

Military Whiteness

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Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial could not have been built without the promise of a second memorial. Facing resistance to Lin's nonfigurative design—declared a “black gash of shame” by one veteran—the chairman of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, John Wheeler, struck a deal with Lin's critics.¹ In March 1982, with the Department of the Interior refusing to authorize construction, Wheeler agreed to add a second memorial to the site, a statue of an eight-foot-tall white marine flanked by one black and one Latino soldier. Lin called it a “farce” and criticized the second memorial's designer, Frederick Hart, who had finished third in the original design competition, for “drawing mustaches on other people's portraits.”² But Wheeler, a West Point graduate and Washington insider, saw it as a healing gesture. That November, he declared the national salute to veterans at the memorial's dedication “the single most important step in the process of healing and redemption.”³

Ethnic studies and feminist scholars such as Yen Le Espiritu, Susan Jeffords, and George Lipsitz have long identified the 1980s as a decade in which lawmakers, writers, and filmmakers “rehabilitated” the white male American veteran through revisionist accounts of the war in Southeast Asia, a rehabilitation that Wheeler led and chronicled.⁴ Two years after

1. Tom Carhart, “Insulting Vietnam Vets,” *New York Times*, 24 Oct. 1981, www.nytimes.com/1981/10/24/opinion/insulting-vietnam-vets.html; hereafter abbreviated “IV.”

2. Quoted in Rick Horowitz, “Maya Lin's Angry Objections,” *Washington Post*, 7 July 1982, www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1982/07/07/maya-lins-angry-objections/df48e2c2-18b6-4e10-88e7-50f5c952d4f6/

3. Quoted in Kurt Anderson and Jay Branegan, “A Homecoming at Last,” *Time*, 22 Nov. 1982, p. 46.

4. See, for example, Sylvia Shin Huey Chong, *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era* (Durham, N.C., 2011); Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Viet-*

the dedication of Lin's memorial, he published *Touched with Fire: The Future of the Vietnam Generation* (1984), his effort to mend the divisions caused by the war and alleviate the "personal pain and disunity they have perpetuated." Borrowing his title from Oliver Wendell Holmes's 1884 Memorial Day address, Wheeler envisioned the war in Southeast Asia as an American civil war fought between those who served and those who didn't, between wounded men and liberated women, and within oneself. The country's unwillingness to confront the meaning and memory of the war, he wrote, has left "many of us harboring unnecessary hurts" that might be eased through "remembrance and dialogue."⁵ Yet, like Hart's statue at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Wheeler's book centered the "unnecessary hurts" of the white veteran and attributed them to a national culture that had been reshaped by the civil rights, feminist, and antiwar movements.

Wheeler cast the Vietnam War—a war waged in Asia and fought by a disproportionate number of working-class American Indian, black, and Latino soldiers—as a source of white alienation that, he argued, had a racializing effect on white American men. "The Vietnam veteran was the nigger of the 1970s," he wrote. "You create a nigger by depriving a person of part of his or her personhood. Ignoring that person or inflicting traumatic hurts is the traditional way to treat a nigger. In this metaphorical sense, woman was the nigger of the 1960s. The black was the nigger of the 1950s. As the hurt dissipates, and ignoring turns into recognition, your time as a nigger begins to end."⁶ Wheeler suggested that racial meaning emerges not from structural forms of violence and the uneven distribution of life chances but from individual traumas and a lack of ceremonial acknowledgement. Thus, as that "hurt" wanes and one achieves recognition,

nam War and Militarized Refuge(es) (Berkeley, 2014); Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989); Katherine Kinney, *Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War* (New York, 2000); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, 2006); and Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley, 1997).

5. John Wheeler, *Touched with Fire: The Future of the Vietnam Generation* (New York, 1984), p. 7.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 16–17.

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one sheds one's racialized status. His remarks reflected, in part, the ideas advanced by such racial neoconservatives as Nathan Glazer, Irving Kristol, and Norman Podhoretz, who equated race with cultural difference (ethnicity) and advocated a nonredistributive, color-blind agenda that served to maintain the existing racial order in the post-civil rights era. Neoconservatives contended that affirmative action and all forms of "race thinking" only exacerbated racial divisions and marginalized innocent white men. But Wheeler's account of the white veteran's alleged racialization was more than a neoconservative treatise. He centered the wounded white male soldier within rather than against liberal multiculturalism—the antagonist of neoconservative thought—as the embodiment of a minoritized cultural tradition in the United States, or a *veteran American*.

Wheeler's book allows us to see how conservatives and liberals formed a nonredistributive racial consensus around the white veteran in the wake of the Vietnam War. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, as Sylvia Chong has shown, 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 subsumed in American visual culture by the body of the white male veteran.⁷ This new fascination with wounded military whiteness has been attributed to a conservative backlash to the racial reforms of the civil rights era that orchestrated a reinvestment in whiteness and the "remasculinization" of national culture.⁸ But the sense of white grievance associated with military service in Southeast Asia achieved cultural dominance, I argue, by bridging the racial politics of neoconservatism and liberal multiculturalism. The cultural figure I am calling the veteran American emerged as a site of consensus in the culture wars by situating the white veteran as a deracinated universal and a minoritized outsider, color-blind and race conscious, center and margin. Evident in the writing of Tim O'Brien, the films of Oliver Stone, and the treatment of veteranhood as a form of "diversity" at universities and colleges, military whiteness unites the assimilationist pluralism of neoconservatism with the positive pluralism of multiculturalism through the simultaneous cultural centering and decentering of the white male veteran—or rather the centering of the veteran *through* his alleged decentering. This political consensus reveals how neoconservatives and liberal multicultu-

7. Chong notes how, in the 1960s and 1970s, self-censoring American news media had treated images of Southeast Asian suffering as an index of *American* national trauma. With a renewed focus on images of wounded white veterans in the late 1970s and 1980s, however, "the Asian body again fades from view," Chong writes, "just as the racial formation of Asian Americans gains political traction" (*The Oriental Obscene*, p. 27).

8. See Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America*.

ralists share an antagonism to material redistribution that has the effect of maintaining white racial dominance. As Roderick Ferguson has observed, whiteness has secured its hegemonic status in the post-civil rights era through the administration of racial difference. “This mode of whiteness, one born of critique but still invested in its own material centrality,” he writes, demonstrates “how a certain investment in minority difference and its crises renews the hegemonic possibilities of whiteness.”⁹

This essay identifies the combat veteran as the folk hero of a new white racial politics. American Indian, black, and Latino soldiers served at higher rates and in more dangerous roles than their white comrades in Southeast Asia. Most came from the working classes. Millions of Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians lost their lives, their families, and their homes. But most novels, films, and news media about the war tell the story of middle-class white men such as O’Brien, Stone, and Wheeler, who experience the defeat in Vietnam as a personal crisis. The whiteness of the war in American culture has often been associated with the conservative movement that reached new heights during the Reagan administration. But military whiteness also drew on the discourse of liberal multiculturalism by casting the white veteran as himself a voice of minoritized difference. The figure of the veteran American advanced a subtle case against even the most limited forms of affirmative action by drawing attention to white men’s alleged exclusion and equating it with racial disenfranchisement. As Wheeler claimed—making a not-so-subtle case—the white veteran succeeded black Americans and women as the country’s racial other. The veteran American organized the terms by which white men could feel aggrieved by state *antiracism* and claim that they had been underserved and neglected on the basis of their *white* skin. The conservative-liberal consensus formed through the racial project of military whiteness can be found in a wide range of cultural forms and media, including the POW/MIA movement to liberate white airmen from their alleged incarceration in postwar Vietnam and Hart’s multiracial statue on the National Mall. These acts of activism and memory reveal the anxiety of whiteness in an age of liberal mul-

9. Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis, 2012), p. 196. Ferguson grounds his criticism of post-civil rights white racial politics in the universities and colleges that, he argues, contained the social movements of the 1960s by severing the relation between representation and redistribution. In the wake of the civil rights era, he writes, “diversity arose as a way of preempting redistribution, making the hegemonic incorporation of minorities and minoritized knowledges into dominant institutions not only part of an affirmation but a preemption as well” (p. 191). The university has disseminated such abstract investments in difference and diversity to state and capital.

multiculturalism and the concerted effort to recenter whiteness within that order.

Veteran America and the New Racial Politics of Whiteness

In 1991, James Davison Hunter, a sociologist of religion at the University of Virginia, diagnosed what he termed the nation's *culture wars*. In his bestselling book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, Hunter argued that Americans had realigned themselves along cultural rather than religious lines in the late twentieth century, with once-hostile orthodox religious communities—evangelical Christians, Orthodox Jews, conservative Catholics—uniting against secularists, Reform Jews, and liberal Catholics and Protestants on such issues as abortion, affirmative action, and educational curriculum. This division, he suggested, had hardened because conservatives with “*the impulse toward orthodoxy*” and liberals with “*the impulse toward progressivism*” looked to different moral authorities (transcendent versus rational-modern) and thus believed in different moral truths.¹⁰ Hunter's book named the struggles of the post-civil rights era and defined them as a moral rift between conservatives and liberals. His writing demonstrates how entertainment and news media narrowed the terms of that struggle to a contest between two dematerialized racial agendas in which the state stands as the ultimate guarantor of racial justice.

The following year, Hazel Carby, in her essay “The Multicultural Wars” (1992), considered how what Hunter called the culture wars had reorganized curricula at universities and colleges. She noted that much-advertised diversity initiatives had led to the inclusion of such writers as Zora Neale Hurston on syllabi at elite universities in the near total absence of black faculty and students. This abstract form of diversity made cultural difference a commodity for the middle-class white student to consume and centered whiteness as the unstated norm against which (black) difference is understood. An obsession with the construction of identities—including, though it goes unacknowledged, white identities—had drowned out discussions of relations of power and domination. At universities and in other institutions, Carby wrote, the materialist antiracism of earlier generations had been substituted for learning about other lives through reading. “Have we, as a society, successfully eliminated the desire for achieving integration through political agitation for civil rights and opted instead for knowing each other through cultural texts?”¹¹

10. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York, 1991), pp. 43, 44.

11. Hazel V. Carby, “The Multicultural Wars,” *Radical History Review* 54 (Fall 1992): 17.

But even this normative form of multiculturalism faced heated criticism from the right and made the English department a contested venue in the final decades of the twentieth century. As Bethany Bryson recalls, with amazement, the arguments of both the conservatives and liberals who waged the culture wars in the 1980s and 1990s shared the “extraordinary premise” that “every time an English teacher put together a reading list, the future of a nation hung in the balance.”¹² The white male veteran writer acted as a critical, if subtle, bridge in that institutional drama. Arguments about the canon were understood as a two-sided battle between defenders of the “great books” curriculum who believed “cultural relativism” was watering down a formidable Western tradition and liberal multiculturalists who advocated a curriculum that reflected the diversity of the nation. These two curricular visions were seen, by Hunter and others, as irreconcilable. Either you taught dead white men, or you taught Toni Morrison, Sandra Cisneros, Maxine Hong Kingston, and N. Scott Momaday. Yet the story of the veteran American writer reveals the wide swath of common ground between neoconservatives and multiculturalists. Mark McGurl has suggested that, due in part to the institutionalization of creative writing, much post-World War II American fiction reflects what he calls high cultural pluralism, a form of modernist writing that combines acts of authorial self-making with “a rhetorical performance of cultural group membership preeminently, though by no means exclusively, marked as ethnic.” Practitioners of high cultural pluralism include black writers, Jewish writers, regional writers, and veteran American writers whose “authoritative experience of war” and “psychic wounds” form the basis of their writing careers “in the same way that [Philip] Roth’s Jewishness” formed his.¹³ On one side of the culture wars, conservatives celebrated the white veteran writer as the deracinated embodiment of “traditional” Americanism who told the sublime story of men at war. On the other side, liberals embraced the veteran writer as a minoritized voice whose story had been neglected by an American mainstream unwilling to reckon with the human costs of war. As illustrated by the universal acclaim that O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990) received from critics and curriculum builders at high schools and universities, the veteran American writer transcended the culture wars.

Why did the white veteran writer, filmmaker, and artist fare so well in this otherwise contentious cultural environment? What does it suggest about the unbridgeable social divide described by Hunter? And what does

12. Bethany Bryson, *Making Multiculturalism: Boundaries and Meaning in U.S. English Departments* (Stanford, Calif., 2005), p. 2.

13. Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), pp. 56, 61.

it tell us about the new, and confused, racial politics of whiteness at the end of the twentieth century? As the white veteran writer's unchallenged status in the canon wars demonstrates, military whiteness served to recenter white men in the post-civil rights era. Neoconservatives such as Glazer advocated a color-blind agenda in which the state would guarantee "equal opportunity" rather than "statistical representation" by disacknowledging racial difference.¹⁴ Any state intervention would only, they argued, further aggravate racial divisions. Liberal multiculturalists articulated a politics of cultural recognition in which the state would foster racial equality by making sanctioned forms of difference more visible in national politics and the arts without altering the uneven distribution of resources and life chances—a kind of trickle-down antiracism. Although they disagreed about the role of state intervention, neoconservatives and multiculturalists shared an understanding of race as a cultural but not structural division, severing the connection between meaning making and social structuration that founds differential relations of human value and valuelessness. Thus white men continued to benefit from entrenched material investments in whiteness and patriarchy while also inhabiting a valorized form of cultural difference through the "forgotten" white veteran, whom conservatives viewed as the victim of multiculturalism and liberals embraced as a subject of multicultural recognition.

The military itself has institutionalized the tension between the universalization and the minoritization of the soldier. The armed forces see basic training as the means by which the individual is broken down so that a soldier, marine, airman, or sailor can be built. A recruit must shed her or his civilian identities—female, male, gay, straight, black, white—and instead inhabit the collective identity of the military and one's rank and assignment within it. Military culture assumes a color-blind, deracinated attitude toward what are considered civilian axes of difference, cultural identities transcended by a new institutional self forged through rigor and collective suffering. This formal deracination elides how whiteness functions as an unacknowledged norm in American life, including in such "color-blind" state institutions as the military. But the armed forces also define basic training as an induction into a minority community of Americans with a familial commitment to "the man on my right and the man on my left"—a sense of minoritization that has grown stronger since the shift to an all-volunteer force at the end of the Vietnam War. Military culture authorizes the white male soldier to imagine himself as a deracinated uni-

14. Nathan Glazer, *Affirmative Discrimination: Ethnic Inequality and Public Policy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp. 168, 169.

versal (read Western man) and a minoritized other (veteran American). Jodi Melamed has shown how, in the second half of the twentieth century, “a formally antiracist, liberal-capitalist modernity” has formed new categories of racial stigma (irrational, illegal, criminal) that do not necessarily cohere with color-line racialization. Following World War II, she writes, “categories of privilege and stigma determined by ideological, economic, and cultural criteria have overlaid older, conventional racial categories to the extent that traditionally recognized racial identities—black, Asian, white, Arab—occupy both sides of the privilege/stigma divide.”¹⁵ Melamed’s work illuminates how, after World War II and anticolonial movements brought about a crisis of white supremacy, the cold war state forged new, not necessarily phenotypic scales of human value that served its liberal-capitalist interests and justified its acts of violence. The uneven detachment of racialization from the color line also, I am suggesting, enabled white Western men to straddle that privilege/stigma divide and contain materialist forms of antiracism by invoking the wounded white veteran and thus claiming their own stigmatized status.

Emerging in the wake of the racial reforms of the 1960s, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that facilitated waves of immigration from Asia and Latin America, and the defeat in Southeast Asia, military whiteness reveals nonredistribution to be the common sense of post-civil rights white racial politics. That common sense hinged on an understanding of race as analogous to ethnicity or cultural identity, in which one exercises a degree of choice in defining one’s identity. Neoconservatives and liberal multiculturalists agreed that race was constructed, but neither was willing to address how it had been constructed through structures of violence and exclusion that founded and maintained an uneven distribution of wealth, health, and security. Instead, the idea of race as a construct meant that racial difference should either be ignored as a social fiction (racial neoconservatism) or valorized as a manifestation of the nation’s diverse culture and a testament to the achievements of the civil rights movement (multiculturalism). Howard Winant has observed how conservatives and liberals put a different spin on what amounts to the same antimaterialist racial agenda. “Neoconservative discourse seeks to preserve white advantages through denial of racial difference,” he writes, whereas “liberal discourse seeks to limit white advantage through denial of racial difference.”¹⁶ The

15. Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis, 2011), pp. 12, 13.

16. Howard Winant, “Behind Blue Eyes: Contemporary White Racial Politics,” in *The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice* (Minneapolis, 2004), pp. 57, 59.

emergence of the veteran American as an embodiment of white injury resolved the contradiction of conservative and liberal racial projects by centering white men within rather than against an understanding of race as a cultural formation.

Situating the white male veteran at the center and margin of American culture has reinforced the association between veteranhood and what O'Brien calls "a true war story," even as the influence of Southeast Asian American literature and culture has grown.¹⁷ In September 2016, at a rally in Philadelphia, Donald Trump alleged that American veterans were "being treated worse than illegal immigrants"—echoing Wheeler's claim thirty years earlier that "the Vietnam veteran was the nigger of the 1970s."¹⁸ Their words suggest that the white American veteran has, since the military defeat in Southeast Asia, been racialized by institutional and cultural neglect because the government and cultural industries have instead directed their resources and attention to black Americans, women, and undocumented immigrants and refugees. While liberals dismiss these analogies as outrageous, they have had an unacknowledged role in authorizing them by treating the veteran as a minoritized voice in a multicultural nation. The idea of the veteran as a simultaneous universal hero and forgotten victim not only reduces his life to its symbolic value but also obscures the state's role in governing material relations and the distribution of life and death in Asia, Europe, and across the Americas—and not just among its own armed combatants. It has therefore not been difficult for conservatives and liberals to agree on the need to rescue the veteran from his imagined imprisonment in Southeast Asia.

Prisoners of Whiteness

In May 1973, congressman Charles Rangel delivered a statement before the House Subcommittee on National Security Policy on prisoners of war in Southeast Asia. That spring, following the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, the North Vietnamese government released 591 American prisoners of war to the United States, leading Richard Nixon to announce in a television address that "all of our American POW's are on their way home."¹⁹ The Pentagon stage-managed the prisoners' arrival, naming the event Op-

17. See Tim O'Brien, "How to Tell a True War Story," *The Things They Carried* (New York, 1990), pp. 73–91.

18. Donald Trump, "Presidential Candidate Donald Trump Remarks in Philadelphia," *C-Span*, 7 Sept. 2016, www.c-span.org/video/?414883-1/donald-trump-delivers-address-philadelphia-military-preparedness

19. Richard Nixon, "Address to the Nation about Vietnam and Domestic Problems," 29 Mar. 1973, *Presidency Project*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=4161

eration Homecoming and ensuring that photographers were on hand to capture the clean-shaven, uniformed vets as they were welcomed home by faithful wives and adoring children. Rangel, a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus, had spoken out against the disproportionate service of black men in combat. Now he could not find more than one or two black faces among the fighting men being celebrated on television and on the front pages of national newspapers. “I have been struck by the fact that the overwhelming majority of these returning prisoners are officers and that an even greater majority are white,” he stated before the committee. “You will recall, I am sure, the protest which arose from the black community over blacks having to fight and die in disproportionate numbers for a society which refuses to give them the full respect and opportunity here at home.”²⁰ The committee chairman, Clement Zablocki, a liberal Democrat from Wisconsin, having no answers for Rangel, asked him for more data. Ngo Vinh Long, an activist and historian of East Asia, also noted the middle-class whiteness of the returning prisoners and argued that Operation Homecoming had served to obscure the working classes that “bore the brunt of this war” and to “cover up and justify the inhumane policies of the United States against the Indochinese people—the gooks, the dinks, the slant-eyes, the Oriental human beings.”²¹

Rangel and Long weren’t seeing things. Operation Homecoming made the prisoners who returned that spring enduring icons in American memory, but they were anything but representative of the diverse, working-class soldiers who served on the front lines in Southeast Asia. Almost all of returnees were officers, career military, with college degrees and years of service to their names. Most were, like future Senator John McCain, pilots who had been shot down and captured before the 1968 halt on bombing campaigns north of the seventeenth parallel. All were men, and, as Rangel suspected, some ninety-five percent were white. Returning from a war in which the draft had been a lightning rod for protestors, the group included not a single draftee.²² The United States had sent into combat those Christian Appy describes as “the nineteen-year-old children of waitresses, factory workers, truck drivers, [and] secretaries,” but Operation Homecom-

20. *American Prisoners of War and Missing in Southeast Asia, 1973: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on National Security Policy and Scientific Developments*, 93rd Cong. 50 (1973). Statement of Charles B. Rangel, a Representative in Congress from the State of New York.

21. Ngo Vinh Long, “The American POWs: Their Glory Is All Moonshine,” *Ramparts*, May 1973, p. 11.

22. See Craig Howe, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs: Witnesses to Their Fight* (New York, 1993), pp. 4–5, and Jamie Howren and Taylor Baldwin Kiland, *Open Doors: Vietnam POWs Thirty Years Later* (Dulles, Va., 2005), p. 155.

ing encouraged Americans to remember the war as having been fought by a few hundred white officers who had suffered out of sight for years before, at last, coming home to picture-perfect reunions with dotting wives and children.²³

The missing soldiers who never returned became even more iconic of a war in which white men had been “left behind” by a divided nation. Nixon had used and to some extent created the POW/MIA issue as a means of extending the war throughout his first term, insisting that he would not begin negotiations with the state’s enemies in Southeast Asia until all American prisoners had been returned. After the Paris Peace Accords, his administration mingled the once-distinct POW, MIA, and KIA/BNR (killed in action, body not recovered) categories to encourage the idea that North Vietnam still held some two thousand Americans hostage, even as the Pentagon’s own evidence suggested otherwise. Nixon’s demand for a “full accounting” of men who North Vietnam could not account for allowed his administration to renege on the more than three billion dollars that it had pledged to the country in reconstruction aid. While the Nixon administration may have created the POW/MIA myth, activist organizations such as the National League of Families ensured that it lived on for decades afterward.²⁴ As H. Bruce Franklin writes, the next five administrations, including two Democratic administrations, ceding to the demands of the League and their allies, “attempted to perpetuate the belief that live POWs *might* exist while avoiding the position that they *do* exist.”²⁵ Despite the immense effort of activists and state officials, only one American prisoner has returned alive since the Paris Peace Accords, Robert Garwood, a defector whose homecoming in 1979 earned him a court-martial.

The POW/MIA myth endured across five administrations by transforming into something more than a belief in live prisoners of war. It gave white men a political framework for talking about their whiteness, without talking about their whiteness, in the post–civil rights era. The economic downturn of the mid-1970s left many working-class white men without the union-protected jobs that had given their fathers a foothold in the middle class a generation earlier. Some had fought in Vietnam. Some had not. But they could all see themselves in the stories of long-suffering white men abandoned by government elites who had never humped a mine detector

23. Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1993), pp. 6–7.

24. For detailed histories of the POW/MIA myth, see Michael J. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2009), and H. Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A., or Mythmaking in America* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1993).

25. Franklin, *M.I.A.*, p. 124.

or worked an assembly line in their lives. The myth of the prisoner of war reflected for these men how the government had turned its back on them as well, setting them at the margin of a national culture remade by civil rights reforms. Although antigovernment white supremacist groups like the Silent Brotherhood embraced the POW/MIA myth—with members invoking the prisoner of war in Vietnam to describe their own literal or figurative imprisonment in the United States—it was not restricted to the political fringe.²⁶ As a 1985 *Newsweek* magazine article declared, diagnosing a “collective amnesia” about the war and its effects on the nation, “We’re Still Prisoners of War.”²⁷

News media treated the prisoners who did return as part of Operation Homecoming, most of whom had been imprisoned in Vietnam for five or more years, as time capsules from a simpler time. Stefan Kanfer, writing for *Time* magazine, described the freed POWs as “a new breed of Van Winkle, blinking at a world that can hardly believe how profoundly it has changed.” The returned prisoners must have been startled, he wrote, to see people gathering in the streets to wave “the perennial banners of militancy, each inscribed with the device, Liberation” over which “are the words Gay, Black, Women’s, Chicano and People’s.” He pictured a returned prisoner getting pulled over by police officers armed with shotguns “to repel something they call the Black Liberation Army” and stuttering as he tried to explain himself to the officers.²⁸ He used the prisoner’s homecoming as a way to represent the changes that had taken place in the soldier’s absence, changes that Kanfer portrayed as turmoil caused by radical antiracist movements and women’s and gay liberation. But he also described the returned prisoner as a victim of state power, pulled over and harassed by armed police officers for no reason other than, it seems, his veteranhood. The white prisoner of war was not only innocent of the chaos wrought by radicals of color and liberated women but also wounded, even racialized, by it.

That cultural narrative may be seen as a response to the radical antiracist movements that announced their allegiance to the National Liberation Front of Vietnam, or the Viet Cong. The American Indian, Asian American, Black Power, and Chicano movements all, to greater and lesser degrees, allied themselves with the Vietnamese guerillas fighting to drive the United States out of south Vietnam. Huey Newton, the Black Panther

26. See Betty A. Dobratz and Stephanie L. Shanks-Meile, *The White Separatist Movement in the United States: “White Power, White Pride!”* (1997; Baltimore, 2000), pp. 197–98.

27. Tom Morganthau et al., “We’re Still Prisoners of War,” *Newsweek*, 15 Apr. 1985, p. 35.

28. Stefan Kanfer, “The Returned: A New Rip Van Winkle,” *Time*, 19 Feb. 1973, pp. 31, 32.

Party leader, for example, wrote a letter to the NLF offering “an undetermined number of troops to assist you in your fight against American imperialism” in “the spirit of international revolutionary solidarity.”²⁹ The 1970 Chicano Moratorium attracted more than twenty thousand people to Los Angeles to march for the liberation of Vietnam and Aztlán, refusing to separate one from the other.³⁰ The POW/MIA myth pitted the returning white prisoners against these radical movements that had, it suggested, undermined the war effort and caused America’s finest fighting men undue and unending harm.

POW/MIA activists gained influence throughout the Reagan administration—Reagan having been an early advocate for POW families as governor of California—but their cause received even greater attention in the early 1990s, at the height of the culture wars. Thanks in part to the success of such POW rescue films as *Uncommon Valor* (dir. Tedd Kotcheff, 1983), *Missing in Action* (dir. Joseph Zito, 1984), and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (dir. George P. Cosmatos, 1985), the POW/MIA myth had moved from the margin to the mainstream by the summer of 1991, when Red McDaniel, the president of the conservative American Defense Institute and a former prisoner of war, released a black-and-white photograph of three white men alleged to be American POWs held hostage somewhere in Southeast Asia. MIA families claimed the men as their own, and, soon after, the photograph ran on the cover of *USA Today* and *Newsweek*.³¹ More photographic evidence of live prisoners followed, and, although it all turned out to be manufactured, the POW/MIA myth became one of the biggest news stories of the summer. It resurfaced in the wake of the Gulf War, when Americans adopted the yellow ribbon to declare that, even if you opposed the war, you should “support our troops.” The yellow ribbon campaign grew out of the belief that Americans had abandoned their men in Vietnam, that they had failed to separate the decision makers in Washington from the men on the ground in Southeast Asia. A direct line can be traced from the POW/MIA bracelets that more than four million American wore in the early 1970s—including Ronald Reagan and George McGovern—to the yellow ribbon campaign of 1991.³² That August, a *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll showed that 69 percent of Americans believed that live prisoners were still being held in Southeast Asia, and three-quarters of those Americans

29. Huey P. Newton, “To the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam: August 29, 1970,” in *To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton* (New York, 1972), p. 178.

30. See Lorena Oropeza, *¡Raza Sí! ¡Guerra No! Chicano Protest and Patriotism during the Viet Nam War Era* (Berkeley, 2005), p. 6.

31. See Morgenthau et al., “Hoping against Hope,” *Newsweek*, 29 July 1991, pp. 20–26.

32. See Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, p. 57.

blamed their own government.³³ Before the photographs were revealed as frauds, John Kerry, the Democratic senator from Massachusetts, and Hank Brown, a Republican senator from Colorado, announced plans to mount an investigation as part of what the *New York Times* described as “a coalition of liberals and conservatives pressing for greater Congressional monitoring of the Administration’s handling of the [POW/MIA] issue.”³⁴ Amid an economic recession and with images of Rodney King being beaten by white police officers on the news, Republicans and Democrats united to search for a few long-dead white airmen.³⁵

Kerry and Brown’s announcement led to the formation of the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, which would conduct an exhaustive seventeen-month investigation that, despite efforts to resolve the issue, lent legitimacy to the idea that the government had wronged middle-class white men during and after the Vietnam War. Eight veterans of the war sat on the twelve-member committee, including Kerry, Brown, and McCain, then the junior senator from Arizona. A mix of conservatives and liberals, the men agreed that the POW/MIA issue transcended politics and represented an opportunity for national unity. Kerry, serving as the committee chair, opened the hearings by stressing that “if there ever was an issue that was not Democrat or Republican, but American and purely American, it is this one.” Bob Smith, a Republican from New Hampshire, insisted that Americans had come “together to demand answers” as “a people united.” And McCain added that the status of “our missing servicemen” should be “the one question in our national affairs that firmly unites every single American.”³⁶

The unity that Kerry, Smith, and McCain envisioned would be achieved through the white bodies of the airmen alleged to be held in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Hundreds of testimonies and thousands of declassified documents revealed that state agencies had, since before Operation

33. See Rich Jaroslovsky, “The *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News Poll—A Special Weekly Report from the *Wall Street Journal*’s Capital Bureau,” *Wall Street Journal*, 2 Aug. 1991, p. A1.

34. Clifford Kraus, “A Photo Said to Show 3 Lost Fliers Jogs Congress on Vietnam Missing,” *New York Times*, 24 July 1991, p. A6.

35. Jennifer Pierce has argued that we must understand media stories of white male innocence and injury at the end of the twentieth century in relation to a larger resistance to affirmative action. These stories, she writes, combined a free-market neoliberal belief that white men’s choices had been constrained by state intervention with the morality-based neoconservative argument that Americans of color are “unworthy of affirmative action because they are ‘unqualified’” (*Racing for Innocence: Whiteness, Gender, and the Backlash against Affirmative Action* [Stanford, Calif., 2012], p. 25). The POW/MIA myth, which found a mainstream foothold in the 1980s and 1990s, contributed to this discourse of white male innocence and injury.

36. *POW/MIA Policy and Process: Hearings Before the Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs*, 102nd Cong. 14 (1991).

Homecoming, assumed the whiteness of its missing men. The Joint Casualty Resolution Center (JCRC), an investigative unit formed in 1973 and tasked with resolving POW/MIA cases, like other government agencies, used the word *Caucasian* to describe all Americans whose bodies had not been recovered during the war. The JCRC conducted extensive interviews with Southeast Asian refugees as part of its investigation. In 1983, for example, a liaison officer administered a lie detector test to an unnamed Vietnamese refugee in Bangkok in which he asked about the refugee's encounters with Americans in postwar Vietnam:

During 1978, did you see Caucasian prisoners in Hanoi? Ans: Yes
 During 1982, did you see Caucasian prisoners near Le Van Linh Camp? Ans: Yes
 Did Quoc [Vietnam's Ministry of Defense] tell you the Caucasian prisoners you saw in 1978 were American? Ans: Yes
 During 1982, did you see Caucasian prisoners near Le Van Linh Camp who were sunbathing? Ans: Yes³⁷

The Select Committee's hearings led to the declassification of thousands of documents that, like this 1983 interview, reveal how lawmakers and officials assumed the whiteness of American prisoners of war. So, while the committee was successful in accelerating the normalization of relations with Vietnam, it further legitimated the racial project of military whiteness in which white veteranness acted as a deracinated national norm and a marginalized subnational form of difference. As the United States built the world's largest prison system, with millions of black and Latino men under some form of correctional control by 1991, Kerry's committee sought justice for a handful of white men who may or may not have been held in Southeast Asia two decades earlier. As Viet 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."³⁸ The figure of the veteran American gave whiteness not only a means of articulating that denial but also a cultural vehicle for suggesting that white men had suffered under, rather than accrued value through, capitalism, race, and war. And that tension, between the universalization and the minoritization of white veteranness, animates the memory of the war on the National Mall.

37. *Analysis of Live Sightings: Hearings Before the Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs*, 102nd Cong. 509 (1992). Polygraph of Vietnamese refugees.

38. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016), p. 221.

Recentering Whiteness on the National Mall

In May 1981, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) announced that Maya Lin, a twenty-one-year-old architecture student at Yale University, had won the competition to design a national memorial for the veterans of the war in Southeast Asia.³⁹ Lin's design of two sloping black granite walls inscribed with the names of the American dead met criticism from veterans, donors, and members of the Reagan administration who found it too subdued and abstract. That fall, Tom Carhart, a white veteran and a classmate of Wheeler's at West Point, contributed an editorial to the *New York Times* in which he lamented that his service would be remembered by "a black gash of shame and sorrow, hacked into the national visage that is the Mall" ("IV"). Carhart, a civilian lawyer at the Pentagon, had submitted his own design featuring "a statue of an officer offering a dead soldier heavenward."⁴⁰ While he attacked Lin's design, he was even more incensed by how it had been chosen. Carhart lamented that the VVMF had held an "open competition" in which the names and backgrounds of the entrants weren't considered and that it had deferred to "a jury made up entirely of civilians—in other words, people who had seen no military service in Vietnam" ("IV").⁴¹ He did not mention Lin by name, but he made it clear that his resistance to the memorial was not only about the design but also the designer. The memorial should, he suggested, be created and chosen by white male veterans of the war, like himself, and not by an Asian American woman and a committee of art-world elites. Leading the crusade against Lin's memorial design, he marshaled white identity politics in defense of veteran America.

Carhart found an alternative to champion when Hart, a realist sculptor and vocal critic of modernist art, offered his services to the VVMF. After secretary of the interior James Watt threatened to block construction, Wheeler and his organization agreed to add Hart's statue of three armed soldiers to the memorial grounds. At a meeting of the Fine Arts Commission in October 1982, just one month before the unveiling of Lin's memorial wall, Carhart mounted a successful case on Hart's behalf, arguing that the wall honored only the dead while the statue would honor the living.⁴² Hart had not served in Southeast Asia, as Carhart would have liked, but burnished his veteran bona fides by advertising the extensive research that

39. "Student Wins War Memorial Contest," *New York Times*, 7 May 1981, p. A20.

40. Quoted in Paul Goldberger, "Vietnam Memorial: Questions of Architecture," *New York Times*, 7 Oct. 1982, p. C25.

41. Carhart had his facts wrong: four of the eight jurists were veterans.

42. See Irvin Molotsky, "Changes Set in Viet Memorial," *New York Times*, 14 Oct. 1982, p. C17.

had gone into his statue. “I researched for three years—read everything,” he told an interviewer. “I became close friends with many vets, drank with them in bars. Lin’s piece is a serene exercise in contemporary art done in a vacuum with no knowledge of its subject. It’s nihilistic—that’s its appeal.”⁴³ Although he did not serve himself, Hart suggested that he, as part of a white masculine community of bar goers, had access to veteran knowledge that an Asian American woman like Lin could never have. He argued that his statue reflected the war as it really was while dismissing Lin’s wall as the navel-gazing pretensions of “a mere student.”⁴⁴ “Maya Lin’s design is elitist and mine is populist,” he stated.⁴⁵

Hart’s account of his statue’s origin shows how military whiteness exceeded the veteran community, offering civilian white men a vehicle for seeing themselves as minoritized underdogs in an age of multiculturalism. His statue enacts a literal centering of whiteness within the multiracial armed forces. The patina-finished bronze sculpture features three male figures: one white, one black, and one Latino. The white man, a marine, stands front and center with his hands held out at his sides, as if warning the others of some danger ahead. The black and Latino men, wearing the uniforms of soldiers, stand at the white marine’s shoulder, following his gaze across the Mall lawn to the memorial wall. Hart told the Fine Arts Commission that he saw the wall “as a kind ocean, a sea of sacrifice that is overwhelming and nearly incomprehensible in its sweep of names” and that he wished to “place these figures upon the shore of that sea, gazing upon it, standing vigil before it, reflecting the human face of it.”⁴⁶ (He left the work untitled to signal its integration with the wall.) The statue fulfills Hart’s vision of a memorial focalized through the eyes of a white military man who acts as the “human face” of the war and models for others—black, Latino, female, civilian—where to look and how to remember.

Yet, despite Hart’s alliance with right wingers like Watt and billionaire donor Ross Perot, he imbued his statue with a liberal-multicultural ethos. Hartz/Meek International, the public-relations firm that oversaw the statue’s 1984 dedication, distributed literature to news media that stressed the

43. Frederick E. Hart, “An Interview with Frederick Hart,” in *Unwinding the Vietnam War: From War into Peace*, ed. Reese Williams (Seattle, 1987), p. 274.

44. Hart, letter to the editor, *Art in America* 71 (Nov. 1983): 5.

45. Hart, “An Interview with Frederick Hart,” p. 274. For detailed accounts of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the controversies it attracted, see Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst, Mass., 2009); Kristin Ann Hass, *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Berkeley, 1998); and Sturken, *Tangled Memories*.

46. Quoted in Benjamin Forgey, “Hart’s Vietnam Statue Unveiled: A Contrast of Bronze and Granite,” *Washington Post*, 21 Sept. 1982, p. B4.

sculptor's exhaustive research and his dedication to honoring "the ethnic groups that fought" by using active-duty soldiers and marines as his models.⁴⁷ Hart based the black soldier on three different men, and although he used just one model for the Latino soldier, corporal Guillermo Smith De Perez DeLeon, Hart later described the figure as having ambiguous "ethnic features" that "could be Jewish, Lebanese, [or] Indian."⁴⁸ He based the white marine on a square-jawed corporal named James Connell, who, unlike the other models, sat for television interviews as part of the media rollout. Thus, while Hart defined the black figure by his blackness and the Latino figure by his interstitial ethnicity, he and Hartz/Meek foregrounded the white marine's individuality through Connell's face and life story. Prefiguring the multicultural ethic of such films as *Platoon* (dir. Oliver Stone, 1986) and *Casualties of War* (dir. Brian De Palma, 1989), the statue imagines a rounded white character serving alongside flat black and Latino characters. It and the all-white committees that orchestrated its selection and installation reflect what Ferguson describes as the white *administration* of racial difference since the civil rights era, in which the white governance of racial discourse recenters whiteness within scenes of multicultural nationalism.⁴⁹

Through its calculated embodiment of multiracial recognition and unification, Hart's statue obscures the racial politics of the war in Southeast Asia. The memorial makes no mention of the six million Southeast Asians who lost their lives in the war and its aftermath nor, of course, does it acknowledge the imperial arrogance that led the United States to subvert Vietnamese self-government for two decades. The three soldiers gaze at the wall, not at Southeast Asia, as if reflecting on the loss of their dead comrades rather than scanning a battlefield. That interaction between the statue and wall frames the memorial as a site for American men to grieve the loss of American men in some undefined otherworld called Vietnam. Hart's inclusion of black and Latino soldiers in his statue facilitates the domestication of the war in American memory by advancing a narrative of cross-racial brotherhood and sacrifice that romanticizes the working-class, multiracial character of the armed forces. Espiritu has documented how, in commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of Saigon, news media authored twinned "good warriors" and "good refugee" narratives in which stories of innocent white do-gooders and thankful "liberated"

47. Kathleen Keenan, "A Vietnam Vision: The Making of the Memorial Statue," Hartz/Meek International press release, 1984.

48. Quoted in Barbara Gamarekian, "The Vietnam War Comes Home Again, in Bronze," *New York Times*, 30 Oct. 1984, p. A20.

49. See Ferguson, *Reorder of Things*, p. 195.

Vietnamese refugees worked in tandem to recast the white male veteran as a humanitarian actor and distract from the devastation his government caused in Southeast Asia.⁵⁰ Dedicated sixteen years earlier, Hart's statue acts as a forerunner to that good warrior/good refugee narrative by redeeming the war on the grounds that it created the conditions for the white soldier to cultivate a liberal-antiracist identity by bonding with his comrades of color. Like Wheeler's memoir and the POW/MIA myth, the figurative addition to Lin's memorial suggests that the white veteran can relate to being black and brown in the United States as he never could before, based on his own suffering in Southeast Asia and his alleged minoritized status at home.

The statue's dedication in November 1984, at a Veterans Day event, demonstrated how veteranhood could serve as a malleable bridge between diversity-minded liberals and color-blind conservatives. On the one hand, Hartz/Meek encouraged news media to take notice of—and write about—Hart's attention to the service of black and Latino men in Vietnam, even as his white marine stands front and center as the normative embodiment of veteranhood. On the other hand, President Reagan commended the statue that day, addressing a crowd of more than one hundred fifty thousand, for how it reflected the deindividuated ideal of the armed forces. The president was coming off the invasion of Grenada, following earlier interventions in El Salvador, Lebanon, and Libya, after running for office on a promise to end the "Vietnam syndrome." He recognized the importance of the new statue and of the meaning assigned to the Vietnam War to reasserting American military power. Reagan had not attended the dedication of Lin's wall two years earlier, and his remarks at what was called "Salute II" by critics of her design marked his first official visit to the memorial. From a stage on the memorial grounds, he admired the statue. "The fighting men depicted in the statue we dedicate today, the three young American servicemen, are individual only in terms of their battle dress; all are as one, with eyes fixed upon the memorial bearing the names of their brothers in arms . . . [determined] never to forget," he stated. "We must, as a society, take guidance from the fighting men memorialized by this statue."⁵¹ Reagan contended that the men were distinguished only by their service branch and rank and that civilian Americans might take a lesson from that institutional color-blindness, a color-blindness that, given the cultural dominance of white soldiers and veterans, masks an assumed whiteness. Military whiteness allowed the president to cast the veteran as a deracinated universal and model for the

50. Espiritu, *Body Counts*, p. 94.

51. Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at Dedication Ceremonies for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Statue," 11 Nov. 1984, *Presidency Project*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=39414

nation and also as a marginalized outsider who had been forgotten by “those who didn’t comprehend.”⁵² The wounded white veteran offered a figure through which white men could claim the center and margin of the post-civil rights racial order and rebuke redistributive forms of antiracism.

Although she did not attend the dedication of Hart’s statue, Lin later acknowledged that “in a funny sense the compromise brings the memorial closer to the truth” by memorializing how “people still cannot resolve the war, nor can they separate the issues, the politics, from it.”⁵³ Yet that lack of resolution may have served the interests of some more than others. At the Veterans Day event, after lauding Hart’s statue, Reagan turned his attention to the wall and reminded the crowd that more than two thousand names were marked with crosses rather than diamonds to indicate that they were “still missing in Southeast Asia” and “may still be serving.”⁵⁴ Thirty years later, in May 2016, the POW/MIA group Rolling Thunder welcomed Trump to their annual motorcycle rally in Washington, D.C., an event that draws close to a million bikers to the capital every Memorial Day. Donning a “Make America Great Again” trucker hat, Trump promised the admiring crowd that as president he would “take care of our veterans” who “have been treated so badly in this country.”⁵⁵ News media could not believe that Trump, who had mocked McCain for being captured in North Vietnam by announcing his preference for “people who weren’t captured,” had somehow won the support of POW/MIA advocates.⁵⁶ But veteranness, as articulated by activists, news media, and lawmakers, has been detached from the veterans themselves, allowing Trump, who didn’t serve in Vietnam, to channel military whiteness to greater effect than McCain, who did. The conflation of whiteness with veteranness since the defeat in Southeast Asia has led to a condition in which invoking the injuries of veteran America does not require the presence or consent of

52. Ibid.

53. Quoted in Jan C. Scruggs and Joel L. Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (New York, 1985), p. 133.

54. Reagan, “Remarks at Dedication Ceremonies for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Statue.”

55. Right Side Broadcasting Network, “Full Event: Donald Trump Speaks at Rolling Thunder Memorial Day Event,” 29 May 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=MoeCopo96rE

56. Quoted in Philip Rucker, “Trump Slams McCain for Being ‘Captured’ in Vietnam; Other Republicans Quickly Condemn Him,” *Washington Post*, 18 July 2015, www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/07/18/trump-slams-mccain-for-being-captured-in-vietnam/. See, for example, Thomas Kaplan, “Donald Trump and Bikers Share Affection at Rolling Thunder Rally,” *New York Times*, 29 May 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/05/30/us/politics/donald-trump-and-bikers-share-affection-at-rolling-thunder-rally.html; and Justin Jouvenal and Jose A. DelReal, “Donald Trump Speaks at Rolling Thunder Rally,” *Washington Post*, 29 May 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/donald-trump-to-speak-at-rolling-thunder-rally/2016/05/29/bb7a2ef3-0368-49f8-8f58-02b2f36d5cd6_story.html

veterans. Trump would later feed a different memorial debate by protesting the removal of Confederate statues, declaring on Twitter—using the language of white supremacists—that it was “sad to see the history and culture of our great country being ripped apart.”⁵⁷ The missing prisoner of war and the memorialized war dead have been valuable political vehicles for civilian white elites like Trump because dead people can’t speak for themselves. If, as Cynthia Young and Min Song write, whiteness abandoned color-blindness and went “on the march” during the Obama administration, then it is critical that we return to not only the civil rights movement but also the Vietnam War to consider how that march has been rallied in the name of veteran America.⁵⁸

57. Trump, Twitter post, 17 Aug. 2017, 6:07 a.m., twitter.com/realDonaldTrump

58. Cynthia A. Young and Min Hyoung Song, “Forum Introduction: Whiteness Redux or Redefined?” *American Quarterly* 66 (Dec. 2014): 1073.