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The Thin White Line:  
Veterans and the White Racial  
Politics of Creative Writing

**Abstract** This essay considers how the creative writing workshop transformed the white Vietnam vet into a minority writer. The MFA system, which organized the group-based politics of post-civil rights American literature, originated as a space geared toward white combat veterans. Some of the first graduate programs in creative writing were founded in the years after World War II, and their classes were dominated by white vets attending college on the GI Bill. The vets received the now-clichéd advice to write what they know, to turn their war experiences into war stories. The next wave of program building followed the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and the Vietnam Veterans' Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966, which brought Vietnam vets into a changing workshop, where students still learned to write what they know but also, as pre-civil rights racial liberalism turned to post-civil rights liberal multiculturalism, write *who they are*. The trauma of combat allowed white men to situate themselves within late twentieth-century literary culture by writing not as white men but as "veteran-Americans." Veteran-American literature set white men within the pluralist institution but without forfeiting the cultural center, or the front seat in the classroom.

**Keywords** whiteness, war literature, Vietnam War, Tim O'Brien, Robert Olen Butler

**A**t the end of a long book tour, the novelist Tim O'Brien welcomed Tobey Herzog, a literature professor and biographer, into his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. O'Brien had recently published *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), his fifth novel based in part on his experience as a veteran of the Vietnam War. Herzog was conducting research for a book on the author's life and work, and he wanted to know why O'Brien continued to circle back to the war in his fiction, why he couldn't seem to shake it. "Regarding this Vietnam War period of your life, what did it contribute to your development as

an author?" Herzog asked. O'Brien had heard the question before, and he bristled at the suggestion that he had perhaps written too much about his life as a vet. "Well, it's impossible to answer," he fired back. "In one respect, it's like asking Toni Morrison, 'What has being black contributed to your being a writer?' Well, it contributes a lot. More particularly, it's like asking Conrad, 'What did your time at sea contribute to your being a writer?' A lot, that is, in terms of memory and material, event, dialogue, situation, setting, smell" (O'Brien 1998: 89).

O'Brien argued, as he had elsewhere, that to ask a Vietnam vet why he wrote about war was as absurd as asking a black writer why she wrote about race. It was who he was. He couldn't stop writing about war because he couldn't stop being a veteran. "I couldn't have written the books that I've written without war," he told Herzog (90). While Morrison wrote about the experience of enslaved people and their descendants, O'Brien, like Joseph Conrad, wrote about the experience of serving an empire at the height of its power and on the verge of decline. It is difficult to see how one corresponds to the other. But O'Brien believed that Vietnam had shaped his writing career as Morrison's race had hers. If she was an African American writer, then he was a veteran-American writer.

O'Brien wrote about veterans because the war in Southeast Asia had been the defining event of his life. It formed the basis of his self-knowledge. He may never have become a writer, he suggested, without having been drafted into the army in 1968, the year he graduated from Macalester College. But O'Brien also lamented that critics regarded him as a war writer, even when they hailed him as "the leading American novelist to emerge from this country's war in Viet Nam" (Young 2017: vii) and "America's most celebrated Vietnam novelist" (Heberle 2001: xiv). He began rejecting that label even before *The Things They Carried* (1990) cemented his status as the most-read American writer of Vietnam War fiction. "I'm not a Vietnam writer," O'Brien (1982: 131) declared, after winning the National Book Award for *Going after Cacciato* in 1979. "Although Vietnam was the impetus and spark for *becoming* a writer, I do not consider myself a war writer." Years later, after penning four more novels featuring Vietnam vets, he was frank in expressing his irritation with being categorized as a Vietnam writer. "It's like calling Toni Morrison a black writer, or Melville a whale writer, or Shakespeare a king writer," O'Brien (2012: 146) said. "It does irritate me, because no writer wants to be grouped in

any kind of ready-made category. Writing is all about being an individual with your own vision, a vision unrelated to anything or anyone else. I don't write about bombs and bullets, after all. I write about the human heart." There is no arguing that, whatever he would like to be called, O'Brien has written novel after novel about the effects of war on men, in combat and long after they have returned home. Sometimes he embraces the idea of himself as a veteran-American writer. Morrison doesn't get asked why she writes about black Americans, and he demands the same deference, that he shouldn't be asked why he writes about vets. (This isn't true; interviewers haven't been as deferent to Morrison as he seems to imagine.) Sometimes O'Brien refuses to be lumped in with Morrison as a minority writer slotted into this or that identity category. He contends that his fiction is not about soldiers and veterans but the universal sorrows of the human heart. O'Brien wants his books to be treated as part of a minoritized tradition of veteran-American writing, but he also wants that tradition to be recognized as the embodiment of a universal American literature.

O'Brien emerged in the 1970s as part of a cohort of war writers who had fought in Southeast Asia and returned to an embittered nation, defeated in Vietnam and divided at home. Most, like O'Brien, and unlike the multiracial armed forces that fought in Southeast Asia, were white middle-class men with college degrees who wrote about the disillusionment of having been raised on a belief in the goodness of the United States that came apart in Southeast Asia. Their careers have been facilitated by the surge of creative writing programs since the end of the war. Unlike World War II veterans Joseph Heller and Norman Mailer, who wrote tomes of five and seven hundred pages about their war, O'Brien is best known for his classroom-friendly short stories "The Things They Carried" and "How to Tell a True War Story." His short fiction has achieved canonical status within the MFA system, and O'Brien himself has served as an endowed chair of creative writing at Texas State University for almost two decades. Literary historian Mark McGurl (2009: 56) argues that the creative writing program remade postwar American literature according to the liberal ethic of "high cultural pluralism," in which student-writers were encouraged to combine acts of authorial self-making with "a rhetorical performance of cultural group membership preeminently, though by no means exclusively, marked as ethnic." High cultural pluralists include black writers, regional writers, Latina/o writers, gay writers,

and “*Veteran-American*” writers whose “psychic wounds” and “authoritative experience of war” have formed the basis of their careers “in the same way that [Philip] Roth’s Jewishness has” his (61). The MFA program is in part responsible for, as O’Brien put it, turning Morrison into a black writer, Melville into a whale writer, and Shakespeare into a king writer.

But the creative writing program didn’t fully embrace high cultural pluralism until the late twentieth century. The radical student movements of the 1960s pushed for broad institutional change, demanding that their universities and colleges hire more faculty of color and women and allocate resources for new departments and programs in ethnic studies and women’s studies. Their institutions responded not with the resource redistribution that students demanded but with reform and representation. The best-funded universities and colleges remained mostly white and mostly middle- and upper-class spaces, but they made the students of color they did enroll more visible, featuring them in campus catalogs and other promotional materials, and they taught more writers and artists of color. The appearance of diversity became part of a school’s sales pitch to prospective *white* students. The university’s adoption of liberal multiculturalism, which surfaces in the English department as high cultural pluralism, took a while to set in. Chicana feminist writer Sandra Cisneros, who attended the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in the mid-1970s, doesn’t remember the creative writing program as a place that prized diversity. “Coming from a working class background, an ethnic community, an urban community, a family that did not have books in the house, I just did not have the same frames of reference as my classmates,” she said in a 1985 interview. “It wasn’t until I realized and accepted that fact that I came upon the subjects I wanted to write about” (Cisneros 1997: 169). The transition from pre-civil rights racial liberalism, which promoted an assimilationist cultural pluralism, to post-civil rights liberal multiculturalism, which promoted a positive cultural pluralism, was a slow and uneven one. No group of writers made that transition more seamlessly than veteran writers, who served as the *explicit* norm of the mid-twentieth-century racial liberal classroom and the *implicit* norm of the late twentieth-century liberal multicultural classroom.

This essay considers how the creative writing workshop transformed the white Vietnam vet into a minority writer. The MFA system, which organized the group-based politics of post-civil rights American

literature, originated as a space geared toward white combat veterans. Some of the first graduate programs in creative writing were founded in the years after World War II—including those at Cornell University, Johns Hopkins University, Stanford University, and the University of Denver—and their classes were dominated by vets attending college on the GI Bill, or the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944. Almost half of all eligible veterans took advantage of the bill’s educational benefits, flooding campuses, and writing workshops, with young men fresh from Europe and the Pacific. But far fewer black vets were able to use their benefits to enroll in colleges and universities because the bill, needing the votes of Southern senators and congressmen, accommodated Jim Crow (see Katznelson 2005: 114). The first creative writing workshops were full of white men with Purple Hearts and government checks, who received the now-clichéd advice to write what they know, to turn their war experiences into war stories. The next wave of program building followed the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and the Vietnam Veterans’ Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966, which brought Vietnam vets into a changing workshop, where students still learned to write what they know but also, as pre-civil rights racial liberalism turned to post-civil rights liberal multiculturalism, write *who they are*. The trauma of combat allowed white men to situate themselves within the high cultural pluralism of late twentieth-century literary culture by writing not as white men but as veteran-Americans. They reimagined themselves as part of a minoritized group of forgotten warriors while retaining their status as representative Americans.

The minoritization of the white veteran necessitated that his American Indian, black, and Latino comrades, who served and died in disproportionate numbers in Southeast Asia, be pushed to the margins of national memory, as were the Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians he fought with and against, millions of whom lost their lives, their families, and their homes. Independent filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha (1991: 101) observed in 1991, following a wave of Hollywood films about white soldiers, “Vietnam as spectacle remains passionately an owned territory.” There are exceptions, of course. Some veterans of color did become writers and did write about the war, and many refugees, including Le Ly Hayslip, Lan Cao, Andrew X. Pham, and Viet Thanh Nguyen, have written novels and memoirs, though they rarely, as Nguyen (2016: 248) himself points out, get treated as “true war

stories.” The most prominent writers of color who served during and write about the Vietnam War are poets—Vince Gotera, Yusef Komunyakaa, Simon J. Ortiz—a position that gives them less mainstream exposure than novelists like Robert Olen Butler, Larry Heinemann, and O’Brien. Their careers have also been less defined by their war-time experience than their white counterparts. Komunyakaa, who served as a correspondent for the military newspaper the *Southern Cross* in Vietnam, didn’t write about the war at all for the first fourteen years of his career. In his creative writing classes at the University of Colorado, Colorado State University, and the University of California, Irvine, where he earned his MFA, Komunyakaa (2010: 22) remembered, “I very systematically wrote around that [war] experience.” It was not until his sixth book, *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), that Komunyakaa made the Vietnam War a central concern of his work. Ever since, Komunyakaa has been the black exception that proves the white rule of Vietnam veteran writing, the one black author invited to events and roundtables with Butler, Philip Caputo, W. D. Ehrhart, Heinemann, O’Brien, and Bruce Weigl—all white men who built their careers as writers out of their tours as soldiers.

Even as veteran fiction has been incubated by some of the best colleges and universities, veteran writers have described war writing as a marginalized form, left out of the post-civil rights literature of difference. This is the balancing act of the white vet writer, who alternates between seeing himself as a deracinated universal and a minoritized outsider, an embodiment of the nation and an exile from it. In Heinemann’s 1986 novel *Paco’s Story*, which won the 1987 National Book Award over Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), the multivoiced narrator begins with “the first clean fact,” announcing that “this ain’t no war story” because “war stories are out—one, two, three, and a heave-ho” (3). The bourgeois American, the voices declare, sees the war story as nothing more than “a geek-monster species of evil-ugly rumor.” Heinemann built a successful career as a teacher and writer of war fiction. He served for fifteen years as a professor of creative writing at Columbia College Chicago and received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. But he held firm to the belief that the war writer had no place in post-civil rights American literature, that he, O’Brien, and other vets were looked down on by elite publishers and critics. Heinemann seemed to intuit that finding a place in post-civil rights American literature

meant presenting himself as not having a place in it, of being not another white man writing about war but a perennial outsider who couldn't find a publisher or an audience, even as he racked up prizes and fellowships. The careers of O'Brien, Heinemann, and Butler reveal how veteran writing formed a rare site of consensus in the canon wars of the late twentieth century by straddling the divide between a color-blind national genre and a minoritized subnational one, part of the "great books" tradition of men at war and an emerging canon of group-based trauma and representation. Veteran-American literature set white men within the pluralist institution but without forfeiting the cultural center, or the front seat in the classroom.

### **Write What You Know**

The GI Bill sent millions of young men straight from combat to college. The first creative writing workshops were filled with vets, older than most of their classmates and with more stories to tell. When Flannery O'Connor arrived at the University of Iowa in 1945, she found herself surrounded by stiff-backed soldiers and marines. The Iowa Writers' Workshop, the first and most distinguished creative writing program, even held classes in military-style Quonset huts until the mid-1960s. (O'Connor herself wrote a master's thesis about a World War II vet named Hazel Motes. It later became her first novel, *Wise Blood* [1952].) Paul Engle (1961: xxii), the director of the workshop from 1941 to 1965, later said of those years, "For the first time in the sad and enchanting history of literature, for the first time in the dreadful and glorious history of the world, the writer was welcome in the academic place. If the mind could be honored there, why not the imagination?" Engle celebrated the diverse voices that the workshop invited and promoted. He later founded the university-affiliated International Writing Program with his wife, the Chinese novelist Hualing Nieh Engle, to bring established international writers to Iowa City. But the dominant voice in the classroom was that of the white vet, who brought government funds and memories of war to the first workshops. The dominant voice was that of men like a gruff former marine sergeant, whom Engle described as having "shoulders which looked as if they could have held up the temple alone" (xxvii). The first creative writing workshops were veterans' writing workshops, and the first student stories were war stories.

Although the creative writing program emerged before the civil rights and feminist movements brought ethnic studies and women's studies to college campuses and forced English departments to add to their syllabi some of the writers they had earlier neglected as marginal or as speaking to less universal concerns, it anticipated and preemptively contained those disciplinary changes by encouraging white vets to see themselves as universal *and* marginal, relatable to all and understood by none. That idea, that the white vet bore witness to a kind of misunderstood minority experience in his own right, helped ensure that the coming student movements wouldn't achieve the radical change they demanded but partial reform, not redistribution and autonomy but representation and incorporation. The latter did not just serve institutions and administrators faced with shrinking budgets—diversifying syllabi will always be cheaper than diversifying faculty—but also offered white men a way to present their own experiences in the language of the student movements. White vets had, after all, already been writing stories about being forgotten, misunderstood, and isolated. Students of color, as they were gradually welcomed into the world of university creative writing, were instructed to write what they know, an ethic that the two most influential workshop directors, Engle and Wallace Stegner, first instituted with their veteran students and their veteran students' hero, Ernest Hemingway, in mind. The white veteran experience formed the bedrock of creative writing, and it was a bedrock that lent itself to the cultural and institutional changes to come.

Stegner, a classmate of Engle's at the University of Iowa, where he earned his PhD in 1935, founded the Stanford Creative Writing Program for his veteran students. He landed in Palo Alto in 1945, following a stint as a lecturer at Harvard University, and fell in love with the writing of the young vets who enrolled in his courses. "Some sort of Stanford writing program was made inevitable when I walked into my first writing class at Stanford in 1945," Stegner (1966: xi) remembered years later, "and found myself facing a dozen students, GI and otherwise, of whom at least five were more talented or more finished, or both, than anyone I had ever seen in a classroom." That was high praise from a writer who had taught at Harvard and led workshops at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. The difference was not Stanford but the presence of the vets, who arrived in his classes "just out of the armed services, much more mature than the ordinary college student,

with many more things to write, and with a sense of urgency brought on by three or four years of lost time in the army or navy” (1988: 56). The first story Stegner received that fall was about a group of marines stationed in the Pacific. Titled “Rest Camp on Maui,” it was written by a white ex-sailor named Eugene Burdick, who would go on to coauthor the best-selling novels *The Ugly American* (1958) and *Fail-Safe* (1962). Burdick published the story a year later in *Harper's*, with Stegner's help, launching his career as a fiction writer. When Stegner collected the program's best writing in *Twenty Years of Stanford Short Stories* (1966), he filled the volume with fiction by vets. More than a third of the selected stories were authored by former soldiers and marines, almost all of whom wrote about combat. He asked that his students write what they knew, and they knew war.

Stegner felt that the writer did not just serve the entertainment of her or his reader but could unite Cold War America by modeling an ethic of collaboration and cross-racial nation building. The year before he founded the program at Stanford, Stegner collaborated with the editors of *Look* magazine on a 1945 coffee-table book celebrating the diverse cultures that constitute the United States. *One Nation* featured photographs of Filipino farmers in California's Imperial Valley, American Indian blacksmiths in Arizona, and Trappist monks in Iowa. The book did not hide the racial violence that marked the nation—the Ku Klux Klan and anti-Semitic groups also made appearances—but Stegner believed that “the problem of making one nation from the many races and creeds and kinds . . . that the promise of freedom has drawn to our shores” could also, if achieved, be the nation's greatest gift to the world (15). He preached an assimilationist pluralism in which Filipino farmers, American Indian blacksmiths, and Trappist monks would learn to value their collective commonalities above their individual differences. The achievement of “a harmony of our races and creeds into a single nation,” Stegner concluded, “is not a job for Congress [but] for the average Americans in every community, the Smiths and Johnsons and Browns in whose image democracy was created” (336). Like most white racial liberals of the postwar period, he believed, as sociologist Gunnar Myrdal put it in his 1944 best seller *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, that black culture was “a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture” and that the cure for that pathological condition was for white people to undertake a moral education and

integrate black people and other minorities into the “general” culture they embodied (928). Modeling this integrationist ethic was, Stegner believed, the highest calling of the writer, but he wouldn’t discover the men who for him epitomized this ethic until the next year in Palo Alto. It was his white veteran students, men who represented the nation but also knew and understood adversity, he decided, who were best suited to welcome black and brown America into the white sphere of Smiths, Johnsons, and Browns.

No single author had a larger influence on the first classes of creative writing students than Hemingway, whose fame reached new heights during World War II. In one of his first classes, Stegner (1949: 185) remembered receiving six short stories from six young men: “Every story was laid in a bar, every one involved a girl, wanton but wistful, with whom the hero was involved, every one contained an impressionistic passage during which the hero studied his drunken countenance in the wavering bar mirror, and every one was written in a tough, bare, corner-of-the-mouth style.” Every one was, that is, written in the mold of a Hemingway short story. But that didn’t mean that Stegner discouraged his veteran students from emulating Hemingway’s fiction. He predicted that Hemingway’s writing would age better than that of other novelists, that he was “more representative of his times than any of them” because he had “shown a keener nose for the news that will be news ten years from now” (1942: 78). That news was war. Stegner believed what Hemingway himself believed: that there was no substitute for world-historical material. In a 1925 letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway (1981: 176) wrote, “Well the reason you are so sore you missed the war is because war is the best subject of all. It groups the maximum of material and speeds up the action and brings out all sorts of stuff that normally you have to wait a lifetime to get.” Stegner’s veteran students had an advantage over their classmates because they had seen things on the fronts of Europe and the Pacific that other college students would never see and could never know. Their knowledge of men at war was the stuff of great literature.

Hemingway’s fiction demonstrated for Burdick and others how a writer could straddle the divide between nationalism and alienation. His “Soldier’s Home” (1925), for example, tells of former marine Harold Krebs’s return to his hometown in Oklahoma. Krebs had bounced around Europe after the war and arrives too late for the hero’s welcome that his fellow vets had received. His neighbors don’t understand why

it took him so long to return, but they want to hear his stories. Krebs discovers that he has to lie to find an audience: "His town had heard too many atrocity stories to be thrilled by actualities. Krebs found that to be listened to at all he had to lie, and after he had done this twice he, too, had a reaction against the war and against talking about it. A distaste for everything that had happened to him in the war set in because of the lies he had told" (Hemingway 1925: 90). Short and assimilable, "Soldier's Home" lent itself to classroom instruction. Stegner taught it in his seminars. The story situates the veteran Krebs as the embodiment of Americanism. The townspeople are eager to hear stories of what he saw and did in the war. But they also fail to listen to Krebs, demanding that he tell tales that conform to what they wish to believe about combat. The town welcomes him as a favorite son and yet makes him feel alienated, unable to share the "actualities" of war. The story offers a model for imagining the white vet as an agent of Stegner's assimilationist pluralism. Krebs, a white man who served the nation in a world war, is a representative American. But his alienation from his hometown suggests that he can also relate to the Filipino farmer, the American Indian blacksmith, and the Trappist monk. He is insider and outsider, national norm and subnational stranger.

That balancing act between nation and alienation did not go unnoticed by Stegner's favorite student, Burdick. "Rest Camp on Maui" is set on a makeshift base in the Pacific, where a correspondent interviews four marines about their experiences in the war. The third-person narration moves in and out of each of the four marines' minds, granting the reader access to their thoughts and memories as they entertain the correspondent with tales of combat and carousing. The narration allows Burdick to highlight the disconnect between the marines' often traumatic memories and the correspondent's propagandistic notes. A marine remembers the desperation of a Japanese woman offering herself to him with her husband looking on, and the correspondent writes, "Marines like Aussie girls, but first love still clean-cut American girls" (Burdick 1946: 85). Another marine, a Jewish private, remembers the heroic death of his Jewish lieutenant who had earned the respect of an anti-Semitic Polish American marine by trouncing him in a boxing match and then visiting him in the hospital. The correspondent writes, "Jewish boys in the Marines, famed for their entertainment on Broadway and in Hollywood, arrange musicals, shows, and other laugh-fests to keep America's finest fighting

men relaxed between battles” (89). Much like Krebs in “Soldier’s Home,” the marines discover that the correspondent (and the American public for which he writes) does not want the truth; he wants the stories that best meet readers’ expectations of America’s finest fighting men. The correspondent renders the four men as ideal Americans, sharing a love of clean-cut American girls and a hunger for battle, but he also denies the less heroic, more human experiences they have endured in the Pacific. The marines can see this, and together, having finished the whiskey the correspondent brought them, kick him out of their tent. “Rest Camp on Maui” reproduces the national alienation of “Soldier’s Home” but weds it to a group-based politics of white identity. Burdick’s story shows how two Jewish marines became white through combat, how they shed their identities as Jewish Americans by becoming marines and vets. Whereas Hemingway presents Krebs as a deracinated vet—the reader knows that he is white, but the story doesn’t say so outright—Burdick demonstrates an emerging self-consciousness among white men about their whiteness, a whiteness they claim indirectly by identifying as marines or vets. “Rest Camp on Maui,” arguably the founding story of the Stanford Creative Writing Program, models how the war story might be turned into a vessel for an unstated white identity politics through which white men can identify as white without identifying as white. From Hemingway to Burdick, the early creative writing program paved the way for the rise of the veteran-American writer.

The founders of the MFA system anticipated the importance of experience and identity—of writing what you know—to postwar literary culture. Engle and Stegner mentored some of the most celebrated writers of the period as well as some of the most influential teachers of creative writing. The graduates of their workshops went on to found their own programs at colleges and universities facing increased enrollment and eager to build new departments and programs. Stegner directed the Stanford program for more than two decades, from 1946 to 1971. But later classes disappointed him; they could never live up to that first cohort of white vets. “Even by graduation the student is often too immature to know his own mind or have enough experience in the world to know where he stands,” Stegner (1950: 430) wrote. “That is why the GI students, now sadly diminishing, have had so large a part to play in the boom of college writing programs. They came mature and experienced and serious; they had something to

think with and something to feel with and something to say.” The creative writing professor could teach a student to write, but he couldn’t give the student his or her material; he couldn’t give the student something to write about. Stegner came to resent the politics of the counterculture. He butted heads with one of his most famous students, Ken Kesey, and won a Pulitzer Prize for a novel, *Angle of Repose* (1971), that mourned the dissolution of consensus national politics. Although Stegner (1966: xvi) chafed at what he called “the amorphous ‘freedom’ movement” and an emerging literature of difference, he and other founding directors of early creative writing programs had a hand in forming that literature by encouraging their veteran students to mine the alienating knowledge of war for material. If Stegner taught his postwar students to write what they know, the post-civil rights students that followed would write who they are.

### **Write Who You Are**

Engle and Stegner built the Iowa and Stanford programs into hubs for the cultivation of writing talent, but they remained institutional oddities throughout their tenures. That began to change in the mid-1960s with the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and the Veterans’ Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966. Part of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society agenda, the Higher Education Act granted federal tuition assistance, in the form of grants and low-interest loans, to students with financial needs. The Veterans’ Readjustment Benefits Act modified the existing GI Bill by extending benefits to veterans who had served since the Korean War. For the first time, college tuition assistance was being offered in part to induce young men and women to join the armed forces. Enlistment became a route to enrollment. The Higher Education Act and the modified GI Bill widened the postwar boom in higher education, with more working-class students enrolling at two- and four-year colleges than ever before, either through loans or veterans’ subsidies. Creative writing programs benefited, too. When the Associated Writing Programs (AWP; now the Association of Writers and Writing Programs) was founded in 1967, it counted just thirteen institutions among its members, including the creative writing programs at Iowa and Stanford. That number increased to seventy-nine by 1975 and more than three hundred by 1984 (see AWP 2012). In his fourth year at Stanford, Stegner (1949: 184) laid out his vision

for the future of creative work: “The young writer who in the twenties headed for Greenwich Village and who in the thirties took out by box-car to bum his way through a hundred odd jobs to fame now heads for some graduate school of English to study with some professional writer.” Stegner’s words may have seemed fanciful in the late 1940s, but they resonated with future MFA-trained writers, who would hone their craft in the classroom and sometimes never leave.

The creative writing program, like the rest of the English department, underwent a slow, fitful transition from pre-civil rights racial liberalism to post-civil rights liberal multiculturalism. Racial liberals cared less about who wrote a book as long as that book offered a right-minded engagement with “the Negro problem,” which, as Myrdal (1944: xlvi) argued, was “a problem in the heart of the [white] American” and could therefore be “solved” only by the white liberal committed to racial justice. Think, for example, of Lillian Smith’s *Strange Fruit* (1944), Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), and John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me* (1961)—three of the period’s most popular books about race. Their white heroes—Smith’s Tracy Deen, Lee’s Atticus Finch, and Griffin’s blacked-up self—confront antiblack racism as a problem in their own hearts to be solved through white moral courage. Smith, Lee, and Griffin did not attend or teach in creative writing programs, but their racial liberalism reflected the culture of postwar higher education, even if you couldn’t find them or their books on campus. Their racial politics could be found in Stegner’s workshop and his vets’ integrationist stories of white cross-racial and cross-ethnic fellow feeling.

The white liberal race novel waned in the later years of the civil rights era and had all but disappeared by the 1980s, when liberal multiculturalism entered the English classroom. The discipline incorporated and contained the lessons of the civil rights, feminist, and anti-war movements by responding to demands for material redistribution with cultural representation. The white liberal collegian could “get to know difference” by reading writers of color, even as her school remained inaccessible to more than the most affluent students of color. Now white students could read N. Scott Momaday to learn about American Indians, Rudolfo Anaya to learn about Chicanos, and Maxine Hong Kingston to learn about Asian Americans. Ethnic studies scholar Jodi Melamed (2011: xvi) shows how literature emerged in the second half of the twentieth century as a “privileged tool” for

white collegians to learn about racial difference. “Because multicultural literature was presumed to be authentic, intimate, and representative,” she writes, “white students with minimal knowledge of or contact with racialized communities could nonetheless presume enough familiarity to legitimate their managerial-class position” (37). The creative writing workshop, which gradually embraced that literature—Momaday, Anaya, and Kingston, for example, all supplemented their writing careers as professors of the craft—shifted from the liberal ethic of “write what you know” to the multicultural ethic of “write who you are.” That shift didn’t exclude white writers, though; they, too, learned to write through the prism of identity, whether as regional writers, working-class writers, or veteran-American writers. This is how the creative writing program has managed to stay so homogenous—even today the AWP reports that programs remain 75 percent white—while championing diversity and difference (see AWP 2016).

The white veteran writer, for whom Engle and Stegner had instituted the creative writing imperatives of experience and identity, was especially well prepared for the transition from racial liberalism to liberal multiculturalism. As the black power, Chicano, American Indian, and Asian American movements fueled renaissances in minority literatures, white writers who had served in Vietnam increasingly embraced the war not as a discrete experience but as the basis of their authorial identities. They were not writers who went to war but warriors who learned to write. Colleges and universities embraced the veteran writer as a new kind of minority—a veteran-American who had committed and borne witness to atrocities in Southeast Asia and returned home defeated and neglected. Not only did the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission recognize veterans as a protected class beginning with the Vietnam Era Veterans’ Readjustment Assistance Act of 1974, but the GI Bill, because it was created and administered in a discriminatory manner, had already established a system in which white men were advantaged over students of color and white women. By the time the Vietnam War escalated, the white vet was already the university’s most protected minority, and after that war, his trauma and sense of loss ensured him a seat at a newly diverse seminar table that now included students of color and women, gay, and queer students. He, a white man writing about war, was an outsider, too.

When four of the most acclaimed Vietnam War novelists—Butler, Caputo, Heinemann, and O’Brien, all white men—gathered at the 1987

Vietnam Veterans of America convention in Washington, DC, they shared a sense of amazement and frustration with the market success of their books. Heinemann described how writers would come to him and tell him that they wished they had been drafted. "Somehow they feel the war is a central literary experience that they have missed," he said. "And I always make a point of telling those guys that they could have traded places with me anytime" (quoted in *New York Times* 1987). Butler, who has taught creative writing at McNeese State University and Florida State University, shared Heinemann's discomfort with the growing audience for his fiction. "America doesn't like losers; I'm not sure how deep the interest in Vietnam really runs," he said. "We've got a psychic wound in the country and the country's artists are usually the people who work those psychic wounds out" (quoted in *New York Times* 1987). Heinemann and Butler welcomed the renewed attention being paid to the Vietnam War, but they also wondered what was motivating that attention. The "guys" Heinemann described wish they had served because the war had given writers like him and Butler an identity in a pluralist literary market. They got to write about America not as white men but as vets. Their suffering as soldiers and marines had turned their fiction into literature. Their status as veteran writers had not marginalized their work but centered it. The vet's psychic wounds, Butler argued, are the nation's psychic wounds, and the nation must listen to the veteran writer if it is ever to heal them.

Veteran-American literature allowed white men in the post-civil rights era to imagine themselves as ethnicized but not racialized. In the late twentieth century, conservatives and liberals found common ground in their denial of racial difference. Conservatives believed that the denial of racial difference would safeguard the racial status quo, while liberals believed that it would facilitate the gradual reform and eventual abolishment of racial hierarchies. That "color-blind" consensus led to the transformation of racial difference (social structure, the distribution of life chances) into ethnic difference (cultural affiliation, immigrant heritage). This is why *multiculturalism* became the term of choice and why most English departments offer a course titled *multiethnic* rather than *multiracial* American literature, even when all of the writers taught are black and brown. It is about cultural representation rather than material redistribution. The canon wars, from which the field of multiethnic American literature emerged,

came at a time of downsizing in humanities departments and offered a convenient distraction from the continued absence of faculty and students of color and first-generation students. Canons are cheap. Salaries and scholarships are not. The turn from race to ethnicity made it possible for white vets to be treated as minorities but without forfeiting their claim to universal status.

The political value of the minoritized veteran-American to countering arguments for affirmative-action policies meant that the war story had to, more than ever, remain a white genre. The turn from racial liberal literature—the most popular of which was written by white authors and about white people confronting learned racist ideas about black people, to liberal multicultural literature, which was mostly written by authors of color and mostly about people of color grappling with their racial or ethnic heritage—established the belief that writers should not venture into someone else’s lane. The response to white novelist William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), which Styron wrote from the perspective of black slave rebellion leader Nat Turner, signaled the transformation of pre-civil rights racial liberalism into post-civil rights liberal multiculturalism. Columbia University awarded the novel the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1968, as it had Harper Lee’s novel seven years earlier, but black critics condemned Styron for ventriloquizing Turner, with Beacon Press publishing *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* that same year. Although Styron’s novel may be a singularly unusual work, the controversy it attracted—with some celebrating it as a triumph of antiracism and others denouncing it as a study in antiblack racism—signaled a crisis and coming transition for liberal white racial politics. Veteran-American literature gave white men something Styron didn’t know he needed in 1967: an identity-based tradition that they could claim as their own.

The whiteness of war writing was nothing new, of course, but with the once-boundless domain of the white male author shrinking, as Styron discovered, he now needed the war story to be his. Like no other genre, war fiction binds the identity of the writer with that of the nation. This is why it is continually being scrutinized, policed, and honored with national prizes. Nguyen, himself a winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, identifies how the whiteness of the war story affects the reception of refugee writing and inhibits Americans’ knowledge of the wars fought with their implicit or explicit consent. “Not all soldiers

who write make the grade, but soldiers who write can make the grade, as [Tim] O'Brien does, because the war story belongs to them," Nguyen (2016: 248) writes. "While the refugee who becomes a writer is given the license to tell a refugee story, he or she is not seen as writing an actual war story, at least not one that is given the same weight as a soldier's. . . . This difficulty is inseparable from the war that created the refugee in the first place and hence created the conditions for grading the refugee turned writer." Our evaluation of literature—how we "grade" the veteran or refugee writer—is tied to the larger valuation of human life across racial and national lines. This is all the more true of the war story because it offered a genre through which white writers and readers could redefine whiteness within the bounds of the emerging diversity paradigm.

O'Brien's career testifies to the success with which the white veteran writer remade himself for a post-civil rights era. The English department and the creative writing program were contested territories in the culture wars of the late twentieth century. Some, believing that "cultural relativism" was watering down a formidable Western tradition, fought for what they called the great books curriculum. Others demanded a revised curriculum that better reflected the multiracial nation in which they and their students lived. The cultural left and the cultural right shared the "extraordinary premise," in sociologist Bethany Bryson's (2005: 2) words, that "every time an English teacher put together a reading list, the future of a nation hung in the balance." Few writers emerged unscathed from the canon wars, but O'Brien could count himself among those fortunate few. The reason he and other veteran writers fared so well is that they could be taught, depending on a professor's bent, either as inheritors of the great books tradition (as white men writing about white men at war) or as representative voices of a forgotten subnational group (as veteran-Americans). O'Brien found an audience on both sides of the canon wars by treating the Vietnam vet as a kind of minoritized universal, by making the veteran-American the truest American not despite but *because of* his minoritized status. In conversation with Butler, Caputo, and Heinemann at the Vietnam Veterans of America convention, O'Brien acknowledged as much. The Vietnam War novel may "go out of fashion," he said. "But all of us are aspiring to write something that can be read a hundred years from now and still have truth to it. . . . It's got nothing to do with the particulars of what happened in Khe Sanh; it's got

nothing to do with the surface details of war” (quoted in *New York Times* 1987). War writing was nothing more for the white vet than a vehicle for reaching the transcendent plane of capital-L literature.

### The Veteran-American Writer

O’Brien once told a reporter that he wanted to write a best seller and “not just [be] read in English classes” (quoted in Bruckner 1990). But English classes, it turned out, would be his route to the best seller list. *The Things They Carried* boasts sales of more than two million copies, and high school and college students account for most of those sales. The book has been selected by hundreds of universities and colleges for their common-read programs. It is part of the curriculum for Advanced Placement English Literature courses. For some students, it is all they will ever learn about the war in Southeast Asia. The National Endowment for the Arts has promoted the book through the Big Read, a program that sponsors reading events and distributes teaching materials to local librarians and high school English teachers. Not since Hemingway has a war writer found such a large institutional audience. Part of the reason is that, like Hemingway, O’Brien writes fiction that lends itself to emulation. It feels, at the surface, *crafted*—like it has been fine-tuned until not a single sentence could be cut and not a single word better chosen. Even the NEA’s teacher’s guide includes a series of writing exercises that ask students to mimic the structure of O’Brien’s short stories. He is a writer made for the creative writing program, and as the history of the MFA system shows, the creative writing program was made for him.

But O’Brien (1994a) has insisted that he not be read as “the Hemingway of the Vietnam generation” because his real subject is not war but trauma. He has described “Vietnam” as a metaphor for all of life’s adversities: “Nam lived on inside me, and I just called it by a different name—I called it life. Nam, divorce, your father’s death—such things live on even though you think you’re over them. They come bubbling up” (1994a: 1990). His critics agree. Mark Heberle titled his 2001 book about O’Brien’s life and work *A Trauma Artist*. Heberle argues that “Vietnam has metamorphosed into an imaginative site in O’Brien” (xxvii) and that trauma rather than the war in Southeast Asia “is the medium within which and out of which his protagonists are impelled to revisit and rewrite their life experiences” (xxi). O’Brien and other

white veteran writers profit from the malleable nature of white identity politics, which allow them to wear their authorial identities more loosely and electively than writers of color. They receive accolades for deploying the tropes of a minority literary culture—including, most of all, the fragmented, cyclical form of the trauma narrative—without being pigeonholed as this or that kind of writer. They get to have it both ways by more forcefully equating their particular trauma with a national trauma. The Vietnam War was an *American* tragedy, and despite the disproportionate service of American Indian, black, and Latino soldiers, the cultural industries have represented it as the white vet's American tragedy. Trauma culture made it possible for O'Brien to compare his minoritization as a war writer to Toni Morrison's as a black writer and, in the next breath, reject that minoritization.

O'Brien didn't suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder himself, but he made his mark as PTSD was being recognized as a diagnosable disorder—first among white Vietnam vets—and then as a cultural signifier of group-based historical knowledge. Trauma was the language of late twentieth-century pluralist literature, with writers from Morrison and Alice Walker to Tony Kushner and Art Spiegelman using it to structure their historical fiction and memoirs. But O'Brien (1994b) believed war to be a transcendent kind of trauma, bringing character and reader closer to death—and the existential knowledge that comes with it—than could be achieved in other genres. “The environment of war is the environment of life, magnified,” he said, echoing Hemingway's letter to Fitzgerald. “The stakes of living in a war are enhanced only because of the awareness of the proximity of death. That is to say, I'm almost dead with every step I take as opposed to fifty steps to the day I get cancer or have a first heart attack. We are all living in a war. It's just that the wolf isn't quite at the door” (23–24). He may be writing about the Vietnam War, O'Brien suggested, but war is about the trauma of facing death head-on. It is about recognizing how fragile life is. It is life magnified. It is something we can all relate to, even if we didn't serve in Southeast Asia or live through the war.

Morrison has suggested something different about the universal in literature. She described herself, in a 1985 conversation with Gloria Naylor, as working with “one facet of a prism.” A black woman may be “over here writing about that side of this huge sort of diamond thing that I see, and then you read another book and somebody has written

about another side. And you know that eventually the whole thing will be lit—all of these planes and all of the facets. But it's all one diamond, it's all one diamond" (Naylor and Morrison 1985: 590). Morrison, who would go on to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, was unwilling to claim more than "this little part" of the diamond. O'Brien and other white Vietnam vets sought to claim the whole thing. We are all living in a war, and war belongs to the white writer.

But O'Brien (1992) has acknowledged a debt to Morrison, and his fiction shows it. He has pointed to her 1977 novel *Song of Solomon* as a book that inspired him to weave myth, mystery, and a belief in the impossible into his own fiction. "People are flying, but it happens mythically," he said of Morrison's novel. "It doesn't matter that it's impossible—they just are." O'Brien's *Going after Cacciato*, published a year after *Song of Solomon*, transforms Southeast Asia into a place of myth and mystery for the American soldier. When the enigmatic private Cacciato leaves the war to walk to Paris—"eight thousand six hundred statute miles" through Laos, Burma, India, Iran, Turkey, and Greece—Paul Berlin and his comrades track him to a mountain, where Berlin spots the AWOL soldier through his binoculars. He sees Cacciato, perched on the face of the mountain, flapping his arms and smiling: "Paul Berlin could not hear. But he saw the wide wings, and the big smile, and the movement of the boy's lips. . . . So Paul Berlin, watching Cacciato fly, repeated it: 'Good-bye'" (O'Brien 2014: 12). The rest of the novel is consumed by Berlin's reveries. He imagines that his squad follows Cacciato all the way to Paris and away from a war that he loathes but lacks the courage to flee himself. No one seems to know Cacciato's first name or much about him at all. Berlin can't even remember his face. It seems that Cacciato somehow "lacked the fine detail, the refinement and final touches" of an adult face. His features are "blurred and uncolored and bland" (8). Cacciato (an Italian name meaning "hunted" or "caught") offers a kind of blank screen onto which Berlin can project his fantasy of escape but also the anxiety of being hunted or caught by his own government. He represents the white ethnic soldier's experience of subjugation in Southeast Asia, the only escape from which is through the soldier's imagination. Berlin must imagine the impossible.

O'Brien admires Morrison, it seems, not for the historical or political resonance of her fiction but for her craft, for how she uses myth

and mystery to fire the reader's imagination. That has been the attitude of the creative writing program since Engle and Stegner taught their first workshops to classrooms full of vets. The social protest novels that had found a wide audience in the interwar period had no place at the postwar seminar table. "A writer has to deal in facts, things, particulars," Stegner (1950: 431) wrote. "If he has ideas, too, as he had better have, they ought to live in the attic of his writing and show themselves like ghosts flitting past the windows after dark." A writer may have ideas, but they better not show. She should keep her politics in the attic where they belong. That is the lesson of O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story." The narrator, also named Tim O'Brien, tells the reader what a war story should and should not do, even as he, knowingly, violates some of his own rules: "A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it" (O'Brien 2009: 65). The narrator identifies something true about the war story itself: it had long ago traded politics for craft. He makes the case, made decades earlier by Stegner, that the writer should traffic in things rather than ideas. The worst thing a war story can do is encourage virtue. The worst thing it can do is instruct, the narrator instructs.

But O'Brien's war stories do have a politics, of course. The absence of politics is never the absence of politics. It is rather a way to claim a privileged relationship to rationality and truth. It is a way to suggest that you are dealing in facts, things, and particulars rather than in the imaginary realm of ideas. The truthfulness of the white vet's war story depends on a belief that he is telling it like it was and not like he wishes it had been, that he is sharing facts and not ideas. But the particulars of war are, O'Brien implies, universal in their traumatic content. His eponymous narrator concludes "How to Tell a True War Story" by admitting that the story he is telling—the story of his comrade Curt Lemon's last seconds of life—is not really a war story but a love story: "A true war story is never about war. It's about sunlight. It's about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen" (81). All of O'Brien's short stories and novels suggest that war is, above all else, a heightened state of consciousness through which the

soldier discovers universal truths about life, death, and love. The true war story always transcends its immediate subject because what the white soldier discovers in combat are the things we all discover, only more slowly and less profoundly, in civilian life. Yet, as the narrator of “How to Tell a True a War Story” indicates, people never listen to the vet. His stories are simultaneously the most universal and the most ignored. If only people would listen, the veteran-American writer would tell them the particular story of the soldier and, through it, the universal story of the nation. From his side of what Morrison describes as the diamond of American literature, he would light up the whole.

### **Vietnam War Literature**

The white Vietnam vet’s authority to tell the story of the nation—to light all of Morrison’s diamond—depended on his authority to tell the story of the war. The Vietnam War gave him a way to voice a racial grievance and assert a racial entitlement without ever having to acknowledge his whiteness. War binds whiteness to Americanness, white skin to green uniforms, which explains why Southeast Asian American writers, many of whom published their first novels and memoirs amid the explosion of veteran fiction, found themselves excluded from the emerging genre of “Vietnam War literature.” This narrowly defined genre insulated itself from refugee writing by turning the liberal white vet into a cultural bridge between white America and Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora, Robert Olen Butler being the most flagrant, and most celebrated, example. He won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1992), a book of short stories about Vietnamese refugees living in the Louisiana bayou. Butler, a graduate of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and a professor of creative writing, had written six novels before *Good Scent*, most of which were third-person accounts of white soldiers and vets as they struggled to come to terms with the devastating results of a misguided war. He changed directions with his fifteen first-person stories about Vietnamese and Vietnamese American men and women reckoning with their memories of war and, for some, their new lives in the United States. Book reviewers received it as an astonishing achievement of imagination and understanding. George Packer (1992) reviewed it for the *New York Times*, declaring it a book that “goes a

long way toward making the Vietnamese real” from a writer “who is intoxicated by Vietnam and Vietnamese, who loves what has alienated so many other Americans, including novelists.” Under the Refugee Act of 1980, hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asian refugees settled in American cities from Houston to San Jose to Westminster, California. But somehow it fell to a white American to make them real.

Butler saw this not as a theft but as a radical act of other-identification. War, he believed, brings to the surface the “central human issue” of where we draw the line around ourselves, how and where we distinguish us from them. When the United States entered Vietnam, Butler remembered,

We thought the line was as wide as the whole world, which I guess grew out of the long-standing sense of America as a melting pot, open to all who would become part of us. But the melting pot also implied losing some of your own particularities, and now, the line is actually tighter. The current sense of finding who you are in an exclusive way by your gender, race, culture, ethnicity, religion, or whatever is the same larger question that Vietnam raised for us—where do you draw the line? (quoted in Herzog 2008: 151)

Butler suggested that the cultural pluralism of the post–civil rights era, in which Americans abandoned the racial liberal melting pot and organized themselves by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion, had tightened the lines we draw around ourselves. But the war had done the opposite for him: “For me in Vietnam, in a personal way, the line was cast to the farthest horizon in a way that, in practical terms, had not effectively been done for me before” (151). War had given him an enlarged sense of human life that had, he argued, allowed him to write short stories from the perspective of Vietnamese refugees. Entering the minds of others, Butler sought to suture the “particularities” of Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans to the “farthest horizon” of the white liberal vet. Twenty-five years earlier Styron’s ventriloquized representation of Nat Turner met scathing criticism. Butler’s refugee stories did not. This is in part because the national memory of the Vietnam War had been turned into a vessel for a new white identity politics in which white men reclaimed the universal by declaring their intimate knowledge of the social margin. The minoritization of the white vet resulted not in his marginalization

but his universalization, not the elevation of those with whom he identified but their erasure.

The reception of Butler's refugee stories shows the extent to which veteran writers have monopolized the genre of Vietnam War literature. Refugee stories by refugees generally aren't received as war stories but as coming-to-America stories, while Butler's, because they are written by a white American vet, are. Butler's identity, rather than the content of his writing, encouraged American readers to receive his work as not just a window onto the soldier's or refugee's experience but a statement on the war at large. It encouraged readers to encounter it as Vietnam War literature. This remains a problem even when veterans of color are welcomed into the genre. In Komunyakaa's poem "Tu Do Street" (1988), a black soldier navigates Saigon bars and brothels that have been segregated to accommodate their American customers, recognizing that he and his white comrades are, despite drinking at different bars, united through "machine-gun fire" and in sleeping with the same Vietnamese prostitutes: "There's more than a nation / inside us, as black & white / soldiers touch the same lovers / minutes apart, tasting / each other's breath / without knowing these rooms / run into each other like tunnels / leading to the underworld" (29). Komunyakaa's poem identifies how the military exports anti-black racism to the places it invades and occupies, but it doesn't address the people at the other end of the machine-gun fire or how the war his country executed created the sex trade in which he is now participating.

Butler now teaches creative writing at Florida State, Komunyakaa at New York University. Butler's most recent novel, *Perfume River* (2016), is about a Vietnam vet struggling with the long-running effects of the war on his family. Komunyakaa has mostly moved on, writing about jazz, blues, and the work of the poet. They teach in programs that have made the war story what it is: a genre about mostly white American men at war with each other and themselves in foreign lands populated by shadows and ghosts. It is a genre that excludes almost all veterans of color and all Southeast Asians, ensuring that most readers will come to know war through the barrel of a white soldier's gun, even if that soldier is a good-hearted liberal. It is the product of an institutional movement that began with Engle and Stegner, continued through Heinemann, O'Brien, and Butler, and now finds expression in the writing of Iraq War vets (and MFAs) Matt Gallagher, Phil Klay,

and Kevin Powers. The creative writing workshop turned the white vet into a minority through whom the white male writer could reclaim the universal as his rightful terrain by administrating rather than ignoring minoritized difference, including his own. He even has a program for it.

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