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Book Review

A Patriot After All: The Story of a Chicano Vietnam Vet by Juan Ramirez. (1999), 192 pages, $16.95.Available from: University of New Mexico Press

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In the 1850s and 1860s, Rafael Chacón, a *Nuevo Mexicano,* [person from New Mexico] was in the Union Army, fought in the American Civil War and returned to his homeland to write *Memorias* [Memoirs] (later reconstructed as *Legacy of Honor: The Life of Rafael Chacón, a Nineteenth Century New Mexican* by Jacqueline Meketa). In this "Memoirs" he vividly recorded his war experiences, the personal sacrifices he made, and the racism existing at that time. He detailed the discrimination he suffered in the Union Army during and after the Civil War—which, ironically, was fought to liberate fellow Americans from the chains of slavery in the bloodiest war in U.S. history. Chacón's *Memorias* will be one example of many novels that will address the issue of the Chicano experience in war.^ In this review article I want to offer an overview of the literature focusing on the war in Vietnam and in particular center my attention on the excellent novel written by Juan Ramírez, a Vietnam veteran: *A Patriot After All: The Story of a Chicano Vietnam Vet* (1999).

Chacón's autobiography, cited above, foreshadows the double consciousness and conflicted loyalties that will appear in subsequent Chicano history and literature as is evident in the Vietnam novels that have recently appeared written by Mexican Americans. After World War II many Chicano veterans returned from the war with a strong commitment to change the prevailing conditions of social, economic, and political discrimination extant in the United States. Sabine Ulibarrí's memoir, *Mayhem Was Our Business: Memorias de un veterano,* records his experiences as a bombardier and recalls how the veterans of his generation refused to further tolerate the conditions which had existed for years. This new awareness on the part of returned Mexican American war veterans in effect changed the course of American history. As Ulibarrí poignantly states in his memoir:

> [T]hey laid the foundation for social, political and educational enfranchisement.... A generation literally baptized by fire would leave an enduring legacy, and their experiences would touch the lives of many: We, who went to war didn't return the same. Not only were we changed, but we in turn have affected and changed all the people related to us. War is not something you hang in the closet (3).

Two generations later, the Vietnam War would sear the American consciousness and conscious as images from this conflict were seen on television screens throughout the nation. While Americans knew the daily body counts of the enemy killed, the horrors the young soldiers were suffering were not in any count. Only after Ronald Reagan became president did the veterans of "the war without order and purpose" began to write their ordeal (Melling 49). The silence of the 1960s and 1970s was broken and the literature about the Vietnam War surfaced to form an important chapter in American literature. Yet, a review of the literature greatly contradicts the reality of who participated in the war. The more than 1,000 literary works and over 400 critical texts focus mostly on white and African American soldiers and thus mislead one to think that only these two racial groups of American military men fought in Vietnam (Loeb 95). Indeed, texts by and about Chicano soldiers form no more than a small part of the literature. Some notable examples are: *An Accidental Soldier: Memoir of a Mestizo in Vietnam* (2003), which provides a vivid account of a young Chicano's loss of innocence. *Aztlan and Viet Nam* (1999) is an anthology of poems, short stories, and other literary works that highlight the contradictions that challenged the traditionally patriotic Mexican American families and the grassroots opposition. *Dogs From Illusion* (1994) is a novel that portrays a raw, harsh picture of war and *The Drug Hazed WAR in Southeast Asia: A Soldier's Extraordinary Experience inthe Killing Fields of South Vietnam* (1998) is the autobiography of a young Chicano's experience in the war. *Humidity Moon* (1999) encompasses a collection of short stories regarding the horrors of war in the jungles of Vietnam. *Interrogations* (1999) offers us a collection of poems about the realities of the Vietnam War and the young men who lost their lives while *Shifting Loyalties* (1995) narrates the lives of five Chicanos before, during, and after the Vietnam War, and their attempts at adjusting back into normal life. *Soldados: Chicanos in Vietnam: Narratives of the Viet Nam War* (1990) are stories of Chicanos who bravely and fiercely fought in the war yet were invisible in films, newspapers, television programs, and in war footage.

Some Chicanos penned their autobiographies in order to provide readers with a different view of the sounds, sights, and smells of the realities of the Vietnam War. It is a little known fact that the first American prisoner of war was a Mexican American, whose plane was shot down while on a mission over Vietnam. Two outstanding novels *Chained Eagle* (1989) and *Code of Conduct* (1991) by Everett Alvarez chronicle his survival in prison for eight and one half years and the beatings and torture he suffered there. He credited his spirit of survival to his parents and grandparents who endured many years as migrant workers in California. Roy Benavidez, a former Green Beret, recorded his experiences in *The Three Wars of Roy Benavidez* (1986), *The Last Medal of Honor* (1990), and *Medal of Honor: A Vietnam Warrior's Story* (1995). In 1981, Benavidez was awarded the Medal of Honor for his bravery under enemy fire and for disregarding his own safety. He remains one of the most decorated soldiers who fought in Vietnam.

The Drug Hazed WAR in Southeast Asia (1998) is Jay Dee Ruybal's portrayal of his life during and after the war and his efforts to overcome his dependency on the drugs that numbed his fears while as a combat soldier. *An Accidental Solider: Memoir of a Mestizo Vietnam* (2003) is Manny Garcia's account of the horrors of war; he recounts how he killed before he was yet a man and before he had learned to love a woman. In order to survive, Garcia learned to shut off his emotions and feelings. Conflicting sentiments of patriotism, doubts, and skepticism characterize the literature. Yet, in spite of the racism, discrimination, and other injustices suffered, these young soldiers were patriotic during and after the war.

Of particular interest among the above group of narratives focusing on the Vietnam War is the novel *A Patriot After All: The Story of a Chicano Vietnam Vet* (1999). The novel is written by Juan Ramirez and details his journey towards an understanding of the social, cultural, and historical forces that shaped his life as a Chicano growing up in California, and as a Marine fighting in Vietnam. Ramirez's autobiography covers three important stages of his life: childhood and family, loss of innocence and the search for identity, and readjustment to civilian life.

The young and idealistic Juan Ramirez joined the Marine Corps after graduating from high school. Like so many other Chicanos who were not encouraged to further their education, he enlisted because it was expected of him and was part of his family's history. Ramirez father and several of his uncles had served in World War II, while another uncle had served in the Korean Conflict. The father had been in the Navy, where he suffered maltreatment and discrimination. Still, the elder Ramirez was proud of his military service. However, when he returned home honorably discharged, he became disillusioned and hurt because American society refused to accord veterans of color equal treatment, regardless of their patriotism and loyalty. His father's bitterly, sad experience prompted young Ramirez's growing self-awareness and his recognition of ethnic and class differences in the United States. This also led to his acceptance of his bi-national and bicultural identity:

> I am undeniably of Mexican descent. I am also without a doubt American even as much as I am denied that designation by mainstream America. I am also, by some definition, Chicano. I.. .can truly say that I am none of the above, yet I am a composite of all of the above. I am a composite of many characteristics (179).

Ramirez's self-awareness and ambivalence is similar to what Arnold Krupat describes as "betweenness" (125). In *Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature* (1992), Krupat argues that "betweenness" is a position of power from which to shape difference as a positive characteristic. He suggests "betweenness" should not be accepted as condemnation, but rather as an impulse to present oneself "as not entirely Other nor yet the same" (125). Thus, Ramirez's biculturality allows him to enter "a contact zone between cultures" where he can translate his difference or "home culture" for those not of his background (Reed-Danahay 127). Deborah Reed-Danahay argues that border crossings and translations of ethnicity form life histories as simultaneously ethnography and autobiography (127).

Juan Ramirez's family history extends back to several generations of *raíces mexicanas* [Mexican roots] and more recently to American roots. As with many Mexican families who came to the United States as immigrants in the early 1900s, Ramirez's family crossed the border as displaced persons, fleeing the Mexican Revolution. His grandparents' and later, his parents' quest for the American Dream meant having to negotiate the zone

which Arnold Krupat argues is where cultures of unequal material power must deal with each other; where identities are not stable, but stand on shifting grounds (5). Believing that assimilation into American society would be a shield against discrimination and racism, Ramirez's parents refused to teach him Spanish. The prohibition to speak Spanish in the schools only heightened his awareness of a separate Mexican identity. These early experiences led to Ramirez's later understanding of "the existing power dynamics and the complex process of domination" (Motzafi-Haller 217). Pnina Motzafi-Haller notes that there always exists a link between a writer's positioning in society and history and the kind of comprehension such personal background forms (217).

Juan Ramirez's disillusionment at the discrimination practiced by the commanding officers in boot camp and Vietnam further shaped his understanding of the process of domination in American society. These recognitions caused great psychological tensions and difficulties. No longer willing to accept without question values such as duty and loyalty to his country, in light of the realities of Vietnam, he goes AWOL and returns to the United States. Ramirez, however, fails to achieve some sense of normalcy and direction in his home life and decides to return to Vietnam. He goes AWOL a second time and lands in jail. Going AWOL was prompted by an increasing emotional instability that was ignored by his superiors and medical staff.

When Ramirez first arrived in Vietnam, he had expected to be fighting Communism, an important mission and ideal: "It was America's duty to defend the free world, and so Americans had to make sacrifices in order to carry out [this] noble goal" (50). Instead Ramirez saw destruction of lives and property and maltreatment of Vietnamese people. The realities of war did not match what he had expected nor did he feel like John Wayne's character in the movie, "Sands of Iowa Jima:" "Nothing in my training, my education.. .prepared me for the reality of this war I had entered" (43).

The trauma of war leads to a loss of innocence and a sense of self-division in Ramirez. Jeff Loeb argues that what formerly was believed to be a whole self was now a fragmented being: "Most narrators, several years removed from their experiences in Vietnam, are compelled to see themselves as previously whole, but broken by those experiences… It is, however, the broken self that does the writing and telling about the trauma...."(100). From this particular "betweenness," Ramirez attempts to create the whole person he was before the trauma of Vietnam. His reference to John Wayne, a popular cultural icon, represents his concept of wholeness.

In the end, Juan Ramirez, recognizes that not all of his identity problems were a result of his Vietnam experiences, but more from his cultural and national environments. His literary journey forced him to examine his identity and to come to terms with who he is and what he is. But most important, Ramirez's story honors his comrades and fellow Chicanos who fought in the war and suffered the highest casualty rates among the soldiers who served in that war. *A Patriot After All* is a testament not only to the courage and determination of one man, but part of a greater story and a story of many chapters still to be written.

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^ Genaro Padilla in his groundbreaking book *My History, Not Yours: The Formation of Mexican American Autobiography*, was one of the first scholars to document not only the maltreatment Chacón suffered while he served the Union cause, but also the injustices inflicted on tens of thousands of Mexicanos during the period of Manifest Destiny in the American invasion of their

homeland. Padilla concludes that these injustices and their far-reaching consequences influenced the concept and writing of *Memorias*: “Having lived on the surface of two distinct plates of social experience-one-cultural, the other national recalling such events produce a distension of consciousness in which contradictory loyalties grate against each other, creating immense psychological pressure..(164).