

## Chicana Casualties of War: Loss, Vietnam, and Fractured Sisterhood in Stella

### Pope Duarte's *Let Their Spirits Dance*

By Cristina Herrera

In order to see women's political agency within the Chicano movement, we must shift our gaze away from hero narratives and look more closely at localized political spaces so that we can put women back into a history they had a role in shaping. (Blackwell 34)

We reach Jesse's panel, and right over us, a few inches above our heads, is his name...*Jesse A. Ramirez*. Priscilla and I stare at it as though we're looking at Jesse's face. We see ourselves reflected in the Wall. In my hand, I feel the pressure of Mom's hand over mine, the exchange of *la manda*. Her promise empowers me to do what I have to do. I reach up and touch my brother's name, feeling my hand turn warm as I trace the letters of his name, rough, uneven under my fingers. (Pope Duarte 309)

Oh, it was terrible. I was at the funeral, but I remember they gave me some shot. I was there, but I wasn't. I wish I could remember more about it, but I don't. It was pretty bad. So when they told me, I guess I went crazy. It's a part of my life, about two years, I think, I was lost. I worked, came home, no interest in anything. I couldn't face it...But the minute I got home, it was there again. I neglected my home, my children, my husband. They all felt that I didn't care about them, and I did. (Ybarra 185-186)

I cite in the epigraph a testimony by a woman named Connie, whose son Hank died in battle in Vietnam on July 15, 1969 at age 22. Describing the intense grief she suffered in the years after her son's untimely death, Connie's narrative is part of Lea Ybarra's volume of testimonies from Chicano Vietnam veterans. That Connie's testimony is included in a text that by its title suggests will solely house the narratives of Chicanos who fought in Vietnam is all the more significant for its insistence on voicing the experiences of the survivors whose stories may otherwise be untold but are equally important for understanding the havoc caused by such a deeply unpopular war. When Connie's words are read alongside Chicana writer Stella Pope Duarte's 2002 novel, *Let Their Spirits Dance*, a text that narrates the Ramírez family's trek to the Vietnam Wall in Washington, D.C., we are more fully able to appreciate the pain that accompanies survival and the bitterness of outliving family members killed through violent means. As Teresa, the protagonist in Pope Duarte's novel suggests while gazing at the Wall, although it is indeed her brother Jesse's name engraved on the Memorial, she nevertheless sees her own face and her sister Priscilla's "reflected in the Wall." Teresa's words insist on recognizing the battles waged at home and the ways in which the Vietnam War not only stole their brother's life, but how it continues to shape the lives of her family members, causing tension, resentment, and a fractured relationship between herself and her younger sister. Yet it is the collective articulation of the pain of Jesse's death, symbolized by their dual reflection in the Wall, and speaking to the multiple ways the war has fractured the Ramírez family, particularly the sisterly relationship, that enables the women to end the war's strain on their lives. By honoring Jesse, they at last acknowledge their unique, though shared pain, demanding attention to their roles as victims and survivors.

Stella Pope Duarte's work has been under-studied by Chicana/o literature scholars, yet her novel fits within the contemporary literary landscape of Chicana/o narratives of the Vietnam War.

Duarte's text examines the decades-long grief held by the survivors, those who did not serve in war but are nevertheless deeply affected by it. As the novel suggests, one of the consequences of the war is the strife it has caused between sisters and the family more generally, resulting in the mother's depression, as well as their younger brother's battles with crime and drug dependency. Suggesting that symbolic battles occurred within the home as a consequence of actual battle overseas, the novel raises questions such as: whose story matters? Who gets to tell the story? And in the case of the fictional Ramírez family, how can they resist the war's control over their present lives when it has seemingly altered their daily existence and their interactions as a family who has suffered such great loss? I take as my focal point of analysis the exceedingly tense relationship between the narrator, Teresa and her sister, Priscilla, to expose the ways in which their brother's death in Vietnam has caused resentment, bitterness, and estrangement among two women who struggle to cope with loss. Reaching the Wall together serves as a reminder of their sacrifice and tragedy and points to their empowering reunion by paying homage not only to their dead brother but to their collective history of survival. I will briefly discuss the politics surrounding the war as a way to contextualize critical sentiments expressed in the novel. I will not delve into a historical or political account of the war but instead, I examine the ways in which the war has been used as a vital topic in Chicana/o writing to critique US imperialism, racism, and the burgeoning stages of Chicana/o activism. In particular, I will situate Pope Duarte's novel within the extensive body of Chicana/o fictional and testimonial works that voice critiques of the war that disproportionately impacted poor men of color. While undoubtedly these works, including Duarte's, insist on exposing the racism and classism beneath imperial projects such as war, the majority of these texts do not extensively discuss the toll that war takes on relationships between Chicanas as mothers, daughters, or sisters. As my title suggests, I call attention to the novel's emphasis on Chicanas as casualties and victims of battle that must be included within the narrative of the Vietnam War, expanding the term "survivor" to incorporate those not engaged in armed conflict.

### **Narrating 'Nam: Chicana/o War Literature**

We have all gathered around a flag-draped coffin. Tino's come home from Vietnam. My brother. The sound of the trumpet caresses our hearts and Mami's gentle sobbing sways in the cool wind of March. (Cantú 14)

In Norma Elia Cantú's seminal text, *Canícula*, the writer briefly recalls the arrival of her dead brother's body from Vietnam. Although comprising merely a few lines in the overall narrative, Cantú's insistence on inserting this detail in her family's history calls attention to the ways that Tino's death has shaped her borderlands consciousness as a Chicana. Perhaps most significant is the passage's account of the private grief shared by the family as symbolic casualties themselves. If the term "war" is associated with gun battles or combat, then what does this mean for the survivors? As Cantú's passage suggests, the overwhelming pain suffered by her family is no less significant in narrating the atrocities of war generally and the Vietnam War in particular.

Cantú's text, like *Let Their Spirits Dance*, must be read within the context of Chicana/o narratives of war, which have a long tradition in Chicana/o literature (Olguín 83). As Theresa Delgadillo explains, "Writing in the aftermath of multiple late-twentieth-century wars in Latin America and with the lingering need to make sense of earlier armed conflicts, Latino/a authors have launched the new millennium with critical explorations of war in varied settings" (Delgadillo 600). It is important to note, however, that though Delgadillo speaks of the preponderance of war narratives within the first decade of the twenty-first century, Chicana/o war narratives, fiction and

nonfiction alike, began to be published in the latter twentieth century (Cutler 584), including Charley Trujillo's well-known collection, *Soldados: Chicanos in Viet Nam* (1990), Juan Ramírez's testimony, *A Patriot After All: The Story of a Chicano Vietnam Vet* (1999), and George Mariscal's edited volume, *Aztlán and Vietnam: Chicano and Chicana Experiences of the War* (1999), for example. These narratives are all the more important because of the ways in which they challenge the invisibility of the Chicana/o population within Vietnam War history, as John Alba Cutler argues: "For despite the fact that Chicano soldiers died in disproportionate numbers in Viet Nam, Chicanos do not figure significantly in dominant American accounts of the war" (Cutler 583-84). This holds true as well for popular films based on written narratives of Vietnam, such as *We Were Soldiers* and *Full Metal Jacket*, both told from the perspective of Anglo protagonists that reduce the stories of male soldiers of color and their survivors to minor plot details. While I do not mean to suggest that film should be read as accurate accounts of historical events, they nevertheless contribute to the construction of Anglo-American visibility and Chicana/o invisibility, with the experiences of people of color serving as a backdrop to the supposed universal story of Anglo-American men as soldiers, activists, survivors, and writers.<sup>i</sup>

It is not surprising, then, to see why war in general and Vietnam in particular figures so prominently in Chicana/o writing. Chicana/o scholars of the Vietnam War have noted that this was the first war in which Chicanos fought in larger numbers in comparison to earlier battles, but as George Mariscal asserts, "That a disproportionate number of combat troops were poor, brown, and black should have forced (but did not) a rethinking of American identity and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship" (Mariscal 18). Thus, themes such as the large number of Chicano casualties and survivors of this war are taken up by Chicana/o writers to demonstrate how Chicanas/os' "status as Americans is always already under erasure" (Olguín 102). To protest this invisibility, Chicanas/os have produced a body of literature that speaks of their experiences not only as veterans but as family members coping with the destruction of death and loss. In many ways, this production of literature mirrors the overall critiques voiced by Chicana/o activists during the war itself. Chicana/o war activists during the Chicana/o Movement<sup>ii</sup> "often directly linked U.S. territorial conquests of the 1840's and U.S. military interventions of the 1960's to insist that Chicanos and the Vietnamese were kindred spirits, both victims of U.S. domination" (Oropeza 93). In the early pages of *Let Their Spirits Dance*, for example, Teresa herself describes the hostile climate in which her Phoenix barrio of El Cielito was situated during the war: "By 1968, we were all drowning. La raza was submerged by mainstream America, a submarine drifting under a sea of politics, prejudice, and racism. Barrios like El Cielito, ignored by the U.S. government, suddenly appeared on Uncle Sam's map" (56). As Teresa's words underscore, Chicana/o activists became increasingly critical and resentful of a country that drafted members of a community that were otherwise treated as second-class citizens, according to the common rhetoric espoused by the Movimiento. One veteran, Juan Ramírez, describes in his testimony, *A Patriot After All: The Story of a Chicano Vietnam Vet*, his newfound awareness of his marginalized status after serving in Vietnam: "The war, along with the racial prejudice I had faced, had provided me with some understanding of my status in this society" (Ramírez 135). Ramírez's racial/ethnic consciousness allows him to see the ways in which he and members of his community were essentially tools to reinforce U.S. imperialism overseas, as William Arce explains:

Ultimately, the impact of the Vietnam War upon Chicanos/Latinos engendered such a profound loss of trust in the U.S. that it unleashed a cultural re-evaluation of what it meant to be American. For many within the community, the liberal idea

of a functional “democratic nation” was no longer viable; the continuous problem of racism coupled with the overrepresentation of working-class men in combat units engendered tremendous disillusionment with the federal government. (Arce 11)

But I would add on to Arce’s analysis by arguing that Chicana accounts of the Vietnam War question what it meant to be women, to be Chicanas, during this period. As Maylei Blackwell examines in her study of gender and Chicana feminism during the Chicana/o Movement, the overarching critiques of racism and classism that served as foundations for the Movement made the voicing of Chicana feminist thought a challenging task because of deep-seated sexism and patriarchy. Arguing that the stories of Chicana feminist activists have been largely erased within studies of the Movement (Blackwell 50), I would suggest that Chicana narratives of Vietnam share Blackwell’s sentiment, namely calling for the insertion of Chicana voices within war histories and literature. War literature written by Chicanas and Latinas “recognize[s] the myriad ways in which war ‘comes home,’ particularly for women and communities of color in the United States” (Vigil 3). In fact, according to Belinda Linn Rincón, Chicana and Mexican women writers have written narratives that depict “alternative war stories...that can challenge state-sanctioned ‘metanarratives,’ [that] highlight the subaltern and gendered experience of warfare, and transform gender norms” (Rincón *War* 6-8). While Carol Acton is correct to state that “women’s writing from the Vietnam War has been excluded from most discussions of women and the war experience” (Acton 54)<sup>iii</sup>, her analysis does not take into account race and ethnicity as additional factors that shape women’s understandings and experiences of war.

For example, in Patricia Santana’s debut novel, *Motorcycle Ride on the Sea of Tranquility*, published the same year as Pope Duarte’s text, the protagonist and narrator, fourteen year-old Yolanda Sahagún, recalls the long-awaited arrival of her Vietnam veteran brother, Chuy. As evident early after his arrival, Chuy most likely suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder, and although this is hinted at by characters in the novel, the diagnosis is never uttered. In a critical manner, Yolanda articulates and critiques her subordinate position within her family while trying to empathize with Chuy’s trauma: “Yoli begins to understand her own gender and sexuality as somehow tied to the violence that Chuy has suffered and acts out” (Cutler 601). Like Pope Duarte’s novel, Santana’s text offers survivors’ stories as essential to Vietnam War history, invoking gender and the politics of a Chicana coming-of-age. Both texts are not so concerned with describing the events leading up to the war, nor details of the war itself; instead, the novels ask a pointed question: What does this period of war look like when narrated by Chicanas? In this light, the novels by Santana and Pope Duarte counter the erasure not only of Chicano war veterans, but the overall silence surrounding women’s voices as mothers, sisters, or partners.<sup>iv</sup> This omission is significant, considering that “examining war through a gendered lens enables us to understand how constructions of masculinity and femininity inform our interpretations of war” (Rincón, “From Maiden to Mambisa” 89). Further, speaking from the position of survivor rather than veteran is an important counter-strategy: “...because most published texts on the war have been written by European American males, the ‘reality’ of the war as received by readers is hopelessly narrow and too often ethnocentric. This approach to veteran-authored texts also establishes an unassailable authority (‘if you weren’t here, you can’t understand’) and excludes alternative ‘experiences’” (Mariscal 24)<sup>v</sup>. The experiences of women become subsumed by this perspective, adds Acton: “The male combatant has seen war, when war is defined as combat, and speaks of war from a privileged position. Seeing and its attendant knowledge give him the right to speak and by

definition deny the woman who has not seen a voice” (Acton 55).<sup>vi</sup> By calling for the inclusion of Chicana experiences as vital, these novels may be classified as protest literature written from a distinct Chicana perspective. However, even in seminal volumes such as *American Protest Literature*, for example, not a single Chicana/o or Latina/o writer is featured in the “Vietnam” section. Much as texts by Trujillo and Ramírez examine the significant sacrifices made by Chicano veteran soldiers, novels by Santana and Pope Duarte critically insert gender and womanhood as a necessary lens to study the war’s impact. In drawing critical attention to the war’s destruction of family ties, including relationships between women, Chicana Vietnam War narratives inscribe a gendered understanding of the multiple battles fought at home.

### “La batalla está aquí”: Warring Sisterhood in *Let Their Spirits Dance*

...in an age when total war affects nearly every citizen—whether man, woman, or child—do *only* soldiers have the right, or the ability, to speak about war? (Metres 4, original italics)

In Lea Ybarra’s volume, *Vietnam Veterans: Chicanos Recall the War*, the editor describes the common refrain of Chicano Movement activists to protest the Vietnam War: “Within the Mexican American community, ‘la batalla está aquí’ was a rallying cry in the 1960’s and 1970’s for those who opposed the Vietnam War. They held that the real battle was in the United States, not in Vietnam...” (Ybarra 4). In the case of Pope Duarte’s novel, *la batalla está entre familia*, among family members who struggle to live with the fact of Jesse’s death thirty years in the past. The novel is narrated by Teresa, but the text also incorporates an epistolary component by including letters written by Jesse to Teresa while he served in Vietnam, and these letters often frame Teresa’s narrative accounts of the years during and after Jesse’s war service, as well as her present-day struggles with an impending divorce from her husband, Ray, her estranged relationship with Priscilla, and her mother’s growing ill health. Recalling the day of Jesse’s departure to boot camp, Teresa becomes overwhelmed with a promise she made to her brother to look after their mother when Jesse confesses to her his fear that he will not return alive. This promise, or rather, her self-imposed belief that she has failed to achieve her brother’s confidence, plagues her throughout her life, altering her relationships with her sister, husband, and children: “I’ve tried to forget what he said for the last thirty years. I never understood why he told me he’d never come back. His words got caught in the chambers of my heart and flowed out to every cell in my body. My head, eyes, feet, skin, every part of me knew. My mind battled the truth and a war began inside me. There’s nothing worse than a private war going on inside you every day” (40). For Teresa, the weight of Jesse’s confession rests alongside the responsibility of being her mother’s caretaker, essentially the caretaker of the entire family, given their late father’s frequent absence stemming from his rampant infidelity with a long-term mistress, Consuelo, in the years before and after Jesse’s death. Alicia, Teresa’s mother, becomes so stunted by Jesse’s death, leading Teresa to state, “There was a part of her that got on the plane with Jesse and never came back” (40). Alicia’s struggles with depression following her son’s death demonstrate how, according to Éva Tettenborn, “mourning and melancholia can be seen as two possible responses to the experience of a substantial and significant loss” (Tettenborn 104). While my reading of *Let Their Spirits Dance* does not center on Alicia’s struggles with depression, melancholia, and mourning,<sup>vii</sup> I do, however, point to the psychological impact waged by war, resulting in emotional divides between mother and child and sister to sister. Rather than collectively mourn as a family over Jesse’s death, Alicia, Teresa, and Priscilla become isolated in their pain, causing strife between the living female family members. If, as scholar Eliza Rodríguez y Gibson says of the poetry of feminists of color,

that “shared grief can be a point of contact and community” (Rodríguez y Gibson 26), then Pope Duarte confirms that process in her novel. If the novel initially describes Teresa’s private guilt and shame for failing to live up to Jesse’s promise, then the text dramatically narrates the need for Teresa and Priscilla to come together as grieving sisters.

That process of reunion is increasingly difficult, and much of the novel describes the often tense and even hostile encounters between Teresa and Priscilla, especially while Teresa begins planning the trip to Washington, D.C. As we learn in the text, the impetus to travel to the Vietnam Memorial is due to Alicia’s belief that Jesse has spoken to her and called for her to visit his engraved name, and she vows to fulfill this *manda*, a sacred promise, any way she can. After receiving a letter from Veterans Affairs in Washington informing Alicia that she has been the recipient of over \$90,000 because of an accounting error that did not disburse the full amount of Jesse’s death benefits in 1968, Teresa fulfills Alicia’s request to plan a trip to the Wall so that they may at last touch his name. This fact becomes local and national news, and the Ramírez family’s trip is reported on throughout its duration, with help from a website created by Teresa’s nephew. However, what is intended by Alicia to be a collective journey of healing and honoring Jesse, is actually a symbolic warring of two hermanas who began drifting apart shortly after their brother’s death. Although referring to actual war, Teresa’s words may be a description of her relationship with Priscilla: “Nations forget common sense, common interests, and make public enemies of each other....After Jesse’s death, the dot-to-dot pictures that connected us got split up. If I moved right, Priscilla moved left, if I visited Mom, Priscilla stayed away. If I stayed away, Priscilla went to see her. We were always passing each other by, and I didn’t know why” (46). Much as battle involves dodging bullets, among other duties, the sisters engage in tactics of avoidance, making calculated moves to distance from each other. The aftermath of Jesse’s death has made the sisters enemies of each other.

Although Teresa states that she “didn’t know why” her relationship with Priscilla has become estranged, she does, however, articulate Priscilla’s mourning over her baby daughter, which as Teresa describes, becomes conflated with her renewed sorrow for Jesse: “Everything Priscilla had gone through with Jesse’s death came back to her when Annette died. It was as if time had not passed for her, and Jesse had never gone to the war. We buried Annette next to Nana Esther and Jesse. When Priscilla saw Jesse’s grave, she knelt down and hugged the headstone and lay her head on it, as she had laid her head on Jesse’s shoulder at the airport” (47). This tragic passage captures what Delgado describes of *Latina/o* war narratives of the twenty-first century:

In this new body of Latino/a fiction, set in cities, small towns, and rural areas across the Americas, we encounter the social divisions and physical devastation that war creates in characters that suffer during battle as well as long after the cessation of armed conflict. Such fiction is also about love, greed, creativity, inequality, envy, sexuality, memory, and loyalty, among other things. That is, these novels are not just about war, but about how it happens, why it continues, what it does to those involved—matters that underscore that war is not an empty exercise of power or violence. (Delgado 601)

For Priscilla, her daughter’s death renews the grief she felt after Jesse’s death, and while Teresa speaks of her sister’s losses with empathy, this does not negate the fact of their growing estrangement. If Teresa can articulate and capture her sister’s pain, why can she not reunite with her in their shared experiences of pain and loss? Rather than join her sister in mourning, however,

Priscilla's loss becomes a source of added conflict between the two women. Delgadillo's assessment of Latina/o war fiction, that "war is not an empty exercise of power or violence" (601), is supported by Teresa's description of her relationship with Priscilla, a relationship that is marked by emotional conflict brought on by an armed battle thirty years in the past. Beyond that, though, is Teresa's inability to shed her growing sense of guilt for holding Jesse's words that she has kept secret from her family: "I've carried a secret, more a wound that pools with guilt" (80). Teresa and Priscilla, the novel suggests, also hold battle wounds that are invisible to each other, but are played out in feelings of guilt, grief, and rising anger toward each other. And as the novel insists, these Chicana casualties continue to live with the daily realities of war's violent capacity to tear families apart. Their war is far from over.

Nowhere is this fact more apparent than during the course of the cross-country trip to Washington, D.C., a trek that is comprised of the Ramírez siblings, their mother Alicia, Alicia's comadre, Irene, who also lost her son to Vietnam, Ramírez grandchildren, and Jesse's veteran friends who have struggled with anxiety, depression, nightmares, and guilt. Continuing the metaphor of warring sisters, their younger brother Paul sarcastically comments, "I hope the two of you make it to the Wall in one piece" (152). Although said in jest, Paul's comment affirms the ways in which the cross-country road trip stirs feelings that refuse to remain buried within the overall excitement of the trek.<sup>viii</sup> The trip not only forces the sisters to be in close quarters, but the purpose of the quest, to reach Jesse's engraved name on the Wall, brings to the surface long-standing grief, or rather, embarking on this trip encourages a collective grieving and articulation of loss that the sisters have been unable to achieve. Yet there are moments when Teresa subtly conveys a desire to share her pain with Priscilla, to unite as sisters who have lost their brother through violence. One day before they depart, Teresa, who has moved into her mother's home following her separation from her husband, Ray, finds an old pair of Priscilla's shoes and wears them for her last teaching day of the year<sup>ix</sup>:

It's strange to walk around in somebody else's shoes, it makes you wonder if you could ever live out that person's life, or if you would want to. I think of my mother's shoes and the things she's walked through, of Ray's, Paul's, of Jesse's, and El Santo Niño's sandals. I'm imagining walking in Priscilla's white leather shoes all the way to the Vietnam Wall. Isn't white the color of mourning in Vietnam? Crazy thoughts come into your head when you're wearing somebody else's shoes. (105)

Wearing Priscilla's shoes is a subtle attempt to connect with a distant sister, and because outward communication is unthinkable given the current state of their relationship, Teresa can only imagine what her sister's life has been like while she walked in those shoes. Most telling in this passage is Teresa's reference to wearing Priscilla's shoes to the Wall, an act that symbolically merges the two women in a moment of mourning. By referencing the color of Priscilla's shoes as white, a traditional color of mourning, she alludes to her sister's experiences with loss, yet why can Teresa only imagine, rather than enact, a shared moment of pain and potential healing? Why must a collective experience of the empowering, healing act of touching their brother's engraved name be mere imagination rather than a real, lived experience? Of course, they do eventually unite as healed, though pained, sisters, but it is a process that requires openly hostile interactions that initially leave the women bitter and resentful.

The trek across the country reinforces the silences each sister has kept to herself, as if the War, or more precisely, the end result of that conflict, Jesse's death, renders their emotions and

thoughts incommunicable to anyone. While driving to Washington, Teresa thinks to herself, “My mind is racing with things I’d like to say to Priscilla, hard things I’ve held inside me for a long time. I’m afraid when I look back and see my mother’s ashen face, afraid of Priscilla’s words. I want the trip to be over, and my mother headed safely back home” (164). Although Teresa’s silence has much to do with the secret of her brother’s words that she has withheld from her family, the intense conflict waged with Priscilla, I would suggest, is partially due to Priscilla’s sense of alienation, a sentiment she expresses only while on the road. As eldest surviving child, Teresa is left responsible for planning the trip and handling Jesse’s death benefits that fund the trip, but Priscilla interprets this as Teresa’s attempts to control the family’s actions, even as proof of Teresa’s superior status within the family: “You’re big sis, the big cheese around here. The one who gives the orders” (190). While George Mariscal states that a “pilgrimage to the Wall is a first step in understanding who has been left out of the historical accounts of the period” (Mariscal 301), I would add that the Ramírez family’s trip confronts the silences, resentments, and intense suffering they have been at pains to divulge with each other. Priscilla’s comment to Teresa (similar to an earlier statement by Paul) may be easily dismissed as jealousy or even immaturity, but woven beneath Priscilla’s sarcasm, I believe, is her insistence on inclusion within the survivor narrative that Teresa cultivates in the telling of her family’s trip to Washington. As storyteller, we learn mostly Teresa’s pain over Jesse’s death, and her relationship with her brother, evidenced in the letters included within the narrative, takes center-stage. But what of Priscilla’s pain? Who will speak of her grief as another sister when Teresa is at first unable to account for this pain as distinct and separate from her own? In fact, when she learns that Jesse met a Vietnamese woman, Thom, whom he married and with whom he had a son, her first reaction aside from surprise is jealousy: “I wish Jesse had told me more about Thom. Is it jealousy I’m feeling or anger that Jesse left me out of this part of his life?” (264). Although Teresa’s question is directed at herself in her attempt to understand the complexity of her feelings surrounding this new knowledge of her brother’s life in Vietnam, her mixed sense of anger and jealousy undoubtedly has impacted her relationship with her family, particularly with Priscilla. Essentially, Teresa is disappointed that her understanding of Jesse’s life and eventual death is incomplete, and as much as she has tried to construct a narrative of her brother with herself as a primary figure, she is forced to admit that Jesse was not only her brother, but brother to Priscilla and Paul, son to Alicia, and husband to Thom.

The sisters’ path to reconciliation requires not only the collective journey to touch Jesse’s engraved name, but their reunion must entail a mutual acknowledgment of their unique pain suffered as grieving sisters. This occurs away from their home in Phoenix, suggesting that a sisterly union necessitates fleeing the home that houses memories of the pain inflicted upon each other. It is not surprising, then, that the sisters’ process of healing begins while on the road, as the road genre has been used by Chicana writers to “explore the significance of female family relations, particularly bonds of sisterhood and mothers and daughters” (Herrera 10)<sup>x</sup>. Mobility, the act of driving toward a destination that symbolizes their sacrifices as sisters to a dead brother, provides the impetus to reconnect, and while the trip does cause arguments and biting comments, Teresa and Priscilla at last come to a voicing of their pain to each other:

“God, why did all this happen to us? Did we do something wrong?” Priscilla asks.  
“Maybe we didn’t love God enough, or each other. Maybe God got mad at us and took Jesse. He was the best our family had to offer. Do you think God’s like that?”  
“He’s not the Aztec god! What are you talking about? Christ sacrificed Himself, what does that tell you?”

“I still miss Annette, Teresa!” Priscilla says suddenly. “God, this trip is killing me! I’ll never touch my baby again! Mom gets to touch Jesse’s name, and all I have is Annette’s headstone.” Priscilla is crying, wiping her tears with the end of her T-shirt. I haven’t seen her cry in years and forgot what it was like to smooth her hair back and blot out her tears with my fingers. (280)

What I find to be poignant in this exchange is Priscilla’s description of Jesse as “the best” in the family, yet this sentiment is paired alongside her later admission of mourning for her dead baby daughter, whom she is unable to memorialize in any other way than by visiting a headstone, in contrast to Jesse’s public memorial that honors his death as the utmost sacrifice. Does Priscilla perhaps resent such a public display on her brother’s behalf, seen not only in the Wall itself, but in the planned trip that comprises a costly, meticulously planned cross-country trek? Once again, I insist on pointing to Priscilla’s efforts to be seen and recognized as a woman who has also suffered, suggesting her belief that her pain has been invisible and unseen by her family. What is important, however, is that these sentiments are spoken aloud, and Teresa’s role as listener, as recipient of Priscilla’s grief, enables her to serve as a source of compassion and healing. In addition, Priscilla’s earlier categorization of Jesse as “the best” highlights the family’s rather problematic idealization of their dead son and brother. With this idealization, Jesse, as the sacrificed veteran, symbolizes the “best” of the family’s traits, with Teresa, Priscilla, and Paul unable to live up to such impossible standards. Priscilla speaks of this unfairness even as she questions dogmatic logic to explain their loss. Beyond that, however, Priscilla articulates her right to mourn not only as sister to Jesse but mother to Annette, and in her grief, she hints at her family’s neglect over her sorrow. She, like her mother, has also lost a child.

Tragically, their mother Alicia dies soon after they arrive to Washington, her ill health having been the subject of numerous arguments between the three siblings throughout their journey. Despite her death, the family visits the Wall anyway to fulfill the promise made to their mother to touch Jesse’s name on her behalf. In the epigraph to this article, I cited the moment of Teresa and Priscilla’s arrival to their brother’s name, signaling their mutual reflection on the panel as survivors, as hermanas united in love and collective agency. Prior to their arrival at Jesse’s panel, the sisters pay homage to the many Latino soldiers: “As I walk by I see more and more men with Spanish last names. “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. Priscilla and I are holding hands” (308). Reciting the names of the Latino casualties becomes a sort of ceremonial chant for Teresa and Priscilla, who are simultaneously shocked and enraged to bear witness to the large number of dead Raza. Stating that “The Wall is reflecting our faces like a mirror” (309), Teresa pays homage to their identities as symbolic casualties, as sister survivors whose lives have been irrevocably shaped by Jesse’s death in Vietnam. By calling out their mirrored reflections, the women also symbolically insert themselves into this public monument, demanding attention to their grief and loss, for which there stands no tribute. What is an emotionally painful moment, however, becomes an empowering experience for Teresa and Priscilla, who join hands throughout the recitation and touching of names. The joining of hands, the touching of skin upon skin between hermanas who at one time methodically avoided each other’s presence, merges their pain while empowering them to claim their unique stories of love, strength, and survival.

Over fifty years after American troops landed in Vietnam to begin one of the bloodiest armed conflicts in American history, this war remains deeply ingrained in US consciousness, as evidenced by the large number of films, books, and memoirs on the subject. Yet by and large,

many narratives of the Vietnam War have not fully taken into account the unique experiences faced by women of color during this period, particularly the voices of Chicana writers. *Let Their Spirits Dance* is one of many Chicana/o texts that have examined the intense emotional, psychic, and physical damage that the Vietnam War has caused for survivors. As such, this novel is an important contribution to a body of literature that speaks of the many sacrifices made by Chicana/o soldiers and survivors, especially family members, whose stories may otherwise be neglected within dominant accounts of this war. In particular, Stella Pope Duarte centralizes the destruction of female family relations, the disintegration of sisterhood. By focalizing the tension between sisters due largely to the havoc caused by war, Pope Duarte demands attention to the battle at home, pointing to the necessity of including survivors' stories within the narrative of Chicanas/os in Vietnam. For survivors such as Teresa and Priscilla, "la batalla está aquí," a conflict that is resolved only by honoring and acknowledging each other's suffering. No longer warring sisters, Teresa and Priscilla unite as surviving kin. In their reunion as family members, Teresa and Priscilla cultivate an empowered space for the construction of a Vietnam narrative that includes sister survivors.

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<sup>i</sup> See Susan L. Eastman's insightful discussion of the film, *We Were Soldiers*, in her article, "Randall Wallace's *We Were Soldiers*: Forgetting the American War in Viet Nam."

<sup>ii</sup> See Maylei Blackwell's important study, *¡Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*, for an analysis of the politics of gender and power in the Movimiento.

<sup>iii</sup> Pope Duarte's novel works to fill the gaps of war literature, and while it may seem as if she is reinforcing the "feminine symbols of what soldiers sought to protect and to whom they longed to return" (Vuic 137) because of her depiction of women as civilians rather than veterans, I argue that the novel critically engages with these gendered roles. Most important is the writer's insistence that women survivors have also engaged in battles that are overlooked as "real" armed conflicts.

<sup>iv</sup> Although writing of the World War II era, Patricia Portales's study, *Women, Bombs, and War: Remapping Mexican American Women's Home Front Agency in World War II Literature, Theater, and Film*, provides a necessary discussion of Chicana and Mexicana women's agency and subjectivity during this armed conflict. See also Joanne Rao Sánchez's chapter, "The Latinas of World War II: From Familial Shelter to Expanding Horizons."

<sup>v</sup> In addition, in much scholarship on the Vietnam War, the very term "survivor" has been used to describe combat survivors, which supports Mariscal's assertion. See, for example, Butko and Loeb, listed in the works cited.

<sup>vi</sup> See also the edited volume, *The Women and War Reader* (1998).

<sup>vii</sup> See also Benigno Trigo's *Remembering Maternal Bodies: Melancholy in Latina and Latin American Women's Writing*, for more discussion of this topic.

<sup>viii</sup> For a discussion of the use of the road genre in Chicana literature, see Cristina Herrera's "Snapshots From the Mother Road": Travel and Motherhood in Lorraine López's *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters*," listed in the works cited.

<sup>ix</sup> There are many scenes in Chicana fiction that feature a protagonist donning another woman's, usually her mother's, shoes, as if to suggest an attempt to discover unknown facts about the woman's life that may be somehow learned by walking in her shoes. Of course, what makes this scene different is that the shoes belong not to a mother who appears to be more a stranger than relative, but to a sister who has become a source of resentment, tension, and estrangement. See, for example, Denise Chávez's *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986) and Melinda Palacio's *Ocotillo Dreams* (2011).

<sup>x</sup> Although I point to Pope Duarte's use of the road genre, my reading of the novel does not privilege this perspective. In her use of the road genre, Pope Duarte engages with themes such as racial profiling (249, 256) that scholars may be interested in pursuing.