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What Does the USVI and Puerto Rico Have in Common? A Summary of a Stimulating Discussion on Self-Determination in the Virgin Islands.

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USVI and Puerto Rico flags. By. GETTY IMAGES

“Soy de aqui como el coqui!” (Puerto Rican Adage)

“I am from here like the leap frog!”

“We bahn ya!” “We from hey!” (Samples of Virgin Islands- VI Creole)

The above quotations in Spanish, English and Virgin Islands Creole are characteristic of the linguistic and cultural identity of Virgin Islanders and Puerto Ricans. This last 4th of July weekend, marked the 246th Anniversary of the Independence of the United States. The 4th of July holiday is observed and celebrated by St Johnians and the wider U.S Virgin Islands Community. However, we are in the midst of political status discussions in the U.S Virgin Islands. Considering that we are yet an Unincorporated Territory of the United States of America, the Office of Self Determination and Constitutional Development, has created a panel series to address the said topics that involve Virgin Islands Identity. Furthermore, the 3rd of July is the 174th Anniversary of the Emancipation of Africans in the Danish West Indies. This aforementioned holiday, is a major milestone in our quest for self-determination. In an effort to accomplish the objective of the series designed to address the questions associated with self-determination, the first [critical panel discussion](#) was held on June 7th, 2022 in the studios of the Virgin Islands' Consortium on Virgin Island/ Puerto Rican/ Boricua Connections. It was ably moderated by former senator, Janette Millin Young of the 29th – 32nd Legislatures of the U.S Virgin Islands. The primary focus of the discussion was the important historic and cultural ties as well as identity. More precisely, the hour long discussion addressed political status, identity, autonomy and sovereignty in the U.S Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. The panelists included Mr. Eduardo Bhatia, former senator and Senate President of Puerto Rico and a visiting professor at Princeton University, Mr. Samuel Sanes, St Croix Administrator, and Papi Love (Julio Martinez) a Radio Talk Show Host on St. Croix.

Perhaps, the fundamental and critical question that one should ask here is: what does the U.S Virgin Islands have in common with Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans? Well, in the words of Dr. Malik Sekou in an earlier article that he wrote [during this month of June 2022](#), “Puerto Rico and the U.S Virgin Islands are like two birds with the same wings.” Now, can one begin to visualize this powerful image in the eye of one’s mind? The U.S Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, can be viewed as conjoined twins or “gemelos” (in Spanish) within the rich socio-cultural context and political milieu of Colonized Caribbean Society.

To begin with, the stimulating discussion housed in the VI Consortium’s Studio, cranked up at 8 pm sharp, with former Senator Janette Millin Young introducing herself and the primary theme of the discussion which was self-determination, then proceeding to present each of the participants. Millin-Young then advanced to provide a brief overview of what self-determination entails and its relevance in Identity Formation. The conversation flowed as each participant weighed in and gave his or her views on self-determination and the political status in the U.S jurisdictions of Puerto Rico and the U.S Virgin Islands. As the conversation resumed, the more complex matters of voting rights in the territories, Virgin Islands and Puerto Rican socio-political ties, socio-cultural ties, and socio-historical ties were mentioned. The conversation deepened as Bhatia, the lead speaker and invited guest to our USVI territory- to discuss the colonial and socio-political statuses of the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, and potential avenues for political autonomy, shared his particular concern with the territorial/colonial statuses of Puerto Rico, the U.S Virgin Islands. By extension, the status of the remaining Caribbean islands, many of which- remain overseas territories to their respective European/ Metropolitan and so-called first world countries and powers, were examined.

Furthermore, Bhatia provided relatable examples on how our colonized status impact us academically, politically, socially and culturally. One classic instance in point that remained etched on my memory was his reference to our fragile electromagnetic power grids in the islands, and how this alone, can have far-reaching effects during times of natural disaster such as a hurricane. For instance, one can relate to the arrest of a massive heat wave, the lack of a cool drink of water and restlessness that accompanies a lack of a fan or air conditioning during the summer,

or worse, during the aftermath of a major hurricane. The former are but a few instances, in which many a Caribbean native, can readily identify with living in tropical and colonized world spaces. Bhatia also suggested that a U.S Territorial Power Grid is feasible, as it can decrease the cost of energy and save the territories some money. WAPA's premium fossil fuel costs is just a classic example of how a joint U.S Territorial Power Grid that provides alternative and environmentally safe energy sources, can benefit our islands. By the same token, here one could ask: what about Virgin Islanders using more solar energy, which is free in our islands?

In the same vein, one might also ask--what about Virgin Islanders using water energy and hydroelectricity since in the Caribbean we are surrounded by two major bodies of water- The Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean? In light of the foregoing statements, the logistical nightmare that accompanies hurricanes and other natural disasters in our region, should be instructive. They serve as stark reminders to our ordinary women and men that identifying alternative and less expensive sources of energy coupled with sovereignty and more cultural freedom- could promise easier and more direct access to technical and financial resources. The U.S Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and by extension, the broader Caribbean region, could benefit from this innovative approach as a feasible solution to some of our energy challenges. While Bhatia presented his views on the significance of self-determination in the USVI and Puerto Rico, as Virgin Islanders, we should begin to see self-determination as a conduit which could lead to a stronger sense of Caribbean Identity and Sovereignty in The U.S Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, our island homes.

In comparison, Sanes in tandem with Bhatia, further stated that despite our small size geographically and population wise, as Virgin Islanders, we should start thinking along lines of partnering with our Caribbean neighbors- and simultaneously, attempt establishing more global connections for purposes of solidarity, for purposes of comparison, for building sustainable partnerships, and for finding relief from political oppression. "We are not expecting Washington to dictate to us what to do. In the case of Puerto Rico, our 70 year constitution needs review, and the 70 billion dollar debt that cut schools and led to the installation of the external PROMESA 7 member fiscal control board in Puerto Rico, is cause for concern," Bhatia said. He added that there is need for a plebiscite in which the Puerto Rican populace, can voice its concerns. In essence, it would appear that Bhatia has closely examined the net effect of Puerto Rico's debt and at the same time, he continues to think in Caribbean and more localized terms, given the dire financial circumstances. Here, one can begin to ponder just how different are U.S Virgin Islanders from Puerto Rico and other colonized Caribbean nations? Equally Sanes and radio host, Papi Love, who suggested the development of a think tank between the U.S Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, and mentioned ways in which our present-day practices can impact our future generations, like Bhatia, insisted that the strengthening of Virgin Islands and Puerto Rican ties and partnerships, can lead to promising, if not countless dividends and multiple possibilities.

For one prime example, meanwhile in 2017, I was studying at the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus, I met a lady from St. Kitts, who had migrated to San Juan, over forty years, prior. During our conversation, she pointed out to me that there existed strong cultural ties between Puerto Rico and the U.S Virgin Islands, for as long as she can remember. She even made reference to the days when Puerto Rico had such a reliable and abundant water system, that Puerto Ricans were able to supply the U.S Virgin Islands with water during moments of water shortage. Simultaneously, I can distinctly remember that even on the island of Anguilla, British West Indies, several merchants traded with Puerto Ricans for building and hardware materials and furniture, as well as other products. Then too, there was even a time when Anguillians recruited Puerto Rican mechanics to travel to Anguilla- to set up shop, and help to satisfy the mechanical needs of Anguillian motorists. A few of the Puerto Rican mechanics and other artisans ultimately made

Anguilla their home. The latter references to Puerto Rico and Anguilla, are a few of the various ways in which people in our islands connect, trade and form alliances. Similar trading partnerships exist today between the B.V.I and Puerto Rico. Likewise, trading and related partnerships already exist between the U.S Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. However, trading partnerships coupled with socio-political and cultural ties between the U.S Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, can be enhanced, but there must be a will on the part of the masses as well as the leadership from both islands- to realize a more focused and structured vision which Caribbean-centered and progressive thinkers in the likes of Sanes and Papi Love, advocate.

In summary, as a Caribbeanist scholar and thinker, I deemed the lively discussion to be both timely and fitting. Considering that scores of communities in the Black and Brown diasporic spaces remain colonized, politically exploited, marginalized and languishing for recognition, a space and a voice compared to their contemporaries of the privileged classes in the so-called first world countries, it is high time that critical dialogues such as the one that this crucial panel involving self-determination, autonomy and sovereignty in one's native land provides, commence. Certainly, Bhatia's views seem consistent with those that were posited by postcolonial writers, theorists and critics in the likes of Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, Sidney Mintz, Mervyn Alleyne, Verene Shepherd, Eudine Barriteau- Foster and Edouard Glissant just to name a few, on the critical issues of Caribbean Identity, Autonomy and Sovereignty in colonized world spaces, where the natives echo sentiments of relief from societal oppression, economic injustice and cultural stagnation. In brief, the aforementioned Caribbeanists in concert, advocate that the colonized subject seeks to redeem him or herself from the various forms of societal oppression by asserting selfhood and developing a deep and heightened sense of self, community and place. Finally, I proceed to leave you with the following profound statement as rendered by Frantz Fanon, a Guadelupian postcolonial thinker and theorist: "Since the other did not recognize me, I had to make my presence known to the other." (Fanon 1967)

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The original title for Dr. Smith's Opinion is: "A Critique of Panel Discussion on VI Puerto Rico Connections and Self-determination with Participants Eduardo Bhatia, Samuel Sanes, Julio Martinez (Papi Love) and Janette Millin- Young as the Moderator on June 7, 2022"

Works Cited: Fanon, Frantz. Black Skin White Masks. Grove Press, 1967.