Part 1 / Standing at the Wall
INTRODUCTION

But from Oliver Stone, you would think that all our boys
looked like Tom Cruise.

Bárbara Renaud González, “The Summer of Vietnam”

In a speech on the floor of the U.S. Senate in 1972, future presidential nominee George McGovern spoke of Mexican Americans as “the most invisible of all our minority groups”: “Whites count. Blacks count. Indians count. But due to the inexplicable ways of the bureaucracy, Mexican-Americans don’t count.” His speech included a timely, but unheeded, plea for Chicano veterans:

I have been increasingly concerned lately with the difficulties facing veterans of our ill-conceived involvement in Vietnam. The unemployment rate among returning Vietnam veterans between 20 and 24 years of ages is 12.4%. These difficulties are even worse for veterans from minority groups, including Mexican-Americans who have contributed more than their fair share to this war. Fifteen percent of California’s casualties, and ten percent of all casualties in the Southwest, have been Mexican-Americans. What Mexican-Americans want to know is why are they first in war but last in peace? Why are they good enough to lead men in combat in Vietnam, to carry the heavy responsibility of life and death, but not good enough to handle a desk in Washington?

Although Chicano GIs found many common issues around which to organize, their experience of Viet Nam was not homogeneous. U.S. citizens of Mexican descent, or la Raza as they were grouped together by the Chicano Movement, have always constituted a heterogenous community whose members have had different historical experiences, the result of class, gender, region, generation, and other factors. In a poem written in 1977, Olivia Chumacero, one of the original players in El Teatro Campesino (the cultural arm of Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers union), compared some of the features of Chicano culture in Texas with those in California:
What's the difference
between Califas y
Texas.
In Califas you know
ah, that's the way it is
you know
y en Texas
luego cambia la onda
tú sabes.
Aunque quieres o no
estamos más agabachados
en Califas
que en Texas.
Everybody digs on
Stevie Wonder and
Santana
y Linda Ronstadt
but not necessarily
in that order
luego siempre andamos con el
give me five!
Meantime back in
el Rancho Grande
están
Los Royal Jesters
Snowball y Compañía
Los Alegres de Terán
y para no
hacer lo menos
Little Joe y la familia
qué locotl no.
Los pochos get down
con salsa y disco
Los tejanos
con cumbias y polkas
y rancheras
el famoso Tex-Mex sound.
Pero no hay fijación
porque
todo es puro movimiento
you dig.
(What's the difference between California and Texas. In California you know, ah, that's the way it is, you know, and in Texas, then the scene changes, you know. Whether you like it or not we're more assimilated in California than in Texas. Everybody digs on Stevie Wonder and Santana and Linda Ronstadt but not necessarily in that order and we always go around with the high five! Meantime back on the Rancho Grande are The Royal Jesters, Snowball and Company, Los Alegres de Terán, and last but not least Little Joe and the family, how cool. The Americanized ones get down with salsa and disco, the Texans with cumbias and polkas and rancheras—the famous Tex-Mex sound. But there's no problem because it's all nothing but movement, you dig.)³

In this poem, Chumacero puts to humorous effect the fact that in many of its aspects Chicano culture in Texas remains more closely tied to the Spanish language and Mexican music than does Chicano culture in California. But the final lines pull the diverse elements together in the universalizing movimiento of the music, which also refers to the political movement that reached its apex during the Viet Nam era.

In Rolando Hinojosa's The Useless Servants (1993), a fictional journal written by Rafe Buenrostro, the narrator comments upon the regional differences among Mexican American soldiers during the Korean War:

Saw one guy I thought was a Texas Mexican. Turned out to be a Coloradan; called himself Donald Trujillo. Says his people came from Spain, and then Charlie and Joey asked him if those were the Spaniards that landed in Virginia and then trekked across the South until delivered safely and soundly to the Promised Land. This is the third Coloradan we've run across, and they all claim to be Spanish. Well, that's the first Mexican of any kind I've ever met named Donald. We spoke Spanish to him, but he answered in English.⁴

These same differences are used for comedic effect by Daniel Cano (see Readings 8 and 9): "Pinche, Woodland Hills, Californio, you vatos spend all your lives with Mickey Mouse y la Marilyn Monroe y John Wayne. That ain't life, ese. C'mon down to the Rio Grande Valley and learn what's it all about."⁵

While regional and linguistic difference can be used to create humor in scenes such as these, more serious differences based on class, gender, and levels of assimilation produced in Chicana/o writings about the American war in Viet Nam a wide range of figures whose complex identities take shape
at the intersection of contradictory and often mutually exclusive categories, for example, the imperative of combat versus Catholicism's condemnation of taking a human life. The texts included in this anthology illustrate a range of reactions to the political and cultural changes, strong feelings of community and solidarity, and the violence and exhilaration that characterized the period. Thus there are writings by Chicano veterans that express a nascent solidarity with the Vietnamese people, an experience not shared by Chicano soldiers who were prisoners of war or career military personnel (see Readings 11 and 12). Yet it is precisely where these texts diverge most from conventional accounts that we may begin to understand the particularities of the “Chicano/a experience” of this country's longest war.

**Toxic Liberalism**

Much has been made of the fact that the Viet Nam War has not been, and perhaps cannot be, absorbed by official U.S. history. Despite attempts to “get beyond Viet Nam” by conducting “more successful” wars against developing nations, the specter of Viet Nam continues to inhabit the national psyche. Books such as Myra MacPherson's *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation* (1984; rpt. 1993) play upon the notion of lingering trauma and tragedy, but I would argue that the war cannot be “figured out” nor “factored in” at least in part because it marked the end of uncontested “white” hegemony and radically destabilized the meaning of what it is to be an American. The racial, ethnic, and class composition of U.S. combat units and the final Vietnamese victory together revealed the hypocrisy and inefficacy of the white male ruling class and its particular brand of liberalism. That a disproportionate number of combat troops were poor, brown, and black should have forced (but did not) a rethinking of American identity and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. The ramifications of this break in the liberal tradition continue to be felt in the late 1990s through neo-conservative charges of “reverse discrimination,” the “oppression of the white male,” and other self-serving fantasies that motivate the roll back of the minimal gains of the Civil Rights era.

In early 1967, in a brilliant moral and political analysis of the war's disastrous effects, Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke in Manhattan’s Riverside Church:
As I ponder the madness of Vietnam and search within myself for ways to understand and respond in compassion my mind goes constantly to the people of that peninsula. I speak now not of the soldiers of each side, not of the junta in Saigon, but simply of the people who have been living under the curse of war for almost three continuous decades now. I think of them too because it is clear to me that there will be no meaningful solution there until some attempt is made to know them and hear their broken cries. . . . In order to atone for our sins and errors in Vietnam, we should take the initiative in bringing a halt to this tragic war. . . . We must continue to raise our voices if our nation persists in its perverse ways in Vietnam. We must be prepared to match actions with words by seeking out every creative means of protest possible.6

Dr. King’s plea for an end to American ethnocentrism, his repudiation of Johnson’s war policy, and his call for renewed efforts by the anti-war movement would be silenced by the assassinations of 1968 and the election of Richard Nixon. But his claim, in the same speech, that the war in Viet Nam had been the primary cause for the derailment of the domestic war on poverty would be picked up by Johnson himself and become a generally accepted axiom.

The bankruptcy of traditional liberalism exposed in Dr. King’s speech deserves our attention. For if poor whites and poor people of color were being victimized at home because of misguided national priorities, poor whites and poor people of color were also the ones thrust into fighting the war. It is the point at which Johnson’s War on Poverty entered into an unholy alliance with the Pentagon that the government created a direct conduit from the barrios and ghettos to the killing fields of Viet Nam. The primary architects of the policy were Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then best known for his analysis of what he called the “disorganized and matrifocal” structure of “the Negro family.” Military service, Moynihan argued, was the perfect cure for poverty: “Very possibly our best hope is seriously to use the armed forces as a socializing experience for the poor—particularly the Southern poor—until somehow their environment begins turning out equal citizens.”7 How the “environment” of the “southern poor” (i.e., poor African Americans) would “somehow” eventually create better citizens was never specified.

The plan to socialize poor people through military service had its origins in the Task Force on Manpower Conservation report submitted to President
Johnson in January 1964. Established by President Kennedy two months before his death, the task force was commissioned to investigate the fact that half the men tested by the Selective Service System were deemed unqualified for the armed forces. In Kennedy’s opinion: “A young man who does not have what it takes to perform military service is not likely to have what it takes to make a living. Today’s military rejects are tomorrow’s hard-core unemployed.” As a member of the original task force, McNamara was well positioned to make the deadly connection between “curing poverty” and supplying additional men for the military. Men who had been rejected for either mental or medical reasons were to be retested for their suitability to enter what Selective Service director General Lewis Hershey called “a program for the guidance, testing, counseling, training and rehabilitation of youths found disqualified for military service.”

During Johnson’s first years in office, this plan gained new urgency as military leaders realized that the draft pool would have to be expanded, either upwards (to include middle-class college students) or downwards. In August 1966, at a time of escalating manpower needs, Secretary of Defense McNamara announced the creation of Project 100,000, thus named because its goal was to enable the induction of 100,000 previously unqualified men each year. By presenting Project 100,000 as another jobs and training program linked to the Great Society, McNamara followed Kennedy in claiming that disadvantaged youth would be well served by the military, that they would learn valuable skills: “The poor of America have not had the opportunity to earn their fair share of this Nation’s abundance, but they can be given an opportunity to serve in their country’s defense and they can be given an opportunity to return to civilian life with skills and aptitudes which, for them and their families, will reverse the downward spiral of human decay.”

The goal of 100,000 inductees was to be met by drastically lowering standards and accepting men with low scores on the Armed Forces Qualification Test. Standards for advanced training programs, however, were not adjusted. As a result, tens of thousands of poor and poorly educated minority soldiers were recruited, assigned to infantry units, and dispatched to Southeast Asia. Over 50 percent of the “new standards men” fought in Viet Nam; over 50 percent of these men were African American.

Because the military did not keep separate statistics for Mexican American or Latino servicemen, no one can calculate the effect of Project 100,000 on Chicano communities. In 1967 a presidential commission, reporting that a disproportionate number of “Negro” soldiers had died in combat (22.4% of
all those killed in action during the first eleven months of 1966), concluded: “There is reason to believe that many of the statistics relating to the Negro would be comparable for some other minority groups, although specific information to establish this is not available.” Data on men previously rejected by the services on “mental” as opposed to physical grounds (over 90 percent of all Project 100,000 inductees) show the largest percentage coming from Puerto Rico and a disproportionate percentage coming from south Texas and other southern states. Many men whose first language was Spanish did not score well on the military qualification test, which placed them in the ranks of the new standards men.

The extent to which the Selective Service interpreted cultural and linguistic difference as “mental inferiority” is impossible to reconstruct. In a report prepared in late 1964 and published by the Department of the Army in 1965 (some eight months before the announcement of Project 100,000), “marginal men” were separated into physical, mental, and moral categories. Following up on studies conducted by the Army in 1953 (“Fort Leonard Wood study”) and by the Air Force in 1952 (“Project 1000”), the report summarized research on whether men who would otherwise be rejected from military service might be given special training in order to increase their “usefulness.” An entire chapter was devoted to “Army-wide Utilization of Puerto Rican Enlisted Men.”

The case of Puerto Rico is suggestive. Since the 1950s, the Department of the Army had operated special English-language programs in Puerto Rico. Once they attained minimal language proficiency, the participants were transferred to the mainland for regular basic training. By the Army’s own admission, these programs were less than successful: through 1964, the drop-out rate was 56 percent. As manpower needs escalated and Project 100,000 was enacted, the government discontinued the language proficiency program; the new lower standards eliminated the need for pre-induction remedial programs. Although Puerto Rico ranked approximately twenty-sixth in population among the fifty states during the Viet Nam era, Puerto Rico ranked fourteenth in casualties and fourth in combat deaths. It was not until 1970 that a federal judge ruled against the Army in the case of portorriqueño Carlos J. Rivera-Toledo, finding that the Army had not complied with its own regulations regarding the testing of non-English-speaking inductees and that the Army had failed to provide adequate training. Rivera-Toledo was subsequently released from military service.

One of the few novels to refer to Project 100,000 is Charles Durden’s
No Bugles, No Drums (1976). A traditional combat narrative set during one soldier's tour of duty, Durden's novel is at the same time a curious blend of anti-war sentiments and stereotypical caricatures of minority GIs. Narrator Jamie Hawkins arrives in Viet Nam and joins other new guys in a platoon that includes four new standards men—three African Americans and a Chicano:

Garcia 'n' the Drill Team, like Jinx, were dubious benefactors of McNamara's brainchild. McNamara's 100,000. It has a ring, like Fortune 500, or 10 Downing Street (which, when I saw it on TV, really wasn't very impressive from the outside). McNamara's 100,000—pulled from the compost heap of America's hopeless. That sounds bitter, but I don't know if I really care much, one way or the other. Maybe I blame McNamara for what happened. I might as well blame God. I don't expect to ever get a chance to talk to either one of 'em. But it was McNamara, not God, who put his name to the program—retrainin' the retards. Takin' people who couldn't read or write well enough to pass the Army's basic entrance exam (geared to a sixth-grade level) and puttin' 'em through a cram course. Teachin' 'em to read 'n' write just enough to pass the test for cannon fodder. Teachin' 'em to write their name so they could sign their own death warrant.\textsuperscript{14}

Durden's anger at another social engineering program and its disastrous effects on poor minorities does not preclude his using Garcia primarily as comic relief. A poor Chicano from San Diego, Garcia speaks fractured English and harbors a dream of becoming a bullfighter. He dies in a gruesome yet ridiculous scene in which he challenges a water buffalo by waving his jacket and shouting "Toro, toro." Even his corpse is an object of mockery: an enterprising GI disposes of Garcia's body in order to ship home a large quantity of marijuana in the coffin. Toward the end of the novel, the narrator points his M-16 at a herd of local pigs, takes aim at the one that the GIs had named McNamara, and blows it apart.

Project 100,000 stands as one of the landmarks in the failure and fundamental dishonesty of the liberal project. Although none of its principal architects would have considered himself racist, the consequences of their actions were unquestionably racist. Liberal discourse was structured upon racialized categories, and racial language permeated policymaker circles to such an extent that even a relatively "progressive" dove like George Ball could write the following, in a memo to President Johnson:
The South Vietnamese are losing the war to the Viet Cong. No one can assure you that we can beat the Viet Cong or even force them to the conference table on our terms, no matter how many hundred thousand white, foreign (U.S.), troops we deploy.

No one has demonstrated that a white ground force of whatever size can win a guerrilla war—which is at the same time a civil war between Asians—in jungle terrain in the midst of a population that refuses cooperation to the white forces (and the South Vietnamese) and thus provides a great intelligence advantage to the other side.15

"White" forces versus people of color—the lines of battle could not be drawn more starkly.

Today conservative politicians and intellectuals are riding the wave of resentment felt by "white males" who claim to be a new persecuted minority. Attacks on affirmative action programs and multicultural education are mounted on the back of the claim that people of color are somehow practicing "reverse discrimination." Although the balance of social and economic power continues to favor white males overwhelmingly, white male supremacy no longer holds the unquestioned privilege it once did—and this, it seems to me, is a direct consequence of the kind of thinking about race, class, and power that began during the Viet Nam War. To cite one important example: On December 26, 1971, fifteen Viet Nam veterans barricaded themselves in the Statue of Liberty, calling for an end to the war. Their statement to the press echoed an analysis that Latino and African American activists had developed early on: "The reason we chose the Statue of Liberty is that since we were children, the statue has been analogous in our minds with freedom and an America we love. Then we went to fight a war in the name of freedom. We saw that freedom is a selective expression allowed only to those who are white and who maintain the status quo."16

Structures of Experience

In her groundbreaking study of U.S. and Vietnamese literature about the war, Renny Christopher summarizes the complex epistemological disjunction between experience and narrative: "Overriding faith in the validity of individual experience causes us to read Viet Nam narratives as historical documents rather than as literature. The relationship to reality is assumed to be unmedi-
ated.” 17 Readers, in other words, mistakenly assume that writings by veterans are close to the truth of what happened. But because most published texts on the war have been written by European American males, the “reality” of the war as received by readers is hopelessly narrow and too often ethnocentric. This approach to veteran-authored texts also establishes an unassailable authority (“if you weren’t here, you can’t understand”) and excludes alternative “experiences.”

The highly mediated nature of narrative, its distance from some irrecoverable “real,” has a special bearing on war stories, including accounts of the anti-war movement. That literary texts constitute a second-level reality composed of inherited forms and languages is a fundamental tenet of criticism, one that in its most recent manifestations produced the fashion for “interrogating representations.” The pitfall is that by narrowing the critical focus to the constituent parts of a given representation, one loses sight of the fact that “something” actually did happen before the production of the text. In other words, while it is true that the “real” or historical itself is not recuperable, it is also true that the aftershocks of the real are the precondition for any textualization. This rather commonsense notion, however, is necessarily an issue for debate for the discipline of cultural criticism, especially in the case of war literature, which, as Fredric Jameson argues, “forces us to confront the issue of the relationship between culture and reality—a political issue—more directly than we have the habit of doing with artistic and cultural representations generally. In particular, it raises the question of whether a work of art can be judged in terms of its accuracy to life, whether it can convey the experience of the war and of the veteran, and even more basically, whether it can communicate that experience to people who have never had it.” 18

The “you had to be there” position typical of many veteran-authored texts founders because not even the participant who retells his or her story can tell an unmediated truth. Yet no one can doubt that the physical and psychological contexts of a veteran’s experience diverge radically from those of the nonveteran. The point, however, is not to privilege one experience over another, even as we concede that the “something that happened” to the veteran will influence his later actions (and in the case of writers, his texts). In a like manner, the experience of the anti-war demonstrator, or that of someone whose relative was killed in the war, still affects his or her present condition in ways that those who did not share that experience will not immediately comprehend.
It is not that literary representations are history, but that literary representations are always historical insofar as they are deeply embedded in the raw material of historical praxis.19 “Within” the texts by Patricio Paiz (Reading 14) and Norma Elia Cantú (Reading 24), for example, lie the very real deaths of two young Chicanos—Arturo Tijerina, twenty-one years old, and Florentino Cantú, Jr., nineteen—both killed by small-arms fire in early 1968 in the Republic of South Viet Nam.

Rather than claiming that each “individual” experience is unique, however, I want to argue that even the most intimate experience cannot be reduced to individual action but rather is the result of complex social conjunctures. In this way, we can begin to speak of Chicano/a experiences of the Viet Nam War. I take the term “structure of experience” from Raymond Williams in order to insist that “something” always precedes the text (“experience”) and also to emphasize that “experience” is a product of social and cultural structures. Williams’s use of the term remained underdeveloped precisely because of its close connection to the more ephemeral concept of “structure of feeling” as he defined it in Marxism and Literature. There, Williams sought to describe those moments when “experience, immediate feeling, and then subjectivity and personality are newly generalized and assembled.”20 Arguing at one point that such moments were often, though not necessarily, linked to specific generations or to the emergence of social classes, Williams obscured the term’s meaning by in essence collapsing it back into the concepts of ideology or worldview. Nevertheless, his initial insight remains useful because it allows us to consider the kinds of unsettling experiences leading to the radical rethinking of inherited “common sense” that the war produced in the Chicano community. Williams argues that the tension between everyday experience and received forms is not always clearly understood:

The tension is as often an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency: the moment of conscious comparison not yet come, often not even coming. And comparison is by no means the only process, though it is powerful and important. There are the experiences to which the fixed forms do not speak at all, which indeed they do not recognize. There are important mixed experiences, where the available meaning would convert part to all, or all to part. And even where form and response can be found to agree, without apparent difficulty, there can be qualifications, reservations, indications elsewhere: what the agreement seemed to settle but still sounding elsewhere.

(Marxism and Literature, p. 130)
It is precisely this "sounding elsewhere" produced by the dissonance between traditional forms of patriotism, masculinity, and assimilation and the actual experience of the war that resonates throughout the readings in this anthology. By isolating specific structures of experience within these texts, I hope to begin the preliminary analysis that will lead to a rethinking of the so-called Viet Nam War canon in U.S. literary studies and a reevaluation of a particular moment in the development of Chicano literature. What we find in many of these writings is a profound questioning of ethnocentrism, white supremacy, Cold War mythology, and traditional forms of masculinity. Because most Chicana/o writers are situated outside the dominant intellectual and artistic circles, and because their communities are invisible to government and economic elites, many of them have been able to view American society with a critical eye and a righteously indignant pen.

"Our kids don't have blue eyes"

In a photograph of a 1968 rally during the Los Angeles high school "blowouts" (demonstrations for educational reform), one sign strikes with special force: "Our kids don't have blue eyes, but they go overseas to die." Some would say that the sign-maker's mistake was to use the conjunction "but," for it is precisely because they did not have blue eyes that young Chicano men were sent overseas. But the sign-maker's point was a different one: "Give us credit for dying for our country. We too are Americans."

Since the turn of the century, Mexican Americans have served in the U.S. armed forces in disproportionate numbers. One factor that complicates the service of this community is the thorny issue of assimilation, its connection to patriotism and to the promise of full citizenship in the nation. For members of groups already marked as not fully "American," the desire to fit in—to not call attention to one's self by refusing to practice conventional behavior—is especially strong. Even the first anti-war plays staged in the late 1960s by El Teatro Campesino embody the tension produced by the desire to assimilate. In the 1971 acto (one-act play) Soldado Razo (Buck Private), the narrator describes the departure of a young Chicano soldier: "So Johnny left for Vietnam, never to return. He didn't want to go and yet he did. It never crossed his mind to refuse. How can he refuse the gobierno de los Estados Unidos? How could he refuse his family?" The suggestion that his family's wishes coincide with those of the U.S. government, that the refusal to serve would dis-
appoint both equally, reminds us that Latinos, like other “unmelted” ethnic
groups, are under immense pressure to fit in and submit to the demands of
state authority.

The drive to assimilate through military service is exacerbated by one of
the most pernicious legacies of Mexican culture: warrior patriotism. The idea
that masculine behavior must include a readiness to die for “la patria” is pow-
erful in Mexican nationalist ideology. When transferred to the Chicano con-
text it is especially dangerous since the Mexican male’s rhetorical claim that
he is willing to die anytime anywhere becomes a fatal reality once it is linked
to U.S. imperialist projects. As the son declares in the “Corrido del padre de
un soldado,” by famed tejano composer José Morante, “Soy purito mexi-
cano / y no le temo al morir” (“I’m one hundred percent Mexican / and I’m
not afraid to die”) (Reading 1). To cite a more recent example: In the wake of
the Persian Gulf War, the tejano musical group Little Joe y la familia combined
national icons from both the United States and Mexico, and invoked clichés
like “Voy a la guerra contento” (“I go happily off to war”) and “Mi raza sabe
morir dondequiera” (“My people know how to die anywhere”).

In the short story “Feliz Cumpleaños, E.U.A.” (“Happy Birthday, U.S.A.”),
published in 1979, Rolando Hinojosa wrote against the patriotic grain and
asks his reader to imagine the unimaginable: “Sí, y como dije, después vino
Korea y de repente, como sí tal cosa, vino el Vietná . . . y allí va la raza de
nuevo . . . ah, y esta vez muchos de los bolillos rehusaron ir—sí, raza—que
no iban y no iban y no fueron . . . ¿qué tal si la raza no hubiera ido, eh? Se
pueden imaginar.” (“Yeah, like I said, then came Korea and then, just like that,
came Vietnam . . . and there went Chicanos again . . . and this time a lot of
white boys refused to go—yes, my fellow Chicanos—they weren’t going to
go and they didn’t go . . . What would have happened if Chicanos hadn’t
gone? You can imagine.”) The implied listener here is a traditional Mexican
American community aghast at the thought that someone, anyone, had re-
fused military service. If Chicanos were to resist, how would the state re-
spond? More important, how would the community react? In Luis Valdez’s
play The Dark Root of a Scream, the death in Viet Nam of the character Indio is
attributed in part to the pressure to serve he felt from the community:

**GATO:** He rapped against the war, but his time came and he had to go
a huevo [of necessity] just like everybody else.

**PRIEST:** He was concerned what the barrio would think if he refused
induction.
GATO: If he’d gone to the pinta [prison] instead of the army, all the barrio would have said he was chicken.

PRIEST: He was considering fleeing the country, but he knew he’d never be able to return as a community leader.25

In massive numbers, Chicanos faced with the prospect of going to Viet Nam reacted with the same sense of duty or fatalism that had inspired their fathers, cousins, and uncles in World War II and Korea.26 The case of the small town of Silvis, Illinois, exemplifies the sacrifices made by Chicanos in the armed forces. The town, which sits along the Mississippi River, near the Iowa border, became home to Mexican railroad workers who had journeyed north to labor on the Rock Island line. During World War II, Korea, and Viet Nam, a single block in that community (renamed Hero Street in the 1960s) sent eighty-seven young men to war. Among those who died were men like Tony Pompa, a Mexican citizen who enlisted under an assumed name. As of 1994, over one hundred residents of Hero Street had served in the U.S. military.

In discussing Mexican American participation in U.S. wars, we must focus critical attention on the social networks that allowed some groups to resist the war while others were unable to do so. The conflation of duty to family and duty to country is strikingly present in one Chicano veteran’s explanation of why he served: “I didn’t have much of a choice. If I had refused to get drafted, what was I going to do? It would have been just as hard to refuse the draft as it was to go into the army. Where was I going to go? I had nowhere to go. That would have been real hard on my jefíos [parents].”27 The chant “You don’t have to go!” offered to minority draftees by the relatively privileged student leaders of the campus anti-war movement wholly ignored the intense pressures and contradictions felt by members of working-class communities of color.

The material conditions of poverty, job discrimination, and educational tracking together with what was felt to be the overwhelming obligation to serve and prove one’s loyalty according to traditional notions of nation and masculinity were responsible for the relatively low number of Chicano draft resisters during the Viet Nam era. Nevertheless, Chicano men slowly joined the ranks of those who refused to participate in the killing. Ernesto Vigil, of Denver, was the first to refuse induction, stating that he would not fight against his “brown brothers in Vietnam.”28 This sentiment and language was echoed by other resisters like Rosalio Muñoz, David Corona (son of long-time Chicano activist Bert Corona), Fred Aviles, and Manuel Gómez. In a let-