

Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature

Latina/o Literature and War: Gendered Combat Zones



Ariana E. Vigil

Subject: North American Literatures Online Publication Date: Apr 2019

DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.318

Summary and Keywords

Latina/o literary engagements with war include a wide variety of texts that touch on more than a century of US militarism and encompass a broad range of genres and perspectives. This body of work includes memoirs by soldiers and novels set during various military conflicts (often based on the authors' own experiences), as well as short stories, plays, poems, and essays that reflect on, question, and problematize Latina/o participation in war. Just as Latina/o individuals and peoples occupy a variety of positions vis-à-vis the US nation-state—as conquered and colonized populations, as internal “minorities,” and as migrants and refugees—so, too, have Latina/o texts that take up war reflected a variety of positions. Taking an expansive view of war that includes movements of military-backed annexation and colonization, this literature may include Latina/o literary and cultural engagements with the annexation of Texas in 1845, the Mexican-American War (1846–1848), and the annexation of Puerto Rico in 1898. These topics sit alongside very different perspectives on US militarism such as those that reflect Latina/o experiences within the US armed forces in World War II, Korea, Viet Nam, Central America, and Iraq. This literature, then, covers works that celebrate and oppose US military action. Although factors such as geopolitical setting, history, ethnicity, and nationality affect the ways Latinas/os have experienced and interacted with US militarism, gender, and sexuality have also played important roles in these articulations. Gender is a necessary category of analysis that facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the way individuals and communities experience war. Just as it is best not to assume that military service for Latinas/os has had a singular or constant meaning (such as an experience of bravery or pride), it is necessary to avoid approaching gender as synonymous with women. Thus a gendered analysis facilitates questioning of the way masculinity and femininity shape and are shaped by questions of violence, military intervention, and national cohesion.

Keywords: Latina/o literature, gender, militarism, masculinity, heterosexuality, Viet Nam, Central America

A Nation Formed by War

Warfare was an integral part of the formation of the modern U.S. nation-state and in the 19th century contributed most directly to the shape of two Latina/o groups—Puerto Ricans and Chicanas/os. Puerto Ricans came under US control in 1898, when the territory was annexed by the United States during the island’s quest for independence from Spain during the Spanish-American War. Some Chicana/o peoples can trace their lineage back to populations who resided within what is now the United States, territories that came under US control after the Mexican American War of 1846–1848 and the subsequent violation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. It may be said that members of these groups *became* US Latinas/os through warfare. The historical and cultural significance of US militarism and expansionism has been remarked on by generations of US Latina/o writers and especially Chicanas/os with ties to the territories that today make up the states of Texas and California. The work of María Amparo Ruíz de Burton, published originally in the late 1800s but republished in the late 20th century as part of the series *Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage*, deals explicitly with the experiences of wealthy Californios dispossessed in the wake of the Mexican-American War. Her book *The Squatter and the Don* focuses on Don Alamar, the owner of a cattle ranch obtained through a Spanish land grant near San Diego.¹ Taking advantage of the Land Act of 1851, which asserted that any land whose title could not be verified within a span of two years would revert to the public domain, a squatter named Darrell takes up residence on the Alamar land. While Alamar and Darrell face court battles, their children, Mercedes and Clarence, fall in love. The romance within the novel contributes to its sentimentality while also bringing to the forefront the “complex negotiations of gender and power undergirding romances between Mexican-American women and Anglo men during the Texas Mexican and Mexican-American wars.”² Jovita González’s novel *Caballero* deals with a similar time period but focuses on a Tejano family in South Texas. The novel remained unpublished in González’s lifetime but was recovered and edited by José E. Limón and María Cotera for publication in 1996. According to Cotera, the novel’s focus on the day-to-day life and domestic sphere of the Santiago family allow it to offer a “uniquely gendered vision of borderlands history.”³ Written by women who remained marginalized by mainstream Anglo political and literary society (in spite of Ruíz de Burton’s economic standing), these texts continue to provide rich terrain for analyzing Mexican American literature as it has responded to gendered warfare and US expansion.⁴

The significance of US militarism in formerly Mexican, French, Spanish, and indigenous territories in the 19th century continues to be explored in 21st-century literature. Emma Pérez’s 2009 novel *Forgetting the Alamo, or, Blood Memory* places a Tejana lesbian at the center of a story set during and after the battles of the Alamo and San Jacinto. Pérez’s novel is notable for the racial mixture exhibited by its characters; the protagonist Micaela falls in love with an African American-indigenous woman and clashes with her Anglo Mexican cousin. *Forgetting the Alamo* queers the typical frontier narrative as it focuses on Micaela’s search for revenge for the murder of her family members. Through Micaela’s cross-dressing—she dons her uncle’s hat and “father’s buckskin coat so that

Latina/o Literature and War: Gendered Combat Zones

[she] would not be seen as a girl vulnerable” to attack—Pérez also alludes to a history of women disguising themselves as men to participate in war.⁵ In placing rape and violence at the forefront of her novel, Pérez’s text reflects a Chicana feminist commitment to speaking openly about racialized gender-based violence. In this regard, the novel echoes Gloria Anzaldúa’s brutal poem “We Call Them Greasers.” Published in Anzaldúa’s groundbreaking work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, “We Call Them Greasers” is set during the time of violence and dispossession that followed the Mexican-American War and violation of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. When the speaker refers to the woman he rapes as the property of another man, the poem reflects the use of rape in warfare and the “sexual violence embedded in processes of colonialism and imperialism.”⁶

These texts, all of them set in the mid-19th century but written and published over the course of two centuries, illustrate the enduring significance for Chicana writers of the warfare that facilitated US expansion. These works also evidence the range of ideological and cultural engagements with 19th-century warfare—from texts that sought to highlight Californio and Tejano dispossession to ones that seek to present alternative portraits of aggressors and victims. All of the texts are in conversation with Chicana/o and Chicana feminist historical research while asserting the role of the imaginary in reflecting and problematizing histories of war, expansion, and occupation.

Masculinities and Gendered Citizenship

Although warfare and US imperialism were integral to the founding and expansion of the United States as it acquired territories and peoples, warfare has also played an important role in such peoples’ asserting their citizenship. Warfare is often imbricated with citizenship because military service is both an obligation to the nation on the part the citizen and a way for the nation to recognize its citizens. This is why orders such as the desegregating of the US armed forces during World War II and the repeal of the policy Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, allowing gay and lesbian soldiers to serve openly, have been important parts of civil rights struggles: Those who are allowed to serve understand such an opportunity as a recognition of their role as citizens. Of course, even today, soldiers and service members have not been treated equally on account of race, gender, and sexuality and thus have utilized their service as the means to mount claims for more comprehensive civil rights. This was especially true for the post-World War II generation who explicitly articulated the contradictions between being asked to “fight for freedom” abroad while lacking full citizenship and civil rights within the United States. Many Chicana/o texts comment on the ways returning soldiers must contend with continued political and economic marginalization as well as the trauma of their service. In Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*, the protagonist’s older brothers serve in World War II and return with post-traumatic stress disorder; their trauma leaves them unable to fulfill their father’s dream of moving as a family to California. When the young boy, Antonio, witnesses the murder of another suffering veteran, Lupito, by the sheriff, he is thrust into a state of religious and moral uncertainty. The contrast between the elder brothers and

Latina/o Literature and War: Gendered Combat Zones

young Antonio, who remains at home with his mother and the titular *curandera* (healer) figure, evidences the gendered split whereby males' participation in the army signifies their activities in the political space of the US nation-state while women and children remain in the domestic sphere. The religious and ethical journey that Antonio undertakes in the novel aligns femininity with domesticity and alternative epistemologies, in opposition to masculine forms of social relation, including war.

Another text set in the World War II era, Américo Paredes's short story "Ichiro Kikuchi," explores Mexicana/o *mestizaje* as it is misrecognized during war. The title character is born and raised near Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico, the son of a Japanese father and a Mexican mother.⁷ He travels to Japan in late 1941, but after the attack on Pearl Harbor and the breaking of diplomatic relations between Mexico and Japan, cannot return home. Kikuchi ends up a prisoner of the US military but is saved when a Mexican American soldier recognizes the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe on his medallion. Often read as emblematic of the "historical processes involved in the creation of hybrid cultural spaces," the story, like *Bless Me, Ultima*, nonetheless suggests that symbols of femininity—here the medallion given to Kikuchi by his Mexican mother—may offer respite, indeed salvation, from masculine death and destruction.⁸ The work of Anaya and Paredes joins texts such as Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit* and Rolando Hinojosa's *Korean Love Songs* to constitute a corpus of Chicana/o war texts; more analysis of the way gender, race, and violence intersect in this bod of literature is both possible and necessary.

Viet Nam Era

Writings that respond to the war in Viet Nam make up a large portion of Chicana/o literary engagements with warfare. George Mariscal's important *Aztlán and Viet Nam* collects material from a range of sources—including university newspapers, poems, letters from soldiers, and excerpts from fictional texts—to portray the complexity of Chicana/o responses to the war. Such responses include discussions of US imperialism, racism within the US and the armed forces, feelings of hopelessness and loss, and a desire for a more just world. Whereas after World War II veterans used their service to critique the lack of freedoms afforded communities of color in the United States, a later generation did so while also opposing US imperialist policies in Viet Nam. Authors who penned narratives about soldiers used their understanding of racism, segregation, and economic inequality in the United States to argue for increased opportunities for US citizens against the dehumanization of Vietnamese peoples and in support of the cessation of the war. Many works described experiences of "sameness" between, in particular, Chicano and Vietnamese soldiers (note that this sameness is also integral to Paredes's "Ichiro Kikuchi"). The grounds for their similarities included their experiences as rural peoples (farmers or campesinos), their darker complexions, and their experiences with US imperialism. Often this sameness is expressed uncritically as one that exists only between men. The poem "Hearts on Fire" by Gina Valdés juxtaposes the speaker's uncle with a Vietnamese campesino, both of whom have lost a son in the war. Having two men stand in as representatives of the two nations, the United States and Viet

Latina/o Literature and War: Gendered Combat Zones

Nam, reverses the collapsing of “woman” and “nation” common in Western thought.⁹ The poem also broadens the geography of war by explicitly invoking the impacts of war on people and families not fighting on the frontlines. A similar move is achieved in Norma Cantú’s autobiographical, multi-genre *Canícula*. In telling the story of her family and childhood in South Texas, Cantú mourns the loss of her brother in Viet Nam. A picture of her brother as a child dressed as a soldier, with a toy helmet and rifle, suggests the ways in which masculinity and militarization are co-constitutive while the accompanying prose detailing her brother’s death speaks to the tragedy of this relationship.

Chicana/o literature about the Viet Nam War, like US literature that deals with the conflict more broadly, often engages in a fortification of masculinity as a response to the supposed emasculation that the United States suffered after its military defeat. As B. V. Olguín explains, Medal of Honor recipient Roy Benavidez narrates his belonging in the US Army and nation through a story that relies on tropes of masculine heroism. Benavidez’s *The Three Wars of Roy Benavidez*, argues Olguín, aligns with what scholars have identified as the “remasculinization” of Viet Nam veterans and of US culture.¹⁰ Although this remasculinization was not limited to works by Chicanas/os (the *Rambo* movies are the most prominent examples of the conceit), in texts by writers of color, questions of masculinity become imbricated with issues of race, class, and nationality. In Benavidez’s work, in the midst of his rescue of several fellow Green Berets, he is mistaken for a North Vietnamese soldier and his wounded body is nearly discarded. These experiences with racism, Olguín explains, resist the claim to alignment with the US national project that is made by their authors and narrators, instead placing Chicano and Vietnamese soldiers in relation to one another.¹¹

Masculinity becomes a way of reviving a US ideal and asserting belonging in the army and the nation, but it also becomes a way of expressing the trauma of war. Alfredo Véa’s novel *Gods Go Begging* engages with sameness while exploring the gendered experiences and repercussions of trauma. The novel focuses on Chicano lawyer and veteran Jesse Pasadoble as he works on a contemporary murder case in San Francisco while dealing with his memories from Viet Nam. A formative experience there involved Jesse’s meeting with a Viet Cong prisoner; the scene articulates explicitly the commonalities between Vietnamese and Chicanas/os when the prisoner, who is behind barbed wire while Jesse is not, nevertheless tells the US soldier, “You same-same me.”¹² Like other literature from the era of the Viet Nam War, the novel also includes discussions of racism within and without the armed forces, as when Jesse comments on the fact that although African Americans serve alongside Anglos, they cannot eat beside them in segregated restaurants back home.¹³ Véa, through Jesse, also pays attention to the gendered and sexual dimensions of warfare. At one point, a character compares warfare to pederasty while Jesse suffers emotional repercussions that leave him unable to sustain a romantic relationship.¹⁴ Véa’s novel joins work by Charley Trujillo, Michael Rodríguez, Daniel Cano, and others in focusing on Chicana/o experiences of the war. The multiracial, hypermasculine space of the US armed forces allows these authors to explore questions of race alongside questions of gender and sexuality within a militarized environment.

Latina/o Literature and War: Gendered Combat Zones

The work of Demetria Martínez similarly works with the trope of sameness between Chicanas/os and Vietnamese while pushing the boundaries of what is considered “war literature” and centering the experiences of women. In her poetry, Martínez often reflects on both the difficulty of speaking about war and the necessity of doing so. In “We Talk About Spanish,” the speaker notes that she is able to communicate with a Vietnamese “poet-soldier” in Spanish that “he learned in Cuba,” reflecting Cuban support for anti-imperial struggles.¹⁵ In “Rules of Engagement” the speaker addresses language more broadly and compares the poem itself to a dispensable figure such as a drafted soldier.¹⁶ The title of the poem reminds readers how much the language of war and militarization is integrated into common speech. Martínez’s work often aligns with that of the authors discussed in this article who assert a special relation between Chicanas/os and Vietnamese, although her poems stage encounters during peacetime as opposed to during war.

In her 1994 novella *Mother Tongue* Martínez questions this distinction between peacetime and wartime, specifically linking domestic violence with military intervention. This juxtaposition of “foreign” and “local” trauma is found in other works by Latina writers. *Mother Tongue* focuses on a young Chicana, María, who falls in love with a Salvadoran refugee, José Luis. Through the course of their relationship, María remembers childhood sexual trauma that she had repressed. On its surface, the text juxtaposes María’s trauma with José Luis’s. The text, however, suggests that both are explicitly connected to warfare; as the protagonist explains, she was abused by a neighbor as scenes of the Viet Nam War played on television. This rendering of violence and abuse creates a “crucial nexus between foreign and domestic violence” and figures the young girl’s body “as the country being invaded.”¹⁷ The novel suggests that María and José Luis are survivors of linked violence, not only US militarism, but a militarism that emboldens masculine privilege and abuse.

In placing María’s suffering alongside that of Vietnamese civilians, Martínez’s novella also expands the category of US Latina/o to include Central American-Americans and figures the domicile as a site impacted by war. Helena María Viramontes’s short story “The Cariboo Cafe” articulates such a perspective as it tells of two lost Latina/o children who are kidnapped by a grieving Central American woman in urban Los Angeles. The woman, who is unnamed, mistakes the young boy, Macky, for her son Gerardo, who was murdered by US-backed troops in her home country. Telling herself that she “lost him once and can’t lose him again,” the woman grabs Macky and his sister Sonya.¹⁸ The woman’s psychic substitution of Macky for Gerardo broaches several issues. First, it drives home the fact that immigrants to the United States bring the trauma they have experienced with them. Although the children and the woman are likely from different nations and have different histories, all of them are undocumented migrants. Their existence side by side, in the shadow of the immigration system in Los Angeles, suggests the commonalities among immigrants and relates the trauma of war that the mother carries with her to the trauma experienced by the children and their parents owing to being undocumented. Second, it reflects a gender-specific experience of trauma; parents of all genders lose their children in war, but mothers who have lost children also lose an

important societally sanctioned role. In this tale the woman tries to recover it by caring for Macky and Sonya. Viramontes also connects these migrants with the owner of the Cariboo Cafe, a working-class man whose marriage dissolved in the wake of the loss of his son in Viet Nam. The father, who doesn't know "what part of Vietnam [his son JoJo] is all crumbled up in," also takes a liking to Macky, who reminds him of his son.¹⁹ But whereas the woman's fondness for Macky propels her to kidnap him and care for him, the owner's affinity for the young boy—as well as his general anger about his own life and loss—lead him to call the police, who kill the woman. The story unites victims of US imperialism from disparate wars and places. Placing them all in Los Angeles drives home the domestic impacts of foreign warfare. The empathy that readers are encouraged to feel for the characters echoes earlier literary ideas of a sameness shared among US Latina/os and people who have been affected by U.S. militarism abroad, while the centering of family, daily life, women, and children evidences a focus on gender, class, and citizenship. Both Martínez and Viramontes highlight the repercussions of war and the passing on of trauma within families and communities.

Anti-Imperial Warfare: After Viet Nam

Many Latinas/os, soldiers and civilians alike, were profoundly altered by the Viet Nam War. The conflict engendered skepticism toward the US government, which had, among other things, illegally operated in neighboring countries such as Laos and Cambodia during the war. This, along with the racism that Latina/o soldiers experienced while serving and upon returning, facilitated ideological breaks with the US Army and the nation as a whole. Latinas/os who opposed US intervention in Viet Nam and elsewhere did not necessarily do so from opposition to warfare itself but rather found models of anti-imperial armed resistance close to home, specifically in figures central to the Cuban revolution including Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. These leaders presented an alternative to visions of white imperialist manhood. Rather than seek assimilation or inclusion in white society, activists and artists proposed an alternate genealogy that stressed the place of US Latinas/os within a longer arc of anti-imperial warfare. They often relied on images of indigenous fighters to bolster these claims.

The Chicano Alejandro Murguía and the Nicaraguan American Roberto Vargas were both active in the movement in opposition to US support for the Somoza dictatorship and both fought in the Sandinista Army in the final offensive that toppled the dictatorship in 1979. Murguía's collection of short stories *Southern Front* is set during this final offensive and follows a Chicano soldier named Ulises. Ulises finds himself having to assert his ethnic identity—specifically distinguishing himself from gringos—while fighting off Somoza's troops and attempting to connect with a young female soldier. In order for Ulises to articulate his belonging in the Sandinista Army he relies on a lineage of fighters who opposed colonization and imperialism. He specifically invokes the Aztec leader Cuauhtemoc alongside Sandinista leader Carlos Fonseca to justify his presence in the Sandinista Army: "In his heart he knew that being here was the right thing. Chicano, Mejicano, Nicoya—the same ancient Nahuatl culture and language, the same struggle

Latina/o Literature and War: Gendered Combat Zones

from Cuauhtemoc to Carlos Fonseca.”²⁰ Later, he expands his list of revolutionaries to include the Nicaraguans Rigoberto López Pérez (who assassinated the dictator Anastasio Somoza García) and Augusto Sandino (who took up arms against the Somoza dictatorship and US troops) as well as the Mexican Emiliano Zapata (who led a peasant uprising against Porfirio Díaz during the Mexican Revolution).²¹ Ulises revises the trope of sameness asserted in literature of the Viet Nam War era in much the same way Martínez does, writing Central Americans, specifically Nicaraguans, into the Chicano struggle against US imperialism. Moreover, by focusing on pre-Columbian men alongside Mexican and Nicaraguan revolutionaries, Ulises places himself in a history that relies on armed insurrection and masculinity to enact resistance to colonialism and imperialism. The connection between male heterosexuality and warfare is driven home when Ulises is startled from an erotic dream by a bombardment by Guardia troops. Instead of firing back, the character ejaculates.²²

Vargas’s multi-genre *Nicaragua, yo te canto besos, balas, y sueños de libertad* similarly builds on tropes concerning the war in Viet Nam to posit a US Latina/o political consciousness oriented toward Central America. In the essay “Managua to Mission,” the author meditates on his own life in relation to that of his foremothers. He traces his social and political situation, explaining that he joined the Marines but realized that he, “along with other Third World brothers,” could be sent to fight “[his] own people . . . or . . . some other brothers and sisters in Asia.”²³ He writes that his grandmother taught him Nicaraguan history and his great-grandmother instilled in him a sense of indigenous pride and identity. These lessons culminate in his Nicaraguan-Latino perspective, which he expresses, like Murguía, by asserting a “Third World consciousness”: “Nicas Blacks Chicanos Chilenos oppressed Indios . . . histories full of Somozas Wounded Knees.”²⁴ As Murguía does, Vargas places the history and present of US military intervention in East Asia and Latin America alongside racism and colonialism. Imperial warfare—and opposition to it—become means of understanding domestic and transnational hierarchies and violence, but whereas Murguía relies on a lineage of male fighters, Vargas emphasizes a matrilineal connection to the nation of his birth.

Vargas and Murguía’s contemporary, the poet, filmmaker, arts educator, and author Nina Serrano, similarly was artistically inspired by her work with the Sandinista solidarity movement. Serrano is the author of a novel, *Nicaragua Way*, as well as a three-volume collection of poetry, *Heart Songs*. Her novel follows a Nicaraguan American poet, Lorna Almendros, who becomes involved in the Sandinista solidarity movement. Moving between Central America and San Francisco and weaving in stories of love and solidarity, the novel reflects the transnational movement of which Murguía, Serrano, and Vargas were a part and the overlap between art, specifically poetry, and activism. Serrano’s poetry collections also include meditations on Nicaragua, often juxtaposed with more recent US intervention in the Middle East. Volume 2 of *Heart Songs* includes a section titled “This Place: Nicaragua Nicaragüita, The Sandinista Revolutionary Project, 1979–1989.” The title refers to Carlos Mejía Godoy’s homage to his country, the song “Nicaragua, Nicaragüita,” and the section captures the joy and heartache of the movement. A poem dedicated to Ben Linder mourns the US activist who was killed, while

Latina/o Literature and War: Gendered Combat Zones

“The End of Faith” discusses the 1989 elections that ended the Sandinista government. Written in the first person in Oakland in 1989, the poem attests to the transnational impact of the war and solidarity movement. Through her poetry, as well as the film she co-produced with Lourdes Portillo, *Después del Terremoto* (1979), Serrano establishes San Francisco and its inhabitants as part of the landscape affected by the Sandinista revolution and Contra war. Murguía, Vargas, Martínez, and Serrano thus challenge the traditional boundaries of war; by writing US locations—Albuquerque, Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Francisco—into the conflicts in Central America, they expand the boundaries of US Latinidad as well as the commonly accepted demarcations of violence.

Latina authors have utilized drama and poetry to capture intersectional responses to US intervention in Central America and the impact of the wars on US Latina/o identity and community. In their collectively written play *Archie Bunker Goes to El Salvador*, the members of Teatro Chicana place the characters from the sitcom *All in the Family* in the middle of the Salvadoran civil war. In the piece, Archie and Edith’s daughter Gloria is excited to be dispatched to El Salvador, where she’ll “be able to see and report the truth on what is really happening down there.”²⁵ Archie returns home and dismisses Gloria’s plan, telling Edith, “That’s men’s work,” and exhibiting pride in the fact that he will soon be going to El Salvador as a military advisor.²⁶ Archie’s character reflects the historical role of the United States. Although that country did not deploy troops directly to El Salvador, it did, as it had in the early stages of the Viet Nam War, send “advisors” to work with the Salvadoran Army. While Archie asserts his opposition to “Communists” in El Salvador and declares that “they [the Salvadorans] need us [the United States],” his daughter thoughtfully interviews working-class people, guerrillas, and a priest (in Spanish).²⁷ Father and daughter eventually encounter each other through an armed clash that results in the death of a young woman and a baby and the wounding of Archie. Gloria attends to her father, and the play ends with a female guerrilla asking her audience what they would do in the face of hunger, poverty, and repression. The play juxtaposes Archie’s male chauvinism, white supremacy, and imperialism against Gloria’s compassion, anti-imperialism, and commitment to educating herself and others. The young female reporter becomes the means for a US-based audience and her father to learn about the role of the United States in the suppression of Salvadoran popular movements. The cold-hearted murder of a young woman and a baby echo the high-profile murders of four US churchwomen in El Salvador in 1989 as well as the documented abuse of children and babies by the Salvadoran Army. The play aligns blustering masculinity with ignorance and murder and intelligent femininity with compassion and resolve. The attention given not only to Gloria but also to female guerrillas—one of whom speaks the play’s last lines—attests to the playwrights’ commitment to highlighting the voices and experiences of women in all aspects of war. Focusing on Gloria’s work as a reporter, the play offers a way for US citizens to take action that does not involve the taking up of arms, in contrast to the works of Murguía and Vargas.

More recently, Maya Chinchilla’s poetry has engaged with the legacies of war and migration for people of Central American origin. In “Solidarity Baby,” the speaker seeks to understand her relation to the peoples and movements around her. At one point she

rattles off the names of Central American revolutionary movements as though they were the alphabet: “A-B-CIA-GIC-FMSLN-URNG-UFW-XYZ.”²⁸ Listing US organizations such as the CIA alongside a Guatemalan revolutionary movement (URNG) and the Chicana/o-led UFW attests to the transnational, but ethnically specific, experiences of the speaker. Chinchilla is one of a growing number of authors, including Cristina Henríquez, Francisco Goldman, Héctor Tobar, and Mario Bencastro, who have produced works that articulate a Central American-American identity and literary engagement with the US-backed wars in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

Refashioning Domestic War

More recently, Latina authors have both referenced and altered the rhetoric of sameness that unites disparate victims of US militarism. Commonalities are suggested via generations of military service by Latinas/os as well as experiences with US violence. These works look more closely at how masculinity and femininity are shaped by and within experiences of war. Quiara Alegria Hudes’s 2012 play *Elliot: A Soldier’s Fugue* portrays three generations of Puerto Rican soldiers who served in Korea, Viet Nam, and Iraq, respectively. The attention to such a family echoes the importance of Puerto Rican soldiers throughout US military history and especially the segregated 65th Infantry regiment, the “Borinqueneers,” which fought in conflicts throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. The youngest generation is represented by nineteen-year-old Elliot, whose parents met during the Viet Nam War in a military hospital where his mother was a nurse and his father was recovering from injuries. The play is concerned with how militarism shapes masculinity, the difficulty of speaking of wartime events, and generational overlap with regard to experiences of war.

In the play’s opening scene, the title character practices appropriate masculinity in front of a mirror, flexing his muscles and clenching his jaw. His father and grandfather narrate his actions, indicating that they have firsthand knowledge of preparing to go to war and that their experiences live on in Elliot. Regardless of the close connection between the three generations of soldiers, they struggle to communicate among themselves and with others. Both Grandpop and Pops are reluctant to speak about their wartime experiences, despite Elliot’s asking them about their stories. The silence concerning war and its association with masculinity only increase Elliot’s estimation of military service as he declares that he joined the Marines because “Dad was a Marine . . . I really did it for him.”²⁹ Whereas literature of the Viet Nam War era suggested commonalities between Chicano and Vietnamese peoples, *Elliot* suggests commonalities between generations of Puerto Rican soldiers as well as between Vietnamese and Iraqi peoples. In the play, both Elliot and Pop kill an enemy soldier; the shared nature of their experience is driven home by the simultaneous narration of the events in the play and the fact that the characters narrate each other’s and their own experiences. For example, Elliot and Pop perform identical actions—kneeling over the dead body and looking at the victim’s wallet. They then take turns narrating what they find, including family pictures:

Pop Dog tags. The wife.

Elliot The children.³⁰

The simultaneity of their actions emphasizes that they have similar if not identical experiences. A Puerto Rican soldier who fought in Iraq is conflated with one who fought in Viet Nam, and their victims are also conflated—the dead Iraqi becoming identical with the dead Vietnamese. While the male soldiers are united through their actions and silence, Elliot's mother Ginny relies on different languages and expressions. Her character speaks often of gardens and greenery, and she recalls the lushness of Puerto Rico while trying to re-create it in New York. Her character, then, is associated with feminine qualities such as giving and nurturing life. The work reflects cycles of service and violence alongside the struggle to overcome silence and isolation.

Virginia Grise's award-winning play *blu* combines the experience of inner-city Chicanas/os and questions of sexuality, class, and race with various forms of masculinized violence. The play centers on a queer family composed of a mother named Soledad, her partner Hailstorm, and their children Blu, Luna, and Gemini. The family faces violence in their home and city as well as abroad: Blu and Luna both become involved in gangs, Gemini is gang-raped, and their father, Eme, is serving time in prison for abusing Soledad. Sexual and domestic violence appear alongside state-backed control and surveillance—helicopters regularly patrol the sky above the family's home, and Blu is killed when his helicopter is shot down in Iraq. Like *Elliot*, the play is concerned with reflecting intergenerational experiences with violence and the significance of gendered violence. Whereas in *Elliot* characters narrate each other's and their own experiences, commonality in *blu* is expressed by characters playing other characters. For example, the stage directions state that Eme, Blu's father, is to be played by the same actor who plays a police officer who harasses the youth at school. This creates a continuity in masculine authority as it reigns over the family. Moreover, experiences with gangs are conflated with experiences with the military. Echoing Murguía's *Ulises*, who declares that many of the *vatos* (homeboys) he knows have died because of imprisonment, gangs, and the US war in Viet Nam, Blu declares that he's joined the army because he's "been at war [his] whole life. [He] fight[s] it here or [he] fight[s] it there. All the same."³¹

The play is distinctive in its attention to expansive family formations and female experiences. The children live with their mother and her female partner, who fights to be recognized as an equal co-parent. Gemini's brutal rape portrays the epidemic of violence against women; that it takes place within the supposedly nonmilitarized space of Los Angeles serves to break down distinctions between "wartime" and "peacetime" for women. The play is also explicit in its engagement with Chicana/o and indigenous imagery. Gemini and Hailstorm both invoke Aztec deities, specifically the story of Coatlicue and her children Coyolxuahqui and Huitzilopochtli. But while Hailstorm celebrates Coyolxuahqui as "a warrior, a guerillera," Gemini resists being scripted into even a female-led vision of warfare. "Why do we always end up killing each other and our own dreams?" she asks.³² Rejecting a female-powered and indigenist but militaristic

version of freedom and power, Gemini reflects a new form of Chicana feminist theorizing that stems from the specific situation of youth of color growing up in militarized spaces.

Discussion of the Literature

Recent decades have seen a surge in literature and scholarship that addresses Latina/o experiences of war. The University of Texas at Austin has played an important role in this research because it is the home of the VOCES Oral History Project, which is devoted to Latina/o experiences of World War II, Korea, and Viet Nam. The project has produced several edited volumes that collect and comment on the oral histories of Latinas/os who served during these conflicts. Such work has largely sought to document and reflect the legacy of these service members. Other forms of cultural production such as the documentaries *The Longoria Affair*, *As Long as I Remember*, and *The Short Life of José Antonio Gutiérrez* similarly offer useful perspectives that add nuance to the understanding of literary works.

Within US Latina/o literary studies, scholars have examined warfare from historical, cultural, and feminist perspectives. The writer B. V. Olguín considers Chicana/o and Latina/o war narratives from a perspective that emphasizes historical breadth, genre, and identity. His articles discuss self-representation in autobiographical texts from the 19th century through today, including texts that deal with Tejano resistance to Anglo imperialism, the Viet Nam War, and the war on terror. Olguín cautions against the “undertheorized uses of war to celebrate ideologically diverse claims to power,” pointing specifically to the way Chicana/o participation in World War II “served as a benchmark for gauging Mexican-American claims to empowerment and inclusion into the American polis” whereas the Viet Nam War has figured as a moment of “rupture” leading to a Chicano “culture of resistance.”³³ In his 2002 article Olguín relies on first-person accounts of soldiers and veterans Juan N. Seguí, Roy Benavidez, José Zuniga, and Elena Rodríguez to examine the way in which masculinity functions in these narratives as well as how the battlefield becomes a place for Mexican American soldiers to assert their “ideological sameness.”³⁴ Olguín’s reading of the memoirs by female veteran Elena Rodríguez and gay veteran José Zuniga argues that their works point to the “counterhegemonic potential” of “political resistance and cultural affirmation from within the ideological parameters of the US military.”³⁵ Although Olguín considers masculinity as it is enacted with and through armed service, his primary concern is identity, and he concludes that these soldier-authors illustrate “how Mexican-American identity simultaneously is a complex First World and Third World phenomenon.”³⁶ This conclusion is supported by the texts he discusses as well as texts such as Helena María Viramontes’s “The Cariboo Cafe.”

Other scholars have similarly sought to connect historical and more contemporary ideological approaches to questions of gender, ethnicity, and war. Belinda Linn Rincón reads the case of Evangelina Cossío Cisneros, a light-skinned, wealthy Cuban woman imprisoned by Spain in 1896, in the context of prevailing US ideas that feminized the

Latina/o Literature and War: Gendered Combat Zones

emerging independent nation of Cuba and portrayed that land and its people as in need of rescue. Rincón analyzes Cisneros's own 1897 narrative of her imprisonment and escape (aided by none other than William Randolph Hearst), *The Story of Evangelina Cisneros: Told by Herself*. Pointing out that "representations of women . . . are often central to warfare propaganda, nationalist projects, and imperialist designs," Rincón links Cisneros's story with that of Private Jessica Lynch—whose rescue from her Iraqi captors was embellished and fabricated in ways that point to "the ideological value of the captive (white) woman to foreign policy and armed intervention."³⁷ Two book-length studies, Rincón's *Bodies at War: Genealogies of Militarism in Chicana Literature and Culture* and Ariana E. Vigil's *War Echoes: Gender and Militarization in U.S. Latina/o Cultural Production*, connect the ways in which gender impacts ideological justifications for war and military intervention. Vigil's book looks at negotiations of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and identity in literary and cultural works that respond to US military intervention in Central America and the Middle East. She problematizes the category "war narratives" by including texts that deal with conflicts in which no formal declaration of war was made such as the US support for the Contra war in Nicaragua. This more expansive perspective allows the text to consider how gender functions both at the front lines of battle as well as within familial and domestic spaces. The transnational focus of this criticism responds to María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo's call to understand US Latina/o identities as rooted in US militarism and neoliberalism.³⁸

Although Chicana/o literature has an important place within US Latina/o cultural production concerning war, one must also note how questions of solidarity, identity, and representation play out within non-Chicana/o cultural responses to war. Ana Patricia Rodríguez studies carefully how US Chicana texts that take up the history of US military intervention in Central America attempt to enact solidarity by including Central American characters without affording these subjects sufficient voice. Rodríguez argues that these "fictions of solidarity" appropriate Central American identities and experiences by presenting them as mediated only through Chicana characters. Her analysis offers a necessary critique of the ways in which Chicano and Chicana feminist authors may express opposition to US militarism while nonetheless contributing to hierarchies within Latina feminist communities and movements. Chicana/o experiences with warfare may be distinct, but they also are often intertwined with Latina/o ones. Araceli Esparza acknowledges Rodríguez's critique but explains that in the case of Sister Dianna Ortíz—a Chicana nun abducted, raped, and tortured by US-backed military forces in Guatemala in 1989—Ortíz's history coincides with experiences of Central American and Guatemalan women during the war. Esparza contends that Ortíz's memoir, *The Blindfold's Eyes: My Journey from Torture to Truth*, allows her and Ana Castillo, who wrote a play based on Ortíz's experiences, to "conceptualize a more localized and comprehensive feminist model of justice" that can respond to legacies of warfare and torture.³⁹ These scholars reflect the ways in which artists, authors, and critics continue to contend with the necessity of examining how cultural engagements with US militarism provoke complex and inspiring articulations of agency and politics.

Links to Digital Material

Voces

Further Reading

Anaya, Rudolfo. *Bless Me, Ultima*. New York: Warner Books, 1994.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012.

Benavídez, Roy P., and Oscar Griffin. *The Three Wars of Roy Benavídez*. San Antonio: Corona, 1986.

Bencastro, Mario. *Odyssey to the North*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 2011.

Cano, Daniel. *Shifting Loyalties*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1995.

Cantú, Norma. *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood in La Frontera*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997.

Castillo, Ana. *Psst . . . I Have Something to Tell You, Mi Amor*. San Antonio: Wings Press, 2005.

Cisneros, Evangelina. *The Story of Evangelina Cisneros*. New York: Continental, 1897.

Goldman, Francisco. *The Long Night of White Chickens*. New York: Grove Press, 1994.

González, Jovita, and Eve Raleigh. *Caballero: A Historical Novel*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996.

Henríquez, Cristina. *Come Together, Fall Apart*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2006.

Hinojosa, Rolando. *Korean Love Songs*. Berkeley, CA: Justa, 1978.

Hinojosa, Rolando. *Useless Servants*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1993.

Martínez, Demetria. *Mother Tongue*. Tempe, AZ: Bilingual Press, 1994.

Mejía, Camilo. *Road from Ar Ramadi: The Private Rebellion of Staff Sergeant Camilo Mejía*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008.

Olguín, B. V. "Barrios of the World Unite! Regionalism, Transnationalism, and Internationalism in Tejano War Poetry from the Mexican Revolution to World War II." In *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States*. Edited by Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, 107–139.

Latina/o Literature and War: Gendered Combat Zones

Olguín, B. V. *Caballeros and Indians: Latina/o Whiteness, Hegemonic Mestizaje, and Ambivalent Indigeneity in Latina/o Autobiographical War Narratives, 1858–2007.* *Multi Ethnic Literatures of the United States* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 30–49.

Olguín, B. V. "From Counter to Hegemonic: Re-Mapping Ideology in Latina/o Life Writing from the War on Terror." *Biography* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 179–210.

Olguín, B. V. *Violentologies: Warfare and Ontology in Latina/o War Literature, Film, and Popular Culture.* Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

Oropeza, Lorena. *¡Raza Si! ¡Guerra No! Chicano Protest and Patriotism during the Viet Nam War Era.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Ortiz, Sister Dianna, with Patricia Davis. *The Blindfold's Eyes: My Journey from Torture to Truth.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002.

Paredes, Américo. *The Hammon and the Beans and Other Stories.* Houston: Arte Público Press, 1990.

Portillo, Lourdes, and Nina Serrano, dirs. *Después del Terremoto*, 1979.

Rincón, Belinda Linn. *Bodies at War: Genealogies of Militarism in Chicana Literature and Culture.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017.

Rivas-Rodríguez, Maggie. *A Legacy Greater Than Words: Stories of U.S. Latinos and Latinas of the WWII Generation.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006.

Rivas-Rodríguez, Maggie, and B. V. Olguín, eds. *Latina/os and World War II: Mobility, Agency, and Ideology.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014.

Rivas-Rodríguez, Maggie, and Emilio Zamora, eds. *Beyond the Latino World War II Hero: The Social and Political Legacy of a Generation.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009.

Rodríguez, Ana Patricia. *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009.

Rodríguez, Elena. *Peacetime: Spirit of the Eagle.* San José: Chusma House, 1997.

Rodríguez, Michael. *Humidity Moon.* San Antonio: Pecan Grove Press, 1998.

Ruíz de Burton, María. *The Squatter and the Don.* Houston: Arte Público Press, 1992.

Sánchez, Rosaura. *Telling Identities: The Californio Testimonios.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

Seguín, Juan. *A Revolution Remembered: The Memoirs and Selected Correspondence of Juan Seguín.* Austin: State House Press, 1991.

Serrano, Nina. *Nicaragua Way.* Oakland, CA: Estuary Press, 2015.

Latina/o Literature and War: Gendered Combat Zones

Specogna, Heidi, dir. *The Short Life of José Antonio Gutiérrez*. Directed by Heidi Specogna. Atopia, 2007.

Teatro Campesino. *Soldado Razo: Actos*. San Juan Bautista: Cucaracha, 1971, 131–45.

Teatro Campesino. *Vietnam Campesino: Actos*. San Juan Bautista: Cucaracha, 1971, 104–30.

Tobar, Hectór. *The Tattooed Soldier*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Trujillo, Charley. *Soldados: Chicanos in Viet Nam*. San José: Chusma House, 1990.

Trujillo, Charley. *Dogs from Illusion*. San José: Chusma House, 1994.

Valadez, John J., dir. and prod. *Independent Lens: The Longoria Affair*, 2010.

Varela, Laura, dir. *As Long as I Remember: American Veterans*, 2010.

Vásquez, Eric. "Interrogative Justice in Héctor Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 64, no. 1 (2018): 129–152.

Vigil, Ariana. *War Echoes: Gender and Militarization in U.S. Latina/o Cultural Production*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014.

Zuniga, José. *Solder of the Year: The Story of a Gay American Patriot*. New York: Pocket, 1994.

Notes:

(1.) See Rosaura Sánchez, *Telling Identities: The Californio Testimonios* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) for an analysis of gender, race, class, and language in thirty *testimonios* from the 1870s.

(2.) B. V. Olguín, "Sangre Mexicana/Corazón Americano: Identity, Ambiguity, and Critique in Mexican-American War Narratives," *American Literary History* 14, no. 1 (2002): 84.

(3.) María Eugenia Cotera, *Native Speakers: Ella Deloria, Zora Neal Hurston, Jovita González and the Poetics of Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 201.

(4.) It is also possible to consider the ways in which well-known corridos such as *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortéz* are literary responses to US imperialism. The great scholar of such work, World War II veteran Américo Paredes, himself published creative work that took up themes of war.

(5.) Emma Pérez, *Forgetting the Alamo, or, Blood Memory* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 54. See also Jesse Alemán, ed. and intro., *The Woman in Battle: The Civil War Narrative of Loreta Janeta Velazquez, Cuban Woman and Confederate Soldier* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

Latina/o Literature and War: Gendered Combat Zones

- (6.) Ariana Vigil, "Heterosexualization and the Nation State: The Poetry of Gloria Anzaldúa," *Chicana/Latina Studies* 16, no. 1 (Fall 2016): 90.
- (7.) "Mestizaje" is largely used to refer to racial mixture, specifically that between indigenous people of the Western hemisphere and conquering Europeans.
- (8.) Ramón Saldivar, *The Borderlands of Culture: Américo Paredes and the Transnational Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 329.
- (9.) George Mariscal, *Aztlán and Viet Nam: Chicano and Chicana Experiences of the War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 225.
- (10.) Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), xi. Jorge Mariscal, "In the Wake of the Gulf War: Untying the Yellow Ribbon," *Cultural Critique* 19 (Autumn, 1991): 104.
- (11.) Olguín, "Sangre Mexicana," 92.
- (12.) Alfredo Véa, *Gods Go Begging* (New York: Plume, 2000), 79.
- (13.) Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 96.
- (14.) Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 39.
- (15.) Demetria Martínez, *Breathing Between the Lines* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 19.
- (16.) Demetria Martínez, *The Devil's Workshop* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 27.
- (17.) Laura Lomas, "'The War Cut Out My Tongue': Domestic Violence, Foreign Wars, and Translation in Demetria Martínez," *American Literature* 78, no. 2 (June 2006): 367.
- (18.) Helena María Viramontes, "The Cariboo Cafe," in *The Moths and Other Stories* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1995), 76.
- (19.) Viramontes, "Cariboo Cafe," 77.
- (20.) Alejandro Murguía, *Southern Front* (Tempe, AZ: Bilingual Press, 1990), 18.
- (21.) Murguía, *Southern Front*, 114.
- (22.) Murguía, *Southern Front*, 38; and Ariana E. Vigil, *War Echoes: Gender and Militarization in U.S. Latina/o Cultural Production* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 44.
- (23.) Roberto Vargas, *Nicaragua, yo te canto besos, balas y sueños de libertad* (San Francisco: Editorial Pocho-Che, 1980), 19-20.
- (24.) Vargas, *Nicaragua*, 22.

Latina/o Literature and War: Gendered Combat Zones

(25.) Teatro Chicana, *Archie Bunker Goes to El Salvador*, in *Teatro Chicana: A Collective Memoir and Selected Plays*, ed. Laura E. García, Sandra M. Gutiérrez, and Felicitas Nuñez (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 246.

(26.) Teatro Chicana, *Archie Bunker*, 248. In addition to sending military advisors to El Salvador, the United States trained many military leaders from Latin America and elsewhere at the School of the Americas (now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security and Cooperation at Fort Benning, Georgia). Graduates of this program have gone on to oversee some of the worst human rights abuses and massacres in Latin America in recent history.

(27.) Teatro Chicana, *Archie Bunker*, 249.

(28.) Maya Chinchilla, *The Cha Cha Files: A Chapina Poética* (San Francisco: Kórima Press, 2014), 4.

(29.) Quiara Alegría Hudes, *Elliot: A Soldier's Fugue* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2012), 51.

(30.) Hudes, *Elliot*, 51.

(31.) Virginia Grise, *blu* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 44.

(32.) Grise, *blu*, 47.

(33.) Olguín, "Sangre Mexicana," 84.

(34.) Olguín, "Sangre Mexicana," 92.

(35.) Olguín, "Sangre Mexicana," 92.

(36.) Olguín, "Sangre Mexicana," 97.

(37.) Belinda Linn Rincón, "From Maiden to Mambisa: Evangelina Cisneros and the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898," in *The Martial Imagination: Cultural Aspects of American Warfare*, ed. Jimmy L. Bryan Jr. (State College: Texas A&M University Press, 2013), 89.

(38.) María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, "From the Borderlands to the Transnational? Critiquing Empire in the Twenty-First Century," in *A Companion to Latina/o Studies*, ed. Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo (Malden, MA: Blackwell), 5012.

(39.) Araceli Esparza, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Justice for the Disappeared: Ana Castillo's Creative Writing and the Case of Sister Dianna Ortiz," *Feminist Formations* 25, no. 3 (Winter 2013): 1.

Ariana E. Vigil

Latina/o Literature and War: Gendered Combat Zones

Department of Women's & Gender Studies, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill