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Mobilizing Memories: Remembrance as a Social Movement Tool in the Vieques Anti-Military Movement (1999–2004)

Roberto Vélez-Vélez

In 2004 the community of Vieques, Puerto Rico witnessed the last chapter of a struggle that unfolded over the previous 60 years – the official closing of the US Navy station and target range, Camp Garcia. The closing of the base came after an intensive five-year protest mobilization manifesting in a diversity of sectors across the archipelago of Puerto Rico. However, this mobilization was most prominently known via its local consolidation as the Vieques Movement. The Movement's claim for ending the military presence in the municipal island focused on three core issues – stopping all live ammunition practices (the regular occurrence of bombing), permanently closing the target range and military station, and returning the land to civilian control. The Vieques Movement deployed a multiplicity of protest tactics to challenge the military institution and sustain popular mobilization – civil disobedience, marches, picket lines, letter writing campaigns, as well as congressional lobbying. As the movement unfolded, activists also engaged in the more subtle process of articulating community members' experiences of the military presence, experiences centered on their perceptions of the past. This was more than a storytelling exercise focused on the impact of military presence; this was an exercise in personal remembrance as a way of making and conveying collective memory. Upon close examination, storytellers intended to re-present the military presence experience in a new light, one that casts the military base and military operations as a source of grievance,

conflict, and trauma. How are the memories of residents' experiences with the military related to the narratives for mobilization activated by movement actors? What influence, if any, did this remembrance exercise over the mobilization against the military? In what ways, if any, were notions of the past challenged here?

In this chapter, I explore the Vieques Movement via local narratives of the military presence using an approach that elucidates the role of memory – and the links between personal and collective memory – in the social movement mobilization processes. I analyze embedded remembrance structures – *mnemonic signifiers* that serve as rich sources of meaning – for their activation capacity and significance to narratives of mobilization (Vélez-Vélez, 2013). The goal is that of approaching the mobilization process from the standpoint of memory and remembrance. In doing so, I trace how the narratives that social movement actors use as tools to achieve political mobilization are made significant via their allocation of meaning to the past.

Grounded on the perspective that mnemonic processes are always ongoing and involving continuous negotiations with the past and its meaning, I argue that we must pay attention to how remembrance, as a personal and collective process, serves to elicit those meanings that shape mobilization narratives. Instead of assuming that movement actors approach representations of the past as fixed frames to be mobilized, I examine the signifying power that personal experiences of historic events render to social movement processes. Focusing on the ways that personal memories connect to larger collective memories, and the role of both in infusing movement narratives with meaning, I build a bridge between the micro and macro dimensions of remembrance and collective action. Using a lens of mnemonic dynamics allows us to better appreciate the allocation of meaning to sources of grievance and, hence, the action-triggering effect for mobilization processes.

To illustrate, I first establish the link between memory and social movement narratives as a foundation for the empirical examination. Next, I present some background on the Vieques Movement. Then, I elucidate the mobilization process rooted in the setting for this analysis. Working retrospectively, I analyze the narratives used to recast the memories of the military presence, revealing them to be mnemonic structures that take on meaning under a new context of mobilization. I will conclude by highlighting how the action-triggering power of the emerging narratives of mobilization rests on the problematization of the past as a grievous and traumatic collective experience.

Narratives for mobilization

Social movement scholars have detailed the significance of narration and the relevance of storytelling practices to processes such as solidarity building, identity construction, and claims articulation (Fine, 1995, 2002; Johnston

and Klandermands, 1995; Jasper, 1997; Kane, 1997; Benford, 2002; Davis, 2002; Polletta, 2002, 2005; Yates and Hunter, 2002; Eyerman, 2003). By recognizing that narratives are an analytical tool for mobilization, researchers have outlined the nuances of a distinctive cultural paradigm. However, in using a narrative approach, one can overlook significant issues. By interpreting social movement narratives as vehicles of meaning, scholars must recognize that they operate retrospectively. “[The] events earlier in time take their meaning and act as causes only because of how things turn out later ... in the future” (Davis, 2002: pp 11–12). This means that a narrative’s explanatory power relies on emplotment or the rendition of past events, which can be seen as a form of social remembrance. In other words, a narrative for mobilization draws its potentiality for triggering action from its constitution of memories or representations of the past (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy, 2011). This implies a link between those renditions of the past and the process of constructing meaning to mobilize action and make future-oriented change. Given that this is the case, then there is an analytic gap in models of narrative analysis if the subject of memory is not problematized or further developed (Davis, 2002; Polletta, 2003, 2005). If meaning allocation and interpretative power depends on the emplotment of past events, particularly when those renditions of the past are the result of social, cultural, and political dynamics, we must look at the remembrance process as central to the power of narrative to mobilize people. Thus, social movements can be approached as “mnemonic agents” in that they operate within the “arena of public memory” and with “collective memories as a strategic feature” of their work (Zamponi, 2013: p 2). Hence, I here propose a mnemonic dynamics approach to better observe and understand the mobilization effect of narratives in social movements (Vélez-Vélez, 2013).

The Vieques Movement

The establishment of a military station in Vieques, Puerto Rico was part of a strategic plan of expansion by the US on the eve of World War II. As the US sought to secure its interests and influence over the Caribbean Basin and the western hemisphere, naval outposts in the region proliferated (Meléndez, 1989; Barreto, 2001). Given the colonial relation of Puerto Rico to the US and its geographic position, the archipelago became a stronghold for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Atlantic Fleet Training Facilities (AFTF) (García Muñiz, 1987; Melendez, 1989; Rodríguez Beruff, 1999; Paralitici, 2005). Though resistance to military presence in Vieques can be traced to the establishment of the naval station in the 1950s, the most prominent and organized efforts took place in the 1970s (McCaffrey, 2002). The movement organizations of the 1970s created the foundation, rhetorical and tactical, for other organized efforts to follow

over the years. The anti-military movement reached a new effervescence in the spring of 1999, after David Sanes, a civilian security guard at the naval station, was killed by a missile that missed its target (Colombani, 1999). This event triggered a mass mobilization to stop the bombing in the island, end the military presence, and close the naval station. This mobilization held a sustained protest movement for five years that combined political actions like lobbying and legislation with direct actions like massive marches and acts of civil disobedience.

The death of David Sanes not only triggered the visibility of the movement but also served as a turning point regarding the articulation of mobilization narratives and the meaning of military presence on the island (Vélez-Vélez, 2013). Specifically, as local activists linked the death of David Sanes to the struggle to end the bombing and close the naval station, they discursively organized their moral and political claims around a bank of shared memories and experiences of the past. Before the tragedy of Sanes's death, the *Comité Pro-Rescate y Desarrollo de Vieques*¹ (CPRDV) had established a mobilization campaign named 4Ds, which stood for demilitarization, decontamination, devolution, and development. The 4Ds represented a programmatic agenda for Vieques, one that instead of focusing solely on immediate issues established a scheme of gradual development that would, activists claimed at the time, lead to fundamental changes regarding military presence on the island. This sequence of stages consolidated into the 4Ds can be interpreted as a master narrative, a storyline to be followed, through which activists envisioned a desirable ending to the struggle (Benford, 2002: pp 54–55).

As a master narrative for mobilization, the 4Ds provide a beginning point, demilitarization, which entails the removal of the military from the island; but does not specify how this can be accomplished (Polletta, 2002). The lack of specificity on how to reach this stage gives the activists freedom to imagine (Davis, 2002: p 19), experiment, and activate their creativity (Polletta, 2002: p 37). This is what Francesca Polletta (2002) refers to as “present ambiguities,” which entice an interpretative audience into solving or finding resolution to a problem (p 35). The 4Ds storyline provides an image of the future, sustainable development, an endpoint towards which people can project their current reality and imagine a new one, feeding the need to search for and mobilize to reach this new reality. The narrative plot structure, a clear timeline, combined with its ambiguous beginning, created expectation among activists who awaited a signal on their horizon. This pushed activists to examine and consider each event that appeared in terms of its potential as source for cognitive liberation of the wider population, and a tipping point on the path to social change and local self-determination. So, the unexpected and accidental death of David Sanes on April 19, 1999 became the needed spark for the movement to turn their master narrative

into action. Movement activists then worked to guide the popular burst of emotion into a coherent claim for change (Fine, 2002; Polletta, 2005).

¡Ni una bomba más!: a narrative of change and challenge

The accidental death of David Sanes brought to the attention of those outside the island a glimpse into the realities that permeated life in Vieques with a military presence, specifically the impact of the bombing. The first outcry of the 1999 mobilization was that of *¡Ni una bomba más!* (Not one more bomb!), a slogan that took center stage in the popular discourse and throughout the news media and movement-related activities. The bombing became the epitome of the problems and concerns of the island's population, and the immediate target of the struggle. According to some residents, this process created a new sense of awareness, connecting the recent accident with their own safety. Edwin, a man in his sixties, retired teacher and longtime leader in the anti-military movement, stated: “[After the accident] a sense of indignation started to grow. Then the people claimed for the bombing to stop. Not one more bomb! That is one of the first claims of Viequesens: Stop the bombing now!”

The process triggered a conscious association between the bombing, the struggle, and the military presence, turning dormant memories and the accident of 1999 into evidence to counter any argument in favor of their continuation.

The end of the bombing became the central objective from 1999 to 2004, the period with the most intensive continuous protest action in the history of the movement (Barreto, 2001; McCaffrey, 2002). The issue of the bombing captured the imagination of people in and outside of the archipelago, drawing supporters in mass numbers to the municipal island from all corners of the globe. This global attention brought an opportunity to seriously challenge the military presence. For many activists this shift in focus was decisive for their success as they narrowed the claim into a fundamental maxim. According to Edwin, “everyone was aware that if the bombing was stopped, the Navy had no other reason to be here” In other words, the bombing was the most elemental connection between the military presence and the end of it; to force an end to the bombing was to remove the asset value of the island to the US Navy (Rodríguez Beruff, 1999).

A parallel process that emerged with global attention on the struggle in Vieques was a revisiting of the island's past as it related to the impact of military presence. To understand the bombing as a lived experience of the military presence, non-residents required contextualization within historical and political timelines (Vélez-Vélez, 2013). For locals, this meant they were to tell and retell their life stories, describe their lives, and produce images

of their life experiences for those who did not share their references and perspectives. Sixty years of military presence left indelible marks on the life of three generations of Viequesens. The exercise of revisiting and retelling their pasts experiences, like all mnemonic practices, involved navigating present social dynamics, namely the “group settings” (Halbwachs, 1992: p 39) and the influence of our “particular social surroundings” (Zerubavel, 1996: p 286) on “the mediation between the past and the present” (Falasca-Zamponi, 2003: p 49). In other words, producing those memories about the military presence involved “an ongoing dialogue” (Olick, 2003: p 264), a negotiation and debate over the stories, events and plots that constitute that memory (Wagner-Pacifici, 1996; Olick and Robbins, 1998; Falasca-Zamponi, 2003). This social process of remembrance was critical in the articulation of the mobilization narratives of the campaign, for “memory is at the same time an outcome of protest and a tool in constructing new mobilizations” (Zamponi, 2013: p 3). It was this social exercise of remembering the military presence experience that established the meanings of the bombing, past and present, and spurred a new cognitive liberation which triggered action from the population. Examining these mnemonic dynamics, as well as the articulation of life experiences, not only reveals the conflicts, tensions, and negotiations that such processes involved, but also elucidates the meaning allocation processes that transformed the stories told by activists and locals into triggers of anti-military collective action in Vieques (Vélez-Vélez, 2013).

Analyzing remembrance of the military presence

Every interpretation of the past is set within its particular moment as a product of negotiation and transformation among those within a community whose members work to advance particular meanings that address their concerns (Zerubavel, 1995; Olick and Levy, 1997; Eyerman, 2003; Olick, 2003; Feindt et al, 2014). “Memory’s salience at any given point in time ... depends not only on its meanings and their manipulations but ... on the complex trajectories memory forms over time” (Olick, 2003: p 8). This negotiated nature of the elements that comprise the narrative of the past creates a separation between those events or happenings that are excluded from the story, but also a distinction among those included. In the constellation of stories that local residents expressed in their shared accounts of growing and living on the island, three stories became prevalent when talking about the military experience: (i) those related to the expropriation of land after the military arrived on the island, (ii) those concerning the contact between the military and civilians, and (iii) those regarding the bombing itself. These stories represent key *mnemonic signifiers* that guide and structure locals’ renditions of their collective experience as a framework that establishes context for, and meaning of, the movement’s claims.

The term mnemonic signifier refers to “any socially relevant figuration of memory” (Feindt et al, 2014: p 31). I borrow this term to add that this figuration can carry the quality of activating meanings grounded in the collective memory and shared experiences of a community (Vélez-Vélez, 2013). While there are multiple events that can be identified as essential in these stories, not all of them are equally significant to the storyline. I suggest that the factor for this distinction is their centrality to the plot of the story. There are elements in the story that function as carriers of the plot, referred here as *primary signifiers*, while others provide texture or dimension to that story, *secondary signifiers*. The logic of their order – primary or secondary – in the remembrance analysis process serves to situate their properties as meaning carriers.²

Primary mnemonic signifiers carry more than just the story; they also carry meanings, symbolic values that serve to frame the story. So, signifiers of a primary order represent significant events that carry strong, shared resonance to the community members. For every primary signifier, there are a few other mnemonic signifiers that are considered of secondary order. The secondary mnemonic signifiers are those events or elements that provide certain texture or depth to the story while not providing significant change to the progression of the story. These secondary signifiers highlight certain aspects of the story, filling in the spaces between turning points of the narration. While the primary order signifiers can sustain the storyline independently, this is not the case for secondary order signifiers; the latter are dependent on the primary as they provide context.

Within the three main stories told by local residents about their experiences living with a military presence, each contained a mnemonic signifier of primary order: the expropriation of the land, contact with the soldiers, and the bombing of the island. Each one of these events represents a key segment of the island’s history and carries a specific set of meanings concerning how islanders remember and make sense of the military presence in Vieques.

The expropriations: beginning of new realities

A series of evictions took place between 1941 to 1943 – popularly known as *las expropiaciones* (the expropriations) – targeting large sugar plantations owned by absentee landlords as well as small properties used by local owners and landless sharecroppers (McCaffrey, 2002). The expropriations are considered by residents a significant and defining event in the lives of Viequeses. This event simultaneously transformed their spatial reference and livelihood on the island.³ Hence, it was a source of change, a turning point. While most scholars highlight the loss of jobs and the economy as the direct impact of this process (Ayala and Carro-Figueroa, 2005; Ayala and Bolivar, 2006; McCaffrey, 2006), Viequeses point to the loss of place

and belonging. The erection of spatial constraints such as restricted-water zones, fences and gates, altered the geography of the island and the ways Viequenses related to it.

To no surprise, the expropriations have a central place in the local stories of Viequenses serving as a boundary marker, a divider in their life stories and in the island's history, between a period before and a period after. Edwin states: "The 1940s is when the first expropriations took place, around [19]40 [to 19]41. I was born in [19]44, which means, that I was born after the expropriations. Thus, I am post ... I'm from the generation that was born after the expropriations."

Similarly, Mariano, a fisherman and leader in the fishing community, in his thirties at the time of the mobilization, comments:

"Since I was born, the Navy has been in Vieques, because I was born in the 1970s and the Navy has been here since 1942. Thus, it's to say that I was born being part of the Navy ... It's not the same for those who were here before their arrival [Navy], and then this thing was integrated into their lives. They didn't have it, and now they do. No. I was born with that Navy."

As a mnemonic signifier, the expropriations frame two versions of Vieques; one framed around the sugar industry heydays, thriving fishing and self-sustainability (before the expropriations); and the other framed around the lack of land, end of sugar production and spatial restrictions (after the expropriations).

The expropriations have also been articulated as a life-determining event, one that defines where people were born and belong. Elsa, a retired teacher in her late fifties and longtime activist comments:

"Well, sadly, I was not born in Vieques, like many other Viequenses. When the Navy arrived to Vieques in the [1940s], my family was among those that suffered the expropriations. Back then, my grandparents had relatives in Luquillo,⁴ so they moved to Luquillo ... That's one of the reasons why me and my brother were born in Luquillo instead of Vieques."

Dolores, a woman protestor in her sixties, reminisced: "My grandmother grew up in Playa Grande ... She told me that my mother was born there [pointing to the fenced area of the base], she was born there and her mother was also born there in Playa Grande ... She had a life of poverty but filled with happiness."

By interpreting their lives in the light of the expropriation experience, the event provided a pivot to ground their life stories. The articulation of

the expropriations as a reference point of the self illustrates the strength of this event as a turning point of their stories, and a defining element of their experiences as they relate to previous generations and to the community more broadly. This contextualization is carried by establishing symbolic associations that might surface in the process of narrative construction, such as the relation between individuals and the land, the relative deprivation of the islanders from other Puerto Ricans, the artificial spatial isolation of the population, and their socio-economic underdevelopment. Through plotting the story of the expropriations, many of these issues were recognized, considered, and explained.

Local accounts illustrated the impact of the expropriations by relating this event with others. Two events that are bound to the expropriation experience are stories of relocation and migration. These secondary signifiers increase the capacity of residents to articulate other experiences as significant by tethering them to the expropriations. These two events provide more depth and complexity to the stories of the expropriation, enhancing the multidimensionality of this experience. Relocation stories illustrate the immediate internal consequence of the expropriations, while the stories of migration, temporary or permanent, also show the external reach and impact of the event. These signifiers, nonetheless, are very much charged with meaning, and it is in their context of complementing the expropriations stories that they move into secondary order.

Thus, in remembering the expropriations, Viequenses represented a starting point for new realities and the beginning of the islanders' life *with* the military in Vieques. This event is the boundary mark to the autobiographical stories of many Viequenses, setting their initial contact point with the military presence as one with visceral implications – loss, displacement, and permanence. The residents situate their eviction stories as a turning point, marking the beginning to a period of decline and giving shape to a shared narrative structure and timeline. Further, by establishing the genesis of the military presence in the expropriations, Viequenses are attributing a more complex context to the issue in present time. Instead of allowing immediate events, like the death of David Sanes and the bombing, to be main signifiers of the military experience, the timeline is expanded and the texture of this experience is problematized. By incorporating the expropriations through the remembering process, it gives nuance to Viequenses's claims; it underlines that to understand their claim for ending the military presence, those supporting them must also understand the breadth and depth of their grievance.

Soldiers versus civilians: the tangible presence

The expropriation of land gave way to the opening of a military station in Vieques, Camp Garcia; an extension of one of the largest military installations

in the Caribbean, Roosevelt Roads Naval Base in Ceiba, Puerto Rico. This expansion and the incorporation of a target range in Vieques intensified the military presence on the island, the Atlantic and the Caribbean Basin (Ayala and Bolivar, 2006). The entrenchment of the Cold War also brought about a stronger military presence on the islands of Vieques and Culebra (McCaffrey, 2002). This growth in militarization was characterized by the introduction of large amounts of soldiers who took part in war games and exercises. As locals recalled, military personnel became a common sight in the civilian space during the periods of the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s. Thus, the insertion of soldiers in Vieques and the forced interactions with them became the second mnemonic signifier in the life stories of those living on the island.

As locals remember growing up in Vieques, their childhood interactions with soldiers provide intimate and concrete representations of the civilian population's contact with the military institution. In other words, the presence of soldiers on the island serves as a signifier which characterizes changes in the local setting and an alteration of social interactions within their social space. The soldiers are recalled as intruders, and the stories recount the introduction of a foreign subject into the sphere of everyday life. Again, Dolores recalls:

“They landed at the beach, close to the malecón⁵ in Esperanza ... They camped for twelve days, and then they marched [by the] thousands ... to Camp Garcia. They marched up the street, and through that road no one could pass. The cars, as few as they were, they had to park. No one could go up that street until they finished marching ... As a young girl, I looked at them with excitement, but now I see it as an abuse.”

Most accounts featured the soldier as the vivid personification of the larger institution, the US Navy, and used the individual soldier to express the way the institution intrudes into different segments of their routines. The tangible nature of the soldier dispelled the notion of *the military* as an abstraction, giving body, face and physicality to that subject previously only alluded to.

Stories of soldiers and civilians interacting *within* the military space were presented as rare occurrences and glossed with cynicism, as they contrast with a larger set of images that take place within the civilian space. Raúl, a man in his sixties who has been active throughout the movement's history, recalls:

“I remember when I was carried in a military truck, to go in and see the military base. Although at night there were fights with the soldiers [and civilians], they [the Navy] were in a constant public relations campaign. So, they took us into the base like today they take kids to

Disney World. I rode on a helicopter, they put us in their trucks, they fed us hamburgers, they brought us all sorts of things.”

The incursion of soldiers into civilian spaces placed indigenous and foreign populations in direct contact, an occurrence that forced a large array of reactions and outcomes. The dominant accounts about soldier–civilian contact presented the public space as the main stage of frictions and clashes, suggesting conflict as the main interaction between these two actors. Edmundo, a maintenance worker in his sixties recalled: “[They] entered the church looking for young women, and everything ended up in riots. We defended Viequense citizens, their rights, and we fought with punches, rocks, kicks, and sticks ... These were the riots.”

Likewise, Edwin states: “The situation in which I was growing in my neighborhood was that of watching the [street] fights ... I took part in those fights in my youth ... I saw their [soldier’s] abuses ... If you were in a bar and they came in, you would have to flee, if not [he winces].”

Locals remember these interactions as epic stories where they and other locals were victims defending themselves against military agents who were presented as a foe or villain. This image of conflict has become common in portrayals of the past, one that reaffirms the sentiments of present circumstances. In these retrospective narratives, the Navy is an invading force and locals have been victimized from the beginning.

Though women have been present throughout the movement process, the mobilization in the 2000s situated women as cardinal actors and voices of resistance (McCaffrey, 2008; Vélez-Vélez, 2010). Women told another set of stories that cast the soldiers, and hence the institution they represented, as a physical threat. The interaction with soldiers, as remembered by women, highlights their sense of being dehumanized and objectified by these agents of the foreign military institution. Karen, an activist in her late fifties and member of a local women’s organization recalls: “Here, we [women] stopped visiting the church, or going to the plaza, because they didn’t care about the age of a woman, if they passed by, they tried to grab her.”

Dolores recounts: “I remember seeing them along the houses, knocking on doors ... People locked their doors, and around a certain hour they would say, ‘Let’s get in, it is time to go to bed!’ especially to girls.”

Likewise, Raúl remembers: “Our mothers liked the idea of the military, because they could work washing and ironing their uniforms, but at night they [the soldiers] got drunk and entered into peoples’ houses where they knew young women lived.”

The stories of the harassment experienced by female residents bolstered the image of the military forcibly imposing themselves and appropriating everything, be it land, water or bodies, which were all at the disposal of the soldier.

From the stories of riots to those of harassment, the mnemonic signifier of the soldier further contextualized, in a relational way, how the boundaries that separated these two spheres, civilian and military, were transgressed. Along with the soldiers, a secondary signifier that is articulated is that of a proliferation of prostitution which provides another contact point between the military and civilian spaces. This element is usually presented as a collateral effect of the soldiers' presence, one that is interpreted as an "erosion" of social codes of decency stemming from the concomitancy of sex work. Thus, while the signifiers of expropriations articulated imagery of spatial constraints, the soldier carries the idea of social encroachment; the transformation of their sociability.

Further, the military takes a physical form in the stories after this point. While before, the military was presented as an abstract force in the expropriation stories, the remembered character of the soldier suggests a direct contact point between the military and the civilian. The soldier embodies multiple attitudes attributed to the institution of the US Navy, becoming a personified focus of resentment, giving traction to current local claims of intrusion and hostility. The remembrance of the soldier also brings about the notion of a population under threat, one being physically harassed and forced to adopt new interactions and dynamics, images that are not lost in the activist claims of the 2000s. Hence, the urgency to remove the military presence is renewed; this is a claim that can be grounded in experiences of the past that were still vivid decades later.

The bombing: a living trauma

While memories of the expropriations defined the conditions of space, and those of the soldiers embodied altered sociability, the bombing is presented as *the* defining element of the military presence in the life of Viequesenses. In its early days, military training in Vieques was focused on landing exercises and small artillery practice. That training exercises in Culebra and Vieques intensified in the 1960s in an assertion of US dominance over the region under the gaze of Cuba's new regime (García Muñoz, 1987). In 1975, after an intensive protest campaign led by fishermen and prominent political figures in Culebra, the heavy artillery target range there was forced to close, ending the military presence in that island (Mullenneaux, 2000; McCaffrey, 2002). With the closing of Culebra's naval operations, training was relocated to Vieques, where a new target range was established, turning the island into the core feature of the Atlantic Fleet Training Facilities (Melendez, 1989; Rodríguez Beruff, 1999). This intensification of military exercises transformed the situation for most residents as they witnessed a new dimension of the military presence moving deeper into their lives; live bombings.

Under the context of the latest mobilization, locals raised the emergence of the bombing as a major mnemonic signifier, an element that embodies the deep indelible imprint of the military presence in the life of Viequesenses. After the death of David Sanes, the bombing occupied a central place in the local narrative, providing a pivot for reflecting on the normalization of disruptive conditions while also accentuating how imperative ending the military presence was. In revisiting the memories of growing with the bombing and how this was disruptive to their lives, their claim of *¡Ni una bomba más!* was strengthened by signifying more than this single incident and grounding it as the source of ongoing trauma.

Trauma is understood as a collective experience when it is constructed on the fabric of shared meanings and the remembrance practices of a mnemonic group (Sztompka, 2000; Langenohl, 2008). The characterization of the event as traumatic is the result of its articulation and construction, not the quality or nature of the event itself. Thus, events are not inherently traumatic but socially deemed as such by the attribution of moral significance in their rendition as part of a shared experience, a collective memory (Kidron, 2003).⁶ However, not all individuals in the mnemonic community assume the traumatic experience in the same way or may share the interpretation of an event as traumatic. Moreover, certain traumatic events are integrated into the community's view of normalcy throughout generations by transforming its moral significance (Eyerman, 2001). We see this integration of the bombing into normalcy when considering the perspective of the youth in Vieques regarding the bombing and the military.

In describing the bombing, some youth in the island presented a story that was deprived of any allusion to fear or dread. Their depictions presented the bombing as an extension of a normal life within a space that is shared with a military installation. Carla, a young woman in her late teens, who turned activist in the last few years, states:

“While in grade school, it did bother [me] at the beginning, the airplanes passing by at night, the bombing ... but I got used to it, and the classes ran normally, these were not interrupted because of the bombs ... Even my mom and I sat at the porch to look at the flares, these red lights in the sky ... it was normal ... Everyone seemed to live in peace with the Navy ... very normal.”

Likewise, Jonathan, also about 20 and member of the same youth organization as Carla, recalls:

“When you are ten, eleven years old, they talk to you about the pollution ... the bombing and the noise, and you do not look at it as a problem. Instead, we thought that it was something normal, not a

problem. ... As a kid I grew up with the bombing, the jets, and made it part of my daily life.”

As a shared experience, the bombing for these youth has transcended into their understanding of normal, free of contradictions or conflict with their expectations of normalcy. This naturalization of the bombing provides a point of conflict in the construction of a narrative that would spearhead a mobilization process to challenge the military presence, in particular, the bombing.

In the context of the mobilization post-David Sanes's death, however, the stories that dominated the discussion involved the articulation of normalcy as an oxymoron for describing Vieques's reality, a condition in total conflict with the routines of a place where bombing was a feature of everyday life. Claudio, former security guard at the base, retired and in his seventies states:

“I cannot describe a normal day prior to [the civil disobedience]. Because ... for you to say that you have a normal day, you would have to be out of the island. Not feeling the bombing, the roar of the machine guns up there, none of that ... Only by leaving the island you couldn't hear it ... So, if you left Vieques, you could have a normal day, but when you returned, Vieques was hell. This was hell.”

These stories challenged the integration of the bombing into normalcy presented by younger generations by attributing the fear, dread, and threat we heard from the stories with the soldiers to the bombing itself. In doing this, the way the event is remembered and interpreted is problematized, suggesting a process of negotiation and reconstruction. Given that remembrance involves a reiteration of those signifiers that provide context, prominence, and meaning to the shared experiences, the bombing is recast as a signifier of trauma (Feindt et al, 2014: p 32).

When locals articulate the experience of growing up in Vieques, they present the bombing as intangible yet as interfering in their daily routines, especially via the sound of the bombs or the vibration from explosions. Residents stressed how their lives were interrupted or upset by the reverberation of the bombs or the gun fire, even miles away. Mariano claims: “With the explosions ... the windows rattled, and that was at a distance of miles ... really far. The houses shook with the detonations, the windows ... boom, boom ... you knew there was bombing over there.”

Again, Elsa adds: “As a teacher, in many occasions the class was interrupted because of the jets and the bombing ... it did not allow students to focus, neither could we ... You could not even take a nap, because they were doing their bombing.”

In these stories, the bombing slithers through the cracks of the quotidian, moving deeper into residents' lives. With this slippage of the bombing into

the ordinary, it is more than sound that invades the spaces of civilians, but what it represents. This representation of the bombing constructs an image of the military as an omnipresent subject, a disembodied form that traverses Viequenses's public and private spaces alike, unchecked and unbounded. The mnemonic signifier of the bombing situates the military presence as an intractable force, one that shaped their sense of normalcy in permanent ways.

Above all, locals present the bombing as an intrusive force that transformed their view and their approach to everyday life. As the bombing gained terrain in the quotidian routines, this eroded the sense of security among residents. Those spaces previously conceived as safe from soldiers' intrusion was now made vulnerable by the pervasiveness of the bombing. The sense of threat created around this experience became a common denominator in the stories about the bombing. Laura, a community outreach worker in her thirties who moved to the island some years before the new mobilization started and now co-led a local women's organization, says: "I could see the lightning of the bombs as they exploded, because my house was towards the eastern area. I was there, thinking, I cannot handle this. I cannot deal with this, I'm scared ... I don't like this."

Similarly, Dolores added: "The most awful experience of my youth was the boom [the bombs]. ... All the time, while you sleep, play, in school ... there was the boom. ... But you play, the boom ... taking a shower, the boom [explosion] of the bombs ... sometimes one after the other, boom, boom, boom."

In the context of post-David Sanes's death, to retell the stories of fear and dread is to reveal the mindscape of a community that had been waiting and foreseeing a tragedy of this magnitude for years. These stories brought forth their awareness of the threat that the bombing represented to their lives and their community. As Karen states so clearly and succinctly, "The threat changed from, 'It is possible that one day a bomb can fall on us ...' to 'the bomb just fell on one of us ...'."

The stories of dread about the bombing further accentuate the emotional toll the recurrence of the bombing carved on the people and put into perspective the impact this experience had over the years. As locals articulated their memories of the bombing, they meant to illustrate how the military presence entered their everyday lives and affected their routines. Their stories illustrated the military as a transforming agent in the lives of Viequenses. Engaging these memories of the bombing as a collective experience of trauma makes the narrative to end the bombing into a direct cry for resolution with an ongoing trauma rooted in both past and present, but also an attempt to change their future. Thus, to end the bombing involved more than ending the military presence; it was a signifier of a possible resolution to a trauma that has been growing for 60 years.

Conclusion

How were these elements – the remembrance of expropriations, soldiers, and bombing – relevant in activating structures of mobilization? How is this discussion of remembrance relevant to our understanding of the link between issues with the past and social movements? Fredrick Harris (2006) has argued that movement organizers engage certain events from social memory through “social appropriation” to generate collective action (p 22). This process suggests that, given the structural opportunities, movement organizers have the capacity to utilize past events in such a way that they are “framed” into claims for mobilization. While this model resonates with the idea of redefining events of the past for the purposes of mobilization, it tends to underplay the role of meaning systems in collective memory. Remembrance involves a process of allocating meaning to the past, one which is key for cognitive liberation, I will add. It is in situating new events in relation to past events through remembrance that meanings are elicited and actions triggered (Armstrong and Crago, 2006). Hence, movement organizers and activists are simultaneously political actors and mnemonic agents.

For a long time the military presence experience in Vieques was assumed as a taken for granted aspect of the island with no bearings on the mobilization process beyond the obvious illustration of an oppositional force or physical source of grievance. Hence, most attributed the triggering effect we saw between 1999 and 2004 to the event of David Sanes’s death and the outcry of ending the bombing that followed. However, our examination of the role of remembrance in the wake of the 1999 incident and the call for mobilization that followed shows a more dynamic process around how this experience was rendered and interpreted. The remembering process in Vieques involved the articulation of the expropriations, the soldiers, and the bombing as signifiers of the military presence. These signifiers were central to the mnemonic process which provided meaning to the death of David Sanes. In other words, the death of David Sanes had to be integrated within the “stock of plots” of the mnemonic community to be understood and interpreted (Polletta, 2002: p 34). As the accident was socially appropriated within the existing social frameworks – familiar stories or narratives – and the current context – via anti-military mobilization – it was defined by the signifiers and their meaning structures through remembering the experiences of military presence. Thus, the narrative *¡Ni una bomba más!*, as articulated and enacted in the shadows of the tragedy, gained traction as the memories of members of the community were revisited along with images and emotions, which were constructed and contained for 60 years. As the community recognized and reflected upon those memories and the meanings that such memories provided, a response was articulated that spurred social movement action.

By looking at mobilization narratives through a lens of mnemonic dynamics, we are best situated to observe, analyze, and critique how mobilization processes are explained. The interpretative lens of mnemonic practices emphasizes the role of meaning construction as a dynamic process that involves negotiation and conflict regarding how the past is rendered and presented. The problematization of the past through mnemonic dynamics – activation of mnemonic signifiers to decode and reconstruct a remembrance of the military presence experience – produced the cognitive liberation that supported the mobilization to stop the bombing and, eventually, close the military base.

Considering this analysis, we can argue that mobilization narratives, however effective in articulating the discourse and contextualizing a tragic event, often achieve their triggering effect because of embedded meanings established by mnemonic signifiers. It was because the military presence was condensed into representations of the past – expropriations, soldiers, and bombing signifiers – and reenacted in the remembrance process, that those meanings were elicited, and individuals were compelled to act (Jansen, 2007). The interaction of activists with their memories in the interpretative process – retelling stories, revisiting images and memories, and reconnecting with attributes – produced the meaning allocation necessary to legitimize them as narratives of mobilization. How they remembered the military presence mattered for how they would envision a future without it; a Vieques without the Navy.

Notes

- ¹ Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques, in English.
- ² It is important to clarify that such a distinction is only nominal, and they do not imply the existence of a real expectation among the residents of the island on the events and experiences with the military. The rationale behind this order difference is in their position vis-à-vis the storyline rather than *importance* for individuals' lives. It is important not to assume order as level of importance because this would undermine individual experiences and their heterogeneous impact.
- ³ An estimate of over a thousand families were relocated between 1941 and 1943. The first wave removed families from the eastern part of the island, now occupied by the former Camp Garcia training lands, to the center of the island. Further expropriations in the western part would reduce the civilian space to a north-south corridor contained between two military installations. For more on this see Ayala and Bolivar (2006) and McCaffrey (2006).
- ⁴ Luquillo is a municipality in the northeastern part of Puerto Rico, 25 miles from Vieques.
- ⁵ Common term for pier or jetty, usually characterized by boardwalks along the shore.
- ⁶ This view has been strongly criticized and challenged by others in memory studies. For a good description of this debate see Kansteiner and Weilnböck (2008).

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