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Combating Narratives: Soldiering in Twentieth-Century African American and Latinx Literature

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**COMBATING NARRATIVES:
SOLDIERING IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY
AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINX LITERATURE**

A Dissertation Presented

by

STACY REARDON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2022

Department of English

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STACY REARDON

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DEDICATION

For the servicepeople of color who fought carrying a vision of a better world

and

in memory of my grandmother, Enes E. Taglieri and my
grandfather, Michele D. Taglieri, a proud veteran of World War II

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My family has been my backbone. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for all your sacrifices, and Umma and Appa, for embracing me as your daughter. My siblings, nieces,

and nephew are a source of joy. To my grandparents, I miss you more than I can say. Most of all, I am grateful to my husband Daniel for your constant support, inspiration, delight, and love through it all. You are my rock, and you make me a better scholar and a better person.

ABSTRACT

COMBATING NARRATIVES: SOLDIERING IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINX LITERATURE

MAY 2022

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The neglect of the stories of African American and Latinx soldiers of color, combined with the relative absence of direct testimony by such soldiers, is very much on the minds of writers who achieve what Toni Morrison calls a “literary archeology” that fills in the gaps of the historical record. By closely examining John Oliver Killens’s *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, Alfredo Véa’s *Gods Go Begging*, and John Edgar Wideman’s *Two Cities: A Love Story*, in this study I argue that twentieth-century African American and Latinx war fiction penned between the start of the Civil Rights era and 9/11 grapples with the concept of war as fought on two fronts: the official military theatre in which characters struggle alongside and sometimes against their white counterparts, and a metaphorical “war” at home for social justice as equal citizens. The troubled intersections between these two fronts distinguishes this fiction and shapes both its form and themes. I establish ways that African American and Latinx literature of war diverges from what has become canonical American war literature through the critiques each offer of the military, the varied ways each engages tropes of innocence and disillusionment, and their relationship to the concept of authenticity of the foot soldier’s experience.

Through narrative play with memory, elision, time, and realism, these texts plumb, resist, and rewrite themes of citizen imaginaries, gender, transnational longings, conflicted loyalties, and ironic sacrifice, while seeking to people the fictional worlds of war with the voices and experiences of those serving invisibly. I bring transnational, postcolonial, and feminist studies to bear on theorizing these themes, particularly as many of these fictional texts examine the relationship between citizenship, gender, and military participation and contemplate the interconnectedness of national and global racial struggle. As such, I address the scholarly lacuna in the criticism of war literature and examine representations of the U.S. military and wars from the perspective of African American and Latinx writers.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
ABSTRACT	vii
CHAPTER	
INTRODUCTION	1
Fighting for Recognition: Historical Underpinnings of Soldiers of Color in the 20th Century U.S. Military	7
The Criticism of War Literature and Its Discontents: Retooling the Representation of Soldiers	16
No Innocence to Lose: This World Was Never Eden	19
Pride Matters: The Perils of Critiquing a Path to Citizenship	24
The Atypical Soldier: The Soldier Voice in Multiethnic American Literature	28
Chapter Summaries: Toward a Vocabulary of African American and Latinx War Literature	31
1. SOLDIERING INTO CITIZENSHIP	38
The Citizen Imaginary	41
Solly's Quest in <i>And Then We Heard the Thunder</i>	57
The Awakening	73
2. URBAN WARRIORS IN THE WAR BACK HOME	84
The War at Home	85
Crisis of Recognition: Jesse Pasadoble in Vietnam	90
Neighborhood Battles: Calvin in Potrero Hill	97
Desire without Humanity	101
Broken Speedometer: The Insight of the Soldier	106
Supposing: The Alternative Power of the Imagination	116
3. WRITING THE FORGOTTEN SOLDIER	127
The Literary Archaeology of Morrison, Duarte, and Williams	129
Reclaiming the Soldier Voice in <i>Two Cities</i>	134
The Lure of Forgetting and the Resurgence of History	146
In Memoriam	153
CONCLUSION	158

BIBLIOGRAPHY 165

INTRODUCTION

Despite its fourteen-hour length, Ken Burns's seminal 2007 PBS documentary on World War II, *The War*, left out all mention of the contributions of Mexican American soldiers, an elision that the American GI Forum and other Mexican American groups earnestly protested (NBC News 2007). Burns ultimately tacked on a thirty-minute segment before the credits to include footage about Mexican American and Native American soldiers. The glaring oversight remains the rule rather than the exception. Mexican Americans participated in World War II in significant numbers, earning a large number of Medals of Honor. More, Mexican American veteran groups have played an active role in civil politics. Despite these accomplishments, Mexican Americans continue to be unacknowledged in popular histories of the military.

This erasure extends to other minoritized American groups. As argued by Katherine Kinney in *Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War*, African American soldiers often appear in the background of popular representations of the Vietnam War where they serve as little more than markers of historical accuracy or as an injection of local color. Detailed histories of African American servicemen and women who marched in a segregated Army in World War I only to return home to a nation besieged by racial violence, Japanese Americans who fought in World War II while their relatives were imprisoned in internment camps, and Puerto Ricans who joined the American military even while the United States militarily controlled their island appear mainly in specialized studies written to fill in the gaps left in most histories. Similarly, with some important exceptions, scholarly analyses of war literature in large part overlook representation of soldiers of color or provide only passing treatment.

Nevertheless, literary fiction that reclaims the legacy of soldiers of color in the military and unravels the effects of military participation, war, and American imperialism on peoples of color has steadily grown. Whereas the mistrust of the brass, and by extension, the state, disillusionment with military values of patriotism, honor, and sacrifice, and skepticism around masculine bravado that we see in writers like Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, and Tim O'Brien also surface in works by writers of color, the way those issues take shape is intimately bound to a history of colonialism, enslavement, exclusion, and racism, with the result that the tropes, characterizations, and themes in multiethnic American war fiction diverge from that of fiction by white writers. Furthermore, just as war fiction by white writers is rarely "art for art's sake," so too is multiethnic American war literature a partly political venture that, in both celebrating the history of soldiers of color and critiquing visions of racial progress that depend on such participation, is often at odds with itself.

The urgency of bringing recognition to the sacrifices of soldiers of color strongly motivates and informs a multiethnic literature of war. The neglect of the history of soldiers of color, particularly before the Vietnam War, as well as the relative absence of direct testimony by such soldiers, is very much on the minds of twentieth-century writers who attempt in their work what Toni Morrison calls a "literary archeology" to fill in gaps in the historical record. Here, soldiers of color occupy an ironic space, charged as they are with protecting and furthering the interests of a nation that relegates them to second-class citizenship and whose imperial actions against peoples of color around the globe in some ways mirror the targeting of their own communities in the U.S. Drawing on the iconography of battle, some texts metaphorically depict the racial struggles of peoples of

color in terms of war and compare activists and gang members to soldiers. While they seek to inscribe themselves in the citizen imaginary, these soldiers also wrestle with divided allegiances as they uncover previously unrealized transnational connections. In some ways, soldiers of color are fighting not just for their country, but fighting *forward*, toward a new version of it.

In response, this dissertation addresses the scholarly lacuna in the criticism of war literature to examine representations of military service and war from the perspective of African American and Latinx soldiers and communities. I argue that African American and Latinx twentieth-century war fiction penned between the start of the Civil Rights era and 9/11 grapples with the concept of war as fought on two fronts: the official military theatre in which characters struggle alongside and sometimes against their white counterparts, and a metaphorical “war” at home for social justice as equal citizens. The troubled intersections between these two fronts distinguishes this fiction and shapes both its form and themes. Through narrative play with memory, elision, time, and realism, these texts plumb, resist, and rewrite themes of citizen imaginaries, gender, transnational longings, conflicted loyalties, and ironic sacrifice, all while seeking to people the fictional worlds of war with the voices and experiences of those serving invisibly. I bring transnational, postcolonial, and feminist studies to bear on theorizing these themes, particularly as many of these fictional texts examine the relationship between citizenship, gender, and military participation and contemplate the interconnectedness of national and global racial struggle.

In this introduction, I will establish ways that African American and Latinx literature of war diverges from what has become canonical American war literature

through the critiques each offer of the military, the varied ways each engages tropes of innocence and disillusionment, and their relationship to the concept of authenticity of the foot soldier's experience. This analysis is contextualized within a history of twentieth-century participation in the military by soldiers of color, focusing on the personal and social forces that motivated enlistment and the contradictory position soldiers of color inhabited as members of a neo-imperial army. Chapter 1 makes the case for what I refer to as a "citizen imaginary" coded as white and masculine that the characters in John Oliver Killens's *And Then We Heard the Thunder* crash up against, resist, and seek to expand by means of gendered military performance. Chapter 2 argues that Alfredo Vea's *Gods Go Begging* appropriates a "soldiering signifier" to first dramatize the stakes of violence playing out in San Francisco and then, in juxtaposition to veteran characters, goes on to critique models of the masculine citizen in favor of a transnational vision that finds common cause with feminist and queer politics. In Chapter 3, "Writing the Forgotten Soldier," I demonstrate that John Edgar Wideman self-consciously conducts what Toni Morrison terms a "literary archeology" to recuperate the missing voices of African American soldiers in *Two Cities: A Love Story*.

Throughout, the image of the soldier splinters from the honored warrior sanctioned by the state into a diverse repertoire of characters that encompasses militants, revolutionaries, traitors, vigilantes, and gang members. Specifically, I identify three recurring manifestations of the soldier in the texts I examine, all of whom reflect and reflect back on the larger body or community they defend, if not always the one with which they identify. The citizen soldiers who appear in Chapter 1 begin a straightforward journey from youth to adulthood, and by implication to equal citizenship, when they join

the U.S. military, but instead of emerging from battle as consolidated and honored American subjects, these soldiers wrestle through a complicated reevaluation of identity and what they fight for. The performative soldiers of Chapter 2 position themselves as metaphorical warriors who must defend their community, nation, or turf, and who are either veterans themselves or who negotiate masculine identities alongside veteran characters. The forgotten soldiers, who I examine in my third chapter, are the soldiers whose absence underpins this project, and whose history lives on in fragments, letters, family, and stories passed-on and passed-over. Insofar as African American and Latinx stories of war give voice to a history that has not been told, together these are the unremembered figures these tales seek to bring to light.

The period between the 1950s and the 9/11 attacks sees a rapid growth and recognition of multiethnic American literature that also opened up space for published narratives that more centrally depicted the experiences of soldiers of color. This period is also particularly fruitful for a study of multiethnic American war literature both because the Civil Rights movement and anti-war activists connected American military actions abroad with the treatment of people of color at home and because the Vietnam War was the first American war fought with a fully integrated military.

In this era, “soldiering” has specific implications. In this dissertation, I define “soldiering” as the act of both physically taking up arms to fight in the name of the abstract concept of the “nation,” as well as the adoption of performative soldierly behaviors, visual cues, and rhetoric. I include fiction written by noncombatants as well as literature incorporating war or the military as a subplot. I also address literature that adopts the narrative strategies and imagery of war in order to articulate a sense of radical

struggle, even when those works do not represent battle in the literal sense. As such, my analysis of African American and Latinx soldiering in literature encompasses its representation in battlefield war literature as traditionally understood, as well as in texts in which characters as varied as activists, vigilantes, revolutionaries, and gang members embrace the iconography of the soldier. I have chosen to organize this analysis around themes of citizen imaginaries, gender, transnational longings, conflicted loyalties, ironic sacrifice, and memory. Comparatively engaging these works reveals a surprising degree of overlap in themes and experiences and opens up space for a synthesized critique of American racism and racial conflict rather than limiting analysis or categorization to the war represented, the time period in which the author wrote, or the race or ethnicity of the author. This dissertation is contextualized within the history and literature of multiethnic American literature broadly, including among others John Okada's *No-No Boy*, Stella Pope Duarte's *Let Their Spirits Dance*, Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Sherman Alexie's *Ten Little Indians*, Rodney Morales's *When the Shark Bites*, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*. Yet, the themes listed above are most complexly and readily present in the scope of three primary texts from this time period—John Oliver Killens's *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, Alfredo Vea's *Gods Go Begging*, and John Edgar Wideman's *Two Cities: A Love Story*—emerging from African American and Latinx literary traditions.

Due to a history of exclusion in the military, women appear rarely in these texts as soldiers. Since soldiering is the focus of this dissertation, my analyses of women in soldier roles must necessarily be limited, but this does not by any means imply gender is marginal to either the texts or my readings. I bring a feminist analysis to this topic,

analyzing how gender is bound up with citizenship and nation in the spirit of critics like Dana Nelson, Michelle Stephens, and Lisa Lowe. The historical exclusion of men of color from white masculine citizenship legitimized the exploitation, disenfranchisement, and second-class status accorded to men of color, and by extension, to women of color whom they could not ‘protect.’ One strategy for social empowerment, therefore, is for characters to seek socially valued models of manhood. Just as often, however, these characters turn away from the pursuit of masculine citizenship and invoke alternative allegiances to ancestral nations, cultural and racial groups, or to transnational alliances.

Fighting for Recognition: Historical Underpinnings of Soldiers of Color in the 20th Century U.S. Military

Although this dissertation focuses on African American and Latinx literature, I contextualize my readings of fictional representations of soldiers of colors within the broader history of multiethnic groups in the military, including Asian American and Native American participation, and in the relationship the U.S. military has had to those communities. For many Americans of color, voluntary participation in the military has been seen as social empowerment on both a collective and individual level: on the collective level, military participation might be part and parcel of the struggle to secure equal rights, treatment, and opportunity; on the individual level, the uniform, the experiences, and the skills soldiers acquire would ground an empowered masculinity based in social respect and physical self-reliance.

These aspirations were consistently met with predictable obstacles: the struggle for equality within a military that remained racially segregated until the Korean War; the degrading relegation of soldiers of color to non-fighting service posts; the continued

subjection of soldiers of color to racial abuse; and the heightened racial antagonism and suspicion rather than respect that these soldiers faced upon their return. The obvious contradiction for an American ideology that urges citizens to fight for liberty and equality while simultaneously denying their own soldiers access to those ideals is one that resurfaces over and over again in war narratives penned by writers of color. While soldiers of color generally proved to be loyal Americans, fulfilling their missions in spite of discriminatory treatment, winning honors and accolades, and rarely deserting, their personal relationship to the military and to American overseas actions as expressed in oral histories, memoirs, literature, and historical accounts is often complex. Likewise, people of color in the United States were ambivalent about supporting American missions abroad and disagreed about the role American soldiers of color should play in them. For those soldiers uncomfortable with their role in perpetuating U.S. wars against colonized people of color, national and communal loyalties sometimes gave way to global, transnational ones. The idea of global solidarity amongst people of color assumed an ideological coherence with the protest movements of the Vietnam War era, but the uneasiness of fighting to dominate other countries in the name of a racist government is a common trope.

The historical experiences of different racial and ethnic groups in the military varied. African Americans have participated in every American war since the Revolution. In an often segregated and racist military, African Americans soldiers had to struggle harder with less reward, were rarely granted officer status, and were often relegated to service rather than combat duties. They dealt with racist behavior, were sometimes treated worse even than captured enemy prisoners, and received harsher punishments for

lesser crimes. Berry and Blassingame report that during World War I the military agreed to enlist African American soldiers “but in ways that reinforced the conception of them as different, inferior, and not fit to serve as equals” (Berry and Blassingame 314). This practice continued right through World War II, in which African American soldiers were chiefly responsible for “carting around supplies, cooking food, and in general doing the dirty work required to equip millions of soldiers far from home (Huebner 43). African American soldiers were more readily punished and more readily discharged from the army for minor infractions, including protesting racism. Brandt reports that 11,000 of 49,000 Section Eight discharges (a discharge without honor or veteran benefits) were given to African Americans “way out of proportion to their percentage in the service” (107). At the same time, as suggested by the Lena Horne incident in which German prisoners of war in World War II were given center seats to her performance while African American soldiers were relegated to the balconies, African American soldiers were treated far below their stations. Desegregation of African American soldiers began during World War II in order to meet the needs of the military but did not reach full integration until the Vietnam War. In Vietnam, when the military was fully integrated, African American soldiers still experienced an informal racial delegation of tasks in which they disproportionately carried out the most dangerous jobs (Berry and Blassingame 332, Friedman, et al.).

Beginning during the Civil War, Latinx soldiers have a long history of joining the U.S. Armed Forces, with Mexican Americans comprising the largest group. About 200,000 Latinx soldiers served during World War I and 500,000 during World War II (Villahermosa, “On the Frontlines” 62). Integration for soldiers began in World War I,

although Puerto Ricans fought principally within segregated units, and Black Puerto Ricans were further segregated. During World War II, Latinx soldiers won twelve Medals of Honor, while in the Korean War, the segregated Puerto Rican 65th Infantry (the Borinqueneers), was the largest American regiment and boasts a particularly storied history. At pains to distinguish themselves from African American soldiers suffering racism, segregation, and inferior positions, after World War II, Mexican American veteran activist groups protested the use of the term “Mexican” and demanded that Mexican Americans be listed instead as Caucasian. As a result, exact numbers on Mexican American participation in the Vietnam War is a matter of debate (Mariscal 3). In the Vietnam War, many troops self-segregated, as Mexican American Vietnam veteran Antonio recalls, “We didn’t understand it, but we were also very segregated within our own groups, so the Chicanos kind of hung out together, and the blacks.” (Ybarra 71). Yet when they were in the front lines, the importance of racial and ethnic divisions diminished before the threat of death, for “in foxholes there were apparently as few racists as atheists” (Huebner 185).

Native Americans, once perceived as a significant threat by the United States’s colonial and, later, national government, have a complex history of engagement with the American military as allies, participants, and enemies. The image of Native Americans as variously savage, terrifying, noble, and primitive was intimately tied with American fears and with the romance of Native Americans as warriors. No longer seen as threats to American sovereignty, the warrior image lives on in propaganda to recruit Native Americans into the modern-day military. The official Navy website reads, “They [Native Americans] do, however, have distinctive cultural values which drive them to serve their

country. One such value is their proud warrior tradition.” The website homogenizes Native Americans into one group and ascribes to them a “warrior tradition” that can now be recuperated to serve American interests. The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, intended to confer citizenships on those Native Americans within the territorial United States who were not yet citizens, was passed partly in response to Native American service during World War I. The Nationality Act of 1940, passed after the start of World War II but before the entrance of the United States, made citizenship inclusive of all people born in the United States and its territories, and may have helped “reinforce the ‘duties’ aspect of citizenship, namely military service” (Franco 33) and ensure all Americans would be eligible for the draft. Some Native Americans contested the draft on the grounds of their citizenship in an independent nation, but this objection failed. Soldiers from the tribes Assiniboine, Cheyenne, Cherokee, Choctaw, Comanche, Hopi, Kiowa, Menominee, Meskwaki, Muscogee, Navajo, Ojibwe (Chippewa), Oneida, Osage, Pawnee, Sauk, Seminole, and Sioux (both Dakota and Lakota) are celebrated as code talkers during the World Wars who communicated with each other in their native tongues to transmit valuable military intelligence that American enemies would not be able to interpret. Their service was officially recognized in 2002 when Congress passed the Code Talkers Recognition Act. During the Vietnam War, about 42,000 Native Americans served (U.S. Navy website), but like many soldiers of color, experienced ambivalence about their role in relation to the U.S.’s mission abroad. One soldier interviewed by Thomas Holm explained how “We went into their country [Vietnam] and killed them and took land that wasn't ours. Just like what the whites did to us” (195).

Although U.S. immigration laws and quotas severely constricted the size of the Asian population in the United States, Asian Americans have participated in several American wars stretching as far back as the Civil War. The U.S. conquest of Hawai'i and the Philippines created new colonial subjects as well as opened the door for immigrants to the mainland. Despite the U.S. military's role in colonization, soldiers of these territories nevertheless served in the military. The history of recent Asian American immigration is deeply marked by war, for "most of the post-1965 Asian immigrants come from societies already disrupted by colonialism and distorted by the upheavals of neocolonial capitalism and war"—wars in which the United States often had material and strategic interests (Lowe 16). Particularly in the turn towards the twentieth century, with the Spanish-American War (1898) and later in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, the foreign 'enemy' increasingly had an Asian face in the eyes of mainstream America. During World War II, Japanese American soldiers lined up for service in the military while their families were sent to internment camps. Private First Class Reginald Edwards recalls that in training to fight in Vietnam, "if there were any Hawaiians and Asian-Americans in the unit, they played the roles of aggressors in the war games" (Terry 5). Asian American soldiers, too, experienced conflict when fighting in the Vietnam War, as "some Asian Americans said they saw the faces of their friends and relatives in the visages of the Vietnamese peasant" (Kim 221).

The role of the military in advancing U.S. imperialism at the expense of colonized peoples has long been a subject for critique and inner conflict for soldiers of color. During the Spanish-American War, "There was a great deal of concern in the black community about the morality of blacks fighting against Filipinos, another people of

color, who were seeking their independence,” (309) and the war was seen by many as an “imperialist venture” (Berry and Blassingame 305). Overseas, “blacks [who had deserted the American army] were apparently welcomed by the Filipino insurgents and some were given major responsibilities (Klotman 128). In such scenarios, the enemy for minoritized soldiers shifted from U.S. adversaries to American white supremacy. These shifting loyalties make their way into the literature, as described, for example, by Ann Folwell Stanford, who reads Gwendolyn Brooks’s “Negro Hero” and “Gay Chaps at the Bar” as poetry that “reconstructs ‘The Enemy’ not as foreigners holding howitzers, but as fellow Americans with white skin” (197). Viewpoints were diverse within communities, as well. Although many African Americans saw military service as opportunity and duty, others looked with disfavor upon participation in American military campaigns. In his discussion of American World War I literature, John T. Matthews notes that “many [African Americans] rejected the prospect of dying in combat for a nation that continued to practice a killing racism” (219).

With the radical thinkers of the Civil Rights and racial nationalist movements of the 1960s, the Vietnam War was often considered to be an explicitly imperialist war aimed at another people of color with whom minoritized American communities had more in common than with the American government and the interests of the white middle-class it represented. For instance, Mexican American nationalist movements situated their history within a global history of colonialism, viewing the Mexican American population as an internal colony that had been first subjugated in the Mexican-American War and then maintained as a permanent, second-class colony of cheap labor (Muñoz). César Chávez rhetorically questioned, “What causes our children to take up

guns and fight their brothers in lands far away?...thousands and thousands of poor, brown, and black farm workers go off to war to kill other poor farm workers in Southeast Asia. Why does it happen?” (64). Malcolm X explicitly linked the Black Power movement in the United States with anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movements around the world, defining “Black” people as a historically linked polity crossing national lines: “when I say black, I mean non-white—black, brown, red or yellow” (50). For Malcolm X, because the histories of European colonialism, American imperialism, and American racism are related, “What happens to a black man in America and Africa happens to the black man in Asia and to the man down in Latin America. What happens to one of us today happens to all of us” (48). For Malcolm X and similar thinkers, liberation struggles must be global in scope, and solidarity between races not of European descent is both necessary and based in material realities.

The cultural climate of globalist solidarity combined readily with anti-Vietnam War sentiments. Read through this lens, the Vietnam War was only the most recent violent attempt by the U.S. government to advance its dominance and economic interests on people of color throughout the world. Some soldiers brought the more militant perspectives of nationalist movements with them to the military, and “many of them expressed a reluctance to fight in order to oppress peoples of color in other countries who were engaged in wars of liberation” (Berry and Blassingame 340). Soldiers on the ground began to see a reflection of themselves in both the faces and in the political position of Vietnamese people. Specialist Emmanuel J. Holloman remarks in an interview that “blacks got along better with the Vietnamese people, because they knew the hardships the Vietnamese went through” (Terry 83), while Antonio, another veteran, recalls a time

when a Vietnamese child “pointed to his face and then my face and said, ‘Same, same.’ So he was telling me, like, ‘Why are you fighting us? You and I look the same’” (Ybarra 69). Likewise, Asian Americans “perceived the parallels between the war in Vietnam and the conquest of the Philippine resistance during the Spanish American war” (Kim 221). While American soldiers of color did not universally feel the pull of these imagined similarities, for many, moments like these led at least to a heightened sympathy on the basis of mutual recognition. For others, such correspondences led to a crisis of loyalty, in which soldiers questioned their treatment in the military, the social disparities they faced, and the justification of war, and found their commitment to nation to be in conflict with broader imagined international communities.

Soldiers of color have always participated in American wars, and they have done so despite the inequality, segregation, and mistreatment they endured, in the hopes of bettering the lives of themselves and their communities. The military offered one path toward citizenship both imagined and literal, and even when it failed to fulfill that promise, the role of warrior and veteran symbolized a manhood often denied at home. The experience of soldiers of color in the military differed from their white counterparts in a number of ways, including the roles they were forced to adopt, their experiences of segregation, their second-class treatment, and in some cases, their growing transnational identifications with peoples of color abroad. Participation in the military often emboldened its veterans to demand equal rights upon their return and laid the foundation for protest. The twentieth century was a critical time in this history, during which soldiers of color won a victory against segregation that was to soon be reflected on the home front, and legal citizenship was offered both as a reward and an enticement to military

service for groups not formerly citizens. The concerns of multiethnic American war literature can be properly understood only against the backdrop of these complex experiences.

The Criticism of War Literature and Its Discontents: Retooling the Representation of Soldiers

Given this rich history, it is conspicuous that soldiers of color receive such little treatment in canonical war literature. Thanks to the influential work of scholars like Paul Fussell and to the explosion of veteran memoir writing, particularly in the wake of the Vietnam War, war literature has been chiseled into a distinctive literary genre. Courses are taught on war writing; scholarly works are devoted to it; and *The Heath Anthology* has established a distinctive section that focuses on war literature. The names of its seminal writers are familiar ones: Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Heller, Tim O'Brien.

These American literary representations of war tell many different, sometimes conflicting, stories. They tell us that Americans are a brave, even divinely backed group of people (*The Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mary Rowlandson*); they show that Americans are idealists who go to war primarily in the name of service, democracy, or freedom, even when those ideals are revealed to be hollow (*A Farewell to Arms*); they depict individual Americans as the misguided victims of a war machine far beyond their control (*Born on the Fourth Of July*). One recurring theme is that of America, as seen through its military, as a fundamentally harmonious brotherhood of races, despite occasional misunderstandings and injustices.

We can see this story told in the romanticized television series, *Band of Brothers*, in which the lives and identities of a group of World War II soldiers from diverse class and ethnic backgrounds become intertwined through the battles they face together. Although they begin as almost irreconcilably different from each other, the power of military experience is such that a new, composite, and distinctly American identity emerges that does battle with and ultimately transcends the claims of descent. In this and in other multicultural representations of Americans in battle, the military and the military experience becomes a privileged locus of national integration, a place where out of necessity old racial and class antagonisms are laid aside in an effort to unite against a common enemy. The military is also a crucible in which loyal Americans can be made out of any material as they fight not just against a common enemy, but also for common national ideals like freedom, equality, and self-determination.

Even in the most critical and inclusive popular and canonical war representations, soldiers of color are secondary characters who befriend or surround the white protagonists. Racial politics, when present, play out in the background to the main storyline. Sometimes the soldiers of color are merely vehicles for portraying racial conflict and sometimes they stand in as symbols of America's increasingly integrated military. Katherine Kinney argues that in representations of the Vietnam War, "The black soldier is primarily placed as a prop of realism... They assure the viewer or reader that this is 'how it was,'" even while ignoring the specificities of that experience (84). What's missing in these stories is the perspectives of minoritized groups, the specific questions and critiques soldiers of color raise and the issues they face, and characters of color in central roles as soldiers who bring culturally specific experiences and difference but who

are also more than just representations of those differences. However, as Jorge Mariscal argues, since “most published texts on the war have been written by European American males, the ‘reality’ of the war as received by readers is hopelessly narrow and too often ethnocentric” (24). Therefore, although war and veteran literature, nurtured by an abundance of literary criticism, has become a prominent sub-genre in American writing, fiction featuring soldiers of color has been given less attention, as has the effects of U.S. wars on minoritized communities, political movements, and war veterans.

This neglect cannot be explained by a corresponding absence of war representations in multiethnic American literature. On the contrary, in twentieth-century multiethnic American memoirs, war novels, and fiction with embedded military subplots, the insistent presence of the soldiers and veterans of U.S. wars demands recognition. In these stories, characters are drafted, join up, fight, suffer wounds, and die across national borders and often in the name of U.S. imperialist policies that they themselves suffer from at home. Given this, why haven’t these works entered the literary canon of war literature? Although multiethnic American representations of soldiering share some qualities with their canonical white counterparts, I argue the image of the soldier in multiethnic American fiction is different enough that multiethnic American war fiction does not fit comfortably within the expected parameters of white war fiction, and as a result for the most part has been overlooked in the study of that fiction.

As I will discuss, literary critics identify three defining characteristics of canonical twentieth-century war literature: the theme of lost innocence, the critical stance these texts take towards the military, and the privileging of the authenticity of the “everyman” soldier in these texts. In the arguments below, I will explain why each of

these three characteristics not only doesn't resonate with the themes of multiethnic war literature, but in some cases directly conflict with them. This gulf is both constitutive and self-perpetuating: because war literature by writers of color is not part of these scholars' original assessment, the unique concerns, themes, and craft with which their work deal do not shape how war literature is defined. As this picture of war literature became reified, multiethnic American war literature fails to be "read" as coherent within this genre.

No Innocence to Lose: This World Was Never Eden

The motifs of lost innocence and cataclysmic rupture from an irrecoverable past undergird the most celebrated of Western twentieth-century war literature, but for writers of color wrestling with histories of colonization, slavery, segregation, and exclusion, the concept of a pre-World War I innocence does not resonate. Instead, WWI and the wars that follow are one more arena in which the consequences of Western imperialism play out, and the military is one more racialized institution in which soldiers of color have to fight for equality and recognition.

Canonical interpretations of the three twentieth-century wars most commemorated in American literature—World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War—are each cast in literature as the cause of a historical shift that closes a chapter of national and individual innocence. Disillusionment manifests itself in each of these wars, as examined in studies such as Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Evelyn Copley's *Representing War: Form and Ideology in First World War Narratives*, Jeffrey Walsh's *American War Literature 1914 to Vietnam* and Philip K. Jason's *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature*. Yet all these studies share the view that each modern war was preceded by an imagined moment of relative innocence.

Each brought out a previously unknown manifestation of horror, forever compromising the ideals of its generation.

“Never such innocence again” writes Philip Larkin of World War I. World War I marked an imagined loss of idealism and hopefulness in the eyes of World War I writers and thinkers, a trope that would resurface in later wars despite such innocence ostensibly already having been stolen. Much of World War I scholarship echoes John T. Matthews’s description of World War I writers as “A generation of writers returned from the war to report that their elders had been mistaken, that the direct experience of war had shaken their confidence in Western faith in progress, reason, technology, and democratic capitalism” (229). The promise of the Enlightenment and its faith in reason and progress through science revealed a darker side of destruction and suggested that human reason and science were not enough to create a more responsible and humane social order. If World War I was the “Great War,” the “War to End All Wars,” then Europe had not adequately prepared itself for World War II with its power-hungry dictators, racial genocides, global reach, and atomic bombs. While the horrors of World War I demanded a new way of writing, the horrors of World War II made even the act of writing obscene. Theodor Adorno famously declared “Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”

Although American writers of the World Wars—Hemingway, Dos Passos, Jones, Heller, Vonnegut—expressed this same sense of loss through their writing, in some ways the United States’s participation in the World Wars strengthened rather than undermined its national self-image. Victorious and convinced of the righteousness of its purpose, and emerging as a world power next to a crumbling Europe, its newfound position signaled the fulfillment of the American promise and its commitment to democracy and liberty.

But this image too would serve as the idealized Eden in America's own story of national innocence that was destroyed by the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War is experienced as a national trauma in the United States not only because of its extended length and ultimate defeat, but also because it "radically destabilized the meaning of what it is to be an American" (Mariscal 18), specifically where being American meant fighting to salvage, rather than undermine, another nation's path to self-determination.

The loss of innocence (and the corresponding bitter enlightenment it occasions) often plays out in an ironic twist on the traditional quest narrative's emphasis on the achievement of successful masculinity through feats of bravery. Rather than foreground the protagonist's positive development into manhood through battle, however, these modern war narratives narrate a reverse epiphany. For example, in *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway's Frederic Henry declares his exhaustion with hearing the abstract words that lead young men to war like "glory, honor, courage, or hallow" (185). Like Henry, modern war protagonists achieve manhood by a paradoxical rejection of the war mythology that led them to battle. Once they experience war firsthand, they are able to see clearly the truth about war and in so doing become independent-thinking men. This is often accompanied by a brokenness born of disillusionment with the social ideals they have prized rather than a satisfaction with their proven bravery. Their achievement of manhood is an individualist one defined against the social mores that sent them to war, rather than a successful incorporation into society.

In contrast, the world of imagined innocence articulated by white writers is for writers of color already a parallel world of racial violence and subjugation. Far from an ideal to be preserved, it is a world that must be overturned before self-determination,

freedom, and equality are possible in the first place. The experience of racism shared by soldier characters in these novels makes them more skeptical towards the genuineness of American values. After all, the world of lost Western innocence in the work of mainstream writers is also a world of imperialism and brutality in which the legacies of colonialism and slavery continue to be felt. As John H. Morrow argues of European attitudes before World War I, *La Belle Époque* “was beautiful only for the wealthy, and only in retrospect” (35). Mark Whalan further elaborates in *The Great War and the Culture of the New Negro*:

African American responses to the war were not typified by the extremes of shock and rupture that characterized those of white Europeans and Americans...such a ‘transformation’ could hardly be said to apply to an African American culture already very attuned to surprise, experience, and victimization, a culture that had only a tenuous relationship to feelings of predictability and security well before the advent of ‘total war.’ (xii)

As a result of this worldview, the fantasy of prewar Edens do not appear in multiethnic literature. When writers of color do adopt the motif of ruptured innocence, it is used specifically to signal the protagonist’s critical racial awakening.

Rather than fight to preserve the past, the protagonists of multiethnic war novels are more interested in battling for change; they entertain hopes (often disappointed) that participation in American wars will win them racial advancement or equality. As a result, novels that write through quest narrative conventions depict protagonists who achieve a more critical racial consciousness and a greater understanding of race relations than when they entered the military. Some multiethnic writers provide a different take on this

longstanding quest narrative. Like the most well-known white protagonists of twentieth century war novels, these protagonists gradually shed their pre-military naivety and become men through experience and a growing realization of the 'way things really are.' Yet their conclusions are informed by their experience of race in the military and therefore sound quite differently from those of their white counterparts. This evolution does involve disillusionment, specifically the realization that participation in the military will not confer the respect and equality soldiers of colors hope for, and a confirmation of the suspicion that the values the American military allegedly fights on behalf of do not extend to them. As Richard Wright poignantly recalls hearing African American veterans lament in "How Bigger Was Born," "What in hell did I fight in the war for? They segregated me even when I was offering my life for my country" (513). The soldiers' complaint reflects their anger at their segregation both in the military and upon return.

Despite this, soldiers of color battle on, and their growth is given a more positive twist in multicultural war novels than in mainstream war narratives, where the protagonists, if more embittered, also become more critically aware of their racialized positions and newfound power. As a result, soldiers of color gain a greater independence and authority over their own self-image. John Oliver Killens's *And Then We Heard the Thunder* dramatizes the progress of an initially naïve soldier to racial awakening who recognizes that his loyalties lie less in an individual and more in a collective struggle for social justice, and that progress can only be made by demanding respect rather than aiming for appeasement. Unlike the war quest narrative that ends in proven manhood in traditional tales of war, disillusionment and individualism in mainstream twentieth century war novels, novels such as George Davis's *Coming Home*, John A. Williams's

Captain Blackman, and Daniel Cano's *Shifting Loyalties* culminate in the protagonist's growing racial consciousness and a new feeling of self-worth that is not dependent on white approval.

Pride Matters: The Perils of Critiquing a Path to Citizenship

Twentieth-century literature's signature theme of loss of innocence goes hand-in-hand with a critical deconstruction of romantic views of war. It is taken as a matter of course that the best war writers of the twentieth century will of necessity be writers who, like Hemingway, Jones, Vonnegut, or O'Brien, effectively challenge romantic conceptions of war. Given the successful incorporation of such protest novels into mainstream American literature, at first glance it may seem unclear why war novels of writers of color languish in obscurity. I would like to discuss the twentieth-century preference for critical portrayals of war in order to ask the following questions: How do the expectations of a certain style of war protest end up excluding writers of color? What additional pressures do the subject positions of writers of color bring to their willingness to make critiques? What kinds of craft do these authors practice to retool standard narratives? Since many multiethnic novels of war also approach war from a critical perspective, their work should speak to audiences concerned with deconstructing the romance of war. However, as I will articulate, the protests they engage do not readily fit into the structures set up by literary critics.

The literary turn to self-aware, critical representations of war is a historical, twentieth-century phenomenon. From the glorious battles of *The Iliad* to *Henry V*'s inspiring St. Crispin Day speech to Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade," celebratory depictions of war not only occupy a prominent place in Western literary

traditions, they dominate it. While they acknowledge the pain of war and allow for subtle critique, they do so within an overall frame of celebratory homage. In the wake of literary modernism, however, Western representations of war, typified by Wilfred Owen's famous World War I poem, "Dulce et Decorum Est," begin to look startlingly different, offering explicit and sometimes bitter critique with an intention to disassemble romanticized views of battle. Protest novels "written by young men whose own romantic expectations had been clawed away in a broken world of actual experience" aim to bring the 'truth' of war home to a readership for whom the "romance [of war] was widely taken for reality" (Cooperman 33). Not only do the most celebrated war writers manifest disillusionment with romantic images of war in their writing, but they also share a similar set of reasons for this disillusionment. In their work, twentieth-century war writers address the horror of the destruction made possible by modern weaponry and the resulting disassociation of the soldier from the effects of their actions; the gap between public perceptions of war and the soldier's experience of war made possible by large-scale government propaganda; and the constraints placed upon the individual by a bureaucratic army demanding uniformity. Scholars have followed suit, giving the most attention to those novels that unseat assumptions of soldierly glory. Perhaps because to a modern intellectual audience romantic representations of war seem naïve at best and ideologically suspect at worst, a novel's critical stance on war is now a defining element of a text's literariness. In his survey *American War Literature 1914 to Vietnam*, Jeffrey Walsh argues that "much war literature has, as its *raison d'être*, a trajectory of protest" (4) without recognizing the way this description actually preselects which texts will be considered literary in the first place. At the same time, novels like Edith Wharton's *The*

Marne that urge young men to go to battle to defend Western civilization are treated as second-rate literature, in part for this reason. As Evelyn Cobley notes, just as important as the quality of prose or the sophistication of form, “readers tend to look for antiwar sentiments, often using these as evaluative criteria” (5).

While the critiques made by writers of color overlap with those in mainstream war literature, they often sound differently. For instance, George Davis’s *Coming Home* about African American soldiers shares with Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* its horror at the destructive capability of modern weaponry, but rather than serving as grounds for nihilism or despair at the failure of Western promise, Davis’s protagonist interprets this capacity as part and parcel of a greedy, racist culture that transnational solidarity (in which he includes himself) might supplant. Davis’s representations mirror those of other writers of color, such as John Oliver Killens, Daniel Cano, Stella Pope Duarte, Alfredo Véa, and many more whose characters often experience transnational identifications with another people fighting their own anti-imperialist battles. In other words, the mixed identifications of soldiers of color shapes their response to the worst aspects of modern war. Perhaps most importantly, soldiers of color impugn the army for its racism and segregation. In depictions of World War I and II, characters of color must fight in order to be able to go to battle in the first place, rather than be relegated to service roles. In the War in Vietnam, they fear they are disproportionately placed in dangerous positions. The characters in Daniel Cano’s *Shifting Loyalties* speculate that Mexican Americans are always given the most threatening assignments: “Whether it’s pulling the shittiest hours on guard duty or going into dangerous situations, if there’s a Chicano around, he’s the one who gets it” (98). The alternative concerns that writers of color

evince in their work mean that they don't resonate with the critiques offered by mainstream war writers and therefore are not read and studied as representative texts.

Moreover, if participation in the U.S. military represents an important route to social respect for disenfranchised young men, and if pointing to their service is one way multiethnic communities might call attention to the sacrifices they have made, then do writers of color imperil the value of their contributions by critiquing war in general and U.S. military policies in particular? To what extent is it a luxury to be in a position to criticize one of the few arenas in which minoritized citizens might improve their social standing? Where "the warrior image remained a white one" through World War II (Huebner 47), and thereafter representations of multiethnic American soldiers has remained decidedly token, the more urgent project for writers of color may be to raise the profile of contributions to the military. In his memoir, *The Three Wars of Roy Benavidez*, Roy Benavidez, a Mexican American veteran of the Vietnam War, gives a first-person account of his struggles on and off the battlefield, arguing through his story that his military valor has earned him inclusion in the United States that he should be (and ultimately was) recognized for. For Margot Norris, criticism of war literature plays an important role in the politics of war since "literature too is shaped by, and shapes, the ideological constructions that legitimate attitudes that inform public policy" (4). If so, for groups still fighting for recognition of their role in the military, to critique American policy, patriotism, and military glory brings with it the risk imperiling the legacy of their service.

To handle this challenge with nuance, writers of color have developed an array of techniques, which in turn means that the forms of their novels do not fit the standard

white template. Some texts embed smaller vignettes of war in novels not otherwise concerned with the military to allow for an indirect and contextual critique. Inclusion of soldiers as minor characters helps memorialize the presence of soldiers of color and also allows writers to avoid simplistic celebratory narratives, even while paying homage to their contributions. In Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Line of the Sun*, Rafael Santacruz's light skin allows him to rise in the Navy ranks and secure a living for his family that their Puerto Rican neighbors can only dream of; Toni Morrison targets the pain of traumatized veterans in *Sula* and *Tar Baby*; John Edgar Wideman sharply rebukes segregation, double standards, and service limitations on African American soldiers in Martin Mallory's flashbacks of World War II in *Two Cities*; George Washington Gómez goes off to the Army at the end of Américo Paredes's novel of the same name; Ralph Ellison documents the disparity between French and American treatment of Black soldiers and the way Americans used violence to 'remind' African American soldiers of their social location upon their return home in *Invisible Man*. Given the prominence of these novels, many of which are standard on American literature reading lists and all of which have been canonized in ethnic studies, interested readers are far more likely to hear of multiethnic American contributions to the military in small snippets than in a detailed narrative.

The Atypical Soldier: The Soldier Voice in Multiethnic American Literature

The first-hand accounts, memoirs, and novels written by former soldiers such as Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Heller, Ron Kovic, Tim O'Brien, and others have come to dominate representations of war in the twentieth century. Indeed, judging from the brightest lights of modern war literature, being a veteran of war is almost a prerequisite to writing about it authoritatively. Norris observes that critics tend to "privilege writing that

has testimonial power—the memoir, the diary, the letter, the poetry and fiction of the soldier” (22). Given this modern characteristic of war literature, what accounts for the unrecognized work of multiethnic soldier/authors, who share their white counterparts’ first-hand war experience and, at least theoretically, the authority born of it? I argue that the experience that undergirds soldier/authors’ representations of war is only authoritative to the extent that it can be read as representative experience.

Several studies of war literature¹ focus on texts written by military veterans who bring their own battlefield experience to their work. In such readings, and in the text themselves, the authority of the soldier’s voice, especially of the foot soldier who might speak on behalf of the common soldier, becomes a recurring trope. The rise of the autobiographical story of war told by a low-ranking, veteran soldier coincides with the modernist revolt of the individual attacking the larger institutional and cultural forces that threaten to limit their freedom. It is not surprising, then, that twentieth century war literature is characterized by its critical impulse. While the beginnings of a critical, rather than celebratory, war literature could already be seen in texts like Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, modern war literature starting with World War I steadily attacks conventional, romanticized views of war and undermines governmental propaganda about war. The unassailable first-hand experience of the soldier/writer potentially makes them most equipped to speak from the authority of experience. While governments could rely on their power and legitimacy to ground their truth claims, a competing perspective

¹ e.g., Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Jeffrey Walsh’s *American War Literature, 1914 to Vietnam*

² For other detailed treatments of *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, see Roy Scranton’s *Total Mobilization: World War II and American Literature* (2019), Stephen Anderson Carey’s *Black Men’s Du Boisian Relationships to Southern Social Institutions in the Novels of John Oliver Killens* (1992), and Jennifer James’s *A Freedom Bought with Blood* (2007), which argues that the novel is an “an uncompromising

on the war emerged from soldier/writers who, even if not backed by military officers, government leaders, or scholars, could rely on the authority of their experience. As Copley argues:

Those writing about the First World War were well aware that their narratives would be accepted as 'true' only if the subject of the discourse could be shown to be authorized to speak...the soldiers who had experienced trench warfare considered themselves to be in a position to make truth claims from a more personal and hence more authentic site of knowledge. (72)

In some ways, the truth claims of ostensibly powerless soldier/authors become even more authoritative than official accounts because of their apparent lack of motive or profit. A soldier's personal narrative, grounded in the first-hand experience of the witness, thereby becomes an authentic and alternative site of knowledge to propagandistic visions of battle.

The privileging of authorial identity and experience as a defining feature of modern war literature has contradictory implications for the work of veterans of color. On the one hand, the aura of authenticity forged in battle might give veterans of color the legitimacy to speak with authority about their war experiences. In a sense, war literature might provide a unique locus where access to a shared military experience allows veterans of color to speak and be heard. On the other hand, the priority of experience masks the way experiences of some subjects are taken to be more authoritative, because more apparently representative, than the experiences of others. For veteran writers of color, "This approach to veteran-authored texts also establishes an unassailable authority ('if you weren't there, you can't understand') and excludes alternative 'experiences'"

(Mariscal 24). The author's experience must not only be an *authentic* experience; it must also be a *recognized and recognizable* experience.

Yet, authenticity is not a transparent quality; it is a constructed category that must be defined and recognized. Critical analyses of the experiences and writings of veterans of color focus on racial issues in the military; critical analyses of the experiences and writings of white veterans focus on life in the military. War stories are part of a larger ethnocentric culture in which the experiences of white Americans are the standard against which those of racially minoritized groups appear as exceptional, and as such, the soldier of color is always the atypical soldier who is defined by difference. As a result, multiethnic American war literature rarely shows up in anthologies, criticism, and classrooms that seek to understand the soldier experience. Because the trappings of authenticity associated with the soldier/author's voice as the privileged point of articulation that can speak the story of "how it really was" has as its side effect the marginalization of the experiences of soldiers of color as able to voice only 'atypical' military experiences, I have not sought to restrict my analyses to writers with direct experience in the military. Rather, I have looked to widen the definition of war literature in an effort to move beyond the authentic/atypical divide.

Chapter Summaries: Toward a Vocabulary of African American and Latinx War Literature

Soldiering always involves national identity construction, but for soldiers of color, it is complicated by a history of racial strife and solidarity both within and across national borders. African American and Latinx soldier narratives differ from their white counterparts because they are always tied to asserting and defending an American

identity that white soldiers already take for granted. Moreover, such participation becomes not just an individual legacy, but a group legacy; not just a project for individual identity construction, but one engaged in how people of color as a whole fit into the American body politic. Novels by writers of color that focus exclusively on war have not received the same amount of critical or public attention as those of their white peers. George Davis's *Coming Home* very narrowly escaped going out of print before the Howard Library of Classics salvaged it; Charley Trujillo was compelled to start his own publishing house, Chusma House, in order to see his work on Mexican American soldiers in Vietnam in print. At the same time, celebratory works like Roy Benavidez's *The Three Wars of Roy Benavidez*, with its unabashed American patriotism, enjoy more popular success, partly because they can be strategically used in mainstream battles over representation and discrimination.

Yet in these works, soldiering begins with a quest for a sometimes legal, sometimes socially recognized masculine citizenship that leads its characters to a change of allegiance, a revolutionary subjectivity, or the adoption of transnational identifications. These issues turn on recurring tropes such as what I call the crisis of recognition, when the soldier/veteran sees himself in the face of the enemy (Daniel Cano's *Shifting Loyalties*); the war at home, in which the fighting overseas mirrors variously anticolonial and Civil Rights struggles within the borders of the United States (Oscar Zeta Acosta's *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*); ironic sacrifice, where soldiers of color risk their lives in imperial wars for the same nation that oppresses their own people (John Oliver Killens's *And Then We Heard the Thunder*); and absence, where soldiers of color

disappear from history and representations of war (Stella Pope Duarte's *Let Their Spirits Dance*).

The paradoxes these characters face often brings them and their communities to a critical re-examination of their relationship to the politics of U.S. internal and international power, but it also lays the groundwork for claims of self-pride, equal treatment, social recognition, and political entitlement. As such, soldiering forms a contradictory but revealing intersection of political exploitation and social empowerment in which hopes for individual acceptance can lead to a disillusioned but potentially liberating critical consciousness. Race-based nationalist movements echo this strategy of empowerment when they adopt the iconography and rhetoric of soldiering as the basis for self-empowerment and community revolution.

While many fictional representations of soldiers of color plumb the conditions and conflicts they experienced, this fiction also works on a larger cultural level to rewrite communities of color into the fabric of American history. For example, Solly Saunders, the protagonist of John Oliver Killens's *And Then We Heard the Thunder* asserts, "You got to be in the Army. This is our country as much as anybody else's. It was built on the backs of our forefathers" (17). While Solly suffers through segregation, violence, and a bloody race rebellion, the novel ends on a hopeful note, with fatigued white and Black soldiers sitting down together, too tired to continue fighting, imagining they are at the beginning of a 'New World.' If serving in American wars is a route to claiming Americanness, then cementing that participation through written literature might bring additional publicity to the sacrifice of minoritized American communities. As such, the writing of war is a deeply serious project, "a means of writing blacks into the national

‘historical destiny’ (James 6). The need to prove or claim social recognition of their Americanness is one of the most persistent themes that spans multiethnic American accounts of war.

Chapter 1, “Soldiering into Citizenship,” investigates the military as a constructing site of the American national imaginary both through which racialized others, immigrants, aliens, imagined enemies, and colonials are forged into (masculine) American citizens and in which those individuals collectively redefine the American nation. Taking John Oliver Killens’s *And Then We Heard the Thunder* as a guiding text, I will look at how entering the military is a pathway to securing a legitimized, masculine American identity for these characters. I will further argue that a close look at these texts reveals a much more complex relationship to military participation than what gets told in popular representations of soldiers of color. Although the characters in the novels I look at yearn to establish their stake in American nationhood, they share an ambivalence of loyalty born of experience that sometimes goes unresolved, and that is revealed structurally through ambiguous endings, disappearance, and elision. Moreover, these characters join the military not just to ‘prove’ their worthiness of citizenship, but in order to actively contest what American citizenship means and who has a right to claim it. On the collective level soldiers of color are re-shaping the American self-image from the location of one of its most patriotic, masculine, criticism-resistant, yet unexpectedly open institutions. Soldiers of color are not only re-casting themselves as proof-positive Americans, they are also redefining what America might be. In so doing, they actively participate in the construction of a “New America” that is richly multi-ethnic and multi-raced and whose borders are increasingly defined as porous and changing.

In chapter 2, “Urban Warriors in the War Back Home,” I investigate the figure of the masculine soldier of the city, most often a radical political activist, self-appointed community guardian, or gang member who, in rejecting legal remedies to institutional racism and economic stratification, seeks out an alternative ‘nation’ that must be won and defended—violently if necessary. While the motives, goals, and strategies of such groups are distinctly different, the representation of such figures overlaps in writers’ use of soldier and war iconography to depict these metaphorical soldiers within a racial struggle. Such representations, I argue, speak to a distinctly American paradox between the ideals of democracy on the one hand and the duty of the (male) citizen to community policing and even violent revolution on the other. As such, these narratives participate in an American tradition that examines how social injustices are to be remedied in a diverse and structurally unequal democracy. Alfredo Vea’s *Gods Go Begging* frames the city as a metaphorical war zone that threatens to become literal. Vea depicts young gang members as corrupted soldiers who turn on each other rather than defend and lead their communities. The metaphor of the city as a war zone stands in tension with the traumatic memories of veteran characters as they seek to understand systemic racism and its impact on marginalized urban communities. In unfolding this narrative, Vea commemorates both the unacknowledged history of soldiers of color in the military and engages the city as a problematic locus for community and protest.

In my third chapter, “Writing the Forgotten Soldier,” I argue that in *Two Cities: A Love Story*, John Edgar Wideman, among others including Toni Morrison, Stella Pope Duarte, and John A. Williams, participates in what Toni Morrison terms a “literary archeology” intent on writing into historical gaps where direct testimony has gone largely

unrecorded. These writers specifically concern themselves with the way race shapes the military experience and postwar afterlives of their characters. Because what these writers address in part is a historical silence of soldiers of color, the narration of the consciousness of the soldiers becomes a central plot line and narrative concern. At the same time, they carefully create distance from the consciousness of their soldier-characters to highlight the impossibility of recovering voices that have been historically lost. To achieve this simultaneous recovery/distancing, they mediate the representation of the consciousness of the soldier-character through another narrator or through irrecoverable forms. They call attention to the imaginativeness of reconstruction through fictional devices including flashbacks, elisions, hallucination, and unreliable narrators. These narrative strategies carefully mark these sections as remnants of a lost history not entirely known, but imaginatively reconstructed.

In our own historical moment, literary critics as well as the general public are paying renewed attention to the stories soldiers have to tell and the stories we tell about soldiers. It is a chance, sometimes rewarded, often unacknowledged, for Native American, Asian American, Latinx and African American soldiers to claim, indeed to fight for their rights and respect as U.S. citizens. But all too often these stories continue to represent the traditional soldier, the soldier most people expect to see: white, male, and straight. Despite an increased attention to diversity in many areas of American literature, soldiering is the one sphere where it is still acceptable to read and retell the same story from the same perspective. In contrast, the image of the soldier in multiethnic American literature is varied and complex, and the definition of what a soldier is and does is broader. African American, Asian American, Native American, and Latinx authors are

writing soldiers of color back into the battlefields of American perception, claiming a legacy that is both fundamentally unique and also demands national recognition of a debt owed and long overdue.

CHAPTER 1

SOLDIERING INTO CITIZENSHIP

In *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass relates that during the Civil War, he “urged every man who could to enlist to get an eagle on his button, a musket on his shoulder, the star-spangled banner over his head” because after that, “there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States” (207-8). Clothed in the trappings of military duty and sacrifice, a soldier’s (and by proxy, his people’s) respected position within the nation is unassailable. Douglass’s call reflects the deep connection between military service and the demand for equal citizenship that have played a powerful role in the struggle for racial equality and inclusion throughout American history. Over one hundred years later, the power of this argument continues to reverberate in multiethnic literature of war. Willie Bodega, the Gatsby-esque anti-hero of Ernesto Quinonez’s 2000 novel *Bodega Dreams*, follows Douglass’s logic in arguing for the claim Puerto Ricans have to the United States: “this country is ours as much as it is theirs. Puerto Rican limbs were lost in the sands of Iwo Jima, in Korea, in Nam. You go to D.C. and you read that wall and you’ll also see our names: Rivera, Ortega, Martinez, Castillo” (26). Bodega unloads the Spanish surnames of the fallen as if they are bullets that will strike down any attempt to deny Puerto Rican rights. This chapter argues that the military is a constructing site of the American citizen imaginary through which racialized others, immigrants, aliens, enemies, and colonials are forged into (masculine) American citizens and in which those individuals collectively redefine the American nation. Enlisting in the military secures a legitimized, masculine American identity for some characters (or seems to), while resisting military service brands others as national enemies.

I will first theorize what I refer to as the citizen imaginary, a cultural concept that serves as a corollary to its legal counterpart. Far from the genderless, unraced legal designation citizenship is imagined to be, certain racial groups have been systematically excluded from citizenship, while women were denied the full privileges of citizenship throughout much of American history. What effect have centuries of legal exclusions had on our collective imaginings of citizenship? I argue that in multiethnic war literature, characters are motivated in part both by a desire to win the full privileges of legal citizenship and also to be recognized as citizens in the eyes of the nation. Yet seeking a place in the citizen imaginary through military service is a gendered proposition, and one that comes with its own limitations. Moreover, the citizen imaginary reveals itself to be a concept that often cannot entirely contain the transnational identities and alliances of soldiers who either emerge from or come to self-consciously situate themselves within a history of diaspora, migration, and empire. In the end, military participation does not always allow characters to enter a preconceived notion of the citizen imaginary as they'd hoped, but the injustice of ongoing exclusion despite military sacrifice instead serves as a catalyst for a reframing of solidarities and action that can be anticolonial and transnational in spirit.

Recalling the quest narrative, this journey soldiers of colors embark on—pursuing masculinized citizenship through the military, experiencing rejection and disillusionment, then fighting for racial justice that is transnational or internationalist in spirit—is perhaps the signature narrative thread of multiethnic war literature. It resembles the narrative of lost innocence common in canonical war literature (particularly of WWI), but is distinguished by its protagonists' position as being already outside the metaphorical

garden and taking up soldiering as a means to enter rather than affirm an idealized masculine citizenship, as well as by its conclusion, in which protagonists are empowered by new critical allegiances rather than demoralized. This journey is always one of narrative irony in which the reader is presumably aware of what the unreliable narrator is not: that he will fail because the game is rigged. The character, however, must experience this journey on his own to reach this understanding, and although he will fail to reach his initial goals, the failure will serve as a catalyst for reframed solidarities that are the seed for true freedom. Rather than seek a place within the citizen imaginary, in other words, the characters come to understand that the concept of the citizen imaginary itself must be reimagined. Sometimes this is accompanied by revelations about gender or at least an expansion of women's place within this fight, and sometimes not. In this chapter, I will look at the ways John Oliver Killens's *And Then We Heard the Thunder* follows and deviates from this common pattern.

Along the way, I will further show that a close look at these texts reveals a more complex relationship to military participation than what gets told in popular representations of soldiers of color. Although the characters in the novels I look at yearn to establish their stake in American nationhood, they share an ambivalence of loyalty born of experience that sometimes goes unresolved, and that is revealed structurally through ambiguous endings, disappearance, and elision. Moreover, these characters join the military not just to 'prove' their worthiness of citizenship, but in order to actively contest what American citizenship means and who has a right to claim it. In other words, soldiers of color are more than just the willing dupes of American military propaganda;

they are agents choosing to fight in order to challenge accepted representations of citizenship.

The Citizen Imaginary

Multiethnic American war literature dramatizes the way minoritized soldiers are compelled to prove through military service their loyalty to the nation and their worthiness for equal citizenship to a suspicious white America. As Lisa Lowe observes, the legal mantle of citizenship is not enough “to guarantee truly equal rights to all the nation’s citizenry” (ix) insofar as the cultural dimension of citizenship remains raced and gendered. As such, this literature confronts head on the paradox of minoritized citizenship in the United States: every person born in the United States is, at least in theory, owed all the basic rights of citizenship, while at the same time citizens of color are institutionally treated as second-class and often socially perceived as foreign or even as less than human.

The citizen is a raced and gendered construct whose contours have become less rigid over the course of the twentieth century as a result of immigration reforms, the Civil Rights movement, and the rise of multiculturalism. Nevertheless, cultural representations still lag behind their legal counterpart. Following the work of Lisa Lowe, Dana Nelson, David Roediger, and Laura Berlant among others, I suggest that in addition to legal citizenship, the institution of citizenship encompasses an abstract dimension I am referring to as the citizen imaginary. For white Americans, especially for white male Americans, being a legal citizen and being perceived as holding citizenship are one in the same. This synchronicity is not available to everyone. I explore the disconnection between who is legally a citizen and who can more readily inhabit this space

unquestioned, a disconnection that has material and psychological implications. This gap propels some men of color to join the military, seeking to be recognized as citizens in both the legal sense and in public perception. These citizenship aspirations form a recurring theme in multiethnic American soldiering narratives. If the citizen imaginary is coded as male, then the assertion of a masculinity made visible yet contained by a demonstrable allegiance to the nation becomes a bridge by which men of color can arrive at the banks of citizenship. However, this spectacle is one that never stops being subjected to scrutiny, but is a performance that must be enacted again and again, and one that loses its potency once the visible displays of soldiering fall away and the battlefield has been left behind. The contradictions arising from soldiering in the name of a nation whose practices at home and abroad protect the interests of its ideal citizens—white male Americans—at cost to people of color at home and to countries in the emerging world often leads characters in the literature I explore to shift identification to transnational, postcolonial, or internationalist communities.

How does the ostensibly neutral abstraction of the citizen become raced and gendered? While arguably a result of economic relations, here I am interested in the cultural and ideological dimensions of citizenship as motivation and an entry point for men of color to redefine themselves. A national consciousness of exclusion created the long history of conferring the rights and privileges of citizenship on white males while visibly denying the presence of other groups. This collective mindset determined the only group to emblematically be an abstraction of citizenship—the citizen imaginary—was white men.

While the Constitution is mostly silent about eligibility for citizenship and the citizen's duties and privileges, during much of its history full American citizenship was limited to white, property-holding men by the law, the courts, and the economic world. The 1857 *Dred Scott* case established on the national level that only whites present during the ratification of the Constitution and their descendants were citizens, and the 1868 Fourteenth Amendment's progressive expansion of citizenship as a birthright came at the same moment that the gendered term *male* was first introduced to the Constitution. In the Progressive era, a series of Asian exclusion laws curtailed Asian immigration and explicitly barred Asians already in the United States from becoming citizens. While white women were understood to be citizens, they suffered a form of second-class citizenship that depended on fathers and husbands for political and economic privileges. Colonized populations were alternately deemed foreign nationals (Native Americans) or nationals (Filipinos) rather than U.S. citizens until the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act gave citizenship to most Native Americans who did not yet have it. Most persons in territories were given limited forms of citizenship by the 1950s. It is only in the twentieth century that Americans of color and women gain equal citizenship in status, with at least legal guarantees of the same rights and immunities as white males.

The justification for this long history of exclusion is intimately tied with raced and gendered philosophies of what constitutes a good citizen. Ostensibly a neutral concept abstracted from the particularities of the individual subject, the citizen is the embodiment of the nation, and in turn the nation is the collective body of its members. The rhetorical equation between citizen and nation has endured since Aristotle defined the citizen as "Whoever is entitled to participate in an office involving deliberation or

decision” whereas the city is defined as “the multitude of such persons” (87). John Locke deepened the signifying power of citizenship by identifying citizenship with an individual’s humanity itself, insofar as a human being’s capacity for reason made him eligible for self-government. While liberal theories like Locke’s bring the promise of equality to the common man and provide a vocabulary for disempowered groups to fight for political rights, under this philosophy those who do not enjoy the full benefits of citizenship are in danger of being erased from not only the imagined nation, but also from what it means to be fully human.

The philosophy that civic virtue and rationality are prerequisites to achieving citizenship, while attractive in theory, in practice historically excluded certain groups. For Enlightenment thinkers the capacity for reason set humans apart from beasts, but during a time when only men of European descent were understood to be capable of reason, this drew a dangerous parallel between non-European humans and non-human animals. After the French Revolution, women were deemed unfit for self-government on the basis of lacking reason and were accorded only “passive citizenship” status. African slaves served ideologically to distinguish white colonists as suitable for self-government in contrast to the “accepted” servitude of African slaves who were “stigmatized as the *antithesis* of republican citizens” (Roediger 36). In *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), Judge Taney declared African Americans to be “so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” While an ostensibly abstract concept neutral on gender and race, in practice citizenship carries a raced and gendered ideological dimension.

During the Revolutionary period, the political melding of regionally, ethnically, and economically diverse European individuals into a uniform white citizen helped

consolidate a diverse and potentially divided population into a new nation. Crèvecoeur in his *Letters from an American Farmer* famously defined the American as “a promiscuous blend” of “English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes” that together would forge a new “race now called Americans” whose entitlement to land drew from labor rather than inheritance (60). Yet this imagined unity came at a cost. As Dana Nelson argues in *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men*, the ideology of white manhood brought “equalitarian reassurance of unmediated brotherhood” to white men, but defines white men’s racial and gender others as firmly outside the category of citizen (x). Similar to the negative underbelly of Locke’s democratic conception of citizenship, the idea of equal citizenship brought the promise of a new egalitarianism for white men, but it also reified the outsidership of women and minoritized communities.

In addition to the qualities of the good citizen being raced and gendered, the evolving but persistent identification between citizenship and white males, and the only recent fuller umbrella that citizenship includes, means the citizen continues to be abstracted in a way that fits more readily on white male bodies. The unique histories experienced by minoritized groups in the U.S. differently frames their relationship to legal citizenship and the cultural imaginary. The repressed history of the Middle Passage and the social destruction of slave families positions African Americans as a group without a pre-history and therefore inherently American, even while they are consigned to an imagined space beyond the bounds of legal citizenship. In contrast, the visible history of some Asian and Latinx immigration and the virulent attempts to exclude them from citizenship means they find themselves continually required to reprove their

national identity. Finally, Native Americans' original inhabitation of the land threatens the legitimacy of white American occupation. Lisa Lowe argues that citizenship makes invisible "the historically sedimented particularities of race, national origin, locality, and embodiment" (2) and leaves in its wake an abstraction that is implicitly coded as white. The history of Asian exclusion acts, for example, although since repealed, has left a cultural footprint in which "the Asian is always seen as an immigrant, as the 'foreigner-within'" (5). Over time, legal exclusions shape the citizen imaginary in ways that undermine the raceless and genderless abstraction it is believed to be, while the citizen imaginary in turn influences law, culture and perception.

In this context, soldiering, with the trappings of patriotic masculinity it provided, was one path open to men of color seeking to obtain equal citizenship and insert themselves into the citizen imaginary. As far back as ancient Greece and Rome, military service has been associated closely with citizenship and in some societies has been a prerequisite to it. More than in any other area of national life, "war is the spectacle of the masculine bond. It is the optimal display of masculine collectivity in America" (Jeffords 73). Take, for instance, Frederick Douglass's passionate Civil War call to arms in 1863: "Men of color. To arms!...For generations we suffered under the horror of slavery, outrage and wrong, our manhood has been denied, our citizenship blotted out" (317). Douglass's call grammatically aligns manhood with citizenship, and offers military participation as a means to both acquire social recognition of manhood *and* be the method through which slaves might be liberated. Indeed, in fiction about multiethnic American soldiers, military service provides men of color with the accoutrements of respectable

masculinity and offers characters unimpeachable proof of their status as citizens, and in some cases is a legal means to obtain citizenship in the first place.

If masculinity is considered in positive terms as a set of socially-recognized traits—including bravery, strength of character and of body, honor, and capableness—upon which male self-esteem and identity can rest, then the denial of social recognition of masculinity could be debilitating to a sense of self. Ralph Ellison equates masculinity with humanity and self-respect when he writes, “The moment that I begin to speak and write like a man they'll use all their energy to jam me off the airways, because, like you, I'll be speaking on the wavelength of the human heart” (qtd. in Hobson 360). Asserting manhood, then, can be a revolutionary act, threatening to the social order, one that will cause those in power to censor it. Where opportunities to achieve social recognition of masculinity were limited and even undermined, “war promised to be one ground upon which black manhood could be created” (James 12). Although still occupying a space in a rigid hierarchy, the soldier of color is no longer to be the subjugated victim of the forces of power, but rather might perform as part of Jeffords’s “display of masculine collectivity” and gain individual authority by virtue of association with an institution of power. In addition to these individualist goals, soldiers of color also functioned, intentionally or not, as symbols of their race and as metaphorical soldiers in a battle for racial equality. By putting their lives at the service of the United States, soldiers of color might not only guarantee personal respect, but also social legitimation for their community.

Soldiering, then, serves as one foundation upon which masculine self-respect and self-determination can be built, but it is always forged in relation to the nation.

Sometimes literal, sometimes metaphorical, soldiering is a path into the citizen imaginary. This sentiment was experienced on the ground by soldiers like Gilberto in Lea Ybarra's oral history, *Vietnam Veterans: Chicanos Recall the War*, who remembers, "I felt a real sense of calling to duty, to the country, and to demonstrate, maybe more than anybody else, how patriotic I really was. I think a lot of Chicanos shared my same feelings and it was like I had to validate myself, that I was in fact American, that I was a citizen" (25). Likewise, Roy Benavidez's tale of nearly dying in a dangerous Vietnam War rescue mission is staged as irrefutable proof of his loyalty and patriotism in *The Three Wars of Roy Benavidez*, a Vietnam War memoir that is also an elaborate defense of Benavidez's claim to American citizenship and patriotism. In order to confirm his identity as a loyal and patriotic bona fide American, Benavidez must do more than the white soldier on every level. He must work harder for less, he must overcome impossible hardships, volunteer for impossible missions, and excuse every racial insult. In the memoir's crucial scene, the severity of Benavidez's injuries after a rescue mission render him unable to protest when white American soldiers, reading his appearance as Vietnamese, nearly abandon him to die. Benavidez describes how "More than once my native American features had been mistaken for Oriental. Now, by God, they were going to get me dumped with the enemy dead" (4). At this instant, his life literally depends on whether or not these U.S. soldiers will recognize him as American. It is a tense moment, one that might profitably be read as a parable of Benavidez's textual move to be claimed as a loyal American. The white soldiers' ambivalence about Benavidez's national identity is mirrored by the imagined white reader's own ambivalence about Mexican American identity. By participating in this crisis, the reader, like the soldiers, is asked to affirm

Benavidez's nationality. Benavidez's memoir is aptly named—his third, most enduring war happened long after his experience in dense jungles, gunfights, and helicopter raids. It is the battle for recognition, both for the valor of his service and for his claims to an American identity; it is a battle in which his inspired, enraging, and above all, calculated, memoir is his final move.

Alfredo Véa reminds us of the corresponding legal history of Mexican citizens fighting on the U.S. side in Vietnam as a secure route of crossing the border when the protagonist of *Gods Go Begging*, Jesse Pasadoble, bitterly explains that, “Enlistment was a way of getting across the Rio Grande that the Border Patrol didn't seem to care about. No idiot gringos were crying out for a greater INS presence at the recruitment centers” (Véa 106-7). Soldiering was a path not only into the citizen imaginary, but also into citizenship in a literal sense. In these examples and many others, the need to prove or claim social recognition of their Americanness is one of the most persistent themes that spans multiethnic accounts of war.

The masculine aura soldiering bestows on its subjects is acquired through the respect accorded the uniform as well as to the skills, training, and sacrifice it symbolizes. The power of soldiering goes beyond a mere transaction between, on the one hand, the state conferring the rights and privileges of citizenship and, on the other, those lending the state their bodies. If, as Judith Butler argues, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance” (33), then soldiering is a particular kind of gender performance whose acts, behaviors, physical comportment, and dress constitute the subject as an honorable man of both power and restraint; power in that the soldier has

the means and authority to kill, but restrained insofar as the soldier lays his power at the feet of his superiors and the head of state.

The soldier's aggressive and violent form of masculinity—a potential threat when performed by certain bodies—is made acceptable by the control of the state and regulated through a highly elaborate system of training, procedure, and submission to authority. Like the Black police figure analyzed by Robyn Wiegman, the soldier of color may “transform his potential subversion of U.S. culture into affirmation, protection, and appear—through presence and visibility—to democratic enunciations” (138). The soldier's is a nationally sanctioned aggressiveness whose uniform signifies loyalty to the nation, service to its people, and protection from outside threats. As Lisa Lowe argues, “the American soldier, who has in every way submitted to the nation, is the quintessential citizen and therefore the ideal representative of the nation” (6). Within patriarchal codifications of masculinity, it is something more than maleness, but an added layer of civilized, characteristically masculine behaviors that might be called “manhood,” the elusive combination of strength and restraint, honor, rationality, and bravery that distinguishes ‘men’ from brutes. Such qualities reveal those in possession of them to be fit for self-government. Cloaked in a government-issued uniform, revealing in his movements corporeal training in the service of protecting the nation, the body of the soldier is, in Foucault's terms, a docile body whose allegiance can be easily read. It is indeed a successful strategy. Native Americans were granted citizenship en masse partly in homage to their service during World War I, and voluntary service in the United States military is one path available to immigrants seeking naturalization. Through socially

recognized civic masculinity, military service can be its own argument for equal citizenship.

However, the effects of the performance of soldiering are only as persuasive as collectively accepted norms; performance is part of a “collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain” gender, but also, crucially, to “believe” in the performance (Butler 140). The confluence of the individual soldier body with the body politic creates a citizen imaginary that is both exclusionary and a space for intervention that was nonetheless fraught. As Jarvis notes, “representations of particular male bodies—young, well-muscled, white—were privileged as the U.S. symbolically rebuilt its body politic and prepared for war” (5). To the extent that soldiers of color don’t “match” with conventional images of the soldier, his performance becomes untenable, the mimicry of a soldier that is “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 122), both the object of derision, and conversely, a threat. Thus, equations of men of color with bestial masculine qualities—sexual appetite, aggressiveness, and violence, co-exist with their denial of citizenship and humanity and served rather to reinforce it. What is heroic and manly when performed by white bodies appears threatening and aggressive when performed by men of color; armed white men suggest protection of the nation, while armed Black men, revolt. This is reflected in the ways segregated soldiers were assigned to service roles because it was deemed too dangerous to put their power of guns in their hands, while during the Vietnam War many soldiers of color found themselves treated as second-class soldiers (Ybarra). Accordingly, recognition of maleness or masculinity alone might not be sufficient to win marginalized men social respect and citizenship insofar as gender

intersects with race and class in ways that reveal the fragmentation of the concept of masculinity itself.

We see this fragmentation in Daniel Cano's 1995 multivocal novel about the Vietnam War, *Shifting Loyalties*, which plumbs the nexus of masculinity, race, class, and war through the development of a core group of Mexican American characters who join the military motivated by paternal influence, aspirations to fulfill their masculine duty, and quests for citizenship, both perceived and actual. David Almas, the protagonist of the novel, was raised with the idea that service and manhood are intimately linked. With his veteran father and uncles as models, David's path seems inevitable. Despite financial difficulties, David's father enrolled him in Little League, explaining that, "It's all a part of the training, being a man, doing your duty, like being drafted in the Army when there's a war. One day you'll see. I'm planting seeds" (22). Ironically, however, the masculine mystique of military service evaporates when the men actually join. The friends David signed up with disappear at the last minute, the same parents who instilled the value of service so strongly are horrified to learn he's enlisted, and David's tour of duty leads him to question the romantic vision of what soldiering would give him.

The idea that men of color must give their lives in order to prove their Americanness to a skeptical and scornful white world appears repeatedly in military history and in the fictional representations of soldiers of color. An unnamed soldier in *Shifting Loyalties* embraces this logic when he argues that "We got rights just like anybody else" because "My old man fought in WWII. My uncle Tino died in some shitty field in Korea" (98). For the soldier, citizenship is literally earned through blood. Death is the ultimate argument that brooks no rebuttal, yet there is a painful irony in the idea that

the worth of soldiers of color is recognized only after they have died in battle. Berry and Blassingame write that “Blacks were the only Americans who continually fought to serve in the military in order to prove their humanity. Ironically, they had to die in order to live” (295). Similarly, according to Olguín, Mexican Americans are seen first as threatening cultural aliens, “enemies whose loyalty—and nationality—cannot be determined until they have made the ultimate sacrifice” (90). Death may be the final word, but it is so partly because a dead soldier no longer embodies the danger of revolt, but rather can safely be turned into a symbol. Death in battle both proves their patriotism and neutralizes any threat they once represented. As such, the bitter irony of the fallen soldier whose sacrifice is an exchange for an imperfect citizenship haunts multiethnic literature of war.

Soldiering did help effect change in citizenship eligibility, and it did expand the limited citizen imaginary, but not all gains were enduring, and while the concept of the citizen imaginary stretched, it was not entirely reformed. Often, there was backlash in the form of heightened racial tension and violence once veterans of color returned home (Berry and Blassingame 306). Once the soldier becomes a veteran, the opportunities to uphold the equation between the subject and soldiering, “tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 140) decline.

Soldiers of color returned from service abroad expecting to be treated with more dignity than when they left. However, a population of trained military men of color proved more threatening than otherwise: the prospect of African American veterans “raises the white fear of armed insurrection and of national self-representation” (Kaplan 222). Waves of racial violence, often aimed at returning veterans, followed the two world

wars. The spike in racial lynching and abuse in 1919, the year the 369th Infantry Regiment, the 'Harlem Hellfighters,' triumphantly marched in Harlem, was intended to be a reminder "that they [African American veterans] were not in France and that they could not expect to be treated equally" (Berry and Blassingame 318).

As a corollary, returning veterans were also less likely to put up with racial abuse, even if that sometimes meant violence was necessary. In 1919, for instance, "twenty-six incidents of serious racial violence erupted in American towns and cities" and "black veterans armed themselves and fought back against white mobs" (Berry and Blassingame 318). During World War II, the Harlem Riot of 1943 was provoked when an African American soldier interceded in the attempted arrest of an African American woman. The police officer shot and wounded the soldier, although the rumor that a white police officer had killed an African American soldier quickly circulated.

Ann Petry's novella *In Darkness and Confusion* captures events like this. Petry exposes the breakdown of the citizen imaginary along race lines and then renders the outbreaks of resistance that follow when African American soldiers return home after World War II only to suffer indignity, segregation, and police harassment. Rather than the rewards of recognized citizenship, social respect, and admiration that Harlem residents William Jones and his wife Pink might expect to accrue from the military enlistment of their son, Sam, during World War II, they instead mourn him being sentenced to twenty years of hard labor when he refuses to sit in the back of the bus. The paradoxical promise of soldiering that the military seeks to both capitalize on and contain means that, although enlisting confirms Sam's manhood, he can no longer endure second-class citizenship. For his parents, Sam's act of defiance and his punishment become

imaginatively intertwined with an unrelated local incident in which an African American soldier is shot after defending an African American woman from a white police officer. Here the novella complicates the gendered equation between masculinity and citizenship in locating the spark of resistance within Pink herself, whose act of hurling a bottle through a shop window touches off the historical Harlem Riot of 1943. While it is implied that Pink dies from exhaustion, the family legacy endures through another woman, their niece, Annie May, who, “like Sam on that bus in Georgia,” will no longer settle for second-class citizenship, but determines to carve out her own future path. *In Darkness and Confusion* sharply repudiates the treatment African American soldiers received during WWII, and it suggests that military service will not inevitably lead to equal rights, but rather that African American peoples must claim those rights themselves.

Likewise, if returning from military service did not always expand the boundaries of the citizen imaginary as much as soldiers envisioned, many soldiers and veterans of color possessed an invigorated self-assurance and a sense of entitlement to the rights of citizenship that they had fought to protect. Christopher Parker explains that African American “veterans, as a group, were uncommonly active in the [civil rights] movement” (174). In his homage to Chicano World War II and Korean War veterans, Raul Morin reports that “the returning Mexican-American veteran...did not want to find things the way he had left them...For too long we had been like outsiders” (277). Gonzalez concurs: “World War II...transformed the thinking of a whole generation of Mexican American men who served in it” (Gonzalez). This renewed self-assurance and entitlement motivated a number of returning veterans to join civil rights, nationalist, and veteran

organizations, including the League of United Latin American Citizens, the American G.I. Forum, and the NAACP.

Of course, aspiring to enter the citizen imaginary through military service comes with its own dangers. In particular, conceptualizing racial progress and equal citizenship by way of militarized manhood, even in its most honorable form, comes at the price of reinforcing asymmetrical gender relations. At its worst, texts such as Charlie Trujillo's *Dogs from Illusion* and George Davis's *Coming Home* depict male characters asserting an aggressive masculinity through troubling and sometimes violent sexual dominance over women. Such models, moreover, leave little space for women to participate as equals in the struggle for justice, and in many of these texts, women characters, when present, are decidedly in the background. Privileging masculinity as a pathway to social advancement reinforces a harmful gendered and raced paradigm whereby enemies and conquered peoples are feminized as a prerequisite and justification to their othering. Jeffords argues that during the Vietnam War, "men of color or of the working class or of other groups oppressed via defined categories of difference can be treated as women—"feminized"—and made subject to domination" (xii). How do soldiers of color reconcile these gender dynamics of war with their own experiences as "unmanned men"? Many of the texts I examine find it troubling that the military is one of the few routes available to their characters in achieving socially legitimized manhood, while in other cases, a feminist reading suggests that any reclamation of soldiering must address the equation of masculinity with self-determination, empowerment, and equal citizenship.

If the body's ability to transparently convey the masculine power and sacrifice of the soldier dwindled upon return, the onus of extending the performance of soldiering

falls to the domain of memory and storytelling. In Jennifer James's words on African American war literature, writing war was also "a means of writing blacks into the national 'historical destiny'" (6). As such, multiethnic war literature is also an intervention into who gets to claim citizenship, and at what cost.

While some texts do reify masculinist tropes, many also turn a critical eye toward the conflation of military services and good citizenship, and end up conceptualizing alternative allegiances that can be racial, translational, or transethnic in nature. While the characters of many texts come to question the idea that they can redeem pre-defined ideas of manhood through soldiering, the journey they take leads not to disillusionment, but to a painful enlightenment that serves as the foundation to metaphorically "soldier" for a difference cause—social justice on behalf of their communities rather than on behalf of a state. Yet perhaps because the stakes of military sacrifice are so high or because the cost of complicating loyalties beyond the national are so dear, many texts employ strategies of ambiguity, buried meanings, and disappearance. Moreover, to the extent that such texts resist glorifying the martial, writers use elision and indirect narration rather than seek to directly depict battlefield sequences. These strategies are common to multiethnic war literature across all the novels I explore in this project, not just the ones covered in this chapter. Perhaps no novel better exemplifies the trope of a protagonist's journey to racial enlightenment through his experiences in the military than John Oliver Killens's 1963 novel *And Then We Heard the Thunder*.

Solly's Quest in *And Then We Heard the Thunder*

Killens's *And Then We Heard the Thunder* frames itself as a quest narrative in which the protagonist, Solly Saunders, pursues an elusive concept of manhood through

military service. In the context of the novel, manhood might be best understood as a racialized and gendered conception of oneself as an independent, moral agent with inherent dignity and, therefore, worthy of inclusion in the citizen imaginary. At first Solly, partially pressured by his wife Millie, imagines that manhood can be achieved through individual advancement in the form of an elite education and material success. Yet, over the course of the novel, Solly will evolve into a “man,” not in either the heroic and individualist ways he originally sets out to, but through his experiences in an army riddled with racism, the lessons he will learn from his fellow African American soldiers, and through his relationship to NAACP activist Fannie Mae. Millie’s individualist model of manhood proves empty, and the idealistic military aspirations of wartime rhetoric reveal themselves to be cheap platitudes that mask imperialist ambitions. The novel suggests that fighting for such an army will not deliver to African Americans the respect of citizenship Solly craves, but rather it is only through collective (gendered) liberation that the dignity promised by manhood can be achieved. The novel also grapples with the limitations of conflating humanity with manhood, but leaves such issues unresolved. Ultimately, the novel will prove unable to fully articulate a path forward for how African American citizens might find dignity and equity within the American citizen imaginary, ending on an ambiguous note that underlines Solly’s shortcomings while suggesting a deep pessimism beneath the perhaps misguidedly hopeful resolution Solly frames at the novel’s conclusion.²

² For other detailed treatments of *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, see Roy Scranton’s *Total Mobilization: World War II and American Literature* (2019), Stephen Anderson Carey’s *Black Men’s Du Boisian Relationships to Southern Social Institutions in the Novels of John Oliver Killens* (1992), and Jennifer James’s *A Freedom Bought with Blood* (2007), which argues that the novel is an “an uncompromising critique of nationalist and imperialist warfare” (262). Alan Wald’s 2007 *Trinity of Passion: The Literary*

Solly begins the novel as a young man embarking on a quest narrative of progress from boyhood to manhood, an evolution he believes will not only improve his individual lot, but prove his worthiness to be a citizen and, by proxy, elevate the race.³ At the same time, the novel's title, *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, as well as the title of its four sections, "The Panting Season," "Cultivation," "Thunder, Lightning, Rainfall," and "The Crop," based on a Civil War description by Harriet Tubman in the novel's epigraph, portends a more ominous journey:

And then we saw the lightning, and that was the guns. And then we heard the thunder and that was the big guns. And then we heard the rain falling and that was the drops of blood falling. And when we came to get in the crops, it was dead men that we reaped.

The inscription suggests that the idea of young men growing to maturity in and through war is a perversion of the natural cycle of life, one that is nourished by violence, where rain is replaced with an image of an unnatural, Biblical plague-like blood, and ending in death rather than regeneration. Killens's dedication of the novel to young people, whom he hopes will never themselves see war firsthand, casts a pall over the idealistic quest Solly is about to embark on, creating a disconnection right from the start between Solly's naive conception of the military and that of the author, who is himself a veteran.

Left and the Antifascist Crusade calls *And Then We Heard the Thunder* "a major contender for the finest U.S. novel of World War II" (50) and attempts to situate the novel within its historical and biographical contexts, with an eye towards Killens's political commitments. Other critics who discuss the novel include Milton Cohen in *Axis, Axes to Grind: Political Slants in American World War II Novels, 1945-1975* (2021) and Christopher Z. Hobson in "Invisible Man and African American Radicalism in World War II" (2005).³ Killens himself is a World War II veteran and shares some biographical commonalities with Solly. For a thorough biography of Killens and a testament to the recognition of Killens's literary achievements, see *Liberation Memories: The Rhetoric and Poetics of John Oliver Killens* (2003) and *John Oliver Killens: A Life of Black Literary Activism* (2010).

Solly enlists to fight in World War II motivated by a patriotic belief in his duty as an American, an idealistic desire to defeat racist fascism, and from his own naïve aspirations for self-advancement to be achieved by donning the uniform. He is supported by his new bride, Millie, who likewise imagines the military to be a path into the middle class:

I know you're not going into the Army with a chip on your shoulder. Forget about the race problem at least for the duration. Be an American instead of a Negro, and concentrate on winning the war, and while you're in the Army work for those promotions just like in civilian life. (6)

Millie's vision is pragmatic but limited, and while Solly aspires to something more idealistic, the financial success and acceptance in white society for which she hungers also strikes a chord with him. Yet unlike Millie, Solly, who comes from a lower economic class, desires to "keep in touch with my folks who will still be stomping at the Savory" (5) and partially rejects the idea of fitting into white society. With complex and contradictory motivations, Solly seeks to win social respect as both a citizen and as a man through enlistment in the Army. Solly's motivations share some superficial similarities to traditional enlistment narratives wherein a young man joins the military out of an eagerness to test his manhood and serve his country. However, Solly's story is overlaid with complexities arising from his position as a subject within a racist society that limits Solly's access to the privileges reserved for white men.

Unlike the white men enlisting as soldiers, Solly cannot take for granted his belongingness in the American nation. On the contrary, he remains an outsider despite signing up for the Army. In Georgia where he is sent for training, he must still endure

segregation and board the bus after whites even while wearing the uniform. He later experiences this racial outsiderism when he wanders away from camp through a predominantly white neighborhood at night and is followed by police. Solly describes his frustration with the constraints upon him, and he imagines the United States as a “foreign country where he was an alien, and never a citizen. A country where he was born and lived as a boy, but could never grow up to become a man” (118). Here, Solly explicitly equates citizenship and manhood: it is through the nation that manhood can be socially constructed. As a racial subject without access to a nation, Solly is an “alien” rather than a human being, and therefore growing into manhood is beyond his reach. Solly experiences the denial of his full citizenship as a diminishment of personhood. At this point, Solly takes an individualist rather than a more expansive view of his predicament, and imagines that if manhood is to be denied him because he is not a full citizen, then the military presents itself as a ready means to prove his worthiness for this symbolic status. Participation in war is for Solly the way to escape this strange condition of being an outsider in one’s own country, and to ensure the mainstream population will view him as a man and hence a citizen upon his return.

Framed in this way, citizenship is something to be earned. Unlike many of the African American soldiers he will soon meet, Solly’s belief in his self-worth and his potential to climb the social ladder are dependent on how he is perceived in a nation ruled by whites. For Solly, African Americans cannot rely on being recognized as citizens as their birthright, but must prove their membership based on other criteria:

We’re American citizens and the country is at war and they need us, and when we get back we won’t let them forget that we fought like everybody else... You got to

be in the Army. This is our country as much as anybody else's. It was built on the backs of our forefathers. (17)

Solly defends African Americans eligibility for citizenship as grounded in the historical slave labor of his ancestors that built the wealth of the United States and proven through ongoing military service. According to Solly, to lay claim to this legacy and continue to earn their right to America, African American men “got to be in the Army.” In a circular logic, to serve in the military is both a means to prove one’s citizenship as well as a desirable right that itself must be defended. If “manhood was the idiom of black soldiers’ political discourse,” (Lentz-Smith 7) then Solly speaks within a long tradition of African American men who argue military service is an undeniable route to citizenship. However, both these defenses of labor and military service depend on external validation of worthiness for citizenship rather than inherent right, a perspective that reads in tension with the voice of the narrative. Although readers are meant to feel Solly’s outrage at the disjuncture between African American contributions to the United States and their status within it, the narrative suggests that to continue conceptualizing citizenship as a status to be earned is naive, as we shall see.

Even at this juncture, the kernel of Solly’s eventual rejection of this notion can already be observed. Solly’s individualist mission has the beginnings of a kind of proto-activism in which he hopes that white America depends on African American participation to win the war, and that having entered into an uneasy bargain, white Americans will have no choice but to honor African American military sacrifice. Nevertheless, Solly recognizes the precariousness of this future acknowledgement and that it may need to be enforced—“we won’t let them forget”—rather than taken for

granted. Military participation alone will not secure the future of middle-class assimilation for which he longs. In this Solly speaks through a history of African American veterans returning from the wars to continue a second battle at home.

The contradiction between Solly's experiences as a Black subject and his belief in the American project is the fault line that makes space for a unique but terrible enlightenment that will ultimately be a source of strength. Unlike his white counterparts, Solly, for all his individualist leanings, cannot but feel responsibility toward the racial community of which he is a part. Regardless of the complexities of the U.S.'s motivation in joining the WWII effort, Solly identifies with what he sees as the American mission to halt Hitler's racist fascism. Stopping the rise of white supremacy is to Solly's idealistic mind a cause that is at once both patriotic and essential to his community, since "if Hitler conquered America, the Negro would be 100 times worse off than he is now" (17). In this historical moment, fighting for the United States and fighting for African Americans are for Solly indistinguishable from each other. With his romantic ideas about the army, Solly's dual motives of individualism and duty to a community beyond himself seem to be in sync. Taken together, Solly's eagerness to prove his manhood to himself, Millie, and his country, the commitment to the individual self-advancement he believes military service will enable, and a longing to serve his race, leads Solly to enlist in the Army.

The disjuncture between what Solly imagines for himself and the ethos of the novel is conveyed through narrative irony. The irony of duty to protect a nation that does not welcome one's presence is lost on Solly but implicit in the narrative voice, which overlays Solly's naive rhetoric with representations of the ugly reality of African Americans in the military. Killens manages a narrative balancing act in which readers are

invited to admire the qualities of moral uprightness, intelligence, and bravery that will ultimately make Solly a hero, but which at present he puts in the service of a cause of which the narrative remains skeptical.

Like other writers describing the experience of soldiering, then, Killens early in the narrative sets up the African American community as a nation within a nation that is both inescapably tied to its destiny yet exiled from it. While a citizen in name, through segregation, economic inequality, and sanctioned state violence against African Americans of the 1930s and 1940s, Solly has been systematically excluded from citizenship's privileges. Solly is, therefore, an 'alien' in a country not his own, seeking admittance and acceptance. Although Solly at this stage recognizes some of this, he still believes he can achieve manhood and citizenship through the socially sanctioned means of military service.

The military, however, provides a different kind of education than the one Solly expects, and his quest for "manhood" shifts along with his understanding of what being a man looks like. Although Solly initially imagines that he may be able to achieve manhood through individual advancement, he receives an education in the military that strains this idea. This education happens by means of the racism Solly experiences in the Army and the interactions he has with other African American soldiers in his unit. It turns out that the kind of soldiering Solly believes will make him a man, and the recognition that it bestows, is reserved for white soldiers. When Solly goes to Georgia for training, he discovers that his segregated, African American unit is intended to perform menial labor rather than engage in active duty, and that there are few opportunities for real leadership, a predicament that was historically true for African American soldiers in World War II

(Berry and Blassingame). In the novel, white soldiers find it amusing to refer to Solly's unit as "Rutherford's plantation," named after their white lieutenant, and refer to the African American soldiers as "Rutherford's slaves" (83), discursively relegating the soldiers to slaves and rhetorically stripping them of the status soldiering should give them. The gap widens between Solly's idealistic imaginings of the military building him into a man and the reality of ongoing racism in the Army.

Perversely, the fact that the African American soldiers are ridiculed as inferior does not protect them from the obverse perception. Armed African American men are seen as a threat rather than loyal brothers in arms. Bucket-head, a fellow recruit, explains to Solly that "*We ain't fighting nobody. You think these crackers gon let you go over there and shoot at other crackers?*" (94). Bucket-head's pithy remark encapsulates the predicament of African American soldiers in the military during this period and in earlier wars, and Solly all at once understands that he has been recruited to provide service and labor, not to fight in battle. Bucket-head's bitter observation reorients the battle lines from the U.S. versus Axis powers to one of white Americans versus Americans of color. In this second "war," enforcing African American subservience and powerlessness trumps the U.S. mission abroad. This underscores the military's fear that once African American soldiers are empowered to kill white Germans, they will not be subservient to white people at home.⁴ The military is not an escape from American structural inequality, but yet another sphere in which racial stratification is reproduced.

⁴ Huebner describes how "During the war numerous public intellectuals had predicted that veterans would form a lawless band of trained killers running rampant across America... When attached to African American veterans, such images could have sinister consequences. In the South portrayals of 'uppity,' gun-wielding black vets accompanied a spike in postwar racial violence and intimidation" (52).

Solly's initial goal is to stand above his peers and become an officer in the military, an accomplishment he imagines will position him well for social and economic advancement. Solly's goal of personal advancement is inherently at odds with the ethos of brotherhood shared by the other soldiers in his unit; however, at this stage, he seeks to supersede his fellow soldiers rather than raise all of them up together. Achieving this mandates following the rules and making a good impression on the Army leadership, which is universally white. However, this goal comes into sharp conflict when he interacts with his fellow African American soldiers, who seek intergroup unity rather than advancement. Fellow soldier Scotty is the most outspoken representative of this viewpoint and serves as Solly's other conscience throughout the war. Scotty brings a committed Black Nationalist perspective that stays consistent throughout the novel, even as Solly's own views evolve:

They put me in this cracker Army against my will and had the nerve to put me under a peckerwood officer and send me to Georgia. Them Japs and Germans ain't done me nothing. These crackers is my natural enemy... and as long as I'm here I'm gonna fight em, Goddammit. (86)

For Scotty, the only real war for African Americans is against white American people, and if he is forced to be in the Army, then he will fight against them rather than against Germans or Japanese soldiers. The perspective is a radical one for Solly, but it is one that will become increasingly convincing to him as he experiences racism in the military, and one that will ultimately prove prescient. Solly's sense of inner conflict grows as his individual goals strain his relationship with the other soldiers who have experienced racism in the Army. They understand their path forward as resistance rather than

acquiescence, and pressure each other to do the same. Throughout the novel, Solly will struggle between his personal desires to advance and the pressure of his peers to show solidarity with them.

Over the course of the novel, segregation combined with the systematic mistreatment by officers culminate in a brutal punishment by MPs, in which Solly is beaten in the genitals for a minor infraction. Solly's growing disillusionment explodes into a total repudiation:

He hated the Great White Democratic Army of the United States of America.

They had taken one of their mighty cannons and placed it up against his forehead and blown away forever the brains of his grand illusion about the Army and the war. And now he hated everything about the Army. (132)

This symbolic castration refers to the history of lynching, in which castration was a common component. In meting out punishment in this way, the MPs symbolically rob Solly of his manhood, Solly's greatest source of both pride and anxiety. It is a transitional moment, the moment at which Solly's perspective and the underlying critical voice of the narration come into alignment. It is only because he had so entirely embraced its rhetoric that he experiences his disillusionment so intensely. Solly's moniker for the Army as the "Great White Democratic Army" attacks the contradiction between the Army's alleged mission to defend democracy and the way that it violently enforces unequal citizenship for its members in practice. The Army proves to be a "white" organization, in contrast with Solly's earlier hope that the Army would prove a melting pot in which national ties would triumph over racial inequality. The term "Great White" aligns Solly with the more strident anti-racist rhetoric we see espoused by other characters, particularly Scotty, and

suggests the next step of his path. Finally, the military metaphor for Solly's disillusionment contributes to an overarching rhetorical move to configure the ideological struggle for racial justice as a warlike situation initiated by white society. Despite the physical pain Solly suffers from his unmerited punishment, what is worse is the psychic 'death' Solly experiences, in which the "brains" of his idealism is blown out by the Army's metaphorical 'canons.' A new Solly emerges from this death.

Just as Solly comes to terms with the entrenched racism in the Army, he is forced to confront his own complicity in the U.S.'s growing role as an imperial power, despite his idealistic beliefs that he would be fighting against white supremacy and fascism. The title of section three, "Thunder, Lightning, Rainfall," suggests the storms that will both bring devastation to but also nourish Solly's already embattled beliefs and identity. Disillusioned with the treatment of African American men in the Army, but still hopeful about the war's ultimate aims to rid the world of fascism, Solly's time in the Philippines will lead him through the next stage of his quest for manhood that the novel sets up. The mission moves the novel from a domestic struggle to the international stage. It is in the Philippines that Solly is able to connect his immediate experience of American racism to a global imperialism based in western hegemony. The crisis situates Solly within a history of Black internationalism as articulated by Du Bois, and is a precursor to the rhetoric of the Black Panthers and Malcolm X that are coming into being as Killens writes the novel, published in 1963.

Transnational themes come to the fore most strongly in this section, in which Solly and his comrades set out from their U.S.-based training and ship out to the Pacific theatre, landing eventually in the Philippines. A common trope within representations of

soldiering in multiethnic American literature in novels such as Daniel Cano's *Shifting Loyalties* and Stella Pope Duarte's *Let Their Spirits Dance*, Solly sees in the local populations of the countries to which he journeys the mirror image of his own people. These moments, when soldiers of color confront colonized peoples abroad, engender a crisis of recognition in which the soldiers find themselves implicated in racialized imperialist actions that they are subjected to at home, and in recognizing themselves in national enemies and subjected peoples, they are forced to face their own role as a soldier in enforcing the military agenda of the U.S.

As Solly takes in the beauty of the Filipino countryside, "with its tall palm trees and giant banana plants," he is struck by a sense of timeless, unchanging struggle that seems eerily familiar. Observing the "women carrying babies on their backs and bending in the everlasting rice paddies with the water almost up to their knees," Solly recalls "his own, the Negro people, standing deep in the corn and cotton fields of Georgia and Mississippi with nowhere to go and not a damn thing to look forward to" (311). The scene, one of the more poetic passages in the novel, signals to us that Solly's understanding of the world is growing, and it underscores an almost mystical connection these two peoples share despite the differences in the specifics of their lives (such as the types of crops they harvest). The romanticization of both groups reminds us that Solly, who grew up in a Northern city and achieved higher education degrees, is also an outsider here and at home.

Killens depicts both the Philippines, an archipelago that formed "millions of years ago, forevermore" and the Southern lands worked by African American laborers as eternal and unchanging. The laborers all "stand deep" in the fields, articulating a

propensity to settle in and make deep roots rather than progress forward, while the rice paddies are “everlasting” and the people have “nowhere to go and not a damn thing to look forward to.” War, and presumably the countries that win and occupy the lands where these people labor, “makes no difference to them” (311). The notion gives rise to a cynicism in Solly, who recognizes that the people in “these poor-assed islands” will continue without improvement to their lives “after the killing was over” (313). This new understanding contrasts with his earlier view that fighting in the war would liberate colonized peoples. As a guerrilla soldier tells Solly, “the Japanese were here yesterday, you're here today, and we can see no difference" (336).

Killens frames Solly’s crisis through the rigid, Black internationalist ethics espoused by General Grant, a soldier from Trinidad who considers the Japanese to be “Black” and “champions of the colored race” (257) despite their imperialist ambitions. General Grant’s claims give Solly a vocabulary to critique the contradiction he wrestles with between the Black soldiers’ personal experiences of racism and their mission on the island. Killens, however, chooses to give General Grant only the coarsest interpretation of Black internationalism, so that he appears more as an ideologue than an enlightened purveyor of a political framework that might free Solly from his inner quandaries.

In keeping with Black internationalist rhetoric, Grant defines “Black” broadly to encompass not only those of African descent, but Asians as well. For Grant, race is the sole axis of oppression, and there is little room to consider gender, class, or how one non-European country might come to militarily dominate another. Although he serves in the US military, Grant vocally cheers for Japanese victories and defends them as “an honorable race of people” who are “fighting for your [African American] freedom and

your dignity” (258), rather than for their own aspirations of empire. General Grant represents an historical mindset of some members of the African American community who saw the Japanese as “a colored people fighting the white oppressor” (Rampersad 35) despite evidence to the contrary. Grant chastises Solly for what he perceives as willful obliviousness: “Hitler and Tojo are going to conquer the whole damn world, and then after that, Tojo going to conquer Hitler, and the colored mawn going to rule the world. The bottom coming to the top” (259). This critique is compelling to Solly in that it draws alliances between groups threatened by European colonization, and it conceptualizes African American oppression within a system of imperialism. At the same time, its single-minded focus on race without taking into account imperialist ambitions and other axes of power, is limited. As Michelle Stephens articulates, radical Black thinkers in the early part of the twentieth century conceived of the concept of race war by borrowing Marxist models of internationalism, but “substituted race instead of class as the grounding term for their analyses of both world history and the future potential of world revolution” (Stephens 37). Solly finds Grant’s claims appealing yet hollow precisely because they lack a grounding in a critique of imperialism—in Grant’s view, as long as the Japanese empire “come out on top,” people of color will be free—or in offering not just a power swap, but a reexamination of power to begin with. Solly wants to hear Grant “tell him that Asia offered something different. Not just the bottom coming to the top. This was not enough for him” (259). Solly is searching for more than just a reversal of power; he is fighting for a democratic world free of colonialist exploitation.

Despite its limitations, Grant’s language does give Solly a starting point to make critical sense of his own subject position as an American soldier making war within a

colonized country. He demands to know, “What are we doing in these people’s country? No-damn-body sent for us... We rain down bombs on their cities and their homes and rice paddies, and we kill thousands of innocent people. And what the hell do the Filipinos get out of it? Not a goddamn thing but death and starvation and degradation” (331).

Rather than a site of liberation, the Philippines is a chess piece in the U.S. mission against the Japanese. In this, Solly’s initial perception that African Americans and Filipino farmers share common cause is called into question by the actions of the African American soldiers, whose leveraging of their relative material wealth to sleep with Filipino women is no different from the exploitation enacted by their white counterparts. The absence of Filipino men, who presumably are away fighting against the Japanese occupiers, leaves Solly and the other African American soldiers surrounded almost entirely by women. While “[t]he Americans had the bags of rice and the pesos... the Filipinos had nothing but their pride and their dignity and their everloving touchable selves” (336). In this context, the notion of an internationalist alliance between colonized peoples is cynically exploited for the edification of the African American soldiers. They tell the Filipino women that “[t]hem crackers ain't no goddamn good. We colored folks got to stick together” (336) as inducement to provide sex. As such, the internationalism the soldiers espouse is rooted in masculine self-interest that women bear the brunt of. In addition to physical pleasure, the soldiers use sex (or stories about sex) with the colonized population as a form of homosocial bonding that establishes their own masculinity. The hypocrisy comes under critique in the novel, as Solly stays far above the fray and refuses to engage in such behavior, while also rebuking his fellow soldier Calvin for inventing stories of erotic escapades in order to allay his own insecurity. By exposing

the limitations of Black internationalism and American patriotism alike through positioning Black soldiers as occupiers who not only fail to improve the lives of the Filipinos, but rather reproduce colonial relationships, Killens carries Solly through another stage in his journey toward an enlightenment of a different kind. In this, he moves past nostalgia and toward a critical assessment of power that includes but goes beyond race to grapple with the politics of misogyny and imperialism.

The Awakening

Solly's evolving views on manhood and the Army inform and ultimately shape his decisions, as he increasingly moves away from a strategy of individual advancement and military prowess in favor of an internationalist alignment rooted in racial solidarity. Solly's changing struggle for "manhood"—a conception of self rooted in Black dignity—is marked by his refusal to continue teaching morale-building sessions to his fellow African American soldiers at the behest of Army leadership, even when this means forfeiting his status as an officer. Self-respect can be earned only through standing up to his superior officers, even at the cost of his career and status as a soldier, not by seeking to appease them. Solly's longing for acceptance as a recognized American citizen is superseded by a desire for acceptance within the African American community, who are represented in the novel by the fellow soldiers in his unit and Fannie Mae, a woman working for the NAACP that Solly fell in love with while in training camp.

Because of his higher educational levels and his middle-class aspirations, Solly initially does rise through the ranks and assumes a leadership position in his unit. As part of this, he is put in charge of "Information and Education," a series of propaganda sessions military leadership feels are necessary because they "are having a little trouble

every now and then” with the African American soldiers. Solly is asked to “tell the men about patriotism and peace and freedom and stuff like that” (269), a pedantic and ironic request since the African American soldiers understand first-hand what it is like to live without peace and freedom. At first Solly justifies this role to himself as an opportunity to hold the Army and the U.S. up to their own standards: “We can say, ‘Here it is in black and white—in your own words. Now let us practice what we preach!’” (270). However, Solly’s conscience is tormented by the gap between the rhetoric of the war’s ideals and the ways those ideals are cynically forced on the men in order to control them, and how despite rhetoric of racial equality, African Americans are treated as disposable soldiers who are sent to certain death on the beaches of the Pacific Islands during Japanese bombing raids. Solly must wrestle with the possibility that he is participating in the subjugation of his own fellow soldiers, and feels like “a traitor and an uncle tom” (315), but the price for rejecting the grand rhetoric of the military is both a personal crisis of ideals as well as demotion in his career.

Throughout the novel, Solly struggles between his longing to believe the Army is fighting fascism through a war that has an inherent meaning, and his first-hand experience that war is barbaric, the Army leadership self-serving, and the Army racist. His flip-flopping on these questions happens throughout the novel and sometimes within the same sentence. The crisis reaches a breaking point when he is asked to give another morale boosting session to the men while preparing for another bloody battle in the Philippines. At this critical moment, Solly admits to himself that the ends can’t justify the means, but rather that liberation can only be achieved through liberatory methods. An army divided by segregation that enforces and reproduces racial inequality reflects the

society it emerges out of—as we see in the way soldiers behave in the Philippines and in General Grant’s longing for the same structures of power, only with people of color at the top. It can only reproduce itself despite the ideals it purports to fight for. Solly wonders, “how in the hell are you going to fight a democratic war with a racist Army?” (333) and concludes that this is not possible, so, “The war is over for me... I’m just sweating it out from here on in” (334). In this scene, we see something starkly new in Solly’s narrative journey toward manhood: the moment when he stands up to his white officer and refuses to serve as the mouthpiece for the Army’s propaganda even at the cost of demotion. As he definitively rejects individual advancement and Millie’s path, Solly transfers his loyalty to his troops instead. He does not want to lead them from above, but desires to accompany them as an equal, and become not “a traitor and an uncle tom” (315), but a man who has recognized his duty is with other Black soldiers. Manhood becomes disentangled from a superficial appearance of respectability or social accolades, and more closely aligned with an internal dignity of self that is intimately bound up with loyalty to one’s community and self-sacrifice for a greater good.

It’s worth pausing here to note that despite his disillusionment with the military as a path to social respect, Solly never questions his quest for manhood; rather, he shifts his methods for how to attain it. Manhood, for Solly, is indistinguishable from what it means to be a human being who has self-respect and self-determination. As Solly’s journey in the military unfolds, soldiering does not prove to be the path to this self-respect; in fact, soldiering is in direct opposition to it as long as Solly’s intentions are to comply with white leadership for his own advancement. This is reinforced through the chorus of African American soldiers in his unit. Loyalty to the unit and skepticism of white officers

are the qualities prized in this context. Anything less is playing the fool, and a fool cannot be a self-respecting man. This dynamic is understood in gendered terms. For example, at the novel's end, at the culmination of Solly's journey, he "smiled and kept moving out into the sunlight. He had burst out of his breeches because they were meant for boys to wear. And Solly Saunders was a man. He didn't need a Great White Father" (334). Fully heroic, it is a moment of emergence heralded by the rise of the daylight surrounding him. The language parallels Solly's crisis of identity at the beginning of the novel, but instead of feeling doomed to a state of perpetual boyhood, Solly attains his identity by embracing his independence, an independence predicated on rejecting the white patriarchy's approval, although not by rejecting patriarchy itself. In this sense, Solly does not question the patriarchal paradigm he finds himself embroiled in, but seeks rather to secure a position of respect within it. This strategy will prove untenable over the course of the novel, although the novel itself seems less attuned to the complications of hewing to traditional models of masculinity.

Nevertheless, the novel, while accepting that manhood is indeed a desirable goal, does question and redefine manhood away from qualities like physical prowess, material success, sexual power over women, and hierarchical superiority over men. Solly is the hero of this novel not because he is a good soldier (although he is that), but because of his intelligence and, critically, his sensitivity. As seen when the unit is stationed in the Philippines, Solly is more likely than his fellow soldiers to abstain from indulgence in sexual conquests, particularly where such relations are exploitative to women. While the others enjoy themselves sleeping with local women, Solly contemplates the beauty of the countryside and the history of colonialism and slavery. While the other soldiers brag

about their exploits, Solly critiques them and turns his attention to taking care of a little girl. An original thinker, Solly enacts his dissent neither through grandstanding (as General Grant) or subversive behavior (Scotty), but by considering issues thoughtfully, then acting on his principles and standing by them. His strength is ultimately rooted in community, in his decision to remain equal to the other soldiers, rather than position himself above them. At the same time, Killens defines an alternative conception of manhood rather than rejects the concept itself, and for each of the ways Solly seems to break from the mold, he is an idealized representation of manhood at the same time: good-looking, strong, highly intelligent, and a leader who leads because he must and because of how his abilities position him, rather than out of a lust for power. Although he doesn't seduce and objectify women, women fall in love with him effortlessly, making him somewhat of a Romeo figure in the novel.

It is partly through the women in Solly's life that different models of manhood are articulated. Solly's wife, Millie, and the woman with whom he falls in love and has an affair, Fannie Mae, represent Solly's internal struggle between individual advancement and community uplift respectively. Solly's infidelity to his wife reveals the fault lines in his commitment to middle-class morality that he once prized as the means to his success and symbolically marks his rejection of a strategy of appeasement. An opinionated activist who is unafraid to speak her mind even when she goes against convention, Fannie Mae is unequivocally Millie's superior according to the ethos of the novel. Millie sits at home waiting for a man to care for her and prizes her personal comfort, whereas Fannie Mae rejects materialism, safety, and the outward trappings of respectability in favor of

fighting for racial equality. At key moments throughout the novel, Solly is haunted by her words:

Manhood is more important than money or promotions. Please remember. Never sacrifice your manhood—never sacrifice your manhood. The one thing they will not stand for is for a black man to be a man. And everything else is worthless if a man can't be a man. (180).

For Fannie Mae, manhood means self-dignity and service for the community, which is a direct contradiction of Millie's desire for Solly to keep his head down and advance his career. Her words become Solly's conscience, and she develops into the oracle of the novel, giving voice to the novel's interpretations of the world and its ideals. Indeed, when Solly after a long internal struggle decides to revolt with the soldiers in his unit, he paints both the Double V and Fannie Mae's name on the front window of his vehicle. At the same time, being a woman, Fannie Mae cannot realize these aspirations herself. While she is the prophet of the new Black man, it is Solly who, as a man, must be the one to live out her vision.

Fannie Mae speaks perhaps more directly than any other character about the centrality of achieving manhood in the racial struggle. On the one hand, that Fannie Mae and Millie make conflicting demands of Solly highlights the ways women are implicated in enforcing gender roles. Solly is just as pressured by the women in his life to achieve a predetermined manhood as he is by the homosocial contexts he lives in. At the same time, putting these words in women's mouths allows Killens license to construct versions of manhood that appear to be validated universally.

Solly's last stand leads to the final embodiment of the man he has always been becoming, the last step in his own quest narrative. In the novel's climax, Solly stands with his African American fellow soldiers in what snowballs into a violent uprising to protest their treatment in the military.⁵ Racial tensions build where the troops are stationed in Bainbridge, Australia, and an African American soldier is arrested. Solly's segregated unit marches to the military prison to demand the soldier's freedom, at gunpoint if necessary. Solly and his protesting unit are chased and attacked by their fellow white soldiers under military orders. A bloodbath results. Solly, who has been given a leadership position within his unit, is torn between competing demands: advancing his career on the one hand and leading his men in what he increasingly comes to see as the true war, not against global powers, but against the white American establishment. The section title "The Crop" suggests that Solly, whose beliefs have been variously nurtured, tested, and challenged through the novel, has reached maturity, but the title is also a bitterly ironic nod to Tubman's poem with which the novel is inscribed: the violence and racism inherent to the military and to the project of war has reaped its fruit: African American soldiers massacred by their own.

While his earlier decision to abstain from teaching propaganda to his fellow troops represented a significant but relatively minor act of insubordination, armed rebellion is an act of another order entirely. Although he struggles with the decision to participate, Solly determines that there are two wars: one between the Allies and the Axis

⁵ Studies that pay special treatment to the historical racial fighting in Brisbane, Australia on which the climax of *And Then We Heard the Thunder* is based include Martyn Bone in "American–Australian Relations and the Battle(s) of Brisbane in Peter Carey's *Amnesia* and John Oliver Killens's *And Then We Heard the Thunder*" (2018) and Daniel McKay in "Deep South Down Under: Nymphs, Satyrs and Race War in America's Australia" (2015).

powers, and one within the Army, and that the latter “is my war, not that Murder Incorporated up on the islands. This is my beachhead” (436). The decision to join the revolt brings him into alignment with Fannie Mae’s position that the true war Solly must fight takes place on an international stage where allegiances are drawn based on skin color rather than nationality, because “[a] fascist is a fascist and a cracker is a cracker. The war is everywhere we find it” (79). In keeping with the motif of framing the revolt as its own war within the war, during the battle, the sides are referred to as the “White Army” and the “Black Army” and the fight as “The Battle of Bainbridge,” while the Australians who host the troops are horrified to watch the war come home to them.

The revolt and the military's response confirm the endemic racism of the Army and how little the lives of soldiers of color are valued. Making plain the racism broiling beneath the surface, the white soldiers now freely curse the African American soldiers with racial epithets while they attack them. A brutal massacre follows. Like Sergeant Williams, whose last thought "was what a goddamn fool he was to believe white folks knew what mercy meant" even those African American soldiers who surrendered are killed point blank. (456). Solly locates the military response to the revolt within the history of slavery and segregation, referring to it as "a good old-fashioned lynching picnic" (458). Ostensibly fighting foreign enemies with a united army, the moment transposes historic American racial violence to a new setting but with the familiar horror and the same race-based power differentials.

In common with the trope of enlightenment through disillusion that is often seen in modern literary treatments of war, the episode disabuses Solly not only of the idealism through which he formerly viewed military service, but also of the idea that war and

violence are strategies through which liberation can be achieved. While he has been gradually disavowing violence since witnessing firsthand the bloodshed in the Philippines, when Solly is confronted with the dead bodies of Worm, Jimmy, and Baby-Face after the revolt, he makes a solemn promise: "I will always hate war with all my heart and all my soul. I will always fight the men who beat the drums for war in the name of Holy Patriotism in any nation, any language. I will fight with all the strength that's in me the goddamn bloated buzzards who profit from this madness" (482). Ultimately, it is war itself and its attendant justification of patriotism, taken as religion, that is an evil regardless of circumstance. The declaration locates Solly within the tradition of modern mainstream war narratives for whom the experience in the military leads to disillusionment with the glory of war, but as we've come to expect, the disillusionment is born first and foremost through Solly's experience as an African American soldier and is complicated by it.

Nevertheless, Killens imagines a hopeful multicultural future. The final section of the novel sees Solly building complicated relationships with characters who are not African American, most notably Lieutenant Samuels, who is Jewish, and the white Australian nurse Celia. Both characters suffer their own shortcomings around race, but they respect Solly and become his allies. Samuels is the only non-African American soldier who follows Solly into the revolt. At some point when the battle is clearly lost, Solly and Samuels slip away and come upon two white soldiers who are also fleeing the violence. Ostensibly on opposing sides, the soldiers, all American, come to a truce and agree to not attack each other. More African American soldiers eventually join the

multiracial group, and together, exhausted and weeping, they watch the sun rise while Solly determines that “a new world would rise up from the smoking ruins” (484-5).

At the same time, the novel remains unable to resolve the complicated images it has drawn of America. Its final image of Solly sitting with a white officer in an imperfect resolution, too fatigued to continue fighting, at the dawn of what might be a new world is an almost hopeful depiction of two soldiers transcending race as they acknowledge being brothers in arms. This is the apotheosis of the military melting pot Solly originally fantasized about. But nothing about the final scene makes us forget all that has preceded it, and it does nothing to overcome the contradictions in which Solly is enmired. The uneasy truce is just that, a truce. It is not born from reconciliation or understanding, but from exhaustion, and there is no suggestion that it will be able to sustain itself.

While the novel's final image suggest a path forward, the harsh reality of racial injustice in the military continues to haunt its closing scene. Solly is not done fighting since “there is no peace till freedom. You can't make a man a slave and have him live in peace with you” (484), although we don't yet know what form his next fight will take. Behind this unofficial truce lies the unspoken future of martial law that Solly will undoubtedly suffer and that will hang over the rest of his life. There will not be justice within the structures of the military. There is a suggestion that the coming fight may be ideological in nature and waged with words, because Solly vows to Bookworm's dead body “I promise you a Double-V” (482) and that “I'll tell the world about your battle here in Bainbridge” (483). The destruction racism is capable of isn't over, and if unaddressed, “the whole damn world will be like Bainbridge” (483).

Solly's struggles, then, go unresolved, a testament to the impossibility of the novel in either endorsing the logical conclusion of its metaphoric-become-literal race war, or a patriotic celebration of military service. The sun rises symbolically in the novel's final moment, but it may not be a sign of hope as much as the inevitable repetition of a struggle that finds no end.

Solly's decision to reject personal career advancement in order to fight the white military leadership, which he comes to perceive as his real enemy, signals Solly's attainment of the manhood he had long sought through military service. No matter what he does, "all his escape hatches from being Negro were more illusion than reality and did not give him dignity" (482). It is only after Solly both recognizes and acts against the superficiality of American values when it comes to race and to material gain that he can claim his identity as an African American man.

Despite Solly's internal struggle for self-realization and gradual recognition of racism's entrenchment in American society, Solly cannot bring himself to give up on the dream of an inclusive United States: "He wished his country loved him like he could love his country. Like he even loved his country now" (343). This doubling-back reveals that Solly's more radical moments do not wholly explain his character; he constantly struggles within the desire his idealism sparks and the realities he confronts. Even at the very end, Solly is still wishing that "all this dying was for something" (485). Solly is no nihilist. America still, for Solly, is his country, and it waits only to realize its potential to be the home worthy of Solly's loyalty. Despite its injustices and aggression Solly's love remains absolute. It is both an undeserved concession and the basis for hope in the future Solly and others like him—brave, moral, self-sacrificing—will bring.

CHAPTER 2

URBAN WARRIORS IN THE WAR BACK HOME

In Alfredo Véa's *Gods Go Begging* (1999), Mexican American lawyer Jesse Pasadoble investigates a murder that happened in the San Francisco Potrero Hill neighborhood as he prepares to defend a young African American boy accused of the crime. What he finds there astounds him: an organization of teenage boys with their own insignia and communication system, their facial expressions reminiscent of those of the soldiers who surrounded Jesse during his own tour in the Vietnam War. Although their conventions may be inscrutable to outsiders, Jesse recognizes that "All of the boys on this hill were wearing their uniforms and waiting for a mission" (163), thus linking two parallel worlds, the one inhabited by soldiers of color in the Vietnam War and its unlikely counterpart of young men in a struggling San Francisco neighborhood. What was the mission for which these boys were waiting? The implied question haunts not only Véa's novel, but other texts that address youth violence, as I discuss briefly here. The novels ultimately conclude that it's the boys themselves who are under metaphorical attack from a racist society in which they have a greater likelihood of suffering police brutality than achieving material success. In other cases, such as Oscar Zeta Acosta's *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973), young people who find themselves to be so targeted style themselves as a vanguard who must self-organize to protect themselves and other minoritized peoples. In this chapter, I first define and contextualize the narrative trope of what I call the urban 'soldier' through a brief discussion of Acosta's novel. Then in my extended discussion of *Gods Go Begging*, I argue that Véa's narrative initially follows the trajectory of this trope before subtly reversing it. Such novels share a framing literary metaphor of the city as war zone; however, where urban soldiers are elsewhere depicted

as heroic or heroic even in the depth of their lost potential, *Gods Go Begging* identifies an inherently pernicious drive at the heart of the soldier that he links to toxic masculinity. The wisdom born of the soldier's traumatic experiences *appears* to hold a greater truth than civilians can access, but the novel implies that this apparent truth is ultimately limiting and can lead only to further violence on the individual level and conquest at the political level. In Vía's text, imagination and love emblemized (not unproblematically) by women in contrast to patriarchal values emerge as both a sustainable alternative and a force of salvation.

The War at Home

It is conventional for political writers to use military imagery and diction, like “fighting a battle,” “waging a war” and “combating oppression” to describe their pursuit of justice—so common, in fact, that it is difficult to talk about resistance movements without such language. Yet this is not the only way. We might use words related to labor like “working toward justice” or spiritual imagery like “inspiring hope.” Political activists and writers who write about politics make a choice to militarize their language, and they do so in order to convey a sense of urgency about their endeavors, to unite supporters against a common “enemy,” and to call up a host of connotations—self-sacrifice, duty, grim necessity—that the idea of war elicits. Yet as common as military language is even in run-of-the-mill electoral politics, there is a point at which the metaphorical force of war bleeds into something more literal. In the militarized atmosphere of the Vietnam War era in the United States, when newly minted soldiers were daily sent off to fight overseas, anti-war and Civil Rights activists co-opted the image of the soldier for their own campaigns. While state-sponsored soldiers fought battles abroad, they suggested, there

was a parallel “war” going on at home. After Lea Ybarra and Nina Genera’s influential pamphlet, for example, for many Mexican American activists, the battle cry was “La batalla está aquí” (The battle is here).

This is especially true of race-based nationalist groups like the Black Panthers and the Brown Berets, who argued through their rhetoric, appearance, and political agenda that they were the foot soldiers of a nation within a nation, an oppressed minority seeking not inclusion but self-determination. The guns, berets, uniform clothing, and clenched fists also indicated a rejection of peaceful electoral politics in favor of, if need be, a violent seizure of their rights. Responding to continued racial violence and discrimination, Chicano student movements like Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) countered that the lands ceded to the United States in the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo were stolen lands that originally constituted the nation of Aztlán, the ancestral home of the Nahua peoples, and that it should be reclaimed through a *reconquista*. While some activists took the idea of the *reconquista* more literally than others, the concept of a unified ‘nation’ that might wage a metaphorical ‘war’ on behalf of the unrepresented aimed to restore cultural pride and build a platform from which to pursue social justice. That said, ethnic and racial nationalisms often came with its own consequences, including alienating those who still favored inclusion or worried about essentializing identity based on race, mandating cultural uniformity, and endorsing limited conceptualizations of masculinity.

Like political rhetoric, literary representations of racial and ethnic nationalist struggles often borrow the literary techniques, imagery, and language of war narratives to frame their stories. War imagery in African American and Latinx literature serves two

purposes: to describe a systemic, ongoing, and violent history of racial oppression and to underline the necessity of a militant response. In Ernesto Quiñonez's *Bodega Dreams* (2000), the history of the militant Puerto Rican group the Young Lords, who knew that "Extreme measures would have to be taken" in Spanish Harlem (31) informs the protagonist's efforts to renew the community and instill Puerto Rican pride in its poor and neglected residents. Likewise, as Fannie Mae of John Oliver Killens's *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (1963) says of the NAACP's "dual victory" campaign during World War II, "The war is everywhere we find it" (79), including in domestic politics if need be. In both of these cases, the military trope infuses the way characters think about racial struggle and consequently the means they use to engage it. This trope can be seen in other multiethnic American fiction of the period, including John Edgar Wideman's short story, "Valaida," (1989) Ann Petry's *In Darkness and Confusion* (1947), and Chester Himes's *If He Hollers, Let Him Go* (1945). Frequently, representations of urban warriors co-mingle with soldiers of color fighting wars overseas.

In *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, Mexican American lawyer and activist Oscar Zeta Acosta offers a semi-autobiographical account of protagonist Buffalo Zeta Brown's experiences with 1960s Mexican American legal cases and social protest. The novel is framed as a war narrative in order to dramatize the urgency of the Mexican American cause and to justify the extremist violent actions his protagonist adopts. Brown builds the case that radical Mexican American groups are legitimately engaged in a war of liberation in response to an Anglo American war of land seizure and political oppression. The Vietnam War taking place in the background of the novel's central events intensifies the martial theme and crucially intersects with the novel's

condemnation of white American imperialism. In this last sense, *The Revolt* can be read alongside novels like Davis's *Coming Home* (1971) and Vía's *Gods Go Begging* that carefully connect the struggles of racial minorities in the United States with those of an imagined postcolonial world.

The shift from Brown's early rhetoric of equal rights to his later rhetoric of land recovery and national independence entails a gradual, corresponding move from war as metaphor to war as literal. Instead of confining his activities to the courtroom, Brown adopts more direct, and ultimately violent methods. In the novel, these protests are rendered with overtones of battle, a "revolution by the people" taking action against an oppressive state. As Brown argues at the protest, "We are the Viet Cong of America. Tooner Flats is Mylai...there is only one issue: LAND. We need to get our own land. We need our own government. We must have our own flag and our own country. Nothing less will save the existence of the Chicanos" (201). As such, he identifies the Mexican Americans with the Viet Cong, an underground, guerilla army fighting against a series of occupying, imperialist regimes—the French, the Japanese, and now the United States. The Viet Cong and the Mexican Americans are further aligned because they are both people of color fighting to free themselves from U.S. imperialism. The end goal of both is national independence and self-determination; Brown's rationale for pursuing this armed struggle is to "save the existence of the Chicanos" where "Chicano" are to be preserved as a cultural and ethnic group from the dual threats of racism and assimilation.

Brown's changed perspective on how justice is to be claimed culminates in two violent attacks: Brown and his friends hurl Molotov cocktails at a grocery store selling grapes in defiance of a UFW boycott, and, later, they plant a bomb in the men's bathroom

of a courthouse to assassinate a judge, accidentally killing a Mexican American janitor in the process, a death Brown sees as a necessary casualty. Brown's limited but nevertheless extreme actions indicate that his early militaristic rhetoric has now become for him a literal way of interpreting racial struggle. This shift demonstrates how strongly military rhetoric shapes Brown's reality and defines what would be considered acceptable political strategies. At the same time, it indicates how far Brown and his fellow Mexican American activists have been pushed and how frustrated their early legalistic efforts have been that they found the only metaphor fit to describe themselves was that of an embattled people.

The Revolt of the Cockroach People and other narratives that use military language do more than recount the stories of resistance movements; their authors understand these texts as tools in the fight. With their rhetoric of nationalism and war, such work takes its place amongst a larger effort to shift the vocabulary of political struggle. While the idea of internal colonies and race wars has remained largely a symbolic device, the rhetoric of ethnic nationalism, for all its limitations, can occasion a conceptual move from assimilation to self-determination, from cultural shame to cultural pride. If this represents a crisis for democracy, then it is arguably a crisis historically brought on by entrenched racism and resistance to social justice. At the same time, such rhetoric brings with it a limiting, reductionist view of identity as well as an implicit legitimacy for violent tactics. In contrast to *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, Alfredo Vea's *Gods Go Begging* argues that the end of violence is more violence.

Crisis of Recognition: Jesse Pasadoble in Vietnam

Alfredo V́ea Jr.'s multilayered and fantastical 1999 novel *Gods Go Begging* traverses both space and time to narrate the interconnectedness of protagonist Jesse Pasadoble's wartime experience in Vietnam with his current career as a public defender in San Francisco. Jesse represents Calvin Thibault, an African American teen suspected of the double murder of Potrero Hill neighborhood restaurant owners Persephone Flyer and Mai Adrong. During the trial, Jesse creates meaning out of his Vietnam War memories by drawing parallels between the government abandonment of people struggling on two geographically distant hills in two different moments in time: the murder of the women and six African American teens on Potrero Hill in San Francisco, and the annihilating bombing of a hill in Vietnam that wiped out Jesse's entire platoon. The two events are connected both thematically and fantastically through the deaths of the two (doubly) married couples: the women Mai and Persephone in present day San Francisco and their soldier husbands Trin Adrong (a Vietnamese soldier) and Sergeant Amos Flyer (an African American soldier). The women and men transgress social, national, and temporal boundaries as they die in each other's arms along intersecting temporal planes. During Calvin's trial, the coincidental connections between the street gang in Potrero Hill and the war in Vietnam are revealed to be even more intricate than Jesse might have imagined, and the overlapping plots unveil a more trenchant parallel between the streets and the military theatre that speaks to U.S. conquest as well as to racial identities and liberation. V́ea formally enacts these themes by sidestepping direct representations of violence in favor of investigative testimony, unreliable fantasies, and flashbacks. In doing so, *Gods Go Begging* departs from a generic characteristic of war novels that, intentionally or not, cater to a voyeuristic fascination with battle.

Gods Go Begging follows in the tradition of multiethnic American war literature from Killens to Morrison in conceiving of soldiers of color as doubly embattled, fighting a literal war in Vietnam and a metaphorical race war at home.⁶ Through the words of Sergeant Amos Flyer, the wizened African American soldier whose sense of duty endures despite his bruised idealism, V ea calls attention to the bitter irony of soldiers who are otherwise marginalized or disenfranchised in the United States joining the military in order to uphold the same: “Some of these boys from the reservations ain’t never seen a white man except on television, and here they’re fighting for him” (96). By soldiering, the soldiers serve the interest of the U.S. government even as they suffer from racism at home and unequal treatment in the military. Flyer enlightens the naive troops whose apprehension of the duality of the war is only just dawning. Whether they are fully aware of it or not, “these boys are fighting a two-front war...They’re fighting the Vietnamese and they’re fighting America, too...Shit, this fucking police action ain’t nothing but a turf war. Today it’s ours, tomorrow it’ll be theirs” (96). For Flyer, the ideal of fighting for equal citizenship has long been tarnished. *And Then We Heard the Thunder*’s Solly Saunders’s rousing words, “we’re American citizens and the country is at war and they need us, and when we get back we won’t let them forget that we fought like everybody else” (17) feel distinctly out of place on the hill in Vietnam. Now, Flyer envisions soldiers of color as “fighting America” directly, not fighting for equal rights within America. And while Solly Saunders could take comfort at least initially in the idea of fighting against the white supremacist ideology of the Nazis, Flyer has no such recourse; the ostensibly noble purpose of the Vietnam War is “nothing but a turf war” that Flyer

⁶ John Alba Cutler situates *Gods Go Begging* within a tradition of Mexican American literature of the Vietnam War in “Disappeared Men: Chicana/o Authenticity and the American War in Viet Nam” (2009).

compares with the motivations of gang members for always shifting territory sought for personal gain.

The contradictions between the two wars, the war in Vietnam and the metaphorical racial war the soldiers are embroiled in, come into sharp relief with the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. In the eyes of the soldiers, the Pentagon deliberately suppresses news of his death “for fear that black soldiers would riot, for fear that they would lay down their arms and refuse to kill men of color” (133-4). The scene in the novel reflects Vea’s personal experience during his time in the Vietnam War learning with other troops about the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., as related in an interview with *Mi Gente* (2000):

The American military was afraid that troops of color would sit down, and refuse to fight if they heard about the assassination in Memphis. It is the most perfect moment of the war: the war in Vietnam and the war back home to sit at a lunch counter in Alabama.

The moment exposed the doubleness of “the war in Vietnam and the war back home,” which made explicit the lines separating white soldiers and soldiers of color, who, at the moment of King’s death, were immediately perceived as potential enemies who “would sit down, and refuse to fight” once they discovered the assassination. The soldiers in *Gods Go Begging* might well ask themselves, “Why the fuck am I shooting at zips? They ain’t never did me no wrong, never called me nigger. I should be back home shooting at the man, shooting at the Klan!” (133). In Vea’s eyes, what government and army leadership feared was that the moment would be an awakening to an idea that the real war was not one of the American army fighting the North Vietnamese army, but of a global

struggle of people of color fighting white supremacy in which soldiers of color and Vietnamese people shared a common cause.

In contrast to Tim O'Brien's multicultural military unit in *The Things They Carried*, race in the Vietnam War breaks apart the unity of American forces in the face of an enemy, and situates the novel closer to other multiethnic American novels of war like Daniel Cano's *Shifting Loyalties* (1995) and Stella Pope Duarte's *Let Their Spirits Dance* (2009) in which soldiers glimpse overlap between the position of their communities at home and those of Vietnam. The novel plays creatively with the potential solidarity between people of color in the U.S. and Vietnamese people struggling with the legacy of French colonialism and the emergence of a neoliberal American world order. In an interview, Vea describes how "the minute the language disappears, there's no difference between a Mexican and a Cambodian, say. All the assumptions just evaporate. It's amazing how similar everybody's lives actually are. We all have the same kind of concerns" (Aldama 280). The novel highlights these imagined connections through interwoven character relationships and experiences. Jesse develops a friendship with a Vietnamese prisoner, Hong Trac, who says, "You same-same me," when he sees the similarities between his features and Jesse's (79). While the Vietnamese prisoner's words refer to physical similarities, they suggest the potential of a deeper connection between the two, particularly in the parallels of Mexico and Vietnam's history of European colonization, one that ironically allows the two men to be able to communicate with each other in French.⁷

⁷ For more on Jesse's transnational identifications with the people of Vietnam, see Jorge Mariscal's "Reading Chicano/a Writing about the American War in Viet Nam" (2000).

As loyalties blur, the soldiers of color are positioned through the lens of a colonial history in the Americas, who, “like the slaves from Africa, like the hopeless Indians, like true artists and the poor, had been chosen to bear the discomfort of their country, to bear the loss.” The “loss” in *Gods Go Begging* signifies the disappearance of “the loss of a hundred native religions, the loss of an entire race of peoples” at the hands of conquest and enslavement. While these cultures are systematically erased, “white America sensed only gain” (196). The resulting loss becomes a political legacy abstracted from a specific history, but a condition reproduced again and again through which colonized peoples might discern commonalities with each other. As elsewhere in the narratives of writers of color about the Vietnam War, an imagined commonality is rhetorically called into being for strategic ends.

The similarities, however, are as superficial as they are deep. Jesse remains an American soldier fighting Hong Trac’s allies, and he refuses to credit Hong Trac’s fear that he will be tortured and killed by the U.S. military. Jesse loses both his innocence about the U.S. military as well as the easy commonality he might share with the Vietnamese when he discovers Hong Trac’s corpse bearing evidence of torture, masked to appear as if he had died in battle. Jesse is riddled with guilt for his naive faith in the humanity of the American military that prevented him from intervening to protect Hong Trac’s life. The friendship and its gruesome demise informs Jesse’s awakened grasp of the neocolonial roots of the war and how that war links up to the racism and economic disparity he experiences at home.

The novel further elaborates on this theme by centering the improbable connection between an African American and Vietnamese couple. Soldiers Amos Flyer

and Trin Adrong are ostensibly enemies, but much like protagonists in other multiethnic American war narratives, brotherhood between them is at least theoretically possible insofar as they both share common cause against white American imperialism. More elaborated on is the deepening friendship between their wives, who find each other through a series of unlikely events in which Mai tattoos Amos's address (written on a slip of paper lodged in her dead husband's Bible) onto her arm and embarks on an international journey to discern the meaning of the illegible characters. In the unofficial yet more "true" closing arguments to Calvin's case that Jesse delivers solely to his on and off again romantic partner, Carolina, he narrates how time and space collapse to bring together the deaths of all four characters: Mai and Persephone, murdered by Reggie in the present time of the novel; Trin Adrong, killed in a suicide mission; Amos Flyer, killed by Trin Adrong's attack. In this imaginary space, we are allowed to contemplate the relationships between colonial wars and trauma, poverty, and violence in American cities as well as the connections that unlikely allies share. In one of the many parallels Vea draws, just as Trin Adrong runs toward Amos, so Mai also runs after Persephone:

She approached Persephone just as the terrible shots rang out, both from Reggie's Glock and from the rifle of a North Vietnamese soldier providing cover fire for her husband. Hearing both shots, she began screaming in the street, her mouth a perfect resonator for her husband's last words, "Tien Lan! Tien Lan! Tien Lan!" (287)

Mai shouts a Vietnamese battle cry, "Forward, comrades!" as if she is her husband in battle. In flinging her body on top of Persephone in order to protect her, Mai both repeats and reverses her husband's suicide charge towards Flyer, a shift that elaborates Vea's

ongoing theme that the power of women's love is more profound than the hatred fueling war.

Although the actions Jesse narrates are violent, the imagery he uses instead depicts the scene as one of an ecstatic union between the four characters, who despite being on opposing sides in the war, could be read as sharing a deeper kind of allyship. Trin Adrong and Amos fall into each other's arms as they die, a moment described with romantic and sexual imagery in which Trin Adrong "threw himself headlong...into the outstretched, embracing arms of the American sergeant...the two men embraced and could have been mistaken for lovers...they saw the face of the enemy as if in a mirror" (287). The moment suggests an epiphanic recognition between Trin Adrong and Flyer in their final moments that, in the words of Hong Trac to Jesse, "You same-same me." The relationships between these four characters, whose intersections are as complex as that between their nations and histories, open up space for V \acute{e} a to explore the imagined connections between people of color in the U.S. and the Vietnamese.

These two temporal moments are collapsed and overlaid with American history through the images of the two different hills, which play on one of the U.S.'s foundational metaphors of itself as being a "City on the Hill": the idea that the United States should serve as a model of democracy and righteousness to the world, with greater responsibility to its ideals by virtue of the visibility of its experiment. In contrast, the chaplain of V \acute{e} a's novel imagines the hill metaphorically to be composed of the people the American empire has been built on top of, a "graveyard" on which the "American Dream—the two-bedroom house with a white picket fence—had always been built" (197). The graveyard of the hill becomes literal in the Potrero Hill as boys are murdered

and buried beneath it, and in the devastating attack that wipes out Jesse's platoon on the hill in Vietnam. Both moments are the casualties of a racialized imperialism that spans historical epochs and communities. Progress and gain for white America "had always been built on a hill" (197) marked by violence and bloodshed. It is fitting, then, the Vea weaves his narrative around the parallels of two hills, which are sites of collateral violence.

Neighborhood Battles: Calvin in Potrero Hill

In *Gods Go Begging*, neighborhood streets are their own battlefield. Through the governing martial metaphor that frames the novel, we see men "soldiering" through three arenas: the world of youth gangs, homeless encampments, and in the criminal justice system. These three arenas come together in the story of Calvin Thibault, a teenager who lives on the outskirts of the gang world only to end up in the center of the criminal justice system, and whose end could easily have been that of his homeless and broken fellow gang member, Reggie Sharp, but who is saved from that fate partly by the testimony of a homeless veteran.⁸

References to the militaristic aspects of life as a gang member abound: Calvin is "a brand new trooper, a slick sleeve, a scared-shitless FNG walking behind point for the very first time" (248) and "a boy born in a combat zone" (272). The imagery suggests that as in war, young boys enter gangs frightened and unaware of the way institutions of violence will transform them into killers. Like naive and hopeful soldiers harvested from

⁸ For in-depth treatment of economics and class violence for the portions of the novel set in San Francisco, see Dennis López's "'When the Union Movement Was Murdered in America': Neoliberalism and the Political Economy of Class War in Alfredo Vea's *Gods Go Begging*" (2018).

the lower classes, they are manipulated and damned by forces larger than themselves, but also, in Vea's world, are partly responsible for having blood on their hands. No one is innocent in this world; the boys are willing to commit violence and murder in their power-hungry drive for personal gain and their selfish quest for glory. The gang members are simultaneously victims and perpetrators of "war." Soldiers, whether in the military or on the streets, are neither noble nor innocent in *Gods Go Begging*, but alternately pitiable and reprehensible. The gang members on Potrero Hill are "boys doing battle for dominion of a squalid hillside" (274) who "like all armies, [march] on their stomach," calling an "uneasy armistice" only when it's time to eat (6). In his courtroom testimony, Calvin adopts the same imagery, painting for the jury a world where "everythin' around me was the enemy, when every day be war" (269). Similar descriptions recur over the course of the novel, and seen through veteran Jesse's eyes, Potrero Hill and its denizens are primarily written in these terms.

The parallels between the world of street gangs and the organization of the military become clearest when Jesse visits Calvin's neighborhood to investigate the defense he will mount for Calvin. Jesse interprets the neighborhood in terms of battle, partly because the framework of war governs his worldview, but also because the extended metaphor allows Vea to convey the physical and structural violence that besieges the neighborhood. Jesse views the landscape as a "free fire zone" (169) populated by boys "wearing their uniforms" consisting of gang insignia and fashionable sneakers while they're "waiting for a mission" (163). Eddy, Jesse's investigator, explains the genesis of youth gangs as the result of:

radon gases from all this concrete mixing with hamburger wrappers and the tons of cocaine residue that have fallen onto the roadway. This compound ferments underfoot and is then bombarded by that dead blue light that pours out of television screens. The result is an insidious chemical gas that slowly leaches the human spirit out of these kids. It attacks and destroys the hippocampus so that these kids have no future and no cultural memory. (170)

The metaphor establishes parallels between the street and the battlefield, specifically Vietnam. In this case, unlike the guns and explosives of war, the causes of the metamorphosis from boy to soldier are environmental, the effects of something like Agent Orange. What sounds absurd has a basis in the kinds of environmental hazards that poor and racially minoritized communities disproportionately suffer, as the fallout from industrialization, “radon gasses from all the concrete,” the detritus of drug use, and cultural impoverishment represented by the “dead blue light” of mindless entertainment combine together to drain residents of hope as well as the knowledge required to connect their current conditions to a history of oppression. After hearing this analysis, Jesse concludes that the youth of the Hill are suffering “Like soldiers in extremis” (170). The longstanding war on the people of the Hill strips them of memory, purpose, and life as if the population were collectively suffering the fate of soldiers in their death throes.

Jesse, too, succumbs to the pernicious influences of the Hill as he begins his investigation. Jesse and Eddy experience a fantastical phenomenon of “Tourette’s” that infects anyone who enters the neighborhood, which causes them to immediately give way to violent impulses and street slang. Jesse and Eddy are in hostile territory now, but in order to complete their lawyerly mission, they must prove their credentials to its

gatekeeper, a young boy who demands to know their reason for being there. When Jesse proves himself by indicating he is defending Calvin, rather than seeking to cause the gang trouble, the boy allows them passage. The boy judges that, in defending Calvin from imprisonment, Jesse and Eddy "are not the enemy." Again, Jesse imagines this interchange in terms of soldiering, describing how the boy "transmitted" their "credentials" throughout the neighborhood by using a secret code reminiscent of soldiers communicating with each other without giving away their plans to spies. Despite his despair at how the boys live, Jesse respects the boy's ability and skills, and sees him as "an RTO and cryptographer combined" (172).

Despite the boy's skills, which would make him well-suited to an intelligence or communications officer in the military, Jesse doesn't suggest the boy's abilities would be better served in the Army or as community defenders rather than in the gang. Vea's representation of gang members as soldiers, while overlapping with that of other war novels, diverges in key ways. Unlike in John Edgar Wideman's *Two Cities*, absent is the mourning for "our soldiers, our blue warriors" whose vigor, masculinity, and power might be put to strategic use as defenders of their communities, but who were absent when "the policy army attacked John Africa and his people" (99). While the starkness and limitations of their material reality is critically represented, *Gods Go Begging* is not a dirge for the "lost sons" of the streets who might reroute their physical prowess to defending or advancing their communities. There is a sense of loss, but it is loss that belongs unilaterally to all on the Hill who have been disregarded. If anything, the gang members are part of the problem, taking out their dissatisfaction and frustration and violent impulses on the community around them. Neither have the gang members

themselves taken on the emblems and strategies of soldiers fighting a race war. Although there is some reluctant respect for the gang members' self-organization and skills, their purpose is purely self-serving. Set after the height of Black nationalism, the Black Panthers, and the Brown Berets in the 1960s that we see in Acosta's work, the radical self-organizing spirit has been broken and dissipated, leaving the youth with neither a path outside of sports for advancement, nor with a purpose to their violence other than personal profit and the respect of their peers.

The absence of nostalgia, pity, and idealization around the gang members' soldierly behavior is consistent with the novel's ethos that soldiering itself is not a laudatory path. Rather, as we shall see, the novel wholeheartedly rejects the idea that violence, force, and masculine ideals can be rerouted to save their communities. In other words, the problem for Reggie and his companions isn't that masculinity has been perverted in a way that leads to self-destruction, but with the demands of masculinity in the first place.

Desire without Humanity

In *Gods Go Begging*, the drive for the appearance and privileges of masculinity fuel the martial longings of both gang members and soldiers. As in many other war novels, we see boys don uniforms, adopt ways of speaking, and perform gender for each other in "the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constituted the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler 140), but unlike the noble aspirations of a Solly Saunders or Frederick Douglass whose primary goals are racial advancement, the boys in *Gods Go Begging* are driven primarily by a desire for power and material gain. Men without the means to otherwise materially improve their

lives join the Army “to fight for blue jeans and convertibles and full-color foldouts of big-breasted blondes” (79), all of the trappings of successful American masculinity, wrapped up in consumerism, financial success, and the rights of acquisition of the female body. Those leaving for war, whether in Vietnam or in the youth gang, model themselves on the American masculinity embodied by John Wayne, who, as noted ironically by Amos Flyer, has “never picked up a real gun” but has nevertheless “gotten a lot of American boys killed” (90). “Respect” and income through drug sales on the streets, as well as social respect and the (empty) promise of employability through the military, are two possible and related strategies available to these men. In this sense, the layering of the Vietnam War onto the present-day of the narrative reveals itself as more than just metaphorical; V^éa suggests the same motivations underlie both youth gangs and government militaries, while the violence resulting from both is indistinguishable.

The hunger for the rewards of male privilege, even at the expense of community and of the boys’ own souls—“desire without humanity,” in the terms of the novel—fuels itself on violence. Desire without humanity might be understood as a hunger for sex and power that is almost animalistic in nature, but that lacks empathy, love, or imagination. V^éa expands on this concept in an interview:

War begins long before battle, it begins when we are boys longing for the initiation rite of the warrior and everything it promises: sexual prowess and sexual license. War lasts long after the last bullet is fired, into old age and death we go carrying a secret knowledge that no one wants to know about. War is the opposite of sexual prowess. War is desire stripped of humanity. As 17 year old boys we danced with the apocalypse and it cooked our hearts. We were disabled in our

spirits and deprived of the power to love. I wanted to write a book that addressed that disabled and twisted desire. Things haven't changed a whole lot. Watch any commercial during a football game. Men are still the cars they drive, the size of the engine, the pulling power. They're still at it, selling prowess and sexual license. They'll never stop. (*Mi Gente*, 2000)

For V́ea, the "twisted" desires of masculinity for material possessions and sexual access is at the root of war and is inextricably bound up with how men are socialized. Since the boys and men we see in *Gods Go Begging* aspire to and, to different degrees, benefit from, their participation in this system, they are both exploited and exploiting, the victims of racism and classism, but also complicit in reproducing its structures, as evidenced in the sexual and physical violence Reggie Harp turns on Mai and Persephone, which reifies gendered power disparities, and by the martial violence in which Jesse participates in the name of American global hegemony in Vietnam.

Despite the cultural narrative around soldiering leading to personal advancement and community uplift, V́ea articulates that in practice the streets funnel young Latinx and African American boys into the military, which in turn spits them out again as physically, psychically, and economically broken men, whose bid for masculine prowess will ultimately fall short of realization. Moreover, their lower social status makes the boys V́ea writes of vulnerable to the dictates of the military machine, where the military doesn't "draft college kids," and even after conscription, poor men of color find themselves unable to escape low-ranking and dangerous positions within it, as "it was always the sons of the poor who ended up on hills like this" (103), left vulnerable and

exposed to enemy attack as disposable soldiers.⁹ These three phases of the warrior—grooming boys for a desire for masculine glory, then sending them to war, and finally discarding them—are represented in the novel through first the characters of Calvin and Reggie, young boys who seek respect and material gain through participation in a gang; then through the younger versions of the narrator Jesse and his fellow soldiers in Vietnam, and ultimately through Jesse's struggles with PTSD and the homelessness of Potrero Hill veterans.

If the streets serve as a pipeline to the military, then they ultimately become the dumping ground for the refuse of war. Following on the metaphor of war to describe the lives of the young men in the neighborhood, *Gods Go Begging* shows how the local homeless population represents another group who live in an embattled position at the mercy of the streets. The homeless are both literal and metaphorical soldiers: in *Gods Go Begging*, they, like many of their real world counterparts, are veterans of the war in Vietnam. Hollis, for example, struggles in a dead-end career because, rather than military service being a bridge to class advancement, it has returned him to his working class roots, a situation which is compounded further by the trauma that has closed off additional avenues for him. Jesse, in contrast, began his service already college educated, and it was this education that lofted him into a superior position in the Army as a communications officer, and, it's implied, that allowed him to absorb the psychological

⁹ Véa's fictional representation of the disproportionate vulnerability and suffering of soldiers of colors is born out in the research; see for example: "Another finding from both NVVRS and AIVVP was that ethnic minority veterans were more likely than white veterans to have been exposed to more combat, violence, atrocities, deprivation, and adverse environmental factors...the higher likelihood of PTSD among minority veterans is due at least in part to the greater likelihood of war zone exposure and not to their minority status" (Friedman et al, 42).

trauma from which he suffers so as to stay afloat in a professional career as a lawyer.¹⁰ His fellow soldiers are not so privileged. Unable or unwilling to adapt to the civilian world, Jesse's unnamed fellow veterans form a ghost community who continue an embattled life, where they are less soldiers on a mission and more survivors, building encampments out of army surplus and organizing their micro-society as if they were soldiers in the field. Their bonds are partly martial but grow out of a sense of brotherhood born from shared experience and societal rejection, as well as a mutual need for survival.

Jesse discovers one such encampment when he sets off in pursuit of a possible witness to the murders known only as “Mr. Homeless,” who turns out to be his old comrade the chaplain. As with Jesse’s first encounter with the youth in Potrero Hill, Vea describes the homeless encampment by way of military terms. Like an army spy doing reconnaissance, “Jesse penetrated the perimeter [of the homeless encampment] at the northwest corner” (262), and his investigation proceeds in the detached technical language of military missions. The encampment is alternately described as a “compound,” “mess hall,” “dark hootch,” and “underground bunker,” and Jesse is the point soldier who must first assess any threat and then take a full inventory of what he discovers there, identifying a “communal kitchen” and “olive-drab army-issue liner,” (263). In contrast with the promise of military service to somehow “make us into men” so that when they finally returned home they could “screw anything in skirts” (223), those who survive battle will return to another “war” with no change in social status, no financial advancement, and no women. After the war concludes, foot soldiers, recovering

¹⁰ For an analysis of how trauma functions in the novel, see William Arce’s “Landscapes of Trauma: The Transnational Dislocation of Vietnam's War Trauma in Alfredo Vea's *Gods Go Begging*” (2011) and Brian J. Williams’s “In This Same Shamble of Strewn Bone”: *Gods Go Begging* and the Community of Loss” (2013).

from physical injury and psychological trauma, are cast back into its trenches. Far from a path upward for lower and working class soldiers, *Gods Go Begging* reveals the Army to be a temporary stop on the road to permanent poverty. As Sergeant Flyer and the other soldiers discover, the promise of masculine virility advertised by the image of John Wayne and others proves bankrupt.

Broken Speedometer: The Insight of the Soldier

Much of *Gods Go Begging* suggests that soldiers are uniquely privy to a raw, painful, understanding of the world, and that this access to a deeper truth is part of the allure of the warrior. In this, V \acute{e} a echoes a common depiction of soldiering in war literature that war is more "real" than reality, yet ultimately the novel will suggest that this supposedly unromantic view of human nature perversely feeds into a romanticization of soldiers and their superior insight, a mystique that is complicit in military recruitment. Ultimately, *Gods Go Begging* will deconstruct this idea of the apparent superiority of the truth revealed by war and posit that the soldier's perspective is only one perspective on what it means to be human, no more valid for its rawness, and no more accurate because of its intensity.

Where civilian life is a complex and illusory performance of social scripts, and truth is eclipsed by social conventions, battle is unmediated and takes place outside the bounds of social decorum. Although terrible, soldiers see human nature and the vulnerable human body for what they truly are, and as a result soldiers can never be the same. Those who are forged in war's fires emerge forever changed, initiated in a truth inaccessible to the civilian population. Jesse's fellow veteran Hollis explains that "war let me see the real things about who we are. It was like all the truth you could handle" (222).

One truth that is made visible in the carnage is the reducibility of the human to the body itself. For Sergeant Amos Flyer, "Combat makes the skin permeable...That's what it's about, isn't it? We're protecting our innermost fluids while trying to cause leaks in the skin of the enemy" (93). More real than the social persona we create or the spiritual soul we long to believe in, our "secret self" is nothing more than our physical body and its animalistic needs and drives, the materiality of which the destruction of war crudely lays bare. After being mortally wounded, Vietnamese soldier Trin Adrong confronts this "secret self" when he "felt himself inside out...exposed to the air and the insects" (280). While the spiritual is not visible and must be taken on faith, the dependence of life on the intactness of the physical body cannot be denied, and in war, the truth of it cannot be escaped. As the chaplain attempts to give a dying soldier his last rites, he is so distracted by the physicality of the soldier's body, which V ea renders in stark, anatomical terms (his "perfectly formed concha" and "unstained lobe"), that he fails to complete the rites, leaving the soldier to die "without forgiveness" (93). In the end, a human being is no more than the physical body itself in all its vulnerability. The discovery of the materiality of human beings sends the chaplain, a man of god, into crisis. In the midst of his mental breakdown, he repeatedly cries out, "All we love is skin!" (91), a quote reminiscent of *Catch-22* protagonist Captain John Yossarian's wartime revelation that human beings are little more than sacks of organs. In the face of the violence of battle, morality and spirituality appear illusory.

Where human beings are reduced to bodies that can be violently disposed of in the name of material gain, soldiers move through an altered reality of survival and amorality that disorients. For example, when the chaplain returns to discover the hill on the Laotian

border razed to the ground by bombs and his fellow soldiers slain, he muses, “If what he saw below had happened in Central Park, it would be considered an American tragedy” (130). Yet, far from being an American tragedy, the bombing is only one of many battles in the Vietnam War, so mundane as to not even be newsworthy, where lost lives are treated as disposable. War operates and is judged on a different scale than civilian life. What is normal in battle is incomprehensible outside of it, a discrepancy that the chaplain can only visualize through an imaginative recontextualization of battle scenes in the civilian world.

Sergeant Flyer describes the way that war heightens the intensity of human experiences through the metaphor of the speedometer, a metaphor that V^éa will use throughout the novel to communicate the altered perception with which the experience of war imbues reality:

That old life of yours back in the world was a lie. You had a small speedometer, padre. A tiny pathetic little gauge up there on the dashboard of your existence...If they [soldiers] get out of here alive, they will always be running at a different speed. A normal day back in the world won't even register on their instruments.
(94-95)

For civilians, the "speedometer," which measures the intensity of experience and emotion, has a limited range, while the extremes of joy, fear, anger, and sorrow engendered by battle necessitate a different compass altogether. Because of the perspective Jesse has access to and can't escape from, the civilian world he re-enters loses its reality. For Jesse, “the hill near Laos was the true, concrete world of the present, while the lawyer and his cases in San Francisco were merely wishful phantasms—the

fabricated, desperate dreams of a frightened soldier” (159). As Sergeant Flyer foresaw, the civilian world feels like an illusion compared to the visceral truths of battle. Jesse and his fellow veterans remain trapped within the eternal present of war, while they experience their civilian lives as insignificant shadows. This initiation into a shared truth enables a brotherhood of soldiers that all soldier-veterans instinctively understand. Jesse feels a kinship with veteran characters like the investigator Eddy, the bartender Hollis, and Anvil Harp. Like them, Jesse has grown accustomed to the heightened psychological and sensory experiences of battle that make soldiers overly aware of the body and their physical surroundings. In comparison, the everyday world is a pale replica of this raw reality.

On a certain level, *Gods Go Begging* endorses and even celebrates this view of the soldier consciousness. Much of the novel appears to subscribe to the conventional war novel trope that participation in war yields a privileged if harsh understanding of the world to which civilians don't have access. As in many twentieth-century war novels, the focus of *Gods Go Begging* is the foot soldier who, for reasons often mundane, finds himself in the midst of battle, and who is drawn in contrast with an image of an idealized soldier who has superior abilities, physical prowess, and a noble mission. Although this foot soldier is an everyman, it is precisely his commonness that allows him to escape the pageantry of war and see it for what it is—an elaborate game for gain and desire for violence masked in patriotism and rhetoric. As Colonel Urban relates, “Those grunts aren't stupid. None of this means nothing. None of this hellhole adds up to democracy, and none of this means God” (126). However, as the novel unfolds, the perniciousness of this trope reveals itself as just one more way that war is glorified. Gradually, it becomes

clear that the insight yielded by war is just as unstable and fallible as any other perspective of reality, and moreover, it may even be a harmful one that leads to alienation and suffering for veteran characters as well as an undesirable glamorization of the soldier experience. In this way, V \acute{e} a first inserts his characters into a twentieth-century tradition of war literature that finds in the first-hand perspective of the foot soldier a unique authenticity of experience, only to question and overturn the idea that the foot soldier has access to a special truth and that martial participation has any redeeming outcomes.

The speedometer that initially gives the young soldiers an expanded range of sensations turns into a curse that inhibits veterans from forming meaningful relationships in civilian life. In the present timeline of the novel, the chaplain reunites with Jesse in San Francisco and immediately identifies what ails him: “It’s that speedometer of yours, isn’t it? Too fast for this world? You’re out of step...can’t dance...can’t touch a living thing because it’s always dying in your eyes...can’t love” (311). Far from access to a privileged truth, Jesse’s expectations of intense, sped-up experiences, as well as his intimate knowledge of death and the frailty of human life, prevent him from acclimating to the civilian world and leave him emotionally closed off, susceptible to drinking, and unable to maintain a romantic relationship. Hollis also struggles with the gap between wartime perception and civilian life. In Hollis’s case, the privileged perspective of the soldier is deconstructed further. Not only is it harmful, but Hollis begins to question to what degree war brought him true insight. Like Jesse, he cannot sustain a romantic relationship; unlike Jesse, he has a dark past abusing his girlfriend, a history that the narrative implies can be partly attributed to the scars of his experience in battle. Connecting his warped view of the world to the destruction he has waged on his own life

and the lives of others, he rejects the soldier perspective, saying, “I don’t want it no more” (222). His belief in the privileges of a soldier’s perspective leads to a dead end, and he has begun to question its veracity. *Gods Go Begging* positions the soldier perspective as equivalent rather than superior to commonplace perceptions of reality, and even as one that is ultimately deceptive. Rather than reveal the ugly truth about human nature, war itself is what robs humanity of our better qualities. The chaplain warns that the theater of battle “can steal your soul as well as your life. Someday a long time from now, you could find yourself loving these moments of horror, embracing them. You could begin to believe that this is true life, that everything slower than three hundred miles an hour is a lie” (138). In this sense, the “truth” war reveals is actually a perversion in which killing becomes a fetish. The more intense experience of destruction represented by the speedometer metaphor is actually an addictive illusion that obscures the deeper value of love and communion. War does not give soldiers greater access to reality; it obscures it. War does not expose the truth of human nature; it destroys it.

Gods Go Begging will seek to undermine and ultimately reject the lens of war as an adequate or productive one for understanding human nature and its value in creating a better world. Those who adopt the soldier’s perspective become emotionally compromised, lead limited lives, and enact violence against themselves and/or those to whom they are close. Jesse comes to an understanding that “when desire is stripped of humanity...all that remains is war” (291). This, then, is the final truth that war gives soldiers and veterans access to, a revelation that strips war of the masculine yearnings for material and sexual success and becomes instead the enactment of the perversion of desire—“lewd acts with boys,” in the words of Sergeant Flyer (96). In the ethos of the

novel, desire fuels human life; in love and empathy, it is generative; in war and violence, that desire degrades and isolates. Ultimately, the “truth” of war that Jesse and his peers had thought they had access to—human nature exposed, greater intensity of experience—dissolves, and reveals that the supposed truth is obscuring more trenchant ones about human life, isolating veterans and making relationships challenging. Jesse is haunted by war, but he has been misreading the messages: “Those lonely and desolate ghost soldiers on that hill in Vietnam had been trying to tell him something...the end of desire was a greater tragedy than the end of life itself” (225). The complexity of desire, which Jesse had thought led young men to fight in war, was contorted by his wartime trauma, and it is only after a failed relationship with Caroline and after meeting the chaplain again that he is able to see desire *with* humanity to be the greater truth.

Véa takes care to avoid replicating the glamorization of war, even inadvertently. Unlike other twentieth-century war novels told from the perspective of the foot soldier, only part of *Gods Go Begging* is set during wartime, with a greater representational emphasis placed on the conditions that lead men to war or violence and the effects of war on veterans and the civilian population. Even in scenes set during the Vietnam War, *Gods Go Begging* carefully skirts direct representation of violence. Instead, it is narratively elided, so that we glimpse it through flashback, via fantasy, or through its effects, rather than head-on. For example, Jesse and the chaplain, through whom much of the wartime action is focalized, are not physically present when the hill near Laos is bombed despite its being a seminal event in the text, but arrive only later to see the destruction. When we do see violence first hand, it is represented in an imaginative, dreamlike reconstruction of what it might have looked like to participants like Trin Adrong and Sergeant Flyer: “He

[Sergeant Flyer] spoke her name as Trin's glasses were blown from a faceless head, as his Bible flew and burned—the scrap of paper in the Creole's jacket rising on the hot concussive wind, then settling into the Bible, somewhere in the book of Ruth" (288). Here, the events narrated belong to a distant past that is not known but rather imagined by Jesse, who was not present in the moment. Despite the apparent gruesomeness of the destruction (as evidenced by details like "a faceless head"), the focus is on the effects of battle, rather than the actions. In the context of Jesse's retelling, the primary point of this description is to hypothesize how Trin's wife was able to track down Persephone by way of Flyer's address miraculously making its way into his enemy's Bible. We see the fighting by means of peripheral details that are described in exaggerated depth, such as the way Sergeant Flyer's neck chain comes apart as he is attacked, sending his dog tags flying through the air—again, details about which Jesse cannot supply a first-person account. If there is no way to directly represent violence that doesn't also glamorize it, Vea's narrative strategy of depicting war through its effects—off-center and through a haze of unreality—resist the temptation.

Along with Jesse's fantastical reconstruction of wartime events, the third-person omniscient narrator has purchase on both worlds and transcends them, giving the reader a critical distance from Jesse's perspective. There is some implication that the chaplain, a shifting border character who occupies many identities, might be the third person narrator. Ostensibly a side character, both trickster and coward, the chaplain slips into the novel's limelight almost imperceptibly, emerging only towards the conclusion as one of the most important, if not the most important, character in the book. The chaplain is a chameleon who both embraces and escapes social categories, and as a noncombatant

soldier, exists in the liminal space between war and peace. This unique subjectivity situates him well as a voice who can bring the authenticity of the embedded soldier along with an outsider perspective. He says of his role:

I cannot be an omniscient narrator, so don't expect me to have the answers to everything, and don't expect me to see every facet as though I had a hundred insect eyes...I suppose that I must have been chosen to spin my own part of this tale...I must have been chosen because I know it all from beginning to end. I am certainly not the story itself. I am only the grass that rattles on the wind. (199-200)

If we take the chaplain to be the narrator of the novel, then the articulation of his role here privileges the role of the storyteller over the soldier as the vehicle for “truth,” to the extent that truth can be apprehended. While the chaplain/narrator cannot be “omniscient” or “have the answers to everything,” he is uniquely “chosen”—as both participant and observer, a noncombatant who unlike the other boys and men who craved violence, feared it instead. He is a man of the cloth who has deeper access to spiritual truths that ultimately emerge as more compelling than the soldier’s reduction of humanity to the body—to be the means through which history is passed on, “the grass that rattles on the wind.” The image is strikingly passive, and in contrast with the aggression that fuels many of the novel’s characters, is an image of nonviolent resistance. The grass’s steady witnessing becomes an instrument for the critique (“tattling”) of the wind. Despite the storyteller’s centrality to this process, he is “not the story itself,” but merely a facilitator.

The description of the chaplain as narrator echoes another of the novel’s framing metaphors about how truth and justice are delivered. In the novel, *Véa* showcases the history of the characters from multiple angles. In this, the writer functions as a lawyer—

sometimes public defender, sometimes prosecutor—laying out all of the evidence, and according to the logic of the metaphor, the role of the reader is implicitly that of a jury member. As V́ea said in an interview with *Mi Gente* in 2000, “my motivation for being a lawyer and writer are the same: to find the truth of things; to bring the truth to the jury, the prosecutor and to the defendant.” Accordingly, an argument is being made through the novel, but it is the reader as jury member who must decide on the case. To that end, Jesse gives two final testimonies at Calvin’s trial: one for the jury, and another when everyone leaves the courtroom except for Carolina, Jesse’s ex-girlfriend. While in the first, Jesse focuses on the provable, factual details of the case, in the second he delivers what he believes to be the “truth” in its entirety, but this truth is a mystical one rather than an articulation of historical details. In this latter exposition, Jesse recounts what happened both at Potrero Hill and at the hill in Vietnam, something he is able to do because he was mystically present at both sites, even if he was not at either one in actuality. He claims, “I am a living witness. It happened here in this city, on Potrero Hill, and on a hill near the eastern edge of Laos. I was there, at both places” (283). We are now in the peculiar space of the lawyer-storyteller, one who reconstructs past events and motives to tell “the story behind the story” (275) by weaving first-hand testimonies, empirical facts, and imagination. The privileged viewpoint of the soldier that can be won only on the battlefield is thus rejected, with no more claims to veracity due to its exclusivity or intensity. Instead, an alternative index of truth is offered: that of the collective judgment of the common people, who both occupy a space external to events but also, as members of the community, are inextricably implicated in them.

Supposing: The Alternative Power of the Imagination

In Vea's world, the violence of the city and the violence of war are underpinned by white hegemony and fueled by a misguided equation of masculinity with power; only through the abandonment of militaristic longings in favor of imagination and narrative can healing begin. The stark grimness of the soldiers' proximity to a harsher reality than that perceived by civilians dissolves and is displaced by the game of "supposing" that sustains the soldiers through both boredom and moments of trauma. Sergeant Flyer defines supposing as a game in which "you and me talk about a different kind of world. You might call it philosophizing" (99). In this game, the soldiers imagine the rippling consequences that the alteration of one moment of history would result in. The differences are both playful and serious. For example, one soldier wonders what "America would be like if there had never been any African slaves" (99). The soldiers suggest various unexpected downstream effects of this historical shift, ultimately concluding that French would be the dominant world language, while jazz and rock would have emerged elsewhere in the world than in the United States. While the tenor of the conversation is light-hearted, what is implied is the emergence of an entirely different world, often one in which African and Native Americans enjoy more self-determination, freedom, and respect, while white supremacy fails to take root. Jesse asks what would have happened had Cortéz landed in Plymouth Rock and the *Mayflower* in Yucatán, a swap the many effects of which would ultimately lead to "Mexicans in space." Supposing, then, is a way of seeing the present as historically contingent rather than inevitable, and the circumstances of the soldiers' own lives as being historically bound and therefore capable of being changed. More than just escapism and wish fulfillment, supposing is rather a radical hope in the power of the imagination and in storytelling—

“desire *with* humanity”—that represents a path toward social justice that violence and war—fueled by “desire *without* humanity”—cannot achieve.

Véa’s faith in the revolutionary potential of imaginative power for exposing the limitations of our current world and envisioning new ones is reflected in his generic choices. For a novel marked by gritty realism, the fantastic plays an unexpectedly prominent part. The role of the fantastic here is neither to entertain nor to suggest how incomprehensible war is. For Véa, fantasy is not inconsistent with realism, but can in some ways enhance it. In an interview, he argues that the weight of realism is compromised by fantasy “only if your cultural walls begin and end with Germanic or Anglo-Saxon religions, the Puritans, or other manifestations of ultra-linear, confirmation-biased thinking” (*Red Wheelbarrow* 71). In the novel, the fantastic assists in building parallelism, allowing the characters from Potrero Hill and those at the hill in Vietnam to literally cross time and space to meet in another dimension, forging a connection that exposes a deeper, more profound truth. Fantasy ruptures the “realism” of battle and our preconceived ideas about its tragic inevitability, instead offering a creative, imaginative space to dream of something better.

If imagination, then, represent an alternative ethos to that of militancy and masculinity in which the characters are initially caught up, then storytelling is the means through which imagination’s vision can be articulated. In Jesse’s eyes, “The heart must have a lyric. It must have a grammar or it can never hear itself. The heart must articulate or it will never be heard” (273). Language is not only the means through which we can express ourselves, but it’s also the means to self-understanding and to connection with

other human beings. Jesse learns how to take this lesson into his own life in the midst of a PTSD-related breakdown, when Carolina pleads:

The heart just needs some lyrics...It needs to articulate. You can't keep hiding among the living; you can't keep forcing your soul to mumble in code. No one can ever answer you. Not me, not anyone...Supposing you chose life, Jesse? Suppose you choose life just this once? (316)

Carolina intervenes by inviting Jesse to abandon the "code" of battle, which limits him to communication with other soldiers who have shared his experience, and connect with her by reentering the civilian space. Like Jesse, she draws on the game of supposing to ask him to imagine other possibilities, possibilities in which he can imagine a world through a lens other than that of battle.

While Véra holds masculinity up for critique, it is women who embody the alternative ethos of desire with humanity. In the *Red Wheelbarrow* interview, Véra describes the role of the women in the novel: "The difference between the men and the women in *Gods* is that the women know the true face of love. It is not the face of war" (73). Persephone and Mai, whose husbands were soldiers on opposite sides and who each killed the other, should by all reason be enemies, but instead they seek each other out in an attempt to find understanding and solace with each other about their deceased husbands, and in the process become friends and, later, lovers and life partners. Out of the sorrows of war and loss, they build community and nourishment through the restaurant they open together. The men in the novel engage in violent combat bent on their mutual annihilation; the women flee violence and risk their own lives to protect each other from harm. In the masculine spaces of the novel, the imaginative solidarity between

people of color across national boundaries fails time and again, whereas the women successfully build toward a new future; they engender the city on the hill in their chosen community with the potential to transform their blighted neighborhood into something more, only to be laid low by the aftershocks of cyclical violence and lingering trauma.

Women are depicted as “soldiers” of a different kind, noncombatants who are nevertheless “conscripted” to fight and are killed in their own “battles” (Mai and Persephone at the hands of gang member Reggie Sharp), who nurture their wounded comrades long after battle (Mai with the chaplain through his memory loss and war wounds, Carolina dealing with Jesse’s PTSD), or who live as prisoners of war by domestic abusers (the young girls in Skelley’s family, Hollis’s ex-girlfriend). In Jesse’s eyes, these women are soldiers who “had seen war and would live to share the nightmare,” (233) just as Jesse and other veteran characters endure PTSD.

While women characters occupy a privileged place of esteem in the novel in offering an alternative path towards change, the characterization also reifies a gender essentializing split, reducing women to two-dimensional characters who primarily serve as illustrations of the destructive fallout of war and embodiment of desire with humanity (love), and their voices are less likely to be the lens through which we view the actions and more likely to be mediated through the point of view of men. Rather, it is two of the men—Calvin and the chaplain—who emerge as emblematic of a feminist manhood. Calvin is given words to tell his story; the chaplain reframes the cowardice with which he was saddled throughout the novel as a choice for nonviolence. Both characters are shot and killed at the same time, and both characters, evoking Christian mythology, are resurrected in the miraculous and fantastical end of the novel.

When we first meet him, Calvin is almost a non-character. Lacking the language to articulate his past, his desires, his motivations, he is literally unable to speak his defense. At the same time, while the narrator dips in and out of the subjectivities of different characters—in this novel, even the dead speak—Calvin’s consciousness is uniquely withheld. In the novel’s early stages, Calvin is a blank canvas upon which play out the assumptions (and sometimes, the agendas) of other people. While Calvin is initially taken in by the promise of masculine belonging that participation in a gang offers, he is on the other hand attracted to the restaurant Mai and Persephone are building, with its savory smells emanating from the windows and the feminine domestic comfort to which he otherwise does not have access. While fellow gang member Reggie Sharp, who represents for V́ea the “brutal warrior” (291) and embodies the very worst drives that in the novel’s view animate war, Calvin is in reality “no soldier.” Although the truth of what happened the night of the murders remains Jesse’s conjecture, the novel suggests that Calvin refuses to join Reggie in rape, but rather locks Mai in the restaurant walk-in freezer to protect her.

To both free Calvin from his entrapment and exonerate him in the courtroom, Jesse starts him on an educational curriculum to learn to read and write. Language and storytelling are more than peaceful means of communication and self-knowledge, but are themselves “another form of ammunition” (290). Jesse counsils Calvin that his “fate will be decided by words” because the “courtroom is a war of words” (70). When Calvin finally has the tools to narrate his own story on the witness stand, rather than be an empty page for the narrative of others, he emerges as a newly sympathetic defendant and is declared innocent by the jury. The Calvin that emerges from imprisonment is

transformed; upon returning to the hill, he discovers that “nothing about it was familiar to him,” but rather he now sees the poverty, yearnings for consumer success, and violence clear-sightedly (300). Instead of rejoining his former gang members, he turns to the game of supposing Jesse had taught him, and begins to imagine alternate worlds in which “there sure as shit could be plenty of homeboys on the moon” (301). The new person that Calvin has become, one who has the words to self-articulate, reject the lures of desire without humanity, and imagine alternate futures, is not someone who can survive life on the hill; he is immediately shot and killed as soon as he reenters his old neighborhood. Nevertheless, Calvin’s fantastical resurrection, which is described in a crescendo of supposing-made-manifest, transforms him into a Christ-like symbol, a sacrificial lamb who offers an alternative manhood that can inspire through nonviolence and love.

As Calvin is transformed through literacy from a boy longing for inclusion into a violent manhood into an empathetic man, the chaplain grows into a man of peace and mercy who brings compassion into a violent world. While the chaplain’s initially cowardly nature is depicted, albeit sympathetically, as a character flaw, his compassion and nurturing nature, qualities traditionally associated with women, uniquely position him to seek out an alternative way to live in the midst of war that is founded in healing and empathy rather than bloodshed. During his time in Vietnam, the chaplain differs from other soldiers in being a squeamish and cowardly person who, as a noncombatant in the military, lacks even the aspiration of the other soldiers to prove themselves as men and acquire worldly possessions and sexual rewards. The chaplain’s fearfulness in the face of battle is both sympathetically portrayed even as its consequences are condemned. The first time he witnesses fatally injured soldiers, he has a mental breakdown; later, in the

face of attack, he flees on a helicopter, abandoning his fellow soldiers. In both instances, he leaves wounded and dying soldiers without spiritual comfort and salvation. He is out of sync with the military machine in which he is enmired. The colonel gives him a dressing down for desertion, railing that the chaplain's actions go even against the spirit of the Bible, in which "Jehovah God is a heat seeker" and there's never a story in which "everyone's happy and yellow cowards like you prosper" (123-124). At this stage of the novel, the chaplain still has not figured out how to reconcile his horror of war with ethical action.

The chaplain's aversion to bloodshed gives him a different perspective. Unlike Jesse and the other soldiers, the chaplain begins his journey to an alternative manhood rooted in peace, for which a different kind of courage is required. More contemplative than the other characters, he is skeptical from the start of rhetoric celebrating the glory of war. For him, war is something that can not only kill you, but also "can steal your soul" (138) even if you survive battle. Unlike the other characters, the chaplain mourns the travesty caused by war's destructiveness, and serves as a foil in battle sequences to refract the horrors of war to which the other soldiers become habituated. This disposition gradually reshapes itself into a principled stance for nonviolence and charity.

In order to attain this spiritual transformation, the chaplain must go through a period of forgetting. The breaking point is the moment the chaplain learns from the colonel that the hill his fellow soldiers died defending was in fact a decoy set up to protect the military's real site of communications. Leadership had every intention of sacrificing the squad, made up mostly of soldiers of color, without their knowledge.

Shocked and disillusioned, the chaplain walks away from the war (rather than flee in terror) and will not return:

the padre was no longer a part of anyone's army, not God's, not America's. He was no longer a part of this war. The sweet, sooty smell of burning humans had finally released his tenuous mind from this agonized plane of reality. No one on the hill would try to stop him as he walked away. It was his personal right. (136)

This time, the chaplain's desertion is half an act of protest, half a breakdown. After deserting, the chaplain wanders until he ends up in a refugee camp, where he loses his memory and identity, an experience that allows him to be spiritually reborn. Abandoning the horrors of war and the demands of the imperialist war machine in which he was embedded, the chaplain is then rehabilitated into the world of women, as represented by Mai (then Cassandra) nurturing him back to health. The lessons Mai/Cassandra will teach are love, care, and selflessness, messages closer to the ethos the chaplain claims to represent and in direct contrast with the colonel's interpretation of the Bible as one of war and domination. Upon recovering from his amnesia, the chaplain reflects, "It seems that remembering means forgetting" (207)—he must forget all he had been taught in war in order to understand the past. Always skeptical of the romance around the soldier's unique perspective, the chaplain must first abandon it in order to see clearly.

In doing so, the chaplain's cowardice transforms into empathy and his courage is founded in self-sacrifice. In the present of the novel, he lives without possessions: Christ-like, he is homeless and ministers to other homeless people. The chaplain's transformation is marked by his choices to first, kill Reggie Sharp as a "mercy killing... when there's no choice, no way out, when someone is wounded beyond hope" (304), and

secondly, to stay by Calvin's side after Calvin is attacked in order to "properly send the boy to meet the Father" despite the fact that doing so put the chaplain's own life in danger (302). In contrast with his experience in Vietnam, during which he would not kill and would flee for his own safety, later in life, the chaplain kills without qualm when empathy demands it, and he stays by the side of the fallen even at risk to himself.

After they are killed, Calvin and the chaplain are both given a fantastical resurrection. The resurrection marks them as Christ-like figures who, through peace and love, symbolize an alternative manhood that eschews the lures of violence and worldly gains fueling many of the boys and men who enter into the military and youth gangs.

Gods Go Begging opens dramatically with a coroner's examination of the bodies of Persephone Flyer and Mai Adrong, the two widows of the War in Vietnam who meet and find companionship and love with each other in San Francisco. The manner of their tragic deaths emerges through the wounds the coroner reads on their flesh. The scene and exposition is representative of the novel's narration as a whole: moments of violence, rarely directly narrated and transpiring at one remove from the reader, will be reconstructed later through the analysis of an expert. Like the art of its lawyer protagonist Jesse Pasadoble's closing testimony in this courtroom-centered novel, the truth of past events can be ascertained only imaginatively by way of the evidence left behind. Meaning will be dramatically overlaid where history is unknowable or lost. The jury and the reader will be called upon to discern truth and pass judgment.

In a novel that frames its subjects—racism, street violence, the justice system, violence against women, and homelessness—through the metaphor of the war that haunts its protagonist, the narrative ultimately seeks to free itself from its own framing in favor

of the humanity and flexibility of alternate modes of love, imagination, and words. Interestingly, despite its attempts to embody its ethos through literary choices, the novel largely fails to invoke women's subjectivity; women characters are instead represented as symbols of a worldview founded in love and imagination, rather than as fully fleshed out characters in their own right.

As common in other war novels, Jesse, himself a Vietnam war veteran suffering from PTSD, and its cast of soldiers, gang members, homeless veterans, and white supremacists, read their lives exclusively through the metaphor of war. While at first it appears that the novel itself turns on this framing, we gradually come to understand that the military metaphor is not only limited but stultifying; its claims of redemption/freedom doomed to failure, and only through a turn to the imagination and the heart, as realized in the written word and in the domain of women (at least as depicted in the novel), can liberation be achieved. Moreover, the failure to break free of this framework leads to self-defeating internal violence, as exemplified by military and gang warfare. Véa also suggests that those who have endured colonialism and racial oppression might be able to offer an alternative worldview to that of conquest-driven Western culture. To the extent that Jesse interprets his world through the metaphor of war, he will be unable to overcome his trauma enough to embrace life. Likewise, as long as Calvin's mind seeks acceptance through rigid and violent notions of masculinity, he will not escape the Hill.

Thus, *Gods Go Begging* condemns the self-interested masculinity that underlies the motivations of both soldiers and gang members and is violently exploited to advance a globalized Western supremacy. Unlike Acosta's *Revolt of the Cockroach People*, which locates resistance in militancy and masculine posturing, the metaphor of soldiering as a

mode of survival, much less as protest, is shown to ensure the replication of the cycle of violence, and it dooms its adherents to entrapment within an empty rhetorical patriarchal paradigm. Instead, *Gods Go Begging* locates an alternative resistance grounded within a history of colonialism and advanced by imagination, storytelling, and femininity that enfolds the voices of women, Native Americans, Mexicans, and other marginalized communities.

CHAPTER 3

WRITING THE FORGOTTEN SOLDIER

As I have elucidated in earlier chapters, the contributions of soldiers of color to American war efforts has often been passed over and marginalized despite long-standing participation. Even more precarious than their mention in historical treatments of wars, the voices of the soldiers themselves, unlike the surge of first-person narratives of white soldiers in the twentieth century, are notably limited, surviving only in oral histories and fragments through the diligent research of scholars like Wallace Terry, Lea Ybarra, and Mary Frances Berry and John W. Blassingame. While we begin to hear the voices of African American soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War as represented in oral histories like Terry's *Bloods*, the voices of African Americans soldiers serving in earlier wars is even more rare.

In this chapter, I situate John Edgar Wideman's 1998 novel *Two Cities: A Love Story* within the context of twentieth-century writers who attempt to imaginatively reconstruct the consciousness of soldiers of colors as they fight, live through, or die in battle. In so doing, I suggest that these writers participate in what Toni Morrison terms a "literary archeology" in which they write into historical gaps where direct testimony has gone largely unnarrated and unrecorded. Intent on inscribing the participation of soldiers of color into the national memory, these writers concern themselves with the soldier consciousness and the way race shapes the military experience of their characters.

In the wake of these historical silences, Morrison crafts such an archeology in fiction and articulates it explicitly in her non-fiction texts. In her fiction we can see this literary strategy in play when she merges historical accounts with the writer's own memories and imagination in order to construct an imaginative portrait of the interior life

of history's forgotten and silenced. Specifically, Morrison turns her attention to the excavation of the interior life of slaves, who even when able to share their stories through the form of slave narratives, often elided their internal thoughts, or had those thoughts stricken out by their white editors, in order to strategically present a case against slavery to white audiences. The result was a critically important but limited set of records in which, as she explains, "the absence of the interior life, the deliberate excising of it from the records that the slaves themselves told" ("Site of Memory" 238) left a tragic loss. Morrison seeks to write the interior world of people who left no record of that life and to whom she cannot directly ask questions. She uses the metaphor of archaeology to articulate how "on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply" (238). The writer's job, then, is to create a hybrid work that draws from history but also fills in the unknown interiority of its participants through the writer's own imagination and memories.

While all of the novels addressed in this dissertation by their very existence contribute to filling in representational gaps, some works address themes of memory and historical elision self-reflexively. As I'll discuss briefly in the first section of this chapter, Wideman's *Two Cities* joins novels such as Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), Stella Pope Duarte's *Let Their Spirits Dance* (2002), and John A. Williams's *Captain Blackman* (1972) in plumbing the writer's role in historical memory and forgetting. I will use Morrison, Duarte, and Williams's texts to set up a discussion of the collective forgetting of soldiers of color on which these novels comment, the memorialization these novels offer in that wake of that gap, and the way the novels both give life to the soldier

consciousness while also withholding it. I then go on to a more detailed discussion of the ways Wideman takes up these themes in *Two Cities*. Wideman embarks on his own literary archaeology by unraveling the conditions for African American soldiers in World War II, and he brings to life the soldier consciousness through the character of Martin Mallory. I show the way Wideman connects Mallory's wartime experiences with his growing artistic theorizations, which in turn frame the artistic ethos of the novel. Both Mallory and Wideman ask how truth can be captured, often in opposition to dominant narratives told from a single vantage point, and both ultimately work towards Morrison's yearning for narrative "truth" where historical facts are absent. Finally, I turn to the way Wideman reconfigures the struggles of his characters with contemporary racial "wars" in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh through the lens of Mallory's wartime memories and locates hope through witnessing, mourning, and love, as represented by the character of Kassima.

The Literary Archaeology of Morrison, Duarte, and Williams

In Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Stella Pope Duarte's *Let Their Spirits Dance*, and John A. Williams's *Captain Blackman*, the reclamation of the lost soldier's voice is a constitutive part of the text. Morrison's *Sula*, first published in 1973 during widespread anti-war sentiment and rising racial consciousness movements, tells a wider story of the United States between wars.¹¹ While the main characters are two women friends, Morrison creates fragmented sub-narratives about two veterans, Shadrack and Plum, whose histories are patchy and partially inaccessible, dipping in and out of the reader's view and constituting a primary plot in its own right. In *Captain Blackman*, John A.

¹¹ Shadrack returns from WWI in 1919, Sula dies in 1941, and Nel experiences her revelation in 1965, at the beginning of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

Williams tells the fantastical tale of Captain Abraham Blackman, an African American army captain during the Vietnam War whose loss of consciousness after an attack initiates a hallucinatory journey through time to experience life as an African American soldier from the battle of Lexington and Concord, to the Civil War, to the fields of France, and beyond. Likewise seeking to keep the memory alive of Mexican American soldiers, in *Let Their Spirits Dance*, Stella Pope Duarte sends her protagonist Teresa Ramirez on a cross-country pilgrimage to the Vietnam War Memorial to honor the memory of her brother Jesse Ramirez, a journey which unexpectedly culminates in a public ceremony recognizing Mexican American contributions to the Vietnam War. In each of these novels, memory and history intermingle as the writers self-consciously explore issues of historical absence and recovery.

Soldiers of color join the military and fight in battle only to be abandoned to endure physical and psychological scars of war, while the history of their participation fades from the national memory. Serving in the American west, David Harrison in *Captain Blackman* wonders, "You'd think that someone, somewhere, sometime would get up and say, loudly and clearly, Oh, look how well those fellows are doing for America. But naw. The more you did, the less they wanted to recognize it" (88). Sacrificing one's life for one's country is no guarantee of national recognition, despite the desires of a character like Solly Saunders in *And Then We Heard the Thunder*. In *Sula*, far from earning recognition as honored citizens and leaders, Plum and Shadrack return from war psychologically incapable of providing leadership or standing up for members of their

community when they are subjected to racism¹², and both men lose themselves to psychological trauma or drug addiction. The exploitation and invisibility of Mexican American soldiers in *Let Their Spirits Dance* is symbolized most poignantly in the fate of Jesse's remains, which is originally sent to another family with a son of the same name. In the context of the novel, the substitution of one Mexican American soldier's body with another underlines the interchangeability of Mexican American soldiers in the eyes of the American mind. Despite their service, the characters in these novels are left behind by American society and forgotten.

Where their contributions go missing from mainstream histories and collective memory, the novels memorialize the history of participation of soldiers of color. *Let Their Spirits Dance*'s dedication clearly articulates the intervention Duarte stages: "DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF SGT. TONY CRUZ AND ALL LA RAZA WHO DIED IN VIETNAM. *We hear you...*" As implied by the ellipses, the "we," by virtue of hearing the voices of dead soldiers, carries an implied obligation to respond to the dead, and the novel that follows the ellipses represents Duarte's own testament to their sacrifice. As a work that aspires to be the absent "story [that] would honor los Chicanos who went across the sea and never came back," the novel declares itself first and foremost as its own monument to the memory of Mexican American soldiers.

In the buried second novel of war that takes place within *Sula*, Morrison makes an explicit critique of the relationship between African Americans and the U.S. military and poses the question of why African American soldiers risk their lives to fight, in the words of the narrator, in "other people's wars" (137). Morrison's writing demands that their

¹² For example, the African American soldiers Helene Wright meets on the train are too fearful themselves to defend her from racism.

stories be told and remembered, albeit in the service of protest and memorialization rather than patriotic commemoration. As shown by the hallucinatory journeys of its protagonist on battlefields throughout history, in *Captain Blackman*, the past can be known; in a very real sense, it is a “place” we can travel to and understand, and through this intellectual journey, Black military history is recoverable. Reminiscent of Dos Passos’s modernist technique of splicing his narrative with fragments of newspaper clippings in order to convey a sense both of the realism of the events described as well as their relevance and contemporaneity, *Captain Blackman* integrates quotes from prominent historical figures, the memoirs of soldiers, newspaper snippets, congressional hearings, and military orders in order to imbue the narrative with the sense of historical, documented truth. While when mainstream America “think[s] of Flanders’ fields...they think of poppies nourished by the blood of thousands upon thousands of soldiers, all white,” Williams will narrate those who “came after... the second layer of blood and bodies that nourished the poppies” (106-7). Where history that has been covered up, the narrative act can restore the truth.

Narrating the consciousness of soldiers of color in addition to (and sometimes instead of) battle sequences allow writers to address the absence of such voices in documented histories. Captain Blackman’s position as external authority of the Black military history seminar gradually deepens into the authority of the first-hand witness. When he first travels back to the American Revolution, his Vietnam War uniform marks him as suspiciously different. However, as he becomes increasingly enmeshed in the suffering and battles of his fellow African American soldiers, the newness and quality of his twentieth century clothing begins to break down. By participating in their world, his

clothing transforms into the slave clothes of his companions, symbolically re-identifying him as an authentic man of the time period. Gradually the other soldiers forget that he was ever different, and Captain Blackman's authority as an eyewitness is fully established. He is therefore able to resurrect undocumented histories for his students and the reader with the authority of the eyewitness. Faced with a similar impossibility to talk to Jesse Ramirez or other deceased Mexican American soldiers in *Let Their Spirits Dance*, we are given some access to Jesse's consciousness through the letters that survive him. The importance of these letters is marked by their striking difference from the rest of the text, which has been narrated in the first person by the protagonist. They constitute the only "unmediated" representation of Jesse's voice and as such are a critical moment of reclamation.

Nevertheless, these writers establish narrative distance from the direct voicing of soldier-characters in order to call attention to the historical loss of such voices. In *Sula*, the opening chapter as told through the eyes of Shadrack while he participates in a battle on the fields of France during WWI is an attempt to reclaim this voice where few direct accounts exist. Shadrack's breakdown and the sense of isolation and lack of control that accompany it is occasioned not just by the shock of battle but also by his sudden loss of identity, which is in turn born of his ruptured memory. The battle in which Shadrack is traumatized is a birth by fire that rips Shadrack from the emotional and social context of his previous life and abandons him into a new, disconnected reality: "weak, hot, frightened, not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn't even know who or what he was...with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book" (10). Without a "past," without memory, Shadrack, unlike his Biblical namesake, can claim no "tribe."

Likewise, in *Captain Blackman* and in *Let Their Spirits Dance*, the artifacts of the past—the letters, newspaper clippings, and the hallucinatory journeys to speak directly with historical actors—that promise to provide unmediated access to history, also by the same token reinforce the absence of the living voices of soldiers lost.

Reclaiming the Soldier Voice in *Two Cities*

Wideman adopts a similar approach of recovering the voices of history's forgotten protagonists. Like Shadrack and Plum's war history in *Sula*, the presence of World War II is written as an embedded narrative within the broader novel of *Two Cities*. *Two Cities* spins out a metaphorical war in Pittsburgh in which the deaths and imprisonment of young African American men are set against a history of lynching, the government bombing of the MOVE organization in Philadelphia, and World War II. With this weighty history looming in the background, Wideman traces the deepening relationship of its three main characters: Kassima, a woman seeking to rebuild her life after her husband dies in prison from AIDS and her two sons are victims of gang violence; Robert Jones, a middle-aged man who is otherwise alone in the world and searching for meaning; and Martin Mallory, a World War II veteran wrapped up in his memories and his photographic art. While the seemingly discordant themes of love and violence stand at the center of the novel, *Two Cities* is less recognized for the characteristics it shares with war literature. Yet a war story is what *Two Cities*, in some sense, profoundly is. In the discussion that follows, I focus on how Wideman brings the voice of veteran Mallory to life through his letters precisely at the moment in the text when Mallory dies, a death that symbolically severs the last link between a living history of African American soldiers during World War II and the contemporary world (roughly

the 1990s) in which the novel is set. This embedded narrative is spun out via the medium of Mallory's unsent letters to Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti. In this subplot, we are taken back to World War II where Mallory is stationed in the Italian theater as a member of a segregated African American troop consigned to manual labor. Rather than a battle sequence, we instead glimpse the unauthorized sojourn Mallory and his friend Gus take when they bring two Italian girls to the beach for a sexual liaison that ends horrifically in a lynching by white soldiers. The soldiers kill Gus and the girls, while Mallory escapes in a scene reminiscent of a slave chase. In the novel, the entire incident is stricken from the American military's historical records in order to cover up the murders. Through a series of literary techniques including epistolary, flashback, and stream-of-consciousness narration, Wideman excavates the interior ruminations of one African American soldier's experience in Italy. Mallory's wartime memories inform his artistic and philosophical theories as a photographer, which in turn speak to Wideman's stylistic choices in *Two Cities*. In this way, Wideman engages in the literary archeology of imaginatively writing the consciousness of World War II African American soldiers.

What is immediately striking about Wideman's depiction of Mallory's experience in Italy is how entirely it departs from common representations of World War II. In fact, some readers misidentify the war as World War I. We are taken neither to scenes of battle nor to concentration camps, but to self-appointed respites from otherwise long days of ditch digging and manual labor. Wideman's snapshot of Mallory in World War II might be read as a counterpoint to the "Big Picture" (in the novel's terms) generally told of the war. Partly because of segregation and the marginalized role they were forced to play, the contributions of African American soldiers to the war effort are often overlooked. As Nat

Brandt explains in *Harlem at War: The Black Experience in World War II*, “By the spring of 1943 more than half a million blacks were in the army. But only 79,000 of them were overseas, and most of them were service troops repeating the experience of their fathers in World War I. They unloaded ships, built roads, drove supply convoys. Most commanders did not want blacks in combat roles” (111). Wideman highlights this unique aspect of African American military experience in the war. Unlike in many war stories, when the scene opens, Mallory and Gus are far from scenes of battle, instead doing the hard labor of digging ditches. As such, military service, limited as it is to “goddamn chain-gang pickaxes and shovels” (180) is for Gus “goddamn slave labor” (179). The deliberate blurring of the specifics of World War II suggest that, segregated and consigned to labor rather than fighting roles, African American experiences in World War II are more similar to their experiences in other wars than to the experience of white soldiers in WWII. The external enemy and circumstances of war may change, but African American soldiers continue to suffer the same indignities in a white military. Instead, Wideman’s handling of Mallory’s military service situates it firmly within African American traditions of the slave narrative and of lynching stories. The deliberate blurring of the specifics of war suggest that African American participation in war fundamentally differs from that of white Americans, and that African American experience in the military must be read within the continuum of African American history in the United States.

The more iconoclastic of the two friends, Gus, is highly suspicious of reformist motivations for African American soldiering, the idea that by participating in the U.S. military, African Americans will earn respect and equality at home. In contrast to the

campaign of the Double V that energized African American enlistment in World War II, the world-weary Gus opines, “They say we widening the road. For what. For who. You know why they got us out there digging holes” (180). Gus suggests African American soldiers are kept from combat roles because white America fears armed and trained African American men.

And indeed, this is the case for Gus and Mallory. Reminiscent of the controls placed on African American soldiers in *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, the racial conflict in the camps has led to the Army tightening control of African American soldiers, who find the atmosphere “tense,” with leadership locking up the soldiers’ rifles and imposing curfew, while rank and file white soldiers attack an African American soldier off-duty, severely wounding him. Gus and Mallory agree that inside the American military camp, “We got our own little war going here” (181).¹³ The American soldiers in *Two Cities* begin to engage in a dangerous game of attack and counterattack. White soldiers jump an African American soldier who dared to wander outside of the African American camp and challenge the military’s formal and informal segregation policies. Later, as Gus and Mallory remind each other, “Couple them hurt worse the next night,” after the African American soldiers retaliate in kind the following evening.

For Mallory and Gus, therefore, the war in Italy is less centrally a war between the Allied and Axis powers, between “good” and “evil”, but an imperial, racial war in which "all over the world ofays speak the same goddamn language when it comes to the negro menace" (180). In the present of the novel, as Mallory comes to terms with his "part in the killing and destruction," he also confesses that there are moments when "I

¹³ Berry and Blassigame note that violence against black soldiers in U.S. camps was typical, and that many black soldiers also fought back (323) in much the ways we see in Killens, Wideman, and other writers.

wish I could have done more to crush Europe's pride, rip the evil from Europe's heart, kill the beast that still pursues and traps and slaughters us here, as it did there, and does everywhere in the world we turn for peace" (179). In other words, for Mallory and Gus, the war is part of broader history rooted in "the beast" of European and American colonial imperialism. The sentiment strongly echoes the remarks of soldier characters in both *Killens* and *Véa*.

The buildup in racial tension and the unjust treatment of African American soldiers leads Gus to a reckless decision to play hooky and leave his Army duties for an overnight excursion to a wooded cabin with Mallory and two Italian women. While the goings-on are far from innocent—the four engage in a sexual orgy crossing racial and gender lines on a deserted beach, while Mallory is already a married man—in Wideman's prose the outing is saturated with a languid, easy beauty and gives a sense of sexual awakening. As if in leaving the peopled, military space with its attending rules and hierarchies, they are free to revel in an Arcadian space where the "bar girls in nylon" (182) mythically transform into "wild creatures" with "white, smooth-as-marble legs" (182).

Yet in spite of the beauty of the landscape and the apparent naturalness of their sexual games, the world is still too much with them. Gus is thrilled by the transgressive power of sexual access to white women's bodies, while Mallory regrets that urban entrapment and sexual modesty have prevented him and his wife from enjoying the same kinds of sexual freedom. Meanwhile, the reality that the women are in fact young girls who have barely come of age, live in scarcity, and trade sex for food and luxury items from better-resourced American soldiers, looms in the background. The bacchanalia

comes to a sudden end the next morning with the arrival of white American soldiers who violently reinforce the racial order by shooting down Gus and the two women. In a scene recalling a slave chase, Mallory is hunted by soldiers and manages to escape by covering his tracks in water. The Army covers up the action with a casual reference in a report that “one U.S. soldier KIA, one wounded, two civilians dead from enemy fire” (197). The multiple lynching and their subsequent erasure confirm Gus’s views that the war is one between white and Black, part of a history of racial subjugation and violence.

Where the voices of African American soldiers are silent, Wideman dreams up the memories of veterans and in doing so can be said to engage in his own literary archaeology of African American World War II soldiers. With the war occurring so deeply in the past of the novel, Wideman brings us into Mallory's experiences through the archival medium of letters, which in turn segue almost imperceptibly in and out of stream-of-consciousness and bluesy exposition that blurs the line between document and imagination. Mallory's letters surface in the novel only after he dies and his presence is no longer accessible to the two other main characters. Instead, the artifacts Mallory leaves behind, and his memory as carried by his unofficial heirs Kassima and Robert, remain as the sole bearer of his voice.

The letters that plunge us into Mallory's World War II experiences interrupt the narrative’s dominant mode of telling, in which the narrator moves effortlessly between the consciousnesses of the three main characters, to segue into an epistolary format. Mallory speaks boldly about his experiences and his artistic theories, and his thoughts as presented in letter form read as transparent and without artifice: “Dear Mr. Giacometti: You don’t know me. No reason you should or ever will. My name is Martin Mallory. I

live in the United States of America and speak only the English language” (81). While the letters at first begin with the formal address of “Dear Mr. Giacometti” and standardized grammar, they gradually become informal, with Mallory speaking to “Mr. G.,” in conversational style, and they eventually segue almost imperceptibly into unmediated dialogue of long-dead characters, as in this segment from Mallory’s deceased friend and fellow soldier, Gus:

Gina says there’s a place up in the hills, empty cabin on a lake only a couple hours’ hump from here. No way none these dumb GI Joes know nothing about it. Slip off early and rendezvous with the ladies. Get the fuck out of here for a day. Day and night if we lucky, know what I mean, green bean. (180)

The testimonial dialogue between Mallory and Gus spools out in slang-enriched, no-nonsense prose, spoken with each other and in front of no outside authority figure. The letters first allow us unmediated access to Mallory’s history. From there, Wideman breaks out of the frame of letter writing to slip into a vivid, direct voicing of history. As readers, we are invited to overhear the lost voices of African American soldiers—hopeful, critical, fearful, naïve. Like the letters left behind by the Mexican American soldier Jesse in *Let Their Spirits Dance*, Mallory’s meditative letters to Giacometti present the illusion of a character’s thoughts unmediated by a narrator or even the writer. The epistolary approach realizes Mallory’s earlier wish for the return of the deceased John Africa’s voice as he wonders, “If the memory creeps back, could the dead rise” (6), as if memories can provide an equivalent experience to communing with friends and family who have passed. Indeed, the introduction of Mallory’s letters surface his consciousness even though his death in the chronology of the plot should have already

silenced his voice. The letters, however, allow that voice to return, and are periodically interrupted and deepened by prose interludes. The interludes feature memories other characters have of Mallory as well as Mallory's own stream-of-consciousness flashbacks, including Mallory's experiences with Gus and women on the beach and their later pursuit by white American soldiers.

The letters, then, are artifacts of the African American soldier past that might linger in family heirlooms and personal memorabilia but do not enter into public memory and therefore are at risk of extinction. Decontextualized and presented without preamble, the letters represent a break in the flow of the narrative that alludes to the rupture of historical memory. They provide access to a history and to truth that would otherwise go unrecorded. In addition to their testimonial power, the letters play a mystical role of resurrecting the voices of the dead and ushering them into the contemporary world. In this sense, the voices of the dead carry a powerful weight, and excavating them becomes an almost mystical, religious experience that can bridge the gap between us and those forgotten. Through Mallory's letters and the memories carried by the living characters, making the "dead rise" is precisely what Wideman seeks to do in *Two Cities*.

In addition to providing access to an imagined world of African American soldiers, the letters serve a second purpose in the novel of plumbing Mallory's interior life and articulating his artistic theories, theories that I argue are realized by *Two Cities* itself.¹⁴ To Kassima and Robert, Mallory appears to be an elderly man who, while kind, is

¹⁴ Mallory's photography and theory of art has captured much of the attention of literary critics of *Two Cities*. The centrality and self-referentiality of Mallory's art is discussed variously by Tracie Church Guzzio in *All Stories Are True: History, Myth, and Trauma in the Work of John Edgar Wideman* (2011), Petra Dreiser in "Black, Not Blank: Photography's (Invisible) Archives in John Edgar Wideman's *Two Cities*" (2004), Tuire Valkeakari in "The Photographer-Flâneur as Facilitator of Urban Connectivity in John

bereft of family, history, or an interior life. He is an empty vessel, kind and fatherly, a lonely and sometimes ill man in need of care. Suddenly, his letter writing reveals him to be educated and articulate, as well as an artist with a deep interior life. In an interview, Wideman describes Mallory as "a guy who would be very familiar to anyone who's lived in an African American community...the man possessed of artistic instinct, artistic power, sensibility, intelligence, who never gets an opportunity to develop and exploit these qualities, these gifts" (Baker 264). Originally assigned to take photographs of corpses during the war as vocation, it's only when he discovers the surprising disconnection between what he observes in the field and what appears in the photograph that he begins to question representation and in so doing, becomes an artist. It is because of his service in Italy, we learn, that Mallory "decided to become a photographer...to find a way, an art to record the struggle, the give-and-take, the dance of light and dark I'd witnessed" (178-9). Mallory trades in his wartime rifle to "shoot" instead with his camera. However, Mallory's camera is still very much a weapon, and the now civilian Mallory a soldier of a different order. I argue that the two keys to Mallory's artistic theories—perspective and repetition—emerge out of memories of his wartime trauma, in which the cover-up of the lynching might be questioned by calling attention to the way representation gets constructed.

Mallory argues that "Those with the guns own the Big Picture" even though their "Big Picture only a snapshot" (100). In the war, Gus's murder at the hands of his comrades goes uninvestigated because, for those in positions of power in the military, the loss of a Black soldier was immaterial, and the lynching of a Black soldier by his white

Edgar Wideman's *Two Cities*" (2019), and Tyrone R. Simpson, II in "'And the Arc of His Witness Explained Nothing': Black Flanerie and Traumatic Photorealism in Wideman's *Two Cities*" (2006).

comrades a potential scandal that must be papered over. In his letters to Giacometti, Mallory calls attention to the artificiality of narration. For him, babies see the world most accurately as a series of disparate images, unconnected by story. When a baby closes its eyes, the world disappears; art should remind us that there is no inherent thread running through history and memory, but that we construct the meanings we find. While there is tremendous creativity in this, there is also danger, as Gus's fate attests. When an interpretation limited by both scope and perspective is taken as truth, it is a form of representational violence. For Mallory, one shot, one view, is not enough in this battle of representation.

In Mallory's letters to Giacometti, he suggests that truth can only be grasped by the accumulation of multiple pictures with variations of perspective and subject. One shot is not enough. In an interview, Wideman compares Mallory's alternative weapon, the camera, to a "hand grenade" that by creating alternative images of Black people is capable of blowing up "the notion of reality that people carry around in their heads." For Wideman, "that's very dangerous; that's very destructive...Real change is always violent" (Baker 265). But Mallory is not satisfied with merely providing alternative representations of African Americans; he looks to capture many different parts of his world from multiple vantage points until the widest and deepest picture is rendered. In effect, what Mallory is describing is a form of collage. Mallory muses over the effects of collage in Romare Bearden's art, whose "paintings are many paintings in one, overlapping, hiding and revealing each other" (117).

Mallory's artistic ideals shed light on the narrative techniques Wideman develops in *Two Cities*. *Two Cities* could be described as a literary collage in which briefly-

sketched scenes abut each other and in which character voices thread together without clear boundaries between them. But what defines the thickness of the representation is not just the fluid juxtaposition of many scenes, but the way those slight differences in the images—temporal, perspectival, or spatial—gradually reveal more. For instance, in almost Faulknerian style, Wideman rehearses over and over again the details of Kassima’s loss of family, until gradually a nuanced, many-layered picture emerges.

But while Wideman’s literary repetition elucidates the characters’ lives over the temporal expanse of the reader’s experience, and the images in Bearden’s collages overlay each other across the physical space of the canvas, Mallory’s photographic repetition occurs neither over temporal nor spatial planes. Mallory’s method consists of capturing multiple images on the same square of film, rolling back the film with each photograph taken, overlaying one image on top of the next. Mallory’s almost compulsive need to represent each scene he photographs in multiple ways comes at a cost. The final product of photographing over and over onto the same piece of film is a gray picture.

My work is taking pictures... When my photos were developed, I found little or no trace of what I thought I'd seen before I snapped the shutter...[you] said it's impossible to copy a world that never stops changing. Seeing is Freedom, you said. Art fakes and freezes seeing. Artists can't copy what they see, you said. They copy their memories or imitate another artist's copy of a memory. Even with a live model sitting in your studio, you said, you can't copy what you see. Your eyes must choose. Study either model or copy. Lose sight of one or the other. When you turn from the model to shape a portrait or clay figure, it's memory and habit,

not sight, that guide your hand... Should I stop asking my pictures to be mirrors.

Will they always be memories, wishes, dreams. Real and unreal. (81-82)

Truth is always elusive; the minute the artist tries to capture it, time and perspective have shifted. Chasing the unfolding of a changing world from a multiperspectival vantage point is not possible. Lines are blurred and eventually lost, leaving nothing but film that holds onto its own secrets. The irony of seeking truth only to end up with an even more opaque result showcases the struggles of the artist.

The problem of conflicting truths and erasure of perspective haunts the novel, and it is a central artistic concern that Mallory wrestles with, one he finds productive engagement in with the work of Giacometti. Like Morrison's concept of literary archaeology, Mallory sees Giacometti as "piecing something together out of nothing, for remembering what's lost" (83). Where the past is inaccessible, the artist must step in to recreate it, but we can only get so close. In *Two Cities*, Wideman carefully creates narrative distance from the consciousness of the soldier-characters to highlight the impossibility of fully recovering voices that have been historically lost. In continued play between authenticity and art, between immediacy and memory, Wideman mediates the representation of Mallory's consciousness through third-person narration and the perspectives of other characters to build a confluence of perspective that nevertheless fails to reach its destination. He considers himself a failed artist, with his photographs confined to boxes in his room and slated to be burned at his death, his artistic vision unrealized, and his work withheld from the community he aspires to capture. Mallory's is an art without audience, without critics. His work comes to life only during Kassima's

inspired funeral sermon, during which they stand not on their own, but rather as part of her performance art, visible testimony to one man's pain and social limitations.

Mallory's letters and the embedded war narrative they bring to life, while only one sliver of the overall novel, has outweighed importance in framing the book's themes of memory, trauma, and violence. Mallory's experiences in World War II recast the persistent historical violence against African Americans in urban landscapes that the novel addresses as part and parcel of a broader metaphorical war. Structurally, the novel reinforces Mallory's symbolic role as a living memory of the past. Mallory's point of view frames the novel, with the opening chapter a ghostly remembrance of his conversation with John Africa that centers around the nature of memory, while the postscript offers a glimpse of Mallory returning from the war in Italy to put down new roots in Pittsburgh, setting in motion a chain of events that will unfold in the contemporary timeline of the novel. The present time of the novel is set decades after World War II and for most of the characters is little more than a dim memory held by an older generation. Mallory, an elderly man, is the last connection the novel's other characters have to this past. In a novel oriented around the problems of memory and representation, Mallory bridges the contemporary world with the history that shaped it. The recovery of Mallory's lost memories in the letters, as well as with Kassima's reclamation and gifting of Mallory's photographs to the community during his funeral, is the driving narrative impetus that allows the other characters and the community to begin healing.

The Lure of Forgetting and the Resurgence of History

In the novel, characters are always forgetting the past or are at risk of forgetting the past, even when that past is most precious to them. Forgetting comes with danger: the

loss of memories that shape one's identity, the disappearance of people one loves, and the broader, historical forgettings that make of the past an insensible landscape whose disparate events cannot be connected.¹⁵ At the same time, forgetting is also a relief, a respite from pain and trauma, and a necessary strategy for survival. The novel wrestles with remembering and forgetting and juxtaposes our need to forget in order to move on with our parallel need to honor the dead and understand how our past shapes our identity and our present. When we forget, the novel suggests, we allow history to repeat itself disastrously.

Throughout the novel, characters struggle with memory and forgetting, and they strive to keep the memory of loved ones and events alive. Very little action happens in the present of the novel, which rather unfolds the development of a gradual union of the characters, haunted by their respective painful histories, as they grapple with and help each other come to terms with long memories. Robert Jones remembers his childhood home populated by the family members who lived in it; Kassima remembers raising her sons, since killed, and visiting her husband in prison; Mallory remembers his weighty conversations with John Africa and his time serving in the war.

Memory also eludes the characters or proves unreliable. Ironically for his role in the novel as preserver of the past, Mallory is himself unable to remember faces and people, and at times seems to suffer from a type of amnesia. Mallory, who abandons his wife in order to join the military, finds himself mentally cut off from his life before the war, unable even to remember the face of his wife or her name. He wonders, "How could

¹⁵ Criticism that situate *Two Cities* an African American and African cultural and linguistic traditions include Bernard Bell's *Bearing Witness to African American Literature: Validating and Valorizing Its Authority, Authenticity, and Agency* (2012) and Stephen Casmier's *African American Literature of the Twenty-First Century and the Black Arts: The Case of John Edgar Wideman* (2021).

he forget her so easily. Out of sight, out of mind. Was it a trick he taught himself. Or was everybody born that way and some people learned the trick of remembering and caring. Why did he forget. Forget what was real in his life. Forget to care” (85). In retrospect, Mallory struggles to understand whether the ability to forget people as soon as they disappear from his field of vision is a survival strategy that he learned in order to shield himself from hurt, or a deficiency he was born with. Whatever the case, it gives his life an air of unreality that allowed him to abandon his old identity for a new one as a soldier. Unable to connect with the past, Mallory's world is one continuous present.

The development of the relationship between the three main characters can in some ways be read as the characters' attempt to recover and make sense of their respective painful histories. For Mallory, one way this happens is by photographing and recounting his past to Kassima, who he often sees as a surrogate for his young wife, telling her that “I can't get over how much you remind me of her...Don't think I remember exactly what she looks like, to tell the truth ... you're like a snapshot of her young, a picture I never saw before, and I remember how her face made me feel” (105-6). Indeed, it is only through his developing relationship with Kassima and their late-night conversations, in which Mallory finally begins to unfold his personal history, that Mallory begins to remember not only what his wife looked like, but her name. Forgetting was necessary for him to free himself from a life in which he felt trapped, but in doing so, he sacrificed people he cared for and a piece of his identity. Cut off from community and time, it is a sacrifice from which Mallory, isolated and alone in the present of the novel, never entirely recovers.

If on a personal level one effect of forgetting is disconnection with family and community, on a collective level a more destructive consequence is the repetition of traumatic history. In order to make plain historical recurrences, *Two Cities* layers overlapping historical moments and seemingly disparate events thematically on top of each other: the history of slavery, lynching, military service, and the precariousness of survival of African American boys and men caught in a cycle of gang violence, police and government violence, and prison. The figure of Emmett Till serves as shorthand for the interconnectedness of these histories. Wideman's emblem for the expendability of and violence waged against young Black men, Till's brutal lynching and the subsequent publishing of the image of his mutilated body in *Jet* magazine reverberate through the text from the perspective of various characters.

The painful history Till represents threatens and inhibits the characters in their lives. In his letters to Giacometti, Mallory describes the image of Till's face as a Medusa's head, a weapon with the power to "freeze and kill":

it was Medusa I thought of years later when I saw a photograph of a black boy's face that turned me to stone. The boy's name was Emmett Till...His battered features and the witch's face blended in a nightmare that still haunts me. Medusa's story made me uneasy from the beginning. Nasty as she was, for some reason I felt sorry for her. Turns out the hero didn't go after her because he was trying to rid the world of evil, he just wanted to steal her evil power for himself. (118)

Mallory reverses the usual narrative of Medusa, humanizing her as the victim in the story, whose power was feared and exploited by Perseus for his own gain. Till's face in *Jet* magazine reminds Mallory of Medusa in that both were made monstrous by the brutality

of those in power and whose fate serve as visceral threats of violence that "freeze" and entrap those without power. In this manner, when Robert sees Till's face in *Jet* as a young man, he is paralyzed by the possibility that someone who looks like him could be so disfigured, by the possibility that this could be his fate too: "maybe that's why he was scared shitless first time he came across Till's dead face in *Jet* magazine. Black boys like Emmett Till, like him, could die" (222). The newfound knowledge immobilizes him with fear, prompting him to attempt to "avoid Till's crumbled face" (223), but despite his attempts at avoidance, he can't help but peek at his mutilated face, an image he remembers for the rest of his life.

Later, Robert reads the violence he sees enacted against African American boys and men through the lens of Till's death in a way that is less fearful and more outraged. He recalls Till when he reads about the death of a nine-year-old who dies in a shooting, and later at the novel's climax, he thinks of Till when he attends the funeral home and views the corpse of yet another murdered teenager (222-3). Likewise, it's the image of Till's face that Mallory sees at "this moment too, the black cabin, frightened whispering" (194), as white American soldiers pursue him after being caught sleeping with white Italian women. The lack of value accorded to Till's life is mirrored in Gus's lynching and in deaths caused by gang violence, including those of Kassima's sons. Elsewhere in the novel, we see it reflected in the MOVE bombing.

Like Wideman's novel *Philadelphia Fire, Two Cities* is steeped in the history of the MOVE organization, a group led by John Africa (Vincent Leaphart) that championed Black liberation, natural living, and animal rights. The city eventually classified the group as a terrorist organization. Amidst ongoing tension between the group, the police,

and the surrounding community, two harrowing events mark its history. In 1978, a shootout followed the police department's attempt to evict the group from their Powelton Village home, resulting in the death of an officer and the injury of several more people. Nine members of the organization were eventually sent to prison for the officer's death. In 1985, the city again targeted the organization and sought to arrest several of the members, sending almost five hundred police officers to the house. After a violent all-day standoff in which MOVE members shot at the police while the police lobbed tear gas canisters into the house and fired over ten thousand rounds of ammunition, the organization's members still had not surrendered. The government then dropped a military-grade satchel bomb on the roof that led to the deaths of eleven people, including John Africa and five children. The fire caused by the bombing spread throughout the previously evacuated neighborhood, leading to the destruction of over sixty homes.

The history of MOVE is deeply intertwined with the military subplot of the novel. As in *And Then We Heard the Thunder* as well as in other war novels by writers of color, Wideman draws parallels between the war abroad and the racial "war at home." In this case, one site of the war at home is waged in Philadelphia, with John Africa imagining the MOVE organization as a kind of military boot camp that trains African American soldiers for an unsanctioned war to be fought in the city of Philadelphia as well as in the public mind: "All us in the Movement trains hard...doing our yoga and hand-to-hand combat. We getting ready for the struggle. Ready for whatever it takes" (10). On the one hand, John Africa's rhetoric, with its vocabulary of "combat," "struggle," and doing "whatever it takes" suggests a militant approach to protest that the members' lives are now dedicated to. At the same time, practicing yoga can hardly be understood as military

training, and hand-to-hand combat is not the kind of fighting that would present a real danger to government forces. Wideman's subtle allusions to the MOVE organization's ultimately negligible resources underscores the enormous gap in power between the government and groups like this one. The disparity means that the government's military tactics of shoot-outs and bombings are wildly disproportionate to the threat, a discrepancy that can be explained only with reference to the race of MOVE's membership.

Nevertheless, John Africa's goals in fighting this "war," are not necessarily to win through force, but rather, through optics, to force a public reckoning with structural racism that he understands to already be a war on African American communities, one that often goes under the radar because its tactics are not always those of brute force. In Africa's view, he "Just got to let people know a war's on...System wants invisible war...So you don't make no progress, so you stay up in each other's faces fussing and doping and shooting and stealing and crying the blues and letting your kids kill each other" (218). Here, Africa describes everyday life as a war that happens invisibly against an imperceptible enemy, whose methods are to turn African Americans against each other and to use poverty and drugs to keep African Americans from realizing full citizenship. In both cases, Black people are struck down by white armies for acts of nonviolent transgression, and in both cases the injustice is made invisible. To underline the similarities between the bombing of MOVE and war, Mallory summarizes the story of the Gus's lynching with an impromptu tune: "*All dead in It-a-ly. All dead on O-sage-Ave. Same dying. Same lies to cover it up*" (197). Part of what *Two Cities* does is make this invisible war visible.

This slow layering, Wideman's careful articulations of the repetitions in slavery, segregation, military service, lynching, and gang violence gradually take on the shape of a metaphor of a war on African American communities. Anchoring this war metaphor is Mallory's military service; framing it are Mallory's mystical conversations with the memories of John Africa and Gus at the opening and close of the novel. Mallory's failed experiments with repetition in photography suggest the more troubling aspects of historical repetition that lie at the heart of *Two Cities*. The street violence that claims Kassima's husband and sons and gorges on the lives of young men in Pittsburgh is metaphorically understood as a perverse war in which potential soldiers who might fight in Africa's "invisible war" are instead allowed to murder each other. When Mallory *shoots* these soldiers, taking pictures of young gang members in the Post Office, he challenges them:

You are our soldiers, our blue warriors, aren't you. Where were you when we needed you. When the police army attacked John Africa and his people, when they slaughtered women and children and burned down our neighborhood. We needed you then. Where were you. (99)

Mallory sees these gang members not as violent criminals, but as young soldiers shirking their duty to defend their community. Mallory, however, is also berating himself and his choice of reform rather than confrontation, his own decision to abandon his family to take up arms for the United States, and his fear of engaging the community with his art.

In Memoriam

The question of responsibility for such violence runs through the novel and weighs heavy on all its characters. Like the epigraph in Stella Pope Duarte's *Let Their*

Spirits Dance, Two Cities's inscription declares the novel to be a memorial from the very beginning:

OMAR WIDEMAN

1971-1992

—

In Memoriam

We didn't try hard enough.

Wideman dedicates the novel to the memory of his deceased nephew, Omar Massey-Wideman, a young man who was brutally executed in his home at the age of twenty-one.

The single line inscription brackets the many possible social and individual causes of the tragedy of what happened in Omar Wideman's life and instead offers a simple *mea culpa*: "we didn't try hard enough." Rather than an admission of Wideman's personal sense of guilt over the tragedy, he speaks on behalf of an ambiguous "we." Who is the "we" referenced in the memorial? It may refer to Wideman's family and indicate a failure on their part to provide his nephew with whatever personal help he may have needed to extricate himself from the situation he was in. Or, it may speak more broadly to a larger "we," implicating the reader right from the start and inviting us to ask ourselves how we have all allowed such violence against African American men to persist.

The words recall the moral struggles of Robert when he faces the coffin of the African American teenager killed by a rival gang. Despite the fact that Robert himself had never met or had any relationship with the boy, he holds himself accountable for his death: "Couldn't admit most of the time because in his heart he knew he was allowing the killing to happen. Doing nothing to stop it. Party to the slaughter. Victim. Her sons. His.

He was the one” (223). Robert, of course, has nothing to do with the murder or the subsequent desecration of the boy's body, nor can he be blamed for the structural and historical inequities that led to the crisis in the first place. And yet, he shares in the self-blame underlying Wideman’s inscription: *he didn't try hard enough*.

What those five words mean will be plumbed and illuminated in the pages of the novel. Layered beneath the image of the dead boy in the coffin is a long series of dead and discarded African-American male lives that the novel addresses: runaway slaves, soldiers, political organizers, gang members, children, bystanders. With each image Wideman evokes, he builds a case for the parallels between them and situate them within a long history of dehumanization and precariousness. As Mallory says, “Everything connects; nothing connects” (6). In the emerging collage reminiscent of Mallory’s photographic technique, the image of Till and other slaughtered African American young men gets repeated until what begins as pictures of unconnected tragedies takes on the weight of entrenched social persecution. Thinking of Till, Robert demands to know, “Shouldn't somebody, him, every soul in Homewood be standing beside the casket in Room A, shouting what she [Emmett Till’s mother] shouted” (223). To fail to identify the commonalities running through the tragedies is to fail to see the connective tissue of history and to be helpless before it, to not try hard enough. Historical remembering, while it has the potential to be immobilizing, can also make sense of contemporary events and be a rallying cry in the fight for justice.

In a sense, *Two Cities* is a novel about mourning. The characters are consumed by and indeed, living within, their memories of their past. Kassima finds herself unable to enter into new relationships of love as she struggles with the loss of her sons and

husband, but also comes to terms with the ways they mistreated her despite her unconditional love for them. The dead come to life through these memories. Mallory walks through Philadelphia streets with John Africa in what are in reality flashbacks, but read like ghost scenes in which he mourns the disposability of Black lives.

It is fitting, then, that the final scenes of the novel take place at a funeral, where the characters mourn Mallory's death, as well as all those who died in their own pasts, and where Kassima finally finds her voice in an ecstatic impromptu sermon after gang members desecrate the coffins of both the murdered boy and Mallory by dumping them in the street. Because grief cannot be adequately conveyed in words, we are not given the text of Kassima's sermon. Not even Kassima has access to it in her memory: "Guess I probably did preach...Don't remember much of what I said but remember once I got started I couldn't stop" (239). Kassima's inability to remember also mark the sermon as an ecstatic one in which she temporarily loses herself and becomes a vehicle for a divine message. At the same time, her words are rooted in her own history and experience, preaching "from my anger. My hurt. My love for those boys. For him and Mr. Mallory and I don't know what else" (239). In this climactic moment, grief reveals itself to always be tied to rage but also as a prerequisite for change. Judith Butler suggests that although "Many people think that grief is privatizing," grief has a role in building "political community," as we see here (22). In fact, when applied to *Two Cities*, Butler's meditations on grief illuminate the novel in interesting ways. Where "certain human lives are more grievable than others," Butler argues that the obituary—or in the case of *Two Cities*, the funeral service—provides a moment of humanization of the dead and serves as a public performance of grief that is enabled by and builds the abstract concept of the

nation: “The obituary functions as the instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed. It is the means by which a life becomes, or fails to become, a publicly grievable life, an icon for national self-recognition, the means by which a life becomes noteworthy. As a result, we have to consider the obituary as an act of nation-building” (34). We might say that *Two Cities* itself is a kind of obituary, first for Wideman’s nephew, and then more broadly for all of the African American lives that have been deemed less grievable and not worthy of entering into history or building the nation. *Two Cities*, in this conception, is nation-building work, and like the other novels I’ve discussed in this dissertation, has a stake in the project of rebuilding the national imaginary.

Where Mallory feels that he falls short of elucidating the past and excavating truth, Wideman succeeds. The means to “record the struggle, the give-and-take, the dance of light and dark” (179) that Mallory aspires to capture is in fact what Wideman so brilliantly achieves in *Two Cities*. Wideman carefully reveals the war on John Africa, Kassima’s family, and African American youth in Pittsburgh while never losing sight of reconciliation and love. Wideman “shoots” his own soldiers, imaginatively conjuring the lost voices of African Americans in World War II, even while calling attention to their ghostly absence from mainstream history. In skillfully layering Mallory’s wartime experience with references to slave labor, slave chases, and lynching, Wideman situates African American military experience within an African American historical and interpretive framework. Insofar as “those with the guns own the Big Picture,” the novel suggests that shooting photography, and creating art more generally, is part of a metaphorical “battle” of representation that is waged not outside of war but alongside it.

CONCLUSION

The words of an unnamed African American soldier from Oswald Rivera's 1990 novel *Fire and Rain* speak to a growing discontentment with the unkept promise of respect and recognition that military service would bring to soldiers of color.

“We don't wanna escape,” he said. “We can't, not even if we try. There's a million Ps and the whole MarDiv waitin' out there beyond the gate. We couldn't get away. But we can burn this place—burn it down till it's dust...That's the only thing we can do, man. That's all we got.” (Rivera 145)

For this African American soldier, a prisoner in the Da Nang military jail, escape is not possible; only protest, even if doomed to fail, can secure their self-respect and a measure of justice. The words come after white guards (MPs) beat an African American soldier to death for complaining about the food. The prison is hit by enemy rockets at the same moment, but while the white prisoners initially use the opportunity to escape, the African American soldiers leverage the mayhem to launch an internal rebellion against the white guards.

While the American military might serve as a route to inclusion in the citizen imaginary, the military provides the characters with the primary grammar for understanding resistance. Narrated from the perspective of Lieutenant Dawson, a white, noncommissioned officer imprisoned for killing his superior, as in many African American and Latinx novels, *Fire and Rain* depicts a war within a war: a fictionalization of the 1968 Da Nang prison race rebellion in which tenuous alliances based on mutual understanding and shared oppression ultimately transcend racial fault lines.

As Dawson navigates the world of the brig, New York Puerto Rican soldier Chi-Chi Hernandez assumes the role of brother, moral guide, and exemplar. Hernandez

introduces Dawson (and possibly the reader) to an alternative interpretation of the social relations in the prison. Dawson initially and naively believes in the guards' rhetoric that individual good behavior and initiative will result in better treatment, but is unable to understand the way the prison's virulent structural racism and power dynamics undermine this naive view, especially for prisoners of color. The growing refusal of the African American prisoners, informed in part by Black Nationalist sentiment, to further tolerate this abuse leads to the armed uprising. The developing pan-ethnic alliance of a once radically segregated group of prisoners is powerfully represented through Dawson's transitional use from the pronoun "I" to "we" to position himself from individual to a member of a composite resistance of white, Puerto Rican, and Black soldiers. Service in the military has the unexpected effect of dislodging the characters' conception of where their loyalties lie and becomes an unlikely site of pan-ethnic resistance to U.S. imperialism, with the Vietnamese anti-colonial war providing the catalyst, the training ground, and the inspiration for their struggles. At such moments of transformation, the texts shift from exploring the effects of the military on the characters to articulating their agency in determining alternative readings of American force.

The events in *Fire and Rain* echo the themes of the ill-fated rebellion launched by John Oliver Killens's soldiers in Australia. It throws into relief a persistent theme in African American and Latinx war literature that the "enemy" is twofold: both the wartime adversary as well as the spectre of racism and the white military majority the soldiers face internally. The fissure opens space for partnerships across racial and ethnic groups (as here in *Fire and Rain* between white, African American, and Latinx

imprisoned soldiers) and translational alliances, as well as a self-determination of the soldiers to fight for equal status at home.

While serving in the military leads the characters to a more critical assessment of American neocolonial practices and gives them a greater sense of self-determination, the characters are portrayed as trapped to the extent to which they continue to operate under a crude oppositional politics fostered by military ways of thinking. In a sense, the text asks to what degree a complex, just politics can emerge from militaristic conceptions of ally and enemy and from liberation through violence. In *Fire and Rain*, Rivera departs from ethnic nationalist narratives to articulate a citizen/colonial who both embodies the transfigured nation born of colonial conquest and shapes resistive identities that call into question the limits of nationalistic and militaristic conceptualizations of resistance.

The struggles depicted in *Fire and Rain* are recurring ones in African American and Latinx war literature, but the specificities of military service for soldiers of color often goes unremarked. This dissertation has sought to fill gaps in the criticism of American war literature that remains largely focused on the works of white, often male, writers. I have striven to accomplish this in two ways. One, I give close attention to three understudied twentieth-century novels—John Oliver Killen’s *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, Alfredo Vea’s *Gods Go Begging*, and John Edgar Wideman’s *Two Cities*—that richly explore themes of war and are each outstanding works in American literature that merit ongoing reading, analysis, and celebration. By situating these works within a flowering of representations of soldiering that ranges from the broken veterans of Toni Morrison’s *Sula* to the conflicted soldiers of Daniel Cano’s *Shifting Loyalties* to the self-proclaimed soldiers of Aztlán in Oscar Zeta Acosta’s *The Revolt of the Cockroach*

People, I articulate a tradition of twentieth-century African American and Latinx war literature in which characters wrestle with the pursuit of citizenship both legal and imaginative, establish transnational alliances, and seek the rewards of and suffer from the limitations of militaristic forms of masculinity.

Secondly, I rethink conventionally recognized characteristics of war literature—its theme of innocence ruptured, its criticalness of war, and the priority of the authentic foot soldier experience—and I ask how conventional understandings of war literature might end up excluding novels that do not readily adhere to those contours. Shifting the frame, I identified common threads that infuse African American and Latinx literature of war, notably the complexities of citizenship and conflicting allegiances, military wars as metaphor for racial and ethnic strife, and a self-referential concern with memory and forgetting in the face of absent public recognition. To frame these struggles, I identify a concept of the citizen imaginary that has been traditionally coded as white, masculine, and property owning, and who carries certain responsibilities and enjoys certain rights and privileges. Even as the legal definition of the American citizen expands through civil rights movements, activism, and legal challenges, the cultural assumptions of citizenship are thornier and traditional assumptions remain entrenched. African American and Latinx soldiers seek entry into the citizen imaginary through one of its most unimpeachable routes: military service with the inherent possibility of the ultimate sacrifice that it holds. Soldiering becomes a kind of performance of American masculinity recognized and sanctioned by the state that allows those who wear the uniform to inhabit the space of the citizen.

Despite such hopes, the reality the characters in these novels face proves more complicated. Killens's Solly Saunders finds himself in a racially segregated unit, endures beatings from white soldiers, and is given dangerous assignments, circumstances that reflect those of characters in other novels as well as reverberate throughout military history. Véa's soldiers return disillusioned and traumatized from Vietnam to find a parallel war claiming lives and souls in their communities, and the promises of masculinity won through violent glory bankrupt. Wideman's Martin Mallory is cast out of the military after his white, fellow soldiers murder his friend and nearly him for sleeping with white women. In all three of these novels, the military betrays the soldier characters, treating them at best as expendable labor and at worst as an internal enemy to be silenced or destroyed. Yet the outcome of this disillusionment is not despair. Instead, the characters in these novels identify new allies, dream up utopic transnational futures, and reject violent masculinities in favor of masculinities that center brotherhood, pride born out of community uplift, and love.

The scope of this project has necessarily been limited, but there are myriad possibilities for widening the lane I have traveled here. The concerns of African American and Latinx writers of war are mirrored in and also differ from writers coming from Asian American, Arab American, and Native American backgrounds, each with their own histories of racism, settler colonialism, American neo-imperialism, and wars of displacement. Future research could deepen exploration of gender and the representations of and works by women and gender nonconforming people.

Indeed, more work is still needed. In 2020, Black soldiers continue to be overrepresented in the military (12.1% in the general population vs. 17.2% in the

military), even while their numbers shrink in the officer ranks (9%) (U.S. Department of Defense 2020 Demographics Report). At the same time, Latinx soldiers are one of the fastest growing groups in the military (Barroso). While scholarly treatment of literature by or about soldiers of color is starting to open up,¹⁶ the popular perception of war literature even after 9/11 continues to hew to the canonical twentieth-century conception of war literature as articulated in this dissertation: novels emerging from the authenticized perspective of the foot soldier who has lost his innocence through battle and goes on to present a critique of war, with white, male soldiers taking center stage. Continuing in this tradition, the novels about the war in Iraq and Afghanistan featured by the eminent *New York Times* book reviewer Michiko Kakutani in “A Reading List of Modern War Stories” (2014) and by Ryan Bubalo in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*’s review essay “Danger Close: The Iraq War in American Fiction” (2013) are mainly eye-witness and protest novels written by white, male soldier-authors.

Where recognition has been slow to come, African American and Latinx war literature has carved out a site of memory, to use the title of Toni Morrison’s seminal essay (which itself recalls Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieu de mémoire*), an imaginative space that brings into being the consciousness of soldiers of color. At its most basic, African American and Latinx literature that represents the presence of soldiers of color in the military demands recognition of that service, which if taken seriously necessarily entails a commitment to a reimagining of the United States as inclusive in more than just

¹⁶ Recent studies of general American war literature have begun to include discussion of race and ethnicity or works by writers of color, including Roy Scranton’s *Total Mobilization: World War II and American Literature* (2019), Keith Gandal’s *War Isn’t the Only Hell: A New Reading of World War I American Literature* (2018), and Brenda M. Boyle’s *The Vietnam War: Topics in Contemporary North American Literature* (2015).

name. It means recognizing the history of African American and Latinx peoples not just as a footnote to the (white) American story, but as constitutive of a revised American story. In this sense, literary representations of soldiers of color are always and necessarily an intervention to reshape the citizen imaginary and reimagine what the American nation is and could become.

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