

JOSEPH DARDA

The Ethnicization of Veteran America:
Larry Heinemann, Toni Morrison, and
Military Whiteness after Vietnam

To think about (and wrestle with) the full implications of my situation leads me to consider what happens when other writers work in a highly and historically racialized society. For them, as for me, imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, *becoming*.

Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*

To the astonishment of book critics, in November 1987, Larry Heinemann's Vietnam War novel *Paco's Story* (1986) won the National Book Award for Fiction over Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). When Heinemann's name was announced during the black-tie event at Manhattan's Pierre Hotel, the audience of authors, editors, and booksellers was silent at first, caught off-guard by the decision. Among the nominees, Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* (1986) had been considered the only real contender to *Beloved*. Morrison had invited three tables of friends and associates, and they, like the rest of the ballroom, were shocked to hear this unfamiliar name. Heinemann, a middle-aged, second-time novelist from Chicago, took the stage and stated the obvious: "This is an interesting surprise" (qtd. in McDowell).

Heinemann's win was met with immediate criticism as another instance of the book industry serving the interests and reinforcing the status of the white male author. Two months later, forty-eight

This essay is indebted to conversations with Maria Bo, Mai-Linh Hong, Jang Huh, Mar-iam Lam, Olivia Moy, Cathy Schlund-Vials, Maria Seger, Sunny Yang, and James Zeigler.

black writers signed a statement in *The New York Times Book Review* that celebrated Morrison's writing and condemned the "oversight and harmful whimsy" that had denied her "the keystone honors of the National Book Award or the Pulitzer Prize." The statement ran alongside a letter from June Jordan and Houston Baker in which they noted that James Baldwin, who had died weeks earlier, had likewise never received these "keystones" and lamented that they could not feel confident that "such national neglect will not occur again, and then again" ("Black Writers"). Though James Davison Hunter would not coin the term *culture wars* for another four years, that is the framework in which the 1987 National Book Award for Fiction is now understood, as having less to do with Morrison's and Heinemann's novels than with the New Right's assault on an alleged "racial favoritism" in the arts.

James English has offered an alternative account of Heinemann's win, casting it within a long-standing conflict among artists, critics, and the administrators of cultural awards. English sees awards as agents of what he calls "capital intraconversion," through which cultural value is "cashed in" for economic fortunes and economic fortunes are exchanged for cultural recognition (10). He argues that institutions such as the Academy Awards and the Pulitzer Prizes are among the most effective instruments for determining the rates of exchange between these two fields—and regulating who can and cannot exchange what. His observations allow us to see that when critics argue that awards are meaningless, and below art, they reinforce the belief that cultural valuation has no relation to something as crude as dollars and cents. But it does, as Jordan and Baker refused to ignore in their letter. They and their co-signees, as English writes, acknowledged "the prize for what it is—a thoroughly social, economic, and (racist) political instrument—and [they credited] it with real, even potentially decisive power in determining long-term literary valuations" (243).¹ For violating the established decorum of

1. The year Heinemann's novel won the National Book Award was a turbulent one for the organization, as English recounts (149–52). In 1980, the National Book Awards rebranded itself as the American Book Awards, added more than a dozen new, publisher-friendly categories, and held an Oscars-like television awards show. Condemned by book critics and boycotted by authors, the American Book Awards did not last long, and in 1987, the organization returned to its original name and format. Some wondered whether

the cultural award, Jordan and Baker were criticized for contributing to what Christopher Hitchens dismissed as a wider “thirst for trophies” that he and others saw as degrading the arts. These criticisms escalated when *Beloved* did win the Pulitzer Prize later that year.² The force with which Morrison’s defenders celebrated her work and the anger that their directness roused suggests the award’s place as a signal event in a shifting literary market—and in the nation’s evolving and tangled understanding of race in the post-civil rights era.³

Left out of the conversation surrounding the 1987 National Book Awards is Heinemann’s novel itself, which, in contrast to Morrison’s *Beloved*, has received limited critical attention. *Paco’s Story* has gone unexamined in accounts of the event, outside of being characterized as an antiwar novel by a white male author who had served in the Vietnam War. I wish to consider Heinemann’s novel as something more than a standard-fare, white-authored text that has endured as a footnote to one of the most read and admired American novels of the last thirty years. Indeed, it is worth heeding Morrison’s advice (in *Playing in the Dark* [1992]) to scrutinize the

the committee felt that they had to select a less “commercial” novel than Morrison’s *Beloved*, which was then on the best-seller list (Fehrman).

2. An editorial in the conservative magazine *New Criterion*, titled “Affirmative-Action Book Prizes,” characterized Jordan and Baker’s letter as a “successful campaign by a group of black writers to secure the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for fiction” for Morrison. Book awards had, it argued, “been so completely politicized that they have been rendered meaningless” (1). Hitchens dismissed the letter as a demand for Morrison to “be upgraded to prizewinner seating.” And Carol Iannone, writing in *Commentary*, bemoaned that such honors had become “less a recognition of literary achievement than some official act of reparation” (51).

3. From William Styron’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) to the #OscarsSoWhite Twitter hashtag in 2015 and 2016, cultural awards have often attracted attention as a site of contested racial politics. Jennifer Ann Ho, for example, has examined the Association for Asian American Studies’ decision to honor *Buffalo Boy and Geronimo*, by white author James Janko, as the best work of Asian American fiction from 2006. While she acknowledges that critics must be attentive to issues of power in such cross-racial “transgressive texts” as Janko’s “Asian American” novel, Ho argues that “opening up Asian American literature and literary study to racially ambiguous works, to transgressive texts, helps to decouple the body of the author from the body of knowledge found in the literary work and to legitimate and make legible the Asian American subject matter that pushes beyond questions of authenticity or identity politics” (141).

distinct—and, I argue, new—form of whiteness embodied by Heinemann's novel, a form constructed in relation to blackness and Asianness in the post-civil rights, post-Vietnam War era.⁴ English is right to distinguish the cultural award as a social, economic, and potentially racist political instrument. In the case of Heinemann's novel, the National Book Award was used to confer cultural value not to just any white-authored text but to an emerging genre of American veteran writing about the war in Southeast Asia.

Paco's Story reflects a broader cultural transformation in the nation's understanding of the Vietnam War during the late 1970s and through the 1980s, when images of Southeast Asian suffering and death—Eddie Adams's *Saigon Execution* (1968), Ronald Haeberle's photographs of the My Lai massacre (1968), Nick Ut's *Napalm Girl* (1972)—were, as Sylvia Chong has observed, subsumed by the figure of the wounded white Vietnam veteran (27). This transformation was achieved in part through the reconfiguration of American veteran writing as a genre that assumes the form of ethnic writing by likening the challenges of military service to the injuries of racial violence. Heinemann's novel reflects a new white racial project that I term *military whiteness*, in which writers, filmmakers, and artists render white enlisted men as, at once, deracinated universals and minoritized outsiders, or "veteran Americans." The American veteran is figured as the victim of his own acts of military violence, as both victimizer and victimized in a circular account of the war. This racial project grew out of the neoconservative movement, which construed race as a kind of ethnicity—as a cultural but not structural formation—and advocated for an individualist and nonredistributive racial agenda that it characterized as color blindness. Grounded in racial neoconservatism, military whiteness has allowed the white veteran to inhabit a hegemonic, deracinated whiteness while also drawing on and subsuming the accounts of American soldiers of color and Southeast Asians. This form of whiteness has shaped the nation's memory of the Vietnam War, its

4. In Morrison's book of literary criticism, she shows how an unacknowledged "Africanist presence" (6) has structured white authors' writing, their sense of Americanness, and the meaning of whiteness in American culture (9). Extending Morrison's investigation, this essay examines how literary whiteness is constituted through cross-racial encounters that include but are not limited to black/white racial knowledge.

uncritical reverence for its veterans, and its understanding of working-class whiteness in an age of limited state antiracism.

This essay theorizes military whiteness as a white racial project that emerged as an answer to the United States' military defeat in Southeast Asia and the mainstreaming of ethnic literatures in the American literary market. While scholars including Chadwick Allen, Jonathan Alba Cutler, and Daryl J. Maeda have documented how the antiwar movement and the service of American soldiers of color in Vietnam contributed to the formation of new transnational, panethnic, and pantribal bodies of American Indian, Chicana/o, Latina/o, and Asian American literatures, less attention has been given to how the war and the rise of ethnic writing remade literary whiteness in the late twentieth century, as white authors contended with a literary market that no longer assumed that American literature meant books by white men.

Paco's Story demonstrates how white writers addressed and contained emergent ethnic literatures by associating the white soldier's sense of defeat in Vietnam with racial disenfranchisement in a cultural transformation that I call *the ethnicization of veteran America*. This transformation has endured in twenty-first-century fiction and film about the counterterror wars. From novels such as Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds* (2012), Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2014), and Matt Gallagher's *Youngblood* (2016) to films such as *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Lone Survivor* (2013), and *American Sniper* (2014), writers and filmmakers have continued to imagine the white American soldier as universal and marginal, deracinated and racialized. The new veteran-American writer, like Heinemann before him, conceives of the Asian body as a signifier of his own suffering and a site of national self-reckoning. To understand military whiteness after Vietnam, I argue, one must extend what Morrison theorized as American literature's "Africanist presence" (*Playing* 6) to consider how other cross-racial encounters have made and remade literary whiteness.

Military Whiteness after Vietnam

Americans' understanding of and interest in the Vietnam War shifted in the fifteen years following its end. As late as 1977, in his best-selling memoir *Dispatches*, Michael Herr could argue that the

Vietnam War was too “awkward” for Hollywood. “If people don’t even want to hear about it,” he wrote, “you know they’re not going to pay money to sit there in the dark and have it brought up” (188). The next decade would suggest otherwise, as dozens of Vietnam War films were released to critical acclaim and box-office success. Herr himself would contribute to Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and cowrite Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, built in 1982, embodied the evolving cultural knowledge of the war, with the nation turning its attention from the political culture that authorized it to the American soldiers who lost their lives in combat. The memorial, which lists the names of all 58,307 American soldiers who died between 1959 and 1975, encouraged visitors to see Vietnam as a site of American (rather than Vietnamese) loss that necessitated intranational healing. This understanding would frame much of the decade’s fiction and film about the Vietnam War, which was dramatized as fought *between* Americans in a struggle for national self-knowledge. This historical revision is distilled in the words of Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen), the narrator of Oliver Stone’s film *Platoon* (1986), when he reflects at the end of his tour, “we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves—and the enemy was in us.” The war was internalized by the nation through the figure of the white veteran, whose rehabilitation was imagined as analogous to the rehabilitation of the nation itself.⁵

This rewriting of the Vietnam War was motivated in part by an uneasiness surrounding white masculinity in the late twentieth century. When Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, real wages had stagnated, American manufacturing was in decline, and the institutional resources available to working-class Americans were vanishing. This constellation of economic changes resulted in a heightened sense of vulnerability among working-class white men, whose fathers had achieved a degree of financial security that now seemed inaccessible to their sons. Reagan harnessed this sense of vulnerability by casting the nation’s economic turmoil as a crisis of white masculinity, in which the value of white male identity had

5. For a detailed account of how this historical revision was achieved through Hollywood films, memorial culture, and television coverage of the Gulf War, see Sturken.

been eroded by the civil rights, antiwar, and feminist movements. According to Reagan and his allies, the worsening conditions of the working class could not be blamed on big business and lawmakers but rather on those who had challenged the normative ideals—whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, patriarchy—of American society. That message, George Lipsitz writes, enabled Reagan to build a cross-class “countersubversive coalition” invested in “defending” white masculinity from its leftist and liberal enemies (73). This defense of whiteness came to be imagined through fiction and film about the military defeat in Vietnam, which, in Reagan’s view, had resulted from the nation’s failure to unite behind its men in “a war our government [was] afraid to let them win” (“Address”). The Vietnam War came to stand for all that was wrong with the racial reforms of the civil rights era and thus became a critical site at which racial knowledge was renegotiated at the end of the twentieth century.

But this reinvestment in whiteness took a curious form, as writing about the war fetishized not achievement but defeat. From Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter* (1978), to Heinemann’s novel, to Brian De Palma’s *Casualties of War* (1989), Southeast Asia emerged as a venue of American trauma and loss, where boys did not “become men” so much as they became alienated from the national fantasies on which they had been raised. Chong has argued that the United States’ military defeat in Vietnam introduced a different order of fantasy, wherein “to fantasize is not simply to construct a narrative that fulfills the desires of the fantasizing subject; it is to expose the essential passivity of that subject to a history of violence that becomes the condition for his or her desires” (134). This understanding of fantasy—which Chong borrows from Jean Laplanche—is not one of mastery but of subjection to the reenactment of the nation’s defeat through the transference of suffering from the Asian body to the white American body. Given the success of these novels and films, it is worth asking why Americans were so eager to fantasize defeat. Why, in Herr’s words, were Americans willing “to pay money to sit there in the dark and have it brought up,” to restage the war as an alienating loss?

This fantasy of defeat was informed by the neoconservative movement, which advanced one of the most influential, if confused,

racial projects of the post-civil rights era.⁶ Neoconservatism traces its origins to a cohort of anticommunist liberal intellectuals, including Norman Podhoretz and Irving Kristol, who disdained the more radical successors to the civil rights movement and clung to the earlier ideal of integration as the solution to racial injustice. They saw it as the state's obligation to ensure, in neoconservative sociologist Nathan Glazer's words, "equal opportunity," rather than "statistical representation," and warned of a "white ethnic backlash" to laws meant to address structural racial disenfranchisement and obstacles to wealth accumulation (168–69). Their understanding of race drew on the egalitarian ethos of the civil rights movement while seeking to maintain the existing racial order by characterizing all redistributive initiatives as a form of "reverse racism" or "racial preference." They advocated a color blindness that was, as Howard Winant observes, "actually deeply race-conscious" and "far more subtle, far more politically effective, than open or coded appeals to white racial fears" ("White Racial Projects" 103). Color blindness allowed neoconservatives to renounce affirmative action as anti-integrationist—using the rhetoric of the civil rights movement to roll back some of its most significant gains—but it also gave white Americans reason to feel aggrieved by state antiracism, to believe that they were being discriminated against on the basis of their *white* skin.

When Reagan was elected, racial neoconservatism moved from the margins to the mainstream. While Reagan avoided addressing race in overt terms, when he did, he almost never failed to invoke (and revise) Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of, as Reagan reimagined it, "a truly color-blind America where all people are judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin" ("Message"). To acknowledge race was not, for Reagan and his allies, to

6. While racial neoconservatism emerged during the 1970s and achieved a hegemonic status during the 1980s, it built on a long tradition of valuing whiteness by devaluing blackness. W. E. B. Du Bois was the first to observe that, following the Civil War and the formal enfranchisement of black men, the basis for one's civil rights shifted from owning land to being white. While being paid low wages, white laborers received what Du Bois called "a sort of public or psychological wage" that drove a wedge between the black and white working classes (700). For more on the relation of class, labor, and the formation of modern white racial consciousness, see Harris and Roediger.

discriminate against black Americans but rather against white men. It was to threaten the status of white men, who were viewed by neoconservatives as the foremost victims of “race thinking.” This racial project allowed white Americans to continue to benefit from the organization of the racial state while also seeking to control the discourse of institutional discrimination. Imagining white men as victims in the post-civil rights era was achieved through the figure of the white Vietnam War veteran, who, in defeat, enabled the nation to disavow its long history of racial violence by reclaiming the status of besieged underdog.

Military whiteness is the embodiment of racial neoconservatism. Evident in a wide range of cultural forms—from fiction and film to news media and political speeches—it is the projection of racial anxieties onto the traumatized body of the white Vietnam veteran as a symbol of the alleged cultural devaluation of whiteness. Military whiteness, as a racial project, is an articulated effort to bind racial signification to social structures. It is a means of distributing resources along racial lines by guiding how institutions, organizations, and state agencies advance racial meaning and how culture reflects, reinforces, and challenges the racial organization of such institutions. This white racial project names the connection between stories of wounded white men “abandoned” by their government in Southeast Asia and the neoconservative case against affirmative action. Though one of many post-civil rights white racial projects, military whiteness is significant for how it allowed white men to see themselves as victims of racial injustice by correlating the military defeat in Vietnam with the racial reforms of the 1960s. This form of white grievance necessitated that the service of American soldiers of color be subordinated to the struggles of the white soldier. So while working-class American Indian, Latino, and black men served in Vietnam at higher rates per capita than their white comrades, fiction and film about the war tends to focus on enlisted white men, such as Stone’s Chris Taylor, while imagining the military as a deracinated institution where one’s identity is first and foremost that of a soldier.⁷

7. Soldiers of color also served in combat roles more often than white soldiers and thus suffered a proportionately larger number of casualties during the war (Oropeza 68;

This is not to suggest that there are no soldiers of color in novels and films about the Vietnam War but rather that their race is subordinated to their status as soldiers, marines, sailors, or airmen. As Sergeant Hartman (R. Lee Ermey) tells new marine recruits in *Full Metal Jacket*: "There is no racial bigotry here! I do not look down on niggers, kikes, wops, or greasers. Here you are all equally worthless!" Hartman's deracinated racism suggests that, as marines, the recruits will not be discriminated against based on their race due to a military culture of universal discrimination in which all men are "niggers, kikes, wops, or greasers." As a drill sergeant, he sees his role as breaking down a *differentially raced* civilian in order to build a *uniformly raced* military man. Being a soldier or veteran is imagined as a cultural identity that mirrors and subsumes racial and ethnic difference, allowing the white soldier to disavow his whiteness—and the value accrued through it—and to instead see himself as "minoritized" by his military service. As Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, "To have no identity at all is the privilege of whiteness, which is the identity that pretends not to have an identity, that denies how it is tied to capitalism, to race, and to war" (221). As a subset of this "nonidentity," white veteranhood is structured by a sense of alienation from domestic culture, from the state, and from oneself for the acts of violence committed in the name of the state. Yet as in Reagan's vision of a "color-blind America," veteranhood is only formally deracinated; it is actually constituted by an uneasiness regarding the meaning of whiteness in a liberal-multicultural milieu and serves to reassert the cultural value of the white male voice within that milieu.

The contradictions of this racial project are nowhere more evident than in literary culture, where to write about one's service in Vietnam is to assume a distinct form of cultural difference. This white racial project is what gets overlooked in accounts of the 1987 National Book Awards. In an article titled "Literature by Quota" in Podhoretz's influential neoconservative magazine *Commentary*,

Phillips 13–14). As Tom Holm writes, American Indians, who served in Vietnam at three times the rate of white Americans, "seemed to draw some of the worst wartime assignments," as "[t]he stereotype of the Indian warrior held, and American Indians were used as scouts on long-range reconnaissance missions and in commando-type units" (105).

Carol Iannone described Jordan and Baker's letter as evidence of an "assault on the ethic of excellence and merit" (50), in which "a group of black writers demanded and obtained the Pulitzer Prize for Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*" (51). Quoting (and distorting) the words of Chinua Achebe, she concluded that awards committees had sacrificed "the demands of excellence to the 'democratic dictatorship of mediocrity'" (53). But Heinemann's National Book Award itself reflected the racial politics of whiteness. Whereas World War II veterans Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, and Kurt Vonnegut *wrote war novels*, Vietnam veterans Tim O'Brien, Gustav Hasford, and Heinemann *are war writers*. This cultural identity is something that Mark McGurl, in his account of how institutional creative writing has reorganized American fiction, refers to as "high cultural pluralism," a form of modernist writing in which acts of authorial self-making are combined with an embodiment of cultural difference (56). Authors of such fiction are, for the most part, writers of color. But so, McGurl writes, is the "Veteran-American writer," whose "authoritative experience of war" informs his career as being black or Jewish might for an ethnic writer (61). While McGurl returns to World War II and the GI Bill to locate the institutional origin of the warrior writer, it was not until the Vietnam War that being a veteran emerged as a distinct cultural identity in the American literary market; it was only then that one could be a "Veteran-American writer."⁸

This shift was instigated by the rise of ethnic literatures, as McGurl suggests, but also by the United States' military defeat in Southeast Asia. These two factors made the veteran novel a critical site for the negotiation of the meaning of white masculinity in the post-civil rights era. This negotiation animates Heinemann's *Paco's Story*, its relation to Morrison's *Beloved*, and its characterization as an antiwar novel. While Heinemann and other veteran writers may not have subscribed to Podhoretz's and Kristol's neoconservatism—indeed, some veteran writers condemned their ideas on race and war—it had become a dominant ideological formation by the 1980s

8. Much veteran-American writing, including Heinemann's, could be characterized as part "high cultural pluralism" and part what McGurl terms "lower-middle-class modernism," which focuses on the struggles of a "post-ethnic" working class (67). This latter form of "program era" fiction is embodied by the writing of Raymond Carver, whose influence Heinemann acknowledges in his 2004 foreword to *Paco's Story*.

and animated how veteran fiction was written, marketed, and read in ways that individual authors could not have foreseen or controlled. Heinemann's novel was not the first instance of such writing, nor the last or most distinguished. *Paco's Story* does not reflect the wide range of fiction written about the war in Southeast Asia. But its association with Morrison's *Beloved* and the controversial 1987 National Book Award allows us to see how the racial politics of literary whiteness tend to go uninterrogated and what surfaces when they are.

Ironically, by restaging defeat the veteran novel was able to confer cultural value on white masculinity and facilitate the remilitarization of the nation after the Vietnam War. Podhoretz argued in 1976 that "an isolationist mood *has* taken hold of the country since we left Vietnam," with liberals and conservatives sharing a reluctance to militarily contain or roll back communist governments, notwithstanding the United States' still-enormous military budget after the war. Podhoretz wrote, "That the American military intervention in Vietnam ended in failure, and worse than failure, is an argument not against those purposes but against the lack of wisdom with which they were in that instance pursued" (n. pag.). This assessment of a weakened state would influence members of the Reagan administration—with Reagan himself diagnosing this "isolationist mood" as "the Vietnam syndrome" in 1980 ("Address")—and be imagined through the figure of the wounded white veteran in need of rehabilitation.

The Ethnicization of Paco Sullivan, Veteran American

Whereas much World War II writing treated the white combat soldier as an idealized figure through whom civilian Americans could envision their own relation to the state, as James Sparrow has shown (12), the veteran novelists who served in Vietnam, borrowing narrative devices from ethnic literatures, situated themselves as writing from the margins of national culture. Though set against one another in accounts of the 1987 National Book Awards, Morrison's *Beloved* and Heinemann's *Paco's Story* share a similar structure. Both novels show the enduring effects of state violence—the slave trade in Morrison's novel, the Vietnam War in Heinemann's. In nonlinear

fragments, they reveal earlier events through their characters' traumatic memories and scarred bodies. And they tell ghost stories in which the living are unable or unwilling to exorcise the dead.⁹ Heinemann's novel follows a wounded veteran, Paco Sullivan, as he struggles to reenter civilian life. Getting off an interstate bus in the small town of Boone, Paco settles into a routine of washing dishes at a local lunch counter while wrestling with his memories of a firefight in Vietnam that killed everyone in his company but him. His story is narrated by the collective voice of those men, who "whisper in his ear, and give him something to think about—a dream or a reverie" (138). Morrison's novel tells the story of a mother, Sethe, haunted by her two-year-old daughter, whom she murdered under the threat of being returned to the Kentucky plantation from which they had fled.

These ghosts—Paco's comrades and Sethe's daughter—do more than linger in the characters' lives; they direct them, haunting their thoughts and dictating their actions. Morrison's and Heinemann's novels render their characters as troubled by traumatic histories that have been forgotten, left out of the official record. The desire to remember a disavowed history and restore it to collective consciousness—what Morrison calls "rememory" (43)—was, by 1987, an established feature of ethnic writing. But it was new to novels about white men at war, an experience well-documented in American history books. Only after the military defeat in Southeast Asia and its association with an alleged crisis of white masculinity could authors such as Heinemann, O'Brien, and Hasford stage their military service as knowledge that had been silenced by an American mainstream and themselves as ethnicized by that exclusion.

Paco's Story invites a reading of its black cultural influences. The novel is narrated by the collective voice of the dead soldiers in a conversational slang that Heinemann describes in his 2004 foreword as the language of "street folks," language that addresses the reader in "a jivey sort of way" (xii). The men's racial backgrounds are never

9. Michiko Kakutani noted these similarities in her 1987 assessment of whether Heinemann's novel deserved its National Book Award. Her conclusion: it did not deserve it as much as did Morrison's "magisterial and deeply moving" fiction. Stacey Peebles has also considered the two novels alongside one another but reaches a different conclusion about the merits of Heinemann's writing.

mentioned. But the language they use is informed by black vernacular English. One of the men is described in a flashback to Vietnam as “booming out some gibberish mumbo jumbo in his best amen-corner baritone and laughing that cool, nasty, grisly laugh of his, acting the jive fool for all those housecats” (8–9). This collective voice is deracinated (as belonging to a deindividuated unit of soldiers) and racialized (its language marked as black). But its formal deracination elides its whiteness. The novel is addressed to a man named James, which, Heinemann writes, comes from the custom of calling strangers on the street “Jim” or “Jack” (xii). Heinemann explains in the foreword that he chose to address a “James” instead because he wanted a name “more formal than street-corner patois” and lists men with the name James: Saint James, King James, James Joyce, Henry James, William James, Jesse James, James Bowie, and James Dean (xiii). Thus Heinemann’s novel assumes a black narrative voice that it “formalizes” in its address to James and directs to white men of the same name.

Heinemann’s novel encourages readers to see veteranness as a cultural identity that subsumes and transcends racial difference when it is, in fact, a reinvention of whiteness for the age of liberal multiculturalism. The same holds true for Paco’s name. For the first two-thirds of the novel, the reader might assume that Paco is Latino. Then, in an aside, Paco’s last name—Sullivan—is mentioned (145), leaving his ethnic background ambiguous. So Heinemann’s novel ethnicizes the veteran by associating military service with being black or Latino, while also rendering him undifferentiated and thus situating him within the hegemonic racial formation of whiteness. This military whiteness grants the veteran a mobile identity that assumes a color-blind orientation but “passes” as ethnic. The story of Paco Sullivan reveals how this form of whiteness has the effect of masking the service of American soldiers of color and containing the violence committed against Southeast Asians during the Vietnam War.

Heinemann’s novel is introduced as an act of bearing witness. It begins with the declaration that what follows “ain’t no war story” (3). War stories, the narrators tell James, “are out—one, two, three, and a heave-ho.” This dismissal of the genre is not meant in earnest, of course, since Heinemann’s audience has demonstrated an interest

in war stories by picking up his novel. This disregard for the genre—the belief that war stories are “out”—is externalized. The narrators and reader get it; they recognize the value of a good war story. They are invited into the masculine world of storytellers (Paco’s dead comrades) and listeners (James on the street) who refuse to turn away from the horrors of war. The narrators tell James that it is mainstream Americans, identified as women and bourgeois men, who refuse to listen:

The people with the purse strings and apron strings gripped in their hot and soft little hands denounce war stories—with perfect diction and practiced gestures—as a geek-monster species of evil-ugly rumor. . . . These people who denounce war stories stand bolt upright and proclaim with broad and timely sweeps of the arm that war stories put *other* folks to sleep where they sit. (When the contrary is more to the truth, James. Any carry worth his cashbox . . . will tell you that most folks will shell out hard-earned, greenback cash, every time, to see artfully performed, urgently fascinating, grisly and gruesome carnage.)

(3-4)

The narrators suggest that the war story is a devalued form that gives voice to the marginalized veteran whose suffering has been ignored by lawmakers (“people with the purse strings”), women (“people with the . . . apron strings”), and college-educated elites (those who denounce war stories “with perfect diction and practiced gestures”). The narrators cast themselves as telling a forgotten history that has been ignored by Americans who did not serve in the war and would rather forget that it ever occurred. But the veteran also fascinates the bourgeois American—as a kind of carnival sideshow, an embodiment of “grisly and gruesome carnage.” Thus the veteran’s knowledge of war is imagined to be obscured twice over, negated as an “evil-ugly rumor” and embraced as a source of obscene amusement.

This framework is familiar to readers of civil rights-era ethnic literatures that struggle to recover forgotten histories of racial violence and to show black, Latina/o, American Indian, and Asian American characters as complexly human rather than as, in James Baldwin’s critical formulation, defined by “the nature of [their] categorization” (20). Heinemann’s narrators’ argument that war stories have been, but should not be, ignored mirrors the concluding sen-

timent of Morrison's novel, in which the line "It was not a story to pass on" is transformed into "This is not a story to pass on" (323–24). These sentences encourage an understanding of how this history—the story of Margaret Garner, the figure on whom Sethe is based, and the Fugitive Slave Act that motivated her act of filicide—had been disremembered (it *was* not a story to *pass on*) but also why it must now be recovered (this *is* not a story to *pass on*). Heinemann's assertion that war stories are "out" suggests that American suffering in Southeast Asia has also been neglected and must be documented by writers like himself and remembered by readers like "James." This sentiment is common among veteran writers of the post-Vietnam War era, including O'Brien, who think of themselves less as writers than as storytellers. Heinemann acknowledges that he "became a writer because of our war in Vietnam, not in spite of it" (xi). He sees himself not as a shaper of stories but as shaped by them.

Heinemann's account of the war story's marginalized status is not all that convincing when considered in the context of 1986. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was by then four years old and had become the National Mall's number one attraction. O'Brien, who had won his own National Book Award for *Going After Cacciato* (1978), wrote his much-anthologized short story "The Things They Carried" that year. And Stone's *Platoon* opened in theaters across the country, collecting more than one hundred million dollars at the box office and going on to win the Academy Award for Best Picture. This renewed interest in Vietnam led Philip Caputo to coin the term "Vietnam chic" and ask how something so "unfashionable in 1977" had become so "wildly fashionable" ten years later (qtd. in "Writers"). When *Paco's Story* arrived in bookstores in December 1986, it was hard to see the war story as a minor form.

Why did books and films about the military defeat in Vietnam become "fashionable"? And why would a writer like Heinemann choose to cast his own work as devalued? The answer returns us to the neoconservative movement and its understanding of race as something cultural but not structural. Taking an individualist and integrationist attitude toward race, neoconservatives held that the greatest obstacle to racial justice was the government's acknowledgment of racial difference, which, in their minds, encouraged

“race thinking” and reinforced rather than alleviated racial divisions. Kristol began arguing in the mid-1960s that black Americans struggled to get ahead not because of generations of legal and extralegal violence and barriers to wealth accumulation, such as redlining, but rather because of government aid. “If anything like our present welfare system had been in existence 50 years ago, or 100 years ago,” he wrote, “this same ‘cycle of dependency’ would have been a striking feature of the Italian and Irish immigrant communities” (132). If the government ignored race, Kristol suggested, then black Americans, too, could become white like Italian and Irish immigrants through the American ethic of “self-reliance.” A fringe idea when Kristol first articulated it, this ahistorical understanding of race and whiteness found a mainstream foothold during the Reagan administration and had achieved hegemonic status by the time *Paco’s Story* won the National Book Award in 1987.

Neoconservative racial politics allowed white Americans to see themselves as victims of “reverse racism” in the form of affirmative action. Under the logic of neoconservatism, they saw themselves as *racialized* by state *antiracism*. Jodi Melamed, in her genealogical account of liberal state antiracism, defines racialization as a means of constituting “differential relations of value and valuelessness according to reigning [legal, political, and economic] orders” (11). Racialization masks its value-making effect by assuming itself to be nothing more than a reflection of existing social conditions, even as it validates some forms of difference and delegitimizes others. Neoconservatives argued for a “postracial” understanding of racialization, through which white Americans could make claims to both sides of what Melamed calls the “privilege/stigma divide” (13): white Americans could benefit from the white advantage embedded in the existing racial order while also alleging their victimization by it. The figure of the white Vietnam veteran models this form of whiteness. He is imagined as the victimizer and victimized of the Vietnam War—and the excluder and excluded of the civil rights era. So while Heinemann’s novel stages a fantasy of defeat, it finds in that defeat a renewed control of the instruments of racialization that organize “differential relations of value and valuelessness.” In claiming the status of racialized *valuelessness* for the white veteran,

the novel makes a case for his racial *value* in a liberal-multicultural literary market.

Arguing that the war story has been disregarded by elites, by “the people with the purse strings,” also serves to recast the armed forces as an underdog in the wake of the Vietnam War. The story of the United States as an outsider has long been fundamental to the nation’s sense of itself in the world. The country is, Marilyn Young observes, animated by a need “to see itself as both supremely powerful *and* forever an underdog” (183). In the wake of the war in Southeast Asia, it was hard to make the case for the United States as an underdog. But Heinemann’s novel achieves just that through a story of unredeemed veteran trauma. The wounded white veteran, as a stand-in for the nation, is imagined as broken by the Vietnam War. Paco is introduced by his dead comrades as forgotten but also as an embodiment of “artfully performed, urgently fascinating, grisly and gruesome carnage.” They devote extended sections to describing what their final firefight did to his body—his “slashing lacerations, big watery burn blisters, and broken, splintered, *ruined* legs” (18)—while the Vietnamese they engage are characterized as disembodied shadows. The fact that Paco’s suffering—and the genre that communicates it, the war story—has been, we are told, denounced as nothing but an “evil-ugly rumor” serves to revise the narrative of the United States as an armed invader in Southeast Asia by foregrounding American loss. Telling a dehistoricized account of a white soldier’s suffering obscures the overwhelming violence done to Southeast Asian life by the United States’ military occupation of the region. Achieved through the ethnicization of the white veteran, this erasure resituates the United States as an outsider and disavows the histories of colonial and racial violence that the Vietnam War had introduced to national consciousness.

The novel’s vision of the white military man as marginalized in the post-civil rights era is further reinforced by how Paco is described as gazed at by women, including the novel’s one identified black character. When he gets off the interstate bus in Boone, Paco is observed by an older black woman looking down at him from her window seat. As she takes note of his cane (“as thin as a pencil”) and his eyes (like “the points of pins”), she “instantly, viv-

idly remembers her own son come home from the Korean War in nineteen and fifty-three . . . who said not a word about the war; who was ever after morose and skittish, what folks round about miscalled lazy and no-'count; who had ever since lapsed into a deep and permanent melancholy" (42). As the bus door closes behind him, Paco sees that he is being watched by the woman and acknowledges that he has been "left behind" (42). The black woman's act of looking at Paco reverses the direction of the white male gaze. She, a black woman, gazes at him, a white man. From her seat above him on the bus, she notices the thinness of his cane and the smallness of his eyes. Her mobility is greater than his, too. Whereas he has run out of money, she continues to ride on to the next town. The novel here inverts the terms of racialization. An embodiment of military whiteness, Paco is rendered as racialized by the *black female gaze*. And he is shown to be aware of and to see himself through her watchful eyes. Paco reminds the woman of her son, a Korean War veteran. Her memory correlates Paco's and her son's veteran status with antiblack racism ("lazy and no-'count"), but her recognition of what Paco shares in common with her son suggests that veteranness is a more basic identity than blackness. The scene imagines a social order in which the white gaze has not been eliminated but rather reversed, turned back on veteran America.

Heinemann's novel associates this female gaze with literature. In Boone, Paco lives in a hotel across the street from the lunch counter where he works. His neighbor, Cathy, is a college student whose aunt and uncle own the building. When Paco first moves in next door, she flirts with the new veteran tenant. One day, after noticing that someone has been inside his room, Paco decides to break into Cathy's room and have a look around. Once inside, he discovers her diary, in which she has recorded her careful observations of him. At first, Cathy is fascinated by Paco's wounds and his military service. "And he's cute, you know, but covered with scars," she writes. "Scars everywhere. But wouldn't that be something to tell my grandchildren" (202). She imagines what it would be like to have an affair with this enigmatic veteran, an alien to her middle-class collegiate life. Yet as Paco reads on, he finds that Cathy's fascination with him turns to disgust. In her more recent entries, she writes: "He gives me the creeps. . . . He gets this set look on his face. Gives

me the creeps. . . . Aunt Myrna says he has a way of stiffening up and staring right through you. As if he's a ghost. Or you're the ghost" (206). Wondering how she ever found him attractive, she adds, "And he's all pasty. And crippled. And honest to God, ugly. Curled up on his bed like death warmed over" (207). Cathy dismisses Paco in much the same way that civilian Americans, according to the narrators, have dismissed the war story—as a source of obscene interest but also of intense uneasiness. She fetishizes Paco's scarred body (as "something to tell my grandchildren" about), but his war wounds later make her uncomfortable, consuming her thoughts and giving her nightmares. He is cute and then hideous, first the embodiment of a story she looks forward to telling and then one she would rather forget.

The gaze assumed to have devalued white male identity is rendered as literary. Cathy condemns Paco's "pasty" whiteness through her written observations of him. Heinemann's novel figures literature as a feminine, multicultural institution that has marginalized the masculine genre of the war story. This belief in the victimization of white men structured what Susan Jeffords has termed the "remasculinization" of American culture, in which conservative masculine values were revived during the Reagan era through a broad cultural revision of the Vietnam War (xii). Encouraged to see themselves in the figure of the wounded veteran, white men began to understand themselves as minoritized by their whiteness—and to seek to recenter it.

This reversal of the white male gaze resonates with the color-blind racial politics advanced by neoconservatives. Like other white racial projects of the post-civil rights era, racial neoconservatism was structured by what Winant, drawing on W. E. B. Du Bois, calls "white racial dualism" (*New Politics* 50). This dualism emerges in neoconservative thought as a color blindness that reveals an unmistakable race consciousness. Neoconservatives subscribed to the idea that race is "socially constructed" as a means of ignoring how it is ingrained in the legal, economic, and cultural life of the nation. The best route to racial justice, they imagined, was to ignore race, to treat it as a fiction that, if left alone long enough, would end in integration. But this anti-interventionist stance amounted to a defense of the existing racial order. Race may be constructed, but it

has been constructed in ways that have long governed uneven material relations and the distribution of life and death. Glazer wrote in his influential 1975 book *Affirmative Discrimination: Ethnic Inequality and Public Policy*, “equal opportunity represents the broadest consensus possible in a multiethnic and yet highly integrated society, and . . . this consensus would be broken if requirements for statistical representation were to become a permanent part of American law and public policy” (168–69). The subtext of Glazer’s case for “equal opportunity” rather than “statistical representation” is that the latter would cause social fracturing and a white backlash: white men would understand themselves to be—and *were*, Glazer argued—the victims of state antiracism.

One can discern echoes of Glazer’s ideas in Reagan’s revisionist references to Martin Luther King Jr. and in Heinemann’s account of Paco being gazed at first by the black woman on the interstate bus and then by Cathy through her writing. Whereas the black woman can afford to ride the bus and Cathy can afford to attend college, Paco lacks social mobility in the reorganized nation to which he has returned. Paco’s situation reflects a neoconservative understanding of whiteness in which affirmative action was characterized as a form of discrimination against working-class white men. The state’s racial reforms were thought to run counter to the earlier ideal of integration, inviting fears of a disinvestment in whiteness which manifested itself in the ethnicization of veteran America.

Military whiteness served as a refutation of affirmative action but also masked the racial violence committed by the state within and outside of its borders. Near the end of the novel, while listening to Cathy having sex with her college boyfriend, Paco remembers how he and his comrades had raped a Vietnamese girl during the war. This memory causes him tremendous distress. The narrators describe how he “winces and squirms; his whole body jerks, but he cannot choose but remember” (174). They recount the event, as Paco remembers it, telling how he and his brutal comrade Gallagher held the girl down while a third man, Jonesy, “tied her wrists together behind her back, then hauled on that wire the same as if he were hoisting the morning colors, just as crisp and snappy as the book says—*The Manual of Arms*, James, the twenty-two-dash-five, we called it” (178–79). The rape, which is described in gruesome detail,

is attributed less to the men who commit it than to the state that trained them as soldiers. Paco is traumatized by the event, as if he, rather than the girl, had been the victim of sexual violence. This effect is achieved by transferring blame from the soldiers to the military; Jonesy binds her wrists in the way he was taught to raise the American flag by Field Manual 22-5, the Army's 1968 rulebook for ceremonial conduct. The allusion to the field manual suggests that their assault of the girl was condoned—or even encouraged—by the state, that it was Jonesy's training as a soldier that led him to commit such an act. Like some of the most acclaimed Vietnam War films of the late 1980s—*Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Casualties of War*—Heinemann's novel was received as an antiwar narrative for its willingness to show American atrocities. Unacknowledged is how often these acts of violence are figured as more traumatizing for the white Americans whose "innocence was lost" in Southeast Asia than for the Southeast Asians who suffered them. The violence committed by the United States in Vietnam is masked in its revelation.

Paco absorbs the traumas of the Vietnamese girl. After each man has taken a turn with her, Gallagher takes the girl behind the thatched hut in which they had tied her down and shoots her in the forehead. The narrators describe how the force of the gunshot covers the other men with the girl's blood. This image haunts Paco, who "remembers the spray of blood, the splatter of brick and bone chips on Gallagher and Jonesy and *everyone*, as thick as freckles, and how it sparkled. He remembers that quick, tingling itch of the spray, like a mist of rain blown through a porch screen" (183). The violence committed against the Vietnamese girl is transferred from her body to the bodies of the men through the "spray" of her blood and the "splatter" of her bone fragments. Her death is subsumed by the bodies of the men who killed her, as they are shown to take on her suffering through the blood that marks their skin like freckles. The narrators describe how for days afterward the men carried "brown bloodstains" (183) on the fronts of their uniforms as a visceral reminder of what they had done, an act that they recognize as "a moment of evil" after which they "would never live the same" (184).

The central drama is not the girl's suffering and death but the Americans' alleged loss of innocence. As Yen Le Espiritu has

argued, this shift is achieved by characterizing Southeast Asia as an anachronistic world “where violence is indigenous” (89). The modern American soldier is figured as traveling backward in time, forced to surrender order for chaos and innocence for violence, while Vietnamese are assumed to be accustomed to such violence. This idea of Southeast Asia as “backward” serves to reassign the blame for American atrocities to the region itself, where violence is thought to be endemic, and to the state for having sent “innocent” American boys there to begin with. Heinemann’s novel is not alone in how it redistributes trauma, guilt, and innocence. *Platoon* and *Casualties of War* also feature scenes in which American violence is communicated through Southeast Asian blood on white American skin. Thus military whiteness is constructed not only through black and Latina/o culture (the narrative voice, the gaze, the counterhistorical thrust, the black woman’s veteran son, Paco’s name) but also through Southeast Asian life (the trauma of the Vietnamese girl). These cross-racial imaginings serve to ethnicize the white American veteran, who becomes the victimizer and victimized of the war, masking the service of Americans of color and the far greater violence done to Southeast Asians by the United States’ invasion of the region.

Heinemann’s novel demonstrates how stories of white martial defeat have recentered whiteness in a liberal-multicultural literary market. Heinemann’s winning the 1987 National Book Award for Fiction over Morrison was not just another instance of the book industry valuing the writing of a white male over that of a black female. It was something new. The civil rights era had shifted the terms of literary valuation, creating new means for black, Latina/o, American Indian, and Asian American writers to have their work recognized by institutions such as cultural awards and universities. This reformed literary market was seen by neoconservatives as an extension of the “racial favoritism” of affirmative action and therefore became a source of confusion regarding the meaning of whiteness in a multicultural milieu. How would the white male author fit into a literary market organized around cultural difference? The rise of the veteran-American writer is one answer, as authors including Heinemann began imbuing their white veteran characters with a sense of ethnic difference that correlated military service with

racial exclusion. Military whiteness grants a character like Paco Sullivan a mobile identity that is color blind and marginalized, deracinated and racialized. Because they focus on the alleged minoritization of the soldier, these veteran-American novels were received as antiwar narratives. But it was this new interest in the defeated Vietnam veteran—evidence of the nation’s failure to unite behind its men—that allowed the United States to reclaim the status of underdog and tell a comeback story in Kuwait and, a decade later, in Iraq and Afghanistan. The ethnicization of veteran America sold books, and then it sold war.

Veteran America in the Twenty-First Century

Although Heinemann has received limited critical attention since winning the National Book Award, American veterans have continued to transform their military service into the material of best-selling, award-winning fiction. Since the beginning of the twenty-first-century wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, critics and readers have celebrated a new generation of veteran writers who, like Heinemann, imagine the white male soldier as marginalized by civilian Americans who either ignore him or fetishize his stories of combat. Indeed, the veteran writer’s sense of marginalization has grown since the United States transitioned to an all-volunteer force at the end of the Vietnam War, with fewer than one in a hundred Americans having served in the counterterror wars. In 2011, veteran and writer Matt Gallagher bemoaned the lack of fiction about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in an *Atlantic* article titled “Where’s the Great Novel about the War on Terror?” Gallagher attributed this absence to Americans’ “general lack of connection with the wars” and envisioned a future “definitive” account that must, he suggested, be written by an American veteran and about an American soldier.

Like many new veteran writers, Gallagher holds an M.F.A. in creative writing from a school, Columbia University, that has taken an active role in transforming war veterans into war writers. In the last decade, some of the most distinguished M.F.A. programs in the country—among them those at Columbia, Syracuse University, New York University, and Johns Hopkins University—have added

veterans writing workshops. Extolling O'Brien's meticulous short fiction as a model for the genre, these courses encourage veterans to see their own struggles as the basic material of war literature. In the words of Ron Capps, the founder of the George Washington University-affiliated Veterans Writing Project, "We write to bear witness" (qtd. in Simon). Since 2011, when Gallagher lamented American readers' lack of interest in war novels, veterans writing workshops have incubated some of the most acclaimed fiction about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, including Powers's *Yellow Birds*, Klay's National Book Award-winning *Redeployment*, Christopher Robinson and Gavin Kovite's *War of the Encyclopaedists* (2015), and Gallagher's own *Youngblood*.

Like veterans of the Vietnam War before them, these new veteran writers have received institutional recognition from universities, scaled best-seller lists, and won national awards but perceive their work as devalued in a liberal-multicultural literary market. Critics have scrutinized the connections between university creative writing, federal agencies such as the National Endowment for the Arts, and veteran trauma writing—what Elliott Colla has called "the military-literary complex" and Roy Scranton identifies as the institutionalization of "the trauma hero myth." Such scholars as Sinan Antoon and book critics including Sam Sacks and Michael Larson have identified how much veteran writing—and the criticism that venerates it—imagines the warrior-scribe as the voice of a minoritized culture and constructs a false correlation between the suffering of the American soldier and that of the Iraqi or Afghan civilian. This veteran writing advances a "reigning narrative in which both Iraqi civilians and American soldiers become victims of this war and those who launched it and carried it out vanish," Antoon writes. "Those who kill and those who are killed are equal in terms of victimhood" (n. pag.). Building on the conversations begun by Antoon and others, this essay concludes with a consideration of twenty-first-century veteran writing to situate these criticisms within the longer history of post-civil rights literary whiteness and to show how veteran fiction has organized a broader sense of white racial grievance since Vietnam.

Not every veteran writer holds an M.F.A., of course, and not every veteran novel focuses on the traumas of the white American soldier.

Elliot Ackerman, for example, wrote his debut novel, *Green on Blue* (2015), about an Afghan soldier forced to fight for a U.S.-funded militia. But it is difficult to ignore that the best-sellers and award-winners tend to reflect the racial project of military whiteness.

Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds*, the first acclaimed novel about the counterterror wars, reflects the ethnicization of veteran America in the twenty-first century in how it imagines the Middle East as an alienating environment for the white soldier. Based on Powers's own tour in Iraq and written in part at the University of Texas at Austin, where he earned his M.F.A., *The Yellow Birds* follows veteran John Bartle as he looks back on his 2004 tour in Nineveh Province and reckons with the loss of his friend Daniel Murphy. The novel does not distinguish the men's racial or ethnic backgrounds and names just one Iraqi character—Malik, their translator—who gets killed within a minute of being introduced. While they are stationed on a roof in the fictional town of Al Tafari, Malik informs Bartle and "Murph" that he was raised in the neighborhood below them and then stands to locate his childhood home. A second later, he is shot and killed, his blood staining Bartle's and Murph's uniforms. "We heard [the bullets] tear at the air around our ears and smack into the clay brick and concrete. We did not see Malik get killed, but Murph and I had his blood on both of our uniforms" (10). Bartle shows no emotion in witnessing Malik's death, a stoicism that he suggests he must maintain for his own survival: "I needed to continue. And to continue, I had to see the world with clear eyes, to focus on the essential. We only pay attention to rare things, and death was not rare" (11). Malik's death is reminiscent of Paco's blood-soaked uniform in Heinemann's novel—and the deaths of Southeast Asian civilians in films such as *Platoon*, *Casualties of War*, and *Full Metal Jacket*—in that it transfers civilian trauma (Malik's blood) to the white American soldier (Bartle's struggle "to continue" amid combat deaths). Introduced and moments later killed off, Malik functions to illustrate the victimization of the American soldier serving in a hostile environment in which "death was not rare" and forgotten by American civilians who, he suggests, would not understand his callousness toward death. But Bartle contradicts his own assertion that war allows no time for mourning by grieving Murph's death throughout his narration. He enacts the racial project

of military whiteness as a *deracinated* embodiment of the nation—a deracination that signals his whiteness—who subsumes the *racialized* devaluation of civilian life carried out by the military he himself serves.

Veteran-American writing's narrow focus on the white soldier's coming-to-terms results in a dehistoricized account of the United States' wars. Like Heinemann's narrators, Bartle looks back on his tour as a veteran and tries to make sense of what he has seen and done. Characteristic of new war fiction such as Klay's short-story collection *Redeployment* and films including *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), *The Messenger* (2009), and *American Sniper* (2014), Powers's novel is less concerned with the war itself than with the veteran's search for a version of events he can live with. *The Yellow Birds* ends in 2009 with Bartle incarcerated at a low-security military prison at Fort Knox, Kentucky, where he is serving a three-year sentence for an unidentified incident in which civilians were killed. He is innocent of the charges brought against him and confused by the events that led to his incarceration. "I could not pattern it," Bartle reflects. "None of it made sense. Nothing followed from anything else and I was required to answer for a story that did not exist" (182). Later, he resigns himself to not knowing, conceding that "the details of the world in which we live are always secondary to the fact that we must live in them" (224). The novel sets aside the historical and political conditions of the war and concentrates instead on the white soldier's mistreatment by the state and his resignation to living with the unknowable. Bartle thus emerges as the foremost victim of an event in which Iraqi civilians died at the hands of American soldiers.

As it did in the wake of the war in Southeast Asia, veteran-American writing has continued to imagine the struggles of the white veteran in ways that draw on (and conceal) structural forms of racial violence. Powers's novel about the wrongful incarceration of a white soldier achieved critical and commercial success in the wake of revelations of torture and abuse at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay and after Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) had been on *The New York Times* best-seller list for more than a year, raising mainstream awareness of how the nation's "tough-on-crime" crusade had organized

a new racial caste system. Even as more Americans began to recognize incarceration as a form of racial control that necessitated redistributive antiracist policies, stories of marginalized white military men continued to advance a subtle case against such policies by staging the state's abandonment of its men in Iraq and Afghanistan. The conservative writer J. D. Vance, for example, contended in April 2016 that presidential candidate Donald Trump found a base among working-class white men due to his willingness to criticize George W. Bush for having "sent their children on a bloody misadventure." Vance also asserts that "white enlistees make up a disproportionate share of those wounded and killed in action" (n. pag.). While Powers's novel does not address the racial politics of incarceration, it advances a discourse of white grievance that has served to maintain an existing racial order in which millions of black and Latino men live under some form of correctional control and in which the state detains Muslim men at "black sites" around the world.

Following in the tradition of Vietnam War veteran writers, the new veteran-American narrative assumes an antiwar ethic based on its willingness to show the white soldier's ambivalence and suffering. In 2015, after critics condemned *American Sniper* as a racist celebration of state violence, director Clint Eastwood declared it to be an antiwar film, maintaining that "the biggest antiwar statement is what it does to the families left behind" (qtd. in McNary). Film critic David Denby agreed with Eastwood, calling *American Sniper* "a devastating antiwar movie" for its "subdued celebration of a warrior's skill and [its] sorrowful lament over his alienation and misery" (n. pag.). Eastwood's and Denby's remarks reveal a broader cultural confusion regarding the meaning of the term *antiwar*, at least since the 1980s, when writers, filmmakers, and lawmakers reimagined the Vietnam War as the externalization of a conflict between Americans that devalued white masculinity in the wake of the racial reforms of the civil rights era. Embodied by Heinemann's National Book Award-winning novel *Paco's Story*, the ethnicization of veteran America obscures the military service of Americans of color and the violence committed against Southeast Asians, Iraqis, and Afghans. It takes little more than "a sorrowful lament over [the white soldier's] alienation and misery" to turn the veteran-American novel

into an antiwar statement. The veteran writing of the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries must be scrutinized for how it has facilitated a reinvestment in whiteness after the civil rights era and the remilitarization of the nation since the Vietnam War.

Texas Christian University

WORKS CITED

- Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah*. 1987. New York: Doubleday, 1988.
- "Affirmative-Action Book Prizes." *New Criterion* Jan. 1991: 1–2.
- Allen, Chadwick. *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002.
- Antoon, Sinan. "Embedded Poetry: Iraq, through a Soldier's Binoculars." *Jadaliyya* 11 June 2014. Web. 1 June 2016.
- Baldwin, James. "Everybody's Protest Novel." *Notes of a Native Son*. 1955. Boston: Beacon, 2012. 13–23.
- "Black Writers in Praise of Toni Morrison." *New York Times Book Review* 24 Jan. 1988. Web. 1 Aug. 2015.
- Chong, Sylvia Shin Huey. *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2012.
- Colla, Elliott. "The Military-Literary Complex." *Jadaliyya* 8 July 2014. Web. 1 June 2016.
- Cutler, Jonathan Alba. *Ends of Assimilation: The Formation of Chicano Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 2015.
- Denby, David. "Living History." *New Yorker* 22–29 Dec. 2014. Web. 1 Aug. 2015.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*. 1935. New York: Free Press, 1998.
- English, James. *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005.
- Espiritu, Yen Le. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2014.
- Fehrman, Craig. "The Short, Unsuccessful Life of the American Book Awards." *New York Times* 28 Oct. 2011. Web. 1 Aug. 2015.
- Full Metal Jacket*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Perf. Matthew Modine, Adam Baldwin, and Vincent D'Onofrio. 1987. Warner, 2007. DVD.
- Gallagher, Matt. "Where's the Great Novel about the War on Terror?" *Atlantic* 14 June 2011. Web. 1 Aug. 2015.
- Glazer, Nathan. *Affirmative Discrimination: Ethnic Inequality and Public Policy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1975.
- Harris, Cheryl I. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (1993): 1707–91. JSTOR. Web. 1 June 2016.
- Heinemann, Larry. *Paco's Story*. 1986. New York: Vintage, 2005.
- Herr, Michael. *Dispatches*. 1977. New York: Vintage, 1991.

- Hitchens, Christopher. "These Glittering Prizes." *Vanity Fair* Dec. 1992. Web. 1 Aug. 2015.
- Ho, Jennifer Ann. *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2015.
- Holm, Tom. *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1996.
- Hunter, James Davison. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic, 1991.
- Iannone, Carol. "Literature by Quota." *Commentary* Mar. 1991: 50–53.
- Jeffords, Susan. *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989.
- Kakutani, Michiko. "Did *Paco's Story* Deserve Its Award?" *New York Times* 16 Nov. 1987. Web. 1 Aug. 2015.
- Kristol, Irving. "The Negro Today Is Like the Immigrant Yesterday." *New York Times* 11 Sept. 1966: 50+.
- Larson, Michael. "Stop Giving War-Veteran Writers a Free Pass." *Salon* 11 Dec. 2012. Web. 1 June 2016.
- Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*. Rev. and expanded ed. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2006.
- Maeda, Daryl J. *The Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2009.
- McDowell, Edwin. "An Upset at the Book Awards." *New York Times* 10 Nov. 1987. Web. 1 Aug. 2015.
- McGurl, Mark. *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009.
- McNary, Dave. "Clint Eastwood Talks *American Sniper's* 'Antiwar Statement,' Bradley Cooper Weight Change." *Variety* 24 Jan. 2015. Web. 1 Aug. 2015.
- Melamed, Jodi. *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2011.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987. New York: Vintage, 2004.
- . *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. 1992. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2016.
- Oropeza, Lorena. *¡Raza Sí! ¡Guerra No! Chicano Protest and Patriotism during the Viet Nam War Era*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2005.
- Peebles, Stacey. "The Ghost That Won't Be Exorcised: Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*." *The Vietnam War: Topics in Contemporary North American Literature*. Ed. Brenda M. Boyle. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. 137–58.
- Phillips, Kimberley. *War! What Is It Good For? Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2012.
- Platoon*. Dir. Oliver Stone. Perf. Charlie Sheen, Tom Berenger, and Willem Dafoe. 1986. MGM, 2011. DVD.

- Podhoretz, Norman. "Making the World Safe for Communism." *Commentary* 1 Apr. 1976. Web. 1 June 2016.
- Powers, Kevin. *The Yellow Birds*. 2012. New York: Back Bay, 2013.
- Reagan, Ronald. "Address to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Chicago." 18 Aug. 1980. *Presidency Project*, n.d. Web. 1 Aug. 2015.
- . "Message to the Congress of Racial Equality on the Observance of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day." 16 Jan. 1986. *Presidency Project*, n.d. Web. 1 Aug. 2015.
- Roediger, David R. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. New York: Verso, 1991.
- Sacks, Sam. "First-Person Shooters." *Harper's* Aug. 2015. Web. 1 June 2016.
- Scranton, Roy. "The Trauma Hero: From Wilfred Owen to *Redeployment* and *American Sniper*." *Los Angeles Review of Books* 25 Jan. 2015. Web. 1 June 2016.
- Simon, Cecilia Capuzzi. "Warrior Voices." *New York Times* 1 Feb. 2013. Web. 1 Aug. 2015.
- Sparrow, James T. *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government*. New York: Oxford UP, 2011.
- Sturken, Marita. *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997.
- Vance, J. D. "Why Trump's Antiwar Message Resonates with White America." *New York Times* 4 Apr. 2016. Web. 1 June 2016.
- Winant, Howard. *The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004.
- . "White Racial Projects." *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*. Ed. Birgit Brander Rasmussen et al. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001. 97–112.
- "Writers Try to Make Sense of the Vietnam-Book Boom." *New York Times* 4 Aug. 1987. Web. 1 Aug. 2015.
- Young, Marilyn. "Permanent War." *Positions* 13.1 (2005): 177–93. *Project Muse*. Web. 1 Aug. 2015.