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## Bieke O Muerte, or My Encounter with the *Canibales*

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### Marithelma Costa

Translated by Bella D. August

*Marithelma Costa is a Puerto Rican writer who teaches Spanish literature at Hunter College in New York City. The following is a personal account of her last year's trip to Vieques, or Bieke, taken with Italian journalist Paolo Dal Ben to gather information about the protest against the U.S. Navy's continued bombardment of that long-inhabited island.*

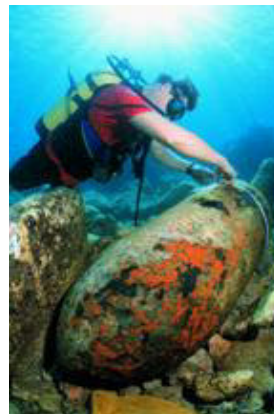
— The Editors

When Don Juan Ponce de Leon conquered Puerto Rico, he and his interpreter, Juan Gonzalez, soon moved up to the north coast of the island, where they built a log fort,

...near the Humacao River. His plan was to destroy the Carib forces that had set sail from the island of Vieques [and other smaller islands] and established a beachhead [near Humacao].... At the fort, Juan Gonzalez received news that the principal cacique [of the area], Guaybana, [a Taino from the island] now allied with the Carib Indians, had attacked the city of Caparra and was camped near the mouth of the Loiza River [between Humacao Province and San Juan].

On April 3, 2000, I went to Vieques, approximately one year after the death of David Sanes, a guard working at the Observation Point in the eastern part of Vieques' target area. While NATO was practicing for the Kosovo war, Sanes was mistakenly hit by a missile and killed. Paolo Dal Ben and I went to Vieques to gather information about the situation that we could then distribute to a broad international audience.

We went with a group of neighbors from New York's Lower East Side. The group's leader—who had once been a journalist himself—and his wife were leftists who had lived through the McCarthy era. Also accompanying us was a ninety-year-old dentist-psychologist, who dozed on the plane with the dignity conferred upon one who is a Jew, who is a Pole, and who has lived through genocide.



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**A 2000 pound General Purpose bomb, Alcatraz Reef, within the U.S. Naval bombing range, Isla de Vieques, Puerto Rico.**

Later, on Yayí beach in the militarized zone of Vieques, I would be lucky enough to meet several modern-day Caribs, whose ancestors were dubbed "canibales" by the earliest Europeans arriving in the Americas.

But first, on another beach, some valiant Boricuas.<sup>1</sup>

When we arrived, we boarded a boat belonging to Vieques fishermen that took us to the area in the south of the island where the bombs and target practice go on. Joining us was a girl from St. Croix, now living in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant section, who intended to videotape what she called the "final conquest" of Vieques. A poet came with a fishing pole, a painter came with a ready laugh, a politician came with a camera. All of these were Boricuas, all had been in the militarized naval zone, and all knew what awaited them upon their arrival. There was also a joyous seventy-year-old woman from Georgia with flowers in hair. It was her first time in Puerto Rico.

Seated next to her was Doña Adelfa Vera, a political activist who has lived many years of her life in New York, and who, at 82, was arrested in front of the United Nations on Three Kings Day<sup>2</sup> together with six other Puerto-Rican women in an act of civil disobedience against the U.S. bombardment of Vieques. Also on the boat, to help us on our trip, were members of *Comité de Paz y Justicia* (the Peace and Justice Committee.) When we landed on the sands of Vieques, two imposing military trucks appeared, loaded with people from the encampments who had come to give us an enthusiastic welcome.

Intent upon interviewing the greatest number of people we could in our limited time there, we made our first stop at the Gilberto Concepcion de Gracia encampment of the *Partido independentista puertorriqueño* (Puerto Rican Independence Party or PIP).

We walked until we came to a white sand beach on the south coast of the island. On a hill to the west was a building painted with red and white squares like a chessboard. This was the Observation Point (O.P.), the *Vigia* (lookout post) of eighteenth-century maps, the place where David Sanes died on April 19, 1999. Multiple helicopters take off and land from this precise point, keeping track of the exact number and location of people in the *zona prohibida*, the several-miles-wide no-trespassing area that lies between the *polígono de tiro* (the target area on the smaller, easternmost tip of the island) and the Observation Point. There, military observers keep track visually or through electronic cells that detect body heat (we are, after all, in the era of smart bombs).

As we approached the encampment, we saw the flags of Puerto Rico and the PIP flying above blue and yellow and purple tents. In the approximately eight-hundred-meters-long beach, the sand is perfectly raked like the patio of a Tibetan monastery or the *parterre* of a chateau of the Loire valley. For the residents of the encampment, this is a sort of Zen exercise through which—and owing to the futility of the effort—they symbolically purify the beach at the same time that they define themselves as a constant presence in it. They do this, in an act of civil disobedience, right in front of those who control the red-and-white building.

Ruben Berríos, president of the PIP, welcomed us with a drink of tamarind juice. Then Ramoncita, an *independista* among the current nine or so members sent regularly from the main island to camp at the beach and bring weekly replenishments, gave us tamarind fruit from Bayamón, a region of the main island well-known for its delicious produce.

The previous night, Dal Ben had interviewed Doña Isabel Rosado, a follower of Pedro Albizu Campos—a lawyer, *afro-puertorriqueño*, Harvard graduate, leader of the nationalist movement of the thirties to fifties, and one of the founding fathers of *independista* thought. He spent half his life in prison and was among the prisoners that the federal government used involuntarily in experiments with the effects of radiation. Doña Isabel herself was imprisoned for seventeen years after the

Nationalist Insurrection of the 1950s; in 1979, she was again brutalized by the police in a protest led by Vieques fishermen. Cheerful and fierce today at age 92, she spends several days each week at Camp García, facing the gates of the restricted zone.

Now it was our turn to interview Berríos, who had not left this beach or this encampment for a year, despite the danger of ongoing proximity to military exercises, some of which employ dissipated uranium warheads. Radioactivity has since been detected in his body.

We spoke about the sun, the heat, the mosquitoes, about the discipline that is required to keep the encampment going. We spoke of the connections that Berríos has—as honorary president of the Socialist International—with the party in office in Italy (the PDS) and with Latin-American leaders. We spoke about the economic value of Vieques—prime beachfront, several million dollars worth of real estate that also generates a substantial amount of rental income for the U.S. military and for U.S. weapons manufacturers. We spoke about political prisoners and about poetry. We talked until the sun began to set and a Capuchin monk arrived for a visit with Berríos. We picked up our backpacks and went on to the next interview, the next encampment.

The dirt in the path had the texture of clay. We passed bullet-riddled trucks, ground-to-air missiles and destroyed airplanes. There were two crows sitting in the bushes, apparently oblivious of the heavy metals they carried in their bodies. There was an immense dry lagoon, carpeted with salt, with spent cartridges and rusty bombs. There were cotton plants in bloom—cotton containing lead, cobalt, nickel, and manganese—but cotton, nevertheless.

The beach called Yayí or Yayita is on the northeast coast of Vieques. Its sand is totally white. Facing it toward the Northeast, where the trade winds enter, is a small islet key planted with flags. Toward the northwest and extending into the sea is a Marine launching ramp. It is solidly built and broad, made of a new high-tech material that looks like stone but surely isn't. Over the last year, without the Marines' boots trampling on it, it has become covered with a dense layer of golden seaweed.



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**Craters pock mark coral reefs on the seaward side of Bahía Salina del Sur, Isla de Vieques, Puerto Rico. All of the craters are perfectly symmetrical holes approximately 12' in diameter.**

As we continued on, el Yunque, the mountain sacred to the god who gave us manioc, rose in the west. Directly north, we saw Culebra, an island that the U.S. Navy had to leave in the 1970s. To the northeast we saw the silhouette of St. Thomas, often called, for its geographical diversity, an island

of a thousand faces. The Danish free port of St. Thomas sheltered Betances, a leader of the independence movement in the nineteenth century, as well as many other Puerto Ricans persecuted by the Spaniards. A settlement of Caribs is on that beach, along with a chapel and several encampments—among them that of El Congreso Hostiano (the Hostos<sup>3</sup> National Congress) and La Federación de Maestros (The Teachers' Federation). A small statue of St. Francis of Assisi stands in the sand.

On this beach, we meet, at last, several modern-day Caribs. A twenty-two-year-old man comes out to greet us. Born in New York, he grew up in the Bronx while his father, a lawyer, worked on a case defending Puerto Rican political prisoners. Now this young man is a literature student at the University of Puerto Rico.

On the same day that the previous governor of Puerto Rico, Governor Rosselló, capitulated to U.S. pressure and accepted the demands of the U.S. Navy (\$40 million to clean up the rebel encampments, and Vieques went back to being a shooting gallery), this young man spoke to his parents and his professors, and decided to go defend what ecology activists here call Vieques, or Bieke. Like Berríos on his beach, he awaits arrest on these sands. While he waits, he practices Tai Chi Ch'uan and Qi Gong; studies Gracián, Quevedo, and Lope de Vega, and is writing a report on what he is seeing and living through on this island.

A Carib archeologist also lives in the settlement. He is familiar with the surrounding waters and knows about the galleons underneath them; he can describe the differences between silver *reales* and half *reales*, coined in Mexico, Santo Domingo, and Spain around 1573 with the image of Charles V of Spain. He also knows fire firsthand. Fifteen years before, in Santurce, Puerto Rico, most of his body had been burned in a gas explosion. His skin now suffers the added insults of sun-exposure and low-intensity radioactivity. He, too, is waiting for the North American federal marshals to arrest him.

In the same camp we meet another young Carib man who questions us and listens to us, listens and questions, questions and listens, as an ancient scholar might. He uses a *djellabah*, a North African robe, to keep himself warm. Young, sweet, patient, he too waits to be arrested.

Finally, we meet the storyteller. He is a Carib from Camuy who had left for Viet Nam when he was the same age as the two university students. Emerging from the plane, he was greeted by the sight of two hundred black plastic body bags on the airstrip, waiting to return home in his place. In his ignominious time he learned to recognize land mines, to survive, while many of his friends did not. He learned not to be afraid of fear and, now, on a Bieke beach, he recounts what he saw. He talks about Viet Nam, napalm; he talks a lot about Agent Orange. He talks about the Vietnamese. He talks about the sixty pounds of ammunition that he had had to carry every day. He talks about the Ho Chi Minh Trail, always dangerous, always polymorphous and ever changing, like the routes taken by the Caribs on the sea of Bieke.

But he also talks about the sharks and the catfish that come at night to scratch themselves on the sands of Yayí. About the dark seagulls and frigate birds that eat on the beach and are sometimes in turn eaten by barracudas. He imitates precisely the song of a sea turtle as she laid her three hundred eggs in front of him one moonlit night. With emotion, he simultaneously describes having had the good fortune of hearing this marine song and having seen the birth of his own children. He speaks of the rhythmic, perfect waves at the encampment on the eastern point of Bieke, where he usually spends the night—under a roof or under the stars, also awaiting arrest.

### Post Script

On May 4th, 2000, at four in the morning, United States federal marshals returned to Vieques. Scarcely one year had passed since the war in Kosovo and the death of David Sanes. On the afternoon of May 5th, they rudely dumped the arrested people in front of the gates of their base—Roosevelt Roads—in Ceiba. But Vieques had not been abandoned. Before federal agents arrived, a dozen magnificent Boricuas swam underwater, from the island's eastern point, to emerge and enter the mountains, where they remain. There, these men and women are confronting the Navy and Marines of the most powerful country on the globe. They are defending the last island of the Caribs in the Caribbean. The most perfect island, saturated with radiation, carpeted with bombs, riddled with bullets and missiles, dusted with uranium, lead, cobalt, nickel, and manganese. The most vulnerable island, known as *Ay-Ay* to the Caribs, as *Santa Ursula* to the Spaniards, as *A-Oraua* to the French, and as *Boriquem* to the Dutch. As *Bieke* to the "canibales"—and to me.

— July 4, 2001

To César Ayala  
 who brought us to Bieke  
 and in memory of Manuel Ramos Otero,  
 a contemporary Puerto Rican writer from New York  
 who died of AIDS

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<sup>1</sup> For our non-Latino readers, Puerto Ricans often refer to their beloved island as *Boriquen* and, thus, to themselves as *Boricuas*.

<sup>2</sup> Three Kings Day, also known as Epiphany, is an important part of the Christmas holiday for Puerto Ricans.

<sup>3</sup> Eugenio María de Hostos (1839-1903), was a Puerto-Rican thinker and educator who wrote books on politics, sociology, moral philosophy, law, economy, history, biography, and literary criticism. He respected as one of the most learned and original Latin-American men of letters.

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### ALSO OF INTEREST

Gonzalez, Juan, [Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America](#) Penguin USA, 2001. Paperback, 346 pages \$15.00.

Murillo, Mario Alfonso, [Islands Of Resistance: Vieques, Puerto Rico, and U.S. Policy](#) . Seven Stories Press, 2001. Open Media Pamphlet Series, 91 pages, \$6.95.

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