

FROM SAN JUAN TO SAIGON:
SHIFTING CONCEPTIONS OF PUERTO RICAN IDENTITY
DURING THE VIETNAM WAR

by

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Abstract

Between 1964 and 1973, the United States sent over 48,000 Puerto Rican soldiers to fight the war in Vietnam. While many enlisted voluntarily, many others were sent as draftees, subject to conscription as citizens of the United States. This is the starting point of this thesis, which looks at the intersection between citizenship, nationality and military service in relation to Puerto Rican identity at the time of the Vietnam War.

This project focuses on the experiences of three distinct groups. First, it uses newspaper and archival research to explore opposition to the draft by Puerto Rican nationalists on the island, who used conscription as a tool to challenge the meaning of their citizenship. They questioned how a state that denied them the right to vote could require them to give the ultimate sacrifice and challenged both the moral and legal dimensions of conscription as it applied to the island. Next, it moves to the Puerto Rican barrios of New York to look at second-generation Puerto Ricans who came of age during the era of civil rights and the Vietnam War. Through the lens of popular culture, it looks at the early development of Puerto Rican stereotypes in Hollywood films and the way that these were challenged by a new generation of writers and activists by the close of the sixties. Finally, it turns to interviews and memoirs of Puerto Rican veterans to present a personal account of what it meant to be Puerto Rican in the U.S. armed forces at the time, and questions the success of the military's effort to construct soldiers who would remain loyal American citizens after the war. Taken separately, each of these chapters provides a small glimpse of the Puerto Rican experience during the Vietnam War era, but taken together they contribute to our understanding of the ways in which the war, and the environment it created, played a role in the efforts of Puerto Ricans to reclaim and reconstruct their collective identity during this period.

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Chapter One:

Introduction

In 1970, with over 300,000 troops in Vietnam, the United States was in the midst of a period of unprecedented social and political unrest. The U.S. invasion of Cambodia and the subsequent shooting of four student protesters at Kent State University in May of that year have become symbols of the era to many Americans, but what has remained largely outside the collective memory is the fact that Puerto Ricans in major U.S. cities and on the island launched significant protests of their own at the same time. That year, over a hundred Puerto Rican activists were arrested for occupying a Methodist church in East Harlem, opposition to U.S. militarism on the island led to rioting at the University of Puerto Rico that left one person dead, and in September island *independentistas* voiced their opposition to conscription by publicly burning over a thousand draft cards. During the late 1960s and into the 1970s, Puerto Rican activists took inspiration from events in the United States and around the world, lending their voice to the progressive movement and using American injustices in the Third World to fuel their demands for social and political rights.

This thesis examines the Puerto Rican experience during the Vietnam War, questioning the ways in which the conflict and the environment that it created contributed to a shifting sense of Puerto Rican identity. Puerto Rico is a colony in a post-colonial era, it is a nation without a state, and it is a population divided in two halves. All of these factors came to bear on the way the Puerto Rican community responded to the war, and they are fundamental to this study. Denied the right to vote on the island and subject to discrimination in the United States, the Puerto Rican population is in many ways defined by its citizenship, and the island's status as an unincorporated territory of the United States is the most fundamental component of its political

and cultural identity. The social upheaval of the sixties led to increasing questions about what this meant in an increasingly post-colonial era, while the obligation of Puerto Rican youth to fight in Vietnam cast light upon some of the most glaring contradictions of the United States' relationship with its island territory. Beyond its social and political implications, the war took an even heavier toll on those who fought it, and were forced to confront head on the conflicting loyalties aroused by the disparity between their nation and their state.

The question of Puerto Rico's political status can be traced back to the Spanish American War of 1898, when the island became a territory of the United States. Prior to the war, Puerto Rico was one of the few remaining colonies of the once-powerful Spanish Empire, but it changed hands with the U.S. victory over Spain and has remained the property of the United States ever since – a fact that has influenced virtually every aspect of Puerto Rican life. In what was possibly the most significant piece of legislation to shape the relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico, Congress passed the Jones Act in 1917 and granted American citizenship to the island's residents. Among the most consequential elements of the legislation was the clause that denied voting rights to citizens residing on the island and the provision allowing free movement between Puerto Rico and the U.S. mainland. Mass migration soon followed, and by mid-century, a large segment of the island's population had relocated to the continental United States. Many of those who fled the island after the Second World War were driven by poor living conditions in Puerto Rico, only to find themselves relegated to neighbourhoods where conditions were no better.

The generation of Puerto Rican youth who came of age during the sixties witnessed a series of events that led many to raise questions about what it meant to be Puerto Rican. They took inspiration from the civil rights movement in the United States as well as the revolutions

that were taking place throughout the Third World, and they expressed their opposition to the war.¹ Central to the anti-war movement in the U.S. was the issue of military conscription, which its critics claimed was laden with racial and social disparity.² For Puerto Rican opponents of the draft, opposition took on an even greater meaning. Since citizenship was granted to the island's residents, Puerto Rican youth had been subject to conscription and yet the same citizenship that imposed compulsory military service denied them the right to vote. This injustice was denounced by leftists on the island at the same time that mainland Puerto Ricans became increasingly vocal in their calls for equality. Those who fought in the war, though removed from the struggles that took place on the streets, confronted many of the same challenges experienced by those at home.

At the center of their struggle was the question of Puerto Rican identity, a subject that has long been a source of debate among scholars, and which can be divided into two broad categories. The first of these is the cultural debate, which in its earliest stages revolved around efforts to define what it means to be Puerto Rican. Contemporary scholars generally identify the work of Antonio Pedreira as a foundational text on the subject, but although it is still praised in some circles, Pedreira's work has been widely discredited as an overtly racist and hispanophilic text.³ Pedreira attempted to locate the essential Puerto Rican character, but later theorists have sought to move away from this approach, attempting to discredit essentialist interpretations that fail to capture the diversity of the Puerto Rican experience. Such works have moved beyond

¹ Roberto P. Rodríguez-Morazzani outlines some of the major factors in the politicization of the mainland Puerto Rican left in "Political Cultures of the Puerto Rican Left in the United States," in *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, ed, Andrés Torres and José E. Velázquez (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 25-47.

² Christian G. Appy explores the role of class in the Vietnam War at length, arguing that the war was largely fought by the working class of the United States. He also explores the issue of race, demonstrating that black soldiers didn't make up a disproportionate number of American troops in Vietnam, but he reveals the more pervasive ways that blacks were exploited, evidenced by statistics such as their much higher proportion of combat deaths. Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

³ Antonio Pedreira, *Insularismo: An Insight into the Puerto Rican Character* (New York: Ausubo Press, 2005).

discussions of character to explore race, gender, language, and popular culture.⁴ Central to this new body of cultural theorists is a generation of scholars that emerged from the Puerto Rican diaspora in the 1970s and 1980s. Critical of island theorists who have largely neglected the existence of the diaspora, the new generation of Puerto Rican scholars has stressed the importance of the mainland population.⁵ Also central to more recent works on Puerto Rican culture has been an emphasis on cultural nationalism, which has moved to the forefront of debates over Puerto Rican identity.⁶

The turn to cultural nationalism and cultural identity has not resulted in a reduced number of accounts exploring Puerto Rico's political situation, for status remains the subject of much scholarly debate. Underlying a large number of these works is the belief that Puerto Rico

⁴ In 1980, José Luis González challenged the claims of Hispanophiles such as Pedreira with the publication of *The Four-Storeyed Country (El País de Cuatro Pisos)* (Princeton: Marcus Weiner Publishing, 1993), in which he used the analogy of a building to define Puerto Rican culture, identifying the country's Afro-Caribbean roots as the first storey, claiming that descendants of African slaves were the first true Puerto Ricans. Laura Briggs explores the island's history from a gendered perspective in *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002), while Frances Negrón-Munatener uses queer theory to explore the role of Puerto Ricans in American popular culture, arguing that "Modern Puerto Rican ethnic and national identity has been historically narrated or performed by tropes of shame and displays of pride," *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and American Culture from West Side Story to Jennifer López* (New York: NYU Press, 2004), xiii. One of the most prolific contemporary theorists of Puerto Rican culture is Juan Flores, who has explored various cultural manifestations of Puerto Rican identity in a large body of work, including *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* (Houston: Arte Publico, 1993) and *From Bomba to Hip Hop* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

⁵ Flores argues that the massive migration of Puerto Ricans to the U.S. should be central to any modern study of Puerto Rican identity, *Divided Borders*, 67. Jorge Duany argues that the diaspora is an integral part of the Puerto Rican nation due to the prevalence of circular migration and the constant exchange of ideas and practices between the island and the mainland, *Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 5.

⁶ Duany defines cultural nationalism as "the assertion of the moral and spiritual autonomy of each people," and claims that it has become the central element of Puerto Rican national identity. He argues that almost all segments of the Puerto Rican population – both on and off the island – demonstrate a belief that they are a distinct nation, 5. Cultural nationalism is the focus of Arlene Dávila's *Sponsored Identities: Cultural Politics in Puerto Rico* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997). She gives a more detailed analysis of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism on the island than Duany, (8-12), but ultimately argues that cultural nationalism on the island has been constructed and promoted as a means to serve the interests of a variety of different players, not the least of which are U.S. government and business interests. Ramon Grosfoguel makes a similar case when he claims that "The recognition of Puerto Rican culture is the central ideological mechanism through which American colonial domination is exercised on the island today," *Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 61-62.

remains a colony of the United States.⁷ This thesis adheres to the colonial interpretation, but it explores colonialism through questions of citizenship, for Puerto Rican citizenship is inherently different from that of the rest of the United States. Legal scholars have explored the subject of citizenship at length. Many of these studies have focused on the Jones Act, in an effort to untangle the legal intricacies of Puerto Rican citizenship. They have explored the extent to which the island's population desired citizenship when it was granted, as well as the forces that shaped the legislation that defined it.⁸ Other writers have focused on the long-term influence of citizenship, often emphasizing its second class nature.⁹ One of the most thorough and provocative accounts is presented by Efrén Rivera Ramos, who argues that citizenship in Puerto Rico functions as a hegemonic force, "a salient factor in the multidimensional process involved in the reproduction of consent to the continued association with the United States."¹⁰ He makes clear that Puerto Rican citizens have always been more than just passive receptors of U.S. policy, however, for they have used their citizenship as a means to make claims upon the state for the

⁷ Many scholars have claimed that Puerto Rico remains a colony, although in a post-colonial era, the traditional meaning of the term 'colony' no longer fits. The island has been described as "a post-colonial colony", Duany, 4; a "modern colony", Grosfoguel, 67; "the oldest colony in the world," José Trías Monge, *Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); and "a colony of a fundamentally non-colonial imperialism", César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1. Juan Flores, ponders the subject at length, claiming that "Puerto Rico is a colony in a different way, jibing only partially and uncomfortably with the inherited notion or stereotype of the classical colony with its earmarks of rampant socioeconomic misery, direct and total political and military control, and peripheralized public life contrasting graphically with that of the metropolis," and that it calls for a re-examination of the post-colonial discourse that takes into consideration modern and de-territorialized forms of colonialism. Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip Hop*, 36.

⁸ José Trías Monge, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico, claims that the Jones Act was designed to keep Puerto Rico as an Americanized colony and argues that that citizenship imposed and "was to be received gratefully, no matter what," 76. Rogers M. Smith explores the racial dimensions of citizenship as applied to Puerto Ricans in *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in US History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 438-39.

⁹ Mark Tushnet compares the limited citizenship of Puerto Ricans to other second-class citizens in the United States in "Partial Membership and Liberal Political Theory," in *Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion and the Constitution*, eds. Christina Duffy Burnett and Burke Marshall, 209-225. Pedro Malavet argues that second-class citizenship has proven to be "the empire's ultimate weapon," for it has enabled the U.S. to subject Puerto Ricans to all the obligations of citizenship without granting them all of its benefits, *America's Colony: The Political and Cultural Conflict between the United States and Puerto Rico* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 158.

¹⁰ Efrén Rivera Ramos, *The Legal Construction of Identity: The Judicial and Social Legacy of American Colonialism in Puerto Rico* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000), 145.

extension of social and political rights.¹¹ While all of these authors raise important questions about the meaning of U.S. citizenship in Puerto Rico, they have largely focused on the island, ignoring the very different struggle of those who live in the continental United States.

The major reason for the omission of mainland Puerto Ricans from much of the literature on citizenship is that theirs is fundamentally different: Puerto Ricans residing on the mainland are allowed to participate in presidential elections. But while island Puerto Ricans are limited by their lack of voting rights, many argue that those on the mainland experience second-hand citizenship that is defined by racism and a lack of economic opportunity. This subject is explored by a number of authors in an edited volume published by Suzanne Oboler in 2006, titled *Latinos and Citizenship*.¹² Writers such as Oboler, Lorrin Thomas, and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas explore many of the problems that Puerto Ricans face in the United States, where they remain part of a minority group that is often viewed as alien in their own country, forced to actively claim their rights as citizens.¹³ Such questions are crucial to this study, which contends that citizenship in the 1960s was a contested issue both on and off the island, taking different forms but in both cases serving as the site of struggle: as *independentistas* in Puerto Rico launched an anti-draft movement that was rooted in the meaning of citizenship, Puerto Rican civil rights organizations on the mainland laid claim to the equality that was promised to them as citizens of the United States.

The significant body of literature relating to these elements of the Puerto Rican experience are foundational to this study, but it relies on one further component. Although the subject of militarism arises frequently in the literature on Puerto Rico, there is little material

¹¹ Rivera Ramos, 145 & 170.

¹² Suzanne Oboler, ed. *Latinos and Citizenship: The Dilemma of Belonging* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

¹³ Suzanne Oboler, "Redefining Citizenship as a Lived Experience." In *Latinos and Citizenship: The Dilemma of Belonging*, ed. Suzanne Oboler (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 10-13.

devoted specifically to their involvement in American wars and no scholarly work at all on their role in the Vietnam War. Many of the works that do exist are commissioned by the military. Colonel Héctor Andrés Negroni's *Historia militar de Puerto Rico*, for example, traces the military history of the island back to the Spanish period. However, the author chooses not to address the Vietnam War, claiming that it is too recent for analysis.¹⁴ More than one book has been written on Puerto Rican involvement in the Korean War, but these have largely focused on revising the story of the all-Puerto Rican 65th Infantry, which was the subject of the largest court martial of the conflict.¹⁵ More broadly, there have been a small number of works published on Latino participation in the Vietnam War, but this subject has also failed to receive scholarly examination of the type given to African-American soldiers, for example.¹⁶

This work attempts to address this gap in the literature, but it is not a military history. Instead, it seeks to draw lessons from the war about broader questions of citizenship and identity. In this regard, it draws upon a final body of work that explores the relationship between minorities and the state in regards to military service. In his 2006 book, *Fighting for Rights*, Ronald Krebs argues that minority groups in the twentieth century have used military service as

¹⁴ Negroni's entry on the Vietnam War consists of a total of roughly half a page in length, which he begins by stating "por lo reciente de este conflicto no es mucho lo que podemos decir." Héctor Andrés Negroni, *Historia militar de Puerto Rico* (Madrid: Ediciones Siruela, 1992), 448.

¹⁵ Two examples of this are Ernest Acosta, *A plea for exoneration the U.S. Army 65th Infantry Regiment Korea 1952*

(San Juan, PR: The Puerto Rican-American Research Institute, 2002) and Gilberto Villahermosa, *Honor and Fidelity: The 65th Infantry in Korea, 1950-1953* (Washington: Center of Military History, 2009).

¹⁶ Gil Dominguez, *They Answered the Call: Latinos in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore: PublishAmerica, 2004) is a collection of interviews with Latino Vietnam War veterans while George Mariscal's edited volume *Aztlan and Vietnam: Chicano and Chicana Experiences of the war* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) is a collection of stories and writings by Mexican-American war veterans. African-American participation in the war has been the subject of a few books, the most important of these still being James Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1997). Others include Herman Graham III, *The Brothers' Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood and the Military Experience* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003) and Natalie Kimbrough, *Equality or Discrimination: African Americans in the U.S. Military during the Vietnam War* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007).

an important tool in their struggle for citizenship rights.¹⁷ Cynthia Enloe focuses her attention on inter-ethnic relations in *Ethnic Soldiers*, disputing the theory that military service enhances inter-group solidarity, and arguing instead that the state's reliance on minority groups in war is more likely to enhance ethnic tensions.¹⁸ The questions motivating both studies speak to the relationship between military service and citizenship as experienced by ethnic and racial minorities. And yet, although both of the above works provide insight into the role of Puerto Rican soldiers in the Vietnam War, the island's unique status again complicates the issue.

The most fundamental question behind this study is that of identity. I adhere to a constructivist view that understands identity as neither predetermined, nor simply a matter of choice; I attribute it to neither structure nor agency, but see it as a balance between the two. In the words of Kwame Anthony Appiah, "we make up selves from a tool kit of options made available by our culture and society. We do make choices, but we don't, individually, determine the options among which we choose."¹⁹ Identity is the way that we understand ourselves, and make sense of our lives. It is both personal, as the series of character traits by which a person defines himself/herself, and it is collective, dependent on membership in any number of groups. I aim to explore some of the ways that citizenship and nationality came to bear on the formation of Puerto Rican identity in relation to the war, on both a personal and a collective level.

It is crucial to bear in mind that people have multiple and overlapping identities, they play many roles, and they belong to many groups, all of which shape their actions and

¹⁷ Ronald R. Krebs, *Fighting for Rights: Military Service and the Politics of Citizenship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Cynthia Enloe, *Ethnic Soldiers: State Security in a Divided Society* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980).

¹⁹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 107. This perspective is also espoused by Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets in *Identity Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13-16. The authors remind us that structures are created by people who then act as agents within them, and therefore we must find a way to move fluidly between the two.

responses.²⁰ The soldier was never *just* a soldier, nor was the activist simply an activist. Peter Burke and Jan Stets outline the difference between role and group identities.²¹ They argue that roles are defined by social structures and come with ready-made scripts; for example, a soldier adheres to a script that tells him how a soldier is meant to behave. However, that same soldier may belong to a group whose membership also influences his actions. If he identifies as Puerto Rican, this carries its own set of meanings that determine his response to the experiences he has as a soldier. This should not be confused with homogeneity, for it is not to say that there is a single Puerto Rican identity that defines how all members should act; it simply means that the way that soldier has internalized his own understanding of *Puerto Rican* will have consequences for his behaviour. The important question for my purposes is what happens when those multiple identities come into conflict, as *soldier* and *Puerto Rican* did for many.

Multiple identities tie people in many ways to social structures, and there is always the possibility that these may come into conflict. According to Burke and Stets, this causes stress for the individual, who is forced to choose between two competing roles or identities.²² They argue that different identities come with different levels of commitment, and thus when two or more come into conflict, the predominant one will determine the individual's behaviour.²³ Take, for example, the soldier insulted about his race. If he gives greater importance to his Puerto Rican identity, he may choose to defend himself and risk punishment. If, however, he is a soldier first, he will likely adhere to discipline and show restraint. This thesis takes the position that the struggle experienced by this soldier goes even deeper, for it is shaped by a fundamental difference that is unique to the Puerto Rican: the conflict that arises due to the disparity between

²⁰ Burke and Stets, 3.

²¹ Ibid., 112-29.

²² Ibid., 7.

²³ Ibid., 133.

citizenship and nationality. The role of soldier is defined by a commitment to the state – an obligation of citizenship – but as a Puerto Rican he may be motivated instead by a distinct, and often conflicting, nationality.

Citizenship has never been a simple concept, and the amount of literature devoted to dissecting its many intricacies and implications attests to this fact. One of the most influential studies of the subject is T.H. Marshall's 1950 work, *Citizenship and Social Class*, in which he traces the development of citizenship from an emphasis on civil, to political, and finally to social rights by the twentieth century.²⁴ Marshall defines civil rights in terms of individual freedoms, such as those enshrined by the United States Constitution, and political rights as the ability to participate in the exercise of power, while social rights were those that became central components of the welfare state by the end of the Second World War.²⁵ Despite the confusion in terms, what Marshall defined as social rights were the driving force behind the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties, with its push for social equality to accompany legal enfranchisement. The movement decried the hypocrisy of a system that purported to be equal while denying rights to many based on race and ethnicity. Rogers M. Smith, in his influential study *Civic Ideals*, argues that U.S. citizenship was always built upon inequality and a set of racially-constructed hierarchies.²⁶ American citizenship, he claims, "has always been an intellectually puzzling, legally confused, and politically charged and contested status."²⁷

Suzanne Oboler backs up Smith's claim in her analysis of Latino citizenship in the United States. She argues that too much emphasis has been placed on voting rights, and instead

²⁴ T.H. Marshall and Tom Bottomore, *Citizenship and Social Class* (London: Pluto Press, 1992), 8-13.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁶ Smith, 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

defines citizenship as a lived experience.²⁸ Citizenship is a legal contract, a set of rights and obligations that shape a person's interaction with the state, but it is experienced and understood differently by people in different contexts.²⁹ Although its legal and political implications are crucial to any understanding of citizenship and its consequences, by moving away from legal formulations, we can see how the exclusionary structures of American citizenship have shaped the everyday expectations of Latin Americans in the U.S. – how they have functioned to create in-groups and out-groups, members and 'aliens.'³⁰ Smith brings us full circle when he claims that this creation of a "collective civic identity ... often becomes integral to individuals' senses of personal identity."³¹

Oboler's description of citizenship as a 'lived experience' surely informs my perspective, as I attempt to explore the ways in which Puerto Ricans of this period understood and experienced their citizenship. While I appreciate her claim that too much emphasis has been put on voting rights, however, I also see this as a matter of perspective. Oboler writes about mainland Puerto Ricans who retain the right to vote, but for those on the island, their lack of voting rights remains an important element of their second-class citizenship. For the purposes of my study this is fundamental, for voting rights were at the heart of island opposition to the draft. Thus it is that my own perspective is shaped by this current interpretation of citizenship, and yet I also hold on to what could perhaps be defined as a more traditional reading that sees voting rights as central, and which understands citizenship as more than just a set of rights, but also a

²⁸ Oboler, 5-7.

²⁹ Charles Tilley, "Citizenship, Identity and Social History," in *Citizenship, Identity and Social History*, ed. Charles Tilley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8; Lynn A. Staeheli, "Political Geography: Where's Citizenship?" *Progress in Human Geography* 35, no. 3 (2010): 393.

³⁰ Oboler, 9.

³¹ Smith, 31.

set of obligations – a contract between the individual and the state that may still ask its citizens to give the ultimate sacrifice.³²

This speaks to a final element of citizenship that is relevant to my study: its relation to military service. This relationship is deeply rooted in the liberal tradition, which views military service as the obligation that balances an individual's right to state protection.³³ In addition to its contractual role, military service has often been touted as a way to promote citizenship. This is based on three main beliefs: first, that war requires an extraordinary commitment of citizens to the state that must be bought through citizenship rights; second, that the mass mobilization resulting from war can lead to significant social change; and finally, that war gives rise to a sense of shared responsibility and "meaningful participation in the national community."³⁴ Underlying this belief is the assumption that there is a connection between citizenship and nationality; that mobilization for a war *in the name of the state* will bring a sense of *national* unity. But as Appiah reminds us, we must resist the urge to conflate state with nation.³⁵

The distinction between state and nation is key to understanding national identity in Puerto Rico. Although many classic studies of nationalism conceive of the nation as a bounded, political entity, more recent works have instead emphasized "cultural distinctiveness ... as the primary determinant of national identity."³⁶ Arlene Dávila points out that, although the word 'nation' remains a contentious and politically-loaded term on the island, there is a common tendency to rely on 'culture' and 'identity' to define Puerto Rico as a "distinct collective unit."³⁷

³² For citizenship as a set of rights and obligations see Tilley, 8; Richard Bellamy, *Citizenship: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3-5 and military service 27-28; Linda K. Kerber, "The Meanings of Citizenship," *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 3 (Dec. 1997):835.

³³ Kerber, 835.

³⁴ J.M. Barbalet, *Citizenship: Rights, Struggle, and Class Inequality* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988), 37.

³⁵ Appiah, 244.

³⁶ Dávila, 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

The powerful sense of nationalism expressed by Puerto Ricans is rooted in culture, and while it stems from the particular nature of their U.S. citizenship, it nonetheless remains distinct from it. This fact is demonstrated by a 1993 study by the cultural institute Ateneo Puertorriqueño, which revealed that 74.5% of islanders considered themselves to be Puerto Rican first and American second.³⁸ In regards to mainland Puerto Ricans, this can also be seen in what has been described as their rejection of the hyphen: their refusal to define themselves as Puerto Rican-Americans, an act interpreted by many as a refusal to assimilate and which indicates a strong sense of nationality even among U.S.-born Puerto Ricans.³⁹

The spirit of resistance exhibited by the Puerto Rican population is central to this study. It looks at the way that citizenship, nationality, and military service collide in the formation of identity, arguing that the Vietnam War era marked a period when many Puerto Ricans chose to challenge the imposition of an identity that was created for them; that they rejected established stereotypes and sought to re-construct Puerto Rican identity as one defined by strength and resistance. This identity was firmly rooted in the island's colonial history and challenged the continuation of the colonial condition both on and off the island, where those who had access to political rights were nonetheless limited by their lack of access to the benefits promised by the American dream. As increasing numbers of Puerto Rican youth were shipped to the jungles of Vietnam, activists at home increasingly questioned why their people should fight for a country that discriminated against them and denied them the full rights of their American citizenship.

During the Vietnam War era, a large number of parties and organizations represented Puerto Rican interests, but to define all of these is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I focus on two main groups: the independence movement on the island and civil rights

³⁸ Rivera Ramos, 12.

³⁹ Juan Flores, *Bomba*, 11&155; Grosfoguel, 141-42.

organizations on the mainland. Within these broad categorizations, a number of smaller organizations represented diverse interests that both collided and overlapped. The two main *independentista* groups in Puerto Rico were the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP) and the Pro Independence Movement (MPI), which would later become the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP). Although the PIP has a longer history on the island, I have chosen to focus on the MPI for two main reasons. First, although the MPI was not a registered party, it played a key role in the re-invigoration of the independence movement during the 1960s. When the PIP lost strength through the 1950s, *independentistas* dissatisfied with the state of the movement founded the MPI, which grew in strength over the next decade to reach a membership of over 10,000 at its peak.⁴⁰ My second reason for focusing on the MPI is that, in addition to being the more radical of the two organizations, labelling itself as the patriotic vanguard and expressing solidarity with Fidel Castro,⁴¹ the MPI was very vocal when it came to the issue of the draft. This opposition was expressed most clearly in the pages of its weekly publication, *Claridad*, which has proven to be an invaluable source in researching the anti-draft movement.

In a similar vein, numerous civil rights groups emerged from the Puerto Rican community in the United States during the sixties and seventies. In addition to the U.S. branch of the MPI, the mainland Puerto Rican left included El Comité, which organized around housing issues in the barrios, the Puerto Rican Students Union (PRSU), and later the Movement for National Liberation.⁴² The group that surfaces most frequently throughout this study, however, is

⁴⁰ For an in-depth description of the PIP, its founding, and its membership, see Rubén Berríos Martínez, *La independencia de Puerto Rico: Razón y lucha* (DF, Mexico: Editorial Linea, 1983), 146-47. Juan Mari Brás provides a detailed account of the founding of the MPI in *El independentismo en Puerto Rico: Su pasado, su presente y su porvenir* (Santo Domingo, DR: Taller, 1984), 130-31. For an overview of the independence movement in Puerto Rico during the 1960s, see Ayala and Bernabe, 226-27.

⁴¹ Ayala and Bernabe, 227.

⁴² A detailed discussion of these groups can be found in Andrés Torres, "Political Radicalism in the Diaspora – The Puerto Rican Experience," in *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, eds. Andrés Torres and José E. Velázquez (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 1-19.

the Young Lords Party. The Young Lords grew out of a Chicago street gang that became politicized by the late sixties, and soon spread to New York and other U.S. cities to become what has been described as “the main catalyst for the second generation’s baptism into radical politics.”⁴³ The Young Lords rallied around the issue of living conditions in the barrios, occupying churches and hospitals, and implementing programs to feed neighbourhood children. They were by far the most visible Puerto Rican civil rights organization, and this was largely due to their use of media: not only did they launch their own newspaper and radio station, they also tried their hand at documentary filmmaking.⁴⁴ As with the MPI on the island, the Young Lords Party plays a significant role in this work due to its prominent place both at the center of the Puerto Rican movement and within the documentary record.

The record itself has proven to be one of the most challenging aspects of this project. With no major works existing on Puerto Rican involvement in the war, there was no clear jumping off point to begin the research. The search for sources, although frustrating at times, gave shape to a project that, though rooted in historical methods, takes an interdisciplinary approach. I used four main types of sources for the project. The first of these is newspapers, which came to form the foundation of my research. As mentioned, the MPI newspaper *Claridad* proved indispensable for this project. Although the paper can be read as a propaganda piece for the MPI, this is not a detriment to my study, for it reveals the way that the independence movement claimed the issue of conscription and situated it as a vital part of their anti-colonial struggle. In addition to promotions and descriptions of anti-draft rallies and protests, numerous personal accounts can be found within the pages of *Claridad*, not only from returned soldiers but also grieving parents and loved ones. *Claridad* therefore enabled me to construct a narrative of

⁴³ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

the anti-draft movement, but also to personalize the war, to give a face to those who refused the draft as well as those who accepted induction but came back to fight against the war.

The information obtained from *Claridad* was complemented by archival research, conducted primarily at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at CUNY's Hunter College in New York. A number of personal collections were used, but of particular interest were the papers of Emelí Velez de Vando, a long time Puerto Rican activist who was involved in the anti-draft movement and an active member of the Sixto Alvélo Defense Committee that organized to raise funds for the defense of draft resisters on the island. The most fruitful information came from the documents of José Velázquez, a member of the mainland branch of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party who refused induction in 1972. The collection includes FBI surveillance files on Velázquez as well as a large collection of legal documents related to his induction case. The center's online archive of FBI surveillance files also proved to be a useful source on the draft-related activities of the independence movement.

In order to explore identity from an oppositional perspective, I chose to use culture as a lens to look at the dominant stereotypes of Puerto Ricans in the 1960s, as well as the challenges to these that emerged during the period. Hollywood cinema presented the best evidence in the construction of Puerto Rican stereotypes, while literature was the primary source of an emergent Puerto Rican identity that grew out of the barrio. By comparing mainstream, non-Puerto Rican portrayals with homegrown depictions from the Puerto Rican community, I was able to look at the way Puerto Rican cultural producers of the sixties shifted the meaning of common perceptions and rooted the social problems that plagued their community within a larger historical framework. Not only did they bind the situation of the mainland Puerto Rican community to the island's colonial history, but they claimed a place for the Puerto Rican

diaspora in the American narrative, alongside other racialized and stigmatized immigrant and minority groups.

The last body of sources that I used, and the heart of this project, were oral histories and memoirs of Puerto Rican veterans. I sifted through numerous oral history collections that have been compiled on American veterans, many of which are still works in progress. The most extensive collection is the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project, which covers every American war from the First World War to the present. From over 13,000 interviews of Vietnam veterans alone, I was able to compile a list of almost thirty Puerto Ricans, roughly half of whom originated from the island while the other half resided in the continental United States; out of the entire list, seventeen ended up proving valuable to my research. I was also able to locate a number of personal memoirs written by veterans and two biographies about Puerto Rican soldiers written by close family members. The interviews and the memoirs personalize the war in a way that other documents cannot, and they are an invaluable means for understanding the realities of the war as it was experienced by this particular group of soldiers.

The sources above can be broken down according to chapter, as each chapter of this project is the product of a different methodology and explores a different thematic focus. Chapter two is set mainly in Puerto Rico and uses newspaper and archival research to tell the story of the anti-draft movement. It reveals the extent to which conscription became a rallying cry for the independence movement, looks at solidarity between activists on and off the island during the era, and explores the ways in which they challenged the meaning of their citizenship. Chapter three focuses on the mainland, and examines the cultural construction of Puerto Rican identity in the United States during the twentieth century. Through the lens of popular culture, it looks at the early development of Puerto Rican stereotypes in Hollywood films and the way that

these were challenged by a new generation of barrio writers by the close of the sixties. The final chapter uses oral history and memoir to explore the experiences of Puerto Rican soldiers during the Vietnam War. It presents a personal account of what it meant to be Puerto Rican in the U.S. armed forces at the time, and questions the success of the military's effort to construct soldiers who would remain loyal American citizens after the war. Taken separately, each of these chapters provides a small glimpse into the Puerto Rican experience during the Vietnam War era, but taken together they contribute to our understanding of the ways in which the war, and the environment it created, played a role in the efforts of Puerto Ricans to reclaim and reconstruct their collective identity during this period.

Chapter 2:

Puerto Rican Nationalism and the Anti-Draft Movement

On August 6, 1966, a young Puerto Rican by the name of Sixto Alvelo stood before a crowd of 25,000 demonstrators in the middle of Times Square. It was the anniversary of the American bombing of Hiroshima, and those gathered chose to mark the occasion by protesting the ongoing involvement of the United States in Vietnam. Alvelo addressed the crowd in Spanish, with the help of a translator, stating:

You may wonder how, if I am not American, if I cannot even say anything in English, how they can try to force me to join the U.S. Army. How is it possible that a foreign army, the invader of my country, wants to use me as cannon fodder to go to fight another people who, just like ours, are fighting for independence?⁴⁵

Alvelo had become a *cause celebre* among Puerto Rican independence activists when he refused induction into the United States Army under the Selective Service Act the year before. Now he stood before a crowd of anti-war activists gathered on U.S. soil and tied his own struggle against the draft to the history of U.S. imperialism around the world, connecting the dots between Puerto Rico, Hiroshima, and Southeast Asia.

For *independentistas* like Alvelo, Puerto Rican involvement in the Vietnam War was yet another manifestation of colonialism. It raised the spectre of status that has long been the defining feature of island politics, it aggravated long-standing divisions among the population, and yet it also served to unite independence activists on the island, who understood military conscription as a fundamentally unconstitutional, colonial institution and placed it at the forefront of their calls for independence. At the heart of their dissent was the meaning of Puerto

⁴⁵ The original text reads: “Se preguntarán ustedes cómo, si no soy norteamericano, si ni siquiera sé hablar nada en inglés, cómo es posible que intenten obligarme a mí a ingresar en el ejército norteamericano. ¿Cómo es posible que en ejército extranjero, invasor de mi Patria, me quiera utilizar de carne de cañón para ir a luchar contra otro pueblo que, al igual que el nuestro, está luchando por su Independencia?” From “Alvelo ante 25,000 personas Condena la Guerra,” *Claridad*, Aug. 16-66, p. 2.

Rican citizenship and the belief that a people who cannot vote cannot fairly be subjected to conscription. Claims that the draft amounted to a blood tax became a rallying cry and a tool by which to challenge the meaning of American democracy, making conscription a vital component in the renewal of the independence movement by the late 1960s. Although it was always a primary motivation for the war's opponents on the island, the anti-draft movement was slower to build among mainland Puerto Ricans. By the close of the decade however, leftist groups both on and off the island found common cause in their opposition to the draft and it served as a building block for solidarity among the two camps.

This chapter traces the evolution of the anti-draft movement that emerged in Puerto Rico soon after the war and eventually spread to the United States mainland. It begins with the independence movement's adoption of the draft as a cause in their struggle against U.S. colonialism, demonstrating that *independentistas* used the conscription of Puerto Rican youth to reveal the injustices of their citizenship – citizenship that they claimed was imposed without the consent of the Puerto Rican people and that required them to send their youth to fight a war in which they had no say. It looks at the way the pro-independence left situated the anti-draft movement within the anti-colonial struggle, tying it to key events in Puerto Rican history and using conscription as a symbol of the island's colonial condition. Opposition to the war became a key component of renewed calls for independence in the 1960s and led to expressions of solidarity with the Vietnamese people, and it helped *independentistas* build ties to Puerto Rican activists on the mainland, who increasingly saw their own struggle as part of a larger anti-colonial movement. Finally, the chapter looks at opposition to the draft as part of a larger student movement on the island, which opposed the presence of the United States military on university campuses and challenged the role of American militarism in the Puerto Rican education system.

Over the course of the war, conscription became a powerful symbol for the Puerto Rican left in their calls for independence.

The story of Puerto Rico's modern independence movement begins in 1898, when the United States took possession of the island after a short and bloody war with Spain. At the close of the century, Guam, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines were all that remained of the once powerful Spanish Empire. In 1898, decades of unrest in Cuba brought the United States into conflict with Spain under the pretence of freeing Cubans from the yoke of Spanish oppression. The battle lasted little more than three months and when the United States declared victory, it took as its prize Spain's few remaining colonies. Although Cuba and the Philippines won independence from the United States in the years that followed, Puerto Rico remained in the possession of the U.S. To this day, the island remains an unincorporated territory of the United States – a nation without a state and, by many accounts, a modern colony – and its political status has been an issue of contention ever since.

The United States Congress attempted to define the ambiguous position of Puerto Ricans by passing the Jones Act in 1917, which granted citizenship to the island's residents. The form of citizenship that applied to Puerto Ricans was particular to the island, and did not guarantee rights equivalent to those of other U.S. citizens. The system established by the Jones Act and the legislation that followed enabled Puerto Ricans to move freely between the island and the mainland; it created a system of government by which residents would elect their own legislature, but it retained the right of the president to appoint a governor; and it freed them from the payment of federal income tax; but it also denied them the right to vote in federal elections. The fact that the legislation was enacted shortly before the U.S. entered the First World War has

led to claims that military recruitment was the driving force behind the legislation.⁴⁶ Scholars such as Efrén Rivera Ramos and José Trías Monge have countered this claim, however, pointing out that non-citizens at the time were also subject to the draft and arguing instead that, while the war may have been a precipitating factor, the decision had more to do with geopolitical strategy and the need to quell a growing independence movement on the island.⁴⁷

Efforts to stifle calls for Puerto Rican independence had failed by the 1930s, when the island went through a period of turmoil exacerbated by the Great Depression. Thirty years of U.S. rule had yet to bring prosperity to Puerto Rico, and poverty was rampant. Discontent with both political and economic status led to the rise of Pedro Albizu Campos, the figure most closely associated with the powerful nationalist movement of the era. Albizu Campos was a veteran of the First World War and the first Puerto Rican graduate of Harvard Law School. A fiery orator and an uncompromising revolutionary, he led the Nationalist Party from 1930 until his death in 1965. Tensions were high in the early thirties, when a series of skirmishes broke out between nationalists and police and events came to a head in 1936, when Albizu Campos and other nationalist leaders were convicted of seditious conspiracy following the murder of the island's American police chief, E. Francis Riggs.⁴⁸ The following year, Governor Blanton Winship ordered the shooting of a group of nationalist protestors in what became known as the

⁴⁶ *United States of America v. José Emiliano Velázquez*, Motion to Dismiss Indictment (1972), The José E. Velázquez Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.

⁴⁷ For a full account of this debate, see Rivera Ramos, 145-151; regarding the Jones Act and the motives behind it see Trías Monge, 67-87; Smith, 433; Raymond Carr, *Puerto Rico: A Colonial Experiment* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 51-54. For further discussion of the United States' policy of conscripting immigrants and resident aliens during the First World War, see Enloe, 73-74. Lucy E. Salyer explores this topic in greater depth in "Baptism by Fire: Race, Military Service, and U.S. Citizenship Policy, 1918-1935," *The Journal of American History* (Dec. 2004): 847-76.

⁴⁸ Trías Monge, 93; Ayala and Bernabe, 110-112. Mari Brás discusses the violence of 1935-36 and its consequences, 97-101. Ronald Fernandez claims that the murder of Riggs was precipitated by the police chief's own involvement in an assassination attempt on Albizu Campos, but the author unfortunately provides no evidence for his charge nor any indication of where the claim originated, in *Prisoners of Colonialism: The Struggle for Justice in Puerto Rico* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1994), 41-43.

Ponce Massacre.⁴⁹ The massacre and the imprisonment of the era's most vocal *independentista* left the independence movement greatly weakened. The close of the 1940s saw the emergence of a new political option, and the independence movement would never again represent more than a small minority of the population.

In 1952, Luís Muñoz Marín, a former *independentista* and the first democratically elected Governor of Puerto Rico, oversaw the implementation of the *Estado Libre Asociado* (ELA). The ELA was widely translated to mean Commonwealth of the United States, and it served as a third option between independence and statehood, both of which appeared increasingly unlikely. What had become clear to Muñoz Marín, as well as a large segment of the Puerto Rican population, was that independence from the United States would most likely leave the island destitute. Looking at their neighbours throughout the Caribbean, it became clear that preferential access to the United States economy ensured a far higher standard of living than they would be able to maintain without.⁵⁰ While it allowed for the adoption of a Puerto Rican Constitution, in reality Commonwealth status did little to fundamentally change the island's relationship with the United States, but the apparent increase in autonomy satisfied many Puerto Ricans and enabled the U.S. to rebuff accusations of colonialism at the height of the Cold War.⁵¹ Although the establishment of the ELA provoked a brief but violent uprising by nationalists, including an attempt on the life of President Truman, the legislation maintained the support of a large segment of the Puerto Rican population for the next twenty years.⁵²

⁴⁹ For an account of the Ponce Massacre, see Ayala and Bernabe, 116 and Arturo Morales Carrión, *Puerto Rico: A Political and Cultural History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc, 1983), 238-239.

⁵⁰ Ayala and Bernabe, 149-151.

⁵¹ Ayala and Bernabe, 158-170; Grosfoguel, 108; Margaret Power, "The Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, Transnational Latin American Solidarity, and the United States during the Cold War," Unpublished Manuscript, 2012.

⁵² Ayala and Bernabe, 177-178. The uprising is the subject of Margaret Power's piece "The Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, Transnational Latin American Solidarity, and the United States during the Cold War."

By the time the 1950s came to a close, the character of the island had changed dramatically. Luís Muñoz Marín's Popular Democratic Party (PPD) had firmly entrenched itself in power, largely due to popular support for the ELA, and independence was almost a non-issue, with the majority of the population now lending support to either the Commonwealth or the statehood option. But there was one other major shift that defined the period, and it marked one of the most significant transformations in Puerto Rico during the twentieth century. Migration between the island and the U.S. mainland began with the Spanish American War and picked up steam with the implementation of the Jones Act in 1917. The wake of the Second World War, however, saw a massive wave of migration, as roughly a quarter of the Puerto Rican population relocated to the mainland in search of opportunity.⁵³ For most, their aspirations were never fulfilled and the growing Puerto Rican population in the United States became one of the most impoverished minority groups in the country.⁵⁴ Discrimination was rampant, and defects in Puerto Rican culture were identified as the cause of their condition, rather than an inherently racist system.⁵⁵ Such discrimination would not be taken quietly, however, and unrest in the barrio was about to explode.

The turmoil of the 1960s left few segments of the American population untouched, and the Puerto Rican community was no exception. For many on the mainland, the civil rights movement inspired acts of civil disobedience and led to the emergence of groups such as the Young Lords Party, which fought for improved health and sanitation in the barrios of major U.S. cities. Puerto Rican students became increasingly radical, both on and off the island. The Puerto

⁵³ Ayala and Bernabe claim that between 1950 and 1970, 27% of the 1950 population of Puerto Rico migrated to the mainland, 194; a similar statistic can be found in Duany, 13.

⁵⁴ Grosfoguel, 110; Torres, 2.

⁵⁵ These defects were central to a report originally released in the 1960s: Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: the Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1970); the Puerto Rican "culture of poverty" and the claims espoused by Glazer and Moynihan are discussed at length from a gendered perspective in Briggs, 163-176.

Rican Students Union (PRSU) that emerged in New York City fought for a culturally appropriate curriculum as well as the establishment of a Puerto Rican Studies program at the City University of New York (CUNY).⁵⁶ On the island, the independence movement spawned student groups such as the University Pro Independence Federation (FUPI) and the University Independence Youth (JIU) which were central to the revival of the independence movement that was taking place by the late 1960s. The JIU and FUPI maintained connections to larger independence groups on the island, such as the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP) and the Pro Independence Movement (MPI). While all factions of the movement were motivated by different causes, they found common ground in their opposition to the Vietnam War.⁵⁷

President Lyndon Baines Johnson increased the United States' involvement in Southeast Asia with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964, and set in motion a series of events that by the end of the decade would threaten to rend in two the very fabric of American society. Johnson hoped to create a Great Society – that his legacy would be defined by ground-breaking civil rights legislation and an improvement in living conditions for the country's poor. Instead, working classes and minorities were shipped to Vietnam in increasing numbers, victims of a draft that became the focal point of the anti-war movement. Although the draft was designed to be inherently democratic, a system of loopholes allowed the country's privileged youth to avoid combat. America's top echelon enlisted in the National Guard, which they understood to be a sure way to avoid combat, or they enrolled in university to take advantage of student deferments that enabled them to delay their induction. Those who occupied the bottom rungs of the social

⁵⁶ For a detailed account of the PRSU, see Basilio Serrano, "¡Riflé, Cañon, y Escopeta!: A Chronicle of the Puerto Rican Student Union," in *The Puerto Rican Experience*, ed. by Andrés Torres and José E. Velázquez (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 124-143. Angela Ryan devotes a chapter to the events at CUNY in her PhD dissertation, "Education for the People: The Third World Student Movement at San Francisco College and City College of New York" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2010), 162-209.

⁵⁷ Ayala and Bernabe provide a break-down of different independence groups on the island, 226-29.

ladder, however, had neither the connections nor the funds to employ such measures. Christian G. Appy, in his study of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam, claims that 80% of combat soldiers came from poor and working class backgrounds.⁵⁸ For racially oppressed minorities in the U.S., most of whom belonged to the country's poor and working classes, this meant a disproportionate burden in fighting the war.⁵⁹ At the same time, the massive wave of migration from the island placed a rising number of Puerto Ricans within this category.

Serving in the U.S. armed forces was nothing new for Puerto Ricans. The island has a long history of military service that dates back to the First World War, to which over 18,000 of its men were sent. Over 65,000 Puerto Ricans fought in the Second World War and another 60,000 were sent to Korea, where the all Puerto Rican 65th Regiment (known commonly as the Borinqueneers) gained infamy.⁶⁰ Early on, the regiment was commended for its heroism and suffered heavy casualties, but its reputation was eventually stained when ninety-five of its members were subject to the largest court-martial of the Korean War for refusing to fight at the Battle for Outpost Kelly in September 1952. In recent years, there has been a campaign to exonerate the Borinqueneers, and a study commissioned by the U.S. Army Center of Military History in 1999 attributed the failure of the unit to a number of factors, many of which revolved around language barriers and the poor relations between Puerto Rican soldiers and their

⁵⁸ Appy, 6.

⁵⁹ While there are few statistics on Hispanic soldiers from this period, much research has been done on the involvement of African Americans in the war. While the proportion of black soldiers in the services was roughly equivalent to that of the larger population, black soldiers were far more likely to be in combat. Deferments and enlistments were predominantly white, thereby creating a disproportionately non-white draft pool. While draftees accounted for 16% of the armed forces, they made up 50-70% of combat deaths by 1969. When the Army lowered enlistment standards with Project 100,000 in 1966, over 40% of those who entered in the first two years were black and mostly poor with little education. See George Q. Flynn *The Draft, 1940-1973* (Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas, 1993), 171 and 206-209.

⁶⁰ These statistics can be found in United States House of Representatives, "Speech on the House Floor Concerning the 88th Anniversary of U.S. Citizenship for Puerto Ricans," *Congressional Record*, Congressman Luis G. Fortuño, March 2, 2005, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CREC-2005-03-02/pdf/CREC-2005-03-02-pt1-PgH918-3.pdf> (accessed July 4, 2011).

commanding officers.⁶¹ For the 48,000 Puerto Ricans who fought in Vietnam, their involvement in the war was nothing new.⁶² What changed was that opposition to the conscription of Puerto Rican youth, an issue that had simmered since the days of Albizu Campos, boiled over in the 1960s.

The Anti-Draft Movement

In 1959, a group of *independentistas*, dissatisfied with the state of the nationalist movement on the island, founded the Pro Independence Movement (MPI). In recent decades, the main organ of the nationalist movement had been the Pro Independence Party (PIP), but infighting had weakened the PIP and electoral support for the party all but disappeared by the sixties.⁶³ As a result of his struggle with party leader Gilberto Concepción de Gracia, attorney Juan Mari Brás led a group of defectors who left the party to form the MPI.⁶⁴ The MPI was not a political party, but an organization of *independentistas* from various points of the political spectrum who sought to change the direction of the independence struggle in Puerto Rico.⁶⁵ It took its inspiration from the Cuban Revolution and openly expressed solidarity with Fidel Castro, maintaining a permanent delegate in Havana and ensuring the constant surveillance of the FBI.⁶⁶ Though it claimed at the time of its founding that it did not advocate violence, it

⁶¹ For a full-length account of the 65th Regiment and the events of the Korean War, see Villahermosa.

⁶² The figure of 48,000 can be found in Appy, 15 and United States House of Representatives, "Speech on the House Floor." There is some disagreement over the number of Puerto Ricans killed in the war. In the same speech cited above, Congressman Fortuño claimed that the total killed amounted to over 430, however 345 is the total given by the United States government. The confusion is likely caused by the challenging of accounting for members of the diaspora. National Archives, "U.S. Military Fatal Casualties of the Vietnam War for Home-State-of-Record: Puerto Rico," <http://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-lists/pr-alpha.pdf> (accessed July 4, 2011).

⁶³ Berrios Martínez, 147.

⁶⁴ Mari Brás gives a detailed account of the founding of the MPI, 130-31, and faults Concepción de Gracia for the defection of MPI leaders, 139.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 129-31.

⁶⁶ Ibid. And Ayala and Bernabe, 226-227.

would openly accept members who did.⁶⁷ The establishment of the MPI in 1959 was accompanied by the launch of the organization's newspaper, *Claridad*, which remains today as one of the island's most important left-leaning news sources. During the 1960s, the MPI became a powerful branch of the independence movement, in what former leader Juan Mari Brás describes as the organization's "golden age."⁶⁸

Despite early denials about their Marxist orientation, over the course of the decade the MPI moved increasingly further to the left, officially adopting Marxist-Leninist ideology in 1969 and announcing its transition to the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP) in 1971.⁶⁹ As the MPI underwent this shift, it moved further from the PIP, which experienced its own evolution by the late 1960s. The death of PIP leader Gilberto Concepción de Gracia brought a change of leadership in 1968, in the form of attorney and UPR law professor Rubén Berríos Martínez. Berríos remained dedicated to independence through electoral reform and, although he found common cause with the more militant MPI, he was committed to electoral reform and adamant that his party would not resort to the aggressive methods espoused by the island's other independence organizations.⁷⁰ Along with the change in leadership of the PIP, the arrival of the

⁶⁷ Volume 38: Puerto Rican Independence Party
http://www.pr-secretfiles.net/binders/SJ-100-4014_25_38_119.pdf

⁶⁸ Mari Brás, 132.

⁶⁹ Ayala and Bernabe, 227. In 1963 the MPI declared that its political thesis was not, nor ever would be, a Marxist-Leninist document, Movimiento Pro Independencia de Puerto Rico, *La hora de independencia: Tesis Política Movimiento Pro Independencia de Puerto Rico* (San Juan, PR: Misión Nacional del Movimiento Pro Independencia de Puerto Rico, 1963), 7. Mari Brás describes the MPI's transition to socialism, 144-45.

⁷⁰ FBI Memo, Dec. 5, 1969, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, *FBI Files on Puerto Ricans*, "Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño, Volume 41," Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY http://www.pr-secretfiles.net/binders/SJ-100-4014_28_41_122.pdf (accessed Aug. 19, 2011). This document outlines a speech given by Berríos, stating that "Here he showed his pride of not wanting to submit to the unitary leadership of MARI BRAS or any other leader who believes in violence." In a later editorial which he wrote for *Claridad*, Mari Brás acknowledges the necessity of revolutionary violence, claiming that revolution was the only sure path to independence in Puerto Rico, "Violencia y Revolución," *Claridad*, March 21, 1971, p.8. Regarding the relationship between the MPI and the PIP, Mari Brás states that the ascension of Berríos as head of the party brought the two organizations closer together by the close of the decade, and identifies 1971 as the height of unity between the PIP and the MPI. A fundamental disagreement over the 1972 elections, however, led to another rift between the two groups, 146-47.

MPI on the national scene reinvigorated the independence movement in Puerto Rico, which underwent “a period of quantitative growth, increased visibility, and ideological redefinition.”⁷¹ Although the leaders of both parties denounced the war, the MPI took strength early on from its virulent and vocal opposition to the conflict in Vietnam and, in particular, the conscription of Puerto Rican youth.

The anti-draft movement in Puerto Rico began early in the war, and was immediately situated within the broader independence movement. In July 1965 *Claridad* raised the question of why Puerto Rican youth, persecuted for committing violence in defence of their own country, were taught to kill for the United States Army.⁷² The island’s colonial status, it claimed, enabled the U.S. to drag its citizens into an aggressive and unjust war, to be used as cannon fodder in support of an imperialist cause.⁷³ The term *carne de cañón* (cannon fodder) can be found frequently in the publications throughout the Vietnam War period, and it was again used by Félix Ojeda in a passionate article written April 2nd, 1966. Ojeda condemned the compensation of dead soldiers’ parents with medals and “a few thousand dollars that reek of death,” and described how Puerto Rican bodies were returned to the island draped in a foreign flag.⁷⁴ At the root of his critique was the issue of citizenship, for the independence movement rejected Puerto Rican citizenship as evidence of the island’s colonial condition.

In making his critique, Ojeda expressed a view commonly espoused by the nationalist movement: that the imposition of U.S. citizenship without the consent of the Puerto Rican people

⁷¹ Ayala and Bernabe, 227.

⁷² “¿Habra Otra Corea?” *Claridad*, July 30, 1965, 4.

⁷³ “Cuántos más Morirán?” *Claridad*, July 30, 1965, 1.

⁷⁴ The original statement is written as “unos cuantos miles de dólares que apestan a muerte”. Félix Ojeda, “Boricuas pagan con muerte,” *Claridad*, April 2, 1966, 3. A later article gives the exact monetary figure as \$10,000; Juan Manuel Delgado, “La ignorancia me llevó al ejército,” *Claridad*, Nov. 1, 1970, 10.

revealed the glaring hypocrisy of democracy in the United States.⁷⁵ Juan Mari Brás described the Jones Act as an “abusive” act of Congress, and called on all Puerto Ricans to renounce their U.S. citizenship.⁷⁶ On the mainland, the Young Lords also made this claim, pointing out that the Puerto Rican legislature twice voted against citizenship before it was granted.⁷⁷ Efrén Rivera Ramos points out that the question of whether or not citizenship was forced upon Puerto Ricans has been the subject of much debate, but he ultimately sides with the nationalist argument. He argues that while it was unclear whether or not the majority of the Puerto Rican population supported citizenship, Congress ignored calls for a plebiscite on the issue and thereby made no effort to ascertain the desires of the Puerto Rican people.⁷⁸

The question of consent plays an important role in such critiques of Puerto Rican citizenship, but it was the very foundation of the independence movement’s opposition to the draft. The imposition of conscription demonstrated a distinct absence of consent, of active participation in the decision-making process. Denied the right to voting representation in Congress, the citizens of Puerto Rico were excluded from decisions about whether or not to go to war and yet they were expected to contribute to the nation’s defence with the blood of their youth. Cynthia Enloe describes this as a common occurrence between powerful nations and their ethnic minorities, claiming that minority groups are often viewed not as active participants in matters of state, but as “resources to be exploited ... most accurately analysed not as loyal

⁷⁵ Lorrin Thomas, “How They Ignore our Rights as American Citizens’: Puerto Rican Migrants and the Politics of Citizenship in the New Deal Era,” in *Latinos and Citizenship: The Dilemma of Belonging*, ed. Suzanne Oboler (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 34.

⁷⁶ Juan Mari Brás, “La ciudadanía Norteamericana,” *Claridad*, Aug. 28, 1965, 2. No one heeded his call at the time and Mari Brás eventually became the first Puerto Rican to legally renounce his American citizenship and be granted Puerto Rican citizenship thirty years later.

⁷⁷ Young Lords Party, *Palante: The Young Lords Party* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co, 1971), 61.

⁷⁸ Rivera Ramos, 152-153. Raymond Carr also addresses the issue of consent, but claims that although the Puerto Rican public was not consulted, it is likely that a majority supported citizenship, 54.

citizens but as state-mobilized cannon fodder.”⁷⁹ For many Puerto Ricans, this was precisely how they understood their situation. The injustice of conscription was apparent to a large segment of the population, for it was commonly believed that they had never given their consent to compulsory military service.⁸⁰

As the war escalated in 1964 and selective service calls reached levels not seen since the Korean War, opposition grew. In May 1965, Sixto Alvelo became the first Puerto Rican to challenge the draft when he was called up for induction and refused to swear allegiance to the U.S. flag. Alvelo became a national symbol for the anti-draft movement, and his case became the impetus for the mobilization of people across the island. The MPI vowed to provide whatever resources would be necessary for his defence and the Sixto Alvelo Defense Committee was formed to provide moral support and raise legal funds.⁸¹ Although the MPI led the charge on Alvelo’s defense, the Comité was not limited to MPI members, but was made up of a broad coalition of *independentistas*.⁸² Alvelo was eventually reclassified and the case against him dropped, but the Comité expanded its mission to provide support and legal assistance to all Puerto Rican youth who refused induction, and eventually changed its name to the Selective Service Resistance Committee.⁸³ Representatives traveled across the island and branches were

⁷⁹ Enloe, 13.

⁸⁰ This opinion was expressed by District Court Judge Hiram Cancio in his decision in *United States v. Feliciano Grafals*, as cited in "Memorandum in Support for Defendant's Motion to Dismiss Inapplicability of Draft Act to Native Born Residents of Puerto Rico, Cruz, Benjamin," *United States of America v. Benjamin Cruz*, José E. Velázquez Papers: box 5; folder 2; Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.

⁸¹ The organization went by the name *Comité Pro Defensa de Sixto Alvelo*, “Ejuician joven por servicio militar,” *Claridad*, April 2, 1966, p. 1.

⁸² “Gathering in Guayama to organize large meeting of Alvelo Committee,” March 21, 1969, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, *FBI Files on Puerto Ricans*, “Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño, Volume 38,” Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY http://www.pr-secretfiles.net/binders/SJ-100-4014_25_38_119.pdf (accessed Aug. 19, 2011).

⁸³ *Comité de Resistencia contra el Servicio Militar Obligatorio*. Pedro Santana Ronda, “Afirman Quemaran miles de tarjetas SMO en Lares,” *Claridad*, Aug. 2, 1970, p. 2.

established in many smaller centers, such as Bayamon and Ponce. The organization vowed to continue its support for Puerto Rican youth who chose to fight against the “blood tax.”⁸⁴

Alvelo’s refusal and the subsequent formation of the Comité were only one component of a much larger movement that was forming in opposition to the draft. Already by 1965, there was a significant protest movement on the island. In August of that year, a group of military age youth protested in front of the San Juan Selective Service offices. Two of the group’s leaders, José Quiles and René Pietri, stood up to speak. They claimed that Puerto Ricans made up only 1% of the United States population, yet accounted for 3.5% of those called up for the draft.⁸⁵ Public demonstrations were accompanied by increasing unrest at the University of Puerto Rico, where FUPI led a protest of 500 students in September and a group of university professors held an educational marathon a month later, which ended in a march of 2,000 students down the streets of Rio Piedras, the San Juan district that was home to the island’s largest and most important university.⁸⁶ In 1966, members of the PIP undertook a series of hunger strikes to protest selective service, eventually traveling to Washington, D.C., where they sat in front of the District Courthouse for five days.⁸⁷ By the close of the decade, anti-draft rallies drew crowds of up to 40,000 people.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Originally stated as “*tributo de sangre*” in “Comite Alvelo Pro Defensa de la Juventud Puertorriquena,” 1969; The Emelí Vélez de Vando Papers; 1998_06; box 5; folder 10; Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños Archives, Hunter College, CUNY; “Archivaron caso Sixto Alvelo,” *Claridad*, Aug. 13, 1966, p. 1.

⁸⁵ “Piquetean oficinas del Servicio Selectivo en San Juan,” *Claridad*, Aug. 28, 1965, p. 3. Although I have not been able to confirm this number through government documents, this statistic was cited repeatedly by the anti-draft movement throughout the war. A *Washington Post* article from 1970, while not citing specific statistics, also claims that Puerto Ricans were being inducted at a higher per capita rate than any of the 50 states: “Puerto Ricans Question Draft,” *The Washington Post, Times Herald* (1959-1973), Jul 27, 1970, <http://ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/147750824?accountid=14656> (accessed December 23, 2011).

⁸⁶ “Demonstración antimilitar dentro universidad,” *Claridad*, Sept. 4, 1965, p. 5 and “Estudiantes repudian guerra Vietnam; Rechazan Servicio Militar Obligatorio,” *Claridad*, Oct. 16, 1965, p. 1.

⁸⁷ Various newspaper articles from *El Mundo*, *El Imparcial* and the *San Juan Star*, dated from July – Sept., 1966 as well as an FBI memo, Sept. 20, 1966, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, *FBI Files on Puerto Ricans*, “Partido

From the beginning, it was clear that the *independentistas* set the agenda for the anti-draft movement, and they frequently tied their opposition to key moments in Puerto Rican history, thereby situating the issue of conscription within the broader colonial context. On March 21, 1966, the MPI held a rally in front of the army recruitment station at Fort Brooke, commemorating the Ponce Massacre of 1937. Two youth, Antonio Diaz and Jorge Plard, honoured the memories of those killed by refusing induction into the U.S. armed forces.⁸⁹ A similar event took place on September 23, when activists celebrated the ninety-eighth anniversary of the first revolt against Spanish rule at Lares with a declaration of Puerto Rican youth to oppose the draft. The declaration stated: "We express our opposition to the tyrannical Selective Service Act that imperialism imposes on the Puerto Rican youth, as part of the colonial subjugation of our country."⁹⁰ Approximately 600 youth signed the declaration, publicly stating their refusal to fight for the U.S. army and the first to sign was Sixto Alvelo.⁹¹ Lares remained the site of protest in the years thereafter; in 1970, 20,000 people turned out to witness the burning of 1,400 draft cards and induction notices.⁹²

By 1966 the movement was gaining strength. In June, *Claridad* published a declaration by Puerto Rican youth who stated their refusal to swear loyalty to the United States. The statement again invoked the issue of consent, rejecting the imposition of selective service as a

Independentista Puertorriqueño, Volume 37," Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY http://www.pr-secretfiles.net/binders/SJ-100-4014_24_37_118.pdf (accessed Aug. 19, 2011).

⁸⁸ Bishop Antulio Parilla Bonilla and Puerto Rico's Committee of Resistance to Compulsory Military Service, "Position Against the Imposition of Any Kind of Military Service to Puerto Rico," Testimony Intended for the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Draft; MIAU/LAB News Services Collection, Box 1, Folder 6; The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University.

⁸⁹ "El aniversario masacre, jovenes del MPI repudian ejército," *Claridad*, March 26, 1966, p. 1.

⁹⁰ "Expresamos nuestro repudio a la tiránica Ley de Servicio Militar Obligatorio que, como parte de la subyugación colonial de nuestra patria, el imperialismo le impone a la juventud puertorriqueña." From "No iremos al ejército," *Claridad*, Oct. 30, 1966, p. 2.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² "Militants Resisting Draft in Puerto Rico." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Oct 04, 1970, <http://ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/118789913?accountid=14656> (accessed December 22, 2011).

fundamentally “arbitrary and anti-democratic” system.⁹³ The declaration identified the Jones Act as the root of the current problem, decrying the fact that Puerto Rican youth were forced to pay the price of “taxation without representation.”⁹⁴ This argument was not uncommon, and it was stated most eloquently in a legal motion which sought to have the draft in Puerto Rico declared illegal: attorneys representing draft-evader Benjamin Cruz pointed out how “repugnant” taxation without representation was to America’s founding fathers and asked if there could be any doubt “that a forced draft without representation would not have been foremost among their grievances.”⁹⁵ This was the force that motivated the 1966 declaration, which asked how Puerto Rican youth could be asked to pay the most valuable tribute – that of life and blood – to a government in which it had no voice, a government that fought without a declaration of war against people with whom Puerto Ricans had no quarrel.⁹⁶

This sentiment was common among the youth who increasingly refused induction. In December 1965, Gabriel Ferrer Arrocho was arrested by the FBI when he refused to swear allegiance to the American flag, swearing loyalty instead to Puerto Rico.⁹⁷ The following February Raúl Grillasca Domenech was supposedly slapped and pushed around by the police when he refused induction.⁹⁸ Such incidents provided fuel for the MPI, which commonly elevated draft evaders to the status of national heroes in the pages of *Claridad*. By 1967 the independence movement claimed some small victory when the U.S. army rejected nationalists due to concern for their radical politics. This was the reason given to FUPI leader Ludgardo

⁹³ “Declaración repudia servicio militar,” *Claridad*, June 18, 1966, p. 4.

⁹⁴ Originally stated as “*tributo sin representación*”, Ibid.

⁹⁵ United States District Court Southern District of New York, *United States of America v. Benjamin Cruz*, “Memorandum in Support of Defendant’s Motion to Dismiss for Inapplicability of Draft Act to Native Born Residents of Puerto Rico,” The José E. Velázquez Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY, 12-13.

⁹⁶ “Declaración repudia servicio militar,” *Claridad*, June 18, 1966, p. 4.

⁹⁷ “Otra joven independentista espera juicio por imposición militar,” *Claridad*, Dec. 4, 1965, p. 1.

⁹⁸ “Joven MPI resiste maltratos ejército,” *Claridad*, May 21, 1966, p. 1.

González in a letter he received January twelfth, which stated that his induction would be “contrary to national security.”⁹⁹ Twelve other student radicals had supposedly been rejected for the same reason. In June of that year, Juan Manuel Rivera Negrón was imprisoned for two days after refusing induction and making clear his nationalist sympathies. Rivera claimed that he was put in isolation by army intelligence so that his *independentista* claims would not contaminate the other recruits.¹⁰⁰ In explaining his refusal to fight in Vietnam, Rivera expressed solidarity with the North Vietnamese, who he referred to as his brothers in the fight for liberation.¹⁰¹ This position was taken even further by FUPI leader Florencio Merced, who claimed upon refusing induction that the only way he would fight in Vietnam would be for the Viet Cong.¹⁰²

Expressions of solidarity with the people of Vietnam held a prominent place in *independentista* propaganda from the earliest days of the conflict. To many nationalists, it was clear that the North Vietnamese were fighting a battle similar to their own: one in which the United States continued to support colonialism. The MPI called upon Puerto Rican youth to “resist the pretensions of North American imperialism,” declared its solidarity with the National Liberation Front (NLF) in South Vietnam, and condemned U.S. aggression against the “heroic” people of Vietnam.¹⁰³ In an editorial written in early 1968, Juan Mari Brás claimed that the struggle of the Vietnamese people was accomplishing more for Puerto Rico than Puerto Ricans had themselves. He declared that Vietnam represented “the beginning of the end of American imperialism,” and that it had shown “that a bleeding people is able to stand up in battle, driven

⁹⁹ The original text states “contrario a la seguridad nacional.” “Ejército rechaza dirigente FUPI,” *Claridad*, Feb. 19, 1967, p. 2.

¹⁰⁰ Manuel de J. González, “Se niega al ejército: ‘No voy a asesinar a mis hermanos,’” *Claridad*, June 4, 1967, p. 2.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Alberto Perez, “Joven arrestado por negarse al ejército ratifico solidaridad con pueblo de Vietnam,” *Claridad*, Aug. 6, 1967, p. 1.

¹⁰³ “No a la guerra sucia: MPI condena agresión E.U. en Viet Nam; Llama juvenes resistir el servicio militar,” *Claridad*, Aug. 7, 1961, p. 1.

by the sacred cause of independence to defeat the most powerful aggressors.”¹⁰⁴ Such expressions were laden with patriotic rhetoric and fierce denunciations of the United States administration, which was frequently compared to the Nazis for their use of napalm and chemical warfare.¹⁰⁵ To the Puerto Rican left, U.S. involvement in Vietnam provided a powerful propaganda tool, for here was obvious proof that the United States was willing to support colonialism through violent means. By declaring their solidarity with the NLF, the *independentistas* situated themselves within the broader Third World struggle, subject to colonialism at home while they were required to enforce it abroad.

Their opposition to the draft, and to the war in Vietnam more broadly, not only led to solidarity with the people of Vietnam, but also brought *independentistas* on the island into closer contact with the Puerto Rican community on the mainland. The war gave common cause to two groups who faced different challenges. Although many on the mainland supported the cause of Puerto Rican independence, their attention was more often focused on the need to confront a system that was defined by racial discrimination. While it is not the case that racism has never existed in Puerto Rico (a common claim among early observers), it is true that the conception of race is very different between the island and the mainland.¹⁰⁶ Whereas the United States adheres to the ‘one drop’ rule – that a single drop of African blood qualifies one as black – in Puerto Rico, the opposite is true: one drop of white blood is often enough to qualify a person as white.¹⁰⁷ The fluidity of race on the island stands in stark contrast to the rigid distinction between

¹⁰⁴ Original text: "Vietnam representa el principio del fin del imperialismo norteamericano. Ha demostrado, con el ejemplo, que un pueblo desangrado es capaz de erguirse en combate, impulsado por la causa sagrada de la independencia, hasta derrotar a los agresores más poderosos." Juan Mari Brás, "Vietnam heroico y Puerto Rico," *Claridad*, Feb. 25, 1968, p. 3.

¹⁰⁵ Numerous examples of such language can be found in *Claridad* throughout this period. One example is "Los Nazis de hoy," *Claridad*, July 23, 1967, p. 7.

¹⁰⁶ For an early account of race in Puerto Rico, see Theodore Brameld, *The Remaking of a Culture: Life and Education in Puerto Rico* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1959), 66-68.

¹⁰⁷ Duany, 237 and Grosfoguel, 34.

black and white on the mainland, where Puerto Ricans who would normally consider themselves ‘white’ find themselves in a position of inferiority.¹⁰⁸ Puerto Ricans in the U.S. were stereotyped as lazy, criminal, stupid, and uncivilized, and their failure to succeed attributed to cultural or racial deficiencies, rather than inherently unequal socioeconomic structures.¹⁰⁹

The poor living conditions faced by New York’s Puerto Rican community were often decried by island leftists in the pages of *Claridad*, but their situation was spelled out in detail in a 1967 article by Pedro Juan Rua. Rua defended recent unrest in Spanish Harlem that had been aroused by police brutality, claiming that police actions were not the only cause of discontent. Among the causes of recent unrest in the barrio were the high rents paid for apartments that failed to meet health standards, the large number of children who faced illnesses carried by rats and insects, and the countless landlords who only provided the bare minimum of heating required by law in the winter. He claimed that discrimination was rampant in the work place, where blacks and Puerto Ricans continued to receive the lowest wages.¹¹⁰ Many more Puerto Ricans were plagued by inability to even find work, with subemployment reaching rates of over 30% among barrio residents by the end of the decade.¹¹¹ Rua claimed that Puerto Ricans in the United States were inspired by the civil rights movement, and that they were waking up to the fact that the movement could offer them the support they needed for their own struggle.¹¹²

The appreciation expressed by Rua for the civil rights movement revealed a source of inspiration not only for leftists in New York, but those on the island as well, and indicated a sense of solidarity that tied together these disparate elements of the movement. In August 1966,

¹⁰⁸ Duany, 239 and Grosfoguel, 33.

¹⁰⁹ Grosfoguel, 149-150 and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, *National Performances: The Politics of Class, Race and Space in Puerto Rican Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 9.

¹¹⁰ Pedro Juan Rua, “Boricuas en Nueva York comienzan a despertar,” *Claridad*, July 30, 1967, p. 2.

¹¹¹ Manuel Maldonado-Denis, “The Puerto Ricans: Protest or Submission?” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 382, no. 26 (1969): 27.

¹¹² Pedro Juan Rua, “Boricuas en Nueva York comienzan a despertar,” *Claridad*, July 30, 1967, p. 2.

when Sixto Alvelo spoke to the crowd of over 25,000 anti-war activists in Times Square, he gave an impassioned speech in which he denounced U.S. imperialism and called for an end to America's dirty war in Vietnam. The struggle of Puerto Rico, he claimed, was the same struggle as those fought in Vietnam, Cuba, and Guatemala, and also the one fought in Watts and Harlem.¹¹³ The following year, black militants in the United States expressed their support for the Puerto Rican cause when Stokely Carmichael traveled to the island, where he participated in an anti-draft march and visited the grave of Pedro Albizu Campos.¹¹⁴ Carmichael, the Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and future Black Panther leader, denounced American motives in Vietnam, claiming "we are told that we will fight for a supposed democracy, but we know the hypocrisy of such a claim. We know in our flesh and blood what 'American democracy' means."¹¹⁵ Like Alvelo and Rua, he too identified the struggle of blacks and Puerto Ricans as one and the same, and tied it to the broader fight against imperialism that was taking place throughout the Third World.

The system of discrimination faced by African Americans in the U.S. had also given rise to increasing political activism in the Puerto Rican barrios of major American cities by the late 1960s. Activism was largely focused on changing the conditions outlined by Rua, and opposition to the war remained secondary. The Young Lords Party, which had become a visible presence by 1970, stated their opposition to the Vietnam War in their platform, but the party's activities were largely focused on improving living conditions in the barrio.¹¹⁶ Puerto Rican activists on the mainland eventually took inspiration from the anti-draft movement on the island, however, and

¹¹³ "Alvelo ante 25,000 personas condena la guerra," *Claridad*, Aug. 16, 1966, p. 2.

¹¹⁴ "Carmichael condena servicio militar," *Claridad*, Jan. 29, 1967, p. 1 and "Exiliados cubanos agreden jóvenes," *Claridad*, Jan. 29, 1967, p. 4.

¹¹⁵ "Carmichael condena servicio militar," *Claridad*, Jan. 29, 1967, p. 1.

¹¹⁶ Young Lords Party, "13 Point Platform and Program of the Young Lords Organization (1969)," in *The Young Lords: A Reader*, ed. Darrel Enck-Wanzer (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 10.

two of them were charged with refusing induction in 1972. José Emiliano Velázquez was a Puerto Rican-born resident of the United States, a member of the New York branch of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (formerly the MPI), and a manager of *Claridad*, which had since expanded its coverage to the U.S. Discussing his arrest in June 1972, he stated:

The party's militants have a tradition of being the people who most staunchly resist the draft. I feel that it's politically correct and, as a member of the party, I have the obligation to resist the selective service. At the same time, a major campaign has to be mounted against the drafting of Puerto Ricans here in this country.¹¹⁷

The call for mainland Puerto Ricans to resist the draft was repeated by Pablo 'Yoruba' Guzman, when he was charged with two counts of selective service violation that same year. Guzman was the Minister of Information of the Young Lords Party and a vocal proponent of Puerto Rican civil rights. He pointed to the massive anti-draft campaign on the island, claiming that thousands of island youth had refused induction, and called upon Puerto Rican organizations on the mainland to "meet the challenge of organizing a massive campaign against the draft."¹¹⁸ Unlike Velázquez, who was sentenced to probation, Guzman was found guilty and sentenced to two years in prison. Looking back on the event years later, he suggested that his political leanings and his involvement in the Young Lords contributed to the length of his sentence. He pointed out that others convicted of the same charge had only been sentenced to six months or community service.¹¹⁹ While many such cases had been tried on the mainland, convictions in Puerto Rico were all but non-existent.

Prior to 1968, few draft evasion cases in Puerto Rico were prosecuted because, according to officials in Washington and San Juan, there was fear that the publicity would encourage more

¹¹⁷ "For draft resistance *Claridad* manager faces arrest," The José E. Velázquez Papers, box 6, folder 1, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.

¹¹⁸ Rafael Baerga, "Puerto Ricans and the draft," *Claridad*, April 7, 1972, p. 8-8.

¹¹⁹ Pablo Yoruba Guzman, "La Pura Vida: A Lord of the Barrio," *The Village Voice*, March 21, 1995, The Richie Pérez Papers, box 33, folder 13, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.

refusals. Furthermore, U.S. attorneys had so far lost every case they had tried.¹²⁰ This changed when the United States won its first case in September 1969, with the conviction of Edwin Feliciano Grafals. Feliciano, a member of the MPI, was sentenced to a year in prison; however, upon reconsidering the case, Hiram Cancio, Chief Judge of the United States District Court of Puerto Rico and a Johnson appointee, reduced the sentence from one year to one hour, claiming that the youth had been convicted for violating a law “that was passed without regard to the peculiarities of Puerto Rico and its political problems.”¹²¹ He further justified the reduced sentence by claiming that he felt Feliciano was sincere in his belief that he was “morally and philosophically bound not to bear arms for a government that invaded his homeland.”¹²² In the wake of Feliciano’s trial, all but six of the remaining *independentista* cases were dropped and Rubén Berríos of the PIP claimed that the draft was all but dead in Puerto Rico.¹²³

The Campaign Against the ROTC

Despite the fact that Feliciano’s sentence was eventually reduced, his initial conviction sparked an uproar among student activists at the University of Puerto Rico, who responded by setting fire to the ROTC building on the Rio Piedras campus. This was not the first time that students directed their anger toward the ROTC; skirmishes had already taken place in 1964 and 1967, when students opposed to U.S. militarism on campus disrupted parading cadets and did

¹²⁰ "Puerto Ricans Question Draft." *The Washington Post, Times Herald* (1959-1973), Jul 27, 1970, <http://ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/147750824?accountid=14656> (accessed December 23, 2011).

¹²¹ "Militants Resisting Draft in Puerto Rico." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Oct 04, 1970, <http://ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/118789913?accountid=14656> (accessed December 22, 2011).

¹²² "Puerto Ricans Question Draft." *The Washington Post, Times Herald* (1959-1973), Jul 27, 1970, <http://ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/147750824?accountid=14656> (accessed December 23, 2011).

¹²³ "Militants Resisting Draft in Puerto Rico." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Oct 04, 1970, <http://ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/118789913?accountid=14656> (accessed December 22, 2011).

battle with campus police.¹²⁴ Parallel to the anti-draft movement, another campaign had been gaining strength at university campuses across the island, where a large number of students opposed the continued presence of the Reserve Officers Training Commission (ROTC), a college program that trained commissioned officers for the United States Armed Forces.¹²⁵ The most vocal opponent of the ROTC was FUPI, the pro-independence student organization.

Formed at the University of Puerto Rico in 1956, FUPI was not officially tied to any party but appeared, to some, to demonstrate an alliance with the MPI.¹²⁶ In a study published in 1970, sociologist Arthur Liebman outlined the general political orientation of Puerto Rican students, noting that although a minority supported independence, support for the PIP in 1964 was eight times higher among university students than it was among the general population.¹²⁷ Over the course of the decade, the student population became increasingly radical, a trend that Liebman attributed to three causes: the election of pro-statehood Governor Luis Ferré in 1968; media exposure to civil rights, black power and student movements in the United States; and opposition to the Vietnam War and the selective service.¹²⁸ The focal point for pro-independence student groups, however, was the FUPI-led opposition to the ROTC.¹²⁹ One FUPI leader summarized the movement, stating that the group would:

¹²⁴ Maldonado-Denis, 30.

¹²⁵ In a statement released following anti-ROTC riots in March, 1971, five professors and members of the academic senate at UPR claimed that a majority of students opposed the ROTC, "Rio Piedras en Estado de Sitio," *Claridad*, March 15, 1971 p. 2.

¹²⁶ Arthur Liebman, *The Politics of Puerto Rican University Students* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), 131. This suspected connection is also apparent in FBI surveillance files, which state that FUPI has no affiliation with any political organizations, yet also note the irregularity of FUPI members showing up to a parade in Marxist-Leninist regalia for, up to that point at least, "the MPI (had) always been careful about identifying its members as sympathizers of Marxism-Leninism." FBI memos dated May 4 and June 15, 1967, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, *FBI Files on Puerto Ricans*, "Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño, Volume 38," Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY http://www.pr-secretfiles.net/binders/SJ-100-4014_25_38_119.pdf (accessed Aug. 19, 2011).

¹²⁷ Liebman, 30-31.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 151-52.

¹²⁹ Arthur Liebman, Kenneth N. Walker and Myron Glazer, *Latin American University Students: A Six Nation Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 206.

struggle against ROTC at the University of Puerto Rico, as the physical presence of the 'Yankee Army' on campus...We have stated that ROTC is in contradiction with our fundamental conception of a university - that we are not here to learn to kill in a war of U.S. aggression in Viet-Nam, rather we are here to learn to serve our country, Puerto Rico.¹³⁰

The movement began shortly after the escalation of the Vietnam War, but by the close of the decade it led to increasingly violent confrontations that pitted the student left against ROTC cadets and police.

The conviction of Edwin Feliciano Grafals energized the student movement in Puerto Rico. The day of his conviction, dozens of students attacked the ROTC building, attempting to burn it down, while thousands more cheered them on. Seven students were arrested for inciting violence, including FUPI leader Florencio Merced.¹³¹ Also among those arrested was José Miguel Pérez, the leader of the University Independence Youth (JIU), the student branch of the PIP.¹³² The JIU followed up the events of September by declaring a hunger strike on October 7, 1969, which lasted for twenty-eight days and saw the participation of forty students.¹³³ Protests continued to escalate in the coming weeks and October 29 brought the largest march in San Juan since the death of Albizu Campos, when thousands of students walked from Rio Piedras to Fort Brooke to protest the ROTC, selective service, and the continued military presence of the United

¹³⁰ Liner notes, *Tengo Puerto Rico en mi Corazon*, Pepe y Flora, Paradon Records, 1971, Smithsonian Folkways, http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/paredon/PAR01005.pdf (accessed Oct. 19, 2011).

¹³¹ "Tension Remains at Puerto Rico U." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Oct 05, 1969, <http://ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/118525302?accountid=14656> (accessed December 22, 2011).

¹³² FBI Memo dated March 11, 1970, "Juventud Independtista Universitario – Security Matter," Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, *FBI Files on Puerto Ricans*, "Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño, Volume 41," Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY http://www.pr-secrefiles.net/binders/SJ-100-4014_28_41_122.pdf (accessed Aug. 19, 2011).

¹³³ Ibid. and "Anti-R.O.T.C. Hunger Strike is Started at Puerto Rico U." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Oct 08, 1969, <http://ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/118688336?accountid=14656> (accessed December 22, 2011).

States in the Caribbean.¹³⁴ Six weeks of pressure by the student movement led to victory on November 6, when the academic senate voted to phase out the ROTC program over the next two years.¹³⁵

However, opposition to the senate's decision revealed that a significant sector of the student body supported the presence of ROTC at the university. The victory for the left was not taken quietly and the following day ROTC supporters directed their anger towards the MPI. The day after the ruling, as pro-independence students gathered in the university theater to discuss the present situation with university Chancellor Abraham Diaz, students and parents in support of the ROTC marched to protest the senate's decision. When they reached the MPI headquarters, a mob of 200 people stormed the building and attempted to set it on fire, trapping forty MPI members inside. As the crowd shouted for the *independentistas* to be burned alive, a Lutheran minister pled with the police to save those inside, but officers replied that their instructions had been to stay out of the fray. When a group of MPI youth arrived on the scene, tensions escalated and gunshots broke out. By the end of the night, two MPI members and a police officer had been shot and another ten people were wounded.¹³⁶ Later that month, the senate decision was overruled by a nine-man academic council that ruled five to four in favour of keeping the ROTC on campus.¹³⁷

Just as the senate's decision did not mark the end of the ROTC on campus, neither did the attack on the MPI bring an end to violent protest at the university. On March 4, 1970, picketing

¹³⁴ Juan E. Mestas and Victor Rodríguez, "Universitarios realizan marcha contra ROTC-SMO," *Claridad*, Nov. 2, 1969, p. 3.

¹³⁵ "Mob in Puerto Rico Attacks the Center for Independence," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Nov 08, 1969, <http://ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/118619982?accountid=14656> (accessed December 22, 2011).

¹³⁶ "13 Puerto Ricans Injured in Clash." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Nov 09, 1969, <http://ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/118605461?accountid=14656> (accessed December 22, 2011).

¹³⁷ "Yanqui Go Home Echoes in Puerto Rican Streets." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Nov 24, 1969, <http://ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/118515416?accountid=14656> (accessed December 22, 2011).

outside the ROTC led to a fight between *independentistas* and cadets. Pro-independence students again set fire to the ROTC building and this time the university administration called in law enforcement. It was the first time the police had entered the grounds of the university in twenty years. As the cops drove the students off campus, the fight spilled into the streets of Rio Piedras and a stray bullet took the life of nineteen-year-old Antonia Martínez, who was watching events from a balcony above.¹³⁸ At least five other people were sent to the hospital with bullet wounds and fifteen were arrested.¹³⁹ In July, university president Jaime Benítez commissioned a report on the ROTC that resulted in the banning of military parades and exercises on campus, but affirmed the university's commitment to endorsing the ROTC presence at UPR. The ruling brought the objection of a number of academic senators, including political science professor Manuel Maldonado-Denis, who derided the report as inherently deficient, for it relied on the assumption that militarism was essential to Puerto Rican society.¹⁴⁰ Maldonado-Denis, himself an *independentista*, continued to voice his objection in an article written for *Claridad*, in which he predicted that the student population would never accept the continued presence of the building on campus, for it was the most symbolic aspect of the reviled ROTC.¹⁴¹

Almost a year to the day after the riot that left Antonia Martínez dead, the warnings of Maldonado-Denis rang true when the campus was shaken by the most violent events to date. A riot was sparked when a fistfight broke out between *independentistas* and ROTC cadets. Tensions had been heating up in the days prior, with disagreements between pro-independence students and

¹³⁸ To this day, Antonia Martínez remains a symbol of the student movement in Puerto Rico.

¹³⁹ "Girl Killed in Riot at Puerto Rico U." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Mar 05, 1970, <http://ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/119012480?accountid=14656> (accessed December 22, 2011) and "San Juan Campus Closed After Police and Students Clash." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Mar 06, 1970, <http://ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/119082453?accountid=14656> (accessed December 22, 2011).

¹⁴⁰ Florencio Merced, "Llaman componenda acuerdos sobre ROTC," *Claridad*, Aug. 9, 1970, p. 3.

¹⁴¹ Manuel Maldonado-Denis, "El ROTC y la universidad," *Claridad*, Aug. 9, 1970, p. 11.

cadets, when a discussion about Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier became heated. The cadets called Ali un-American and when the debate continued the next day, they showed up wearing the uniforms that had been banned from campus and carrying an American flag. The fight escalated when the cadets ran to the ROTC building, followed by FUPI members and other militant students, who did battle with the cadets.¹⁴² *Claridad* claimed that the first shots were fired from the ROTC building, directed towards rock-throwing *independentistas*.¹⁴³ The fight continued to escalate, as the student body divided along political lines and eventually 3,000 students faced off against 200 riot police and another sixty uniformed guards. By the end of the day, three people were dead, over sixty wounded, and sixty-four arrested. Among those killed was Juan B. Mercado, chief of the tactical police.¹⁴⁴

Student leaders aroused considerable support among the student body in their campaign against the ROTC, but activists never claimed a victory in their battle over conscription. The anti-draft movement came to an end nonetheless when President Richard Nixon put an end to Selective Service in 1973. Nixon won the 1968 election with a promise not only to end the draft, but to extract the United States from Vietnam altogether. It took him five years to follow through on his promise, and his years in office were among the most tumultuous of the Vietnam War era. Early in

¹⁴² Student independence leaders Luis Nieves Falcón, Pablo García Rodríguez, Felix Ojéda Reyes provide a point-by-point description of the events of March 9-11 in a work released shortly after the riots, *Puerto Rico: Grito y Mordaza*. Río Piedras, PR: Ediciones Librería Internacional, 1971), 7-10.

¹⁴³ "Río Piedras en Estado de Sitio," *Claridad*, March 15, 1971, p. 2 and "Humberto Pagan: His fate is Puerto Rico's," *Claridad*, April 23, 1972, p. S2.

¹⁴⁴ The events of March 11, 1971 are described in a number of news articles, including "Río Piedras en Estado de Sitio," *Claridad*, March 15, 1971, p. 2; "2 Police, Student Die in Puerto Rico Riot," *The Washington Post, Times Herald* (1959-1973), Mar 12, 1971, <http://ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/148117789?accountid=14656> (accessed December 23, 2011); "64 Held in Puerto Rico Campus Rioting," *The Washington Post, Times Herald* (1959-1973), Mar 13, 1971, <http://ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/147990381?accountid=14656> (accessed December 23, 2011); "Puerto Rican Campus is Quiet but Root of Riot is Untouched," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Mar 13, 1971, <http://ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/119353723?accountid=14656> (accessed December 22, 2011); and "Humberto Pagan: His fate is Puerto Rico's," *Claridad*, April 23, 1972, p. S2.

his first term, Nixon implemented a policy of ‘Vietnamization,’ reducing the number of U.S. combat troops while placing the burden of fighting on the South Vietnamese. By the end of 1971, only 156,800 American troops remained in Vietnam, down from half a million four years earlier.¹⁴⁵ On June 28, 1972, Nixon announced that no more draftees would be sent to Vietnam and the draft officially came to an end on January 27 the following year. By March 29, the last U.S. troops were withdrawn from Vietnam, marking an end to American involvement in the war that had so divided the U.S. public.

Much has been written about the impact of the Vietnam War on American society, but few of these – if any – take into consideration what it meant for the Puerto Rican citizens of the United States. On the island, opposition to the war became a central component in the renewal of the independence movement that had been so badly weakened a decade prior. Although the two leading independence groups on the island, the Puerto Rican Independence Party and the Pro Independence Movement, remained divided in their basic approach, they were united in their opposition to conscription and supported by an increasingly radical student movement. While it was clear that a large segment of the Puerto Rican population continued to back the island’s ties to the U.S., evidenced by support for the ELA, the ROTC, and the anger that was directed at the MPI, a significant portion of the generation that came of age in the 1960s found inspiration not only in the ideas espoused by Albizu Campos a generation before, but in the spirit of militancy that epitomized the zeitgeist of the era.

For Puerto Rican nationalists, conscription was the violent manifestation of the colonial condition that was at the root of their struggle. By tying their opposition to the draft to defining moments in the nationalist struggle, they situated conscription clearly within the colonial context.

¹⁴⁵ George Donelson Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal*, 5th ed (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006), 460-465.

Anti-draft rallies were held at Lares, commemorating the first revolt against Spanish rule, and in honour of the Ponce Massacre, reminding all who would listen of the colonial aggressor's callous disregard for Puerto Rican lives. They decried the fact that their youth were used as 'cannon fodder,' and took special offense at the fact that Puerto Rican bodies were sacrificed in the name of U.S. imperialism; that their boys were made to kill in the name of the very colonial system that they so despised. As the most radical voice on the island, the MPI was vocal in its support for the Vietnamese patriots who fought against the American aggressor. To the militant *independentistas*, the Viet Cong fought the same battle as Cuba, as Algeria, as the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico was not isolated from them, but part of a larger Third World movement that was breaking free of the shackles of colonialism. Nor were leftists on the island divided from their counterparts in the U.S., for their opposition to the war helped to bridge the gap between the two halves of the Puerto Rican population. Furthermore, it bred alliances with other radical groups in the United States, particularly the Black Power movement, who used increasingly militant tactics to make claims on the state.

At the very heart of the movement was citizenship, and the rights that it entailed. Despite the divisions between the island and the mainland, what motivated both groups was the need to challenge their second-class citizenship. On the island, where residents were denied the right to participate in federal politics, the opposition of the independence movement hinged on political rights and the issue of consent. The most powerful claim made by the Puerto Rican left was that conscription of island youth amounted to taxation without representation, that it was contrary to the very notion of American democracy. If Puerto Rican citizens were denied a voice in government, then they were denied the opportunity to give their consent for both the conduct of the war and the conscription of their youth to fight it. *Independentistas* thus rejected second-class

citizenship and opposed conscription as an inherently colonial institution. At the same time, for Puerto Ricans on the mainland, who were granted the right to full participation in government, activism was motivated by social rights and the struggle for equality in a system that placed them at the bottom of a racial hierarchy.

The activism of Puerto Ricans during the Vietnam War era must be situated within the context of the larger movement. Their efforts took place during an era that Suzanne Oboler describes as the critical moment when citizenship became defined through struggle, when it evolved from an abstract concept to a lived experience.¹⁴⁶ It was not the first time that Puerto Rican *independentistas* voiced their opposition to American imperialism, nor was it even the first time that they spoke out against conscription, but the movement was invigorated by a progressive force in the United States that seemed to hold the promise of advancement. Ronald Krebs explains the importance of Puerto Rican participation in the movement when he claims that “minorities are signposts indicating the nation's frontiers” and that

As (they) plead for first-class citizenship, protest for equal treatment and equal rights, demand autonomy, and even rise up in rebellion, they necessarily give shape to the larger community with which they are in dialogue and with which their relationship is ambiguous and perhaps ambivalent.¹⁴⁷

By challenging their access to political and social rights, the Puerto Rican left questioned their value in American society and drew attention to their colonial condition.

Opposition to the draft was not the single motivation behind the renewal of the Puerto Rican independence movement during the Vietnam War era, but it was a cause that appealed to all segments of the left, even bridging the gap between island and mainland Puerto Ricans. Conscription highlighted the inequalities that were inherent in the U.S. system and served as a tool by which to challenge the meaning of American democracy. It gave fuel to radicals who saw

¹⁴⁶ Oboler, 7.

¹⁴⁷ Krebs, 12.

themselves as not only part of a national movement, but a global movement, and made colonialism the centerpiece of their struggle.

Chapter 3: Popular Culture, Stereotypes and Changing Conceptions of Puerto Rican Identity

In 1968 a black Puerto Rican named Piri Thomas published a memoir called *Down These Mean Streets*. The fact that the book was categorized with black nationalist works of the period – placed on the same shelf as Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, for example – attests to the misconceptions that still surrounded the Puerto Rican population of the mainland United States at the time. Such a categorization indicated that the publishing industry chose to identify Thomas first and foremost by the tone of his skin, situating him on that much-maligned bottom rung of the U.S. racial hierarchy, a notch below what was allotted to him by his Puerto Rican ethnicity. As such, the publication and the marketing of the book served as a reflection of its content, for it is this question – the question of Puerto Rican racial and ethnic identity in the barrios of New York City – that is the source of Piri’s inner turmoil throughout the book, as his efforts to come to terms with own his identity motivate his most important decisions and give rise to the most powerful scenes in the story. While there may have been some confusion, or perhaps outright ignorance, among the wider public, to the Puerto Rican diaspora the book spoke to the realities of daily life on the ‘mean streets’ of New York. Today Thomas is recognized by many as the father of the Nuyorican literary movement that followed.

Thomas’s book came at a crucial moment for the Puerto Rican community. The decade defined by the Vietnam War marked a cultural awakening for the Puerto Rican population of the continental United States. Inspired by the radicalism of the period and the civil rights movement that so many of them had grown up with, the second- and third-generation Puerto Rican youth who came of age in the 1960s set out to confront the stereotypes that had in so many ways defined their early lives. The term ‘spik’ was imbued with a world of meanings, defined by

images of delinquency, deviance, and sexual promiscuity. It implied a script that came pre-packaged, easily identifiable to the country's ethnic majority and rooted in cultural defects that would secure the Puerto Rican position at the margins of society. By the close of the sixties, however, a sense of cultural pride emerged as the youth took it upon themselves to challenge this script, to take on damaging stereotypes and situate their culture within its broader social and historical context.

Kwame Anthony Appiah has claimed that “identities are founded in antagonism.”¹⁴⁸ Although he refers directly to Africans Americans, arguing that their identity is shaped by white perceptions of what it means to be black, he could just as easily be speaking of the Puerto Rican minority. He speaks of historical moments when “we see groups contesting and transforming the meaning of their identities with seismic vigor,” when old scripts of self-hatred are re-written to be something of value.¹⁴⁹ This chapter takes this idea as its starting point. It sets out to examine the re-claiming of Puerto Rican identity among the mainland population during the Vietnam War era and the re-writing of the negative scripts that had come to define the Puerto Rican population by mid-century. Using popular culture as a lens, it will explore the construction of the Puerto Rican stereotype that became firmly entrenched in the U.S. imaginary with the film version of *West Side Story*, comparing this to grassroots constructions of Puerto Rican identity that emerged from the barrio by the late sixties and early seventies.

What resulted from these grassroots depictions was an identity that defied both island narratives of docility and otherness and the common American conception of a people defined by cultural defects. Members of the mainland Puerto Rican community took to the streets in a struggle to claim what was owed to them as citizens of the United States while writers such as

¹⁴⁸ Appiah, 106.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 109.

Piri Thomas and the poet Pedro Pietri offered to the world a glimpse of life in the barrio.

Together, they took the common construction of *nuyoricán* and turned it on its head, challenging claims that they belonged neither here nor there, derided as aliens both on the island and the mainland, and instead emphasized a station in life defined by U.S. imperialism and the colonial position of Puerto Ricans both within and outside of the United States. They rejected depictions of their people as passive receptors of societal mistreatment and recast them as a population demonstrating strength and determination in the face of adversity.

The question of Puerto Rican identity was a preoccupation of island intellectuals in the early twentieth century, particularly those known as the *generación del treinta* (generation of the thirties). While *los del treinta* included notables such as future Governor Luis Muñoz Marín and nationalist leader Pedro Albizu Campos, the era also produced one of the most influential Puerto Rican intellectuals of the twentieth century: Antonio Pedreira. Pedreira's 1934 work, *Insularismo*, was one of the most important texts on the subject of Puerto Rican identity. It takes an essentialist stance, claiming that the defining feature of Puerto Rican identity is docility, what he refers to as "tropical laissez-faire."¹⁵⁰ Despite its continuing prominence in Puerto Rican intellectualism, *Insularismo* is an unapologetically racist and hispanophilic text, for Pedreira claims that the mixing of black and European roots is the cause of his people's characteristic indecision. In a particularly offensive passage, he states that:

During times of historical significance when the marshaling rhythms of our European ancestors flower in our gestures, we are capable of great undertakings and the most courageous heroism. Yet when the impulse comes steeped in African blood we hesitate, as if left agape before colorful beads, or frightened before the cinematic image of witches and ghosts.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Pedreira, 16-17. The theme of docility was not limited to the thirties generation, for it was elaborated again in a 1960 essay by playwright René Marqués titled "El puertorriqueño docil," published in *El puertorriqueño docil y otros ensayos (1953-1971)* (Rio Piedras: Editorial Antillana, 1977).

¹⁵¹ Pedreira, 16.

Cultural scholar Juan Flores has criticized Pedreira's work at length, pointing out that such essential traits are in fact symptoms of colonial rule.¹⁵² Despite such flaws, he argues that Pedreira remains central to any understanding of Puerto Rican identity, both on and off the island.¹⁵³

Flores makes a valid point, for it is difficult to conceptualize even this thesis without reference to Pedreira's claims. *Insularismo* espoused four of the most important ideological premises of the generation of the thirties: first, that Puerto Ricans were defined by their common place of birth; second, that Puerto Rican culture and identity were bounded by the island's territory and threatened by contamination from the outside; third, that the Spanish language was the "cornerstone of Puerto Ricanness;" and finally, that the nation was defined by its combination of Spanish, indigenous Taino, and African heritage.¹⁵⁴ As mainland Puerto Ricans struggled to define their own identity – an identity that they saw as firmly grounded in their island roots – their location outside the imaginary boundaries of the island diminished their Puerto Ricanness, according to the traditional definition. The 'Nuyorican' identity came to carry negative connotations on the island, where elites looked down upon a group that was born on the mainland, contaminated by U.S. culture, and spoke English as their first language. Ramon Grosfoguel argues further that the ties of mainland Puerto Ricans to African American culture posed a threat to island elites, in their "efforts to conceal their African heritage while privileging the Spanish culture."¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Flores, *Divided Borders*, 18. Rafael L. Ramirez made a similar claim in 1976, when he pointed out that it was Frantz Fanon who identified docility as a colonial symptom, "National Culture in Puerto Rico," *Latin American Perspectives* 3, no. 3 (Summer 1976): 111.

¹⁵³ Flores, *Divided Borders*, 15.

¹⁵⁴ Duany, 21.

¹⁵⁵ Grosfoguel, 142. A number of scholars have written on the subject of the divisions between the island and the mainland. Jorge Duany claims that they were shunned primarily for linguistic reasons, conceived of as "dangerous, hybrid, and contaminated, Duany, 29. Further elaboration can also be found in the work of Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas,

Yet if mainland Puerto Ricans were too American for those on the island, they were still too Puerto Rican to be American.¹⁵⁶ By the middle of the twentieth century, they were being recognized as a distinct, racialized other.¹⁵⁷ The 1940s and 1950s saw a massive wave of migration from the island, as Operation Bootstrap industrialized the Puerto Rican economy and drove thousands of displaced workers to the United States. They came at a turning point in race relations in the U.S., a period when it was becoming increasingly difficult to understand American society in simple shades of black and white.¹⁵⁸ Their arrival was preceded by the Zoot Suit Riots of the forties, when white servicemen in Los Angeles attacked Chicano, Filipino and African-American youth whose colourful, garish clothing they considered offensive. Zoot suits were taken to be a sign of deviance closely tied to Mexican-American street gangs, and the riots marked a period of increased public awareness of the growing Hispanic minority in the United States.¹⁵⁹ Puerto Rican migrants, tied to Mexicans by language and defying established racial binaries in the U.S., were forced to carve out an identity for themselves in the American cultural landscape just as its very structure was being torn apart. The generation of Puerto Ricans who came of age in the U.S. during the 1960s became a part of the larger movement that defined the era, part of a “burgeoning consciousness among ethnoracial minorities in the United States” that brought a period of intense political and social upheaval.¹⁶⁰ Out of this period grew a body of Puerto Rican cultural output that sought to erase old stereotypes and re-define what it meant to be Puerto Rican in the United States.

who claims that Puerto Ricans on the mainland use the performance of a Puerto Rican national identity to prove their Puerto Ricanness, while islanders are free from such burdens, *National Performances*, 32&144-45.

¹⁵⁶ Edna Acosta-Belén, "Beyond Island Boundaries: Ethnicity, Gender, and Cultural Revitalization in Nuyorican Literature," *Callaloo* 15, no. 4 (Autumn 1992): 984.

¹⁵⁷ Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick, *Immigration and American Popular Culture: An Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 104.

¹⁵⁸ Rubin and Melnick, 88-89.

¹⁵⁹ Rubin and Melnick devote an entire chapter to the Zoot Suit Riots and their implications for U.S. society in the 1940s, 49-87.

¹⁶⁰ Acosta-Belen, 980.

Puerto Rican Stereotypes in the Mainstream Media

Depictions of Puerto Ricans in American popular culture can be traced back to the Spanish-American War. Historian Louis A. Pérez, Jr. uses political cartoons from the era to argue that residents of the territories won during the war were constructed as childlike, racialized subjects, incapable of self-government and in need of guidance from Uncle Sam.¹⁶¹ The period of rising tensions between the United States and Spain also coincided with the production of the earliest moving pictures, so not only did the war bring illustrated depictions of the newest American subjects, it also brought the very first portrayals of Hispanics on film.¹⁶² A number of observers have made the claim that racialized constructions of Puerto Ricans – and Hispanics in general – were necessary in order to justify the colonization and subordination of the island at the turn of the century and beyond.¹⁶³ The case is perhaps made most eloquently by Charles Ramírez Berg, who likens American “Latinism” to Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism, arguing that stereotypical constructions of Latin Americans have historically served as a means to perpetuate American hegemony.¹⁶⁴

Ramírez Berg traces the origin of Latin American stereotypes in film to the turn of the twentieth century and identifies six enduring types that were established early on. The *bandido* was often seen in the form of the Mexican bandit, vicious and immoral, identifiable by his broken English and low intelligence. His female counterpart was the hot-tempered harlot, usually

¹⁶¹ This subject is explored in detail in Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba in the American Imaginary: Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008). For a detailed analysis of islanders portrayed as children, see 258-265.

¹⁶² Gary D. Keller, *Hispanics and United States Film: An Overview and Handbook* (Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1994). 9.

¹⁶³ Steven W. Bender, *Greasers and Gringos: Latinos, Law, and the American Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 2 and Richie Pérez, "From Assimilation to Annihilation: Puerto Rican Images in U.S. Films," In *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in U.S. Media*, edited by Clara E. Rodríguez, 142-163. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 145.

¹⁶⁴ Charles Ramírez Berg, *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 4-5.

found lusting after the Anglo male. Like the bandido, the male buffoon was unable to master English, but he was defined less by malice than by his role as the comic foil to the white male lead. The buffoon also has a female counterpart, who is exotic and oversexed, exaggerated “to the point of caricature.”¹⁶⁵ The final pairing are the male Latin Lover and the female Dark Lady: the Latin Lover defined by a slightly dangerous eroticism while the Dark Lady is virginal and often aristocratic, remaining aloof to the affections of her Anglo suitor.¹⁶⁶ In their earliest forms, these types were developed most often in reference to Mexicans, but as different Latin American migrants moved into the United States, they quickly became the recipients of existing stereotypes.¹⁶⁷

The earliest Puerto Rican migrants to the U.S. mainland arrived to find a set of stereotypes that were already more or less established. A 1932 letter published by a cancer researcher for the Rockefeller Institute, Dr. Cornelius P. Rhoads, claimed that Puerto Ricans were “the dirtiest, laziest, most degenerate and thievish race of men ever inhabiting this sphere.”¹⁶⁸ Less than a decade later, *Scribner’s Commentator* published an article that aroused vehement opposition among the Puerto Rican community. The 1940 article, titled “Welcome Paupers and Crime: Puerto Rico’s Shocking Gift to the U.S.,” declared that “all Puerto Ricans were totally lacking in moral values, which is why none of them seemed to mind wallowing in abject moral degradation.”¹⁶⁹ Such statements reflected common perceptions of Puerto Ricans as

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 75.

¹⁶⁶ Detailed descriptions and examples of these character types can be found in Ramirez Berg, 68-76. Keller also breaks down the standard Latino stereotypes, but he differs from Berg in that he provides not three male types, but eight. Although there are some differences, his eight can more or less be condensed to line up closely with Berg’s analysis. Keller, *Hispanics*, 48-60.

¹⁶⁷ Bender, 14.

¹⁶⁸ Rhoads is a controversial figure, accused of using this perspective to justify infecting unknowing Puerto Rican patients with cancer for the purposes of experimentation. Quoted in Malavet, 151-152.

¹⁶⁹ This article is cited in a number of works, including Bender, 31; Lillian Jiménez, “Moving from the Margin to the Center: Puerto Rican Cinema in New York,” in *Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts*, eds. Chon Noriega and Ana M. López (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 23; Negron-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop*, 21; and Monica

lazy, criminal, and sexually irresponsible; ignorant for their lack of English and hot-tempered, with a propensity for violence.¹⁷⁰ These stereotypes thus identified Puerto Rican criminality as inherent to the national character while ignoring the social structures that made it all but impossible to achieve success in the U.S. and served to perpetuate the conditions of poverty that were so common among the population.

By the close of the 1950s, these supposed character traits manifested in a stereotype that soon became entrenched in the U.S. imaginary: the Puerto Rican gangster. While panic over juvenile delinquency had already taken shape by the 1950s, it was the 1959 case of Salvador “Capeman” Agron that helped to solidify the image of Puerto Ricans as urban gangsters. Agron, a Puerto Rican teen of questionable intelligence, stabbed two white teens to death on a New York City playground after mistaking them for members of a rival gang. The highly-sensationalized case seemed to confirm the most damaging misconceptions about Puerto Rican youth.¹⁷¹ Following the Capeman murders, two films were produced that helped to further cement the image of the Puerto Rican youth as gangster: *West Side Story* and *Young Savages*, both released in 1961. The films marked the evolution of the bandido figure to the urban gangster, who favoured the switchblade over his gun.¹⁷²

It is hard to overstate the significance of *West Side Story* in constructing the popular image of Puerto Ricans in the United States. The film won ten Academy Awards and remains a classic of American cinema to this day. It was also one of the earliest depictions of Puerto Rican characters in U.S. pop culture. Earlier figures can be found, such as Morales in *Blackboard*

Alexandria Brown, “Delinquent Citizens: Nation and Identity in Chicano/a and Puerto Rican Urban Narratives” (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1998), 62.

¹⁷⁰ Bender, 4 & 11-14.

¹⁷¹ Accounts of the Agron case can be found in Bender, 16; Rubin and Melnick, 108-9; Frances Negron-Muntaner, “Feeling Pretty: *West Side Story* and Puerto Rican Identity Discourses,” *Social Text* 63 (June 2000): 103; and Negron-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop*, 75.

¹⁷² Bender, 5.

Jungle, whose struggles with the English language relegate him to the traditional role of the buffoon, but *West Side Story* was among the first – and easily the most widely watched – films to feature Puerto Ricans as prominent characters. Although its popularity is undeniable, the film has failed to achieve consensus among Puerto Rican critics, who remain divided over its impact on their image in American society.

Supporters of the film claim that it is a tale about overcoming racism and violence. A modern take on *Romeo and Juliet*, the story revolves around the young and beautiful Maria, recently arrived from Puerto Rico, and Tony, a former gang member who has recently gone straight. Maria is the sister of Bernardo, the leader of a Puerto Rican gang called the Sharks, who just so happen to be the rivals of Tony's former gang, the Jets, which is composed of an amalgam of other (white) immigrant groups. Maria and Tony's love transcends the racial tensions that are rampant on the west side of Manhattan, but ultimately it is not enough to overcome the violence of their neighbourhood streets. In *Immigration and American Popular Culture*, Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick point out that the "cross-the-tracks" love story has been a popular device in American culture to confront social tensions, promoting the idea that such problems can be overcome by love.¹⁷³ Yet, the emphasis on interracial love and the melodrama that surround it have failed to deter many of its critics from arguing that *West Side Story* is an essentially racist tract.

Cultural critic Frances Negron-Muntaner denounces the film as "a blatant, seminal (pun intended), racialized, aestheticized eruption into the national consciousness."¹⁷⁴ The film's sympathy towards its Puerto Rican characters is negated by the fact that only one of the main characters, Anita, is played by a Puerto Rican. Maria is played by a poorly accented Natalie

¹⁷³ Rubin and Melnick, 97.

¹⁷⁴ Negron-Muntaner, "Feeling Pretty," 88.

Wood while Bernardo is portrayed by a white actor wearing brown face make-up. Racial differences are further emphasized by the fact that many of the Jets display unnaturally blonde hair. Although the film builds sympathy for the Puerto Rican characters, it can be argued that this only applies to the females. Through optics alone, the Sharks are presented in a far more ominous light than their white counterparts. In the opening scene, the Sharks face off against the Jets on a playground. Looking only at their shoes, we see the Sharks portrayed in (villainous) black and the Jets in white. The same can be said of their hair and their clothing. Later, in the dance scene, the Jets show up in vibrantly-coloured suits, their aggressive reds and purples in stark contrast to the Jets' mild yellow and blue jackets. Nor do the names imply an even portrayal: the vicious and threatening Sharks face off against the all-American Jets.¹⁷⁵

Such a portrayal of the Sharks builds an air of menace, and contributes to their image as urban gang members and a threat to society. While Riff, the leader of the Jets, seems to convey a typical boys-will-be-boys attitude, Bernardo always carries with him an air of malice. Despite the fact that the film portrayed some realistic elements of Puerto Rican life (the importance of family for example), any positive images were outweighed by their depiction as knife-wielding gang members.¹⁷⁶ The film not only depicted a single Puerto Rican as criminal, argues Negron-Muntaner, it cast all Puerto Rican youth as violent and delinquent.¹⁷⁷ Whereas the males were constructed as criminal, the story's females are constructed as victims,¹⁷⁸ doing little to dispel the common stereotypes of Latin women. In fact, Maria and Anita fall comfortably within the virgin/whore dichotomy, fulfilling Ramirez Berg's types of the Dark Lady and the Harlot.

¹⁷⁵ Numerous readings of *West Side Story* include Negron-Muntaner, "Feeling Pretty;" Negron-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop*, 58-84; Pérez; Rubin and Melnick, 88-128; and Alberto Sandoval Sanchez, "West Side Story: A Puerto Rican Reading of 'America'," in *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in U.S. Media*, ed. Clara E. Rodríguez (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 164-79.

¹⁷⁶ Pérez, 151.

¹⁷⁷ Negron-Muntaner, "Feeling Pretty," 86.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

Such stereotypes are also present in the other film to portray Puerto Rican youth as gangsters, *Young Savages*. Released in 1961, the same year as *West Side Story*, *Young Savages* is a direct take-off the Capeman murders of 1959. And yet, the film distorts the events by featuring a cape-wearing, mentally-challenged Italian youth as one of three Anglo gang members to murder a blind Puerto Rican teen. Compared to the melodrama of *West Side Story*, *Young Savages* attempts social realism in its exploration of a similar subject.¹⁷⁹ Portraying the blind youth as the victim of gang violence, the film builds sympathy for its Puerto Rican subjects, even entering the home of one of the gang members to show the squalor in which his family lives. Yet the hero of the story is the Italian detective, a man named Bell who got out of the ghetto and anglicized his name. In the end, Bell exonerates one of the youth who allegedly committed the murder and as the plot unfolds, it is revealed that the blind youth was really the head of the Puerto Rican gang who also happened to be pimping out his teenage sister. Although *Young Savages* expresses a clear liberal impulse, putting the blame for youth delinquency on society, it traffics in the same stereotypes as *West Side Story* in its portrayal of criminality and sexual deviance.

Films were not the only source of such stereotypes. Already a popular topic among social scientists by the 1950s, New York's Puerto Rican community became the subject of a 1963 publication by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan that elaborated on many of the themes that were only hinted at in *West Side Story*. In *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Glazer and Moynihan claimed that by the 1930s, the Puerto Rican community had already become "the biggest social work problem in New York" – that they were "sadly defective" in terms of their culture.¹⁸⁰ The study took its cue from the work of anthropologist Oscar Lewis, who argued that poverty was not

¹⁷⁹ Rubin and Melnick, 110.

¹⁸⁰ Glazer and Moynihan, 91 & 88.

merely the result of societal problems but was perpetuated by certain ethnic groups due to cultural characteristics.¹⁸¹ Glazer and Moynihan argued that the prevalence of common law marriage and the “sexual adventurism” of husbands and fathers bred confusion in children, while mothers’ love was itself destructive, for in attempting to compensate for their husbands’ neglect, they loved their children “to the point of overprotection.”¹⁸² The idea that poverty could be rooted in the fact that mothers loved their children too much seems ridiculous, but the ideas contained in the report carried serious implications.

Such claims, espoused by politicians and academics, blamed the poor for their own poverty while disregarding the role of social and governmental structures. For many Puerto Ricans who migrated from the island in search of opportunity, what they found instead was discrimination that made it all but impossible to get ahead. They were often underemployed and underpaid, mistreated by landlords who rented out rat-infested apartments with inadequate sanitation. Yet these realities were ignored by observers who portrayed Puerto Ricans as defective, as welfare bums who were responsible for their own poor living conditions.¹⁸³ Racialized conceptions of the ‘culture of poverty,’ not limited to Latinos but used to explain the plight of African Americans as well, were necessary to perpetuate what Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas describes as “the hegemonic operations of the American dream and its white supremacist construction of the American nation as a meritocracy.”¹⁸⁴ By blaming the failure to succeed on cultural deficiencies of racial and ethnic minorities, society was able to uphold the myth of

¹⁸¹ Lewis turned his attention to the Puerto Rican community in 1966, claiming that the source of Puerto Rican poverty could be found in absentee fathers, youth mothers, violence, poor work habits, and obsession with sex. Cited in Briggs, 163.

¹⁸² Glazer and Moynihan, 89.

¹⁸³ Briggs, 3 and Jiménez, 22.

¹⁸⁴ Ramos-Zayas, *National Performances*, 9.

American democracy and equality while denying the consequences of capitalism and colonialism for its oppressed minorities.

The culture of poverty and the theories espoused by Glazer and Moynihan not only perpetuated racial stereotypes, but they carried a gendered dimension as well. Laura Briggs provides a gendered reading of the report in her 2002 work, *Reproducing Empire*. Briggs points out the damage done to Puerto Rican women by the study and by the historical insistence that the Puerto Rican family structure was at the root of social problems, both on and off the island.¹⁸⁵ Overpopulation, long blamed for social conditions on the island, was due to the fact that women were having too many babies, and justified controversial sterilization programs that have been a source of contention ever since.¹⁸⁶ Briggs argues that “it is precisely through science and social science that Puerto Rican difference has been produced and located in women’s sexuality and reproduction,” a difference that has been used to justify the continuation of U.S. rule in Puerto Rico.¹⁸⁷ The very same argument can be applied to the mainland population, however, for the differences defined in *Beyond the Melting Pot* provided not only a convenient explanation for Puerto Rican poverty, but it also gave a justification for society at large to continue in its discrimination against the Puerto Rican minority.

***Nuyoricans* and the Emergent Barrio Culture**

These damaging and pervasive depictions of Puerto Rican culture were the target of the earliest Puerto Rican authors to write about life in the barrio. Pedro Juan Soto, for example, published a collection of short stories in 1956 titled *Spiks*. Soto spent time in New York before

¹⁸⁵ Briggs, 6.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 8.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 9.

moving back to Puerto Rico, where the book was published in Spanish. It paints a picture of life in the barrio where parents struggle to feed their children and kids grow up having to prove their street smarts, but it also conveyed a sense of the liminality of Puerto Rican migration, opening with a story set in the San Juan airport as a shamed daughter awaits her flight into exile.¹⁸⁸

Although *Spiks* was praised as one of the best short story collections ever published in Puerto Rico, it was not until 1961 that the first book-length work about life in the barrio was published in English. Jesus Colón's *A Puerto Rican in New York* was the first work written in English by a Puerto Rican author.¹⁸⁹ For what it may lack in terms of literary sophistication, the book serves as an important testament to life in the barrios written by an early migrant, one who stowed away on a ship and braved the journey through treacherous waters in the middle of the First World War. Colón was an important figure in the Puerto Rican community, a lifelong activist and devoted communist. In addition to portraying the hardships of life in the U.S., his book is a memoir of political radicalization and an overtly socialist tract. Beyond conveying the reality of life in the barrio, Colón's work speaks to his experiences as a black Puerto Rican and challenges the images established by *West Side Story* and *Young Savages*, which disregarded the racial complexities of the Puerto Rican community.

Colón's work preceded the turmoil that shook the United States in the 1960s. It came at a time when the civil rights movement was in full swing, but by the close of the decade it seemed to many that the movement had failed to achieve its most important goals. The assassinations of both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. by 1968 brought an air of pessimism and inspired an increasing militancy on the part of black leaders, such as Stokely Carmichael, Huey Newton, and Bobby Seale. 1968 also marked the year of the Tet Offensive, when Walter Cronkite made

¹⁸⁸ Pedro Juan Soto, *Spiks*, trans. Victoria Ortiz (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 21-31.

¹⁸⁹ Jesus Colón, *A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches* (New York: International Publishers, 1982).

his famous declaration that the United States could not win the war in Vietnam. Opposition to the war had already been brewing, and in Puerto Rico the anti-draft movement was in full swing. In the United States, Puerto Rican youth were becoming increasingly radicalized, protesting the war and taking part in the student movement that swept the country. The close of the decade saw an increasing militancy among Puerto Ricans who began to fight for their own rights, to denounce the appalling living conditions which so many suffered in the streets of American cities. It also saw the stirrings of a new generation of cultural producers who set out to challenge the common misperceptions of what it meant to be Puerto Rican, and to situate the plight of their people within a broader social and historical context.

One of the most important accomplishments of the artists of the barrio was to reveal the conditions in which they lived, and to challenge the claims of social scientists like Glazer and Moynihan that poverty was a natural result of cultural defects. Pedro Pietri, arguably the most famous of the Nuyorican poets, painted a bleak portrait of life in the barrio in his 1973 collection, *Puerto Rican Obituary*. The theme of death occurs throughout the work, the image of funerals attended at such a rate that he no longer has time to send his black suit to the cleaner.¹⁹⁰ In "The Last Game of the World Series," Pietri ponders what they will eat at the funeral he is about to attend, as the next of kin had no money to feed the mourners, and he expresses the hope that the next person to die will leave money for cold cuts.¹⁹¹ *Puerto Rican Obituary* paints a picture of the utter destructiveness of poverty; of a people obliterated by destitution that is no different from what they left on the island. The pointlessness of migration is made clear in his

¹⁹⁰ Pedro Pietri, "Suicide Note from a Cockroach in a Low Income Housing Project," in *Puerto Rican Obituary* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 26.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

description of the flight to the mainland, when he declares that “the only thing that changes/ is the picture postcard to fool you into believing/ that you are somewhere else.”¹⁹²

The decimation of his people goes beyond poverty in Pietri’s work, for he speaks to a recurring theme in Puerto Rican literature, one which dates back to Pedreira and beyond: that Puerto Rican culture is being destroyed by Americanization. Pietri rails against the consumption found in the barrios, where neighbours compete to have more than each other, where “Miguel/ died hating Milagros because Milagros/ had a color television set.”¹⁹³ He denounces the war on poverty, claiming that electrical appliances are executing his people.¹⁹⁴ Programs meant to improve their lives are simply killing them in other ways. When he declares “THIS IS GENOCIDE,”¹⁹⁵ one must wonder if Pietri means only the slow death of his people by starvation and disease or if he means the death of their culture in the face of Americanization. To some observers, the appeal of American culture has been just as important to the maintenance of U.S. hegemony in Puerto Rico as citizenship.¹⁹⁶ The target of Pietri’s poems is not limited to cultural imperialism, however, but is only one part of a far more comprehensive critique.

Pietri ties culture and soft power to a more violent manifestation of U.S. imperialism in the first of two poems to address the Vietnam War, “The B-52 Blew.”¹⁹⁷ Pietri, a Vietnam veteran who was present during the Tet Offensive of 1968, presents a twisted vision of American imperialism: “I WANT YOU to take your orders directly from/ general mickey mouse and colonel donald duck/ who received the medal of honor for throwing/ hand grenades at innocent

¹⁹² Ibid., 83.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 8.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 25.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 27.

¹⁹⁶ Juan Flores expresses this viewpoint in his discussion of colonialism ‘lite,’ in which he places the Puerto Rican case within the broader discussion of American soft power and the appeal of U.S.-style consumerism, *From Bomba to Hip Hop*, 36-39.

¹⁹⁷ Pietri, 60-66.

people/ in Saigon while under the/ influence of superman/ comic books.”¹⁹⁸ Pietri’s Vietnam War is a war tied up in cultural imperialism – hard power/soft power, guns and bombs, Walt Disney and Coca-Cola. His second poem to address Vietnam is the last in the book and the only piece written completely in Spanish. “Para la Madre de Angel Luna” is written as a letter to the mother of a young Puerto Rican boy from the Bronx who went to fight in Vietnam. He tells the mother how badly her son wanted to go AWOL the night before he was shipped out, but he resisted out of fear that the police would show up on her doorstep. Instead he goes to war, asking that he be buried in “la tierra de Borinken” if he should die.¹⁹⁹ The poem implies solidarity with Puerto Rico, and locates the Vietnam War as part and parcel of the system that oppresses his own people, yet another manifestation of the same colonial system that is wiping out Puerto Ricans on the island and the mainland, both literally and figuratively.

In one of the most powerful passages in the collection, Pietri declares that “we are concentrated/ castrated and liquidated/ in the name of democracy/ that raped our nation/ with deadly weapons/ and dumped us into/ the garment district.”²⁰⁰ In so few words, he dismantles the notion of a culture of poverty and reveals the hypocrisy of American democracy. Poverty is not rooted in culture, but in the capitalist and imperialist system that justified the colonization of Puerto Rico and the continued suppression of its population. In Pietri’s vision, Puerto Rican citizens are just as much colonial subjects on the mainland as they are on the island, uprooted from their home by Operation Bootstrap and displaced into the factories of New York City to be cogs in the wheel of the capitalist system that profits from the island while keeping its residents in a state of perpetual poverty. The population is feminized, not only raped but castrated, its

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 61.

¹⁹⁹ *Borinken* is an Americanized spelling of Borinquen, which is the native name attributed to Puerto Rico. Ibid., 108-9.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 21.

women forced to work long hours in the garment district while observers such as Glazer and Moynihan fault them for their ineffective parenting skills, placing them at the root of their people's poverty.

The challenge to negative depictions of Puerto Rican family life is an important element of barrio literature from the period, and it is a theme that surfaces in what is arguably the era's most important literary work, Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets*. The exploited parent in this case is not the long-suffering mother, but Piri's father, who works long hours digging ditches in the freezing cold for the Works Progress Administration, a Roosevelt-era relief program that provided employment during the Great Depression.²⁰¹ Worn down by hard work and low pay, Piri imagines his father must dream of running away, and yet after a long, cold day of hard labour he comes home to play games with his children in what Thomas paints as a picture of a happy and loving family life.²⁰² Although Piri's father eventually takes a mistress, he never leaves his family. He never becomes an absentee father, but continues to work hard, eventually earning a decent living in an airplane factory during the war and moving them out of the ghetto, to the suburbs of Long Island, to give his children a better life.

The self-sacrifice of the Puerto Rican father is also depicted in a movie from the same period, *Popi*, which was released in 1969. In contrast to the unidimensional characters that represented Puerto Ricans only eight years before, *Popi* features a far more nuanced and complex portrayal of life in New York's Puerto Rican barrios. The movie tells the story of a single father, Abraham Rodríguez, who is so desperate to give his sons a better life that he hatches a plot to pass them off as Cuban refugees and have them adopted into a wealthy family. Softened by light-hearted comedy, the film actually conveys a stark reality. Abraham works

²⁰¹ Piri Thomas, *Down these Mean Streets* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 8.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 11-13.

three jobs to keep his family housed in a dirty tenement building while his two young sons hatch schemes to survive life in the mean streets, devising stories that their father is a gangster and a pimp, rather than a lowly maintenance man and busboy. The story points to the difference in perception – and treatment – between Puerto Ricans and Cubans. When the boys are mistaken for Cuban dissidents who washed up on the Miami shoreline, they are praised as heroes, but when they are discovered to be Puerto Ricans from New York, one official claims that they can't be adopted for fear that they might kill the person who takes them in. To the viewer, such a claim is ridiculous, but it serves as a reminder of the sort of prejudice and stereotypes that exist for the characters outside of their own community.

Violence and delinquency are apparent in *Popi*, but they exist as an outside threat – a force that is always present, threatening to claim Abraham's sons. In *Down These Mean Streets*, however, gang life is central to the plot. In contrast to *West Side Story*, Piri's membership in a gang is given context. We see him struggle with the violence of life in the barrio and come to understand that the gang is his only means of protection. The streets of Harlem are broken down by nationality, ruled by mobs of boys whose main purpose in life is to defend their turf. When Piri's family moves into an Italian neighbourhood, he is relentlessly bullied, beaten, and almost blinded by a gang of Italian boys who decide to welcome the new kid "to their country."²⁰³ In her PhD dissertation, "Delinquent Citizens: Nation and Identity in Chicano/a and Puerto Rican Urban Narratives," Monica Alexandria Brown claims that urban territorial spaces have become imbued with "passionate cultural nationalisms" to be both defended and conquered.²⁰⁴ Examined through the lens of citizenship, the gang provides not only protection but membership in a

²⁰³ Ibid., 24-26.

²⁰⁴ Monica Alexandria Brown, *Delinquent Citizens: Nation and Identity in Chicano/a and Puerto Rican Urban Narratives* (PhD Dissertation, Ohio State University. 1998), 59.

community and a sense of shared identity. It provides something akin to citizenship for those who have been denied access to the American dream.

As Brown points out, that dream is unattainable to Piri unless he steals and this he does early on in the narrative. His first foray into the labour force is as a shoeshine boy on Lexington Avenue in Spanish Harlem. Despite the high quality of his work, which often earns him more than just the fifteen cents he charges, he calculates that he'll be almost a thousand years old before he earns his first million dollars.²⁰⁵ He moves on to start a lemonade "syndicate" with his friends, stealing the supplies so they can maximize their profits, an act that eventually snowballs into full-fledged robbery.²⁰⁶ Thomas never makes excuses for his crimes, nor does he justify them, but the story reveals much about the motives behind his criminal life. Piri takes the easy way, stealing, doing hold-ups and selling drugs, having watched his father work himself into the ground his entire life in pursuit of something society would never let him have.

The American dream is a spectre that haunts Pietri's work as well. It is defined by consumption, and its pursuit is what has bred ghettos filled with condemned buildings that function as incinerators,²⁰⁷ where radios and televisions blast advertisements all day and people live off TV dinners, isolated from their neighbours by "a system tailored/ especially for you and/ all your close relatives/ who came here looking/ for better days and/ finding the worst nights/ of their existence."²⁰⁸ He addresses this theme most directly in "The Broken English Dream," when he speaks of migrants who came "to pledge allegiance/ to the flag/ of the united states/ of installment plans" but instead found discrimination and a line-up at the home relief office.²⁰⁹ The

²⁰⁵ Thomas, 71-72.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 72-75.

²⁰⁷ This is a theme that repeats throughout *Puerto Rican Obituary*, and can be found in such pieces as "Monday Morning," 20-23; "Suicide Note from a Cockroach Living in a Low-Income Housing Project," 24-36; and "O/D," 37-52.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 54.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 14.

title of this poem links the American dream to the issue of language that has always been central to debates over Puerto Rican identity, and is prevalent throughout the work of both Pietri and Thomas. In Pietri's barrio, those who cannot speak English should simply "follow the garbage truck/ to the welfare department."²¹⁰

Language has always been an important marker of Puerto Rican identity, operating in more ways than one. During the first half of the twentieth century, the American administration on the island established English as the official language of Puerto Rico and the language of instruction for the island's schools. This policy became the target of 1930s intellectuals, including Albizu Campos and Antonio Pedreira, who saw it as a threat to their Spanish language and culture.²¹¹ The importance attributed to the Spanish language should not be surprising, as it is central to most conceptions of nationality. It is discussed at length by Benedict Anderson, who not only identifies print-language as one of the primary bases for the development of national consciousness, but examines the power relations established by access to the official language.²¹² By establishing English as the official language – the language of power – the U.S. administration shut out a large part of the Puerto Rican population, including many of the country's elites. By mid-century, Puerto Rican schools reverted back to Spanish as an indication of the island's new-found cultural autonomy, but although English had no long-term impact on the predominance of the Spanish language, it continued to be seen by many as a source of contamination, particularly as it applied to the growing mainland population.

Among many mainlanders, the norm of everyday speech is 'Spanglish,' a form of code-switching that carries a particular stigma and has been a subject of derision by both Puerto Rican elites and the American education system. Juan Flores explains that code-switching is often

²¹⁰ Ibid., 15.

²¹¹ Pedreira, 61.

²¹² Benedict Anderson, "Old Languages, New Models," *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006), 67-82.

understood as “the tragic convergence of two nonstandard vernaculars,” that it is interpreted by outsiders as a failure to adequately express either English or Spanish.²¹³ To many islanders, the ‘bastardization’ of the language represents a degradation of Puerto Rican culture, while the U.S. government understands Puerto Rican bilingualism as *alingualism*: a lack of proficiency in either language.²¹⁴ Flores disagrees and argues that on a grammatical level, code-switching is actually correct, that it only occurs when grammatical structures are congruent.²¹⁵ Spanglish is used throughout the works of both Thomas and Pietri, who use it as an authentic form of barrio street language. Thomas’s work is laden with Spanish phrases, curses, and terms of endearment, but it is the melding of the two languages that signifies code-switching, such as when a boy from a rival gang tells Piri, “we deal with our *manos*”²¹⁶ or when Thomas describes his gang as making him feel “*grande* and bad.”²¹⁷

While Thomas utilizes street language for authenticity, Pietri uses it in numerous other ways. Many of his poems can be found littered with broken English, true to the grammatical tendencies of Spanish-speakers. He misuses the past tense, claiming that “radios use to be a luxury”²¹⁸ and that he “was prepare/ to cut anyone up/ who threaten (his wife’s) life,”²¹⁹ and he clips words, such as his repeated use of “condem” for ‘condemned.’²²⁰ Language is present in Pietri’s poems as a subtle marker of class and ethnicity, but he also addresses it directly, such as his imitation of an employer who tells his worker: “Spic I is feeling bored/ amuse me with your/ broken english humor.”²²¹ Pietri conjures the image of the buffoon stereotype, the scene in

²¹³ Flores, *Divided Borders*, 164.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 165.

²¹⁶ Thomas, 52.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 106.

²¹⁸ Pietri, 25.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 31.

²²⁰ Ibid., 21, 43.

²²¹ Ibid., 22.

Blackboard Jungle when the other students goad Morales into recording his speech, only to laugh at his broken English. Yet he also inverts the use of language in the poem “Beware of Signs,” which is about salespeople who adopt Spanish in order to turn a profit off of Puerto Rican customers. The lines are humorous - “SI NO SAY NECESITA/ NINGUNO DINEROS/ SOLAMENTAY YOU SIGN/ AQUÍ ON THIS LINE/ Y TODO WILL BE FINE”²²² – but they represent an interesting inversion of the power of language, as the speaker sets out to manipulate the customer by appealing to his/her cultural identity.

In both works Spanish is a marker of identity, but in *Down These Mean Streets* Piri uses language as a means to prove that he is Puerto Rican, as a means of *performing* his ethnic identity. Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas has argued that mainland Puerto Ricans have always had to prove their Puerto Ricanness, to perform their national identity in overt ways that were never required by island nationals, due to geography.²²³ In Thomas’s work, language is the only signifier strong enough to overcome skin colour. Piri and his father are both black, but to be Puerto Rican was always assumed to be a station higher in life than a ‘negro.’ Piri’s father admits how, as a youth, he would exaggerate his Puerto Rican accent to gain access to segregated public spaces.²²⁴ When Piri visits the south, on a pilgrimage to come to terms with his own racial ambiguity, he takes out his rage on a white prostitute, only securing her services by hiding his ability to speak English so that he can ‘pass’ for Puerto Rican.²²⁵

Possibly the most significant contribution of Thomas’s work to the construction of Puerto Rican identity is what he reveals about race. In both *West Side Story* and *Young Savages*, there is a conspicuous absence of black characters. The films attempted to erase the complexities of race

²²² Ibid., 18.

²²³ Ramos-Zayas, *National Performances*, 144-45.

²²⁴ Thomas, 153.

²²⁵ Ibid., 188-89.

relations in the Puerto Rican barrios, despite the fact that race was one of the biggest challenges faced by Puerto Ricans in New York, whose lives were closely tied to those of African Americans.²²⁶ If black Puerto Ricans were absent in the cultural imaginary, they were put front and center in *Down These Mean Streets*, the plot of which is largely driven by Piri's conflicted identity, by his attempts to decipher the meaning of his own skin colour. Race is present from the very first pages, when Piri wonders why his father treats him differently than his lighter-skinned siblings.²²⁷ Soon afterwards, he is beaten up by a gang of Italian kids, who claim that "he's black enuff to be a nigger." He defends himself, claiming that he's Puerto Rican, but after they beat him and nearly leave him blind, he hears one of the boys refer to him again as a "nigger," and he thinks to himself "a *spik*."²²⁸ The tension created as Piri struggles with race comes to a head, and occupies the entire mid-section of the book.

As Piri struggles with his race, and eventually confronts it head on by making a pilgrimage to the deep south, Thomas peels back the layers of racial constructions in the United States. After engaging in a game of insults with his black friend Brew, Piri finds himself being challenged on his own hierarchical conceptions of race when he insists that he is Puerto Rican, not black. Brew informs Piri that his ability to speak another language does nothing to change the colour of his skin, and challenges him to visit the south before he claims to understand the black man's problems. Piri accepts the challenge, and his decision brings a pivotal scene in the book. As he prepares for his departure, he visits his family in Long Island, where his younger siblings have been passing as white. When he confronts his brother José, pointing out that their father's African blood makes him just as black as Piri, José screams: "I ain't no nigger! You can be if you want to be. You can go down South and grow cotton, or pick it, or whatever the fuck

²²⁶ Rubin and Melnick, 114.

²²⁷ Thomas, 22.

²²⁸ Ibid., 24-32.

they do. You can eat that cornbread or whatever shit they eat. You can bow and kiss ass and clean shit bowls. But - I - am - *white!*”²²⁹ After spending months traveling aboard a ship as a merchant marine, visiting ports all over the south and beyond, Piri comes to terms with the fact that it doesn’t matter where his parents were born or what language he speaks, he is still black.

Piri’s struggles reflect the different conceptions of race between Puerto Rico and the United States. Popular among social scientists in the twentieth century were claims that the island was a racial democracy, that the ease with which people of different races mixed was an indication that racism was not a powerful force.²³⁰ This can be seen in the book, evidenced by the fact that Piri’s light-skinned mother saw no problem in marrying a man with *moyeto* (African) blood. Although race on the island is clearly more fluid, there has nonetheless been systematic discrimination against those of the darkest skin. Where racial identity has differed is for those who occupy the middle ground. Anthropologist Jorge Duany outlines nineteen different racial categories that are commonly used in Puerto Rico, where the opposite of the American ‘one drop rule’ applies: whereas in the United States, one drop of African blood makes you black, in Puerto Rico, one drop of white blood makes you white.²³¹ Piri’s father attempts to navigate these complexities by claiming his ‘Indian’ heritage and by performing Puerto Rican and Latino stereotypes to prove that he is actually white.²³² Rather than rejecting racialized stereotypes of what it means to be Hispanic, Piri’s father embraces them as a way to escape accusations of blackness.

²²⁹ Ibid., 145.

²³⁰ Brameld, 67-68.

²³¹ Jorge Duany provides a nuanced analysis of race in Puerto Rico, 237-40. His claims about the ‘one drop rule’ are backed up by Ramon Grosfoguel, 34.

²³² Marta E. Sánchez, "La Malinche at the Intersection: Race and Gender in Down These Mean Streets," *PMLA* 113, no. 1 (Jan. 1998): 122.

Down These Mean Streets speaks to the racial hierarchies confronted by Puerto Ricans – and particularly black Puerto Ricans – in the United States. In the world portrayed by Thomas, they are forced to “identify themselves against African Americans as a means of establishing a slightly higher position on a hierarchy determined by fine degrees of social marginalization.”²³³ By performing his Puerto Ricanness, Piri’s father is asserting a position of racial privilege that places him above African Americans.²³⁴ The book also reveals the damage done by such definitions, which is clear from Piri’s understanding that his father favours his light-skinned brothers and sisters. No matter how hard his father tried to assert his position as Puerto Rican, to pass as ‘white,’ the complexion of his eldest son stood as a constant reminder of his own maligned social status. For Piri, his internalized racism manifests in self-hatred and destructive behaviour and he is eventually confronted with the fact that he must make a choice to either embrace or reject racial privilege.²³⁵

Released in 1968, *Down These Mean Streets* portrayed the reality of life experienced for many Puerto Rican youth who were becoming increasingly radicalized in the 1960s. Ramos-Zayas addresses the significance of the book when she claims that for many, Piri Thomas was read as “a guideline to Puerto-Ricanness.”²³⁶ Although his memoir was set in an earlier decade, little had changed by the sixties, and the generation that followed Thomas was beginning to fight back against the conditions they had known all their lives. Pedro Pietri was part of this new group of Puerto Rican cultural producers who sought to re-write what it meant to be Puerto Rican, to embrace Thomas’s vision and give it new meaning. They constructed an identity that was inseparable from the island yet still distinctly rooted in the barrios of New York, and

²³³ Marta Caminero-Santangelo, "‘Puerto Rican Negro’: Defining Race in Piri Thomas’s ‘Down These Mean Streets’," *MELUS* 29, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 209.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 211.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 220.

²³⁶ Ramos-Zayas, *National Performances*, 154.

“shaped by the anti-imperialist ideology of the period.”²³⁷ The words of Pietri echoed the social activism of groups such as the Young Lords Party, whose 1971 film *El pueblo se levanta* placed them among the first Puerto Ricans to use film as a medium to convey the realities of life in the barrio.

The positive image of Puerto Ricans constructed by *El pueblo se levanta*, and by earlier Hollywood films like *Popi*, did not mark a sea change in the portrayals of Puerto Ricans on film but merely a tentative beginning. In fact, one of the most racist and damaging presentations of mainland Puerto Ricans was released at the height of the Puerto Rican civil rights era. The 1973 film *Badge 373* features as its hero a bigoted and chauvinist police officer from the Bronx with a particular hatred for ‘spiks.’ He is investigating the murder of his partner, who was tied up in a plot to smuggle guns to the Puerto Rican independence movement. The story’s villain is a wealthy, Harvard educated Puerto Rican who points out that Pedro Albizu Campos, the first Puerto Rican to attend Harvard, was also responsible for the attempted assassination of President Truman. Not only does the film construct educated Puerto Ricans as villains and heroin dealers, but it criminalizes both the Puerto Rican independence movement and mainland civil rights organizations, featuring violent activists and gun smugglers who are clearly modeled after the Young Lords Party. The film aroused enormous opposition among the community, including demands that it be withdrawn from circulation.²³⁸

Badge 373 was an indication of the staying power of negative Puerto Rican stereotypes, and it was certainly not the last film of its kind. It marks the beginning of a second transformation of the bandido character, from the urban gang member to the drug runner that

²³⁷ Jiménez, 25.

²³⁸ Richie Pérez provides both an analysis of the film and an account of the Puerto Rican community’s response to it, 157-58.

would dominate screen portrayals of Latinos for the remainder of the twentieth century.²³⁹ But it was also released at the time of an awakening for Puerto Rican youth, an era when they decided that they would not submit to such negative perceptions. The resistance that supported neighbourhood organizations in the 1950s turned radical by the late sixties, as politicized youth were swept up in a wave of militant protest, taking inspiration from the Black Power movement and the anti-war movement. This generation chose to confront racist stereotypes head on, to give context to the images assigned to them by America's ethnic and cultural majority.

During the 1960s, culture was a powerful tool by which activists challenged the status quo in the United States. Both the civil rights and anti-war movements used popular culture in order to spread ideas and draw attention to their cause, and culture was utilized by the Puerto Rican population of the United States in much the same way. Thomas and Pietri used literature as a way to explore the problems that plagued their community, giving them context and placing the blame for the Puerto Rican condition squarely upon the shoulders of a society that denied them equal rights and the government that exploited their labour. The Young Lords Party used the media to gain exposure, using images to convey the realities of life in the barrios of New York City. These actors relied on a space that was opened by the wider movement. The civil rights movement and the anti-war movement laid the groundwork for the Puerto Rican community to challenge its position in the American social hierarchy by giving rise to a spirit of dissent and creating a dialogue for protest. The Vietnam War cast doubt upon the U.S. government and opened it up to criticism from broad segments of society. Ultimately, each component of the larger movement was part of the same struggle: civil rights leaders, anti-war protestors and Puerto Rican activists all objected to U.S. colonialism, whether at home or abroad, just as the independence movement did on the island.

²³⁹ Bender, 32.

Colonialism was the common factor that tied together the many disparate voices of the movement, and it was the cause that motivated Puerto Rican activists. On the island, *independentistas* rejected second-class citizenship that was imposed upon them and denied them the rights of other Americans, and they objected to conscription that was further evidence of their colonial position. Mainland activists, who demanded equality and fought against discrimination, understood that their struggle was fundamentally rooted in Puerto Rico's colonial condition. This interpretation can clearly be found in the work of Pietri and the Young Lords Party's film, *El pueblo se levanta*, which labels the hardships of mainland Puerto Ricans as "genocide against Third World people."²⁴⁰ The solidarity between island and mainland activists was based upon a shared understanding of their colonial condition and it tied them to the broader protest movement in the United States and to anti-colonial struggles all over the world.

By the close of the sixties, the mainland Puerto Rican community added its voice to the movement that swept the United States. Piri Thomas and Pedro Pietri joined the Young Lords Party to challenge the colonial condition that continued to shape Puerto Rican lives both on and off the island, and to confront the stereotypes that defined them as less than equal. They refused to conform to the image society created for them, and through their use of culture they presented a new image to the American public. They constructed a Puerto Rican identity that was preserved through popular culture and created a counter to the racialized and stereotyped depictions that preceded them. Today, that record remains as a testament to the spirit of the era and the generation of Puerto Rican youth who refused to consent to the identity that society crafted for them.

²⁴⁰ *El pueblo se levanta*, directed by the Young Lords Party, produced by the Young Lords Party, 1971.

Chapter 4:

Puerto Rican Veterans and the Vietnam Experience

Herminio Soto Ramírez had been in the jungles of Vietnam and Cambodia for three long months when he was finally transported to the U.S. base camp for a few days of rest. During his stay, Herminio drank frequently with the other men and whenever the alcohol began to “brutalize (their) senses,” he would find himself overcome with hatred and resentment.²⁴¹ On one such occasion, the young Puerto Rican draftee got drunk with a Latino friend and the two soldiers laid out a plan to get rid of a racist sergeant who, time and again, had put Herminio in harm’s way. Herminio recalled a time when he lost a piece of his rifle and reported it to the sergeant, then waited for weeks while it went unrepaired. When he dared confront him about the issue, he received a string of racist insults in return. Herminio claims that the sergeant looked for every opportunity to send him into enemy territory with his broken weapon. That drunken night, he stalked the sergeant for hours until he watched him pass out drunk on the floor, but when the opportunity arose, he couldn’t bring himself to take the man’s life. Eventually the sergeant was transferred, but he carried the outrage caused by such overt racism with him long after the war.²⁴²

There are many tales like that of Herminio, who was one of more than 48,000 Puerto Rican soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War.²⁴³ They fought in all branches of the armed forces and served many roles; there were those who enlisted and those who were sent against their will; and while some did their time and then returned to civilian life, many stayed on as

²⁴¹ Original text reads “*Había confabulación, odio y rencor que aparecía cuando la embriaguez comenzaba a embrutecer nuestros sentidos.*” Herminio Soto Ramírez, *Vietnam: La terrible verdad* (Guayanilla, PR: Centro Cultural Marina Arzola, 1997), 52.

²⁴² Soto Ramírez, 52-54.

²⁴³ The figure of 48,000 can be found in Appy, 15 and United States House of Representatives, “Speech on the House Floor Concerning the 88th Anniversary of U.S. Citizenship for Puerto Ricans.”

career soldiers. Despite their different paths, for many the war was a distinctly Puerto Rican experience, shaped by discrimination and racism that was at times devastating. Claims of bigotry were common among ethnic minorities who fought in the war, but for many Puerto Ricans their service carried the additional burden of a colonized people fighting a colonial war.²⁴⁴ By no means was this burden carried by all, for many served the United States proudly and would do it again if asked, but for those who did experience it, the war left them alienated from the country that asked them to risk their lives.

The experience of Puerto Rican soldiers in Vietnam raises important questions about the role of ethnic minorities in the armed forces, but also about the meaning of citizenship and identity in times of war. Their case, in particular, is complicated by two factors that set it apart from previous American military experiences. For one, among U.S. conflicts of the twentieth century the Vietnam War was unique in that it was widely believed to be unjust. Many soldiers shared this perspective, unsure of why they were there. Second, Puerto Ricans were differentiated from the other troops by their position as a United States territory. For those who equated ‘territory’ with ‘colony,’ and thus perceived themselves as colonial subjects, the difference between them and the people they fought was not so clear.²⁴⁵ The Vietnam War thus exemplified the indignities of the Puerto Rican situation: they were sent by a country that regarded them as second-class citizens to fight a war that, to many, lacked justification, and while risking their lives for the state they became of the objects of racism and discrimination.

²⁴⁴ Oscar López-Rivera and Bernard Headley, "Who is the Terrorist? The Making of a Puerto Rican Freedom Fighter," *Social Justice* 16, no 4 (winter 1989): 172.

²⁴⁵ This sentiment was commonly expressed by the MPI and those who resisted the draft, as outlined in Chapter Two, 35-36. Veteran Oscar López identified with the Vietnamese, Ronald Fernandez, *Prisoners of Colonialism: The Struggle for Justice in Puerto Rico* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1994), 166. Veteran Jaime Vazquez laments the destruction caused by the war. He points out that that the U.S. fought against a people who were defending the very goals that it supported and questions why the U.S. supported France's goal to colonize and "enslave" the Vietnamese, Jaime Vazquez Collection (AFC/2001/001/38567), Video recording, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.38567/> (accessed April 6, 2011).

The military has historically been a site of contention, where minorities have fought for their rights as citizens. Asians, Mexicans, and Native Americans have all used their service to prove their worth to the state. The case of African Americans has been the most clearly documented, from their involvement in the Civil War to the ‘Double V’ campaign of the Second World War, which sought victory at home as well as on the battlefield.²⁴⁶ This campaign had some measure of success when, in 1948, President Truman issued an executive order to end segregation in the United States military.²⁴⁷ The armed forces soon showed a higher degree of desegregation than any other facet of American society and Vietnam was hailed as “the first truly integrated war.”²⁴⁸ Discrimination on the ground was still rampant, however, and as the war went on and racial tensions heated up on the home front, the formal integration of the military was undermined by an increasing level of polarization and racial violence; self-imposed segregation became increasingly common among the rank and file.²⁴⁹

What legal desegregation couldn’t repair was the pervasiveness of the stereotypes that defined the African American community, and which continued to be perpetuated within the military. Such stereotypes weren’t limited to the black community, for the Puerto Rican population of the United States was perceived in a similar manner, as discussed in Chapter Three. As colonized and racialized subjects, both groups have occupied a place in the white, Euro-American imaginary defined by stereotypes of laziness and criminality.²⁵⁰ Both have fought against an American identity that has historically been defined as white, and military

²⁴⁶ James Burk, "The Military Obligation of Citizens Since Vietnam," *Parameters* 31 (Summer 2001): 48-60.

²⁴⁷ Henry Truman, Executive Order 9981, “Establishing the President’s Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity In the Armed Forces,” July 26, 1948 <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/9981a.htm> (accessed March 18, 2012).

²⁴⁸ For an account of military desegregation, see Charles Moskos, *Soldiers and Sociology* (Alexandria, VA: United States Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 1988), 9 and Krebs, 5. The quote can be found in Appy, 20.

²⁴⁹ Moskos, 9.

²⁵⁰ Grosfoguel, 149-50.

service has long been used as a tool in this struggle. Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas describes this struggle as the performance of citizenship identity, and the “politics of worthiness.”²⁵¹ By fighting for the United States, Puerto Rican youth are asked to prove not only their worth as citizens but consequently their ‘whiteness’ by first accepting the stereotypes that define them and then placing themselves outside of them. They prove themselves by demonstrating a devotion to their country that differentiates them from other, stereotypical Puerto Ricans. She argues that the military thus “legitimizes citizenship...as a route to deracialize oneself - to prove that one is disciplined, not lazy; productive, not a parasite of the system; law abiding, not criminal.”²⁵²

The military serves as a site where Puerto Rican youth can challenge the identities that have been constructed for them, where they can embrace the role of soldier that holds such high esteem in the national imaginary. While military service has long been accepted as a rite of passage, a way for boys to become men and to earn their place as citizens,²⁵³ it also has the potential to go beyond this, to function as what Kwame Anthony Appiah has described as a project of “soul making.”²⁵⁴ He explains soul making as a project of the state, but military service only serves this purpose if it “improve(s) the ethical prospects of those who take it up, by *altering their identities*, changing the interpretation of their circumstances that guides their lives.”²⁵⁵ The military attempts to change identity by destroying and rebuilding it. Boys arrive at basic training where they are shaven, stripped and issued uniforms, freed from all sense of individuality. Mental punishment reduces recruits to a psychological condition akin to early

²⁵¹ Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, "Delinquent Citizenship, National Performances: Racialization, Surveillance, and the Politics of 'Worthiness' in Puerto Rican Chicago," in *Latinos and Citizenship: The Dilemma of Belonging*, ed. Suzanne Oboler (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 277&283.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 287-88.

²⁵³ James Burk, "Citizenship Status and Military Service: The Quest for Inclusion by Minorities and Conscientious Objectors," *Armed Forces and Society* 21, no. 4 (Summer 1995): 505 and Eliot A. Cohen, *Citizens and Soldiers: The Dilemmas of Military Service* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 122.

²⁵⁴ Appiah, 164.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

childhood and every civilian instinct in them is destroyed so that they can be rebuilt as soldiers.²⁵⁶ If an ethical life can, as Appiah claims, be judged upon the degree to which an individual both creates and experiences things of significance, and to which he or she fulfills their life's ambitions,²⁵⁷ then soul making only occurs if this reconstruction of identity brings the individual a greater sense of fulfillment.

The question at the foundation of this chapter is the extent to which this project of identity construction – of soul making – was successful not only for the Puerto Rican youth who fought in Vietnam, but for the government by which it was undertaken. There are two competing perspectives on the role of military service. One adheres to the idea that the military is ultimately a project of socialization, that it builds citizens and serves as the ultimate melting pot by breaking down ethnic ties and fostering allegiance to the state. The testimony of many Puerto Rican veterans supports this claim: they identify as patriots and defenders of American freedoms, and claim without reservation that they would do it again if asked. But there is another group that supports the opposing perspective: that military service strengthens ethnic identity at the expense of allegiance to the state. I will explore both of these outcomes through the stories of Puerto Rican veterans, recounted in memoirs and oral history collections, looking first at those whose experience adheres to the socialization theory of military service, before turning to those whose time in the U.S. armed forces failed to strengthen their loyalty to the state. I do not argue that one of these perspectives is right and one wrong, for the evidence suggests that both are true. Instead, I will use these experiences to explore the role of military service in the construction of identity, ultimately returning to Appiah's claims about soul making and raising the question of how military service altered individuals' understanding of their own circumstances.

²⁵⁶ Appy, 87-88.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 162.

Socialization and the United States Military

Throughout the twentieth century, it was commonly believed that military service functioned as a way to foster allegiance to the state. Ronald Krebs describes this perception of the military as a ‘school for the nation,’ and traces it back to the work of Max Weber, through Machiavelli, and ultimately to ancient Greece.²⁵⁸ It is the idea that the military is a socializing force; that by stripping recruits of their identity, the military can create a blank slate upon which to inscribe all the defining values of a society. In the process, ethnic and racial divisions may be overcome through regular contact and close working relationships among soldiers. This is the logic that underpins the notion of the armed forces as a national melting pot.²⁵⁹ It was an interpretation that dovetailed with manpower requirements during the First World War, when the government offered to bestow citizenship upon resident aliens who proved willing to fight for the United States. Such an act demonstrated that, in the eyes of the government, military service was enough to instill a sense of national belonging.²⁶⁰

The socialization theory has stood the test of time, and it can still be found among some observers of the modern U.S. military. In a 2005 article titled “Class Warfare,” Josiah Bunting III makes the claim that “the tired melting pot metaphor is for once apt. Birth, creed, color, and wealth are no longer a criteria of judgment, acceptance, or advancement.”²⁶¹ Military service, he claims, creates better citizens by instilling in survivors “a kind of canny wisdom” that will serve them for the rest of their lives.²⁶² Bunting’s purpose in writing the article is to argue in favour of conscription as a way to ensure the participation of all segments of U.S. society in the defense of the nation – that the military should act as an egalitarian institution requiring the same

²⁵⁸ Krebs, 1.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 6-7.

²⁶⁰ Enloe, 73-74.

²⁶¹ Josiah Bunting III, “Class Warfare,” *American Scholar* 74, no. 1 (2005): 16.

²⁶² Ibid., 16.

commitment from the country's elite as it does from its poor. The same argument is forth by Barry Strauss, who expresses a similar perspective when he argues that citizens who join the military "gain the sense of community that comes from sharing a common cause."²⁶³ While some of Bunting's claims are questionable (particularly that color, creed and wealth are no longer a criteria for judgment), an examination of the experiences of Puerto Rican veterans reveals that many did in fact gain a sense of community and built strong ties to their country of citizenship.

Many of the Vietnam veterans who expressed such sentiment went into the services voluntarily.²⁶⁴ Luis Muñiz López joined the army in 1956, looking for a better life, an escape from the New York streets where he grew up. He paints a rosy picture of his two tours in Vietnam. He describes the high quality of the food he was served and the time he and his friends spent singing and playing guitar. No one in his unit was killed, and – aside from the risk of losing a limb – he claims to have "had a pretty good time, as far as being in a war."²⁶⁵ Enrique Cotto Talentino was so eager to go to war that he forged his parents' signature so he could enlist at the age of sixteen. He describes the inspiration he took from a statue of a soldier that he saw in his youth, claiming that when he looked up at it he saw his own face.²⁶⁶ Such claims are common among interviewees, many of whom grew up watching war movies and playing soldiers. Luis Colón Osorio recalls watching John Wayne movies as a child and modeling himself after Wayne

²⁶³ Barry Strauss, "Reflections on the Citizen-Soldier," *Parameters* 33 (Summer 2003): 68.

²⁶⁴ Of the seventeen interviews used for this project, those who enlisted voluntarily (and gave no mention of being motivated by the draft) were most likely to express support for U.S. actions in Vietnam. Among the nine who expressed support for the war, six enlisted and three were draftees. Of the five interview subjects who expressed clear anti-war sentiment, four were draftees. Jaime Vazquez was the only enlistee to speak against the war in Vietnam. The remainder expressed no clear opinion one way or the other.

²⁶⁵ Luis Muñiz López Collection (AFC/2001/001/73455), Audio recording, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

²⁶⁶ Enrique Cotto Talentino Collection (AFC/2001/001/33324), Video recording, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

while dreaming of a future as a Marine.²⁶⁷ Christian Appy argues that the glorification of war that was so common among the Vietnam generation that it “surely contributed to the proliferation of uncritical patriotism.”²⁶⁸

In the case of Cotto, this connection proves true. When asked in an interview what it was like to be a Puerto Rican in Vietnam and how he would like others to think of him, he responds: “I want them to think of me that I was one of the ones to fight for freedom...to fight for the flag of the United States. I fight for freedom and if I had to do it again, I'd do it, just for my country.”²⁶⁹ Cotto is not the only Puerto Rican veteran to express this unquestioning belief that the war in Vietnam was fought for the freedom of the United States. Joseph López, a naval officer who grew up in New York, claims that he and his men fought for American freedom just as their fathers had. The war was necessary to keep the U.S. free from the threat of oppression, from those who hated America and its lifestyle and sought to take away what they had.²⁷⁰ Not only does López express an unwavering faith that the war was right, but in referencing his forefathers he appeals to Puerto Rico’s military history and situates his own participation in the Vietnam War within the larger context of the island’s support for U.S. military efforts.

A more elaborate example of this historicization can be found in José Santiago Torres’s 1979 book, *Mas allá del deber* (Beyond Duty), which tells the story of Medal of Honor recipient Euripides Rubio. The book is part biography and part military history, written by Rubio’s father-in-law. While it presents the kind of patriotic account that is to be expected in the story of such a decorated soldier, what is interesting is the care with which Santiago embeds Rubio’s story within a long and distinguished record of Puerto Rican service to the United States. Rubio was

²⁶⁷ Fernandez, 127.

²⁶⁸ Appy, 61.

²⁶⁹ Enrique Cotto Talentino Collection, Veterans History Project.

²⁷⁰ Joseph López Collection (AFC/2001/001/57205), Video recording, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

born in 1938, in the years leading up to the conflict in which his father would serve.²⁷¹ Santiago claims that Rubio grew up with a profound respect for the founders of the most powerful nation in the world,²⁷² and even goes so far as to tie Puerto Rico to the cause of American independence by recounting the tale of a frigate full of revolutionaries who sought refuge on the island's shores in 1779. He describes a faithful colony, characterized by patriotic fervor and loyalty to the *madre patria* (homeland) during the Spanish colonial period, yet already connected to its American patron over a century before the island became a territory of the United States.²⁷³ He relates the *Grito de Lares*, Puerto Rico's 1868 bid for independence from Spain, to the abolitionist efforts of the U.S. during the Civil War that was being fought at roughly the same time.²⁷⁴ Not surprisingly, Santiago makes no mention of the fact that the independence movement on the island shifted direction after the Spanish-American War, targeting instead the United States.

The sense of patriotism exhibited by Santiago and Cotto is reflective of the political sentiment of a large portion of the Puerto Rican population. Since the establishment of the *Estado Libre Asociado* in 1952, the Puerto Rican community has mainly been divided among those who support the continuation of commonwealth status and those who favour the pursuit of statehood, while independence supporters have shrunk to a very small segment of the population.²⁷⁵ When asked about his political stance, Cotto replies that statehood would make him proud and goes on to say that Puerto Ricans who don't favour statehood don't know American history.²⁷⁶ Another veteran, by the name of Eduardo Oyola Rivera, also expresses his support for statehood when asked, claiming that his time in the war taught him to appreciate

²⁷¹ José Santiago Torres, *Mas alla del deber: Historia de un heroe en la guerra de Vietnam* (San Juan, PR: Santiago Torres, 1979), 35.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 87-88.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁷⁵ The political division of the island between the two camps has been written about extensively. See Ayala and Bernabe, 178; Duany, 2; Grosfoguel, 43-45, for just a few examples.

²⁷⁶ Enrique Cotto Talentino Collection, Veterans History Project.

what he has as an American. A draftee and a paraplegic, Oyola Rivera is asked whether he thinks it was fair that he was drafted, given the fact that he cannot vote, but he never gives a straight answer and ends the interview by saying that he would fight for his country again if asked.²⁷⁷

Eduardo Oyola Rivera's story reveals that it isn't just enlistees who express support for U.S. actions in Vietnam, nor is it only those who, like Luis Muñiz López, claim to have had an easy time in the war. Many of the men who convey a strong sense of patriotism for the United States also tell tales of discrimination and hardship. Oyola Rivera recounts how he and the other Puerto Ricans in basic training were constantly fighting with the other recruits. He relates most of these conflicts to the challenges presented by language, claiming that fights broke out due to misunderstandings and perceived insults.²⁷⁸ Cotto tells the same story, explaining that the Puerto Ricans in basic training fought every day with the other recruits. In his case, he claims that their use of the Spanish language always identified them for punishment.²⁷⁹ In fact, many of the stories told revolve around language, for it is commonly claimed that Puerto Rican soldiers were forbidden from speaking Spanish, even if they spoke no English.²⁸⁰

Negative experiences were not limited to boot camp, and some of the most troubling stories come from the years after the war. Captain Vazquez-Rodriguez reminisces about his experiences in Korea and Vietnam in his memoir, *Proud to Serve My Country*. As indicated by the title, the work expresses the author's unwavering patriotism and his fervent belief that John F. Kennedy was right to send troops to Vietnam.²⁸¹ What is clear from the book is that the author's own sense of identity is firmly rooted in his role as a soldier, evidenced by the fact that

²⁷⁷ Eduardo Oyola-Rivera Collection (AFC/2001/001/53368), Video Recording, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Enrique Cotto Talentino Collection, Veterans History Project.

²⁸⁰ This claim is made veteran Marcelino Garcia, Marcelino Garcia Collection (AFC/2001/001/64447), Video recording, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, and again in "Veterano de Ejército Yanqui Describe Cómo Tratan Boricuas," *Claridad*, April 16, 1972, p. 21.

²⁸¹ Captain Vazquez-Rodriguez, *Proud to Serve my Country* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2011), 4.

he never uses his first name, but identifies himself only by rank. Yet he too recounts the discrimination that he experienced in the U.S. military, where he claims that Puerto Ricans were always viewed as inferior.²⁸² His distinguished service in Vietnam earned him an advancement in rank and a coveted assignment, but his new position was cut short when he was replaced by a soldier from Indiana. The military justified its decision by claiming that the men, a National Guard unit from Indiana, preferred to be commanded by someone they could relate to. Vazquez-Rodriguez responded by stating: “what you are trying to say is that I am a native Puerto Rican and your men may not like that.”²⁸³ He believes that he was the victim of discrimination, but this does nothing to diminish the loyalty he expresses to the U.S. Army.²⁸⁴

Another disturbing tale is recounted by Hector Rosario, an Air Force veteran who suffers from numerous health problems that have been linked to Agent Orange exposure. When he applied for veteran’s benefits, the administration claimed not to have his records. He fought for years for recognition as a Vietnam veteran and claims that the loss of his documents shows a lack of respect by the United States military. Rosario suspects that the action was intentional and that they did it out of spite because he wouldn’t re-enlist, and he claims that he feels wronged. He eventually proved his case and received health benefits from the Veterans’ Administration, and despite this experience, he states that given the chance he would go to war again.²⁸⁵ Enrique Cotto Talentino, who expresses pride in his service, suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that eventually developed into schizophrenia. In a particularly poignant statement, he says:

They teach me how to kill, they teach me how to protect myself, they teach me how to survive, but they didn't teach me how to forget. They didn't teach me how I should go

²⁸² Ibid., 82.

²⁸³ Ibid., 254.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 251-54.

²⁸⁵ Hector Manuel Rosario Collection, Veterans History Project.

back home and forget what I did ... They brainwashed me when I went over there, but they didn't brainwash me when I came back.²⁸⁶

And yet, not for a moment does he express any doubt that what he suffers was for a worthwhile cause. Men such as Hector Rosario and Enrique Cotto Talentino demonstrate the power of the military to shape identity. They are a testament to the sense of patriotism that can be fostered by military service, and evidence of a successful project to build loyal citizens.

Discrimination and Resentment

Men like Cotto and Rosario, whose painful experiences did not ultimately outweigh their sense of patriotism, only tell one side of the story. For every soldier who feels that his service was justified, another expresses anger and resentment at the actions of the United States. This sentiment is not uncommon among veterans of the much-maligned war, but the experience of Puerto Ricans in Vietnam was also shaped by the disconnect between state and nation, by the fact that loyalty to one does not necessarily imply loyalty to the other. The thousands of Puerto Rican soldiers who fought for the United States military were exposed to “one of the most ideologically oriented institutions” imaginable, one of whose main goals is to instill a sense of loyalty.²⁸⁷ Efrén Rivera Ramos claims that this project was successful in regards to the Puerto Rican soldiers who have fought in American wars, for he claims that a majority have emerged with an increased sense of loyalty to the U.S.²⁸⁸ It is difficult to gauge the extent to which this is true for Vietnam veterans, whether this group indeed represents a majority, but what is clear is that they by no means represent all of those who fought, for a significant number instead left the service disillusioned and expressing a distinctly anti-American sentiment.

²⁸⁶ Enrique Cotto Talentino Collection, Veterans History Project.

²⁸⁷ Rivera Ramos, 164.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

The veterans who fall into this category demonstrate that the military's project of indoctrination has not always been successful. Ronald Krebs is critical of the military's goal of socialization, for it relies upon an interpretation of soldiers as passive receptors.²⁸⁹ While it is true that military service undeniably changes individuals, it is always possible for them to challenge "hegemonic projects," and it is thus impossible to assume that socialization will result in identification with the state.²⁹⁰ While Krebs advises skepticism, Cynthia Enloe takes the argument further, claiming that an enhanced sense of ethnic identity is the most common outcome of military service among minority groups.²⁹¹ Enloe presents a strong case for her claim, applying it to a number of historical case studies, but it is difficult to say whether a majority of Puerto Ricans left the service with a stronger commitment to their ethnic identity. The outcome is ultimately dependent on the social, economic and political context, not to mention the individual's own beliefs and experiences. What is clear, however, is that many soldiers do not express the sense of loyalty and discipline required of them on the battlefield after their return to civilian society.²⁹²

The military's socialization project is ultimately an exercise in identity formation, but it is clear that the new identity that is built does not always become permanently engrained in the recipient. In basic training and on the battlefield, survival requires that soldiers adopt and internalize the values that have been instilled in them by the military: that they think and act in the manner that they have been trained. Upon returning to society, however, acting like a soldier is no longer necessary for survival and adhering to that role becomes a matter of choice. In contrast, identifications such as race and ethnicity are inherently different because the individual

²⁸⁹ Krebs, 8.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Enloe, 11.

²⁹² Krebs, 8-10.

has no control over them. They are foundational because they not only carry meanings that may or may not be internalized by the individual, but also those that are assigned to them by others.²⁹³ Such outside ascriptions of identity are at the root of stereotypes and discrimination, for they rely upon socially constructed conceptions of what it means to *be* a particular race or ethnicity. Many Puerto Rican soldiers experienced treatment that was based upon the most fundamental aspects of who they are and this experience was formative.

The theme of language arises frequently in the stories told by Puerto Rican veterans and it functions in a number of different ways. In the case of Cotto, it served as a marker that was consistently used to identify him and his friends for punishment. For Marcelino García, it was the source of many of his problems. He claims that the army forbid him from speaking Spanish, despite the fact that he spoke no English. He resented this rule, for he believed that he was entitled to speak his own language. When he refused to comply and spoke Spanish anyway, he ended up in a physical confrontation with a sergeant that almost resulted in a court martial.²⁹⁴ García managed to avoid such an outcome, but José Antonio Vargas faced a court martial after his own violent confrontation with a drunken superior. His family reported to the press that Vargas wasn't given an adequate defense because the military failed to provide him with an attorney who spoke Spanish.²⁹⁵ Language therefore served not only as a marker, but also as a source of conflict and a means of stripping the individual of power.

Power is inherent in language and this fact is confirmed repeatedly by such stories. Cases like that of Vargas reveal the extent to which political power can be held – and denied – through language.²⁹⁶ In its failure to provide him with a Spanish-speaking attorney, the military denied

²⁹³ Appiah, 65-71.

²⁹⁴ Marcelino Garcia Collection, Veterans History Project.

²⁹⁵ "Soldados denuncia discrimen contra boricuas en ejercito," *Claridad*, Oct. 22-67, p.1.

²⁹⁶ For a historical account of the language of power, see Anderson, 67-82.

Vargas the ability to fully participate in own defense. It is in this sense that Appiah defines language as an “instrument of citizenship,”²⁹⁷ for it is a vital component of any citizen’s ability to participate in public life. In their objection to his lack of a fair trial, Vargas’s family made a claim to his right as an American citizen that hinged upon the issue of language. The power of language is not merely legal and political, however, for there is also power in its very construction and the way that it conveys meaning. The act of labeling is a particularly powerful use of language, for it is through labels that identities are inscribed upon others. When such labels are racist or discriminatory in nature, they create a power relationship between those who assign them and those to whom they are applied.

A powerful example of this can be found in the story of Luis Colón Osorio. Luis never went to Vietnam, but he signed up for the army at the age of eighteen with every intention of going to Southeast Asia. He recalls the day that he enlisted, claiming that he filled out forms written in English that he couldn’t understand. After he signed the papers and all was official, he was informed that he had unknowingly signed on for an extra year. When he asked the sergeant why this had happened, the response was “we took you for a ride.”²⁹⁸ Another of the forms asked for his race, to which Luis responded with ‘Puerto Rican,’ only to be informed that this was not an option. They ridiculed his answer, and wrote on the form: “nationality, American, Race, Black.”²⁹⁹ He identifies this experience as his first encounter with American racism, but he became much more familiar with it in basic training, when he was repeatedly referred to as ‘spik,’ a label that carried with it such contempt that it was beyond his comprehension.³⁰⁰ The

²⁹⁷ Appiah, 101-2.

²⁹⁸ Fernandez, 134.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 134-35.

term 'spik,' such a common epithet at the time, reveals the way that language and race were inextricably tied, dual components of the discrimination against Puerto Ricans.

Tales of racism are common among Puerto Rican veterans, many of whom identify it as the most formative experience they had in the U.S. military. Marcelino García claims that most of the officers in his unit were racist, and gave preferential treatment to white soldiers at the expense of blacks and Hispanics. His experience with racism marked him, and he left the war laden with resentment toward Americans that was difficult to overcome.³⁰¹ Luis Hernández Martínez claims that he and his friends encountered racism from the very first moment they entered the United States for basic training, and that Puerto Rican recruits were not only given the worst jobs but suffered the most severe punishments.³⁰² Although many soldiers regarded their position as similar to that of African American soldiers, there were those who expressed the belief that Puerto Ricans were actually at the bottom of the social scale.³⁰³ Another common experience he recounted was that he was trained as a non-combat specialist, only to be given a rifle and sent to the front when he arrived in Vietnam. Published in the pages of *Claridad*, Hernández's story gave fuel to claims that Puerto Ricans were being used as cannon fodder.

One of the most interesting accounts of race can be found in Osvaldo Fernández Gordian's *A Tragedy of Unknown Heroes*. Published in Spanish as *Vietnam: Una tragedia Puertorriqueña* (Vietnam: A Puerto Rican tragedy), the book is a collection of stories written by a Puerto Rican soldier shortly after he returned from the war. Four short stories recount the experiences of a group of friends, all of whom had the misfortune of being sent to Vietnam. The author explores the nuances of race throughout the book, taking the time to define each of the Puerto Rican characters in terms of their skin colour and thus revealing the diversity of

³⁰¹ Marcelino García Collection, Veterans History Project.

³⁰² "Veterano Guerra Vietnam Insta Jovenes Resistir a SMO," *Claridad*, Sept. 20-70, p. 7.

³⁰³ "Soldado puertorriqueño rehusa ir a vietnam," *Claridad*, Nov. 30-69, p. 3.

complexions on the island. Chegui was blonde-haired and blue-eyed, while Coco, Yoyo and Carlitos were all black. Oscar and Octavio enlisted as white, but they were “the perfect mix of Spaniard White, Taino Indian and African Negro.”³⁰⁴ Yoyo caused confusion among the other soldiers due to the picture he carried of his girlfriend. He claims that despite her straight hair and her “white girl’s nose,” her grandfather was just as black as he himself.³⁰⁵

Fernández gives depth to his characters, painting a detailed portrait of what it meant to be a Puerto Rican taken from the island and dropped on the battlefields of Vietnam. He speaks of their “voluntary exile” not to the mainland, but to a war where they not only risked their lives, but were subjected to racial prejudice on a regular basis.³⁰⁶ He reveals the frequency with which men like Luis Hernández Martínez were sent to the front lines after being promised non-combat duty and expresses the belief that black soldiers were placed ahead of Puerto Ricans.³⁰⁷ And yet he also expresses the pride of Puerto Rican soldiers, describing it as “that peculiar and very particular feeling of being a Puerto Rican trying to stand tall before the North American Nordic giants.”³⁰⁸ It is interesting to note that for all his efforts at giving depth to his Puerto Rican characters, in his description of African American soldiers, Fernández replicates the same sort of racist stereotypes that he himself tries to escape. As one of his characters reflects back upon his life in Puerto Rico, he imagines his black friend must be dreaming about skinny-legged girls, Kentucky Fried Chicken and watermelon.³⁰⁹

Although race features prominently in Fernández’s story, the book is ultimately about tragedy. The author himself never saw the publication of his work, for in 1977 he suffered a

³⁰⁴ Sgt. Osvaldo Fernandez Gordian, *Tragedy of Unknown Heroes* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2010), 19-20.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 66 and 17.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

mental breakdown and forever returned in his mind to the jungles of Vietnam. His wife published the book as a tribute to her husband, but also to make public the experience of the Puerto Rican soldiers who fought in the war. Her bitterness is palpable when she addresses the matter of citizenship, claiming that:

It is very important and relevant the fact that all Puerto Ricans are born American citizens no matter where they are born, since P.R. is an American territory. This is important because now a days [sic] there is a common belief among the populace in the USA that all Spanish speaking personnel have to earn that privilege. We are born with it, we are equals, whether they like it or not. *Piss on them.*³¹⁰

Not only does Fernández's own story end in tragedy, so does that of every character in his book: Octavio dies in the war, Carlitos goes home to become the town drunk, Yoyo lives out the rest of his life alienated from everyone around him, and Oscar suffers from both PTSD and Agent Orange exposure.

The outcome of these stories is no different from the actual experiences of many veterans, whose own recollections are often haunting and deeply troubling. Like Cotto, who laments the fact that no one deprogrammed him when he returned from the war, many veterans speak of the brainwashing they experienced. Luis Colón Osorio recalls his training, and how he was taught to burn down houses that looked just like the ones he had grown up with on the island of Culebra. The instructors would yell "KILL! KILL! KILL!" as they attacked dummies that looked like unarmed men, women, and children.³¹¹ The training was transformative for Luis, who volunteered to go to Vietnam just so he could release some of the anger that was building inside him; he never dreamed that he could be capable of the violence he felt after his training.³¹² Jaime Vazquez refers to this element of his training as psychological operations, and recalls being told by a sergeant that it was the fault of the Vietnamese that their mothers were at home

³¹⁰ Ibid., v-vi.

³¹¹ Fernández, 126-27.

³¹² Ibid., 135.

suffering and that their girlfriends would go off and sleep with other men. He arrived in Vietnam full of anger at the Vietnamese, only to realize the truth: that “we are the ones who went 10,000 miles to attack *their* country.”³¹³

Jaime Vazquez is one of countless Vietnam veterans who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Although he has anger issues and he doesn’t sleep well, with symptoms that have only gotten worse over the years, Vazquez seems to have overcome the odds and found success as a municipal politician and anti-war activist in Jersey City.³¹⁴ The story of Sergio Morales, on the other hand, doesn’t have such a happy ending. Sergio was drafted out of the ghettos of Brooklyn in 1965 and volunteered to go to Vietnam in order to keep his younger brother out of the war. His voice is pained as he recounts his experience: he recalls the shooting of pregnant women and the taking of body parts as souvenirs. There were atrocities that he witnessed and those that he committed himself. After the war he visited Puerto Rico and was traumatized when he saw two young children who looked like the ones he’d killed in Vietnam. Sergio is clearly tormented by his memories. He says that he’s still angry, that he carries these things with him all the time and thinks about the war more than anything else in his life. Nothing helps – not even drugs. All of his feelings about the war, the baggage he carries with him, are conveyed at the end of his interview when he quotes Robert Frost: “The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep.”³¹⁵ It is clear that Sergio longs for peace, but one doubts whether he will ever come to terms with what he did during the war.

³¹³ Jaime Vazquez Collection, Veterans History Project.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Sergio Antonio Morales Collection (AFC/2001/001/57252), Audio recording, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

Equally tragic is the story told by Herminio Soto Ramírez, the soldier who couldn't bring himself to murder his commanding officer. Herminio's memoir, *Vietnam: La terrible verdad* (Vietnam: The Terrible Truth), stands in stark contrast to those of men such as Captain Vazquez-Rodríguez, which is brimming with patriotism and martial pride. Instead, his is a tale of innocence lost that is characterized by a series of flashbacks to his childhood on the banks of the Guayanilla River and memories of the friends that he lost. He claims that the draft "extended its many tentacles to separate them forever," and he attributes their shattered dreams to the whims of the Selective Service Committee.³¹⁶ He questions the miserable compensation – \$10,000 – given to families who lost their loved ones in the war, and the injustice of the fact that those who could afford to were able to buy their way out.³¹⁷ In making such statements, Soto raises the common claim that the war was defined by class. He identifies the war as just one component of the major social transformation that was taking place in Puerto Rico at the time, largely due to Operation Bootstrap; those of his friends who didn't ship out to Vietnam were instead exiled to the mainland in search of work.³¹⁸

Although his story takes place in Southeast Asia, Puerto Rico is always present in Herminio's story. When he is not flashing back to his youth, he is searching for signs of home. He recalls that on the night of his arrival he was greeted by a group of Puerto Rican soldiers and he joined them for a drink. He marvelled at the fact that they sat speaking Spanish and drinking American beer in such a far-off place.³¹⁹ Later, while on rest in Thailand, he gets drunk on Puerto Rican rum and wakes the next morning to the sound of Latin music on the radio; he's

³¹⁶ "El Servicio Militar Obligatorio, extendió sus tentáculos múltiples para desunirlos para siempre." Soto Ramírez, 5.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 29.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 8.

engulfed by a sense of joy that also leaves him with a profound sadness.³²⁰ Eventually, Herminio found Hispanic friends, one of whom got drunk with him and helped him plot a murder.³²¹ It was from this friend that he took strength, as together they confronted the army's racial factionalism. He is still tortured by the memory of his friend's death, which he describes as an "eternal void of anguish and pain in memory of he who gave his life for a useless cause."³²²

This is only one of many memories that plague Herminio, who like so many other veterans suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.³²³ He traces the root of his sadness to November 7th, 1969, when he was sent on a secret operation to search for a group of POWs. He was hit in the chest with grenade fragments and has spent the rest of his life fighting to receive veteran's benefits.³²⁴ It is easy to see that his pain goes far beyond that one moment, however, as he recalls the day when his unit was ordered to burn down a village. When a woman begged him to protect her young son, his superior commanded that he proceed with his orders and threatened to kill him if he didn't. They burned the village to the ground and abandoned the woman and her son. To this day he is haunted by the memory of the child's face.³²⁵ Herminio claims that since the war, he's been unable to find joy in anything, that his senses are always tortured by the scent of blood. He lives a lonely life and feels forgotten, but he claims that forgetting is more painful

³²⁰ Ibid., 56.

³²¹ Ibid., 52.

³²² The original text reads "*un vacío de angustia y dolor en memoria de aquel que ofrendó su vida por una causa inútil*," *ibid.*, 49.

³²³ A study conducted in response to a congressional mandate in 1983 found that among male veterans of the war, 30.9% had experienced PTSD at some point, while 15.2% continued to suffer from it at the time of the study. Female veterans experienced PTSD 26.9% over the course of their lifetime and 8.5% at the time of the study. Jennifer L. Price, "Findings from the National Vietnam Veterans' Readjustment Study," *National Center for PTSD*, <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/pages/vietnam-vets-study.asp> (accessed April 18, 2012).

³²⁴ Ibid., 58-59.

³²⁵ Ibid., 46.

to him than death and so he refuses to let go.³²⁶ He dedicates the book to the Puerto Rican soldiers who fought in Vietnam, but especially those who continue to suffer from PTSD.³²⁷

There is a common bitterness among those, like Herminio, who had to fight for their benefits. Many veterans claim to have enlisted for the chance at a better life, and an important element of this was access to the GI Bill. Originally passed as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, the bill was meant to assist WWII veterans with their return to civilian life. An important component of the bill was the subsidization that it provided for college education. Although a 1966 amendment marked a significant reduction in the benefits provided by the original act, many Vietnam veterans were still able to earn a college degree as a result of the bill.³²⁸ What has proved more difficult to obtain, however, are health benefits, especially mental health benefits, for the Veterans Administration rarely compensates for psychological disorders among combat veterans.³²⁹ For returning vets, who were already shunned and ridiculed by those segments of the public that were opposed to the war, the denial of benefits was a further insult. Military sociologist Charles Moskos claims that the United States government showed a distinct lack of appreciation towards Vietnam vets, going so far as to claim that the federal government seemed "intent on placing Vietnam veterans at a disadvantage with those who had stayed out of the service."³³⁰

The fight for benefits is not limited to Puerto Rican veterans, nor is the incidence of PTSD. In many ways, the tales told by Herminio Soto Ramírez and Sergio Morales echo those of other soldiers, be they black, white, Asian or Native American. Yet there are certain facets of the

³²⁶ Ibid., 59-60.

³²⁷ Ibid., 63.

³²⁸ For information on the GI Bill and its 1966 version, see Glenn Altschuler, and Stuart Blumin *GI Bill: The New Deal for Veterans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 208-210 and Moskos, 14. Among those who claim to have earned an education as a result of the GI Bill are Eduardo Oyola Rivera, Hector Rosario and Jaime Vazquez, Veterans History Project.

³²⁹ Appy, 257.

³³⁰ Moskos, 14.

Puerto Rican experience that were unique. Puerto Rican soldiers were United States citizens, yet their language differentiated them, even from other ethnic minorities. While racism certainly wasn't unique to Puerto Rican soldiers, those from the island often experienced blatant discrimination for the first time in the armed forces where, as Oscar López states, they were “thrust into an environment that was very hostile and (they) weren't prepared for the rejection (they) encountered.”³³¹

Military Service and Politicization

Not surprisingly, the response to such treatment both during and after the war has varied greatly among Puerto Rican veterans. As already mentioned, there are those like Joseph López and Eduardo Oyola Rivera, who express no regrets about their service or the actions of the United States in Vietnam, and those like Enrique Cotto Talentino and Hector Rosario, who readily show the scars of their experience, yet claim they would do it again. Then there are men like Sergio Morales and Herminio Soto Rodríguez, who never really left the war and remain traumatized by their time in Vietnam. Yet there are also those who, though they regard their experience in Vietnam as inherently negative, also took strength from it and became politicized by the war. This is not unusual, for many future politicians emerged from the generation of American youth who fought in Vietnam,³³² but in the case of these veterans, their politicization manifested itself in a renewed – or even altogether new – commitment to the cause of Puerto Rican nationalism.

³³¹ Fernandez, 169.

³³² Both Enloe and Krebs address the frequency with which war politicizes soldiers. Enloe focuses on the way that war can create leaders among minority ethnic groups, as veterans become more familiar with outside politics and less fearful of engagement with outsiders, 199. Krebs makes a similar case, claiming that veterans are more likely to become familiar with political rhetoric and that they are given more access to political resources, both of which make them “more likely to demand the redress of inequity,” 8.

Over the course of the war, the left-leaning newspaper *Claridad* published numerous accounts of veterans who declared their commitment to the *independentista* cause after their experience in the U.S. military. In May 1970, Luis Hernández Martínez was wounded in combat. When the army tried to reward him for his service, he refused not only the Purple Heart but also a medal for courage. The resentment he feels towards the United States is abundantly clear when he claims: “they (the gringos) call us ‘hot blooded.’ We will use this hot blood to the last drop to fight against them.”³³³ The same sentiment was expressed by Cándido Morales Irizarry, who claimed that many recruits left camp as *independentistas*. “The only thing I thank the US army for,” he says, “is teaching me how to shoot – maybe someday they’ll regret it.”³³⁴ Juan Manuel Delgado entered the army ignorant of the racism that he would encounter. Like Soto Ramírez, he questions the value that the U.S. government has for human life when it offers \$10,000 as the price of a body, what he calls the price of blood. He claims that the worst punishment he suffered was mental, when he claims: “we have to sing their anthem, not ours; salute their flag, not ours; speak their language, not ours and hear day after the day the phrase ‘dirty Puerto Ricans.’”³³⁵ All his life he had been indoctrinated; he grew up in a family that supported statehood, but now he knew that independence was the only real option.

The bold nationalist rhetoric expressed by veterans in the pages of *Claridad* was clearly meant to serve the cause of the independence movement, and it was powerful propaganda, but evidence of such attitudes can be found outside its pages as well. Tony Santiago is a Puerto Rican veteran who grew up on the streets of New York City, where he ran with local gangs in Queens and the Bronx. After being accepted to Columbia University, he decided instead to join

³³³ “Ellos (los gringos) nos llaman ‘hot blood’. Vamos a usar esa sangre caliente hasta la ultima gota para luchar contra ellos.” “Veterano Guerra Vietnam Insta Jovenes Resistir a SMO,” *Claridad*, Sept. 20-70, p. 7.

³³⁴ “Soldado puertorriqueño rehusa ir a Vietnam,” *Claridad*, Nov. 30-69, p. 3.

³³⁵ Juan Manuel Delgado, “La ignorancia me llevó al ejército,” *Claridad*, Nov. 1-70 p. 10.

the Marines and he ended up in Vietnam. During his time in the war, his experiences with discrimination led him to seek solutions for the tensions that existed between races. He founded a group called Puerto Rican Power in Unity (later Latin Power in Unity), which worked closely with a black power organization to improve race relations in their company. When he left Vietnam, he didn't return to New York but went instead to Puerto Rico where he became an *independentista*, and he attributes his politicization to his time in the war. Today Tony is an administrator for Wikipedia and a writer for *Somos Primos* magazine. He has been recognized by the government of Puerto Rico for his commitment to preserving the positive contributions made by Hispanics to American society, and particularly to the U.S. military, and remains a supporter of independence to this day.³³⁶

Perhaps the most interesting – and certainly the most famous – case of a politicized Puerto Rican veteran, is that of Oscar López Rivera. Oscar was drafted by the U.S. Army in 1965 and returned to Chicago after his tour, where he became a community and independence activist. He eventually became involved in a group known as the FALN (Armed Forces of National Liberation), a Puerto Rican independence group based on the U.S. mainland that was responsible for a series of bombings in the late seventies and early eighties. The group's actions amounted to "armed propaganda," directed at property rather than people, but two of the bombings resulted in six deaths in 1975 and 1977.³³⁷ In 1981, López was arrested for his involvement in the FALN and convicted of seditious conspiracy with a fifty-five year sentence. A later escape attempt added another fifteen years to his sentence and he is now the longest-

³³⁶ This information can be found in Tony Santiago, "User: Marine 69-71," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Marine_69-71 (accessed Feb. 2, 2011) and Tony Santiago, "Who is Tony the Marine," *Somos Primos*, Jan. 2007, <http://www.somosprimos.com/sp2007/spjan07/spjan07.htm#Military> (accessed March 14, 2012).

³³⁷ Margaret Power, "Last but not Least: The Fight to Release Oscar López Rivera," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 44, no. 1 (Jan. 2011): 10.

serving Puerto Rican political prisoner in the United States, over thirty-one years into a seventy year prison term.³³⁸

López traces the roots of his activism to his experience in Vietnam, referring to his time in the war as his “political baptism.”³³⁹ When he first arrived in Southeast Asia, he firmly believed in his mission, that he was there to fight a communist invasion, but it wasn’t long before he began to doubt the American cause. He expected to be welcomed with open arms by the Vietnamese people, but instead found hostility, and he soon realized that the American troops were seen at best as intruders, but even worse, as invaders.³⁴⁰ Yet even as Oscar came to understand the resentment with which so many of the Vietnamese viewed the American soldiers, he perceived a difference in the way that he himself was treated. It is here that the nuances of race arise in Oscar’s story, for he claims that he was treated well by the Vietnamese peasants, who would often compare themselves to him: small-framed, standing only five feet, five inches tall, the Vietnamese remarked on Oscar’s similar size and skin tone.³⁴¹

It was not only the Vietnamese with whom López found common cause, for he also experienced a sense of solidarity with both the Puerto Rican and African American soldiers he encountered. He recalls the feeling of brotherhood between Puerto Ricans and describes the way that they would draw the Puerto Rican flag on their helmets so that they could identify each other. This identification made them “a different kind of soldier,” and their bond was so strong that the others looked at them differently.³⁴² Despite this distinction that he felt as a Puerto Rican, it was also clear to Oscar what they had in common with black soldiers. He recalls that in

³³⁸ There is disagreement over whether Puerto Rican independence activists qualify as political prisoners, but the FALN members who were arrested in 1981 went so far as to claim they were prisoners of war. For account of their defence see Power, 10. This interpretation underlies Fernandez’s book *Prisoners of Colonialism*.

³³⁹ López-Rivera and Headley, 171.

³⁴⁰ Fernandez, 165-66 and López-Rivera and Headley, 171.

³⁴¹ Fernandez, 166.

³⁴² López quoted in Fernandez, 167.

the years before the war, he was told by Korean veterans “that we and our African American brethren were being used as cannon fodder in the white's (sic) man's wars,” and that it was only after his own experience that he truly understood what they meant.³⁴³ He describes how he was always chosen to lead mine sweeping operations and to climb down into the tunnels, how he walked around weighed down by weapons and ammunition, “trying to kill people who had not done anything to the Puerto Rican people.”³⁴⁴ Meanwhile, there was another war going on at home, on the streets of Chicago, and when he was fortunate enough to speak to his mother, he could hear gunfire in the background as she informed him that he was probably safer in Vietnam.³⁴⁵

López returned to Chicago in 1967, only to be affronted by the suffering of the Puerto Rican community. He was appalled by the treatment of Puerto Ricans, especially the poor conditions in which they were forced to live and the lack of quality education for children in the barrio.³⁴⁶ It was then that Oscar became politicized. He claims that his very first political act was to find out what the Vietnam War was about, to answer the questions that he couldn't answer while he was immersed in it. His second act was to take up the cause of social and economic justice for Chicago's Puerto Rican population.³⁴⁷ He began working as a community organizer, fighting for tenants' rights and changes to the curriculum at the local school. It was through such experiences that Oscar came to believe that Puerto Rico's colonial status was the root of the community's problems and that the liberation of the island was the only possible path to empowerment.³⁴⁸ This conviction was what ultimately led to his involvement with the FALN.

³⁴³ López-Rivera and Headley, 171.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 172.

³⁴⁶ Fernandez, 169-70.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 168 and 174.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 175.

His position as a colonial subject is fundamental to the way that López understands his experiences, including his time in Vietnam. He explores the deeper meaning of his military service when he claims that he was sent “to do what good colonized people do; protect the economic, military and political interests of the colonizer.”³⁴⁹ Given the original motivations of the war, which the United States entered in order to defend French colonial interests, from this perspective the conscription and deployment of Puerto Ricans takes on a sinister meaning: that they were colonial subjects sent to fight a colonial war. For Oscar, this was clear, and in his mind it justifies his actions against the United States. He was trained as a terrorist, and yet during the war he was never defined as one. Instead he was awarded a Bronze Star, given a medal for meritorious achievement.³⁵⁰ It was only after the war, when he took those same skills given to him by the United States military and directed them towards the U.S. government, that he was labeled as a terrorist.

When Oscar was convicted of seditious conspiracy, he spoke before the court at his sentencing and appealed to the multiple identities to which he subscribed. In so doing, he denied the one-dimensional role assigned to him by the United States government: that of terrorist. He stated:

I have a history, something that has not come out here. I have marched with black people in this country for their rights. I have marched for jobs. There is a history of that. I have marched for housing and there is a history of that. I was in Vietnam. I am a veteran of Vietnam. There is a history of that.³⁵¹

When he claimed to have a history, Oscar asked that his actions be placed within their broader context. His entire existence was shaped by his role as a colonial subject: first as a “by-product

³⁴⁹ López-Rivera and Headley, 172.

³⁵⁰ Ibid,

³⁵¹ López quoted in Fernandez, 226.

of forced immigration,”³⁵² then as a second-class citizen whose early life was indelibly marked by discrimination, and later by his lack of choice when he was made to risk his life for the United States. He identifies himself as a proponent of civil rights when he claims that he marched with black people, and as a defender of the working class who marched for jobs and decent living conditions. Finally, he makes his most powerful claim when he appeals to his identity as a veteran. His statement serves to discredit the perception of López as a terrorist – an inherently negative label – by laying claim to a number of roles that carry with them the weight of moral rectitude. Years later, Oscar’s brother would describe him as “the embodiment of the best virtues of the Puerto Rican character: resilience, compassion, and solidarity.”³⁵³

Resilience, compassion, solidarity: such descriptors stand in stark contrast to the common perceptions of laziness, stupidity, and criminality tied up in the term ‘spik’ – a word with which many of the men discussed in this chapter were forced to contend. It was through his position as a veteran and an activist that López earned the right to make such claims, that he was able to rewrite his own script. He is not alone in this project. Tony Santiago recalls that during his youth, the only Latino role models he could find were the Cisco Kid and Speedy Gonzalez.³⁵⁴ Now he actively seeks to challenge such stereotypes, motivated by his own experiences as a Puerto Rican soldier during the war. Both men were changed by their time in Vietnam, that much is clear, but unlike those who were broken by their experience, Oscar and Tony took strength from it. They left the military determined to challenge the system responsible for the injustices that they saw and experienced during the war, and in doing so, they rejected the path that society had laid out for them.

³⁵² López-Rivera and Headley, 166.

³⁵³ José López quoted in Power, 13.

³⁵⁴ Tony Santiago, “User: Marine 69-71.”

If, as Appiah claims, military service can be understood as soul making only if it “improve(s) the ethical prospects of those who take it up, by *altering their identities*, changing the interpretation of their circumstances that guides their lives,”³⁵⁵ then for whom was this project successful? It was successful for those who continue to identify as soldiers, men like those discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Captain Vazquez-Rodríguez and Eduardo Oyola Rivera demonstrate a strong identification as soldiers. For Vazquez-Rodríguez, and many others, it changed his circumstances in that it paved the way for a career in the military. Oyola Rivera took advantage of the GI Bill to get an education, as did Hector Rosario who went on to earn a Master’s degree and teach university for seven years.³⁵⁶ Not only did their experience in the military significantly alter their identities, it also changed their circumstances by opening doors that otherwise may not have been open to them. Their time in the military was indeed a project in soul making, and it was successful in the way it was intended by the armed forces.

But was the experience any less a project of soul making for Oscar López and Tony Santiago? Both men continue to demonstrate a strong attachment to their identity as soldiers, laying claim to the label of veteran that is almost unmatched in terms of the moral weight that it carries. Despite having internalized their identity as soldiers, they emerged from the war with a stronger commitment not to the United States, but to their identity as Puerto Ricans. In this sense, the socialization project of the military failed, and yet it could also be said that their identities were profoundly altered and their circumstances changed in a way that did, in fact, mark an improvement in their ‘ethical prospects.’ Tony Santiago has found fulfillment recording and publicizing the contributions made by Puerto Ricans to the greater good and Oscar López, to this day, remains committed to the cause for which he has spent the last thirty-one years of his

³⁵⁵ Appiah, 164.

³⁵⁶ Eduardo Oyola Rivera and Hector Rosario Collections, Veterans History Project.

life behind bars. By politicizing these men, by giving them a cause that would determine their future paths in life, and by giving them a sense of satisfaction in achieving their goals, their military service was no less a project in soul making.

Their experience can also be understood in light of what Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas defines as the politics of worthiness.³⁵⁷ The Puerto Ricans who fought in Vietnam challenged the stereotypes that defined them as lazy and criminal, demonstrating discipline and a willingness to risk their lives for the state. In contrast to those who remained loyal U.S. citizens, however, the men who became *independentistas* proved that being worthy of their citizenship did not necessarily conflict with their identity as Puerto Ricans. When Oscar López stood before the court and appealed to his identity as both a veteran and an activist, he simultaneously claimed his worth as a citizen and his opposition to the inequalities of the U.S. system; he demonstrated that being a ‘good’ Puerto Rican did not require him to be an acquiescent colonial subject. In so doing, he lent his voice to the increasingly vocal segment of the Puerto Rican community who refused to simply accept not only the identity, but the lot in life that had been assigned to them.

Sadly, not all of those who fought in the war came out stronger as a result of their experience. Where the military’s project did not succeed, it resulted in tragedy. Where souls were not made they were destroyed, and many men were left traumatized by their experience. Some were unable to reconcile their conflicting identities – ‘Puerto Rican’ could never coexist with ‘soldier in the United States Army’ – while others simply witnessed or experienced too many terrible things. They were the ones unable to re-write their own scripts, to alter their circumstances and take something in return for what they gave. Stripped of their identities, torn down and rebuilt, they are a powerful testament to the dangers of soul making.

³⁵⁷ Ramos-Zayas, “Delinquent Citizenship,” 284.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The era of the Vietnam War brought profound social change to the United States, and the country's Puerto Rican population lent its voice to the wave of dissent that swept the country. For over half a century they had been part of U.S. society, yet they had rarely been visible to the majority. As a generation of American youth stood up to what they believed was wrong with their country – a system of imperialism abroad paired with rampant and pervasive inequality at home – Puerto Ricans claimed their place as the one segment of the U.S. population subject to both of these forces: colonized, exploited, and marginalized. As independence activists on the island rallied around opposition to the draft, mainland Puerto Ricans demanded to be heard, confronting the system that relegated them to slums and denied them access to a better life. While all of this was going on at home – whether on the island or in the barrio – many of those in Vietnam fought their own battle, not just against the Viet Cong, but against a system of discrimination that legal desegregation couldn't dismantle.

In writing this thesis, I have become aware of the intricacies and complexities of the Puerto Rican situation. Looking at Puerto Rican responses to the war and their part in the anti-war and civil rights movements of the sixties, it was clear from the outset that there was no single, unifying experience. The clear division among the island population was evident from the fact that writers from major mainstream Puerto Rican papers rarely printed a word of dissent about Vietnam, while the pages of *Claridad* contained loud and angry denunciations of a draft that was premised upon unequal citizenship. Among those on the mainland, opposition to the war was often secondary to their calls for social rights and equality. Even among veterans, their experiences were diverse and often shaped by political divisions. Over the course of my

research, however, it became clear that all of their experiences were shaped by Puerto Rico's second-class citizenship and that any understanding of the Puerto Rican experience during the war would have to take into account the island's colonial status.

These two factors helped to resolve what was perhaps the biggest challenge in writing this thesis: the need to bridge the gap between the two halves of the Puerto Rican population. While it may have been easier to focus on only one side, I agree with scholars such as Juan Flores and Jorge Duany that the two halves of the Puerto Rican population cannot be separated, and I approached this project with the knowledge that though I needed to clearly differentiate between the two, I would also have to figure out how they came together. As I began to read and listen to veterans' stories, I discovered that many of them made the crossing between island and mainland before, during and after the war, and it became even more apparent that I would need to bridge that geographical and intellectual divide. Key to this was the belief of both *independentistas* and mainland civil rights activists that their struggles were two components of a much larger battle against U.S. imperialism in the developing world. This belief led to expressions of solidarity with anti-colonial and Third World national liberation movements around the world, but it also helped to establish and strengthen ties between the two halves of the Puerto Rican population.

The close ties forged between the two camps at the time were predicated upon the understanding that the experience of both groups was rooted in the island's colonial status and the second-class citizenship that it conferred. *Independentistas* rejected citizenship that was fundamentally limited by the inability to vote. Denied a say in matters of state, they questioned the legality of their obligation to participate in a war for which they had never given consent. The draft became a tool by which they denounced their citizenship, presenting it as further

evidence of their colonial condition. Mainlanders were able to vote, but their struggle was no less about citizenship: their fight for social rights was a fight to define what it meant to be an American citizen who was denied the benefits of that citizenship. They asked the same question as civil rights leaders, black power activists, and Puerto Rican *independentistas*: What was the meaning of citizenship that was inherently unequal?

The Puerto Rican experience speaks to the complexities of citizenship. It reminds us of the continued relevance of classic interpretations while also giving weight to new perspectives. The traditional interpretation views conscription as an obligation of citizenship, a duty performed in exchange for rights. Using Marshall's theory of citizenship as a set of civil, political and social rights, it is clear that on neither the island nor the mainland was the pact of citizenship fulfilled. In neither case was the sacrifice of Puerto Ricans rewarded with full rights. The draft thus provides evidence that Puerto Rican citizenship was, in fact, second-class. To the independence movement, it was more than that: it was further evidence of their colonial status. It is also useful to apply Suzanne Oboler's definition of citizenship as a lived experience – an experience shaped by different contexts. While citizenship on the island was most clearly experienced as a legal and political institution, those in the continental United States experienced their citizenship in more informal ways. The discrimination they suffered was not legal, but it was enacted by people on a day-to-day basis. But perhaps citizenship was experienced most profoundly by those who were drafted to fight in Vietnam. They lived their citizenship every day that they were in the war, subject to discrimination by the same state that obligated them to fight.

Racial discrimination was a key part of the Puerto Rican experience during the war. For those on the mainland, it was part of everyday life, and it became that for many of the Puerto

Rican soldiers who fought in Vietnam. For those who interacted with American society on a daily basis – either on the streets of U.S. cities or in the jungles of Southeast Asia – racial and ethnic stereotypes in many ways defined their existence. Ideas of what it meant to be Puerto Rican were social constructs, reinforced by popular culture and disseminated to the public via films like *West Side Story*. For the many Americans who had never met a Puerto Rican, their understanding of Puerto Rican culture depended solely upon the characters they saw on the screen or the articles they read in newspapers and magazines, articles that used phrases like ‘culture of poverty’ and perpetuated the idea that Puerto Rican criminality was an inherent trait. Like Piri in *Down These Mean Streets*, many mainland Puerto Ricans were well acquainted with racism and felt a deep connection to the African American community; they could identify with what it meant to be black. For many of the soldiers who were shipped to Vietnam from Puerto Rico, however, the war brought their first encounter with American racism and it was often a defining experience.

Racism was, of course, only one element of a profoundly formative experience for those who fought in the war. While there were many who took it in stride, others were left scarred and deeply resentful. And yet for some, their experience politicized them; it motivated them to take up the cause of defending their people. Tony Santiago turned to the pen in an effort to promote the positive contributions his people made to the U.S. military, American culture, and society. His time in the war led him to believe that independence was the only true path to redemption for the Puerto Rican people, and he became a committed *independentista*. Oscar López reached the same conclusion as Tony, but to him, the only way Puerto Rico would ever achieve independence was through violent revolution. The radical transformation of Oscar López is unique (so far as we know), but it is possibly the most extreme result of an experience that pitted

his Puerto Rican identity against his role as a soldier made to fight for a state that regarded him as a second-class citizen.

By no means is Oscar López representative of the Puerto Rican experience in the war, but he is the embodiment of all the questions that have motivated this project. Oscar has many identities and he has played many roles. Some of these he was born into: *United States citizen*, *Puerto Rican national*. When he moved to the United States, he discovered that *Puerto Rican* brought with it a set of meanings assigned to him by others, a set of meanings different from those he knew on the island. It was an identity cast upon him, but also one that he embraced, and which was fundamental to how he understood himself and how he wrote his own narrative. *Draftee* was an identity given to him by the state, and *soldier* was a role he was forced to play for the sake of his own survival. After the war, he became an *activist* and while he defined himself as a freedom fighter, society labelled him a *terrorist*. Citizenship, nationality, and military service were all crucial to the identity that Oscar constructed; they interacted and in many cases they collided, but they were all vital components of the narrative that he wrote for himself.

This narrative that he wrote flew in the face of the one that society had written for him. He ultimately became part of an effort to reclaim and reconstruct Puerto Rican identity that grew against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. The independence movement on the island had a long history, but it found a powerful cause in conscription and the anti-draft movement became a vital component of a renewed and reinvigorated independence movement. *Independentistas* revealed the disparity between American citizenship and Puerto Rican nationality, expressing loyalty to the nation in the face of threats from the state. They challenged the meaning of their citizenship and laid claim to a Puerto Rican identity that was a fundamentally *colonial* identity. On the

mainland, a generation of Puerto Rican youth shared this understanding and they used it to challenge the identity that had been imposed upon them. They confronted stereotypes that defined them as criminals, gang members, and drug abusers, situating their social problems within a broader history of colonialism and exploitation. Inspired by the spirit of protest that was the defining feature of the era, Puerto Ricans in the 1960s rewrote what it meant to *be* Puerto Rican: not lazy or criminal, nor docile, passive, or victimized, but a talented and capable people, imbued with a fighting spirit that was invaluable in the face of struggle.

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