



From Sugar Fields to Rice Fields: An Oral History of Puerto Ricans From the Vietnam War Generation

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ABSTRACT

This article utilized oral histories to trace a historical and cultural map of the generation of Puerto Rican draftees and volunteers who served in Vietnam. The project was based on oral histories gathered during interviews conducted in December 2011 in Aguada, Puerto Rico, as part of the Proyecto de Historia Oral: Voces at the University of Texas at Austin. These interviews chronicled the experiences of Julio Avilés-Pérez, Germán Abadía-Olmeda, and Miguel Figueroa-Mejía, three Puerto Ricans who served in the Vietnam War between 1965 and 1975. The methodological approach draws upon the concept of shared authorship, as coined by Maggie Rivas-Rodríguez and Emilio Zamora in their book *Beyond the Latino World War Hero* (2009). Within this framework, narrators and interpreters engage in a dialogue, reshaping the past from a contemporary perspective, thereby cocreating a narrative that emerges at the intersection of personal experiences and the prevailing historical narrative. Through this analytical lens, the article examined three life stories, situating them within a context of colonial subjectivity and a broader narrative of modernization, industrialization, and sociocultural revolution in Puerto Rico.

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Puerto Ricans have been actively serving in the US military since 1899, starting with the Battalion of Porto Rican Volunteers. This commitment dates back to the US occupation of the island in 1898 and its subsequent annexation after the Spanish–American War, thus linking the island to US military campaigns. The 1917 decision to grant US citizenship to Puerto Ricans likely stemmed from the desire to leverage their workforce for military purposes. Historian Silvia Álvarez-Curbelo (2008) pointed out that in the same year citizenship was conferred, Puerto Ricans were summoned for World War I (WWI) service. As of 1918, out of the total registered population of 236,853 Puerto Rican citizens, 17,855 individuals were drafted for service. Concurrently, the US military’s footprint in Puerto Rico grew with the establishment of additional bases, further boosting the involvement of Puerto Rican soldiers (Avilés-Santiago, 2014).

Puerto Rican families often have multiple generations serving in the military, as noted by scholar Harry Franqui-Rivera (2021). My family is no exception. My grandfather was among the over 65,000 Puerto Ricans who served in World War II (WWII). His brother served in the Korean War with the 65th Infantry Division, known as the “Borinqueneers.” This unit, renowned for its valor, was involved in the Korean War’s largest court-martial. My uncle and godfather were drafted into the Vietnam War. Their service, like that of many Puerto Ricans, was sometimes motivated by socioeconomic advancement, but always deeply influenced by the island’s history as a military colony. This legacy dates back to Spanish rule (1493–1898) and continues under the territorial relationship with the US (1898–present).

This enduring legacy of military service has captured the attention of scholars, with WWII and the Korean War serving as particularly captivating subjects. The focus on these conflicts has produced an extensive body of work, aimed at both commemorating and reassessing the historical contributions of Puerto Rican soldiers. Multiple books and a full-length documentary have explored Puerto Rican involvement in the Korean War. Yet, these works have largely focused on rectifying the narrative of the 65th Infantry Regiment, an all-Puerto Rican unit that faced the largest court-martial of the conflict (Aikens-Nuñez, 2023; Figueroa-Soulet, 2007; Villahermosa, 2009;). Harry Franqui-Rivera (2013) worked with Puerto Ricans’ experiences in the Korean War to emphasize the impact of the GI Bill on Puerto Rico’s socioeconomic development.¹ Silvia Álvarez-Curbelo (2005; 2008) produced scholarly works exploring Puerto Rican participation in WWII and the Korean conflict. Her research, much of which goes hand in hand with the Voces Oral History Project² revealed the need to understand Puerto Rican soldiers’ experiences in the context of the literal and

symbolic war fought within the complex categorizations that wrap around every Puerto Rican as a colonial subject and second-class US citizen.

The attention given to the contributions of Puerto Rican soldiers in WWII and the Korean War, particularly as detailed in the works of scholars like Harry Franqui-Rivera (2013; 2014; 2021) and Silvia Álvarez-Curbelo (2005; 2008), underscores a profound legacy. However, this focus diverges markedly when considering the Vietnam era. Despite the significant participation of approximately 48,000 Puerto Ricans in the Vietnam conflict, the documentation and recognition of their experiences remain limited, creating a notable void in the comprehensive narrative of Puerto Rican military service.³

During a preliminary search for a bibliography on draftees to Vietnam from Puerto Rico, the literature I found was related primarily to mental health (Ortega & Rosenheck, 2000; Rosenheck & Fontana, 1994). Much of this work stems from the psychiatric diagnosis labeled Puerto Rican Syndrome, a culturally bound medical condition known as *ataque de nervios* (i.e., an attack of the nerves or nervous breakdown) and ascribed to Puerto Rican soldiers who participated in the Korean War (Gherovici, 2003). Ashley L. Black’s thesis, “From San Juan to Saigon: Shifting Conceptions of Puerto Rican Identity during the Vietnam War” (2012), delved into the complex interplay of citizenship, nationality, and military service for Puerto Ricans during the Vietnam War, offering insights into the experiences and identity negotiations of veterans in the continental US. Other scholars have examined the Puerto Rican experience during the Vietnam War years by focusing on the intersection of the Civil Rights, anti-war, and the pro-independence movements of Puerto Rico, both on the island and in the US (McCoy, 2015; Ogbar, 2006). Alongside these projects, memoirs such as *Vietnam: La Terrible Verdad* (Soto-Ramírez, 1997) and *Tragedy of Unknown Heroes* (Negrón, 2010), stand out as significant nonacademic contributions that offer personal insights into the experiences of Puerto Rican Vietnam veterans.

This article stems from the necessity of contextualizing the experiences of Puerto Rican Vietnam veterans within the intricate framework that positions each Puerto Rican as both a colonial subject and a second-class US citizen. It draws upon oral histories collected from interviews I conducted in December 2011 in Aguada, Puerto Rico, while serving as a research assistant for the Voces Oral History Project. These interviews recount the experiences of Julio Avilés-Pérez, Germán Abadía-Olmeda, and Miguel Figueroa-Mejía, three Puerto Ricans who served during the Vietnam War-era, offering a critical counter-narrative to the war’s established and often misconstrued recollections. My research question was How do the personal experiences

of Puerto Rican veterans, as captured through oral histories, intersect with, and shed light on larger historical movements of modernization, industrialization, and sociocultural revolution in Puerto Rico, and what do these narratives reveal about the dynamics of colonialism, military service, and the construction of historical memory in an often-overlooked community?

I used oral history to trace a historical-cultural map of the generation that served as draftees and volunteers from Puerto Rico in Vietnam. In developing the methodological framework for this study, I engaged with the concept of shared authorship, a concept coined by Maggie Rivas-Rodríguez and Emilio Zamora (2009) in *Beyond the Latino World War II Hero: The Social and Political Legacy of a Generation*). This approach recognized that both narrators and researchers actively construct the narrative, which is not merely recounted but cocreated. Such narratives are crafted through a dialogical process that involves reflecting on, and reinterpreting the past through the lens of present understandings. As the oral histories are conveyed, they weave together the threads of individual recollections and the broader, hegemonic historical account. I concur with Rivas-Rodríguez and Zamora that oral narratives have assumed an important role in supplementing a record of neglect in hegemonic narratives of war. However, building upon the insights of shared authorship in oral history, I am cognizant of the inherent challenges it presents. While I have employed shared authorship as a guiding framework for this project, I am mindful that achieving equal distribution of narrative control is particularly challenging within the constraints of peer-reviewed academic work, where editorial and scholarly standards often necessitate a greater assertion of the researcher's influence. I am also aware that, as pointed out by Hagopian (1991), the search for an entirely "raw" or unmediated narrative is an unrealistic pursuit. The oral histories of Puerto Rican veterans, like all oral histories, are mediated by a complex interplay of personal experiences, cultural influences, and the broader societal and ideological context in which they exist.

Acknowledging the limitations of shared authorship and oral histories in academic settings prompted me to reflect more deeply on my role as a researcher. This is particularly significant given my personal connection to Puerto Rico's military history. As a Puerto Rican who grew up near an Air Force Base and was raised among veterans from WWII, Korea, and Vietnam, I have a profound understanding of the urgency to amplify the voices that have been historically silenced. And yet, on the other hand, it is imperative to recognize,

The issue of intellectual privilege and academic authority in oral history research on marginalized

ethnic groups [and call for] a critical and candid reflection on the politics of the knowledge production about marginalized peoples, the politics of location and representation, and ethical and moral responsibilities of researchers toward their research participants and readers. (Kim, 2008, p. 1347)

This study analyzed the life stories of three Puerto Rican Vietnam veterans against the backdrop of modernization, industrialization, and cultural and social revolution, using their personal experiences to explore how they navigated the military's unique "contact zones" (Pratt, 1992), encompassing basic training and battlefield dynamics.

As conceptualized by Mary Louise Pratt (1992), a contact zone is a space—physical or metaphorical—where cultures meet, interact, and often clash, particularly in contexts shaped by colonialism and its legacies. This concept is particularly relevant to understanding the experiences of Puerto Rican soldiers in the Vietnam War as they navigate the US military culture as colonial subjects. Ramón Grosfoguel (2003) described Puerto Rican "colonial subjects" as individuals under colonialism's political, economic, and social control. He viewed them as active agents challenging colonial power structures, while also facing racialization, ethnicization, and linguistic marginalization—tactics used by colonial elites to justify exploitation. In the contact zones configured within the parameters of the US military, the colonial subjectivity entangled within ethnically, racially, and linguistic differences played out in relations of power, shaping the experiences of Puerto Rican soldiers in both basic training and combat. Five decades later, the individuals in the oral histories analyzed in the upcoming sections reflect on their service not merely as soldiers in military zones under colonial subjectivity, but also as veterans whose stories contribute an additional layer to the public memory of the Vietnam War.

THE CHILDREN OF THE POST-WAR ERA

The Puerto Rican Vietnam generation consists of men and women who came of age in the 60s and were children of the generation that was shaped by Roosevelt's New Deal, WWII, and the postwar PR modernization and industrialization projects—such as Operation Bootstrap—that were initiated by Luis Muñoz Marín's administration (1949–1965). These events, which are straightforwardly described on the macro level, were experienced on the micro level by the trio of interviewees featured herein, whose stories take us from the sugarcane plantations of Puerto Rico to the rice fields of Vietnam.

Miguel Figueroa-Mejía was born in Aguada in 1939. He grew up in Barrio Tablonal, a small working-class community in western Puerto Rico bordering Coloso Valley, a sugar mill that essentially constituted the municipality's economy. He was 4 years old when his father, Bernardo Figueroa, was drafted to serve in the WWII Pacific theater. In 1950, Figueroa-Mejía's brother left to serve in Korea, a conflict Clay Blair (1987) described as the "forgotten war," since its place in US collective memory was much smaller than its actual scale and geopolitical impact. This year was pivotal for the configuration of the image of the Puerto Rican soldier. Two years before Governor Luis Muñoz Marín formally proclaimed a Constitution for the island, which would henceforth be called the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the figure of the soldier symbolized "the transition between a plantation colony, which is what Puerto Rico had been since 1898, to an autonomic agreement 'between equals'" (Álvarez-Curbelo, 2008, p. 28).⁴ Puerto Ricans, though US citizens from 1917, lacked local autonomy until 1952.

Figueroa-Mejía was, in one way or the other, inserted into this autonomic agreement. He could see the sugarcane field—a legacy of the Spanish colonial regime—from his home, but no one in his immediate family worked there. At the same time, he perceived military service in the armed forces—a legacy of US colonial relations—as a routine obligation rather than a patriotic duty in line with the views of his father and brother:

I saw my father leave for and return from WWII. Then I saw my brother leave for and return from Korea. So, back then, I understood that if I were called, I would have to leave, and if I was lucky, return, but it was not an opportunity I sought actively.⁵

The essence of Figueroa-Mejía's quote encapsulates the ingrained sense of duty and familial legacy that cast military service as an expected obligation rather than a personal choice; here, Figueroa-Mejía reflects on a cultural norm where men in his family was supposed to be ready to serve when called upon.

Julio Avilés-Pérez did not seek a life in the military either. He was born on 27 October 1945, 6 months after the end of WWII, in the countryside of the municipality of Moca to a military family. His father, Jesús Avilés-Barreto, worked on the construction of Punta Borinquen Air Force Base, volunteered for the armed forces during WWII, and finished high school, thanks to GI Bill benefits. During his preteen years, Avilés-Pérez saw his uncle, Inocencio Avilés, leave for and return from the Korean War as a soldier in the 65th Infantry Regiment, and recalled that he went to see

his older brother, Jesús, march in the Puerto Rico National Guard parades a few years later. As a young man, Avilés-Pérez was unconcerned with the Cold War maneuverings that animated US military interventions, instead viewing the armed forces as a means of advancing himself socially and economically in Puerto Rico:

Puerto Rico's economy was not the best, but the people who left to serve in the military earned income and helped their relatives financially. That is why the idea persisted that those who left for a military life not only reformed themselves and became men but achieved social advancements.

Avilés-Pérez—like the other two interviewees (Miguel Figueroa-Mejía [introduced above] and Germán Abadía-Olmeda [see next paragraph—was raised in a country where abundant funding of the military, and spurring the transition to a knowledge-driven society (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009). Such incentives made it a solid choice for young (mostly) Puerto Rican men to gain a foothold in life. In the words of Arcadio Díaz-Quinones (1993),

The military power, which since 1917 [had] forced Puerto Rican men to register, offered benefits to thousands of families, pensions, scholarships for their children, possibilities for study, and loans for purchasing a house, thus achieving a major impact in society. (p. 34)

Avilés-Pérez admitted, however, that despite recognizing the potential value to him of the military, being an active part of it was "absolutely" not his preference. In this regard, military service was not a personal choice, but rather what Christian Appy (1993) referred to as a collective rite of passage for many in working-class communities.

Germán Abadía-Olmeda saw military life as equally unenticing. He was born on 3 September 1948, the same year Puerto Rico elected its first governor, Luis Muñoz Marín, which set the basis began to transition from an agrarian economy to one with a greater focus on industrialization and the establishment of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico in 1952. As Abadía-Olmeda lived in Fajardo, on the opposite end of the island from Aguada, he nevertheless grew up 12 miles from Roosevelt Roads: Roosy, as the naval station in Ceiba was known. The base had been erected in 1943 as a strategic military bridge between the US and Latin America, quickly becoming a major economic driver in the region. However, the winds of progress that caressed the palm trees of Ceiba did not reach the community of Las Croabas.⁶ This northeastern region of the island was deeply tied to the waning sugar and textile industries.⁷ Unable to

make ends meet, Abadía-Olmeda's parents migrated to New York, joining the more than half a million Puerto Ricans who left to become part of the US industrial reserve army during the 1950s (Ayala, 1996).

Remaining behind, Abadía-Olmeda was raised in a working-class home by his paternal uncle, Juan Abadía, a chief engineer at the Fajardo Sugar Company.⁸ Even as a teenager, his family's financial situation forced Abadía-Olmeda to work full time in the sugar industry, which was in the process of transitioning from cane monoculture to an industrialized form of farming and refining. He worked for \$1.10 per hour doing "A bit of everything, from electric work to plumbing and even mechanics." After discovering that he could make a living as a jack-of-all-trades in the plant, he decided to become a plumber and took courses at the Escuela Vocacional de Fajardo.

Abadía-Olmeda's school existed to extend modernization into rural areas, a form of economic development pursued by Western capitalist and socialist economies during the 50s. Luis Muñoz Marín's policies were informed by the notion that the state should encourage predominantly agricultural populations of workers to shift to industrial jobs, a transition that depended, in part, on the skills-based training of vocational schools. The planning and funding of these schools began with the New Deal programs of the 1930s, when Congress extended the Smith and Hughes Vocational Educational Act's benefits to the island.⁹ Money was allocated to promote vocational education, producing a skilled blue-collar class trained in agriculture, home economics, and industrial arts, with the latter comprising classes in mechanics, electricity, painting, carpentry, woodcraft, sewing, radio engineering, and plumbing. Abadía-Olmeda was the kind of person these programs targeted—bright, willing to work, and independent:

I wasn't interested in college. I wanted to start working, make money, and help my family. Vocational schools prepared you for that. You could take general courses, but also those specialized in the area of your choosing. In my case, that was plumbing. Back then, there was a high demand, as there was a lot of construction going on in the island.

This was a period of explosive growth on the US mainland, which attracted emigrants from Puerto Rico, leading to a tighter market for workers there. This was also an era of accelerated urbanism on the US mainland that was good for construction workers as urban infrastructures were built and public housing projects boomed. The percentage of the workforce in agriculture declined from 25.6 in 1950 to 8.5 in 1965 (Croom, 2008); manufacturing and construction

expanded to take up the slack. High school and college education also expanded: the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico's Constitution established that "Instruction in the elementary and secondary schools shall be free and shall be compulsory in the elementary schools to the extent permitted by the facilities of the state." (*Constitution of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Article Two, February 6, 1952*). As high-school graduation rates climbed, more Puerto Rican students entered college. However, there was scant financial incentive to go to college rather than to take up a trade. Abadía-Olmeda's decision, like that of hundreds of thousands of members of his generation, seemed a better bet.

Figueroa-Mejía and Avilés-Pérez chose the route of college education instead. This decision was made more enticing by the expansion of the campus and the greater number of specialties offered by the University of Puerto Rico. The university's reforms—carried out by the professor, rector, and ultimately President of the University of Puerto Rico (from 1940 to 1966) Jaime Benítez—sought to make college education more attainable for citizens throughout the island. Being raised in the countryside of Aguada (like Abadía-Olmeda) or Moca (like Avilés-Pérez), was thus no obstacle for bright high-school students. Their proximity to the College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts (CAAM)¹⁰ in the city of Mayagüez made this campus the ideal location for Figueroa-Mejía's and Avilés-Pérez's professional training. CAAM was the product of a hybrid rural and industrial model¹¹ that combined studies in the liberal arts with engineering and land surveyance (Álvarez-Curbelo, 2005).

Avilés-Pérez began his studies in electrical engineering; Figueroa-Mejía in land surveyance. Both professional careers were favored by the accelerated industrialization that the island was undergoing. According to Eric Hobsbawm (2012), Puerto Rico was participating in the dramatic changes of an era that brought about "The greatest, most intense, quickest, and most universal social transformation in the history of humanity" (p. 291). The island was positioned to become the Caribbean's model of capitalism and development vis-à-vis Communist Soviet Cuba, although it was still an open question, in this period, which model would outdo the other.

YOUTH INTERRUPTED

One of the results of Operation Bootstrap was the massive migration of working-class Puerto Ricans to the US after WWII, the need for workers during the unprecedented boom (which raised wages) triggered a huge exodus to cities like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. President Harry Truman's administration decreed an airfare reduction to expedite the process. Abadía-Olmeda's parents left on one of the hundreds of *guaguas aéreas* (air buses) of the

50s; a piece of his history flew with them, leaving him with the desire to move to New York himself, someday, to join the rest of his biological family.

To emigrate, Abadía-Olmeda had to be creative. While he studied at the vocational school, he raised a bull calf named Tolón: “I nursed Tolón with the powdered milk my family received from the PRERA.” The Puerto Rican Emergency Relief Administration (PRERA) was a New Deal initiative implemented by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. PRERA’s objective, in addition to public investment in infrastructure projects like highways and bridges, was to allocate funds for the distribution of food. The powdered milk Abadía-Olmeda fed to Tolón was one of the most welcome supplements, among which were also butter, cheese, prunes, wheat flour, and canned meat. Abadía-Olmeda sold a strong fat calf for \$45—money he used to pay his ticket to New York. During the 2 months he remained in the city of skyscrapers, he recounts, he used his wits to get a gig in a jewelry factory. But he was unable to overcome his difficulties with the English language and his homesickness, which made him decide to return to Puerto Rico. To his surprise, notice from the draft board awaited him back home, giving him 2 months to return to the mainland, first, for basic training followed by advanced infantry training.

Germán Abadía-Olmeda, like most working-class men in both the island and the mainland, had to learn about the war the hard way, by being drafted and fighting it (Appy, 1993). Although the year he was drafted, 1967, the Vietnam War was beginning to reach its peak intensity, Abadía-Olmeda admits that he did not give it much thought:

I was very young and had only three things on my mind: baseball; my girlfriend, Olga; and the balls I attended with her in Las Croabas of Fajardo. Back then I didn’t follow the news. The little I heard on the streets was that there was a war in Vietnam, that marijuana bloomed wild over there, and that people were fighting at the other end of the world.

The idea of serving in a war for incomprehensible reasons in a distant country made Abadía-Olmeda consider ignoring the summons. In fact, he seriously weighed the risks and advantages of fleeing back to New York, thus avoiding mandatory service. However, his foster mother convinced him that this would get him into deep trouble with the authorities and could potentially lead to a prison sentence.

By 1967 the antiwar and antidraft movements had intensified significantly. The bureaucratic impediments to conscientious objection on the island and mainland in addition to the evident inequality between those with deferments—who were mostly in the middle or upper class

and attending college—and those without deferments—mostly young working-class men—incited widespread civil disobedience. Those who refused to consent to the draft were threatened with prison and often landed there, even though their objections were not to military service per se, only to participating in an unjust and genocidal struggle against an authentic national liberation insurgency (Acevedo-Nieves, 1970).

For Avilés-Pérez, the threat of military service seemed inevitable as his college entrance coincided with significant historical events. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on August 7, 1964, which authorized President Lyndon B. Johnson to commit ground troops in Vietnam, set the stage for increased US involvement in the conflict. This period saw Avilés-Pérez witnessing firsthand the rising tensions on campus. He remembered intense university protests demanding structural reform alongside those calling to end the Vietnam War and mandatory military service. These dual struggles mirrored the national sentiment, with the war becoming a personal concern for those likely to be drafted or who knew potential draftees. Amidst this, Avilés-Pérez recalled his chemistry professor, Jean García, who would later run for mayor with the New Progressive Party in Mayagüez, espousing a pro-US stance and using his platform to discuss the ideological battles of the conflict, underpinning the classroom indoctrination that was taking place.

Parallel to these academic and political pressures, the circulation of media images of the war seeped into Avilés-Pérez’s consciousness, notably the 1963 shocking self-immolation of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc, symbolizing the depth of protest against the persecution of Buddhists by South Vietnam’s government.¹² By 1967, as US participation surged and the draft escalated, sending countless young men to the battlefields of South Vietnam and into bombing campaigns over the North, Avilés-Pérez was handed the I-A classification.¹³ This classification abruptly ended his studies, compelling him to leave for basic training and face the realities of the war he had seen unfolding both in media portrayals and in his university’s classrooms.

Figueroa-Mejía also recalled experiences of the strong university-based movement against the Vietnam War. In 1960, while a student at CAAM, he was also an active member of the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC), a body created in 1919 at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus, and at CAAM in Mayagüez as part of the Pentagon’s program to recruit bright students to become military officers. The ROTC promised numerous benefits, but as the Pentagon’s foothold on campus, it became a natural target for protesters. At the Ivy Leagues and many liberal arts colleges on the mainland, the administration,

yielding to student protests, extinguished ROTC programs. Other colleges, including in Puerto Rico, were in a weaker position vis-à-vis government funding and relations, and had mandatory ROTC courses as the norm. By the 1960s, the recently created Federación de Universitarios Pro Independencia (Federation of University Students for the Independence, FUPI, created in 1956), strongly opposed such mandates. Supporters of Puerto Rican statehood were worried that antimilitary and antiimperialist sentiment among college students on the island would create bad publicity on the mainland, making the goal of becoming a state harder to achieve. The anticommunist ideology of the time, which emphasized the conspiratorial notion that radical political discourse was directed by foreign sources—namely the Soviets and the Cubans—linked the nationalists, the antiwar movement, and the Cubans in a discrediting narrative meant to dissipate any sympathy for the Viet Cong and the struggle for decolonization in Vietnam. In the midst of these theoretical and real-world confrontations, Figueroa-Mejía was still able to finish his bachelor's degree in land surveyance under the aegis of the ROTC.

Shortly after graduation in 1964, Figueroa-Mejía was recruited to work at the recently inaugurated nuclear plant in the municipality of Rincón, a symbol of Puerto Rico's modernity situated at the convergence of state planning and private enterprise. The plant was the first in Latin America and the eighth in the US; it was created via cooperative oversight by the US Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) and the Puerto Rico Water Resources Authority, which broke ground in 1960 and had the plant online by 1964. The objective—which was consistent with thinking in development economics at the time—was that Puerto Rico would be midwifed into capitalist modernity by means of state-of-the-art power technology.¹⁴ Nuclear power had undisputed prestige as a positive scientific advance, joining other technological advances—like space rockets and computing—as an icon of progress. Figueroa-Mejía's career at the nuclear plant was, however, short lived: He soon received his draft notice and had to leave his position to report for basic training on the mainland. His final destination: Vietnam.

BASIC TRAINING AND THE CONFIGURATION OF CONTACT ZONES

The participation of the Boricua¹⁵ soldier in the US military and their interactions in the military space merits special attention because it highlights the paradoxical sociopolitical and cultural situation in which they—a soldier who had not voted in presidential elections, had not mastered the

English language, and did not fully understand the reasons for which they were being sent to war in Vietnam—becomes immersed in a space that transforms them into a racialized colonial subject (Avilés-Santiago, 2014; Grosfoguel, 2003). The oral histories presented in this article shared Fort Jackson in Columbia, South Carolina, as a significant contact zone. Fort Jackson served as a critical juncture, not only for the three individuals featured in this study, but also for the majority of Puerto Rican soldiers on their way to the Vietnam War. The camp's location in the US South was itself part of the modernization and assimilation of the poorer, former Confederate states into the US system. The base represented a special site of encounter for racial tensions of the time, especially with regards to the struggle for civil rights.

The federal government had, since Truman's presidency, been advancing an agenda of integration at the camp that ran contrary to the climate of segregation and racial subordination that dominated the region. Fort Jackson was, in this sense, a product of the liberal hopes that had culminated in Lyndon Johnson's Great Society; it was one of the first military facilities to be racially integrated, becoming something akin to a "social laboratory" (Myers, 2006) from 1950, in the wake of Truman's Executive Order 9901, which formally desegregated the US Armed Forces. Thousands of Puerto Ricans were sent to Fort Jackson for training; by their sheer numbers, they destabilized the prevailing hegemonic racial categories. Into the mix of Black, White, Mexican, and Hispanic, the Puerto Ricans added their own classifications—*trigueño*, *moreno*, *jabao*, *prieto*, and *indio*.¹⁶

LANGUAGE AS CULTURAL STIGMA

Avilés-Pérez departed Base Ramey in Aguadilla for Fort Jackson in 1967. He left behind the political convulsions that resulted from the victory of the Commonwealth status formula in the Puerto Rican plebiscite. He arrived in the US during the tumultuous era that began in the 1950s, with 2 decades of fervent civil rights struggles and confrontations—a reality that seemed alien to him, given Puerto Rico's distinctly different racial dynamics. On the island, the struggles were mostly around political ideologies and antiwar movements. According to Avilés-Pérez, basic training was supposed to be cocooned from the sociopolitical context of the rest of the nation, but this did not simplify his path through Fort Jackson:

It wasn't easy. During basic training I passed all the physical tests with the very minimum required and I didn't understand half of what they said. Since I hadn't mastered English, I didn't understand the formation instructions, less still the exercises that we

had to do. Oh, [and] on top of it all, when we were organized in alphabetical order by our surnames, I was always first in line, so the one behind me followed and it was a mess.

Avilés-Pérez, like Figueroa-Mejía and Abadía-Olmeda, was the product of Mariano Villaronga's reign as secretary of education for Governor Luis Muñoz Marín. Villaronga officially made official Spanish the primary teaching language in elementary and secondary schools via Circular Letter No. 10 of 6 August 1948; English was to be taught as a special subject. Thus Avilés-Pérez—a Puerto Rican with light skin, light brown hair, and green eyes—could “pass” as an average John Smith. That is, he stated, “Until I opened my mouth. ... The language, the accent, culturally brands you.” This cultural demarcation led to tension, as Avilés-Pérez recounted with an anecdote: “This created friction between whites and Puerto Ricans. For instance, I had problems with a roommate. He hated it when my Hispanic friend visited me. I teased him by singing Spanish songs,” illustrating the friction caused by linguistic and cultural differences within the military ranks.

Avilés-Pérez's experiences during training at Fort Jackson highlighted not just the cultural and linguistic barriers he faced, but also the racial tensions that were prevalent among the soldiers. He was reassigned to a room with two others: a young Black man from New York and a white man from a southern state, exposing him to the stark racial divides of the time. He recalled a particular conversation that underscored this divide, saying:

I noticed that the white guy tried talking to me, but he never spoke to our Black roommate. One day, when we were alone, I asked him what his problem was and why he didn't speak to him, and he answered: “I won't hurt him, but my family raised me to hate them, and I will die hating him.” He spent his days reading the Bible and I told him: “Hey, but you're a religious person, besides, Jesus was not white.” But nothing made him change his mind.

This interaction reflected the entrenched racial attitudes of the era—attitudes that were at odds with the unity needed among soldiers. Avilés-Pérez completed his basic training uneventfully but was cognizant that language marked him as “other,” as opposed to his racial appearance. He recognized that fluency in the dominant language was crucial for forming relationships and alliances on the battlefield, putting him at a significant disadvantage.

However, at the same time, language served as an instrument of resistance for Latino soldiers, as observed by Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez (2009) in her oral histories

with Latino WWII veterans. Based on her research, Latino soldiers were cognizant of the restrictions against speaking Spanish, but nonetheless leveraged their native tongue to sustain cultural connections and assert their agency. In the case of Avilés-Pérez, the deliberate use of Spanish in conversations and songs became a form of defiance against in the contact zone defined by the use of English. Abadía-Olmeda was also marked not only by language, but also racialized because of the color of his skin.

“I'M NOT 'ABERDÍA,' I AM ABADÍA”

On 14 December 1968, Abadía-Olmeda departed from the Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport on a Trans World Airlines flight along with hundreds of other Puerto Ricans. Although he did not remember their names, he did remember whence they hailed: “There was one from Yabucoa, one from Lares, and one from Mayagüez; all of them visibly scared.” By that time, Abadía-Olmeda had learned more about what was happening in Vietnam. The year 1968 had been pivotal in the conflict; the Tet Offensive had destroyed the US pretense that the war was on the verge of being won, casting doubt on the claims of US policymakers. Lyndon Johnson had initiated negotiations and a halt to the bombing North Vietnam. Abadía-Olmeda had heard that some residents of his hometown had lost their lives on the battlefield. Nevertheless, he felt that he was “armed” by his faith for what awaited him. Although he had never previously identified as particularly religious, he was raised within the Catholic faith, and had packed in his luggage a Bible that some Jehovah's Witness friends of the family had given to him.

Upon his arrival, he was greeted at training camp by low temperatures—around 20 degrees Fahrenheit. Despite the cold weather, Abadía-Olmeda recalled, the basic training—especially the physical component—was easy for him. Because of his years as an amateur baseball player in Fajardo, he was fit and physically capable, even gaining some weight: “I don't know whether I wasn't fed enough at home, but I gained 10 pounds in the army.” While this aspect of his training may have been relatively straightforward, he had known that culture shock would await him, in particular because of his unfamiliarity with the English language. Indeed, Abadía-Olmeda, an Afro-Puerto Rican, observed that the formation of racial cliques and alliances based on language was the norm. “I'm *prieto*, and the *morenos* (in reference to African Americans) as well as the other Latinos joined us, Boricuas. It was always easier for me to relate to these groups than to Whites.” His recollections emphasize the way in which racial categories are always shifting. For Abadía-Olmeda, *prieto* and *Boricua* were synonyms; *Latino* functioned as an umbrella term that more or less included *prieto* and *Boricua*, and *moreno* referred to Black

Americans. Bárbara Abadía-Rexach (2012) elucidated that “Puerto Ricans, as racialized beings, aside from repudiating the dominant classification scheme, continue assigning new meanings to themselves” (p. 35). In this case, Abadía-Olmeda distanced himself from the Black/White binary and embraced identification categories specific to Puerto Rico to explain the racial dynamics at Fort Jackson.

Abadía-Olmeda’s story strays from the topic of skin color to delve into the way language bound soldiers together on the battlefield. He recalled looking at the surname embroidered on each military uniform to find possible friends: “Whenever I saw Spanish surnames like Rodríguez or Pérez, I quickly asked where they hailed from.” Looking for other Spanish speakers was his way of surviving as, like Avilés-Pérez, Abadía-Olmeda found the language barrier to be one of the greatest hurdles he confronted during his army service: “I struggled with English a lot. We didn’t have interpreters, so I had to defend myself with what little I had learned at public school in Puerto Rico, which was definitely not the best.” Although “he understood a bit,” his conversation was not fluid, and he was aggravated by the disdainful tone with which many Anglos spoke to him:

Something that upset me was that, although I tried speaking to them in English, they laughed at me and told me “No comprendo, no comprendo.” That would make me mad! Sometimes they called me on the speakers, and I never noticed. They had to look for me in person and they would say “Aberdía, we were calling you all day.” To which I would reply, “I am not Aberdía, I am Abadía.”

However, Abadía-Olmeda was fluent enough to use his scant English to evade the military authorities. A month before he was sent to Vietnam, he was given a 30-day pass to visit his family in Puerto Rico—a period that he extended to 40 days because he wanted to spend the whole holiday season on the island. He recounts:

I had to report on December 31, but I decided to stay until the day after Three Kings Day [6 January, Epiphany]. When I returned to the base in Oakland, they asked me why I was late, to which I replied: “Christmas in Puerto Rico, too good. I go to Vietnam maybe I never come back.” I was given a nonjudicial punishment, best known as an Article 15. In my case, it consisted of 3 months without pay. But it was worth it.

A week later, Abadía-Olmeda again found himself drenched in the tropical heat and humidity, now at longitudes far to the east.

THE ARRIVAL

Figueroa-Mejía arrived in Vietnam on the night of 19 September 1965 “unarmed, hungry, and scared shitless,” to serve as a medic. Although the heat and humidity of the area reminded him of the weather in Puerto Rico, nothing else was familiar: “[O]nce you arrive in Vietnam, the friends you made at basic training disappear; you no longer know anyone.” When asked if basic training had prepared him for what he found upon arrival, Figueroa-Mejía replied in the negative: the combat zone conditions did not compare at all to the circumstances in which he was trained. For him, in Vietnam, life was very much “day by day”; the methods, formations, and protocols of his formal training were left behind.

Although Abadía-Olmeda arrived in Vietnam 3-years later—in the crucial month of January 1968 when the Tet Offensive broke out—he concurred with Figueroa-Mejía as to the improvisational and informal aspects of the battlefield. Regarding his arrival, Abadía says:

I was placed in a camp in terrible condition. Everything had been built with canvas. The formality of basic training was forgotten once we were installed there. I remember many of [the soldiers] ripped the sleeves off of their shirts; others were shirtless, but we all had our rifles at our sides.

As a paratrooper, Abadía-Olmeda lived in dangerous conditions.

My position was very frightening. They had us guard gas tanks, endlessly, sometimes even for 18-hour periods. Add to that that it was always raining in Vietnam. I remember on one occasion it rained nonstop for five days. When the sun finally came out, we were assaulted by a swarm of mosquitoes.

Abadía-Olmeda would forget the lost nights and mosquito bites whenever he found tropical fruit, which evoked memories from his island home. The heat, the rain, and the humidity, as well as much of the flora and fauna of the region was similar to that of Puerto Rico.

The Vietnamese were surprised because I recognized many of the fruits. For example, mangoes, tamarinds, plantains, [and] pineapples were abundant in the wild. But what surprised them most was my ability to eat sugarcane. They couldn’t believe that I knew how to peel and suck it correctly.

He told, too, of how his *gringo*¹⁷ friends begged him to get coconuts from the palm trees. “I was used to climbing

palm trees in Fajardo, but for them, that was a novelty. In fact, they nicknamed me ‘monkey.’”

Avilés-Pérez also arrived in 1968. His role as a weapons maintenance officer kept him farther from the jungle, and neither coconut nor pineapple nor tamarind was able to appease his homesickness. Instead, his tie to home was the long-awaited parcel from Puerto Rico.

Back then, people could visit the offices of the Extension Service of the USDA¹⁸ to prepare the parcels they would send us. My mom, always spoiling me, prepared rice with green peas, all freshly made right there, and they had equipment to can it. [My family] also sent me *pasteles*.¹⁹

The parcel came with news. Although the post office where Avilés-Pérez was stationed had telephone service, his family’s house in Puerto Rico did not. His parents sent him newspaper cutouts from *El Mundo* to keep him apprised of what was happening on the island and around the world.

1968: LOCAL AND GLOBAL DILEMMAS

The year 1968 was a pivotal period in the histories of the US and Puerto Rico, marked by significant political upheaval and social unrest. On the mainland, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, and Robert F. Kennedy on June 6, led to widespread rebellions in major US cities, with days of intense riots following King’s death. The Democratic convention in Chicago, where pro-war candidate Vice President Hubert Humphrey was nominated, escalated into a nationally televised riot, with police brutally clashing with protestors. Meanwhile, in Puerto Rico, the political landscape was dramatically altered as the divided Popular Democratic Party, after 28 years in power, lost the elections to the pro-statehood New Progressive Party (NPP), triggering civil unrest on the island. The global wave of student protests against the war resonated with young Puerto Ricans, aligning them with their peers in New York, Paris, Milan, and Berlin. Additionally, international tensions peaked with the Soviet Union’s invasion of Czechoslovakia to suppress the breakaway Communist government under Dubček. These national and international events had profound effects on Puerto Rico, leading to intense confrontations among politically divergent groups. This period of violence resulted in six deaths, hundreds of injuries, and extensive unrest. Students faced severe repercussions, including imprisonment, suspension, and expulsion. The ROTC building was set on fire, and the homes of Independence Committee members and supporters became targets of attacks (Paralitici, 2005).

Puerto Rican popular culture became another site of struggle. Playwright Piri Fernández²⁰ used theater

to protest mandatory military service. Plays such as *El Tributo* (Fernández, 1968), which offers a historical retrospective on antimilitary struggle, were performed in theaters across the island municipalities (Ramos, 2006). A protest song titled *Yo Protesto* performed by artists Roy Brown, Andrés Jiménez, El Topo, and the Grupo Taoné raised antiwar awareness via music. Television, a more heavily controlled medium, provided limited response to the events swirling outside the studio via the military humor exemplified by the *Soldado Manteca* comedy sketches, a Gomer-Pyle-like character that first appeared on the late 60s in the Puerto Rican televisual landscape (Avilés-Santiago, 2014).

According to all three oral histories featured herein, soldiers in the combat zone were aware of these disturbances at home. However, the official discourse that circulated in the camps was wholly supportive of the war regardless of currents in public opinion. Avilés-Pérez elaborates on the role of the press as to how war was perceived:

The Vietnam War was quite unpopular, and the press contributed to that. The journalists were there—they covered everything, working alongside us, but the official information that reached us there was propaganda. For instance, what was distributed in the camps was the *Stars and Stripes*,²¹ a newspaper that only said what they [the US Department of Defense] wanted us to know, for example that the war was against communism and that we were winning it—though what we saw was something altogether different.

Avilés-Pérez then made references to some internal challenges he observed in his position in the military such as the drug use and abuse and the pervasive issue of prostitution.

DRUG USE AND PROSTITUTION: A MORAL CONUNDRUM

Public memory and representations of the Vietnam War in popular culture often evoke images of drug abuse and prostitution. These themes, perpetuated by Hollywood productions such as *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979) and *Platoon* (Stone, 1986), resonate with the oral histories shared by Avilés-Pérez and Figueroa-Mejía. Such references may partly stem from the stigma associated with drug use and sex workers in Puerto Rico during that era, fostered by public policy and religious beliefs. According to Luis A. López-Rojas (2008), there was a growing market for marijuana in the 1960s Puerto Rico; Governor Luis Muñoz Marín declared a war against the problem as a matter of

public policy. Puerto Rican celebrities including popular singers Ismael Rivera, Rafael Cortijo, and Gilberto Monroig (Lopez-Rojas, 2008) were arrested. Perhaps the societal disapproval and criminalization around the use of drugs a prevented the interviewees from using it—or talking about it—although they recognized that many of their comrades used and abused drugs during war.

Figueroa-Mejía, who worked in several hospitals in the regions of Da Nang and Chu Lai during his stay in Vietnam, witnessed the collateral damages of drug use at first hand:

We received patients, often victims of overdose, and they had shell casings in their pant pockets that, instead of gunpowder, contained marijuana trims. But there was also much distribution of other opiates, such as morphine and heroin.²²

According to Avilés-Pérez, “Drug distribution was enormous, common, and an everyday thing”; the greatest problem it caused was that “Quite often, those who were appointed as guards were drugged and could not perform their functions.” In fact, he affirmed that the use and abuse of controlled substances was one of the reasons why the war was lost—it contributed to the demoralization of the military. However, historian Jeremy Kuzmarov (2009) challenged this idea and argued that the popular notion of US soldiers in Vietnam being widespread drug abusers is a myth, fueled by pro-war and antiwar movements for their respective political agendas. The author claimed that while drug use did occur among some soldiers, it was not as prevalent as commonly believed, and alcohol remained the primary inebriant of choice.

Figueroa-Mejía saw prostitution as collateral damage of the war, which caused high casualty rates among South Vietnamese civilians as well as immense disruptions to the rhythm of village life. In these circumstances, women were often best able to support their households by selling sex to an affluent US occupying force. Avilés-Pérez felt that the military hierarchy itself normalized prostitution:

Where we lived, civilian women cleaned our barracks. We paid them \$2 weekly and they ironed our clothes, cooked, etc. But, besides that, the army itself had recreational areas where [these women] gave you haircuts, bathed you, and prostituted themselves. Nobody seemed to care. Everyone was an enabler.

As a medic, Figueroa-Mejía witnessed the high number of sexually transmitted infections—such as gonorrhea and syphilis—for which remedies existed for the US soldiers

but not so much for civilian Vietnamese women. Many pregnancies were also reported: there came a time, he stated, when it was normal to see Vietnamese children on the streets who were obviously fathered by White or Black men.

Heather Stur, in her book *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (2011), contended that the US military’s operations in South Vietnam created conditions that led to prostitution as a survival strategy for many Vietnamese women, who turned to the sex trade due to war-induced rural devastation and subsequent urban migration. The military, despite its mission to defend and assist, inadvertently supported and regularized the sex industry, employing it as an official means to regulate the conduct of American servicemen. It could be argued that the perception of prostitution as a significant problem among the interviewees may partly stem from Puerto Rican society’s religious underpinnings, particularly Christianity and Catholicism. The moral teachings and social norms influenced by Catholic dogma likely shaped the interviewees’ views, leading them to see prostitution through a lens of religious and ethical judgment.

FROM BOLEROS TO PRAYERS: TIME FOR LEISURE, ENTERTAINMENT, AND FAITH

Since WWII, the US Department of Defense has coordinated events to entertain soldiers and boost their morale on the battlefield (Tucker, 1998). Organizations like the American Red Cross and the United Service Organizations (USO) have long joined efforts to produce events to boost morale for US troops and allies in times of war. For instance, television host Bob Hope, along with NBC, produced the annual *Bob Hope Christmas Show* over more than a decade, gathering celebrities, including actress and singer Raquel Welch, Miss Universe 1964 Corinna Tsopei, and actor and comedian Jerry Colona, who went to Vietnam to support the troops.

Avilés-Pérez recalled that, in his free time, what he longed for most was “going to the barrack to sleep and the days flew by.” Some events of interest (e.g., Filipino impersonators) were held at his base; however, and radio was another important leisure activity—as fictionalized in the Hollywood film *Good Morning Vietnam* (1987). Avilés-Pérez mentioned an underground Cuban radio station with a signal that seemed to come from North Vietnam.²³ Although he does not remember the station name, he recounts how the host occasionally exclaimed “Vaya, Boricua!” (Hey, Boricua!) when playing some of the bolero hits of the time such as those popularized by singer, Benny Moré.

Entertainment time was sometimes easier to come by on battlefield during rainy days, Abadía-Olmeda recounted:

Sometimes it rained so hard that there was nothing else to do than stop for an indefinite time. Then, back then movies were projected against the walls. Sometimes I went to rest and write to my family and my girlfriend Olga.

He also revealed how he interacted with his comrades during leisure time—interactions that, in turn, led to discussions.

They were interested in who I was and where I came from. They didn't know where Puerto Rico was. I had to tell them: "I am from the land of Roberto Clemente" so they could understand me.

By the end of the '60s, evidently, acclaimed Afro Puerto Rican baseball player Roberto Clemente was such a baseball legend in the US that foot soldiers knew of Puerto Rico primarily because of him.

Given his medical role and its 16 to 18-hour shifts, Figueroa-Mejía had very little entertainment and leisure time: "The responsibility of treating the wounded was so big that we wouldn't have the energy to do anything else." However, because of the emotional burden of working in a medical unit, he seized the opportunity brought by his frequent contact with Puerto Rican patients to create *El Club de Puertorriqueños*, an organization geared towards identifying Boricuas among the injured to provide them mutual friends and support. According to official statistics from the US Department of Defense, approximately 3,000 Puerto Ricans were wounded during the war (Collins, 2016).

Avilés-Pérez found such support at the military camp chapel. Always an active member of Catholic youth groups back in Moca, Puerto Rico, he claimed never to have missed Sunday mass during his stay in Vietnam. He recalled high attendance at mass, which was a way of connecting not only with fellow Catholics, but also fellow Puerto Ricans. In Moca, Puerto Rico, Julia Pérez-Areizaga, Avilés-Pérez's mother, asked Saint Jude Thaddeus for her son to come back alive; Avilés-Pérez prayed to all the saints for an end to his days in Vietnam. This personal experience aligns with the analysis of Rea Ann Trotter (2009), who emphasized the pivotal role of faith as a cornerstone of cultural and spiritual identity among Latino soldiers. She claimed that this faith, deeply rooted in popular Catholicism, provided a framework for comprehending and articulating wartime experiences, as exemplified by Avilés-Pérez's story. His unwavering reliance on prayer and the spiritual support provided by his mother back home, underscore the integral role of Catholicism in his coping mechanism and the deepening of his spirituality amidst the hardships of war.

THE RETURN

Abadía-Olmeda arrived back in Puerto Rico in December 1970; the first thing he did was to return the Bible that his Jehovah Witness Friends had given to him. It had been his good luck charm, but it was also a reminder of his time in Vietnam, which he wanted to leave behind. When he was settled on the island, he took advantage of the GI Bill to take more plumbing, carpentry, woodworking, and mechanics courses. Aside from the ability to gain this practical knowledge, the GI Bill guaranteed him a monthly "additional check." In June 1970, he married Olga Rexach, the young woman with whom he had exchanged letters during his tour in Vietnam. Three decades later, Abadía-Olmeda reflected on his war experience, arguing that the greatest enemy in the Vietnam War was the US army itself:

One of the biggest problems is that the training we received never prepared us for a war with such primitive weapons and tactics. We were trained to fight with weapons. We weren't trained to fight with bamboo sticks. And to top it all off, this was a war fought by guys who were too young and not ready for what they faced, and who also did not know what they were fighting for. Because communism. What was communism? Now, as an old man, one more or less understands, but back then, no one knew.

In tears, Abadía-Olmeda ended his interview by listing the medical conditions he continued to suffer as a consequence of his exposure to Agent Orange, the herbicide used by the US army in Vietnam as part of its chemical warfare program. Ed Martini (2012) contended that the contentious debate regarding the effects of Agent Orange continues to stir controversy among nations, communities, and scholars, with impacted soldiers and civilians linking numerous health issues to the chemical, even as many scientific inquiries cast doubt on these claims. Additionally, he pointed out the stark underrepresentation of Agent Orange's usage in Vietnam within historical accounts, where it is frequently relegated to brief mentions in the broader narrative of the war.

Avilés-Pérez's return to Puerto Rico was unassuming: "The Vietnam War was so unpopular that only your family cared if you returned or not." He chuckled, recalling that he used his military uniform to secure a discount on his plane tickets; upon arrival at the airport, he shed the uniform. Although he didn't remember any protests directed at returning soldiers in Puerto Rico, he mentioned demonstrations at the airport in Oakland, California. Drawing upon Jerry Lembcke's book *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and*

the Legacy of Vietnam (2000), Avilés-Pérez's low-key return to Puerto Rico can be construed as a challenge to the prevalent myth of systematic mistreatment of Vietnam veterans. Lembcke claimed that there is limited evidence of such abuse, proposing that the narrative of spitting and vilification was a myth perpetuated by political agendas and reinforced by Hollywood rather than a reflection of reality. This perspective highlights a discrepancy between the perceived national ingratitude towards veterans portrayed in media and political discourse and the more nuanced interactions that many veterans like Avilés-Pérez experienced.

Avilés-Pérez returned to college, where he was able to finish his engineering degree. He was an engineer until 2013, when he retired. When asked whether he would participate in the Vietnam War if he were reborn in the same decade, he stated,

No way. I never saw the logic behind that war and I still fail to understand it ... I don't recommend that anyone enlists in the army. Enlisting to achieve discipline makes no sense. Making a line and following it is not discipline. Discipline is only achieved by making decisions.

At the interview's close, Avilés-Pérez claimed that this was the first time he had ever spoken about his experience in Vietnam. He never belonged to a veteran association, nor was he interested in joining.

Avilés-Pérez's explicit refusal to re-enlist if given a chance and his failure to grasp the logic behind the Vietnam War exemplify an individual challenging and disassociating himself from the rationale for the war. Furthermore, Avilés-Pérez's disinterest in veteran associations and his perspective on discipline, viewing it as a product of personal decision-making rather than compliance with orders. The fact that Avilés-Pérez chose to remain silent about his experiences until this oral history suggests a personal journey that may not align with the collective narratives of patriotism often expected of veterans, reflecting a nuanced interplay between personal experience and broader sociocultural constructs.

The story of Figueroa-Mejía's return is a contrast with that of the other two:

In Vietnam, there were reconstruction companies and I joined one. They accepted me as medic. I learned the language, the traditions, and even ate the food. I fell in love with a Vietnamese woman, married her, and had two children. In 1973, they started expelling us from Vietnam, and we came to Puerto Rico.

The greatest paradox for Figueroa-Mejía was that, on the one hand, Vietnam had forced him to watch hundreds of lives being taken while, on the other hand, it gave him a family and a profession. Thanks to the GI Bill, he was able to study medicine; at present he works as a family physician in his natal Aguada. Thirty-four years after the war, Figueroa went back to Vietnam, traveling with his children and grandchildren to meet the rest of his family:

When we came back, things had improved: There was more literacy and a drastic increase in minimum wage. Relationships with the US are good; in fact, they have a McDonald's and a Kentucky Fried Chicken on every corner. What is true, however, is that in Vietnam people neither talk about, nor remember, nor celebrate war.

Figueroa-Mejía is an active member of the Pro-Statehood party in Puerto Rico. When his interview was over, he adjusted his veteran's cap, gave me a handshake, thanked me, and left. He, too, had never before talked about his experience in Vietnam.

The reluctance to discuss war experiences is not unique to Puerto Rican veterans. Merrick Manchester (2019) suggested that the silence among Vietnam veterans regarding their war experiences stems from a complex interplay of psychological, personal, and physical factors, further reinforced by public perceptions of the Vietnam War. In the context of Puerto Rican veterans, this silence might be linked to the colonial paradox of supporting a colonial empire through military service. The wave of pro-independence activism and antiwar movements in Puerto Rico during the late 60s and early 70s (Ogbar, 2006) likely influenced the political, cultural, and psychological perspectives of Puerto Rican veterans, affecting both their self-perception and the public's perception of their service.

CONCLUSION

The history of Puerto Rican Vietnam veterans has been overshadowed by those who served in less divisive wars: WWI, WWII, and the stories of the participation of the 65th Infantry Regiment in the Korean War.²⁴ Each oral history that I was able to hear and document in Puerto Rico added a voice against the silence surrounding the Vietnam War. During this war, Puerto Ricans came face to face with the colonial reality differently than in WWII and Korea, in which ethnical units tended to create circles of solidarity. In Vietnam, the bonds formed at basic training dissolved, and Puerto Ricanness was a subjective and not shared entity. While ethnic units in previous wars often fostered solidarity, in Vietnam, the

camaraderie formed during basic training often dissolved, leaving Puerto Rican identity as a subjective and solitary experience. The instances of cultural nationalism were faint on the battlefield, with the soldiers' primary connection to their heritage being their shared longing to return home. Unlike their predecessors, Puerto Rican Vietnam veterans did not receive a hero's welcome; there were no parades. Their return was individual and quiet, reflecting the contentious nature of the war and the divided opinions it generated at home. Issues such as partisan politics, race, discrimination, and a growing antimilitary sentiment shaped their experiences as soldiers and veterans.

Silvia Álvarez-Curbelo (2008) claimed that "The most important turning points in Puerto Rico's history throughout the 20th Century were inexorably linked to wars" (p. 223). In this case, the oral stories of Germán Abadía-Olmeda, Julio Avilés-Pérez, and Miguel Figueroa-Mejía offer "resignification keys to understand the deep modernization processes and the complex relationship with the United States" (Álvarez-Curbelo, 2008, p. 223). Vietnam veterans reveal a part of our history of fighting for a nation that, in turn, kept the citizens of Puerto Rico in a subaltern position economically, politically and in the media. As time takes its toll on the Vietnam generation, the importance of oral history projects in Puerto Rico becomes even more crucial.

NOTES

- 1 The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the GI Bill, was a statute created at of WWII that granted educational benefits to soldiers returning from the war. The objective was to advance the social and financial status of soldiers through education and capacity-building; credits for housing, farmland, or business endeavors; and unemployment insurance.
- 2 *The Proyecto de Historia Oral: Voces* (Voces Oral History Center) was founded in 1999 as the US Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project. Directed by Maggie Rivas-Rodríguez, a professor at the School of Journalism and the Center of Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, the project has created an archive of more than 3,000 interviews with World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam War veterans; see <https://voces.moody.utexas.edu>.
- 3 Official statistics indicate that 48,000 Puerto Ricans participated in the Vietnam War, with the US Department of Defense reporting 345 killed and 3,000 wounded from Puerto Rico. These figures, however, solely account for those drafted or enlisted in Puerto Rico. Alternate estimates suggest Puerto Rican fatalities could be as high as 450. Additionally, it is conservatively estimated that approximately 12,000 Puerto Ricans residing in the United States also served, indicating that Puerto Ricans constituted about one-third of all Hispanic participants in the conflict, though the actual number is likely higher (Avilés, 2014).
- 4 All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
- 5 All quotations from Figueroa-Mejía, Avilés-Pérez, and Abadía-Olmeda are from interviews conducted on June 17, 2010 and December 28, 2011. Interview records are available at <https://voces.moody.utexas.edu/collections/stories>.
- 6 *Las Croabas of Fajardo* is a barrio whose population is mostly composed of fishing families; the area is recognized for its quality culinary and entertainment offerings.
- 7 During the 1950s, manufacturing increased from 50,000 to 81,000 jobs in Puerto Rico; textiles and sugar fell from 51,000 to 10,000 and from 87,000 to 45,000 jobs, respectively (Ayala, 1996).
- 8 The Fajardo Sugar Company was one of the 11 most important sugar cane plantations (of 40 total) in Puerto Rico (Ayala, 1996).
- 9 The 1917 Smith-Hughes National Vocational Educational Act was a statute penned by Congress to promote training in vocational agriculture and to spend federal funds for that purpose (Croom, 2008).
- 10 The College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts [Colegio de Agricultura y Artes Mecánicas] is now the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus.
- 11 The college was created via the US "land grant" model, in which a system of federal subsidies and aid allows the expropriation of land for the foundation of a college center.
- 12 Malcolm Browne of the Associated Press took the famed picture, and David Halberstam of *The New York Times* reported the event; both men won the Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting in 1964.
- 13 I-A classification means "available for service" (Rottman & Lyles, 2012).
- 14 The plant operated from 1962 and was shut down in 1968, as it fulfilled its demonstration purpose. In 1969, the decommission of the plant started to allow access to the public. At present, it is a technological museum that shows how the plant operated and generated power.
- 15 *Boricua* is another way to refer to a person born in Puerto Rico or of Puerto Rican descent. The term derives from the word *Borikén*, the Indigenous Taino name for Puerto Rico.
- 16 The concepts of *trigueño*, *moreno*, *jabao*, *prieto*, and *indio* comprise Puerto Rican racial vocabulary in the mid-twentieth century. *Trigueño* refers to golden trigo (wheat), and thus refers to a white person whose skin has been darkened by exposure to the elements, perhaps due to hard agricultural work. *Moreno* (recalling the much older term "Moor") is the Puerto Rican word for Black. *Jabao* refers to a "whitewashed" or "token" Black person, whose demeanor might seem "white" or whose facial features might look more typically white. *Jabao* may refer to any person of color, including a light-skinned Black or mixed-race person who might at one time have been referred to as "mulatto." *Indio* means biracial or simply copper skinned.
- 17 *Gringo* is a term that originated in Spanish-speaking countries, and is typically used to refer to someone from an English-speaking country, especially the United States.
- 18 The Extension Service of the USDA (US Department of Agriculture) was created via the Smith-Lever Act and began in Puerto Rico in 1934, offering practical farming and home economics demonstrations in local communities.
- 19 *Pasteles* are a traditional dish in Puerto Rico commonly served during the holidays. Similar to a tamal, the pastel is made with pork and adobo encased in green plantain masa and wrapped in banana leaves.
- 20 Fernández directed the Committee for the Defense of Sixto Albelo in support of the first Puerto Rican conscientious objector to the Vietnam War.
- 21 *Star and Stripes* is a newspaper produced by the Department of Defense. Its journalistic independence is legally guaranteed by the First Amendment. A daily edition has been printed since WWII.
- 22 In request for clarification on August 18, 2024, Figueroa-Mejía clarified that the overdose he referred to in his interview were caused by opiates.
- 23 Some authors point to Radio Havana as one of the stations who retransmitted its programming in North Vietnam (Bieger & Lammert, 2013; Durham, 2014). During the Cold War, especially during the Vietnam War period, North Vietnam maintained close ties with Cuba, even more than with its neighbor China, and of another nature than with its arms supplier, the Soviet Union.
- 24 The documentary *The Borinqueneers*, produced by Noemí Figueroa-Soulet (2007), presents the experiences of this regiment in Korea.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

The Voces Oral History Project is committed to the ethical collection, preservation, and use of oral histories in accordance with the guidelines established by the Oral History Association (OHA). We ensure informed consent by providing participants comprehensive information about the project's purpose and their rights, including voluntary participation and the right to withdraw.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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