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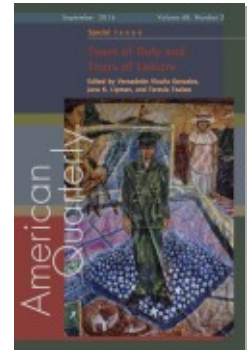
Is This Gitmo, or Club Med?

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Is This Gitmo, or Club Med?

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They're living in the tropics, they're well fed, they've got everything they could possibly want.
—Dick Cheney, on prisoners at Guantánamo, June 2005

If you type “Vieques” into a search engine today, in 2016, you will be bombarded by travel ads, first from big commercial outfits like TripAdvisor or BookingBuddy, followed by a long string of vacation guides, hotel guides, island guides, beach guides, spa guides, and an image bank of aerial shots with turquoise waters, curved sun-drenched beaches, and nary a soul in sight. Those empty, uncommercialized beaches are there because until 2003, two-thirds of the island of Vieques was owned by the US Navy, who used it for sixty years as a training site for aerial bombing, amphibious landings, ship-to-shore gunfighting, and ground warfare. Here, tourism is layered on top of the detritus of militarism, just one of the ways these two imperial enterprises converge and intersect on the planet's tropical islands. Vieques shares this history of convergence with Hawai'i, Guam, the Marshall Islands, the Philippines, and other places certain to be mentioned in this thematic cluster.¹

Vieques is an island of fifty-two square miles that lies a few miles east of Puerto Rico, to which it was annexed in 1854. It has been an imperial playing field for five centuries. Claimed by Spain in the 1490s, it became a base for Taino resistance to the Spanish invasion. After the Taino were crushed, Vieques was left unsettled and became a haven for piracy, contraband, and accompanying forms of frontier anarchy, while Spain fended off attempts by France, Britain, Denmark, and Scotland to take it over and colonize it. Three hundred years later, in the early 1800s, the colonial governor of Puerto Rico finally decided to settle Vieques. Sugar plantations were established, attracting laborers, slave and free, from all over the Caribbean. Sugar was gold in the nineteenth century.² In 1898, after Spain's defeat in the Spanish-American war, Vieques was annexed to the United States' expanding empire, along with the Philippines, the rest of Puerto Rico, and another potential but as yet unrealized resort site, Guantánamo Bay in Cuba. The island's economy was in deep decline when in 1941, in the middle of World War II, the US Navy expropriated the plantations, paid off the landowners, threw out the sugar

workers, and turned two-thirds of the island—26,000 acres—into a training colony, firing range, and military waste dump.³ For the inhabitants, by then fewer than ten thousand, it was a military occupation. For the next sixty years, Vieques and its surrounding waters were bombed an average of 180 days a year by an estimated five million pounds of ordnance *per year*, some of it live and much of it not. Its waste dump received an estimated twenty-two million pounds of military and industrial waste during the navy's occupation.⁴ The occupation generated almost no jobs for the local economy, which depended mainly on subsistence agriculture and fishing. Today 43 percent of Viequenses live below the poverty line.

Anticolonial politics have flourished in Puerto Rico from the moment of its annexation by the United States. Efforts to expel the navy, led by the Puerto Rican Independence Party, were continuous, but got traction only in 1999 when the death of a Puerto Rican worker in a practice bombing made Vieques into a cause célèbre for Americans opposed to the rightward shift of US politics. Celebrity activists joined occupations of the island, and some of them, most memorably Rev. Al Sharpton, went to jail for months. In 2003 the navy ended all its military operations in Vieques and began what was to become its largest cleanup operation ever. Under the guidance of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of the Interior, the navy was charged with demilitarizing the landscape and making Vieques safe for tourism.⁵ In a strategic move, the federal government turned over most of the navy's lands to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, which declared the eastern part of the island, the former bombing range, a wildlife refuge. This designation cleverly closed that most damaged area of the island off from economic development and human settlement, which would require a nearly impossible cleanup. Within the refuge, the irremediably contaminated live ammunition range, where no effective cleanup was possible, became a wilderness area, closing it off entirely from humans. This region of Vieques is probably the only spot in the United States that is both a wilderness area and (as of 2005) an EPA Superfund site. (That doubling is possible because cleanup standards refer only to the health of humans and are indifferent to other life forms.) In empire's hinterlands, wilderness and wasteland, refuge and death trap become one. While more than eight hundred thousand tons of explosives have been removed so far,⁶ debate continues as to whether enough has been done for human inhabitants and potential visitors.⁷ No other stakes are recognized.

In Vieques, US militarism snatched a Caribbean island out of the narrative of development that swamped the global South after Bretton Woods. Sixty years later, rehabilitated and demilitarized, the island is reinserted into that

narrative with an enhanced value that results from a time warp. Vieques, the travel sites crowd, has not a single stoplight, golf course, or McDonald's (the lack of a hospital passes unmentioned).

The story of Vieques is not the story of Latin America as a whole, however. In the Monroe Doctrine (1823), the United States declared Latin America its exclusive geopolitical sphere of influence, a relation summed up in the colloquial image of the *patio de atrás*, or backyard. It has conducted over fifty military interventions there since 1898.⁸ Many of them, including the 1954 coup in Guatemala, the 1973 coup in Chile, the 1980s contra invasion in Nicaragua, the 1983 invasion of Grenada, and the 2009 coup in Honduras, responded to unacceptably democratic election outcomes. US militarism in Latin America has been almost exclusively concerned with making the hemisphere safe for American capitalism and unsafe for communism, socialism, labor rights, and economic democracy. Apart from direct interventions, the United States since the 1950s has invested enormous resources in militarizing Latin America, through networks of schools and training programs for militaries and police, some publicly known and many not.⁹ Latin American militarism, which gave us the dictatorships and torture regimes of the 1970s and 1980s, is to a significant degree both a creation and an extension of US militarism.

Where do these geopolitics converge with tourism? With some conspicuous exceptions, notably the Caribbean islands and Mexico, for the most part, they do not. Overall, tourism has developed in Latin America in only quite limited ways. For the moneyed elites who dominate most places, tourism does not compete with industrial agriculture and extractive industry for profitability. In both its urban (Paris, Mexico City) and nonurban (Cancun, Antarctica) forms, tourism requires a great deal of infrastructure, usually supported by concentrated, multifaceted state investment. Mexico, Costa Rica, and Cuba have made such an investment. Everyone else has not. Chile, Peru, Argentina, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Uruguay, Brazil—these are all countries with enormous undeveloped potential for tourism. The Peruvian altiplano is awash in archaeological sites and natural wonders, yet Peru funnels the first world's curious hordes down a single railroad track to Machu Picchu. Ecuador does the same in the Galápagos. The Chilean state invests virtually nothing in tourism along its 2,650 miles of stunning coastline. The UN's World Tourist Organization's list of the world's ten top tourist destination includes only one Latin American country, Mexico, in last place.¹⁰ Is the industry insufficiently profitable? Is an expanded presence of first world foreigners unappealing in places where states and oligarchs hold power through the withholding of education, health care, environmental and

economic security from local inhabitants? The hinterlands and out-of-the-way places where tourism thrives are also the places where labor exploitation and resource plunder thrive. The ecological and human depredations of mining and agrarian monoculture do not naturally line up with the orchestrated, aestheticized desires of the tourist industry. For the state of Nicaragua and its business class, no tourist development could approach the profit-making potential of the Chinese proposal for an artificial waterway across the middle of the country, an alternative to the Panama Canal. The project will destroy the inland lakes and forests that are Nicaragua's main potential for tourism. For the Kirchner government in Argentina, mountaintop removal mining in Patagonia far exceeded the potential of tourism to generate the wealth it could use to reduce economic inequality. The mountain climbers will have to go elsewhere. For Brazil, the value of the Amazon River system as a source of hydroelectric energy renders completely trivial its value as an ecosystem, a human habitat, or a tourist destination. It is no accident that the recent left-leaning governments in Brazil, Bolivia, and Ecuador all pushed to allow resource extraction in the huge national parks they themselves created under the banner of conservation. Conservation operates, as it has in the United States, as an instrument for taking hinterlands out of the control of their inhabitants and placing them at the disposal of whatever the state defines as the national interest. In Mexico, if it came down to a face-off between tourism and the drug trade, the latter would win hands down. Tourism is one of the biggest industries in the world,¹¹ but in capitalist Latin America, though it thrives in some particular sites, it does not compete with other profit machines.

Cheney's astoundingly perverse remark to Wolf Blitzer (quoted in the epigraph) offers a more suggestive point of entry into our topic. What do military bases and tourist resorts have in common? Even for militarism gone mad, how can Gitmo be imagined as Club Med? Well, both are all-inclusive occupation machines, designed to keep you on the premises and satisfy your wants and needs there. Both are enclaves on foreign soil, enacting the extroverted work of empire. Both command local resources, including sex trafficking; both require negotiated acceptance by host societies. Tourism and militarism unfold in geographies organized by empires and the afterlives of empire. Both are heirs and instruments of these geohistorical forces. The rifle of Teddy Roosevelt the big game hunter in Africa is the same as the rifle of Roosevelt the Indian killer in New Mexico, and Roosevelt the Rough Rider in Cuba. Military bases and tourist resorts are enclaves that enact the us–them scripts through which empire unfolds and mutates over time. Soldiers and tourists both have to be

taught these scripts, the rules of these games. So do the societies that host and service these enclaves. Local labor has to be instructed on how to perform its subaltern status in exercises of hosting; tourists and soldiers must be taught how to honor and obey that inequality. All must be trained to organize their appetites, aspirations, and expectations in line with specifications. All must be told why they are here and what the mission is. All must be policed, all the time (tourism and policing go hand in hand—start with *Passage to India*). In 1867 *Blackwood's Magazine* commented on the unfreedom of the tourist: “Perhaps one ought to pity this class of beings, for they are docile and obedient, and, indeed, their offensiveness comes less of any self-willed viciousness, than of a subjection to certain established regulations.”¹² Sounds a bit like the army, doesn't it? Or Gitmo. Or Disneyland.

But here we must distinguish between tourism and tourists, and between militarism and soldiers. In each of these dyads, it is easy, but mistaken, to demonize the latter in the name of the former. If tourists must be taught to be tourists, and soldiers to be soldiers, it is because they are many things prior and in addition to those roles. Outposts of empire attract people in search of displacement, of renewal or escape, of adventure, experiences unavailable or withheld at home. For as long as the United States has been an imperial power, young people of limited means have joined the military to *get away*, to see the world, to act on their knowledge that other places are not like here. For decades, the landlocked desert states of New Mexico and Arizona have fed a constant stream of young Chicanos and Native Americans into the navy for reasons like these. (New Mexico has monuments to both the Bataan Death March and the Rough Riders, enterprises to which it contributed a disproportionate number of men.) Tourists are people with the means and desire to seek out experiences different or absent from their daily lives. Leisure tourism is shaped around providing things that corporate work culture withholds, including such basics as sleep, sunlight, art and music, physical exercise, relief from stress, a break from surveillance and policed time, from the women's double day and the culture of busyness, from the myriad mechanisms of social discipline that dehumanize and despiritualize metropolitan life. How to quarrel with such a list? Of course the quest for such desiderata is compatible with everything we denounce about tourism and militarism—enclave mentalities, superficial engagement, the exploitation of others, the exercise of white supremacy, the excessive consumption of resources, and the destructive intervention in other people's worlds. These things coexist, but they are not simply the same thing. Ask the people of Vieques.

Notes

1. As I write these words, militarism and tourism are intersecting in an entirely different way on the continental landmass of Africa and the Middle East. Over the past six months, ISIS and Al-Qaeda have mounted a series of attacks on tourist destinations in Egypt, Turkey, Burkina Faso, and elsewhere, with the deliberate goal of disrupting economies, destabilizing these fragile states, and interrupting their relations with Europe as enacted in tourism.
2. Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985).
3. According to some sources, the initial purpose of the takeover was to provide a possible safe haven for the British Navy in the event of its defeat by the Germans, which appeared very likely by 1941.
4. Katherine T. McCaffrey, "The Battle for Vieques' Future," *CENTRO Journal* 18.1 (2006): 125–47. See also McCaffrey, *Military Power and Popular Protest: The U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Mario Murillo, *Islands of Resistance: Puerto Rico, Vieques, and U.S. Policy* (New York: Seven Stories, 2001); and Alejandro Torres Rivera, *Vision de Vieques: el uso del territorio nacional puertorriqueño por parte de las fuerzas armadas de Estados Unidos* (San Juan: Ateneo Puertorriqueño, 2003).
5. Mireya Navarro, "New Battle on Vieques over Navy's Cleanup of Munitions," *New York Times*, August 7, 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/08/07/science/earth/07vieques.html.
6. David Bearden, "Vieques and Culebra Island: An Analysis of Cleanup Status and Costs," Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, July 7, 2005, www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL32533.pdf.
7. Ben Fox, "Vieques Cleanup: Island at Odds with U.S. Government Declaration That Four-Hundred-Acre Bomb Site Cleanup Is Complete," www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/05/vieques-cleanup-bomb-site_n_1942107.html (accessed July 20, 2015); Beardon, "Vieques and Culebra Island"; Navarro, "New Battle on Vieques."
8. Marc Becker, "History of United States Interventions in Latin America," www.yachana.org/teaching/resources/interventions.html (accessed July 20, 2015).
9. Jean Franco, *Cruel Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
10. World Tourist Organization, www2.unwto.org/content/why-tourism (accessed July 20, 2015).
11. Elizabeth Becker, *Overlooked: The Exploding Business of Travel and Tourism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013); Alan A. Lew, "Tourism Is NOT the Biggest Industry in the World," May 1, 2008, TG Journal's Tourism Place (blog), tourismplace.blogspot.com/2008/04/tourism-is-not-worlds-largest-industry.html.
12. Quoted in James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to Culture, 1800–1918* (New York: Oxford, 1993).