
Book Review

War Echoes: Gender and militarization in U.S. Latina/o cultural production

Ariana E. Vigil

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Confronted with an expanding Sunni insurgency in 2005, the Pentagon circulated memos weighing a “Salvador option” of Special Forces-trained Iraqi death squads to diminish the insurgency’s success. The official nomenclature for this program calls attention to the continuity and deep structural parallels between US support for the 1980s counterinsurgency against Central American leftist guerrillas and the occupation of Iraq. Ariana E. Vigil’s *War Echoes* notes this correspondence but prefers to examine it not from the elevation of the halls of power, but from the grassroots by way of Latina/o narrative literature. Contributing to scholarship on the contentious relationship between Latinas/os and US militarism, Vigil’s monograph examines how turn of the century Latina/o cultural responses to US military intervention in Central America and the Middle East “arise from and simultaneously rework political and cultural affinities among Latina/o artists and activists” (18). Consequently, she defines the stakes of her analysis as more than the parallels between wars, but also *latinidad* as a descriptor of political and cultural solidarity.

As the passage above suggests, exploring *latinidad*, a concept commonly circumscribed

within national parameters, through narratives about Latina/o engagements with US foreign policy renders the possibility of “situatedness” a core dilemma for each of Vigil’s authors. For readers unfamiliar with feminist intersectional theory, “situatedness” serves as a foundational spatial metaphor that enables the analysis of subjects’ multiple and overlapping identities. Vigil is conscious that, placed in international situations, intersectional premises that would seem to place individuals within specific social hierarchies are brought into question. For example, she explains the shortcomings of Chicano pan-ethnic identification with Latin America through Alejandro Murguía’s core protagonist in *Southern Front* (1990) during his volunteer enlistment with Sandinista forces. Ulises, Murguía’s protagonist, “misses the opportunity to assert a politically based position of transnational solidarity,” Vigil asserts, when he identifies with the Sandinistas through ahistorical *mestizaje* or bonds with fellow soldiers through exaggerated performances of heterosexuality (42).

More appropriately situated Latina/o narratives take up what Vigil terms a “*glocal* perspective” defined as a position/perspective/



identity that emerges from the awareness of one's conditioning by historical processes and national context, but then leverages this identity to connect with individuals, movements, and ideas that are similarly situated to both US and global processes and powers" (19). Put more critically, declaring solidarity with forces opposed to US imperialism in Guatemala or Afghanistan does not divest a Latina/o of the privileges and restricted standpoint predicated on a first-world upbringing, heteronormativity, or masculinity. Instead, the "Glocal recognizes the power of the nation-state without granting it primacy," Vigil argues, hinting at the political valence of the term "glocal" (19).

Each chapter explores Latina/o strivings for and retreats from glocal affinities through narratives. Vigil organizes her chapters into a rough chronology of distinct conflicts: Chapter 1 analyzes Murguía's *Southern Front* and Lourdes Portillo / Nina Serrano's film *Después del Terremoto* (1979) in relationship to Nicaragua, Chapter 2 explores Sister Dianna Ortiz's *The Blindfold's Eye: My Journey Through Torture to Truth* (2002) alongside Ana Castillo's dramatization of Ortiz's memoir in *Psst...I Have Something to Tell You Mi Amor* both depicting torture in Guatemala (2005); in regards to El Salvador's refugees, Chapter 3 examines former sanctuary activist Demetria Martínez's novel *Mother Tongue* (1994); looking to the 1991 Gulf War in Iraq, Chapter 4 examines queer empowerment in José Zuniga's *Soldier of the Year: The Story of a Gay American Patriot* (1994), and the final chapter addresses the recent war in Iraq through Camilo Mejía's *Road from Ar Ramadi: The Private Rebellion of Staff Sergeant Camilo Mejía* (2008). Beyond merely covering post-Vietnam wars, each chapter grapples with obstacles in conceptualizing struggles against militarism and for emancipatory politics. For example, Vigil's analysis of

Soldier of the Year indicates that Zuniga embraces forms of queer kinship—by contrast to the military's paternalism—but cannot fully reject the patriarchal imperialism implicit in the military he hopes to reform with the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT). Such "homonationalism," a term Vigil draws from Jasbir Puar, is evident in how LGBT rights organizations have been quick to laud DADT's termination, but strangely silent on matters concerning transwoman, former soldier, whistleblower, Chelsea Manning.

War Echoes' structure, along with Vigil's choice of primary sources, raises issues that warrant further consideration. Careful readers should note an implicit split between the first three chapters and the final two: the first thread is guided by concerns of Central American studies and internationalist solidarity; and, the second, due partially to the concentration on memoirs of Latinos serving the military, is devoted to citizenship and, surprisingly, "humanness." The "human" as a category of ethical obligation and as a bearer of rights, first arises in Vigil's discussion of Zuniga where she criticizes his invocation of "undifferentiated humanity [which] marks his thinking as steeped in Western and male-centric notions of individualism and personhood." Vigil identifies Zuniga's rhetoric of humanness with his lack of engagement with Chicana/o ethnic politics, which would vaccinate him from embracing the "human" as a political identity freighted with too much historical, Eurocentric, and masculinist baggage (141). But in her analysis of Mejía—son of former Sandinista, Carlos Mejía Godoy, and chair of the Iraq Veterans Against the War—"humanity" is "deployed not to gloss over salient differences or assume a normative, unmarked subject position but rather to combat the racist violence of the armed forces particularly in regard to Iraqi Muslims (171).



What are the broader implications of Mejía's commitment to "humanity"? Does it signal the historical shift from a Cold War era, Third Worldist ethnic political frame to an unmarked cosmopolitan advocacy preoccupied with confronting the militarist state in domestic politics? Does it indicate that Vigil's "glocal" standpoint is in retreat or instead finding a new beginning? While Vigil does not intervene at the level of shifting political imaginaries, her analysis of

Mejía's response to the DREAM Act may be the beginning of an answer: he "upholds the inherently degrading effects of any and all armed conflicts and looks outside of the nation-state for justice" (183).

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