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RECENT WORKS ON VIEQUES, COLONIALISM, AND FISHERMEN

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REVIEW ESSAY

Recent Works on Vieques,
Colonialism, and Fishermen

CÉSAR AYALA

*Fishers at Work, Workers at Sea:
A Puerto Rican Journey through Labor and Refuge.*

By David Griffith and Manuel Valdés Pizzini.

Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002.

280 pages; \$19.95 paper

Islands of Resistance: Puerto Rico, Vieques and U.S. Policy.

By Mario Murillo.

New York: Seven Stories Press (The Open Media Pamphlet Series), 2001.

90 pages; \$6.95 paper

*Military Power and Popular Protest:
the U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico.*

By Katherine T. McCaffrey.

New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

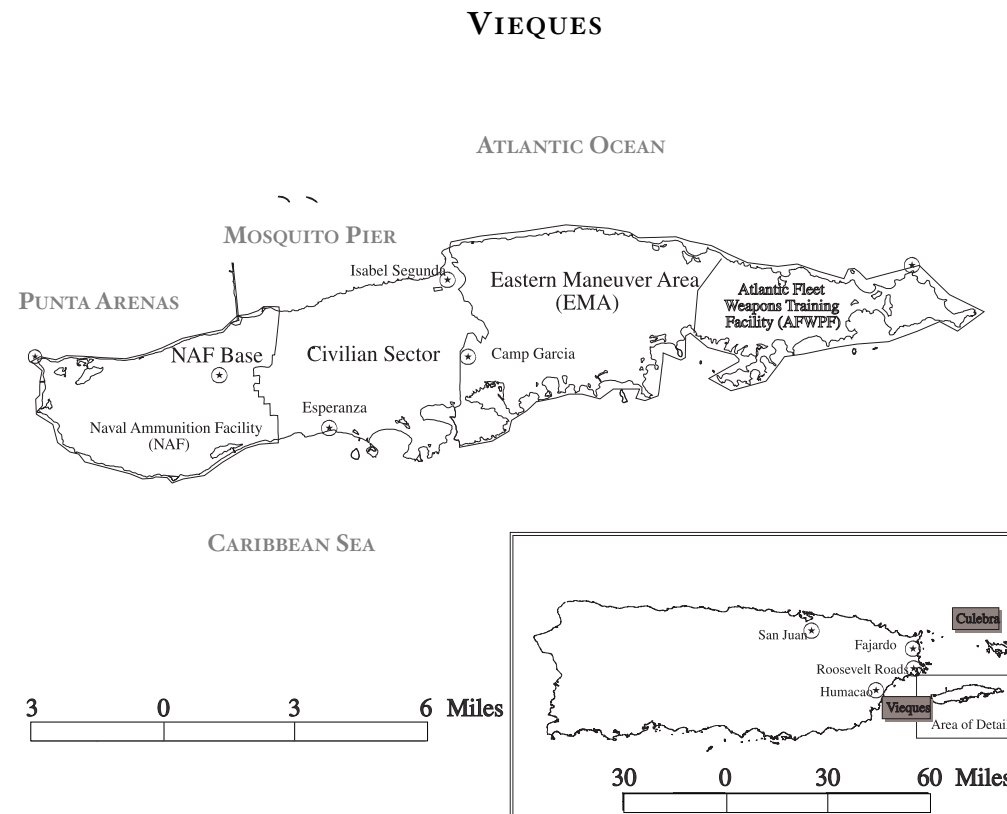
219 pages; \$22.00 paper

Vieques, the Navy and Puerto Rican Politics.

By Amílcar Antonio Barreto.

Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2002.

168 pages; \$55.00 cloth



The Puerto Rican island of Vieques has lately been the object of much attention. In April 1999, a Navy jet dropped a bomb off the mark from its intended objective in the target range in the east of the island, and killed a civilian security guard. This sparked a wave of protests in Vieques, in the main island of Puerto Rico, and in the communities of the Puerto Rican diaspora in the continental United States. Protesters occupied the target range for 13 months (April 1999 to May 2000), until U.S. federal marshals forcibly removed them. Peaceful demonstrations in Puerto Rico twice assembled crowds of between 80,000 and 150,000, depending on whose estimation you believe (the island has a total population of 3.8 million). The three members of Congress who are Puerto Rican—Nydia Velázquez and José Serrano from New York; and Luis Gutiérrez from Illinois—have been arrested while protesting the use of Vieques by the U.S. Navy as a target range. In Vieques, in Puerto Rico, in the Puerto Rican communities in the continental United States, the universal call is for the cessation of bombing and total withdrawal of the Navy, the return of land to civilian use, and the cleanup of toxics accumulated during 60 years of use by the Navy. The root of the problem in Vieques dates back to World War II, when the U.S. Navy expropriated two-thirds of the civilian lands and relocated the population to the center of the island. Since then, *viequenses* have struggled, on and off, to rid their island of the U.S. Navy. Three recent publications look at the situation of Vieques, and one looks more generally at the situation of fishermen in Puerto Rico, including Vieques. They all offer insights into what is happening in Vieques. The explanations they offer, however, are far from uniform.

Mario Murillo's pamphlet *Islands of Resistance: Puerto Rico, Vieques and U.S. Policy*, is a useful introduction to the issue of Vieques as it relates to the broader problem of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico. An experienced journalist of the left, Murillo is clear, concise, and to the point. The pamphlet is addressed to the general public, in accessible and intelligible language, without unnecessary academic jargon. It links the issue of U.S. militarism in Vieques to a larger grassroots anti-imperialist perspective while explaining, simultaneously, a century of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico. The discussion on Vieques is framed in relation to the defeated Young Bill of 1998, which would have organized yet another plebiscite to poll residents of Puerto Rico on their preferences towards statehood or independence. In the aftermath of the defeated Young Bill, the importance of Puerto Rico's colonial problem faded in the press of the United States, until an errant bomb dropped from a fighter jet killed David Sanes in Vieques on April 19, 1999. The mobilizations in Vieques rekindled the dormant issues of colonialism in Puerto Rico. Murillo argues that "for Vieques and for the people of Puerto Rico, it has never been clearer: this colonial relationship must be terminated" (Murillo, p. 65).

Murillo thinks that the protests in Vieques are good cause to reopen the debate that died with the Young Bill. That bill was originally designed to polarize options in Puerto Rico. Islanders would have to choose between statehood or independence, with the current Commonwealth status option, as defined by the pro-Commonwealth people in Puerto Rico, not included among the options. According to Murillo, that was one of the flaws of the bill. Another, deeper problem with federally sponsored plebiscites is that some proponents of Puerto Rican independence, but notably not the Puerto Rican Independence Party, want any referendum on the status of the Island to comply with the strictures of the United Nations Decolonization Committee, which requires that the armed forces of the colonial power withdraw from the colonial territory previous to any electoral consultation on the colonial question. Thus, the Navy would have to leave Vieques and all the other U.S. military bases in the island would have to close first, in order for Puerto Ricans to exercise the power of the ballot meaningfully. For Murillo, as for so many other proponents of Puerto Rican independence, a vote under the current circumstances, with the island occupied by more than a dozen U.S. military installations, is meaningless. These are strong points that are constantly aired internationally, but the U.S. federal government treats Puerto Rico as an internal matter, and disregards the U.N. Decolonization Committee on these issues.

In the 2000 local elections in Puerto Rico, more than 60 percent of *viequenses* voted for the candidate of the pro-Commonwealth party (PDP) for mayor of their island. Thus the population of Vieques does not necessarily share Murillo's conclusion that "this colonial relationship must be terminated". At least not under the present circumstances. This is perhaps because the Vieques issue is *not only* about the colonial situation of Puerto Rico. There are other dimensions to the matter. While practically every political matter in the colony brings to the fore the colonial question, most matters cannot be reduced to the colonial question tout court.

Amílcar Antonio Barreto's *Vieques, the Navy, and Puerto Rican Politics* considers the recent mobilizations against the U.S. Navy in Vieques as part of a larger phenomenon of Puerto Rican resistance to United States impositions. Like Murillo's pamphlet, it places the Vieques mobilization in relation to the ever-present status question of Puerto Rico and examines it in the context of Puerto Rican nationalism. For Barreto, the struggle to oust the Navy from Vieques is not merely an ecological or a pacifist

mobilization, let alone a struggle of fishermen for subsistence. It is primarily an affirmation of *puertorriqueñidad* on the part of *viequenses*, of the residents of the island of Puerto Rico, and most importantly, on the part of the communities of the Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States.

The book is written for a North American audience, with the assumption that the reader knows little or nothing about the particular situation of Puerto Rico or mainland Puerto Ricans, and hence considerable space is devoted to introducing the reader to the basic parameters of the Puerto Rican colonial situation. In that sense the book is at once a narration of the struggle in Vieques and an analysis of the larger Puerto Rican colonial dilemma throughout the twentieth century, seen through the prism of recent events in Vieques. This double function of the book can be considered both an asset and a drawback, depending on the perspective of the reader. To those more familiar with the Puerto Rican situation, the book can come across as a bit longwinded. Barreto does not quite get to the point, there is too much background, too much dwelling on the general literature of Puerto Ricans and not enough about the situation in Vieques.

For instance, Chapter 5, "Politics in El Barrio," which describes the mobilization of the New York Puerto Rican communities on behalf of Vieques, first takes the reader through a tour of the history of Puerto Rican communities. It begins in the nineteenth century, discusses the incorporation of Puerto Ricans into the American political structures through the Democratic Party, the history of working class resistance and the famous tobacco workers who formed the intelligentsia of the Puerto Rican working class in exile, the role of language issues in the formation of Puerto Rican forms of resistance in the diaspora, the Young Lords Party in the 1960s and their recovery of Nationalist Party leader Pedro Albizu Campos as an icon of Puerto Rican resistance, and so forth. Finally, in the last 4 pages of the chapter, the reader is treated to some of the details of the political mobilization around Vieques in New York. The effect of the Vieques issue on the political campaigns of New York candidates is given prominence.

There were in New York interesting discussions of methods of struggle: do we protest in front of the United Nations, or block access to the aircraft carriers parked as tourist attractions in the Hudson River? Do we take delegations to Vieques or do we spend the resources lobbying politicians in New York? Do we carry out civil disobedience, peaceful marches, or dramatic actions such as those of Tito Kayak, who placed the Vieques flag atop the Statue of Liberty? Those were indeed the political discussions in the barrios, in Spanish Harlem as well as the Lower East Side, Hunts Point, Washington Heights, Los Sures. Yet there is little in Barreto about these discussions. The reader who is more familiar with the Puerto Rican situation will wait impatiently to reach the section that actually has information on the Vieques struggle in New York. If the reader is a New Yorker who has actually been involved in the Vieques issue, she or he will find that the actual coverage in the chapter "Politics in El Barrio" is rather meager.

Indeed, the book as a whole is mostly about colonialism in Puerto Rico; there is no original research into the situation of Vieques. The specifics of the situation in Vieques—the social structure of the plantations before the expropriations; the social effects of the Navy's expropriations; the social transition of many *viequenses*, from *agregados* in plantations to reconcentrated populations; the ways in which the population attempted to make a living; the emergence of the struggle of the fishermen in the 1970s and of the squatters movement in the late 1980s in Vieques—

all of these are out of sight. Vieques exists primarily as the symbolic locus of resistance for Puerto Ricans in the United States and Puerto Rico, the place where they deposit their grievances and hopes. Unfortunately, Vieques is not addressed as a real place in its own right, with a community that has a rich and complex history of struggle that needs to be examined.

On the positive side, the reader unacquainted with the colonial situation of Puerto Rico will benefit from the historical perspective offered, and will be able to place the Vieques struggle in context, as one instance in a long sequence of mobilizations of Puerto Rican affirmation in the mainland. This is undoubtedly an asset. Barreto's book has the additional merit of considering the Vieques mobilizations in the Island and in the communities of the Puerto Rican diaspora jointly, examining what it means to each and why Puerto Ricans everywhere have converged on this issue. And if the reader has had any question that the Vieques issue is related to the issue of colonialism after reading Murillo, by the time she finishes reading Barreto all doubts should have been dispelled.

Barreto's book ends, as do all others in this review, at a time when the Vieques issue remains unresolved. The fundamental claim it makes is not dependent on the outcome of the struggle—whether or when the Navy actually leaves Vieques—but is rather more long term and I believe well sustained in the book. Barreto claims that Vieques has acquired strategic *symbolic* importance. Puerto Rican nationalism, as all other nationalisms, feeds on its own myths and icons, its own sacred places and symbols of horizontal co-fraternity. Barreto argues that Vieques has become the symbolic locus of resistance of the Puerto Rican nation, both in the island of Puerto Rico and in the continental United States. The explanation of how and why both communities came to share the same symbolic locus of resistance is Barreto's original contribution to the literature on Vieques and the literature on the Puerto Rican sense of peoplehood.

According to Barreto, the struggle in Vieques is not just about the island of Vieques. Instead, it is a sort of condensation of diverse grievances of Puerto Rican communities in the island and in the United States. "Protesting military policy in Vieques became a vehicle for openly expressing pride in *puertorriqueñidad* and anger over the perceived injustices inflicted on one particular ethnic group. The crisis in Vieques focused that resentment on one particular spot. In the process it [Vieques] became the newly anointed locus of Puerto Rican national consciousness" (Barreto, p. 97). The point is well taken, but the concrete problems and the agency of *viequesenses* disappear from the map.

This fundamental void is filled by Katherine McCaffrey *Military Power and Popular Protest: the U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico*, which examines the actual social movements of the *viequesenses*. Fishermen protested in the late 1970s against the destruction of their natural habitat. Local *rescatadores de terrenos* (squatters) occupied Navy lands in the late 1980s. Since 1999, a broadly based social movement against the bombing practices has demanded the total withdrawal of the Navy from the island and has challenged all attempts to carry military maneuvers in Vieques, with hundreds of arrests in Navy territory and bitter legal struggles in the U.S. federal court in Puerto Rico.

McCaffrey integrates her analysis of local social movements with larger questions of power and politics in a colonial setting. A bit of background is necessary, before going into the details of her argument. In the epoch of unchallenged U.S. planetary hegemony, in which European protestations about U.S. policy in Iraq hardly cause

a reaction this side of the Atlantic, the finer points of U.S. unilateralism towards Puerto Rico are not likely to capture international attention. Nor are they considered important at all by the international community. The peculiarities of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico, which treats it as a foreign territory for domestic purposes, but as an internal territory for international purposes, has conditioned the response of local movements and the ways in which they frame their struggles. U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico reflects both streaks of the larger U.S. imperial project, one descended from Roosevelt's big stick policy, the other from Wilson's more enlightened discourse on self-determination. Throughout the 20th century, Puerto Rico has held strategic importance for the United States. The dozens of military installations in the Island display the naked power of the empire and its military might. And who doubts that the empire will squash those who opposed its might, with the consent of the European powers if possible, unilaterally if necessary? The strategic designs of the U.S. Navy are an immense force to contend with.

But U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico is not just about brute force. In 1917, under president Wilson, an act of Congress made all Puerto Ricans U.S. citizens. Specifically designed to preempt the political field from the protestations of local elites and the political parties, which were beginning to talk of independence, citizenship promised Puerto Ricans individual equality within the empire, so long as they did not reside in Puerto Rico. The island, however, was considered unfit for statehood or self-government, largely for racist reasons, in the context of U.S. rule in the Philippines, which were considered even more "alien," and to which citizenship was not extended.

Puerto Ricans are thus individually citizens of the empire, but collectively in their island they do not participate on federal elections, have no voting representatives in Congress, cannot choose the president of the United States. This may seem a surprising anomaly in a country that experienced the U.S. civil rights movement of the 1960s. The French treat their colonies in the Caribbean differently, and afford them the status of a province of France.

But there are reasons to be attached to the empire. Under present conditions of Latin American immigration, Puerto Rican workers who migrate to the United States are shielded from the most atrocious conditions imposed on those who are undocumented. Citizenship, and the extension of some of the reforms of the New Deal to the island, elicits the consent of the colonial population. A contradictory field of forces characterized by a combination of force and consent is the setting in which Puerto Rican social movements unfold. The combination of force and consent is of course a characteristic of all systems of domination. It is the specifics of the mix that matter. In Puerto Rico this mix involves colonialism, extreme militarization of the local society due to the presence of U.S. bases, high levels of participation of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. armed forces, and U.S. citizenship. So, given the specifics of U.S. colonial hegemony, how do social movements frame their struggles when they have to confront the U.S. Navy, one of the pillars of the military might of the world hegemon? How do these social movements maneuver, given the attachment of the population to United States citizenship and the benefits it affords, on the one hand, and the existence of a deeply entrenched Puerto Rican national culture in the Island and in the Puerto Rican communities in the United States, on the other?¹

Throughout the 20th century, autonomism, understood broadly as the struggle to improve local conditions *within* the colonial framework, has dominated colonial politics. This is no less true today, despite the dramatic overrepresentation of pro-independence

organizations and cadres in the leadership of every social movement in Puerto Rico, including Vieques.

McCaffrey's *Military Power and Popular Protest* is a serious scholarly discussion of the situation of Vieques, based on primary ethnographic research in that small island in 1993–1994, and during the summers of 1995, 1997, 1999, and 2000. Unlike the works of Murillo and Barreto, which are based principally on press reports and are focused on current political concerns, McCaffrey's work is based on in-depth ethnographic interviews and asks questions that seek to understand the conflict in Vieques in terms of the *complex cultural identities* (i.e., not just national identities) of the fishermen who led the mobilizations against the Navy in 1978. The research was undertaken before the recent Vieques crisis caused by the death of David Sanes, and was initially focused on the struggles of the late 1970s; recently, it was modified to incorporate the latest events.²

McCaffrey examined the struggle of the fishermen in the late 1970s and asked herself why the fishermen framed their protest as *working people trying to support their families*, that is, as people who were impeded from making a living by the Navy's repeated bombardment of the sea surrounding Vieques. *Viequenses* and their allies have been struggling against the U.S. Navy for a long time. McCaffrey's study was originally focused on the struggles of 1978, in which a flotilla of fishing boats paralyzed military maneuvers. The fishermen interposed themselves between the Navy and the target zones, putting their own bodies on the line to stop the bombings. The cover of McCaffrey's book displays a photograph of a fisherman swinging a slingshot at a U.S. Navy boat, an actual picture from 1978 which serves to symbolize the David vs. Goliath dimension of the fight, back then as well as today. In 1978, Angel Rodríguez Cristóbal, a Puerto Rican member of the Movimiento Socialista de los Trabajadores, was arrested for trespassing in Vieques during a protest and died under mysterious circumstances in federal prison in Tallahassee. Even in 1978, there were no "anthropologically-pure" fishermen in the struggle against the Navy, and left-wing organizations and pro-independence organizations were well represented in the protests against the Navy. However, McCaffrey found in her ethnographic research that the fishermen who led the struggle in the late 1970s strategically chose to represent themselves primarily as heads of families impeded from earning a living. The fishermen did not speak of Puerto Rican independence but of the right to make a living, and framed the conflict "in terms of a set of discrete, local, material grievances. They did this by asserting a local identity, links to the land, and a 'traditional' way of life" (McCaffrey, p. 78).

This collective representation of the fishermen appealed to the work and self-help ethic of the empire, as well as to the ethical values of the labor movement internationally. It was also a way of framing the Vieques struggle as something other than a struggle for national sovereignty, assuring the participation of a broad spectrum of fishermen independently of their position on the question of the political status of Puerto Rico. In Vieques, "most perceived the struggle not as one of national liberation, but rather as a struggle for a right to make a living and obtain a certain quality of life, uninterrupted by relentless bombing raids" (McCaffrey, p. 101).

The reasons why a majority of the local population did not choose to frame the Vieques issue as principally one of national liberation are manifold. Fear of repression is certainly one of them. After the death of Angel Rodríguez Cristóbal, "a veil of terror and violence descended upon Vieques's struggle." Colonial repression has made it very difficult to frame struggles as openly national struggles.

Some sectors of the population, as in the rest of Puerto Rico, are attached to U.S. citizenship, and still others do not want to render local issues in Vieques contingent on a resolution of the colonial problem. Rather, they chose to fight for reforms, or improvements, within the colonial framework. The central problem faced by *viequenses* was "how to articulate their particular grievances against the military without having the cause spiral into an overwhelming battle against U.S. colonialism. Fishermen became crucial in emphasizing the cultural and economic dimensions of a struggle within a highly charged political setting" (McCaffrey, p. 68).

McCaffrey located the emergence of the way of life of the fishermen in the dissolution of the customary rights of the peasantry of Vieques produced by the expropriations of the 1940s. Before the U.S. Navy seized two-thirds of the land of Vieques during World War II and its aftermath, the island had been a plantation society producing sugar in the *latifundia* of the Benítez family and the Eastern Sugar Associates corporation. Most workers owned no land, many were *agregados* of the landowners, but like all peasants everywhere, they used the natural resources around them abundantly, had small *conucos* for food production, fished in the mangroves, and sporadically fished on the sea. Thus, even though the *agregados* and proletarians of the Vieques plantations did not have title to land, they did enjoy broad usufruct rights, from which they derived a large portion of their subsistence.³ This peasant culture, shared by *agregados* and rural proletarians alike, is at the root of the fishing culture of the *viequenses*.

McCaffrey examines the transition from the plantation way of life to life in the resettlement tracts of the Navy after the expropriations. The sugar economy was dismantled, alternative agricultural projects such as pineapple production were thwarted, and military construction ceased after 1943. There was little work to be found, and many workers took to the sea, becoming fishermen in the process. But because they had never been "pure" proletarians to begin with, in the transition to being fishermen they drew on many of the cultural assets of their peasant communities, including the skills involved in fishing, which they now amplified given the lack of alternative subsistence.

The panorama of the economy of Vieques after the expropriations is stark. The United States Navy relocated the rural workers to the center of the island, and barred them from most of the coastline and most of the mangroves, which are important sources of marine life. During a set of maneuvers in 1950, the Navy even destroyed the coconut groves of Vieques, which had provided food, coconut oil, and stove fuel to the rural population. There is a detailed analysis in McCaffrey of the ways in which the Navy presence in Vieques constricted the economic opportunities of *viequenses*, blow by blow. Navy rights over airspace and sea routes retarded the development of Vieques and prevented the development of a major tourism project by the Woolnor Corporation in 1960.

Coupled with the ethnographic research on the lives of *viequenses*, *Military Power and Popular Protest* offers a detailed panorama of the political context of the 1970s. The struggle was not carried out by abstract producers separated from the political realm, as in the literature on "everyday forms of peasant resistance," which considers resistance without politics.⁴ In the late 1960s, there was a movement against the development of strip-mining in Puerto Rico, which explicitly formulated a nationalist opposition to foreign corporations exploiting the Puerto Rican subsoil. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Puerto Rican youth revolted against conscription, against the Vietnam War, and against the presence of the ROTC in the University

of Puerto Rico. The Puerto Rican Socialist Party was large and significant, and was influenced by the model of the Cuban revolution of 1959. The struggle of the fishermen in the late 1970s was clearly stimulated by these earlier movements, and by the U.S. civil rights movement. The fishermen called their activities a “sail-in,” in the tradition of the “sit-ins” of the civil rights movement.

The complex analysis that emerges is both elegant and credible. Whereas Murillo and Barreto focus on the broad political aspects of the struggle in Vieques without a detailed look at the local actors in this drama, McCaffrey integrates the local, the Puerto Rican political dimension, and the larger international dimension. Anthropological research allowed her to analyze the culture of work among the fishermen, its peasant origins, and the values on which it was based. Research on the political history of Vieques and Puerto Rico served to integrate the local-level analysis with a political analysis to explain why it was the fishermen, and not another group, who confronted the Navy. It also helped to explain the way in which the fishermen framed their struggle.

If the fishermen of Vieques sought at a certain point in time to present themselves as working men trying to feed their families, as opposed to Puerto Rican patriots fighting the empire, or U.S. citizens demanding equal rights, that decision was a *political* decision driven by their identity as local producers, by desire for unity in the struggle, as well as by a realistic assessment of the opposing forces. I find this a persuasive portrayal of the struggle of the Vieques community against the Navy.

Recent events must have influenced McCaffrey’s analysis. They also tend to confirm it. For, whereas the struggle of 1978 was led by fishermen, the struggles of the recent past have been characterized by immense social heterogeneity. After the death of David Sanes, the forces opposing the Navy represent a broad spectrum of Puerto Rican society. Among the social forces represented in the peace encampments, which blocked the U.S. Navy from bombing Vieques from the time of the death of David Sanes in April 1999 until the mass arrests of May 4, 2000, there were members of the Pro Independence Party (the president of the party stayed in Vieques in a tent for almost a year), representatives of the Teachers Federation of Puerto Rico, students from the University of Puerto Rico, church groups with prominent support from the Catholic Bishop of Caguas, Alvaro Corrada, women’s groups, environmental groups, Christian Peacemaker Teams from the U.S., and other pacifists and antimilitarists.

The complex array of protesters had a number of overlapping reasons for opposing the Navy. To many residents of Vieques, the Navy is a long-standing enemy who took their land and constrained their economic activity. Environmentalists have focused on the pollution produced by military toxics and on destruction of the natural habitat of several species, including the human species. Toxins produced by bomb explosions are carried by the trade winds to the civilian area.⁵ The use of napalm and depleted uranium, along with 60 years of military use, has produced a cancer rate in Vieques that is 27 percent higher than that in the island of Puerto Rico. The church groups have focused on how target practices in Vieques are a violation of the right to live in peace. They argue that children should be able to grow up without fear of stray bombs overhead. The pro-independence organizations—the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), Congreso Nacional Hostosiano, and Frente Socialista, among other groups—see Vieques as a symbol of national oppression. They believe it must be rescued from the Navy for the sake of the islanders, as part of the process of achieving full national self-determination for Puerto Rico. McCaffrey highlights

how a social movement of women has taken a central role in the struggle against the U.S. Navy in Vieques. A complex array of forces converged in the movement to rid Vieques of the destructive presence of the U.S. Navy. As a result, the movement in 1999–2000 is somewhat more complex and inclusive than the movement in 1978, which was centered on the fishermen.

But the fundamental characteristic of the movement is that it has not framed the Vieques struggle as exclusively an issue of national liberation. Instead, the struggles have been around concrete local issues, and for the most part they coincide with the programmatic demands of the *Comité Pro Rescate y Desarrollo de Vieques*: demilitarization, devolution or return of the land, decontamination, and development. The coalition, which came together over the question of Vieques in 1999, includes many *independentistas*, as is usual in many community struggles in Puerto Rico, but is actually much broader than that.

McCaffrey contrasts in her book the easy victory in Culebra, in which the PIP played a prominent role, with the more prolonged and difficult struggle in Vieques, which has not been framed exclusively in nationalist terms. In the neighboring Puerto Rican island of Culebra, protests led by the Puerto Rican Independence Party produced the retreat of the Navy from that island. But the ease with which the Navy withdrew from Culebra was based in part on its ability to move its practices to Vieques after 1976. Thus the “easy” victory was in fact no victory at all. What the Navy gave in Culebra, it more than took in expanded utilization and destruction of Vieques.

Whereas the mobilizations to oust the Navy from Culebra were led by the Pro Independence Party and can hence be considered nationalist, the struggles to get the Navy out of Vieques have been more politically diverse. They cannot be considered nationalist but rather *national* in that they have implicated the broadest layers of the Puerto Rican population in the island and in the diaspora, and have enjoyed the overwhelming support of island public opinion. Ultimately, the question McCaffrey asks is a momentous one and has no easy answer: How does a small community struggle against the immense power of the naval forces of the unchallenged hegemonic power in the world today? What are the chances of success for a semienfranchised,⁶ colonial population?

Fishers at Work, Workers at Sea: a Puerto Rican Journey through Labor and Refuge, by David Griffith and Manuel Valdés Pizzini, is a study of fishermen in Puerto Rico, including Vieques. The essential theme of the book is semi-proletarianization. Fishermen are typically on the frontier—the area that exists between wage-labor work and independent commodity production. Through extensive interviews with fishermen in the island, Griffith and Valdés Pizzini reconstruct the class position and the life trajectories of their subjects in great detail. The typical fisherman in Puerto Rico was in all likelihood a proletarian at some point, and with few exceptions most fishermen recurrently border on re-proletarianization. Many are return migrants from the fields and factories of the United States. They may be members of a political party espousing a specific solution to the colonial question of Puerto Rico. Some have served for a while in the U.S. armed forces. They are certainly not isolated primitives dissociated from the structures of the world economy. Quite the opposite. Griffith and Valdés Pizzini emphasize the international economic linkages of the workers/ fishermen and wonder to what extent their situation is typical of the globalized producers of the Third World today.

Griffith and Valdés Pizzini looked at fisheries in all of the coastal regions of Puerto Rico and in Vieques, and interviewed fishers everywhere. Comparatively, the eastern

zone of Puerto Rico, and by extension Vieques, is the poorest fishing area of all, with the lowest ratios of catch to fishing area. The western fisheries of the island, located near the Mona Passage, are the most productive. The fishery in Puerto Real in southwestern Puerto Rico is the only one that sustains what can properly be called commercial fishing. There, a process of differentiation among fishermen has generated wage laborers and capitalists. Merchant capital in control of the refrigeration facilities controls the industry.

Fishers at Work is an anthropological study where there are no primitives. What appears as “traditional” is simply a previous adaptation from another epoch in which producers were also linked to the world market. This is a strong theme in Caribbean history: the islands are an entirely new world, with hardly any continuity with pre-Columbian civilizations, which were destroyed in the course of the conquest. Thus, the peasantries in some of the islands were composed of immigrants who came as settlers or indentured servants from Europe or Asia, or as slaves from Africa. Many of these peasantries were formed after emancipation, that is, they were “reconstituted” historical products, to use the famous phrase of Sydney Mintz. So with all of the “traditional” formulated as clearly a set of adaptations from an earlier period, but not as an original state of being, the question that arises is: How does the process of capitalist accumulation generate interstitial spaces of resistance and non-capitalist forms of organization? The fishermen are really a product of incomplete proletarianization—of an ongoing process that reconstitutes petty commodity producers in marginal occupations in the midst of generalized integration to the capitalist market economy. The insights this outlook affords are interesting.

Petty commodity producers such as fishermen, which combine subsistence with small market transactions, develop local cultures around their work and occupations. Whereas few people develop cultural attachments to the figure of the wage laborer at the low end of the market, which has neither unions nor industrial organization, being a fisherman is a source of pride and an entrenched identity, even though most of these fishermen are only partially so, and most have to resort to wage employment periodically. This cultural identity as something other than wage laborers is an attractive alternative to incorporation as wage labor into the market economy. The cultural forms seem to be defined in opposition to the dominance of wage labor, and the values characteristic of the fishermen are the antithesis of industrial discipline. Fishermen refer to their occupation, when contrasted with wage labor’s world of stress and industrial accidents, as “therapy,” both physical and psychological.

So fishing is a refuge for the fishing communities. Due to the encroachment of tourist developments along the coastal zones and due to the social differentiation within the fishing communities—external and internal threats to the culture—Griffith and Valdés Pizzini modestly describe the fishing craft as a “fragment of a refuge.” The process and pace of production are controlled by the producers. Even the contracts of hired fishermen in small enterprises seem governed more by tradition than by the market, and the hiring of workers for a fishing expedition typically involves family members and is thus mediated by kinship rather than abstract supply and demand. Payment takes the form of a certain share of the catch. The less skilled the workers, the more they tend to rely on kinship networks for solidarity and survival. These are interesting insights into the lives of direct producers in the neoliberal age of unfettered market forces.

The figure of the fisherman is a romantic one, by which I mean a figure that represents a longing for a world in which market values are not dominant.

Capitalist modernity has for centuries now destroyed and recomposed ways of life across the planet. As Marx and Engels noticed over 150 years ago, nothing seems to withstand its impact and “everything that is solid melts into air.” Given this reality, modernity has generated a multitude of intellectual responses with a longing for alternatives to the values of the market. This is a strong trend in Puerto Rico,⁷ where capitalist modernity has been imposed by a foreign colonial power and the responses to it have typically taken the form of a combination of an imaginary harmonious national past *and* a rejection of market values. Where the utopias differ the most is in the vision of the imaginary utopian past.

Island intellectuals have imagined a harmonious authoritarian past where landowners in their haciendas presided over organic rural communities and all were united by their attachment to the land and the rural life. Other utopias have imagined that Puerto Rico before the advent of U.S. colonialism was a society of equals, of small farmers who constituted a “legion of proprietors” shattered by capitalist accumulation. All strands have rejected the market as a desirable orienting principle. The image presented by Griffith and Valdés Pizzini does not share any of the idealizations of the rural past, but it does share the vision of escape from the market. Instead of a rosy vision of the rural past, *Fishers at Work* offers a convincing portrayal, based on anthropological research, of Puerto Rico’s agrarian history, which originated from corporate-controlled plantation agriculture. And it reminds us that in the past, too, as much as in the present, folks struggled to escape the dictates of the market and constituted autonomous areas of existence, whether as *agregados* with *conucos* and usufruct rights or fishers utilizing the ultimate commons in the planet, the sea itself.

In this attempt to reconstitute themselves in terms other than those dictated by the market, the fishermen have created their own cultural space. They have learned to manage interactions with political parties and the local, Commonwealth, and federal governments. Presidents of fishing associations are typically bilingual, and often have experience in factory and agricultural work in the United States. Most fishing is artisanal, labor intensive, technologically simple, and small scale: fishermen use seines, called *chinchorros*; trammel nets, called *mallorquinas*; and gill nets, which are called *filetes* if used near the surface, and *trasmayos* if used near the bottom. Because fishing is small scale, it is threatened by commercial capital, and yet fishing communities have shown surprising resilience and adaptability. Independent household production of the type the fishermen engage in is both a complement to capitalist production and a competitor. Because so many fishermen are actually semi-proletarians, household production serves the primary function of ensuring the reproduction of labor power without having the full cost of reproduction fall on the wage directly. In this sense it is a subsidy to capital. But fishing also competes for adherents with wage labor, and removes some laborers from the market. Griffith and Valdés Pizzini wonder which of these two effects is strongest. Given the historical surplus of labor power in Puerto Rico, and the history of out-migration, it is likely that the complementary effect is stronger than the competing effect.

Fishers at Work has a small problem of overreliance on the literature on plantation life in Puerto Rico. Like McCaffrey, Griffith and Valdés Pizzini look at the communal rights of rural workers in the epoch of plantation agriculture in Puerto Rico as a source of the cultural life of the fishers. This is partly because there is such a great literature on that subject, beginning with the famous collection *The People of Puerto Rico*,

edited by Julian Steward. McCaffrey dated the transition from plantation life in Vieques in the 1950s, due to the expropriations of the Navy. At that time most workers were indeed sugar plantation workers. However, by the 1980s and 1990s in Puerto Rico, which is when most of the life trajectories in *Fishers at Work* are unfolding, sugarcane agriculture had practically disappeared from the island. The result is that the analysis of the transition from plantation life to fishing community is somewhat disjointed in time. Between the collapse of plantation agriculture in the 1960s and 1970s, and the generation of the fishers studied here, something else must have happened. This is reflected in the life histories: “[...] most other fishers who worked in the cane left sugar production in the 1960s and 1970s but did not enter fishing immediately. They took other routes that included proletarianization in other sectors of the insular economy and in the United States” (Griffith and Valdés Pizzini, p. 163). The path, then, seems to be from rural proletarian in the plantations, to national or international migrant, to fisherman.

The insights for an analysis of the situation in Vieques are manifold. The endurance of the culture of fishers is not a product of some inherent quality of the culture, but rather a recurrent process of resistance to the market and opposition to industrial discipline. Capitalist expansion creates and reproduces “so-called traditional social, cultural, and technological adaptations.” Semi-proletarians have multiple livelihoods, and they resist poverty by utilizing kinship networks and reconstituting elements of a peasant commune. Their lives “suggest a more or less continuous resistance to structure and a longing for pathways different from those that other wagedworkers have taken” (Griffith and Valdés Pizzini, p. 230). Their location in relation to nature, and specifically the sea, makes them “custodians of a lengthy history of exchanges and reciprocity with nature based on a set of rules much different from those guided by profit and the market” (Griffith and Valdés Pizzini, 218). The four works presented here differ in their analysis of the meaning of the Vieques struggle. This marvelous work by Griffith and Valdés Pizzini suggests that whatever else the Vieques struggle might be, it is *also* a contribution to the fight against the rule of the market over our collective lives.



NOTES

- ¹ For the peculiarities of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism, see the excellent book by Jorge Duany, *Puerto Rican Nation on the Move* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
- ² The book is based on McCaffrey’s dissertation (Katherine T. McCaffrey, “Culture, Power and Struggle: Anti-Military Protest in Vieques, Puerto Rico” Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1999) but is a significant departure from it and incorporates an analysis of post-David Sanes events.
- ³ The landmark work on this issue is Juan Giusti-Cordero’s study of Loíza: “Labor, Ecology and History in a Caribbean Sugar Plantation Region: Piñones (Loíza), Puerto Rico 1770–1950.” Ph. D. diss., SUNY-Binghamton, 1994.
- ⁴ See the incisive comments on this literature by Samuel Farber, *Social Decay and Transformation: A View from the Left* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2000), pp. 97–112.
- ⁵ Prof. Arturo Massol of the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez carried out a study in Vieques and found heavy metals in plants grown in the civilian area. Massol concluded that the damage caused has rendered Vieques unfit for agriculture, except perhaps hydroponics. See his “Impactos militares en Vieques desde una perspectiva ecológica” (<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/ayala/Vieques/viequesupr/massol.pdf>), Congreso Universitario de Investigación y Proyectos sobre Vieques, April 16–17, 2002, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. For the use of depleted uranium in Vieques, see for example Associated Press, “Radioactive Shells Fired in Puerto Rico Officials Say Navy Didn’t Tell Them of Mistake,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 29, 1999: 26; Michelle Faul, “Puerto Rico Officials Say US Didn’t Tell of Shelling Error,” *Boston Globe* May 29, 1999: A3.
- ⁶ The only voting representation Puerto Ricans have in the U.S. Congress comes through the communities in the diaspora, and their representatives in Congress: José Serrano and Nydia Velázquez, Democrats from New York; and Luis Gutiérrez, Democrat from Illinois. All three oppose the presence of the Navy in Vieques, and Gutiérrez and Velázquez have been arrested for civil disobedience in Vieques.
- ⁷ I am drawing here on the ideas of Rafael Bernabe, *La maldición de Pedreira: aspectos de la crítica romántico-cultural de la modernidad en Puerto Rico* (San Juan: Ediciones Huracán, 2002).