

Contesting Visions of Caribbean Landscapes  
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A few weeks into my doctoral fieldwork on the Caribbean island of Culebra<sup>1</sup>, as the initial enthusiasm of arriving to the field began to subside and I started to accommodate to the island routine, Paul Franklin, a Welsh resident of the island, approached me to ask if I would accompany him to the courthouse the following Wednesday, to be his translator during his trial.

I did not know Paul from before, though I had seen him around. After all, Culebra has some 3,000 residents on a 30 square km surface and one can quickly get a general idea of its full-time residents. I had always taken Paul as a member of the slowly growing population of “gringos” that have been moving to the island during the past twenty years. Anglo residents on Culebra have become more visible since the expulsion of the US Navy base on the island, which resulted in freeing land that was previously used as a practice bombing range. Anglos on Culebra are associated with being wealthy part-time residents who have recently purchased lands, mostly in the north of the island, and built luxurious estates. Their conversations usually involve the beauty of the island, the weather, the Anglo community of Culebra and unreliable locals.

My observation of Paul, before our encounter on the side of a Culebra road, was that he kept mostly to himself. His Welsh accent had softened and he spoke at a low volume and enunciated syllable by syllable. His dress was very similar to the other Anglos on the island, short pants, sandals, colourful shirts and driving the rouged jeep; contrary to native islanders who tend to dress less casual and drive inexpensive Japanese cars. He was short and cut an athletic figure with calloused hands that were indicative of his job as a carpenter. Paul had been living on the island uninterruptedly for close to ten years. He had married the island’s mid-wife, a French Canadian who has lived most of her life on Culebra, and had better knowledge of the island’s residents than the usual Anglo. His Spanish was functional but he was unable to manage the Puerto Rican accent that predominates on Culebra, hence the request for me to appear in court with him as translator.

His neighbour, a wealthy North American industrialist who is reputed to have built one of the biggest and most luxurious houses on Culebra, which includes a pool, desalinisation plant and a helicopter-landing pad, had taken Paul to court. Paul’s neighbour had hired bulldozers in order to clear the coastal area of the bay that he shares with Paul and a third property. In Paul’s mind, the removal of the shore’s vegetation was an unacceptable violation of the coastal area that endangered the integrity of the beach and the swamplands adjacent to the bay. Paul felt that the wealthy neighbour did not have the right to develop coastal lands regardless of the fact that the neighbour’s property line included the coast. Paul had contacted the police and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) but was getting frustrated at their lack of action. According to the state authorities, the industrialist had the right to clear vegetation up to 15 meters to the shoreline. During the most recent land clearance, Paul had gone down to the beach and physically stopped the bulldozers from finishing their job. The

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<sup>1</sup> The island of Culebra lies between Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands. It is one of two off shore municipalities of Puerto Rico, who in turn is a non-incorporated territory of the United States. I did fieldwork on Culebra from September 2003 to September 2004, where I was looking at the different ways in which regional, transnational and global movements inform the construction of an insular place.

police was called and Paul was cited to court the following week. The American owner built a fence and a gate on his side of the bay, presumably, to prohibit any more interference from Paul or anybody else in his development plans for the beach.

Around this time, the third property owner of the bay was also taking Paul to court for vandalism. Paul's second neighbour is a Puerto Rican entrepreneur and activist who has bought various properties on Culebra and promotes cultural events associated with Puerto Rican independence and nationalism. Him and his wife are well known for being Puerto Rican nationalists and promoters of traditional customs in Culebra. Paul was accused by this neighbour of breaking a light bulb on the porch of his beachfront house. The Puerto Rican neighbour wished the court to place a restraining order on Paul to prohibit him from going to the beach. At the same time, he built a fence and gate closing off public access to the beach from his end of the bay. The Puerto Rican couple understood their campaign against Paul as consistent with their nationalist politics and made direct connections between their problems with Paul and broader issues of American imperialism in Puerto Rico. They also referenced the successful campaign carried out by the people of Culebra whereby they expelled the US Navy from the island 30 years ago, as if their campaign followed up on that legacy.

Paul denied breaking the light bulb. He understood these court cases as coordinated efforts by the American industrialist and the Puerto Rican nationalists to acquire the land where he lives with his wife and stepson in order to fill the swamp that lies beyond the beach and develop the bay. Paul understood his role as an environmental activist that is struggling to maintain the integrity of a delicate ecosystem. The irony of this situation, in Paul's view, was that the Puerto Rican activist, by assuming a similar stance as the American industrialist, was acting as the stereotypical "gringo imperialist" while Paul was getting into trouble for supporting the broader environmental interest of the island, which suggests a more intimate connection to the land and its resources.

News of the trials went around the island along with conflicting versions of the type of vegetation that the American industrialist was removing, the manner in which the vegetation was being removed and the distances from the shoreline of the affected areas. Local authorities agreed that the removal of the vegetation was being carried out according to the law. But Paul and his sympathisers did not trust the DNR because of their reputation for green lighting construction projects to the benefit of non-Culebra interests. The mayor's silence during the controversy brought attention to the fact that the American industrialist had offered his house to the mayor for his wedding reception, suggesting a personal relationship between the industrialist and the mayor. What drew more attention was the issue of the construction of fences and gates by the two-shoreline property owners. This concerned people of Culebra because, in the broader political and historical context of the island, the limiting of access to the sea by non-island/non-native elements has been the cause of social mobilisations and protests in the past.

The trials received little public attention. They were not featured in the local newsletter and they were not being discussed much in the weekly radio show, but were frequently talked about in bars and privately. For the majority of people that I spent my fieldwork with, the immediate outcome of the trial was not necessarily a matter of urgency. After all, it was an affair amongst gringos and Puerto Ricans who were taking each other to court over access to a beach that was not frequented much by native Culebra islanders. However, the Paul Franklin court cases are significant because they play into a wider social contest that has revolved around policies and discourses that have refashioned Culebra as a tourist destination. The characters and events surrounding the court case, which is still ongoing after three years,

represent complexities and contradictions that, while dislodging straight forward understandings of Caribbean tourism development, actually contribute to the reproduction of analytical and political binaries associated with tourism development; such as local-global, native-tourist, local-global, tradition-change, etc.

### Broader Political Context

Since 1952, when Puerto Rico signed its constitution ratifying the island as the Free Associated State of Puerto Rico<sup>2</sup> (ELA), executive power in Puerto Rico has been oscillating between two parties. The Partido Popular Democrático (PPD) advocates for the island, including its two off shore municipalities<sup>3</sup>, to maintain its relationship with the USA as stipulated in the constitution. Economically, the party supports measures where the island maintains an intimate link to the USA by providing tax incentives to American industries to establish themselves in Puerto Rico, the use of the US dollar as currency and having trade exclusivity with the USA, amongst other policies. Politically, it is associated with a populism that values Puerto Rican traditions and values without fostering a sense of nationalism that would threaten USA legitimacy on the island. The main opposition to the PPD has been the Partido Nuevo Progresista (PNP). The PNP advocates that Puerto Rico become the 51<sup>st</sup> state of the USA. They argue that the best way to resolve the inconsistencies of the ELA is by consummating the relationship between Puerto Rico and the USA and fully incorporate the island into the federal union. Throughout its history, the party has been associated with promoting neo-liberal economic policies and assimilationist rhetoric. The third party of the Puerto Rican political landscape is the Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (PIP). The PIP has historically struggled at the polls but always managed to win a seat in the legislature and have a persistent voice in the Puerto Rican political scene. Their platform is based on viability of Puerto Rican independence from the USA and for the participation of Puerto Rico in the broader Caribbean and international trade and political community.

Historically, the PPD has held the mayoral seat in Culebra. Mayors of Culebra have been related to traditional community patriarchs who had a paternalistic approach towards administering the municipality. Ideologically, these mayors maintained a discourse along the lines of the national agenda of the party exemplified by a valorisation of island uniqueness, the support of grassroots initiatives and traditional modes of production, in the case of Culebra fishing.

The PNP in Culebra has historically been a minority until the elections of 1996 when the statehood candidate won the elections. The victory of the PNP in Culebra is related to a Puerto Rico wide victory that ushered in a government that promoted a neo-liberal agenda for Puerto Rico and an aggressive infrastructure development plan for Puerto Rico. In the case of Culebra, however, the PNP candidate presented himself more conservative than his national counterparts. His policy reflected a slower development agenda for Culebra and instituting ordinances with a moralistic agenda, such as curfews for under aged (announced by a siren), banning alcohol during Carnival and eliminating other public festivities. The passing of these ordinances, coupled with a perceived slowness of the administration in comparison with the rest of Puerto Rico that was experiencing a construction boom, painted a conservative and traditionalist picture of the PNP in Culebra.

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<sup>2</sup> In Spanish, Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico (ELA). This ambiguous name suggests the ambiguities of the political definition of Puerto Rico as a non-incorporated territory of the USA. The contradictions of the ELA has been the primary focus of attention in Puerto Rican politics throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> Culebra and Vieques are the two offshore towns of Puerto Rico. They lie to the east of mainland Puerto Rico.

For the following elections, in 2000, the PPD in Culebra exploited the imagery of a PNP administration that lacked the initiative to properly address the underdevelopment and marginality of Culebra in relation to Puerto Rico. The PPD presented a young, articulate and aggressive candidate for the following elections. The PPD candidate, who happened to be the nephew of his opponent, highlighted his opponent's, lack of action in looking out for the best interests for the community of Culebra. His slogan, "bettering the quality of life in Culebra", promised that he would work to alleviate the disparity of resources that an average family in Culebra has in relation to a Puerto Rican family. He highlighted the current administration's lack of projects to address the infrastructure deficiencies of the school, water service, electricity service, and ferry service to Puerto Rico, and categorized them as a gross oversight on the incumbent's behalf. The PPD candidate promised that he would lobby for Culebra to be allocated more resources by the national state and that he would institute policies that would promote a sustainable economic programme for Culebra, meaning the regulation of tourism.

Tourism has been steadily growing as the main economic activity on Culebra during the past ten years. Culebra's main attractions are the beautiful white sandy beaches that dot the northwest of the island, off shore cays and deep sea fishing grounds to the north of the island. Publicity materials for Culebra invest the island with a tropical Eden-like paradise imagery that is so often used by tourist brochures to depict Caribbean islands as hedonistic pleasure grounds with virginal coasts awaiting discovery.

However, there has been concern that the full time residents of the island have not been benefiting to the fullest from the rise of visitors. Tourism, the argument goes, has not been managed effectively in Culebra because local businesses have not been profiting accordingly. Also, the argument goes, the main village of Culebra, was not planned to accommodate such an influx of tourists, and as a consequence the residents suffer from traffic congestion, lack of water services, noise, influx of illegal drugs, trash collecting problems, amongst other problems. The PPD candidate of 2000 promised to address these issues with a comprehensive programme that included investment in infrastructure, promotion of Culebra businesses, tax incentives for new businesses to establish themselves in Culebra and lobbying for more resources from the national government. He effectively played up on the imagery of Culebra's poverty by emphasising marginality and a lack of infrastructure.

The PPD candidate won by a landslide in 2000, along with a PPD victory for the executive in Puerto Rico, and started his development programme. In Puerto Rico, the PPD was shifting the policies left by the previous PNP administration. While they could not go back on some of the development projects that were already underway, the governor of Puerto Rico embarked on a policy reminiscent of the populism and paternalism that characterised the party. One of the new administration's priorities centred on the issue of poverty in Puerto Rico. Leaders of the PPD at a national level spoke of "pockets of poverty" that dotted Puerto Rico and allocated a budget to fund social and infrastructure programmes throughout the island.

The new mayor of Culebra did not have many problems justifying the need in his municipality for these funds. Historically, the Puerto Rican media and the political establishment have invested Culebra with imagery of poverty and marginality in relation to metropolitan Puerto Rico. This imagery becomes prominent whenever Culebra is hit by hurricanes and the island-municipality is one of the last municipalities to receive aid from the central government. This imagery is also reinforced aesthetically by Culebra's dry and harsh landscape dominated by thorny trees in comparison with Puerto Rico's lush rainforests and its dense urban landscapes. The idea that the people of Culebra live a harsh life, on the margins

of the Puerto Rico modernisation project, was well heard in the capital and funds for development projects were quickly approved.

Some of the development projects green lighted by the new mayor was a new secondary school with a capacity for 700 students, including an Olympic size swimming pool and tennis courts, broadening the pier area, widening the main road in town, a water treatment plant, a sewer system, facilities for more shops in town, parking lots outside town, legislation to provide tax incentives for new businesses in Culebra, municipal control of the most visited beach on Culebra including life guards and regulation of the camping ground, placing all telephone and electric lines in town underground, scholarships for university students from Culebra, a public housing complex, a new plaza, a second bridge connecting the town to the south-eastern peninsula of the island, a youth centre with internet access computers and a variety of arcade games, a new government centre to house the mayor's office and all the municipal authorities, increased police presence, asphaltting roads, and an emergency centre to house the fire department, civil defence, and police. This programme was enacted under the slogan of "bettering the quality of life of Culebra," suggesting that the mayor was working to alleviate the discourse of poverty and marginality through an agenda that focused primarily on infrastructure development. An underlying logic to the development programme was to further the democratisation of Culebra by bringing it into the national fold and correspond the resources between the Puerto Rican and Culebra islanders. However, this "updating" of Culebra was effectively an aesthetic makeover designed to re-fashion the landscape to make it more appealing for tourist consumption. The projects focused on the town centre and the pier area and were more targeted to improving the tourist facilities.

These projects were met with considerable resistance from various elements of Culebra society. Perhaps, the most powerful and effective resistance to the development programme came from conservative elements within the mayor's own party. Amongst the strongest criticisms made to the mayor's development programme was the suggestion that these projects were being carried out without fully consulting the population. The accusation that the mayor's policy was undemocratic was reinforced by the presence of non-Culebra consultants and engineers advising the mayor, who were suspected of having a conflict of interest in the construction projects. Other criticisms were that the island could not sustain such an impact environmentally and that these projects would eventually destroy the natural resources that attracted tourists in the first place.

But what lay at the core of these criticisms was the argument that this type of tourism development was not sensitive to a historical reality of Culebra and its social relations. The programme was criticised for its Puerto Rican-centricity, which in turn was following a USA type of planning and infrastructure development. The argument differed from the mayor's understanding of Culebra being a harsh and inhospitable place and instead valued a history of intimate social relations, a peaceful and relaxed lifestyle that was being threatened by the developmentalist agenda. It valued the landscape of Culebra as being inscribed with a history of island activism and pride. The removal of historical structures, altering the pier area and not appreciating the aesthetic quality of the landscape were criticized as underestimating core understandings of belonging in Culebra.

## Binaries Nonetheless

Paul Franklin was being taken to court at the peak of the development controversy. His case brought attention to the coastal gentrification of Culebra and was made more sensitive by the development discussions. Key characters that opposed the development programme, such as a

PPD ex-mayor who was very vocal in his stance against the development programme, supported Paul and accompanied him to the trials, testified, and accompanied the lawyers in field visits. The PPD ex-mayor told me that his opposition to the state sponsored development and his support for Paul were connected because both processes went back to the same contestation, which was about democratising control of land and sea access in Culebra. In our conversations he would often make reference to the different ways in which this type of state development coupled with private land speculation and investment has caused negative environmental and social consequences in other islands of the West Indies. The standards he used to decide who to support were not necessarily ethnic or linked to political party. The ex-mayor was supporting an Anglo immigrant, who by his ethnicity would be associated with being an instigator in the commodification of Culebra and does not share the historical connection with the land as a Culebra person would, in a controversy that implicated his own political party of which he was still an important leader. Instead, the criteria employed by the mayor to decide whom to support revolved around the aesthetic qualifications that actors would ascribe to the landscape of the island. In the ex-mayor's case, a positive relationship to the landscape arises from a historical experience that links the subject to the land and to neighbouring islands.

The participation of the ex-mayor in the Franklin affair was significant because the ex-mayor was a key leader during the grassroots initiative to expel the US Navy from the island during the 1970s. On that occasion, Puerto Rican independence groups had joined Culebra activists in successfully ousting the US military who had been using the island as a practice range on and off for the past thirty years. This is a particularly important moment in Culebra history because the island consolidated itself as an insular agent and effectively resisted US military interests. It is used as a reference of Culebra islanders' commitment to their land, activism and developing a political awareness that distinguishes the island. Also, Puerto Rican independence groups often reference the historical event as a successful resistance to US imperialism in the region. The presence of this ex-mayor referenced that history of island assertion.

In this sense, the opposition to the American industrialist may seem pretty straightforward. The American's intentions are consistent with privatisation of land and developing it to raise its market value and in the process limit resident's access to the shore. The issue of curtailing access to land and, especially, the sea is reminiscent of US Navy practices and reproduces the binary of foreigners vs. locals struggling over access to the island's resources. However, this aspect of the case gets complicated when the current mayor of Culebra (the PPD who enacted the development programme) was implicated in collaborating with the American industrialist and fostering a close personal relationship to him, while at the same time arguing for democratising the resources of Culebra under Culebra terms. The current mayor did not have any qualms of being associated with Anglo residents of the island nor following the advice of Puerto Rican consultants for his agenda because, in his mind, such is the condition of Culebra. The island is not entirely insular, but located within a network of places and interests that should be exploited for the benefit of the population.

The position of the Puerto Rican couple, the third property owners that were suing Franklin for vandalism, was more consistent with Puerto Rican anti-colonial rhetoric. As I mentioned, above, the couple has a history of participating independence advocacy groups and promoting cultural events in Puerto Rico. They have recently gotten involved in Culebra NGOs that promote Culebra cultural events, have participated in the coordination of marches and protests against the privatisation of beaches in Culebra and written essays that speak about the endangering of Culebra lifestyle due to tourist development. They allowed themselves such a

contradiction, of protesting the privatisation of beaches while closing off access to their own beach front property, because they understand the current controversies of Culebra as operating along ethnic lines. For the Puerto Rican couple, Franklin represented a foreign agent; a symbol of Anglo encroachment of Culebra land and their issues with him were a continuation of the struggle to achieve full independence of Puerto Rico from the USA. In my conversations with them, the couple often equated North American imperial interests as enacted through Anglos while the colonised/peasant/proletariat is represented through the Puerto Rican Creole. In their mind, there is no contradiction between taking Franklin to court and barring him from the beach, closing off their own property (which is illegal in Puerto Rican law) and marching for public access of other beaches on the island because it takes place in a broader colonial context where what is at stake is the expulsion of USA presence in the region.

The court cases and the broader political context that surrounds them highlight a series of contradictions that can be complicated to understand using static political models. Each character and pressure group deploys rhetoric and position themselves in complex ways, a complexity that is indicative of the colonial context of Puerto Rico, Culebra's role within the Puerto Rican discourse and the Caribbean's global imagery. But regardless of the complexities and contradictions that characterise this contest, the activists and politicians of Culebra continue to reproduce binary categories when planning and carrying out their strategies.

Each of the positions draws from a different network of ideas and images to construct an insular place; an isolated location on the margins of the national and western discourse of modernity. These social contests are enacted through differing visions of the Culebra landscape each of which assume a static and authoritative definition of the island and the nature of its social relations. The assumption of Culebra insularity permits dualistic categorisations because the actors engaged in this contestation are basically lobbying for their understanding of what is best for the island against what they understand to be foreign or outside interests (inclusion vs. exclusion).

I would argue that this controversy actually points to the mobile dimensions of Culebra social life. The characters of this social contest are networking through the island and imagining an insular location and acting from their perspective (Puerto Rican nationalism, West Indian development, US sponsored Puerto Rican modernity, US capitalism, grassroots politics, global environmentalism). I would argue that the complexities of Culebra tourism development and its politics of contestation emanates from a condition where the political actors are engaged in a practice of movement while constructing a stable and insular location. Understanding the tension created by mobile and insular discourses and practices as a creative process, rather than a negative contradiction, is key in understanding the complexities behind tourism contestations in Culebra in particular and can be a useful tool in understanding the complexities of Caribbean politics in general.