who defied the boundaries of the military restricted zone. "Disobedients" crossed over into the live fire zone, sang songs, prayed, pitched tents, camped out, swam, cooked, and ate fried fish on beaches littered with bombs. For roughly a year, the Navy was paralyzed by these acts of communal consciousness before cracking down on demonstrators in 2001 and arresting hundreds over the course of the next two years. Charrón's beautiful portraits capture some of the faces of the diverse people who sustained this movement.

The Vieques movement evolved from a local struggle over military encroachment into a mass mobilization with international support. Puerto Rican activists in the United States played a crucial role in the solidarity movement and in leveraging a military withdrawal from the island. Juan Cartagena

interviews Vicente "Panama" Alba, a veteran Young Lord, who organized the David Sanes Brigade (honoring the Vieques security guard killed by Navy bombs) in New York. Alba embodies the creativity and militancy of the U.S.-based solidarity movement. Alba makes clear that New York activists drew inspiration from the struggles in Vieques, where residents occupied the military bombing range, acting as human shields against Navy bombing practice.

Alba recognizes that the struggle in Vieques emerged from bread and butter issues, not political ideology. To support that movement meant adopting a broader perspective, putting aside politics, and reaching out to other communities for support. It also meant taking direct action to protest the military abuse, and being willing to face the consequences of defiance. Indeed, many New York-based activists served relatively lengthy terms in federal prison on trespassing charges.

May 2003 marked a historical milestone in Vieques, as the Navy officially closed its base and withdrew from island. But as the essays by Berman Santana, Baver, and McCaffrey indicate, Vieques' struggle did not end with the official closure of the base. As Berman outlines, there are four general areas of struggle to which Vieques activists currently devote themselves: completely removing all vestiges of military control; pressuring the Navy to clean up unexploded ordnance and military toxins contaminating former baseland; reclaiming land for civilian use; and putting into place a community-directed, ecologically and socially sustainable land use and development plan.

Berman's article highlights some of the political obstacles that have already emerged to obstruct these goals. She makes it clear that in spite of the base's formal closure, the Navy remains a very active player in the island's affairs,

and a continued obstruction to the island's autonomy and fruitful development. The battle for clean-up, for example, is impeded by military efforts to deny responsibility for contamination. Berman describes how the navy marshals evidence from its own contracted experts and federal agencies to dispute military responsibility for heavy metal contamination and higher disease rates on the island. In addition, Berman notes that the Puerto Rican government's response to Vieques' needs has been disappointing. With cancer rates at disturbingly high levels, the Puerto Rican Department of Health has withheld results of a major health survey on island cancer rates, and failed to provide badly needed health care services.

Baver's article develops the environmental dimensions of Vieques' current struggles. The Navy used the eastern part of Vieques as a live fire range for roughly 60 years, leaving a legacy of toxic and hazardous contamination. Unexploded ordnance, depleted uranium bullets, mercury, lead, perchlorate, TNT, PCBs, solvents and pesticides contaminate the landscape. Baver argues that an environmental justice framework is useful in analyzing the current phase of struggle. Environmental justice movements, she notes, are associated with demands for remediation and social equity at the grassroots level. Vieques' current struggle involves not only pressuring the military to fulfill its legal responsibilities for clean-up, but also gaining a community voice in the "mind-numbing" and bureaucratic clean-up process. Keeping the community

movement alive and energized during this highly technical and long-term process, she notes, will be vital to achieving a just remediation process.

Finally, in my own essay, I consider the broad power dynamics that are shaping the development process in Vieques, residents' perceptions of what development means, and what their desires are for the future. The Navy's departure has had a paradoxical effect on Vieques, freeing the island's economy and society from some of the most blatant dangers and constraints imposed by military occupation, but at the same time making Vieques vulnerable to the pressures of the market and privatization. In my essay, I consider the contradictions evoked by an exclusive, walled beach-front resort on Vieques' north coast. Residents I interviewed enthusiastically supported the resort as an important source of employment on the island, while at the same expressing reluctance to work there. Further questioning exposed considerable resentment of a hotel that walled off access to the beach, an affront to popular understandings of both the existing law and much deeper identification with common property practices. I suggest that a sense of entitlement to the land is an enduring legacy of resistance to the military, and a potential rallying point for future collective action.

We hope that this special Vieques section will spark continued interest in Vieques' dramatic past, and in its continuing struggles as it seeks to completely free itself from the constricting legacy of over a half century of military occupation.



*Imágenes anti-bélicas en un helipuerto, Vieques, Puerto Rico (Antiwar images at a Vieques heliport).
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