

## REFLEXIVITY IN MOBILIZATION: GENDER AND MEMORY AS CULTURAL FEATURES OF WOMEN'S MOBILIZATION IN VIEQUES, 1999-2003\*

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*This article explores the significance of reflexivity as a cultural process in social movements. It examines the roles that gender and memory played in mobilizing women in the antimilitary movement in Vieques, Puerto Rico, between 1999-2003. In particular, the analysis focuses on the articulations and actions undertaken by the Alianza de Mujeres Viequesenses. While some emerging research stresses the novelty of women's participation in the latest effort to remove the U.S. Navy from this island, none have operationalized the event in a theoretical context and highlighted key nuances. This article engages literatures on the significance of gender in the mobilization process as well as the cultural nature of remembrance and its significance in the meaning-making process for collective actors. It does so through an examination of the mobilization of women in the antimilitary movement. Furthermore it argues for the acknowledgement of reflexivity in the examination of claims articulation for mobilization.*

In the spring of 1999 the resistance movement in Vieques, Puerto Rico against the use of the island by the U.S. Navy as missile target training grounds reemerged. The Vieques movement has spanned sixty years (Barreto 2001; McCaffrey 2002; Melendez 1989; Mullenneaux 2000), but observers noted the presence of women as a novel feature of this latest protest wave (McCaffrey 2008). The novelty was not that they were women, but that they became the movement's leaders and most active voices, defining and steering its direction. To date, their participation and accomplishments have not been assessed within the broader context of the movement's history and mobilization processes. It is with this oversight in mind that I analyze the mobilization of women in the latest protest wave of the Vieques antimilitary movement (1999-2003) and their impact upon the processes of mobilization on the island.

This article analyzes the work of the Alianza de Mujeres Viequesenses (hereafter, Alianza) and the role played by gender through reflexivity in the group's engagement. I draw on the debates over the significance of gender in social movement processes (Acker 1990; Brown and Ferguson 1995; Einwohner et al. 2000; Ferree and Martin 1995; Neal and Phillips 1990; West and Blumberg 1990). Specifically, my analysis builds on the subjectivity of gendered mobilization (Aretxaga 1997; Borland and Sutton 2007; Friedman 1998; Moghadam 2000; Robnett 1996) to address the ways this variable informs the use of discourse, strategies, and collective action by women in the movement, especially participants from Alianza. As part of this reflexive approach, I consider the role of memory as a defining element in the formulation of ideas and meanings for those being mobilized (Olick and Levy 1997; Olick and Robbins 1998; Pennebaker 1997; Wagner-Pacifci 1996; Zerubavel 1995). I further argue that women's engagement in the mobilization events of 1999-2003 was guided by *their* history of the military presence on the island and *their* appropriation and interpretation of the struggle. This cultural process of meaning making—or *reflexivity*—resulted in a mobilization discourse and narratives that set Alianza's work apart from that of preexisting actors while broadening the field of action of the antimilitary movement. This article contributes to social movement theory by considering gender and reflexivity as key cultural variables. In particular, how

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Alianza's reflexive work took place within the framework of a threefold mobilization process: the forging of a female perspective, the establishment of an autonomous voice and language, and the inclusion of alternative means of action and aims in the movement.

## DATA AND METHODS

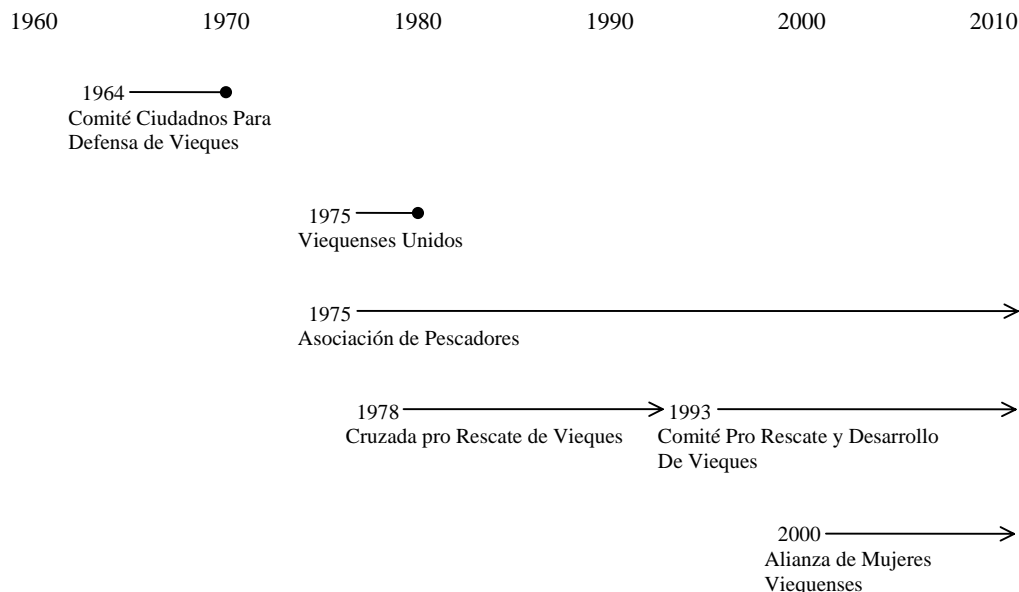
This inquiry into women's participation in the latest wave of protest of the antimilitary movement in Vieques is part of a project that applies a cultural lens to analyze the mobilization processes taking place on the island. The primary question driving this project is related to the impact the military presence had on both the way the antimilitary movement made claims and on the factors leading to its success. The project utilizes a qualitative model of narrative analysis based on unstructured interviews. Thirty interviews were collected from residents involved directly and indirectly in the campaign. Conducted between 2005 and 2006, the interviews focused primarily on three subjects: the experience of growing up on the island with the military presence, the impact of such an element on daily life, and the experience of involvement in the antimilitary movement.

Interviewed participants included organizers and activists from the three main local collectivities participating in the process of mobilization: thirteen from the *Comité Pro Rescate y Desarrollo de Vieques* (Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques), four the *Asociación de Pescadores de Vieques* (Fishermen's Association), and thirteen from *Alianza de Mujeres Viequesenses* (Vieques Women Alliance)—the movement's first women-led organization. Among the first two groups, only four of those interviewed were women. All participants were selected on the basis of a combination of internal knowledge and snowball sampling methods, taking advantage of key informants and acquaintances formed over a period of five years (2001-2006) as a result of early visits and fieldwork on the island.<sup>1</sup> Although they are not specifically annotated in the body of this article, several hours of field notes from the early stages (2001 and 2002) have also informed this project.

## ALIANZA AND THE VIEQUES ANTIMILITARY MOVEMENT, 1999-2003

The Vieques movement represents against the military presence on the island dates back to the 1940s. During World War II, the United States established a stronger presence in the Caribbean Basin, the area extending from the Florida Keys to the isthmus in Panama (Garcia Muñoz 1987; Griffith 1991). The geographic position of Puerto Rico as a bridge between the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, and the colonial status of the island since 1898, served as incentives to establish a stronghold for U.S. interests in the region. In 1941, this stronghold took the form of Roosevelt Roads Naval Station. Comprised of two offshore islands (Vieques and Culebra) and the southeast shore of the main island (Ceiba), Roosevelt Roads Naval Station is one of the largest naval stations in the region. Vieques has since become the U.S. Navy's "crown jewel" of regional strategy, serving as an area for the United States and NATO allies to conduct practice exercises, including air strikes, ballistic missile launchings, and landing and sea maneuvers (McCaffrey 2002; Garcia Muñoz 1987).

While a certain amount of resistance was documented in the early stages of the military establishment (Ruiz 1947), the first massive, organized initiatives against the military presence took place in 1964 (see figure 1). This resistance was initiated by a student-led antimilitary movement at the University of Puerto Rico (see Paralitici 2005a, 2005b), and by local organization efforts. It was not until the mid-1970s that the general public on the main island became aware of the conflict, as local fishing boat fleets challenged NATO battleships in open water counter-maneuvers on the shores of Vieques (Barreto 2001; McCaffrey 2002; Melendez 1989). In the background, the successful struggle of Culebra's fishermen<sup>2</sup> to end

**Figure 1.** Local Movement Organizations Active in Vieques from the 1960s to 2010

decades of maneuvers infused hope in the neighboring Fishermen’s Association. These events also triggered the imagination of the public, who sympathized with their cause in an intense but short-lived wave of resistance, which, in turn, resulted in the disarticulation of the main movement organization, La Cruzada (the Crusade) in 1979 and its ultimate dissolution in the mid-1980s with the signing of the Fortin Accord in 1983 (McCaffrey 2002: 96).

Drawing on previous efforts, the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques (CPRDV) refocused the struggle in the 1990s with its discourse of the *4Ds*: demilitarization, decontamination, devolution, and development. This discourse presented a long-term and comprehensive agenda aimed at putting an end to the military presence and improving conditions for the locals. The CPRDV originally focused on public education and consciousness raising, but the organization was prompted into mass mobilization work in 1999 after a civilian—David Sanes Rodriguez—was accidentally killed by a missile in the impact zone of Camp Garcia. This event “shook the consciousness of the people.” (Rabin 2006)

Alianza de Mujeres de Vieques emerged during the mobilization activities after the death of David Sanes. The conception of Alianza, however, was actually an initiative aimed at incorporating women in the mobilization process, providing space and opportunity for their full engagement in the movement (McCaffrey 2008). Judith Conde, one of Alianza’s co-founders, explains how this took place:

[Weeks] after the accident of David Sanes, things were returning to “normal,” and a colleague of mine [Gladys Rivera] said, “I do not know what is more indignant—the fact that they keep bombing or that we [women] stay quiet. We have to say something...we have to do something....” Then she and I talked with others about the uneasiness that we shared as women, as mothers.... And that is when everything started to come out.

Experienced in local community outreach, these two women had participated in various events related to the struggle in Vieques, including the protests against the installation of the ROTH (relocatable over the horizon radar). Both had experienced firsthand the lack of serious consideration given to women’s ideas and views in the discussion of the military

presence (McCaffrey 2002, 2008). Determined to add a “woman’s perspective” to the movement, they invited the women of the community to talk about the military presence a few months after the accident (McCaffrey 2008: 165).

The call for a public meeting yielded a crowd of twenty-five women from diverse backgrounds, some with previous connections to the movement—wives of leaders and sideline participants—and others entirely lacking experience in political activism related to the military presence. As Judith notes, “We had people from different political and religious ideologies—professionals, housewives, you name it.” When asked why they attended, the women’s responses reflected a broad diversity. Mari, a participant in the first meeting, said, “Well, I read the flier that said, ‘Viequense women,’ and I am both Viequense and a woman.” A retired schoolteacher, Carmen Valencia recalled her motives this way:

There were two women that had the idea of organizing the local women. Men have always been there [in the struggle], so why not organize women who also have a say in this? And the truth is that when the men are absent and something happens at home, who deals with the situation? Women! So, here we are.

According to Gladys, cofounder of Alianza and school social worker, “The women were interested in expressing themselves and were looking for an opportunity to speak” (in McCaffrey 2008: 165). It was issues such as safety, health, and disempowerment that brought them together. The formation of Alianza provided the space to overcome their silence and exclusion, to generate a new discourse of action—one driven by *gendered* views of the military presence and the struggle to change it.

### GENDER IN MOBILIZATION

Over the last decade, feminist and social movement scholars have debated the role of gender in mobilization as a determinant variable of strategies, actions, cognitive liberation, and solidarity building, among other building blocks of social movement processes (Acker 1990; Brown and Ferguson 1995; Einwohner et al. 2000; Ferree and Martin 1995; Taylor 1999; West and Blumberg 1990). This debate has come about largely in response to the absence of any serious consideration of gender in social movement theory. The guiding arguments behind this growing scholarship are twofold. On the one hand, social movement processes are subject to hierarchical gender dynamics in that they occur in response to institutional and cultural elements (Acker 1990; Connell 1987). Just like gender differentiation affects society at the interactional, structural, and cultural levels, it has a similarly profound impact on collective action processes. On the other hand, gender as a “cultural resource” (Williams 1995) also functions as a lens for the interpretation and creation of opportunities, strategies, and spaces for collective action (Einwohner et al. 2000; Lobao 1990; Neal and Phillips 1990; West and Blumberg 1990).

The construction of a *gendered* discourse of collective action implies the acknowledgement of certain subjectivities emerging from the very gender-differentiated experience of women (Einwohner et al. 2000). These subjectivities can be interpreted as issues that “can only happen to [and be understood by] a woman” (Spivak 1998: 184 in Arextaga 1997: 142). They also provide the semantic and cultural “substance” needed to create the instruments of action, lenses of interpretation, and claims for social change that empowered women as collective actors. Finally, they also broadened the very field of action (McCammon et al. 2001). It is this *reflexive* feature of the role of gender in collective action that I intend to highlight in the examination of the mobilization process within Alianza: the articulation of the mobilization of women *as* women.

### REFEXIVITY AND ALIANZA'S ARTICULATION OF RESISTANCE

The mobilization of women in the latest wave of protest in Vieques is interpreted by scholars as a novel and unprecedented event (Barreto 2001; McCaffrey 2002, 2006, 2008). "This comes as no surprise to anyone, but the leadership [of the antimilitary movement] in Vieques was dominated by men," said Nilda Medina, one of the organizers of the CPRDV who entered the struggle in the early 1980s. Norma Torres, a retired teacher reaffirms: "[In the time of] the fishermen...their [wives] were present, but that was to support the operatives. They were there for [their husbands] and [they] took care of them. But they never talked. The majority never spoke." According to activists interviewed, the women's initiative in Vieques issued a challenge to the current articulation of issues concerning the military presence and the existing approaches to mobilization on the island. The exclusion of women from bodies of demand articulation and decision making surfaced in the public arena in a number of events that followed 1999 incident. This challenge was issued with the incorporation of a woman's perspective on the struggle, the adoption of new language and context, and the provision of new tools and aims.

#### *Towards a Woman's Perspective*

In the initial meeting of Alianza, the coordinators of the organization set to work on establishing with their prospective members what can best be understood as the rationale and objectives of their organized effort:

I opened [by] saying, "I have this concern [about the military presence].... I am very worried about this. You saw what happened [with David Sanes]. I think this affected us [women] the most. We should get together...." Then there was [Gladys]. She was a school social worker who became aware that every time there were maneuvers, the kids got hyperactive, aggressive and spoke louder.... All these things related to the maneuvers affected the school, but no one [said or] did anything. (Judith)

This pattern of defining motivations for mobilization and activism as a response to the interpretation of our gender roles has been understood to be the result of the very process of socialization and the extent to which these roles are ingrained in our lives (Brown and Ferguson 1995; Neal and Phillips 1990). As Moghadam (2000) clearly states, "gender ideologies may shape social movements in profound ways, deeply affecting the discourse, objectives, tactics and outcomes of social movements" (60). In this sense, Alianza's standpoint was rooted in its members' gendered experiences (Lobao 1990; Morgen 1998).

The presentation of an alternative discourse stressing the inclusion of women's subjectivities was not necessarily random. According to Alianza activists, there was a clear difference between their understanding and interpretation of the military presence as compared with that of men. Rosaura, an Alianza activist since its inception, emphasized this distinction: "Men tend to talk about statistics and numbers, but the stuff from here [pointing to her heart] and the real things...Never!" Echoing Rosaura's observation, Judith expressed the same conviction: "when men talk about this issue [the military presence], they have a particular way of seeing things that goes along with their numbers and statistics and their politics. It is politics. But we [women] go with what happened at home, with the family...." Women activists attributed this distinction to the very nature of their social and gendered location. According to these women, earlier efforts to challenge the military presence were made without a comprehensive grasp of the social realities of the island. The antimilitary movement overlooked the perspective offered by women, the domestic sphere, and the family. To the women's way of thinking, this served as grounds for reinterpreting the struggle and incorporating new experiences and viewpoints. This represents the elaboration of a *female logic* (Acker 1990; Taylor 1999), a form of *reflexivity* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) that

incorporated experiences and knowledge in the interpretation of meanings in everyday life and actions. In the context of the military presence, Viequense women highlighted certain aspects previously omitted from the history of the islander's life experience.

Initially, Alianza engaged a discursive shift involving changes in the language, scope, and interpretation of the mobilization process. Nilda Medina highlights this point:

I am a woman, and it is not to downplay the work of my male colleagues, but I think the commitment of women to the struggle is greater because [theirs] is a commitment to the family, their children...I think that this is what has brought [women] into activism. They got involved for their families.

Alianza took into account the impact of the military presence on the home and the family, articulating an alternative perspective on their actions. Rather than defining themselves in terms of an engagement *by* women in the struggle, Alianza activists defined themselves as engaged *as* women, thus projecting their gendered sensibilities. At the heart of this new discourse was the relocation of women's experiences in the history of the military presence, thereby providing a new basis for restoring the meaning of the collective experience.

#### *Women in Their Pasts*

The death of David Sanes in 1999 stirred the sentiments and memories of local residents who feared such an eventuality. Judith aptly describes the shift in thinking that occurred regarding the presence of the military on the island: "The threat changed from 'It is possible that one day a bomb will fall on us' to 'The bomb just fell on one of us.'" It was not so much the novelty of the accident as its impact on the local memory of the community that is noteworthy here. "People in the community were upset and scared because they knew of numerous other accidents" (Carmen). This experience of "déjà vu" (Barreto 2001: 41) triggered a revisiting of experiences related to the military presence as a mechanism to contextualize the accident as part of the collective memory and a process of making sense of it (Vélez-Vélez 2008; Polletta 2002).

Women questioned the extent to which the revisited stories were representative. Memory accounts have relied chiefly on generic anecdotes of local experiences that excluded the experiences of women from the pool of images, characters, and meanings. For instance, the general portrayal of the expropriations of the 1940s has focused on the loss of land, stressing the implications on the expectations of material distribution and conditions on the island. We can contrast this perspective with that of Mimita, an activist since the 1980s, who presents another side of the expropriation experience:

My grandmother grew up in Playa Grande. We were originally from Playa Grande.... She told me that my mother was born there, she was born there, and her mother was also born there.... She lived a life of poverty but was full of happiness, and then she was removed from there, from her roots. They gave her two or three days.... She got the paper that said that she had to vacate the house.... They took down all the houses—not only hers, but all the houses. Then she had to move to Esperanza, where we are now. I know she died with the pain that she never saw Playa Grande again, [the place] where she grew up, where she left her roots.

This interpretation of the expropriation experience goes beyond physical loss and crosses into the symbolic aspect of belonging, emphasizing the significant relationship between family, "roots," and "land." By making direct reference to "roots," Mimita illustrates an intangible form of loss of place, which might otherwise have been misconstrued as a mere loss of property. Similarly, by referencing the multigenerational connection to a location, Mimita alludes to the irreparable consequences of loss and placelessness. These interpretations give new meaning to the collective experience of the expropriation—an event

considered by many scholars to be a turning point in the history of the island—by highlighting an angle that has gone unexplored, namely that of belonging.

In a similar way, Viequense women viewed the impact of the expropriations in a different light. While the expropriation and relocation process directly impacted the spatial conditions of the island, it also transformed the economic landscape by eliminating the sugarcane industry, which was the main source of employment and income on the island (Ayala and Bolívar 2006). This forced many individuals—primarily men—to migrate as seasonal workers off the island (Ayala and Carro-Figueroa 2005: 194). When asked about the impact of the expropriations, Carmen points out another side of this economic transformation:

As I have said before, the first thing that the Navy did to my family and that of others was to make us orphans.... That is what they did to us because our father was forced to leave us.... In those days, men were forced to leave. So you can imagine, growing up in a house with a mother without a job, without a dad.... Women had to turn into tough *machotas*<sup>3</sup> [in order] to cope with their families, the discrimination, and all the other barriers.

While the most common assessments of the impact of the expropriations highlight the restructuring of economic patterns, they fail to address a different restructuring process, namely that of the family unit. This interpretation of forced migration stresses the changes caused by the absence of the male figure—as father and provider—and the new challenges faced by women at home. In addition to the issues of economic distress, Carmen’s testimony brings to light the ripple effect of domestic-public divides. She highlights the “discrimination” and “barriers” confronted by women outside the home and the need for women to assume a different attitude—that of “tough *machotas*”—as they entered the public sphere, a significant change in the lives of women.

The absence of such stories is the result of gender dynamics springing from the exclusion of women in organizations of collective action—that is, the pervasive “gender regime” upon which these memories were constructed (Connell 1987: 120). Alianza recognized, however, that simply adding women to the stories was insufficient. They understood that it was a woman’s perspective—a woman’s account of the military presence—that was lacking in these stories. The stories subsequently contributed by women allude to unspoken aspects of the collective experience and thus support the argument regarding inherited distinctions between the ways that men and women interpreted the military presence. This process of restoring the experience of women in connection with the military process has introduced new interpretative nuances on two levels: (1) its meaning, and (2) its impact.

The process of recasting the way an event is remembered and interpreted must be understood as a cultural process. Because they seek to highlight the views of marginalized groups while simultaneously challenging existing memory accounts—in this case those of men—Yael Zerubavel (1995: 11) termed these alternative accounts of events and happenings “countermemory narratives.” Countermemory narratives provide an alternative vantage point on how certain processes reshaped the local community, carrying forward new images previously omitted. Within the context of a woman’s perspective on the military presence, these narratives challenged the meaning and interpretation previously rendered as a source of cognitive liberation in the struggle. In other words, in Alianza we see gender—that of women—as a shaping force in the mobilization process as a whole. Articulating an alternative set of stories on the experience of the military presence changed the meaning of such experiences in relation to the struggle, propelling a process whereby the language and context of the antimilitary movement were adapted significantly.

### *Women’s Voice and Context*

The discursive shift propelled by Alianza was rooted in an interpretation of the military presence by women as women, as opposed to an interpretation by men or the movement over

all. By challenging generalized meanings, deconstructing memory accounts, and including their subjectivities, women began to change meaning attribution and symbolic association in the struggle. For Alianza, this represented an opportunity to reveal their hidden voice, to be recognized as essential actors in the mobilization process. Thus, a space was generated for women to articulate their own voices and language, and to call upon others for action by defining their claims through new sensibilities and lenses.

### *On Visibility and Voice*

Women challenged the current perspective on the basis of the lack of a proper representation of their experiences. This failure to represent the experiences of women was clearly reflected in the ways the movement previously articulated its claims and issues of concern. Claims for action and demands were rooted in the collective experience and grievances of the islanders. Alianza's approach sought to break with the generic "residents" and make room for a new face and a new voice, highlighting in particular those belonging to women. Judith affirmed this in her contrast of Alianza's claims with the claims of the CPRDV:

Until then, [the struggle in] Vieques was [about] the land, decontamination, devolution... but you didn't often see the faces of those who cried or laughed, or of those who were concerned. They had no face. Then, we [Alianza] started to provide one, to give a face, to give emotions, and sensibility. It is not only about the devolution of the land. It is also about the fact that I was born in this land.

In Judith's comment we see the clear distinction the Alianza women are making about their approach as compared with that of the other organization. This supports the arguments mentioned previously regarding a "women-men" cognitive divide on the struggle against the military presence. While CPRDV articulated an "objective" set of premises around which to mobilize—the 4Ds—Alianza stressed more "subjective" premises—emotions, sensibility, and a sense of belonging. Such an approach offered fertile ground for innovative courses of action—from increasing female presence in existing representative bodies to creating new forms of collective action.

The visibility of women increased after Alianza was created in 2000, particularly in spaces that had previously been either out of reach for women or socially segregated by gender (Einwohner et al. 2000). Carmen, who served as one of the *cabilderos del pueblo*<sup>4</sup> (people's lobbyists) in the year 2000 to 2001, attests to this development in her description of the forum: "When the *cabilderos* took place [in Washington, D.C.], the majority were women. This gave a face to the people of that 'uninhabited' island where a bomb killed a civilian."

The increased visibility of women in forums represents a significant change in the field of action of the antimilitary movement over its forty year history. Some activists have argued that the movement experienced a visible "change of heart" such that the active participation of women became more acceptable (Arjona Reichard 2007). This breakthrough in visibility was also observed by Liliana, another member of Alianza, who commented, "There were women who had never spoken in public their entire lives, who never said a word, but when they realized that we were being heard and that no one was taking advantage of us, they came out." This increase in visibility and empowerment served to further engage women in the movement. As women recognized that they were accepted and even embraced as legitimate actors in these spaces, they responded by presenting themselves as political actors. Regarding this tendency, Neal and Phillips (1990) argue that the legitimacy of a women-based group has much to do with their label as "housewives," "concerned mothers," or "neighborhood women" (252). In the context of Alianza, their presentation as "Viequense women" separated their identity from ideological and political hues, and projected a more accepted gendered identity (Einwohner et al. 2000; Taylor 1999). This ideological and political neutrality is relevant, particularly in light of the divisive nature of political ideologies in the Vieques



struggle and, to a larger extent, Puerto Rican politics (Murillo 2001; McCaffrey 2008). However, this “neutrality” could also be attributed to the very changes women were introducing to the rubrics of the mobilization process. It is through the challenge of current public discourses that Alianza places women on the field of action.

From the onset of the latest wave of protest and in response to the death of David Sanes, the central goal of the movement shifted to “stop the bombing.” This claim was sustained by two key elements: the collective experience of the bombing on the one hand, and, on the other, the “Not one more bomb!” popular outcry that was embraced as the spearhead of the opening protest events after 1999 (Vélez-Vélez, 2008; McCaffrey 2002; Mullenneaux 2000). Focusing on the bombing manifested both a semiotic and strategic logic; it linked the civilian’s fatality with the movement’s cause and substantiated the argument to remove the military from the island, respectively. The demand to end the bombing was legitimized when the governor of Puerto Rico appointed a Special Commission on Vieques for the purpose of examining the impact of the military practices on the island and reconsidering the permanence of the military. This political cleavage provided a forum for the CPRDV and others to cement their claims regarding the meaning and impact of the bombing on the population. In that forum, Carmen represented Alianza, presenting her testimony about the military presence. Carmen’s story, however, was not at all the expected narrative:

After I presented the written statement for the hearing, Norma Burgos [chief committee member] said to me that she knew how talking about these things affected us, but that she wanted me to say how I was bothered by the bombing. I looked at her and said, “Look. It was not only the bombing. Yes, the bombing scared us because you thought that the houses would fall apart and all that...but what bothered us was the attitude of those people [the soldiers], and how they behaved....” And then I told the story of my mother and me growing up...the fear at night and the threat of them knocking on doors in search of women.... The archbishop was there and he said [to me] later, “I have never heard anyone from Vieques talking about this....” Nobody had [mentioned] that [before] because there were no women, only men.

Here we have a clear reference to silence in the archbishop’s acknowledgment of “never” having heard this. This testimony not only challenged the bombing as *the* defining element of the local experience, but also publicized the silence imposed on women, thus altering the repertoires of meanings upon which the local experience was created.

Scholarship on mobilization narratives argues that such conventional discrepancies—the deviation from expected narratives—may result in the delegitimization of the storyteller or, as in the case of Alianza, the challenging of boundaries in master narratives (Nolan 2002). The introduction of “the fear at night and the threat of them,” a likely allusion to sexual harassment, also reflected a set of experiences that only a woman may have had, lived, and understood. This story of sexual harassment in Vieques “tapped into an experience of femininity excluded from the public discourse” (Arextaga 1997: 122). For Alianza, this was an opportunity to carry an autonomous voice and language into the public sphere, highlighting alternative experiences in connection with the military presence as sources of meaning for women.

### *On Language*

With the rise in women’s visibility and the recognition by other participants of their presence as political actors, Alianza shifted the mobilization process into high gear, seeking to maintain an autonomous voice amidst the cacophony of the organizations now involved in the struggle. The establishment of Alianza in the field of action as “the women’s organization” constrained the organization to reach the female population rather than a general audience. Although this became a handicap presenting additional challenges, it centered their efforts on the creation of a set of claims that better represented the goals of the larger movement while

resonating with women more broadly. The ultimate outcome was the activation of a “female” vernacular, a particular mobilization language. “One thing that was very effective for us in organizing other women was the metaphor of *la casa* [the home], ‘*Vieques es nuestra casa*’ [Vieques is our home]” (Judith). This expression embodied women’s life and space, articulating symbols and issues that were present in their everyday lives.

The use of *la casa* metaphor as the focal point of their claims suggested an empowered abstract space, one in which women felt they dominated, and which transcended into the territory of the family and ultimately the island. Judith explained the articulation of this metaphor: “We started saying: ‘Your home, you want it all clean. You do not want anyone to enter and cause harm. You want your home to be safe for your children....’ We present a scenario where we [women] are in control, [where] we dominate our realm.” According to Labao (1990), this sense of “dominance” or “control” over a given space is a product of the structural expectations concerning gender. Labao states “The patriarchal model of Latin American family structure is characterized by the male’s control over most activities related to the outside world (*calle*).... Within the domestic sphere (*casa*)...women maintain considerable control through their acknowledged experience in...household activities” (1990: 182). However, the *la casa* metaphor was also a vehicle to connect women’s commitment to their families with a commitment to their island (McCaffrey 2008). By fusing these meanings, Alianza bridged these commitments, expanding the boundaries of those spaces which allowed for women’s expected nurturing and reproductive duties to include more public duties (Neal and Phillips 1990: 248, 253).

Alianza gave a powerful demonstration of this new language of mobilization at a series of public hearings held in 2002 by the U.S. Navy to evaluate the proposal to clean the western side of the militarized territory. Judith described the situation as follows:

So, there were public hearings about cleaning the western area of the island—the proposal made by the Navy for the cleaning—and we wanted to be there because we found the plan unsatisfactory.... We presented the metaphor to them as follows: “At home, when we clean the floor, first we pick up anything that is lying around. Then we sweep with a broom. Then we deep clean all over with a hose or *baldeamos* [we use buckets]. After that we mop the floor to finish. Of course, there are those who go a step further and wax their floors. The process I just described involves about four to five steps. What you are proposing to do here is a mere sweep, and it takes more steps than that to clean our house. You need to clean well and deep. We don’t want you to sweep the dirt under the rug and then leave because this is our home. Vieques is our home and we cannot allow that.”

The public presentation of this metaphor and the translation of the debate into both domestic and lay languages opened it up and transferred the issues from experts’ to women’s hands (Brown and Ferguson 1995: 147). When asked about the effectiveness and reach of this metaphor for Alianza, Judith responded, “[I would] say that we have come to a place where we can reach them [women] because even though some have a university education and others don’t, we are all women and we speak a common language.” This “common language” was articulated as part of their “shared understandings” (Kane 1997: 5), a semantic common ground for women. The establishment of a mobilization language also transformed the patterns of meaning allocation and symbolic control, transferring the semiotic power to local actors that now included women. Moreover, the public articulation of this language and its “lay” nature made it accessible to others in the community, proposing further challenges to the movement at large and altering the direction of the struggle.

#### *New Actions and Aims*

Although Alianza became recognized as a legitimate actor in the struggle, the organization’s designation as the female component of the collective front constrained their

capacity to address more general issues to a larger audience. Alianza's initial forms of incorporation thus became a barrier that impeded women's participation in other transformative processes. Because of their integration into the struggle as an organization "of women," Alianza lacked the capacity to act outside their assigned field of action, thereby reducing the range of their reach and input (Friedman 1998: 122). This nominal delimitation caused the women-led organization to question the very strategies and aims driving the movement, and to critically examine their field of action in search of ways to broaden the organization's scope. On the basis of this critical examination, Alianza introduced new forms of action and goals into the antimilitary movement repertoire, moving the organization into the forefront of the struggle.

#### *From Disobedience to Ribbons*

Civil disobedience was viewed within the movement as the main tool for action and resistance guided the direct action approach (Paralatici 2006: 8-10). Since May of 1999, protestors have occupied the target range in an attempt to stop maneuvers and force the state and federal government to give serious consideration to issues pertaining to the military presence in Vieques. This resistance tool has actually been part of the repertoire of protest on the island since the 1970s, as fishermen countered military maneuvers in the open sea with counter-maneuvers of their own. Likewise, other protestors occupied beaches in the military zone to claim the "rescuing" of their land (Melendez 1989; McCaffrey 2002). While this approach was deemed acceptable by the majority of activists and organizations, Alianza saw its limitations in that it excluded those for whom "disobedience" represented a compromise of moral or personal beliefs. Judith details how Alianza confronted this issue:

In Vieques, people started talking about disobedience and other issues. Many women stated, "I cannot do that!" Not everyone was up to taking part in a rally or picketing, which were the [typical] things that you might relate to in a struggle like this. So, we decided to respect everyone's way of supporting the struggle.... [W]e said [that] those who wanted to talk could talk, those who wanted to write could write, those who wanted to cook could cook; and those who wanted to get arrested would be arrested. So, within reason, we needed to respect that.

This desire to accommodate those forms of resistance that people felt compelled, comfortable, or confident to engage in opened a discussion about the protest repertoire of the movement.

Benford (2002) argues that the repertoire of a given movement tends to respond to the discourse, interests, and strategies shared by the collectivity. In the case of Vieques, the political discourse of United States-Puerto Rico status had proven divisive whenever attempts were made to rally popular support behind the grievances against the military presence. In the latest wave of protest, however, many organizations have forged alliances across the political spectrum in an attempt to free the movement of such discursive limitations (Barreto 2001; McCaffrey 2002). The establishment of an approach of "inclusion" and Alianza's introduction of alternative means of support reflected Alianza's determination to widen the field of action and discourse in the mobilization process.

In response to this initiative, the movement experienced a surge in creative forms of participation ranging from symbolic and subtle to direct and bold. Nilda Medina, coordinator of the Justice and Peace Camp—one of two disobedience camps outside the restricted territory—described this development as follows:

This was a struggle that changed the way we approached our "enemy." This changed everything. It gave mobility to the people to participate in the way they could.... For instance, if they couldn't do civil disobedience or throw a stone, but could hold a religious service in our name, they [could still] feel they were part of the struggle. That provided the opportunity for more community participation in the struggle.

It was recognition of this shift in confrontation of “the enemy” that cemented Alianza’s reputation as an organization that would engage the whole community in the struggle rather than just a segment of the community.

One of the strategies Alianza proposed as part of their inclusive approach was “the white ribbons,” which rose in status from liminal to seminal in the repertoire of resistance for the movement at large. Judith explains:

We started asking ourselves, “What can we do that will reduce these reactions [of inhibition] and infuse confidence?” Well, let’s transform the gate—that sign of repression that represents the military presence—into something that we want. Let’s turn it into a shield that protects us from what is inside. How? Let’s tie little white ribbons to the gate...so many that whenever we look at that gate, we cannot notice the cyclone fence that made us afraid.... We started tying ribbons, and people dared to follow. And later, those little ribbons started to appear in the most conspicuous of places—on car antennas, on bicycles, in very personal places, almost invisible.... That was like telling us, “I believe in what you are doing...I am with you....” In the end, everyone who visited Vieques tied a ribbon to that gate. Everyone.

The creation of a “shield” of ribbons presents an instance of symbolic creativity in which the activists sought to deconstruct the meaning of an established structure to reflect its opposite by first appropriating it and then allocating new meanings. This type of deconstruction left the meaning allocation to the participant. Scholars argue (Polletta 2003; Kane 1997) that the presence of a certain ambiguity in the constitution of symbolic associations encourages audiences to fill the blanks and makes the discursive structure more flexible in operation. In this sense, the white ribbons offered interlocutors or participants the flexibility to engage in the meaning-making process without necessarily committing to any ideological or discursive premises. However, it was the appearance of ribbons outside the gate that illustrated the cementation of this symbol as a recognized and appropriated means of resistance. The success of the “white ribbon campaign” can also be interpreted as a strong step forward for Alianza in the sense that it broadened the organization’s field of action and positioned it at the center of the mobilization process itself (McCaffrey 2008).

#### *From Land to Health...to Gender*

Alianza advanced its agenda by introducing the voices of women in forums and advocating bodies, increasing its representation, and gaining recognition among other collective actors. Their interest in infusing a women’s sensibility into the struggle thus began to reach beyond the organization itself. Initially, and primarily because of pervasive social gender dynamics, it was this inclusion of women’s ideas and interests that presented the greatest challenge to Alianza. This phenomenon affected even those already inside collectivities, like Nilda, who admitted:

Because you are a woman, people always wonder whether it is harder for [you] because you are working mostly around men...[who] don’t want you there.... [Y]es, it is a little more difficult because you have to fight your way in so that your ideas are taken into account. The effort that we [women] have to make is probably twice that of men because of this.

Mari shared the same frustration when asked about the initial reaction of her male peers to the participation of women:

Sometimes they [men] questioned us, “What do you [women] have to say?” As if we were not living here with them. We have the very same right to talk—we have hearts and we have feelings.... We have experienced the good and bad things that happened on the island. So, it is fair that a space was opened for us to share our thoughts.

Despite the challenges, the establishment of Alianza and its agenda has begun to erode preexisting barriers in the community. As McCammon et al. (2001) argue, “changing gender [dynamics] can provide a gender opportunity” (53), meaning that the processes of reflexive mobilization engaged in by Alianza—the woman’s perspective and voice—promoted the insertion of women’s interests into the mobilization process.

That women inserted additional issues into the movement is particularly evident in the health arena. While other actors had previously raised health-related issues as part of the claims against the military presence, many understood that as an organization of women, Alianza had a *primordial* stake in the issue. According to Nilda, “Alianza brought this issue [health] into the struggle [in terms of] how it affected the family.” The clarification regarding “how this affected the family” stresses two aspects in which Alianza’s approach to the topic of health issues differs from that of previous collective actors. This difference highlights the presence of a gender sensibility.

The health debate in the arena of the antimilitary movement had previously been closely associated with the issues of environmental pollution and natural resource depletion. The CPRDV placed environmental issues within the rubric of the 4Ds. Decontamination appeared second on the list of programmatic stages of CPRDV as part of a viable development of the island after achieving the Navy’s removal. The driving force of this program, however, was to establish sustainable economic development for the island, a goal that responded appropriately to the social conditions of high unemployment, poverty, and relative deprivation (U.S. Census 1990). This emphasis on economic development was not embraced by many members of Alianza, who advocated a shift in focus. A registered nurse and community coordinator for Alianza, Zaida highlights the disparity she observed with respect to the attention given to health:

I think that what Alianza has done is to create the opportunity for us to express many things.... I have always agreed that we need sustainable development for Vieques to take the island to its best [possible] future, but they cannot accomplish this by simply focusing on the future because we have a problem here, and I always say this...it is our health. [We] cannot have a plan for sustainable economic development without addressing other areas.... And [health] is one area, unfortunately, that has been neglected.

Although Zaida would readily admit that the experience of losing her fifteen-year-old daughter to leukemia the previous year influenced her decision to engage both the issue and Alianza, it is precisely this commitment of women to their families that differentiates their approach to health from that of men.

The concern about health in Vieques and its causal relation to the military presence has been recognized by many observers within the public health and scientific community in Puerto Rico (Díaz and Massol-Deyá 2003; Estudios Técnicos 2004). The same concern is shared by the general population, where the incidence of cancer—particularly among children—motivates their commitment. Reflecting on the issue of cancer on the island, Mari explains why the issue of health was a central concern for women in Alianza:

Women’s bodies are becoming contaminated, so their children are born contaminated.... The fear that their children might be contaminated or born with illnesses is very real to women.... That is the chief concern of women, even [those who are] healthy.

The notion of health as a “concern of women” suggests that many women were inspired to participate in Alianza as a result of their interests as “women,” as mothers or heads of households. The concept of engaging in the struggle specifically in response to “threat[s] to their families” coincides with arguments put forth by feminist scholars regarding the mobilization of women as “caretakers” or “nurturers” and the expectations of “maternalism” (West

and Blumberg 1990; Lobao 1990; Neal and Phillip 1990). Furthermore, Brown and Ferguson (1995) stress that although they are not likely to mobilize around concerns of politics or even gender specific issues, women are compelled to act upon issues of health, particularly at the local level, as evidenced by their contribution to the toxic waste issue (150).

Although the health issue in Vieques was not uniquely supported by Alianza, due to the “expectations” levied on them as a women’s organization and their articulation of the issue, they were given central stage to advance it in the movement’s agenda. Perhaps of greater interest is that “[in] the process, they have expanded role boundaries and defined their public behavior as an extension of the traditional [gender roles]” (West and Blumberg 1990: 205). Thus, Alianza’s reflexive articulation of their activism in the antimilitary movement, and their place in the field of action, afforded women new opportunities and spaces to invest their gendered subjectivities in public discourse (Borland and Sutton 2007).

## CONCLUSION

The mobilization of women in Vieques through the establishment of Alianza represents a significant change in the movement aimed at removing the military presence from the island. Beyond the obvious increase in visibility, Alianza transformed the field of action during the antimilitary movement’s latest wave of protest (1999-2003) by articulating claims for mobilization along women’s subjectivities. This reflexive process emerged from the inclusion of their experiences, sensibilities, and concerns within the cultural sources that attached meaning to the military presence as a collective experience. While scholars and observers have acknowledged the innovative nature of Alianza, with the exception of McCaffrey (2008), none have addressed the source and reach of its contribution. By considering the cultural roots of the process of meaning making engaged by Alianza and examining the role played by gender in the mobilization process, we are better able to appreciate the changes and challenges that Alianza introduced to the latest wave of protest of the antimilitary movement in Vieques.

Alianza’s presentation of countermemory narratives, the utilization of the *la casa* metaphor, and the broadening of definitions and meanings permeating the field of action facilitated the enactment of women’s experiences and sensibilities as cultural references. Through the reflexivity practices—perspective, voice, and scope—Alianza challenged the mobilization process and altered the very struggle. By proposing new goals and engaging into new actions, Alianza contributed to the antimilitary movement in Vieques in unexpected ways.

Blending the significance of gender with that of reflexivity processes, this analysis presented herein sheds light on areas previously overlooked by scholars. On the one hand, the gender aspect explains why the family became a central theme in the articulation of action claims and why the selection of a “parochial” language was made for women’s narrative construction. This analysis also illustrates the pervasiveness of gendered role expectations in the legitimacy of mobilization and protest, and the ways in which gender informed Alianza’s choice of identity as “concerned women and/or mothers.” On the other hand, the consideration of reflexivity as part of a cultural process sheds light on the significance of collective experiences as part of the articulation of mobilization narratives. Even as Alianza challenged the existing mobilization narratives, it also challenged the renditions—or countermemory narratives—of that collective experience, thereby propelling a revision of meanings and images that served as symbolic grounds for mobilizing and engaging others. This article opens the door for further examination of the significance of memory processes as essential cultural and gendered features of meaning making in mobilization while presenting a new angle of exploration for the antimilitary movement in Vieques.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> With their informed consent, some interviewees are referred to here by their actual names. Others, who wish to remain anonymous, are referred to with pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Another island of the archipelago of Puerto Rico, Culebra, was also used for target practice from the late 1950s until 1971. In 1970, after the U.S. Navy threatened to take over the entire island and remove its population, a wave of protest and civil disobedience led by the fishermen association and supported by the Independence Party of Puerto Rico (PIP) pressured the federal government to take action to end the maneuvers. Although President Richard Nixon signed the Culebra Agreement in 1971, the agreement to terminate the maneuvers did not take effect until 1974, at which point the target range was relocated to Vieques, signaling a victory for the Culebrenses and a new burden for the Viequenses.

<sup>3</sup> The slang term *machotas* is derived from *macho* or “manly” and denotes a toughness typically associated with the male gender. The interviewee uses the term here to represent women in a context of virility within their gender.

<sup>4</sup> After the events of April 19, 1999, the Clinton Administration and the U.S. Congress appointed a Special Commission on Vieques to study the claims and demands in connection with the military presence on the island. As part of that initiative, Congressional hearings were held in Washington, D.C. with the participation of delegates representing the government of Puerto Rico, the political parties, and the Vieques community. The delegates from the community of Vieques were designated *Cabilderos del Pueblo* to highlight their representation of the people and neutrality from any political associations.

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