

(the empty sign)

Ramey, Kathryn

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Kathryn Ramey

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Abstract

This essay elaborates the research and pre-production phase for a feature length experimental documentary titled *E (the empty sign)* with the intention of showing how such a work, although made to exist mainly within the sphere of the art world, engages with concerns common to anthropology and can be seen as a hybrid between the two disciplines. In order to provide a context for the piece short histories of US imperialism in the Caribbean and the former planet Pluto are provided as well as descriptions of earlier films that relate to this project and an elaboration of the term *essay film*.

Herausgeber:

Universität Hamburg
Institut für Ethnologie
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 (West)
D-20146 Hamburg
Tel.: 040 42838 4182
E-Mail: IfE@uni-hamburg.de
<http://www.ethnologie.uni-hamburg.de>

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E (the empty sign)

Kathryn Ramey

“Appeals to the past are amongst the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present. What animates such appeals is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms.” (Said 1994:3)



Figure 1: Rue Ramey, Paris France; photo by Kathryn Ramey

In Paris there is a Rue Ramey. Nearby is the film school La Fémis. When I met the director, Marc Nicolas a few years ago, he remarked on my name and said, “You must come to visit us and see the street with your name!” This road is likely named after Claude or Jules Ramey, both sculptors, or Madeline Ramey the 19th century actress or the 18th century politician Marie-Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Sugny Ramey. In other words, there are a handful of French Rameys and decent enough reasons for this relatively unassuming street to be named after them. Several years ago, while researching US expansionism, militarism and neo-colonialism in the Americas I came upon a significantly less charming use of my surname. Ramey Sector US Border Patrol is the 21st sector in the system and the only one that exists outside of the continental

United States. It was constructed on the site of the decommissioned cold war era Ramey Air Force base and effectively continues the imperialist political and economic interests of the United States in the region into the 21st century.

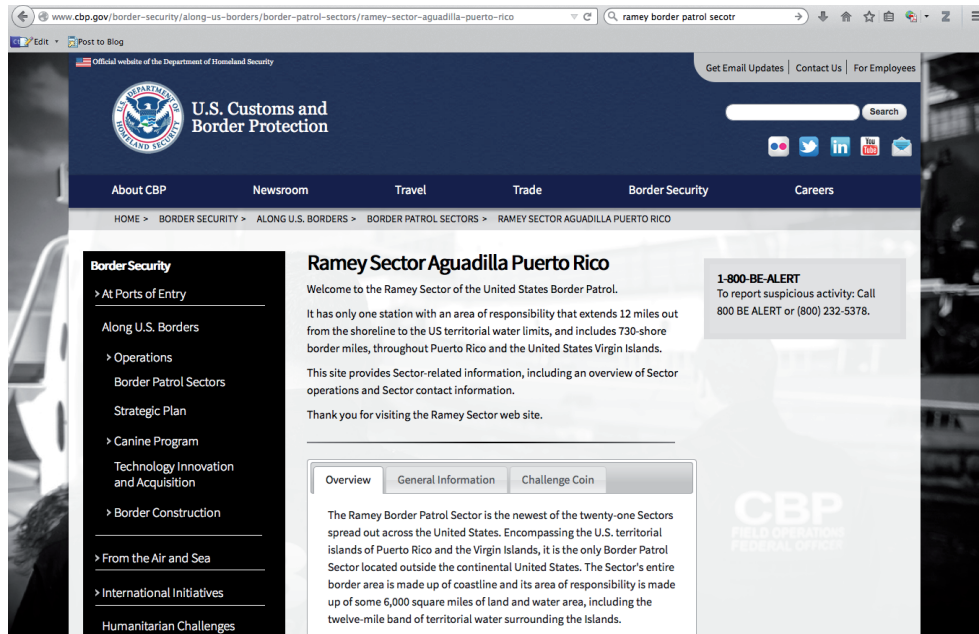


Figure 2: Ramey Border Control; photo by Kathryn Ramey

This essay is about the genesis of a film project, *♅ (the empty sign)*. The main title for the film, *♅*, the astronomical symbol for the dwarf planet Pluto, emerged out of the bizarre origin narrative of the US border control sector that bears the name RAMEY – my family name. The secondary title (*the empty sign*), is a playful invocation of Roland Barthes' use of the term in his essay, *La Tour Eiffel* and captures how my name through its use in the subjugation of the Caribbean has developed for me a surplus of meaning, a meaning that has replaced a center in me with a void. In the same way that the former planet Pluto was made and unmade through human – specifically American – discourse in the 20th century, my name has, through no intention of my own, become a wound. Mining this strange serendipity, my film will be a cinematic essay folding together a demoted planet, an MIA WWII General and a US commonwealth to examine the scientific, militaristic and historic rationalities surrounding them. Focusing on narratives of discovering and forgetting, the cross-inspection of these accounts raises an army of questions that challenge the validity of our collective historical recollection, most importantly: What discourses of power undergird these histories and what are the residues of these processes in contemporary life? Inspection of this question through the voice of the filmmaker connects main narratives of the once planet and base and is combined with the historic imaginary of

contemporary Puerto Rican artists, scholars and activists to create a multi-valent critique of the United State's military and technocratic ambitions over the Caribbean.

Pluto/plutoed

In 1947 the formerly Borinquen Air Force base was named after Howard K. Ramey, a US general who disappeared in a B-17 called "Pluto" in 1943. This plane was adorned with a likeness of the Disney dog that was named after the "American" planet so – called because it remains the only planet (or once planet) in our solar system "discovered" and named in the US. Percival Lowell, scion of the Massachusetts Lowell family, who built a research facility dedicated to its discovery in Flagstaff Arizona, had hypothesized the 9th planet. Although Percival died years before evidence of Pluto was documented, Clyde Tombaugh, working at Lowell observatory produced photographic "proof" of Pluto's existence in 1930. This dark sphere, furthest from the sun in our system was named, on the suggestion of Venetia Phair (née Burney), an English school girl whose grandfather just happened to be friends with a prominent astronomer, after the Roman god of the underworld with the astronomical sign an overlay of Lowell's initials: P + L = ♇. When Pluto was "discovered" it was hailed as a kind of American victory, proof of the US emergence onto the world stage of science. Pluto became accepted as the 9th planet in the solar system and everywhere school children learned the names of the planet with mnemonic devices such as *My (Mercury) Very (Venus) Educated (Earth) Mother (Mars) Just (Jupiter) Served (Saturn) Us (Uranus) Nine (Neptune) Pizzas (Pluto)*.

Over the next forty years more objects were discovered orbiting our sun, many of them spherical, some with atmospheres and moons. The working definition that humans had used for five hundred years to designate "planet," as a world orbiting a star, was deemed insufficient. As it turns out, there had never been a *scientific* definition of what a planet is (Tyson 2008). Most of the planets, excepting Uranus, Neptune and Pluto had been documented before the 17th century. Astronomy in the 17th and 18th centuries was consumed with charting the outer regions of the solar system as well as documenting the various moons and other interplanetary objects in the sky. As other large objects were documented in the outer regions of space, soon referred to as the Kuiper belt, debate erupted as to whether Pluto should be called a planet at all. There was enough doubt in this regard, that when the Hayden Planetarium opened in New York City in 2000 with Pluto listed as the largest object in the Kuiper belt and *not* a planet, there was serious backlash, much of it directed at the man who designed the display, Neil de Grasse Tyson (Tyson 2008). There was so much outrage that the International Astronomical Union met and drafted a resolution in 2006 to define a planet as "a celestial body that (a) has suffi-

cient mass for its self-gravity to overcome rigid body forces so that it assumes a hydrostatic equilibrium (nearly round) shape, and (b) is in orbit around a star, and is neither a star nor a satellite of a planet” (IAU 2006). Despite vociferous protest, mostly from non-astronomers, media and school children, planet Pluto was downgraded to a *dwarf* planet.

Overnight E became an empty sign, pointing to nothing and a new verb was coined. In 2006 the American Dialect Society voted *to pluto/to be plu-toed* is “to demote or devalue someone or something” as its word of the year.¹ That same year the National Air and Space Administration launched the New Horizons mission to the outer regions of the solar system and recently on December 6th, 2014, the sleeping craft awoke to English tenor Russell Watson singing a specially recorded version of “Where My Heart Will Take Me” (BBC) in preparation for its January 2015 rendezvous with the now dwarf planet. This is a truly romantic use of science with aims noble and pure. But one cannot deny the cold war legacy of the “space race” and how even now there is no way to delimit the boundaries between technology made for peaceful ends and that which will be used for war and oppression. In his film *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969), Harun Faroki concludes his investigation into the manufacture of Napalm by Dow chemicals with the following statement: “What we make depends on the workers, the students and the engineers” (Faroki 1967): In other words, companies manufacture and governments militarize technology what civil society institutions and persons *allow* them to. In the United States, the aerospace industry has enabled spaceflight but it has also perfected drones that allow for ever more impersonal surveillance and killing.



Figure 3: A political map of the Caribbean as it is currently constituted.
Courtesy of <http://ian.macky.net/pat/map/country.html>

¹ http://www.americandialect.org/Word-of-the-Year_2006.pdf.

A Brief History of US Imperialism in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean

Puerto Rico – a US territory since 1898 whose residents, though US citizens, lack representation at the federal level – was doomed by its geographic location to be a launching pad for 20th century American economic and military ambition in the Caribbean and Central America. Since its “discovery” by Christopher Columbus on his second voyage to the Americas in 1493, Puerto Rico had been claimed as an outpost of the Spanish Empire. In the 1800’s many Spanish colonies in the Americas achieved independence. There was strong resistance to Spanish imperialism in Puerto Rico including a handful of uprisings and the island became an autonomous province of Spain in 1897. Unfortunately for Puerto Rico, the United States was about to intervene in the affairs of the Caribbean. In 1898 they supported Cuba in its war against Spain. War was declared with the US by Spain that April and as a part of the conflict Puerto Rico was first bombarded from the sea and then invaded by the United States Army, led by Major General Nelson A. Miles. Fighting lasted into August, without clear-cut success for the United States in Puerto Rico, however, as part of the terms of the Treaty of Paris in 1898, Spain ceded the island, in addition to other Spanish holdings to the United States.

Throughout the 1800’s the United States had been expanding its territory in the Americas via the displacement and destruction of the native population and through military domination of former Mexican territories. Although these were by no means peaceable acquisitions at least these territories were, once annexed, and eventually made part of the republic. With Puerto Rico the United States took an entirely different tack. Through a series of political maneuvers the US Congress created laws (upheld by the Supreme Court) that essentially made colonialism and the ruling and taxation of a territory without granting its inhabitants representation at the federal level, constitutional as long as certain individual rights were maintained (Ayala and Bernabe 2007:26-27). This legislation and ones that would follow dramatically transformed the economy of Puerto Rico, expanding certain agricultural and artisanal exports (e.g. sugar and needlework) such that farmland became consolidated into big parcels increasing the exploitation of day labor and at home piecework by women and children became a central to the finances of many families. By 1930, 95% of Puerto Rico’s external trade was with the United States. They were isolated from a larger world economy and the dependence on their new landlords created dramatic shifts in demographics as people moved geographically for work and historic family ties to land that had been used for subsistence farming decreased (Ayala and Bernabe 2007).

After being given as a spoil of war from Spain to the United States, Puerto Rico was governed from August 1898 to 1900 by the US Army, headed by the very man, General Miles, who had invaded them. This regime dismantled the remains of the Spanish colonial government and instituted new legal and

political institutions (Beruff 2007:18). This brief stewardship had significant impact, as the framework the military set up was to carry over into the civil administration. In the post-Civil war period the US Army had two major experiences controlling civilian populations in the States: that of corralling and moving the indigenous population and that of working with big corporations to quell labor disputes (Beruff 2007:19). These experiences engendered racist and classist sentiments that helped to shape the way in which the Army and the administration that would follow saw the Puerto Rican population as “ethnic other” that required an authoritarian regime to “guide” them (Beruff 2007). Not only was the economy of Puerto Rico dramatically redesigned to fit a US model of industrial capitalism with a monopoly industry (sugar), the governing structure shifted from being relatively self-determined under a long absent colonial power to the institution of civil and political structures that reinforced its status as an unincorporated colony with strategic military significance.

After Britain’s exploitation of the Caribbean during the War of 1812 US politicians became convinced that sovereignty for the United States could only be obtained through total influence throughout the Americas with a strong military presence in the Caribbean. Following the States Civil War, various plans were drawn up to create a passageway between the Pacific and the Atlantic to facilitate trade and the movement of troops. Although initially a site in Nicaragua was considered (my film *Yanqui WALKER and the OPTICAL REVOLUTION* explores this), the Isthmus of Darien, a small strip of land linking the North and South American continents was determined to be the best site. Private interests began a canal project in this area but quickly went bankrupt so the US exerted influence and successfully “encouraged” the succession of the Republica de Panama from Columbia in 1903. The US Army Corps of Engineers took up the task of building the canal and completed it in 1914. Protecting this investment became a central part of US foreign policy in the hemisphere from then on. To this end, in the lead up to World War II, Puerto Rico became a major site for Navy and Air force bases built on land expropriated by the United States. Tens of thousands of families were displaced on the island of Vieques as US took most of the island for a Naval base and munitions testing ground eliminating access to fishing around the island which caused economic hardship for the families that remained. Although the US built up a strong Naval presence, it was felt that the only real threat posed from across the Atlantic would be an air attack. Therefore, a series of air bases were planned to serve as a part of the military network established to “defend” the Panama Canal and ensure US interests in the region. It was determined that the main Air Force base would be located in Punta Borinquen, Aguadilla. On September 6th, 1938 the US government requisitioned almost two thousand acres and gave the affected residents of the neighborhoods Maleza Alta and Maleza Baja twenty days to move (Beruff

2007:232 and 358). Although the construction of the base would employ many workers, the displaced workers and those residents that remained were mainly farmers so their services were not required (Hernández 2006:121). Thus, in addition to losing their ancestral land that many used for income and/or subsistence farming, dispossessed residents were also unable to gain from employment from the base. Several bombardment units served out of the base during WWII. Following the war the base was expanded further to allow for its role as a bomber base in the Strategic Air Command which meant that its fields and hangers needed to be large enough to support the B-36 “Peacemaker” airplanes that were capable of carrying nuclear weapons.

What’s in a Name? Filmmaking as an act of Personal Responsibility

It was during this post-WWII period that the Borinquen base was renamed for my distant relative General Howard K. Ramey. Decommissioned in the 1970’s as an Air Force base, the land was transferred to the US Army and Coast Guard with some put into civilian use for the University of Puerto Rico, Rafael Hernandez International Airport, a Courtyard Marriot™ and most recently, the RAMEY Skate and Splash Park. At the time of this writing the RAMEY base continues to house the offices of the Ramey sector border control, a detention center for undocumented immigrants attempting to reach the US and serves as an airfield for drones patrolling the surrounding waters. These drones and this base are the extension of two US initiatives, the “war on drugs” and immigration from Central America through the Caribbean. Border control issues “challenge coins” to all that work there. This is a far cry from the romantic Rue Ramey in Paris.



Figure 4: Challenge Coins RAMEY sector US Border Control. *Qué sorpresa desagradable!!* (What a disagreeable surprise!); photo by Kathryn Ramey

So what do you do when confronted with the fact that your name has been used as an arm of US Imperialism? I decided to make a film. Having an aesthetic response is what artists do when they are confronted with things that trouble them. Since I'm trained as an anthropologist, I cannot help but be inflected by that training. But what will it be? When I began making films, my work was often personal, in the present tense, and very formally experimental. As I developed my style and began making work that cast a broader net, largely under the influence of my studies in anthropology, I became very interested in social and historical processes and how so much is forgotten or neglected in causal explanations. My two films, *Yanqui WALKER and the OPTICAL REVOLUTION* (2009) and *WEST: What I know about her* (2012)² addressed these ambiguities but also began a somewhat new trajectory in my work. In different ways, both of these films deal with the legacy of US military and social movements during the expansionist period in the mid 1800's referred to as "manifest destiny" that were disastrous for millions of Native Americans and anyone else who lived in the way. These events are frequently reduced to a small chapter in US history books and education and the suffering they caused barely mentioned. For me, filmmaking has become a way to address the past as a necessary component of personal responsibility. I look for projects that engage how my own subject position as a citizen of the world is enmeshed in complex and often invisible histories and relations of power. My work seeks to uncover these or at least parts of them and activates in the viewer a desire to do the same. Investigating drone use and immigrant detention in the Caribbean I discovered a military base and a "sector" of border control WITH MY NAME. How could I not make work around this?

In his essay, *La Tour Eiffel*, Roland Barthes relates that Maupassant often ate at the restaurant there, because it was the only place in Paris where he did not have to see the tower. Barthes goes on to describe the tower as an empty sign that can be seen and can be seen from. In a few months I will go to what is left of the Ramey Air force base, the Ramey sector of border control, the Marriot hotel (inhabiting the old Ramey hospital) and the Ramey historical museum (a monument built and maintained by ex-airmen who have claimed the island as their home) and see what I can see from there. Will the blight on my surname become invisible from this place? Will I somehow reclaim it? Of course I existed before my name and it is only borrowed anyhow. The name was my father's and his father's before him and so on and somewhere down the generations general Ramey and I share a common ancestor. Of course there was the "i" that existed before I was named, but that period was brief and I don't remember it. I have lived 47 years in this name and have

2 The capitalization is consistent with the titles of the original works and is present for visual emphasis in the films. Low resolution copies of the film can be viewed online as follows: *Yanqui WALKER and the OPTICAL REVOLUTION* (2009) at <http://vimeo.com/kramey/WALKER> and *WEST: What I know about her* at <http://vimeo.com/kramey/WEST>.

come to inhabit it. It isn't a common name. So as much as it is possible to feel romantic about Rue Ramey in Paris it is also possible to feel ashamed about Ramey border control. But if I walk around it, if I look from inside it, will I see things differently? And how to account for those who do not celebrate it? Who do not memorialize it? For whom the very name conjures US imperialism? A few months ago I had the opportunity to find out. I met a colleague, Jose Martinez-Reyes whose friends had been arrested on the base in the mid-1990s for protesting the US invasion of Panama. When you live in Western Puerto Rico, Aguadilla is where you go to protest the United States or at least where that protest will be noticed. When he heard my name was Ramey, his eyebrows shot up. "*Él no es mi abuelo!*" (He is not my grandfather!) I said. But somehow we *are* related. This man has connected me with colleagues in Mayaguez who live near the base. And from them I met (virtually) Carlos Hernández Hernández the author of *Pueblo Nómada: de la Villa Agrícola de San Antonio al Emporio Militar de "Ramey Base"* (2006). (Nomadic Village: From the Small Agricultural town of San Antonio to the Military Center of Commerce "Ramey Base"). This book is a history of a series of expropriations of land by the US government to build and expand the base in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico. It chronicles the displacement of families and the rationalizations that have been made for this displacement. It also asks over and over at each historical juncture that it covers "Why?" Why was Puerto Rico so important to the United States in the years leading up to World War II, what purpose did it serve economically, militarily, politically and why have histories taught in Puerto Rico neglected to question if what was perceived as good for the United States was actually good for Puerto Rico.

E (*the empty sign*) inquires into the United States' thirst for dominion: of the solar system, planet earth and the social, economic and political destiny of the Caribbean and Central America. The film examines the neo-colonialist period following WWI and the rise of the military industrial complex obliquely from this future point. Weaving together seemingly spatially and temporally disparate narratives to inquire: What are the residues of these processes in our post-colonial, consumer driven, global-market economy where space exploration is quickly becoming privatized and military ambitions are increasingly achieved via cyberspace and desktop "warriors" piloting drones? What is the historic imaginary of the American tourist sipping rum by the pool of the luxury hotel in Aguadilla, PR, the hotel worker who serves them, the skate punk in the nearby RAMEY skate park or the student attending the nearby college?

Currently in pre-production, the film will be comprised of repurposed found footage of the geographic locals central to the story, contemporary film shot in and around Aguadilla, PR as well as newly created animations and re-enactments of various narratives pertinent to the story. Stylistically the film will draw on some aspects that can be found in my earlier work. *Yan-*

qui WALKER and the OPTICAL REVOLUTION had a similar structure in that it connected, a biography of William Walker (American born dictator of Nicaragua in 1857), a sketch of the science of optics from the last three centuries, an overview of the transition from colonialism to neo-colonialism in Central America and a travelogue of my experience traveling through the terrain pertinent to the narrative. The film also employed a reworking of found film materials, mostly educational films about Central America and through the use of these materials raised the questions: How have we been taught to think about this region? Who benefits from us thinking this way? Who suffers? What is hidden? When discussing the rationalizations for invading Nicaragua, William Walker said he was going to “spread democracy” to its inhabitants. This is a claim that the United States continues to use to this day to invade sovereign nations.



Figure 5: Film Still Yanqui WALKER and the OPTICAL REVOLUTION;
photo by Kathryn Ramey

WALKER relied on a voice over to help carry the story, a style that I moved away from in my next film *WEST: What I know about her* an experimental documentary about Elizabeth Crandall Perry: adventurer, midwife and my distant ancestor. In the film I travel with my 5-yr old son along the path Perry took across the American West and film side-by-side through monuments to American expansionism until we arrive at the family farm in Oregon. Juxtaposing found footage, historical narrative and contemporary looks at the Willamette Valley; the film is a meditation on how to understand a past fraught with contradictory points of view and the role of the artist in the

making of meaning. In *WEST* I relied predominantly on text that I “found” on historical markers as well as “journal entries” about the main character written under the camera. The film also featured strong ambient sounds and sound effects that helped to accent certain scenes. The film is a first person account told without voice over.

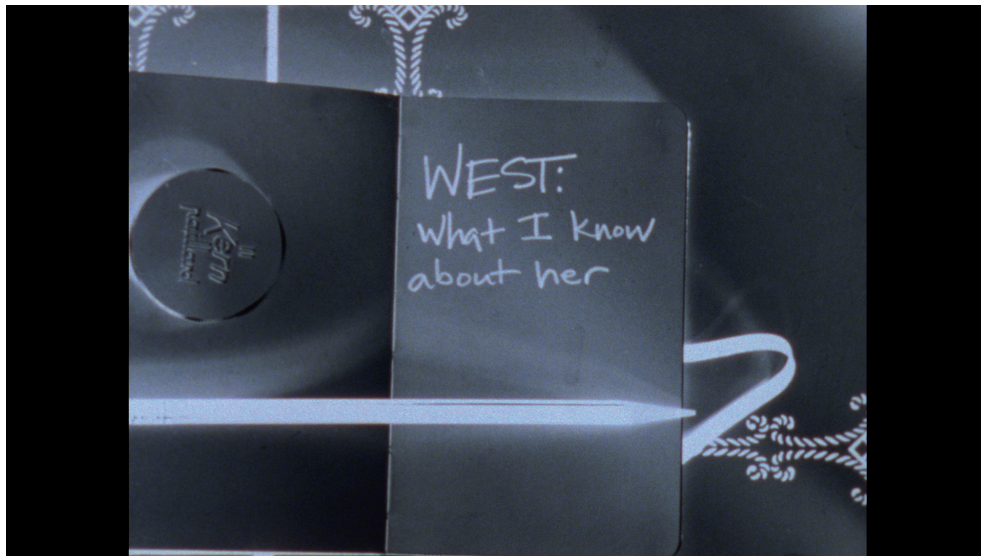


Figure 6: “Journal entry” from *WEST: What I know about her*; photo by Kathryn Ramey

E (the empty sign) is an expansion of things that were successful in both projects. Like *WALKER* it blends seemingly disparate subject matter to ruminate on particular ways of thinking and doing things that have led to present circumstances. But like *WEST* it will move away from a reliance on first person voice over and use text and sounds present in the locations of the film to provide contextualization. As a citizen of the United States it is important to acknowledge that Spanish should now be held equivalent to English as the *lingua franca* of the land. Therefore the film will move between English (my native tongue) and Spanish (a new acquisition for me) to explore the boundaries of my own privilege as a white, English speaking, US citizen as well as foreground how ubiquitous Spanish is in our culture and how central it will be in the 21st century. Most importantly, *E* is a film that blends personal responsibility (these things, these places are literally in my name) with political and social analysis. Although my work tries hard not to be didactic, I am always striving to raise awareness of histories that are under-represented or untold and cause people to question assumptions they might have been unaware that they held. Even in regards to the planet Pluto, the International Astronomical Union changed its official definition of “planet” expressly with the intention of excluding Pluto and a number of recently discovered similar sized astral bodies in the solar system as opposed to creating a more inclusive definition. Naming and categorizing are all about creating boundaries

around bodies and knowledge and thus they are powerful acts. As a filmmaker my intention is to try to lay bare and destabilize these lines of power. What do the planet Pluto, the name Ramey and Puerto Rico have in common? They've all been *plutoed*.

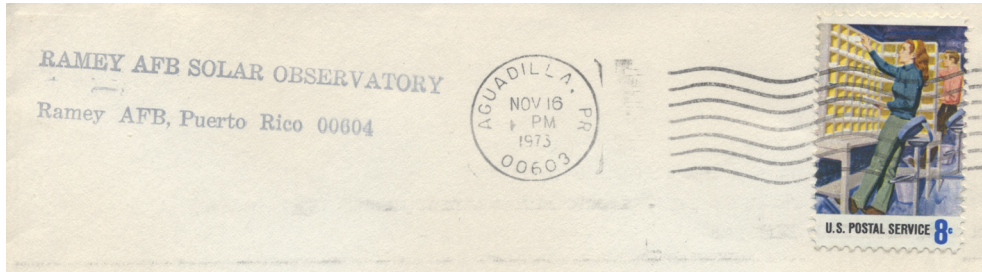


Figure 7: I have been collecting Ramey base memorabilia. This is postage from the base; photo by Kathryn Ramey

Concluding Remarks – Essay Films, Anthropology and Art

As with all of my work, structure and formal techniques employed in E will be determined through praxis. For E, I am collecting mementos from RAMEY Air Force base and US military and educational films “about” Puerto Rico and ephemera from the “space race”. These *objets trouvés* (fr. “found objects”) take on the significance of characters as the weight of their history and the power relations they express is explored. Made in the 21st century looking back at the 20th, both film and digital technology will be used in representation and deconstruction with manipulation of celluloid and glitch. Glitching refers to taking digital material “bending” the image/sound at the level of code. This breaking down of information to reveal the structuring systems beneath will serve as a unifying visual metaphor and provide an image corollary to the empty sign of E. Foregrounding dialogic inquiry, present day footage and interviews from Aguadilla, PR will also be filmed. There are a number of persons still living who were displaced as children to make way for the building of the base. There is a small group of retired airmen who have created the Ramey museum and made the region their home. There is a man who grew up on the base whose brother died of cancer from exposure to defoliants used there as a child. There are hotel workers in the Marriott. Refusing linear narrative or voice of authority in favor of digressions, E will reconsider these histories by weaving together their perspectives in both English and Spanish with footage of the ruins of the base, the surrounding surf beaches and towns and historical markers (Christopher Columbus’ 2nd landing in the “Americas” is just below Aguadilla).



Figure 8: Glitched image of the Disney dog Pluto from the trailer for the film *E*³;
photo by Kathryn Ramey

The form of my work, categorized by film scholars as “the essay film” is a kind of experimental documentary originally written about by Hans Richter who called for films that moved beyond recording the real world to “portray a concept”. He averred a film should “collect its material from everywhere; its space and time must be conditioned only by the need to explain and show the idea” (Leyda 1964:31). Beginning his career a decade or so after Richter wrote this, Chris Marker is probably the best known maker of essay films and his epistolary *San Soleil*, *The Last Bolshevik* (1992) and *Letters from Siberia* (1957) have been very influential on my style. The films do not follow linear explorations of specific events or individuals, but allow themselves to digress, be self-reflexive and dwell on the seemingly mundane in an effort to uncover a larger connection or meaning – rather than simply telling. They ask the viewer not to observe passively but to engage. It can be confusing and at times off-putting but it also agitates. Agitation is memorable. My work draws on the cinematic history of makers such as Marker, Agnes Varda, and Harun Farocki and finds a contemporary context with artists such as the Otolith Group, Deborah Stratman and Rebecca Baron.

Furthermore as anthropologist Arnd Schneider writes, “contemporary art and experimental film [...] disturb our assumptions and allow a distance for the observer”.⁴ Schneider is particularly interested in how artists/anthro-

3 A short trailer for *E* (*the empty sign*) is available to view online here <http://vimeo.com/kramey/emptysign>

4 From the program notes for *New Visions: Experimental film, Art and Anthropology* an international symposium at Musee du Quai Branly, March 30-31, 2012 in which I was a participant screening my film *Yanqui WALKER and the OPTICAL REVOLUTION*.

pologists can “challenge previous borders and categorizations across the two disciplines” (2008). Merging ethnographic fieldwork with formal experimentation my films shake up received notions of what is an appropriate presentation for anthropological research as well as what kind of content is acceptable for experimental film. In a promising contribution to both fields, *E (the empty sign)* combines ethnographic research and experimental practice to link up the forgotten costs of US militarism with other post-colonial, scientific and global touristic narratives of the 20th century.

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Kathryn Ramey is an anthropologist and filmmaker who teaches at Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts USA. Her award-winning films have played internationally and she has published essays in *Visual Anthropology Review*, *EJumpcut*, and the anthologies *Made to be Seen: The History of Visual Anthropology*, *Womens' Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, *Experimental Film and Anthropology and Anthropology and Art Practice*. Find out more about her on her website www.rameyfilms.com