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Victor M. Torres-Vlez , Sarah Molinari & Katharine Lawrence (2013) Conjuring the Close from Afar, *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 15:1-2, 89-109, DOI: 10.1080/10999949.2013.803377

Souls

Black Protest, Politics and Forms of Resistance

### **Conjuring the Close from Afar A Border-Crossing Tale of Vieques' Activism and Obama-Empire**

Víctor M. Torres-Vélez, Sarah Molinari, and Katharine Lawrence

*After more than 60 years of military occupation, 30 of these under violent military practices, a social movement forced the U.S. Navy from the island of Vieques. This victory would not have been possible without the highly effective organization of civil disobedience carried out on the island. But the sum total of the actions that eventually forced out the U.S. Navy, neither happened exclusively within the boundaries of Vieques, nor was carried out by Viequense residents alone. In this article we want to suggest that this amazing victory—a testament of people's will in the face of globalization—is also a border-crossing tale. Drawing from interviews with key activists currently based in Puerto Rico and New York, this article will explore the myriad routes of connections enacted, maintained and negotiated within and beyond territorial and ethnic boundaries. It will particularly look at how various activists conjured networks of solidarity, kinship, political affiliation, and friendship, among others, in their quest to liberate the island from the U.S. military occupation. Under the backdrop of Obama's post-racial discourse, this paper illustrates how the Vieques movement circumvented the politics of Empire through creative maneuvers and negotiations.*

Keywords: activism, colonialism, color-blindness, diaspora, empire, ethnic studies, New York City, Obama, Puerto Rican Studies, Puerto Rico, transnationalism, Vieques

#### **Introduction**

That the environmental public health crisis in Vieques has only worsened after a decade of “demilitarization” is a painful reality only evident to Viequenses confronting illness in their everyday lives. Non-Governmental epidemiologists have been whistle-blowing about the health crisis since the early 2000s to no avail (Cruz Nazario 2001; Ortiz-Roque, Ortiz-Roque, and AlBandoz-Ortiz 2000; Wargo 2009). Just like minorities' hopes of openly addressing decades of racial inequalities were never fulfilled within Barack Obama's “post-racial” government in the continental United States, in colonial Puerto Rico, Viequenses' hopes of addressing environmental injustices were never fulfilled either. For instance, the March 2013 official report of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) again rejected the

connection between military activity and the health and environmental crisis in Vieques.<sup>ii</sup> This despite the mounting evidence to the contrary collected within the last decade by independent scientists, epidemiologists, and renowned researchers from the United States and Puerto Rico (Cruz Nazario 2001; Ortiz-Roque, et al. 2000; Wargo 2009; Zavala Zegarra 1999). Without a doubt, this report sealed the fate of Viequenses when coincidentally a week later, and after years of litigation, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the U.S. Navy in the class action case of 7,000 Viequenses who sued the U.S. Navy for health-related damages. These blows have completely shaken any hopes for badly needed access to healthcare facilities in the island, not to mention any possible reparations for their suffering. Meanwhile, under the banner of “post-racism” in the United States, the historic gains of affirmative action initiatives are also being dismantled.

We want to suggest that the invisibility shared by both racialized minorities in the continental United States and racialized colonial subjects in Vieques is neither incidental nor new (Bonilla-Silva 2003). On the contrary, it is at the heart of how Empire historically has dealt with the “minority problem.” The first part of this article suggests that the fate of these two groups is not separated but actually interlocked within the long-lasting political economy of Empire, on the one hand, and internal colonialism, on the other. The second part of this article suggests that we need to pay attention to the creative ways the Puerto Rican diaspora, particularly in the Vieques struggle, was able to carve out spaces of action that challenged Empire’s politics of invisibility and silence. This article explores the myriad routes of connections enacted, maintained and negotiated within and beyond territorial and ethnic boundaries. It illustrates how networks of solidarity, kinship, political affiliation, and friendship, among others, were conjured in the quest to liberate Vieques from the U.S. military occupation. We conclude suggesting that these different strategies not only help to circumvent Empire’s corrosive framework but also undermine traditionally defined discourses surrounding colonialism, national identity and sovereignty.

### **“Post-Racism” in Obama’s Era**

Everyone’s eyes were glued to the TV that cold night of November 2008 in New York City. Every second of the election was broadcast live; one by one, each state was painted blue or red on the political pundits’ maps. The hopes of African Americans, Latinos, and many racialized others—historically repressed in the United States—were fatefully placed in Barack Obama’s chance to win the election, thus also winning a symbolic vindication to their condition of eternal foreignness. Obama’s victory came like a tsunami flooding the air with emotions: tears and hugs filling the room with a solidarity I have only witnessed once before, under quite different circumstances. The other time I witnessed such cathartic expression was in Vieques, Puerto Rico, where a grassroots social movement achieved a historic victory against the U.S. colonial military occupation of the island. Events like these are rare. They are like the eye of a hurricane where time seems to stop altogether to show, to those daring to look, a precious moment before the wild winds of history resume.

However, the sweet taste of victory for generations of minorities subjected to internal

colonialism in the United States became too bitter too soon. As it turned out, the weight of the historic expectations was too formidable to be borne by one man. But there was much more than this. The strategy that led Obama, a black man, to power, paradoxically depended on the silencing of race within public discussions. Obama needed to wear a white discursive mask to become the legitimate heir of imperial power. In a perverse turn, embodying difference meant the silencing of difference (Fanon 2008).

In the past four years, the right-wing has repeatedly reinvigorated this so-called color-blind discourse (Wise 2010). Color-blindness professes racial equality (“I can only see humans, not the color of the skin”) by denying centuries of racism and colonial oppression. Obama’s presidency was hailed as ushering in a new era of post-racism in the United States, closing the door to any mention of race in the public arena. The expression “playing the race card” became all too common.

The silencing of inequalities endured by racialized and colonized others within the United States has meant that the few spaces gained by these groups through fierce struggle within the last 50 years are now under attack (Wise 2010). The gains of movements like the Black Panthers, Young Lords, Civil Rights, Chicano, and indigenous movements in the United States—which were inextricably tied to the establishment of affirmative action laws and Ethnic Studies programs across the United States—are now losing ground at an alarming rate. For instance, the state of Arizona has banned Mexican American Studies from the K–12 educational system, despite the outcry of students. Texas, the second largest state in the United States with the most influential textbook publishing houses in the country, has mandated that K–12 textbooks re-cast local and national histories to naturalize and legitimize white hegemony (Ochoa O’Leary et al. 2012). Departments of Ethnic Studies—which were formed by the struggles of minority students during the ‘70s—are currently grossly underfunded everywhere and have lower academic status within the larger academic community. For instance, in one of the oldest ethnic studies programs in existence, the Department of Africana, Puerto Rican, and Latino Studies at Hunter College, the administration is not opening new faculty lines despite the fact that five senior faculty already retired. Repressive new immigration laws enacted in many right-wing Republican states are giving new power to the police to stop anybody on the basis of ethnicity and race. In the South, new immigration policies prompted thousands of immigrants who worked in the poultry industry to flee the state for fear of deportation. All of this is happening at the same time that “Latinos” are growing as the largest minority population in the United States with over 50 million people. When ethnicity is invoked, it is done within a Pan-Latino discourse that undermines the efforts of departments’ attention to the specificity of particular ethnic groups’ history within the United States, for instance Puerto Ricans.

Despite the U.S. government’s denial of its imperial identity, the United States shares more with the old European empires than it cares to admit. Neither Obama, nor any other previous “progressive” Democratic president (from Roosevelt to Kennedy) has ever changed this imperial reality. In fact, there is nothing more consistent in U.S. history than its imperial policies within and beyond its national boundaries (Chomsky 1985). However, very much like its

imperial predecessors, the United States now has to deal with the unintended consequences of centuries of colonial pillage: colonial immigration and diasporic communities penetrating the sanitized imperial body always imagined in terms of ethnic purity (Gilroy 2005). Colonized spaces are not the only ones changed by colonialism, but metropolitan centers of power—more than ever—are transformed by this ethnic= racial infusion in powerful and unpredictable ways (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Stoler 1995). This reality, closely linked to globalization, needs to inform questions of national liberation and how nation- states and national identities are articulated. The case of the social movement in Vieques, Puerto Rico seems to offer some tentative answers to some these questions.

More than 30 years of U.S. Navy military practices have carved spaces of danger, pollution, and health risks in Vieques. These are spaces of uncertainty and alterity. They are the product of forces that transcended the island's physical boundaries, while heightening such boundaries and thus, isolating the island and its people. This began in the 1940s when the U.S. Navy took over two-thirds of the island. The Navy's rearrangement of space—forcing Viequenses to the center of the island and surrounding them with fences, military buildings, and warning signs—not only limited people's mobility, but ensured a long-lasting feeling of imprisonment. In countless interviews—from youth to the elderly—the narratives of feeling trapped kept surfacing. This rearrangement of space was indeed a symbolic reordering of their world and was military in nature.

But this reordering of space in Vieques was much more than simply military; behind the idyllic beauty of Vieques lies hidden the story of modernity's betrayal, a path of destruction that, unlike Walter Benjamin's angel of history,<sup>iii</sup> can only be seen from up close, as if examining a dark twist on Monet's impressionist technique. Sickness lurks within every toxic pollutant. A scene made out of bullets, bombs and war machines; the canvas, colonized lands, and subjugated bodies carved by the broken promises of progress.

This profound transformation of landscapes ripped places from socio-historical relations by treating spaces as abstract and empty of people and meaning. After more than 60 years of military occupation, 30 of these under violent military practices, a social movement forced the U.S. Navy from the island of Vieques. This victory would not have been possible without the highly effective organization of civil disobedience carried out on the island. But the sum total of the actions that eventually brought down the U.S. Navy neither happened exclusively within the boundaries of Vieques nor was carried out by Viequense residents alone.

Through a discussion of Vieques' case study we provide a tentative interpretation of what these collective actions might mean to larger questions of Empire, colonialism, national, and deterritorialized forms of identity against the backdrop of globalization.

### **Benevolent, Almost Tender Empire**

That Empires measured their economic and political prowess by their corrosive capacity to undermine their colonial subjects' boundaries is by now a truism among scholars. A less known phenomena, however, is that colonial subjects, far from assuming their roles as victims,

are now engaging with Empire in surprising new ways (Cervantes-Rodriguez, Grosfoguel, and Mielants 2009; Kearney 1991).

Although these new types of engagement differ from mid-20th century emancipatory struggles in content, form and location, they still share the impetus of reclaiming a sense of sovereignty. What is new about this sense of sovereignty—of regaining control from the encroaching forces of globalization—is that it is purposely divorced from traditional (political) nationalist discourses (Davila 1997; Duany 2000; Grosfoguel 2003).

Puerto Rico offers a particularly revealing example of these new types of engagements with Empire. To date, it is the oldest remaining colony in the world. But since the '50s, and under the pressures of the Cold War, elite Puerto Rican intellectuals strategically re-invented nationalism as a cultural project rather than a political one. Along with drastic economic reforms, 587,535 Puerto Ricans emigrated to the United States between the 1950s and 1980s in what is known as the largest airborne migration of the 20th century (Grosfoguel 2003: 135).

The rather limited space of internal political autonomy carved by the architects of the Commonwealth—established in 1952—was enough to push forward cultural nationalism as the only viable and valid nation-building project. It also inoculated the United States from any anti-colonial critique within the international relations context. Experts in the field have called this re-articulated juridical relationship “colonialism lite,” because, among other things, it shares key elements of the English Empire’s formula of indirect colonial rule (Duany 2000; Flores 2007). Both within the international arena and within Puerto Rico, this “tender” imperialism succeeded in veiling everyday forms of colonial violence under an effective discourse of benevolence that still persists.<sup>iv</sup>

The extractive economic relationship that forced Puerto Rico into an export substitution dependency during the early 20th century—by shifting subsistence agriculture into mono crop agro-industrial capitalism—only deepened with the 1950s final transformation of Puerto Rico into a fully industrial economy. While the industrial sector proved to be hugely profitable for North American investors (thanks to tax exemptions, lower wages, and corporate welfare), the development model failed to solve the unemployment problem in Puerto Rico. U.S. federal welfare monies, particularly the Food Stamps program, from the '70s on have been an important stabilizer of social unrest in Puerto Rico by providing food benefits to a majority of Puerto Ricans (Dietz 1986). About half of the Puerto Rican population lives below the poverty line and receives Food Stamps. Under these dire circumstances within the context of one of the worst economic recessions in Puerto Rican history, it makes sense that this discourse of U.S. benevolence is deeply rooted among the most marginalized in Puerto Rico.

This type of tender imperialism (Wexler 2000), even under altruistic disguise, both constructs the U.S. government as a benefactor and Puerto Ricans as recipients in an unequal relationship. The economically marginalized can only be grateful for without the federal monies they would be completely doomed. However, receiving welfare simultaneously marks them as unworthy, for in a meritocracy, not finding a job is the individual’s fault. Just like the 1950s cultural nationalist discourse of *mestizaje* (racial integration) pushed away discussions of

structural racism and political sovereignty in Puerto Rico (Davila 1997), the discourse of U.S. benevolence pushed away the U.S. and the Puerto Rican government's role in the production of these circumstances. In both of these projects, however, circular migration became both a strategy of economic survival and an affirmation of national identity.

Thus, the question of migration needs to be placed at the forefront because colonized nations are also diasporic nations. In referring to Puerto Rico as a "nation on the move," Jorge Duany suggests that this type of colonial migration has profound implications for how Puerto Ricans re-imagine themselves as a community across boundaries. Unfortunately, as Duany (2002, 2011) has pointed out, the transnational literature has overlooked the case of Puerto Rico, given the island's colonial status. The fact that Puerto Ricans have U.S. citizenship has precluded transnationalism scholars from exploring and understanding that Puerto Ricans do cross a cultural and national border when traveling to the United States. This is explained, in part, by Puerto Ricans' second-class citizenship and, in part, by their strong sense of cultural nationalism.

Puerto Rico is perhaps the paradigmatic case of this, with more Puerto Ricans living outside of Puerto Rico than in Puerto Rico itself. As of 2011 there are 3.7 million Puerto Ricans on the island and 4.8 million outside of the island (U.S. Census Bureau). The reality is that de-territorialized diasporic communities are a force that empires have to reckon with (Hardt and Negri 2000). From the point of view of political boundaries, national boundaries and the boundaries of national identities, all of them are being pushed to the extremes by the realities of transnationalism and forced migrations. The case of Puerto Rico is illustrative because of its particular colonial history, which has forced Puerto Ricans to articulate national identities in non-traditional terms. These new group identity articulations might point to new ways of imagining community that break with parochialisms without sacrificing the specificity of their ethnic, racial, and historical reality.

The case of Vieques' diasporic and transnational activism is illustrative of these complex articulations of nation, self, multi-ethnic alliance and even post-nationalism, no doubt building upon but also differing from cultural-nationalism in important ways. The main difference being activists' conscious avoidance of parochial particularisms of national identity (even when predicated in its cultural form) and distance from discourses on political nationalism with their anti-colonial connotations. There is also a strategic re-appropriation of citizenship rights. As Katherine McCaffrey (2002: 42) notes, some organizations' popular success relied on positioning between "the assertion of local needs and declarations of loyalty to the United States." Puerto Ricans' U.S. citizenship, therefore, was used to rally support from the U.S. body politic. Finally, all of this is done through the activation of a multiplicity of networks that expand across borders. This article explores the nature of these rhizomic connections (Deleuze and Guattari 1985; 1987) to understand how activists navigate, strategize, and negotiate their subject positions with a specific aim at hand—the removal of the military from Vieques. The following case study is an example, among other things, of the ways in which Vieques activists were able to build inter-ethnic, racial, and national solidarities in order to directly confront power. Instead of remaining silent about difference, these activists' strategies relied on openly discussing

difference in order to find a common ground of understanding and action.

### **Communities of Praxis Engaging Empire**

This border-crossing tale draws from interviews with key activists currently based in Puerto Rico and New York and explores the conjuring of communities of praxis. We use the term “conjure” to represent a trope of transnational activism (Tsing 2001). As Anna Tsing (2005: 57) refers to global financial conjuring as “creating a magic show of peculiar meanings, symbols and practices” in the “economy of appearances,” transnational activism was articulated in a similar fashion in an economy of reciprocity. The activation of these relationships is pragmatic—often they are activated when collective action needs to happen—and yet these relationships are not subsumed under the logic of practical reason. They follow a complex economy of reciprocity exchanges where symbolic, cultural and social capital reigns king. Instead of the calculating, possessive individualism of neo-liberal economics, or the territorially rooted “native” of traditional ethnographic accounts, we find social actors relying on use-value, horizontal solidarities, kinship, friendship, and personal relationships that constantly collapse time and space through information technologies (Harvey 1990).

Of course these types of use-value reciprocities exchanges are not new, and they have been extensively documented and theorized (under different guises) from Bordieu (1977) to Marcel Mauss (1990) and Joel Kovel (2002). In fact, the transnational literature has done a particularly good job tracing these types of reciprocities in the building of communities across borders (Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Louie 2000; Mahler 1998; Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999; Rouse 1995; Schein 1999; Smith 1998). This article re-inserts Puerto Rico, and especially the case of Vieques, into the conceptualization of transnationalism and will contribute to the growing literature on the Puerto Rican experience by analyzing how communities of praxis, or communities organized around activist agendas, are enacted, conjured, and sustained across borders.

Networks act as frameworks that allow imagined communities to exist through a particular set of conjured relationships. As a “community of praxis,” these networks result in a community building process that relies not only on classic identities—including racial/ethnic, political, and class—but also on a myriad of other exchange relationships, which require specific and unique forms of conjuring and maintenance. The activist movement in Vieques used these (re)imagined networks to develop collective actions around the expulsion of the U.S. Navy from the island—a shared, pragmatic end-point that was nonetheless mobilized from a variety of non-centralized points of contact, routes of connection, and discourses that pushed beyond traditional national imagination. Issues of political independence/sovereignty, women’s rights, health and environmental justice, and religious activism served as particular vantage points for these transnational networks; to organize collective actions, the activists relied upon these carefully constructed relationships to achieve particular end goals. And, while, the activists’ identities were often performed from one or more of these perspectives, what is most interesting are the intersections between these vantage points, and the fluidity with which the activists

alternated between them, as well as the extraordinary amount of personal effort that went into cultivating and employing them.

### **Here, There, and Beyond: Pushing the Boundaries of Self and Nation**

The sum total of collective actions is more than its parts. However, without the parts (that is, individuals' sacrifices), there would be very little to talk about. The success of the Vieques movement in particular relied upon the diversity of its participants' geographical location, personal identities, political affiliations and tactical strategies, which have implications that challenge notions of identity, community and territoriality. The narratives that follow present different experiences of activism for Vieques that exhibit the multifaceted and multi-sited nature of the movement. However, each of the narrators is familiar with one another, and they are keenly aware of the discourses, strategies, activities and even the idiosyncrasies of their fellow activists. Indeed, they often appear in each other's stories. Their relationships reflect the unique and conjured networks that were activated during the movement. They embodied the myriad interests and concerns that individuals and groups brought to the struggle; and, like many relationships, these networks were not immune to tension and conflict. Ultimately, these (re)imagined networks were both supported by and essential to the Vieques movement, and in particular the strategies and tactics employed by the activists.

### **Individual and Group Negotiations**

#### *Vignette 1: Climbing the Statue of Liberty*

Examining the activists' identities reveals contradictions involved in negotiating within communities of praxis. Born in Puerto Rico and raised in the Lower East Side, life-long activist and organizer, Frank Velgara, was influenced by an understanding of gringo that more or less meant "colonizer." The idea of even dating a gringa was a taboo in Frank's house. It was a non-negotiable—one of the rare occasions, Frank said, where he was told, "*esto no se puede discutir*" ["this cannot be discussed"]. When Frank began to date, his mother and grandmother sat him down and said, "*mira, tú me trae una negra aquí, chevere. Tú me trae una china, tú me trae ... pero si tú me trae una gringa aquí, olvídate. No te la vamos a recibir.*" ["Look, if you bring me a black woman here, cool. Bring me a Chinese woman ... but if you bring a gringa woman here, forget it. We will not receive her"]. However, while this narrative might suggest a politics of separation, particularly in relation to the white-Anglo-Saxon dominant group, Frank's activist engagements for Vieques both honored his mother's strong sense of Puerto Rican identity yet transcended the exclusionary logic implicit in her dating prohibitions. For example, Frank played a coordinating role from his New York City apartment when notorious Puerto Rican environmental activist, Tito Kayak, climbed the Statue of Liberty to post a Puerto Rican and Viequense flag in the crown in 2000. The action required detailed preparation, and various networks within the community of praxis were awakened and mobilized.

One day Frank received a call informing him of Tito's plan. This phone call set off a strategic line of diasporic coordination. Another New York-based activist went to Paragon Sports in Union Square "*con una lista de todo lo que iba a necesitar pa' treparse arriba. Despues nos pusimos a coordinar.*" ["With a list of everything he would need to climb up. Then we put ourselves together to coordinate"]. The coordination also included timing and documenting Tito's arrival at the Statue, Frank explained. "*Porque temprano llegan los turistas allá en la entrada, la cosa era que nosotros teníamos que asegurar que nuestra gente van a ser los primeros para hacerle camino a Tito a demande y reclutar gente con camera y video y toda la jodienda para documentar.*" ["Since the tourists arrive early at the entrance, we had to make sure that our people would be the first there to open the way for Tito and recruit people with cameras and all that to document"].

After Tito's arrest, Martin Stoller, a gringo lawyer who has a history with the Puerto Rican movement and political cases, offered to assist with legal matters. According to Frank, when Stoller arrived to get Tito out of jail, Tito was suspicious and unreceptive. "*Pues, f\*\*\* Tito, verdad, él [Stoller] llega a sacarlo de la cárcel y [Tito] dice, 'no, no, yo quiero un abogado boricua, olvídate. Ni pa' carajo un abogado gringo.'*" ["So, f\*\*\* Tito, right, Stoller arrives to take him out of jail and Tito says, 'no, no, I want a Puerto Rican lawyer, forget about it, no way'"]. When Frank heard Tito's demand, he sent Tito a message: "*mira, dile que yo dije que se cague en su madre si se quiere pudrir allá adentro, que se deje de mierda, que este compañero lo conocemos tantos años, y siempre se presta.*" ["Look, tell him that I said to go ahead if he wants to rot there in jail, to stop messing around since we've known this partner [Stoller] for so many years and he always lends himself"].<sup>v</sup> The collaboration with Stoller demonstrates a decision made for the activism as a whole that moved beyond ethnic and racial barriers. These actions would not have been made possible outside of the community—from purchasing the necessary supplies to strategically arriving at the Statue and soliciting legal help—had it not been for the collective action of many. The collective negotiations and actions of various individuals such as Frank coalesced to make the action a successful and unique display of conjured solidarity. The overall impact of Tito's actions for the movement written at large was not only that it drew attention to Vieques' struggle within an international context but that it was able to make evident the similarities between the struggles of occupied Palestine and colonized Puerto Rico.

### *Vignette 2: Activism in El Barrio and the Three Kings Day Parade*

Vieques solidarity networks in the New York diaspora proliferated in the late 1990s and early 2000s and exemplified the kind of transnational circulation of people, ideas and strategies that made the movement successful. Activist groups experienced and negotiated tensions and divisions just as individual activists. At times these negotiations ended harmoniously, whereas at other times networks were altered or separated. For example, groups in the diaspora were divided over slogans. A group's slogan represented more than just words on a banner. It reflected what

that group stood for and how they framed the Vieques struggle. Frank explained the group dynamics over slogans: “*Toda Nueva York con Vieques* said only ‘*Paz para Vieques*,’ right. The Campaign [for Vieques] said, ‘but the Viequenses are saying *Paz para Vieques, fuera la Marina*,’ right. And um, [Vincente] Panamá’s group said, ‘no, *eso tiene que ser derechos humanos* for Vieques.’” [“*Toda Nueva York con Vieques* said only ‘Peace for Vieques,’ right. The Campaign [for Vieques] said, ‘but the Viequenses are saying ‘Peace for Vieques, Navy get out,’ right. And um, [Vincente] Panamá’s group said, ‘this has to be human rights for Vieques’”]. These intra-group tensions at times made it difficult for collective organization. “Then you had hotheads in all the groups saying, ‘we can’t work with those people from the Barrio because they just want to talk shit about peace,’ and blah, blah blah. Or, ‘look at them, they want to talk about *fuera la Marina* [Navy get out], they’re going to isolate people.’” The discourse of peace or human rights strategically omitted anything political about the Navy. “If you start talking anti-Navy stuff, you won’t get a broad sector of people.” However, some groups did not want to conceal a broader political stance.

Yolanda Rosado was born and raised in Puerto Rico in “*una casa independentista*” [a pro-Puerto Rican independence house] that gave her a certain social justice consciousness from a young age and informed her activism for Vieques and other causes. Her activism for Vieques dates back to 1981 when she participated in a demonstration at 18 years old. When she moved to El Barrio in 1982, Yolanda connected with the Puerto Rican Socialist Party and the Socialist Front, which had an office in El Barrio. She did not define herself as exclusively belonging to any group, however. “*No pertenecía a nada, a ningún grupo, pero si, trabajaba con todos.*” [“I did not pertain to anything, to any group, but yes, I worked with them all”]. In El Barrio Yolanda connected with Gloria Quiñones, who also comes from a long history of border-crossing activism. Gloria left Puerto Rico at years old and moved to New York, where her parents founded the Puerto Rican Independence Party of New York. Growing up in this political environment, she says it was very “natural” to be an activist. “*Por lo tanto pude, yo dormí en la silla de atrás en la sala de reuniones. Pero me crié en este ambiente.*” [“As much as I could, I slept in the chair behind the meeting room. So I was raised in this environment”]. The “spark” that motivated Gloria to get involved with the Vieques struggle was when David Sanes, a Viequense civilian employee of the Navy, was killed by an off-target bomb. That summer of 1999, Gloria visited Vieques, and upon returning to El Barrio, got involved with New York-based networks for Vieques.

The group *Las Mujeres por Paz y Justicia en Vieques* [Women for Peace and Justice in Vieques] formed after an action in front of the United Nations coordinated by Gloria, among others. Yolanda joined the group, which chose a stance that was overtly anti-imperialist and pro-independence for Puerto Rico. The aim was to “*reconocer que el país, nuestra isla, es una colonia y que la situación de Vieques es un síntoma de la colonia, de la colonización,*” Yolanda said. “*Y que sí, queríamos que la Marina se fuera de Vieques pero también hablamos de la independencia para Puerto Rico.*” [“Recognize that our island is a colony and that the situation of Vieques is a symptom of the colony and colonization. And yes, we wanted the Navy to leave

Vieques but we also spoke about independence for Puerto Rico’]. For Gloria, however, politics did not mix well with her strategic group vision, and she ultimately broke off with *Las Mujeres* to form the group *Todo el Barrio con Vieques*. Although this decision might not have reflected her personal politics, Gloria wanted to be careful not to isolate potential allies in the movement. According to Yolanda, “*presentar la línea anti-imperialista era, iba ir en contra de, o muy fuerte para el apoyo político que ellos querían tener de los elected officials. So querían ir un poquito más suave ellos.*” [“To present the anti-imperialist argument was against, or too strong for the political support that they wanted from the elected officials. So they wanted to take it a bit softer”]. Elected officials were certainly disinclined to support a group touting leftist, pro-independence agendas, so it came down to a tension of ideology versus strategy. Despite parting ways, both groups worked together, suggesting that their strategic and ideological dissonance did not negate common goals for the movement. “We did collective work and manifestations together and all that,” Yolanda recollected.

One of those manifested activities was at the El Museo del Barrio’s annual Three Kings Day Parade. Despite the group trying to distance itself from political messages from its onset, *Todo el Barrio con Vieques* did not avoid certain actions considered political expression in the diaspora. The group asked El Museo for permission to march in the parade displaying their banner. They were at first rejected because El Museo “*querían eliminar la participación política porque es un evento realmente cultural.*” [El Museo “wanted to eliminate political participation because it’s really a cultural event”]. When they were finally approved to participate, *Todo el Barrio con Vieques* was put at the end of the parade. “*Allí estábamos protestando y ellos no estaban muy contentos pero ya estábamos allí y la gente aplaudiendo y todo eso.*” [There we were protesting and they were not too happy but we were already there and people were applauding and all that’]. This parade was an important victory because in the following years, the group was no longer allowed to participate. A cultural demonstration was not meant to be political. The presence of both Yolanda and Gloria in this action demonstrates group collaboration moving beyond certain tensions and how “political” activism was in itself a fluid characterization that was difficult to avoid.

## **Digitized Routes of Connection**

### *Vignette 3: Solidarity Transmissions with Australia*

As with other activist strategies and negotiations, the transnational quality of Vieques activism was facilitated by the novel use of technology and time-space compression to communicate with target audiences (Appadurai 1996; 2001; Sassen 2001). The media was appropriated for coordination, connection and performance. While not unique to the Vieques movement, these digitized routes of connection served as an important means and site of reciprocal network activation, or what Appadurai calls “diasporic public spheres” to cross-fertilize activist strategies (Appadurai 1996).

Robert Rabin is a Jewish-American leftist from Boston who made his life in Vieques after participating in the movement and now directs Vieques' Museo Fuerte Conde Mirasol. Here he recalls digital solidarity exchanges with the Ricky Martin Fan Club in Queensland, Australia: "They did a protest in front of the U.S. Embassy in 2001 or 2002 to stop bombing on Vieques. We did a couple of live solidarity transmissions, mutual solidarity phone transmissions with people in Australia as well as big demonstrations against U.S. military maneuvers with the Australian military in Australia. So at a big protest we'd call in by phone and they'd put us on big speakers, then we'd have them speak and we'd put them on big speakers." What is remarkable about these types of long-distance synchronous collective actions is that time-space was compressed by bottom-up activist strategies as opposed to top-down global prerogatives. The use of popular culture to rally supports across the globe is another salient strategy of the repertoire of action that activists such as Rabin were capable of deploying with incredible sophistication.

#### *Vignette 4: Press Conference in New York*

"If you think one person can't be effective, you've never been in bed with a mosquito," Mary Anne Grady Flores quipped. The energetic daughter of Catholic Irish-Americans, Mary Anne grew up with both a family tradition of activism and a connection to Puerto Rico. Her parents were part of the Young Christian Workers (YCW), which sent her whole family to Ponce, Puerto Rico for language training when Mary Anne was three years old.

Mary Anne's early exposure in the Socialist Catholic community fomented extensive activist networks. For example, her father was a close friend of the Berrigan brothers, radical Catholic priests known for their direct actions during the Vietnam War and the anti-nuclear movement. At the court trial for Phil Berrigan in 2000, Mary Anne first learned about depleted uranium (DU) and its pervasive use in militarized spaces, including Iraq and Puerto Rico. "[Phil] went on to talk about how it worked, you know, the aerosolation of that weapons system.... And then he talked about the birth defects," Mary Anne explained. "And I'm realizing, my God, Vieques is where the A-10 Warthog was also practiced with!" The A-10 Warthog plane that practiced in Vieques fired 3,900 rounds of DU-tipped munitions per minute. In 1999, the Navy admitted to having used DU in Vieques and the issue became central to the movement and to Mary Anne's activism.

Motivated by her experiences in court, Mary Anne decided to tell the story of DU in Vieques by organizing a press conference in New York City in 2000. "So I had these ideas to have this press conference, and we would do it in New York. Do it in City Hall. Do it big." Mary Anne had never held a major press conference before, and she relied heavily on her previous activist field experience of distributing press releases and reaching out to her networks. "I already had many emails that I'd been gathering from other work that I'd been doing, political work in Ithaca." To solidify her New York network, she connected with Frank Velagra through a mutual friend in California.

With her network in place, Mary Anne marched on City Hall, determined to get a date for her press conference. Frank had advised Mary Anne on what to do. “I was told, ‘go to the City Council and talk about your Vieques experience.’ So I showed up and I met a couple people, including José Rivera, the New York Councilman. And I said, ‘I want to talk with you, I have an idea.’ He says, ‘come back to my office.’” Coincidentally, during her meeting with Councilman Rivera, more networks were revealed. “We go and sit down in the office. He gets a phone call in the middle of me telling him what I had just done down in Vieques. And he said, ‘okay Paniagua, okay no problem.’” The name rang a bell for Mary Anne, and she asked, “is that Ralph Paniagua?” He said, ‘yeah!’ I said, ‘can I talk with him?’”

Mary Anne had known Paniagua, an influential Latin print media executive, since his early teens. Mary Anne’s personal relationship with Paniagua, endearingly referred to as BB, helped convince José Rivera to support her plans for the press conference on depleted uranium in Vieques. “Because of me knowing Paniagua, the Councilman realized, ‘oh she knows somebody.’ I mean that was just a fluke!” Mary Anne got on the phone with BB and explained her idea. José Rivera said, “‘all right Mary, I’ll help you to get the word out.’ And he gave me his whole office and his staff to work for me to do the press conference.”

The press conference was planned in only one week and took place on the steps of City Hall in June 2000, strategically on the Friday before New York City’s Puerto Rican Day Parade. Various activist groups sponsored and participated in the event. “I got the Physicians for Social Responsibility to be the co-sponsors of the press conference. I got the Veterans for Peace. We had about eleven different groups represented. People, Puerto Ricans from New Jersey, I’m forgetting all the names!” The conference also received wide press coverage. “Telemundo came. We had the AP. We had every single one of the Puerto Rican [press], or all the Latino press gave us page one, two or three,” she recalled. At the same time as the press conference, Frank Velgara was participating in an action for Vieques at Yankee Stadium just north of Manhattan where the activists demonstrated on the ball field.

Through a mix of political savvy, social networking, and serendipity, Mary Anne was able to unite the many activist concerns of the Vieques movement—health, human rights, and environment—in a way that transcended geopolitical, social, and ethnic boundaries, to create an event that was representative of the Vieques movement in the diaspora as a whole.

### *Vignette 5: Dramatic Activism in Palestine*

Performance in the transnational arena through these digitized routes was a crucial tool of deterritorialized connection that points to new articulations of community amid globalized technologies (Louie 2004). On April 20, 2007, Tito Kayak performed another dramatic act of civil disobedience for Vieques and climbed a communications tower in Bil’in, Palestine near Israel’s West Bank separation barrier. He staked a Palestinian and Vieques flag on top and stood there for hours in order to make the connection between occupation of Palestine and the occupation of Puerto Rico. Tito’s action generated extensive international press coverage

“because Tito is like the light bulb, everybody follows that bug,” Mary Anne said, laughing. Frank Velgara recalled finding out about Tito’s action from New York. “Do you know that [Mary Anne] got him a plane f\*\*\* ticket and I’m on the internet and I see a f\*\*\* picture of Tito Kayak in Israel on top of the fence with a Palestinian and a Vieques flag, one in each hand!” Tito even did phone interviews directly from the top of the communication tower. “On the top of the tower, he had his cellphone, he had his cellphone on the cell tower!” joked Mary Anne. “Anyway, he was picking up interviews from the press from Puerto Rico.” At the same time as Tito was conducting his tower-top interviews, Mary Anne was contacting Ismael Guadalupe, another Vieques activist back in Puerto Rico, to notify the press of Tito’s actions. “I said, ‘Ismael, please, this is our only shot! Right now!’” Tito’s lawyer was notified and spread the word. The lawyer had “all the press contacts and everything. So he put the word out, and Al Jazeera was in Palestine so they covered it,” said Mary Anne. As a result, said Frank, “That shit went around the world.”

### **Conclusion: Conjuring the Close From Afar**

As Manning Marable argues in his “Racializing Obama” article,<sup>vi</sup> Obama’s unstable racial signification has gone through all the shades of the color spectrum. Particularly, during his 2007–2008 presidential campaign, Obama was criticized for not being black enough, for being too black, and for being multi-ethnic. These criticisms were coming from both Republicans and liberals as well. Obama’s racialized image was, what Stuart Hall once called, a floating signifier, in which competing interests were always trying to fix meaning. What remains clear is that Obama’s flickering face on TV served as a Lacanian mirror in which racialized minorities recognized themselves (Lacan 1977). That having to wear a white discursive mask eventually betrayed his embodied constituency was the price Obama needed to pay to represent Empire (Fanon 2008; Wise 2010). Furthermore, from the Chicano experience in Arizona, to the Puerto Rican experience in New York City, the attacks on Ethnic Studies programs are symptomatic of what seems to be a larger cultural trend in the United States where the use of color-blind discourse allows regressive politics to seize the public imagination (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Wise 2010).

“I am living a weird dream right now,” Luis Ortiz explains as he looks at himself in a mirror while crossing a street in the Bronx. His uncanny resemblance to Barack Obama still surprises him. “When I look at the mirror I see him.” This self-recognition, however, was not enough to overcome the setbacks of post-racism. If for Obama embodying difference means the silencing of difference, then personifying Obama could mean a way out of the paradox. In another scene from this New York Times short documentary, this unemployed Bronx resident nods as he carefully studies one of Obama’s televised speeches praising meritocracy. While the short documentary captures the irony of embodying Obama, it fails to acknowledge that Ortiz is Puerto Rican. “I am running from poverty,” instead of for the presidency, Ortiz retorts in another clip. Of course is not only that a Puerto Rican man can pass as Obama, but that Obama himself could pass as a Puerto Rican.

The trope of Obama-Rican illustrates the multiple intersections of race, Empire, continental minorities, and colonial subjects. It speaks of the Puerto Rican migratory experience to New York, of the failure of meritocracy, of the silencing of their suffering. It also speaks of the Puerto Rican diaspora and their growing influence within the U.S. body politic—as the capacity to swing Presidential elections in Florida has clearly shown. Metropolitan centers of power are not immune to the influence of diasporic communities (Duany 2011; Flores 2007; Stoler 1995). Communities of praxis, such as the ones discussed in this article, illustrate the creative maneuvers and negotiations, to circumvent the politics of Empire.

A key point of this reflection was to pay attention to the fluidity of the Vieques movement, as both a reflection of the people it represented as well as a particular set of strategies employed by the activists to appropriate, undermine, and usurp traditional discourses surrounding colonialism, national identity and sovereignty. The different geographical locations of activism underscore that the success of the movement was dependent on moving “beyond,” both in terms of physical and geopolitical boundaries and in terms of the networks, mechanisms, and discourses used to achieve the movement’s success. The former story is emblematic of the multiple ways in which close relationships are summoned up to conjure solidarities across borders. What seems to be most relevant of this case study is the particular strategies use to confront power. These strategies openly confronted difference by engaging difference; confronted Empire by using non-traditional discourses of liberation; and confronted power by transcending time and space in myriad ways (from the use of information technologies to a reliance on active and dormant networks of action). The sum total of these strategies seem to point to ways of building communities of praxis that transcend traditional identity politics without undermining the importance of the specificity of experiences among minority groups.

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## Notes

i I wrote an earlier version of this article in honor of Franz Fanon's Commemoration. It was presented in Martinique, December 2011. In the writing of this larger article I am collaborating with Sarah Molinari and Katharine Lawrence, two terrifically gifted research assistants without which this work would not have been possible.

ii [http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/hac/pha/vieques/Vieques\\_Summary\\_Final\\_Report\\_English\\_2013.pdf](http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/hac/pha/vieques/Vieques_Summary_Final_Report_English_2013.pdf).

iii An important member of the Frankfurt School who—like other critical thinkers of this era—witnessed the emergence of Nazi Germany, Benjamin argued that the path to progress was a path of destruction. He developed this idea in his now famous piece, *The Concept of History*: “His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm.”

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>.

iv I am drawing on Laura Wexler's (2000) notion of “tender violence” where she explores the politics of representing the exotic other as a violent exercise even if always engulfed in discourses of altruism.

v The authors have maintained the original phrases as the interlocutors related them.

vi <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cbh/souls/firstperson.html>.