VIVIENDO EN EL OLVIDO ...

The “war on terror” is trumpeted on every public corner, but the actual soldiers who have been dispatched to fight it out in Iraq inhabit the “blind spot” of our civic consciousness, only to jolt it every so often, through a revelation of an “unauthorized” incident of torture. They kill and are killed, they suffer and make others suffer, mental illness steps in as a reprieve of sorts. Hundreds return maimed, or in coffins, or, at best, with horrendous nightmares, broken spirits, unspeakable feelings, silenced experiences. Many are Latino/as. Most went to war to make their families proud, to make themselves proud, to make their country proud. But once back, who still cares why they left? Meager social service assistance is offered to those who are now discharged. The majority has to fight to get health care, mental health assistance. Most depend on their close ones to make sense of it all, of their war experience, of their prospects for the future, of their ability to see their place in the greater picture...

Often, only just returned, they are subjected to none-too-subtle pressures to go back to combat. Some have refused to return – soldiers like Camilo Mejia and Pablo Paredes, for example. The former was court-martialed and spent 9 months in jail last year. In a statement at his court martial, Paredes explained why he refused to return to Iraq, stating:

“I am convinced that the current war in Iraq is illegal. I am also convinced that the true causality for it lacked any high ground in the topography of morality. I believe as a member of the Armed Forces, beyond having duty to my Chain of Command and my President, I have a higher duty to my conscience and to the supreme law of the land. Both of these higher duties dictate that I must not participate in any way, hands-on or indirect, in the current aggression that has been unleashed on Iraq. In the past few months I have been continually asked if I regret my decision to refuse to board my ship and to do so publicly. I have spent hour upon hour reflecting on my decision, and I can tell you with every fiber of certitude that I possess that I feel in my heart I did the right thing.”

Paredes was convicted in May 2005, but in what is considered a victory for all those who view this war as illegal, he was not sentenced to jail, but rather to 3 months of hard labor. Nevertheless, like others, soldiers such as Mejia and Paredes continue to be criminalized for refusing to compact with state-sponsored criminality...

Of course, there are those who cling hard to a stance of denial. For them, victory is always around the corner and “all is well in the best of all possible worlds.” For them society *is* caring for its wounded soldiers, it *is* trying to support them as they reintegrate into daily life again. As Homer said a very long time ago, “justice is the first to flee the camp of the victors.” It has always been easy to justify the suffering of others and to open wide the gates of generous rhetoric, while keeping tight the strings of the public purse and one’s own heart...

The soldiers of course are not the only ones currently living *en el olvido*. There are others in our society who are suffering from the growing inhumanity of our institutions – the poor, the unemployed, the undocumented, the thousands who are being incarcerated every day – again, many of them are Latinos. Yes, prisoners too live in *el olvido*. In fact they are the quintessential example of *los olvidados* – the forgotten. As one Latino in a New York prison recently put it: *Lo peor de estar aquí adentro no es la falta de libertad. Es saber que uno vive en el olvido*. (The worst part about being in here isn’t the lack of freedom. It is knowing that we live in the oblivion of others...)

It is essential that we stay alert, that we remember. Memory and gendered representations are major themes in the articles in this issue, which also includes both a special section of Reflexiones Pedagógicas on Latino/as in Higher Education and an account of history through the murals of the Puerto Rican community of Chicago. Whether it is privileging the body as “a site and a mechanism” in the construction of collective memory as Kelli Lyon Johnson argues in her article on US Latinas’ literary representations of the 1980s Civil War in El Salvador; whether it is through Isabel Molina Guzmán’s assessment of the ways in which the media mediates the society’s gendered understanding of the Cuban community, as well as, more generally Latino/a politics and identity, such that these gendered and racialized representations actually shape the Cuban community’s experience; or whether it is analyzing the extent to which discourses on Latinas’ gender and sexuality contribute toward negatively shaping the context within which decisions on sexual practices are made, as Patricia Zavella and Xóchitl Castañeda’s article suggests – the struggle to make Latino/as known in the US context, as citizens and as human beings, requires the constant scrutiny of this society’s memory and the recognition of the millions of Latino/as who are shaped by it and actively contribute toward its (re)construction.

Saludos!

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