

¡RAZA SI! ¡GUERRA NO! *Chicano Protest and Patriotism During the Viet Nam War Era*. By Lorena Oropeza. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005. 296 pp. \$21.95 paper.) Reviewed by Ben Chappell.

Over the first half of the twentieth century, the struggle by Mexican American individuals and organizations for full-fledged citizenship focused on several key concerns. For instance, in a segregated society, they often claimed the status of “whiteness.” Engaging the highly gendered discourse of citizenship, many Mexican Americans also asserted what they imagined to be an “American” masculinity. Perhaps most importantly, the willingness of Mexican Americans to serve in the military and contribute to the prosecution of the nation’s wars was central to these citizenship claims. As is so much else in United States society, this strategy had begun to shift by the beginning of the Viet Nam War. The mid-century cultural and political crisis was also a watershed in Mexican American history, a transition from the “Mexican-American generation” to the ascendance of the Chicano/a era. Part of this change, a shift in attitudes toward the U.S. military, provides the focus of Lorena Oropeza’s engaging new history. Oropeza makes a strong case that the relationship to the military, and by extension U.S. foreign policy, has been central both to internal debates on Mexican American identity and to the quest for first-class citizenship. Such issues remain urgently relevant in an era of persistent social inequality and seemingly permanent interventionist warfare.

Oropeza gives us a book about a tension—between “patriotism” as defined by Anglo-hegemonic norms and institutions, and the “protest” that we remember now as a sign of the times—but another tension lies in her approach in the book itself: between a rich narrative built on personal experiences and a more schematic summary. The best contributions of the book come from the former in the form of biographical stories of young Chicanos’ rising consciousness, supported by the thirty-three life-history interviews and some fifty local, alternative, and movement publications listed in the bibliography. The “big-picture” summarizing tendency that in places takes over these individual life experiences is no less useful for raising relevant issues, but it does tend to paint over the complex picture of a politically and culturally fraught situation.

The book is situated to work as a stand-alone introduction to Mexican American social movements in the twentieth century, and at times this necessitates running hastily over familiar territory, such as the “Zoot-Suit Riots” or WWII casualty Felix Longoria’s burial in Arlington National Cemetery after a funeral home in his home town of Three Rivers, Texas, prepared to bury him in a segregated plot. Then again, these stories are told more fully elsewhere. The more central concern of the book is the historical, strategic move away from what Oropeza calls a “politics of supplication,” which amounted to Mexican Americans trying to assuage racism by providing assurances to Anglo society as to their suitability for first-class citizenship and their asking for acceptance. The principal argument that Oropeza advances is that the switch from this strategy to one of “confrontation” was also a rejection of militarism as a claim to “legitimate” citizenship.

What is most interesting about this approach is how Oropeza suggests that categories of race, nation, and gender were “confronted” of a piece, indicating a sophisticated awareness of how the attendant social structures are articulated together. It also introduces the

possibility of an oversimplified history that becomes less convincing than the more nuanced, personal passages. Oropeza often writes as if Mexican American perspectives on all of the “traditional parameters of belonging” (p. 103)—whiteness, masculinity, and militarism—shifted in concert. Certainly, “Chicanismo” involved an embrace of non-white racial identity, and it roughly coincided with the turn against the war that signaled a rupture with the idea of militarism as a valuable road to social mobility. But it is a bit misleading to describe Chicanas’ argument that joining the military was not necessary to prove masculinity and then assert that “men in the movement made a similar argument” (p. 108). Did they? Perhaps some did, but what is underplayed in this narrative is that the critique of gender that ultimately animated Chicana cultural theory as a distinct field of intellectual accomplishment by women was bitterly forged and not without accusations by men of treason against “the community” or “the movement.” Mexican Americans by no means came to a critique of patriarchy together or all at once. Oropeza notes how women in the Brown Berets were considered treacherous for their critique of male posturing (p. 144), but this was hardly a dynamic limited to that particular organization.

The problem of such moments in the book is that it becomes too easy to slide into a version that holds Mexican America, or even “the movement” up as a single, coherent historical agent. On the other hand, the story is more interesting and convincing when detailed and personal accounts highlight the conflicts and discontinuities that mark a period of rapid change. One of the most compelling situations is that of Delia and Everett Alvarez, a sister and brother who found themselves very publicly on opposite sides of the domestic conflict over the Viet Nam War. Here the tension between patriotism and protest comes through in living color, and the notion of confronting one’s own flesh and blood on these terms is both easy and painful to imagine. Indeed it would be worth considering the broader topic within the familiar yet wrenching frame of a family divided.

Personal narratives, describing for instance the growing consciousness of activists such as Rosalio Muñoz or Valentina Valdez, lend a narrative richness that serves to support the overall argument: there can be no simple or single answer to the question of Mexican Americans’ relationship to the military. These narratives provide the rising action that moves the book toward the climax of the Chicano Moratorium March in East Los Angeles on August 29, 1970. It comes as a surprise, then, that Oropeza turns away from the personal experience narratives toward a more synoptic, summary approach in order to explain what the Moratorium March “meant.” If the landmark demonstration, perhaps the largest gathering of Mexican Americans up to that point, was really the *personal* milestone for many participants that she tells us it was, it would certainly make sense to write its history in terms of what the experience was like on the ground as well as what it came to represent for Mexican Americans in general.

Despite these occasional moments at cross-purposes, the story of young Chicano and Chicana activists gradually moving towards identification with the Vietnamese people, and thus toward a critique of the war, becomes clear. Thus we see the consolidation of a movement defined not only by ethnic solidarity but by cogent critiques of racial and economic structures in the United States as well as processes of colonialism both “internal” and abroad.

Today, the disproportionately high representation of young people of color in the armed forces, and particularly in high-risk assignments, has not likely gone away—indeed, the elimination of a universal draft and the tacit, socioeconomic conscription that accompanies a “volunteer” military may have caused the armed forces to be less white than ever before. It is clear from anecdotes about immigrants in the military that there are some for whom the dream of substantiating a claim to citizenship through willing military sacrifice is still very real. It may be that we will again have the tragic opportunity to revisit one of the core questions in the book: do disproportionate casualties sustained by a particular group signal exceptional bravery and commitment or victimization? And, in either case, do these casualties support a claim to full citizenship in this country?

How the cultural politics of identity and identification with competing nationalisms or other lines of affiliation play out in the new social formation remains to be seen. Those interested in seeing can attune their eyes by picking up Oropeza’s thought-provoking book.

*Ben Chappell is an anthropologist and assistant professor of sociology and cultural studies at Bridgewater College, Virginia. He is at work on an ethnographic study of lowriders and the cultural politics of space in Texas.*

LOS ANGELES AND THE FUTURE OF URBAN CULTURES: A *Special Issue of American Quarterly*. Edited By Raúl Homero Villa and George J. Sánchez. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. 357 pp. \$19.95 paper.)  
Reviewed by Allison Varzally.

The compelling question that engages the contributors to *Los Angeles and the Future of Urban Cultures*, a special issue of the *American Quarterly*, inspired by the journal’s recent relocation to the University of Southern California, is “How, in other words, can we best know this place called Los Angeles?” (p. 3). The answers offered suggest not only the affection of authors from a range of disciplinary backgrounds for the Pacific Coast city and the maturation of Los Angeles studies but a concern for the interplay between the particular and general, the local and global. The authors do not gaze upon Los Angeles from the lofty heights of central city skyscrapers, police helicopters, or the Malibu Hills. Nor do they treat L.A. as the creation of disconnected and abstracted economic and political forces. Alternatively, their L.A. is an inhabited city where diverse groups actively engage with capitalism and globalization. They look upon the global city from a variety of grounded sites—art galleries, dance clubs, streets, parks, housing developments, freeway underbelly—where “the everyday problems and promise of urban life are played out” (p. 3). Thanks to the proliferation and recognition of Los Angeles-based studies in the past ten years, these writers are largely freed from debates about whether the city is a “worthy” or exceptional locale. Instead they focus upon Los Angeles in order to “draw attention to the current practices and strategies in the field of American studies more broadly” (p. 3).