OUT OF THE BARRIO: STELLA POPE DUARTE’S *LET THEIR SPIRITS DANCE*

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We're all children off on an adventure, Americans who have never seen America. (Duarte, *Let Their Spirits Dance* 153)

We've got mainstream American traveling with us now. . . . (274)

In visualizing the setting of *Let Their Spirits Dance* (2002), Stella Pope Duarte immerses readers in the history of Phoenix in relation to the movement of ethnic groups across complex racial and ethnic lines. In large measure, this movement makes an important iconographic use of the physical layout of Phoenix.

Washington Street is a main thoroughfare that cuts across the city of Phoenix from East to West; on the east it ends at the entrance to the suburb of Tempe, and on the west, once you get past the state capitol complex, it peters out into just another residential street. However, in the central corridor, where the original financial district is still located and where the state capitol is located, along with buildings for the City of Phoenix, Maricopa Country, and the federal administrative district, Washington Street is important enough to be a broad one-way street (moving traffic from east to west). At Central Avenue it creates the ground zero for the numbering system that locks Phoenix into the almost perfect geometric grid that has been respected even with the enormous demographic growth in the past fifty years: for example, all numbered avenues still lie to the west, and numbered streets to the east of Central; numbering north of Washington is designated North, while numbering
south is designation as South.

The designation of Washington Street goes back to a jejunely patriotic America in which it was frequent for a central plat to be distinguished by the names of the U.S. presidents: in the case of Phoenix, this section of town must have been done in the first decade of the last century, since Theodore Roosevelt is the last president so remembered. Moreover, the person responsible for the designation of streets had the novel, is not very mnemonic idea, of alternating streets north-south between at least a first round of presidents, as Adams is one block north of Washington, Jefferson one block south; yet Monroe lies two blocks north, and Madison two blocks south, despite the fact that pattern logic would have it the other way around.

Whatever the curiously logic of the arrangement of these streets may have been, this presidential constellation, which accounts for a band almost a mile in north-south depth on the city map, constitutes a symbolic swath, an institutional Anglo-American border in which is located the historic core of modern Phoenix, north of which stretch the successive residential districts of the historic ruling bourgeoisie, and south of which lies the no man's land of ethnic margination.¹ Although today, up against and around South Mountain, which marks the southern edge of the so-called Valley of the Sun where Phoenix lies, there is now a bundle of middle-class residential areas that have leap-frogged over the ethnic neighbor-

¹South Phoenix is given little more than passing reference in Luckingham's *Phoenix* (94, 98) and, as one might expect, none in his coffee table book, *Discovering Greater Phoenix.*
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hoods, there remains the ideological perception that the Phoenix south of the downtown frontier is somehow on the fringes of where the city has gone, which is, literally and in urban terms, north of that frontier. And, while it is true that many things are now happening that have moved the ethnic neighborhoods north just as the white bourgeoisie is taking over the south, with the possibility that those neighborhoods in time will be absorbed, the mental image of many Phoenicians continues to preserve the north-south divide represented by the Washington Street corridor.

In the case of Phoenix's Chicano community (in actually, now more of a Latino community, as a consequence of the extensive infusions of individuals of Hispanic descent from all over the Americas), although there are large historical communities still tied to the old agricultural areas to the west of the city (which are increasingly disappearing under the onslaught of urban sprawl), south of downtown Phoenix, south of the railroad tracks that cut through the "presidential band," and immediately north and south of the now dry bed of the Rio Salado that cuts east and west through the Valley of the Sun is the locus of what is perceived to be Hispanic Phoenix. Parts of this area, particularly south of the Rio Salado, are also African-American, this ethnic group having come in as part of the services and armed forces contingent during World War II and remaining, completely with their own segregated high school immediately south of downtown; there is also an Asian-American presence.

Duarte's *Let Their Spirits Dance* takes place in what the Chicano community calls La Sonorita and what urban planners have more customarily referred to as the Grant Park District, because of a park in the area of that name (Pancrazio; Reynolds). La Sonorita, which is the oldest Chicano barrio in Phoenix, goes back to the early twentieth century, and many of the houses built in that area, houses whose minimalist architecture is well suited to the Sonoran Desert climate, are still standing and in use today. With the growth of the Phoenix core, what used to be a skyline of a few large buildings (the twelve-story Luhrs
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Tower, built in 1930, was for decades the tallest building in the Southwest; a building to the east in the next block that is now called Barrister Square was used for the opening sequence of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* [1950]), with a band of warehouses and factories contributing to the physical divide between north and south, is now an increasing dense outline of the sort of skyscrapers associated with the development of a major commercial center like Phoenix. However, with dreadful irony, given the demographics of the American prison population, what most dominates immediately the line of vision as one looks north to the city from La Sonorita, is the Madison Street Jail, a veritable monument to the incarceration mentality that remains part of a residual frontier mind-set still firmly entrenched in Arizona.

Duarte's novel is the first major Chicano novel--the first novel to be published by a mainline American press--to take place in downtown Phoenix and to evoke the lives of this now deeply historical district of the city. *Let Their Spirits Dance* is also a novel about the effects of the Viet Nam War on a Chicano family. Sgt. Jesse A. Ramírez was killed in Viet Nam, less than a year after having been sent to the front. Although the novel is more concerned with the effects of his death on his family, there are chapters that focus on his experiences in Viet Nam, and his letters to his sister are reproduced in the novel. At the end of the novel, we learn that Jesse had married a Vietnamese woman, who eventually made it to California with her son, and she, hers and Jesse's son, and his son are reunited with the Ramírez family at the end of the novel.
It is evident that the novel wishes to evoke a Christological dimension for Jesse, beginning with his name.\textsuperscript{2} The time of the Viet Nam war was, as is well known, the time of civil unrest in the United States, particularly with regard to racial discrimination against people of color. There was the wide-spread belief that one dimension of the Administration's pursuit of the Viet Nam War was because it provided the opportunity to ship off to the Southeast Asian jungle young men "from the ghetto," thereby removing some of the agents of the extensive unrest of the period (see Trujillo for studies on Chicanos and Viet Nam). Concomitantly, there was the feeling that men of color paid a higher price than white recruits: not only where the officers in the field mostly white, but their troops of color were far more likely than white soldiers to be in the murderous front lines, being killed and doing the killing\textsuperscript{3}:

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 maps. Chicanos, who had never been thought about before were on the list of draftees. . . . This was a game that said, We're going to

\textsuperscript{2}Mexicans with the name of Jesús, which was offensive to Anglo sensibilities when pronounced in English, often say their name changed to Jesse, and many Chicanos ended up, officially or otherwise, with Jesse as their name rather than the more Hispanic Jesús (María, by contrast, never provided a problem when pronounced in English).

\textsuperscript{3}I have been unable to identify any study dealing with the representation of the Viet Nam conflict in Chicano literature, although numerous Chicano texts refer to the conflict. Another important novel by a woman is Gina Valdés's \textit{There Are No Madmen Here} (1981; rev. 1996).
pay you for being over there, and if you don't want to go, we'll draft you any-
way. So why don't you join up and avoid all the trouble? (56)

One of the significant geographical fault lines of the novel, therefore, involves the
correlation between the barrio and Viet Nam. The narrator--who is Jesse's sister Teresa--
describes the family trip to Sky Harbor Airport to see Jesse off; she has the presentment that
he will never return alive, which only serves to enhance his image as a sacrificial victim to
yet another exercise in *gabacho* imperialism. The movement from El Cielito to Viet Nam is,
conceptually, a lateral one. It is not so much that the barrio is a "war zone": the novel en-
gages in a delicate balance between portraying the social and economic margination of life
on the Chicano side of the tracks, while at the same time underscoring time and again the
complex humanity, with both the good and the bad, of barrio life. Yet, the barrio is marginal
to mainstream American life: as the quote above states, it wasn't even on U.S. government
maps--just as the Viet Nam villages soldiers like Jesse were sent to weren't on any govern-
ment maps either--not, at least, until they were ready to be bombed.

Such a lateral move from one realm
of subaltermity to another is an important
thematic axis of the novel, and both poles are
united in the marriage of Jesse to a Vietnam-
ese woman. Moreover, when Teresa and her
family go to see Jesse off, they still remain
below the frontier dividing the barrio from the Anglo city, as Sky Harbor International was
built along the river bottom, a reasonable location, but one that displaced traditional neigh-
brhoods of people of color. Indeed, as I write this, the Barrios Unidos neighborhood,
which lies to the east of the area in which Duarte's novel is set, is targeted for elimination,
as Sky Harbor plans for the extension from the east of its runways. In this way, Sky Harbor,
which is a major symbol of the modern development of the Phoenix metropolitan area, located in the heart of neighborhoods of color, is the point of reference from the transference of Jesse from one subaltern realm to another: the transference is initially a destructive one—he is sent to kill the Vietnamese opposition—but it becomes a beneficent one, as he forges a relationship with a Vietnamese woman that lasts beyond the grave and constitutes an important second-degree symbolic return of his spirit to the El Cielito barrio.

When Jesse was killed, the Ramírez family was supposed to receive his remains and a $10,000 indemnification. Not only was his body first sent to the wrong address (an effective correlative of how the government is incapable of keeping track of its minority citizens\(^4\)), until finally it is laid to rest properly in the barrio. Since Jesse's remains do return to the barrio, the recovery of his Vietnamese family and what one assumes will be their eventual visit to El Cielito constitute a return in a second-degree of Jesse's spirit to his place of origin.

Additionally, his mother was only paid half of the indemnification she was owed; since she did not know how much she was supposed to have received, it never occurred to her to reclaim the missing half. Yet, the machinery of the bureaucracy is implacable, less toward righting a wrong than in correcting the imbalances on its books. As a consequence, one day Alicia Ramírez receives a phone call from an official to inform her that they have finally caught the error (over thirty years after the fact), and that they will be sending her a check for the amount plus compound interest--almost $100,000 in all.

The receipt of this money becomes the major catalyst for the second half of the novel, which is driven by Jesse's mother's unshakable conviction that the money should be used to enable the entire family, including Jesse's friends, to travel to Washington, D.C. to visit

\(^4\)Except, of course, those who go through the prison system.
Duarte's description of this highly charged journey across America, with all of the resonance of the discovery of the American heartland, unfolds with full rhetorical panache. Duarte sees this journey as symbolic on several levels. First and obviously, there is the reaffirmation of Jesse's spirit through access to his immortalization--along with that of thousands of other Chicanos and Latinos--in the Viet Nam War Memorial, the Wall. Second, there is the consolidation of the extended Ramírez family through the emotional intensity of the experience: Mrs. Ramírez may die, having fulfilled her final burning wish to see her son's name on the Wall, but many conflicts within the family have been resolved, relations have been reestablished between the family and old friends of Jesse's, and even Teresa reconnects with a Chicano she had met in the anti-War protests by Hispanics in San Francisco: there is the promise that this will be a definitive relationship for her.

Then there is the symbolic value not only of a Chicano family enacting a migratory experience across the map of the country, but in a way that is ennobling to them, in contrast to the way in which migration for most Chicanos--whether up from Mexico or within the United States--is an experience of economic exploitation. This migration of the Ramírez family is a triumphal march across the land. Not only is there the notoriety, ever renewed by television coverage and the internet page maintained by one of the Teresa's precocious young nephews, they also attract attention because of the way in which the government has
corrected its debt with them: this is the stuff of urban legend. Moreover, there is the way in which they accrue fellow travelers who each have their own reason to join the caravan.

Finally, all of this culminates in a Hispanic self-affirmation on/over the land: the Ramírezes are a Chicano family that has become famous, and in pursuing their collective dream, they attract to themselves a wide array of citizens for whom their story becomes a major point of reference for their own personal experiences. That is, in a word, this one paradigmatic Chicano story emerges, in the universe of the novel, as a narrative—perhaps even mythic—prototype for many others to adhere to. The narrator waxes quite epiphanic in her sense of the culminating meaning of such an adventure, hearing her mother sing, upon their arrival in the nation’s capital, for the first time since Jesse’s death:

My mother's voice is rushing in my ears, and I never want her to stop, not now, not ever. Her voice is my lullaby again, caressing my soul. We round the corner onto Constitution Avenue and see the Capitol loom ahead of us, imposing, regal. On either side are buildings that belong to the Smithsonian, some with American flags waving from entrances and front lawns. The cavalcade of cars curves behind us with my mother’s voice announcing to the nation’s capital that we are here, the Mexicas of Aztlán, to pay honor to their fallen warriors. (292)

In the process of working this narrative out, Duarte figures a new geographical relationship between Phoenix, the barrio, and the nation. The axis of this relationship is the conceptual field of "Washington." The physical journey from El Cielito to the nation’s capital is not only a family odyssey that is a multiple recovery of the lost son/brother Jesse, but it becomes also a symbolic enterprise that details the bases for another degree of integration of the Chicano community, on an immediate level, but as well the Latino community and even the broader community of people of color, into the so-called American mainstream. In the
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process of coming out of the barrio to undertake their journey, the Ramírez's and their friends are inserting themselves in the vast landscape of the United States, literally by traversing it and symbolically by mastering it.

This voyage involves effectively making their way across America, negotiating the details of their itinerary, confronting a potential ugly encounter with a redneck policeman, manipulating the internet to obtain information, to confirm alliances (one of which turns out to be Jesse's Vietnamese family), and to manipulate television coverage to their advantage. Jesse himself had left the barrio, but under military authority and in a way that impeded his having any control over his own life, so much so that he very promptly loses it, ostensibly defending his country. The Ramírez family's journey is their own freely chosen experience of discovery (albeit driven by Jesse's mother's sense of fulfilling a manda, an order received in a vision from God that cannot be ignored or postponed). In the process they assert over and over again their control of their own experiences and destiny:

La manda, my mother's promise, is changing our landscape forever. It's suffering in motion. We're carrying our burdens on our backs as our Indian ancestors did, adjusting the weight every once in a while to make ourselves feel better. Suffering is our map, it's why we're on the road. Men and women in pain stand close to Christ, the man of sorrow; every procession at St. Anthony's taught us that. We wouldn't be on the road if it weren't for war and suffering. We're part of some unearthly plan to balance the scales of suffering, to release a spring in our souls that will free us from the fear of suffering. (165)

While the narrator is clearly using "landscape" in this quote in a metaphorical sense, there is also a literal dimension in the traversing of the landscape, a dimension that assumes its own symbolic meaning in the dynamic of the novel.
One aspect of this literal dimension is the first immediate stage of leaving the barrio. Duarte, evoking Arizona writer Miguel Méndez-M. groundbreaking Chicano novel, *Peregrinos de Aztlán* (1979), gives its name to the chapter describing their departure from Phoenix, "Pilgrims of Aztlán," which is the title of the published English translation of Méndez-M.'s novel. This departure not only involves leaving the barrio, but it also involves crossing over the frontier between the barrio and downtown Phoenix. This is necessary in order to pick up Interstate 17 (here identified by its local name, the Black Canyon Highway), which runs through Phoenix to the west of the downtown area on its way north, which is the route to be followed in order to pick up the connecting interstate highways that will take them on into Washington, D.C. While the novel is appropriately vague as to what inner-city route will lead them to the freeway entrance (after all, the narrator is not interest in giving a geography lesson about Phoenix), I-17 cuts through the barrio east-west as it comes up from Tucson, before turning north. By following this route out of the barrio, the caravan necessarily traverses--actually, by freeway, leaps over--what I have called the barrier of the presidential band of streets that broadly separates historical Anglo Phoenix from Chicano Phoenix, the Phoenix of color.

Since the anchor street of this presidential band is Washington Street, by crossing over it within minutes of setting out from their home, the Ramírez family engages unknowingly (since no one in the novel remarks on the coincidence) is a symbolic gesture of leaving the barrio in order to accede to the unknown America (cf. my epigraphic quote taken from this same chapter) beyond the barrio. The odyssey-like nature of this journey is captured in the closing words of the chapter of departure, with a re-evocation of the highly
charged title of that chapter:

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 faith will get us there. (157)

Duarte's novel is neither a novel about Phoenix, except only in passing at the outset; nor is it only circumstantially set in Phoenix. The story she tells has many autobiographical dimensions, and she has made it clear that the novel is written in part as a tribute to her own family and her own experiences of growing up in the Sonorita barrio south of downtown Phoenix. As befits a novelistic undertaking, Duarte engages in verifiable identities for her setting, while at the same time engaging in poetic license. The long-time resident of Phoenix will recognize the reference to the Black Canyon Highway and to St. Anthony's Catholic Church in the Sonorita barrio, as well as to presence to the west of the railroad tracks and the city's pioneering days cemetery (Pioneer and Military Memorial Park, where Jesse's remains finally come to rest). But the name of the barrio is fictional, and the name of the neighborhood school were Teresa teaches (Duarte is also herself a public school teacher) is changed. There is little direct evocation of Phoenix outside the barrio: it is simply there as the overwhelming Other of barrio life, the Anglo world that intrudes on and disrupts in so many ways the pursuit of local existence. That disruption is sustainedly there in terms of the long arm of the law that impacts so much on Chicano lives and sends so many Chicano men and women to prison (as captured in films like Edward James Olmos's American Me [1992] and Allison Anders's Mi vida loca [1993]). This is why I have emphasized the visually imposing presence of the Madison Street Jail and the long--symbolic, if not actual--shadow it
casts over the barrio. In one sense, Duarte's novel could be set anywhere in the many places in the United States where there is a historically significant concentration of Chicano life. By placing *Let Their Spirits Dance* in her native Phoenix, Duarte has provided her native city and her native barrio with the first major urban Chicano novel in Phoenix's still lamentably thin literary history. Most significantly, in setting up the dynamics of meaning in the novel to enhance the depiction of the momentous movement of Chicano life into one dimension of the American mainstream, here embodied by Jesse's Viet Nam War experience, the Wall, and the epiphanic journey across America to enter into a new level of memory regarding Jesse through seeing his name on the Wall and tracing it on a piece of paper, Duarte makes a judicious use of the material aspects of the city of Phoenix. It is a utilization that contributes directly and effectively to the eloquence of her novel.

**REFERENCES**


Reynolds, Jean. "'We Knew Our Neighbors, and It was Like One Family': The History of the Grant Park Neighborhood, 1880-1950." October 1, 1999, for the City of Phoe-


Note: Photographs of La Sonorita barrio by the author; map fragment from Thomas Guide to Phoenix and Tucson; digital edition.