2003

The Chicano Experience During the Viet Nam War Era as seen in Chicano/a Literature

Raymundo E. Rojas

Follow this and additional works at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo
Part of the Latin American Languages and Societies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol7/iss1/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Latino Research at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Diálogo by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact wsulliv6@depaul.edu, c.mcclure@depaul.edu.
The Chicano Experience During the Viet Nam War Era as seen in Chicano/a Literature

Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

This article is available in Diálogo: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol7/iss1/10
The Chicano Renaissance was one of the great literary movements of the late-Twentieth Century. Chicano writers exploded onto the scene putting their works out in greater numbers than ever before, reading at poetry festivals, and taking the theatrical stage. However, the Chicano Renaissance was also a time of sadness, death, and disillusion. Political turbulence in Southeast Asia paralleled the Chicano literary explosion.

The statistics are well-known whether on paper or in the hearts of many Chicano/as. The Vietnam Conflict was a war in which Chicano/as gave more than their fair share. Many often quote the studies in Mexican American Casualties in Vietnam by Ralph Guzman. Chicanos died in higher proportions in the Vietnam War when compared with other ethnic groups.

Whether on the battlefield or on the home front, the Vietnam War played a major role in the lives of Chicanos in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As the first televised war in history, it vividly and dramatically mired the American public in the horrors of war. Its effects were felt more subtly in another medium that has received little attention from cultural historians: Chicano Literature.

Surprisingly, although Chicanos served and died in great numbers in Viet Nam, the literature concerning Chicanos and the Vietnam War is little-known outside of Chicano Literature. I contend that a great amount of prejudice and/or ignorance still exists toward Chicano/a authors. Though many have entered the so-called “mainstream,” publishers still regard the Chicano/a experience as something readers would find uninteresting.

In the introduction to Soldados: Chicanos In Viet Nam, Charley Trujillo illustrates how he searched high and low for a publisher for his book. This is reminiscent of Raúl Morin’s effort in the 1950s and 60s to get his collection of narratives, Among the Valiant: Mexican-Americans in World War II and Korea, published. Morin found that publishers had no interest in publishing the work. Morin finally received support from the American G.I. Forum, a Mexican American veterans’ organization, and was able to publish his work. It was not until much later that a larger publisher picked up Morin’s book, which is now out of print.

In Charley Trujillo’s case, more than 30 years later, there had already been a wealth of ethnic-based books on the Vietnam War. These include Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam
War by Black Veterans and Vietnam and Black America: An Anthology of Protest and Resistance, both about African-American servicemen and Landing Zones: Southern Veterans Remember Vietnam. This indicates that there already existed a market for oral histories of Vietnam War veterans from various parts of the United States. Trujillo finally followed a tradition often seen in the Chicano Literary World: He started an alternative publishing house. Chusma House Publications joins the ranks of Quinto Sol, Mictla, and Abelardo Delgado’s Barrio Publications. These publishing houses enabled Chicano/a authors to get their works published.

Authors write concerning the influence of the Vietnam War in various ways within the genre. However, there have been many studies on Chicanos and the Vietnam War, few deal with the topic within Chicano Literature. Analysis of Chicano Literature provides helpful insight into the Chicano experience during the war. Scholars often study the literature of an era to get a feel of the time and experiences of the people. However, in discussing experiences, there is not one definite Chicano experience. Within this paper, the reader will see a variety of experiences.

Within Chicano Literature dealing with the Vietnam Conflict, one can see several themes. The Vietnam War becomes synonymous with and symbolic of death. In addition, several cultural traits in the writing of Chicano/a authors arise. Furthermore, the aftermath of the war takes its toll. The veterans were never the same again.

We can see the transformative influences of the war in most of the works. In this analysis, I will survey different genres within Chicano Literature, which include novels, short stories, autobiographies/biographies, poetry, and theater. I will also analyze Chicanas and their writing on the Vietnam Conflict. Chicano scholarship often leaves out the experiences of Chicanas and this analysis will show how the war greatly affected both Chicanas and Chicanos. Most of the descriptions are of veterans, or they deal with relatives or a relation who is a veteran.

THE CHICANO/A NOVEL

In Ana Castillo’s So Far From God, she devotes a chapter to the character Francisco el Penitente who carves wooden saints as a livelihood. Her prime focus is on the aftermath of his return from Viet Nam. After giving the reader a small summary of his childhood, she writes about his service in Viet Nam giving emphasis in a paragraph to the minorities serving in the war: “But to his buddies in ‘Nam he was Chico” (Castillo, 94). She states that Francisco “didn’t like Chico no more than the Navajo who was also in his platoon went for the nickname “Chief,” or the Puerto Rican from Rio Piedras, just shy of finishing his Ph.D. when he was drafted, liked to be called “Little Chico” (Ibid.). Within this passage, she gives a small hint at the unfair draft procedures in how they take a Puerto Rican who was also in his platoon went for the nickname “Chief,” or the Puerto Rican from Rio Piedras, just shy of finishing his Ph.D. when he was drafted, liked to be called “Little Chico” (Ibid.). Within this passage, she gives a small hint at the unfair draft procedures in how they take a Puerto Rican who is just about done with doctoral school.

The author comments on some of the racial mimicking that occurred in Francisco’s unit. This mimicking was probably not serious, but could be taken serious at times. The nickname “Chico,” short for Chico, seemed to bother Francisco though the text never has him complaining about it. Castillo also shows how the unit included a Navajo, Puerto Rican, and a Chicano.

Ana Castillo portrays Francisco as a character forever changed by the war. The narrator says it “was hard for him to concentrate on things, to take a steady job...” (99). On a psychological aspect, Castillo portrays Francisco to be in a “mummified state and that in his sexual encounters, while he went about the motions, he never quite felt present.” (Ibid.). She describes Francisco’s relations to women as being strained; his family passes it off as something from his experience in Viet Nam (195). This shows us the beginning of a pattern that we will see in most texts dealing with returning Vietnam War veterans. In Francisco’s case, he felt the aftermath sexually, it had repercussions on his attention span, and he seemed to develop an avoidance of women.

Castillo also focuses upon class status and the war. In one such passage, she depicts a pre-Vietnam War girlfriend of Francisco as having a “lack of encumbrance by material things like money, that just as so many youth felt in 1969 -- at least those who did not go to Viet Nam, or show did not live in barrios and housing projects” (99). In this passage, Castillo implies that the Vietnam War affected individuals of different classes and ethnic groups in different ways. The girlfriend, who is White in the story, seems to have no worry about Viet Nam. Some had no worry about the war, but the typical Chicano family worried about the military drafting their sons. Young wives also showed that concern.

Joe Rodriguez’ The Oddsplayer presents several experiences of Chicano soldiers. In one passage, he explains, “The non-coms and officers are Blancos and we Trigueños and Spics are expendable” (Mariscal, 73). The reader can see the surface discrimination and how Chicano soldiers were aware that they were expendable. Most Chicano Literature dealing with Viet Nam portrays Chicanos with this awareness.

Some do not feel the effects of the war until it hit them personally. In Rainbow’s End, author Genaro González gives the account of a family from the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Fela, one of the main characters, is a curandera (healer). González illustrates how Fela has heard of the war, but is not personally touched by it until she receives an unusual request. Maria Valenzuela comes in asking for Fela to curse her son, so he will not pass the medical exam for the Army: “Three weeks later a somewhat disappointed but infinitely relieved Chato Valenzuela was back from San Antonio after failing his physical” (González, 154).

This draft evasion is the first example we examine in this study. I give another in Diego Vázquez, Jr.’s book, which will be covered later in this paper. González illustrates a mother caring for her son not wanting him to be killed in Viet Nam. Visiting a curandera, so a young man can fail his physical, is an aspect original to Chicano and other ethnic groups with alternative or non-traditional medicine.

When people hear what Fela did, she states, “Our real enemy’s Whites are the real enemy not the Vietnamese. This is a comment that brings to light many of the feelings of Chicanos. Though some were in support of the war, others were wondering why we were trying to solve problems across the sea when we had our own problems at home.
Genaro González devotes two chapters to the Vietnam War on the battlefront and the home front. Considering that *Rainbow's End* is a family epic, *Viet Nam* would have played an important role in any Chicano family in the 1960s and early 1970s. This was especially true if the family had young men. In speaking of Fela, he states:

The following month her nephews David and Esteban graduated from high school in a ceremony steeped in patriotism and the separation of future soldiers from scholars. David's future was already secure: his father had promised tuition and a new car...But the thought of spending four more years in school paled alongside the glory of fighting for his country. His middle-class friends, though, made no bones about their motives for going to college: to avoid the draft (156).

The young Chicanos in this passage even joke about going to “Saigon City College” (ibid.). In this passage, we see both the glorification and idealization of the war as a male rite to passage. Also shown is the inevitable draft for young Chicanos who just graduated from high school. In this case, David, who could have received a break from his father, chooses to enlist.

David serves his tours and returns to Texas. His aunt Fela, the curandera, describes her nephew's character when he comes back: “You prayed for him to come back in one piece but forgot about his soul” (159). Again, we see a transformation in character as a result of the war. David approaches his girlfriend whom he left behind and after having sex with her, he finds she has given him a venereal disease: “‘One tour in Nam!’ he cursed in silence. ‘Four long seasons in that small hell’ To come home to the clap from a woman who had been his reason for staying safe and sane” (159). He visits the doctor and the doctor thinks he brought the venereal disease home from Viet Nam. “‘There’s a lot of this going around,’ the physician states, ‘I just hope you boys don’t bring back a strain that eats the barrio for breakfast’” (ibid.). “I got it here,” David angrily explains (ibid.).

The rumor of David’s venereal disease spreads and this embarrasses him so much that he considers re-enlisting. “Why not join the Foreign Legion?” his grandfather states. “I hear there’s a special platoon for men with the clap” (160). The conversation continues:

“That’s a low blow, grandpa. Let’s not get personal.”
“You’re the one who’s taking it personal. Look, son, I’m against this war, but I respect your decision.” “I only want to fight for my country’s honor...”
“You mean your prick’s honor. It’s the injured party in this mess. But why take it out on innocent people” (ibid.).

In this passage, González humorously assesses how even in the same family of the soldier, one could find those who were against the war, those who were for, and those who served.

One of the most recent works dealing with the Vietnam War is Diego Vázquez, Jr.’s *Growing Through the Ugly*. A well-written work, Vázquez writes from the perspective of a soldier coming home in a casket. He starts the first sentence of his work with: “August 31, 1969. This is my first day of being dead.... Memory stuck inside this box with me. Soon there will be memorials, but I am the memory” (Vázquez, 13). Vázquez gives the memory of the life of the main character Buzzy. Vázquez, like Ramirez and others, shows the draft is an impending reminder. Vázquez mentions it sporadically throughout the novel. It was as if not that important, but in reality a great importance. As an immigrant, his family had forged his birth certificate so he would be able to get a job at a younger age. Unfortunately, the side effect of this forgery is that he also is susceptible to the draft at a younger age of sixteen. He drops out of school and his grandmother warns, “...if you don’t stay in school, mi’jo, that Army will take you and send you into war” (148). The main character states later, “Abuelita was right. I had dropped out of high school at the wrong time” (149). These “wrong times,” many began to feel, especially those susceptible to the draft.

Buzzy thinks about dodging the draft, but the death in Viet Nam of his friend Johnny prompts him not to evade. In a chapter chillingly titled “They Came Home Before I Did,” Vázquez speaks of Buzzy’s friend Johnny’s funeral and the reaction of the family. Johnny had also forged his birth certificate, but in his case to get into the Marines earlier than eighteen. Again, we see a volunteer, a Chicano just waiting to go to war. Johnny, as Vázquez states, was the first: “Everywhere I turned, one of us was dying. Becoming a hero for my dead "compas" didn’t take shape in the Nam” (181). Vázquez discusses this change of mind. He writes, “After his death I started to believe I could go to war and return home as a war hero. Their families would welcome me back as a survivor. A survivor in a box” (185).
Buzzy is bisexual in the novel and when he reports to his physical, his female cousin accompanies him yelling and screaming to the officers that Buzzy is gay. Describing him as "joto as the night is dark" (75). She and Buzzy get into an argument and she states that he is doing nothing to fight the draft and that he is a sissy who never learned to fight:

'The other day when that stupid punk was trying to rape me, what did you do? Nothing. I hit the fucker on his huevos and kicked his ass out of the house. You, in the meantime, just pranced about like you need to get fucked in the butt. You are a sissy. You fucking queer. I love you and nobody is taking you away from me' (Ibid.).

Vázquez proceeds to suggest that the military no longer listened to excuses as if they had heard them all already. He tells how a mother broke a bottle of pulque over her son's head right in the draft office. It only postponed his draft for a few days. The draft evasion, as in many of these works, seems to be a family collaboration; it was a collaboration that many times did not work. After Buzzy finishes boot camp, Vázquez describes how the soldiers get their orders. Most of the minorities are assigned to Viet Nam and Whites assigned elsewhere.

Vázquez calls the last chapter of his book "Return to Sender." Buzzy's cousin Red writes a letter to him, which the author narrates in the novel, but Buzzy states he is already dead. This is a chilling ending to Vázquez' novel, but who knows how many similar letters were written to the already deceased.

**CHICANO SHORT STORY**

In Daniel Cano's short story "Somewhere Outside Duc Pho," he depicts the defection of a Chicano soldier who is in the main narrator's platoon to the Viet Cong. Cano describes various reasons why the U.S. soldiers think he defected. Many of the reasons are given comparing Chicano culture to that of the Vietnamese. He acknowledges the discrimination and liberation factors one can find in both ethnic groups. Cano's work also assesses prejudice as a factor in the war (Mariscal, 90). "Someone else wanted to know," the story states, "how come we get the worst duties. Whether it's pulling the shittiest hours on guard duty or going into dangerous situations, if there's a Chicano around, he's the one who gets it (Mariscal, 95)." Again, we observe Chicanos portrayed as being expendable and that the Chicanos are well aware of this. One can see why so many Chicanos lost their lives in comparison to other ethnic groups.

Estela Portillo Trambley gives us a Chicana writer's view in "Rain of Scorpions." Within the second paragraph, she gives us a Vietnam War veteran who has disabilities:

Fito had lost a leg in Nam. Blacks and browns dying for their country in Nam. The poor sent out as cannon fodder by the rich. What the common man will do in the guise of patriotism (Portillo Trambley, 111).

According to Portillo Trambley, the Vietnam War was a war of the poor and of minorities. Her comments on patriotism tell us how many were patriotic and went to war only to find their own country had betrayed them. Later, Fito is returning from the veteran's hospital when he meets a stranger on the bus. He tells him of the poison gases being released by a smelter in El Paso, Texas. Resuming the conversation with the stranger, Fito points to his leg, "Nam. My gift to the U.S.A. who poisons me and my people" (122). Thinking of his neighborhood Smeltertown, Portillo Trambley illustrates his thoughts as he departs the bus. She explains how nine men from Smeltertown joined the Army and went to Viet Nam, but only three returned home. Portillo Trambley describes the smelter company forcing the residents who live on the company-owned Smeltertown to leave, so the residents cannot later sue the company for poisoning them. The residents are mostly poor Chicanos as their evictions parallel the United States using poor Chicanos to swell the ranks of the armed forces and poisoning them. Their only reward was getting kicked out of their neighborhoods. This poisoning of the people in Smeltertown parallels the poisoning of troops in Viet Nam by Agent Orange and other toxins.

Later, the author shows a more dramatic aftermath experience of Fito. He is described sleeping, dreaming, "Memories running back to Nam. Images clicked, a dull blazing orange machine gunfire," and more. He wakes up frightened, repeating to himself, "The past is the past, the past is past . . ." (156). Post-traumatic Stress Disorder follows the veterans portrayed in literature. Even after years, veterans are still entering therapy and suffering from repercussions of the war.

**CHICANO AUTOBIOGRAPHY/NARRATIVES**

With the exception of Charley Trujillo's *Dogs from Illusion* and Daniel Cano's *Shifting Loyalties*, few major literary works in Chicano literature focus solely on the war. Instead, they only mention the war in brief. However, within the genre of personal narratives and autobiography, there are a number of excellent works. These include *Congressional Medal of Honor winner Roy Benavidez' Medal of Honor: A Vietnam Warriors Story* and *The Three Wars of Roy Benavidez* with his description of his heroic rescues of his fellow servicemen. *Soldados: Chicanos In Viet Nam* by Trujillo is another work that gives personal narratives of several veterans from Corcoran, California.

One of the most recent works of personal stories is Juan Ramirez' *A Patriot After All: The Story of a Chicano Vietnam Vet*. Ramirez illustrates his life as a teenager who has the Vietnam War as a constant reminder. "Juan Ramirez [sic] always believed he would die in Viet Nam," reads the back cover of Ramirez' book. We see how Viet Nam becomes synonymous with death. The author describes how when barely becoming a teenager, his family began hearing reports about a "distant country called Vietnam" (Ramirez, 19). Before the war, the average American did not have any idea where Viet Nam was located, but the consciousness of the location grew within American society.

As in Daniel Cano's short story, Ramirez is also aware of the racial and class discrimination. When Ramirez is in Viet Nam, he is under the orders of an officer "Jensen" who has a prejudice against Black and Latino soldiers. Ramirez remarks, after explaining the high casualties and lack of guidance and leadership in his platoon: "I also know that the fact that we have so many people of color in our squad had something to do with Jensen's lack of concern for us" (59). Because they are Black or brown, their superior officer has no care for their safety. Within his platoon, he meets Anglo soldiers that had never seen Mexicans before. One member of his platoon declares:

All I know is that I ain't never seen a Mexican before I went to college, and even then it was in books. Beside, we beat the hell out of y'all in a war, anyway. Right? (85).
For many soldiers, the war was the first time they had been out of the country or interacted with other ethnic groups. Many of Chicano soldiers realize the difference between the poor and minority soldiers and others. "A lot of middle-class families found ways to get their boys back. The rest of us didn’t have those kinds of connections (99)." Ramirez proceeds to describe relationships on the battlefield. Once in the battlefield, the platoon unites, but once back at camp, they would segregate into their own ethnic groups. "Working together wasn’t a problem," Ramirez contends:

...for blacks and whites, but outside of that, there was segregation and conflict. People would simply go off to their separate groups after patrols, not ever talking again until it was time to go back out (Ibid.).

Even within the Chicanos themselves, there were divisions: "The other Chico marines [sic] thought I was too assimilated," Ramirez argues, referring to how other Chicano soldiers responded to his sometime association with Whites. We observe how Chicano soldiers from different regions also held prejudices against each other. At times he did not fit in with the Whites or Blacks, being in the middle: A Chicano Soldier.

In dealing with his return from Viet Nam, Ramirez joins the various activist movements. This is a pattern often seen among Vietnam War veterans who identify as Chicanos. He also goes to school, which is an opportunity he did not have before the war. Many of the Chicano student activists of the early 1970s were Vietnam War Veterans. Ramirez also gets heavily into drugs and alcohol, which is another pattern that arose in some veterans. The author meets a woman whom he later marries and he is afraid to admit to her, as well as to others, that he is a Vietnam War veteran. Ramirez becomes disillusioned with his and other veterans' role in the war:

I began to understand my experience in a new way. What I eventually came to believe, what I still believe, what finally allowed me to come to liveable term with my experience, was this: I, and all the other young Americans like me, were victimized by the U.S. war machine, which played on our honest patriotic desire by lying to us about the nature of the war (162).

Bearing the burden of "survivor’s guilt," Ramirez is diagnosed with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and goes into therapy. He finds that not many Vietnam War veterans solicit help. He describes the role his wife plays in his aftermath experience, the years that she puts up with him and how she begins "some therapy of her own with a veterans’ partner group" (169). Ramirez reveals the Chicana side, how the effects of the war on him effected his marriage, and how his spouse also needed therapy. In ending his autobiography, he states that he "felt compelled to make a statement about the war through my own experiences a grunt, especially as a Chicano" (173). He comments on how the Vietnam War changed his life. He says, "Brown and black [sic] people kill and are killed for a society that still calls us spics and niggers when we get home" (174).

In his two autobiographies, Roy Benavidez describes the effects of the Vietnam War from a different perspective. Just as with Everett Alvarez Jr., author of Chained Eagle, usually Chicanos who achieved high rank or were career soldiers had different interpretations. They usually did not feel betrayal by their county. Nevertheless, when Benavidez describes his first injury, where soldiers find him in the jungle unconscious and in black Viet Cong (VC) pajamas, they nearly leave him for dead because they think he is a VC. They find a set of dog tags sewn into the lapel of the pajamas, that state BENAVIDEZ, SGT RP. Later, he gives a description of his arrival to the camp after his heroic rescue of his fellow soldiers. They again confuse him with a VC. He is nearly left for dead because they think somebody accidentally rescued a VC. "Hey! That's Benavidez,' [sic] I heard a familiar voice cry out. 'That's no damn Gook!'" (Benavidez, 5). This confusion has much merit. The Vietnamese were mostly rural, like many Chicanos. They were poor, short, and brown. They fit the stereotypical Chicano. This shows how confusion could set in and how many Chicano soldiers compared themselves with the Vietnamese people.

Growing up in South Texas, Benavidez describes when studying to get into the Special Forces, he had no study skills being a high school dropout. Like many Chicanos, he dropped out of high school due to financial problems at home. It would either be life in the fields or find a way out of them. One can also see this in the narratives of Charley Trujillo’s Soldados and Carmen Tafolla gives another example of this happening in a poem which I will discuss later.

Norma Cantú, also from Texas, gives us an autobiographical aspect in her Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera. Sadly, as in many cases with Chicanica writers, it deals with the death in Viet Nam of a family member. She describes her brother Tino dressing up and playing soldier as a child. Her sentimental reminiscing of her brother reminds "he's playing, even in the picture, at being a soldier. Only years later, 1968, he is a soldier, and it's not a game" (Cantú, 14). Furthermore, she proceeds to vividly describe the arrival of Tino’s coffin. She accounts of how her brother had survived a childhood illness, only to die in Viet Nam. Cantú shows her father praying to an image and remembering his son's illness stating, “For this, you spared my son (Mariscal 178)." The death of her brother haunts the family for years, never really leaving. Her description of him as a boy playing soldier and how he dies as a soldier is an ironic tragedy.

**CHICANO/A POETRY**

No genre of Chicano/a Literature has dealt with the Vietnam War more than poetry. Though a great amount of poetry mentioning the war exists, most being somewhat harder to find than in the case of novels and short stories. In Carmen Tafolla's “Los Corts 5 (la viejita)," she gives the reader aspects of an old lady. The “viejita” describes her husband, children, and one of her sons who is in uniform in a photo. She tells us:

"Ese es, el que Soldado. Se está de uniforme de, fue para Vietnam y gracias a Dios, me lo mandaron bueno y sano otra vez. Nomás que me lo llevaron de muy muchacho y muy simpático y siempre sonriendo, y ahora a veces se me pone medio-triste y se mete a pelerar" (Tafolla, 61).

In this passage, Tafolla gives us an old Chicana’s perspective of the aftermath of her son’s return from Viet Nam. Though thanking God that he returned, similarly to the women in Castillo’s and González’ books, she finds him to be sad at times, unlike he was before. This is noticeable especially to mothers who find their sons not to be the same.
In Tafolla’s poem “and when I dream dreams . . .” Tafolla again focuses on the war:

And the locker of our minds,
are now assigned to other minds,
carry other books,
follow other rules,
silence other tongues,
go to other schools-
Schools of Viet Nam,
Schools of dropout dropping, prison pains, and
Cop car’s bulleted brains.

Marcelino thought the only way
to finance college was the Air Force
(G.I. Bill and good pay!)
War looked easy compared to here)
Took his chances on a college education,
Took his pay on a shot-down helicopter
in a brown-skinned ‘Nam,
(Tafolla, 96-97).

“Schools of Viet Nam” [sic] analogously shows how life-changing education was more in the battlefields than in the real schools. She demonstrates Marcelino not having money to go to college, so he enters the Air Force, which sends him to Viet Nam. Higher education was not a reality for many Chicano/as, and unfortunately, if male, the draft was. Tafolla’s work shows not only were Chicano men drafted, but many also volunteered. In Marcelino’s case, it was to pay for college at risk of death to do so.

María Herrera-Sobek, another Chicana writer, gives her perspective in “Cinco poèmes: Silver Medals”:

The silver medals
Purple hearts
medals of conquering heroes
Hung on Chicano homes
Another Mexican hero
Brought home
Under the Stars and Stripes
(Herrera-Sobek, 232)

In this poem, Herrera-Sobek gives wonderful imagery. Though not telling us the soldier has died, she lets us know by stating, “Under the stars and stripes,” hinting a flag-covered coffin. “Another Mexican hero,” she states, as if adding to the list of the dead.

In a personal conversation with Abelardo B. Delgado (Oct. 1, 1999), one of the fathers of Chicano Renaissance poetry, he stated that it was difficult for many of the early Chicano/a writers to write about the Vietnam War (Delgado). He said that if he wrote supporting the Chicano soldiers, some might see him as supporting the war. On the other hand, he did not want to write poems against the war because he knew many who were in Viet Nam. Additionally, serving your country was a virtue of honor. On the death of his friend Francisco Marin, he wrote a poetic eulogy called, “Despedida a Kiko” parts one and two. “Kiko,” which is a nickname for Francisco, dies in the line of duty. Delgado describes the Francisco’s mother hearing the news:

Another Mexican hero
Under the stars and stripes
Brought home
Another Mexican hero,
Under the Stars and Stripes
(Herrera-Sobek, 232)

In this scene, Valdez demonstrates the government exploitation of minority soldiers. He attributes some of it to war glorification and machismo aspects of Chicano males. When the character Butt Anglo enters, he goes for the Butt Anglo’s son:

BUTT: He’s trying to take my boy.

GENERAL: (ANGRILY) What’s the matter with you, Draft?

GENERAL: What trouble? Mexicans are pouring into the army. We just give ‘em a pretty little uniform, a few pesos, a blessing from mamacita, and wham-o, they’re on the frontlines. Those boys are just dying to show their machismo. (Váldez)

In this scene, Váldez demonstrates the government exploitation of minority soldiers. He attributes some of it to war glorification and machismo aspects of Chicano males. When the character Draft enters, he goes for the Butt Anglo’s son:

BUTT: You know all that trouble you’ve been having recruiting chicanos [sic] for Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos? (sic)

GENERAL: (ANGRILY) What’s the matter with you, Draft?

GENERAL: Yes, what seems to be the trouble here?

BUTT: He’s trying to take my boy.

GENERAL: (ANGRILY) What’s the matter with you, Draft? Haven’t I told you to stick to the minorities? Go draft some Mexicans, some Indians, some Blacks, some Asians, some Puerto-ricans [sic] (Váldez)

CALIFORNIA VOLVIÓ TU HERMANO QUE TE SEGUIA, TRAÍA EL CORAZON PESADO Y SU SANGRE ESTABA FRIA. LLEGÓ TU CUERPO POR UN AVIÓN AQUELLO DE LA MADRUGADA. CON BRAZOS HABIERTOS TU PADRE ESPERÓ LA LLEGADA.AQUELLOS MOMENTOS SE VOLVIERON TROZOS DE PLOMO. . ANGUSTIOSOS. EL SUFRIR DE TUS PADRES FUE ORO ADORNANDO CON SOLLOZOS.

Delgado describes the long wait for the coming home of Kiko’s coffin. Kiko’s corpse deteriorates very badly, and it was recommended not having an open casket funeral. Delgado describes Kiko as being a victim of “nuestra época enferma” (sick era), this “bad time” for Chicanos that other writers focus upon (Delgado). The poet woefully eulogizes Kiko stating that instead of dying in Viet Nam, Kiko could have fought for the Chicano Movement at home, that he died in vain. Delgado writes this for a friend describing the pain of the family, Kiko’s mother clawing at the coffin wanting to see her son: “Your poor mother, she clawed on the coffin which they entombed you in” (Delgado). The effects on this Chicana are tremendous as with all those who knew Kiko.

TEATRO CHICANO

Some of the founding works of contemporary Chicano theatre concern protest against the Vietnam War. These include Teatro Campesino’s Luis Váldez’ “Soldado Razo” and “Vietnam Campesino.” Within “Vietnam Campesino,” the character General Defense and Butt Anglo (an Agri-Businessman), plot ways to stop the United Farm Worker’s Union. They also plot how to send more Chicanos to Viet Nam. In one passage, Butt Anglo and General Defense are having a conversation:

BUTT: You know all that trouble you’ve been having recruiting chicanos [sic] for Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos? (sic)

GENERAL: What trouble? Mexicans are pouring into the army. We just give ‘em a pretty little uniform, a few pesos, a blessing from mamacita, and wham-o, they’re on the frontlines. Those boys are just dying to show their machismo. (Váldez)

In this scene, Váldez demonstrates the government exploitation of minority soldiers. He attributes some of it to war glorification and machismo aspects of Chicano males. When the character Draft enters, he goes for the Butt Anglo’s son:

BUTT: General Defense!

GENERAL DEFENSE ENTERS IMMEDIATELY AND STEPS BETWEEN THE DRAFT AND BUTT.

GENERAL: Yes, what seems to be the trouble here?

BUTT: He’s trying to take my boy.

GENERAL: (ANGRILY) What’s the matter with you, Draft? Haven’t I told you to stick to the minorities? Go draft some Mexicans, some Indians, some Blacks, some Asians, some Puerto-ricans [sic] (Váldez)
Again, Váldez focuses on socio-political themes. The draft is his target here. The character bluntly states to Draft to stay away from the rich agri-bussinessman’s son and go for the minorities. Váldez also emphasizes Agent Orange and other deforestation chemicals. He, as Portillo Trambley, makes parallels to the poisoning of soldiers. Váldez compares the poisoning to the poisoning of farmworkers due to pesticides.

In “Barrio Tragedy” by Joe Olvera, Leo Rojas, and Raúl Estrada, the main character accidentally kills a woman in Viet Nam, only to come home and kill his mother. The main character Johnny finds his girlfriend dating one of his friends. In the day of Johnny’s return from Viet Nam, his girlfriend breaks up with him. He turns to the bottle as a result. While fleeing the police who come to arrest him, Johnny is killed.

A strong award winning play, it has never been performed on stage, many afraid of its strong overtones and difficult slang. Written before Váldez’ works, the authors intertwines a wondrous use of pachuquismos (Spanish Caló). The saturated El Paso pachuquismos made it a difficult play to perform. The Viet Nam veteran in the play reminisces about how he envisioned the United States when he was younger:

Johnny: Guacha, yo me acuerdo cuando estaban chavalito. . . . [sic] uno dos Star Spangled Banner super-Americans, que cuando tocaban esa rola me ponía la mano en el corazón; guacha, cuando me hablaron a mi, yo no tuve miedo venir, porque yo sabía que iba pelear por mi país. But now (slight pause) no se! He shakes his head and looks down.

Again, the authors have a wonderful use of Spanish Caló. Johnny’s friend adds how he came to the United States and had nothing and how he wanted to give something back to his country, “Y por eso estoy aquí. Y también estoy peleando por mi patria, ese.” Johnny adds:

Johnny: A mi me importa madre. Cunado a mí me draftieron, I decided to come. I didn’t go to Canada... ooooo or Mexico. I came here because I wanted to stop communism, y guacha lao que estamos haciendo. (sic)

We once again see the disillusionment with patriotism.

One of the most recent plays to deal with the Vietnam War issue is “The Last Angry Brown Hat” by Alfredo Ramos. It portrays an after-funeral get-together of four former Brown Berets. “Rude Boy,” one of the characters, is a Vietnam War veteran who suffers from alcoholism and drug abuse. In one part of the play, he undergoes a flashback and breaks into sobs. One of the other characters holds him. In one passage he states:

‘Chicano power! Hell no! Where was the movement when I got shipped over to Viet Nam, huh? Here I am, just barely eighteen years old, fighting in some strange country. Shit, until then, I’d never been outside of East LA’ (Ramos).

Ramos shows the experience of many Chicanos. They had never been out of the barrio, much less anywhere, until going to Viet Nam. Though a touching play, George Mariscal makes a good point in his Aztlan and Vietnam: Chicano and Chicana Experiences in the Viet Nam War. He states that, the play:

"erases the Chicano anti-war movement by leaving unanswered Rude Boy’s question...JoJo, a Hollywood screenwriter (in “Last Angry Brown Hat”), promises he will write a screenplay about the Brown Berets and the Movement, but Ramos’s play makes it clear that, even if JoJo keeps his promise, there is no place in the mass media market for treatments of Chicano history, especially those that convey an excess of anger” (Mariscal, 298).

Citing an article where Ramos speaks about the new Chicano playwrights, Mariscal states that, “The ‘new and improved’ middle-class Hispanic of the 1990s can afford not to be angry since he has never faced conscription, battlefield combat, police and border patrol violence, or the killing of his friends” (Ibid.). Mariscal makes us aware of the changing perception of the Vietnam War by Hispanics. As we move toward the new century, we find youth who did not grow up during the time of war, so it does not touch them personally. For others, the war is still very real.

To the best of my research, I could not find a theatrical work by a Chicana dealing with the Vietnam War. These may exist or are yet to be published. In general, scholars give less attention to experiences of women in the Vietnam War or experiences the women in the families of service men. Some writing has been published that focuses on the experiences of women, both on the war front and the home front. However, most of these writings only deal with non-Hispanic white women.

We have seen several genres of Chicano/a Literature and how they portray Chicano/as in the time of the Vietnam War. Within this study, I have showed how Viet Nam and death became synonymous, and how the draft was on the minds of many young Chicanos and their loved ones. Several cultural traits were also cited, some original to Chicano/as. Largely seen in this study were the transformative influences of the war. The lives of Chicanos who fought were never the same and the same could be said for their families and relations. The writing of Chicanas also sheds light on a view of the war seldom focused upon.

The Vietnam War remains in the minds of Chicano/as, even so many years later. Our experiences are now beginning to see more light and it is hoped that mainstream literature will open their eyes to Chicano experience, which are many and diverse. More studies need to be done on the influence on Chicanas and the war. We must also seek out our Chicanas Vietnam War veterans. The war was truly a life changing experience and we must look at it with many lenses. Our experiences are still being over looked. As an elderly Chicano male stated concerning a largely Chicano High School called Bowie in El Paso, Texas: “I saw Saving Private Ryan and with the exception of a name on tombstone, not one Mexican was portrayed. Many of my friends from la Bowie died on that beach and not one was portrayed.”

A native of El Paso, Raymundo Eli Rojas is the editor of Pluma Fronteriza, a publication dedicated to Chicano and Latino writers from the El Paso, Texas/Cd. Juarez, Chihauhua/Las Cruces, New Mexico region. He publishes numerous reviews on Chicano Literature and is currently studying law at the University of Kansas in Lawrence.
In naming the country, I use the spelling Viet Nam, except when within quotations and titles. As for the war, the spelling Vietnam War and Vietnam Conflict are used.

“Chicano Renaissance” is a term coined by Felipe de Ortego y Gasca in his landmark article on Chicano Literature of the same title. First published in the Journal of Social Casework May 1971, Chicanos literary scholars use the term to describe the production of Chicanoa Literature since 1966. Ortego states in an unpublished article “The Chicano Renaissance: Reflections on Mexican American Literary History, Theory, and Criticism—1966-1999” (University of Texas at El Paso MECHa Lecture Series, April 22, 1999), “It’s difficult to say just when a literary phenomenon like the Chicano renaissance began and equally difficult to say just when it ended—if it has ended at all as some Chicano critics contend. ..1975, the year I’ve used as the terminus for the Chicano renaissance. The starting point, 1966, is not an arbitrary date, for it was in that year that a group of Chicano intellectuals (mostly from colleges and universities) met at Occidental College in California to examine and to discuss the conceptions of Chicano intellectual though against the background of the emerging Chicano Movement.” Though some scholars scoff at the use of the term “Renaissance,” I hold that the term has embedded itself into the jargon of Chicano literary criticism and theory. I do not use Ortego’s “terminus,” though in my opinion, the “Renaissance” has ended. For the sake of describing contemporary Chicano Literature, I use “Chicano Renaissance” to describe all post-1966 Chicanoa literary production.

I originally presented this paper at the Vietnam Symposium, Oct. 1999, Houston, TX.

Within this paper, I use Chicano/a and Mexican American synonymously. Not all authors identify themselves as Chicano writers. Writer Juan Felipe Herrera stated in an interview by Ray González in The Bloomsbury Review Vol. 20, No. 2 March/April 2000, when asked “How would you describe a Chicano poet today?” His answer: “I would have to answer with a counterquestion: Do we have a Chicano poet today? I think we have a multiplicity of Chicano poets, and they are not all Chicano poets. We have Mexican and Latin American writers writing in Chicano idioms. We have Chicano writers writing and discontinuing to write in their own cultural idioms. There are Chicano writers today who do not see themselves as being Chicano and the literary media labeling them so.”


Smeltetown was located next to the American Smelting and Refinery Company (ASARCO) in El Paso, Texas. It consisted of Smeltetown, Smelter Terrace, and La Calavera. When the children of Smeltetown where found to have high percentages of lead in their blood, ASARCO evicted the residents and tore down the town (with exception of La Calavera).

“El Segundo” is the name of a predominantly Chicano area of South El Paso, Texas. It is called El Segundo Barrio or the Second Ward, and it is used regularly as a setting in Chicanoa Literature.

See Barth Byrd’s Home Front: Women and Vietnam. Though the author and the press are from El Paso, Texas, which is a Chicanomajority city, the book contains no accounts from Chicanas. Deena González states in “Chicana Identity Matters” in Aztlán, Vol. 22, #2, Fall 1997: “...not naming women constitutes including them by omission.”

© All right reserved. Ray Rojas, 2001. No part of this essay may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without the written permission of the author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.