From Military Exercises to Visions of Wilderness:
Constructed Environments in Vieques, Puerto Rico

by

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Thesis submitted to
the Department of Anthropology, Wellesley College
April 2013

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Deborah Matzner in the Department of Anthropology and Professor Jay Turner in the Department of Environmental Studies at Wellesley College for their guidance in my research. I would also like to thank everyone – from fishermen to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service – for sharing their knowledge, expertise, and life experience living and/or working in Vieques. Their different understandings of the environmental and social challenges in Vieques that I came to know through interviews and conversation are really at the heart of my thesis. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their continual support and encouragement in this academic pursuit.
Abstract

I hope to tell the story of the contested landscape of a former military training base in Vieques, a small island municipality of Puerto Rico. Military occupation on the island from 1940 until 2003 led to serious environmental and economic devastation. In 2003, the Navy gave two-thirds of the island to U.S. Fish and Wildlife. In effect, toxic wasteland is now under “conservation” where cleanup is impossible given its status as a wildlife sanctuary. This paradox has been kept out of local dialogue and has provided popular media with a platform to dub Vieques as an untouched gem of the Caribbean.
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Coconut Palms (Photo taken by Ada Smith, June 2011)

Introduction: The Illusion of the Coconut Palm

As I flipped through my photos from the summer I spent in Vieques, I came across image after image of what is an icon of tropical paradise today; the coconut palm. I travelled to Vieques for the first time in the summer of 2011 when I was selected and funded by Wellesley College to be a summer intern at the Vieques Conservation and Historical Trust, a local non-profit dedicated to environmental and cultural conservation of the island. Having spent the majority of my life in a temperate climate, the tropical environment I would call my home that summer seemed like it was right out of the pages of a magazine. I was amazed that the water was actually that color of blue and that the white sand beaches actually lived up to their name. But what
caught my eye (and my camera lens) more than anything when I set foot in Vieques were the tall, coconut palms. Subconsciously, the coconut palm became a pervasive image in my “Summer in Vieques” album. The palms seemed like the perfect representation of the beauty of the island I was on, but why? What was it about the coconut palm that embodies quintessential island life?

Images of coconut palms riddle Caribbean travel magazines and tourist brochures today. To the modern traveler, it seems that coconut palms have come to represent tropical paradise. Swaying coconut trees may symbolize the laid-back lifestyle of the tropics and the promise of long lazy days spent swinging in hammocks, sipping cool drinks, and gazing out at the turquoise blue water.

The image of the coconut palm came to represent the Caribbean tropical island fantasy that I thought I had encountered my first time in Vieques, with the initial gaze of a tourist. But as with all fantasies, we prefer not to be reminded of reality, which may be far less engaging than the dream. Let’s consider the facts behind the ubiquitous image of the coconut palm and all that it stands for.

The coconut palm was first seen by Western eyes through the travel journals of Spanish colonists in the late sixteenth century. It is believed to have evolved in the Pacific region and is not native to the Caribbean, but has since adapted well to tropical coasts around the globe.¹ While the details of when and by whom the first coconut palm was planted in the Caribbean, research on the coconut’s DNA indicates that it was brought to the region by colonists during the late 15th or early 16th century and was planted in the Caribbean because of its valuable fruit. More recently, the coconut palm has been intensely propagated by beachside resorts and hotels for its towering foliage, framing paths to the beach. In fact, every palm you see in the Caribbean

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exists because of the role of the human hand - and in Vieques, it seems that palms are just about everywhere.

The coconut palm in the Caribbean in general, and more specifically Vieques, is gazed upon as a symbol of natural beauty, when in reality it embodies the story of colonial domination, biological imperialism, and the re-invention of natural landscapes. These major themes are encompassed by the story of the coconut palm, but are themes that I will return to again and again as I explore the environmental and political history and present day in Vieques in the following chapters.

In Vieques, coconut palms rim the coasts of what many herald as a wilderness conservation area today; the Vieques Wildlife Refuge. In reality, this “wilderness” was once used as a bombing range by the U.S. military and in part makes up a U.S. Superfund site, or toxic wasteland. This Refuge, now overgrown with the coconut palm was once a larger and better-functioning mangrove system. But nevertheless, the military pointed to the establishment of the conservation of these invasive species and the contaminated soil; perhaps as a way to maintain their presence on the island, perhaps as an “eco-friendly” veil or perhaps to evade costly cleanup.

The story of the coconut palm introduces the themes power and colonialism in and the invisible domination of a natural landscape and the natural resources that Viequense residents rely on for their health and survival. The toxicity that persists in in the seemingly natural Refuge illuminates the issues of invisible violence and environmental injustice- challenges the island faces today.

With the help of its picturesque palms, the Vieques Wildlife Refuge today represents a “natural Vieques” that fulfills an iconic, ecological theme, which has become essential to the tourism industry in the post-Navy era. Tourists recognize paradise when they see it, and while
the military originally harmed the island, from a visitor’s gaze, Vieques looks as if it has since been rescued by Edenic nature. Magazines, images on the web, brochures, and other advertisements convince tourists that when they visit Vieques, they will find tropical nature. And when tourists arrive, many believe that they have. But in reality, it is a commodified idea of nature and a false notion of pristineness. In reality, tourists gaze upon a landscape that has been altered by human presence and cultivation for hundreds of years. The landscape in Vieques, like other Caribbean islands, has been reinvented and reimagined in the public sphere to support the ideals of a tourist destination and tourist economy, which now makes up the most important industry on the island.

The history of the palm has remained out of public awareness and so has the violent environmental and military history of Vieques. The coconut palm is gazed upon as a piece of the natural, unspoiled paradise in Vieques rather than as an embodiment of the biological and cultural domination of the island. The extensive replication and promotion of this stereotypical image threatens to encourage a new form of imperialism, that of the global tourism industry, and undermine the demands of the Vieques community for environmental justice and public health. In my thesis I ask you to consider the facts behind the “Vieques story” like the truths behind the coconut palm. I hope to reveal Vieques’ forgotten history and write against the illusion of paradise so that the subaltern voices of the island community may be heard.
Location of Vieques, Puerto Rico

NOAA. “An Ecological Characterization of the Marine Resources of Vieques, Puerto Rico.”
In the following pages, I attempt to tell a story about the contested landscape on the former military base in Vieques, a small island municipality of Puerto Rico, and on the multiple stakeholders who have engaged with the land through its past, present, and future. I attempt, through ethnographic experience and reading of relevant literature in anthropology and environmental studies, to elaborate and better understand relationships between political, cultural, and environmental transformation in a particular time and place. I hope to put into conversation a charting of the physical environmental history of the land with its socially constructed history.

Vieques is located approximately 11 km southeast of the main island of Puerto Rico in the Caribbean Sea. Approximately 33 km long and 7 km wide, the quaint island has two small towns located on opposite sides of the mid-section of the island, Isabel Segunda on the north shore and Esperanza on the south coast where the islands’ almost 10,000 residents reside.  

**An Overview of the Conflict**

Between 1941 and 1947, the United States annexed approximately two-thirds of the land on both the eastern and western ends of Vieques for use by the military, specifically the Navy, as a base and training facility (Figure 1). For sixty years, the military utilized the west end of the island as a Naval Ammunition Support Detachment (NASD) for storage of ammunition, while the east was used for active training. Referred to as the Vieques Naval Training Range (VNTR), the land was divided from west to east into the Eastern Maneuver Area (EMA), Secondary Impact Area (SIA), Live Impact Area (LIA), and Eastern Conservation Area (ECA). Military training included everything from air, sea, and maneuver warfare and air-to-ground bombing to amphibious landings and artillery training operations.

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Figure 1.2. Former land ownership in Vieques from 1941 to land transfer in 2001 and 2003. Boundaries were provided by Geo-Marine, Inc. NASD = Naval Ammunition Support Detachment, CA = Civilian Area, EMA = the Eastern Maneuver Area, SIA = Secondary Impact Area, LIA = Live Impact Area, ECA = Eastern Conservation Area.

Figure 1.3. Land ownership distribution in Vieques as of 2006. Boundaries were provided by William Hernandez (US Fish and Wildlife Service). ROTH = Relocatable Over the Horizon Radar; NWR = National Wildlife Refuge.
From 1940 until 2003, Viequense residents lived sandwiched between the Naval munitions storage and live bombing activity. The six decades of military occupation on the island captured the attention of local residents, activists, media and government officials alike. Protests against the U.S. Navy in Vieques were largely a fight for human rights and environmental justice. While tension resides regarding political and economic association with the U.S., naval occupation in Vieques was highly contested. The navy in Vieques didn’t simply symbolize political power of the U.S. but caused very real material harm to the island and its civilian community. Protest was largely framed on the basis of this harm including the detrimental impact to economic activity, denial of access to natural resources, destruction of the environment and degradation of public health.

In 1964, the Citizen’s Committee for the Defense of Vieques, one of the earliest citizen opposition groups was formed. Much of their fight against the navy was around the issues of land use and subsistence. The navy had barred access to the coast where residents fished and collected coconuts and fruits, squelching the local fishing economy and residents’ access to natural resources. In the 1970s, fishermen became the face of Vieques and led a grassroots campaign to halt Navy maneuvers. Between 1978-1983, clashes and resentment toward the Navy emerged dramatically, resting on the basis of the restriction of fishing rights and economic survival. In the 1980s, the “Fisherman’s War” collapsed but tension continued.

A mishap on April 19, 1999, where an F-18 fighter jet dropped two 500-pound bombs several miles off target killing Vieques- born David Sanes-Rodríguez, a civilian security guard working for the U.S. Navy catalyzed renewed protest. For a year after this incident, dozens of

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4 NOAA. “An Ecological Characterization of the Marine Resources of Vieques, Puerto Rico.”
protestors occupied a military target range in a mass mobilization of grassroots effort that eventually shut down the base. The bombing range, having had devastating effects on the environment, human health and economy, became the apotheosis of local and international activist efforts to demilitarize the island and the US military stopped all activity on the island-municipality on May 1, 2003.  

After the Navy ceased active training in 2003 they handed over the two-thirds of the island they occupied to U.S. Fish and Wildlife to establish the Vieques Wildlife Refuge. In effect, land that was once bombed 180 days of the year and is currently deemed an EPA Superfund, or one of the nation’s most hazardous and toxic waste sites, is now under “conservation” where clean-up is impossible given its status as a wildlife sanctuary. Superfund sites in the United States constitute land identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that has been contaminated by hazardous waste and poses a risk to human health or the environment or both. The cleanup of Superfund sites can take years or decades and cost hundreds of millions of dollars. In cases where a responsible party is involved, such as oil spills or illegal dumping of toxic waste, the government operates on the “polluter pays” principal. In Vieques, the responsible party is our very own U.S. military and funding for cleanup is limited.

Today, it seems as though this paradox has not only been kept out of local dialogue, but has provided the media with a platform to dub Vieques as an untouched gem of the Caribbean. Contrary to these claims, Vieques in reality faces serious environmental and human health consequences as a result of military activity.

While recent public health research is limited, a study published in the American Journal

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for Public Health in 2001 reveals evidence from government census data showing the serious health challenges in Vieques compared with the main island of Puerto Rico. Health data shows that from 1985 through 1989, standardized cancer incidence rates on Vieques were 27% higher than those in Puerto Rico overall. Of Puerto Rico’s 78 municipalities, in 1995 Vieques had the highest mortality rate and the likelihood that a pregnant woman would give birth to an underweight infant was 65% greater in Vieques than on the main island. While studies have not been conducted since, high prevalence of cancer continues to be attributed to naval activity and environmental toxins by both the Vieques community and public health researchers from around the US and Puerto Rico.

At the date the article was published in 2001, the need for the navy to leave Vieques was considered consensus among the public health community. Researchers at the University of Puerto Rico Graduate School of Public Health sponsored a policy statement that was adopted by the American Public Health Association calling on the US Navy to leave Vieques and an organization called “Paz (Peace) para Vieques” was formed after interns from New York visited the island and recognized that health issues linked to environmental contamination were not being met. Dr. Joe Asbury of “Paz para Vieques” described that after decades of bombing “the eastern tip of Vieques has more craters per square kilometer than the moon” and that the munitions-related toxins left behind can be linked to increased cancer rates found among the people of Vieques. These toxins leach into the environment and eventually people’s bodies, making them susceptible not only to cancer, but respiratory disease, skin conditions, and low

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10 Wilcox, Joyce. "Vieques, Puerto Rico: An Island Under Siege."
11 Wilcox, Joyce. "Vieques, Puerto Rico: An Island Under Siege."
birth rates. With no cleanup having taken place, it would be wishful thinking that toxins aren’t still affecting the islands residents.

Why Vieques? The Theme of Peripherality and Marginality in Vieques

Military bases along with all kinds of other toxic activity are frequently established on the political margins of national territory, on lands occupied by ethnic and cultural minorities or otherwise disadvantaged populations. In the case of Vieques, the outbreak of WWII encouraged US military thinkers to envision Vieques in strategic terms. The navy has argued that choosing Vieques as a naval base was a necessity for national defense. However, residents, activists, and others claim the decision was made with the knowledge of clear economic advantages of using Vieques as a base. Unlike bases in other countries, the U.S. military didn’t pay any fees or “permission cost” to Puerto Rico for the use of land in Vieques. In fact, Vieques acted as a source of revenue for the U.S. military. Land was rented out to foreign militaries to bomb, earning the military about $80 million per year, not a penny of which many have argued benefited the island community. Aside from the expropriation of two-thirds of the island and the strangling of the economy, residents and activists argue that the military paid no taxes or contributed in any way financially to the community.

In Katherine McCaffrey’s ethnography, she quotes forty-year old fisherman and anti-navy activist Ivan Melendez who argues, “This is part racism, and in part environmental racism.” He continues, “The navy is doing things here that it would never do in the States. Leaving its garbage here, destroying our environment. Getting paid by other countries to leave its garbage

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12 Wilcox, Joyce. "Vieques, Puerto Rico: An Island Under Siege."
While many residents are in favor of Puerto Rico’s association with the U.S., Viequenses are also angered by the undue harm they experience from military training.

From the Navy’s point of view, the burden borne by Vieques citizens from the military base is no different from that of other American citizens with full congressional representation who live in proximity to training sites. They argue that Vieques is simply one of 57 military training sites in the US using live or inert ordnance. In McCaffrey’s activist ethnography, she argues that a different set of standards governed military activity in Vieques compared to that in the mainland U.S. For example, in 1997 the Environmental Protection Agency ordered a halt to live and dummy artillery shelling at the Massachusetts Military Reservation on Cape Cod when explosive fallout was shown to contaminate the water supply. In the similar situation in Vieques, environmental officials recognized that naval bombing contaminated coastal water and drinking supply, but action was not taken upon the discovery of this evidence. Similarly, on the island of Kaho’olawe Hawaii, political pressure against the active training and bombing was so great that it forced the navy to retreat. This island was uninhabited. In Vieques, with civilian population of 10,000, protesters and politicians tried to leverage the same deal, yet the Viequense community faced decades of resistance from the Navy.

Vieques’ smallness and position on the periphery of Puerto Rico, which lies on the periphery of the United States, plays a central role in the environmental and social conflicts and solutions I will explore in the following pages. Puerto Rico, as a Commonwealth of the United States, falls under a semi-autonomous category where it is not fully independent or fully integrated as a state. The island in many ways is culturally autonomous and publicly displays its flag, but the government of Puerto Rico, while operating day-to-day by a local administration

with its own Constitution, falls ultimately on the U.S. Congress.¹⁶ Puerto Rican residents are U.S. citizens and make up about 1.3% of the total population of the United States, but those who live in Puerto Rico cannot vote for the U.S. President in the general elections. Puerto Rico is not only geographically peripheral to the United States, but it is also economically and socially marginal to the mainland.

The marginality of Puerto Rico, and subsequently Vieques, can be seen even in the scholarly study of the region itself. Caribbean studies have often held a peripheral and liminal position within U.S. academic institutions under the umbrella of Latin American or Africana “area studies” and in the field of anthropology.¹⁷ Additionally, the focus of academic research has largely been situated within American economic, political, and sociocultural relations with the region, which has shaped the boundaries of scholarly knowledge production.

The position of the Caribbean region, and Puerto Rico in particular, on the outskirts of scholarly attention and on the periphery of American politics, culture, and the economic system is amplified in Vieques. It is situated on the geographical periphery of both Puerto Rico and the United States, its small and rapidly changing population is socially and economically isolated, and the island has been overlooked and marginalized in policy terms. As you will come to see, exterior forces, namely the U.S. Military, U.S. Fish & Wildlife, and most recently the global tourism industry have been able to dominate decision-making processes in Vieques regarding land use and the economic trajectory of the island while the voices of residents and local activist organizations remain secondary.

The Battles in Vieques Today: Media Representation and Community Organization

After the military’s retreat, the fact that bombing had ceased and the drone of airplanes overhead wasn’t a daily occurrence was celebrated, but the fight to reclaim the island’s economy, restore its natural resources, and human health continue to be contested concerns.

Today Vieques is known as a Caribbean getaway with pristine beaches, colourful coral reefs, wild horses, and a magical bioluminescent bay. Countless visitors deem Vieques “paradise” at first glance. New York Travel Magazine recently described the island as “untouched” and “pristine” while The Washington Post called Vieques one of the “planet’s last bright spots.” In popular media today, the wounds of the islands tumultuous history remain hidden behind descriptions and images of picturesque palms, turquoise water, and white sand beaches iconic of the Caribbean island. Vieques’ image as a tropical wilderness seems to have become naturalized in the collective psyche of the Viequense community and is promoted to tourists and visitors.

Given the complexity and lack of awareness of this environmental and public health issue, it has been incredibly difficult for the Viequense community to mobilize around one common concern or goal and fight for the health of their community.

Today there are organizations, both activist and government-established, that attempt to address environmental and public health issues in Vieques today. These organizations include the Vieques Women’s Alliance (La Alianza de Mujeres de Vieques) and the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques, two activist organizations, the Vieques Conservation and Historical Trust, which primarily speaks on behalf of environmental conservation and protection, and the government-created Vieques Sustainability Task Force, which is involved in development planning, and the navy’s Restoration Advisory Board, which oversees the clean-up
of former military land. In the following chapters I will explain the role of each of these groups in greater detail, but want to point out here that while these groups exist, their activity and power is seriously limited due to the sheer smallness and nature of the population in Vieques.

While it may seem that between all of the groups there might be a large cohort of active community members, I found in my own experience in Vieques and in ethnographic interviews that the membership between groups is largely comprised of the same people. The lack of formal education among islanders along with the absence of an institution for higher-education on the island, jobs that require higher degrees, and the fact that many residents only live on the island seasonally or leave to pursue employment opportunities may contribute to the limited number of actively involved residents. A study conducted in 2008 in Vieques found that among residents 18 and older in Vieques, 27% had not pursued and education past ninth grade, 23% attended high school but didn’t receive a diploma, 26 percent received a high school diploma, 7% received a Bachelors, and only 2.3% had earned a graduate or professional degree.\(^\text{18}\) Given the small number of actively involved and educated community members, the relationships between and within institutions are important and fragile. This makes decision-making processes in Vieques unique from other cases in the continental US or other mainland locations where interpersonal relationships are not as fragile and perhaps not held as sacred.

**My Experience in Vieques**

I came to know Vieques as an intern during the summer of 2011 at the Vieques Conservation and Historical Trust, a local non-profit organization concerned with the protection of environmental and cultural resources on the island through education and research. For two and a half months I worked on a range of projects-- from writing magazine articles to improving

the summer camp programs -- that addressed environmental challenges.

The Trust has the difficult task of balancing the concerns of both locals and tourists, North Americans and Puerto Ricans. Co-founded in 1984 by two North Americans who fell in love with Vieques, the Trust continues to rely on donations from North Americans like them who come to the island, are taken by its natural wonders and want to protect them. Recent research at the Trust has also been supported by the U.S Environmental Protection Agency. Given its reliance on outside funding, the Trust must strike a balance between the interests of the donors and the local community, which are not always aligned. Given the diverse range of stakeholders’ desires and outlook for the island, the Trust has steered away from addressing the heated issue of toxic contamination on the island. A dominant stance for or against the U.S. Navy would likely upset a portion of the organizations support.

The Trust has instead chosen to focus its programs on environmental issues supported by locals, tourists, Americans and Puerto Ricans alike. Currently, research and conservation efforts at the Trust are focused on maintaining the health of Puerto Mosquito, one of brightest bioluminescent bays in the world and one of Vieques’ main tourist attractions. In recent years, the bay has suffered from light pollution and water quality issues, which have dimmed the turquoise glow that swimmers can experience on a “Bio Bay” tour almost any night of the year. With only a small staff of around five managing the day-to-day business and priority given to well-funded and unanimously supported projects such as the Bio Bay, little attention has been given to toxic contamination in the contested and complicated landscape of the Vieques Wildlife Refuge. The issue has been viewed as outside the scope of VCHT programs and research and no other funded environmental organization exists to take it up as their concern.

I also came to learn about the history of Vieques and the deep seeded roots of
environmental, social and economic problems on the island through the work of anthropologist Katherine T. McCaffrey, whom you’ll note I’ve already cited above. In her ethnography, *Military Power and Popular Protest: The U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico*, McCaffrey considers the origins of conflict in Vieques in a historical context. In the decade from 1991-2001, McCaffrey spent time on the island following the conflict between the U.S Navy and civilians and witnessing the most heated era of protest for the halt of military practice. It is McCaffrey’s ethnography that I use as a point of departure for my work. I see my thesis as the next chapter in the story McCaffrey begins to tell about the plight of the Vieques community. McCaffrey ends the writing of her ethnography just as the navy was preparing to exit the island. She considers the struggles that lie ahead for the island, but it is my goal to explore these issues further. While for many, it seems that victory has been won, I hope to challenge this popular notion by exploring the environmental, social, and economic devastation that continues to plague Vieques.

**The Trajectory of this Thesis**

The multidimensionality of this situation calls for a scholarly analysis that puts the environmental, social, and cultural dimensions of the issue into conversation. My background in environmental studies and anthropology will allow me to do just that. In my thesis research I will explore the way in which the Viequense community has addressed and continues to address (or not) the environmental and human health issues in the post-Navy era. More specifically, I will investigate how (and to what extent) environmental issues have been communicated to the local community and the general public and how this discourse has inspired and/or limited efforts to restore both human and environmental health in Vieques.

I will attempt to attend to the different stances that individuals and groups have on this issue based on their ideological and political orientation as well as their social situation. The
major characters in this story include the U.S. Government agencies, the Viequense community, and the tourism industry. I will follow these main players as they have and continue to assert control over the development and land use practices of former military land in Vieques. Each group has made assertions about the cultural meanings and histories that the land embodies. Yet all share the common reality of toxic contamination and failure of restoration/clean-up.

Residents of Vieques continue to express their anxieties over the effects of toxic contamination on human and environmental health, which has spurred debate over Vieques’ future. The inhabitants of Vieques argue that the military exercises involving live bombing and artillery practice have caused severe environmental destruction, cancer and other health problems, as well as social and economic crises on the island. I will explore these anxieties and the disputes over meaning and territory that arose from the transfer of military land to U.S. Fish and Wildlife and the ongoing debates about Vieques’ future. By considering ecology in terms of history of colonial relations and social practice, and in describing social practice through ethnographic experience and ethnography of media resources, I approach the case in Vieques as a way to study how this pristine Caribbean landscape and island culture are mutually produced and reinforced. I will situate differently placed agents in historical context by drawing on written text including ethnographic data and my experience on island.

In this transformative period, ownership, use, and representation of this physical landscape has been a lens through which to observe intersections between the environment, environmentalism, and Viequense identity. Since efforts to ensure, create, or imagine ecological stability and pristineness intersect with aspirations for visions for development, public health and environmental activism as well as wilderness creation demonstrate important dynamics in the reproduction or contestation of cultural ideas.
A single analysis such as this cannot capture the vast complexity and range of Vieques’ political and environmental transformation since military presence. I attempt, instead, to focus and reflect on a subset of differently positioned actors that stake claim to and who are affected by the contaminated environment and to the ways they define, understand, and represent the contamination as an issue or nonissue. My intention is to illuminate the sociocultural dimensions of environmental degradation and the construction of a pristine landscape. I hope to offer an analysis of the ways that ecological contamination formed discursive terrain for an island community seeking both public health and economic development. My work will also hopefully serve to analyze the limits of environmental activism in a very complex political and environmental situation on an island at the margins of the state.

This is not an assessment of whose perspective is right or wrong in the conflict, but rather an assessment of what the perspectives are, how they agree and disagree with one another, and how each one is incomplete. Addressing the complex problems on this small island from multiple perspectives is important and necessary. However, ethnographic writing is a complex and an inherently imperfect endeavour. No matter how self-reflexive or careful one is crafting an inoffensive and “truthful” representation of a culture, it seems nearly impossible to avoid criticism from one audience or another.

Although I attempt to be properly ethnographic in addressing the situation in Vieques from a multi-dimensional perspective, my work is also personally politically committed to the people of Vieques. That said, this is to a degree, “activist anthropology.” Although I attempt to attend to every perspective on the issue, my analysis is inherently partial. As my research evolved, principles of selection became the partiality to the truth I attempt to tell.
My attempt to offer a macro or holistic perspective on the environmental and social issues in Vieques follows a new trend in interdisciplinary arenas of ethnography focused on following connections, relationships, and associations rather than clearly bounded areas of study.\textsuperscript{19} Since the 1980s, the growing subfields of media, medical, and environmental anthropology cover issues embedded in the world-system such as globalization or organized capitalism that call for a holistic approach to research.\textsuperscript{20} Well-known research in this genre includes Bronislaw Malinowski’s archetypal account of \textit{Aragonauts of the Western Pacific} where he mapped cultural complexes by following the ritual exchange of objects in space and Sidney Mintz’s ethnography entitled \textit{Sweetness and Power} where he traced the origins of sugar.\textsuperscript{21} Multi-sited ethnography puts into practice what Marcus calls “constructivism” where ethnographers define their objects of study as they trace it through chains, connections, paths, people, things, ideas the ethnographer follows. My research charts the post-navy struggles in Vieques from a cast of differently positioned actors.

In “Chapter 1: Writing Against Historical Amnesia,” I present an overview of the colonial history of Vieques from the hands of the Spanish to its current position as an American territory. I hope to illuminate how the current struggle for environmental and human health in Vieques connects to a much longer struggle between the island community and global forces. I will describe, in the detail I felt adequate, the long history of human land use on the island from intensive agriculture to Naval training and present an overview of Naval presence from 1941 until 2003 and the heated conflict that has arisen over public and environmental health issues today. My historical overview is an attempt to write against the historical amnesia that I’ve


\textsuperscript{20} Marcus, George. “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography.”

\textsuperscript{21} Marcus, George. “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography.”
witnessed in Vieques and in popular literature and media advertisements for the island by examining Vieques in the context of a long history of domination by foreign powers.

In the chapters following the historical overview of Vieques, I attempt to narrate the debates over environmental and social concerns in Vieques from the perspectives of key stakeholders on the island, which I’ve identified as U.S. Government agencies, Vieques community members, and the tourism industry. I attempt to present their understanding and representation of challenges on the island and their vision for the future of Vieques with regard to the former naval lands and the development trajectory of the island in general. In “Chapter 2: Government Voices: Intentions and Limitations in the ‘Vieques Case,’” I bring forward the voices of U.S. Government representatives from the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). I present their understanding of government priorities regarding the future of former military lands, their personal views on the situation, and how they see the “Vieques Case” moving forward.

In “Chapter 3: Touristic Illusions” I explore the way in which the tourism industry represents Vieques in popular media today. I highlight the way in which tourism industry fails to address the environmental and health issues on the island and instead depicts Vieques as an unspoiled and pristine island getaway. I argue that this deceptive representation, or “tourist-gaze,” is a form of “neo-imperialism” that obscures the realities of environmental, economic, and social harm done by the navy, the last imperial power that dominated the island.

In the next chapter, I present the voices of the activist community in Vieques today. This chapter, entitled “Chapter 4: Activism’s Promise and Limitations in the Vieques Case,” examines the activity, or lack thereof, on the part of the Vieques community to voice their demands for decontamination, devolution, and sustainable development for the island. I explore the reasons
for a lack of mobilization around cleanup and development today and highlight the desires and
demands of those who are engaged in the continued fight for environmental and social justice in
Vieques.

In my concluding chapter, “Vieques Ten Years Later and Ten Years From Now: A
Framework for the Future,” I explore how the visions and goals of the various stakeholders in
Vieques could align to promote healthy natural, social, political and economic environments on
the island. I offer my vision for the future of Vieques, in which I suggest alternate forms of
tourism that could support an environmentally and socially just economy while helping to foster
a empowered, educated, and environmentally conscious residential and tourist community in
Vieques.
Chapter 1: Writing Against Historical Amnesia

The current struggle for environmental and human health in Vieques connects to a much longer struggle between the island community and global forces. From the hands of the Spanish to its current position under the stars and stripes of the American flag, Vieques has always been considered by foreign powers in strategic terms. For the past five hundred years, Vieques has developed on the margins of foreign power and that tradition continues today with the presence of U.S. Fish and Wildlife and global tourism’s eyes on Vieques as the next tourist destination to overtake. But Vieques’ colonial history has been left out of discussion about current environmental, economic, and social issues on the island. In this chapter I am writing against what seems to be a forgotten colonial past or the “historical amnesia” that I’ve witnessed both in the Vieques community and in popular media and tourists advertisements today. One can only fully understand the issues on the island today with an understanding of the foreign powers that have and continue to push Vieques to the political, economic, and social periphery as a strategic colony that would fulfill military or industry desires.
In McCaffrey’s words, “Puerto Rico developed as a strategic colony, and Vieques was its satellite.” Its history has been integrally linked to that of the Spanish and American colonial empires. Military interests and visions for the island have remained top priorities, leaving environment and human well-being as secondary concerns. This brief history of power and land use in Vieques I hope will illuminate the way in which the island’s community has been pushed to the periphery of society, economy, and environment by industry and military alike on their own land.

While the sources on Puerto Rican history are vast, literature on the specifics of the history of Vieques is anything but robust. I came to learn about the island’s early history mostly in a small book by Elizabeth Langhorne, an American ex-pat, called *Vieques: History of a Small Island*. While I was on the island, it was the only book I could find at the Trust that covered the islands history from its first documented occupants and was considered the “go-to” source by my Viequense friends. The second source I turned to was the first chapter of anthropologist Katherine McCaffrey’s ethnography *Military Power and Popular Protest: The U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico*, in which she situates Vieques’s history within the broader context of Puerto Rican colonial history. McCaffrey explores Vieques’s positionality as a “colony of a colony” from the era of Spanish to U.S. hegemony and explores what she considers to be paradox between the strategic goals and civilian life on the island. Though all history is contested, political, and partial, and the small body of literature on Vieques makes it even less well rounded, what I have read has nonetheless provided me with an understanding for the political and economic backdrop I will use to illuminate the roots of current tensions on the island.

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**Vieques: A colony on the periphery**

In many ways, Vieques is a microcosm of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. Lying just off the east coast of Puerto Rico, this small island just twenty-one miles long and between four and six miles wide has seen generations of different peoples and cultures come and go as has the rest of the Caribbean. In 1493, Christopher Columbus first sighted Vieques on his second voyage to the Caribbean, but it wasn’t until several decades later that Vieques formally came under Spanish rule. When Columbus and his crew first landed, the Taínos were the islands only inhabitants.²³ It wasn’t long before the Taínos heard news of the *Encomiendas*, a system of forced labor, which was being inflicted upon their brothers on the main island. In 1511, Puerto Rico (then called San Juan Bautista) was sending 10,000 pesos in gold to Spanish investors on the backs of laboring Indians. Hearing this, the two Taino chieftains, Cacimar and his brother Yaureibo, lead separate revolts against the Spaniards. They were both soon defeated and killed. What was left of the Taino population was reduced to slavery and taken to Puerto Rico.²⁴ This marked an end to Spain’s most immediate security threat.

In 1524 Vieques was officially proclaimed as Spanish domain, though they failed to formally establish a settlement on the island, which would secure their claim. Spain was less interested in settling Vieques than it was interested in keeping the island empty of any settlement that would threatened their hegemony. McCaffrey describes Vieques as an extreme expression of Spain’s focus military rather than economic concerns in the Caribbean.²⁵ However, the next period of the islands history was characterized by a succession of attempted colonizations by the English, French and Danish. The English made the first attempt and by 1688, three hundred

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English men, women, children and a hundred slaves settled in Vieques. But just a year after their arrival Governor Don Gaspar Martínez of Puerto Rico saw the population as a potential threat and transported the whole group of English to Santo Domingo. Ships of many nationalities, primarily English and Danish, continued to land on Vieques, but were never permitted to settle the territory. The Spaniards drove them out as they did with the English.²⁶

Between these attempted colonizations, Vieques was often referred to as “Crab Island, and was used by pirates to re-supply their ships. These pirates, corsairs, and fugitives from the main island, often called “cow catchers,” touched town on the little patch of land while they roamed the seas and took advantage of the abundant with shellfish, fish, birds, and timber in Vieques.²⁷ Vieques’ natural resources, including fertile soils and its own water source, made the island particularly attractive for colonists.

Of even greater importance to Spain were Vieques’ strategic advantages. It’s shores provided harbor for ships sailing between the Leeward Islands and Jamaica and the movement of Spanish vessels was visible from its coasts. For these reasons, Spain continually drove out English settlers and finally, during the first half of the 19th century, permanently colonized Vieques.²⁸

The annexation of Vieques began in 1811 under military commander Juan Rosselló, appointed by Don Salvador Meléndez, then governor of Puerto Rico. In 1832, under the Spanish Puerto Rican administration, Frenchman Teófilo José Jaime María Le Guillou became Governor of Vieques, and began to enforce order in the disorderly province. Le Guillou, known today as the founder of Vieques, first established the large sugar plantations, which would become the backbone of Vieques’ economy for the next century.

At the time of Le Guillou’s death in 1843 Vieques had two sugar mills, but the island had not yet been completely dominated by the sugar monoculture. Mixed agriculture flourished with frutas menores of wheat, corn and some coffee along with subsistence plots of the jíbaro. Even still, the island was far from self sufficient, relying on cargoes that included basic food items such as wheat flour, pork, butter, corn meal, salted herring, rice, beans, and even wine and beer. While the island had not yet seen an economic boom, it was, as the islanders would soon find out, to their advantage, as they were “producing nothing which made them a valuable prize in the Caribbean wars of the day.”

When Vieques was founded in 1844 in lieu of Le Guillou’s death, Spain had been losing its New World empire as its colonies struggled for independence. Spain attempted to keep Cuba and Puerto Rico loyal by issuing the Cedula de Gracias, a royal decree that promoted foreign commerce and liberalized immigration policy. Attracted by land grants or driven by slave revolts, immigrants came to Puerto Rico from the Americas, Haiti, Europe, and the Caribbean. Hundreds of French planters from the islands of Guadalupe and Martinique moved to Vieques and brought hundreds of African slaves, who, together with English-speaking free workers from the British Virgin Islands and creole Puerto Rican workers, contributed to the growth of the islands’ economy.

Slavery in Puerto Rico reached its peak between 1834-1846 when Vieques was established as an island municipality. But slave society in the Caribbean shortly disintegrated after England abolished slavery in 1834 and pushed Spain to follow suit. Planters on the main island of Puerto Rico adopted a series of coercive laws to compel white peasantry to work, but in Vieques planters relied on black contract laborers from neighboring British Isles to do the work.

Unlike on the main island, contract laborers in Vieques shaped the character of society. By 1872, the British consulate claimed that 90 percent of Vieques residents were British laborers working under contract.\textsuperscript{32}

It was in 1898 after Spain’s defeat in the Spanish-American War that initiated the unsustainable transformation of Puerto Rico and subsequently Vieques into “sugar islands” under the control of the U.S. To reinforce the real impact of American occupation, statistics show that in 1897 sugar had only been 21% of Puerto Rico’s exports, where after the occupation it rose to 50%.\textsuperscript{33} By 1920, half of the island’s sugar production had fallen into the hands of four U.S. corporations. While productivity increased, land ownership was concentrated, and so too were the industry’s profits, leaving most Puerto Ricans living in poverty.

Vieques stood as one of the most severe expressions of the inequalities of land ownership and living conditions during Puerto Rico’s sugar era. The economic pressure to produce sugar resulted in an almost entirely one crop agricultural system on the island. By the first two decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century there were four sugar mills - Esperanza, Santa María, Arkadia and Playa Grande- processing thousands of tons of sugar cane. Only two sugar corporations consumed 71 percent of land in Vieques and by the 1930s, two thirds of the total population of 10,582 was landless.\textsuperscript{34}

But as quickly as the industry boomed, it busted. Puerto Rico’s sugar industry was crippled by falling sugar prices, outdated production techniques, and a lack of capital investment. In 1934-35 the Agricultural Adjustment Administration imposed quotas on the industry that enforced labor standards such as the eight-hour workday, which made it impossible to increase

\textsuperscript{33} Langhorne, Elizabeth Coles. \textit{Vieques: History of a Small Island}, 55.
production in order to compensate for falling price of sugar.\textsuperscript{35} By 1940, Playa Grande, the last remaining sugar mill in Vieques, declared bankruptcy. With no opportunity for work and thousands on the brink of starvation, there was a mass exodus of cane workers from Vieques to the neighboring island of St. Croix in search of work in the sugar industry that had not yet collapsed. The situation in Vieques embodied the worst of the crisis that faced Puerto Rico.

A report by the Puerto Rican government in 1937 read, “The tragedy of Vieques Island is analogous to the tragedy of Puerto Rico, only much more serious. Thirty-three thousand acres of land are hoarded, for the most part, by two large sugar corporations. Eleven thousand inhabitants are living on what little remains of the land. A very rich island, with every kind of fruit, fish, and livestock is impeded from developing its full agricultural and industrial potential. The per capita income scarcely reaches the ridiculous level of $22.”\textsuperscript{36}

The 1930s, Puerto Rico became increasingly volatile and the U.S. became more concerned with its stability given the interest of the region for U.S. Military strategy. The Puerto Rican Nationalist Party was on the rise, demanding immediate independence for Puerto Rico and articulating a fervent anticolonial sentiment. In 1935 and 1936, the Nationalist Party organized demonstrations that turned violent and fatal. After these exhibits of volatility, the U.S. recognized that the economic and social crisis in Puerto Rico demanded attention. The rational behind U.S aid didn’t stem from a humanitarian ethic, but instead stemmed from U.S. Military interests. This wouldn’t be the first time the U.S. would put military priorities over the issues of social justice.

During the 1930s, the turmoil in Europe with the rise of German fascism was playing out between British and German warships off the coast of Brazil and the U.S. saw the Caribbean as

\textsuperscript{35} Langhorne, Elizabeth Coles. \textit{Vieques: History of a Small Island}, 58.
the next potential region of conflict. Puerto Rico emerged as an essential component to strengthening military installations in the Caribbean and securing new bases in the event that the European conflict changed location. In 1939 Congress granted $30 million to build large air and naval bases in Puerto Rico, leasing vast tracts of land and dislocating thousands of residents. The most dramatic installations, however, were on Puerto Rico’s eastern shores and just eight miles off the coast in Vieques, in Ensenada Honda on the east coast, the navy expropriated 6,680 acres of land, but its biggest operating base in the Caribbean was destined for Vieques where 21,020 acres, or two-thirds of the island, would be transformed into a theater for war games. The arrival of the U.S. Navy in 1941 put the last nail in the coffin to the islands dying sugar industry and marked the beginning of a new cycle of social inequality and environmental violence in Vieques.

**War Games: Vieques and the U.S. Military 1941-2003**

With the outbreak of WWII, the Navy envisioned the base in Vieques to be the so-called “Caribbean Pearl Harbor.” It would provide anchorage, docking, repair, and supply sources for 60 percent of the Atlantic Fleet and potential point of supply and refuge for the entire British Fleet if need be. A gigantic seawall would be built connecting Vieques bases and the base on the main island and a marine camp would be established on the neighbouring island of Culebra. It would be a Naval mecca. So the project was underway at breakneck speed. Thousands of people, mostly agregos- or tenant labourers on sugar cane plantations- were dislocated from their homes, loaded into trucks and deposited in cane fields that the navy designated as resettlement areas. During such a politically charged time, the Roosevelt Roads Naval Base promised security

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and gained widespread support for the war against fascism. Residents in Vieques hoped that the base would alleviate the intensified hunger and poverty during wartime.

But the devastating destruction of Pearl Harbor raised Naval concern and construction at Roosevelt Roads Naval Station came to a halt. By 1943, naval planners decided that the major base was unnecessary. The abandonment of the station devastated Vieques’ economy. There was no work left on the island and the navy had taken over almost all of the former sugar cane land. From the sugar industry into military hands, Vieques’ economy was effectively owned and guided like a dog on a leash.

During the Cold War, the Navy drew up new strategic plans for Vieques. In 1947, the navy began converting the island into a training ground for amphibious maneuvers, artillery fire, and live bombing exercises. To the navy, Vieques seemed to be idyllic location for war simulations and experiment. An article from 2005 by Javier Arbona describes naval rational well. He writes:

“The Navy was fond of Vieques. They could practice beach landings, special-operations parachute drops, and small-arms fire in the maneuver area. They could shoot big artillery shells from the dry forest into the bombing range. They could shoot from ground to air, air to the ground, ground to sea, and sea to ground. And they could simulate realistic combat involving close coordination between units and even foreign allies. They claimed such multiuse space was hard to find anywhere else.”

Not only were the physical landscape ideal, but poverty and social inequality in Vieques also facilitated military takeover. Land was concentrated in the hands of few and the landless

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majority had little political leverage with which to counter the U.S. Navy. Moreover, the navy argued that the new base would provide work and opportunity to islanders.

In preparation for their next big island instalment, the navy proceeded to revoke their brief lease of agricultural land to the Puerto Rican government and began a second round of expropriations on over 4,000 more acres in eastern Vieques, displacing 130 families.\textsuperscript{40} Given that the Navy’s land was split in two— one part in the west and another in the east— they were hoping they would persuade the Puerto Rican government to let them acquire the entire island. However, the Puerto Rican government resisted and so the civilian population of approximately 10,000 lived wedged between an ammunition depot in the west, bombing exercises in the east, air maneuvers above, and amphibious training below.

For the next sixty years, tensions between the island’s civilian residential community and the navy escalated. Initial enthusiasm for the base faded quickly as islanders realized the number of jobs the navy would create was sparse and the troops they brought only stayed long enough to perform brief maneuvers and would not support the development of a service industry.

In 1955, an attempt to stimulate tourism, community development and industry was made by the Puerto Rican Commonwealth Economic Development Administration. However, the navy quickly squelched the proposition. In her ethnography, McCaffrey writes, “Tourism, it [the navy] argued, was incompatible with large-scale amphibious training activities. Naval planes and helicopters would fly at low altitudes directly above the hotel, creating conflicts over noise. Civilian boats would have to be restricted during amphibious landing practices. The increase in civilian air traffic would affect the mine-laying operations off the shores of Roosevelt Roads.”\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{40} McCaffrey, Katherine T. \textit{Military Power and Popular Protest: The U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico}, 35.
As a result, the tourism industry never flourished in Vieques and the Navy never provided the island with economic stability.

**A Long History of Slow Violence**

The issues of social and environmental injustice we see today in Vieques are expressions of a much longer history of inequality, marginality, and environmental destruction. In this way, the people and environment of Puerto Rico have been the victims of slow violence- a violence that often escapes our short-term memory and is rooting in the deep-seeded colonial history of the Caribbean.

In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon defines “slow violence” as environmental destruction that occurs gradually and often so invisibly that we don’t consider it to be violence at all. It is destruction that is dispersed across time and space, qualities that allow it to escape public attention, which is often focused on only the most sensational environmental disasters. Nixon’s concept of “slow violence” helps us understand the structural issues with deep-seeded environmental threats that have left them invisible to much of the world. Climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, oil spills, and acidifying oceans Nixon argues are all examples of “slow violence.” While the issues are vastly different, their devastating effects can only be witnessed over a long period of time, their consequences are geographically far-reaching, and their devastation isn’t conducive to dramatization or being made to seem “urgent” – a quality necessary for attracting the media’s attention.

Nixon argues that slow violence escapes public awareness in part because it doesn’t lend itself to the developed world’s short attention span and spectacle-driven media. The crawling toxic oil spill, the thickening smog, the slowly-receding glacier; how can these pressing
environmental crises ever compete for press coverage with explosions and the affairs of politicians? Nixon writes, “The insidious workings of slow violence derives largely from the unequal attention given to spectacular and unspectacular time. In an age that venerates instant spectacle, slow violence is deficient in the recognizable special effects that fill movie theaters and boost ratings on TV.” Environmental crises that don’t mesh with media quickly fall out of sight and out of mind.

While our bias toward spectacular violence clouds our awareness of the long-term effects that issues like climate change has on ecosystems, it simultaneously marginalizes the people reliant on those ecosystems for survival. Nixon argues that underrepresented environmental crises are exacerbated when it is the poor, particularly the poor in the global south, who are the frontline victims. Impoverished societies often have less stringent or unenforced environmental regulations, allowing transnational corporations to exploit their natural resources in a way that would not be allowed in the U.S. or Europe. Thus, slow violence is often an issue of environmental injustice and necessitates solutions that look out for environmental and human rights. Just as the issues of slow violence have become more complex, their solutions also face similar complexities and representational challenges. At the heart of environmentalism today there is a struggle to define environmental justice and what constitutes sustainability.

The Vieques Paradox Today: A protected EPA Superfund Site

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In the simplest of terms, we are only as healthy as the world around us. From the environmental justice perspective, everyone has the right to a safe, healthy, productive and sustainable environment, where ‘environment’ is considered in its totality to include the ecological, social, political aesthetic and economic environments.

The environment in Vieques continues to suffer from the long history of naval activity. Scarred with bomb-craters and a contaminated ecosystem, much of the former military training sites in Vieques are now toxic wastelands. Since the military stopped active training in 2003, the most heavily bombed area on the island has been deemed an EPA Superfund site. Decades of bombing has left the ocean along the eastern shores of Vieques littered with a wide assortment of missiles and bombs that have yet to be cleaned up. Scientists have discovered significant environmental contamination caused by the six decades of bombing and other military activity. Thousands of tons of unexploded ordnance have accumulated, raising questions and concerns about the extent of contamination and the effects it has and will continue to have on human and

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environmental health.\textsuperscript{44} Heavy metals have been found in levels deemed unsafe by the EPA in human hair and nails, as well as residential area soil, ground water, drinking water, house dust, plant life, as well as aquatic life.

At the same time the land has been given Superfund status, much of the land has also been taken over by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and designated as the “Vieques Wildlife Refuge.” The central paradox in this decision to conserve toxic wasteland is what that I hope to pull apart in this section. For island residents, this designation entails further social and environmental violence by marginalizing their demands for decontamination and municipal management. For the navy, the “protection” means evading costly cleanup that they deem unnecessary. And for the tourism industry, the illusion of pristine wilderness fulfills Vieques’ image as a Caribbean island getaway. The refuge creation means both positive and negative consequences for the differently positioned stakeholders in Vieques. For many, the complexity of the issue, with an illusion of “good” and the invisible nature of the “bad,” invites an ambivalence that is evidenced in the lack of mobilization around the issue for the last decade. This controversy helps to shed light on the deeper seeded ethics and politics of land use and wilderness conservation resonant with the conservation tradition in the U.S. environmental movement.

The former Vieques National Training Range (VNTR), which comprises approximately 14,573 acres, provided ground warfare and amphibious training for Marines, naval gunfire support training, and air to ground training. The former VNTR was also described as four separate operational areas, which comprised from west to east: the EMA, the Surface Impact

\textsuperscript{44} McCaffrey, Katherine T. \textit{Military Power and Popular Protest: The U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico}, 7.
Area (SIA), the Live Impact Area (LIA), and the Eastern Conservation Area (ECA) at the easternmost tip of the island.

On April 30, 2003, the entirety of naval lands in east Vieques were transferred to the Department of the Interior to be operated and managed by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service as a National Wildlife Refuge and Wilderness Area. Approximately 900 acres of the former VNTR, consisting of the Live Impact Area would be managed as a “wilderness” and the public must be excluded from this area (in accordance with Public Law 106–398 and Public Law 107–107) (Environmental Restoration Program Public Website). In the west, 8,114 acres of the former naval land had been divided between the DOI, the Municipality of Vieques, and the Puerto Rico Conservation Trust. The property owned by DOI (approximately 3,158 acres), as in the west, is managed as part of the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge (Public Website).

On the public website for the “Environmental Restoration Program” in Vieques, the government claims that, “the restoration of the former Naval Ammunition Support Detachment NASD will be based upon potential risks to human health and the environment, with consideration given to the planned future land use.” However, in the Defense Spending bill from 2001 that transferred portions of the testing grounds to the Fish and Wildlife Service, there is actual legislative language requiring that the contaminated portions of the refuge be managed as "wilderness" without public access. This suggests that U.S. Fish and Wildlife don’t plan to consider remediation or public access or use of the land. In many ways, this law could be considered a perversion of the intent of the Wilderness Act.

Setting aside these 900 acres of the most toxic land for “wilderness,” many island residents argue, is threatening environmental and human health as heavy metals leach into the surrounding ecosystem and make their way into the bodies of the island population.
Additionally, the creation of the refuge will strip Viequenses access to the coast and immediate coastal waters that they once used to fish. Aside from tourism, fishing is the lifeblood of the economy on the island and is the livelihood for many islanders. While thought to be an environmental triumph, islanders feel that turning two-thirds of this small Caribbean island into a “wildlife refuge” poses threats to the natural ecosystem and raises questions of environmental justice as the community suffers from toxins and restricted from accesses to essential environmental resources.

In the October-November issue of the Vieques Events Magazine, the islands primary source of printed news, an article entitled, “Community RAB Members to Navy: Fencing around the toxic waste is not a cleanup” conveys community concerns. Members of the Restoration Advisory Board (RAB), which advise the Navy on cleanup, actively articulated their opposition to the Navy’s proposal to leave contamination in one site in the west of Vieques, saying that it is the navy’s responsibility to clean what they contaminated. In a public meeting held on September 17th, RAB member Lirio Marquez expressed that, “the Navy stated that fences as a remedy will be instituted in all places where munitions were used in Vieques. This is unacceptable to the community. They expect the people of Vieques to accept fences and use restrictions as a “remedy?” This is no remedy. It is simply, doing the least possible, the cheapest way.”

The RAB further contends that the decision to neglect restoration on this site (Solid Waste Management Unit 4) would set a dangerous precedent for the clean-up in other sites with military toxics left by the Navy’s 60 years of practice. During the public comment period, the Vice President of the Municipal Legislature Gilda Pimental, sent a clear message to the Navy
that, “The one who dirties the house, must clean it.” The article also quotes Jorge Fernández Porto, a member of the RAB for over ten years:

Porto said, “The Navy is proposing to finish the cleanup of one of the sites they contaminated, fencing an area where they detonated defective bombs, instead of removing all the explosive material. This proposal, which is unacceptable to the community, means that the 352 acres of the Boquiquebrada area, area used by residents and tourists, could have explosive materials threatening their safety. The Navy will be fencing most of the area and will only allow access to a small portion along the coast. The Navy must clean the area they contaminated to such a level that does not constitute a threat to life or the environment.”

The community RAB members believe that, contrary to what the Navy suggests, a complete clean up can be accomplished without clear cutting important tree species. They believe the Navy is using this excuse as a justification for leaving the contamination in place.

Controversy over the fate of “Solid Waste Management Unit 4” has been the most recent source of tension around former military lands and has sparked local dialogue about the issue. But since it was handed over to U.S. Fish and Wildlife in 2003, writers from outside the Vieques community have expressed concerns around the “conservation” of former military land. Javier Arbona studied the contested landscape in Vieques in 2003 as for his Master’s thesis as an architecture student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Arbona writes, “This unfolding scenario reveals how conservation areas have provided first a pollution veil, and second (especially after 1993) a green shroud in which the Navy has wrapped itself.”

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that the Navy wanted to establish the conservation areas as a way to justify its presence in
Vieques for another twenty years and that they were falsely heralded for their efforts to conserve
“wilderness” that was once a much better functioning ecosystem. Arbona states that, “today such
areas further fulfill an iconic, ecological theme essential to the tourism industry in the post-Navy
era.”47 The navy was strategic in crafting a “solution” to the contamination that would be
supported by tourism industry, which would benefits from the new representation of Vieques as
a preserved sanctuary.

**Vieques Wildlife Refuge in the Context of U.S. Environmentalism and the “Fortress Model”
of Conservation**

The Vieques Wildlife Refuge was created based on problematic ideological premises
rooted in a long history of conservation and preservation dominating U.S. environmentalism.
The Refuge serves to illuminate the lasting problem with the concept of “wilderness” in
environmental issues today.

The concept of “wilderness” was a fundamental tenant in early U.S. environmentalism
and remains important to the environmental movement today. While historically the intrigue of a
world largely untouched by man was an important tool in drawing public awareness to the
environment, the wilderness myth threatens the goals - specifically sustainability and
environmental justice- of the environmental movement in the U.S. today.

The “wilderness ideal” began to take shape in the nature writing of authors such as
Muir describes a place where “over-civilized people” can escape – where they can recreate,
“panting in whole-souled exercise, and rejoicing in deep, long-drawn breaths of pure

47 Arbona, Javier. “Vieques, Puerto Rico: From Devastation to Conservation and Back Again.”
He depicts unspoiled nature that he calls the American public to worship and preserve. William Wordsworth depicts a similar image of divine wilderness in his poem “The Prelude” where he recounts his journey in the Alps, as does Thoreau in his written account of a climb of Mount Katahdin in Maine. These authors and more helped to construct the world of “wilderness” outside the civilized, human world.

Beginning in the early twentieth century, Americans began to read these important literary works and were paying more attention to the uncivilized frontier that was slowly creeping closer to their backyard. People began to realize and experience the beauty of undeveloped space and became interested in protecting it. This new cohort of conservationists pushed the government to take action and pass legislation to save the last of the “frontier.”

In response to this push, the U.S government passed the Wilderness Act in 1964. While the goal was to establish a National Wilderness Preservation System, this legislation simultaneously reaffirmed the “realness” of the existence of wilderness. Wilderness was defined as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” and where the land has “been affected primarily by forces of nature.” Conservationists and the U.S. government seemed to have reached a consensus that there was pristine, unspoiled, wild land left in need of protection. The Wilderness Act served as confirmation that wilderness did in fact exist out there, apart from civilization and was fundamental to the evolution of the environmental movement in the United States.

Literature and legislation of the early twentieth century helped to construct this concept of “wilderness” for the American public, and more importantly illuminated the threat of its

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disappearance. The widespread notion that humanity was encroaching on the last of its wild land, the frontier, struck a chord with the American public. Indeed, it was the frontier that gave birth to this nation, so what will happen if there is no more? Wilderness came to represent the “last bastion of rugged individualism” and nostalgia for the free life of a “rough-rider.” People still wanted the opportunity to escape from civilization and it was this desire that helped light the fire for a more an environmental movement.

Beginning in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century, societies, clubs, and groups were organized around protecting the “wild.” For example, the Sierra Club was co-founded in 1892 by John Muir and Robert Underwood Johnson, the National Audubon Society opened chapters in New York and Massachusetts in 1896, and the Wilderness Society was established in 1935. All of these organizations were grounded in conserving the natural environment and protecting wildlife. These clubs are still active in their conservation efforts today and continue to use the idea of the existence of wilderness to motivate people to become members, donate, and engage in their organization.

To this day, the concept of wilderness is still very much engrained in the way people in America mobilize over environmental issues. While our urge to save the last of the “wild” has set much land aside for conservation and helped environmentalism gain ground with the American public, it has also obscured and threatened to undermine goals of the environmental movement today.

First, the wilderness concept has perpetuated the dualism between nature and humanity. Today we still have “wilderness areas,” “wildlife refuges,” and use slogans such as “save the

51 Cronon, William. “The Trouble with Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.”
whales” or “save the planet” that dangerously disconnect humans from the natural world. If we view humans as being part of another system, then we obscure the connection between environmental and human health that is so crucial to gaining public support for environmentally sound practices.

Second, separating humanity from the “wild” reinforces the notion that wilderness is there as a resource for us, rather than a resource that supports us. Essentially, the wilderness myth perpetuates consumerism. From its conceptual origin, we have gone into the wilderness “not as a producer but as a consumer.” Wilderness areas attracted the elite who essentially used the space as their playground- building giant ranches in the mountains, going to resort hotels and on big-game hunts. Today, ecotourism does a similar thing- it takes people to tropical wildlife refuges and rainforest getaways where they can stay in eco-resorts with palm-front huts and go zip-lining through the canopy or forging through the understory all the while trampling vegetation and spraying harmful repellants.

Not only does the fundamental concept of wilderness separate us from the natural world and feed into consumer culture, but saving the wilderness has been inadequate in addressing issues of sustainability and environmental justice.

While the concept of wilderness served as an important catalyst to the environmental movement of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, we can see that it can be inadequate if not detrimental in encompassing all facets of environmentalism today.

I situate the Vieques Wildlife Refuge in the context of U.S. Environmentalism and the “fortress model” of conservation because it brings into discussion the roots of the current conflict around the cleanup, land use, and development of “nature” in Vieques today. The story of the

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53 Cronon, William. “The Trouble with Wilderness ; or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.”
present-day paradox of the “wilderness area” and the anxieties over public health and environmental repercussions of “wilderness” designation are at the heart current discussion and debate in Vieques. The Navy has been heralded for efforts to protect “wilderness” because it is so valued in American culture. But does the “wilderness myth” threaten the goals of toxic contamination cleanup, sustainable development, and environmental justice in Vieques?

In the next chapters, I present the voices of the various stakeholders I’ve identified in this conflict, namely U.S. Government agencies, Vieques community members, and the tourism industry, on their desires for the “natural” environment in Vieques. In the next chapter, Chapter 2: Government Voices: Intentions and Limitations in the “Vieques Case,” I bring forward the voices of U.S. Government representatives from the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Chapter 2: Government Voices: Intentions and Limitations in the “Vieques Case”

One night about 6 years ago U.S. Fish and Wildlife Biologist Richard Henry was conducting a sea grass survey just off of Mosquito Pier, a mile-long seawall built off the northern shore of the island. His research was to be used in an Environmental Impact Statement for an upcoming project to enhance the pier in anticipation of more ferry service to the island. Henry and the other researchers were finishing up their work for the day and putting their gear in their vehicles before heading back to the hotel, when they struck up a conversation with an older gentleman who had brought his grandkids to the pier to swim.
“He was what I would consider a very thoughtful, lifelong resident of Vieques— one of those guys when you look at ‘em he looks like the Old Man and the Sea,” Henry described to me, “You know, grey hair and big beard and stuff, tanned…” He continued:

“So we were talking to him about what you think of the Fish and Wildlife Service being here and what do you think of the Navy being gone…and he thinks about it and then he says, “You know, I’m glad the Navy’s gone, but I’m also glad that we don’t have the land to manage.”

And I said, “What do you mean?”

And he said, “Well, look around you…you know, what do you see?

I said, “I don’t know, I see trees and water…”

“Exactly,” he says, “What you don’t see is high-rise hotel. What you don’t see is a casino. What you don’t see is an interstate highway. And I’m glad that you guys are here because if you weren’t, that’s what these guys would do.”

And that’s what would happen to Vieques— what would happen to Vieques would be the same thing that happened to San Juan— where you have hotels right on the beach, all kinds of erosion problems, it would be very poorly developed.

So he (the older Viequense man) says, “I’m glad you’re here. And I think most people on Vieques are glad you’re here. Because we don’t want that stuff. We want our island to be sleepy and quiet and low key— we want to be under the radar.”

I could almost see Henry smiling as he told this story on the other end of the line. He had spent almost an hour describing to me how controversial his work in Vieques has been over the last decade. Henry has served as a Project Manager on the Vieques “Case Team” for the USFW-Southwest Region’s Damage Assessment, Remediation, & Restoration Program. Among the
biggest challenges has been the disconnect in understanding between the Viequense community and U.S. Government agencies regarding what’s possible for the future of former military land. Henry stressed over and over again that USFW’s goals to help restore the island’s environment was being done with attention to local desires; that the USFW Service was doing their very best to find solutions that would suit everyone. Through all of the opposition, the gratitude expressed by this stranger on the part of USFW’s efforts to protect the environment that they all enjoy, seemed to be a highlight in Henry’s career. This moment, Henry expressed, was what made his work at the Fish & Wildlife’s feel worthwhile.

It was through my conversation with Henry and others working for the U.S. Government on the “Vieques case” that I finally heard the human voices behind the dry legal jargon of government documents and highly charged news articles and books that often demonize the “military machine” on the island. The empathy and frustration Henry and the others conveyed in conversations about their work revealed the deep complexity government agencies face and the difficulty in coming to consensus regarding the future of the former military lands.

A Greener Future Ahead? Vieques: Half empty or half full?

While the toxic environmental contamination in Vieques is undoubtedly extensive, the impacts of military activities on overall environmental health have long been a subject of debate. Like Henry and the Viequense man he ran into on the pier, some believe military activity in Vieques was not all bad. Since Naval lands lacked residential and commercial development they also lacked much of the environmental degradation associated with development. In effect, the island was protected from erosion, light pollution, and runoff from many anthropogenic activities that are known to harm marine resources. Additionally, since prior marine zoning restricted access to much of the coastal waters adjacent to the Navy lands, according to a study conducted
by NOAA, it is likely that fishing pressure would have been lower in these areas when the boundaries were enforced, creating a de facto marine protected area. This study analyzed the composition and health of marine resources in Vieques to provide information regarding what is there and what management options should be considered to best protect the marine ecosystem. In contrast, others emphasize that the extent of contamination is far more harmful to both human and environmental health than typical development would have been, and trumps any benefits that underdevelopment may have presented for the island. This theory emphasizes the degraded biological communities and higher degree of contamination in sediments as well as documented damage to reefs and elevated contaminant levels in organisms adjacent to sites in which ordnance was tested.

But whether the Navy left Vieques as a glass is half empty or half full regarding the environment, I came away from conversations with U.S. Government representatives with a clear understanding that their mission is to replenish the glass, or restore environmental health, regardless.

So the questions of concern aren’t if or whether environmental health should be restored, but rather what constitutes “restoration”? For what or whom is the cleanup for? And are the standards for wildlife the same as standards for people? Given that the government’s priorities seem to be twofold -- toxic cleanup and wildlife conservation -- which comes first? Through conversations with government representatives, I came to understand one set of answers to these questions. I spoke with the head of the Navy’s Vieques restoration program Dan Waddill, U.S.

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55 NOAA. “An Ecological Characterization of the Marine Resources of Vieques, Puerto Rico.”
Fish & Wildlife’s project manager on the Vieques case Rich Henry, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) Marine Debris Program Deputy Director Jason Rolfe. Although they represent different agencies, there were overarching themes in their responses that gave me a better idea about where the government stands regarding the cleanup process. To my surprise, I came away from my conversations feeling as though from the government’s perspective, the “Vieques case” was generally a null point for debate.

**Vieques is “typical”**

While visitors travel from all corners of the globe to see the bioluminescent bay, paso fino horses, and sip the island’s well-known bilí, I came to understand that from the government’s perspective, Vieques is not special or unique. As a Superfund site and Wildlife Refuge, the laws and regulations that govern Vieques are the same as those that govern any other sites in the U.S. with the same status.

“Vieques is typical,” stated Rich Henry, “it’s just that the social issues associated with Vieques are somewhat unique, but the situation isn’t.”

Jason Rolfe seconded Henry in his comment, “Vieques was being used in a typical island sense. The main difference there is that there are people there who still remember the unfortunate history of the island.”

As both Henry and Rolfe described, the situation in Vieques’ is typical for reasons twofold. First, the military has long been using small islands for experimental test ranges and training activities on the basis of relatively few people needing to be relocated, security assurance by nature of geographic isolation, and a reduction of human exposure to contaminants. Like Vieques, islands in the Pacific such as Johnston Atoll, Bikini Atoll, Kiritimati Island, and the Marshall Islands, were heavily used for weapons testing during the 1940s and 50s. By 1958,
over 100 nuclear weapons had been detonated in the Pacific and Bikini Atoll had experienced tent tests that were each 100 times more destructive than the Hiroshima bomb.  

Secondly, it is not unusual for military training activities to leave behind sites that are both toxic wastelands while simultaneously given wildlife refuge or wilderness status. Other sites formerly owned by the Department of Defense that have these contradictory designations include several islands in the Pacific including Johnston Atoll. As previously mentioned, the island was used for nuclear testing and was in 1962 the site of two misfired rockets that spewed plutonium across the island. Johnston Atoll served as a storage and disposal site for the military’s chemical weapons until 2000, but has since been integrated into Pacific Island National Wildlife Refuge system and “restored” to a level of “acceptable risk.”

Another paradoxical landscape is Adak Island, a former naval air station in the Alaskan Aleutian chain that became part of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge in 1980. Within that same refuge are the small islands of Amchitka and Cannikan, both used for nuclear testing in the 1960s and currently managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

While these sites are both small islands with both toxic wastelands and wildlife refuges like Vieques, they differ in that they are home to a fraction of Vieques’ nearly 10,000 residents. In fact, Johnston Atoll, never had indigenous inhabitants and has no residential population at all to this day. The islands peak population was in 1970 when there were 1,007 military personnel and civilian contractors living there. Adak Island, over twice the size of Vieques, has a current population of 326 according to the 2010 census. Unlike Vieques, most of Adak’s residents

today are shareholders of Aleut Corporation and relocated to the island after it was virtually uninhabited when the former Naval station closed in 1997 and naval personnel and their families left.

Vieques population is not only significantly larger than either Johnston or Adak, but active military training is also in the islands’ very recent history. As Rolfe stated, there are still residents who remember the active training and bombing exercises.

From Henry’s perspective, it is practical and efficient for the government to have a standardized method for cleaning up Superfund sites. *But is it right for toxic cleanup be one-size-fits-all?* It seems that this ignores Vieques’ unique colonial history and development.

Because the government has encountered situations they consider to be similar to Vieques in the past, the way they will go about dealing with it is similar as well. The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) guides all cleanup under Superfund status in the US. The cleanup of the lands under jurisdiction of the Fish and Wildlife Service that make up the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge are no different.61

Rich Henry made this clear when he explained, “These laws are not Vieques specific—these laws deal with any contaminated site in the United States. And with any responsible party—whether it’s Navy or Exxon. It’s just applied in Vieques in such a fashion that people don’t like. And I may not like it either, but that’s the way it is.”

He continued, “As an organization, I can’t go to my management and say, ‘You know what, let’s give these folks a break and clean it up much more stringently because they want to

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put a daycare center here- even though it’s a refuge.’ My management would say, ‘Dude, it’s against the law, you can’t do that.’ So it's a conundrum.”

**U.S. Government: Only as “green” as the law**

According to CERCLA, the extent of cleanup on Superfund sites is done according to the future of the land use. For instance, if Superfund land is planned to be used as an industrials site where factories will be build on top, it will be held to a lower standard than if a community has plans to build a day care on that land. In Vieques, because the future land use is that of a Wildlife Refuge, cleanup is aimed at the standards adequate for the natural ecosystem to thrive, which is held to a lower standard than that of land used for human purposes. Since Wildlife Refuges may, and should, include areas from the public to enjoy nature, a detailed map of where human use is the guiding tool in the cleanup process.

One area, the highly contaminated former Live Impact Area, has been slated to be for wilderness only, which will restrict public access. But why would the most contaminated site on the island be held to the least stringent standards for cleanup? One theory is that with the wilderness designation, Congress was able to deny public access. They could argue that exposure to chemical hazards could be prevented by denying public access and at the same time eliminate the need to spend hundreds of millions of federal dollars to restore the site.62

Henry described that, for the last 10 years or so, the remediation in Vieques has been what he called “time critical removal reaction” under CERCLA. Through this program, the Navy is currently removing all terrestrial unexploded ordnance (UXO), which often necessitates open detonation or “blow-in-place” of unexploded ordnance. Public access is currently restricted in a large part of the eastern refuge lands due to these activities and other remnant hazards.

In other words, if there’s an imminent threat to human health and the environment, Henry said, “you don’t worry about the details, you go in there and do a removal action,” which he said at other Superfund sites could be a leaking drum, a tanker rail car that overturned and is leaking, or any even that results in an imminent threat. Once the imminent threat is reduced and the situation is stabilized, the Navy can then implement the remedy, which in the case of munitions is often removal.

But not all areas in Vieques are given the same treatment; it depends on what the land will be used for in the future. Henry explained that the implementation of remedies is based on these proposed land uses, which has become the source of recent tension between the Vieques community, tourism industry, and US Government. What the USFW foresees for the future of the land is very different than what many islanders envision.

Henry described the most recent controversy was a situation in which the USFW was in the process of remediation at a site on the west side of Vieques. They were ready to make a decision on the remedial option, but the public voiced discontent with the plan because it didn’t allow an unrestricted use of the USFW land. This is just one example of where Henry described the USFW as being stuck between a rock and a hard place, or, the law and public opinion.

Given the rigidity of the law, Henry seems to think that the main issue is a social one. He said, “It’s got nothing to do with technical issues or Superfund or the cleanup -- it's a social thing where the folks on Vieques say ‘we want this land back- and we want it back in the way it was before the Navy got here and we want to be able to do whatever we want with it.”

I could hear the exasperation in Henry’s voice. His volume had increased and his tone had changed from calm to heated. It seemed that the lack of control Henry has in situations like this had brought on the frustration that he was feeling. While Henry works for USFW, the
agency with most control over former Naval lands, it was clear that he also understood the desires of Viequense citizens but feels he has no authority to address them.

In his frustration Henry explained, “I don’t have the authority- nor does the USFW service, nor does the Department of the Interior to say ‘Eh, you know what, these people do have a point, so we’re going to ignore the Executive order that was signed by the President and Congress- we can’t do that--we just can’t! …And we’ll be at a consistent impasse into perpetuity and the public will continue to be pissed off because they’re not getting what they want and we’re going to continue to antagonize them because we have to do what’s required under the law.”

Not only is the law a limiting factor for the possibilities of cleanup in Vieques, but the agency is also dependent on the Navy for funding, adding to the complexity of the decision-making process.

Henry said, “The responsible party – the Navy- says, ‘Hey, we can only spend money on what’s legal to do’ and the EPA says, ‘We can only make the Navy do what’s legal to do’ EQB (Environmental Quality Board) says, ‘We can only make the Navy do what’s legal to do’ and USFW says, ‘We can only propose land uses that are consistent with the Organic Act which created National Wildlife Refuges.’ There’s a Wildlife Refuge Act that says, ‘this is what you do on a Wildlife Refuge so we can’t propose a land use that’s inconsistent with that.”

After hearing this, my thoughts began to race as I wondered, are these laws doing what they should? Or are they preventing adequate cleanup and compromise between USFW and Viequense citizens? Isn’t the law supposed to protect its environment and its citizens? It was at this point in the conversation where the naïve and idealistic voice in my head kept called out,
“Rules are meant to be broken!” In a democracy, shouldn’t the laws be flexible and public opinion the mechanism for change?

It is possible that in an ideal world in Vieques, both parties could get what they want. If enough people petitioned for a new Executive Order, a lifting of the constraints of CERCLA is theoretically possible. The people of Vieques, main island Puerto Rico, and other concerned citizens would have to sway the President and Congress to resend the original Executive Order that ceased Naval activity in 2001 and ask for it to be changed. Instead of the transfer to USFW, it could read that the land will be transferred over to the Viequense people to do with as they see fit. Then, the people of Vieques could designate the land to be used as they wish and cleanup would have to be aimed at higher standards.

But my faith in this possibility was swiftly dissolved when I asked Rich Henry about the possibility of this scenario. He first responded with a “Well, no,” and then went on to explain. He said that it comes down to financial issues. The Vieques site, he said, makes up about 5 percent of Navy sites that are currently being remediated. However, the Vieques site receives about 40 percent of the Navy budget. So, Vieques gets a disproportionate amount of money every year for cleanup of contaminants, which means that the money needed to clean up the land fulfill the requirements of the public, would far exceed the budget that the Navy has.

“If an Executive Order is signed that says, ‘the land will go back to the people,’ funds will have to make that happen…” Henry explained, “and there’s not the amount of money in the world that will allow unrestricted use to that land- it’s just a fact. Right now with the current technology we have in 2013, you’ll never be able to have unrestricted use.”

_How much health can the U.S. Government pay for? The issue of funding_
As if to say, “case closed” all three informants addressed the issue of funding for the cleanup as a hurdle that to them seems nearly impossible to surmount.

Rich Henry posed the question, “Now if the Navy were to go in there and implement the cleanup that was outside the proposed land use, how are they going to get money to do that? They would have to encumber those funds to do something that is essentially outside of the law. Because the law clearly says, ‘this is how it should be done.’” He felt that as much as people demand for the decontamination of the land, the navy would neither have the money nor the legal push to do so. Cleaning the land to a higher standard is outside what the law requires of the navy. So Henry asked the rhetorical questions, “Where is that extra money going to come from and how is that money going to be spent when you’re doing something that is outside the regulations permit you to do?”

Henry said that this conundrum has come up at meetings he has attended in Vieques. He described the conversation:

“The navy said they have a budget of $20 million a year. And the response from the public was, “get more money” and that’s a somewhat unrealistic response given the nature of our budget right now. And I understand- somebody at the meeting on Sunday made the comment that the Navy is building – I think 5 aircraft carriers at a cost of you know $50 billion a piece. Get rid of one of those aircraft carriers, take that $50 billion dollars and spend it on Vieques. And are they unjustified in saying that? I don’t think so. Is it gonna happen? I don’t think so.”

Henry had done such a thorough job of convincing me of the implausibility of any kind of alternative land use and restoration plan. It was in this instance that began to wonder, how do Viequenses even think they have a chance? One reason may be reality of thorough and timely
cleanup that has happened at other former military bases in the U.S. In fact, The Massachusetts Military Reservation had a similar history to Vieques and has experienced a response from the navy much different than that to the “Vieques Case.”

*Is Richer Safer? The “MMR” Case*

Twentieth century political scientist Aaron Wildavsky once wrote, “Richer is safer.” Environmental scientist John Wargo uses Wildavsky’s words to help us understand the past and perhaps the future of Vieques. In his book *Green Intelligence*, Wargo wrote a chapter on Vieques where he told the story of a similarly contaminated military training site on the western side of Cape Cod, MA that, since the military left, has begun to write a much more promising future for itself. And Wargo suggests that it comes down to money; both the wealth that was already there in the surrounding community and subsequently the money that the military invested was willing to invest in the cleanup.

The military took ownership of the Massachusetts Military Reservation (MMR) in 1940, at the same time of Naval expropriations in Vieques. A thirty-four square mile area, the MMR was used for ammunition storage, live-fire training grounds, and for fire suppression practice. These activities occurred with little understanding that the toxic munitions and chemicals were slowly contaminating underground water supplies. In 1978, detergents were discovered in a nearby community well, which led to intensive testing of chemical hazards, but further testing was delayed. For over a decade, the soil and the primary source drinking water for four neighboring towns was found to be contaminated, adding the MMR to the Superfund national priority list in 1989. The base continued to be used up until 2001 when the National Guard lead a failed attempt to intercept the hijacked airliners aiming for U.S. target.
Both Vieques and the MMR have a sixty-year history of military activity including training, weapons testing, and intense contamination. But unlike Vieques, by 2004 the military had already spent $750 million in cleanup— a year before cleanup would even begin in Vieques.\textsuperscript{63} By 2008, the military only setting aside $250 million for the following seven years to remove contamination.\textsuperscript{64} And while controversy still pervades over the extent of contamination in Vieques, contamination in the MMR is well documented and on a clear schedule for restoration. In Vieques the toxins may be less of a threat to drinking water, but they are also not contained and flow freely into coastal fishing waters.

The amount of money invested in MMR for cleanup may to some extent reflect and add to the money that was already there. It could be thought of as a prime example of, “the rich get richer. The MMR is surrounded by an affluent population who are advantaged when it comes to identifying and managing serious health threats and who were represented in 2008 by Senators Edward Kennedy and John Kerry who have consistently defended environmental and human health. In stark contrast, Vieques is among the poorest of Puerto Rico’s municipalities and has no voting authority in Congress.\textsuperscript{65}

This comparison goes to show that there are in fact alternate routes that have been taken in situations like Vieques. It seems that more than just the law has played a role in decisions around cleanup and development. Given the greater political representation and greater wealth in Massachusetts versus Vieques, it seems very reasonable, even very likely, that these factors influenced the way in which the former military bases were treated.

\textit{Can the King do no wrong?}

\textsuperscript{63} Wargo, John. \textit{Green intelligence: creating environments that protect human health}, 130.
\textsuperscript{65} Wargo, John. \textit{Green intelligence: creating environments that protect human health}, 132.
From my research, I found that my initial goal of writing a “narrative” about the Vieques story from the perspective of the U.S. Government could not be accomplished because, in fact, the government does not speak with one voice. The government embodies multiple agencies that have, at times, radically different priorities. While the military’s primary mission is to maintain social security for people, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife in some sense aims to maintain security for nature. And the EPA’s goal is to protect U.S. citizens from environmental hazards. So the questions arise; should the military’s historic mission—that of protecting Americans from harm—extend to protecting Americans from the military’s own environmental mess? Does the U.S. Military need to act in compliance with U.S. environmental law or is its mission superior? Given their toxic legacy, if the military knows in advance that their testing grounds will be a Superfund site, or at least heavily contaminated posing risks to human health, is it right that they go about contaminating for training purposes anyway?

One report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) assessed whether the military’s compliance with U.S. environmental laws has affected military training or military readiness. While they found that the affect of environmental laws on military readiness was negligible, what struck me initially about this article was the framing of the issue; the military’s training activities were framed as inherently more important than environmental protection and environmental laws were framed as potential burdens to training. Compliance with environmental laws, as the article described, is something that the military refers to as “workarounds” in their training activities.

The report described that from the perspective of the Department of Defense, a fundamental principle of military readiness is that the military must train as it intends to fight,

and that military training ranges allow them to accomplish this goal. According to DOD officials, a heightened focus on the application of environmental statutes in recent years has affected the use of its training areas. What was most alarming to me in this report was the fact that since 2003, DOD has obtained exemptions from three environmental laws and has sought exemptions from three others.\textsuperscript{67} While GAO's review of readiness data for active duty combat units did not confirm that compliance with environmental laws hampers overall military readiness, the requests for exemption from environmental laws the part the DOD’s reveal that their top concern is not environmental health and that it is simply viewed as a hurdle to their training activities.

The navy’s sentiment for being “above the law” was reinforced just last year after they gained “sovereign immunity” in a class action lawsuit filed against them by three-fourths of Vieques’ residents in 2005.\textsuperscript{68} The lawsuit sought monetary reparations for health problems residents believe were caused by toxins left over from weapons testing. Vieques residents asserted that the navy failed to warn them of any potential danger from the government’s military activities. A federal district court in Puerto Rico first dismissed the case in 2010 and that dismissal was most recently affirmed on a 2-to-1 vote of a three-judge panel of the US First Circuit Court of Appeals on Valentine's Day 2012.\textsuperscript{69} Both courts decisions asserted that the navy had "sovereign immunity," a legal doctrine that gives the federal government the discretion to carry out its activities without being sued, except under a few circumstances specified by Congress.

\textsuperscript{67} Government Accountability Office. “Compliance with Environmental Laws Affects Some Training Activities, but DOD Has Not Made a Sound Business Case for Additional Environmental Exemptions.”


\textsuperscript{69} Forsythe, Jerilyn. “Rebuffed by Federal Agencies and Courts, Vieques Island’s Residents Fight for their Land and Health.”
The courts felt that the navy was doing what it was designed to do, while the Vieques residents continue to argue that while this was true, the navy was also violating the law, which is not within their discretion. John Arthur Eaves, Jr., a prominent Mississippi attorney represented the Vieques residents in court and referred specifically to violations of the Clean Water Act of 1972. In fact, the Environmental Protection Agency cited the Navy for violating the act by dropping too many bombs off the shores of Vieques, which according to Eaves, was over 102 times in one year.\(^\text{70}\)

The dissenting appellate judge in the case, Juan Torruella of Puerto Rico, wrote that the government was aware of the toxicity of bombing, yet chose not to warn Vieques residents and therefore should not receive the status of sovereign immunity. Torruella’s message is quoted in the article in which she stated, "Nowhere does the medieval concept of 'the King can do no wrong' underlying the doctrine of sovereign immunity sound more hollow and abusive than when an imperial power applies it to a group of helpless subjects. This cannot be a proper role for the United States of America."\(^\text{71}\)

The U.S. Government’s decision exemplifies the power of government agencies to work within their own system to further what they designate as a priority. The lawsuit decision illuminates the ability for the military, as a government agency, to use its status as part of the government to navigate or “workaround” the law. This raises serious questions about whether the U.S. court system has the ability to do justice when it’s own military is on the defense. The lawsuit also raises legitimate questions about health on the island and the role of the navy in addressing these issues.

\(^\text{70}\) Forsythe, Jerilyn. “Rebuffed by Federal Agencies and Courts, Vieques Island’s Residents Fight for their Land and Health.”

\(^\text{71}\) Forsythe, Jerilyn. “Rebuffed by Federal Agencies and Courts, Vieques Island’s Residents Fight for their Land and Health.”
Visions for the Future

Although the government officials I spoke with seemed empathetic to the Vieques community’s concerns, the legal excusal of the navy by the U.S. Government makes any compensation seem unlikely. All three of my interviews concluded with nothing but a “fingers-crossed” kind of hope in achieving environmental and human health in Vieques. Rich Henry referred more than once to this situation as a “conundrum,” and as “stuck between a rock and a hard place.”

“We understand what they want,” Henry repeated, and what I think may happen - we have to come together and come up with something that may make the public happy, but is still legal to do.” But what that solution is, Henry did not specify.

Jason Rolfe also expressed discouragement in addressing the environmental and health challenges in Vieques. He bluntly stated, “I’ve lost my idealism dealing with government processes.” Rolfe believes that looking forward, Vieques can’t rely on the U.S. Government for help, but instead, he told me that he thinks there will have to be some sort of commercial enterprise on the island in the future that could help encourage what he called “smart growth.” He said he believes it is possible to strike a balance between protecting the environment and encouraging commercial growth, but he did not point to any specifics.

Dan Waddill also expressed hope for the future of Vieques, but didn’t offer any clear advice for what could be done so the issues can be resolved.

“I certainly hope that their health issues can be resolved and you know, I know they’re thinking about how they want to develop as an island,” he said. “I love it. It's a beautiful place- I like the people- they’re great to work with. As you know they’re very passionate and they care a
lot about their island. And you know, we do too. We want to get it cleaned up- and that’s what we’re doing.

Although Waddill told me he has been to Vieques numerous times, he seemed to speak of the Vieques community in a very distant way, as the subject of his job, rather than as people in which he is emotionally invested.

He concluded, “I really hope and do believe that there are good things ahead for Vieques. And I certainly wish that for them.”

From my conversations with Rich Henry, Dan Waddill, and Jason Rolfe it became apparent to me that the law is not always capable of ensuring justice and those working within the system don’t necessarily have the power to change the law or dictate what happens. Though it seems as thought people like Henry, Waddill, and Rolfe are empathetic with the Vieques community and should be empowered as representatives of the U.S. Government to help navigate the law in favor of the island residents, the feelings I got from them were quite contrary. The “Vieques case” to them seemed complex and a “conundrum.” I came away from my conversations with Henry, Waddill, and Rolfe feeling as though the authority and decision-making power was beyond those working on the “Vieques case.” Thus the questions arise, who is making the final decisions around funding, restoration, and land use? Should they have the power and authority potentially without complete knowledge or experience with the case? And is the law capable of achieving environmental and social justice for the island and its inhabitants?
Chapter 3: Touristic Illusions

After being whisked from San Juan on a 8-seat, “puddle-jumper” plane to fly to what looks like from above a forested jungle of an island, imagine that you are welcomed with a cold piña colada at the luxurious W resort in Vieques. During your time there you go on a couple “excursions”- a morning riding on horseback along the beach, an afternoon back at the hotel spa, and a night spent out at the glowing bioluminescent bay. A few days on quiet, white-sand beaches and you head home feeling relaxed and rejuvenated.

Many tourists arrive in Vieques expecting relaxation and adventure in tropical paradise. And often, they leave with their expectations fulfilled. Advertisements and visual media crafted for the tourism industry depict what we know is a contested and contaminated landscape as pristine, untouched, and wild. In this chapter, I will explore how the tourism industry and popular media about Vieques today may function as agents of environmental, economic, and
social oppression. The historical traumata as well as the environmental, economic, and social realities of Vieques are obscured and replaced by the capitalist commodity of an “island paradise.”

One scholar, Oliver Kuhne, in his study of tourism in Okinawa, Japan, referred to this illusion of paradise as a “tourist-gaze” that can turn into a “neo-imperial gaze.” In Vieques, the cessation of bombing marked the exit of one imperial actor and the entrance of the “neo-imperial” actor of the global tourism industry.

Vieques, in advertisements and popular media today, is in a way posited as outside of global capitalism, an alternative to vacationers’ workaday worlds, while in fact, the landscape is invisibly marked by years of labor and usage. Even minimal knowledge of the history of Vieques would reveal that the island is anything but pristine or untouched. But the tourism industry and the Navy do not expose the island’s dirty secrets and most tourists choose not to look. The average tourist experiences Vieques ignorance and bliss.

While advertisements don’t necessarily aim to fool people, it might be that the way tourists want to experience Vieques inclines them to want to be fooled. Visitors want to believe what their eyes see because it serves as an escape from having to think about the violence or harm that took place on the same land that they now lay comfortable, sipping a piña colada, on. While this suspension of belief in a violent history is only natural for those looking to experience a carefree vacation, it is problematic nonetheless.

The issue of visibility of advertising stands in stark contrast to the invisibility of the toxic traces the military has left. Popular media about Vieques in as a tourist destination distracts

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consumers from the actual reality of conditions on the island—of environmental contamination, a public health crisis, local unemployment, and so on.

In this chapter I will explore how the notion of a “pristine” island among tourists and the tourism industry is created and reinforced by popular media and advertising today. I attempt to understand how the tourism industry has both shaped visitors and residents understanding of Vieques’ history. By “tourism industry” I primarily focus on businesses in Vieques that cater to tourists coming from the United States. While Vieques attracts visitors from Puerto Rico, from my own experience on the island, Americans make up a much greater portion of tourists who visit. Additionally, much of the advertising for Vieques is in English and includes travel recommendations, maps, and the like, which are geared toward tourists coming from the States who are unfamiliar with the island and Puerto Rican transportation. In this chapter, I will examine the sentiment of those in the hospitality and tourism businesses in Vieques toward the Navy and USFW. Does the tourism industry see the National Wildlife Refuge and six decades of non-development as an unintentional gift from the U.S. military that makes Vieques unique as a Caribbean tourist destination?

Drawing from primary and secondary sources including ethnographic interviews, phone calls to tourism personnel, popular media, advertising and tourism reviews, I hope to show how the military has presented itself as the restorer of nature after Spanish ravaging of the island and the steward of a pristine wilderness. Popular literature, media and advertising for Vieques portray military legacy in a positive light. The Navy’s message of heroism in “saving nature” only provides the tourism industry with “restored” and “pristine” land to capitalize on. And while the tourism industry praises the Navy for its gifts, it also silently facilitates the continued
existence of contaminated landscape and the downplaying of environmental and social justice issues that plague the island today.

From the Spanish to the Navy and now to USFW and eco-tourism industry, the landscape in Vieques can teach us about the continuous remaking of landscapes and how they are reinforced by the world of advertising and media today. This case reflects the power of marketing to not only reinvent a physical space, but to also rewrite its history. In Vieques, social injustice and environmental violence is being slowly forgotten as it gets buried under the glossy pages of images of rescued, unspoiled nature.

In the concluding chapter of my thesis, I will discuss how it might be possible to use tourism as a way to reclaim the landscape honestly, transparently and for the good of both the island’s residents, tourists, business and environment.

**Maintaining the Illusion in Popular Media: Vieques as an Unintentional “paradise”**

Today Vieques is known as a Caribbean getaway with pristine beaches, colourful coral reefs, wild horses, and a magical bioluminescent bay. Countless visitors deem Vieques “paradise” at first glance. *New York Travel Magazine* recently described the island as “untouched” and “pristine” while *The Washington Post* called Vieques one of the “planet’s last bright spots.” In popular media today, the wounds of the island’s tumultuous history remain hidden behind descriptions and images of picturesque palms, turquoise water, and white sand beaches iconic of the Caribbean island.

The idea of “wilderness” cultivated in Vieques informs a visualization of Vieques that is superficial and lacks depth in reality and history. It is a visualization that shapes the tourists experience and also provides advertisers a platform on which to market the small island.
Advertising of Vieques plays on spectacle and visual representation, a topic that has been written about widely in the social sciences. Social theorists from Guy Debord and the more contemporary Slavoj Zizek have written about the age of spectacle, visual displays, and the way in which advertising distracts consumers from the actual reality. In his famous work, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), French Marxist theorist Guy Debord critiques contemporary consumer culture and commodity fetishism. Debord takes the stance that the spectacle, or in other words, the domination of life by images and icons, has encompassed all other forms of domination. In his book, Debord argues that social life has deteriorated from being into having, and having into purely emerging. From his perspective, commodity is the colonizer of social life. In Vieques, as the island has become a “spectacle” in mass media, the island has succumb to the domination of tourism and global tourism has become the most recent “colonizer.” Global tourism’s interest in Vieques reinforces Debord’s beliefs that the advertising industry and spectacle serve to promote cultural imperialism.

Vieques, as a postcolonial island, is appreciated as a stereotypical tropical paradise with beautiful beaches and so-called untouched nature, where relaxation awaits the visitor. Although affirmative, such interchangeable images obscure the historical oppression of Vieques and the social, economic and political realities that the island faces today. The question thus arises about whether or not these voices are part of new, “neo-imperial” power that has swooped in to dominate and silence the subaltern voices of Viequense residents. While the Vieques community is divided in their involvement and support of the tourism industry, it seems as thought both of the islanders viewpoints against and ambivalent to global tourism industry are not heard.

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In my ethnographic study of advertisements and popular literature about Vieques, I see the way in which the spectacle of Vieques as “untouched” and “wild” which relies on visual traces of Edenic nature disinclines people to look below the surface. What I see here is that tourists are purposefully left in the dark about Vieques’ history and present-day struggles, which limits the possibility of a critical examination of the toxic legacy of the military and the potential for future sustainable development. Ignorance, which will only become more pervasive with time, undermines genuine and collaborative efforts of members of the Vieques community who demand for a more thorough cleanup and sustainable development.

Advertising as Strategy

The notion of Vieques as a “natural” and “wild” landscape is not only false, but serves as a veil to hide the true challenges the island faces including widespread toxic contamination, hazardous weapon and artillery remnants, and the devastation of this pollution on the islands delicate ecosystems and the health of long-term residents.

As big tourism corporations establish a more substantial presence in post-military Vieques, they will increasingly seek to recreate picturesque panoramas of the quintessential Caribbean paradise. The military encouraged the adoption of such false landscapes by protecting the land and designating it as a Wildlife Refuge. When Navy officials agreed to set aside conservation areas on the island, did they imagine or possibly even plan that they would be facilitating the development of a resort industry in Vieques? Today, the toxic landscape left from 60 years of military training practices coincides perfectly with what the resort and tourism businesses now needs to market Vieques globally. Whether it was yet another strategic move or coincidence, the mirage of paradise in Vieques has helped to both excuse the military of its clean-up responsibilities and commodify nature that is so vital for a future of ecotourism on the
island.

The cessation of active Naval training in 2003 marked the beginning of a new era for Vieques. Since then, Vieques has been recast in a positive light as an “unintentional paradise” of the Caribbean. After having been put on the world stage as the island that was been bombed, Vieques was swiftly reinvented as the newest Caribbean tourist destination.

An article was published in *The New York Times* only months after the Navy left recognizing this new opportunity for Vieques. The article stated, “When the United States Navy officially stopped its bombing exercises on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques in May, the 9,000 islanders were overjoyed. After more than 60 years of using Vieques for target practice and occupying two-thirds of the island, the Navy left behind a priceless gift: 16,000 acres of untouched land that could make Vieques an unparalleled site for Caribbean eco-tourism.”

The paradox of this “gift” exemplifies the re-imagining and re-inventing of a landscape once seen as a theater of war. Ironically, the word “gift” connotes something wrapped in pretty packaging, but unknown underneath.

Anyone reading this article would think that the Navy has been a hero to Viequenses; the people were “overjoyed,” the navy left behind a “priceless gift” of “untouched land” that could propel Vieques into a future of “unparalleled” eco-tourism. How could it get any better! But to those who know or who have lived through Vieques’ recent history, this recap of Vieques’ presents a fairy tale ending that does not reflect reality. How can 16,000 acres that were used for target practice be left untouched? And how can a highly contaminated former training base turn around to become an “unparalleled site for Caribbean eco-tourism”? The article gives the impression that Vieques is ripe for immediate tourism. It reads, “That land left behind by the

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Navy has rolling, forested hills that rise out of the blue Caribbean. The magnificent white-sand beaches are almost deserted. With the exodus of the Navy, this area has become a national wildlife refuge, one of the largest in the Caribbean.

While statements like these are not lies, it seems that they are incredibly partial truths that give a false impression that Vieques has been somehow protected or rescued by the Navy as if it were part of a national security mission. Though the islands reputation turned 180 degrees in a matter of months, the major environmental and public health challenges did not. The speed at which news and publicity operate in our fast-paced world do not match the pace of environmental clean-up that is needed to remove contamination from 60 years of constant abuse. But in the interest of business and development, the environmental damage and health are obscured by rhetoric of preservation.

*Ignorance is Bliss at The “W” Resort – Vieques*

No business makes Vieques seem more heavenly than the W Resort, the largest and only tourist franchise to make it to the island so far. Among all of their other resort destinations, their description about Vieques reads:

“Cast away in the turquoise waters of the Caribbean Sea, W Retreat & Spa - Vieques Island is nestled delicately in the pristine beauty of the island. With tropical weather and endless sunshine, W Vieques is an idyllic retreat and romantic playground. Beneath the surface manta rays mingle with sea turtles and starfish pose for perfect pictures.

The island of Vieques offers a generous menu of unspoiled beaches that allow you to take in tropical paradise. Every effort has been made to preserve the natural beauty, marine life and delicate ecosystem of these Vieques Island beaches.”

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75 Todd, John. “A Golden Opportunity for Vieques to be Green.”
From this brief description, Vieques would appeal to anyone looking for a tropical paradise. According to the W, Vieques is “pristine” with “unspoiled beaches” where “every effort has been made to preserve the natural beauty” of the island. This short introduction to Vieques is a quintessential example of how conservation in Vieques is used by business to fulfill the tourist’s desires.

As Vieques’ first self-contained tourist franchise on the island, the W has taken full advantage of the seemingly pristine landscape the Navy has left behind. To visitors of the W, they descend upon an island that looks like it did in the brochures and web images that may have drawn them to the island in the first place. The traces of its military use are invisible to visitors—both visually and aurally. They require testing, the interpretation of complex data, and translation that is a task yet to be filled by the government, tourist industry, or community. One could imagine a public art piece that would translate the data into something visible or activists posting toxicity data. The knowledge of the dire effects of the military control of the island isn’t anywhere to be seen or heard.

Through visitors’ eyes, Vieques looks perfectly untouched. After both a thorough browsing of their website and a conversation with the receptionist about their Vieques resort, I neither found nor heard much of anything about the island’s violent history or unique culture.

In a downloaded online handbook that is meant to give guests at the W a brief overview of the where the resort is situated, I found a mere five-sentence summary of Vieques’ long agricultural and Naval history that not only drastically downplays its significance, but also is quick to acknowledge the silver lining of the military legacy; beaches.
“The US Navy owned and occupied 2/3 of the island from 1940-2003. Prior to the Navy’s arrival, the island was primarily farmed for sugar cane. As of 2003, the former Navy land has been designated a National Wildlife Refuge and is managed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. This means that 2/3 of the island is undeveloped and protected. The diverse ecology of the refuge consists of sub-tropical dry forest on the eastern side of the island, upland forest, mangrove wetlands, lagoons, sea grass beds, coral reefs, and best of all- some of the most beautiful beaches in the world.”

This statement is taken from the W’s website and strongly exemplifies the importance of conservation and the wildlife refuge in terms of producing tourist desires. From the point of view of tourist use, the undeveloped yet polluted Wildlife Refuge is a positive legacy of the military’s former presence.

The W seems to believe that the less attractive aspects of Vieques’ history is irrelevant to their guest’s experience. The W entices guests to enjoy meals and other amenities within their gates, assuring that they will only see the pristine beaches and “preserved” wilderness of their immediate surroundings, rather than the preserved poverty and underdevelopment that is exhibited in other parts of the island.

From their promotional material, it seems as the W resort personnel hope you will rejuvenate yourself at their AWAY Spa, take a dip in the infinity-edged pool or sip a cocktail at sunset in the W Living Room. When I spoke with a receptionist over the phone and inquired about Vieques, asking about what the island was like and what there was to do, she seemed caught off guard.

“Um, the thing is that the island is not that busy, however, the thing is that mostly the

guests, they do, they visit here at the W,” she said, “because this is like one of the bigger hotels here that we have in the island.” Not having gotten an answer, I said I know the W has a lot to offer, but I’d like to know more.

She responded, “Ok, um, like, what would you um like to know more about? ‘Cause Vieques is just a small island. Well most people do- um- here we have one of the top bioluminescent bay tours; um it’s like a microorganisms that um glow in the water at night. And lots of people do those tours.” Gaining momentum, she continued, “It’s really bright- you could even go to swim in the water and you’re glowing- your whole body in the water. Um, that’s one of our major activities and there also is horseback riding as well as um, lots of jet skiing. There’s lots of water sports to be able to do here.” Realizing I’d probably be pressing my luck to ask about restaurants, music, or other community and cultural events, I decided not to forge any other territory in my conversation with her. But my conversation did leave me wondering; didn’t other guests want to know what was beyond the hotel walls? Or, do most visitors at the W stay on resort property, like my Wellesley peer Val and this receptionist had conveyed?

It became apparent that wealthy tourists could enter and leave Vieques only to see an artificial world of thick lawns, sweeping ocean views, and palm-framed swimming pools. The resort caters to a wealthy audience who want a luxurious getaway where everything they might want can be found within the hotel’s gates.

An article in *Caribbean Travel Magazine* reveals the goals of the W to transform visitors experience in Vieques from “dowdy” and slow to sexy and luxurious. It reads, “The 157-room W promises to turn Vieques into a trendy hot spot for urbane fashionistas. A $150-million metamorphosis replaced the Wyndham’s dowdy colonial features with W’s trademark sexy sophistication in a surfeit of white, taupe and chocolate-tone wenge wood. The resort…hopes to
lure a well-heeled clientele with its 6,000-square-foot spa and artful Mix restaurant, serving French-Caribbean-Latino cuisine courtesy of Michelin-star chef Alain Ducasse, fresh from his engagement at the Jules Verne restaurant atop the Eiffel Tower. It's a light-year leap for Vieques, a place where things happen poco a poco, on the Viequenses' own time. In their attempt to erase the formerly “colonial” aesthetic that was at the Wyndham and replace it with a more cosmopolitan façade, the renovation also serves to erase elements of colonial history and oppression at the same time.

This excerpt also suggests that the W and its surroundings stand side-by-side in complete contrast. While the W’s guests experience quintessential paradise, life beyond the hotel gates is not as glamorous. The majority of Vieques residents can only get this world as housekeeping staff changing towels or as gardeners shearing hedges. With its high walls, secure gates, and chic décor, the W stands in sharp contrast to the laid-back Spanish aesthetic and slow pace of everyday life in Vieques. But just outside of its gates lives an overwhelmingly poor, working class island.

This wealth and exclusion at “W” represents another way in which commercial businesses can capitalize off of the illusion of pristineness on the island while residents suffer from invisible toxicity. The W recreates Vieques as a Caribbean utopia where life inside and outside the walls is pristine and perfect. In trying to ensure that guests come happy and leave happy, the W leaves out information about the island’s tumultuous past, the Navy’s toxic legacy, and pressing environmental and public health issues. It is clear that the W is not only in the business of tourism, but also the business of illusion and deception.

**Visions for Vieques**

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While the tourism industry surely benefits from the Naval legacy, not all businesses are aimed at creating such a utopia for their guests. There are a range of small guesthouses in Vieques that are geared toward not only the paradise-seeking tourist, but also encourage guests to explore and enjoy the island’s own culture and charm. Unlike the W, many of these guesthouses have been around since the and 1980s and 1990s when adventurous Americas began to discover the island and settle there as so-called “snowbirds.” Still today, it is predominantly Americans (as opposed to foreigners from Europe or elsewhere) who seek property in Vieques for seasonal and sometimes permanent residence.

One of those adventurers was Joanne Hamilton, the owner of an upscale Hix Island House. Hamilton offers a unique perspective as both part of the tourism industry in Vieques and also a long-time resident of an island. She has lived on the island for over 20 years during both pre- and post- Naval occupation

Joanne witnessed the quick change in representation of Vieques in the news and media beginning in 2003 Navy took flight and the W along with other eager tourism businesses swooped in. She explained, “I’d say about month before the Navy left- or a couple of months before the Navy left, then we were getting all negative publicity. Before it was all people trying to save us from the surge of the Navy. And in about ten seconds, it felt like, after they left, two or three magazines came out with articles about us being the unspoiled gem of the Caribbean, a perfect place to buy- the time is now, affordable, blah, blah, blah. So it certainly changed the complexion of who was coming here.”

Hamilton described how the changing “complexion” of Vieques in the media has resulted in a changing cast of characters over the years. She described the range of people she has seen come through the island. “When I first lived here the Inn on the Blue Horizon was just about to
open and that was a really radical new growth, a new building down here bringing in a whole new style- and a lot of publicity at that time—you know, in the mid-90s. You know a lot of publicity was generated by them because they were in the fashion industry. So a lot of fashion people came,” she explained. Hamilton continued, “But then there were adventurers and the adventurers were followed by the wanna-be-seen-where people are saying it’s special, different, whatever… so it became more your random tourist sort of following the trend that the see in a magazine and that’s the way they’re doing it now. We just went back to adventurers again and now we’re to… free-for-alls!” Hamilton laughed as she described the most recent cohort of visitors.

Throughout the years, Joanne witnessed the island in flux as people arrived and then left like the tide. But she recognizes that the arrival of USFW has been a point of controversy. From her perspective, the creation of the Wildlife Refuge has been a good thing to promote ecotourism rather than, in her words, “rampant growth in a more capitalistic sort of way.”

But she also explained from her point of view the tension that the Refuge has created among islanders. While it is a good thing for economic growth, she said that like many things in Vieques, what seems to be good is often an illusion.

“We’ll take three steps forward and then take four steps backwards,” she said, “You think ‘Wow, that’s really cool that this happened!’ Well maybe it’s great that the Navy left, yes it’s great that there’s a Wildlife Refuge- that it wasn’t just a land grab out there- but there’s still just a big problem between all of the groups who are here.” She continued, “You’ve got people who come here to develop and there are people who’ve lived here there whole life, and then there are people who came back thinking that they were going to get something that maybe belonged to someone in their family.”
As a long-time resident of Vieques, Joanne seemed to have a thorough understanding for what different groups of people on the island want and where there are disconnects in the desires of various stakeholders. While she has been an active community member and has made it a point to educate herself about the current status of former naval land, Joanne she is part of the minority who are actively engaged. Joanne said that the most basic challenge in Vieques is education and conveying the details of the cleanup process and regulations to the public.

She explained, “Everybody’s screaming about needing this mega clean up, well, if we need this cleanup then what would the municipality do with it? Build houses on it? You know, it’s like, huh?” Joanne’s perplexed tone seemed to stem from the fact as one of Puerto Rico’s poorest municipalities, the level of cleanup that would be required to build houses would necessitate a budget far beyond what the municipality could pay for. That said, it seems baffling to Joanne that some residents would continue to fight for what she believes is impossible and would not benefit the island in the long run.

“One of these days it’s gonna have to become like a National Park and we have to pay to go in there to maintain it. And that’s not unreasonable,” Joanne predicted. “But,” she said, “I could betcha anything there will be marches at the gates and people having a fit about that if it’s happened because they’re not educated enough to understand the economics of it either.”

The lack of education in the community as Joanne put it also translates negatively into the workplace and prevents the tourism and hospitality businesses from hiring locals. Joanne explained that unemployment among the local population is a growing tension on the island and has come up as a red flag for visitors that the community in Vieques is not unified. She explained, “I just read a Trip Advisor review for Vieques and the people who wrote it said that
they were really surprised to see so many people from the northeast working at all businesses—why don’t the businessmen hire the locals?”

Joanne exclaimed the answer the reviewers question, “They don’t have to work!” she said, “I mean there’s so much subsidy, the poor people who have been under the scourge of the Navy now have unlimited resources.”

Joanne said that the lack of employment of the locals at many restaurants and hotels has led tourists to believe that businesses in Vieques are unjustly discriminating in their hiring process. She said, “It’s sort of like we are all putting down the locals by hiring someone who comes down from New Hampshire gets hired over a local Viequense kid, and that’s not the case at all.”

She continued, “There has to be a work ethic, and there has to be some education going along with the want- the desire to work- first of all. I mean, why do you even have to work if you can get a check at the end of each week or each month… from the government!?” After a brief pause and a deep breath, Joanne sighed and said, “There are a whole lot of things here that are – like anywhere in the world- that are not easy to fix.”

Although Joanne recognizes the complexity of social and environmental issues in Vieques, she sees education and ecotourism as promising ways forward for the prosperity of Vieques. Her vision is an economy based on eco-tourism with a lot more businesses that are run by local people. Joanne explained that the massive publicity the island is getting today since bombing stopped, along with the natural features such as the bioluminescent bay and the beaches attract people come to Vieques. She also believes that the fact that the underdevelopment of Vieques compared to its Caribbean neighbors is also a big draw for visitors, which is a reason to keep tourism in Vieques on a smaller scale. She said, “There’s still not a street light on the
island- that’s a big thing.” Joanne would like to keep Vieques this way where development is small scale and the focus is on environmental education. She imagines the old observation post, a remnant of military architecture, on a mountain in the middle of the Wildlife Refuge as a future destination for tourists who want to learn about the history of the island. She described her vision; “The top of that mountain is the most beautiful view – and that observation post would be a wonderful ecotourism education center, about the Caribbean as a whole and about Vieques individually.”

**A Conversation with Carl from the Bravo Beach Hotel**

Joanne’s vision for development in Vieques to remain relatively small-scale was seconded by Carl, another resident from the continental U.S. who works in hospitality in Vieques. Unlike Joanne, Carl had only been living in Vieques for a year and a half working for the Bravo Beach Hotel. As a newcomer to the island, Carl understands the challenges on the island much differently than Joanne. He pointed to infrastructural issues as the main limitation to growth and development for tourism and business.

“Vieques will boom to a certain extent- I mean right now during this time of year pretty much everyone is full. But it’s never going to turn into a Cancun or something like that because the infrastructure just isn’t there and its’- there’s not enough available land to really do something like that,” he said.

Carl explained, “We get all of our power and water- specifically the water- from the main island. And to increase the capacity of that you’d have to run an additional pipe. And to do that you’d have to do a bunch of environmental studies – and it would cost about $30 million dollars to put in the pipe. And there’s only one spot to build a hotel.” He concluded by saying, “It’ll
probably end up being like a St. John, which doesn’t have a lot of big resorts, but it is a more expensive place because of limited supply and demand.”

Carl looked at the issues in Vieques as logistical and technical rather than social like Joanne had. As our conversation moved forward, Carl did not question the presence of USFW and did not point to military presence as an underlying cause of the financial and infrastructural issues that he was presenting. He also seemed to think that most people were also accepting of USFW.

I asked Carl what his understanding was of the controversy over the future use of naval land and he responded bluntly, “As far as what controversy?” He continued, “There’s no real controversy over it- I think most people like havin’ it be under the Fish & Wildlife. I mean, the Navy’s had the land for over 80 years. It’s not like anyone was – not too many people are left alive now that before the Navy was there, so the Navy had always been there.”

Carl seemed to think that because the Navy and USFW had had control over the land for so long, there was a general acceptance that they were there for good. He even went as far as saying that from the local’s perspective he thinks that, “some people might kinda miss the Navy ‘cause they actually have to pay or things versus the Navy used to pay for everything. But now the city’s bankrupt.”

Carl’s understanding of the islands history and controversy over naval land was extremely limited. It was clear that Carl was not aware of the issues of toxic contamination, public health threats, and environmental degradation associated with the former naval lands. Carl seemed to take the Vieques Wildlife Refuge at face value. He said, “I mean, that’s where all the best beaches are located- in the Fish & Wildlife area- so they allow us access in there and patrol
that and do all that in that area. But since it’s wildlife area, it’s not something that’s going to be
developed like a national park would be, cause that’s not the primary focus of it.”

Hearing Carl’s perspective made me wonder if the concerns about the lingering contamination are discussed in the public sphere, or at least in the sphere of English-speaking, North Americans like him who have moved to Vieques temporarily, seasonally, or permanently. Carl’s lack of knowledge about issues and history of the island made clear the existence of different public spheres in Vieques- those in English and Spanish - and question the varying discourse that exists in different public spheres in Vieques. And what public spheres exist

In a year and a half of living on the island, Carl seemed to think that there was no controversy over former Naval land whatsoever. To Carl, the creation of the Vieques Wildlife Refuge in Vieques plays an explicit role in adding to tourist value. From his perspective, USFW protects the “best beaches” which draw people to the island. He did not acknowledge the existence of pollution on Refuge land or other safety hazards that resulted in the creation of this apparent sanctuary. From my perspective, it seems as though Carl may be representative of many tourists and “outsiders” who remain ignorant about the islands history. Whether this is due to language barrier, or limited public dialogue, the public health threats of the toxicity and environmental contamination aren’t pervasive. The fundamental lack of visibility of these issues allows them to remain imperceptible to both visitors and residents of the island.

From my conversation with Carl, it became clear that for newcomers and tourists in Vieques today, the voices of islanders who protests the USFW have become merely whispers and the issues seem mute while people and nature struggle in silence.

“Taking Advantage”
In Vieques, not only has the island’s landscape been reinvented and recast as a tropical paradise, but a positive light has also been shed upon the U.S. Military. The military’s handoff of 15,000 acres of land in Vieques almost exclusively to USFW was not passive. It was well thought out, strategic, and played an integral role in camouflaging the traces of the Navy’s former presence and lingering harm. By letting the USFW take control of former military lands, the Navy redirected the gaze of locals and tourists alike onto an overgrown jungle environment that would convince any viewer that they look out upon pure nature. With fast growing vegetation and a tropical climate, it hasn’t taken long for the land to appear healed. This carefully crafted mirage not only allows the military to leave the scene excused and forgiven, but it could also pave the way for another imperial machine to take advantage of Vieques—that of global tourism.

An article in The Boston Globe in 2007 read, “When the Navy left, it ended 60 years of bombing practice and maneuvers that kept some of the island's most spectacular beaches off limits at various times of the year. Jurisdiction of the former military preserve passed to the US Fish & Wildlife Service. Tourists and investors descended on Vieques, seeking to take advantage of the island's undiscovered charms.” 79

And in 2011, Caribbean Travel Magazine said that the new focus in Vieques is “eco-tourism and active adventures that take advantage of the islands' unspoiled charms.” 80

The expression to “take advantage” of something or someone evokes the notion of exploitation, unfairness, and injustice. It also connotes “capitalize on,” which clearly resonates

with capitalism and highlights tourism’s role in global capitalism. From Spanish colonialism to land acquisition by the Navy in the 1940s that many argue was only legal on paper, to the eager tourism companies today, Vieques has been taken advantage of and gotten the short end of the stick since history has been recorded.

Slavoj Zizek’s, a Slovene philosopher and cultural critic, has written on the “farce” of ethical consumerism, including eco-tourism. Eco-tourism and “active adventures” in Vieques that hope to take advantage of “unspoiled nature” Zizek would refer to as falsely ethical consumerism. From his viewpoint, so-called “conscious consumerism” or socially or environmentally enlightened buying habits aren’t as virtuous as they may seem. He argues that commodities such as fair trade coffee serve as palliatives that only perpetuate an immoral economic system. Zizek argues that there is an element of hypocrisy involved in industries like eco-tourism because those businesses also support the economic structures that cause environmental and social problems in the first place. In Vieques, eco-tourism has the potential to only go skin-deep in ameliorating the island’s underlying issues.

The marketing of international tourism has captured not only the attention of adventurers and tourists, but has slowly captured the imaginations of locals who envision their island as a prosperous tourist destination. Even the voices those who’ve spent years fighting for the cleanup of their land are beginning to fade to a whisper as they begin to see the beauty of their island on glossy magazine pages.

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Chapter 4: The Promise and Limitations of Activism and Tourism in Vieques

“We are saying sometimes, somebody wants everybody in Vieques to die, so they can have the whole island of Vieques like they did someplace else. And somehow there’s still the thought in us that they still want the island to make a base- or maybe not just today to make a base- maybe for the tourists to take over. Maybe now they don’t want Vieques for the military, but maybe they want it for the tourists. And they want us to die so they can have the island.”

-- Carmen Valencia, a lifelong resident of Vieques

Carmen speaks for many Viequense residents when she expresses feelings of exploitation, domination of her homeland by imperial bodies from the military to global tourism. She and many others have lived from one uphill battle to the next - from one takeover to another.
Just ten years ago, Carmen and many other Vieques residents celebrated the end of bombing on their island – an unimaginable situation where the drone of bomber planes purred overhead 180 days out of the year riddling the land and water with toxic ammunition. While the end to these practices was a victory for Viequenses, since the navy left in May of 2003, Viequense residents face an arguably more challenging battle for the proper cleanup and use of former military land. Viequenses now fight against violence that is invisible; toxic contamination that is hidden beneath the soil and under the skin of residents and a violent history that has been erased in glossy Caribbean travel magazines and grown over by “wild,” “undiscovered” nature.

Since 2003, questions regarding what might happen to the lands once the bombings ceased and the bases closed down have aroused less publicity than what was a more dramatic, and evidently a more news worthy, struggle against the military presence. For the last decade, local efforts to revive the island’s economy have been ignored by the Navy, by government and private interests, and have failed to grab the attention of the media and widespread community support.82

The next couple of years will be integral for the Viequense community to come together and take back control to determine what the future of their island could look like. So far, the power of the U.S. military, U.S. Fish & Wildlife, and now “neo-imperial” global tourism have drowned out the voices of Viequense residents.

But this May (2013), their voices will be heard once again. As I write this, Viequenses and activists from around the world prepare to come together on the small island to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the cessation of active naval training. Organizations from Vieques, Puerto

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Rico, and the United States are preparing to commemorate the first victory in what will be a long struggle against the U.S. government.

The anniversary this May will not only be a time for celebration-- it will also provide a forum in which residents and activist organizations can come together in solidarity to discuss the continued contamination of Vieques after U.S. military use. While the Navy may have physically left, the Viequense community argues that its presence is still felt in the residents’ fear of the thousands of undetonated bombs that remain, their refusal to clean and decontaminate the island, and the vacant parts of the island that remain undeveloped or unusable. For residents of Vieques, the battle for their island is not over until cleanup is held to a higher standard and some of the former military lands are returned from federal government back the municipal or commonwealth.

While these demands have been repeated by the Viequense community in news articles, blogs, websites, and so on, from the interviews I had with activists, it seems apparent that there is in fact very limited action on the part of the activist community today. In this chapter I will examine this absence of action on the part of activist community to voice their demands for the cleanup and sustainable development of former military lands.

Despite the lack of widespread mobilization and media-attention given to resident’s demands today, there are various groups that exist and attempt to voice the desires of the community. The two dominant activist groups in Vieques today are the Vieques Women’s Alliance and the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques. The Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques (CRDV) was established in the 1990s by Vieques activist who continued to protest lingering Navy activities in Vieques and also committed themselves to la protesta con la propuesta (the protest with the proposal) for the island’s biggest ecological,
economic and social challenges, by advocating “the four D’s: Demilitarization, Decontamination, Devolution (return of lands) and (community-based, sustainable) Development.”\textsuperscript{83} The group continues to make demands to the U.S. government using the “4-D’s” framework, although as we will see, their activity has weakened since the fight for demilitarization transitioned to the latter three “D’s.”

Since the establishment of La Alianza and the CRDV, two other groups have been formed in Vieques to facilitate communication and conversation between the various stakeholders on the island. These groups include the Vieques Sustainability Task Force (VSTF), created by the Obama administration, and the Restoration Advisory Board (RAB) created by the U.S. Navy.

The Vieques Sustainability Task Force first met in April of 2011 with the intention of helping to promote sustainable development in Vieques.\textsuperscript{84} The goal is that the task force would act as a bridge by facilitating communication between the U.S. government and Vieques residents in hopes of accelerating the implementation of new initiatives and projects on the island. Its two overarching goals are to advance the Superfund remediation and clean-up process and advance sustainable economic development and job creation projects on Vieques for the benefit of its residents. The VSFT recognized areas of focus including; Superfund, energy, job creation, hospitality, Bio-bay, transportation, sustainable agriculture, land-use planning, solid waste, and health care and recently published an updated report on these issues in May of 2012.

The Restoration Advisory Board, established by the navy, also acts as a link between the Vieques community and the government with regard to the environmental restoration process of the Superfund site. RAB’s are commonplace in communities undergoing environmental

\textsuperscript{83} Santana, Deborah Berman. "La Lucha Continua: Challenges for a Post-Navy Vieques."
restoration as a result of military training. The Department of Defense gives each community the option of forming one to share their views with government decision-makers at the site. The RAB is made up of representatives of the DOD, the local government, and the community and RAB members are in charge of reporting information to the community about the DOD’s restoration activities. 85

Both of these groups give a voice to islanders while working with U.S. and Puerto Rican government and tourism industries in the planning process for both decontamination and development. However, as we will see, having a comprehensive plan is one thing and carrying that plan out is another. While these groups may have made room for a discussion about development to take place, according to my sources, significant action has yet to take place.

For residents, Vieques cannot be completely healed without progress on all of these fronts. The success of this second stage of the struggle hinges on the degree of public awareness and support about local grievances and desires, the length and extent of Superfund cleanup, and the control of future development on the island.

A New Stage of the “Vieques Struggle”

Since demilitarization in Vieques was achieved, mobilization around decontamination, devolution, and development has failed to gain momentum among activist community like the social movement in Vieques a decade ago. Protests to stop the U.S. Navy from bombing the island made international headlines. The movement was referred to as a “David and Goliath” story where vibrant local resistance attracted the attention and support of environmental social justice activists as well as religious, political and civic leaders worldwide. While the activity against the military in the 1990s in Vieques’ was highly publicized, the struggles today have received less attention from popular media.

Academic scholarship describing the continued struggles on the island emphasize this marked difference in local and international activism by describing the pre-military and post-military demands as two distinct phases of protest. In an academic journal article by Sherrie Baver, a professor of Political Science at The City University of New York, she analyzes the

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post-naval protests as the “second stage of the Vieques struggle.” Baver characterizes the first stage of the struggle as the period of protests between 1999-2003 to expel the U.S. Navy from the island that captured attention as the civil society of Puerto Rico united around human rights and social justice. Baver suggests that the Viequenses fight symbolized a broader fight by communities suffering from military colonialism. The “second” stage is characterized by the struggle to control the cleanup of toxic contamination and the trajectory of development of the island.  

Baver’s analysis emphasizes the differences between activism today and that just over a decade ago. Her use of “stages” suggests that there has not been continuity in action between the fight for demilitarization and the subsequent 3 D’s of decontamination, devolution, and development.

One reason for the discontinuity in action I would argue is the shift in nature of the second stage of the “Vieques struggle” to issues less tangible and less visible than the active bombing. Toxic cleanup and public health and has thus lost momentum. While the demilitarization movement unified residents for a clear and concrete mission, the second stage of the struggle is less dramatic and more complex.

The successful community organization that demilitarized Vieques focused on health as a fundamental human right. Living in a healthy and safe environment is the basis of this right and the cumulative exposure to war-simulation exercises in Vieques over 60 years of Naval control was closely linked to negative physical, psychological, social, and ecological outcomes. The World Health Organization’s defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social

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well being. In Vieques, their community-led actions focused on the restoration of the island’s environment and other resources vital to realizing health in its broadest sense.

Rather than organizing around the single claim of US colonialism, the citizens of Vieques, lead by the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques, focused on social, economic, and ecological barriers they faced that led to real public health consequences. They focused on the fact that restrictions on fishing and a reduction of the industry had left them unemployed and crippled the economy. Residents argued that no land meant that they had no ability grow subsistence crops and that the natural resources that had once sustained them, were now depleted. The Vieques residents drew from their personal experiences of psychosocial stress imposed upon them by constant bombing, the high rates of health problems attributed to environmental degradation, and the disruption of family and social ties from out-migration. The community fought using and extensive repertoire of personal grievances and real evidence of harm in their public health approach to organizing.

In an article published in 2005 in the *American Journal of Public Health*, Maria Idali Torres reveals how the Viequense community, without being aware of it, organized successfully in a “text-book case” of community health education (CHE), applying all ten commitments of the framework. Most notably, she emphasized that this coalition succeeded in “creating an action-oriented movement of the civil society from very distinct, and in some cases oppositional, social agendas and ideological orientations.” Joining this movement were faith organizations, community groups, academic institutions, NGOs, and thousands of concerned citizens.

While Vieques’ social movement to halt active bombing succeeded in because it

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mobilized concerns about health, today military contamination is left out-of-sight (and out-of-
mind) behind the barbed wire fences of the Vieques Wildlife Refuge. As long as the
contamination is hidden and land is designated for endangered birds and turtles rather than
humans, it seems that the issue might also be left in dust.

Given the lack of local activism in Vieques today, finding those Vieques residents
involved in what activity exists today was not an easy task.

Bob Rabin, although he hails from originally from Boston, has lived in Vieques for over
20 years and has played a leading role in the Comité Pro Rescate y Desarrollo de Vieques
(CPRDV) or Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques, described to me the lack of
“genuine,” “vibrant,” or “empowered community organization. In our phone conversation, he
stressed the lack of “real” community involvement around the issues of decontamination,
devolution and development. Bob explained that while organizations like the CPRDV and the
Vieques Women’s Alliance exist, they are not active like they were during the struggle for
demilitarization and went as far as calling it the “crisis in the organizational reality in Vieques”
since the cessation of bombing.

He said, “We were really an empowered community between 99-2003- that’s definitely
not the case anymore. The Vieques Women’s Alliance exists in one or two women who do some
very sporadic stuff. I’d say the same is true for our committee- the Committee for the Rescue and
Development of Vieques. You know, we have these two main projects- the Vieques
Microbusiness Incubator to push community development and the Vieques Radio Project- those
are the two main projects of the Committee for Rescue and Development of Vieques and that has
sort of caused a dissemination of information through our social media, but the type of vibrant
activity that was happening during that period of the struggle to stop the bombing is non-existent now.”

He continued, “There has been- for the past five or six years- no consistent local, organized efforts on behalf of cleanup or working for the health issues and definitely not for the devolution issue.”

Community activity demanding environmental cleanup and attention to health issues by the government Bob described as “sporadic” and poorly organized. He explained to me that not only have these pressing issues been left out of community discussion, but they’ve also received inadequate attention from the municipal government, the government of Puerto Rico, and the U.S. government. Part of the issue, Bob says, is the broken promises of the Obama administration.

“The federal government - Obama – created the ‘President’s Task Force on Puerto Rico’ and included a special Task Force on Vieques headed up by the regional director of the EPA… but as far as I’m concerned there’s a lot of flack-catchers (who) come and keep people, you know, talking and talking and talking, but there’s been no concrete action on the part of the Obama administration over the past, you know, six years,” Bob explained. He continued, “Obama has done absolutely nothing, despite promises during his campaign for his first presidential term. You know, he made campaign promises right here in Vieques and has not fulfilled them.”

The “promise” that Bob was referring to was a letter Obama wrote in February of 2008 to then Governor of Puerto Rico Aníbal Acevedo Vilá and the people of Puerto Rico in which he pledged to "actively work" to clean up Vieques and to help those suffering from the health
effects of toxic heavy metals, chemicals and radioactivity associated with the Navy's use of Vieques. In his letter, Obama wrote:

"My Administration will actively work with the Department of Defense as well to achieve an environmentally acceptable cleanup of the former U.S. Navy lands in Vieques, Puerto Rico. We will closely monitor the health of the people of Vieques and promote appropriate remedies to health conditions caused by military activities conducted by the U.S. Navy on Vieques.”

As Bob expressed, the Obama Administration has yet to act on his promise. Very little public health research has been conducted on the island since the late 1980s and no “remedies” have been sought to health conditions that Obama acknowledges are “caused by military activities conducted by the U.S. Navy on Vieques.” An article published in the *American Journal of Public Health* in 2001, which you will note I cited in the Introduction, presents shocking statistics from the late 80s-90s that illuminate the health disparities in Vieques that residents claim still exist today. Standardized cancer incidence rates on Vieques from 1985 through 1989 were 27% higher than those in Puerto Rico overall and in 1995, population-based government health data showed that the risk of dying from cancer was 1.39 times higher on Vieques than on the main island. Although there is no recent data to show that these disparities still exist, Vieques residents believe that there continue to be significantly higher rates of cancer caused by the existing toxic contamination on the island from the Navy. These residents can’t afford to wait for a decision from the courts that could take years to make its way through the court system. But

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despite what seems like significant evidence correlating disease to a contaminated environment, the navy has done nothing to help alleviate the suffering it has caused.

**Descontaminación/Decontamination**

Part of this lack in action on the part of the U.S. military can be attributed to a series of studies conducted by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry that contend there is no definitive connection between the Navy's weapons testing and the islanders' numerous and heightened health problems. The ATSDR is a federal agency created to prevent harmful exposures and diseases related to toxic substances that has released eight reports on Vieques since 1999 upon being asked by a local resident to look at a possible link between the Navy's contaminants and emerging health issues. These studies have served to undercut the demands of Vieques residents for a thorough cleanup of former naval lands on the basis of health concerns.

In interviews and conversation with Vieques residents, the ATSDR’s studies came up frequently as a major barrier to achieving a higher standard of cleanup and, consequently, public health on the island. The ATSDR’s reports have served to relieve the navy of responsibility for this public health crisis and some even believe that the agency has allied with the navy to produce faulty evidence.

And most recently, on Valentine’s Day of 2012, a U.S. Supreme Court decision giving the navy “sovereign immunity” from being sued by residents seeking monetary reparations for health problems put a nail in the coffin for ill Viequense residents demanding further cleanup. In 2005, a class action lawsuit was filed against the Navy by three-fourths of the island's residents seeking monetary compensation for health problems they believe are caused by toxins left over from weapons testing. The lawsuit asserted that the Navy failed to warn residents of any potential danger from the government's military activities. A federal district court in Puerto Rico
dismissed the case in 2010 and that dismissal was affirmed in the U.S. First Circuit Court of Appeals just last year.

In my interview with Bob Rabin, the ATSDR reports and the most recent Supreme Court decision were the first two things he brought up as barriers to resident’s current demands from the U.S. government. To Bob, this situation is, “what we would describe as the most recent attack against the health, the ecology, and the economy of Vieques on the part of the U.S. Government.” In this statement, Bob points out the fact that this is only the latest example of the way in which U.S. government agencies have found ways to escape what many consider to be crime against people of Vieques and an infringement of basic human rights.

Vieques is not the only community who has felt like a victim of the U.S. government. Numerous authors and activist groups recognize that Vieques is simply one case of many where the U.S. Government has circumnavigated the law in order to take advantage of communities, particularly island communities, for military use. In a book called *Green Intelligence* by John Wargo, a professor of environmental policy, risk analysis, and political science at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and the Department of Political Science at Yale University, he examines the histories of five hazardous technologies and practices, including the military training in Vieques, which reveal patterns in the delayed discovery of toxic threats and the governments’ failure to manage them effectively. Wargo argues that information about synthetic substances is often unavailable, distorted, kept secret, or presented in a way that prevents citizens from mobilizing to reduce these threats.

Wargo writes, “The ASTDR’s findings were not credible to many in the Vieques population. The islanders find it unthinkable that hundreds of millions of pounds of bombs and
other weapons could be exploded on the island’s land or within its coastal waters and be undetectable in its marine food webs.” 93

Wargo also believes that the islanders’ risk of exposure is almost certainly high. Wargo and two Yale undergrads conducted a food-intake survey during the summer of 2003 and administered it to nearly 50 Vieques fisherman to assess whether the amount of fish islanders eat is enough to pose health-risks. The results showed that some fishermen consumed twelve pounds per week, which is thirty-two times more than the FDA and EPA had predicted. Consequently, Wargo argues that even low levels of chemical contamination in these fish could result in significant chemical exposures for the fishermen.94 As an adviser to Vice President Al Gore, the U.S. Congress, the U.N. World Health Organization, and other institutions, Wargo’s expertise serves to bolster the intuition of Viequense residents that the invisible, yet toxic substances are a threat to their well-being.

Wargo’s study further illuminates the difficulties Viequenses face in their fight for public health given a lack of transparency and information around the issue. Without any significant studies other than questionable studies by the ASTDR, the U.S. government has kept Vieques community in the dark regarding the real health risks posed by the existing contamination. Without information on their side and the world’s attention focused on Vieques as a vacation destination, locals lack the tools and the international support to create a vibrant movement as they did for demilitarization.

Vieques’ peripheral positionality as peripheral to Puerto Rico and even more to the United States also contributes to resident’s inability to mobilize around their demands for environmental and social justice today. Anthropologist Amahl Bishara, in her ethnography Back

94 Wargo, John. *Green Intelligence: Creating Environments That Protect Human Health*, 123
Stories: U.S. News Production and Palestinian Politics, has argued that having basic human rights, such as freedom speech and expression, is contingent on being a citizen within a state. Bishara examines the way in which U.S. news about Palestinians in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict depends on the collaborations between American and Palestinian journalists. While they are collaborators, the citizenship of correspondents from the United States affords them greater access to interviewees and protection in time of emergencies than their Palestinian counterparts who, because of their lesser authority as citizens, lack the same mobility, clout, and protection. She writes, “It is no coincidence that statelessness, a lack of political representation, often begets something akin to voicelessness, a lack of media representation.”

Like the Palestinian journalists Bishara refers to, the lack of political representation of Vieques in the context of Puerto Rican government and the United States government, has begotten a lack of media representation, especially after the bombing ceased and journalists packed up their notepads and cameras. Since 2003, the community in Vieques has to an extent been stranded in silence as marginally positioned citizens, vis-à-vis a state, like Palestinians in Bishara’s ethnography.

This is further exemplified in the fact that similar communities suffering from contamination by the military who are more centrally positioned in a state, such as the Massachusetts Military Reservation in Cape Cod have also enjoyed timely cleanup, or basic human rights. On the other hand, peripheral people, like the Viequense community, are less able to “have” human rights because of their lessened power to demand them.

The diminished power of Viequense residents is evidenced in their quietness and discouragement in this second stage of the struggle was made no more apparent than in a radio interview with long-time Vieques resident Carmen Valencia, whose voice I introduced in the

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beginning of this chapter. Carmen plays an integral role in the Vieques Women’s Alliance, or La Alianza de Mujeres de Vieques, an organization made up of the mothers, daughters, and wives in Vieques who are fighting for their health, the health of their families, and for the health of generations to come.

In an hour-long interview with local radio station Radio Libre, we learn that Carmen has been involved in the struggle in Vieques since the very beginning. She was part of the first group of women who got together as a collective to raise their voices in solidarity to protect their own lives, the lives of their children, their families, and their land. She helped chain the gates of the naval base for the very first time in the late 90s and kept the lock and keys along with other women in the Alliance. Carmen was an English teacher in Vieques for most of her adulthood until she fell seriously ill from exposure to bat droppings. At that time, she was old enough to retire, but couldn’t stand sitting at home, so she got involved in community affairs.

Though only made up of a few women today, the Alliance has spent the last decade fighting the claims of the ATSDR by seeking outside scientific and medical support and also providing adequate health services for those residents in Vieques she believes suffer illnesses directly related to the toxic legacy of the Navy.

In the interview with Radio Libre, Carmen said:

“We learned that the (...) ATSDR did some testing in Camp Lejeune and said there was no relationship between the cancer in Camp Lejeune and the area surrounding. The army was throwing their dirty waters where the people were drinking the same water. And they did relate the cancer there with what they were doing with the waters. And they had said that there was no relationship but somehow they found out that they lied, you know, with the results.”
Carmen continued, “So there was this man who went to Vieques- he said that they would do some testing in Vieques again, including the chemist from Vieques. So they would join their efforts to give real results, but I don’t know what happened after that!”

It seemed that Carmen’s hope faded as the promise of outside support for the health of Viequense residents was broken. Carmen concluded in an audibly defeated tone, “They try to hide all the results (and) since they say they (the Navy) have sovereign immunity— that’s why the struggle continues.”

Though so much has happened since the first battles Carmen and other women were involved in, Carmen continues to be motivated and to struggle for health and justice. Today Carmen plays an integral role in addressing the most serious and pressing health issues on the island requiring medical attention from the main island. Though a long-retired teacher (likely in her 70’s since her six children range in age from 30-50), Carmen single-handedly coordinates appointments for people in Vieques with medical specialists from the main island. Her efforts to improve health care on the island, though crucial, are only a partial solution to the problem going forward. The struggle for public health needs to garner support like the fight for demilitarization, with help sympathetic activists in Puerto Rico, on the mainland, and abroad.

**Devolución /Devolution of the land, or “The Hand-Off”**

Residents have expressed deep frustration with the turnover of land from the military to Fish and Wildlife because it is viewed as an obstacle to the cleanup that residents want. Rather than appreciating Fish and Wildlife’s “protection” of the environment, residents of Vieques view the agency as the island’s most recent usurper. They see the mandate to protect former base land as an extension of restrictions and absolute control over the land established by the Navy.

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But devolution has been mostly left out of local dialogue partly due to the lack of “vibrant” and “empowered” community organization that Bob Rabin described previously, and partly due to the limitations of the law.

In my conversation with Bob, he stated that, “Devolution has not even been discussed-devolution is a word that people here are not- there has not been any action whatsoever on the part of the community, on the part of the local government, on the part of the government of Puerto Rico to demand the return of the land. That has been an area greatly lacking in any activity.”

Devolution seems to be the demand put on the back burner, while decontamination is viewed as the more pressing issue. Perhaps residents have given more attention to decontamination as it directly affects health regardless of who controls the land. On the other hand, devolution is a point of frustration, but one that residents may not be able to do much about.

From the perspective of USFW, demanding the devolution of land would be a waste of residents’ time. Rich Henry who heads the “Vieques Case” for USFW and whom I introduced in the previous chapter seemed to be very aware of the local discontent regarding the land transfer. In our conversation, Henry seemed expressed his empathy for the islanders, recognizing that from their point of view the USFW service was stepping in as another seemingly “imperialistic” power shaking hands with its ally, the U.S. military. He attempted to narrate the story as he saw it from the Viequense perspective:

“Since the main land transfer occurred, or prior to the land transfer there was the civil disobedience and protests against the Navy. The folks that live on Vieques as well as
people who live on mainland Puerto Rico or other places, said, ‘Navy, get out! We’re
tired of you doing this and we’re tired of you doing that, so get out!’

So the Navy says, ‘Alright, we’re outta here! We’ve got another place to fulfill
our mission and then the President of Congress said, ‘Yep, Navy you’re outta there, but
Fish and Wildlife Service, you’re in.’ And the people that were involved in the protests
were not very happy with that because they wanted the land transferred back to the
municipality- to the people of Vieques. So there’s a conflict there in that, as far as the
people were concerned, the land got transferred from one imperialistic organization to
another imperialistic organization. So one branch of the federal government handed off to
the other and their feeling was ‘we got screwed again.’”

Henry seemed to understand pretty accurately the feeling of locals, but given the technicalities of
cleanup (which I presented in the previous chapter) devolution of land to him seems almost
impossible.

Devolution of land also has the potential to negate other aspirations of Vieques residents
regarding the islands development. Small-scale tourism and eco-tourism in Vieques will rely on
the health and illusion of “nature” on the island, which is cultivated in large part by the Vieques
Wildlife Refuge. Turning over this land to the municipality could mean more residential or
commercial development, which would undercut the island’s most attractive feature of
wilderness.

These conflicting desires were made clear in an interview I had with a friend of mine,
Ivan, who has lived in Vieques all his life working in everything from construction to hospitality
to the Bio-bay tours. After asking Ivan what he thought was the biggest draw for people to come
to Vieques, he stated, “I believe mostly it’s the nature- it’s a non-developed island unlike most of
the other islands and it gives you the feeling like you’re discovering a new place.” Ivan believes that the wildlife refuge is crucial in setting Vieques apart and establishing nature as its most unique and attractive feature for tourists.

He said, “It will be attractive to people because if we make this place like any other place full of malls and fast food then it could be any other choice, but the simplicity of the island-- that thing about being a new place to discover-- have been really attractive to people to come to the island and check it out.”

But on the other hand, he drew attention to the fact that Vieques Wildlife Refuge will continue to give tourists the impression that they gaze upon a wild and natural landscape. “I believe it’s really unfair that we call it a wildlife refuge,” he said, “the United States have to compromise to clean the land the way it’s supposed to do but the easiest thing to do was make it a Wildlife Refuge… in a place that they used to kill whales.” He also commented, “the people only got access to it at 20 percent at the most because it’s full of bombs you know. That’s the kind of refuge we have.”

Ivan addressed the fact that if the land weren’t for wildlife, then it might be used for people. For him, that would be the worse of two evils. He explained, “I don’t mind the wildlife, because I better appreciate that wildlife in the area rather than people, you know.”

Although Ivan would like Vieques to stay the way that it is currently- relatively small-scale development and quiet, he doesn’t think that will be the case. He lamented, “Oh from 20 years, or 10 years from now in Vieques it’s gonna be really sad.” I could hear Ivan sigh from over the phone. He continue, “The problem I see with the island is that, like most of the – like ninety percent of the tourists- are gonna be people from outside. And what I mean about people from outside, mostly people from North America. And I’m not against American peoples- that
would make me racist- but I see this island full of outsider with outside type of business, you know.”

Desarrollo/Development

Like Ivan, many other Vieques residents have expressed their desire for the development of Vieques to be driven by small-scale tourism and local businesses. While the economy will rely on Vieques being known as a tourist destination, most resident hope that the tourist economy to be controlled by the people of Vieques and not others. Most Viequense residents seem to support a sustainable development plan based upon guidelines created by the community promoting small-businesses, eco-tourism, and the building of desperately needed modern hospital and improved transportation to the main island.

“Tourism is crucial, key, it’s an obvious area for economic development here,” said Bob Rabin, “We do, however, hope that it should be focused on local, community-based tourism and not the traditional, external, high-scale, tourism. We’re definitely pushing for people in Vieques to really have more control as owners of tourism and not just as people who clean the toilet and cut the grass, which is basically what happens for the most part.”

The contrast between locals and visitors is made clear at Vieques’ only large resort, the “W” hotel and spa. While the “W” helps fills the desperate need for local employment in Vieques, the hotel simultaneously excludes and alienates the public where dress is fashion-forward and high walls that effectively privatize the (legally) public beach.

Bob Rabin was quick to mention that the W is the “diametric opposite” of the kind of development he hopes to see in the future.

“I’m not sure if that’s a correct phraseology or not, but you know, this is the type of project that is diametrically opposed to what’s presented in the master plan for sustainable
development for Vieques,” he said. “It’s an all-inclusive, walled-in resort owned by some foreign speculators, foreign hotel company. On the one hand, they provide employment- there is certainly something to be said about the importance of employment and stimulating some economic activity-- there’s no doubt about that-- but it’s exactly what we do not want to see here in Vieques anymore.”

He did say that the current management has been more sensitive to community needs by working with community organizations such as the historical museum, but he still called it the “antithesis” of the locally-drive community tourist development most residents would like to see.

Another key aspect for residents in achieving the right kind of tourism is a push for the right kind of advertising and publicity. In order for the residents of Vieques to gain support in their continued struggle against the navy, publicity and advertising must not negate the realities of the violent history and toxic legacy of the military that have created the current serious public health and economic problems today. The present struggle, many argue, should be part of the package for tourism, not a separate issue. It has the potential to be part of the allure for visitors; a chance for them to go somewhere where they will not only enjoy the scenery, but will have the opportunity to contribute to improving the health and sustainable growth of the island.

“We want people to be interested in Vieques because of its historic struggle,” said Bob Rabin, “Instead of hiding it, we would suggest that that be part of tourism related to environmental justice issues, tourism related to social justice issues, et cetera.” He continued, “I think it would be a really neat combination- so we need to find a way to do that without scaring people off, but attracting people who might be interested in these social justice issues.”

In his last remarks, Rabin said to me, “There is some hope that the tenth year anniversary will help to stimulate the rebirth of a more vibrant movement to continue to push for cleanup and
health issues and economic development. We continue to demand a genuine, complete and thorough environment and genuine community participation that’s not happening.”

In the following concluding chapter, I present my vision for what the future of tourism in Vieques could look like which would bring people to the island and create jobs while operating on basis of environmental stewardship, education, and empowerment. It is not too late for a Vieques to embrace sustainable tourism and the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the cessation of bombing in Vieques could help to reinvigorate movement for positive change.
When I set foot in Vieques for the first time, what captured my attention (and camera lens) was the natural beauty of the island - the coconut palms, the white sand beaches, the turquoise water. Like many other tourists, I was initially drawn to the picturesque island environment that I had been dreaming of ever since I bought my plane ticket to the island for the summer of 2011. I had looked up Vieques on the internet numerous times to get a sense for where I would be, and every time I found myself looking at images of quintessential Caribbean paradise. And when I finally arrived, paradise is what I saw; picturesque palms, coconuts and sunsets over calm Caribbean tide.

Arriving with little knowledge other than the basic ins-and-outs of my internship at the Vieques Conservation and Historical Trust, I first came to appreciate Vieques for its stereotypical allure with the gaze of a tourist. Even after over a month on the island and working for an NGO dedicated to environmental and cultural conservation, I had not become fully aware of the long agricultural history of in Vieques or the extent of the toxic legacy left by the Navy. These messages weren’t pervasive in magazines, on signs, or other popular media and the Trust did not take an activist stance in its exhibits or summer programs for local kids. From what I saw and what I did on a daily basis, I had no reason to believe that there was serious environmental and social injustice at play.

But slowly, my eyes began to wander beyond the beauty. My tourist gaze shifted to one more nuanced as I took notice of the signs around me and asked questions. With little emphasis on military history in my work at the Vieques Conservation and Historical Trust, I realize now that I was gradually puzzle-piecing the history as I came across framed images, dusty naval reports on the bookshelf, and other indicators of military presence. Looking back, it was almost as if the Trust had a missing exhibit as the displays moved from the archaeological evidence of
the Taíno Indians and early agriculture to the “touch-tank” aquarium and black-lit “Bio Bay” room.

Before I had taken it upon myself to investigate Vieques’ violent past, I snapped a photo of a spray-painted sign that read “PAZ!” or, in English, “Peace!” The sign looked as old as the paint had begun to fade. The message was sprayed on what looked like a run-down house on a residential street away from the tourist thoroughfare.

“PAZ!” Graffiti sign (Photo taken by Ada Smith, January 2012)

On another walk, I took a photo of a large, colorful boulder sitting steadfast in the small fishing village of Esperanza where I lived. Above an eerie image of three solemn Puerto Rican caricatures surrounded by watchful skulls of the deceased was a short plea in white spray paint.
It read, “Reorganicemos la fuerza de Vieques…Descontaminacion, Rescate, Desarrollo” or “Reorganize the strength of Vieques…Decontamination, Recovery, Development.” At the time, little did I know that this demand for action referred to resuscitating the environment, economy, and public health that many residents still feel was eroded during sixty years of military occupation by the U.S. Navy from 1940 until 2003.

I only happened to stumble upon this artwork on my second trip to the island in January of 2012 when was forced to take a detour to little market that I didn’t usually frequent due to the lack of fresh produce. The boulder was located in a barrio set back just far enough from the beach and the bustling beachfront bar strip, the malecón. It rests in an area that tourists rarely wander. As one of the only public expressions of underlying struggles in Vieques, the boulder and its message remains largely out of sight and perhaps out of mind. The boulder was troublesome, yet trouble and worry were words I rarely heard on the island.
Finally, the end of my summer album was filled with so many pictures of smiling MANTA eco-campers that the joy is contagious just looking at them. The kids were holding up starfish for the first time, learning how to swim, and practicing sustainable fishing habits off the dock. They wore their colorful shirts with the silhouette of a Manta ray that signified the Movimiento en Apoyo a Nuestros Tesoros Ambientales (Movement in Support of Our Environmental Treasures) we hoped to inspire. The MANTA program was created at the Trust to educate young people in Vieques about the history, conservation and protection of environmental resources, and potential economic growth areas in the community through hands-on and interactive activities. These young people can act as agents of change on the island, raising awareness in the previously mentioned areas amongst themselves, their peer group, and the various Vieques communities. In a small and tightly knit community like Vieques, programs like MANTA have the promise to ignite significant change.

*MANTA camper holding sea star (Photo taken by Ada Smith, July 2011)*

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These types of images you will not likely find in the album of tourists in Vieques, but it is expression and activity like this that I believe must be reinvigorated and become more pervasive in the tourists experience for real change to happen on the island. In this so-called second phase of the Vieques struggle, it is my hope that visitors will see and hear the voice of residents and come and go with an understanding and appreciation for the history of the island. With more visible signs of the island’s unique history and vibrant culture, Vieques’ past could serve as an inspiration for tourists to visit, learn, and help be part of creating a more just and sustainable future.

**An Island in Transition and a Framework for the Future**

Right now in Vieques there are still more horses than cars, more fishing boats than jet skis, more beaches than beach resorts. Real estate prices and tourist numbers have increased since the Navy left, but you can still tie your hammock between two palms on a quarter mile of beach and see only two or three other people the whole day. There are more cars on the island, but still no traffic light. Even the golden arches have yet to claim a spot in Vieques.

This is an exciting time for Vieques; it is in a time of transition and opportunity. Many questions remain unanswered about Vieques’ future: What do people want to see in Vieques in 5, 10, 15 years? Who will control the island’s development? What planning is being done today regarding future infrastructure on the island? Will tourism be large-scale with resorts like the “W” or geared toward eco-tourism and smaller-scale hospitality? How “green” will Vieques be? Should it be eco-chic or eco-family-friendly?

In a matter of years, Vieques’ “live impact area” could look like an original wilderness, be it polluted or not. Signs and monuments could pay homage to the U.S. military for creating such a sanctuary. Or, signs could acknowledge the violent past and make transparent the
solutions in progress. The green veil could remain or the curtain could be pulled back to reveal a stage in which new actors could build a new story upon. How will Vieques represent itself?

The answer to these questions will hinge on the kind of development and the kind of tourism. Residents, the tourism industry, and the U.S. and Puerto Rican government should be participants in these decisions. In this conclusion, I will suggest an alternative framework of tourism as a development option that could satisfy the desires of all three parties and hold promise of employment for the local population while preserving the natural environment and bolstering regional pride. While I will not propose solutions to the many complex issues in Vieques, I will consider how the “wilderness” in Vieques might be used as not only a way to attract tourism and business to support the local economy, but could be used also as a vehicle for addressing environmental and public health issues rather than a veil to cover them up.

I see this time as a blank page for the island’s residents, businesses, and American and Puerto Rican government agencies, to co-author the next chapter of the Viequense story. While it can’t be written without compromise, now is the perfect opportunity for the different stakeholders to listen to one another about their visions for the future.

My vision for Vieques’ future development trajectory is an opportunity for vibrant community action around environmental health, environmental justice, and sustainable development. I see the beautiful and magical nature in Vieques as something of interest to all stakeholders in Vieques - residents, business-owners, and tourists alike. Protecting this nature, I see, as a point of convergence between the desires of those who demand decontamination, sustainable development, and those who also hope for economic prosperity and employment from the blossoming tourism industry. I see a changing attitude toward the environment and an
economy based on transparent and ethical forms of tourism as the prosperous way forward for Vieques.

“Wilderness” in Vieques: The “Geography of Hope”

In James Turner’s book *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics since 1964*, he describes the power of wilderness as not only a physical place, but also as an idea. In his book, Turner quotes writer Wallace Stegner who, in 1960, described wilderness as the “geography of hope.” He stated, “For Americans, wilderness has been a patriotic inspiration, a primitive recreational retreat, a place of sublime beauty, a countercultural ideal, and a reserve for biodiversity. Wilderness has powerfully informed the American environmental imagination.” 97 Wilderness in American environmental thought has the power to change attitudes and influence actions around land management. In Vieques today, the Wildlife Refuge could become a tool to raise environmental awareness and offers the island a physical space to reimagine what the natural environment could be on the island.

Compared to many islands in the Caribbean, because of its history as a bombing range, Vieques has been relatively undeveloped. But while this quaintness or lack of big franchises and resorts has created the illusion of pristine nature, human hands have changed Vieques over centuries. The landscape is riddled with pockmarks and grown-over with the invasive coconut palm. But the nature that exists there today, while changed and contaminated, it offers the island another opportunity to cultivate a landscape in which the economy is based on its beauty, protection, and sustainable use. It is, in its beauty and toxicity, simply the next canvass for humans to reinvent to fulfill our needs and desires.

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The natural environment in Vieques could be seen as the means for compromise, rather than as a point of conflict between stakeholders. The tourism industry and visual media could function as agents of change for the island while reaping the benefits in business. From my optimistic perspective, tourism and development in Vieques don’t mark the end of the small, quaint Vieques that so many love nor do they represent an inevitable future of Caribbean commercialism. Tourism and development in a sustainable manner could represent the beginning of a long-awaited economic miracle and the emergence of a vibrant environmental culture.

**Alternative Tourism as a Way Forward**

In my concluding remarks, I will present a concept called “slow tourism” as a model that I believe offers an alternative to mass tourism and the negative repercussions that go along with it, including economic dependency, social division, and environmental degradation. I first learned of the “slow tourism” concept in an article entitled, “Slow Tourism at the Caribbean’s Geographical Margins,” where social scientists Benjamin Timms and Dennis Conway propose the slow tourism model and argue that the best places to promote it are in the Caribbean’s overlooked geographical margins, like Vieques, where diversity and authenticity still exist. As defined by Timms and Conway, slow tourism focuses on “countering the loss of local distinctiveness as it relates to leisure, conviviality, sense of place and hospitality” and on linking the “three E’s of sustainable development – environment, economy and equity.”

The concept of “slow tourism” originated from the Italian-born Slow Food Movement, which strives to preserve traditional and regional cuisines and operates on the philosophy that

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everyone has the fundamental right to the pleasure of good food.\textsuperscript{100} Slow food stands as the antithesis to “fast food,” which is the manifestation of the quickening of life’s pace and along with it an increase of goods consumed and the separation of consumers from the product, which masks the social, cultural, and environmental consequences of its production. Similarly, slow tourism stands as the antithesis of mass tourism, which, as we have seen in the context of Vieques, can mask environmental contamination and degradation and become “standardized” (like fast food) with disregard for the local culture and identity.

By Timms and Conway’s definition, the remoteness and relative inaccessibility of Vieques would act as an advantage for “slow tourism.” Because Vieques lacks the coastal amenities (such as cruise docks) and urban infrastructure (such as street lights and water resources discussed earlier), it may not be seen as a prime spot for mass tourism developers and planners. In Vieques, available property also remains an issue for mass tourism, resulting in smaller “undeveloped spaces” for alternative and divers forms of tourism to take root. It would be wise, then, to find and promote alternative models of sustainable tourism that maximizes local benefits while enhancing the breadth of tourism offerings. Thus, according to Timms and Conway, slow tourism promotes niche marketing as well as a democratization of control and benefits of tourism development. Slow tourism fosters a more inclusive, community-based, and “bottom-up,” approach to growing the tourism economy.

Timms and Conway use the example of Treasure Beach, Jamaica to show how the concept of slow tourism can evolve and how the concept can be implemented in other geographically marginal locations like Vieques. Treasure Beach is a series of small fishing villages located on the marginal southwest coast of Jamaica. Treasure beach lacks a number of

factors – white sand beaches, easy accessibility, a tropical wet climate, and calm season -- that would appeal to mass tourism developers.\textsuperscript{101} As a result, an alternative form of tourism, which is very much aligned with the ideal of slow tourism, has taken hold and flourished. Although no one set out to develop slow tourism in Treasure Beach, this case exemplifies how slow tourism can evolve, be maintained, and be implemented in similar locations. Timms and Conway propose a number of recommendations for developing slow tourism, which I envision being applied in Vieques.

The first recommendation is to keep tourism establishments small scale and high-quality, with careful planning and cooperation between local stakeholders and local government. In Treasure Beach, local legislation limits tourist accommodations to 15 rooms per acre and has also limited the expansion of water utilities to intentionally exclude mass tourism industry. In Vieques, local legislation could be similar. Fortunately, water utilities are already limited on the island and have not been expanded for the growing tourism industry. Local efforts could help keep it this way. Small businesses could be further supported in Vieques by expanding the Vieques and Culebra Tourism Development Microloans Program that was developed by the Puerto Rico Department of Economic Development and Commerce.\textsuperscript{102} Increasing opportunities for local employment and resident-owned small businesses would ensure that tourism is guided and controlled by local concerns and interests.

In order for slow tourism to flourish, the small businesses establishments must not simply be locally controlled, but must develop relationships with other local businesses so that the entire system is working to stimulate the local economy. For example, the small resort called Jake’s in

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Treasure Beach has developed a relationship with the local agricultural cooperative, purchases seafood from local fishermen, meats from local ranchers and uses local building materials and workers intentionally to help develop the local community. In Vieques, although local agriculture is limited, restaurants and guesthouses could procure fish from local fishermen, baked goods from local bakers, and so on, to spread the benefits of small scale tourism to the entire community.

A third recommendation is to increase the diversity of establishments in terms of price points in order to cater to a broader range of tourists. High quality, small-scale tourism often caters to a limited, elite crowd that seeks high-end chic small resorts and villas. In order to create a more community-oriented tourism that resists the elitism in alternative tourism today, communities like Vieques should aim to expand mid-priced guesthouses and inexpensive backpacker establishments. One way to attract tourists looking for less-expensive accommodations is through increased advertising and web presence of slow tourism establishments, a tactic that worked for the community in Treasure Beach. Currently, the W Hotel is the largest of all accommodations on the island and dominates the media’s attention. The Vieques community could increase media attention to smaller scale hospitality by creating its own web-portal that includes searches for small-scale accommodations, restaurants and local business.

Fourthly, the development of partnerships between tourism and the local community should be the primary focus of slow tourism, not simply economic growth. In Treasure Beach, this symbiotic relationship is achieved in a variety of ways, but one specific example is a donation system where $US1 is given to local community development groups for each occupied

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103 Conway, Dennis and Benjamin F. Timms. “Slow Tourism at the Caribbean’s Geographical Margins.”
hotel room. Groups range from promoting health and literacy campaigns to local sports teams and even disaster relief assistance. Businesses in Vieques, particularly the bigger hotels and the W resorts, could set up a similar donation program. Money could fund environmental education programs at the Vieques Conservation and Historical Trust, skills training for young adults, or public health research.

A sustainable future for Vieques would also mean expanding our definition of the natural environment and adopting the idea of “wise use” or sustainable use of the land as the center of development plans, rather than trying to achieve the illusion of a “pristine” or “unspoiled” landscape. In a Science and Democracy lecture by William Cronon he introduced the term “wise-use” as the antithesis of how we have historically, and problematically, talked about landscapes as either “working” or “non-working” lands. In the lecture, Cronon states, “there has been a tendency in environmentalism often to privilege the non-working lands as the most worth saving- the most natural, the places where nature and its systems and creatures are most free.” He argues that we need new ways of talking about landscapes that we use -- for agriculture, for living, for recreating-- that are subtler than the crude dualisms that we use today of either wild or non-wild, pristine or profane, fallen or unfallen. In Vieques, the tourism industry must begin to recognize the land in Vieques as neither wild nor non-wild; it has a history of human use that must be told, not covered up. It is not pristine, untouched or unspoiled. And at the same time is also not yet fully exploited, fallen, or hopeless.

Given that the Wildlife Refuge will be in the hands of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife for the foreseeable future, it could provide the vehicle by which residents and visitors could come to see

104 Conway, Dennis and Benjamin F. Timms. “Slow Tourism at the Caribbean’s Geographical Margins.”
the bombing range as a fertile ground for reinvention yet again. The Refuge could help strengthen the Viequense identity and help develop a sense of place for both locals and tourists as their landscape is reconstituted as symbolic of their history and of their cherished and vulnerable resources.

Environmental education among locals and visitors alike will play a huge role in lifting the veil of the constructed paradise that is currently referred to as “wilderness” and “pristine.” There should be a focus on environmental education in schools, at local organizations like the Vieques Conservation and Historical Trust and within the tourist literature and media. Increasing environmental literacy in Vieques would bring the community one step closer to bringing about a movement for environmental cleanup and environmental justice that the island has been waiting for.

The celebration of the tenth anniversary of an end to bombing on the island this May (2013) could mark the beginning of a new movement among both the local and international community to support the island in achieving adequate cleanup of toxic contamination, health care, and sustainable development. It is an opportunity for the invisibilities of contamination and harm to human health on the part of the Navy to be made visible. It is also a time for the illusions of unspoiled and pristine nature in popular media and tourist advertisements to be replaced by a more accurate representation and a call to action on the part of the international environmentalist community. Today, travel, tourism, and visual media have the ability to function as agents of political, economic, and social change.

Ten years ago, the people of Vieques and their supporters from around the world defeated the most powerful military in the world, through mass civil disobedience and without firing a single shot. This May, a decade later, the people of Vieques and their supporters have the
opportunity to organize once again, but this time in a movement against the invisible toxic legacy of the navy and against the threat of global tourism. In revisiting their victorious past this May, I hope there comes a renewed sense of empowerment and vibrancy among the Vieques community that is brought by the realization that a future - where environmental, economic, and social justice is achieved – is possible.
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