Acknowledgement

I want to profoundly thank Dr. Susan H. Ellison and Dr. Justin Armstrong for making me an Anthropologist. In particular, I want to thank Professor Ellison for the countless hours she spent advising me this year.

Thank you to all my friends and family, especially my parents Camille and José, for their constant support.

I would also like to dedicate my thesis to Robert Rabin Siegel, Shaney Lara, and all the residents of Vieques for their guidance and their openness to sharing their stories with me.

A los Viequenses: la lucha sigue.
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Introduction

I sat in Bananas, a restaurant on the malecón, with my friend Olivia. The restaurant was open air. The face of the restaurant opened onto the street and, then, to the boardwalk that ran along the beach. “The malecón” describes the concrete boardwalk, but also the area as a whole with its small strip of restaurants, bars, and hotels. It is the epicenter of touristic activity on Vieques. Local vendors selling crafts or tour guides selling bioluminescent bay tours always dot the walkway. On the weekend, you might catch a couple of locals busking and playing Bomba, a traditional Afro-Puerto Rican form of music. The malécon is the hotspot where both locals and tourists spend their weekends.
As I sat waiting for my food, I surveyed my surroundings. Hurricane María, the 2017 Category 5 hurricane, had ripped parts of the concrete pillars that framed the boardwalk (pictured above). La Nasa, a small structure on land reserved by the government for the fishermen, lay closed. The building, strung together with thin plywood, usually housed a lively bar frequented by locals that would blare Spanish music. Now it lay dark and wobbly, like the next storm might push it over into the ocean. Suddenly, down the street, I heard loud reggaetón music, blasting from the darkness. It came closer. I finally realized that it blared from a modified car, which had speakers attached to the back of the trunk.

As the car passed, the music resonated so loudly, our table vibrated. At first, I thought nothing of it. It was common in Puerto Rico to modify cars and to play loud music. However, the person in the car circled back. I heard the same song, Bad Bunny’s “Estamos Bien,” this time as they passed in the opposite direction. Then, they were back again, driving past all of the open-air restaurants. I saw the patrons in front of me start to discuss the disturbance. I craned my neck, like the rest of the tourists, each of the five times the person drove by. I tried to identify who was driving, but the windows were too darkly tinted. I turned to Olivia, a college student who was also not from Vieques, and asked if she thought it was weird. She lived on this side of the Island, in the town of Esperanza, and I thought she might have some insight. She responded, “No, people do that all the time.” But the situation still intrigued me. I pressed, “Don’t you feel like that person was trying to say something? Why else would they drive in circles five times down the same street?” I found it odd because although I had seen Viequense driving and playing loud music before, it had not been so repetitive at a set location. She hesitated in thought, “I guess it is kind of weird.”
Still curious, the next day, I approached a local, a Viequense, who volunteered at the historical archives where I worked that summer. I told her the story and asked, “Don’t you think they were trying to protest?” She responded by saying, “Well, I can’t say if it was a protest.”

Continuing, I asked her if she found it funny that the person played the music down the malecón exactly at the time that most of the tourists would be out at dinner. While stacking her papers, she reflected, “Well, I would have to see it to know if it was a protest, but I think we should think about it metaphorically. Here is a young Viequense trying to make a statement, at the very least, but he just becomes a minor inconvenience to the tourists, something they would rather not have.” At this moment, a switch flipped in my head. I began to wonder, how these instances of “minor inconvenience,” or other less discernible frictions could be a part of the changing socio-political landscape on Vieques. My internship slowly became eclipsed by talking to residents and noticing everyday signals of local dissent—ones that might not immediately register as protest. In my subsequent fieldwork, I began to see how these signals of local dissent emerged, but also how they interacted with and formed into more overt forms of protests.

In the summer of 2018, I went to Vieques to intern at the Fortín Conde de Mirasol, an old Spanish fort that was run by the Institute of Culture of Puerto Rico. The Fortín serves as a cultural hub, housing the local radio station, a museum, and the archives. My keen interest in Vieques began in an Africana Studies class at Wellesley College focused on environmental injustice. Although I had been partially raised in Puerto Rico and had visited Vieques when I was younger, if asked to draw a picture of Puerto Rico before living on Vieques, I would have drawn the Puerto Rican mainland. I never would have included the small islands around it and never called it an archipelago. Like many Puerto Ricans, my language and conceptualization of Puerto
Rico centered on the mainland. Vieques and Culebra, the two small island municipalities east of the big island, were on the periphery of my own understanding.

In the class, we learned about the U.S. Navy’s sixty-year occupation of Vieques. During this U.S. occupation, the Navy dropped millions of tons of highly explosive ammunition bombs and even rented out the land to foreign militaries to practice their own military maneuvers. However, our focus on the Vieques case was to examine the use of resistance. In 1999, a young security guard employed by the U.S. Navy, David Sanes Rodriguez, was killed after a missile was dropped off-target. While there had long been discontent with the U.S. Navy, the death of the Viequense became a rallying cry for the people of Vieques, Puerto Ricans, and activist groups in the United States. The protests united Puerto Ricans and Viequenses who used powerful cultural symbols, like white crosses,¹ to mobilize the peace movement of Vieques. Following a two year struggle during which Viequenses constantly picketed and put their bodies on military lands to re-occupy it, in 2002, the U.S. Navy finally announced that it would withdraw from the island the following year.

My passion for learning more about the struggle of Viequenses led me to reach out to Robert Rabin, the Director of the Fortín, and eventually to my time working in the archives of the fort. I contacted Rabin, a Boston native, because he is a well-known and respected activist who has spent more than thirty years on the island. I had received funding to go to a foreign country, with an exception that included Puerto Rico. Although a U.S. territory, Wellesley, like many citizens and funders in the mainland U.S., continues to code Puerto Rico as foreign to the United States. Thus due to this technicality, I spent the next three months on Vieques. I

¹ A symbol of Christian martyrdom that became a crucial symbol in the protests of Vieques.
documented community meetings, attended a significant protest, and listened to people explain what was unfolding in their everyday lives. I realized the problems I had come there trying to understand—the legacies of the U.S. Navy—were no longer at the forefront in the daily lives of Viequeneses. Instead, I learned about American gentrification (defined below), health issues, and deepening poverty on the island.

I arrived in Vieques six months after the hurricanes, María and Irma; and, the island had not recovered. The ferry that ran between the main island and Vieques was never on time. The energy for the entire island was generated by two diesel generators and, “se vende,” or for sale, signs were everywhere. Exasperated by the hurricanes, Viequenses talked about problems of gentrification, a lack of food security, the inability to access a hospital, and an incapability to live a “Vida Digna,” or dignified life. On Vieques, I saw how the Viequenses were responding in complex and varied ways to the economic and political transformations that were occurring in the wake of the U.S. Navy’s withdrawal and the destruction wrought by the hurricanes. And, I began to recognize how those two hurricanes made many of these entanglements more salient.

In the months after I returned to school, I followed closely what was unfolding in Vieques via social media platforms. In January 2020, I returned to Vieques, with funding from Wellesley College and my IRB protocol in hand, to complete interviews and to engage in participant-observation to write about these encounters. I arrived in Vieques just as a set of massive earthquakes hit Puerto Rico. Then, two weeks into my research, the death of a young Viequense girl sparked a large scale demonstration that mirrored the U.S. Navy protests from decades prior. These massive events underscored some of the patterns I had already witnessed, as
"natural" disasters exacerbated existing inequalities and Viequenses responded, expressing their dissent in both overt and more subtle ways.

In this thesis, I will examine a pattern of everyday acts of resistance—acts that further reinforce a sense of shared Viequense identity—and its relationship to post-hurricane María social and political transformations. My analysis hones in on three key issues where I observed Viequenses expressing dissent: the privatization of the island’s ferry, its lack of a formal hospital, and American gentrification. Also, I will examine how people encounter these problems and how they become salient in Viequense’s everyday lives. My goal is to understand: (1) the socio-economic transformation occurring on Vieques, (2) the ongoing dynamics of colonialism, in particular concerning American gentrification, and (3) the relationship between contemporary expressions of resistance today and historical protests associated with resistance against the U.S. Navy.

My thesis is organized around the three major concerns articulated by Viequenses above: American gentrification, the privatization of the ferry, and the lack of a hospital. In Chapter 1, “American Gentrification,” I will examine a trend of displacement that has been occurring since the withdrawal of the U.S. Navy, American Gentrification. I use the term “American Gentrification” to describe a trend of displacing local people to make way for touristic spaces and American migrants. These American migrants are both retired and working-aged. However, both participate in a pattern of displacement on Vieques. In Chapter 2, “The Ferry,” I will look at the privatization of the Ferry system and the organizing I saw in 2018 around minimizing the increase in ticket prices. In particular, I discuss how the ferry system becomes a very salient connection between the mainland and Vieques, but also how many other issues are inevitably
tied to the transportation system. In Chapter 3, “The Hospital,” I discuss the historic struggle of getting a proper health care system on Vieques. I will examine the recent overt protest that eventually secured funding for a hospital. Throughout these chapters, I discuss everyday forms of resistance, principally rumor, gossip and storytelling, and how they become constant aids in governing everyday struggles and information on Vieques. In addition, in the second and third chapters, I will show how these everyday expressions of resistance become a vital part of sustaining larger movements on Vieques. Understanding these forms of dissent is crucial because they present us with a lens to view Viequenses’ motivations for taking certain actions of resistance but not others and how the people of Vieques understand and shape their future.

My work will be in conversation with several important texts. Notably, Tourism and Language in Vieques: An Ethnography of the Post-Navy Period (2017) and James Scott’s Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (1985). In Tourism and Language in Vieques, the author, Luis Galanes Valldejuli, concludes that like in Gayatri Spivak’s, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” the answer is no—the Viequense cannot speak. He explains that due to a multitude of factors, the voice of the Viequense is “muted.” While they resist, there is no one listening, and in fact, there are even more forces trying to actively silence them (2017). In many ways, I agree with Galanes Valldejuli’s arguments and found the evidence he presents compelling in its claim that Viequense are being muted, particularly with the onset of tourism and neoliberalism. However, I found his argument limited the value and power that Viequenses have found through their voice. Through forms of everyday resistance, storytelling and gossip, Viequenese have been able to form large social networks, or “submerged networks” (Melucci 1989), and widely narrate the problems they face. In “Notes towards autonomous geographies:
creation, resistance and self-management as survival tactics,” by Jenny Pickerill and Paul Chatterton (2006), the authors set out to examine a variety of activists' work and the politics of hope. And, through this examination of “autonomous geographies” they find that “the process [of resistance] is as important as the outcome of resistance,” (2006: 9). Similarly, I argue that there is inherent value in the process of resistance, where these social networks grow and are able to create large-scale community awareness, even if, in the end, the resistance does not achieve its desired goal. Finally, in Gallens Valldejulli’s work he ignores that although there are those who do not listen, there are key exceptions. In particular and thanks to the outspoken activism of Viequenses, many U.S. media outlets, and U.S. government officials have listened, and as a consequence, they have enacted change on the island.

Second, I will be in conversation with Scott’s (1985) seminal book, Weapons of the Weak. In particular, Scott highlights how subordinate classes have found ways of protesting that are not always organized political movements. This text is fundamental to my work because while I have attended two large, overt demonstrations on Vieques, I found that other forms of resistance, or what Scott dubs “everyday resistance,” to be equally powerful and worthy of our attention. These studies inform my own work, in particular how I define resistance. In my work, I define large scale resistance as collective dissent to powerful institutions. And, I define everyday resistance as resistance that does not follow a set movement or organization, but is a way for an individual to share fears and dissent toward problems and disturbances. This takes form mostly in patterns of complaints, gossip, and storytelling in Vieques, Puerto Rico. While this mode of resistance is not directly orchestrated, it is often performed in similar patterns and used by many members of the community. My work utilizes Scott’s everyday resistance, but also
documents the relationship between these everyday forms and larger resistances (Thompson 1963; Pickerill and Chatterton 2006).

Due to the onset of anthropogenic climate change and late-stage capitalism, this research can be applied and compared with other small islands undergoing demographic and or socio-political shifts after disaster. My work thus contributes to studies of small island communities as they confront these pressing realities. Such research is crucial as it helps us to examine and document the strategies communities are utilizing to preserve islands’ ways of life in the face of these shared problems. For example, in “Exploring Resistance in Rural and Remote Island Communities” by Zrinka Mendas (2016), the author explores how, through a culture of cooperation, islands in Croatia are able to resist financial capitalism. Additionally, in Mendas’ other work, “Tracing socio-economic impact of ferry provision in Zadar island archipelago” (2015), while studying one Croatian island, Zadar, the author notes a lack of economic opportunities and the flaws in the current rural-urban ferry linkages, which are key themes in my work. Therefore, our works share similar themes including how islands are able to define local identity and preserve their way of life despite changes in migration and population.

In addition to the ways these studies help us understand how small islands world-wide are grappling with shared dilemmas and developing coping strategies to deal with these recurring pressures, the story of Vieques can also be critical for understanding problems that are specific to Puerto Rico. Many Viequeneses call Vieques “the colony of the colony.” This moniker refers to the fact that Puerto Rico is still in a colonial relationship with the United States, and Vieques has such a dependent relationship with Puerto Rico, that islanders experience a sense of compounded coloniality. At the same time, Vieques serves a microcosmic example of the problems unraveling
the main island as Puerto Rico confronts privatization, economic reliance on tourism, and
dependence on outside food systems. Due to the size of Vieques and its compounded colonial
relationship, the problems both islands face are often more tangibly felt on the smaller of the two
islands; however, these problems are just as germane on the big island. Thus, seeing how
Vieques is responding to these problems can offer a window into how Puerto Rico as a whole is
confronting its problems as a colonial state.

Beyond these contributions to anthropological studies of resistance and efforts to
understand global patterns affecting island communities, it is my hope that local Viequense
activists—and those sympathetic to their struggles against the legacies of injustice on
Vieques—will be able to reflect on how this island is countering problems in the post-María era.
In my ethnography, I ask many of the same questions that I heard local Viequense raise and aim
to provide some insight into the patterns I observed as Viequenses express dissent, reinforce their
shared sense of identity in the face of such outside pressures, and push for meaningful change on
the island.

A note on my pseudonym practice: I have altered all names with only key exceptions. I
have left the names of Myrna, Ana Elisa, and Robert unaltered as they are well-known activists
on the island and gave me express permission to use their names within my paper. While there
are other known activists within this work, I have both put them under a different name and or
refer to them as an activist. I did this either because they wanted to go under a pseudonym, or I
did not formally interview them and was not able to ask their permission to use their name.
While many of the people mentioned in this thesis could be recognizable to those on Vieques, I
have also added some vague or composite characteristics for those who expressed a desire not to be identified in my work.
Since my arrival in Vieques in 2018, one of the key problems that was emphasized to me consistently by local residents has been the “desplazamiento” of Viequenses. The word literally means the displacement of a person from their land. However, this term, when used today to describe the island, is understood by Viequeneses to mean the influx of American tourism and residents and the displacement and exodus of locals. I use the term gentrification, as a synonym in this thesis because it indicates to the reader the causation and additional socio-economic changes that are occurring alongside the word displacement.

Scholars in cultural studies have documented the “expat” phenomenon in places like Vieques as people move from the Global North to the Global South (Knowles and Harper 2009; Galanes Valldejuli 2017). However, within this North-South migration, most document the movement of retired populations, or “lifestyle migrants,” (Benson 2015; Hayes 2018). During
my ethnographic work, I saw this same trend, but also observed the migration of working-aged individuals. To understand the unique gentrification phenomenon, I pursued interviews with young American workers in their twenties and thirties in order to better understand the influx of young Americans in Vieques. I was keenly aware of these workers because Viequenses often pointed to them as the acute symbols of gentrification. These workers were often marked, as gringos, American, either with benign or malicious intentions toward the community. Interested in how they understood their own relationship to Vieques, I began to interview these young workers in the tourism and service industry.

Here, I highlight an interview I had with Elizabeth, a bartender who worked at one of the local restaurants on the malecón. When I asked her if she would ever move back to the U.S., she responded by exclaiming, “I can’t move back to San Francisco because there is too much gentrification. Are you crazy? I would never be able to afford a nice place to live.” She had been raised her whole life in San Francisco and at eighteen decided to work in the service industry. When I asked why she had moved to Vieques in her late 20s, she continued by saying she found the cost of living in California to be too high for a bartender. Attempting to understand her motives for living a decade on Vieques, I asked her what she thought the benefit of living on the island was. She responded by saying for what she earned working as a bartender, the cost of living was very low. Elizabeth told me her salary was close to $48,000 USD a year, but her rent was about $450 USD a month. Her salary was much higher than I expected, as the average household salary on Vieques is around $12,000 USD (Data USA). I asked her if she ever missed the U.S., she said she did, but she enjoyed “island life” much more.
In interviews with Elizabeth and other young workers, there were several trends in their responses. First, when asked why they decided to move to Vieques, they talked about how they needed a “more relaxed environment” or “because Vieques was a safe place, where you can always go to the beach.” Often, their reasoning invoked a sense that Vieques was an escape—one with a new pace of life that had different demands on them than in the United States. It appeared that they were seeking an alternative lifestyle to the fast-paced capitalistic world that they did not enjoy. A hotel worker in her thirties, when asked if she would ever go back to the U.S. told me, “Why would I ever want to go back to ‘real’ life?” However, it was not just this change in culture that people sought, but also an escape from the financial realities of living in the United States. These young Americans often spoke about how on Vieques they were paying off student debt, had a low cost of rent, and lower amounts of work hours but with good pay. And, how these factors made it hard to return to their own or other cities in the U.S., where they would have to face the opposite of these circumstances.

I often steeped in their statements and would ponder what to think about these young Americans. I was so curious about this group because it astounded me that these Americans would highlight inequalities and economic hardships in their own home communities, but often failed to recognize or relate how their own presence was a factor in creating inequalities and gentrification on Vieques. These young people were moving to the poorest municipality of Puerto Rico, as economic migrants, to hold some of the highest paying jobs on the island.

However, these young American workers were only one group among many that were participating in the gentrification process. To better understand the different actors, I wanted a way of classifying the larger patterns I saw. In Japonica Brown-Saracino’s (2009) book, A
Neighborhood that Never Changes: Gentrification, Social Preservation, and the Search for Authenticity, the author examines two New England and two Chicago neighborhoods facing gentrification in order to disrupt the common single understanding of gentrifiers. By assessing origins, motivations, visions for neighborhood change, differing attitudes toward both newcomers and old timers, she carefully crafts three categories of gentrifiers. These categories include: social preservationists, social homesteaders, and pioneers. Social preservationists are people who value the community they are moving into and its people. They make concerted efforts to help longtime residents. Pioneers, by contrast, are people who enter a community with “little regard for those who lived before them” (4). And, Social homesteaders lay in the middle ground; they take-up space to serve their purposes, but do so not as uncritically as pioneers. Homesteaders are particularly interested in preserving a place's character, that is, preserving the aesthetics of older buildings or maintaining a sense of “authenticity” and “culture” as it is on display. I saw all three groups reflected in the Viequense community. For example, I saw social preservationists, or “long-term belongers” (Knowles and Harper 2009), in the American activists, who continually did advocacy work to give back to the community. Or, the social homesteaders, in the young-American workers who came to Vieques for a relaxed environment and although did not always actively participate in local culture, were often well-meaning and wanted to at least understand the local culture. However, I felt this typology could not fully explain the motivations and how gentrifiers were perceived by the Viequense community.

On Vieques, due to its history and current colonial status, large amounts of tourism, and differing patterns of North-South Migration, Viequenses assess gentrification through other markers of difference, namely a person’s length of stay on the island, Spanish-speaking ability,
origin and kin relations, and involvement in the community. Thus, I decided to create a new typology that catered to the specific patterns I saw unfolding on Vieques.

This typology includes:

1. Tourists, who were only here from a day to a couple weeks to enjoy the beach,
2. Snowbirds and Invisible Landlords, who often rented or Airbnb-ed their land, who owned property and often did not attempt to integrate themselves with Viequenses,
3. Almost Viequenses, the people who while not from Vieques were deeply engaged with the community and who often gave back,
4. Nonprofit or Business Owners, who owned tourism businesses or restaurants, that benefited from Vieques and had vastly different levels of engagement with the community,
5. Repatriated Viequenses, people belonging to or descended from Viequense families that move for economic benefit, but later returned,
6. Non-Viequense working population, includes both main island workers and Americans in the service industry.

Of course this typology is not all encompassing and there are people that can fall into multiple groups, like a non-profit owner who lives most of their life in the United States or a person who is a worker, but became so involved in the community that people characterize them as “almost Viequense.” Developing this, typology for myself was valuable because it enabled me to identify four different factors that shifted the ways Viequenses perceived gentrifiers, and, in some, how they perceived themselves. These factors were rooted in how I heard residents on Vieques talk about their own legitimacy or factors I heard discussed or gossiped about by life-long Viequenses, who ranked gentrifiers with these terms as either good or bad.

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2 I would also include volunteers in this category.
3 A name given by Viequeneses to describe the “flight” of these residents to their second homes in Vieques once the cold weather hit the US. This word is also often used to encompass the North to South migration of retirees.
4 This is part of a larger pattern of what LA native’s call “Gente-fication,” which is the return of people native to that community, who have gained upward mobility through outside means.
In this chapter, I will discuss the history of displacement on the island in order to situate the current debate over who belongs and what impact they are having on the island. Then, I will focus on how gossip is utilized as an everyday form of resistance on Vieques. Particularly, how gossip is used to narrate, spread, and distinguish information including who is and is not accepted on Vieques. In particular, I highlight how these systems of gossip are able to create networks within the Viequense community that are able to monitor and think critically about the problem.

History

The history of displacement—and the fight over who owns the land—is the history of Vieques. This history has many waves of displacement, but the ones described to me the most were the displacement of the Tainos, the downfall of the Sugar Industry, the age of U.S. imperialism, and, finally, the U.S. military occupation. These histories were often referenced as signifiers that powerful forces have never cared or wanted the local people to occupy and live “vidas dignas,” dignified lives, on Vieques. And, most often these waves of displacement were referenced as ways of explaining the current situation of the increased presence of American landowners and the tourism industry. I will briefly go over these four events in history to help locate local and historical understanding of displacement.

First, the Tainos were the local people of Vieques who were colonized and raided by the Spanish in 1524. The Spanish killed and or sold the Tainos into slavery, sending them to Santo Domingo; thus, exterminating the local people from their rightful land (McCaffrey 2002: 17-20). This violent first contact began 300 years of Spanish rule and authority over the small island. In 1815, the Spanish finally decided to settle its own people on the land, after almost 200 years of
defending and trying to rid the land from French, Dutch, and English settlers. This move by the Spanish colonial state was concurrent with the dawn of the Sugar and other agricultural plantations on Vieques. This shift necessitated a working populus, which meant large quantities of slaves and contracted black famers from the British Isles were brought over. The land of Vieques was thus held in the hands of a few rich farmers, despite a large boom in population (2002: 20-21). Today on Vieques, there is a strong consciousness and identity tied to the Tainos. Many people on Vieques have indigenous Taino names like Urayoán, Enriquillo, or Hatuey. In addition, people use the identifier “indio”, or Indian, as a way of referring to people of darker complexion. This Taino legacy was often referenced or presented to me in order to show that even from the beginning, there have been displacements on the island.

Second, in the 20th century, the United States took military control of Puerto Rico and Vieques in the Spanish-American War. The population continued to grow with the domination of the Sugar Plantations under American Imperialism, but soon 71% of the land on Vieques was owned by only two sugar Plantations. The population of Vieques was around 10,000 in 1930. Workers lived on the land owned by sugar plantations, but the rest were squeezed in the small tracts of land not owned by the Sugar industry. However, when the plantations, who already failed to give the working people a decent living, began to have an economic downturn in 1935, thousands of workers had to flee economic misery and move to St. Croix. The people who remained stayed in terrible economic conditions (2002: 25-26). Today, there are many first and second generation repatriated Viequenses who came back from St. Croix. In particular, people who had this history would reference this part of their family history to discuss land problems today.
Third, with the onset of World War II and fears over German submarines and the defence of the Panama Canal, the U.S. government and military had a renewed interest in the Caribbean and the land on Vieques. With a declaration of a national emergency, the U.S. Navy rapidly took over 21,020 acres on Vieques. The U.S. took over the land of the sugar plantations, paying the planter class for the land and evicting thousands of people in 24 hours from their homes, which were situated on these lands. Thus, most of the population moved to the remaining one-third of the land or immigrated to St. Croix. The building of the military base was a small reprieve from poverty for Viequenses, which only recurred after the base was completed in 1943 (2002: 29-31). This displacement was often used to point to the cruelty of the American occupation. And, often referenced as the end of the strong agricultural roots of the island.

Fourth, In 1947, the U.S. military decided to keep its presence on the island to use the land as a training base for military maneuvers. They would bomb, test, and even rent out the lands to foreign militaries for the next 60 years. One of the scariest times for Viequenses was in the 1970s. Popularly dubbed “The Dracula Plan,” the U.S. government planned to transform the entire island of Vieques into a military training facility. This would entail removing the entire Viequense population. Locals named it the “Dracula Plan” because it proposed to remove every buried body on the island so that Viequenses would have no reason to return to their home (Galanes Valldejuli 2018: 20). Viequenses highlighted this plan to me over and over, emphasizing that their mass displacement was a long held goal of the United States. This plan was only stopped after vehement protests by the Viequenses, and eventually the Puerto Rican Government. The U.S. military annexation and the later training base are both continuously discussed on the island to frame social justice issues and were also applied to gentrification.
Viequenses most often wanted me to understand modern displacement by comparing it to the “Dracula Plan,” invoking it frequently in our conversations.

Finally, the current wave of displacement began at the removal of the U.S. Navy in 2003. What Viequenses hoped would represent a time of finally recovering the land for local people turned into the next great battlefront against displacement. The U.S. Navy handed over two-thirds of the island over to the U.S. Land and Wildlife Department rather than Viequenses. As a consequence, although the land was “made public,” there were and remain serious limits on the times when and places where local Viequenses and other civilians can access this land reserve. But that wasn’t all. Protected by the former military gates, the once Military to Wildlife reservation, transformed overnight. Now, some of the most beautiful beaches on the entire island were revealed, transforming the area into a “pristine” tourism location. It was not long after the Navy’s removal that tourism became the main source of income for the small island. Americans who had come to protest the U.S. Navy decided to settle on the island and in the next ten years, Vieques saw an exponential increase of American ownership. The land prices also began to soar. In *Tourism and Language in Vieques* Luis Galenes Valldejuli estimates that the land prices increased by 300% in those ten years (2017). The current displacement is remarkably salient in the everyday lives of Viequenses. As one activist described to me, “I used to live on a street of all Viequeneses, now there are only two houses left. Can you imagine that in the short years since the Navy left, so many would leave.”

American Gentrification is often pointed to as the next great displacement of the island. While it happens much slower than the 24 hour evictions made by the U.S. Navy, many interviews I conducted, particularly with older Viequenses, would begin with contemporary
concerns about displacement, but almost without fail end with that old timer asking me, “you know about the Vampire plan, right?” Or “since the Tainos the local Viequenese have never been able to live in peace.” Thus Viequenses deploy their history to understand their present experiences of displacement. They reference long held goals of powerful forces that work against the local people, but in a way also signal hope by saying that the local Viequenses still remain on the island despite every effort to remove them.

**Spanish-Speaking as Viequense Identity**

When a poster for a Mayoral candidate went up in early January in Isabella Segunda, the largest town on Vieques, several people told me I had to go see it. So, one day I walked down to the ferry terminal to read the poster, which hung on a post by the entrance to the plaza. At first glance, I did not see anything wrong with it. Perplexed, I asked a friend who had accompanied me why people were so upset. She pointed out something that was so obvious, but I had missed. The sign was in English. It was an uneasy moment for me. I recalled how almost two years ago a Viequense business owner had told me, “Our greatest fear is that one day we will have a mayor who speaks English instead of Spanish.” I often heard gossip or complaints about how Spanish was dying on Vieques or that it would soon become all English-speaking. While I was not dismissive of these concerns, I often classified them as a problem for the future. Here, in front of me was proof that it was a problem of the present. And, I hadn’t recognized it.

In Vieques, I directly saw how gossip between Viequenses became a way of spreading fears about the future, but also a way of reinforcing a shared sense of Viequense identity (as opposed to an American Identity). In addition, through gossip, Viequenses could enforce a standard of differentiation of who did or did not belong within the Vieques community.
Viequenses accomplished this by praising or condemning certain factors about the “gentrifiers,” which included their length of stay, Spanish-speaking ability, origin and kin relations, and involvement in the community. However, while the other factors were discussed, I observed how the main determinant for Viequenses about who truly belonged was often reduced to one's Spanish-speaking ability. Spanish, a key characteristic of identity to Viequenses, as opposed to the American and English identity, became an easy marker of deciding an outsider's intentions and ability to belong in the community.

During my summer on Vieques, gossip about who could and could not speak Spanish became a constant in my everyday life. I would hear rumors that certain businesses would not allow their employees to speak Spanish. I would hear complaints about certain Americans who could only speak “baby Spanish,”—ironically labeled in English—meaning they could only speak a few basic words. Even at the vigil of a young girl, when Evan, a Puerto Rican non-governmental organization worker, translated the protests from Spanish into English, I heard whispers of distaste behind me. They whispered that people who did not know Spanish should have stayed home. In other instances, when people who genuinely cared about the community, who had lived there for decades, did not know Spanish, I would hear, “I just don’t understand why they never learned Spanish.” And, if these dedicated people had learned Spanish, I would hear people jokingly laud that they were, practically Viequense.

In order to understand this gossip, and the language politics it revealed, I decided to interview an employee from one of the restaurants that supposedly did not allow their workers to speak Spanish. I asked her whether the rumors were founded or not. She told me that everyone heard those same stories, but they were not true. However, I could not help notice that this
restaurant only hired twenty and thirty year old American workers. And, that it was more likely
the case that they refused to hire people who did not speak perfect English. Regardless of the
veracity of those stories or the ways the business may have silenced Spanish speaking through its
hiring practices instead of edicts, these rumors are revelatory of a broader pattern. These rumors
were used as a way for people to warn, or bring to light their concerns.

In Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts, James Scott states that
“rumor thrives most in situations in which events of vital importance to people's interests are
occurring and in which no reliable information or only ambiguous information is available,”
(1990). As uncertain livelihoods and futures are a reality in post-Navy and post-María Vieques,
Viequenses use gossip and rumors to share their fears and dismay over the structural changes
brought on by the process of gentrification. The endless gossip I heard about different
American’s Spanish-speaking abilities signaled the vulnerability that Viequenses felt within this
process. They felt they were losing power within their own community.

However, these patterns of gossip were not exclusive to Viequenses. American residents,
Spanish-speaking or not, were acutely aware of how Viequenses perceived and judged them
through gossip. Many Americans fluent in Spanish would often co-opt the same language and
judgments about non-Spanish speakers. In one interview, an older American activist, who had
moved to Vieques to fight the U.S. Navy's occupation in 2001, talked disparagingly of younger
Americans who “refused” to learn Spanish. She chastised me as if I were the offender, and
scolded, “How can you move to a place with complete disregard of the people who speak there?
How are you supposed to be a part of the community when you cannot even communicate?”
When I noticed this co-opting of the Viequenses own language, it showed me how Americans had learned these standards from Viequenses, who probably praised them for learning Spanish. Overall, I gleaned that gossip between Vieques was a way of creating a shared awareness over gentrification. Viequenses have little power over who moves to the island, but through the policing of Spanish and continually keeping the community aware over their dismay of gentrification they are able to begin to navigate the shifting power dynamics. Ultimately, As Viequenses felt they were losing power in their own community, Spanish, and policing others to learn it, became a way of fighting against this power shift. To understand the complexities of this disappointment, it is also helpful to look at American expats who receive acclaim from Viequenses.

**Almost Viequense**

When Olivia moved to Vieques she got her apartment for 400 USD a month. It was a two bedroom apartment that she shared with a roommate. She worked as a hostess for one of the restaurants down on the malecón in Esperanza. However, one of the things that set her apart was that she spoke Spanish fluently. Raised in the United States as a Dominican-American, she always had an interest in living in the Caribbean. Olivia had come down to Vieques with her University after the hurricanes to help set up a KP4 system, a type of radio communication, and help with the local radio station, Radio Vieques. However, she fell in love with Vieques and decided to move down after graduation to work at the Radio Station. However, she also took a job working in the tourism industry, which was much more financially sustainable for her. She was a perfect example of what Myrna, a local activist, had said when she told me in an interview, “we love to see them come, but hate to see them stay.” Meaning that Viequeneses loved to see
volunteers come and help the community, but hated it when they then decided to move to the island furthering gentrification. However, when I mentioned Olivia to Myrna, she told me without hesitation, “I love Olivia, what a great girl, doing some good work.” I was taken aback. We had just been discussing the extreme level of gentrification that was taking place in her neighborhood of Esperanza and her fear that almost all service industry jobs were going to outsiders. I would have thought Olivia represented those same gentrification processes that she found so distressing. So, what made Olivia unique?: Her commitment to the community and her ability to speak Spanish. While she had only been on the island for two years, multiple people I encountered praised her. As my co-worker joked with me, “Olivia’s practically Viequense.” I heard similar comments directed toward other relatively-recent arrivals, including another young woman who had moved to Vieques when she was fifteen. Her mother had integrated herself with the community as a non-profit employee, and her daughter had spent her teenage years actively participating in community events. One of her friends, when talking about her said, “She’s Viequense, just not Viequense-Viequense.” This distinction denotes that she is a part of the local community, even if she isn’t a “true,” born in Vieques Viequense, whose family was also from the island.

In another case, Robert “Bob” Rabin was born in Boston, but moved as a history teacher to Vieques in the 80s. Bob has now lived on Vieques for 40 years and has constantly worked with and for the community of Vieques. While some people might not say he is Viequense, more people than not have come to think of Bob as an integral part of the community. When his wife, Nilda, a Viequense who runs the Incubadora, spoke at a general gathering about his integration
into the community, she said none of it would have been possible if he had not become fluent in Spanish.

These cases underline the fact that it is possible to become a part of the Vieques community. In addition, it shows that people who move to Vieques are not always immediately looked down on or simply classified as participating in the displacement process. It also highlights the vital importance of learning Spanish for Viequenses to accept new people into their community. In many ways, with the influx of Americans, Vieques’ culture is changing without the Viequenses consent, but by learning Spanish it indicates to local Viequenses, that you are committed to the island and to the people who live there (even if you may never become Viequense-Viequense).

The Visibility and Invisibility of Gentrification

When I lived on Vieques after hurricane María, I was astounded by the multitude of “se vende,” for sale, signs that littered the different neighborhoods in Vieques. Vieques itself housed three different real estate agencies (an astounding number for how small the island is), however most of these signs were not official real estate signs, but spray painted on the house itself. Besides, these houses other houses lay empty, which depending on who I spoke to would mark them as either a promise of return or irresponsible abandonment. Vines grew up the concrete and paint was peeling of the concrete, which only further highlighted their emptiness. It was hard to guess how long these houses lay empty. These houses were markers of those who had left Vieques and one of the most arresting factors of the gentrification process, which largely remains intangible.
This intangibility is why problematizing this era of displacement becomes complicated. For the most part, people *like* their American neighbors and express appreciation for those who have integrated themselves into the community. They also *like* that the tourism industry has provided an economic backbone to the community and they celebrate those Vieques businesses that have succeeded in this tourist economy. And, they *like* that the Navy is gone. However, people also understand the potential negative repercussions of American gentrification, especially following hurricane María. Vieques is in many ways a textbook case of “disaster capitalism” (Bonilla and LeBrón 2018). After Maria, due to the destruction of houses and the halt of the tourism economy, many people on Vieques left to find better economic opportunities. Almost 1,000 residents left. People promptly sold their land, but due to the flooding of the market, the costs of land plummeted. Thus, many residents received very low settlements for their homes. Consequently, the drop in house prices, led to a sharp rise of American homeowners. This sharp about-face in homeownership led to a lot of frustration for those who did not leave.

However, *how* Viequenses talk about the problem of displacement, specifically in reference to other historical forced displacements, highlighted to me how people were thinking about this issue in a systemic framework. When I talked to one mother about whether she ever thought about moving off the island, she told me that since María, she had thought about it everyday. She spoke to me about the difficulty of having to live with her parents because the rents were too high and the cost of supporting her young children on the island were suffocating. And, when I asked her why she stayed, she told me it was because Vieques was her home and she could not imagine having to raise her children in a foreign culture or without the support of
her community. When I asked her what she thought of the Americans on the island, she told me it depended on the person; she had no problem with most of them, she told me, but as whole, they were changing Vieques into “a new world with many problems.” However, this interview, and the many like it, showed me one of the most crucial aspects of gossip on the island: such gossip allows Viequenses to keep an otherwise intangible problem present in the conversations happening among members of the community.

The majority of my conversations on the island were with non-activists. However, I was astounded by how attuned the local people were to the problems on the island, including among those people who wouldn’t self-identify as activists. Indeed, these non-activists criticized economic hardships and lack of jobs, they complained over people who bought property but who did not live on the island (a very invisible part of the gentrification process), and many even spoke about how the economy needed to become “more sustainable.” These conversations highlighted how this informal social network that comprises the everyday lives of Viequenses, keeps the problems on Vieques tangible to the community.

In addition, these webs of gossip also made Viequense share the burden—that is, share the blame—of gentrification. There were many instances when in interviews people would tell me, “Displacement is also the fault of the Viequense.” The first time I heard this comment, I was shocked. How could gentrification be the fault of those who had to leave? However, the more I heard these comments and testimonies, the more I realized that is not what they specifically meant. Instead, Viequenses were describing how Gentrification, specifically in its early stages, became such a problem. In their answers, they would describe how Viequenese were not even aware it was or would be a problem. They explained how, at first, people would just sell their
house to whomever and for whatever price. They would follow these comments up by putting blame not on the homeseller, but on the lack of information and knowledge. They lamented that Viequenses did not understand this trend of American property buyers. However, many Viequenses would then follow-up these comments by emphasizing that Viequenses were now more aware of the problem, and as a consequence people were becoming more cautious about who was interested in buying their houses. Thus these informal social networks provided people who had otherwise been bewildered by these transformations with both the language to critique what was happening around them and the tools to critically question how they might, too, be participating in enabling those changes to occur—or could refuse to do so.

Conclusion

One of the first things I observed on Vieques was how gentrification is prominently criticized. Yet while issues of land have long been a problem for Viequenses, this new turn is one that is harder to point to, as there are no laws, and no direct forces removing people like in the case of the Navy. In addition, there is a dilemma at bay: Viequenses like many of the Americans who come to Vieques in addition to relying on tourism as the basis for their economy. These factors make it hard to strictly draw the line between who and what is the problem.

However, Viequenses are fighting back in distinct ways. The gossip and rumors that spread about who does and does not speak Spanish is a way of expressing fear over the future of the local people, but also a way of distinguishing “the good versus the bad” American. Thus the gossip gives more nuance to the more simple argument: Gentrification is bad. Instead, they are able to navigate the good and bad forces by distinguishing the different types of gentrifiers. In
turn, gossip is also used as a way of keeping the everyday Viequense aware of the issue, and thus, able to respond to them. While Viequenses have little political or economic power in changing who owns the land, through the use of gossip and rumors people are beginning to articulate this fear and making it a shared problem that the Viequenses must face. Accordingly, gossip is transformed into a tool of everyday resistance.
Chapter 2: Ferry

The ferry, or la lancha, is in constant motion and is an ordinary yet crucial part of life on Vieques. On Vieques, it is commonplace to buy a ticket for the cargo ferry and bring one's car to the mainland to go to a large store like Walmart or Costco and stock up on supplies. These stores provide Viequenses with essentials like groceries, toilet paper, and medicine, and so I would often see elderly couples headed over to do their weekly shopping. Indeed, there are always recognizable groups of Viequenses on both the cargo and passenger ferry. Local business owners or employees who do not get deliveries by ferry, rely instead on taking the ferry to the main island to purchase goods they sell in their businesses. On the passenger ferry, middle-aged Viequenses bring their elderly parents or children to doctor's visits. People with jobs on the mainland take it, sports teams take it to participate in their competitions, while college students or younger workers that live on the main island take the ferry back home to visit their families.
Thus Viequenses have habitual cycles of going to the mainland. One day, when I was walking to my job at the Fortín, Jerry spotted me from his car and stopped to say hello. When I asked him what he was doing so early in the morning, he told me he was going to the mainland with his wife to get supplies. A retired taxi driver, who I had become friends with, told me about how he and his wife, on every other Friday, would take the earliest cargo ferry they could get on and go to Walmart to pick up his prescription and buy groceries in bulk. My point is that the ferry system is an essential and routine part of connecting Vieques to the main island of Puerto Rico. And it has been for a long time.

The first public ferry system began in the 1930s and has been serving the people of Vieques ever since. In a 2009 study by Ana Fabían, who surveyed the opinions and use of the ferry, she remarked that 96% of the Vieques population used the Ferry to go to the mainland in a two month period. This regular and almost universal usage of this system points to how poignant this link becomes—it connects Viequenses to their families, doctors visits, essential supplies and groceries, and schools. In this chapter, I will discuss the protests around the ferry’s privatization and how it served as a way of discussing Vieques’ vulnerability and expressing fears over these problems. I will also show how these protests relied heavily on Viequense identity and past foundations of protesting the Navy, as well as the use of gossip to arouse larger overt protests.

Despite its centrality to daily life on Vieques, the ferry system has always had a reputation of being flawed. When I lived in Vieques in 2018, I always noted that the sea journey lasted longer than its allotted hour. The journey was often bumpy due to high surf and winds. I

5 For Viequenses they consider themselves both Puerto Rican and Viequense. This Viequense identity is a strong local identification. (See Chapter 1, For Viequense Identity as opposed to the American Identity).
was always comfortable on boats, but anytime there were higher winds, when the ferry pulled away from the dock I found myself closing my eyes. This was to avoid seeing the waves crashing over the windows and to make the up and down jerking movement feel less jarring. However, the journey was the least of the problem. I grew accustomed to the long hours waiting in plastic chairs to get on a ferry, fighting through the box office window with the attendant to buy a ticket. And then there were the random, or at least little-explained, cancelations of the service. In the end of her 2009 study, Fabian noted that 80% of locals reported they had confronted such problems while using the ferry (2009). Nine years after her study, during the summer of 2018, Viequenses consistently complained to me that, following hurricane María, the services of the ferry had grown even more unreliable. Then, in July of 2018, there was an announcement by “El Nuevo Día, a major Puerto Rican newspaper, that claimed that based on a presentation by the Autoridad Transporte Maritimo (ATM), Puerto Rico’s Maritime Transport Authority, there would be a 500% increase of ferry prices for non-residents (López Alicea). As expected, the news spread quickly through the community. And, that’s when I first learned that the ATM had announced earlier that summer that it would be hiring a private company to enter into a private-public partnership.

The Privatization of the Ferry

While many in the United States believed that Puerto Rico was suffering in 2017 because of hurricane María, Puerto Rico had already been deteriorating under the United States’ colonial relationship. The hurricane only revealed by how much. In 2015, the Puerto Rican economy crashed. There was an astounding debt crisis caused by the Puerto Rican government’s overspending and its inability to finance public debt. Puerto Rico could not declare bankruptcy,
like the other states and Washington D.C., because of its territorial status. So, the U.S. government created the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), which created an unelected board that implaced stringent economic measures on public spending (Cortés). The ATM had an undisclosed amount of debt, and following the advice of PROMESA, was asked to enter a public-private contract. The ATM contracted the United States company, “Fast Ferries Puerto Rico, LCC” (FFPR), to operate all its boats to comply with the Washington Consensus-style privatization recommendations given by PROMESA.

While this contract was widely known on Vieques, few of the details were discussed and officials did not release much information to the public. Yet, many Viequenses expressed discontent over the move to privatize the ferry, which they often characterized as a bad decision by both the Puerto Rican and American governments. In the middle of July, when all the news was coming out about the increase and fares, the ATM announced they would hold public hearings about the fare in Fajardo, Culebra, and Vieques.6 On August 3rd, 2018, the director of the ATM visited Vieques to hold a town meeting with the community at the Multiple Use Center, a building in the plaza in Isabella Segunda.

A few weeks before the protest, flyers went up in town and in most of the businesses' windows. The flyer announced that there would be a protest at the hearing. A day before the protest, I received a text with the flyer reminding me to go from a local activist. The information about the event spread quickly through social media, along with several rumors about the increase in tariffs. For example, despite a public statement by the ATM, in an island-wide newspaper, I saw a thread on a Viequense facebook group, that there would not be an increase in

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6 The three stops of the ferry.
price for locals. In addition to this thread, as we walked to the protest, one of my coworkers told me that once privatization occurred, there was no guarantee of the government’s word. Rumors continued to swirl until the protest.

At 10:30 a.m. on August 3rd, when I arrived at the Multiple Use Center, hundreds of people were already there. Since Radio Vieques, the community radio station in the Fortín, was going to be recording the lecture, I arrived early to help set up. Despite arriving early, there were people wearing blue ACLU vests at the doors as we entered, which marked them as “observers.” As we entered the room, we discovered it was already completely full. People were ringing cowbells and banging spoons against pans, a traditional symbol of protest in Puerto Rico. Other attendees waved large Vieques flags, while others chanted to the sound of bomba drums. These symbols are deeply ingrained in the Puerto Rican imaginings of protest. As Kathrine McCaffrey highlights in *Military Power and Popular Protest* (2002), cultural framings of the protests were crucial to engaging the wider public and a factor in Vieques’ success against the US Navy, (160-162). Now, almost two decades later, I watched as protesters continued to draw on these cultural playbooks of protest. This was the first overt social mobilization I had seen on Vieques. When I entered the room, I remember thinking, “this is the community that took down the U.S. Navy.” For the first time, through this apparent protest, I began to understand the power that had developed through the historical Navy protests, as well as the relationship between those historical events and the everyday forms of dissent I had already observed. For the first time, I realized the networks in place that had made the local community mobilize so quickly. And, by virtue of working at the Fortín, a cultural and activism hub, I had been looped into these circles.
The meeting soon began and the crowd quieted. In brief, the director of the ATM stated that, in response to the debt crisis, the ATM, would implement several changes in order to make the ferry system more “efficient,” which started with an increase in ticket prices. The tickets would stay the same for residents at $2 and would go from $2 to $12 for all non-residents. The second change, ferries would run less frequently, but with more accuracy. Third, residents would have to bring their car on the new cargo ferry for $40-50 one way, depending on the size of the car and day of the week, when it had previously been $10-15. Also, construction products and other goods brought over on the ferry would all have larger fees, augmented by 100s of percent. The final announcement, the ferry would be moving the port on the main island from Fajardo to Ceiba, which are neighboring municipalities on the Eastern coast of Puerto Rico, in order to decrease the time of the ferry. While it was already common knowledge that the ATM wanted to move the terminal, it still received negative reactions in the form of crowd boo-ing.

Alongside the rumors of local tariff increase, I had heard one rumor that coincided with the move to Ceiba: the ATM also wanted to move the Vieques’ terminal to Mosquito Pier, a former military runway and pier. This was talked about because, if true, it would mean the ferry would no longer enter Isabella Segunda, where most locals and local businesses lay. This worried locals who feared that with the move of the ferry, the tourists could easily avoid all the local businesses and people. The ferry is what the majority of tourists use to get to and from the island and if moved would drastically change the way tourists interact with Vieques. However, while this had been mentioned in a news blog (Kantrow-Vázquez) and Trip Advisor, it was not mentioned in the report given that day.
Curious, I turned to the Viequense near me, a coworker, and asked him if he had heard that rumor. He told me that he had heard that rumor for years, ever since the growth of the tourism industry. While it has been mentioned by some governing bodies, it had never come to fruition. He told me that people are so reliant on tourism, there is a constant fear they will lose business or that Viequenses will be removed. So, these rumors get circled around so people can express fear, but also be “pendiente,” or be alert. Often language I heard in rumors, reflected how Viequenses felt—at the mercy of powerful institutions. Many people would use stories to compare themselves to feeling like a puppet or being in a system that forced you to leave. Through these rumors, I was being warned to constantly be aware of these powerful forces, whether they be Puerto Rican, U.S., or corporate forces.

In his influential book, *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), James Scott introduced his approach to everyday forms of resistance, stating, “They require little or no coordination or planning; they make use of implicit understandings and informal networks; they often represent a form of individual self help; they typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority.” The rumors I heard and the people who told them fit firmly into this definition. Here, the rumor served as a way of informally keeping large parts of the community alert. However, unlike in Scott’s discussion, they were also key to fueling the larger protest—including the rapid dissemination of information within the community that occurred in order to mobilize people to the ferry meeting.

Once I understood the Mosquito Pier rumor, I turned my attention back to the speaker, who was finishing his short introduction. Then, the microphone was turned to the people of Vieques. In the next two and a half hours, community leaders and local residents outlined all the
problems with the changes suggested. The biggest concerns outlined by the community were as follows:

**Residents versus Tourist Prices.**

Before, with the resident/non-resident price, it did not matter who you were because ticket attendants would simply sell the $2 tickets to everyone. Now, due to the drastic difference in the price, the question became: how were you going to prove if you were Viequense or not? Proving residency can be quite difficult for Viequenses. As pointed out by one resident, almost all documentation like driver's licenses or birth certificates do not reflect a Viequense’ nativity. In addition, Viequenses were worried about family members who had left the island for work or school, who no longer “live” on the island, but who are still part of the community. Another problem was the large amounts of seasonal and temporary workers on the island. The work force on the island is small, so for any large construction projects or during the height of the tourist season, workers from the main island come to Vieques, and would not be able to commute to the island with the high prices. The final, and one of greatest concerns to small business owners, like Rafael, who spoke at the meeting was how it would affect internal tourism, or Puerto Ricans from the mainland visiting Vieques. A large amount of tourism to the island is directly from the main island of Puerto Rico, who often come for only a day to go to the beaches, but who might reconsider coming to Vieques for other beaches on the mainland because of the high prices. Many people argued that Vieques *is* Puerto Rico and it did not make sense to exclude their own people from Vieques.

**Local cars being placed in the cargo ferry category.**
In some ways the new cargo system was responding to Viequenses concerns about the need for better access, transporting large trucks and large quantities of goods. The problem, however, is grouping the local population transporting their cars into the price hikes determined for the “cargo” category. Vieques, like Puerto Rico, is not food sovereign, meaning that Vieques receives the majority of its food from Puerto Rico, and Puerto Rico, in turn, receives the majority of its food stuffs from abroad. Produce and other foodstuffs in Puerto Rico already receive high tariffs because of the Jones Act, which requires that all food shipped to Puerto Rico must first go through the mainland US (Cortés). Thus, while food shipments to Puerto Rico are already far more expensive than the same items sold in the U.S., by the time it arrives in Vieques, residents are paying far more than their Puerto Rican compatriots and mainland U.S. residents. To combat these high prices, Viequenses often travel themselves to the main island and buy most of their food in bulk then bring it back in their cars with the ferry (as described above).

Doctor visits.

Vieques, largely due to the U.S. Navy's occupation, has the highest rate of cancer, diabetes, and kidney failure in Puerto Rico (McCaffrey 2002). All specialized doctor and hospital visits, besides very minor procedures, are done on the main island. If the new ferry system limits people's ability to bring their car over, instead of the usual $15 dollars that people spend on transportation to medical care, people would have to spend nearly $65 on taxis to get medical attention. While Puerto Rico determined that access to medicine is a human right when it established its own universal health care system (Cortés), the increased prices of bringing one's car over could create a decrease in seeking medical treatment. Many activists tuned into this
language referencing human rights, which signaled people were adopting language from years of activism.

**General frustrations with Officials not hearing ordinary Viequenses’ demands.**

The largest cheer of the day came when Julian, a local activist, stood at the microphone and asked, “Why did the ATM not listen to Viequenses and Culebrenses? Where was the study saying that these augmentations were just?” When the director tried to cut off Julian, since people speaking had a time limit, Viequeneses would stand-up and donate their own time to let him, then others finish their points. This was always met with loud cheers. As mentioned above, a fear of outside forces getting rid of Viequenses, i.e. silencing and pushing aside the local people is often a very vocal point for Viequenses. In the end, one Viequense said, “We beat the U.S. Navy by protesting and we can protest again.”

There are many issues we can dissect in the above concerns that reveal Viequenses’ positionality and offer insight into the current crisis’ on Vieques. First, these issues were all framed as larger discussions of the precariousness of living on Vieques. For example, the cargo ferry discussion was centered on food security, the doctors’ visits centered on toxicity from the Navy and lack of adequate health facilities on Vieques, and the ticket pricing was centered on Puerto Rican identity (people argued that it is wrong to separate the Viequense identity from the Puerto Rican identity as opposed to the U.S. identity). This mesh of Puerto Rican and Viequense identity has its roots in the U.S. Navy protests, where the two identities were framed together in order to create an anti-colonial front against the U.S. Navy. Specifically, protests against the
Navy used widely accepted Puerto Rican cultural symbols to appeal to a wider Puerto Rican audience (like Bomba drums) (McCaffrey, 2002 : Pg. 162-163).

While the ferry’s privatization was a major concern, what was fascinating to me was how Viequenses were able to articulate systemic problems intersecting on Vieques through the ferry transportation. The ferry, through its figurative and literal connection to the mainland, came to represent how reliant Viequenses were to the mainland and also the fear and vulnerability associated with that dependency. Through both the informal networks of gossip, especially seen on social media, and the networks of activists who had rallied against the U.S. Navy, the community on Vieques was able to mobilize a very successful protest, which showed a large amount of public dissent toward the changes suggested by the ATM.

**Back on the Ferry**

When I drove to Ceiba in January of 2020, the new town where the ferry was docked, it was otherworldly. I was used to the very cramped city of Fajardo, one of the most eastern cities of Puerto Rico. Ceiba, a smaller municipality, below Fajardo, offered a startling contrast. Let me take you there:

My friend Olivia had picked me up in her car and we were driving to Ceiba to take the passenger ferry back to Vieques. Once off the highway exit, we entered the town of Ceiba. I observed the typical shopping center and gated communities until the GPS told Olivia to take a sudden left turn. After a couple of back roads, we turned onto a seven minute ride down an old military road. The road is surrounded by brush and large grass, so it is almost impossible to see anything else besides the narrow road. At the end of the road, there is a right turn, with a stone sign, “Roosevelt Roads.” That had been crossed out in black spray paint. Roosevelt Roads was
the name of the large military base in Ceiba, which Vieques served as an extension of until it officially closed. Fast Ferries was now using the abandoned military lands. I asked my friend Olivia (who had been on the mainland to get parts for her car because there were none on Vieques) if the black spray paint was protest or construction. She said, “based on the way people talk about Ceiba, I’m assuming protest.”

While there was a kiosk that sold snacks, the rest of the ferry terminal was sparse. The waiting area was still covered by large white tents. I approached the ticket attendant, asked for two tickets in Spanish, and then waited to see if he would ask me if I was buying a resident or tourist ticket. He never asked. Instead, he just said, “Four dollars,” and handed me the two tickets in exchange. I had expected the hike in price that was mentioned during the 2018 hearing, but soon learned it had never been put in place. I began to think back to how Viequenses had organized in 2018 and wondered if their protests had stalled the price increase.

Both the new and old ferry terminal were built with two waiting areas, one for residents and another for tourists. This physical demarcation was meant to ensure that residents would be the first to board and get seats. The attendant monitoring the seating areas recognized my friend Olivia and put us both in the resident section. After waiting an hour, we were on one of the brand new passenger boats; and, in 45 minutes, we were on Vieques. However, with the earthquakes that were occurring regularly, high surfs had impacted ferry schedules and the noon ferry was the last to bring people to Vieques that day. A colleague of Olivia’s who we saw waiting for the 1 o’clock Ferry ended up sleeping in her car until the ferries resumed service the next day. Although the new boats were nice, I struggled to believe the move was worth it. The ferry
terminal had moved from all of its supporting structures, a parking facility, a nearby hospital and city, for a fifteen minute shorter ride.

**Gossip Continued**

In the wake of Hurricane María, the ferry system proved not only to be flawed, but, more seriously, to be fatally flawed. Food, medicine, and gas became critically low on the island. People often recounted hardships to me that involved the almost constant cancelations of ferries and deliveries after María. I could see the residual stress of those times, when in the summer of 2018, the Vieques community received a warning about a tropical storm. I went to the grocery store the same day to buy my groceries and it had been wiped clean—there were very few necessary food items left on the shelves. And, the grocery store remained like that until the next week’s delivery. When I returned in January 2020, after the earthquake and its aftershocks that struck Puerto Rico, the ferries stopped. Again, there was a large rush to buy groceries. I laughed, when one of my friends proudly brandished a carton of eggs, and pronounced, “these are the last eggs on the island.” Although appearing humorous, I later reflected that the situation was vaguely sinister as well. Without the ferries, there was little to no access to food. The change in operation of ferries had not changed the fact that Vieques was food insecure or any less reliant on receiving its groceries and medicine from the main island. During the earthquakes, another problem came to light. Because of the earthquakes, tourism stalled. Businesses were empty. Beaches were empty. The island fell quiet without the constant flow of tourists and the economy ground to a halt. Local business people who relied on that tourist economy were struggling to make money. Many people in everyday conversation told me that Vieques needed more diversity
in its economy, something that was not solely reliant on tourism and here lay the proof. Without the income brought in by the tourism industry, Vieques had nothing else to depend on. I heard stories comparing the earthquake to the weeks after the hurricane.

While these shortages were going on, I conducted interviews with locals who often expressed to me the fear of vulnerability. One example was the vulnerability of being reliant on the ferry for food and medicine, but they also tied these to larger structural vulnerabilities including the lack of agriculture and reliance on the tourism economy.

However, while there was a very salient issue again highlighted by the ferry and there were all these utterances of dismay, there were no overt protests. The social mobilization around the ferries had gone back to stories and gossip. In “Rumour and gossip in a time of crisis: Resistance and accommodation in a South Indian plantation frontier” by Jayaseelan Raj (2018), the author examines gossip as an agent of resistance within plantation workers in Kerala, India. He claims that gossip can serve two purposes as “co-existence of resistance and accommodation,” (2018). On one hand, he argues that gossip by workers against the plantation served as a way of voicing criticism and uniting workers. On the other hand, he highlights how rumors by intermediaries, like labor unions, would be accepted by workers because they offered hope for better working conditions. Then, workers would “accommodate their exploitation and dispossession,” (2018). While on Vieques, I did not see rumors by intermediaries or contradicting rumors. I did see gaps between overt protest. In his article, Raj points to the rumors of hope that created these lulls. On Vieques, I argue that gossip only continued as an agent of resistance, people unceasingly continued to talk about the larger vulnerabilities of the ferry and frequently expressed frustrations over the transportation system. Even though overt protests were
not occurring, Viequenses were still relying on everyday forms of dissent to keep the community engaged in the issue.

Conclusion

The different responses regarding the privatization of the ferry between 2018 and 2020 offered me a unique opportunity to compare differing forms and outcomes of dissent. In 2018, there were many long held anxieties and strong awareness of the failing ferry system. The announcement for the ferry privatization served as a catalyst to emplace the cultivated networks of activists, remnants of the Navy protest, and informal social networks that were forged through everyday forms of resistance. In 2018, the antagonism became sufficiently recognized to stir sufficient mobilization for a manifestation. The use of a culturally salient playbook of protests, or using culturally salient symbols that were widely understood by the community, was an important aspect of the ferry protest in 2018. Both in 2018 and 2020, Viequenses highlighted the structural problems of the ferry. And, by 2020, the issue of the ferry was still an antagonism that was griped and gossiped about, but it subsided in intensity because the dire situation of not having a hospital became much more salient to Viequenses, which is discussed in the next chapter. Here, everyday forms of resistance and cultural symbolism also played a crucial part in sustaining a larger form of protests.
Chapter 3: The Hospital

The struggle to simply have access to medical service has been a long and arduous fight for Viequenses. Before arriving in Vieques, I watched the documentary “Vieques: An Island Forging Futures,” which depicts the civilian protests against the U.S. Navy at the height of its resistance in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Bermudez-Ruiz). The video captures protesters being restrained and carried away by the FBI and other law enforcement bodies as they occupied the U.S. Navy held lands and beaches on the island. In one interview that particularly drew my interest, a woman denied the links between ill effects on health and the U.S. Navy, la Marina. Instead, she pointed to the lack of hospital on Vieques as the critical cause for concern. Her response surprised me because many scientific studies have proven the links between poor health and the contamination by the U.S. Navy. These studies record a higher incidence of cancer (Nazario, Cruz, Suárez, González, Neris, Figueroa-Vallés, and Bartolomei 2001; Sanderson, Hans, Fauser, Stauber, Christensen, Løfstrøm, and Becker 2017), mercury levels (Ortiz-Roque
and López-Rivera 2004), and infant mortality on Vieques in comparison to the main island of Puerto Rico (Medina, Pellegrini, and Mogro-Wilson 2014). Yet while the ill effects of the U.S. Navy cannot be denied, this woman highlighted the other critical factor that has compounded the adverse health outcomes on the island: a lack of hospital.

The problems associated with not having a hospital were striking because of how salient health issues were and continue to be in the everyday lives of Viequenses. I can recount many stories which detailed one's family members who had suffered at the hands of the treatment they had received on the island. However, while I observed and often heard stories about those negative health outcomes, the truly pervasiveness of the problem was highlighted to me in one interview with Ana Elisa, a prominent activist for food sovereignty and for the resurgence of sustainable agriculture on the island. She underscored her work going into schools to educate local school-aged children about her cause. Ana Elisa narrated how she begins her lessons by asking the children if they know someone in their family who has cancer or diabetes. She recounted how, without a doubt, most of the children would raise their hands. Through these lessons, she makes a poignant call for better food systems to improve health on the island, where nearly all the food is produced and shipped to Vieques. Ana Elisa links the colonial relationship of Vieques to Puerto Rico, and Puerto Rico to the United States to articulate not only the Navy’s toxic legacy, but the legacy of a lack of sustainable agriculture. She highlights the multitude of colonial legacies that factor into the debilitating health on Vieques. And, how health then emerges as a major concern for the island. This interview was one of many where I discovered how commonplace it was to know someone on the island with a severe health condition. Later, I would see how this ubiquitousness would translate to center on demands for a hospital.
This pervasiveness was noted in Luis Galanes Valldejuli’s (2018) *Tourism and Language in Vieques: An Ethnography of the Post-Navy Period* in his chapter on “Decontamination, Reparations, Health, and Crime Issues.” However, in the chapter, he also begins by discussing how, while Viequenese do speak about these powerful issues and have garnered the support of influential people to speak on their behalf, colonial forces ignore those demands, limiting the ability of Viequenses to meaningfully enact change. Here, Galanes Valldejuli acknowledges that Viequenses *do* express dissent, including around widespread health issues. Yet because he does not see those expressions resulting in or having the capacity to produce change, he confines their speech as ineffectual resistance. By contrast, in my chapter, I will discuss how in Post-hurricane María, the people of Vieques showed the power of its voice, but also its ability to enact change, through its collective demand for a hospital. In particular, I will discuss how the hurricane centered issues on the island and made them more tangible to everyday Viequenses. Then, I will discuss how the death of a young girl became a flashpoint for protests, a shared way of articulating this long-held frustration of residents, translating everyday expressions of dissent shared between residents into large scale mobilizations. In addition, I will highlight two key tools Viequenses used to sustain this resistance, including storytelling and gossip, and the use of symbolism, similar to its use in protests against the U.S. Navy.

**The CDT**

Hurricane María solidified many truths for Puerto Rico including its colonial relationship and its lack of support from the United States. It also exacerbated many trends, including out migration to the U.S. and deepening poverty. Similar patterns and accompanying exasperation
occurred on Vieques, especially regarding its health care system. First, I will discuss how, in the
wake of the Hurricane, the storm revealed the already weak healthcare system on Vieques, while
also further decreasing its ability to operate. During my internship in 2018, the issue I readily
identified on Vieques was a lack of health infrastructure and resources. It became self-evident in
many ways as people relayed the arduous and often complicated journey to the main island for
doctor appointments and medicine, as I discussed in the previous chapter, or as they made
reference to the lasting health effects of the Navy. I often heard Viequenses lament the
debilitated health system. However, their stories often foregrounded the ways Hurricane María
and its aftermath further eroded an already-broken system, magnifying health problems on the
island. In one instance, during a casual conversation about her life on Vieques, a woman shared
her frustration and indeed her fear regarding the lack of proper health care on the island. She
recounted the death of her mother, who had diabetes, which occurred two weeks after María. She
blamed the storm and the lack of resources available with the destruction of the The Center for
Diagnosis and Treatment (CDT). Similarly in an interview that aired on Radio Vieques, a
Viequense parent shared his and his neighbors concern for their children. They were distressed
about the possibility of respiratory problems caused by the massive amounts of smoke being
released from generators supplying the island with electricity in the wake of María. The two
diesel generators ran for eighteen months until the underwater electricity cable was reconnected.
In addition to these two stories, there were constant exchanges detailing a lack of medicine or
equipment at the CDT.

It is crucial to understand the history of the CDT and why its destruction during hurricane
María became the foundation of collective resistance on the island. First, It is important to note
that Vieques has never had a proper hospital. In January 2020, an article by NBC stated, “Almost
two years after Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, the smaller island of Vieques still does
not have a hospital” (Acevedo). This is one of the misleading headlines by the U.S. and Puerto
Rican press. The CDT did act for many years as a quasi-hospital that was open 24/7 and, at one
point, was a licensed hospital (before the U.S. Health Department demoted them to a CDT in
2015). However, through all these years and even during the period when it held a hospital
license, the Susana Centeno Family Health Center, still lacked the full capabilities of a hospital.
And, throughout the island’s history, the people of Vieques have continually traveled to the main
island for their health needs.

    After Hurricane María passed through Vieques, the building that housed the CDT was so
damaged that FEMA moved the CDT into a few trailers located at an old school in the Las María
neighborhood, far removed from the more populous areas of the island. This new location was
also further away from the airport, which is used if a patient needs to be airlifted to the main
island for “proper care.” Indeed, many Viequenses would use statements like proper care,
tratamiento adecuado, to discuss the service you get on the main island, as opposed to the
facilities at the CDT.

    During my first summer on the island, while running an errand, I was able to visit a part
of the temporary health facility trailers and got a better sense of the health center’s conditions.
The facility built by FEMA was so small I was able to quickly walk through the entire building
while looking for the nurse who dealt with administrative issues. The center was in fact not a
single building but rather constructed by attaching a number of basic trailer-like rooms together,

7 The building that housed all the health facilities until its closure after the Hurricanes
each with a designated area for specific ailments or treatment-types. Those areas were identified
by simple paper signs and separated by medical curtains rather than sturdy walls. Everything
about these facilities, from the trailers to its paper signs, spoke of its temporariness. Its
resemblance was closer to a temporary shelter, than a hospital or health facility. My own
experience being insured and living close to cities in Puerto Rico then Boston meant that I
always had access to a 24-hour clinic or hospital. Maybe that experience, combined with the
stories I had heard from Viequenses, was why I had such an uneasy feeling walking through the
trailers. However, I pacified myself by thinking that these were just a Band Aid until they
reconstructed a new health facility.

However, when I returned at the beginning of 2020, the island was still reliant on the
temporary “hospital” in Las Marias along with the trailers. In 2018 and 2019, FEMA allocated
money for the reconstruction of the CDT, and the U.S. government and the PROMESA board
approved the construction. However, due to multiple bureaucratic hurdles, the money had not
been released for use. As reported in an article by the Center for Investigative Journalism, some
of those bureaucratic hurdles included whether the classification of the building should be a
hospital or health center, how the money should be used, and whether FEMA should rebuild in
the same place, or build a new building at a different location (Del Mar Quilles). Here,
understanding how FEMA classifies Vieques’ health needs is essential because by calling the
CDT a hospital, there would be severe implications for the amount of funding it would receive.
The people of Vieques have made it clear they want a real hospital, and the U.S. media and
FEMA have called the CDT a hospital. However, in reports, FEMA has categorically designated
it as a clinic (FEMA). Hurricane María increased health issues on the island by further
debilitating an already insufficient medical facilities. The disaster, followed by FEMA and the Puerto Rican government’s failure to reach a decision regarding the categorization of the center, which further delayed its reconstruction, meant that the health of Viequenses remained vulnerable. Many Viequenses regularly expressed their dissatisfaction with both the previous CDT facilities and the temporary clinic through the stories they shared with me during my stay in 2018. When I returned in 2020, however, those frustrations would reach a tipping point.

**Una Vida Digna and A New Martyr**

On January 12th, 2020, Jaideliz “Jai” Moreno Ventura, a 13-year old Viequense, died. The death of the girl shocked the entire Viequense community. I first learned of her death on the many channels on Facebook dedicated to sharing news of the community. Within hours of her death first circulating on social media, I received a text with a flyer invitation to a vigil and protest at the CDT in Las Marias. The word spread quickly and efficiently through social media like Facebook and Whatsapp and through the local networks on Vieques. Later, during an interview discussing the quick social action, Jaime, a local business owner who attended the vigil, told me, “well, she was so young, and that scared a lot of people. And of course, for it to happen to a Ventura...” he concluded, referencing the fact that the Ventura family is a prominent family on the island. Jaime also remarked that Vieques was a small island, so information was able to spread quicker. The girl’s shockingly-young age, her prominent family, and the efficiency of social media rallied people quickly. But as I will suggest below, her death inflamed Viequenses’ already smoldering frustration, linking Viequense protests from previous eras to contemporary expressions of dissent.
On January 15th, the day of the gathering, I, along with a couple hundred residents of Vieques, attended the half-vigil, half-protest. Walking up to the CDT, there was an immense sadness emanating from the crowd. Before the protest began, people were milling around greeting their friends, but with a very silent air. One of the activists I had known since the summer of 2018 walked over and greeted me. She kissed me on both cheeks, the standard greeting, but then grabbed my hands and gave them a reassuring squeeze and didn’t let go for a couple minutes until she went to greet another friend. Looking around the crowd, I could see how unique this gathering was to the other significant protests I had attended on Vieques. There were so many children. First, many of Jai’s classmates showed-up to support and mourn for their compañera, but there were also many mothers who had brought their children. These mothers with their children indicated a change in demographic to the other protest I had witnessed, which included more elderly adult residents. Their presence showed how vitally these mothers felt that they needed to secure a hospital for their children. Thus, children became the face of Vieques’ failed health infrastructure.

The protest began with a prayer for Jaideliz, and then changed to speeches by community members. Evan, diligently translated the Spanish into English for the American residents to understand, which was criticized later (as discussed in chapter 1). The speeches centered on the inadequacies of the CDT and the health injustices that Viequenses face. The Moreno Ventura family gave a speech going over every intimate detail of what happened to Jai—including when medical staff made a family member administer CPR on her. The grandfather, who was going over the details, said it was important to the family to share those details so that the community could understand the situation, and also suggested that if foreign media asked Viequenses, they
could share the story accurately to the media. As Jai’s grandfather told the story, her mother’s cries were so heart wrenching that those gathered all around me wept along with her. “¿Cuando vamos a tener una vida digna para los Viequense?,” When will we have a dignified life for Viequenses, a woman behind me whispered to her companion as she cried.

The next speech started when one activist stepped forward and began, “This is how we felt when David Sanes died.” He continued his speech by stating that Jai’s death would not be in vain and that she would serve as the new rallying cry of the Viequense, a new martyr. In so doing, the speaker linked Jai’s death to another Viequense who has stood as a symbol of injustice on the island. David Sanes was a local Viequenses who worked as a security officer for the U.S. Navy. In 1999, while Sanes was on the job, two bombs used in a training exercise were dropped in the incorrect location, killing Sanes. While many people had been upset with the occupation of the U.S. Navy and had shown forms of dissent toward la marina, his death sparked the largest protest against their removal (McCaffrey 2002: 149-150). His death is directly credited for being a vital force in the removal of the U.S. Navy. Sanes’ family expressed that they did not wish for his death to become political. Nevertheless, it served as the spark for mobilizing the long-held grievances of the Viequense population into the years-long physical and collective protests that occurred on the island between 1999 and 2002.

Other community leaders also spoke at Jai’s vigil-protest. Their recurring call was for a new hospital, “a proper one” that had the right medications, equipment, and doctors. Additionally, people recounted their own horrors receiving treatment at the CDT or transportation to the main island. Most of these stories I had heard before through rumors or as stories shared in private conversations, however they became more real as I heard them at the
rally told by families and people who experienced them first-hand. People stressed how this issue was about “human rights” and a part of “the continued fight of Vieques,” language adopted from U.S. Navy protests. At this protest, I heard the term “crisis de salud,” health crisis, used for the first time to describe the health problems on Vieques. This term, “health crisis,” indicated to me the seriousness of people’s understanding of the problem. One important aspect to note is that people on Vieques were asking for a “proper hospital,” this is a distinction from just going back to the way things were before the hurricane hit. Instead, protesters demanded not only a new facility but also a completely new way of receiving treatment on the island.

In the following two weeks, my interviews centered on the death of Jai. People were keen to discuss the importance of her death and the need for a hospital. In one interview with a mother on Vieques, she commented to me, “Even though we never imagined it was coming, we should have.” I heard many similar sentiments. My interviews centered on concerns of the “health crisis.” However, it was not just my interviews that began to change. My casual conversations also centered on the news of the death and peoples own horror stories with the CDT. These stories all had similar ends: I could have been Jai, or my family member could have been Jai. People told me about having to bring their own medical equipment to the hospital, about being misdiagnosed, and in the case of Robert Rabin, my old boss, of sitting in a dirty cot in an airplane to be brought to the main island. A 20-year-old girl told me about how, when she went to seek medical attention for a sharp pain in her abdomen, she was told that she was having menstrual cramps and to go home. When her instincts led her to the main island for treatment, she learned that she had appendicitis. She, again, ended her story like so many others, “I could have been her.”
At that moment, the risk of living on Vieques was made even more tangible to the people of Vieques. Jai’s death differed from previous experiences and circulating stories that always seemed to be about close misses. Or, when death did occur, it could be placated by, “this person was old, or they had this condition that made them susceptible.” While people were angry about the hospital before and showed their dissent through storytelling, the death of Jai, for the first time, crystalized how the inadequacies of the health system affected and could affect everyone. Most importantly, drawing similarities with the protests against the Navy, The death of Jai served as a flashpoint. Like the death of Sanes, it became a way for people to pointedly and collectively articulate anger at the health crisis on Vieques. In my interviews, many people would reference the death of Sanes when discussing the death of the Moreno Ventura girl. This further linked how striking this death was for the people of Vieques.

In contrast, in 2018, I observed that most health problems on Vieques were almost always discussed in sympathetic yet slightly removed ways—where people, if not directly affected, did not actively advocate for change. They did share stories and gossiped over the problems about the CDT. They participated and actively engaged in sharing their opposition like with the issues of the ferry and the gentrification. However, there was a drastic change with Jai’s death. People began to frame their arguments in a “it could be me,” or it could be an everyday person on Vieques. This scared people. And, the CDT and the inaction of FEMA became the ground zero of these health problems on Vieques. Although I want to note that one crucial aspect was highlighted, namely the shortcomings of the CDT and need for a hospital, many other problems in the health crisis were ignored, like food insecurity and the U.S. Navy’s residual toxic waste. The focus of these protests was the CDTs inadequacies, and the solution to the health crisis that
protesters identified was to get a “proper” hospital. While activists did situate the hospital within the framework of larger structural health inequities, by making the hospital the tangible site of protests, larger health inequalities were reduced, or even muted, from the larger public call for change. This highlighted how directly the one event, Jai’s death, impacted the entire narrative of the subsequent overt protest.

#YoTengoMiBloqueYTú

A few days after the protest held in Las Marias, I began to see a hashtag on various social media pages: #YoTengoMiBloqueYTú. The hashtag translates to, “I have my block, what about you?” The hashtag was part of a campaign for a proper hospital in Vieques. The videos, which accompanied the hashtag, told people to bring one concrete block to the central plaza in Isabella Segunda, the largest town on Vieques, to write their name on it, each block was a representation of each resident of Vieques. The symbolism used here is referencing how almost every building in Puerto Rico is created out of concrete blocks. By bringing your block, it was a symbol that if the U.S. and Puerto Rican government did not construct the hospital, the community would build the hospital—one concrete block at a time.

Wanting to understand the similarities between the U.S. Navy’s protest and the current protests. I read Katherine McCaffrey’s book, “Military Power and Popular Protest: The U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico. In her book, she highlights four key elements to the success of the U.S. navy’s removal. They were: (1) the end of the Cold War, (2) activists founded an organization, The Committee to Rescue and Develop Vieques, that was “broad based and inclusive,” (3) The Committee used local identity politics “that avoided debates of Puerto Rican
Sovereignty,” (4) and, the Navy’s “unwillingness to compromise” gave activists a clear focus (2002: 125-126). Within these elements, I found two crucial similarities to the #YoTengoMiBloqueYTú movement. First, during the Navy protest, participants helped a diverse coalition of people to come together, most notably the working Viequenses, the church, local and Puerto Rican activists, and North-Americans. There was a similar, melting-pot like appeal to be a part of the #YoTengoMiBloqueYTú. I saw many Viequenses engage with American residents and even tourists in the plaza by explaining the current situation, or why the blocks were there to symbolize. And, although some were not happy with the decision, the entire vigil for Jai was translated into English. Second, in the U.S. Navy protests, activists constructed a couple of 12-foot white crosses on the military’s land. This was used as a local cultural understanding to symbolize Sanes’ Christian martyrdom, and in turn, was also used to symbolize peace to an outside gaze (Garces 2010). McCaffrey notes that this symbolic framework was crucial to engaging women and the church, but also actors outside of Puerto Rico (160-161). Similarly, while these blocks had crucial local symbolism—as building materials, they also appealed to outside news sources, who saw and reported (NPR, NBC, Vox) on it as a peaceful way of protesting for better health care systems.

An important aspect to the #YoTengoMiBloqueYTú protests, was how acts of everyday resistance, like gossip, continued to be a crucial and ever-present part of the movement. Many Viequeneses distrusted the bureaucratic and political forces who had the power to build the hospital. A couple days after the campaign began, the plaza was filled with over 4000 blocks. However, soon I saw a rumor on Facebook that the mayor of Vieques and his office were going to remove the blocks. The story soon spread to other social media and over text. They were
calling for people to go down to the plaza and be on alert. However, only hours later, the
governor was laying down his own block in the plaza, saying there was no intention of removing
the blocks and that he stands with the people of Vieques. In addition to this rumor, I was also
warned that FEMA had no intention of building any new facility for Vieques, even though
FEMA had already allocated money for the reconstruction of the CDT. These rumors and how
quickly they spread reflected a deep fear of people that the government would try to dismiss,
silence, or simply ignore their protest for a new hospital.

A Shift in Resistance

While I had recorded a plethora of stories and gossip about the systemic failings of the
CDT in 2018. The death of Jai Moreno Ventura was the catalyst for discussions I had never
heard and it became the cry for a new hospital. The forms of everyday resistance, in the form of
gossip and storytelling, became more poignant and commonplace. As discussed above, the
change in interviews and casual conversations in the weeks after Jai’s death were drastic, and
they were used as an ever-present reminder to why Vieques needed a hospital. The gossip, like
the one about the governor removing the blocks or that FEMA was refusing to even consider
funding the hospital, were reflections of the deep mistrust of the government, but more
importantly were used as a tool to keep people vigilant to their community organizing.
Viequenses were able to promote awareness of the protest by utilizing the very same webs of
communication they were using before the death of Jai. Indeed, the informal webs that were
formed through years of everyday resistance—sharing stories and gossip—made these large
scale protests possible.
The #YoTengoMiBloqueYTú also sparked other forms of individual resistance. For example, the vast mural that held emoji faces on one of the busiest streets on the island was transformed into an overt political statement. Each emoji face now included a comic book speech bubble with one word: “hospital…”. In addition, there were also spray paintings across the Mosquito Pier, a former military dock, asking for Viequenses “to wake up to the abuse,” (Ellison 2019). However, the most considerable changes were the two protests—the vigil and the #YoTengoMiBloqueYTú in the plaza. When I attended the demonstration of the ferry system in 2018, it was mostly older residents, and it was still only around 200 people. Both the demographics and magnitude of the vigil and the #YoTengoMiBloqueYTú movement differed from the ferry protest. For example, the vigil had more young people—students and mothers with children—and the participation of the #YoTengoMiBloqueYTú was by far the most significant collective resistance I had seen on the island. This change in demographics and magnitude signalled the underlying ability the community possesses: to create a far-reaching movement that is able to engage more people than the usual, committed activists.

Conclusion

The death of Jaideliz (Jai) Ventura Moreno, like the death of David Sanes, made a huge, but often abstract, problem tangible in the everyday Viequense, provoking a massive outpouring of public dissent. This shift in intensity and continued use of storytelling and gossip, the spray painting and change in the emoji mural, and the collective physical action of the vigil and the #Yotengomibloqueytú movement unified the island in new ways. Like the U.S. Navy protests, the #Yotengomibloqueytú used a form of symbolic protest that had wide-spread participation and
engaged all sects of the island. Everyone I met in the days after the movement began would ask me if, “I had put my block down.”

In Galanes Valldejuli’s book, he states, “Sixty years of struggle with the Navy has produced a legacy of community leaders and mobilization capacity that has continued to mark social life even after the departure of the Navy,” (2017: xiii). I agree, and these legacies are saliently seen throughout the hospital protest. He continues by saying that Viequenses have a “combative voice,” although their dissent becomes “muted” because powerful actors will not listen to them. In contrast, I have argued in the previous two chapters that this “combative voice” is a key tool in the everyday lives of the Viequense. It helps create a shared framework for understanding and narrating the problems facing Vieques, as we saw in the discourses surrounding gentrification. It helps circulate those analyses throughout the community and it reminds community members to be “pendiente” or attuned/alert to the unfolding situation. This voice was the success of the #Yotengomibloqueytú movement. Ultimately, the protest of the hospital proves that this voice is not “muted,” and still carries the weight to enact change.

On January 21st, only a couple days after the wide-spread news coverage of the #YoTengoMiBloqueYTú movement and the mounting criticism, the Federal Emergency Management Agency approved $39.5 million to construct the hospital on Vieques. This was a giant win for the people of Vieques. They were able to mobilize and create a far-reaching protest; the voice of the Viequense was heard. However, complications with this announcement have already begun. When will the money be released? When will the hospital be built? And, will it be a proper hospital or only an improved clinic? There are no reliable answers to these
questions yet, and no promises. As FEMA aid, under the Trump Administration, has been hard to secure and distribute even if promised by the agency.

However, Viequenses are determined to get a hospital. In February, Representative Nydia Velazquez (D-NY), brought Jai Moreno Ventura’s mother, Jessica Moraima Ventura Perez, to the State of the Union address to further advocate for Vieques. At the State of the Union, Ventura Perez did an interview with David Begnaud, a reporter for CBS, who has become a strong advocate for Puerto Rican issues in the mainstream media. In late January, massive protests were occurring in San Juan over the discovery of unused aid and for the resignation of the governor, Wanda Velez Garced. During these demonstrations, right in front of the Governor's household, La Fortaleza, on a plastic blockade was a single cement block with “Hospital pa Vieques,” Hospital for Vieques, written on it. Then, on February 6th, the school-aged children, many of whom were classmates of Jai, held a “protesta infantil,” youth protest, in San Juan to continue to ensure that Viequenses would get a hospital and that there would be “Justice for Jai.” The Viequense are demanding new terms—ones with better health for their island—and they are determined to be heard.
Conclusion

One hot day during my 2018 internship, I was sitting in the front entrance of the Fortín. Someone had accidentally taken the keys to the archives home, so, locked out of work, I decided to help at the museum. However, it was the peak of summer, and there weren’t many tourists coming in (as most tourists to Vieques visit during the cold months of the U.S.). With little else to do, I sat and chatted with one of the workers of the Fortín, Raúl.

Raúl told me about his childhood on Vieques. He narrated whimsical stories of swimming in the bioluminescent bay at night, long before regulations were put in place by conservation laws that would prohibit such dalliances now, and learning to ride a horse for the first time. However, amid telling me about his success in catching a wild horse, he stopped abruptly and changed to a new story.
He rolled his sleeve up and pointed to a perfectly round scar. I stared because I had never seen a vaccination scar before. He tapped it. “Lo ves,” do you see? He explained how, when he was a little kid, one day, the Navy burst into their school and forced them all to get vaccinations. “We didn’t know what it was. As if they would ask our parents.” I knew the history of the contraceptive pill trials and unconsented sterilization in Puerto Rico, but it still came as a shock to hear this story. He paused briefly and then launched into one of his myriad la marina stories.

As Raúl retold his stories, his eyes drew upward as one does when trying hard to remember the details. He recounted the stories of hearing bombs go off during class and seeing women verbally harassed by soldiers. Chiefly, he spoke of watching the military march across the civilian part of the island. For several decades, this was how soldiers traveled to enter the opposing Navy land, as the civilian land lay sandwiched between them. As the soldiers marched, he told me that he and the other children would throw water at them. At first, I thought he meant in anger, but he clarified the children did this in sympathy. They felt bad for the soldiers, who had to march in the Puerto Rican heat.

Then, he stopped again, and focused on me and asked what I thought the future of Puerto Rico should be. Although, almost a non sequitur, I knew the relationship between these stories and the question. His words narrated a part of the colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. And, he wanted to know where I stood on the archipelago’s connection to the United States. I paused. I knew what my answer would be. However, living in the U.S. for so long, I felt ambivalent about airing my opinions on the possible outcome of Puerto Rico. I did not want to overstep people who had to live this colonial relationship every day. So, I finally said, “I don’t know.”
Turning the question back on him, I asked, “and, you? What do you think Puerto Rico should do?” He paused, much longer than I had, almost to the point that the silence had begun to become awkward. He took a deep breath in, shaking his head, and uttered, “No se, pero no puede quedar así, porque Vieques no puede existir así,” I don’t know, but it cannot stay how it is because Vieques can not continue to exist like this.

I share this story to show that the unique experiences of Viequenses shape their political understanding of resistance and coloniality. Sixty years of Naval occupation have given them a keen will to fight for a better Vieques. While the question of Puerto Rico’s colonial status is a fraught topic on both Puerto Rico and Vieques, many people in interviews or casual conversations would invariably explain how much Vieques still needed to change despite the removal of the Navy. The people of Vieques openly shared stories of the histories and problems on Vieques with me. And, due to the interest I showed in their stories, they also promptly looped me into their networks of gossip and dissent.

In my participant-observation, key patterns and problems emerged, and, in my interviews, the issues became repeatedly highlighted and explained to me by Viequenses. I use the issues I learned about—American Gentrification, the ferry privatization, and the lack of a hospital—to understand the ways Viequenese are preserving their way of life and trying to regain control over their future. I studied how Viequenses use gossip and stories as a tool of everyday resistance. While this was not obvious at first, as seen throughout the chapters above, it is one of the most valuable tools that the community uses to share problems and provoke people to recognize them and assume responsibility for them. Another pattern that emerged at first in the ferry demonstration, and later within the hospital protests, were the ways that gossip became an
apparatus for sustaining more overt forms of protest. Throughout those two chapters, I sought to understand the relationship between the history of the Navy’s protests as well as how subtle and overt forms of resistance relate to each other. That relationship suggests that there is not one thing we can call “resistance,” but rather that we can better understand modes of resistance as part of an ongoing process.

One of the problems I had while writing this thesis was narrowing down which issues to highlight. There are many problems on Vieques (food insecurity, corporate goodwill, drug trafficking, and violence against women) that I documented that never ended up in this thesis. However, the three I chose to write about are crucial for understanding the broader socio-political transformations occurring on Vieques and how residents are responding to these issues.

I hope that by reading this thesis, the reader has learned about these “crossroad” issues, or issues whose solutions are still undecided, on Vieques, and how everyday resistance holds within them the potential to become something more profound. Finally, I wish to note that my work is just a small contribution to what Viequenses, activists, and scholars who study Vieques want: to create a continued discussion of the problems facing Vieques to ensure that there will one day be a just future for the Viequense.
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