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## ¿Darles voz?: Chicana Narrative as Reaffirming National Belonging in Stella Pope Duarte's "Let Their Spirits Dance"

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¿Darles voz?:<sup>1</sup> Chicana Narrative as Reaffirming National Belonging in Stella Pope Duarte's

*Let Their Spirits Dance*

“We’re pilgrims of Aztlán, heading east, following the rising sun, on our own quest, una manda, searching out an invisible trek in a maze of voices calling, prayers, magical words, singsong chants of the ancient world, good wishes, broken promises, pain, traveling through the whiteness of Aztlán. My mother, the beginning of it all, is blind to all she’s done. We’re pilgrims on a journey to America’s wailing wall. Only our faith will get us there.”

–Stella Pope Duarte<sup>2</sup>

The Vietnam War Memorial was surrounded by controversy when the design was first revealed, some calling it a “black gash of shame and sorrow,” a “degrading ditch” or a “tombstone” in reaction to the unconventional nature of the site (Sturken 51). The appearance of the two black walls, sunken low into the ground that met in the middle, functioned as a visual opposition to the phallic monuments constructed out of white stone that dominated the Washington Mall already, and was seen as a degrading or shameful form of honoring those whose lives were lost in the war. For many Americans, the black wall etched with the names of fallen soldiers who fought in a failed and unwanted war, embodies the same despair and loss associated with the mourners at Jerusalem’s Wailing Wall. Just as Jews go to this site to mourn and bemoan the destruction of the sacredness of the temple, Americans journey to the Vietnam War Memorial to heal old wounds, and mourn not only the death of so many soldiers, but also the social stigmatization endured by veterans of that war. Marita Sturken explains, “the memorial has tapped into a reservoir of need to express in public the pain of this war, a desire to transfer

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<sup>1</sup> Giving them voice?

<sup>2</sup> Duarte, Stella Pope. *Let Their Spirits Dance*. New York: Rayo, 2002, p. 157. Print.

private memories into a collective experience” (76). Inclusion in the war memorial is not just about honoring the dead, but it is a sign of inclusion into America’s national narrative, a symbol for national belonging for which Chican@s<sup>3</sup> have fought so hard—and continue to do so to this day. For many minority ethnic soldiers, ironically, this recognition only occurs when they are no longer there to witness it.

Chicana author Stella Pope Duarte’s novel *Let Their Spirits Dance* (hereafter referred to as *Their Spirits*) (2002) sets out to underscore these minority ethnic casualties in this national place of mourning. *Their Spirits* follows a broken Chican@ family, never fully recovered from the death of their son and brother in Vietnam, on their path towards healing and reconciliation. This process is manifested in a physical pilgrimage from their hometown of Phoenix, Arizona to the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., the very action alluding to the religious and/or spiritual significance that such a journey has for the family. The text explores the significance of America’s Wailing Wall for those whose lives were affected by the Vietnam War, highlighting a sense of national collectivity and multicultural solidarity over the specificity of a Chican@ critical consciousness. In this paper, I examine how *Their Spirits* revisits the Vietnam era and its impact on the Chican@ community from a feminine perspective, lending a new voice to the extant body of Chicano narratives (written specifically by male authors) on Vietnam. I question whether the text succeeds in “darles voz,” giving voice, in a faithful and critical manner to the Chicano and Latino soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War. I interpret Duarte’s text as a problematic representation of contemporary forms of Chican@ activism due to the text’s

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, I will use “Chican@” as a gender-neutral term to refer to the larger community that encompasses both men and women. In the cases that I specifically refer to Chicano or Chicana identities, I do so to consciously emphasize the gender-specific identity of those individuals. I specifically use the male designation “Chicano” when discussing soldiers from the Chican@ community since the vast majority of those fighting in Vietnam were men, and the literature I discuss limits its representation solely to male Chicano soldiers.

portrayal of an idealized multicultural consciousness that is largely conformist in nature and works within the system rather than against it. While Duarte gestures to the war and its consequences on the family members and other loved ones left behind, war is not the central issue addressed in the novel. I assert that the war ultimately ends up serving as the backdrop to the narrative's focus on the incorporation of Chican@s into the national narrative, thus reaffirming national belonging for the community in general, and for Chicano and Latino soldiers and veterans in particular.

The literary representation of Chicano soldiers in the Vietnam War has been explored extensively by Jorge Mariscal in *Aztlán and Viet Nam: Chicano and Chicana Experiences of the War*, and more recently by Benjamin Olguin and William Arce. However, not surprisingly, it has been almost exclusively male Chicano authors who have written about this, portraying for the most part the experience of Chicano soldiers in Vietnam. The equally pertinent experience of Chican@ family members at home has been left largely unexplored, especially the impact that the (temporary or permanent) loss of a close relative has on the female members of the household. *Their Spirits* gives voice to the female experience of losing a Chicano brother and son to the Vietnam War and its long-term impact on the stability of the family left behind. As Joan Boyd recognizes in her interview of Duarte, *Their Spirits* was the first novel to be written by a Chicana on the Vietnam War (Boyd 1). While other Chicana authors have incorporated the war and anti-war movement in the background of their narratives, Duarte's text was the first to feature the Vietnam War and its effects prominently.<sup>4</sup> Two other Chicana novels have emerged

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<sup>4</sup> Helena Maria Viramontes' recent novel *Their Dogs Came with Them* addresses the Vietnam War era in East Los Angeles, portraying one of the female protagonist's struggle to overcome the loss of her brother as part of a larger reflection on the destructive and marginalizing effects of urban redevelopment on the Chicano barrio. Three of Lucha Corpi's novels address the Vietnam War and Chicano Moratorium tangentially, including *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*, *Cactus Blood*, and *Delia's Song*; the first two novels belonging to the Gloria Damasco mystery series. Norma Elia Cantú's memoir *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* describes growing up in Laredo, Texas in

since the publication of Duarte's novel that also focus more closely on the Vietnam War. These include *Motorcycle Ride On the Sea of Tranquility* by Patricia Santana and Gloria Velásquez's forthcoming autobiographical novel titled *Toy Soldiers and Dolls*.<sup>5</sup>

The texts published by Chicanas in recent decades have begun to speak back to the historical silencing and marginalization of their communities,<sup>6</sup> as well as to confront the exclusion of their voices from the traditionally male Chicano literary tradition (Madsen 17-18). Many Chicana writers contribute to the construction of a critical counter-memory that documents a collective past for the community so that it can no longer be silenced or forgotten.<sup>7</sup> The fact that it is specifically female Chicana writers undertaking this project of establishing an alternative critical memory for their community is equally significant since women have traditionally been subordinated under the male population by the dominant patriarchal structures engrained in Latino/Latin American culture. Chicana authors have simultaneously carved out a presence within a formerly male-dominated Chicano literary tradition and inserted contestatory

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the 40s and 50s with her brother Tino, and his eventual death in Vietnam during the 1960s. However, the main focus of the text is to represent the reality of life on the U.S./Mexico border for Mexican Americans during this period in U.S. history. There is a wealth of Chicana poetry written on the subject, much of which was compiled by Mariscal in *Aztlán and Viet Nam*, in addition to earlier poetry published by Gloria Velásquez and Sandra Cisneros. See Cisneros' 1994 poetry collection *Loose Woman*. Gloria Velásquez, who lost her brother in Vietnam, has written numerous poems on the war and its effects. See especially her anthology *I Used to be a Superwoman: Superwoman Chicana*.

<sup>5</sup> In Chapter 3 of my dissertation, "(Re)presenting the Vietnam War era through the Chicana Perspective: The Fragmented Chican@ Family and Crises in Female Identity," I expand my discussion of the representation of the Vietnam War in the contemporary Chicana narrative. I identify a similar trend in the approach of several Chicana authors, including Patricia Santana, Gloria Velásquez and Stella Pope Duarte, in presenting the Vietnam War as part of the background to their narrative while focusing their text on a more nuanced representation of the fragmented Chican@ family unit as the principal issue. Duarte's novel, however, is the only narrative that reaffirms notions of national belonging and U.S. citizenship.

<sup>6</sup> Historically, the mainstream media, U.S. history books and the U.S. government itself have continually silenced the voices of Chican@s. This is also the case with the history of the Vietnam War, where mainstream historiographies and discussions of war literature have marginalized and silenced the experience of Chicano soldiers (Arce 28).

<sup>7</sup> My use of the term counter-memory borrows from the concept developed by Jorge Mariscal in his discussion of Chican@ writings on the American wars in Southeast Asia. Mariscal identifies a "collective countermemory" that at once insists on the productivity of personal experience, performs a structural critique of "traditional nationalism, masculinity, and/or racism in order to expose their origins and dangers," and counters "official history as it has been written for the last thirty years by articulating the Chicano/a community's collective experience of the war" ("Reading Chicano/a Writing" 30).

voices representative of the entire Chican@ community into dominant U.S. historical narratives. However, I assert that Duarte's text only partially carries out this project. While the text gives voice to the experiences of the marginalized Chicana women whose lives were impacted (and continue to be affected to this day) by the Vietnam War, her narrative's reaffirmation of the notions of U.S. citizenship and national belonging seems to accomplish just the opposite by reinforcing U.S. master narratives. Ironically, Duarte's novel is one of the books that has been targeted by the Tucson Unified School District's book ban. The district removed *Let Their Spirits Dance* from the curriculum for seventh and eighth grade English classes. Tucson Unified has justified their banning of books by asserting that the books targeted, including Duarte's novel, promote racial resentment and/or anti-government sentiment (Efe 1). This phenomenon is yet another example of the silencing of Chican@ voices and the marginalization of the community's history in the U.S. that continues to occur to this day. However, the administration's accusation that Duarte's novel is in any way radical or politically charged is clearly erroneous.<sup>8</sup>

Similar to many other Chican@ texts that have been banned by Tucson Unified, Duarte's novel focuses not solely on the Vietnam War, but also on the anti-war movement that was being championed by a large sector of the Chican@ community during the Vietnam era and which emerged alongside the Chicano Movement in the southwest. In one scene, the protagonist recalls her brief experience with the Brown Berets and the Chicano Moratorium in 1968, and the personal conflict she felt protesting a war

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<sup>8</sup> Duarte, a native Arizonian, responded to the banning of her novel by saying, "What we are experiencing is racism. The people who are in control of this kind of racism and discrimination have a lot of fear" (Efe 1). She also emphasized the positive, unifying nature of *Their Spirits*, calling it "a story of familial love" (1). For more information on the Tucson book banning, see "Hide it from the Kids" by Jeffrey Di Leo and "Cutting Class: Why Arizona's Ethnic Studies Ban Won't Ban Ethnic Studies" by Nicholas Lundholm. NACCS also filed an Amicus Curiae Brief in support of Tucson's Ethnic Studies case which can be accessed from their website.

that her own brother was fighting in (Duarte 167-182). While the two chapters that focus on these movements are only a few pages in length, Duarte's text still succeeds in reflecting the tension between the patriotism and desire for national belonging that motivated some Chicanos to enlist in the military, and the condemnation of U.S. imperialism and direct opposition to the war that was carried out by another faction of the Chican@ community. The narrator makes this social instability clear within the first fifty pages of the novel, "By 1968, we were all drowning. La raza was submerged by mainstream America, a submarine drifting under a sea of politics, prejudice and racism" (56). Duarte's approach is similar to many other texts on the experience of Chicanos and Latinos in the Vietnam War, (many of which have also been banned by Tucson Unified) in that it presents what William Arce refers to as a "binary of resistance and assimilation" (Arce 24). However, the assimilationist approach ultimately wins out in *Their Spirits* as its Chican@ protagonists are incorporated into the folds of America's national narrative.

*Their Spirits* tells the story of the Ramirezes, a Chican@ working-class family in Phoenix, Arizona, and the long-term effects of the loss of their son Jesse in the Vietnam War. The female narrator Teresa, Jesse's sister, describes how her family is still broken thirty years after the death of her family's first-born son. She alternates between a narration of the present-day events in the 1990s, and a series of flashbacks and memories of different moments from her childhood and adolescence leading up to her brother's departure for Vietnam in the mid-1960s. When her dying mother Alicia hears her son's voice calling to her one night, Teresa and her family embark on a physical and emotional journey in search of closure, traveling to the Vietnam Wall to touch Jesse's name. The pilgrimage is motivated by "una manda"<sup>9</sup> that Alicia receives from the spirit of her dead son. The funds for the trip appear almost miraculously in the form of a government check repaying the Ramirez family for the half of

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<sup>9</sup> "Una manda" is best described as a promise someone makes to God, a sort of mandate that they vow to carry out.

Jesse's death benefit payment that had been mistakenly sent to the wrong family nearly twenty years earlier. With interest, the total amounted to more than ninety thousand dollars (Duarte 112). The fact that the government voluntarily offered up such a large sum of money to the Ramirez family is clearly far-fetched, yet the check serves the purpose of the narrative by providing the means for their pilgrimage. The family's journey to Washington, D.C. encompasses the second half of the novel, and becomes a unifying collective pilgrimage as they welcome fellow travelers from diverse backgrounds along the way.

The need for some sort of spiritual ritual that one could physically perform as a means of finding closure and healing old wounds associated with the war is what ultimately motivates the protagonists in Duarte's novel to embark on their trip to the memorial in Washington, D.C. Yet, beyond the religious significance of the characters' journey lies a more personal motivation: to become a family again, to reunite the fragmented pieces of the close-knit family unit that they had formed before the loss of their son and brother Jesse to the atrocities of Vietnam. In this way, the consequences of the Vietnam War intersect at the individual, familial, and national levels to portray the complex aftermath of such a scorned and shameful war for the American people. *Their Spirits* combines Catholic religious influences with Mexican indigenous beliefs, harkening the mythical *mexica* homeland of Aztlán, and relating the historical pilgrimage of the *mexica* people to the contemporary pilgrimage of a Chicana family to the nation's capitol. The text's incorporation of religious and spiritual symbols at times becomes confusing, and often seems exaggerated and essentialized, all the while remaining largely irrelevant to the true issues at hand in the novel. In addition, Duarte's representation of Chicana women as so heavily reliant on religion, in the case of Alicia, or on men, in the case of both Alicia and Teresa, perpetuates certain patriarchal notions that critical Chicana narratives are attempting to break. Alicia, as well



as her best friend Irene, are both devoted *Guadalupanas* who devote their lives to venerating the Virgen de Guadalupe, and pray to her daily.<sup>10</sup> The women rely heavily on the saintly virgin's will and guidance rather than their own agency to make decisions and form their own individual opinions. Both Alicia and her daughter have been involved in tumultuous relationships with men who constantly cheated on and disrespected them. Yet, both women continued to take them back and fight for their men. Teresa only begins to let go of her ex-husband Ray after humiliating herself by starting a barroom brawl with his lover Sandra (Duarte 6-7). Before gaining any true closure over the loss of her marriage, Teresa jumps into bed with her brother's old friend Chris who is accompanying the Ramirez family on their journey. Rather than allow the Ramirez women any type of agency or individual will, Duarte portrays them as perpetually dependent on either religion, men, or both.

While Duarte's text is situated squarely in the initial moment of the Chicano movement (which was informed by the civil rights movement), the journey of Teresa and her family to the Vietnam War Memorial that takes place in the present moment of the text in the 1990s gestures toward an idealized form of multicultural collective awareness.<sup>11</sup> In the text, this racially and culturally diverse collectivity encompasses a multiplicity of ethnic minorities, as well as individuals who are otherwise marginalized from mainstream American society, namely Vietnam veterans, be they black, brown or white. Yet the main goal of these individuals is not to

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<sup>10</sup> Duarte defines the *Guadalupana* identity as a permanent lifestyle, describing it as "a comadrazgo, a sisterhood bound together by spiritual ties to the Church and to La Virgen de Guadalupe" (88). In the novel, the *Guadalupanas* are portrayed as a close-knit sisterhood of women of Mexican origin who dress a certain way, wear a gold Virgen de Guadalupe medallion, and participate in processions in the virgin's honor. When Alicia dies at the end of the novel, a fellow *Guadalupana* "guardia" (guard) accompanies her body until it is buried, according to tradition (302-303).

<sup>11</sup> The novel's non-linear structure and incorporation of different literary forms including letters and news articles reflects a trend in contemporary Chicana literature for authors to experiment with hybridity in their writing. As Deborah Madsen recognizes, "contemporary Hispanic women's writing is highly innovative, producing literary styles that are hybrid and provisional, using an associative logic in place of coherent linear narrative" (Madsen 37). Teresa's first person narration abounds with flashbacks and spatial and temporal displacement as a result of associative logic, moving from one anecdote to another in a seemingly illogical manner, but one that nevertheless works in the end.

contest or disrupt the nation-state apparatus that has oppressed them for so long, but rather to be seen as part of that nation, and to be accepted completely into the American national identity. It is this aspiration that motivates the veterans to journey to the Vietnam War Memorial—to finally receive that recognition and appreciation and to be incorporated into the protective folds of America. While there may be a gesture towards multiculturalism in *Their Spirits*, it is an idealized, apolitical form of multiculturalism that is espoused by Duarte. Kevin Bloor describes the concept of multiculturalism as the rejection of the homogeneity of a monoculture “in favour of diversity. Embedded within this positive endorsement of multiculturalism are various liberal concepts such as tolerance, pluralism and the protection of minority rights from the tyranny of the majority” (Bloor 272). While Duarte’s novel embraces notions of cultural diversity and tolerance, it does not take the social commentary any farther, failing even to clearly advocate for a specific set of minority rights. In the celebration of a shared experience across cultures and races, the specificity of the Chican@ experience is partially lost. By emphasizing the commonalities amongst the diverse group of travelers, the differences are cast aside and rendered insignificant—the very differences that continue to serve as the basis for discriminatory and racist treatment of minority ethnic communities like the Chican@ population.

The alliances between groups of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds often have a clear political motivation, the unification coming about because of a common goal such as protecting the civil rights of marginalized minority communities. Yet in *Their Spirits* there is no common political objective; the goal is rather that of a social collective which is organized around the common experience of the Vietnam War shared by each member of the group. Every individual making the journey has his/her own, very personal motivations for making the trip to the wall, yet they do not share any concrete political aspiration. Political change is not the

objective of the travelers—Visiting the Vietnam War Memorial is primarily a gesture of affect and reconciliation, although clearly multiethnic in spirit. Perhaps, as Yen Le Espiritu explains, Latin@/Chican@, Native American and Asian American groups “have at times united to protect and advance their civic engagement... despite their distinct histories and separate identities,” reflecting that grassroots community movements can be more effective when they organize across cultural and ethnic barriers (Espiritu 119). Yet once again, the organizing here is not around a specific political cause but is rather solely focused on arriving at a destination.

There is no doubt that an increasingly public, collective identity is forming as Teresa and Alicia’s caravan drives across country, but it is important to note that this collectivity has no political agenda; it is purely social in nature. “Two men have joined Willy, Gates, and Yellowhair at their table. They may be Vietnam veterans, or the brothers, cousins, and friends of somebody who served there” (Duarte 238). The collectivity forms around the common experience of Vietnam, resulting in the “flattening out,” so to speak, of the specific individual backgrounds and experiences of the men sitting at the table. While their shared experience of Vietnam may not be glorified or patriotic, neither is it politically charged. Instead, the travelers, both men and women, share an emotional sense of individual and communal loss as well as a sense of deception and mourning at the circumstances surrounding the war, how it was handled, and how Vietnam veterans have been treated. While they are not happy with the nature of the war in itself, they have not articulated a list of objectives or demands to address their concerns as a collective political movement.

In an earlier scene in the novel during the planning stages of the trip, Gates, a childhood African American friend of Jesse’s, now a Vietnam veteran, is invited to join the Ramirezes on their trip. Teresa seeks him out at Alicia’s request as she wants to reunite all of her son’s

surviving friends.<sup>12</sup> When Teresa finds him in his dive bar hangout, he responds emotionally to her invitation.

Look at me, Teresa. Do you think I want to get to that Wall? I got brothers on that Wall, Black, Brown, and White! God, girl, look at me, I'm a fuck-up! I never got it together, Teresa. I can't let them see me like this... All the medals and shit they gave us, for what? Last of all they build the Wall, like they were saying, There, now shut up! I saw my buddies shot over there like dogs. White guys made the plans on paper, but the blood was real, and they didn't give a shit about us. (143-144)

Gates' experience of racial discrimination is presented here as a way of establishing parallel lines between the racism and discrimination faced by black and Chicano soldiers. The black veteran's experience of the war was just as racialized as was Jesse's or that of any other ethnic minority soldier. It is this common experience that unites them. But it is also this commonality that erases the specificity of each community's experience of oppression and marginalization, a specificity that must be recognized in order to bring about any concrete changes. Gates shares the experience of being traumatized as a result of exposure to such atrocious violence during the war, but his experience is universalized through his emphasis of "Black, Brown, and White." Reading between the lines, it is as if Gates is really saying that "we" (everyone who lived through Vietnam) are all victims at an equal level, no one suffered or was discriminated against more than the next guy. In the novel, he ultimately ends up conceding and making the journey with Teresa and her family, along with other friends of Jesse's. However his decision to take the trip has nothing to do with protesting racism within the military or condemning the United States' imperialist wars.

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<sup>12</sup> The majority of Jesse's friends in the town were drafted into or enlisted in the Vietnam War; Jesse was not the only one who didn't make it back.

Another of Jessie's friends to accompany the family on their trip is Willy Wong, a Chinese American boy from the neighborhood who scandalized the local Chinese community by enlisting in the Marines and going off to fight in a war where, he was informed, the Chinese had already been "and nothing good had come of it" (67). Because of his parents' national origins, Willy is interpellated as "Chinese," immediately being associated with the Communist Chinese troops who fought against the U.S. in the war. For Willy, his decision to join the Marines reflects his yearning for that sense of belonging, not only as an American, but as "one of the vatos from El Cielito," where he had grown up (67). Fighting in the war and returning as a veteran was his way of proving himself, and as he joins the journey to the capital, Willy is already viewed as a full-fledged citizen. Then there is Chris, another friend from the neighborhood, and his friend Yellowhair, a Zuñi Indian who joins the pilgrimage with his mother Sarah, whose other son was killed in Vietnam in 1970 (219). The inclusion of a Native American character is especially interesting due to the connection that Duarte draws in the text between the Chicana@ identity and the community's indigenous roots from Mexico. Here the author draws on the indigenous roots of America, recalling another brutal conquest; not that of the Spanish in Mexico and Latin America, but that of the British-turned-Americans in North America. One cannot miss the irony in the participation of a Native American soldier fighting in a U.S. war that only seeks to further extend its global domination. Nevertheless, Yellowhair is also folded into the U.S. nation-state along with the rest of his comrades through his identity as a military veteran.

While the journey of the Ramirezes and their fellow travelers becomes at once a demand for public recognition of the destructive effects that the Vietnam War had on the Chicana@ community as well as a journey of personal healing for each individual, it is important to note the idealized nature of this trip. The joining together of individuals who are representative of all sectors of the U.S. nation-state

to make this trek gestures to a patriotic pilgrimage that reaffirms the travelers' sense of national belonging as well as their U.S. citizenship. The fact that a novel written by an ethnic minority author like Duarte about a war that disproportionately affected her community<sup>13</sup> reinforces notions of U.S. national belonging is potentially problematic. While *Their Spirits* does bring attention to certain adversities faced by Chican@s like the U.S. military's targeting and recruitment of working class minority males and their continually disproportionate presence on the frontlines (Berkowitz 3), the text fails to concretely address the circumstances surrounding the historic marginalization that members of the Chican@ community have constantly endured. One cannot forget that this is a minority group that has been perpetually excluded from the U.S. nation-state and repeatedly told that they did not belong.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately the text's social commentary does not achieve a truly critical Chican@ consciousness due to its emphasis on the war memorial as the group's ultimate destination as well as the protagonists' participation in this official ritual of remembrance that reaffirms the U.S. national narrative.

The reinforcement of dominant narratives seen in the novel's idealistic portrayal of the group's pilgrimage is furthered by Duarte's inclusion of mass media in the novel. In addition, new forms of technology (in the context of the 1990s) like the internet are featured in *Their Spirits*—avenues of communication to which not everyone has access, especially the working class community. "Michael's got his laptop computer in a leather case. He slings it over his shoulder. 'This,' he says, 'is what's gonna keep us in touch with America. I made a website for Nana.' He points to the web site address pasted on the inside of the van window, [www.jramirez68.com](http://www.jramirez68.com)" (Duarte 153). Michael, Alicia's highly intelligent and tech savvy teenage

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<sup>13</sup> As Jorge Mariscal explains (quoted by Berkowitz), "nearly 25% of Latinos in the military are involved in combat or hazardous duty occupations. They are basically the grunts" (Berkowitz 3).

<sup>14</sup> This message of exclusion often comes in the form of legislation such as Propositions 187 and 227 in California and more recently, Arizona law SB-1070. The exclusion is frequently manifested in the dehumanizing effects of detention and deportation of undocumented immigrants, as well as the police brutality inflicted on Chican@s, and the murder of unarmed migrants, such as Anastacio Hernández-Rojas in San Diego, carried out by U.S. Border Patrol Agents (Beadle 1).

grandson, starts a website to publicize his family's trip which allowed people to follow them on their journey across the country. Yet, the "America" Michael will be keeping touch with is a limited sector of the U.S. population, especially in the '90s when internet access was still relatively restricted.

Interestingly, the majority of the people who recognize the Ramirezes from the news or internet and approach them appear to be Caucasian. When the caravan stops at a store in Raton, New Mexico, two of the "package boys" recognize Teresa and her family from their website, and share their experience regarding Vietnam with her (the father of one of the boys, Jeffrey, is a Vietnam veteran), then ask to meet her mom. "I introduce Jeffrey and Scott to the Guadalupanas. At first, the boys are surprised to see two old Doñas. I don't know what they were expecting... They are two blond, blue-eyed boys making contact with two matriarchs from another world. 'God bless you both,' my mother says" (225). Through these encounters during the protagonists' journey, Duarte emphasizes the unifying ability of shared experiences and its ability to bridge different types of gaps, be they generational, cultural, or ethnic. Jeffrey and Scott are linked to Alicia and Teresa because of the common bond of having a loved one who fought in Vietnam. This commonality, the text appears to communicate, is enough to overcome even the most marked of differences.

Often, the ethnic identity of the people the family comes across is left ambiguous, once again reflecting the "flattening out" nature of the text that presents Americans primarily through their commonalities, not their differences. As their journey wears on, it becomes a national news story, spurred on by Michael's active presence online and constant engagement with the public via social media. Yet the news networks report the story in their own way, deciding which parts to include and which to leave out. After Alicia was interviewed about the money they received

from the government that allowed them to make the trip to the memorial, only half of the story is included on the evening news. “On the six o’clock news that night, we saw a head shot of Mom and the redhead [reporter]... We heard the part about the money, nothing about la manda or El Santo Niño. No surprise to me” (117-118). The supernatural aspects of the Chicana matriarch’s story, namely Jesse’s voice speaking to her and her “manda,” or promise to God, are conveniently eliminated from the story to make it more comprehensible for the mainstream American public. While Michael tries to control the media’s reporting on his family’s journey, he is unable to influence the reporting decisions made by mainstream media sources, whose sole interest is in keeping ratings up, not telling the real story of a Chican@ veteran’s family and the injustice they suffered at the hands of the U.S. government. The Ramirez’s story becomes yet another narrative of national belonging, where the government rights its wrongs and through this process, recognizes the Ramirez family as “true” American citizens.

In a later scene, when Teresa finally reaches the wall carrying out her mother’s “manda” as her last promise to her before she died, the narrator gives voice to the complex, shared sentiment of shame, mourning, and outrage felt by many of the individuals who had made the pilgrimage with her. “This is a massacre, a travesty. Each name is alive. I turn to the crowd, hundreds standing on the cobblestone walkway, on the lawns, under the trees, and by the waters of the Potomac River in the distance. ‘Why did we let this happen?’ There is silence” (309). Teresa communicates a collective tone of disillusionment and impotence; she is weighed down both by the fact that it is too late for anything to be done to bring back the lives of the fallen soldiers, but also by the thought that she and everyone there standing in the crowd is complicit in what happened, in letting the war go on, in not working harder to put a stop to it. The narrator begins to list all the Latino/Hispanic surnames spread across the wall, directly signaling the



tragedy of the destruction of an entire generation of Chican@/Latin@ youth for the imperialist interests of the power-hungry U.S. “Oh, my Christ... look at all the Spanish names! They cleaned out the barrios for this war! I cry out the words. A reporter puts them down on paper” (308). This is one of the few moments in the text where the unique identity that differentiates Chican@s and Latin@s from the rest of Americans is clearly highlighted. The emotional intensity of Teresa’s words is incredibly powerful and communicates the deep sense of loss felt by her and the Chican@/Latin@ community for whom she speaks. Ironically, Teresa calls this out in the middle of an official U.S. Army ceremony organized around the Ramirezes’ visit to the wall, supposedly to pay tribute to the Hispanic soldiers who served in Vietnam. While her words may condemn this military apparatus that has targeted underrepresented and undereducated minorities for decades, her very presence at the ceremony sends another message—one of acknowledgement, if not acceptance, of her national belonging to the U.S. and all that it represents.

The last lines of *Their Spirits*, however, do not continue to draw attention to the specificity of the Chican@ experience in relation to the Vietnam War, but rather fall back on the idealized notion of multicultural unity that has been repeated throughout the text. “Chris, Gates, Willy, Manuel, Tennessee, and the kids touch Jesse’s name. All around me everyone else is touching their man’s name. The Wall is reflecting our faces like a mirror. We’ve journeyed through Aztlán to the place where our warriors are immortalized in stone” (309). The collective “we,” and the wall’s reflection of a multiplicity of faces achieve the effect of blending together these unique individuals’ experiences into a common collective consciousness, affirming solidarity and unity over any type of difference or adversity. In this sense, one could conclude that the novel ends on a conformist note—Teresa and her family assume their roles as full-

fledged American citizens and conform to the nation's form of remembrance by venerating the official memorial and participating in the U.S. military's patriotic ceremony.

As Marita Sturken recognizes, the wall represents the assimilation of soldiers of all backgrounds into one homogenous American identity, much as Duarte's text achieves a flattening of cultural and ethnic differences that minimizes the specificity of each minority community's unique background. While Duarte does acknowledge the historical contributions of the Chican@ community to the American military, an issue that is often ignored by dominant master narratives in the U.S., she emphasizes their contributions from *within* the national narrative, failing to offer alternatives that escape from the nation-state ideology or to condemn the American imperialist system in itself. Instead, *Their Spirits* emphasizes multicultural solidarity as a central element in the process of coming to terms with and attempting to move beyond the systemic discrimination against ethnic minorities in the military and other governmental institutions. The text ultimately conforms to the homogenized national identity represented by the Vietnam War Memorial.

Returning to the journey itself, one scene particularly exemplifies the nationalist values embodied in *Their Spirits*. In the middle of their journey, Teresa looks back on the caravan as they drive and sees:

The U.S. flags and Mexican flags on our vans are flapping in the wind... I turn around and look out through the rear window and see the two vehicles in single file. Paul, Donna, Priscilla and the boys, Willy and Susie with the News Channel 5 Van trailing us, shooting its last footage. By the time we drive onto Central Avenue, other cars have joined us... Without knowing it, we have made our own procession. (157)

The vision of the Mexican and U.S. flags flapping side by side on the Ramirez family van is an iconic image of assimilation into the American way of life. It is not enough for Teresa and Alicia to be proud of their Mexican identity and origins; they must also fully embrace their American-ness. As they join the vehicles on the city's main avenue, it is as if the cars in the caravan fade into the mass of automobiles on this typical American street, merging with the diverse, multicultural U.S. population in the most American of all processions—the road trip. Their accompaniment by the news van signals once again the ever-present influence of mass media, selling their manipulated narrative to the eager consumers ready to swallow whatever they are fed. Duarte's culturally specific description of her protagonists as “pilgrims of Aztlán” in the epigraph to this article does not change the true nature of their journey. For Teresa, Gates, Willy and all the rest, arrival at America's wailing wall comes down to this: recognition, acceptance and *belonging*.

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