

## WORLD WAR II AND VIETNAM WAR IN POETRY: CHARLES SIMIC AND YUSEF

## KOMUNYAKAA AS EYEWITNESSES

Ketlyn Mara Rosa

*Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina*

Janaina Mirian Rosa

*Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina*

**ABSTRACT:** This article aims to bring a discussion related to eyewitness experiences in the works of two North American poets, Charles Simic and Yusef Komunyakaa, during war times. Simic's contact with the destruction of the Second World War serves as a background that inherently connects itself with his essays and poems. The traumatic experiences of devastation and violence remain as pivotal themes in the search for the "unimportant events" that constitute a history focused on the journey of the individual. Komunyakaa is linked to Simic by the horrifying circumstances of war but differentiated by decades in his experiences in the Vietnam War. As a soldier, his participation in the combat zone allows him to have an eyewitness perspective of the fragility of life.

**KEYWORDS:** Charles Simic, Yusef Komunyakaa, eyewitness, Second World War, Vietnam War.

**RESUMO:** Este artigo tem como objetivo discutir as experiências como testemunhas oculares nas obras de dois poetas Norte-Americanos, Charles Simic e Yusef Komunyakaa, durante períodos de guerra. O contato de Simic com a destruição durante a Segunda Guerra Mundial serve como base inerente aos seus ensaios e poemas. As experiências traumáticas de devastação e violência são temas cruciais na procura pelos chamados "eventos sem importância" que constituem uma história focada na jornada do indivíduo. Komunyakaa está conectado à Simic pelas horríveis circunstâncias de guerra, mas separado por décadas em suas experiências na Guerra do Vietnã. Como soldado, sua participação na zona de combate permite que o poeta tenha uma perspectiva de testemunha ocular da fragilidade da vida.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Charles Simic, Yusef Komunyakaa, testemunha ocular, Segunda Guerra Mundial, Guerra do Vietnã.

Throughout the history of humankind, violent combats have generated discussions about the nature of these conflicts and their impact in society. The cruelty and violence generated as a result of these warfare encounters have damaged those who experienced such situations up-close as soldiers from different nations, civilian victims of the cruel acts, and also the general public affected by the consequences of living in a violent world. Patricia Pinnock explains in her book *Skyline* what might possibly resemble to her a definition of war: "It is with you always, war, waiting to explode

your life and throw you down beside a river to die. War wants death, always; war wants to quiet your mother's songs. War wants your sorrow" (PINNOCK, 2000: 15). In this highly traumatized description of a war conflict, it is possible to notice the effect during and after the violent acts, the pain inflicted in the moment and the afterward losses that will come with it. Either from the military side or the civilian perspective, war becomes a moment in a person's life in which values are modified and lives are lost or deeply changed. Thus, the objective of this article is to discuss the ideas generated by the works of Charles Simic and Yusef Komunyakaa in relation to their characteristics as eyewitnesses of war experiences, connecting to the idea of "unimportant events" developed by Simic.

Since war and history are two notions that are highly interwoven, it is relevant to explore the idea of history and its ramifications. Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* comments on the changes throughout the years regarding the understanding of the term history. Foucault mentions that during the nineteenth century, the notion of continuity in history was shattered, as he states:

We are usually inclined to believe that the nineteenth century [...] paid closer attention to human history, that the idea of an order or a continuous level of time was abandoned, as well as that of an uninterrupted progress, and that the bourgeoisie, in attempting to recount its own ascension, encountered, in the calendar, the historical density of institutions, the specific gravity of habits and beliefs, the violence struggles, the alteration of success and failure. [...] By the fragmentation of the space over which Classical knowledge extended in its continuity, by the folding over of each separated domain upon its own development, the man who appears at the beginning of the nineteenth century is 'dehistoricized' (FOUCAULT, 1994: 368-369).

Regarding the issue of historical fragmentation, Foucault points out that after the history of the positivities, that is, the monumental history as an epic chronicle, a history related to man was brought to discussion, as he argues:

Thus, behind the history of the positivities, there appears another, more radical, history, that of man himself—a history that now concerns man's very being, since he now realizes that he not only 'has history' all around him, but is himself, in his own historicity, that by means of which a history of human life, a history of economics, and a history of languages are given their form. (FOUCAULT, 1994: 370)

The focus on the history of the individual stands not as a sign of isolation but as a characteristic that will pervade all other human sciences. Foucault explains that with history other sciences are able to have a background and a safe area to stand (FOUCAULT, 1994: 371). Nevertheless, history also challenges the delimited territory of human sciences in terms of their "validity within the element of universality" (FOUCAULT, 1994: 371).

Another critic that discusses the repercussions of the notion of history is James Longenbach in *Modernist Poetics of History*. In his book, he comments on the concept of "existential historicism" and its major critics, such as Wilhelm Dilthey (LONGENBACH, 1987: 9). Longenbach points out the emphasis "that history is a living part of the present that cannot be destroyed; to live, for the existential historian, is to live historically" (LONGENBACH, 1987: 10). He explains that for poets such as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot "the present is nothing more than the sum of the entire past—a palimpsest, a complex tissue of historical remnants" (LONGENBACH, 1987: 11). The acknowledgement of the actions of the past, either remote or contemporary, is of extreme importance in order to better understand its reverberations into the present.

Moreover, as a Second World War survivor, Charles Simic has pointed out and discussed several particularities in relation to the conflict's portrayal, especially in poetry. One of his main notions is the "unimportant event" which can be exemplified in his essay "Poetry and History" as "a dead cat, say, lying in the rubble of a bombed city, rather than the rationale for that air campaign" (SIMIC, 1997: 36). It can be understood as a very straightforward example that visually conveys a significant idea related to the suffering and traumas during war times. The attention is not turned to the military operation that released the bomb, but in the individual casualty that it caused. Simic then continues by stating:

Poetry succeeds at times in conveying the pain of individuals caught in the wheels of history. One of the most terrifying lines of twentieth-century poetry is by the Italian poet Salvatore Quasimodo, who speaks of "the black howl of the mother gone to meet her son crucified on a telephone pole." (SIMIC, 1997: 36)

The focus on the use of individual stories that are inserted into major events in history shows the desire to look for the most effective ways to portray stories of pain that otherwise would be lost in the vast ocean of historical data.

In his essay "Notes on Poetry and History", Simic confirms the idea that he is interested in the history of the individual when stating that he prefers "Sappho rather than Homer as model" (SIMIC, 1997: 127). The Greek author Homer is well known for his epic works *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Homer's epic conflicts, such as the Trojan War in *The Iliad*, highlight the importance of the grandeur of history accounts, which is precisely what Simic is not concerned as a poet. On the other hand, Sappho, also a Greek poet as Homer, would have a different approach regarding the individual in her work. The poet would be more interested in human emotions, early discussing the

issues of gender and sexuality, as Thomas Habinek in *Re-reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission* emphasizes:

The increasing empowerment of women, with the resultant interest in women's history, women's writing, and women's "way of knowing", has accounted for the focus on Sappho as the first female writer in Western tradition whose works have survived in any quantity [...] As proto-queer, Sappho raises comparable issues with respect to sexual orientation: is she the recovered voice of a long-suppressed lesbian consciousness or does she instead invite us to consider alternative ways of categorizing human sexual behaviors and emotions? (HABINEK, 1996: xii)

In fact, what generated the discussion on Homer and Sappho in Simic's aforementioned essay was the fact that the poet was addressing the contrast of both the historian and the poet's responsibilities. The historian would be in charge of collecting and finding connections among events, whereas the poet would be concerned with "the history of 'unimportant' events" (SIMIC, 1997: 126). Thus the historian keeps himself or herself distant from the individuality of facts, as opposed to the poet whose task is to be involved by the same individuality avoided by historians. Simic points out that as a poet he "want[s] to experience the vulnerability of those participating in tragic events" (SIMIC, 1997: 126). The author is then referring to the very same term he proposes, the "history of 'unimportant' events" (SIMIC, 1997: 126), which is related to the account of the individual experiences, especially those ones that seem irrelevant to the eyes of the world.

Furthermore, in the essay "Poetry and History", Simic discusses the role of the poet regarding his or her involvement in the suffering of others. Bearing in mind the issue of deaths in wars, Simic reflects on the absurd ideology of war conflicts when he states that "the problem for those constructing heaven on earth is that there is always an individual, a class of people, or a

national ethnic, or religious group standing in the way" (SIMIC, 1997: 35). His main target concerning such reflection, however, is the poet himself of herself. For this reason, Simic raises a question that is related to the distance of poetry from discussing issues regarding worldwide events, and the impact they might have in one's existence (SIMIC, 1997: 35). Unfortunately, as he answers his own question, it appears that in some instances poetry seems to be far from being involved in such matters, as he states that "there are many examples of poets who, judging by their work, never read a newspaper in their lives" (SIMIC, 1997: 35). He continues by calling the poets' attention to concentrate on what he considers reasonable issues in poetry, as he claims that a poet lives in a "fool's paradise" when he or she "ignores the evil and injustices" that surround them (SIMIC, 1997: 35).

As regards his essay "Orphan Factory", Simic relates a very personal instance in his life that was affected by the war in Europe. On April 6, 1941, a building next to where he lived was bombed, and the blast from the explosion hit his house (SIMIC, 1997: 23). His history with bombs and explosions was just in the beginning since he would still be in war territory for many years to come. According to H. P. Willmott, Robin Cross, and Charles Messenger in *World War II*, on that particular day Belgrade was being bombed by the German Luftwaffe, the aerial warfare branch, as part of what was called "Operation Punishment" (WILLMOTT; CROSS; MESSENGER, 2009: 93). A week after the massive attack from the Axis and the Yugoslavian capital was already completely occupied. Throughout his poems, Simic contemplates life around him as it is immersed into the massive and brutal conflicts of war that involved the participation of the five continents.

Simic comments on the issue of the common practice of bombing and attacking cities in his essay "Poetry and History". Simic traces back the level of mass terror in comparison to contemporary times, as he states that "in the days of mounted cavalries, foot soldiers, and cannons dragged by horses, the civilian population had to worry about a long siege, eventual conquest with

accompanying pillage and rape, and an occasional burning of a city [...]" (SIMIC, 1997: 36). He continues by pointing the difficulties of bombing a city some centuries ago. According to Simic, in 1849, the Austrians tried to bomb the city of Venice by means of paper balloons. The wind, however, was too strong and blew away the paper balloons, and the city of Venice was safe again (SIMIC, 1997: 37). In contrast to contemporary times, in which technology and the greediness of leaders merge into a deadly combination, bombing and attacking a city is no longer an unthinkable idea, as Simic states that:

Nowadays, whether conventional or nuclear bombs are being utilized, everyone expects to be a sitting duck. Mass terror on a scale impossible to imagine in previous centuries is a real possibility, an option carefully studied by every military power in the world. (SIMIC, 1997: 37)

It is not necessary to go too far to illustrate Simic's arguments. The recent conflicts involving countries in the Middle East area are valuable examples. The unpredictability of bomb explosions and targets lead to the idea that civilians are highly exposed to such dangers. Ironically, Simic observes that in a war it is safer to be part of the military service than to be a civilian, since it seems that the sides which are fighting the war have allied against the civilians (SIMIC, 1997: 38). By commenting on the absurdities of war, both past and contemporary ones, Simic puts himself in the position of being involved in the issues that surround him; in other words, he reflects on the "evil and injustices" (SIMIC, 1997: 35) of others, which is exactly the characteristic he considers essential in a poet.

Furthermore, Simic in "Poetry and History" comments on the effect of the large numbers of casualties in wars. These numbers may indeed be shocking ones, but in fact they cannot be truly reliable (SIMIC, 1997: 38). Simic claims that "bombing history plays games with numbers to

conceal the fate of individuals. The deaths of women and children are an embarrassment" (SIMIC, 1997: 38). Therefore, the numbers of casualties certainly vary according to the source and the final purpose of the inquiry (SIMIC, 1997: 38). Besides, as Simic points out, the usual reaction to large numbers of casualties is of incomprehension, since those numbers are similar to "astronomical distances or the speed of light" (SIMIC, 1997: 38). However, a casualty number such as "100,001" would cause different reactions. The individuality would then be taken into consideration, as Simic states that:

A figure like 100,000 conveys horror on an abstract level. It is a rough estimate since no one really knows for sure. It is easily forgotten, easily altered. A number like 100,001, on the other hand, would be far more alarming. That alone, additionally would restore the reality to the thousands of casualties. (SIMIC, 1997: 39)

The personal issues of injustice and atrocities in war can be seen, for instance, in Simic's poem entitled "Prodigy", in which he uses the figure of a chessboard and the masters to address such subjects. By calling attention to a very specific moment in his life, that is located in the poem by the year of 1944, Simic situates the poem in the Second World War and gives the context from which his message can be understood. He then focuses on the "unimportant event" of playing chess. However, the action of playing chess has an important subtext in terms of manipulation in times of war:

In chess, too, the professor told me,  
the masters play blindfolded,  
the great ones on several boards  
at the same time. (SIMIC, 1990: 139)



This description fits the idea of the chessboard implying the world and the masters standing for the people and the military personnel who make the decisions during war times. They are blindfolded, therefore cannot see the details and do not realize that their moves have colossal impacts on people's lives. The death and suffering caused by their decisions do not affect their political or financial agenda. War goes on without serious care for its participants, whether soldiers or civilians, or the atrocities that are being generated. Simic's portrayal of war through the extremely personal experience of playing chess as a child can be seen as a memory that otherwise would be taken for granted, but in the end says more about the act of killing and cold strategies than any explanation of a military operation.

Simic relates his eyewitness experience in another poem that starts with "My mother was a braid of black smoke" (SIMIC, 1989: 3). In this poem, Simic conveys the reality of war through a series of surreal images that relate to his history as a survivor. The line "She bore me swaddled over the burning cities" (SIMIC, 1989: 3) shows the destruction and devastation caused by war and the image of the mother protecting the child in any possible way. His eyewitness tone can be seen through "We met many others who were just like us / They were trying to put their overcoats with / arms made of smoke" (SIMIC, 1989: 3) as experiences are shared and the images of what happens to bodies during war take shape. There is a mixture of a child's imagination with the adult world when describing the mutilation of the arms and the overcoats. Instead of a romantic view of stars, there is again the visual of mutilation as a consequence of explosions or bombing: "The high heavens were full of little shrunken / deaf ears instead of stars" (SIMIC, 1989: 3).

In addition, the poem "History" brings the irony of the monumental history versus the idea of the unimportant events. By portraying the people who experienced war in this poem, Simic brings together the small details of these people's lives amid the horror of war juxtaposed with the

epic history. The following lines are references to the epic poetry and the heroism in chaotic times that does not fit the real situation in the poem:

Do they speak in heroic couplets as he's dragged  
away looking over his shoulder?  
A few words for that park statue with pigeons  
on it? (SIMIC, 1990: 15)

The organic reaction that might not seem significant enough to address is represented in the lines:

More likely she wipes her eyes and nose with a  
sleeve,  
Asks for a stiff drink, takes her place in the  
breadline. (SIMIC, 1990: 15)

There is no general interest in talking about this "unimportant event". However, it sums up the core of this woman's suffering and portrays how a human being grieves in times of sorrow. This is the perspective of an eyewitness, someone who underwent such conditions, and does not glorify the moment. By not unrealistically exalting or diminishing a personal experience, Simic displays a level of sensibility in relation to the history of the individual.

Another poet that was also an eyewitness to a war conflict and pays great tribute to his individual experiences is Yusef Komunyakaa. His first hand participation in the Vietnam War gives him, similarly to Simic, a unique perspective of the events as a survivor of war. Komunyakaa's work can also be connected to Simic's in relation to their focus on the "unimportant events" as a way to remove oneself from the monumental side of the war and concentrate on the apparent minor details. By highlighting the history of the individual in their works, both authors bring a ground level

perspective that enhances the devastating effects from a personal angle in relation to war conflicts. This focus on individuality distances itself from the general approach taken by epic accounts that tend to overlook the "unimportant events".

Regarding Komunyakaa's historical context, the Vietnam War had many distinctions from the World War II and other conflicts not only in terms of decades and geography. Philip Caputo, in *10,000 Days of Thunder: A History of the Vietnam*, comments on the different aspects:

The war was mostly and unconventional, guerilla conflict fought against an elusive enemy in thick jungles, where it was difficult to see much farther than a few yards in any direction. While certain areas of Vietnam were safer than others, there were no established front lines; the enemy could be behind you as well as in front of you (CAPUTO, 2005: 1).

The impact of Komunyakaa's participation in the Vietnam War is perceived in several of his poems. Bruce Weber writes in an interview for *The New York Times Online*, a comment by Komunyakaa: "It took me 14 years to write poems about Vietnam. I had never thought about writing about it, and in a way I had been systematically writing around it". The impact of such traumatic experiences during war can affect soldiers and participants in psychological and emotional levels decades after the event.

In his poem "We Never Know", Komunyakaa describes the death of a soldier and its effects. The initial lines depict the soldier getting shot in a way that connects with the act of dancing, as follows:

He danced with tall grass  
for a moment, like he was swaying  
with a woman. Our gun barrels

glowed white-hot. (KOMUNYAKAA, 1993: 145)

Such unusual description of a person dying has a strong musical influence and poetic tone. His eyewitness experience is highlighted in the following lines:

When I got to him,  
 a blue halo  
 of flies had already claimed him.  
 I pulled the crumbled photograph  
 from his fingers. (KOMUNYAKAA, 1993: 145)

Once again death is seen through the eyes of a sensible and poetic person who does not describe it in the most brutal and sanguinary way. When there are no words to express one's feelings, in this case about the killing of the soldier and the crumbled picture in his hands, he expresses how he was touched by the scene with simple words: "There's no other way / to say this: I fell in love" (KOMUNYAKAA, 1993: 145). The cliché of the dead soldier holding on to a photograph as he dies is renovated by the intensity of the images portraying his death. The last image is that of dignity, as if in the absurdity of war and its killings, the soldier could still be feeling the ground: "& I turned him over, so he wouldn't be / kissing the ground" (KOMUNYAKAA, 1993: 145). The death of this one particular soldier can be considered an "unimportant event" that matters and has individual consequences, in the midst of thousands of casualties in the Vietnam War.

Being in the battlefield and participating in combat situations can be seen as a true matter of life and death. In the Vietnam War, a soldier's life was extremely fragile, especially due to the fact that the enemies could be located in all directions and the vegetation made visual accuracy a difficult task. In "Thanks", Komunyakaa poetically lists several "unimportant events" that saved his life during his war experiences. Nature is one of the main causes of influence in the military

operations: "Thanks for the tree / between me & a sniper's bullet" (KOMUNYAKAA, 1993: 154), and "Thanks for deflecting the ricochet / against that anarchy of dusk" (KOMUNYAKAA, 1993: 154). His thanks for all the small details that ended up saving his life during the conflicts denotes a sense of a higher power behind all these actions, even if its origin is unknown to him: "I don't know what made the grass / sway seconds before the Viet Cong / raised his soundless rifle" (KOMUNYAKAA, 1993: 154).

In one passage of the aforementioned poem, Komunyakaa touches on a similar subject to that of Simic's "Prodigy" in which "the masters play blindfolded" (SIMIC, 1990: 139). Towards the middle of the poem, Komunyakaa mentions a white flower:

[...] Thanks  
 for the vague white flower  
 that pointed to the gleaming metal  
 reflecting how it is to be broken  
 like mist over the grass,  
 as we played some deadly  
 game for blind gods. (KOMUNYAKAA, 1993: 154)

This part of the poem deals with the subject of injustice and moral righteousness in the war. The white flower, which could be seen as an "unimportant event", was the reason why his attention was called to the danger from the enemy. This was a lucky moment in the middle of a long and exhausting war that could have taken his life away. The leaders, who similar to Simic's "Prodigy" are not aware of the atrocities committed in the field, and if they are, turn a blind eye to the suffering by focusing on the long term investment. The soldiers and civilians are the ones risking their lives by playing deadly games, and surviving by the fluke of a warning reflection or a "dud / hand grenade" (KOMUNYAKAA, 1993: 154).

Another example of Komunyakaa's first-hand experience of combat can be perceived in the poem "Facing It". In this poem, the Vietnam memorial stands as a reminder of the events and the soldiers who perished in the line of duty. The first lines "My black face fades, / hiding inside the black granite" (KOMUNYAKAA, 1993: 159) convey the idea that he is not a mere bystander, but someone who has experienced those instances of war just as the soldiers whose names are there. His involvement is not only on the surface but as an insider, and someone who almost had his life taken by a deadly event in combat. The memorial itself is a celebration of the individual names that are all gathered in a single place. There are specific numbers of casualties, not round as if in statistics: "I go down the 58,022 names" (KOMUNYAKAA, 1993: 159). This focus on individuality makes a difference in the memorial since each one of those soldiers has a particular life and death story.

In conclusion, both poets, Simic and Komunyakaa, have explored their specific life stories in relation to the distinct wars in their own personal way as survivors. Either from the point of view of a civilian on the run from conflict or a soldier rushing towards the enemy, war experiences have and always will shape people's notions of the present and the future. Both authors delve into life stories of suffering during armed conflicts by focusing on "unimportant events" as occurrences that have a major weight on the understanding of human behavior. Their attention to the history of the individual reinforces the significance of human emotions and personal experiences when trying to convey the agonies of war. The powerful effect that such intense moments have in the participants' minds allows artists to translate these unique experiences into instances of poetic beauty and reflection.

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