Reading the Vietnam War and Encountering Other Others: Race and Ethnicity in American Novels of the Vietnam War

Erin Marie Rentschler

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READING THE VIETNAM WAR AND ENCOUNTERING OTHER OTHERS:
RACE AND ETHNICITY IN AMERICAN NOVELS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

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ABSTRACT

READING THE VIETNAM WAR AND ENCOUNTERING OTHER OTHERS: RACE AND ETHNICITY IN AMERICAN NOVELS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

By
Erin Marie Rentschler
May 2016

Dissertation supervised by Magali C. Michael

This dissertation examines four novels that specifically and deliberately focus on the perspectives of people of color in the United States in order to explore a gap in the conversations surrounding representation of the Vietnam War. Opening the canon to include more diverse perspectives of the Vietnam War acknowledges how predominantly white representation of the war effaces the experiences of the many soldiers of color, who often fought and died in disproportionately greater numbers than white soldiers, and attempts to redress such erasure. These novels include Arthur R. Flowers’s *De Mojo Blues*, which focuses on African American soldiers’ experience and highlights intra-racial conflicts and Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge*, an exploration of Vietnamese American women living as refugees in the United States. Additionally, Alfredo Véa’s *Gods Go Begging* and Linda Hogan’s *People of the Whale* go beyond the Chicano and Native American identities of their respective protagonists by including a diverse range of voices.
and re-imagining boundaries associated with racial and national identities. Responding to the myth of American exceptionalism, the novels illuminate how the war perpetuated long-standing systems of oppression and interrogate oppositions between self and other, individual and community, and past and present that war often sustains. As such these novels emerge as critical interventions in discourses of race and nation by highlighting and creating space for difference. Ultimately, these novels provide a vision of hope by imagining a world that embraces the complexities of cross-cultural community rather than merely superficial melting pot diversity.
DEDICATION

For my family, especially my children and their powerful ability to imagine.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This dissertation is the product of a long journey that I am fortunate not to have made alone. I am grateful for the support of my committee. Dr. Magali Michael remained constant in her patience with my struggles and her commitment to my success. She pushed me to clarify my thoughts and to grow as a writer and a scholar. Dr. Emad Mirmotahiri demonstrated an enthusiasm for my work that often re-invigorated my passion for the project. His feedback was compelling and challenged me to think in new ways. Often at pivotal moments, Dr. Kathy Glass provided keen feedback and valuable resources that helped me move through each chapter with confidence. Equally important was her understanding of my desire to maintain work-life balance. Together, this committee provided unwavering support, especially in those moments when giving up seemed like the best option. I appreciate the kindness of the faculty and graduate students in the English department and I am grateful for the intellectual stimulation and financial support I received during my graduate studies. I also thank my students, whose curiosity often showed me new paths to explore as I made my way to this particular project.

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My deepest gratitude belongs with my family, near and far. My family’s unconditional love helped me to keep this journey in perspective. My parents and my siblings never questioned my goals but instead provided steadfast support and encouragement. My husband Brett managed my stress, fear, excitement and absence with patience, kindness, and love far beyond my expectations. Finally, my son Bennett, who came into my life as I began this project, and his sister, who will arrive not long after I complete it, provide the most appropriate bookends for this project. I could not love you all any more.
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Introduction

The era commonly referred to simply as “the sixties” is often considered one of the most tumultuous times in American history. As a decade, it reaches beyond its chronological markers and continues to influence national and individual identity.\(^1\) The Vietnam War, a key event within this particular period, sparked a variety of cultural responses that shaped American memory and understanding of itself as a nation. The war, in which Americans participated most fully from 1965-1973 through a heavily conscripted military, holds a unique place in the American imagination because it involved a lot of firsts: the Vietnam War was the first war to be fully integrated throughout all military branches and ranks; television reporters brought war into American homes; and the United States experienced clear defeat for the first time.\(^2\) A

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\(^1\) For example, the Vietnam War has caused considerable controversy in presidential campaigns long after the end of the war. In presidential debates and in the press, the role candidates played in Vietnam has been used both to praise and denounce candidates’ patriotism. In 1991, despite George Bush’s statement that the United States had “kicked the Vietnam War syndrome once and for all” through the military success of the Gulf War, Bill Clinton’s opponents tried to discredit him by questioning his draft deferments and his objections to the war. In 2004, John Kerry and George W. Bush were scrutinized for their Vietnam War experiences. In 2008, Barack Obama’s patriotism was called into question by opponents contrasting his lack of military service (among other things) to John McCain’s status as a Vietnam War hero. In 2015, Donald Trump attempted to discredit John McCain by suggesting the latter was not a war hero because he had been captured by North Vietnamese. Reporters were quick to point out Trump’s multiple draft deferments. Attention has also been drawn to Bernie Sanders’ objection to the Vietnam War and to long-shot candidate Jim Webber’s lauded service in the war.

\(^2\) Even the historical facts of the Vietnam War continue to be contested; however, general consensus holds that active American military involvement in the war began in 1965 and steadily increased until the end of the decade. Prior to that, beginning as early as the last days of World War II, United States involvement in Vietnam initially took the form of covert, small scale operations, followed by political and military advisement, until ground troops arrived in 1962. Withdrawal of American troops began in the early 1970s, with the last troops leaving in 1973 (though many Americans remained in Vietnam as prisoners of war or were designated missing in action). While other wars involved a racially diverse military, racial segregation kept soldiers of color from the front lines, relegating them to labor and support duties. Barracks and dining halls remained segregated even though the United States officially abolished discrimination in the military after World War II (see Westheider). A more detailed discussion of military integration can be found in Chapter One. Some consider the broadcasting of the war as one of the reasons that the United States was defeated; they theorize that as the public saw more of the war, anti-war protest increased and prompted troop withdrawals (see, for example, Mandelbaum’s “Vietnam: The Television War”).
heavy anti-war movement developed alongside several other movements working for
gender and racial equality, so that the period of the war significantly disrupted the
nation’s sense of itself as the land of the free and the home of the brave. The war, the
draft, and the protests all set the stage for exposing in new ways the nation’s failure to
live up to its democratic ideals, and Americans have produced thousands of narratives of
the Vietnam War in histories, journalism, literature, film, and music. These
representations work to create meaning from a situation that caused a tremendous loss of
life, honor, and human dignity. This dissertation examines four novels whose
representations of the Vietnam War emphasize the perspectives of people of color in the
United States in order to call attention to narratives that have been marginalized despite
the connections between the war and racial tension of the period. The novels illuminate
how the war perpetuated long-standing systems of oppression while also providing hope
by creating a vision of a more equal future.

Especially before the Vietnam War, the idea of war often emerged as a series of
images shaped by notions of the courage and strength of the soldier. The soldier
represented a heroic figure committed to sacrificing his own life to protect his country
and the democratic ideals for which it stood. America’s long-held sense of itself as an
exceptional nation, one occupying a superior place in the world for its military and
political strengths, supported such glorification of war. Chris Hedges argues in War is a
Force that Gives Us Meaning that “Most of us are willing to accept war as long as we can
fold it into a belief system that paints the ensuing suffering as necessary for a higher
good, for human beings seek not only happiness but also meaning” (10). The “higher
good” of war for the United States derives from its sense of itself as the Nation of
nations, more capable than any other nation of defeating those who threaten the
democratic ideals upon which the United States was founded and therefore morally
obligated to do so. Hedges indicates that “war makes the world understandable” by
creating “a black and white tableau of them and us. It suspends thought. […] We are one”
(10).³ The rationale behind the Vietnam War seemed to provide such a tableau: America
needed to provide aid to South Vietnam in order to prevent them from succumbing to the
communism in North Vietnam. The United States feared that a communist South
Vietnam would ultimately lead to the spread of communism throughout Asia and thereby
threaten the United States and the rest of the free world.

Media reporting of the Vietnam War revealed, however, that these versions of war
and the American national identity of exceptionalism were myths rather than objective
truths. This reportage presented the United States as defeated in Vietnam, thus
undermining the idea that its military was superior, as well as American young men
perpetrating meaningless acts of violence on innocent civilians rather than courageous,
righteous soldiers defending their country against an evil enemy. As the violence
continued and the list of casualties grew, the idea that war was “imperative” to
maintaining the “free world” and that “good [would] triumph” gave way to a new reality
(Hedges 22). The Vietnam War ultimately claimed the lives of over 58,000 American
soldiers and likely more than a million Vietnamese, many of whom were civilians. The

³ The phrase “you’re either with us or against us,” emphasized by George Bush after the September 11,
2001 attacks, exemplifies this notion. Such rally cries call attention to the ways in which war highlights
these tensions between individual and nation. As another example, the phrase “end the war, support the
troops” proliferated bumper stickers and yard signs throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century.
This particular phrase was seen by many as an attempt to prevent the shaming of soldiers that occurred
during the Vietnam War protests, yet drew attention to the nuances of patriotism, unity, and dissent.
Supporting the troops sometimes necessitates asking hard questions about the conditions that they face,
including those related to race relations within the United States military, and embracing the complexities
of a situation as the best opportunity for peaceful resolution.
high death rates, the drafting of American soldiers, and the length of the war resulted in a high volume of protest from Americans. For many citizens, the continued sacrifice of Americans in Vietnam did not make sense. Moreover, these myths of war and America’s sense of itself as exceptional tended to perpetuate simple binaries, separating the world into too-easy oppositions that conflated difference with enemy. This desire for an indivisible oneness, repeated in the notion of an American melting pot, undermined the value of diversity by privileging sameness and thereby created tension with the American ideals of individualism and equality. These tensions provided significant connections between the war and the Civil Rights Movement and form the basis of this dissertation.

The novels discussed in the following chapters specifically call attention to the constructed nature of the myth of America as a superior or exceptional country by examining the relationships between personal and national identity and highlighting how the systems of racism perpetuated in the war have a long history in the United States and how these systems contradict the ideals of American exceptionalism.

The myth of American exceptionalism that these novels respond to emerged early in the nation’s history with what Donald Pease describes as the first white settlers’ “belief in America as the fulfillment of European dreams for a fresh start” and John Winthrop’s pronouncement that, in this new world, they would build a City upon a Hill that would capture the attention of the rest of the world. Over time, this sense of exceptionalism has grown into “a complex assemblage of theological and secular assumptions out of which Americans have developed the lasting belief in America as the fulfillment of the national ideal to which other nations aspire” (7). Likewise, Hilde Restad indicates that the notion of exceptionalism provides the cornerstone of American identity:
Americans believe they are a superior people, they believe they are endowed with a unique mission, and they believe they will never succumb to the merciless laws of history. American identity can be meaningfully defined as American exceptionalism because, notwithstanding its debatable objective validity, the belief in American exceptionalism has been a powerful, persistent, and popular myth throughout American history. (14, original emphasis)

The myth of exceptionalism has been shaped and reshaped to adjust to particular historical moments. Restad argues, for example, that America’s self-identification as an exceptional nation has been divided into two strains: America as an exemplary nation, which “cast[s] the United States as a haven for the deserving, a new beginning for the persecuted of the Old World,” and America as a missionary nation, which “casts the United States in the role of a hands-on missionary, actively promoting its values of democracy and capitalism around the world” (7). While some see these strains as “swinging like a pendulum,” others see them as encompassing two distinct periods. In the first period, the nation viewed itself as exceptional in an exemplary sense until as early as the 1898 involvement in the Spanish American War. In the second period, especially during World War II and through the duration of the Cold War, the nation’s focus seemed to shift to a missionary endeavor (Restad 8). Likewise, Pease maintains that American exceptionalism “has undergone decisive shifts in its self-representation -- from the City on the Hill in the sixteenth century to the Conqueror of the World’s Markets in the twentieth century” (8).
The constructedness of the myth of exceptionalism underpins both Pease’s and Restad’s analyses of American identity and also informs my examination of the four novels discussed in the following chapters. These novels call attention to the illusion of American exceptionalism as a system of beliefs rather than a set of truths. The novels do not merely unravel the myth, however. Instead, they work to create a new vision of national identity that values collaboration over superiority. Pease depicts the shifting construction of American self-representation through an “archive” of phrases: “America is a moral exception (the ‘City on the Hill’); America is a nation with ‘Manifest Destiny’; America is the “Nation of Nations”; America is an ‘Invincible Nation’” (8). Pease recognizes the phrases as “conceptual metaphors” that serve not to define what America is but rather to “give directions for finding the meanings that are intended to corroborate the belief in American exceptionality” and ultimately argues that exceptionalism emerges as a fantasy in which America figures as “‘distinctive’ (meaning merely different), or ‘unique’ (meaning anomalous), or ‘exemplary’ (meaning a model for others to follow), or [as] ‘exempt’ from the laws of historical progress (meaning that it is an ‘exception’ to the laws and rules governing the development of other nations)” (9). While Restad agrees with the variances in definitions of American exceptionalism, she dismisses the idea of American exceptionalism simply meaning “distinct” or different and thus questions, “Why use the term ‘exceptional if one does not mean normatively superior? American exceptionalism cannot simply mean different, because all nations are different.” Restad makes this claim to highlight the concept of American exceptionalism as an “ideational” notion rather than one derived from objective understanding even as she demonstrates how the myth has informed policy (17). Likewise, Pease suggests that “American
exceptionalism was a political doctrine as well as a regulatory fantasy that enabled U.S. citizens to define, support, and defend the U.S. national identity,” especially after World War II and during the Cold War when “U.S. policymakers depended upon the fantasy of American exceptionalism to authorize their practices of governance” (11). Pease indicates that, by positing the Soviet Empire as a threat to the United States’ ability to maintain its role as a “Nation of Nations,” “American exceptionalism produced the desire within U.S. citizens to construe U.S. imperialism as a nation-preserving measure that would prevent Soviet imperialism from destroying American national ideals” (20-21).

This same fantasy compelled those who believed in the necessity of the U.S. entering Vietnam in order to prevent the spread of communism. However, as more and more Americans were sent overseas, sacrificing their lives for what came to be understood as an unwinnable war, the atrocity of the war and the violence perpetrated on civilians spread through images on television screens, highlighting contradictions that “menaced the legitimacy of [the United States’] perennial self-representation as the exceptionalist and ‘redeemer nation’” (Spanos ix). This was especially true for communities of color, whose men were sent disproportionately to fight and die in Vietnam or to return home only to be treated as second class citizens in the country they had just served. Rather than elevating the nation’s sense of itself as exceptional, the sensory reality of war exposed “gross human cruelty” and “the ordinariness” of a nation (Hedges 22-23). News media and soldiers returning from Vietnam revealed the truth behind the myth of America’s superiority, paving the way for a diverse body of narratives attempting to come to terms with the loss of this illusion. These narratives work to make
sense of the chaos and confusion, sometimes trying to restore the myth, sometimes trying
to locate blame for why the myth unraveled, always attempting to make meaning.

American literary writers also actively confront the ways in which the war
unraveled the nation’s sense of itself, and the war stories of this generation particularly
disrupt notions of the glory of war and depict the meaninglessness of their sacrifice.
Brenda Boyle, in the introduction to The Vietnam War: Topics in Contemporary North
American Literature, argues that, “whether motivated by moral selflessness or strategic
protection of the United States, the depiction of US citizens in American literature
focuses largely on the trauma of their personal disappointment.” This disappointment
stems from disillusionment and the literature often portrays soldiers mourning the
“glorious, ennobling, and morally satisfying experience” they expected. Consequently,
the soldiers find themselves bored or confused. As such, truth, or a sense of what war is
actually like, becomes a pervasive theme as soldiers attempt to come to terms with the
new reality of war. These truth claims are represented in literary scholarship as well.
Boyle notices “how critics almost always mention an author is a veteran, short-hand for
truth-teller” and explains that “the logic is that because a veteran author [...] had the
experience of being at war, of being an eyewitness, he knows best about the conduct of
war; better than anyone, he can articulate the conditions of war in Vietnam” (7-8).

This desire for truth and meaning-making often underlies categorizations of the
literature of the war. In Acts and Shadows, for example, Phillip K. Jason indicates that
Vietnam War literature can be divided into two generations, the first of which highlights
the testimony of soldiers in the field and the second of which engages with the aftermath
of the war (though sometimes returning to the combat narrative) in order to explore the
impact of the war. Lucas Carpenter also identifies two strains in the literature, especially in novels. According to Carpenter, the first strain generally focuses on the combat narrative through literary realism and places the Vietnam War in a long tradition of American literature of war that posits that “the essence of the human experience of war is always everywhere the same, generally entailing a profound progression from innocence to experience […]. Vietnam was different only in terms of locale, participants and technology” (31). The second strain of novels frames the war as a postmodern event requiring new literary paradigms that “demonstrate the multi-perspectival, relativistic nature of America’s Vietnam experience and the futility of any attempt to identify, much less communicate (especially via language), any fundamental meaning or truth derived from the war” (Carpenter 32). Often, this later generation of writers reveals an effort to find closure or healing for the suffering not only of the soldiers but also of a nation trying to come to terms with a distorted sense of self. However, this notion of healing becomes problematic when it shifts into sentimentalism or a nostalgia for the war. These reactions, suggests Don Ringnalda, have the tendency to glorify the warrior and, therefore, reclaim blindly the myth of exceptionalism. Ringnalda sees the representations of the war that “elic[i]t thoughtful reflection rather than goosebumps, sentimental tears, and the reification of warrior nostalgia” as more productive because “they show us how to remember the war without conferring dignity on it” (xii). While Ringnalda privileges the latter in his analyses of writings by Michael Herr and Tim O’Brien, his readings also point to the danger of embracing the absurdity of the war as the primary means for trying to understand it. In other words, privileging such interpretations of the war risks reducing
the war to something that simply cannot be understood. The risk then becomes pushing
the war out of memory as an incomprehensible event unworthy of further investigation.

Despite such turns to multiplicity, American literature of the Vietnam War
generally remains within the bounds of a United States’ master narrative, focusing on the
American experience of the war rather than extending outward to the others who
experienced the same war (such as American allies or the Vietnamese). It is revealing to
note that a country that waged war on the basis of a moral duty to help others and whose
anti-war protests often focus on the dehumanization of the Vietnamese people virtually
ignores those others in its literature. As Boyle indicates, “in most American Vietnam War
representations the Vietnamese are not even supporting characters;” instead they
“disappear and the Americans take center stage” (7). This insular focus echoes the way
that the war has been named in the United States as the Vietnam War and often simply as
Vietnam. Renny Christopher argues that, by conflating the country with the war, “U.S.
representations collapse all distinctions between enemy and ally among Vietnamese
individuals, leaving only one distinction: ‘The World’ of the West, being desirable,
homey, and ‘good,’ versus ‘Vietnam,’ an entity composed of country and war together
where only evil resides” (5).

Most American literature representing the war also collapses the experiences of
the American soldiers, generally depicting a white male perspective.\textsuperscript{4} Despite the
attention given to the various movements seeking equality for marginalized groups in the

\textsuperscript{4} Scanning the contents of critical works examining the literature, for example, one would expect to find
the writings of Philip Caputo, Ron Kovic, Tim O’Brien, Larry Heinemann, Michael Herr, and, perhaps,
Bobbie Ann Mason. For a fuller catalog of canonical texts, see Philip Beidler’s “Thirty Years After: The
Archaeologies” in \textit{Thirty Years After: New Essays on Vietnam War Literature, Film and Art}. 

\textsuperscript{xix}
more recently, little critical attention has been given in literary studies to those marginalized voices that represent the war and its aftermath. The Vietnam War that appears in popular cultural representations and canonical literature often foregrounds the military cliché of a “band of brothers” playing out acts of colorblind heroism rather than exploring the racial tension that emerged in a newly integrated United States military. In reality, racism often defined the war experience for these soldiers. Before heading to Vietnam, for example, soldiers were prepared for war by intense training and military reconditioning intended to build a sense of the United States’ superiority and aggression toward the Vietnamese enemy; dehumanizing the enemy and injecting the soldiers with confidence and adrenaline prepared these men to fight for survival. This conditioning often involved “a constant denigration of the culture of Vietnam as something alien, weird and unimportant” (Scurfield 74). Consequently, racism was a part of the landscape, even if it was not always directed at American soldiers. Raymond Scurfield captures the impact of such indirect exposure by sharing the experience of one veteran who reflected, “you know, when you kept hearing about ‘gooks,’ ‘chinks,’ ‘slopes’ all the time, it didn’t take too much imagination to think that these are the very same kind of white Americans who would say ‘nigger’ and ‘spics’” (81).

While direct inter-racial conflict did not often emerge between soldiers on the front lines, racial conflict between United States soldiers was common in areas of less immediate threat: soldiers often self-segregated and symbols of racial antagonism, such as the confederate flag, were visible. Microaggressive behavior evolved into more direct

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conflict later in the war, especially after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. However, most literary representations virtually ignore the dynamics of race relations except to provide stock characters of color whose actions frequently bear little on the narrative or its outcome. Consequently, representations of the war are predominantly filtered through the majority perspective, such that what ultimately reaches the audience is a view of “the race issue” that comes pre-filtered through white preconceptions, anxieties, and interests. [...] a specific perspective on race and on minority soldiers is always already implied simply by the protagonist’s [white] subject position. As a result, and certainly given the disproportionate number of works in this field that are authored by white artists, race in relation to whiteness is the predominant mode of representing race in Vietnam War narrative.

(Dunnaway 126)

In other words, superficial treatments of soldiers of color has the potential to do more harm than good, especially because whiteness and its privileges often remain invisible. Acknowledging the whiteness of the representation of the war provides a crucial first step; listening and assigning value to the representation of the war from other lenses emerges as necessary and equally important.

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6 The well-known texts of Tim O’Brien and Michael Herr, among others, exemplify a relatively superficial treatment of race/ethnicity. The argument can be made that these authors’ narratives do complicate questions of identity more than their predecessors, but they contain problematic absences and flat perspectives.

7 This analysis aligns with Linda Alcoff’s argument in “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” in which she argues that “the effect of the practice of speaking for others is often, though not always, erasure and a reinscription of sexual, national, and other kinds of hierarchies” (29). As such, it is important to note that this dissertation, written as it is by a white woman, is not an attempt at speaking for but rather (to use
This dissertation focuses on four novels that depict the Vietnam War from the perspectives of people of color in the United States. Examining these particular American narratives of the Vietnam War provides a complex interrogation of the oppositions generally established in/by war such as those between self and other, individual and community, here and there, and past and present. The novels discussed in the following chapters directly confront these categorical oppositions, refusing to allow marginalized figures to remain in positions that relegate them to the status of minorities or victims. Rather, these narratives emerge as powerful interventions in both the representation of the Vietnam War and contemporary discourses about racial and ethnic identity. They pose larger questions about the relationships between individual and collective identities and call attention to how fiction writers challenge the very real boundaries that exist between individuals and nations living in a world constantly framed by and/or within oppositional frameworks of difference. Arthur R. Flowers’s *De Mojo Blues* (1985) focuses on African American soldiers’ experience during and after the war and highlights intra-racial conflicts; Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* (1997) follows the lives of two Vietnamese American women as they work to comprehend the role of the war in their new lives as refugees in the United States. Both Alfredo Véa’s *Gods Go Begging* (1999) and Linda Hogan’s *People of the Whale* (2009) introduce a diverse range of voices and experiences in order to re-imagine the boundaries associated with racial and national identities. While the primary narrative voice of Véa’s novel is Chicano, *Gods Go Begging* also includes African American, Vietnamese, and Native American perspectives to examine the ways in which war alters the connectedness of human beings. Similarly, Alcoff’s description serves as a “messenger” about the importance of advocating the value of these novels and their perspectives in history of the war and within the literary canon.
Hogan’s novel interrupts the primary narratives of a Native American family to include that of a Vietnamese girl born to a Native American soldier and a Vietnamese woman. These multicultural and cross-racial American narratives of the Vietnam War complicate master narratives about the war, and thus about American identity, by calling attention to racial and ethnic difference. However, this focus on difference does not further marginalize voices from so-called minority positions by separating them from those voices more commonly acknowledged in and by dominant narratives of the Vietnam War, namely those of white males. Instead, this separation provides a space for voices often silenced by more dominant narratives. These contemporary narratives offer a new lens that accounts for difference, accepts it as crucial to understanding the historical moment, and embraces it in a vision of the future focused on cross cultural collaboration. Ultimately, these novels provide hope by daring to envision a world where meaning is not produced through destruction but through connection, especially the ability to engage in human relationships despite racial and cultural difference.

To communicate this vision, each novel emphasizes the role of storytelling, or creating fictions, in making sense of individual experiences of race, ethnicity, and war, indicating the value of putting lived experience into imaginative narratives to be shared and circulated among a larger community. This attention to the power of storytelling contrasts with the notion perpetuated by early Vietnam War literature that the capacity for understanding what happened during the Vietnam War is limited to those who actually experienced it. Such a desire for authenticity is problematic when paired with the disproportionate number of narratives authored by white veterans, many of whom fought
the war from afar, and the disproportionate number of minority soldier deaths. The novels under discussion in this dissertation insist on more complex negotiations of truth by emphasizing the construction of narratives, whether historical, personal, or ideological. By foregrounding the constructed nature of narratives and challenging the privilege granted by pretenses of authenticity, the novels not only expose the limitations of existing narratives but also provide the opportunity for the creation of new narratives of war and identity. I argue that these novels show that imagined experience *can* provide a point of access to the very real conditions surrounding events such as the Vietnam War or positions of marginalized subjectivity that are seemingly inaccessible by those who do not experience or inhabit them. Such a point of access creates space for empathetic understanding and mutual responsibility. Readers are confronted with a choice either to imagine new ways of being in the world or to revert to the status quo. The narratives thus challenge readers’ sense of personal responsibility by confronting their assumptions and engaging them in the active piecing together of the multiple perspectives of the war and the narratives of history and identity that have emerged out of it.

A renewed interest, particularly after the prolonged conflicts in the Middle East, in both the Vietnam War and its representation has increased the amount and variety of scholarship on literature about the war. Yet, literary and cultural studies have not conceived of issues of racial and ethnic identity during the Vietnam War as *central* to the

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8 Brenda Boyle discusses the discourse of authenticity and authority in Vietnam War narratives: “Note how critics almost always mention an author is a veteran, shorthand for truth-teller. The logic is that because a veteran author—as it happens, usually an officer or war correspondent, almost always a male—had experience of being at war, of being an eyewitness, he knows best about the conduct of war; better than anyone, he can articulate the conditions of war in Vietnam” (8). Boyle does not mention that most officers and correspondents were white, and though she does call attention to the fact that ‘veteran’ does not signify ‘combatant,’ and thereby draws a distinction between military classes and the ways in which narratives of the war have been told from the top down, she does not address the racial bias in this hierarchy.
re-conception of American national and individual identity in its aftermath. A 1993 review in *Contemporary Literature*, for example, indicates that the literary scholarship focused on Vietnam War narratives participates in this culture of revisiting the war but fails to mention that none of the texts under review covers to any substantial degree literature by people of color or contextualizes their analyses of white-authored texts as essentially ignoring the racial tension of the time period. Critics such as Milton J. Bates and Katherine Kinney situate their analyses of American Vietnam War literature in cultural conflicts between soldiers. In *The Wars We Took to Vietnam* (1996), Bates explores the cultural conflicts—class, gender, generation, and race—that influence the telling of war stories, but his chapter on race is limited to African American experience. The same is true for Katherine Kinney in *Friendly Fire* (2001), which argues that the primary American image of the Vietnam War is of Americans fighting each other. While both Bates and Kinney illuminate many complexities of the war and its representation in literature and film, the scope of their studies remains relatively limited in its specific attention to race and ethnicity. Mark Heberle’s *Thirty Years After: New Essays on Vietnam War Literature, Film, and Art* (2009) is perhaps the most recent example of this type of exclusion. While Heberle’s collection of thirty-four essays does give significant attention to non-American representations of the war, only three deal with perspectives from the racial or ethnic margins of the United States.

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10 Bates acknowledges the limited scope of his examination of “The Race War” that the United States took to Vietnam, indicating that “In trying to recreate the ‘thickness’ of one culture, the African American, I have had to forgo treatment of Native, Latino and Asian American responses to Vietnam. For these too the 1960s was a decade of assimilation and separation; thus some features of the black experience of the war have parallels in theirs” (51).
Critics of Vietnam War narratives generally do call attention to the “othering” of Vietnamese soldiers used by American troops to dehumanize and defeat the enemy. Racialization of the enemy, generally, is viewed as an extension of the frontier myth or inevitable outcome of war—a necessary coping mechanism for survival, both literal and figurative—and has been the subject of scholarly work on literary representations of the Vietnam War, but such discussions again generally focus on those writing from the center, rather than the margins, of this experience. Considerable attention has also been given more recently to the ways in which American voices have continued waging war against Vietnam by silencing the Vietnamese perspective in cultural representation. Critics are quick to point out the ways in which the Vietnamese become background props upon which Americans tell their story of loss by collapsing distinctions between Vietnam the war and Vietnam the country. Especially important to this study of the Vietnamese perspective is Renny Christopher’s *The Viet Nam War/the American War: Images and Representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives*, which calls attention to the erasure of the Vietnamese, as well as to fiction and poetry that attempts to instill a new vision of the Vietnamese but fails and to a few novels that take seriously the task of portraying the Vietnamese as human beings with their own history. While much work remains regarding the Vietnamese perspective, marginal voices from within the United States offer fruitful opportunities for examining the intersections of

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11 In addition to Bates and Kinney, see John Hellman’s *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*. Likewise, Richard Slotkin traces the development of the frontier myth in an analysis of war films with a particular focus on the transformation of the ethnic unit. Slotkin argues that initial portrayals of multiethnic units served to advance a particular vision of the American military as united, but this union served to motivate hatred toward the enemy, generally portrayed as a racial other, and ultimately created new forms of racism.
race and war by examining encounters with the enemy alongside cross racial encounters between American soldiers at home and abroad. As will be discussed in the chapters that follow, characters of color often experience moments of double consciousness, during which they recognize themselves as powerful over these other Others because of their affiliation with the United States military even as they themselves are disempowered by that affiliation. These narratives thereby highlight how the novels do more than document the Vietnam War as a particular moment in American history; they also testify to a much longer history of oppression and racism in the United States. Likewise, the novels engage with twenty-first century America’s conversations about race and culture, especially those involving black and immigrant communities, and involve readers in the important work of envisioning futures that refuse to accept these marginalizing and oppressive conditions as the status quo.

The scholarly work that does take up the so-called minority experience of the Vietnam War tends to be social and historical, rather than literary, in nature and generally focuses on a single ethnic identity rather than on a collective or comparative approach. The few studies of American narratives of war from the perspective of people of color that do exist tend to focus on single groups/entities, most predominantly on African American and Vietnamese perspectives, followed by those on Native Americans and Chicano/Latino Americans. These exist largely as anthologies of primary sources or as portions of larger discussions about the conflicts and tensions generated within and by the war, often pointing to the social and historical context of war rather than the literature representing it. Of particular interest are George Mariscal’s Aztlán and Vietnam and Terry Wallace’s Bloods, both of which mix documentary and literary narratives to
portray the experience of the Vietnam War from, respectively, Chicano and African American perspectives. Mariscal situates selections of fiction, poetry, and drama within a series of critical commentaries on the role of religion, language, and protest in Chicano communities while Wallace records the stories of several African American soldiers in their own words. Isabelle Pelaud’s This is All I Choose to Tell, the first monograph on Vietnamese American literature, offers an important intervention by examining the possibility of disentangling the Vietnamese American people from the war in order to reposition them as active agents in the national narrative rather than as victims or passive participants. My project, through its focus on the fictional strategies of Flowers, Cao, Hogan, and Véa, extends these other critical conversations by specifically examining the relationships between war, race, and fiction and exploring the multifaceted tensions and complications of both the contemporary texts and the historical moment they represent. As such, each chapter situates the novel upon which it focuses within the sociohistorical context. Doing so disallows the conversation from excluding the very real conditions faced by the marginalized soldiers that served and the communities that felt the weight of that service by calling attention to the systemic racism at work.

Chapter One, “Sayso, Somebodyness, and Lives that Matter: Examining the Black Experience of the Vietnam War in Arthur Flowers’ De Mojo Blues: De Quest of John de Conqueror,” focuses on the intra-racial conflicts that emerge for three black veterans who struggle to reintegrate into civilian life after the war. The novel’s focus on the black experience of war through this lens of intra-racial conflict enables readers to engage with a more complex view of the black soldier than the racial tokenism displayed by so many popular representations of the war. By incorporating flashbacks of the war
and descriptions of African cultural traditions that rely on the intermingling of past and present worlds, the novel draws parallels between the conditions black men faced in the war with those their ancestors faced in earlier eras. By portraying only the black perspective, *De Mojo Blues* provides a sharp critique of the ways in which the Vietnam War exhibits and perpetuates the United States’ long history of systemic racism and counters the sense of inferiority established as a result of such oppression. Victimized by a military system that privileges whiteness, the black soldiers grow empowered through their solidarity. Rather than allowing the war to become yet another narrative of the oppression of the black community, the novel highlights how the men’s retrieval of African culture enables them to create a new vision of an empowered black community that refuses to succumb to master narratives despite the community’s internal differences.

Chapter Two, “‘a habit of silence where Vietnam [is] concerned’: Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge,*” examines the perspectives of Vietnamese refugees, a mother and her daughter attempting to create a new home in the United States. Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* takes on what Renny Christopher calls a “meta-war” that “attempts to erase Vietnamese from their own reality and make them part of American reality” (4). The characters in Cao’s novel directly confront the Americanized version of the war, which generally positions the Vietnamese as victims needing to be saved by Americans or as savage enemies to be feared. *Monkey Bridge* instead presents a Vietnamese people who inhabit a land and culture with a rich and complex history that cannot be easily categorized using American-defined oppositions. The novel achieves this dynamic portrait through its dual narrative structure, which alternates between the mother’s and daughter’s perspectives, and by directly engaging what have become iconic images of the war. This strategy
creates a “narrative tangle,” a term Marita Sturken describes as a space of contested memories in which silenced perspectives come into contact with dominant ones (44). Cao’s novel instantiates such a tangle in a way that holds the reader accountable without simply placing blame. In other words, the novel provides a model for cross-cultural exchange by illuminating the importance of empathetic understanding and inviting the reader to participate in the shaping of the memory of the Vietnam War as an ally of those whose voices have been continually relegated to the margins.

Chapter Three focuses on the Native American experience of the Vietnam War by exploring Linda Hogan’s *People of the Whale*. This chapter, “‘a story is forever unfolding’: Coming Home from Vietnam in Linda Hogan’s *People of the Whale,*” examines how the connections between the natural environment, the spiritual world, and Native American rituals of storytelling offer a homecoming experience for Native American soldiers that provides renewal and restoration not only for the veteran but also for the broader community. This transformative experience highlights a uniquely communal responsibility for healing the trauma of war. The characters must both assume responsibility for their involvement in the violence and destruction of the war and also allow themselves to share the burden of their suffering with others, a process that disallows any one individual to be cast to the margins. The novel’s use of the ritual of coming home to the United States from war in Vietnam adds layers to the conversations surrounding the troubled reception of Vietnam War veterans who often had difficulties reintegrating into civilian society. The notion of an American national identity built on a sense of home as a place of belonging is complicated by the novel’s attention to the white colonization of Native American nations. The novel highlights the humanity of a people
depicted as savages from the beginning of the national history, in part by blurring the lines between the Native American people and the Vietnamese. This decentering of the white narrative by privileging the stories of other Others enables Hogan’s *People of the Whale* to renew hope for a world in which fluid identities provide the foundation for new perspectives on diversity and cross-cultural collaboration.

Chapter Four, “‘an articulation of the heart:’ Alfredo Véa’s *Gods Go Begging,*” draws connections between Toni Morrison’s concept of rememory and the literary technique of magical realism in order to examine how Véa’s novel invites readers to suspend disbelief and thereby experience a new way of being in the world that unravels the boundaries between vast times, places, and peoples. Specifically, while the novel’s author and protagonist are both Chicano, that category of identity is displaced in order to depict a diverse range of racial and ethnic identities, as well as other categories of identity such as class, gender, and sexuality. Through the novel’s magical realist impulses, the histories of diverse peoples and places converge in violent memories of the Vietnam War and its legacies. But these same impulses also open spaces for exploring the complexities of lived experience, often highlighting the beauty and potential of human relationships and consequently revealing the generative potential of fluid categories of identity. Ultimately, the novel illuminates the potential for healing traumatic experiences by establishing cross cultural communities that blur categories of identity and displace hierarchical relationships often found at the core of war and racism. By championing characters that choose to relinquish power by being vulnerable with and for one another, *Gods Go Begging* establishes the power of mutual and empathetic understanding.
The goal of this project is not merely to pluralize the experience of the Vietnam War nor to move marginal voices so that they simply create a new center. Instead, the goal is to engage these texts in a line of questioning that considers how perception of a particular moment in United States national history continues to shape the present moment. Doing so dismantles the hierarchical canon of Vietnam War Literature and insists that the multiple perspectives dialogue with one another. The novels under discussion in this dissertation work together to illuminate the point that no person, community, or nation exists as a singular entity or in a singular moment. As the United States still works to extract meaning from the Vietnam War through literature, film, and parallels drawn to the twenty-first century conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, national myths, grounded in the moral obligation of so-called American exceptionalism, are continually bolstered and occasionally broken. The narratives that come together in this project puncture these long-held myths and, most importantly, they also look forward to the future by daring to envision a time that focuses less on categorizations that perpetuate conflict and more on an appreciation for common humanity. Rather than working toward superficial melting pot diversity, the novels provide hope for a future that embraces difference as a key factor in cross-cultural collaborations.
Chapter One:
Sayso, Somebodyness, and Lives that Matter:
Examining the Black Experience of the Vietnam War in Arthur
Flowers’ De Mojo Blues: De Quest of HighJohn de Conqueror

“One positive response to our dilemma is to develop
a rugged sense of somebodyness...this sense of
somebodyness means the refusal to be ashamed of
being black”

Martin Luther King, JR.

The 1985 novel De Mojo Blues De Quest of HighJohn de Conqueror by Arthur
Flowers, an African American veteran of Vietnam War, opens with the image of three
black men in handcuffs being led off of a Freedom Bird to the U.S. military base where
they will be discharged officially and dishonorably from the army for a crime that they
did not commit. The three men are charged with the murder of a white officer, who had
repeatedly forced a fellow black soldier to draw ambush, despite the soldier’s clear
exhaustion and unfair share of a dangerous job. The accused men, the novel later reveals,
did plan to confront and harm the officer but their plans are thwarted by another black
soldier who subsequently deserts the military in Vietnam. The deserter remains free in
Vietnam, but ostracized from his fellow Americans and constrained by his status as a
deserter who must be constantly on the move. The accused are freed from the military but
constrained by the stigma of a dishonorable discharge and by their skin color in a racist
society. Even though the opening conflict of the novel originates between black and
white soldiers, the novel focuses primarily on intra-racial conflict and the black
community. De Mojo Blues highlights the concerns of Flowers’s contemporaries
regarding the definitions of black identity, the role of the black community, and the best
path for not merely achieving equal rights in the United States but also gaining equal
opportunity to reap the benefits of those rights.\textsuperscript{12} Through a series of flashbacks and conjured visions, the novel chronicles the consciousness-raising efforts of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam era’s African American communities, not by focusing as much on conflict with the white majority but instead by exploring the tensions that emerge within the black community both in Vietnam and in the United States.

\textit{De Mojo Blues} reveals how racial tensions lead Tucept Highjohn, the novel’s protagonist, into an exploration of his own blackness, not because of how he is perceived by white soldiers but rather because of his perceptions of other black soldiers and their perceptions of him. After his discharge from the military, Tucept finds it difficult to return to life as a civilian in the United States. Tucept’s struggles seem to converge at the question of his identity and his role in the larger community as he works to develop a sense of \textit{somebodyness} and often finds himself powerless in a society marked by both inter- and intra-racial tension. Tucept looks to the brotherhood formed between him and other black soldiers in Vietnam, drawing upon the diversity of black experience, in order to realize his own potential and bring together the larger black community both within and beyond the United States. The novel establishes that this sense of self comes from Tucept’s ability to embrace an alternative method of perceiving himself and the world around him in ways that differentiate him from mainstream, predominantly white, American society. Moreover, the novel’s title signals the ways in which Tucept draws from both African and African American notions of identity, with “mojo” referring to African folk traditions of hoodoo and “blues” referring to the significance of music in the

\textsuperscript{12} Although \textit{De Mojo Blues} was published after the Black Arts Movement of the sixties and seventies, the novel clearly represents two of the movement’s legacies: capturing on the page the sounds of African American culture through spoken word and music and engaging social politics by examining the history of Africans in America.
African American tradition. The novel does not separate the two traditions but rather gestures toward continuity between the two. Tucept’s integration of the folklore of hoodoo and tales of Highjohn the Conqueror, a heroic trickster of the slave era, with contemporary aspects of African American culture, such as blues music and art, provides Tucept with a form of healing from his experiences in Vietnam as well as with the potential to inspire the larger black community to rise up in the face of racial adversity and to define itself. The novel depicts the suffering of the black soldier in the war, illuminates the way the war catalyzes a black brotherhood, and ultimately suggests that a sense of somebodyness emerges with the simultaneous engagement of all black communities—past, present, near and far.

Reading Flowers’s unapologetically separatist novel in the twenty-first century warrants a re-examination of the notion of identity-based politics that dominated the novel’s contemporary time and that have been reignited in the beginning of the twenty-first century, especially in the wake of racially motivated acts of violence against black men by white police officers. The novel examines the internal and external pressures on the black community as it works to develop a sense of somebodyness in the face of systems of oppression that constantly demonstrate how some lives seem to matter more than others. De Mojo Blues echoes King’s message of developing a sense of somebodyness that will “overcome this terrible feeling of being less than human” and “assert for all to hear and see a majestic sense of worth” (King 122). The utterances of

13 Milton Bates also asserts the significance of the word “de” in the title because it calls attention to the novel’s use of black dialect and suggests that as such the novel is “a vernacular work of art” in the tradition of Zora Neale Hurston (80). Indeed, each word of the title indicates the novel’s unique way of combining aspects of African culture with American culture, with “mojo” referring to African traditions and “blues” referring to the ways in which African song had been transformed in the United States through gospel, jazz, and blues.
and discussions surrounding the phrase “black lives matter,” prompted by pervasive and highly visible cases of white-perpetrated police brutality against black males throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century, call attention to the realities of racial identities in a similar way as Flowers’s novel explores the meaning that his characters ascribe to their blackness. In a society that often claims the achievement of being “post-racial,” the protest phrase “black lives matter” has drawn criticism and prompted the emergence of the reactionary phrase that “all lives matter.” The tension between these phrases provides opportunity for reconsidering consequences of the intentional invocation of race or other identity factors in political protest and social justice causes. In an interview with George Yancy, Judith Butler states that “Claiming ‘all lives matter’ does not immediately mark or enable black lives only because they have not been fully recognized as having lives that matter. […] If we jump too quickly to the universal formulation ‘all lives matter,’ then we miss the fact that black people have not yet been included in the idea of ‘all lives’.” Butler maintains that in order to create a society in which all lives really do matter, “we have to foreground those lives that are not mattering now, to mark that exclusion, and militate against it” (qtd. in Yancy). Identity-based politics provide one opportunity to draw the kind of attention that Butler suggests is necessary to highlight the exclusion and marginalization of entire groups of people. Yet, the identity-based politics that drove many of the successes of Civil Rights era movements have been criticized for being opportunistic, opposed to the larger good, overly focused on victimization, or, as is suggested by the reactionary phrase “all lives matter,” as posing a threat to collaboration between diverse populations (Alcoff & Mohanty 2). While many view a focus on social identity as “mired in distorted ideologies,” these
identities also provide “the lenses through which we learn to view our world accurately” (Alcoff & Mohanty 6). Ignoring differences not only risks ignoring the complexities of cultures and relationships but also diminishes the importance of the historical trajectories that have shaped attitudes, policies, and relationships, thereby hindering the ability to understand differences and empathize with those considered others.

*De Mojo Blues* offers a lens through which readers can examine the intersections between African Americans and the Vietnam War, as well as the intersections between black America and the larger world. By examining novels for the way that they construct identities while also paying attention to the multiple realities that they engage, fiction readers can begin the process of foregrounding those who have been marginalized or excluded in order, to use Butler’s words, to “mark” and “militate” against such marginalization or exclusion. Black writers are frequently marginalized within the literary canon, especially where Vietnam War literature is concerned; Arthur Flowers does not even register in most discussions of African American literature. The African American perspective remains marginalized in the representation of the Vietnam War and in the critical conversations surrounding that representation. In his 1996 examination of Vietnam War literature, Milton Bates reflects on the fear articulated by Wallace Terry, author of the oral history *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War*, that by the onset of the twenty first century “the African American role in Vietnam would be erased from cultural memory” (84). Bates shows that black storytellers, whose narratives perform cultural recuperation, work against this suppression of memory. What is to be made, however, of the virtual nonexistence of the war in African American narratives? The number of writings about the Vietnam War by African Americans is generally reported to
be nineteen—and this crosses genres, including novels, collections of poetry, and memoirs. Anthony Groom’s 2001 novel *Bombingham* is likely the most recent addition to the list of African American authored novels loosely focused on the war, while not quite a dozen others—like Alice Walker in *Meridian* and *By the Light of My Father’s Smile* or Toni Morrison in *Paradise*—treat the war as a smaller component of the novel’s primary focus. Given the disproportionately high death rate of African American soldiers in Vietnam and the toll that the war took on the African American community long after its conclusion in the form of high rates of incarcerated, homeless, and jobless veterans, it is surprising that the war and its aftermath does not figure as predominantly in African American literature as it does in the so-called mainstream. As Heike Raphael-Hernandez notes, “Considering that African American authors [since the 1970s] dealt in their works with nearly everything that has been connected to contemporary and historical forms of racism and injustice done to the black community, it is strange that the Vietnam War was so rarely addressed” (105). Raphael-Hernandez examines the complexity of the potential causes for this silence:

African American writers in their function as intellectual vanguards of their communities at first seemed to have missed not just the words but perhaps even the theoretical frame for placing all these dilemmas—the war itself, the conflict it caused for the American society at large, the

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linkage of the war to the civil rights movement, racism in all its different forms, the war as war against another people of color, the concept of individual responsibility and personal guilt, and the African American place in all of this—into a meaningful relationship that would make interpretive sense for African America. (109)

Asking questions and theorizing about the reason for the silence of African American writers when it comes to the Vietnam War becomes less important than turning up the volume on the few voices that already represent the African American involvement in the Vietnam War so that they do not become lost.

As Raphael-Hernandez indicates, however, the continued near invisibility of the black experience in Vietnam seems to raise more questions than responses. Silence about the complicated relationship between the Vietnam War and the African American community persists in contemporary scholarly exploration of the war’s representation. Generally, critical conversations about the limited amount of African American-authored fiction and poetry are limited in comparison to the attention given to white-authored texts. For example, as mentioned in the Introduction, Heberle’s collection of thirty-four essays includes only three dealing with perspectives from the racial or ethnic margins of the United States. Two of these three essays discuss the poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa, who seems to have become the representative voice of African American experience of the Vietnam War in most anthologies and critical scholarship. While attention to Komunyakaa’s poetry is certainly warranted, it reveals the problematic over-attention that privileges certain types of representation, creating lines of distinction between what is considered worthy of scholarly examination. Such over attention further reflects an
unproductive tokenism, wherein one voice comes to stand for a diverse African American community. One essay in Heberle’s collection approaches the invisibility of the black voice by investigating canon formation. In this essay Shirley Hanshaw argues that, “similar to the way in which black soldiers were put on the front lines to become cannon fodder during the Vietnam War, black writers of war literature have been relegated to can(n)on fodder in the ongoing battle to determine which texts comprise the Vietnam War literary canon” (123-124). Hanshaw’s essay addresses an important gap in the scholarship about Vietnam War literature, especially because it alludes to a problematic aspect of the lack of attention given to black voices in the mainstream Vietnam War literary canon: that is, when African American perspectives on the war are considered, they are generally addressed in the context of minority or marginalized canons. The existence of two separate canons is troubling because it highlights a disconnect between conversations about the war and conversations about race when really the two are inextricably linked.

The continued lack of deep attention given to African Americans’ participation in and representation of the war resonates with the current utterances of “black lives matter” and calls attention to the stagnancy of improvements in race relations and racial equality. Butler indicates that this protest phrase speaks volumes because “it states the obvious” even though the “obvious has not yet been historically realized. So it is a statement of outrage and a demand for equality, for the right to live free of constraint.” Butler goes on to indicate that the “black lives matter” chant “links the history of slavery, of debt peonage, segregation, and a prison system geared toward the containment, neutralization and degradation of black lives” (qtd. in Yancy). Butler’s analysis of this contemporary
protest phrase demonstrates the importance of examining critical events like war as moments within a larger historical context.

Intersections between slavery, segregation, and the justice system find relevance in discussions of the Vietnam War and African Americans, especially in the novel upon which this chapter focuses. These intersections might be explained by the fact that the troops sent to Vietnam were the first to be fully integrated from the front lines to the labor forces, despite the important involvement of African Americans in the earliest United States military, including the Civil War. As Bates explains, “after years of being relegated to labor duty, the black soldier was [in Vietnam] enjoying the prestige of the warrior” (54). Despite the potential for upward mobility granted by the integration of the military’s front lines, what emerged were simply new iterations of the same old stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory practices. Drawing upon the hypermasculinity of the black male, for example, some saw the black soldier as a “super soldier” (Bates 54). This typecasting draws from concepts of race anchored in essentialism, such as the notion often used to justify slavery that African American males possess a brute force and physicality particularly suited for hard work. Westheider argues that the integration of the military during the Vietnam War unsettled the myth of black inferiority but created two new stereotypical images of black men: that of the “good” black soldiers, who followed orders and “did not question too deeply either the war or basic fabric of American society” but simply accepted their duty and their place (9), and that of the “bad” black soldiers, also known as the “militants in uniform” or the “black-power types” (10). These “bad” black soldiers opposed the war and their involvement in it, citing the disconnect between the supposed reason for fighting the war—to protect democratic ideals like
equality—and their status as second-class citizens in the country they were risking their lives to protect. These stereotypes indicate that the military’s integration did little to improve the hierarchical, race-based structures. Those who fit the latter stereotype were often subjected to discriminatory military justice whereby blacks were routinely punished for actions for which whites were not (Westheider 55). Westheider reports that “several investigations [...] reached the same conclusion: institutional and personal racism in the administration of military justice severely affected African American service personnel and led to a racially based double standard” (50). This double-standard resembles the “containment, neutralization and degradation of black lives” that Butler describes as pervading contemporary conversations. Indeed, by the late 1960s, when the death rate for black soldiers climbed to “roughly 30 percent higher than the death rate for [other] U.S. forces fighting in Southeast Asia,” the “issue was no longer whether black Americans would be allowed to do their fair share in their country’s wars but rather if they were being asked to carry a disproportionate load of the fighting and dying” (Westheider 17). Those who survived the war, however, often continued to face the repercussions of unofficial military systems of prejudice and racism. Dishonorable discharges for black soldiers led to problems with employment and contributed to economic setbacks, including loss of veteran’s benefits. These soldiers were doubly stigmatized as black veterans of a war many Americans did not approve and struggled to reintegrate as black citizens in a newly racially integrated United States where they continued to be perceived as inferior.

Published in the mid-eighties, the period during which the United States first began acknowledging and recognizing the sacrifices of the Vietnam veterans who had
previously been treated as criminals and ostracized for their participation in the war or blamed for losing the war, *De Mojo Blues* asserts the contributions of black soldiers who were seen doubly as second-class citizens because they were black in a racist society and fighting in an unpopular war. The book directly confronts many of the aforementioned racial typing. The 1980s can generally be characterized as one of rehabilitation in terms of the war; efforts to understand the trauma experienced by the soldiers and events to honor them, such as the dedication of the Vietnam Memorial Wall and the Three Soldiers statue, revealed a turn toward healing and remembrance and away from protest and controversy, though certainly protest and controversy continued. The novel itself functions as an act of both personal and cultural recuperation: as Highjohn works to heal from the trauma he experienced during the war, especially from the death of his friend Jethro, by piecing together fragments of African American culture, the novel works to restore the presence of the African American soldier within the history of the Vietnam War.

To examine in the twenty-first century a novel like Flowers’, which engages with identity-based racial politics, is to mark the exclusions that remain present in the depiction of the Vietnam War. Importantly, some of this exclusion results from the lack of written histories about African Americans, some of which stems from the orality of African American storytelling. African American novels, then, work doubly to capture the oral culture and to remember important historical events. This is especially true of novels like Flowers’s that maintain African American language and use storytelling as an important narrative strategy. In the case of *De Mojo Blues*, Tucdept Highjohn works within the framework of hoodoo, conjuring, and myth-making both to create his own
sense of *somebodyness* and to re-inspire the will and the way of the collective black spirit. As Tucept creates a myth that he will feed through telepathic communication to the black community, he emphasizes the struggles and suffering caused by unjust social and legal systems within the United States and calls attention to the black community’s constant exclusion from American society. His purpose, however, is not to implant a culture of victimization but rather to instill a sense of strength and power that originates in belonging to the collective spirit of the black community. For Tucept, engaging with his cultural past provides relief from the suffering he endured in the war. Furthermore, as the narrative alternates between the novel’s present time and Tucept’s flashbacks of the war, readers are able to draw connections between multiple systems of oppression that originated before the war, were perpetuated by it, and lingered after it.

By beginning with the image of three black men in handcuffs and chains, the novel immediately engages with a history of oppression for African American black men. When the military police officer in charge of the three prisoners unlocks the men’s handcuffs, Tucept “rubbed his wrist with little sense of gratitude. He wouldn’t really feel free until he was out of the army and had the papers to prove it” (4). The opening scene links the image of the soldiers being led off the military helicopter and down a ramp to the slave blocks where black slaves were auctioned to white masters and the military discharge papers to the freedom papers granted to some blacks releasing them from slavery. The novel’s opening words and images denoting American democratic ideals—flags, honor, the soldiers as the country’s “brave and proud”—contrast sharply with the containment of Tucept and the other black men in handcuffs. They are stared at as spectacles and “looked through” as if they are not even present, clearly not regarded as
representing the pride and honor of the country. Having clearly articulated the larger inter-racial conflict, the majority of the narrative thereafter focuses on the black characters’ interactions with one another as they work to reintegrate into a civilian society. The novel establishes that the men’s reintegration will be a collective effort deeply rooted in the black community, though at times that sense of community will be strained. After the procedures of the military discharge have been completed, the novel hones in on the reintegration of Tucept and the other two soldiers who returned to U.S. soil in handcuffs. Joining Tucept are Mike Daniels and William E. Burghart Dubois Brown, the latter referred to throughout the novel simply as Willie D. The initial scenes of the men re-entering the United States as civilians establish the depths of their friendship and illustrate the ways in which their collective experiences in the war provide them with a sense of identity that will be challenged as they work to reintegrate into life after the war.

Much of this difficulty derives from their desire to quickly leave their experiences in Vietnam behind them while still maintaining the sense of self they developed there. Before returning to their individual homes, the men decide to stay in San Francisco together for a few days and their first order of business is to rid themselves of physical manifestations of their experience in Vietnam, though they soon realize that their stylistic choices do more to make them stand out than blend in. The men’s status as newly returned veterans is conspicuous when they “hit the street in Hong Kong specials from Vietnam’s ever present Hong Kong tailors” and are convinced at a local barbershop that “the blowout was the latest thing.” Out of their military garb but not out of a military mindset, the men “strode Market again, up and down, shiny suits and afro halos gleaming
in a midday sun. Unconsciously they stride in cadence, side by side, left right left right left right.” Despite their efforts to blend in with the local scene, the men are immediately called out as veterans by the owner of a military ring store much like those they had seen “at nearly every post they had ever done duty on” in Vietnam. At first the men are offended that they are “peeped” by the store owner as “army. Or even ex-army” but the offense quells to camaraderie when the store owner, a man named Bennett, assures them that he is not trying to sell them something but rather “saw [they] were just out the war and thought to blackenize some” (10). Bennett’s invitation “to blackenize” involves the “elaborate handshake ritual of black Vietnam. The Black to Black salute” known as the “dap.” This connection causes the men’s “suspiciousness” to “evaporate” and they agree to attend a party with Bennett later that evening. Tucept, Mike, and Willie D. seem relieved to “see a brother from the war doing well and enjoying himself,” which demonstrates both their fear that they will struggle to reintegrate and also hope that they too will be successful (11). The novel’s depictions of the men’s first interactions with others outside of the military thereby reveal the tension that comes from the veterans’ desire simultaneously to rid themselves of their experience in Vietnam and to maintain the familiarity and bonds established there.

Once at the party, the three men stand “in a selfconscious little knot, feeling as if they were still in dressgreens.” Despite their previous excitement about attending the party, “they felt out of place and intimidated.” The narrative further illuminates the men’s difficulty in reintegrating by calling attention to the music being played at the party: “They hear Marvin Gaye coming out of wall speakers, talking about what’s happening brother, he was just getting back from the war and wanted to know what’s going” (14).
The allusion to the song highlights the way in which soldiers came back to a world that was very different than Vietnam and from the United States they had left before for the war and provides the first of many references to the African American musical traditions. While Mike and Willie D. soon enjoy themselves at the party by fraternizing with the other guests, Tucept keeps to himself but maintains a sight line of Mike and Willie D., a “habit” he carries with him from the war that establishes his role in their friendship as a watchman and caretaker. Tucept continues to feel out of place, recognizing that “Nam had changed him,” and “he watched the party with a strange sense of distance” before his mind wanders back to the “golden bamboo gardens” of Vietnam and to the death of his friend Jethro (15). Tucept’s flashback is the first of several that the novel employs to keep in play the tension between present and past. In addition to the intrusive flashback that Tucept experiences as a result of the emotional trauma of war, the narrative calls attention to the physical manifestations of bodily trauma through the scars on Willie D.’s face, which Tucept focuses on as he comes to from the trance-like state of his flashback. Noticing Tucept’s continued distance, Willie D. and Mike attempt to bring Tucept back to the present by reminding him, “Number ten, GI, don’t bring Nam back with you. Com bic?” (17). The irony of Mike’s use of the language of the war to advise

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15 As will be discussed, the novel incorporates artifacts of African American culture throughout, often at key points in Tucept’s journey to discovering a sense of self. The novel establishes Tucept’s connection to music early on, indicating that the Marvin Gaye song “sent tingles down his spine” (14). Again, the orality of African American culture is significant and the novel points to this significance by incorporating song and storytelling.

16 Willie D.’s wounds, caused by a “fragmentation grenade [that] had sliced [his] walnut face into so fine a pattern,” provide a constant physical reminder of the trauma of war and Tucept’s attention to the patterns of the scars often similarly found in slave narratives. The connection is more explicitly drawn in a later scene, where another black veteran opens his shirt to reveal a gouge in his chest and, in the midst of an emotional rant at the veteran’s service center, demands his “40 acres and mule” as reparation for his service in Vietnam. The phrase represents the expectations of freed black people during the Civil War era that they would not only be freed but provided with the means to sustain their freedom through land ownership.
Tucept to leave Vietnam behind is telling, especially since the novel generally depicts Mike as having successfully left behind his Vietnam experience whereas Tucept and Willie D. find doing so considerably more difficult. These habits of mind and body illustrate the men’s deeply engrained experience of the war and the difficulty of separating past and present.

While this difficulty in reintegrating is not unique to the African American soldiers, the novel directs attention to the men’s racial identity and the role that it plays in their experience and relationship. As such, the novel stresses the ways in which racial identity influenced the men’s experience of the war. For example, Bennett’s desire “to blackenize” when he sees Tucept, Mike, and Willie D. and their exchange of the “black to black salute” highlight the importance of creating and articulating African American identity during the Vietnam era. In *The Brothers’ Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience*, Herman Graham outlines the significance of the phrase “to blackenize,” invented by black soldiers who supported the nationalist Black Power movement developing in the United States during the Vietnam War. These soldiers subscribed to the notion that “African Americans would be better off strengthening their own communities rather than subjecting themselves to the psychological wounds of racial integration” (Graham 98). In a consciousness-raising movement, Black Power groups focused on racial solidarity and the creation of their own system in opposition to those systems of white society that had enslaved and then subordinated them. According to

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These physical wounds provide a reminder of the ways in which difference is often marked on the body, rendering some unable to escape the psychological trauma associated with war and racism. The scene in the veteran’s affairs office clearly depicts the long history of oppression, marked not only through rhetoric but through systemic racism that often keeps the black community at a disadvantage by withholding access to financial security and education. Katharine Kinney indicates that the scene “represents the physical fact of black labor on behalf of American society and the cruel denial of its benefits” (98).
Graham, “stimulated by Black Power thought and culture, young African American GIs developed counterhegemonic notions of masculinity as a strategy for overcoming their marginal status,” which required prioritizing their identity as black men over their identity as military men (99-100). The creation of a new lexicon, including the phrase “to blackenize,” called attention to racial consciousness in a setting fraught with racial tension, where “even the most innocuous manifestations of racial consciousness—such as GIs calling themselves ‘black’ instead of ‘Negro’—threatened the status quo” (Graham 100). Graham argues that the phrase marked a “cultural transformation” and “underscored the symbolic meaning of ‘black’ to their rhetoric,” which also expressed “symbolic kinship ties” through the use of words “like ‘brothers,’ ‘soul brothers,’ and ‘bloods’” and thereby “emphasized communitarian values” (101-102). Graham’s analysis hones in on the importance of developing a sense of community through separation and attention to difference. Articulating blackness through phrases like the ones that emerged in Vietnam worked toward the “refusal to be ashamed of being black” by establishing a “rugged sense of somebodyness” (King, 130).17

*De Mojo Blues*’s use of a black lexicon emphasizes the significance of racial identity in the characters’ experience of the war. Articulating racial identity provides the men with an opportunity to connect with one another. The narrative illustrates how the war created the need for these men to develop *collectively* a sense of *somebodyness*; fighting for their lives in a violent war and battling the racial tension in the military required the men to establish a black brotherhood to provide both physical and moral support. Over the course of the novel, the narrative establishes that this black brotherhood

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17 As an advocate for peace and non-violence, Dr. King was opposed to the Black Power slogan because of the associations between power and violence.
developed as a response to racial tension and not, as is often portrayed in media and cultural representations of the Vietnam War, as merely derived from cultural differences like taste in music or entertainment. For example, Tucept and the other black soldiers, especially his bunkmate Jethro, find themselves suffering the consequences of racially based military justice and are punished for smaller infractions with greater consequence than their white peers. Through Tucept’s flashbacks, the narrative indicates that the circumstances for this brotherhood were established early on, prior to the men’s arrival in Vietnam. Tucept remembers, for example, an incident during training camp that depicts the separation of black and white soldiers and the efforts of the black soldiers to establish unity. The incident involves a black man called Dofunny, who was unsuccessful in meeting the physical expectations of military training and tended to fall behind during group exercise. As Tucept recalls,

Most of the brothers in the company were in the 1st Platoon while the 2nd Platoon was a Tennessee hillbilly haven. The DIs encouraged the two platoons’ rivalry in everything, including the morning run. So nothing was done when every morning Dofunny would start weaving and gasping, fall out of the 1st Platoon’s ranks and under the thudding boots of the 2nd. (53)

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18 Milton Bates, among others, discusses how the integration of the military during the Vietnam War appeared successful and is often used as a marker of the progress made in the racial environment of the United States. But this seeming success was a result of voluntary segregation, with black soldiers congregating together and apart from white soldiers both on and off base. Their separation was “partly a reaction against the hostility of some white soldiers” but “primarily an assertion […] of racial pride” (Bates, 55). In part, according to Herman Graham, this need to assert racial pride derived when African Americans “discovered [in the military] that the same race-sex hierarchy that circumscribed their lives as civilians continued to hamper their ambitions as soldiers,” especially when “black soldiers felt emasculated by the types of jobs they were given” and “deaf ears […] heard their complaints of discrimination” (The Brothers’ Vietnam War 91, 93). Bates and Graham both describe how these conditions strengthened the black soldiers’ ties to one another and to the larger Black Power Movement.
The passage points to the racially segregated nature of the army despite being officially integrated and highlights the tensions that grew out of this division. The men are called to action when “one morning Dofunny came back from sick call with his head bandaged and Jethro freaked. Muttered and paced the floor all night long, I don’t believe this shit, he said, aint taking this shit, not in 1969” (53). While the narrative does not reveal what caused Dofunny’s injury, his return from the infirmary immediately follows the description of the rivalry between the black and white troops and hints that Dofunny’s injuries manifest the extent of this rivalry. When the morning run ritual happens again, this time with the 3rd Platoon also trampling Dofunny, Jethro refuses to sit back and watch. Instead, he
called the brothers to meeting […] and they stood in awe of his performance. He yowled and cajoled, his body weaving and dipping and speaking in tongues, exciting them as much with the body language as he did with the rap.
He demanded.
They agreed.
Something had to be done.
So we fall back right? said Jethro, We fall back and we see if they can kick all our black asses together as easy as they do one fool on his own.
(53)
The men clearly see the value of a collective effort, though their ability to maintain that collectivity is quickly tested. Nevertheless, the passage illuminates the ways in which the
black brotherhood created in the military emerged from racial tension and as a means of survival before even being sent to war.

Jethro’s performance also highlights the way in which the soldiers were empowered by black culture and connected through an oral tradition tied to a long history of survival rooted in community-based storytelling; the novel emphasizes the importance of these traditions by subsequently incorporating other instances of oral tradition. Jethro’s rally takes the form of call and response, an African American cultural tradition with roots in the work songs of slaves, who used the rhythm and repetition of call and response to bolster their spirits in the fields and as code to communicate about their masters and to continue practicing African religions prohibited by their masters. The work songs thus signal a history of oppression and a tradition of resistance grounded in collective action. The novel textually links the call and response tradition to the genre of military cadence: immediately following Jethro’s call to action, the narrative transitions to the men beginning their morning run and contains the entirety of “Sound Off,” a well-known military cadence written by an African American soldier in World War II. 19

Ironically, the novel includes this military cadence typically used to keep men in stride with another to introduce Jethro’s plan to disrupt the group’s morning run. The scene pairs the inclusion of “Sound Off” with an African American tradition known as the “toast,” or “rap,” through the story of Shine and the Titanic. The use of the toast tradition within the novel, especially within the depiction of group focused activities, highlights

19 For more on the connection between work songs of slaves and military cadence, see Frannie Kelley’s article on NPR.org. Kelley describes how in 1944 “a particular rhythm infiltrated the segregated Army. The cadence was credited to a soldier named Willie Duckworth. As told on a V-Disc, one of the inspirational recordings made during World War II by the U.S. military and sent to troops overseas, Duckworth was ‘chanting to build up the spirits of his weary comrades.’”
the orality of African American culture, its communal nature, and the importance of maintaining connections between past and present. Because they are dependent on an audience, toasts naturally highlight the role of community in African American culture. As Bruce Jackson’s collection of these oral narratives highlights, toasts vary from one iteration to the next, with the changes often dependent on the context of performer and audience. As the toasts are carried from generation to generation, they demonstrate the fluidity of the relationship between past and present.

In the “Toast of the Titanic,” Shine is the lone black passenger on the sinking ship. When the white captain ignores Shine’s warnings that the ship is flooding, Shine decides to jump ship and save himself, ignoring the pleading and cajoling of the white passengers he encounters. To the captain, Shine says, “to save you would be very fine, But I got to first save this black ass of mine” (Hancock, 1388). In the DoFunny scene, the novel includes the refrain of the toast, “Shine Shine you doing fine but if you miss one stroke your ass is mine,” which are the words of the shark that chases Shine as he swims ashore. The narrative introduces the Shine toast when Dofunny begins to fall out of stride and Tucept and another black soldier try to carry him along and keep him in line with others. The narrative describes how “Tucept felt the hot breath of the 2nd Platoon” and “heard the relentless thudding of their boots” before repeating the Shine refrain three times (54). The close textual position of the thudding of the white soldiers’ feet and the shark’s lines in the toast link the perspectives, indicating that the shark and the white

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20 See also Robin Kelley’s discussion of black folk culture, wherein she recalls how black folk culture was promoted by black writers as “implicitly rebellious, if not the true expression of an oppressed nation” (50). Kelley suggests that black communists, in particular, recognized in black writing the “birth of a utopian future rising out of the abyss of racism and oppression” (51). Kinney, too, discusses the role of the Shine narrative with respect to Larry Neal’s analysis of the Black Aesthetic. See Friendly Fire, pages 93-94.
soldiers share this point of view that the black man must “stay in line” or face the consequence of being caught and beaten. The novel’s allusion to the Shine toast is important for the way in which it supports a strong and independent black identity. As Hancock suggests, Shine “crosses accepted class and race boundaries in his profane and direct replies to the White passengers’ requests that he save them” and his responses “also demonstrate the transparency of such boundaries as well as a practical focus on surviving” (1389). The Shine toast celebrates Shine’s rejection of the racial norms of the times and highlights how assimilation and subordination to whites did not serve the black community well. At the same time, Shine’s attitude toward whites is not necessarily hostile; rather, as Bruce Jackson has argued, the white characters serve as a foil to Shine, rather than as enemies (36). Jackson’s argument is important for examining the Shine toast in the novel, which, while separatist and black-focused, is not necessarily hostile toward whites. By including this allusion in the novel, which also quotes from the toast in its epigraph and conclusion, the novel privileges an identity-based politics that is dependent on the connections between individuals within the group.

Through the depiction of Jethro and the Dofunny scene, the novel also underscores that this black community is not inherently and flawlessly connected through the commonality of its members’ race and that the solidarity of the group can and does weaken under the pressures of external systems. When the men fall back and break stride alongside Dofunny, a brawl ensues between the white and black platoons, but it is not long before Tucept realizes that he and Jethro alone are fighting back and subsequently are taken to the orderly room (55). The narrative concludes this flashback by describing how Tucept “muttered something under his breath about colored people. Won’t stick
together for shit” (55). Tucept’s statement becomes indicative of his standpoint throughout the novel as he works to heal himself and to establish a stronger black collective in a community that is fraught with intra-racial tension. Ironically, the flashback that closes with Jethro and Tucept as united begins by describing how different the men are from one another and with Tucept’s intention to avoid Jethro after the two of them spend their very first day in the military punished with kitchen duty. Tucept learns that Jethro “didn’t like the army, didn’t like Fort Campbell, didn’t like sergeants and officers and brownnosing sergeants.” The narrative describes the two men as different in nearly all aspects: Jethro is a non-stop talker, while Tucept is a quiet, “pompous moody man, already weighed down with the need to know all the angles before he could make the simplest of moves whereas Jethro was spontaneity incarnate” (44). The novel uses the men’s developing friendship to flesh out some of the differences in the black community’s response to the racial environment, noting that Tucept attempts to “master and max” the army, to “buck” the system while trying “to look like he was playing by the rules” while Jethro “bucked the army and didn’t care who peeped it” (49). The men’s resistance to discriminatory and racial hierarchies, in other words, manifests quite differently. Despite their differences, however, Jethro and Tucept develop a brotherly bond and, through their relationship, Tucept becomes interested in his African cultural roots and learns about his namesake, Highjohn the Conqueror, and the practice of hoodoo.

Such is not the case with Tucept’s interactions with other members of the black community. Bookending the flashback of the beginning of Jethro and Tucept’s friendship are two other encounters with African American men, each of which explores conflict in
the black community and leaves Tucept struggling to identify his place in that community. These scenes work to show the difficulties of establishing a sense of *somebodyness*. The first encounter occurs when Tucept returns to Tennessee and visits his girlfriend Ruby. Ruby’s friends take Tucept to task for having been to Vietnam and are hard on him for having joined the army and fought in the war voluntarily when they resisted and “told [the draft board] what they could do with that hokey shit.” The men revel in their opposition to the war and are intent on making Tucept uncomfortable for his participation in it. One of the men, Joe Dyer, “leaps on” and “ambushes” Tucept when he learns that Tucept volunteered. Dyer ridicules Tucept by comparing him to the comic series characters “Sergeant Fury and his howling commando,” by joking that perhaps Tucept thought the military was “going to send [his] black ass to the Pentagon,” and finally accusing Tucept of not “thinking” (28). When Tucept tries to counter the men’s pathologizing of the soldiers and the uselessness of the war by explaining that “brothers stood together,” Joe Dyer responds, “Wait a minute man […] what you trying to tell us is that you felt like a man cause you were over there playing soldier for these whitefolks, a nigger killing gooks for crackers” (29). Dyer accuses Tucept of participating in the same racist ideology that continually subordinates the black community, and the criticism clearly irritates Tucept, who throughout the novel struggles to figure out what his role is as a black man, especially within the black community. Furthermore, Dyer’s comment questions Tucept’s masculinity, and the novel engages the tensions between power and masculinity by following the confrontation with a scene between Ruby and Tucept in which Tucept is sexually impotent. Unable to engage in sex with Ruby, Tucept falls
asleep and begins to have nightmares of his time in Vietnam. Tucept moans and twitches in his sleep and the narrative describes the dream:

Choppers fall from a leaden sky and spit buffalo soldiers into a muddy gold ricepaddy. Puppets on a string, buckdancing minstrels dodging slow motion bullets to the tune of Yankee Doodle Dandy. You dance on gossamer strings sometimes seen sometimes not. They move your arms like jerky windmills and buckdance your feet, you fight and strain but still you dance, what dance do they do. (32)

Tucept’s nightmare incorporates into the Vietnam War narrative historical instances of African Americans’ subordination and calls attention to Tucept’s concern with his lack of power. By depicting the black soldiers as puppets on a string who perform the buckdance, the narrative once again connects past and present. References to the buck dance and minstrelsy point to the exploitation of black people at the hands of whites. The narrative illuminates the often subtle ways in which black freedom, like integration, came with “strings attached,” which the novel rightly indicates sometimes remain unseen or unrecognized. The gossamer strings in Tucept’s dream suggest the difficulty in gaining full control when operating within a system controlled by white society. Tucept’s argument with Dyer and the subsequent nightmare reveal Tucept’s feelings of disempowerment and uncertainty about himself and his role now that he is no longer at war in Vietnam. Tucept’s feelings of disempowerment and disconnect from the black community become exacerbated once he is separated from the men with whom he had established a powerful bond during the war.
Although the novel depicts their bond as powerful and genuine, the men appear uncertain about how to maintain it in the United States, where they each return to their homes after spending a brief time together in San Francisco. After discussing their plans for the future, the men sit in a “reflective pause. Over the last year they’ve been accustomed to leaning on each other, Blood, Brother me, Brother Black. Now they’re back to the World and preparing to go their separate ways.” The recognition of this separation makes the men “suddenly uncomfortable.” The narrative indicates that the men’s bond emerges from their racial similarity but also directs the reader’s attention to the differences between the men and the ways in which these differences become more visible when they are not united in the common goal of survival in Vietnam. Upon their return from the war, the men discuss their plans, and the narrative reveals that the men’s reasons for entering the military significantly impact their plans for returning to life after the war and their ability to heal from the trauma they suffered in Vietnam. Willie D., for example, “had joined planning to make the army a career” but “the court martial had destroyed his dreams of being a lifer.” Mike had been drafted and went to war despite his father’s “pulling strings;” the narrative quickly establishes Mike’s higher socioeconomic status by indicating that his father is a “big man in Atlanta insurance” and that Mike intends to go to law school. The details about Tucept’s entrance into the military do not emerge until later in the novel, when he indicates that he voluntarily joined the military without real expectation of going to war. He, too, plans on returning to school but his plan is not “convincing” (13). In part, Tucept’s difficulty in committing to a particular path postwar derives from the inevitable dispersion of their group, but the first half of the
novel depicts Tucept as a man who wanders and commits whole heartedly to very little until he discovers the sense of agency that accompanies his hoodoo training.

Tucept’s interest in hoodoo grows out of his interest in African and African American culture, but his path to hoodoo practice is winding and indirect—especially since Tucept initially sees little credibility in it. His transition from an unbeliever to a promising hoodoo practitioner is catalyzed by a series of events that prompt Tucept to consider his role in the black community. The first of these events focuses on his discovery of a “strange” house that sits on stilts “high on the hill” in a wooded park on a Memphis bluff alongside the Mississippi River (36-37). The house enables Tucept’s isolation because it is difficult to find and often depicted as a mirage, a feature that lends itself to the otherworldliness of African American folk culture, especially hoodoo. Tucept spends time exploring the woods surrounding the house and shortly after moving in discovers a chair that becomes Tucept’s nearly sole focus over the next two years; it is as if the chair entrances him. He finds the chair while reading from “Chancellor Williams’s Destruction of Black Civilization” and becomes captivated by “the ancient glories of Mene’s Memphis. Old Memphis on the Nile. Ptah’s city, the Egyptian god of scribes. He who thought the world, said it in a word and then it was so” (38-39). The subject matter of Tucept’s reading material foreshadows his growing interest in ancient African culture and its continuation in the United States; as such it also provides another important

21 My analysis here focuses Tucept’s evolving identity as a hoodoo practitioner after the war. However, Tucept’s coming into being is narratively connected to the war through flashbacks of Vietnam. In particular, the reading that follows examines events that occur once Tucept arrives in Memphis but the Dofunny scene interrupts the linearity of these events, helping to shape the reader’s understanding of the relationship between what happened in Vietnam to diminish Tucept’s sense of somebodyness and his coming into being as a hoodoo practitioner with the potential to empower others in the black community.
connection between the intersections of past and present. Chancellor Williams’ concern with connecting African Americans to a rich history as a means to counter the white insistence of black inferiority provides an important lens as Tucept searches for his role in the black community.

Specifically, the narrative’s pairing of Tucept’s reading material with the discovery of the chair works to highlight the chair’s symbolic significance. The physical features of the chair symbolize Tucept’s growing interest in the power of hoodoo to revive a weary African American collective spirit:

Something drew Tucept’s attention and he looked up just as the chair was floating by in the water. A monster of a wood chair, with thick armrests and a high carved back. [...] It had obviously been in the river for awhile and river artistry had carved it into flowing driftwood lines. The setting sun threw the grooves into deep relief and Tucept could almost see movement in the chair’s fluid surface. [...] Carved in the back was an Xed circle. (39)

The chair has been worn by the river over time, but Tucept sees potential in its unique features. The Xed circle is an African cosmogram that represents the connection between the living and the dead. Additionally, “a cosmogram drawn on the ground or embodied in the form of a forked stick or crossroads drew spiritual power to a particular point on earth” (Fett 56). Through heightened attention to this symbolic feature on the chair, the

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22 Importantly, Tucept’s reading material and the included passages point to the way in which the novel, while certainly separatist in black and white America, gestures toward a more global perspective by considering a deeper and more expansive history of the black community. Specifically, the novel gestures toward pan-Africanism by referencing and drawing upon a variety of African cultures and suggests that solidarity amongst the black community can develop through these connections. In many ways, the vision of Africa the novel presents relates to the notion of Aztlán discussed in Chapter Four.
narrative indicates the impact that the chair will have on Tucept and marks a pivotal moment in his quest for identity. The chair itself is a powerful force and the presence of the cosmogram foreshadows Tucept’s evolution into a spiritual healer. Tucept grows “obsessed” with restoring the chair, “marveling over the twisted rivergrooved ridges, the grain coming to life beneath the deadwood. He cleaned and regrooved the crossed sun in the high back” (40). As Tucept renews the appearance of the chair, he renews his own sense of purpose and begins to feel empowered.

While the chair’s appearance connects it to African and African American folklore and Tucept discovers it while reading about ancient African history, the text also pairs his restoration of the chair with his love for contemporary music. Incorporating excerpts of the music of the 1960s and 70s, the narrative again blends old and new cultures, highlighting continuations between the two and locating within them the potential for cultural renewal. On the day that Tucept finds the chair, he spends the night “playing Lou’s Breaking My Back,” a Lou Rawl’s song that becomes Tucept’s soundtrack for the restoration. The narrative’s inclusion of some of the song’s lyrics captures Tucept’s increasing sense of self and empowerment: “I know I got the will but it’s the way I got to find / To stop breaking my back and start using my mind” (41). The chair’s powerful effect on Tucept marks a turning point for his self-discovery, and the Rawl’s song that becomes his anthem while working on the chair clearly establishes a newfound determination to inhabit a sense of somebodyness. While Tucept has a hunger to learn that will influence his search for self, the narrative also indicates Tucept’s preference for knowledge that comes in untraditional forms. Tucept works on the chair with a focus and intentionality that take priority over school, which he finds boring but
has to pursue in order to continue receiving veterans’ benefits. On occasion “a class interested him and he would attend until he had milked it for all the information he thought he could get out of it” (40). Tucept’s growing sense of self and understanding of the world around him appear most clear when he engages meditatively with the chair and the music.

At the same time, however, his focus on the chair consumes Tucept and drives him inward so that he becomes a little too self-focused. If he was not “shaping and carving to Lou’s rhymes,” Tucept was sitting in the chair, “idly handling the little bag” that he brought back from Vietnam and which he hangs from the chair (40-41). The narrative captures the intensity of Tucept’s obsession with the chair through his girlfriend Marva’s increasing frustration with his lack of attention to her. Marva reflects that Tucept “was so much into that damned chair and that damned bag that he hardly had time to live” (41). Even when Marva’s frustration turns to violence and she holds Tucept at knifepoint, Tucept’s attention to the chair is only broken momentarily before he returns to the chair and music. Once Marva leaves, Tucept sits in the chair and loses himself in a “Bill Withers album and Withers’s guitar leaped into the silence of the room. Tucept sat back. He loved him some Withers. Lean on me when you’re not strong. A good old country boy singing good old country blues. Look like everytime he open his mouth he say something real. Painting pretty pictures with a song” (44). Tucept’s respect for the power of language is evident throughout the novel, and his consideration of Withers’s words here calls attention to both the importance of community and the inevitability of moments of vulnerability: Withers’s popular “Lean on Me” depicts the presence of pain in all lives and celebrates mutual dependence in these times of need. In other words, the
song insists on the importance of relationships.\textsuperscript{23} The narrative’s inclusion of the Withers’s song precedes a visit from Tucept’s sister Caldonia; this visit provides Tucept with the opportunity to reflect on how his relationships with others impact who and what he is.

Of particular importance during Caldonia’s visit is the attention to the small bag that hangs from Tucept’s chair. Although the narrative depicts Tucept handling the bag on a few other occasions prior to his sister’s visit, Tucept finally articulates its origins. When Caldonia asks about the bag, Tucept tells her that it “belonged to a brother I knew back in the war. His mojo bag he called it, he was into that hoodoo shit” (45). Although Tucept clearly has strong feelings about the bag, which he quickly prohibits Caldonia from opening, his words indicate his dismissive attitude toward the practice of hoodoo. Caldonia is not quite as skeptical, informing Tucept that their mother had told Caldonia that “hoodoo run in her family” (45). The conversation turns to family dynamics and specifically to Caldonia’s insecurities about raising her child as single mother. When Tucept looks at his sister, he sees a haunted look in her eyes, tension in her shoulders. He felt for her. His sister. She reminded him so much of himself, hardheaded and determined to fuck up in my own way thank you. If she went down, he thought, he would be the last of the Highjohn line. He would be alone. The thought scared him. A lot. (46)

\textsuperscript{23} Withers indicated in an interview with \textit{Rolling Stone} that “Lean on Me” was written when he grew “tired of love songs” and wanted to write a “simple ode to friendship.” The song calls attention to male friendship through its use of the phrase “brother.” These details are not insignificant in a novel about the bonds that black men established during the Vietnam War. See Andy Greene’s “Bill Withers: The Soul Man Who Walked Away”
Tucept’s fear of being alone indicates his ability to be vulnerable, and this vulnerability allows him to empathize with others. As he listens to Caldonia, he realizes that men like himself – those who treat women as secondary – have contributed to “low horizons and rawdeals” and that this is contradictory to his belief in “folks being the most that they could be” (47). Tucept’s reflection leads him to decide to “try to be a more progressive man in the future” (47-48). When his sister leaves, Tucept finds that “being emotional was tiring. But hell, who knows when I might need someone to lean on” (48). By incorporating the Withers song into his thoughts, the narrative demonstrates how Tucept’s focus, though still primarily self-directed, begins to turn toward a communal dynamic in which he recognizes the importance of his relationships to others and the impact that his individual actions can have in his community.

Tucept’s visit with Caldonia and the self-reflection that this visit prompts allows the narrative to illuminate the many ways in which Tucept’s sense of self is tied to multiple sites of identity, including race and gender, and emphasizes Tucept’s growing awareness that these identities can be shifted. Tucept recognizes that his ability to develop a sense of somebodyness depends not on how others see him but on how he sees himself and how he chooses to act. Further illuminating Tucept’s shifting identity from a brooding war veteran to a powerful community healer, the narrative juxtaposes Tucept’s visit from Caldonia with two other crucial encounters. The first of these is with two men who have been “involved in local community activism” and have come to question what Tucept will do to improve the black community’s future (58). The second represents Tucept’s final engagement with “the fringes of the movement through the low profile ‘70s” (64). Both of these encounters significantly influence Tucept’s desire to pursue his
own path to empowerment for himself and for the black community and are therefore worthy of close examination. Importantly, both encounters encourage Tucept to embrace a non-traditional approach to effecting social and political change.

The first encounter occurs when Tucept returns to his parents’ home to clean the attic, which is full of memories of the past. By prefacing Tucept’s encounter with the community activists with the attic cleaning, the narrative emphasizes the importance of Tucept’s connection to the past in helping him to achieve a sense of somebodyness in the future. When he arrives, Tucept finds his mother “humming a blues over her loom” and notes that “it always felt good to be around his momma. Something about her refreshed folk, made em feel good” (56). The moment between Tucept and his mother is tender: she gives him her hot lemonade to heal a sore throat, and the two sit together as she weaves. The scene also highlights the significance of cultural practices through Mrs. Highjohn’s loom and humming of the blues and reinforces their importance through Tucept’s discoveries in the attic. When Tucept climbs into the attic, he finds remnants of his family’s history, including “his momma’s notebooks from Fisk. Her old essays. The Effect of Religion on Community. Power and the Negro Worldview. The Blues and Hoodoo as Negro Psychology and Treatment” (57). The narrative reintroduces Mrs. Highjohn’s hoodoo practices, which had been previously addressed through Caldonia’s comment about the mojo bag Tucept keeps on his chair. Here, however, Mrs. Highjohn’s study of healing practices become paired with Tucept’s memory of tagging along on his father’s house calls and sharing the back seat of the car with Caldonia and the patients’ payment for services – fruits, vegetables, and meats from the farming families that Dr. Highjohn treated. Having parents experienced in multiple forms of healing practices
eventually provides Tucept with various sources to draw from in his own practice. Fascinated with what he has found in the attic, Tucept tells himself, “Damn. Momma was deep. The attic was deep.” The narrative uses Tucept’s respect for his mother and the titles of her college papers to privilege her methods of bringing healing to the black community (57).

The narrative prevents Tucept from becoming too engaged in his and his family’s past in order to maintain the immediacy of the black community’s concerns. Tucept is interrupted when the ringing doorbell establishes the presence of “two dashikiclad brothers,” one of whom Tucept recognizes as “one of Martin Luther King’s lieutenants” who “had stayed in Memphis after King was shot” (58). The men’s presence shifts the narrative tone away from the tenderness of Tucept’s respect for his mother. The men “glare” at Tucept, make “pronouncements,” and are “abrupt” (58). Tucept feels antagonized by the men, who challenge Tucept’s role in the efforts to help the black community. Shukim’s connection to Martin Luther King allows the narrative to contextualize itself within an important historical moment for black civil rights and for Vietnam War history. As Tucept tries to clear his head from the memory of Shukim’s presence after King’s assassination and marijuana induced fog so that he can respond to Shukim’s provocation, he recalls that the last time he saw Shukim was at the Mason Temple on the night that King gave his final sermon, one night prior to Dr. King’s assassination:

On a humbug him and his cronies had decided to see King since he would be speaking over at the Temple. Irrelevant local militants, Levi jackets faded to uniform perfection, they had helped break up King’s first parade
for the sanitation strike and forced him to try again. And now they came to jeer him. (59)

In addition to the final sentences of King’s speech, Tucept also recalls the “big storm that night, thunder and lightning rippling around the Temple to the cadence of [King’s] words” (59). The intensity of the storm matches the emotional impact of King’s Mountaintop speech. Although he had come to jeer King, “Tucept had been moved. Tear tracks trickled from his eyes. And when he saw the way that blackfolks in the audience stood up with a longlost pride and dignity he left with a lot more respect for the King” (60). Tucept’s reaction complicates his militant persona by revealing emotional vulnerability and a positive response to Dr. King’s appeal for love and peace. The novel’s inclusion of this important historical moment thereby calls readers’ attention to the black community’s layered, complex, and often conflicting approaches to achieving civil rights.

While the novel contains few flashbacks to Tucept’s life before Vietnam, each memory prompts Tucept’s ability to perceive in himself a sense of *somebodyness*. When he returns to the present time, Tucept recognizes that “he had been like Shukim in those days. Before the war. Looked like him and acted like him. But he had been playing a role, strutting the stage. Shukim was sincere” (60). His compartmentalizing of his life pre- and postwar indicates the impact that the war has had on him; the war clearly shifted Tucept’s life but it also provided Tucept with a new way of seeing himself in the world. His reflection on Shukim’s sincere dedication to the black community points to Tucept’s own

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24 The description of the weather on the night of MLK’s final speech is not only historically accurate but also symbolically significant in *De Mojo Blues*. Stormy weather appears throughout the novel, usually at key moments in Tucept’s growth. At the peak of Tucept’s hoodoo practice, he climbs a mountaintop amidst a storm and speaks his myth. This scene in the novel will be discussed at greater length later.
desire to achieve a sense of depth in his identity. For Tucept this sincerity of a personal identity contrasts with the posture characterized by Tucept’s association before the war in the group mentality of “irrelevant militants” whose jean jackets faded to “uniform perfection” indicate a superficiality. Nonetheless, he is hostile to Shukim, especially when Shukim suggests that Tucept hides behind his middle class comfort and tells Tucept, “You bougie Blacks are all alike. People tell me that you and your daddy got some sense, but I can see you aint doing nothing for blackfolk” (60). Tucept takes offense to this class accusation even as he recognizes its validity, noting that the “very comfortableness” of his parents’ home substantiates Shukim’s “accusation” of his socioeconomic class (61). This rift over class status is significant in the intra-racial conflicts during the Civil Rights era and through the nationalist movement that followed. In “The Paradox of the African American Rebellion,” Cornel West traces the intraracial conflict through the rise of the new black middle class, and the tension between Shukim and Tucept echoes with West’s claim that the dilemma in the movement became a matter of rising black middle class’s response to the poor urban masses. West argues that “beneath the rhetoric of Black Power, black control, and black self-determination was a budding ‘new,’ black, middle class hungry for power and starving for status” (31). In the novel, Shukim works as a community activist in the local projects, “trying to organize

25 This reading comments on the narrative’s suggestion that Tucept’s involvement in militant groups is a posture. At the same time, critique of the Black Power movement often attends to the often empty rhetoric and commodification of the movement’s “look” as a flaw of the movement. See Eddie Glaude’s *Is It Nation Time?* Importantly, the novel does not dismiss the strides made by either the early civil rights era activist or the subsequent black revolutionaries. Rather, the novel resists seeing the historical period as clearly defined or the intra-racial tensions as being definitively organized along particular political, class, or other lines. Glaude argues that the nuances and ambiguities, especially of Black Power and Black Nationalism, are especially important to examining the “complex political and cultural desires of black America” in the past and in the present (2). Flowers’s novel seems an early response to Glaude’s call to “tell better stories about the Black Power era and its complicated legacies” (3).
them for survival” (Flowers 61). Shukim studies the home “as if calculating how many blackfolks had to suffer so that Tucept Highjohn could grow up comfortable” (62). The tension between the two men is palpable and even as Tucept internally recognizes the problematic nature of the class conflict, his response to Shukim comes back to the need for real work to take precedence over rhetoric:

I went through the sixties too man. I was there. I been beat and teargassed and busted, I was there man. I marched and I fought. And I know all about talking and posing too. Now you want me to talk some more. No more talk man, I’m willing to work with anything that’s real, something that’s concrete, [...] I aint got to sit here and convince you of some plan I got for blackfolk’s freedom. (61)

Tucept’s response to Shukim results in “a strange sensation of standing back and watching himself, watching too swift too angry words tripping over themselves” that is suggestive of Tucept’s growing sense of self-awareness regarding his role in the black community (61). This strange sensation—often also described as a tingle or chill—comes to stand for Tucept’s ability to see the world through the alternative lens of a hoodoo practitioner who is empowered and able to motivate others to change the mindset of the black community. The moment clearly illuminates a productive tension between the reality of lived experience and the powerful potential in alternative ways of perceiving the world, which allows for a sense of hope in what might otherwise seem bleak circumstances.

The second encounter that significantly influences Tucept’s desire to pursue his own path to empowerment for himself and for the black community also culminates in a
“strange sensation” and heightens Tucept’s attention to the alternative perception that he eventually fully embraces. In this second encounter, Tucept critiques an activist document, saying that the authors have not written anything “new” but rather repeated “a bunch of rhetoric that folks have heard a thousand times already. Old news. We gotta be a lot slicker than this, otherwise blackfolks gon be suffering forever” (64). Tucept is accused of being an “intellectual, the ultimate activist putdown” (64). Prompted by the putdown, Tucept “made so bold as to suggest that there was only one legitimate goal of political activity: Conquer and Hold” (65). When he speaks the phrase, the “strange sensation surged through him, a quick chill as quickly gone” and leaves him “confused” and “unfocused” (65). The group chides him for thinking he is “Highjohn de Conqueror again” and suggesting that his commitment is “halfass,” and Tucept tries to laugh it off with them. When the group “went back to yesteryear’s plans. Yesterday’s battles,” Tucept “sat back, shut his mouth and watched through veiled eyes” even as he assures himself that his presence is not “wasted time” but a way of “keeping his finger on the pulse” (65). In other words, Tucept recognizes that, in order to aid the community, he must be aware of what others are doing in it. Even though the group ignores Tucept’s efforts, “the sensation lingered, a memory tingling with significance.” Tucept ponders “his contribution to blackfolk’s freedom” and acknowledges that “he was only one man with a limited time on the planet. One shot. He wouldn’t waste it on no bullshit” (65).

The sensation leaves Tucept feeling empowered, and the narrative connects this empowerment to the past through the “memory tingling with significance” and to the future as Tucept begins to acknowledge both his role in and responsibility for the black community.
To emphasize the role that the past will play in Tucet’s coming to power, the narrative immediately follows this second encounter with a flashback to Vietnam in which Tucet and Jethro carry on a conversation about the history of Tucet’s family name, Highjohn. The flashback begins with a group of black soldiers giving and returning “power” through the iconic black power salute: “the fist, two pumps” (66). The novel emphasizes the role of black solidarity throughout its frequent descriptions of black soldiers exchanging the black power salute, a symbolic gesture also widely recognized as a protest against white supremacy and privilege through the Vietnam era and the Black Power movement. The novel uses this symbolic gesture of black solidarity and its role in the empowerment of the black community to preface Tucet and Jethro’s conversation about the legacy of Tucet’s name. The conversation also opens the narrative not only to the racial dynamic of the Vietnam War but also to the more distant past of Tucet’s family’s experience of the Civil War. When Jethro asks Tucet what he knows about the history of his name, Tucet replies, “According to my family, my greatgrans choose it after the Civil War […]. Named after some root. Some HighJohn de Conquer root” (68). Tucet’s response draws attention to important moments in black history – the end of legalized slavery and beginning of black autonomy through Tucet’s grandmother choosing her own name and rejecting the name given to her by white masters. The novel thus contextualizes the long history of the battle for black empowerment against the pressures of social and institutional racism. In this way, the narrative justifies the characters’ anger and desire for radical change. These experiences are not, in other words, individual and uncommon instances of racial injustice; rather they provide evidence of the racism engrained in the national history and identity of the United States.
Jethro adds dimension to Tucept’s understanding of his family name by explaining that it comes not from just any root but from “The root. The serious mojo root. That’s ole Highjohn de Conqueror himself’s root” and then taking out “a twisted little blackbrown root,” which he gives to Tucept. Tucept is both “fascinated” and “uneasy” with the “strange little grooved thing” but accepts the gift after Jethro tells him, “it’s yours anyway” (68). When Tucept admits that he does not know much about HighJohn the Conqueror, “except that he was a slavery myth about some tricking man,” Jethro explains,

“Highjohn de Conqueror is more than a slavery myth […], it’s just that slavery was the last time blackfolks needed him, but his spirit rests right there in that there root of his and whenever blackfolk’s backs are pressed up against the wall, then ole Highjohn he get to walking this earth like a natural man, kicking ass ‘n taking names, overcoming all obstacles in his path. Blackfolks just can’t lose when the spirit of Highjohn is walking with them. Hell ole Highjohn might get to walking here in Nam, tough as it’s been over ‘round here. According the Lost Book of Hoodoo, the spirit of Highjohn gon be walking soon. I been reading the signs and blackfolks is sho backed up enough against the wall. (68-69)

Jethro’s explanation of the Highjohn myth works to link the racial turmoil of the mid-twentieth century with that of the Civil War era. This connection serves to highlight the extent to which the racial turmoil of the Vietnam War era threatens the black community, who are enslaved by other means, such as Jim Crow segregation and denial of civil rights, long after emancipation. Jethro’s insistence that Highjohn is not a myth and will
rise again to empower the black community intrigues Tucept, who expresses his desire to find and read the “Lost Book of Hoodoo,” which Jethro also refers to as “de black book of power” (69). Jethro responds to Tucept’s desire to find the book through a riddle housed in a “blues ditty,” instructing Tucept to “go back to where the blues was born” and “ask old man river to blow his horn” (69). Tucept is angered by Jethro’s response but Jethro advises him that “one day that mojo gon start talking to you boy, you remember what I say, the birth of the blues, the man with the horn. […] Don’t matter if you listen or not, I was told to wake you up” (69). While he insists that Tucept is not yet “ready” to hear the mojo call, Jethro does tell Tucept that they were destined to meet before the two finish their conversation and the flashback ends with both men surviving a violent attack that presumably kills the other black soldiers with whom Jethro and Tucept had exchanged the black power salute. Jethro’s indication that he knows Tucept will be “called” prepares readers for the otherworldliness of the hoodoo tradition and sets up this alternative way of knowing the world as legitimate.

The encounters with black activists and the flashback to his conversation with Jethro bring Tucept to a place of readiness. Seated in his highback chair, watching a thunderstorm, Tucept finally works up the courage to open the small leather bag that Jethro gave him just before he died in Vietnam. Through its sequencing, the novel indicates that Tucept has been awakened by his encounters with Caldonia, Shukim, and his “cronies in the movement,” but the flashback to Vietnam and the conversation with Jethro give rise to a heightened interest in alternative methods of empowerment. Opening the mojo bag, Tucept finds “little pieces of bone” and “fighting a surge of revulsion he forced himself to look at them, shadows fluid in the raintainted darkness” (72). Tucept’s
willingness to face his fears and to look beyond the strangeness of the bones indicates his increased maturity and commitment to change. When the bones fall to the floor and land in “a circular, symmetrical pattern. The shouldered cross,” Tucept “resist[s] the urge to sweep them up” and continues to examine them as the storm rages outside (72). Lightning “lit up the room with a bright jagged flash, momentarily etching the pattern of the bones in a sharp abstract afterimage in Tucept’s eyes” (72). Like the cosmogram on the highback chair, the bones’ circular pattern suggests the intermingling of the past and present, and Tucept has a vision of “a dead and dying universe of dull suns old and cold” that seems to transport him to an earlier time (72). Much like Tucept’s flashbacks to the war, the vision “slid into his mind,” “clear and distinct,” indicating that he cannot avoid it and that its impact is quite strong. While the intrusiveness of the vision creates a sense of urgency and the images emerge as apocalyptic, Tucept’s vision insists on survival:

He saw a people marching. Tired and worn lean by survival’s demands, yet still they marched, even danced, an elegant graceful dance of survival. Survivors. A sensation of strength and power flowed through him as he watched the vision flicker into an existence just as quickly gone. […] The vision died, leaving him with that tingle of significance. […] It had been different than any dream or day dream he had ever had, more vivid, more real. He had felt it. Felt it. He shivered. For a quick moment he had known power. (72-73)

The image of “a people walking” invokes historic moments of black communities walking through the horrors of slavery and the marches of the Civil Rights Movement. Tucept’s sense of power comes from the vision of survivors who, to return to Jethro’s
description of Highjohn the Conqueror’s return to the black community, have their backs against a wall but find a will to move forward anyway.

Motivated by the brief sensation of power, Tucept decides to seek “de black book of power” by following Jethro’s riddle and going to Beale Street in Memphis. Rather than a concrete answer, however, Tucept finds more riddles that ultimately place him on “de quest” for power, the Book of Hoodoo, and a place for himself in the black community. The riddle begins on Beale Street, where he encounters an old man named Spijoko who reads Tucept’s mind. Spijoko senses Tucept’s disappointment in the apparent decline of Beale, which he remembers as lively place: the “first stop on the trek upriver […], to the promised land and the cold concrete of the northern cities” was now a “ghosttown” created by so-called “urban renewal” (73). Spijoko assures Tucept, “Don’t you worry about the Beale none […], blues neither boy, Beale ‘n the blues both will live again when the folks need em. Aint never dies, just moving through transitions with the folks. The blues like to keep up. Been an unbroken line son” (74). Spijoko emphasizes the power of the blues for the black community, telling Tucept that the “blues been around long as blackfolks have. Got us over many a hump. The blues is a living blues. Been a unbroken line boy, we aint got too many of them” (75). Despite Tucept’s efforts to “shield his mind,” Spijoko reads Tucept’s thoughts and Tucept remains resistant to the older man until he realizes that Spijoko files his nails into the same triangular cut as Jethro. Tucept’s excitement that he might find the Book of Hoodoo wanes, however, when Spijoko tells him that if he wants to read the book he should “go see Mike and Willie” (76). Confused as to how the man knows about Mike and Willie, he tells Spijoko that “all this mumbo jumbo aint necessary” (76) and leaves without further information. Tucept’s
defensiveness arises from his lack of control, which the text emphasizes when Tucept does go to see Willie D. and Mike, who live in New York City and Washington, DC, respectively. Even as Tucept dismisses the “riddles” he has been provided in response to his questions as “mumbo jumbo,” he is drawn to the path on which these riddles send him. Although he does not find the book during his visits with Willie D. and Mike, Tucept returns to Spijoko intent on reading the Book, which he now understands as a way of life, the hoodoo path. Despite Spijoko’s warning that “the hoodoo path aint no easy road” on which “bigger men have fell. The water always deeper than it look,” Tucept commits, indicating, “I wanna know power” (93). Tucept’s commitment to learning the hoodoo path under Spijoko despite his initial resistance to the man demonstrates the effect that his visits to New York City and Washington, D.C. have on him.

Because the narrative figures Spijoko as the novel’s wise man and cultural custodian, his advice that Tucept seek “de black book of power” by visiting Willie D. and Mike further indicates the value of each man’s perspective. The narrative clearly links Tucept’s commitment to this path to power to his experiences with Willie D. and Mike, making their role in the novel worthy of close examination. The narrative uses Tucept’s interactions with his veteran peers to call attention to the various ways in which the black community engages with the social and political adversity they face in the novel’s present time while also highlighting these particular men’s responses to reintegrating into American civil society after Vietnam. Later in the novel, when the two men travel to Tucept’s house at Tucept’s request, Tucept alleviates the tension between his two friends by telling them, “I didn’t bring yall down here to squabble over who’s the better negro, house or field” (233). Tucept acknowledges the men’s different approaches to positioning
themselves as black men living in a racist society by referring to a common typology of slaves: those who worked in the house and admired their master’s lifestyle and those who worked in the fields and looked upon the white master with disdain. The novel illuminates the differences between the men but emphasizes each man’s ability to recognize the struggle of the black community and potential for power in solidarity despite these differences. Although Tucept goes to visit the men expecting to find a physical book, the knowledge he uncovers is less tangible; instead Tucept realizes that a sense of *somebodyness* lives in the interactions with the black community. During both trips, Tucept engages with black culture in ways that solidify his commitment to the quest to power through hoodoo. Furthermore, his visits prompt both Willie D. and Mike to reflect on their own roles in the black community, catalyzing each man’s desire for a sense of *somebodyness*.  

In many ways, the novel frames Willie D.’s character through a connection to the past and suggests this connection to the past has the potential both to hinder and propel Willie D.’s ability to develop a sense of *somebodyness*. The narrative first establishes Willie D.’s connection to the past by describing him as conspicuously wearing his “faded army field jacket” as a way of demonstrating his “serious[ness] about being a vet” (77, 26)

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26 The novel’s depictions of Tucept’s visits with his friends are interrupted only by a short flashback to Vietnam. Although the narrative does not indicate the timing between these visits, their textual proximity suggests that the visits happen within a short span of time. After these visits with his friends, Tucept returns to Spijoko and articulates his commitment to the hoodoo path and the first section of the novel ends. Section Two follows the narrative pattern of Section One; that is, it interrupts Tucept’s present day experiences with flashbacks of Vietnam, each of which helps both Tucept and the reader to piece together the significance of his Vietnam experience with his current quest to power. However, Section Two also chronicles Mike and Willie D.’s present day experiences after their respective visits with Tucept. In the analysis that follows, I integrate the narrative’s treatment of Willie D. and Mike, respectively, from Section 1 and 2 in order to draw connections between their visit with Tucept and to draw distinctions between the way the men experience life in the black community post-Vietnam. I then treat Tucept’s rise as a hoodoo practitioner, which reaches a highpoint in the novel’s final section when the three men unite again at Tucept’s house in the woods.
Moreover, he maintains a community of fellow Vietnam Veterans and the conversation between him and Tucept during the men’s reunion in New York centers on the war. Through these and other similar details, the novel makes clear that Willie D. identifies himself strongly with his past, specifically with the war. At the same time, the narrative also highlights Willie D.’s involvement in grassroots political activism that seeks to create a better future for the black community. For example, he works with the city to rebuild the ghetto where he resides with his family despite frequent intra-racial violence there. Willie D. has covered the walls of his family’s apartment with “political posters, some framed: One People, One Struggle. If There Is No Struggle There Will Be No Progress. People’s War. Forward Ever, Backwards Never. Martin, Malcolm, Marcus, and Maurice.” The posters align Willie D. with more radical and future-oriented black movements. The intensity with which Willie D. invests himself simultaneously in his past and present creates an emotional response in Tucept, who experiences a range of feelings during their visit.

In addition to the violence that erupts when Willie D. catches two black men trying to burn down the building that he and his wife are restoring, Tucept experiences pangs of loneliness watching the love between Willie D. and his family. The family exudes a sense of strength and survival despite living in what Tucept experiences as “a moody bombed-out landscape” in which the nearly-empty buildings resemble “brooding sentinels of a dead civilization” (83). This physical landscape that resembles a war zone and being with his friend from the war also sends Tucept back to the past, making him “nostalgic for the time when they had felt strong, powerful, brotherme, brotherblood, brotherblack” (84). The end of Tucept’s visit with Willie D. also symbolically links the
latter man to the past. Willie D. cannot provide Tucept with any additional information about the hoodoo book, but he does take Tucept to a Nigerian art exhibit at the Met, where Tucept once again experiences the “strange sensation” that he comes to identify as power. The sensation is particularly strong when Tucept comes upon an ancient sculpture of “two hands broken off at the wrist” and holding “a small creature” (85). Tucept stares at the sculpture, “greedily drinking the power emanating from it” when he notices that the sculptured hands feature the same blunt triangular finger nails of Jethro and Spijoko. Reading the plaque by the sculpture, Tucept learns that the sculpture depicts an African sorcerer and the trademark fingernails align with “the tradition of some African sorcerers since before recorded history” (85). Once again, Tucept experiences the sensation of power when interacting with hoodoo artifacts, reinforcing his commitment to finding the lost Book of Hoodoo.

Although the visit increases Tucept’s confidence that he will find the source of power, it has a different effect on Willie D., who feels increasingly disempowered after seeing Tucept. Tucept’s visit and developing hoodoo practice seem to provide the catalyst for Willie D.’s ability and willingness to more closely examine his own approach. This reinforces the notion that Tucept’s drive to power is not self-focused but outwardly directed to the larger black community and its ability to overcome subordination by white society. Willie D. ultimately comes to sense that despite his efforts and struggle for black independence, “their protests were just street theater, amusement” (197). Willie D. seeks change when he recognizes that his nostalgia for Vietnam has created a false sense of the “camaraderie and strength” he experienced during the war. Although he enjoys the time he spends with other veterans, Willie
recognizes that the time they spend “trading old leftover war stories” resembles “junkies skinpopping a memory” and does not yield powerful results (146). Willie’s epiphany begins to take shape after an incident at the veterans’ service center leads to a flashback of Vietnam. An argument with a caseworker leads a fellow veteran to an angry breakdown during which he compares the denial of his benefits check to the post-slavery era by yelling, “I want my mule […]. You owe me dammit and I want my money, I went to the fucking war, I want my money” (140). When the security guards approach the man, “he loudtalked them, Yessir boss, yessir, I’se gon be good, just want my acres, just want my mules,” before opening his shirt to reveal “a throbbing gouge carved out of his chest,” waving a Purple Heart medal, and then exclaiming that he has done his time and is now due his pay. Although the narrative indicates that the man’s response results from an emotional and psychological breakdown, it simultaneously rationalizes the break through the man’s rant, in which he draws parallels between the lack of support Vietnam veterans received after the war and the failed system of reparation for slaves after the Civil War. In other words, the narrative indicates that the man’s suffering derives from the systemic subordination of the black community. Emphasizing the effect of institutionalized racism, the man’s protest escalates despite Willie D. and the other men’s efforts to settle him down. The man compares the subordination of blacks to that of the Vietnamese during the war, once again calling attention to the long history of black subordination and highlighting the hypocrisy of the war’s so-called spread of democratic ideals. The man shouts,
Paciffuckincation!
The brother slapped at the wall, each pistol slap accenting syllables of the long word, *pa ci fi fuck in ca tion*, that’s all this shit is, keep the niggers happy, pacify their black ass, just like they tried to do the gooks.
Paciffuckincation. Well gimme the fucking mule. Pacify me. (142)

Willie is too late in trying “to calm the brother down” and the guards physically remove the man from the room. He and the other vets follow behind “in a river of anger” but are matched by the anger of the guards, one whose “dark face flushed with anger” comes with “nightstick flailing” (142). Although no amount of begging from the veteran group to let their friend go convinces the guards, who have called the police, Willie D. and the others demonstrate their support for the man by waiting.

As he waits, Willie sees a newspaper that features a story about a New York City police officer acquitted of “blowing open the head of a 13-year old boy who had walked up to him and asked him a question in front of a multitude of witnesses. Temporary epilepsy” (144).27 By the time the police arrive, Willie “had a attitude” and his anger only increases when he realizes the police officers’ faces reveal a sense of “irritability, resentment, boredom, amusement” that ultimately triggers flashbacks of his own involvement in Vietnam: “suddenly he saw himself in Nam. Keeping the natives in line. The same colonial arrogance the cops were using on them” (144). Recalling the narrative’s earlier description of Willie as an intended military “lifer,” and thereby desiring to participate in a system that the novel has posited as complicit in oppressing

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27 For contemporary readers in the early 21st century, this type of headline will likely resonate for its resemblance to the multiple cases of police shootings that killed young black men. Rather than progress, this series of incidents and the news story’s resonation for these contemporary readers, the narrative emphasizes a continuation of institutional racism.
black men, readers witness an epiphany in Willie, who now experiences “a curiously guilty anger” upon reflecting that

    In Nam they had been the soldiers. Caesar’s legions in blackface. Colonial troops patrolling Vietnamese villages and Harlem streets, keeping the peace in the name of Western Civilization. Willie remembered the sense of power, the too easy growth of emotional callousness on soldiers who control a subject people and play god, arbiter of life and death. (144-145)

Willie D.’s recognition of his own participation in the abuse of power in Vietnam contributes to his awareness that his activist involvement has not been effective. Unable to help the man in police custody, Willie D. and the others return to the office to get their checks but have already missed their call. Deflated and pooling financial resources to make sure that they would all be able to return to the office in the morning, one of the other veterans articulates their shared sentiment: “When we were in the war we could’ve help that brother, he paused, somehow” (144). Willie responds to the statement by sharing a story of how, on his return flight from Vietnam back to the United States, more black than white men were bumped so that “a general and his family could go home” (145). Willie continues, “The rest of us didn’t say shit, just glad it wasn’t us. And we had just left Nam where we didn’t let a brother go down for nothing” (145). Willie’s reflection indicates that, while there was certainly difference and conflict between the black soldiers in Vietnam, the context of war necessitated solidarity of action. Out of Vietnam, though, the men are quickly re-inscribed into American individualism. The narrative equates this lack of solidarity with the diminished sense of power. Paired with his earlier reflection that the power they did have in Vietnam was often derived from the
same racist systems of power that subordinate the black community in the United States, the narrative represents Willie’s desire for a change of tactics from the protests perceived of as “street theater.” This series of events leads Willie to the conclusion that “they had to broaden their thinking” but without a definitive answer for how to do so (197). Because readers see Willie D.’s experiences in the context of Tucept’s growing hoodoo practice, however, the novel hints that Willie D. will soon encounter an opportunity to achieve the feelings of solidarity and somethingness that he craves.

In contrast to Willie D.’s seriousness about being a Vietnam veteran, Mike tells Tucept, “It’s been a while since I even thought about Nam” (88). Mike has shed his army gear and veteran status for the shirt and tie he wears as a law student and then employee at a law firm, from which he is “ready to leap to the money track and a quick lick at the power track” (90). Tucept feels sharply the socioeconomic difference between Willie D. and Mike when Mike, “thick black hair sculptured, his sand tan skin smooth and pampered [and] dressed in soft well cut casuals” pulls up in an expensive red sports car. Before heading to a nice bar that requires Tucept to shed his field jacket for a tie in order to fit in alongside the “tailored men and glittering women draping the bar,” Mike takes Tucept along for the ride to drop off his son at the boy’s mother’s “large Georgian house” in the suburban area outside of the capital city (89, 87). While Mike seems to realize that his middle class life comes at a price, indicating that his “corporate joyride” also restrains him with “some nice golden handcuffs” (89), he also appears fully comfortable in maintaining this status quo. The men do not exchange war stories and their reunion does not have the ease of the one between Tucept and Willie D.; their conversation stays focused on the present and quickly turns to the purpose of Tucept’s trip to D.C. Like
Willie D., Mike has no knowledge of the Lost Book of Hoodoo, and the men’s conversation just as quickly shifts to how they will spend the rest of their evening together. The pace at which the conversation moves forward highlights Mike’s focus on the present and the future, contrasting with Willie D.’s more nostalgic perspective.

Likewise, the aspect of culture with which Tucept engages while visiting Mike represents the contemporary moment rather than the past. When Tucept requests “something refreshing,” Mike responds by taking them to a dive bar where Bob Marley performs. The novel’s incorporation of Bob Marley into the narrative provides readers with an opportunity to encounter both the music and the international politics of a popular musician, whose lyrics often explicitly engage global black solidarity against oppression. Marley’s music often balances a grim reality with hope for the future. Music guides Tucept in his developing sense of *somebodyness*; thus, incorporating Bob Marley emphasizes the novel’s attention to a survivor spirit, one that follows MLK’s suggestion to refuse “to be ashamed of being black.” The novel describes the club where Marley plays as “seething with energy” and Marley as a “wildman, shaking his dreads, bounding all over the little stage, electrifying his audience, stroking, pulling, moving em” (91). As it has throughout *De Mojo Blues*, music has a strong effect on Tucept, who listens carefully to the lyrics of Marley’s “War.” The narrative describes the song as “a declaration of war taken from an old Selassie speech, telling folks that this is war but don’t worry, our victory is as certain as good over evil” (91). “War” is a rally song; its lyrics directly engage African history and the push for global, racial equality: “until there no longer / First class and second class citizens of any nation / Until the colour of a man's skin / Is of no more significance / than the colour of his eyes / Me say war” (lines 10-14).
The novel’s use of the song provides one of several connections between Africa and that of the United States, thereby positioning the local alongside the global. As he does at the Nigerian art exhibit in New York with Willie D., Tucept experiences the “sensation” of power in the club. He is “jerked alert” when Marley begins “Redemption Song” and sings, “Some say it’s just a part of it, we’ve got to fulfill the Book” (92, original emphasis). Here, Tucept’s being “jerked alert” resonates with the aforementioned flashback in which Jethro explains that he has been directed to wake up Tucept. Tucept is not surprised when examining Marley’s hands that the musician’s “fingers [were] tipped in triangular points. Delta-nailed” (92), symbolizing Marley’s association with the hoodoo path. Tucept approaches Marley after the set and asks about the Lost Book of Hoodoo, but he receives only a “string of Jamaica style geechie talk and his question ignored. But even as the man ranted and turned to walk off, deep within his eyes, he spoke” (92). Although the narrative does not indicate what exactly Marley’s eyes speak to Tucept, it suggests that the message involves the musician’s encore, which is a “hypnotic, incantoric” rendition of his song, “Survival”: “we’re the survivors […] the black survivors” (92). Both the ability to communicate indirectly and this message of survival foreshadow Tucept’s hoodoo practice, through which Tucept creates a myth of survival to telepathically feed the spirit of the black community as they rise in the face of adversity.

While the novel does not apprise readers of Mike’s reaction to the Bob Marley show, thematic connections indicate a similarly powerful impact when the narrative returns to examine Mike’s life after his visit with Tucept. In keeping with the global concerns raised through its inclusion of Bob Marley’s music, the novel first situates Mike
in a peer circle that includes Thembu, a “wide broadfaced brother with the ANC mission” who engages Mike in a conversation about the power potential in “the real liberation of Africa. The unity of all Africa” (186). When Mike invokes the notion of a “worldwide entity of black peoples. A global state. A Black Federation,” Thembu responds with laughter, noting that “younger intellectuals have also speculated on such an entity, but we are not so arrogant as to try and structure it yet” (186). While the novel does not directly engage the conversation about Africa any further, this conversation opens the narrative to global concerns of human liberation and connections between people of color beyond the United States. Doing so emphasizes the necessity of a fundamental belief in community that extends beyond national identifications. Further, the exchange between Mike and Thembu calls attention to the tension between a hopeful vision for the future and the challenges of the present reality; the narrative then maintains this tension in depicting Mike’s individual struggle to achieve a sense of *somebodyness*. Like Willie D., Mike grows increasingly disempowered despite the recent successes he has had in his career. At a work event, Mike becomes distracted both by attractive women in the room and an ongoing case in which Mike’s client must take a plea bargain in order to avoid the death penalty. Mike decides against asking the judge for a favor, deciding that “the case was lost long before Mike got it. […] It didn’t make any difference. None of this volunteer work made any difference. Just kept the system unclogged. His little bit for the people, he thought cynically, his mouth souring” (182). Mike’s rising discontent with his ability to effect change leads him to consider the judge’s request for help in running for office by running alongside him. In his plea for Mike to join the campaign for political office, the judge tells Mike:
The name of the game is cut the dead weight and we’re the first ones up for sacrifice. Actually it’s going to be a good thing for us. We’ve been on that welfare tit way too damned long anyway, it’s sapped our damned spirit. Whatever, we’re about to ride some rough water Mike. The blacks are going to have to march. Throwing ourselves on the mercy of the whitefolks doesn’t work anymore, if it ever did. It’s about power this go-round Mike. Power. How do we get it, how do we use it. We gotta march Mike. (189)

The judge’s plea to Mike presents a different state of the black community than that depicted through Willie D. because it focuses on change through formal political systems rather than grassroots activism. However, the novel does not privilege either perspective, instead highlighting the stymied reach of both strategies by depicting each man’s growing disenchantment with his roles in the black community.

Just as Willie D. concludes that his activism is not being taken seriously, Mike also realizes that his involvement in law and order has not significantly contributed to the larger black community’s self-empowerment. When watching a news report of a black man offered a job as a presidential adviser on minority affairs, Mike is not impressed, noting that “it didn’t rate as power in his book. The same old yassuh boss colored power that we’ve always had. Only kind a blackman in America can get” (190). Mike’s response demonstrates the limitations experienced by black individuals in the United States, where a sense of *somebodyness* as Martin Luther King defines it cannot exist because, in order to be empowered, he must sacrifice his racial identity and thereby perpetuate a “shame” or “inferiority” of blackness. Mike acknowledges that his
bitterness toward the success of the other man manifests his own exhaustion at “being swept up in every little game that came down the pike” rather than being intentional in his actions (192). Reflecting on his position Mike determines to discover “what he wanted […]. He had been what his father wanted, what the army wanted and what Acme wanted, he had been what the people wanted and now the judge wanted to make him what he wanted […]. Well, what did he want, and how was he going to get it?” (193). Mike is able to determine that his “objective” is “power” but ultimately struggles to map a plan for how to achieve “a little power of his very own” (193). Nonetheless, Mike’s reflection signals a determination to achieve a sense of *somebodyness* on his own terms and without sacrificing his racial identity.

Mike and Willie D.’s growing sense of disempowerment and subsequent determination to change their respective courses align with Tucept’s growth as a hoodoo practitioner. While each of the three men depicted in handcuffs in the novel’s opening scene expresses his desire for power, Tucept is the only one who is able to access it. His involvement with hoodoo practice under the mentorship of Spijoko gives Tucept a point of entry to the sensations of power he encountered briefly during his reunions with Mike and Willie D.. As Tucept embraces the empowerment he feels through hoodoo, the constraints that he has felt throughout the novel begin to dissolve. This is especially important with respect to Tucept’s flashbacks situated in the Vietnam War: as the novel progresses, the flashbacks become less inhibiting and serve instead as a catalyst for Tucept’s understanding of the power of black solidarity and the survivor spirit. The novel thereby privileges Tucept’s alternative approach by contrasting it to Mike and Willie D.’s more traditional approaches, which initially leave the men unfulfilled. Later in the novel
Mike and Willie D. ultimately have a better receptiveness to Tucept’s approach when the three men reunite for the first time since returning from the war. The narrative’s focus on alternative ways of navigating the world emphasizes the futility of maintaining the status quo. *De Mojo Blues* embraces the powerful potential of creative approaches, especially those that emerge from embracing blackness rather than suppressing it in order to assimilate into mainstream white society. As Robin Kelley argues in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, real social justice emerges when communities and individuals “stop begging for inclusion in a corrupt system, take responsibility for transforming our culture, and remake ourselves as human beings” (133). This transformation of a culture, Kelley maintains, begins with hope. Consequently, Kelley privileges the role of the imagination for its accessibility to all individuals and its ability to inspire a contagious hope and the ability to image a better future. Specifically, Kelley draws on the revolutionary vision of activist Grace Lee Boggs, who argues that imaginative vision fuels the hope that is “essential to the building of a movement” (134). The ability to imagine a new world is a significant component of effecting change in the present reality, especially for marginalized individuals and groups for whom the “conditions of daily life, of every day oppression, of survival […] render much of [the] imagination inert” (11). The inability to imagine a new future signifies a loss of hope for what might be and, consequently, an acceptance of what is and maintenance of the status quo. The novel’s characters portray how the ability to inhabit a hopeful survivor spirit rather than a victimized one becomes a crucial component of actualizing a future in which they begin to see themselves as “part of a continuing struggle of human beings, not only to survive but to evolve into more human human beings” (Boggs, qtd. in Kelley
The ability of a group that has endured brutal racial oppression to embrace such a spirit provides a model of human evolution that focuses on resilience. This emphasis on humanity is crucial in the representation of the Vietnam War, which so often emerges primarily as a tale of destruction. *De Mojo Blues* certainly incorporates the very real and destructive forces put into play as a result of the war; however, the novel reimagines the role of the black soldier by illuminating Tucept’s progression from a traumatized veteran to a healer of his community.

Tucept’s ability to envision an empowered future very much depends on his relationship with Spijoko, who enables Tucept not only to grow as a hoodoo practitioner but also to develop a sense of *somebodyness* that re-imagines what it means to be a black man with power. The novel’s focus on this relationship provides another example of the collaborative nature of one’s journey to a sense of self. Spijoko’s mentorship of Tucept involves inculcating the younger man with a sense of responsibility for the larger black community that extends beyond the form of black solidarity Tucept experienced in Vietnam, which focused on surviving the physical dangers of war, to address emotional needs. Through his lessons with his mentor, Tucept begins to balance his own anger with his compassion for the community at large. Tucept grows to see himself as spirit doctor with the ability to nourish the weary souls in his community and listens wholeheartedly when Spijoko tell him, “the tribe’s spirit is your responsibility” (Flowers 131). The narrative increasingly reveals Tucept’s vulnerability, thereby embracing a notion of masculinity that defies notions of masculine that prioritize strength and control and instead posits Tucept as a caretaker and attentive to his and others’ emotions, a role not typically embraced by men in black or white society. As such, the novel more specifically
complicates stereotypical images of the black soldier as an angry, violent man by positioning Tucept as possessing a vision of a future that centers on survival rather than destruction. The novel directly attends to these conceptions of masculine identity through a pivotal interaction between Tucept and his father. Tucept’s visit from his father comes shortly after Tucept has decided that his efforts to be a “progressive” man are not worth the pain and suffering he experiences as a result.\(^{28}\)

Tucept’s father makes a rare visit to Tucept’s home and reflects on the way he raised Tucept. Tucept is surprised by the visit and by his father’s being “tongue-tied” because Dr. Highjohn typically treated Tucept with “dictatorial brevity” (170). Tucept allows himself to suppress some of the resentment he still stores for his father, who reflects on his parenting style: “Well I did what I thought was best at the time, what I thought was right then, but I guess I had some funny ideas of what being a man was” (170). Upon hearing his father’s admission, Tucept maintains a mask of composure that hides conflicting emotions of “love, resentment embarrassment affection pride” (170). Stumbling over words and emotions, Tucept’s father eventually articulates an apology for the time that he made his son wear a dress for crying. Tucept remembers looking at his

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\(^{28}\) Shortly before seeing his father, Tucept ends a romantic relationship. Throughout the novel, Tucept identifies himself as a “progressive macho” and the narrative calls attention to the fact that “he had done a little thinking on the new assertiveness by black women. His cronies considered him soft on the woman question. He approved because he believed in folks being the most that they could be and he could see where some women might feel that they get limited horizons and rawdeals” (47). At the same time, Tucept’s sense of himself as a black man is always in the process of becoming. He struggles in his relationships with women, especially with those who might be described as being assertive, and often falters in his attempt to be “more progressive” (48). This attention to Tucept’s actions and intentions regarding his views on women illuminates the novel’s historical and social context and inflects the war narrative with the frame of gender. As previously suggested, gender is an important piece of the narrative of black men in the Vietnam War: many black soldiers initially saw their military participation as “a means of defining their manhood” but eventually felt emasculated by the inferior roles they were assigned (Graham 91). For many, subscribing to the male dominated perspective of Black Nationalism provided rehabilitation of a sense of masculinity but this came at a price of alienating black women. *De Mojo Blues* engages the role of gender in the black community, especially through Tucept’s attempt to create his own identity.
family’s “backyard wavy through crying eyes and his father’s angry stinging voice, Aint no boy of mine going to be crying every time some little thing happens to him. You’ll wear that dress until you’re broken of it” (170). Dr. Highjohn explains a bit more about his “funny ideas” of masculinity before admitting, “Shit, I cry myself sometimes” (170). His father’s admission prompts Tucept to think:

Listening to his father stumble through his apology he realized how much he was like his father, how much he owed him for what he was, even the mask of cool he now clutched so determinedly to his face. Now that he has learned to wear his own manmask he sees the man beneath his father’s mask and he knows how much effort it cost him to make his apology.

(170)

Tucept’s reflection demonstrates the intertwined nature of his identity and enables him to see and experience the complexity of developing a sense of somebodyness as a black man in predominantly white America. The narrative’s description of the “manmask” resonates in many ways with W.E.B DuBois’s concept of double consciousness and the veiled existence lived by black Americans. Tucept’s mask is suggestive of the DuBoisian veil inasmuch as Tucept is able to see the ways in which he has been performing a certain type of masculinity, one regulated by the norms of white society’s expectation of males as strong and resolute. De Mojo Blues also works to lift the veil for readers, exposing them to the inner workings of this black man’s experiences, and providing an alternative lens for viewing the world. Tucept’s ability to see his own mask allows him to lower it and be vulnerable both for and with his father: “Tucept’s face cracked into a smile and tears rolled down his cheeks, It’s alright Daddy, he said, I still cry when folks aint
looking” (170). Tucept’s reaction reveals the ways in which he simultaneously conforms to and challenges norms of black masculine identity. Most importantly, it highlights Tucept’s growing sense of *somebodyness* and his refusal to accept a singular view of what it means to be a black man.

The larger impact of this conversation with his father emerges in Tucept’s growing ability to heal the pain and suffering of others. By opening himself to both his own suffering and that of others through his hoodoo training, Tucept takes on the responsibility for instilling a vision of survival in the larger community. During an early training session Tucept uses his “spirit vision” to observe the souls of a group of children, “most all of them ailed, lackluster, ill, tattered, some stunted and stilted, cramped into low horizons. Some were half alert, staring sluggishly back at him. Most were dead, totally asleep” (130). Tucept is “thoroughly shocked” and “guessed he had always thought that souls would be Disneyland sets, euphoric gardens with bright butterflies, singing bluebirds and floating quarter notes” (130). The experience of seeing the black community’s youth already ailing overwhelms Tucept, who “began to hurt for them, his eyes full and trying to blink back the tears that threatened to fall” (131, emphasis added).

Tucept’s response to the suffering of the children marks a shift not only toward a more vulnerable state but also toward a more other-centered existence. He fears what will become of the black community at large if they continue to see themselves as inferior because of their race. He reflects, “We are a broken people […]. How far have we fallen as a people? How much farther can we fall and still exist as a people” (131). Tucept’s concern for his people’s spiritual wellbeing motivates his ability to grow into a powerful
healer. In other words, the narrative indicates that Tucept’s willingness to expose himself to the pain and suffering experienced by those around him grants him the ability to heal.

As a caretaker for the spirit of the black community, Tucept’s primary responsibility is to provide “a conduit of the power” through stories of black survival that foster strength and persistence by connecting his people to their rich culture and to one another (100). In this way, Tucept assumes the role of a griot, the West African storyteller who serves as the collector “of stories, genealogies, histories, songs and rituals” that are then circulated within the community (Atkinson, n. pag.). For example, Tucept shares with his nephew and other children the story of Moj, the first monkey to stand upright: “shaman of a monkey tribe in the heart of Africa. Moj the monkey shaman was a monkey with vision” who refuses to be limited by walking on four legs and decides to stand. The other monkeys are fearful but eventually follow Moj’s courage and stand, “and so the Tribes of Moj stood and ascended monkey. They conquered and spread across the face of the earth” (181). Tucept concludes his story by telling the children, “Where others must crawl and whimper the Firstborn stand, unafraid. That is all” (181). Tucept’s pronouncement, “that is all,” indicates his belief in the possibility of willing a new reality into being through the creation of story. Likewise, the power of myths and story in African/American culture rests in creating a shared history: “It is through the utilization of nommo, a Bantu term which denotes the magical power of words to cause change, that a griot creates a shared community, a shared culture” (Atkinson, n. pag). As a people whose role in the United States has been defined by the white majority, self-definition by black community calls upon this cultural tradition of storytelling, which empowers both the griot and the audience to shape not only their history but also their
future. This sense of empowerment to articulate positively the black identity is what Tucept refers to as “sayso,” which aligns with the notion of *nommo*, the power of language to determine reality. He embraces Spijoko’s lesson that “reality is what you will it to be. […] As you define so shall it be. That’s what makes you the sorcerer. To bend reality to your will is the essence of magic” (99). Consequently, Tucept situates this new reality for himself and the African American community in a myth in which blackness does not equate to inferiority but rather to a superior ability to survive and thrive as a people.

Tucept grows as a conjure man by treating individual clients. His interactions with these clients testify to his ability to soothe the spirit and create a mindset of collaboration and community. For example, in the final strands of the novel’s second section, “De Quest,” the narrative depicts a client who comes to Tucept’s practice in what appears to be a state of desperation but leaves in a state of determination to continue “the good black fight” (204). As the man approaches Tucept’s door, he experiences the kind of self-doubt that Tucept hopes to replace with a sense of *somebodyness*. The man wonders,

Why was he doing this? A damned conjureman? Is this 1980 or isn’t it?

[…] He was tired. No, not tired, weary. Weary. Battle fatigue, burnout, you name it he had it. He had given his youth to the struggle, the Movement, to this organization and that organization. Paid his Tax, he thought with a wry smile. His Black Tax, his mentor had called it long ago […]. Our only power is in organization.” (203)
The man represents many of the black souls that Tucept has “read” in his training with Spijoko: they are the “many black spirits crippled and cramped if not out-and-out dead” (131). Faced with this weary client, though, Tucept “massaged the kinks out [the man’s soul] and softened old calluses grown thick. He toned it up and oiled it with ancient primal essences,” all the while humming “deep Delta blues […] life trying to teach you a lesson blues” (203). The shift in Tucept’s ability to transform the worn spirits of his people with hope and confidence marks the extent of his training. No longer overwhelmed by the weariness of others, Tucept “finetun[ed] the client’s soul” and then “fed it, letting mojo flow through his Hands in waves of power until the soul glowed with renewed lifeforce” (203). Rather than weary, the man leaves Tucept’s house thankful and proud of his role in the efforts for black liberation. As he descends the steps, another client climbs; he recognizes her as a musician whose songs had a significant impact on him. His reflection that her music provides a “black world resource” demonstrates both the power of music and the shared responsibility of the movement while his sense that “plenty of sunshine was coming his way” indicates the effectiveness of Tucept’s soul work (204).

Although the man who visits Tucept’s practice experiences a profound transformation, there is more to Tucept’s plan than these individual encounters. As if to remind readers and Tucept of the significance of his calling, the narrative follows this depiction of Tucept at work as a conjure man with a flashback to Vietnam in which readers learn of the events that lead to the false accusation that Tucept, Willie D., and Mike killed the white lieutenant. The flashback reinforces the oppression faced by the black soldiers and the solidarity that enabled many of them to survive, particularly by
highlighting Tucept’s first participation in the dap line, where another black soldier tells Tucept, “you and me brother, against the world” (210). This invocation of a black brotherhood persists through the conclusion of the novel’s second section, which depicts Tucept receiving the call from the “Hoodoo Brotherhood” while seated once again in his highback chair with the bones arranged in the shouldered cross on the floor in front of him. Tucept receives the call from “shadowed figures” who speak in a low murmuring babble of languages and dialects that only he heard” (212). Tucept recognizes the voices of these figures as black revolutionaries: “Ol’ Prophet Nat. Gullah Jack. O Balio. uMlenghi. Doc. John. D. Walker. Boukman. O.L. Young. LaBas.” (212). The figures are depicted as “shadows in shadows in shadows,” pointing to a continuity of time and place that allows Tucept and readers to draw connections between the injustices Tucept experiences and those of enslaved Africans. The voices encourage Tucept to “Listen young hoodoo” so that he can “grow in power” (212). The second section closes “de quest”: “Tucept listens and is born again. Highjohn stands. Hoodooman. I am The Way” (212). Like Moj, Tucept stands, marking his transformation from one who desires change to one who refuses to maintain the status quo, and inhabits the legacy of his namesake, Highjohn the Conqueror.

As Highjohn in the novel’s final section, Tucept possesses “de power” to “program into the soul of the Tribe” a new myth of their existence that will come “alive, its heart a burning sunheat thing, a beacon in times of both celebration and despair” (217). Drawing upon the tradition of nommo, the narrative calls attention to the ability

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29 The novel switches to a first person perspective a handful of times in the novel. In the final section, the narrative refers to Tucept as Highjohn, signaling the character’s rebirth. The final segments are told from Highjohn’s perspective and use the first person. This narrative strategy instantiates Tucept’s achievement.
of language to create from story or myth a new reality; story, then, possesses a dynamic lifeforce that can influence a community. As such, Highjohn, as the novel refers to Tucept in the final section, creates his myth carefully, examining its “emotional impact, logical holes, vividness and texture, factors that would affects its life span, that would give or take away the fire that gave it life. He fussed over the details,” knowing that his myth would become the way (217). Highjohn’s power of “sayso” means that, once his myth is implanted, the black community will either thrive or suffer. Well “aware of the responsibility of power,” Highjohn contemplates whether he is “for real” or whether by implanting his myth he will be “just ghostdancing his people down a hardroad to genocide” (219). At the same time, Highjohn recognizes that they “already suffer” and so his goal is to create a “strong people” in place of a “broken and conquered people” (219). To be successful in creating a “race of rulers” that will “never again be enslaved,” he “programmed in traits like discipline and dignity, selfresponsibility and selfdirection, the ability to grow from both victory and defeat” (219, 217). Taking great pains to study and test his myth carefully, Highjohn assures Spijoko that “there will be no ambushes while [he] is on point” (220). Drawing upon the combat position of “walking point,” the narrative reintroduces Tucept’s Vietnam War experience to illustrate his willingness to take responsibility for his troops by leading them to safety.

Moreover, the image of Tucept walking point directly addresses the novel’s final flashback of the war, in which Tucept recalls the deaths of two friends that result from the type of racially based military justice described earlier, in that both men are subjected to more than their fair share of walking point or other dangerous missions. Jethro is one of voice – he has acquired “sayso.” In keeping with the novel’s shift in naming the protagonist, I refer to Tucept as “Highjohn” whenever the analysis is focused solely on Tucept’s new identity.
of these men and the narrative indicates that Jethro senses his death and so gives Tucept the mojo bag, asking the latter to take care of it for him. Weary from the day’s battle, Tucept accepts without question, telling his friend that he has him “covered” (209).

Although Tucept is not able to “cover” or protect Jethro from death by ambush, he is able to maintain Jethro’s larger mission – to recover “de black book of power.” Recognizing that he cannot complete this mission alone, Highjohn enlists Mike and Willie D.30 Once the men arrive at Tucept’s home in the woods, he explains that part of his hoodoo game involves “monitoring the games of black warlords” and suggests that if they were to come together each man would be stronger (235). Handing each man a bit of the Highjohn root, he tells them that he has “brought you power” and then “opened their minds and planted his myth” (235). The combination of the root and the implantation of the myth result in the men experiencing

a disturbing yet exhilarating parade of images, sensations, thoughts, and emotions. From the distant past to the far future the saga of the Firstborn unfolded in their minds. They fought their way from a brutish fourfooted existence to the knowledge of themselves as men. […] They built the Sphinx and knew the pit of slaveships. […] They saw the rise and the fall and the reemergence of the Thousand Black Worlds. Far into the future they saw generations come and go as Highjohn carefully weaved myth into the fibers of their souls. A saga of struggle (236).

30 Tucept’s recognition that he needs others to assist him in the mission is important. The novel places Tucept in a position of authority throughout; this positioning is not without flaws since it has the potential of communicating that the larger community cannot achieve power on their own. Tucept’s willingness to learn from others, however, and to trust others with his myth, alleviates some of this concern by suggesting a ripple effect rather than a top-down approach.
By the time that Highjohn finishes his work, Willie D. and Mike recognize “themselves as links in a line unbroken” (211). The narrative describes both men as inhabiting a sense of self that resonates with MLK’s notion that a “sense of somebodyness means the refusal to be ashamed of being black.” Willie D., for example, “drew power and felt himself filled with a determination that he would do all that he could to ensure that what he saw and felt would come to be” and feels a “surge of pride and arrogance about being Black” (236). Mike catches Willie D.’s eye and “felt a camaraderie that he hadn’t felt since” Vietnam; he also experiences a new confidence “and no longer questioned his decision to commit his life to the struggle. He believed in the victory and the importance of his contribution to the victory” (236).

Clearly, the men are inspired by Highjohn’s myth and the effect of the root. Before the men return to their respective cities, Highjohn “conferred upon them the power of conviction and armored them in a sense of destiny. With this amulet of power chanted the shaman, you are invincible before the enemies of the Tribe. We shall win. Be confident in victory. Good over evil. Do battle” (237). Highjohn’s final words to his friends are issued like a battle cry, inciting the men to action. As such, the men have the opportunity to revisit their experience as soldiers in Vietnam, where they were disheartened not only by the hypocritical guise of the reasons for the war but also by their inability to protect one another from the military justice that threatened both their solidarity and their lives. Rather than feeling inferior as a result of the racial discrimination that contributed to the death of their friends Prester John and Jethro, the men are empowered by the strength they feel under Highjohn’s guidance. Unlike their final days together as soldiers in Vietnam, pride and hope mark these final moments
together. Henry Giroux argues that hope becomes subversive when it becomes “part of a broader politics” rather than a “wistful attempt to look beyond the horizon of the given.” The subversive hope generated in and by *De Mojo Blues* provides what Giroux suggests is “the foundation for enabling human beings to learn about their potential as moral and civic agents” (38). As the novel comes to a close, hope dominates: Mike, Willie D., and Tucept move forward, confident in their plans to establish a sense of *somebodyness* not only for themselves but for their respective communities. Tucept, as Highjohn, delivers his call to the masses—a large gathering representing a multicultural and global black community that defies expectations of time and space—and implants his myth. The narrative depicts a mutual exchange of power and passion between Tucept and the crowd as together they chant “De Moja” (240) continuously until “the word came to be.” As Highjohn narrates, “I felt it when it began to live in the hearts of the people and the soul of the Tribe. When I am no longer needed to nurture it. It lived. […] My heart is full and I am so proud that tears roll from my eyes. My people. […] My people shall survive” (241). Before leaving the gathering place, Highjohn drops his root and stomps it into the ground, signifying the completion of his mission and his eventual return should the people need him again. Before concluding Tucept Highjohn’s narrative, the novel addresses the reader and invokes the power of *nommo*: “Such is my myth and so it is written. Believe or be damned. That is all” (242). Milton J. Bates calls this ending an “uncompromising call to the reader” and suggests that, in keeping with the African American concept of call and response, “the reader is invited to say Amen” to the novel’s vision and “so bring it to pass in the world of politics” (79-80). However, the narrative’s invitation to the reader is fleeting since the final words of the novel repeat the Shine toast
that serves as the novel’s epigraph, indicating that none of the fish will out swim Shine. In other words, Shine will be a survivor. Invoking the Shine toast serves as the novel’s insistence that, whether or not the reader embraces the hope it offers, the black community will be just fine. Arthur Flowers’ novel brings to the forefront the exclusion of the African American voices in the narrative of the Vietnam War and insists that black lives really do matter in the narrative of American history.
Chapter Two:
“A habit of silence where Vietnam [is] concerned:” Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge*

Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* is considered one of the first novels to portray the Vietnamese American experience. Despite the still-growing list of American novels depicting the Vietnam War, and the high number of Vietnamese who sought refuge in America after the war, Vietnamese American voices have been relatively quiet, with most narratives written as autobiography, memoir, or history. Cao’s 1997 novel works toward reclaiming Vietnam—both the country and the war (there called the American War)—through the voices of a Vietnamese mother steeped in the cultural tradition of her home country and a daughter assimilating into American society. *Monkey Bridge* primarily tells the story of adolescent Mai, who has been removed from Vietnam around the time of the “fall of Saigon” by Uncle Michael, an American soldier who befriends Mai’s father after Mai, as a child volunteer, cares for Michael in the hospital. In addition to Mai’s narrative, the novel includes the story of Mai’s mother, Thanh, through her journals and a suicide letter that periodically interrupt Mai’s narration. Through Mai’s conversations and reflections, the narrative also incorporates the perspectives of Uncle Michael, an American who adopts Mai and brings her to the United States; the immigrant women of the Little Saigon community where Mai and Thanh live; and GI Bill, a veteran of the war who frequents the market where Thanh works. The novel’s main plot line rests on Mai’s failed attempt to make contact with her grandfather, Baba Quan, so that he can come to the United States and help with Thanh’s recovery after a stroke. This task proves difficult because of the U.S.–Vietnam trade embargo. Mai believes that her grandfather’s failure to meet Thanh on the day of her escape from Vietnam was a mix-up of sorts; however,
through her mother’s journals and suicide letter, Mai learns that her grandfather was a Vietcong supporter whose wife, Thanh’s mother, became a concubine to save their family from poverty by providing a powerful landlord with a daughter. Through the journals and letter Mai learns more about the Vietnamese culture (myths, legends, and customs) that she left behind, bears witness to her mother’s suffering as she puts the pieces of her family’s history together, and works to integrate this new knowledge into her existing sense of how their lives fit into the broader picture of Vietnam, the American War there, the Vietnamese American community, and her own sense of self.

As a result of the various perspectives through which Mai must sift, the novel creates a nuanced and complex portrait of the Vietnamese and Vietnamese American perspective of what Americans call the Vietnam War and the ways in which war and its refugees alter notions of national identity. Alongside Vietnamese history and folklore, tropes of immigration and acculturation, remembering and forgetting, the novel weaves in images and representations that have become common in Vietnam War literature and then complicates them by viewing them through Vietnamese American and Vietnamese lenses. While Mai craves structure and clarity for her sense of identity, the novel refuses to bind its protagonist within common either-or paradigms, such as those that limit one to opposed positions like enemy or victim and resistor or accommodator. Instead, the novel leaves both readers and Mai with multiple narratives that do not always come together and thereby resist flattening out complex identities and historical moments in the way that popular and master narratives of the Vietnam War often do. Renny Christopher has argued that a postwar “meta-war,” created by political rhetoric and fictional renderings, has erased the Vietnamese from the history of the war by continually looking through an
American lens. This meta-war “succeeds in erasing the Vietnamese in a way that was never quite possible during the shooting phase of the American war in Viet Nam” (Christopher 4). While there is a need to move beyond seeing Americans as victims of a lost war, positioning Vietnamese others only as victims continues to undermine the strength and humanity of the Vietnamese and relegate the voices of refugees and their families to the margins. Cao’s novel succeeds in depicting this dilemma, revealing the Vietnamese not only as survivors but also as an important part of the American memory of the war through the refugees and Vietnamese American citizens who now call the United States home. Such revision entails viewing the United States not only as a victim of a lost war but also as culpable in a dehumanizing political and cultural war.

*Monkey Bridge* enters into a decades-long conversation that has been dominated primarily by white Americans. The novel considers how the narrative of this war, which often seems to consume the United States and its perceptions of itself, can exclude the voices of the very people living, seeking refuge, and participating in the national community as a direct result of the war itself. In this chapter, I examine how the novel frames the war within varied generational and gendered, as well as racial and ethnic, perspectives and how it engages these perspectives in an interrogation of the more common representations of the war that silence Vietnamese voices like Mai’s and her mother’s. While the novel’s narrative voices sometimes seem enamored by the prospect of an American Dream, the novel, as a result of the diverse perspectives it offers, effectively unravels an American national narrative of the war which has focused on the pain and suffering of Americans at the expense of others. Cao’s novel refuses to ignore that the Vietnamese people endured significant loss of life and land during the war. It also
reveals how after the war Vietnamese refugees, who entered an already turbulent United States with respect to both race relations and attitudes about the war, continued to be victimized and othered. Not only were the Vietnamese a racial other but, for many Americans, Vietnamese refugees also stood as the locus of shame, loss, and/or anger in the aftermath of what, for the United States, was perceived to be the first lost war. Such conditions intensify perceived differences and blur the ability to encounter an other with an open mind. As in most wars, in the Vietnam War racial identity was used as an ideological weapon to fuel violence and create the distance that soldiers needed to perform their primary responsibility in war: to destroy an enemy, a racial other, and in so doing shift territorial boundaries that define nations through land and notions of identity. While more well-known Vietnam War representations from the United States often perpetuate faulty divisions such as between self and other or good and evil, Cao’s novel calls these constructed divisions into question by incorporating the immigrant narrative upon which American identity is built into a narrative of the war through those other eyes. In other words, while Mai is often depicted as a model minority, the very type upon which the ideals of American democracy have been fabricated, she is also a victim of and a threat to those ideals because her presence is a testament to the constructedness of American national identity. Mai’s narrative insists on inclusion in a national narrative that, in reality, has been built by exclusion. What appears on the surface to be Mai’s success in assimilating to American culture ultimately becomes understood as an illusion, created by the erasure of her Vietnamese culture. The dissonance reveals itself in the narrative through Mai’s confusion, especially as she increasingly understands what has been withheld from her.
Through its varied and often layered lenses, *Monkey Bridge* reveals a Vietnam far more nuanced than the one often portrayed in popular American representations of the war and thus forces a reconsideration not only of how the Vietnamese people are portrayed but also of how the narrative of the Vietnam War has been constructed and controlled. Because the novel directly focuses its attention on many of these popular representations, it raises important questions about what versions of the war are valued and why and it gives voice to those narratives that have been silenced. In other words, the novel does not merely narrate its own story; rather, it responds directly to the story of the Vietnam War told by school textbooks, news media, and popular film. At the same time, however, the novel does not simply contribute one more voice. Instead, it holds its own narrative in tension with so many others, departing from discourses that are determined to locate the one “true” account of the war and thereby revealing the power structures that are created and maintained when narratives from marginal perspectives are silenced, ignored, or misunderstood.

Marita Sturken’s work on cultural memory is useful in understanding how the novel disrupts master narratives of the war. She defines cultural memory as “a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history” (*Tangled*, 1), as a space in which “cultural memories slide through and into one another, creating a *narrative tangle*” (*Tangled*, 44, my emphasis). According to Sturken, focusing on cultural rather than individual memory “does not efface the individual but rather involves the *interaction* of individuals in the creation of cultural meaning” (*Tangled* 1, my emphasis). Sturken’s focus on the interaction between individuals is pertinent to my reading of Cao’s novel in that I argue that both the individuals within the novel and the individuals
responding to the novel play a role in the creation of cultural meaning and therefore have a voice in the process of history- and meaning-making. Individual memories and individuals’ responses to the memories of others, whether in the form of personal narrative, canonical literature, or popular film, involve a process of negotiation that can contribute to an individual’s identity as a member of a larger community. Within this process of negotiation, of course, is also a process of inclusion and exclusion—one based as much on forgetting as it is on remembering. In the realm of cultural memory, what and how and whom individuals or nations choose to remember (and to forget) reveals as much about the past as it does about the present and about the individuals who are both representatives and shapers of culture. In other words, focusing on cultural memories within an individual narrative helps to illuminate perspectives that might otherwise be forgotten, lost, or silenced. Voices, like those in Cao’s novel, that disrupt this silence also disrupt the status quo by challenging norms and presenting new considerations of history and culture.

The ability that fiction has to disrupt or challenge master narratives comes with the understanding that history itself is a narrative constructed on multiple levels and, as Milton J. Bates suggests in *The Wars We Took to Vietnam*, that “war is a culturally specific invention” created by human beings with particular values (2). It thus follows that the stories told during and after a war often illuminate those values. These stories and the other “noise” surrounding a war, which Bates calls “the rumor of war,” participate in a “narrative reconstruction of constructed events [that] is doubly imbued with the assumptions, values, and purposes of human culture” (2). Extending Bates’s argument, then, narrative reconstructions told from a bicultural perspective, and thus positioning
themselves between two cultures, build layers upon layers as they (re)construct new notions of war and culture. In other words, as a Vietnamese American narrative of the Vietnam War, Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* not only reconstructs an already constructed event but also reconstructs the “rumors of war” that have pervaded American society since the height of American involvement in Vietnam during the late sixties. That these rumors can be reconstructed suggests that visions of the war and the people it continues to affect can also change, creating space not only for revised and more representative representation but also for interactive dialogue between and amongst diverse groups of people. As Bates claims, “the war story, like war itself, is politics by other means” inasmuch as, “in some cases, the war story endorses the values of the dominant ideology [while] in other cases it calls them into question” (2). Opening up the definition of politics to include “not just government and public policy but what happens whenever someone becomes conscious of another person and understands how that person’s needs and desires may shape or be shaped by one’s own” means that “politics begins when you have two people in a room…or when you have one person looking in a mirror” (Bates 5). I take Bates’s suggestion as embracing the political potential in every day moments that engage individuals in critical thought about the larger repercussions of how they interact with others. Ultimately, I argue in this chapter that both Cao’s writing about the war and readers’ active engagement with the novel constitute a political act rather than a mere passive action. Cao’s novel enters into a dynamic dialogue about the Vietnam War, its historiography, and its popular narrativization; it thereby actively challenges dominant representations of the war and of the position of the Vietnamese American in American literature and culture. Specifically, it refutes the notion that the Vietnam War was
primarily an American (white) experience and challenges representations that limit Vietnamese Americans to binary positions of victim or enemy other, situated within the paradigm of accommodation or resistance commonly depicted or discussed in the context of Asian American and other immigrant fictions. Freeing Vietnamese Americans from these limiting positions through a “narrative tangle” enables the kind of cross cultural exchange that has the potential to actually produce social change.

Such an exchange necessitates, of course, that white readers engage not only with the narrative but also with their own expectations and assumptions, an imperative hinted at through Cao’s use of an epigraph from TS Eliot’s The Wasteland, which addresses the reader in the second person, imploring him/her to “come in under the shadow of this red rock” where the speaker will show the reader “fear in a handful of dust.” Isabel Pelaud reads the epigraph as the novel’s “warning” “that [readers] will find something ‘different’ from their ‘shadow,’” that they will find something other than “a mirror of their expectations” (86). Extending Pelaud’s reading of the epigraph, I suggest that the inclusion of this epigraph establishes the reader as an active agent in sifting through the novel’s narrative tangle and in the meaning-making that subsequently results. Cao’s choice to excerpt from The Wasteland—a poem that is concerned with postwar fragmentation, loss, and alienation and uses a montage of voices and images whose referents have been lost in the poet’s modern society creates an interesting starting point for a novel about the Vietnam War. In particular another line of the poem—“You cannot say, or guess, for you know only a heap of broken images”—is not included in the novel’s epigraph but it informs my reading of the novel’s use of a “narrative tangle” as well as the notion that iconic images are, essentially, broken—both in the sense that they do not
function and that they are incomplete. Moreover, an important point of reference throughout the novel is Mai’s focus on April 30, 1975, with April being, of course, Eliot’s “cruelest month” and the date representing the “fall of Saigon” after the US withdrew from Vietnam. Cao’s choice of epigraph and the parallels between the poem and the novel guide the lens through which readers approach their experience of the novel. As such, the epigraph frames the novel with a warning about the meaninglessness that happens when people become isolated from both one another and culture as a result of the way cultural memory often excludes entire groups or events.

The novel works to engage the reader in this negotiation of cultural, collective, and individual memory through its use of multiple narrative voices and by working both within and against common elements of immigrant fiction. Balancing an adolescent perspective focused on the present and future with an adult’s perspective focused on the past, Cao’s novel draws attention to physical, emotional, and psychological trauma and human suffering at the core of the experiences of war and refugeeism. Thus, in addition to generational gaps in knowledge, the novel illuminates the ways in which reality can become blurred by traumatic memory. This also means, however, that readers must actively work through the novel to make sense of the “truth.” Such a narrative strategy emphasizes the role that individual narratives play in making sense of understandings of race, ethnicity and war, stressing both the importance and the danger—as well as the political nature—of framing lived experience within stories shared, circulated, and, at times, authorized both within/by communities as small as ethnic enclaves like the Little Saigon of Cao’s novel or as large as the United States. Though it appears to be a familiar immigrant story with features such as nostalgia for the homeland, generational gaps, and
instances of culture shock, *Monkey Bridge*’s “narrative tangle” invites interrogation of such a categorization and consequently contributes in important ways to contemporary conversations about the relationships between war, race, and ethnicity in American society.\(^{31}\)

The novel’s use of Mai’s perspective as the first voice that readers encounter complicates the depiction of Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans that have dominated white America’s representation of the war: the enemy or the victim, both positions generally objectified and silenced, even by those whose intentions are to help. As Viet Thanh Nguyen describes, the function of the Vietnamese in American discourse of the war tends to locate itself in the “unspoken (or spoken-for) locus of the Vietnamese body. From the self-immolation of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc, to the My Lai massacre, to the ‘boat people,’ Vietnamese bodies have been the silent spectacle upon which American discourse has been staged” (108). Whereas so-called “iconic” images from the war tend(ed) to exploit the suffering of the Vietnamese to an American end (i.e., as the basis for both protest and support of the war), the Vietnamese perspective that appears in memoirs and fiction gives voice and authority otherwise denied and thereby opens the lines of communication for multicultural dialogue not only within the diverse

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\(^{31}\) See Cowart, *Trailing Clouds*, as one example of traits of immigrant fiction. Cowart provides a “modest schematic of immigrant fictions” not to “invite charges of a failure to reinvent or to imagine or to ‘make it new’” but to illuminate how familiar patterns “frame, one hopes, fresh perceptions” (6). Included in these “fresh perceptions,” Cowart explores, through analysis of immigrant fictions including Cao’s novel, the notion that while immigration is often “a painful passage” it also “does issue in physical, mental, emotional and spiritual renewal” and “sooner or later reverses the polarization of self and other.” Cowart suggests that “despised at first, exploited, even brutalized, the alien presently becomes part of a national self that, never subjected to these fresh integrations, would inevitably drift toward, at best, an unvital or insular complacency—or, at worst, a xenophobic or racist isolationism” (149). While I struggle with the idea that any nation’s growth hinges upon a marginalized person’s suffering, I sense underlying Cowart’s argument a notion of mutual responsibility, a concept I examine with respect to the ways in which the novel’s minor characters contribute, often unwittingly, to Mai’s suffering.
Vietnamese/Vietnamese American population but also between the Vietnamese/Vietnamese American population and other groups in the United States. In addition to (or perhaps as a part of) creating a narrative tangle, the novel uses its multiple perspectives to depict Mai and her mother in encounters with Others that highlight the ways in which the Vietnamese War and the Vietnamese people have been silenced by the white majority of the United States. Their reactions in these situations upset stereotypical assumptions and thus serve to envision new ways of thinking about racial and ethnic identity and the relationship between so-called minority and majority cultures.

Mai, for example, does not represent the types of “emblematic victim[s] [or] embody the plight of the Vietnamese people” that have often been depicted in Vietnam War representation, in which the Vietnamese are often broadly painted as farmers, peasants, and passive victims or as prostitutes or cruel torturers (Pelaud 87). Rather, Mai comes from a privileged and educated class, she leaves Vietnam by plane and in a relatively uneventful manner, and her father was not killed in war but died peacefully in his sleep. At the same time, Mai’s childhood in Vietnam very much carries with it the context of war; she remembers conversations about the politics of war as well as helping injured soldiers like Uncle Michael and a man who, with a grenade embedded in his stomach, blows up in front of her. As Tuon suggests, Mai possesses an “awareness of

32 As Nguyen suggests in his analysis of Le Ly Hayslip’s autobiographies, “[Hayslip] enters this discursive dimension by giving the victimized body voice and subjectivity. Instead of being defined only by her contact with the United States, Hayslip presents herself as a historical person, existing before the United States and located in a nostalgic fiction of Vietnam as agrarian, precapitalist, and fundamentally stable and ‘natural’ in its social organization. American violation of this world is not unique but is instead rendered part of a sequence of wars” (108-109). Nguyen’s reading resonates with Cao’s novel, which as I will later discuss, recalls Vietnam’s vast experience with imperial invasion and reveals that the sense of uniqueness of the Vietnam War emphasized by representation from the white majority is flawed in its insular perspective. In other words, the focus often becomes what happened in the US, or to American soldiers, rather than on the complexity of an historic event involving vast and diverse groups of people across the globe.
events without having real knowledge of them” (6). This conditional awareness comes in part from Mai’s age but also from the trauma she endures in bearing witness to a violent war and in being uprooted from her home and inserted into a completely different culture. Furthermore, as a member of the “1.5 generation,” Mai “exists between the worlds of the first and second generation, precariously constructing a fragile reality—part invention, part fragmented memory—that is designed to hold the various forces of the past and present together in a delicate balance” (Tuon 6). While at times keenly aware of the fragility of this position and feeling as though her life could unravel at any moment, Mai is also empowered by the flexibility granted by her “inbetween-ness,” which lends her the ability to view both generational gaps and immigrant status with a creative and critical lens.

This same perspective is also granted to readers, who must navigate Mai’s narrative alongside Thanh’s and negotiate between both versions of the family’s experiences in Vietnam and the United States, as well as with pre-formed assumptions and understanding of the war, the country, and the people. The novel challenges its readers not only by juxtaposing Mai and Thanh’s stories but also by presenting two narrators whose memories are skewed by age, trauma, and injury (Thanh, at the opening of the novel, is recovering from a stroke). Determining the reliability of these narrators, in combination with the novel’s other narrative strategies, leaves readers with a unique opportunity to interrogate more broadly the narratives they have been given as well as those they have participated in shaping in order to determine where and how the novel’s narratives fit. Guided by the narrative voice of a young woman struggling to make sense of who and what she is as well as where she is, readers, especially those of majority
subjectivities, are presented with an opportunity to navigate the text as an ally, to read with an open heart and mind, not with the intention of explaining or speaking for but rather with a focus on hearing, learning, and understanding—all of which require a looking back and looking within not only to produce a reading or analysis of a text but also to jostle ways of thinking and, ideally, shift ways of being in a complex and diverse community.

Within the novel’s narrative tangle, and especially through Mai’s perspective, more recognizable images of the war are juxtaposed with more silent articulations of Vietnam, the war and the country, that come from other voices in order to reveal how the novel interrupts the familiarity and thus the assumptions that inhabit iconic images of the war. The articulations that generally remain quiet are voiced through Mai’s responses to the versions of Vietnam presented to her by others. Throughout the novel, Mai works to comprehend the Vietnam that she encounters within her own memories, her mother’s memories, news reporting and images, school, and her encounters with others both within the Vietnamese American community and outside of it. For example, shortly after arriving to the U.S., Mai saw her future unfold on television […]. All eyes across the world must also have been on the television set that April of 1975. We had all been transfixed by the sight of it, and although some of us, like Uncle Michael and me, had tried to avert our eyes, we all ended up staring at it, as if we were passersby caught among the accumulated wreckage, the blunders and pileup by the roadside. It was on TV […] that I witnessed my own untranslatable world unfold to Americans half a globe away (97-98).
Mai connects the images she sees on TV to the scenes of the Tet Offensive she witnessed in person years prior, recalling the sights and the smells of burnt chemicals, dust, and smoke. She contrasts the vision on TV with her own memories, referring to the former as an “imaginary world” where “a helicopter skittered on the edge of the U.S. Embassy, breathless under the weight of several Vietnamese hanging from the closing doors” (99) and from which “a voice of mingled sorrow and surprise, a network newscaster announced, ‘It all began with the best of intentions’” (99). The segment highlights the novel’s complication of falsely simple dichotomies: for example, Mai watches her future unfold, though the events have already happened; the world is untranslatable, yet it is being relayed and she is recalling it; that world is both “imaginary” and real. Mai’s sense that her world is untranslatable suggests the traumatic impact that her experiences of the war have had on her; her ability to recount the events as she experienced them is limited by the nature of her personal suffering. Yet, others—like the newscasters—assert an authority over the war that Mai, as a young child and a survivor of war trauma, lacks since she is unable to understand fully her own experience. Mai, in a previous episode involving U.S. news coverage of the war, describes the effect of such coverage: “Ours after all, was an inescapable history that continued to be dissected and remodeled by a slew of commentators and experts” (42). Juxtaposing Mai’s perspective with the newscaster’s announcement regarding the “intentions” of the United State’s involvement in the war allows the novel to call attention to the narrativization of the war and to the assumptions of authority that are taken/granted by various reporting/representing entities.

Mai watches the news both as a Vietnamese and as an assimilating immigrant in the United States, enacting a double consciousness that is further multiplied by the
novel’s additional frames of representation and interpretation and that challenges readers to interrogate and revise their own assumptions about and associations of Vietnam. Later, after a conversation about contemporary Vietnam (1979) with Uncle Michael, Mai flips through the card catalog at the library “for books on Vietnam. They were classified under ‘Vietnam War’ and were all written by Americans. Most had been written at the height of American involvement in the war…and there was nothing about Vietnam after April 30, 1975, and nothing about my current preoccupation, the boat people and their methods of escape from the new communist regime” (216). Despite the layers of mediation on which Mai reflects, the official narratives of the war to which she has access tell a very one-sided story. Mai’s inability to find any books on Vietnam after the fall of Saigon suggests that Vietnam as a country does not exist outside of the scope of the American war there, despite the thousands of Vietnamese desperately seeking refuge in the United States in the novel’s present time. These episodes point to the ways in which certain voices are silenced and deauthorized in the construction of a particular (United States) narrative; as such, the novel serves to remind readers of the power dynamics present in narrative voices, regardless of where they are heard.

While the media images depicted through Mai’s narrations are likely to be familiar to those who study the history of the Vietnam War, recollections of even more popular images come from Cao’s inclusion of a film, which though it remains unnamed, is clearly the Deerhunter, released in 1979 and winner of several Academy awards. The film is recognizable for its references to the small-town steel miners who comprise the primary cast of characters and to Russian roulette, which is the focus of a much-talked about scene in the film that depicts American prisoners of war who are forced by
Vietcong to play Russian roulette with one another. That Cao chooses to describe but not name the film calls attention to what associations of the Vietnam War have become iconic. Because the novel views the film from the perspectives of both an American soldier and a Vietnamese refugee, it provides the space for dialogue between characters as well as for an external dialogue with readers. This layered interaction problematizes the iconicity of such images. Mai watches the film with Uncle Michael in the theater and notes that, “halfway through the movie, Uncle Michael bent down and whispered, ‘I was in Vietnam for six years and I’ve not seen or heard of anyone doing this before, at least on this massive a scale’” (100). Cowart describes Michael’s reaction to the film as “a puzzlement that was widespread among literal-minded viewers at the time of [the film’s] release” (157) and notes the contrast in Mai’s description of the film, which her narrative views as metaphorical:

a succession of hypnotic scenes played on the giant movie screen—dreary American steel mills, tropical jungles, prisoners of war in bamboo cages immersed in a brown, churning river, dark, smoky back rooms in low-slung, unprosperous Saigon buildings where disillusioned GIs newly addicted to war came to play Russian roulette and gape unflinchingly at the grotesque underbelly of life. […] In one hallucinatory scene after another, against a disturbing background of incomprehensible grunts which supposedly constituted spoken Vietnamese, the roulette-like spin of a gun as arbitrary and senseless as Vietnam would dictate the life and death of American innocence. Vietnam was becoming a huge allegorical black hole into which all things primeval could be sucked (100-Cao 101).
Extending Cowart’s observation, I see the inclusion of the film and the characters’ responses to it as highlighting the problem of representation: any attempt at representation will be flawed since literal/accurate interpretation is not possible and metaphorical representation often has the tendency to undermine the lived experience by focusing on abstraction. The film, and Mai’s interpretation of it, captures the way in which Vietnam the country became, for many Americans, synonymous with the Vietnam War, senselessness, and a certain incomprehensibility. It also shows the ways in which the Vietnamese generally have been framed in literary and filmic representations of the war as the enemy other, as an evil corrupting American innocence and righteousness. The language Mai uses to describe the film calls attention to how problematic such representations are; words like “hallucinatory” and “hypnotic” and “allegorical” focus on the unreality of the representation and thus serve as a reminder of the ways in which the war has (problematically) become a symbol, especially when paired with other sections of the novel that work to depict the harsh realities of war for both Mai and Michael.

Indeed, Cao uses the film as a catalyst for a conversation between Mai and Uncle Michael about what Mai initially calls their “common past,” but she soon realizes the commonalities between their experiences during the war are quite superficial. This conversation had never before occurred because both Mai and Uncle Michael “maintained barriers that were rarely unguarded” (101) and this lack of communication provides a metaphor for the larger silences surrounding the war (e.g. veterans unable to talk about their experiences as a result of trauma, failed or non-existent intercultural exchanges) and thereby provides yet another opportunity for the novel to articulate alternate versions of the historical moment. Mai and Michael’s conversation moves from
the dangers Michael faced in war to the beauty of the Delta, which Uncle Michael thinks is the “most gorgeous spot on earth” and Mai knows as “the place where the spirits of [her] ancestors remained, a supple burial ground for all those ancestral souls” (102). The conversation juxtaposes war time images of Vietnam as a site of destruction with a pastoral paradise, revealing the country as more than the site of the evil other. Mai realizes that, because she never traveled far from Saigon and had little experience in Vietnam and with her own family there, Uncle Michael “knew a Vietnam that she did not” (104). Mai’s sense of self comes from other voices, both public and private, and she is left to sort through the tangle on her own. Both she and the reader discover a lot about the land, about the atmosphere, and about Mai’s family from Michael’s embedded narrative. However, this information comes from Michael’s perspective, one that at times participates in a discourse that might be described as that of the benevolent white soldier, whose comments, while seemingly well-placed, nevertheless uphold stereotypical understandings of the war and the Vietnamese. Thus, Mai’s interaction with Michael widens but also creates tension within Mai’s narrative.

For example, upon Mai’s probing about what he experienced in Vietnam during the war, Uncle Michael recalls an encounter with a Vietnamese mother whose child had been killed in a firefight just prior to Michael’s troop’s arrival on the scene but whose body suddenly moves, prompting “a flash of machine gun [to blast] from the tips of our fingers, with an effortlessness that seemed almost like magic. And before we knew what happened the boy had died a second death, his body shredded open by the terrible convulsions of gunfire from our rifles” (105). The men react to what they think is enemy action, desecrating a dead child’s body, and then discover a kitten hiding by the boy. The
scene is one common in Vietnam War representation: American soldiers fear everything Vietnamese and are suspicious of women and children, who may be used to hide explosives; baby animals (often adopted as US soldiers’ companions) survive massive destruction, suggesting a strange innocence amidst the violence. Like many other white male perspectives, Uncle Michael’s Vietnam War story indicates a personal struggle with the situation, particularly when the mother arrives on the scene, calling to her dead child and he “watched in silence as the woman walked—actually walked—with a sense of quiet, exaggerated dignity, toward us and the body. [...] She just stared at us, and you could see the hatred and the sadness in her eyes.” He expresses surprise that the mother “left. She just left” after covering the boy’s body with her hat and shock that the mother seemed to believe that the boy “had been indiscriminately murdered by us, a group of men highly trained to act with the utmost of amount of precision” (105-106). Michael’s primary focus in the retelling of this experience, however, is on “the irony” that, while the men had not killed this particular child, they may well have killed another one. In other words, his focus is not on the mother’s grief or the child’s death but rather on the mother’s “strange” reaction and their own sense of guilt. Michael’s recollection of this encounter with the other is self-focused; it highlights difference in such a way that maintains a sense of white superiority and undermines to some extent the good that Michael has done by sponsoring Mai and bringing her to the United States, where he acts as her adoptive father.33 Uncle Michael’s presence in the novel and the narrative

33 Michael’s role as a surrogate (and not biological) father to Mai is interesting given the number of children born to Vietnamese women and U.S. soldiers. Cao’s novel puts a spin on this relatively popular narrative, in which the children left behind in Vietnam were discriminated against, viewed as painful reminders of the war and of the allies who deserted or the invaders who destroyed them. They were often rejected by their mothers and subjected to a life of poverty, referred to as “children of the dust.” This is a
perspective his conversations with Mai afford reveal the ways in which even the most well-intentioned people participate in narratives that shape and perpetuate stereotypes.

Rather than simply indicting Michael as an ethnocentric white male, however, the novel reveals how the narrative tangle through which Mai and Michael make sense of their past calls attention to the process of narrating (and receiving) complex, traumatic, and historical events like war. Uncle Michael tells Mai about an encounter during which Mai’s grandfather, Baba Quan, saved Uncle Michael’s life by helping him and his fellow American soldiers navigate the landmines and subsequently received honors from the American military for his actions. As their conversation comes to a close, Mai remarks that the story sounds like a “storybook story, too good to be true” (114), indicating Mai’s own recognition that the events have been crafted into a particular kind of narrative and also foreshadowing for the reader Mai’s revelation later in the novel that Baba Quan was actually a Vietcong supporter, not the idyllic peasant farmer that she pictures in her collected and collective memories of him. The revelation comes with a host of others that Thanh has tried to keep from her daughter, among them the fact that Thanh’s scars originated not from a kitchen fire but from napalm and that Thanh herself was the product of Baba Quan’s prostituting his wife. But these secrets—which in themselves have the potential to relegate the Vietnamese and Vietnamese American characters to a position of victimization—serve to counter those other images of Baba Quan as both the
trope employed by Linda Hogan’s People of the Whale and will be discussed in my chapter on that novel. Cao’s novel subverts recognizable images of the child born to a Vietnamese prostitute destined to a life of victimhood. Renewed interest in this aspect of the Vietnam War emerges as many Amerasian children of the war reach adulthood and aging veterans work to resolve loose ends by finding the children they left behind, some of whom now live in the U.S. See, for example, a recent story in the NY Times, “Vietnam Legacy: Finding G.I. Fathers, and Children Left Behind” (16 September 2013 A1, available online: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/16/us/vietnam-legacy-finding-gi-fathers-and-children-left-behind.html?_r=0)
enemy other and the savior of American soldiers. The Vietnamese characters in the book do not speak in incomprehensible grunts; Thanh’s journals are eloquent and Mai comments on the beauty of her writing. The novel holds these competing images of Vietnam in tension, disallowing hierarchical binary comparisons that limit Vietnam and the Vietnamese to a position of the evil or the exotic other and instead calling attention to the constructedness of such images and to the ways in which complicated concepts such as national and personal identity or events like war often get boiled down to iconic images (i.e. crazy veterans, evil Vietcong, helpless victims, etc.) and work to perpetuate faulty and racist stereotypes.

The novel uses the transmission of stories like the ones Michael and Mai tell each other to invite exploration of the ways that identities are constructed through narrative and to highlight the consequences of stereotypical and flawed representative images. With the transmission of stories comes Mai’s growing awareness of the complexity of her status as a Vietnamese American and a refugee of a war most Americans were striving to forget. Although Mai does not represent the emblematic victim, as aforementioned, she remains in many ways a victim of others’ efforts to assist her. In the United States Mai’s encounters with others are generally characterized by well-meaning intentions. She is supported by people like Michael and his wife on several occasions, but even these efforts contribute to the silencing of Vietnam in Mai’s sense of self. As such, these encounters serve to remind readers of the distinctions between speaking for, speaking of, and speaking by those considered others. Though it often appears that Mai herself is attempting to forget her Vietnamese-ness in favor of assimilating into American culture,
this desire is couched in a fear that, given all the representations of Vietnam produced by others, she has neither access to what Vietnam is nor the right to articulate it.

As a case in point, much of the novel’s present time occurs just as Mai is preparing to begin college, a rite of passage typically viewed in the United States as a portal to independence and self-development and a rite portrayed in immigrant fiction as a stepping stone toward acculturation and the American Dream. Throughout the novel, Mai sees college as an opportunity to enter “into [her] own new life” (17), but during Mai’s college admissions interview the interviewer’s focus on the war leaves Mai uncomfortable and uncertain. Although the novel contains several of Mai’s encounters with Others, this meeting proves particularly difficult for Mai, who is advised by her adopted Aunt Mary, Michael’s wife, to “be herself,” a complex feat when “immigration represents unlimited possibilities for rebirth, reinvention, and other fancy euphemisms for half-truths and outright lies” (124). The interview challenges Mai’s decision as well as her ability to assimilate and accept an American identity, beginning when the interviewer enters the room and reads Mai’s name “in an uncertain voice” and then “quickly scanned the room and zeroed in on [Mai]” (124-125). The interviewer’s hesitation in pronouncing Mai’s name, coupled with her “zeroing in on” Mai, suggests that both Mai’s name and her physical appearance mark Mai as a racial and ethnic other. Mai’s reaction to hearing her name depicts this limitation: “In the prevailing hush of the room, [my name] had an especially clumsy ring, an undertone of impermanence. It felt, in fact, like a borrowed name, on loan to satisfy my teachers’ insistence on rhyme and order. ‘Mai Nguyen’ was my American name, or at least the American spin on my name. But it sounded unnatural. After all, tradition dictated that ‘Nguyen,’ a family name, be granted pride of place, a
position at the beginning. ‘Mai,’ an individual name, should tag a few respectful steps behind” (125). Mai recognizes that her two cultures are not that easy to blend and questions the extent to which she wishes to blend them as well as the extent to which others will allow her to blend them.

This recognition on Mai’s part brings to the fore the ways in which individuals marked by difference can quickly be pitied, exoticized, seen as an opportunity to add a multicultural flare, or feared and rejected as an enemy—all of which leave hierarchical relationships in place. Mai struggles to determine just how her Vietnamese identity is perceived during the interview and, feeling both frustration and uncertainty, she approaches the situation “drunken-monkey style,” taking on the “Trung-sister strategy, the strategy of fluidity and softness” (129). Mai seems to understand that her interviewer is seeking certain information and refuses to address the woman’s “preconceived notions head-on,” opting instead to draw upon the energy of the story of the Trung sisters, venerated women warriors in Vietnamese history for their resistance against the Chinese (129).34 Mai’s drawing upon this warrior mentality to prepare for her interview is significant: she expects the interview “to be a battle,” indicating, as the narrative often does, that Mai perceives her position in the United States as impermanent and works to protect herself and her assimilation into American way of life by channeling the very Vietnamese history and folklore that she often desires to escape. As Lisa Long suggests in “Contemporary Women's Roles through Hmong, Vietnamese, and American Eyes,” this depiction of ancient Vietnamese warriors recalls “Vietcong tactics” and thus has the

34 As Patricia Pelley suggests in Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past, the story of the Trung sisters has taken various forms in Vietnamese History, but they are generally seen as a symbol of resistance and freedom.
potential to perpetuate faulty notions of the Vietnamese as only a cunning enemy, but it also historicizes Vietnamese resistance and refuses to detach the American war in Vietnam from the country’s long history of war and invasion. Significantly, Mai draws upon this warrior mentality after she and Uncle Michael watch *The Deer Hunter*, a film that depicts Vietnamese warriors as cruel and vicious male aggressors, not as female martial artists “elevat[ing] guerilla warfare and hit-and-run tactics into an *art* of war” against colonial empires like the Chinese, the French, and later the United States (Cao 119, my emphasis). The narrative thus casts American stereotypes of the Vietnamese in a different light as Mai, recalling how her parents “had stories that offered the sweet shield” of her country’s “ancient, mournful history,” takes on the perspective of one of the Trung sisters, who in Mai’s version of the story frees the country from a savage tiger, is subsequently proclaimed the people’s general, and urges them “to rise up against the invaders” (120). Although Mai’s use of her Vietnameseness remains an internal coping mechanism, the narrative gives readers access to the ways in which Mai’s identity at once becomes freeing and confining.

Despite the quandary in which Mai finds herself, the identity conflict she faces during the interview makes visible the social structures that create this conflict, and visibility is crucial to dismantling hierarchical structures. Mai’s reaction derives partially from fear: she worries that she will lose her opportunity for college admission—for that American rite of passage—if she gives the wrong answer. At the same time, drawing upon her cultural inheritance to determine how best to navigate the situation indicates her desire not to merely escape her Vietnameseness. In other words, her reaction also derives from a determination to assert herself as a Vietnamese, though she does so quietly.
without letting anyone but the reader in on her secret. Importantly, this desire grows in the moment of an encounter with an Other, who, while seemingly well-intentioned, silences the Vietnamese perspective of Vietnam by focusing on the American war there. When asked where in Vietnam she lived, for example, Mai responds simply, “In Saigon, right in the downtown section,” though she wants to tell the interviewer much more about her home there: “a plain limestone painted a custard yellow with a brick courtyard surrounded by a wrought iron fence on a wide boulevard lined with French villas and old tamarind trees. I’d concocted a habit of silence where Vietnam was concerned, but suddenly, […] I felt an urge to reveal something palpable, something that would make the country crack open so she could see the tender, vital, and most important, mundane parts—the ordinary…” (127-128). Mai’s narration goes on to list the things she would love to tell the strange woman beside her, including a depiction of the Tet holiday—which, in much war representation, comes to stand for a brutal attack by the North Vietnamese—and the joy it brought to the children. She realizes, however, that she is unable to speak and break her silence, because “The Vietnam delivered to America had truly passed beyond reclamation. It was no longer mine to explain” (128). While Mai is unable to confront the preconceived notions of the college interviewer, the novel certainly works to unravel them and to reclaim Vietnam through what Isabelle Pelaud calls “discrete steps in the process of articulating new identities that cannot be fixed in time” (1). Nor does the text fix new identities in place; instead, they remain fluid and flexible, moving simultaneously through past and present in a narrative tangle. They present themselves as competing stories and, while Trinh T. Minh-ha has asserted that “a
story is created to invite talk around it” (15, my emphasis), Cao has created a novel in which the stories talk to one another, blurring the lines, and resisting silence.

Cao’s novel effectively resists silence in part because of the way its narrative tangle enables various perspectives to engage in dialogue that draws attention to the missteps of white characters, like the college interviewer, even when the characters themselves do not engage in such a dialogue. Such encounters highlight how seemingly commonplace interactions have the potential for the kind of politics that, as Milton Bates suggests, includes “what happens whenever someone becomes conscious of another person and understands how that person’s needs and desires may shape or be shaped by one’s own” (5). In the case of Cao’s novel, Mai becomes conscious of how others are shaping her, and the narrative directs readers’ attention to ways in which privileged individuals maintain control of articulating particular versions of history. For example, the interviewer reminds Mai of a “strain [she’d] seen in so many Americans, an undertone of ambivalence behind the cordial, easygoing façade. She could have turned into the school-bus driver who informed me the first day we met that her husband had done door-to-door combat in the streets of Hue in 1968. ‘My husband lost both of his legs over there’” (126). The “ambivalence” that Mai detects seems, in the context of the novel and the college interview scene, to point to the ways in which the Vietnamese have often been narrowly viewed as enemy and/or victim and thus as the source of American loss and shame, rather than as human beings with their own stories and complex emotions. Paired with the interviewer’s hesitations and line of questioning, this ambivalence captures the kind of ignorance that disallows useful cross cultural relationships.
The novel reveals how even those with good intentions often hold people like Mai “hostage” by focusing on the war and their difference – filling the conversation with “searing chitchat” about how Mai has done “a remarkable job adjusting” despite having been in Vietnam “the whole time the war was going on” (127, 126) rather than on “social pleasantries” such as Mai’s “nice skirt” or the “rotten day outside” (127). The interviewer’s “unreadable” and “uncertain” voice and gestures like throat clearing at Mai’s reticence indicate her own discomfort with the encounter, but Mai’s discomfort reminds readers that Mai lacks power (because of her age and her difference). While the interview likely proceeds like typical college interviews (the narrative suggests the interviewer bases her questions on Mai’s application materials, including Mai’s essay on “living in a country at war and leaving it on the verge of peace”), the scene highlights how “seemingly innocuous information like an applicant’s place of birth” situates racial and ethnic others as just that—the Vietnamease are others, not one of “us” but one of “them” (126). Mai admits trying to “make the most of” her situation in her application materials by positioning herself as a survivor, but she becomes a victim of her identity when it is placed in the interviewer’s control. While the interviewer’s comment that Mai has adjusted well is likely intended as a compliment, a large part of Mai’s “adjustment” requires her silence and fitting well into the model that others have created of/for her. Mai enacts a survivor’s identity for the purposes of her college essay, yet the interview leaves Mai in the position of a victim, one who is disempowered by the sense of pity and personal shame of those who have power over her and her future. While perhaps better than the images of the Vietnamese promoted by war time propaganda or popular culture images like those in *The Deerhunter*, the interviewer nonetheless relegates Mai to a
position of silence that prohibits Mai from articulating the complexities of her identity and thus maintains a binary and opposed relationship in a situation that was a potential site for dynamic dialogue that could voice to difference so as to unsettles ethnic/race-based hierarchies.

What remains largely unexplored in both the novel and the critical discussion surrounding it, however, are the ways in which racial identity factor into the experiences that Mai and Thanh encounter. Mai clearly undergoes the trauma of immigration and assimilation, and yet her narrative never explicitly engages race. In the depiction of the college interview and in the bildungsroman genre, education is a key rite of passage in both coming of age and in becoming American. As Barrett and Roediger observe in “How White People Became White,” “the story of Americanization is vital and compelling, but it took place in a nation also obsessed by race. For new immigrant workers the processes of becoming white and becoming American were connected at every turn” (40). Mai’s situation post-Vietnam War certainly differs from the processes Barrett and Roediger examine in the early 20th century; what does not differ, however, is the connection between whiteness and Americanness. Whether the absence of the novel’s explicit engagement with racial identity is a strategic gap or whether it falls within the mindset of the transformation of Asian Americans into the category of whiteness is impossible to determine. I would argue, however, that given the narrative tangle that comprises Monkey Bridge, the absence of overt references to race in Cao’s novel begs the question of how/why race matters in the contexts of war and immigrant/multicultural fiction of the United States. Perhaps more importantly, the text also serves as an invitation toward white alliance that provides a foundation for building
multiracial coalitions by drawing attention to the assumptions of privilege that whiteness brings. The narrative thus works in line with Beverly Tatum’s suggestion that the conversation “about racism needs to shift from an exploration of the experiences of victims and victimizers to that of empowered people of color and their white allies, creating the possibility of working together as partners in the establishment of a more just society” (474). What Tatum and other advocates for white alliance suggest begins with an examination of the ways in which white assumptions get in the way of meaningful cross cultural work. Cao’s novel, though it does not directly engage Mai’s identity formation with respect to race, nonetheless points to the obliviousness of those who hold positions of power precisely because of their race and who consequently become blind to the ways in which their own identity marginalizes those they attempt to help.

Likewise, and as I have previously indicated with regard to Uncle Michael and the college interviewer, the novel points to the ways in which the people in Mai’s life who attempt to come to her aid simultaneously relegate her to positions of silence and otherness that maintain difference as a divider rather than as something upon which positive social change can occur. In so doing, Monkey Bridge implicates (white/majority) readers without distancing them, an important step in multicultural coalition building. As another case in point, Michael’s wife, referred to as Aunt Mary, missteps in her relationship with Mai, who nonetheless recognizes Mary’s actions as grounded in good intentions. Mai also sees Aunt Mary as her key to assimilation: Aunt Mary’s voice and pronunciation of the English language, for example, is Mai’s “model of perfection” (36) and Mary unlocks American ways of living when Mai first arrives in the United States. In her encounters with Mary, Mai maintains the same silence evidenced during her college
interview, but the novel’s insistence on depicting Mai’s discomfort and lack of power reveal the necessity for honesty and dialogue. The narrative probes the ways assumptive thinking relegates minorities to the margins, positions them in opposition to those in power, and inhibits cross cultural relationships that can transform individuals, groups, and societies.

Perhaps the strongest example of this in *Monkey Bridge* is the effort Aunt Mary (presumably) makes to help Mai see herself and other Vietnamese people as citizens of the United States. Mary collects and sends Mai “newspaper clippings about Vietnam” that depict “boat people and Vietnam Vets and Little Saigons, in downtown Hartford and elsewhere” (87). The inclusion of clippings about the veterans suggest that, for Mary, Vietnam the country and Vietnam the war are interchangeable. Moreover, the general topics of the clippings reveal a narrow scope for capturing what Vietnam is/means in the United States. During her visit to Michael and Mary’s for the college interview, Mai looks through the most recent collection of clippings, “carefully cut and stapled to blank pages, some highlighted with a yellow marker, other with red exclamation marks in the margin” and takes “note of each story, because an itemized acknowledgement would please Aunt Mary” (87). On the one hand, Mary’s actions work to show that she acknowledges and accepts Mai’s difference. On the other hand, they are self-serving: if Mai is in the position of a silenced victim, who can be led, then Mary’s desire for an “itemized acknowledgement” reveals Mary as the hero who can save Mai by showing her images of the model minority and directing Mai’s thoughts by providing her own

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35 Importantly, Cao’s novel does include an American veteran of the Vietnam War aside from Uncle Michael. Referred to as GI, “Bill, last name unknown, was a regular among a gaggle of other GI regulars” at the grocery store where Thanh is employed. Bill’s function in the novel is significant and is addressed later in this chapter.
(superior) perspective on those depicted in the articles via her highlighting and red exclamation points, presumably indicating what is to be valued and what is shocking or disturbing. Because readers learn about this aspect of the pile of clippings before learning any details of the articles’ contents, they are led to surmise what information would elicit “yellow highlighting” and which “red exclamation points”; what readers surmise, of course, is based on their own knowledge and assumptions. Mai’s narrative mimics the way in which she “made note of each story,” briefly describing each of the most recent articles Mary has compiled:

From the lower-right-hand corner of a Hartford Courant page, a Vietnamese boy smiled contemplatively as he was inducted into the school’s National Honor Society. On the next page was a grim article about tension in a neighborhood. It began unspectacularly, with standard descriptions of homeowners and shopkeepers. Then, following the introductory paragraph, in clear inexorable print, neutral as the news itself, was a story about how a Vietnamese family had been suspected of eating an old neighbor’s dog. The orphan pup had been the man’s only companion (88).

The image of the “model minority” (a young boy being indoctrinated into American ways of being and happily accepting his new position) is countered by the image of a problem minority (the family who rejects Americanization by allegedly eating a family pet). In the case of the latter, Mai’s description indicates that she understands the danger inherent in the narrativization of the experience of minority populations: in noting the “inexorable print” she acknowledges that what is written cannot be unwritten. Moreover, her reaction
highlights the tension between a white woman in a position to either subordinate Mai or to help liberate her from the margins. Yet Mai’s ability to choose her role in the relationship with Mary is limited by the hierarchies built into their relationship: Mai is a child, Mary an adult; Mary is white, Mai is not; Mary is American, Mai is Vietnamese. Consequently, Mai wonders what she is “supposed to say” to Mary about the article and reflects on the internal tensions that result from the double-consciousness granted to her through her assimilation by indicating that the “dilemma was that, seeing both sides to everything, I belonged to neither. I had become the intermediary” (88). Mai’s perception of herself is troubling and has pathetic appeal, but, as a representation of a real tension, Mai articulates a real dilemma in cross cultural relationships: if it is not Mai’s job to educate/correct Mary and others like her, then whose is it? The novel indicates that Mai certainly cannot represent her race (which is not homogenous), nor can she carry the burden of educating those who are not part of it and do not know how best to help.

While the college interviewer, Michael, and Mary are situated in Mai’s life as authoritative figures (with a certain power to both silence and free Mai), Mai’s friendship with a white girl named Bobbie also plays an important role in the novel’s work toward exploring the role of the white ally and the need for cross cultural relationships that provide a foundation for more productive coalitions. Mai values Bobbie as a peer but recognizes the ways in which their relationship is based on superficial understanding.

36 Mai’s reflection echoes W.E.B Dubois’ notion of double-consciousness in the African American community. DuBois writes, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.” DuBois indicates the challenges of double-consciousness but also emphasizes the desire to merge these versions of self for a “truer” self: “In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world” (2-3).
further limited by lack of knowledge and life experience. The girls’ relationship is a product of their respective cultures but also suggests the possibility of a more dynamic space, in which differences can be shared, empathized with, and used to form powerful alliances that have the potential to shift oppositional paradigms of race/ethnicity. This potential can only be realized through the crossing of social/cultural boundaries that separate and seem to render incomprehensible disparate experiences. Cao depicts the girls’ relationship most fully by evoking a common trope in Vietnam War representation: that of the drafted soldier travelling to Canada to avoid the war and waver ing under the pressures of war, conscience, and an uncertain future. Cao’s novel instead places a young Vietnamese American woman at the Canadian border, contemplating whether she can cross in order to make a phone call to Vietnam in the hopes of locating her grandfather.

Accompanying Mai on this journey to the border is Bobbie, whom Mai perceives as a “bundle of normality” (17). As a close reading of the episode will reveal, Mai’s encounter with the border is anything but normal and this is precisely because Mai is not Bobbie, a young white woman born and raised in the United States and thus free not only from the kind of war experience that Mai has undergone but also from a Vietnamese mother’s insistence on karma. Rather, Mai approaches the border with a new understanding of the role of Vietnamese in the United States and with her mother’s grip still seizing her:

I felt a tightening in my chest. The Americans, rumors had it, could forbid us to return if we stuck so much as half a foot outside the perimeters of their country. My mother’s voice churned inside my head […] ‘They’d jump at the chance to send us all back. Nomads, that’s what we’ve all
become.’ Besides, I knew from my own reading that refugees were a burden to the economy. Hadn’t our local paper warned of the consequences when thousands of Indochinese began settling in Virginia in 1975? We were, after all, a ragtag accumulation of unwanted, an awkward remnant of a war the whole country was trying to forget. (15) Mai sees herself as an unwanted burden and thus finds herself in a precarious situation, threatened not only by a sense of being unwelcome in the United States but also by deportation. Bobbie, on the other hand, perceives the situation as simple, telling Mai, “All we have to do is cross the border and you’ll be able to call Baba Quan. Just like that” (14). She then continues, “If you close your eyes and let me step on the pedal, you won’t know we’re crossing a border” (25). Although Bobbie’s comments that Mai will not even know that a border is being crossed points to the constructed nature of national borders, but also dismisses the very real fear Mai has of being deported. Bobbie’s words, however, derive from a lack of knowledge. Mai describes Bobbie as having a “sweet, uncorrupted innocence that made me love her” (14). This “innocence” is highlighted by the “storehouse of inspirational quotes, battle cries she had picked up from her father’s Alcoholics Anonymous pamphlets: Easy Does It But Do It, Act Your Way Into Right Thinking, Think Positive,” which Bobbie uses in her attempt to get Mai to move forward with their plan (16). Although Bobbie’s childhood may have been complicated by her father’s alcoholism, it certainly does not give her the perspective to understand Mai or to comfort her in a meaningful way. Nonetheless, Mai sees Bobbie as the “one who opened up America for me, steadied its quick inscrutable heartbeat for my sake. For the most part, Bobbie blended in and blended me in with her” (27). Despite this “blending,” the
narrative consistently points to the striking contrast between the two girls’ experience. For example, while Bobbie “twisted open a Coke bottle and watched the foam rise,” Mai “touched my green card in my jacket pocket and felt the plastic protective cover between my fingers. Even the feel of an official document did not comfort” (16). Depictions of Bobbie in this scene and throughout the novel repeatedly point to an ease that is attached to her American identity through references to American commodities such as music (Bobbie listens to the Eagles, for example) and cars (her car is a Chevy) and in their excursions to the movie theater and mall. For Mai, however, the same moments take on a completely different tone. For example, watching Bobbie play the piano in a mall store causes Mai to have a flashback to Vietnam: Bobbie’s finger, “her index finger—her right hand trigger finger, to be precise—was turning into a blanched pulpy stump of gauze and bandages that moved spastically […]. There it was, the raw, pulpy stub of flesh, a bare bone-colored white” (28), just like the finger of Mai’s friend a young Vietnamese man whose finger is cut off to avoid the draft in 1968, when “Vietnam was becoming a land of fingerless eighteen-year-old boys” (28). As Bobbie sleeps comfortably in the car parked at the Canadian border, everything Mai sees becomes a threat, triggering memories and shifting readers’ perspective to the reality of Mai’s traumatic past and present.

The episode points to what is lacking in this cross cultural relationship and reveals the need for both Mai and Bobbie to enter into their relationship aware of their own and one another’s lack of awareness. The narrative thereby indicates the importance of a mutuality of responsibility: in other words, Bobbie’s inability to perceive Mai’s suffering and to act comes in part from Mai’s inability to communicate her trauma and in part from the racial and ethnic contexts in which the girls are coming of age. Ultimately, Mai
decides she is unable to cross the border, but she allows herself to imagine her “most wishful and magnanimous daydream” in which “Bobbie’s Chevy could become an elephant […]” all the while noting the reality that “Vietnam had been neither a pioneering nor an empire-building country. Ours, I had learned in school, had been primarily a history of defending, not crossing boundaries” (29). While Mai’s actions are halted by fear (imparted on her primarily by U.S. white majority perspectives), her imagination enables her white friend’s vehicle to represent forward movement that would enable growth and transformation. Moreover, the novel itself does much of what Mai finds herself unable to do: it crosses boundaries by blurring the lines typically drawn between categories of identity, whether personal or collective. Cao’s novel is thus both critical and understanding of the gaps in knowledge and experience, providing the space for readers to engage and interact with both the problem and the solutions to such a cross-cultural relationship.

Through these relationships, Mai’s perspective provides an effective lens for re-envisioning the Vietnam War and its representation. Her narrative has the ability to intervene in the dominant discourse surrounding the war and, as Renny Christopher indicates, “the little evidence available suggests that writings by women and people of color might transgress the dominant mythologizing about the war” (8). The type of boundary crossing to which Christopher alludes implies a shift in the ways that people respond and react to one another, both between and within cultures. While the novel thus explores Mai’s intercultural encounters, it also focuses on Mai’s relationship with her mother to illuminate the intracultural relationships that inform Mai’s understanding of the war and her sense of self—despite her own ambivalence or unawareness about her
Vietnamese culture. Mai’s focus on assimilating into American culture often interferes with her relationship with her mother, and, as a result, her primary contact with Vietnamese culture, remains strained. Mai’s own perspective is limited and thus mimics in many ways the lack of knowing present in the majority representation of the war. The novel offers Mai’s relationship with her mother and the little Saigon community as a means of widening the frame of reference from which both Mai and readers view the war and the new relationships that form between cultures as a result of the war.

Although Mai’s perspective alone provides readers with multiple points of view, Cao’s inclusion of Thanh’s voice via her journal entries and a final suicide letter to Mai reveals not only a more fleshed out portrait of Mai but also a more complex view of the war and the refugee experience from a Vietnamese perspective. Mai often sees her mother as a child, the result of both the stroke Thanh suffers and her struggle with the English language. As in many immigrant narratives, the parent-child relationship becomes inverted: Mai acts as a translator for her mother and tends to her when she is ill. From this perspective, Mai appears mature beyond her years. She is ready to move forward in her new American life, while her mother appears timid and naïve about American life. Rather than silencing Thanh’s perspective, however, *Monkey Bridge* includes it, not to compete with Mai’s but to further entangle the multiple narratives about Vietnam, war and country. From Thanh’s perspective, readers learn that, though Mai may indeed be mature, she is also naïve and has an incomplete understanding not only of herself but also of her mother and their Vietnamese culture. The presence of Thanh’s voice in the novel, particularly through its interruption of Mai’s narrative, adds dimension to the myths that emerge in/from representations of the Vietnam War because
Thanh remembers the war in a much larger context and yet her narrative is intensely personal since readers peer into Thanh’s world via her diary entries and her suicide letter to her daughter. Thus, Thanh’s narrative articulates the nuances and subtleties of the Vietnamese experience that are missing from narratives that include Vietnamese merely as a backdrop upon which to tell the (white) American story of the war. Thanh’s story insists that there cannot be such a divide between Vietnam and “the World,” as American soldiers often referred to life in the United States, if anything resembling a whole story is to be told. Thanh’s narrative has this ability because her memories bring her back to Vietnam, where her material reality was anything but simple, while her present day interactions in the United States convey the flawed integration of Vietnam and the United States via the Little Saigon community where she and Mai now live. As such the novel emphasizes the impact of American involvement in Vietnam, both there and here and now and then. By refusing to isolate the Vietnam War in particular generational, temporal, or geographical zones, *Monkey Bridge* casts a wider net of both understanding of and responsibility for the war and its aftermath.

Seeing Thanh and Mai interact with one another in this community provides a broader context and thus serves to initiate a dialogue between generations and nations. Such dialogue is crucial in the creation of new and more inclusive histories. Because Thanh’s writings interrupt Mai’s narrative, they direct readers to the discrepancies

37 In this way, the novel undermines the theory (previously discussed in the introduction) of “having been there” or the notion that only American veterans can provide the true story of the Vietnam War. It also insists that Vietnam is part of “the World,” a phrase often used to contrast the country of Vietnam and the war with the United States (see Christopher, 5). It is also important to note that Thanh’s narrative involves much more than I discuss here; because this dissertation focuses on the Vietnam War and its racial and ethnic legacies in the United States, I focus on Thanh’s narrative as it relates to popular representation of the war and the ways in which it adds depth to Mai’s narrative.
between the two and challenge the notion of a singular truth by depicting alternative ways of knowing and understanding the world. The letters also disrupt the reader’s sense of linear time because they generally refer back to previous events alluded to by Mai or follow Mai’s flashbacks. By including Thanh’s perspective, the novel further intensifies the narrative tangle and allows the alternative histories competing in the space of the novel to challenge the reader’s new and preconceived understandings of the Vietnamese and the Vietnam War by engaging with multiple narratives and their layered geographical and temporal spaces. The reader’s meaning-making process, like Mai’s as she discovers new truths about her family, becomes part of the larger negotiation of cultural memory of the war. Sorting through these discrepancies puts readers in a position of power but also of responsibility by confronting them with the difficult decision of weighing and assigning value to the multiple narratives, particularly given that the novel presents each of the narratives as valid in its own right.

The tension between the mother and daughter and between the women’s narratives results from a narrative tangle created by the women themselves; Mai and Thanh withhold information from one another and remember their common past differently. The stories in Thanh’s journals are her attempt to re-imagine her reality not only to cope with the trauma that she suffered but also to protect Mai from the karma of the family’s history, and they explicitly call attention to the ways in which individual memory is constructed within particular contexts. The result of this tension in the novel works to depict the intensely personal dimension of history, as something that is shaped and created by individuals. Specifically, Thanh’s narrative shows how she wields a type of power in choosing what stories to share, yet it also demonstrates the impact that such
choices have on others. Readers begin to see, too, how memories or interpretation of the past are altered by the trauma that the women experience, as well as by their encounters with one another and with others both within and outside of their community. While both women have similar feelings of being divided by past and present, Vietnam and the United States, each experiences this in-betweenness differently because her personal experiences are situated in a particular context, which includes traumatic experiences. Thanh’s experience of war in Vietnam stretches beyond the American involvement; her marriage to Mai’s father, for example, reveals how she has been in exile before coming to the United States. These experiences weigh heavily on Thanh’s ability to look forward with the same kind of optimism that Mai possesses. As readers discover the additional narratives that comprise Mai and Thanh’s lives, they also experience the tension not only between mother and daughter but also between and within cultures.

The resulting tension between the women is both symptomatic of and contributes to their postwar suffering. As Pelaud suggests, “Mai’s frustration with her mother arises out of what Mai perceives to be her mother’s lack of control over her environment and the extreme anxieties that seem to consume [Thanh]” (88). Yet, Mai has little knowledge of the trauma that her mother has endured. Indeed, both women suppress their traumatic past and hide their suffering from one another: Mai treats her posttraumatic nightmares with No-Doz while Thanh creates an alternative version of her past to shield both herself and her daughter from its painful reality. An example of their disparate memories and ways of understanding the world is the origin of the scar on Thanh’s face, which Mai believes resulted from a kitchen accident. Thanh’s journals later reveal that the scar actually resulted from a napalm attack, an event that punctuates Thanh’s memory of her
own mother’s death and the revelation of her father’s secrets. The scar provides the
driving force of the novel’s plotline: Mai’s lack of knowledge about the scar’s true origin
is what causes her to try to reunite Thanh and Baba Quan. Mai misreads and
misunderstands Thanh’s calling out for Baba Quan in her sleep; thinking that her mother
would recuperate from her stroke faster and have company once Mai left for college, Mai
tries to find Baba Quan and bring him to the United States. What she does not learn until
after her mother commits suicide, however, is that Thanh has actually been trying to
escape from the man she called father and her cries have actually been out of fear and not
loss. From Thanh’s suicide letter Mai learns that Thanh’s journals do not tell the
complete truth because, as Thanh explains, she has written them as “alternate versions
that suit my imagination and heal my soul” (227). For readers the scar becomes a symbol
not only of the suffering that both women have endured but also of their attempts to cope
with that suffering long after the war has ended in Vietnam. Early in the novel Mai
describes her mother’s scar as a “very old burn on her cheeks that occasionally ignited
into a fresh, rampaging red” (9). The occasional freshness of the scar serves both as a
metaphor for the resurfacing of the memories of the traumatic events that caused it and as
the embodiment of the physical and emotional pain that Thanh endured. As Tuon
suggests, the scar is a “physical trace of a single moment in her life where complex
political forces, class warfare, and family tragedy were indelibly intertwined” (12). The
complexity of the events surrounding Thanh’s injury illustrates how the effects of war,
both broad and deep, shape the multiple narratives vying for space in both personal and
collective memory. As Mai learns in her mother’s suicide letter, Thanh is physically
scarred by napalm but emotionally and psychologically she is scarred by how the event
disrupts her sense of self and others. Ultimately, the culmination of the events surrounding her scarring challenges her notion of the connection between individual and national identity.

The effect of the war time bombing cannot be isolated in Thanh’s memory or in the exploration of how this incident contributes to her definition of self/others. Rather, the burning by napalm represents just one incident in a series of interrelated events, all of which are influenced by Thanh’s worldview and shed light on how one understands the war. Although burning by napalm in and of itself is a traumatic experience, Thanh’s burns occur alongside a series of additional traumatic happenings. First, a heightened period of violence during the war forces the family to separate and Thanh goes to her parents, who must evacuate their village and relocate to a strategic hamlet. As Thanh explains in her letter to Mai, the desolation of the strategic hamlet quickly causes Thanh’s mother to lose her will to live. Thanh describes the hamlet as a place where,

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among the unmoored lives of villagers who had once anchored themselves by the roots of the earth, your grandmother and I and Baba Quan were told to navigate our way into a new life. I remembered feeling the strange hardness of cement beneath my feet as I held your grandmother in my arms. We were in a barracks, one among many identical barracks. On a table were two tin pots, a can opener, and a carton of canned sardines issued by the government. Tacked on the wall was our schedule for the week, lectures on civic duty, lessons on the art of uncovering Vietcong agents, seminars on the village autonomy and economic self-sufficiency (246-247).
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The layering of Thanh’s suffering is intense; she is uprooted from her own life and home and her own country has been militarized beyond recognition. The roots that nourish the country’s primary crop—rice—and their understanding of the connection between land and national identity have been destroyed by concrete poured to create military barracks. In these concrete barracks, the people are expected to turn themselves over to a new way of life, as if their past can simply be pushed under the concrete. Thanh has suddenly reversed roles with her own mother, who is unable to care for herself. For Thanh and her family, connection to the land, family, and nation are deeply interrelated through mythic beliefs. Her belief in karma, which she defines as “an ethical, spiritual chromosome, an amalgamation of parent and child, which is as much a part of our history as the DNA strands” (170), is related to her belief in the connection between land and spirit. Thanh believes that one’s soul is in the land, and, for her, “to know a rice field is to know the soul of Vietnam” (172), which is why the war was “fought in the rice fields, because it was a war fought for the soul of the country” (172). These connections are severed in the strategic hamlet (which literally paves over the land, stunting its growth) and upon Thanh’s mother’s passing. Thanh’s revisiting of the past reveals a perspective that Mai is not able to provide. Mai’s youth does not allow her to understand the complex conditions created by and driving the war; Thanh’s description gestures toward cultural and economic underpinnings of the war. Moreover, Thanh’s secretive past, naturally spanning more time than Mai’s, paints a complex portrait of the intertwining relationships between individual, family, nation, and culture.

Driven as she is by the philosophy of karma, Thanh risks her life to allow her mother “to die where she was born” because they believe in a karmic circle comprised of
“a beginning and an end that converged toward and occupied one single, concentrated space” (248). As Mai learns in the suicide letter, Thanh ignores the declaration of her old village as a free-fire zone, “which meant that any moving thing caught in its vicinity could and would be shot,” in order to return “to the graves of [her] ancestors, back to the sacred land where [her] mother’s placenta and umbilical cord had been buried and where her body would have to be buried as well” (172). Thanh makes it back to the ancestral village, but she is unable to bury her mother: after she witnesses Baba Quan murdering Uncle Khan, with the assistance of a known Vietcong supporter, Thanh is forced to abandon her mission to bury her mother. She flees the scene of the murder, but a napalm attack prevents her from returning to her mother’s body, which is never recovered. Thanh’s claim that “a part of her died forever on that river bank” (250) is not exaggerated given her belief in the karmic connection, which means that Thanh’s inability to bring her mother to rest properly leaves Mai’s grandmother “exposed, soulless, forever hungry and forever wandering” (251). Subsequently, after being left in a coma for months, physically scarred for life, and feeling that she has abandoned her mother, Thanh’s sense of self unravels. Unable to bury her mother, Thanh severs the connection between resting place, land, and nation, initiating what she sees as a devastating karma. Although seeking refuge in the United States grants Thanh safety, she sacrifices “mythic notions of cultural identity defined by inhabitation of native homelands and loyalty to ancestors’ spirits” (Baelav 140). Mai sees land/nation as something that can just be left behind—she was uprooted and set on a path to create a new life for herself—but Thanh continues to suffer the loss of place and a confusion of identity.
This confusion of identity is exacerbated by Thanh’s attempt to understand the conditions that lead Baba Quan to commit murder. Mai’s desire to find Baba Quan and bring him to the United States reveal her naiveté but also demonstrate the ways in which narratives often become boiled down to oversimplifications. Thanh does not reveal the truth about Baba Quan because the truth is difficult to determined. In her journal entries and suicide letter, Thanh struggles to make sense of the event that she witnesses: her narrative highlights the intensely personal trauma that she suffers as a result of the illegitimacy of her birth and her father’s subsequent degeneration, but it also puts Baba Quan’s actions into a larger historical context that complicate an already complex situation. In her final message to Mai, Thanh describes the “act that continues to haunt [her] to this day” as “a slow-burning rage that had begun years before, finally released with the deadly precision of a knife’s edge” (249). When Baba Quan’s accomplice encourages Baba Quan to tell Uncle Khan that “Crimes against the people cannot go unpunished” and shouts “Land to the Landless,” Baba Quan says, “Believe me, he knows, comrade, he knows the way he knows the beat of his own lustful heart why he is being punished” (249-250). The dialogue Thanh recounts points to a larger social and political protest, but Thanh understands the depth of the smaller, personal context when she indicates that Baba Quan’s motive for murder is ultimately the result of the raw, untamed anguish of a man who had lived his life like a clenched fist, a man who had dreamed of turning a cool hatred into a tormented howl for revenge—against a landlord who had turned his wife into a concubine and taken from him a child who should have been rightfully his. I understood it clearly as I stood by the river’s edge, this thumping, messy
rage, tightly wound and simmering like a hissing fury—funneled and unburdened decades later as nothing more than a pristine lesson in class warfare (250).

Thanh’s analysis of the murder is important because it depicts a daughter unwilling to use the war or its larger circumstances as an excuse for her father’s actions while at the same time she acknowledges the impact of the larger social context on one individual’s actions.

This depiction of Baba Quan is significantly at odds with the man Mai sees as an old world farmer, connected to the land in a mythic way. The stories that Mai remembers and Thanh’s creative rendering of her past in her journal seem to substantiate this mythic image Mai has of her grandfather, but Thanh’s suicide letter, especially when put into the novel’s larger context, demonstrates the flexibility of narrative in constructing memories and experience, giving new meaning to Mai’s earlier observation that “Baba Quan was free to be everything” (108). Thus, Thanh’s final characterization of Baba Quan does not quite diminish the “majestic grandfatherliness” Mai garners from the stories she has of him. Instead, Thanh describes Baba Quan to Mai as

a man consumed by resonating anguish, a deeply personal passion that always curls back into the reflection of its own anger. The basic building block, the atoms and molecules that mattered to him, was not the certainty of conviction but the raw messiness of faith and retribution. That was what motivated him to risk his own life to save Uncle Michael from the riddles of a minefield he himself had designed. Love and hate rivered through his veins and blasted through his flesh, and he could as easily murder the
enemy, the landlord Khan, as he could save an American Special Forces Unit. He saved Uncle Michael, and Michael in turn saved us. (251-252)

Thanh’s final analysis of Baba Quan maintains complexity and allows him to exist in a space at odds with the oversimplified either-or mentality presented by more stereotypical versions of the Vietnamese in the larger war narrative told by the majority perspective. This analysis also allows Mai (and the novel’s readers) to move forward and create her own version of Baba Quan, compiled from within the narrative tangle. Though the novel hardly allows Baba Quan to be redeemed by saving Uncle Michael, it also refuses to see him as merely an evil Vietcong. Rather, the narrative considers the broader social context that seems to drive Baba Quan to his actions and presents him within a human dimension.

In many ways, Thanh’s belief in karma allows her to maintain this sense of complexity, which is very much at odds with Mai’s desire to find clarity and simplicity in the world around her. This aspect of Thanh’s perspective brings to bear alternative insights about time and history, particularly with respect to the trauma that Thanh and her family endure, by placing her experiences within a framework of motherhood and Buddhism. Thanh’s belief in karma, which she connects to her role as a mother, shifts readers’ perspectives, allowing them to examine through a new lens the roles of victim and oppressor, as well as the distinctions between here and there and now and then, and thereby allowing for alternative considerations of history not present in mainstream Vietnam War representation in which Americans are presented primarily as victims—whether of the Vietnamese, the United States government, or the sense of chaos that often characterizes American perception of the war. Michelle Balaev argues that “traumatic experience is portrayed in the novel from a non-Western perspective that values trauma.
in terms of personal, global, and even mythic contexts” (54). Balaev notes that, “rather than a transhistorical definition of trauma,” *Monkey Bridge* posits that “the responses to an extreme event are experienced and narrated differently due to individual variants and temporal specificities” (54). While I largely agree with Balaev’s assertion regarding the significance of geographical and temporal locations, her emphasis on this specificity undermines the potential that *Monkey Bridge* has in generating more productive cross cultural (or even cross generational) dialogue. While the emphasis on the specificity of time and place works to cultivate the value of the individual experience and articulation of the past, centralizing place also poses the danger of denying access to empathetic understanding across cultures. Although Balaev’s objective focuses on listening to a variety of voices and understanding the variety of contexts from which individuals experience trauma like war, the underlying notions of her argument echo the popular mentality of Vietnam War literature that privileges “having been there.” This popular mentality posits that those who served in Vietnam are really the only ones who can comprehend what it was like and suggests that the experience is incomprehensible and untranslatable to others. Rather than creating a narrative tangle in which multiple versions of history slide into one another and create space for dynamic dialogues that stimulate and energize new knowledge, then, what emerges is a competitive space that creates hierarchies (often grounded in categories of identity). Cao’s novel illuminates this dilemma by drawing attention to the tension between Thanh and her daughter.

This very sense of inability to access a particular notion of Vietnam creates much of the tension between Thanh and Mai, whose versions of Vietnam and America often seem at odds with one another. In her journal entries, Thanh writes with some dismay
that Mai, “who was born into a country already at war and sheltered in Saigon, has never known a rice field and the current of grace that runs through it like golden light” or how the water in the fields forms “translucent rectangles forever framed in the very heart, the very soul of the land” (Cao 172). Thanh’s sense of identity is so connected to place that she is unable to embrace her place in the United States in the way that Mai does, seeing it as an opportunity for a “new beginning unrestricted by a past life” (169). Both see the other’s viewpoint as flawed, though Mai eventually comes to see how her rejection of her mother’s views has created some of the tension between them while Thanh often “plays dumb” to Mai’s duplicity and allows Mai the “satisfaction of thinking that [she’s] unaware” (53). Mostly, though, the novel suggests that the two women, despite their familial and karmic connection, other one another and this othering leaves each feeling isolated in an already isolated Little Saigon community.

Examining the Little Saigon community, and specifically the Mekong Grocery where Thanh works, illuminates the narrative tangle at work in a more public sphere than Mai and Thanh’s narratives. This community is one in which Vietnamese refugees cling to one another; Mai perceives it as “a world in and of itself, a world that census takers had documented, one hundred thousand and growing” (203). As such it is a world that is both hidden and public, serving as a space between the many oppositions of the war (here, there, now, then, us, them). By Mai’s account, the Little Saigon community is full paradoxes. For example, it reflects the intent nostalgia and reaching back of the Little Saigon community at the same time that it thrives on their hope of “a brand-new tomorrow” that stands as a “glorious monument to a picture-perfect past uncomplicated and unimpaired by political realities” (204).
In Little Saigon, the grocery store is not simply a commonplace for carrying out daily activities; rather, it projects what Mai senses is a palpable otherness that becomes superficially covered in nostalgia for Vietnam. More specifically, the Mekong Grocery store represents a “transfigured space, distinctly foreign to the senses, where shadows took on different forms and cast silhouettes in an alien way” (203). Amidst the items one would expect in a grocery store, the Mekong Grocery is also filled with items that distinctly represent the South Vietnamese living in Little Saigon. Mai describes how “the silk fabric and tortoise shell accessories […]; frozen pulps of jackfruits and durians; the burlap sacks of dried arnica and lemon-grass stalks; […] apothecary jars of eucalyptus oil, rice wine, and medicinal fluid steeped in hundred-year-old herbs; even the vats of nuoc mam” exhibit the community’s attempt to “fabricate a familiarity for our own comfort” (64). The comfort, however, is easily punctured, as it is on the day when Mai comes to the grocery and, “in addition to the daily little worries,” the occupants of the grocery are listening to “three different radios tuned to three different stations—the Voice of America, the BBC, and a French station” to hear “the latest news about a border skirmish between Hanoi and Beijing” (203, 206). Among the “sweeping imponderables that held their attention” are issues of “war, rearranged borders, a country assembled and disassembled by forces beyond their control” (203). The description of the store functions as a reminder that the community, despite its location in the United States, remains outside the constructed image of America as a united multicultural space. Rather, it exists as an other space that captures the lack of certainty and stability that pervades Mai’s narrative. Like the scene at the Canadian border, the description of the grocery reminds readers that despite the war being “over,” the aftermath of the war continues to affect the
Vietnamese refugees of Little Saigon, who likely have not just hopes of returning to Vietnam but also have family members who were not able to escape. As Mai indicates, the war “represented a consuming complication of allegiances” that requires choosing sides. The grocery is a space between the many oppositions that emerge from the war: it is neither here nor there and the community members are neither us nor them. This space between presents opportunities for reimagining identities, as well as serving as a source of anxiety and insecurity.

Ironically, the Mekong Grocery is also a “popular gathering space for many American GIs” who, also struggling with postwar identity, seek the solace of Mrs. Bay, Thanh’s friend and another grocery employee. To the soldiers, Mrs. Bay “was keeper of the Old World, and to them she represented the hidden part of their lives, which they could not show to others, most of all to other Americans” (64). Mrs. Bay indicates that turbulence ignited by the war necessitates hiding, as best one can, connections to Vietnam if one desires to fit into American society: “Mrs. Bay had come to this unerring conclusion: as long as America hated its own soldiers, we would never be welcome in this country. Those who had been in Vietnam, the vets and us, were forever set apart from everyone else, who hadn’t” (65). This sense of division—of experience “in country”—is common in Vietnam War literature, giving authority to those who have been there on the basis of a claim to authenticity. According to Renny Christopher, only those who were there can really understand the experience. This qualification sets the participant writer greater ‘authority’ and sets him (it is usually ‘him’ since few books have been written by women veterans) at the center of the discussion. Vietnam War narratives tend to be judged
first on the basis of ‘authenticity,’ rather than their literary merit, 
popularity, moral value, or political vision. (9-10)

Christopher challenges these notions of experience, authority, and authenticity, calling 
attention to the absence of perspectives of women, people of color in the United States, 
and the Vietnamese, all of whom had certainly been there. Similarly, although Monkey 
Bridge appears to keep intact the authority of experience, or having been there, through 
the space of the Mekong Grocery and Mrs. Bay’s relationships with the soldiers who 
frequent the store, the novel does challenge the status quo by extending authority to the 
Vietnamese, whose perspective often goes largely unheard, especially in fiction.

The novel grants Mrs. Bay a position of agency through her ability to provide 
solace to the veterans, who “came waiting for her to ask them questions,” and her 
willingness to ask those questions (Cao 65). Notably, the men seem to wait for Mrs. 
Bay’s permission to speak, to share their stories; this deference to Mrs. Bay, while 
perhaps a small detail, signals a significant shift. The men do not simply insert 
themselves into the picture but instead work within a framework of exchange. While the 
novel does not specify what the men ask, it describes their conversations as being about 
“enormous things” in which the men would “sweat [their] monsters with [Mrs. Bay]” 
(65). Given that so much representation of the war depicting veterans works through 
confessions of brutality to civilians, or more general guilt for having been in the war at 
all, it is feasible that some of these “enormous things” are in the same vein. Mrs. Bay 
then is granted a form of power to accept, perhaps even forgive, some of the wrongs she 
and others suffered as a result of the war. For these men, Mrs. Bay “was keeper of the
Old World, and to them she represented the hidden part of their lives, which they could not show to others, most of all to other Americans” (64).

The depiction of Mrs. Bay is not without its problems: she remains in the domestic sphere, providing lessons to the veterans on how to cook Vietnamese noodles, for example. Linking Mrs. Bay to images of Vietnam and the Vietnamese as a primitive heart of darkness is also troubling. However, the novel also counters these images by depicting Mrs. Bay as a savvy business woman who establishes the hui, a community loan program. Given that Cao’s is one of the first novels to represent the Vietnamese American experience and does so relatively soon after the war and the end of the U.S.-Vietnam embargo, the novel’s ability to add dimension to Vietnamese female characters is notable. Specifically, the way in which Mrs. Bay is able to dialogue with ostracized American veterans models intercultural dialogue necessary for allowing diverse voices to co-exist rather than compete in the space of the narrative tangle. Mrs. Bay does not diminish the soldiers’ “monsters” by insisting on her own troubles. Rather, she allows them their space alongside her and offers the kind of empathetic understanding that can form the basis of cross cultural coalitions. This acknowledgement and potential for cross cultural understanding is not often recognized in Vietnam War literature, perhaps because a sense of competition to be heard and understood from both sides gets in the way of real exchange.

The novel acknowledges the suffering of American soldiers alongside the refugees most distinctly through “Bill, last name unknown, [who] was a regular among a gaggle of other GI regulars” at the Mekong Grocery. Though the previous descriptions of the grocery situate the Mekong as a foreign space in an American city (in Northern
Virginia), Bill makes a point of undertaking “routine visits to an unglamorous warehouse that doubled as a grocery store.” Bill’s role in the novel signals a notable cross cultural concern, given that, in the overly simplified dichotomy of us and them, Bill would be considered one of “them” in the Little Saigon community but Mrs. Bay considers Bill an “old friend” and a “good friend” (207). The narrative presents Bill as a “lost” man who finds “momentary solace and protection” in the Mekong Grocery (209). As Mai notes, “Bill did not subscribe to President Ford’s proclamation that the end of the war ‘closes a chapter in the American experience.’ Years after his tours of duty, the debris of Vietnam remained” (207). Like Mai and Thanh, Bill remains haunted by his memories of Vietnam and comes to the grocery store to “exchange confessions about the turbulence of daily life” with Mrs. Bay, who can “minister to his memories” (208). The narrative provides an example of the kind of daily “turbulence” that Bill faces as a veteran when a man who had tried to cut Bill in line notices Bill’s “pea-sized insignia button that said ‘Vietnam vet’ […] and practically wet his pants” (208). The man’s fear comes from an “American public [that] indeed seemed quite willing to believe that men who returned from the original sin and primordial evil of Vietnam had a natural predisposition toward madness.” While many veterans indeed struggle to reintegrate in civilian life postwar, the novel criticizes the tendency to view veterans as possessing “psychotic derangement” by describing it sarcastically as an “assumption […] natural enough to require no further exploration or investigation” (209). Rather than the antagonism that might be expected between Americans and Vietnamese in a war story, the narrative creates a “tender space” (208). To this space, Bill brings “his little piece of a big history” and, though it is not the
Vietnamese community’s experience, Mai indicates that “we were in fact part of the same experience” (209).

The novel’s inclusion of Bill privileges the perspective of having been there while also pointing out how his ‘mere’ having been there situates him on the margins of his own society, indicating, though not endorsing, how mere association with Vietnam negates real belonging within the norms of U.S. society. Specifically, Mrs. Bay sensed a continuing connection with the American soldiers who visited the store, for the simple reason that a common base, she believed, existed to connect us exiles, on one point, to these lost men, on another point of the American triangle. We were all trying to make our way from the bottom base toward the unreachable apex, and along two equal sides of an isosceles triangle; the slope we would have to climb would be a difficult one. (209)

Mai’s observations of the relationship between Bill and Mrs. Bay are perceptive, though she does maintain her sense that sides have to be chosen when it comes to the varying perspectives of the war. She acknowledges that, although they are all part of a shared experience, Vietnamese exiles and veterans like Bill “were like two distinctly different shapes that would come together to form an amalgamation of common and at the same time competing truths” (209, my emphasis). Mai’s sense of competitive memory stands apart from Mrs. Bay’s ability to see the entangled nature of these various strands of the past. The danger of Mai’s notion of competitive history and authority of experience is indicated in her feeling like “the outsider with insider information” (212). Through the process of her assimilation into American culture, Mai has grown accustomed to—if not
entirely comfortable with—the sense of competition embedded in the narrative of American history and society, which thrives on the notion of winners and losers. Mai excludes the Vietnamese belief in karma, to which Thanh clings so tightly and which challenges this notion of winners and losers.

Through Thanh’s perspective, the novel draws attention to the entanglement of multiple historical moments in order to illuminate the complexity and rippled effects of war. Thanh’s belief systems place her simultaneously in a world that is both general and specific; her trauma is the result of a series of karmic actions and reactions that originate equally from the local (Baba Quan’s actions) and the global (the war and all its many national and international ties). In her suicide letter to Mai, Thanh writes that “karma is a continuing presence […] as indivisible as our notion of time itself. Our reality […] is a simultaneous past, present, and future. The verbs in our language are not conjugated, because our sense of time is tenseless, indivisible, and knows no end” (Cao 252). Thanh’s karmic understanding of time suggests that wars do not simply begin and end with a marker on a time line, or because a political leader proclaims the end to the Vietnam War Syndrome. In an earlier journal entry, Thanh expresses her belief that the situation in which Vietnam finds itself during the American War there is not entirely surprising but, rather, a karmic consequence connected to the “total demolition of the Indrapura and the thousands and thousands of Chams by our ancestors” (55). This notion indicates that, as Balaev also suggests, the war and Thanh’s resulting trauma results from not only American involvement but also her own nation’s history (Balaev 54). Thanh indicates that “karma is the antithesis of Manifest Destiny, the kind of Manifest Destiny they teach my daughter in her history book about the great American West” (Cao 55). Taking issue
with the “American preoccupation with cowboys who win and Indians who lose,” Thanh rejects the “American sense of invincibility” and instead views Vietnamese southward expansion “with sorrow and shame, not with a sense of conquest and pride” (55-56). She explains that “karma is based less on rights and entitlements than on moral duty and obligation, less on celebrations of victories than on repentance and atonement” (56).

Like Thanh, Mrs. Bay embraces the complexity of history exhibited in the “daily turbulence” of the Mekong Grocery, which serves in part to offer the comfort of nostalgia by surrounding the patrons with Vietnamese goods. However, the space makes clear that the comfort is fabricated, which can result in a dangerous nostalgia that Mai fears but also senses can be dangerous. Watching Mrs. Bay and Thanh interact, Mai sees that “the three of them made an unlikely but nice little congregation in their pool of common space, a coalescence of assorted shapes that fit snugly in their common contagion of nostalgia” (212). Despite her desire for “seamless, unsuperstitious order,” Mai’s wariness of nostalgia’s ability to blur reality and make the past look more desirable than the present is perceptive. As many scholars of Vietnam War representation and history indicate, the danger of nostalgia as the primary mode of articulation. Such a framework often focuses on the kind of national pride, forgiveness, and healing that has the potential to empty meaning and replace it with something marketable, whether in politics, popular culture, or literature. Sturken, for example, suggests that the “orchestrated” memories of the Vietnam War create a problematic situation in which the “healing process is turned into spectacle and commodity,” creating a “nostalgia industry” (Tangled 75).

Despite the often sentimental appeal of the characters in Monkey Bridge, the novel does not soften its focus in portraying the suffering that results from war. For
example, Thanh cannot find the comfort that she needs to see her through life in America. Rather, she commits suicide in an effort to shift her daughter’s karma; there is no happy ending in which mother and daughter see eye-to-eye, achieve their American dream, and live happily ever after. Instead, Thanh’s narrative draws grisly connections between the individual, the family, and the nation. These connections work to empower the belief that the personal is political, echoing my earlier reference to Bates’ assertion of the value of war stories (in which stories and, as I extend, the reading of stories mirrors and constitutes a political act). In her letter Thanh writes to Mai that “motherhood is the same in every language. It touches you, exaggerates your capacity to love, and makes you do things that are wholly unordinary,” like sacrificing her own life in order to give Mai “a new beginning” (Cao 252, 253). Through Thanh’s writings, the connections between karma and motherhood lend a point of access to those hesitant to accept Thanh’s way of perceiving the world around her by gesturing toward the universality of the love a mother has for her child. The narrative evokes a sense of desperation. Moreover, Thanh’s reference to her own impending suicide is coupled with a description of Thich Quang Duc, a Buddhist monk who protested the persecution of Buddhists in South Vietnam by lighting himself on fire in a ritual ceremony. The 1963 event was photographed by American reporter Malcolm Browne; and Browne’s photographs quickly made international headlines and eventually became iconic images of the war: “The riveting power of Browne's photographs was such that they focused Americans on an area of the world that had only received marginal attention up until then. In so doing, the photographs became a frame through which many Americans perceived the events in South Vietnam” (Skow, n. pg). The photographs of the burning monk captured the
attention of an American public that, many would argue, had not been as attentive to the war as they had been to domestic issues; the photograph is one of many that called attention to the severity of the situation in Vietnam. It is often credited as initiating not only an increase of public attention but also an increase of military presence in Vietnam. Moreover, debate over the image and its interpretation call attention to the complexity of the interconnected issues of the war—where religion, politics, and public attention intersect, controversy is bound to ensue. The conversations surrounding the photographs, even decades later, point to the difficulty in establishing one narrative as more important than any other.  

The novel’s reference to this iconic incident establishes a parallel between Thanh’s actions and the protest of the Buddhist monk. This parallel remains unexplained by Thanh’s narrative—Thanh does not make clear why she shares this information with Mai, though she does explain many of the other anecdotes she shares. However, the novel uses the inclusion to contrast the very public sacrifice by the Buddhist monk and the relatively private sacrifice Thanh makes by overdosing on pills and alcohol in her own home. Thanh acknowledges the unordinary nature of her actions by creating this parallel between the monk and herself and the narrative thereby calls attention to the severity of her life as an exile in the United States, unable to reconcile the guilt that she has for her mother’s improper burial, the shame she feels for her illegitimate birth and Baba Quan’s murderous actions, and the helplessness she has regarding Mai’s future. Immediately following her description of the monk who “performed the ultimate sacrifice and pressed

38 See, for example, Barbie Zelizer’s attention to this event in About to Die: How News Images Move the Public or Kendrick Oliver’s essay, “‘I would too, wouldn’t you?’: Regarding the Deaths of Others during the Vietnam War,” in Knapp and Footit’s Liberal Democracies at War: Conflict and Representation.
his palms in prayer, a sermon of fire, his body in an erect, uncollapsible lotus position, while flames burning, orange and ocher […] enveloped and consumed the flesh he offered as an act of supreme devotion,” Thanh writes, “I am already a dying person, Mai. This soil is as poisonous to my soul as the poison that once turned our village into a dead earth” (Cao 253). Despite the striking parallels Thanh’s letter draws between the two suicides, the distinctions are also clear. While Thanh describes the monk as uncollapsible and the moment as a stunning spectacle, the narrative later describes Thanh’s death in a way that distinguishes it from the shocking beauty of Browne’s photograph. Mai explains what she saw upon finding her mother: “It was the face I had found most shocking, not the green vomit that leaked from her nose, but the imperceptibly calm face, a dead face, blue like the tender middle of raw meat. She had vomited in her coma, and it must have blocked her lungs, turning her face a hard, morbid blue” (256). The striking contrast between the two suicides calls attention to the way in which experiences like Thanh’s often remain unacknowledged; Thanh’s unglorified death receives little attention, except from a few members of the Little Saigon community and Mai’s adopted family, Uncle Michael and Mary. The funeral feast is prepared in advance, by Thanh herself. Thanh’s story receives no international headlines. Yet, her suffering is intense and her story adds shape and texture to a narrative of the war that typically lacks dimension because of its focus on the experience of white, male American soldiers. Despite her desperation to fictionalize her past or her inclination to hide it away, Thanh’s decision to articulate the truths she has silenced for so long bring her an “unburdened sense of tranquility” (254). The final words of Thanh’s suicide letter indicate that Thanh recognizes the importance
of Mai having a sense of her family’s past and the ability to carve her own path into an “imperishable future” (254).

Thanh’s sense of resolution, however, does not bring Mai the same sense of calm. Mai questions her treatment of her mother and wonders whether she could have “been more perceptive [...] Could I have understood a week-long four-burner feast to be a death mask or a funeral arrangement, a happy face to be a face of despair [...]? Could I have guessed that behind my grandfather’s caresses were fingers that committed murders and designed a labyrinth of underground tunnels and mines?” (256). Mai doubts herself and continues living in a world where “one wrong move” and “the entire mess can just disarrange itself and collapse like a hundred pieces of flying metal for the whole world to see” (257). For Mai, this “brand-new slate” that she has been given via her mother’s sacrifice could unravel at any moment. She is unable to incorporate her past into her sense of self and continues to try to keep the past at bay. As she mourns her mother, alone in her bed at night before her college education is scheduled to begin, the narrative depicts the dangers of this repression of the past as the threat of everything unraveling. Mai “held [her]self against the bed, keeping the tears [she] didn’t know [she] had in, inside, safely invisible behind the eyes” (260) and tries to focus on the future. The narrative, however, represents this future through yet another narrative, in “a glossy color brochure” from the college which “promised incoming students the openness of an unexplored future and the safety of its sanctuary” (260). Beneath the glossiness of the brochure, however, exists a narrative that is not so polished, not as clearly defined, and likely as raw as the suffering Mai and her mother have endured. The narrative, and Mai to some degree, depicts this future as one that is contained, within the boundaries of the
campus, within the confines of the advertising of the brochure, and thus limited those boundaries that are always susceptible to encroachment by other narratives, including the past. The narrative depicts this encroachment symbolically: Mai’s college acceptance letter “whispered a starlight of reassurance” but the “faint sliver of what only two weeks ago had been a full moon dangled like a sea horse from the sky” (260). Throughout the novel, the seahorse symbolizes the country of Vietnam, and here the whispering starlight of the future and the faintness of the moon indicate a tentative balance of past and present and here and there both dim and quiet but with a continuing presence. The novel ends with this tentativeness; Mai’s future is ambiguous and readers do not know what will become of her or how she will bridge the many narratives she has encountered during the space of the novel. Leaving the novel open this way allows readers to imagine the possibilities; they can choose to see a world in which Mai can free herself from the fear of hiding her past and her suffering. This world might be full of people willing to see the narrative tangle not as a mess to be ignored but as a space in which differences can be bridged with multiple points of connection.
Chapter Three:
“A Story is Forever Unfolding”: Coming Home from Vietnam in Linda Hogan’s People of the Whale

Unlike the veterans who were welcomed and honored by parades after previous wars, Vietnam veterans returned from the war individually and were more likely to be met protestors than by supporters who saw them as heroic soldiers. Following a highly controversial war, Vietnam veterans often felt shamed or pitied; they struggled to reintegrate into a society that frequently characterized them as murderers or psychopaths and withdrew, sometimes into substance abuse or suicide. Feelings of isolation often exacerbated the veterans’ symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and contributed to high rates of alcoholism and suicide. Representations of the Vietnam War often limit veterans to such characterizations and thereby position them outside the norms of society. As veterans already marginalized by their racial and ethnic difference and sometimes physically separated from typical United States communities by the bounds of reservations, Native Americans often faced intense alienation and, perhaps more than other veterans, inhabited a liminal space of being “both, yet neither, soldiers and civilians” (Sturken “The Wall,” 494).

Linda Hogan’s People of the Whale depicts this complexity of the Vietnam War experience for Native Americans through the story of Thomas Witka Just, a veteran and a member of the fictional A’atsika community, a whaling people living in a town called Dark River located on the Northwest coast. When Thomas goes to war, he leaves

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39 Hogan, in various interviews, has indicated that the idea for the fictional A’atsika community in People of the Whale originated with her work for her book, Sightings: The Gray Whales’ Mysterious Journey, co-authored with Brenda Peterson. The book explores the connections between humans and whales from indigenous, scientific, and environmental perspectives. It also explores the controversy that ensued when
behind his wife Ruth and their unborn son Marco, as well as a Native American community on the brink of dissolution. The novel expands the war narrative beyond the typical combat experience, which is primarily captured through flashbacks, to include Thomas’s experiences as a veteran and his family’s experiences during his time away and as he re-integrates after the war. As Thomas travels from place to place, the narrative often meanders from past to present and back again; time and place thereby become thematically important in illuminating complex notions of home and identity. Although Thomas states that he enlisted in the military because he is “not just an Indian” but also “an American,” his experiences in Vietnam lead him to question his ability (and perhaps willingness) to claim either of those identities as his own (30). The novel delays Thomas’s return to Dark River through a series of complicated events, which begin with a chaotic and violent episode in civilian territory in South Vietnam. Presumed either dead or missing in action, Thomas actually remains in a Vietnamese village for some time after the war is considered over by the United States. He falls in love with a villager named Ma and they have a daughter, whom they call Lin. Thomas, whose survival is ultimately discovered by the United States military, eventually returns to the United States, staying first in a veterans’ hospital in Hawaii and then hiding in San Francisco before returning to Dark River when he hears through the media that the A’atsika people are planning a ceremonial whale hunt. Even when he returns to Dark River, however,

the Makah Nation, an indigenous whaling community in Northwest Washington, fought for an exemption to the global ban on whaling in order to re-establish cultural tradition. A whale hunt took place in 1999 with approval from the United States but animal rights activists have since blocked the exemption. In 2007, another whale was hunted without approval from Makah leaders. The novel clearly uses the Makah nation’s history as its source and contains several direct parallels, but the novel’s A’atsika community is a fictional entity.

40 Use of labels to refer to native peoples of the United States varies widely in scholarship and fiction and these labels are not without controversy. The novel refers to the A’atsika people as Indians, natives, and tribal people. Outside of quoted material, I use the term Native American.
Thomas struggles to be part of the community because, in addition to having been gone for so long without providing any explanation to his family, Thomas struggles internally with his actions in Vietnam. Moreover, his son Marco’s death during the whale hunt creates distress for Thomas and tension within the community. When a drought strikes the community, Thomas makes a sacrifice that takes him on a restorative journey to Washington, D.C. Each of these places Thomas inhabits guides him as he makes the long journey home from Vietnam to his A’atsika people.

For many Native American communities, the notion of coming home from the war entails not just arriving back on United States soil to a reservation or to a family home. Rather, a ceremonial “coming home” encompasses a continual process of “psychological, social, and moral transformation” (O’Nell 442), which often involves the community through ceremonies or rituals and which ultimately points to a way of life, rather than a particular destination. However, Thomas’s experiences in particular places, including Dark River, San Francisco, Vietnam, and Washington, D.C. do play an important role in helping him to come home. Thomas’s interactions with these places, as well as with the people who inhabit them, illuminate the potential for new and powerful relationships that close the gap between self and other. Thomas’s struggles are intensely personal, yet the novel highlights the role of his Native American community, in which the interconnectedness of all living creatures means that the people must share their burdens and take responsibility for one another. This interconnectedness extends to Thomas’s daughter Lin, whom Thomas leaves behind in Vietnam and whose life after the war becomes the focal point of a significant portion of the second of the novel’s three sections. Lin’s ability to forge unlikely bonds brings solace to herself and her community.
in Saigon. This same sense of community also proves to be a crucial factor in Thomas’s ability to confront the guilt and shame he experiences as a result of his service in Vietnam and in his ability to begin to heal the invisible wounds of war.

Living in community, however, does not mean that the A’asitka community is without internal conflict; nor does it mean that they are outside the influence of non-Native America. Like Thomas, the people struggle to make sense of the old way of life in a modern age fraught with political and personal conflict. The novel thus parallels the global conflict that is the Vietnam War with the A’atsika’s local conflict over whether to return to the whaling culture that once defined them. Hogan’s use of this parallel allows the novel to examine the intersections of the global and the particular, a technique that reinforces the effectiveness of the A’atsika community in its efforts to achieve balance and reach for both internal and external peace. The text positions Thomas’s experience in Vietnam as not belonging to Thomas Just alone; rather, the experience and its narrative are shared by Thomas’s people, as well as by those he encounters and the natural environment around him. This shared narrative captures how the war and its aftermath alter both peoples and places in a ripple effect, requiring a communal approach that involves not only the story of the Native American community but also the stories of the whales, the ocean, and the surrounding natural environment. The novel’s focus on the natural world presents a form of continuity unique from the other novels in this dissertation. By blurring the line between the human and the natural and/or spiritual world, People of the Whale presents a new way of understanding the war and those whose emotional and environmental landscapes it altered. As Thomas begins to integrate these multiple narratives, he becomes the center of complex circles of history, memory,
and identity from which healing can begin. This sense of community eventually enables Thomas to move from feelings of pity and guilt to a sense of responsibility so that he can face what the war has done to him, as well as what he did during the war, in order to make peace with himself and those around him—to come home to the A’atsika way of life that promotes peace and respect for all living creatures. The novel thus presents a world in which reaching backward into the past provides future-oriented momentum that inspires hope for a more peaceful existence.

While the objective of my larger project is clearly not to privilege any one of the ethnic and racial groups’ narratives, Hogan’s focus on the Native American experience of the war is particularly important. This is the group upon which the first colonizers to North America cast their eyes as they envisioned a new nation. The colonizers’ vision largely disregarded the diversity of the indigenous groups and reduced them to savages to be civilized or conquered. This initial contact has relegated Native Americans persistently to an Othered position; their history and livelihood have been used as a backdrop for white American expansion and exceptionalism. This backdrop was prominent in the discourse surrounding the Vietnam War and includes a view of Native Americans that, as Barsh indicates, “collapsed Indian realities into the stereotypes embraced by non-Indian Americans: cruel warriors, lazy drunkards, desirable but doomed princesses, spacey mystical masters” (404, emphasis added). Likewise, Louis Owen suggests that the notion of the “American Indian in the world consciousness is a treasured invention, a gothic artifact evoked like the ‘powwows’ in Hawthorne’s ‘Young Goodman Brown’ out of the

41 Unlike the other minoritized communities under discussion in this dissertation, the Native Americans were not immigrants to the United States as were Latinos and Vietnamese. Nor were they forced into the United States like the African Americans.
dark reaches of the continent to replace the actual native, who, painfully problematic in real life, is supposed to have long since vanished” (4, emphasis added). Both Barsh and Owens highlight the way in which these negative stereotypes of Native Americans have been viewed positively by white Americans, likely because they keep intact hierarchical, race-based relationships and paint a romantic picture of America as a superior and successful nation.

The notion of an Indian warrior has been put to particular use during American times of war in public discourse, as well as in film, memoir, and fiction. The Vietnam War specifically was presented to the troops and to the American public within a framework that relegated Native Americans to the distant past as a symbol, rather than as a modern, living entity of the national community. Enemy territory was often referred to as “Indian Country” and the war was viewed as a mission to pacify a savage people; this linkage between the Vietnamese enemy and Native Americans reinforced a sense of a racially-based superiority while simultaneously claiming to fight for democracy. The notion that white America would dominate, despite the presence of Native Americans fighting as U.S. citizens in the so-called Indian Country, undermined the racial diversity of the troops and contributed to racial tension at home and abroad. Similarly, representations of the war that depict the racial diversity of the troops generally do so superficially. Richard Slotkin, for example, in his examination of the role race plays in war films, explores how the trope of a racially diverse roll call “expresses a myth of American nationality” involving “the idealized self-image of a multiethnic, multiracial democracy, hospitable to difference but united by a common sense of national belonging” (469). For Native Americans, this sense of belonging was undercut by the persistence of
situates, the regular references to soldiers as “Chief” or “Brave,” and the absence of a racial category on enlistment records. Moreover, this sense of belonging hinged on the Native American soldier participating in the destruction of land of a persecuted people. In other words, it required that the Native American participate in the same type of actions that historically led to the dissolution of his own cultural group and likely required suppressing the complexity of his identity in order to fit in with his peers. Many critics have noted the ways in which the Native American character in a war narrative (generally only a single, token representative) often “exists as a figure of speech rather than as a flesh-and-blood character” afforded the opportunity to reach an epiphany (Dunnaway 116). Instead, these characters are reduced to almost mythical warrior scouts who possess “the ability to detect the presence of an enemy from a bent blade of grass or to hide themselves in an open field” (Holm 88) and whose depth does not expand beyond their physical performance in the arena of war.

Unfortunately, these images of the Native American warrior do not appear only in fictional narratives. Tom Holm traces the history of Native Americans in U.S. military combat and concludes that “deeply ingrained white stereotypes of Indians incredibly gave Native Americans a degree of status within the military, but it also endangered their lives” (137), especially in Vietnam. This endangerment derived from the way in which

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42 Holm reports that military contracts and draft papers did not contain a racial category for Native Americans. Instead, recruiters habitually and simply assigned racial categories to individuals based on appearance.” In Holm’s study, he indicates that most Native Americans were listed as white, several simply as “other,” and few as either Latino or black (122).
43 Holm traces the induction and reception of Native Americans in the U.S. military services, highlighting the focus of assimilation in WWI, which would afford Native Americans the opportunity to “learn the values of American citizenship” (89), as well as the use of Native Americans as code talkers in both World Wars, specifically those who stood “shoulder-to-shoulder with the whites against Nazi oppression” (106). Native Americans were used both as cannon fodder and as propaganda to bolster the American war efforts; Native Americans made significant wartime sacrifices and were applauded as heroes. Postwar, however,
Native Americans were more likely to serve on the front lines, walk point, and be assigned to special reconnaissance missions. According to Holm, “American Indian Vietnam combat veterans, almost to a man, feel that they were given these kinds of duties more often than their non-Indian comrades and that most of the time these assignments were racially motivated” (138). In other words, the stereotypes of a fierce Indian warrior or stoic Indian brave influenced the extent to which Native Americans saw active, frontline combat, which is considered one of the highest contributing factors for postwar suffering because of the likelihood of witnessing firsthand the most violent aspects of war. Native American soldiers’ feelings of racial, ethnic, and/or cultural discrimination and alienation likely contributed to their experience of war trauma and their struggle to re-integrate postwar. As such, like Holm and others have articulated, Native American veterans often faced unique issues in healing the wounds of war, both physical and emotional, because of difficulty navigating the federal VA system as citizens of a sovereign nation. Additionally, traditional methods of coping with trauma often did not take into account the Native Americans’ unique beliefs. Native American ritual ceremonies often address these unique needs and highlight the role and responsibility of the larger community in helping an individual who suffers as the result of war trauma.

termination and relocation efforts dismantled tribal sovereignty, causing financial and educational problems that affected families, healthcare, and resulted in loss of tribal languages (110). Holm reports that the relocation efforts created a “situation that encouraged supratribal amalgamation” (109), with both positive and negative results in the American Indian Movement of the sixties and seventies. This period of economic, social, and educational turbulence provides the context for the Vietnam War generation of Native Americans and echoes throughout Holm’s history and Hogan’s novel.

44 Walking point means to walk ahead of the rest of the troop, often drawing fire from opposing forces. Native Americans were more likely to serve in the Marines or in areas of heavy combat. The U.S. Department of Veterans’ Affairs (VA) reports, as does Holm, that Native Americans were more likely than other ethnic groups to serve in this way and also received more medals for combat than other ethnic groups. See the VA’s “Psychological Trauma for American Indians Who Served in Vietnam.”
Studies completed by a working group within the Veterans Administration (VA) in the decades following the Vietnam War highlight important data and perceptions concerning Native Americans who served. Using these studies, Holm reports that, while Native Americans comprised only two percent of the troops, they comprised only one percent of the general population, which means that their representative numbers for combat were more than doubled in proportion to the general population (10-11). He explains that, while education and socioeconomic levels largely determined a soldier’s assignment in Vietnam, the VA working group’s reports and Holm’s additional research indicate that stereotypes also factored into the type of assignment one would receive during service. Holm suggests that “the answer to the question of why [Native Americans] saw a great deal of combat, were wounded in relatively large numbers, and were so decorated for courageous actions in the face of the enemy is far more complex than just a consequence of low education and economic levels” (20). To explore this complexity, Holm makes connections between the warrior tradition of many Native American groups, their service in the military during times of war throughout history, and broader social contexts including education and socioeconomics, as well as the way in which outside perspectives of native identity shaped military experience. He concludes that service in the military did offer opportunities for personal improvement but that the

45 In the early 1980s, after a congressional mandate to explore the effects and treatment of post traumatic stress disorder in Vietnam War veterans, the U.S. Department of Veterans’ Affairs, through the Readjustment Counseling Service, created working groups to contribute insight to outreach efforts for the reintegration of black, Asian American, and female soldiers. Soon thereafter, a Hispanic working group formed and eventually, the working group on American Indians. Thomas Holm served as a consultant for that group and reported that even into the late 1980s, Native Americans were the least understood ethnic group in the VA. See Holm, Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls or the multiple resources of The National Center for PTSD, a VA Center providing services, research, and education on posttraumatic stress disorder.

46 Using a combination of records, studies typically capture the number of Native Americans who served in Vietnam as 42,000.
notion of Native Americans as warriors factored into both the voluntary enlistment and recruitment of Native Americans during the war.

While the contemporary discourse surrounding the Vietnam War often marginalized or trivialized the participation of Native Americans, Linda Hogan’s novel makes visible the reality of Native American service in the war by creating tension around stereotypical images of Native Americans as instinctive warriors. *People of the Whale* depicts Thomas as a character with depth and complexity; Thomas’s struggle to retain the values of his A’atsika people during war complicates these stereotypes and presents a multidimensional character. The novel demonstrates that the war disrupts Thomas’s sense of identity because it separates him from his community and makes visible to him how those outside of his Native American community perceive him as different and inferior. Thomas initially joins the military on a whim; he enlists with a group of friends during a night of drinking, telling his wife Ruth, “I’m not just an Indian. I’m an American, too” (30) and “we are warriors” (161). Thomas joins the military with both a sense of patriotism for the United States and a sense of his A’atsika identity, which includes a warrior tradition. Ruth, however, realizes that Thomas is a product of “how men were so influenced by their peers and governments” (30). This realization seems to point to the recruiting techniques described by Holm. However, Thomas is sent to Vietnam ahead of his peers despite the fact that the “army promised [them] the buddy system” (30). The native sense of togetherness does not work well with the military’s goal of breaking the soldiers’ ties with family and friends in order to establish their loyalty to the military and to the cause ahead of them during the war. Thomas soon recognizes this promise of the buddy system as the first of many lies and feels that “he
was owned” (30). As a result, Thomas’s sense of being “owned” challenges his sense of individual agency when he is placed in a military community that privileges a hierarchical unit mentality guided by the white male perspective.

Thomas finds the tension between his dual identities particularly difficult in Vietnam because of the violence and destruction he witnesses. Such devastation is contrary to his A’atsika beliefs, but he is often required to participate in the violence in order to save his own life. This feeling of being divided or split contributes significantly to Thomas’s endurance of typical war trauma. At first, Thomas follows orders, understanding that the military way of “name, rank, serial number” does not provide space for differentiating between the individual belief systems of the soldiers, yet Thomas is constantly singled out for his Native American identity (122). Thomas especially senses his racial and ethnic difference when he is with white soldiers, who have only a superficial understanding of Thomas’s Native American identity and simultaneously distrust and admire his ability to survive, which they link directly to his native identity. During a conversation about the lack of proper protective equipment, for example, one of the soldiers comments, “Bulletproof jackets. Like those shirts, what do you call them, Tommy? You know, you Indians wore them? They were bulletproof” (121). In this case, singling Thomas out as a representative of a group causes Thomas to tighten his jaw and deny knowledge of ghost shirts. Yet, Thomas also privately recalls how his grandmother “had been a ghost dancer before the massacres” and kept her ghost dance dress with “raven feathers off the arms like wings, and single eagle feather in the center” though she had known “that they weren’t invulnerable humans” (122). Thomas’s memory and his frustration call attention to the way in which native belief systems and
ways of life have been reduced to superficial, and often supernatural, myths. As Holm suggests, “whites have developed a mythology built around the idea that Indian adeptness in combat had an almost mystical character” and tend to believe that such “attributes are genetically acquired rather than learned” (88). While Thomas’s fellow soldiers come to believe that Thomas has special protective powers and take to following his instinct, they also suspect Thomas because of his difference. For example, when his fellow soldiers begin planting landmines in a civilian area, he refuses to dig. One of the soldiers tells him that “there ain’t no such thing as a civilian […] Everyone here is a VC or pig or enemy of some kind. Remember this. There’s no room for peace on any inch of this goddamned land if you want to stay alive” (114). Thomas is threatened for articulating such objections; he notices how the other men “eyed [him] with suspicion for his concerns and he knew they would kill him if he didn’t keep silent” (Hogan 114).

In addition to his value system, Thomas’s physical appearance also causes the other men to be suspicious of him. He recalls that when he “protested about a girl,” he “saw an M16 turn slowly toward him, point at him, and he knew that they would kill him” (249). Thomas feels just as threatened as the enemy soldiers he has been trained to kill, and his fears are warranted by the words and actions of his peers. Murph tells Thomas, “You even look like one of them,” referring to Thomas’s physical resemblance to the villagers in the hamlet. When the others laugh in response, Thomas understands “they were no longer together, not a unit. He, with his black hair, dark skin. He was a man who couldn’t lose his whole history of knowing that life was precious, sacred, irretrievable. […] It was in his blood. From his grandmother and mother all the way back in time” (249). Recognizing his difference alienates Thomas from the unit and intensifies
his need to survive in any way that he can. Thomas’s ability to stay alive depends less on uniting with his military band of brothers and more on his ability to protect himself from both the violence of the war and the cultural ignorance of his fellow soldiers.

Although it may appear at times that Thomas subscribes to stereotypes perpetuated by other narratives’ depiction of the Native American soldier, a careful examination of Thomas’s development in Vietnam reveals that his adeptness as a soldier does not result from essential traits. Rather, Thomas draws upon an upbringing that privileges knowledge and understanding beyond the human world: he “thought like a lynx” and because he was a lynx and a snake, the other men began to tease him and call him a ‘brave’ [...]. Now he tried to sleep in trees and pretty soon they thought maybe it was smart, not carrying all that shit. But he also knew when to dig in. Maybe they joked but they knew in truth he could feel what was there. He could feel what was around and so everyone followed him and if he stopped, they took cover. (172)

The narrative’s description seems to reinforce the essentialist notion that warriors are born rather than made, especially when such descriptions as those above are taken out of the narrative’s larger context. Examining this larger context, however, reveals that what Thomas possesses is not a genetic quality but rather a belief system that focuses on a deep respect for all living things and does not prioritize human knowledge or technology. His ability to sense danger around him comes from his willingness to observe how the world around him functions. His peers, however, follow orders blindly without taking notice of the extraordinary circumstances and environment around them. Thomas notices,
for example, that the Vietnamese soldiers “didn’t need gear, they didn’t need anything but what they could glean from the dead and fallen, the trees, the strips of bamboo, even a tossed away can.” Thomas reflects on the Vietnamese peoples’ success against other invaders, noting that winning wars had come with “knowledge of their own land.” Thomas begins to leave behind bits and pieces of his gear, carrying only what he needs to survive. Doing so allows him to move quickly and “to be light in order to survive” by developing a minimalist attitude that goes against the more typical American perspective that more is better (171). In other words, he does not rely on a false sense of protection offered by the U.S. military’s bigger and more powerful weaponry. Thomas absorbs, rather than resisting or attempting to conquer, the environment around him and approaches it with an open mind and heart; consequently, Thomas finds himself physically surviving in war with an ease not found by his fellow soldiers.

Despite the stereotyping or suspicions that Thomas encounters, however, he knows that his survival is not the result of supernatural powers. Just as his grandmother explained when she showed him her ghostdance dress, Thomas knows he is not a god but a vulnerable human being. He recognizes the ever present danger and often fears for his life. He describes how “the enemy always watched. They were there when his men walked by. He saw a face appear now and then from the leaves, then disappear. It was eerie. It was crazy as hell, he thought. Really, it was hell” (172). Despite feeling that war is hell, Thomas notices what his peers do not and with a tenderness that seems unlikely in

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47 Throughout the novel, details such as these illuminate the similarities between Thomas and the Vietnamese people he encounters. While the other novels under discussion in this dissertation depict connections between U.S. soldiers of color and the Vietnamese, Hogan’s depiction of the Native American soldiers highlights not only similarities of race but also parallels the two groups’ relationship to the natural world. Thomas belongs to the titular “people of the whale,” suggesting that this relationship to the environment is as important as human relationships, if not more so.
a war zone dominated by masculine adrenaline. As a case in point, “going through the still remaining jungle without his things,” Thomas arrives at “a tree with glasses, cups of china on its branches. Someone lived there, but where would they get the cups and blue bottles? They even had a teapot” (171). Thomas is “touched” by the scene, which makes his “heart hurt” (171). The moment clearly points to a sense of normality in the hellish atmosphere of war and directly contrasts with the search and destroy mentality of Thomas’s military adversary, a white man named Murph who seems to Thomas to be “turned inside out” with feelings only of “adrenaline, hate, fear, and insane laughter” (120). Unlike Murph, Thomas “protested the destruction” of the “termite mounds which he thought most beautiful, like the land itself, and the termites would immediately begin to save the young and rebuild” (167). Throughout the novel, episodes like these show Thomas grieving the destruction of the land, wildlife, and people in order to reveal a tenderness and connectedness that undermines stereotypes of a stoic warrior who has a fighting spirit. People of the Whale depicts a man who struggles with his sense of self and how to reconcile the A’atsika way of peace with his presence in a very violent war.

At the same time, Thomas experiences very real emotions of anger. He rejects the search-and-destroy mentality of Murphy but is not an absolute pacifist. He sees the necessity of using violence to aid those who suffer from greater violence. In a moment of reflection, Thomas rejects the notion of using suicide to escape the horrors of war in favor of “wait[ing] and tak[ing] someone with him[.] Maybe someone evil or trying to kill a child or a friend” (170). Such a mentality directs readers’ attention to Thomas’s values and his desire to protect the innocent. The novel poses difficult questions about whether violence is ever warranted using Thomas’s character, working against one
dimensional views of the Native American character often lurking in the backdrop of other Vietnam War representations.\textsuperscript{48} \textit{People of the Whale} foregrounds a multidimensional character torn by his desire to stay alive and to do right by the beliefs of the A’atsika people.

Thomas’s thinking about his ability to perpetrate violence on behalf of innocent people also foreshadows the traumatic event that surfaces in his memories as the novel progresses. Although fragments of Thomas’s memories are scattered throughout the novel, his secret is not fully disclosed until the third and final section of the novel. Until this disclosure, readers know only that Thomas feels that he is “a lie. His cells were lies and his being was made up of lies” (45). The narrative often describes Thomas as having multiple lives, which at times seem to him compartmentalized, organized in terms of before and after the incident in Vietnam. The novel provides fragments of Thomas’s experience in Vietnam through his own flashbacks and also through visions Ruth has of Thomas. As the memories emerge in the context of Thomas’s present encounters and re-encounters with the A’atsika community and environment, they increasingly make more sense—for readers and for Thomas. In other words, Thomas is able to make sense of his experiences when he faces them in the presence of others, who help him to transform the meaning he assigns to his experiences and provide Thomas with the courage to face his past and look forward to a less embattled future.

Nearly all of Thomas’s flashbacks of Vietnam depict him as a witness to violence perpetrated by others; however, the moment that catalyzes Thomas’s tremendous guilt

\textsuperscript{48} Take, as one example, the character Kiowa in Tim O’Brien’s \textit{The Things They Carried}; he is a moccasin-wearing soldier who is named for an entire Native American group and seems to serve more as symbol than fleshed-out character.
involves his own actions. When the troop is sent into an unknown area, Thomas once
again senses that they have entered civilian territory but he has been given orders for
“what was supposed to be a short-stand recon mission. They were sent there suddenly
and never told why.” Despite protesting to the helicopter pilot that the area contains only
rice paddies and nowhere “for men to hide,” Thomas is sent down with the others,
including Murphy, who responds to Thomas’s protests by saying, “It doesn’t matter. I
don’t discriminate. I’m going to take out every living thing wherever we are. This is
search-and-destroy. They told me” (176). In a situation that sounds much like the My Lai
Massacre, Thomas watches as the American soldiers become “the deciding gods over all
the innocent people, the mothers covering their children, the crying, the ones staring
down, waiting for what comes next. His men were the ones who decided life or death”
(177). Often, events such as this one described in other representations of the war are
followed by confessions of guilt for either participating in war crimes or standing by as
other men torture, rape, and kill innocent women and children. Guilt tends to result in
emotional paralysis or a disconnect with reality that leads to more violence, perpetrated
on others or on himself. Although such guilt generally appears genuine, it is often
couched in a sense of victimization caused by the nature of war, and what is often
described as the chaos particularly unique to the Vietnam War. Even crazed characters
who appear caught up in the adrenaline and confusion of the moment are often excused
of their behaviors because of the wide use of drugs or the extraordinary circumstances of
war.49

49 So-called “berserker” soldiers can be found in representations of the Vietnam War, such as in Herr’s
Dispatches or Stone’s Platoon, and are generally depicted in trance-like states of extreme violence. I do not
belittle the very real suffering that many soldiers faced during and after the Vietnam War (or any other war,
Thomas’s guilt comes from a different place and moves in a different direction than these other portrayals because he does not stand helplessly by as innocent people die; instead, Thomas intervenes in the violence perpetrated by American soldiers. When Murphy goes after a young girl and the others begin to set the people’s homes on fire, Thomas fires his gun at Murphy and the soldiers, pushing only one American soldier to safety.\(^5^0\) The narrative describes this event as happening quickly and even Thomas is surprised by his own actions: he “didn’t think he could do something that fast, that unable to be changed, restored. […] Everything there always happened too quick or too slow. There was no normal time in war” (177). Aside from the soldier Thomas saves, the others die by Thomas’s weapon or by the fires the men have set. When backup troops come in, they find only bodies and parts of bodies, Thomas’s dog tags, and “a deserted, burned village” (178). Readers can piece this flashback together with others before it to determine that the villagers escape, as does Thomas, whom they nurse back to health because he is also injured in the event. Thomas’s initial experience of the disorientation of war and the sense of warped time soon dissipates when he faces what he has done.

Thomas does not consider himself a hero for saving innocent Vietnamese lives; instead, he calls himself “Monster” and despises the violence he perpetrated (175, 178). This sense of self-hatred contrasts significantly with the attitudes of other soldiers and for that matter). The arena of war is disorienting, and often leads people to act out of accordance with their normal behaviors. Certainly, altered states of mind—whether from use of narcotics or exposure to extreme circumstances—were a reality in Vietnam that lead to undesirable consequences. My focus here is on the representation of crazed soldiers and the lack of culpability expressed in many of these representations. As will be discussed later, confessions of guilt that are followed by positive actions do more to restore individual and collective peace than passive acceptance of excusatory conditions.

\(^5^0\) Thomas saves a young white soldier named Mike, who surfaces in Thomas’s memories as an innocent young boy who should have never been sent to war. Thomas’s concern for Mike stands in contrast with his responses to Murphy. While a minor detail, its inclusion signals to some extent that Thomas does not simply choose to protect those who are like him. In other words, Thomas’s conflicts are often influenced by race/ethnicity but this is not the primary factor guiding his decisions.
foreshadows the action that Thomas takes to restore peace once he eventually returns to Dark River years after the war. Although he does seem stuck in his self-hatred, Thomas’s refusal to be found and to return immediately to an American way of life strays from the typical version of escape through a passive acceptance of the circumstances of a chaotic war. It instead depicts a man who removes himself from an environment that he views as toxic and goes where he can effect change: to a community-centered environment where connections between human beings are valued and nurtured.

Thomas’s atypical response seems to derive from his ability to see the similarity between himself and the Vietnamese people. At the same time, Thomas is aware that he committed a crime, against the U.S. military and a broader humanity, and his awareness complicates his sense of responsibility. In other words, the novel does not simply suggest that Thomas acts in a racially-focused solidarity or that he completely dismisses his American national identity. Rather, Thomas’s allegiances are grounded in a broader human community that is often disrupted by conflicts based in constructions of national, racial, and ethnic difference. Thomas becomes increasingly concerned with the restoration of peaceful community. His inability to perceive significant differences between his people and those he has been taught to consider enemies and to destroy contributes both to his sense of guilt and dishonor to a larger community and to his eventual ability to turn these negative feelings into more productive ones. Specifically, Thomas’s ability to move from a place of guilt to a sense of responsibility originates in the relationships that he develops with the Vietnamese people. His time with them is worthy of examination because it highlights a sense of community that is based less on expected roles and more on the relationships that one is able to develop. While the
narrative at times describes Thomas as a prisoner of war, mostly he seems to accept remaining in Vietnam, if not choosing to stay of his own volition, and he plays an integral role in helping the villagers meet their basic needs. This ambiguity surrounding Thomas’s situation serves to disrupt the readers’ expectations of the events that cause Thomas’s suffering and more effectively challenges the status quo by disrupting a clear sense of us and them.

The novel complicates the seemingly arbitrary divide between self and other by revealing it as a false distinction often based—especially in the predominantly white United States—in visual, race-based cues. This racial (non)distinction allows Thomas to remain in Vietnam undetected even by American troops after the villagers he saves nurse him back to health. Thomas lives in the village and falls in love with Ma, one of the village women; they have a daughter named Lin. Until he is discovered years later and returned to the United States, Thomas lives with these villagers (whom many others would consider enemies), farming rice and fishing. He “becomes” one of “them,” blending in because of his dark skin and hair, and lives “day by day, one after the other, aware that he was missing” (169), yet he feels at peace because he “was again part of a people” even if “their little village was a makeshift place, put together with debris from the war-broken world” (167). Thomas’s immersion in the Vietnamese community becomes so deep that his notions of home are significantly altered. Thomas is able to live and survive in war-torn Vietnam because of his love for Ma, Lin, and the Vietnamese community, who believe that Thomas is “a beloved man, a man of great beauty and spirit” (186). Thomas senses a connection with these “people of the earth,” who, like him, survived as “a tribe, or what remained of one” (167). Thomas eventually leaves
Vietnam, not of his own free will, but because he “had too much grief to think of hiding” after Ma is killed by a land mine while chasing Lin” (183). American helicopters circle above Ma’s funeral and the military eventually finds Thomas and brings him back to the United States. Later in the novel, Lin remembers that when the Americans came to take Thomas, he protested, tried to fight them off, and walked away. The departure is stalled for the funeral rituals, but eventually Thomas is taken away in handcuffs. He leaves Vietnam weeping because “down there was what he loved. His other world seemed dimensions away” (185).

Despite the love he feels for Lin and Ma, Thomas also regrets the pain he has caused Ruth and their son. While the novel provides mitigating circumstances for this betrayal (Thomas was led to believe, among other things, that Ruth had been unfaithful to him with his father and that Marco was not his), it never excuses his behavior completely. In this way, the novel depicts the fine balance between facing extraordinary circumstances and one’s own culpability in them. Although the guilt that Thomas’s faces calls attention to this personal responsibility, it also initially causes Thomas to remain insular and somewhat passive. His sense of being “taken away” and “owned” highlights this seeming lack of agency. Thomas views himself as a “body of lies” and fears that if he returns to Dark River, to Ruth and to the A’atsika people on the ocean, he would “have been surrounded by human faces that believed the lies about him and he would have to act as if they were true” (45). Thomas is unable to bear having the whaling

51 That Thomas is handcuffed signals that he is considered a threat to US troops, rather than a victim of the war or the soldier Missing in Action, as the letter Ruth receives after the shooting incident indicates earlier in the novel. Thomas fears that the truth of his actions has been discovered, and this fear seems to provide one reason for his leaving his daughter behind. Symbolically, the handcuffs reveal that Thomas lives more freely hiding among the Vietnamese than he does within the bounds of the United States military.
people believe he is a hero and he finds himself unworthy of belonging to a people who “had purity and purpose. […] They were honest, even in their treaties, which in truth they called entreaties” (45). Thomas, on the other hand, sees himself as a dishonest because of his actions in Vietnam and his betrayal of Ruth and Marco. Rather than return to Dark River, Thomas travels to San Francisco feeling as though he had been “taken away” from both of his lives and as if these lives would never cross one another (46). Thomas’s sense of being “taken away” makes him unable to act against forces larger than him. His focus on his own guilt, however, blinds him to what exactly he has been taken away from: his community.

Thomas’s sense of belonging is often tied to place or to people within a particular location, as is his ability to cope with the trauma he endures. Although he often feels as if he has been taken away from each of his lives in a manner that makes those lives feel separate, the narrative textually highlights connections between people and places otherwise at odds. In particular, the narrative parallels Thomas’s war memories with his return to the ocean in Dark River, explaining that when “Thomas hears the Ocean, he remembers the river” in Vietnam (164). Much like his A’atsika community in the United States depends on the ocean for cultural and economic survival, the Vietnamese community in which he lives for a time depends upon the river for both travel and for the water it feeds to the rice paddies. In one of his flashbacks to the war, Thomas reflects on the physical space around him and its connections to the native people. He looks at a map of Vietnam, “trying to figure out where he was. He’d studied the legend. Legend. It was a good word for kilometers and miles, things covering space. As if the world was merely a story, and it was, one story laid down over another. As it was in his older country, too”
Thomas’s attention to maps throughout the novel emphasizes the territorial boundaries that war disrupts by rearranging borders and relocating the people who live between them. In this particular scene, Thomas’s attempts to figure out where he is serve both literal and figurative purposes: his ability to read a map leads him to understand that the area his troop is attacking is not a war zone but rather a civilian village. This recognition and his inability to change the situation lead him to question not only the war but the supposed difference between his native people and the Vietnamese, whose land is being stripped from them. This question brings him closer to the interconnectedness upon which the A’atsika cultural survival hinges. Like translating the legend on a map, story reveals connections between seemingly distant people and places. At the same time, however, war often causes stories to get lost or revised along with the territorial boundaries. By creating parallels between Thomas’s Native American identity and the Vietnamese people, whose stories are often forgotten, the novel revives these stories and imbues them with the power to connect past and present.

Thomas leaves Vietnam physically but he remains, mentally and emotionally, “still in battle” unable to synthesize experiences he views as distinct. Thomas is embattled by the guilt he feels for his service in Vietnam, as well as the guilt of leaving behind Ruth and their son and continuing to abandon them by not returning to Dark River. Thomas’s inability to articulate his Vietnam experience likely contributes to the disconnect that Thomas feels between his lives and his isolation upon his return to the United States. Moreover, he does not feel worthy of an audience to hear his story or

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52 Thomas’s flashback of the maps is prompted by his communion with the ocean and the life source provided by bodies of water. Pairing this with Thomas’s reflection on maps, the narrative juxtaposes the flexibility and fluidity of water with the seeming rigidity of national boundaries. Thomas’s focus on the map’s legend emphasizes, however, the constructed nature of these boundaries.
deserving of the community’s help in healing his emotional wounds. Although her study focuses on the traditions and worldviews of a particular community of Northern Plains Indians, Theresa O’Nell’s work is useful in understanding the role that community plays in Thomas’s eventual transformation from, as the narrative often describes it, a world of fog to a place of clarity where he is able to take action and move toward the creation of a more peaceful community for himself and others. O’Nell describes the effects of war trauma on the Native American veterans she interviewed in much the same way that the novel describes Thomas as “still in battle.” As O’Nell explains, “Friends and relatives of Vietnam veterans say that they can recognize veterans by the ‘lost and faraway look’ in their eyes, and that those veterans are still in Vietnam, trying to finish the war. In local terms, many veterans have not yet come home” (446). According to O’Nell, “there is a widespread conviction that what is needed for veterans to ‘come home’ is for them to be able to ‘forget’ the war; and the way that veterans are to ‘forget’ the war, somewhat paradoxically, is to ‘talk about it’” (446). More specifically, O’Nell’s study focuses on the way in which “waktoglaka—telling war stories in ceremonial and intergenerational contexts—is serious talk, spoken in the voice of mature men” and has the “capacity to help Vietnam combat veterans to ‘forget Vietnam’ and ‘come home’” (455). O’Nell argues that waktoglaka provides the foundation for psychological and emotional healing following traumatic experience of war because the process does not involve complete erasure of memories. Rather, waktoglaka shifts the meaning of memories by “transforming war experience from an experience that is limited in its significance to a given time and place to an experience that encompasses what it means to be a ‘real’
Indian and what it means to be a ‘real’ man” (456). In order for Thomas to transform the way he thinks about his war experience, then, he needs both the proper audience and the individual strength to give voice to even the most painful of his memories. These memories, though specific to particular events, harbor a broader sense of disillusionment regarding Thomas’s ability to help others. Thomas goes into the war “thinking, I am going to help our country, my people, their country, their people” but comes out of the war feeling as though all he did was cause pain and suffering for both the A’atsika and Vietnamese people (Hogan 136). Thomas’s sense of failure is grounded in A’atsika beliefs that all things are connected; he fears his community’s reactions to his Vietnam experience and this fear inhibits his ability to seek their assistance in healing by sharing his stories with them.

Thomas struggles to believe that his homecoming would not only initiate a personal transformation but would contribute to the A’atsika community’s ability to return to its traditional ways. As Holm notes, “the healing of war trauma seems to be as much a social and cultural process as it is individual and psychological” (190) and ceremonies serve to restore bonds within the community at large, not just for the individuals within in. Hogan’s People of the Whale does not depict ceremonies specific to healing war trauma; however, the novel’s focus on the A’atsika whaling rituals bear resemblance to the “rituals of renewal and restoration” possessed by “nearly every Indian

53 O’Nell’s references to authenticity are grounded in her observations and interviews with the Northern Plains Indians in her study. While the quotation marks around the word “real” attempt to reveal the problems with notions of authenticity, the novel also gestures in this direction as well. It draws attention to questions of masculinity in the portrayal of Thomas’s need to make himself vulnerable to his emotions and it notes distinctions between mixed blood and full blood A’atsika characters, as well as those who truly live and believe in their culture and those whose superficial beliefs are used for individual benefit. Thomas’s guilt stems from the belief that he has not lived up to the A’atsik way of life and is not worthy of return. When he does return to Dark River, it is in part to try to “prove himself.”
society in America” (Holm 190). These ceremonies “reaffirm group cohesion, reassert the individual participant’s value in the community, and attest to the tribal obligation to the Creator” (Holm 191). After thirteen years of hiding in San Francisco upon his return to the United States from Vietnam, Thomas sees news coverage reporting the A’atsika community’s desire to return to tradition by hunting a whale. Upon learning about the whale hunt, Thomas “was suddenly full of need and pride. […] By morning he had convinced himself that, being the grandson of Witka, it was his duty to go home. By tradition he had to hunt. He had to be one who returned. […] He was busy thinking, I am the grandson of the greatest whaler” (Hogan 70). Thomas’s pride develops out of a sense of belonging and a sense of duty to his ancestors and the A’atsika community; however, his desire to be “one who returned” also stems from an individual need to relieve his Vietnam guilt. He thinks, “It was time to go home, as if killing the whale, as if being like Witka, would excuse his lies and actions, as if he could, in one act, save himself from one history and return to another, slide into it with the ease he’d been lacking” (Hogan 70). Thomas finds that his return to Dark River is far from easy precisely because he cannot reconcile his multiple lives. His father senses that Thomas did not come home “for the love of humans, for a woman, a boy, or for him. He who had not been there for his loved ones was now here for the whale” (75). Although Thomas initially hopes to use the whale hunt as a way to move back in time and erase his immediate past, the novel reveals how the whaling rituals provide renewal and healing by drawing strength from the past in order to renew the future. For the A’atsika people, whaling is about far more than a single event; their stories paint a picture of a people who view the whale as an ancestor, and their respect for the whale and the ocean underpin the whaling culture and guide the
rituals that accompany the hunt. Among these rituals are songs, which articulate the relationship between humans and whales as mutual and bound by love:

Oh brother, sister whale, [...] If you come here to land we have beautiful leaves and trees. [...] We have babies to feed and we’ll let your eyes gaze upon them. We will let your soul become a child again. We will pray it back into a body. It will enter our bodies. You will be part human. We’ll be part whale. Within our bodies, you will dance in warm rooms, create light, make love. We will be strong in thought for you. (22-23)

The whale hunt is meant to be a community event that brings individuals together as one entity, but Thomas alienates himself from the community by physically secluding himself in his grandfather’s house on a cliff and distancing himself emotionally from those around him. Consequently, his homecoming does not enable him to “return to tradition and find himself” as he hoped (77).

The whale hunt that brings Thomas home to Dark River and his A’atsika community also serves to provide readers with a portrait of modern Native American culture. Specifically, it depicts a people who share a history on “a small reserve” where “nothing is given to straight lines” (26). The non-linear layout of the land mimics the A’atsika people’s approach to life, which is more circular and based less on a sense of chronological time and more on a spirit of continuity, or the presence of the past. Moreover, the people are deeply connected to one another, sharing not only the space of their community but also their histories and burdens: “the houses, sitting here and there, hold people who have grown together, all with the same histories like one tree with the same roots and fallen leaves” (26). Similarly, Thomas and Ruth were thought to be of the
same person, “sharing the same world, the same thoughts” (28). For the A’atsika people this sharing is more than simply having lived through the same events; rather, the connection runs deeper. The community perceives, for example, that Marco is not merely a likeness of his ancestors, but an “incarnation” of one (38), while Ruth has visions of Thomas’s life in Vietnam long after she has been told that he is dead: “Ruth’s spirit never remained in the hiding place of her body. It always traveled” (36). The portrait of the community and the sense of oneness exhibited by Ruth and Thomas’s relationship highlight an alternative way of experiencing the world that privileges a shared responsibility for maintaining the spiritual wellbeing of both the individuals and the collective group. Indeed, the wellness of the one depends on the wellness of the other. This sense of continuity is maintained through songs, stories, and ritual ceremonies that serve to connect the individual and the community to ancient traditions and a particular worldview that privileges peace and honor.

Thomas’s effort to return to this way of living through the whale hunt and thereby escape his Vietnam history is thwarted not only because of his inability to truly connect with the A’atsika community but also because Thomas fails to understand that the whale hunt has been initiated without consulting the elders of the community, who warn that “nothing good will come” of it (71). The men leading the whale hunt plan secretly to sell the meat to Japan under the guise of returning to their whaling culture, but the elders know that these men “haven’t praised the whales since they were children, if then. They haven’t cleansed themselves. Some of them have been to war and not yet purified themselves. […] They have not put themselves in the right mind” (71). The elders’ concerns are multiple but what is most significant here is the way in which the elders
articulate the respect between the whales and the people, manifested by rituals such as fasting and “scrubbing with cedar” (71). This respect is absent from the whale hunt and results in disaster, including the death of Thomas’s son Marco; it becomes “a spectacle” rather than “a holy thing” in much the same way that the war became a spectacle rather than an honor-bound effort to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people in the name of spreading democracy (87). The hunt causes further tension in the A’atsika community, in which “the men seemed to have lost their hearts and the women who still had them were against the hunters and the division was a desolate thing for a tribe, whose purpose was to be One” (89). Despite the growing conflict, however, Ruth and the elders continue to protest and pray that the whale hunt will not happen, hoping until the very end that an approaching storm will deter the men from killing a whale. Ruth, keen to the suffering of others, fears the pain of the whale as well as the suffering that has led the whale hunters to this perversion of the ritual whale hunt. Her perceptions point to the difficulty of cohesion and unity, particularly when the A’atsika sense of community has been undermined by larger social and political systems. Ruth reflects that

It was so difficult to go against your own people who had already been wounded and persecuted and to want to see them thrive, to really be, like they once were, and to see how compassion had been taken away from their lives by their experience in the new and other world as if they’d been transported away from themselves. Now they were merely trying to fill themselves up but not with the heart, not with the soul. They’d lost both of those things, some of them. (90)
Ruth, who has been fierce in going against the men who planned the hunt, demonstrates a profound depth of empathy toward the men, even toward Thomas who virtually ignores Ruth and Marco when he returns. Ruth’s reflection reframes Thomas’s sense of being “taken away” by allusively placing it in a larger historical context that gestures toward the colonization of Native American groups in the United States.

Likewise, the whale hunt and Thomas’s participation in it trigger many of Thomas’s memories of Vietnam, where the soldiers acted with utter disrespect for the dead and for the living, particularly when the whale is killed brutally and desecrated by the drunken men in a storm of chaos and confusion. Thomas recalls being “of two minds” during the whale hunt, as if outside of himself and unable to control the actions he did not want to be taking:

And then he, Thomas, shot [the whale] with them. […] Hell, he couldn’t remember now, except at the same time wondering, Why? Why am I doing this? He would later wonder, At which second could I have stopped myself? But then it was the familiar feel of the weapon, the sounds. […] It was the feel of it, of war. It was habit. Somewhere, in the old or new of his memory, he heard other shots. (93)

Thomas’s sense of being of two minds and the description above indicate that during the whale hunt Thomas experiences flashbacks of Vietnam that alter his ability to act with full control. Rather than solace, then, the whale hunt leaves Thomas confused, angry, and full of guilt for his participation. As the elders had predicted, nothing good comes of the whale hunt and a drought consumes Dark River, causing the ocean to recede drastically. The elders indicate that the ocean mourns because so much had been taken from it,
including Thomas’s son Marco. Thomas feels responsible for his son’s death, which he believes is “another reason to hate himself” considering that “it wasn’t pride so much as passivity” that lead him to stay away from Ruth and Marco after his return to the U.S. (98). Thomas blames himself for his son’s death, noting that “even the men he’d killed in the war had to kill, were in that other world, the one Marco now entered, and they were all carried in the same wave of his fault. It was a tsunami of memories that could not be held back, faces, ghosts, loves” (98-99). The whale hunt and Marco’s death prove to be a breaking point for Thomas, and, during the drought, without the sounds of the ocean water, “all he has to listen to are his thoughts” (136).

Facing his thoughts is difficult for Thomas, who makes a concerted effort to forget the past, most literally by building a fence that blocks the view of the ocean from his grandfather’s hillside home. He builds the fence and wonders, “is it a haven? No. Is it protection from the wind? No. He hates himself too much to seek protection. It is to keep dreams from crossing the ocean and coming to him. But nothing ever comes in from the water that isn’t polished away by the sea” (114). Thomas fears the dreams that haunt him because of the memories that they bring. His eventual willingness to face them signals the kind of transformation that O’Nell suggests occurs through the articulation and sharing of memories in the process of waktogla. Slowly, the meaning of Thomas’s Vietnam memories begins to shift and

instead of the fog of self-hatred, he also sees that he had compassion. He had been wrong, and he was not wrong. I killed, he thinks, but I saved. I ended up loving and then hating myself for it. It was a world of doubleness. There are no clear lines between evil and good. He is both.
And so he makes decisions. A sacrifice is in order and he knows it. Truth-telling is part of the price, if he can do it. (136-137)

The guilt Thomas feels for having taken part in the whale hunt and the subsequent drought initiates this “slow dawn of his knowing” (137). Confronted with his grief in silence, Thomas finally begins to give voice to his trauma: “he calls out in Witka’s home, all the names he can remember, the men he’d seen die, the woman he loved. He cries out for Song, the old man of the [Vietnamese] village, and for Lin, and he calls out for Ruth. Then for Marco. Saying his name over and over. He cries out for all that is no more, and it is so much” (136). Once he has spoken, or begun the process of waktoglaka as O’Nell describes it, Thomas is able to move forward and come home.

Thomas literally goes home to his grandfather’s house, but in the Native American sense he returns to his grandfather’s spirit. The whale hunt causes memories to surface and, perhaps more importantly, ignites his need “to speak them over and over again” until “he realizes that he is telling Witka,” whose spirit remains in the house Thomas now occupies. Witka, Thomas’s grandfather and the great A’atsika whaler, was a man of tradition and the kind of man Thomas admires and had hoped to emulate by participating in the whale hunt. Although Thomas omits some of the story initially, “Witka knows. And Thomas knows that Witka knows. To be a hero you always have to betray something or someone. Witka forgives him but Thomas doesn’t feel forgiven yet” (179). While giving voice to traumatic memories provides a crucial step in recognizing the emotions that accompany the trauma, taking responsibility and demonstrating one’s responsibility to and for others becomes equally as important and requires active movement. In other words, healing the self necessitates communing with others in a way
that establishes one’s identity within the group. O’Nell emphasizes that the articulation of memories in a positive manner and to a community prepared to handle the weight of those memories for the speaker, as occurs in waktoglaka, “constructs its speaker as one whose allegiance extends backward to honor the ways of the ancestors and forward to care for the upcoming generations” (456). Thomas’s readiness to face and articulate his memories positions him to make the sacrifice of “truth-telling” for his community. This sacrifice involves honoring the ways of his ancestors by putting himself in the “right mind” (Hogan 71) and focusing on the “continuation of the family and tribe” (O’Nell 456). The failure of the whale hunt and the ensuing drought prompt Thomas to move forward with a sacrifice to restore the rain for his community and their natural world. Having articulated his guilt, Thomas finds himself ready to take responsibility and begin his truth-telling journey, which involves going to Washington D.C. “to tell the truth to the army, and then to Saigon, now called Ho Chi Minh City, to see if he can find his daughter” (Hogan 151). In order to come home from the war, Thomas must once again leave his home in Dark River. This irony of leaving home to come home calls attention to the value of other spaces in creating or understanding one’s sense of self.

*People of the Whale* indicates that in order to come home to a life rooted in native tradition, Thomas needs to embrace the overlapping of multiple worlds and spaces beyond those that are crucial to the A’atsika community; these include Vietnam and the United States. Although Thomas does ultimately prioritize his A’atsika identity, the Vietnamese and American spaces that Thomas encounters prove crucial to his ability to come home and work toward achieving the A’atsika notion of peaceful co-existence. Rather than a complete rejection or assimilation of normative white American values, the
novel uses spaces of otherness to reveal the fluidity of time, space, and personal identity. As such, the text creates a more flexible notion of identity and community that values an interconnectedness that broadens the reach of the individual and his community given that the relationships thrive on mutual responsibility. Hogan’s novel thereby maps a different trajectory than other Native American-authored novels that depict soldiers struggling with their war time experiences and in need of healing that only cultural ceremonies and native spaces can provide. Indeed, the novel highlights how Thomas’s “worlds overlapped […] like transparent pages in a book” (166). Thomas begins to see how stories are not merely covered over, but also blend and overlap in places so that old stories emerge in the new and vice versa. To emphasize this overlapping of worlds, the novel uses Thomas’s visit to the Vietnam Memorial Wall to link textually and thematically Thomas’s different lives. The black stone of the memorial wall provides a textual link that connects the black stones accentuating the cliffs and oceans in Dark River, as well as the black shadows and blackened vegetation in Vietnam, thereby emphasizing the overlapping of Thomas’s worlds.

Although a national monument seems at odds with the kind of community the novel envisions, the Memorial Wall also holds a unique place in American commemorative history. As Kirk Savage notes in Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape, American response to monuments has transformed over the course of the nation’s history. Savage argues that a shift of perception about landscape from “public grounds” to “public space” initiated a transformation during which “physical space thus became psychological space, engaging its viewers in a new experience of historical complexity and trauma.”
Part of this shift occurred with Maya Lin’s design for the Wall, which cuts into the Earth—marring it, but also depending on it for support. Despite the seeming permanence that the Wall conveys, Lin has described the wall as “analogous to a book,” including how the “right-hand panels the pages are set ragged right and on the left they are set ragged left, creating a spine at the apex” (“Making the Memorial,” n.p.). Reading this book requires standing below grade, as the memorial cuts into the earth in such a way that it has been described inhabiting the space of the dead. Additionally, the small text type “creates a very intimate reading in a very public space, the difference in intimacy between reading a billboard and reading a book” (Lin, n.p.) The book-like design points to the significance of story in articulating a memory and engaging people in dynamic interactions with the past. The Wall’s carved names provide texture while the glossiness reflects the viewer; the Wall consequently becomes a constantly changing space despite its immovable size and stature. Lin hoped that the “names, seemingly infinite in number, [would] convey the sense of overwhelming numbers, while unifying these individuals into a whole” (Library of Congress, n.p.). This desire to make whole an event that fragmented individuals and fractured a nation is one common in America, and it is precisely this kind of peace that Hogan’s story seems to seek, even as it acknowledges the difficulties in doing so.

Thomas’s journey to the Wall brings a surge of some of his most difficult memories of his service in Vietnam, but the Wall, as a communal space, allows Thomas to spend a significant amount of time observing others in their commemoration of fallen soldiers. He reflects that the Wall “is a world, a time, a place” and especially notes the

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54 Also see Savage’s Monument Wars: Washington, D.C, the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape (especially chapters 2, 4 and 5).
tokens others have left to remember their loved ones—flowers, baseballs, donuts, a button, poems. While the typical purpose of walls is “to keep things separate,” for Thomas the fragments of his seemingly disparate experiences “come together” at the Vietnam Memorial Wall, where people congregate, some to cry, others to talk, and Thomas feels “the heat of the black stone as if it holds the fire of yesterday and not today […] in his body, remembering the heat of another country (243, 244). For Thomas, the space is one in which distinctions between past and present and between here and there begin to blur and he no longer sees his experiences so compartmentally. Moreover, Thomas is not alone in visiting the past: the items he notices at the Wall depict a coming together of a diverse group of people and memories that indicate a community of grieving and surviving. As Sturken explains, this leaving of items at the Wall indicates a “desire to transfer private memories into the collective experience” (“The Wall…” 135). This transmission of private to public motivated by the Wall resembles the role of the speech act that O’Nell describes as waktoglaka and the burden sharing that Holm indicates is unique to tribal communities and the healing of Native American veterans of war.

Although the Wall is often described as a place where people can let go of their suffering, for Thomas the Wall becomes a place to communicate with his suffering and begin to reconcile his guilt: “Here in this Washington is a wall of revelations” (243). The Wall becomes, in other words, a place where his multiple worlds begin to merge and take on

55 The Wall has a history and story of its own, which the novel gestures toward but cannot be given sufficient attention here. Of particular note, though, is that the more traditional monuments added to the site to quell some of the controversy of the Wall do not represent the Native American veteran. These additions include a women’s memorial, as well as the “Three Soldiers” memorial statue, the latter of which, while attempting to represent the racial diversity of the troops, is typically understood to represent a white, black, and Hispanic soldier. As Sturken has indicated, at least a dozen books have been written about the memorial itself. Sturken, in Tangled Memories, as well as her essay quoted here, provides interesting analyses of the Wall as its own narrative. Kirk Savage’s history of the Washington Mall also includes important discussion of the memorial wall.
new meaning. Perhaps the most important revelation for Thomas comes in locating the names of the members of his unit who died during the war. Initially, Thomas remains at a distance and observes how others “touch a name as if it is a human being and cry and walk away. Everyone touches The Wall” (246). He finds himself “touching the map of names, touching it as if to be certain it is real, they were real, as if to touch them” (248) and notes that “Touching it you feel you touch a human being. A name is more than just a name” (246). His own name, in particular, serves as metaphor for his journey. Thomas finds his own name, “listed as one of the dead. Then a cross with a circle at the edge of it, which means he was resurrected” (248). As Thomas finds himself, literally, reflected on the Wall, the narrative indicates the possibility of his rebirth.

Thomas’s thoughts while he is at the Wall move through space and time, returning him to Vietnam, as well as to a place even farther back into the past, and presenting him with a glimpse of the future:

Thomas would never find words for what he is feeling. Anger, fear, guilt. But he’d have to live with what he did and return home. For a passing moment he thought about his world, his real world. Stone. In the A’atsika stories there is an account where the stones speak and tell a lost boy the direction home. So it is with this one. It says name after name of boys and men of America, a generation broken, some now still lost, some who found their way home covered with a flag. He thinks of the song ‘Can’t Find my Way Home.’ For him, this stone is a direction home, speaking to him. The morning light on it is reflection on water. (245)
The passage provides a clear example of how Hogan textually links the various worlds that Thomas strives to reconcile and indicates his desire to come home. Symbols of Thomas’s native identity align with those of his American identity within stone, an image which repeats itself increasingly throughout the novel and specifically so in the form of black stone, like that from which the Memorial Wall has been created.\(^{56}\) The narrative uses the stone’s solidity to represent the endurance of time—the names carved on the stone are permanent and “it is a map, right, wrong, changed, earth opened to geographies of other kinds. Humans have carved on stone throughout all their brief existence. Here, instead of the names, should be handprints, spirals, buffalo, horses, or whales like the stones in sacred places” (252). On top of this stone, however, Thomas sees the reflection of water, which reminds him of the river in Vietnam and the ocean in Dark River, as well as the reason Thomas has made this trip to D.C.: to restore the rain to Dark River. The fluidity of water contrasts with the rigidity of the stone and gives the sense that even that which seems permanent can be changed. Despite Thomas’s sense that he “cannot find his way home,” he passes from present to past during his visit to the Wall and his subsequent actions ultimately become future-oriented. Even as he conflates the jungle of Vietnam with the swamp upon which Washington, D.C. is built, Thomas focuses on the “insects lighting up between the leaves of trees, as reminder of the light still remaining in the world” (252). Clearly, the light signifies hope for a less conflicted future.

\(^{56}\) It is also useful here to return to the intentions of Maya Lin. Lin’s Asian American identity caused controversy shortly after her design for the monument was selected, with some protesting that the selection should stand. While it is impossible to know whether Hogan intended to evoke Lin’s work so specifically, the thematic use of the Wall, and the connections that Thomas makes on his visit, are difficult to ignore. Lin points to her own notion of home, “As the child of immigrants you have that sense of, Where are you? Where’s home?” (PBS, art21, n.page). Lin’s Asian American identity caused controversy shortly after her design for the monument was selected, with some protesting that the selection should stand. While it is impossible to know whether Hogan intended to evoke Lin’s work so specifically, the thematic use of the Wall, and the connections that Thomas makes on his visit, are difficult to ignore.
At the Wall Thomas takes cues from the natural world that his darkness will fade, but he must face the truth he has come to tell in Washington. That truth, that he turned his gun on American soldiers to prevent them from attacking civilian women and children, is followed by an uglier one: that one of his fellow veterans is responsible for the death of his son. This recognition strengthens Thomas’s resolve to tell a different story than that told by his medals and military decorations. Thomas first confronts these truths in the motel where he and the other A’atsika veterans stay in D.C. The men gather at the motel after visiting the Wall and Thomas finds them “subdued, drinking beer from the cooler, turning on the TV, changing the channel, sitting around in T-shirts, making jokes as if they were uncomfortable with silence, with their memories” (252). The men do not notice the pain on Thomas’s face as they joke about their experience in Vietnam, recalling incidents like stealing “food from a truck going to a camp for villagers” before Dwight, one of the leaders in the botched whale hunt at Dark River and the man whom Ruth and others suspect is responsible for Marco’s death, changes the tone of the conversation by remembering a confrontation with a Vietnamese woman: “She looked just like my sister. How could I kill her? […] But I did it. More than once. But you know those gooks. Hey, I hear one came to see you, Thomas” (253). The woman Dwight refers to is Lin, Thomas’s daughter and the comment, along with the derogatory name calling, sets Thomas into a whirlwind of memories while the others leave to go swimming. The conversation is much like what O’Nell describes as iglata, storytelling that is merely “bragging, boasting, or joking in profane contexts” and generally does not occur in intergenerational contexts (454).
Thomas refuses to participate in the men’s iglata, but instead attempts to relieve some of his burden by offering them a confession of his own actions in Vietnam and placing their actions in a larger context:

I killed my own men. I looked at their faces, I looked at the children they were going to kill, the women they were going to hurt, and I shot the Americans, those men. They looked so white. It was like it was happening to us Indians. They were going to kill the children. One of them was going to rape a little girl. (255)

In this confrontation, Thomas explicitly draws a parallel between the violence perpetrated on Native Americans by white men and that perpetrated on the Vietnamese during the war, crying that “It was like us, our history, like one more group of murderers” (255). The narrative emphasizes the continuity and fluidity of time by drawing connections to Native American history and refusing to let either story remain silent. Where Dwight and the other men refer to the Vietnamese as the white men did, by using derogatory slurs, Thomas recognizes the parallel histories that both groups share as colonized peoples. Thomas’s ability to recognize these parallels empowers him to a greater world vision, one closer to that his ancestors held, but it also challenges his ability to cope with and heal from the trauma he endured during the war, especially because he has been disconnected from community for so long. Thomas’s peers, who have been drinking most of the evening, do not comprehend the immensity of Thomas’s confession and cannot share his burden. As O’Nell indicates, a cathartic effect depends on the audience. In this case, Thomas’s listeners “lack the cultural authority to legitimize the historical and social significance of the veteran’s actions” (O’Nell 458). As a result of not finding the right
audience in his first public articulation of his trauma, Thomas does not find solace in his confession. Instead, he finds that he has “broken the rules” of what the other men perceive as proper masculine conversation by revealing his emotions and crying (Hogan 255). Nevertheless, Thomas declares that he “will not be remembered as an American who killed children and women” and the narrative explains that “he comprehends the immensity of his decisions, the long line of American tragedies that had shaped him” (Hogan 257). Unlike Dwight, who insists that “no one gives a damn who killed what, who didn’t,” Thomas chooses to abide by the A’atsika way of life, which prioritizes a peaceful life (264). Thomas recalls “the creators of his own world, how unlike Americans they were. The A’atsika creators punished humans who weren’t peaceful. They sent them traveling, like Adam out of paradise, not for having knowledge but for having a lack of peace. They were sent from one world to another for being like the human he had become and he wondered what his next world would become” (261). Although Dwight and the other men eventually indicate that they also might have taken similar actions as Thomas did, they are all too willing to dismiss their behavior as simply being part of the war. Thomas, however, is intent on setting things right and making good on his sacrifice to the rain by continuing his truth-telling mission.

While the visit to the Memorial Wall helps Thomas to confront some of his memories and to articulate them to his peers, the sacrifice he offers in exchange for relief from the drought ultimately involves setting right the official record of his military service. His willingness to confront his own fears, as well as the potential consequences of his actions (whether he will be charged with murder and desertion, for example), solidify Thomas’s intentions as possessing a depth of meaning unparalleled by the more
superficial utterances of his peers during their drunken confrontation. The novel sharpens the contrast between Thomas’s and other men’s responses to the violence perpetrated in Vietnam through Thomas’s confession at the U.S. Pentagon. The narrative uses Thomas’s visit to the Pentagon to illuminate the ease with which killing, even in war, comes too naturally to most Americans, even members of Thomas’s Native American community. His primary goal in D.C. is to return the medals he received for his service in Vietnam and to admit his wrongdoings. Donning full military dress, Thomas travels to the Pentagon to right his wrong and admit that he is not a hero but a killer. But his request is met with confusion. Army officials seem either unable or unwilling to believe Thomas’s story, which differs from the one in his files: “When his records come up on their computer, a voice from out of the sky like god’s voice, says, ‘Hell, why do you want to turn them in?’” (264). The officials also remind Thomas that he has told the Army this information before, and that what he did was right by “military law. The simple rules of engagement” (264). He is encouraged to forget the past; the war is over. One of the men indicates that in “[his] book” Thomas did the “right thing” by attempting to stop his fellow soldiers from raping and killing innocent Vietnamese women and children (264). While Thomas fails in having his actions recorded, he still refuses to let the past rest. He vows to move into a deeper past in order to “make up for what he has done,” again insisting on a sense of responsibility rather than allowing the confusion of war to excuse his actions. Thomas understands that the A’atsika ancient ones, or spirits, want him to “open the pathway to the future” and they are “there to take his human hand, its lines, its dark skin with pale scars from a never-won war, not that winning would have ever made a difference. In their world, there is only the hand to take, the human hand, to slide
through time along its mysterious pathway sometimes called memory, sometimes called feeling” (268).

Although Thomas is not granted the catharsis he seeks with his peers, or with the United States Army, he is able to put together the pieces of his son’s death and begin the grieving process. Facing the man who killed his son, Thomas refuses to be silent; rather, he chooses to be like his son, who was “the one who said what was wrong” (252). Confronting his son’s killer, “He passes through a door, not the kind that opens and closes” (257). The threshold that Thomas crosses resembles the kind that O’Nell implies presents itself through waktoglaka and provides the impetus for Thomas to return to his community. When he returns to Dark River, Thomas prepares for the “spiritual requirements to make up for all he has done,” despite the “ache […] so great he would like to harm it by harming himself” (267). Having begun the process of unburdening himself of painful truths, Thomas recognizes that the spiritual requirements desired by “the ancient ones” is different: “they want him to open the pathway into the future, not to fast or starve or harm any part of himself but to be whole and nourished” (267). Thomas begins to see that

the horrors in his body will be there the rest of his life if he doesn’t heal them. Maybe even they might remain but he would see them differently […]. His humanity has been broken as an old walking stick that once held up a crippled man named Thomas. He realizes the stick and the man are one thing and he can fall. He has violated laws beneath the laws of men and countries, something deeper, the earth and sea, the explosion of trees.
He has to care again. He has to be water again, rock, earth with its new
spring wildflowers and its beautiful, complex mosses. (268)

In order to heal, Thomas needs “to care again” and he begins his transformation by
considering, as he did in Washington, D.C., what he wants as his legacy. Significantly,
the narrative depicts Thomas as pondering his future and making active choices; in other
words, Thomas’s ability to heal is not something that just happens and he reflects that he
must “think. How am I going to be remembered in the end?” (270). Such reflections drive
the novel’s insistence on taking personal responsibility but also on the interdependence of
the individual and the community, since the A’atsika’s continuity and survival very much
hinge on Thomas’s ability to heal. Moreover, Thomas indicates that he is “changing
history now” by choosing to be remembered as “the man who could kill but doesn’t” and
who has “good thoughts” (270). Although Thomas recognizes that he cannot change the
past, he does sense that his actions can have a positive impact in the future. This sense of
empowerment is important in the narrativization of the Vietnam War, which so often tells
a tale of victimization.

As do the other novels in this dissertation, People of the Whale incorporates
diverse voices and presents alternative ways of viewing the war and the people whose
lives continue to be altered by it. In addition to Thomas’s experience, the novel also tells
the story of Lin, Thomas’s daughter who remained in Vietnam when Thomas left. Lin’s
story interrupts Thomas’s in a multichapter segment midway through the novel. Lin’s
narrative immediately follows Thomas’s initial articulation of his memories to Witka’s
spirit and ends before his visit to the Wall. The placement of the narrative directs readers
to view Lin’s story as integral to Thomas’s and the segue between the two narrative
suggests that, despite the time and space between the father and daughter, they remain connected: “He is thinking about Lin when she is out there somewhere thinking about him” (180). Lin’s narrative begins in the novel’s present time with a recollection of her father that prioritizes her forgiveness of him: “as she thinks of him she remembers more than she has told anyone […]. She remembers that he did not want to leave. She knows that. She cannot blame him or be angry and so her feelings belong only to her” (181-182). Beginning Lin’s narrative with understanding Thomas for having left her in Vietnam and placing this narrative before Thomas develops the ability to forgive himself, the novel prompts the reader to empathize simultaneously with Thomas and Lin. Their reunion provides for each a key element of their ability to heal from the trauma they endure and thereby indicates the necessity of including a range of voices, even in the story of an individual.

Hogan’s inclusion of Lin’s narrative provides a perspective of the war’s aftermath outside of the United States that is not typically told, especially within American literature. Many representations depicting the child’s perspective of the war often redirect attention back to the United States in a way that shifts the focus back to an American lens. Various documentaries, for example, depict the hundreds of thousands of children removed from Vietnam through the humanitarian effort known as Operation Babylift. Hogan’s novel explores the aftermath of the war for a child who remains in Vietnam as a “child of the dust,” born to a Vietnamese woman and U.S. soldier. These children, dubbed throughout history, literature, and other postwar representations as the “forgotten children” or “children of the dust,” were often unwanted, both in the United States and in Vietnam, and they often lived as orphans on the streets of Vietnam. The novel presents
Lin as one of these children not rescued by U.S. humanitarian aid and she struggles to survive in Vietnam after all of her family dies in the war or at the hands of the new regime following the war. Lin’s coming of age story broadens readers’ understanding of the scope of the damage and suffering, but hers is also a tale of survival that works to present the Vietnamese people in all of their complexity. Additionally, while many representations of the war often depict Vietnamese who are saved and/or need saving, they generally do not look beyond the encounter to what happens after the individual is saved. By including Lin’s narrative, Hogan’s novel gives voice to the villagers that Thomas saves rather than merely presenting him as the American hero whose narrative dominates that of others.

Lin and her family are forced to flee their village after Thomas is taken away, but Lin is separated from her family and other caretakers in a “bomb attack by the new soldier boys” and “everyone scattered. […] All around the girl, people screamed and bled in a furry of movement and sounds. There was confusion and running. She was certain her heart had been hit because it hurt so bad and she cried” (188). Lin is helped by a young boy who is considered the enemy before she makes her way to Saigon on a truck, hiding under what are presumably dead bodies. In Saigon Lin becomes “a child alone in

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57 The novel seems to use “new regime” to refer to Communist-led reunification of North and South Vietnam, which prohibited schooling and “reeducation” efforts. The lack of clarity flaws the novel reveals the gaps in Western representation and understanding of the war. Additionally, Lin’s ethnic background remains unclear, even to her, and the novel often leaves ambiguous whether Lin is Vietnamese, Montagnard, or some other Vietnamese ethnic group, or even Cambodian. Lin remembers the confusion that resulted when she and her family tried to leave their village because “no one knew if they were ‘Yards’ who assisted the Americans, communists, or ordinary villagers and whichever, they were threatening to any of the groups, as if there had been no such thing any longer as a simple human being, a villager. The child she had been was an enemy to someone. Everyone was a kind of enemy or another” (196). Another character wonders if Lin “came from the Delta,” if “she escaped the Khmer,” or if she might be Cambodian because he “sees the face of Buddha” in Lin’s eyes (193-194). This ambiguity reinforces the novel’s focus on a common humanity, but it also calls attention to the complexities of Vietnamese culture and identity, which are often depicted as monolithic, much in the same way that the various groups are more generally called Native Americans or American Indians.
the city, one of many such children” who roam Saigon “like ghosts” (189). Like Thomas, Lin struggles with her memories but finds solace in a community in Saigon and later in her education. Paralleling the way in which Thomas feels he lives a “taken away” life, Lin describes hers as a “lost life.” Lin, however, fights not only to survive but also to understand the complex world around her by attending “secret classes” because there were no schools. She gravitates toward languages and algebra, “because she was always seeking the mystery of $x$. It was the important factor in her life where everything was missing, lost, and sought-after” (198). While Thomas avoids the fragments of his past, Lin works to put pieces back together and to make sense of disorder. In addition to searching for her father, Lin also helps the Vietnamese who have been separated from one another. She uses her language training to translate and “study the archives of the lost” to facilitate reunions of war torn families. Lin “expends energy finding documents, as if each one is personal to her, a search of her own, sometimes working late hours” because during shifts in political powers, “papers were gone through, torn, used against people. Some files were scattered and missing, some wet and difficult to read.” Lin “has compassion” and finds joy in “finding the children of the mother who was taken from beneath the tree where [Lin] once lived.” Moreover, she understands that “words have great power” and “looks for words to put together” a story with a happier ending than her own, which she rarely shares with others (213). Lin’s attention to language leads her to look up the meaning of the word war and discovers that “it meant confusion more than any other one verb and it was not the noun it was thought to be. It meant hostilities, armed battle. She never understood why humans did not live in peace, which seemed so easy compared to war” (198). Lin’s analysis of “war” as a verb rather than a noun
indicates that she perceives it as an action that people perform rather than a static entity or an inevitable state of being and thus implies that it can be stopped even if, as one of her favorite teachers believes, war is “a chain of skulls, a chain linked together with no clasp, and it is so strong it can’t be broken. Humans are poor, unforgiving animals” (199). Lin likens her ability to piece together fragments of history and to reunite families to “restringing beads of a broken necklace, not the necklace of war, of skulls, but of beauty, pearls. […] She continues stringing the necklace until it is complete, the clasp in place. It is made of pearls with a dragon claw to hold it. She closes it so it will not come undone” (215-216). Lin possesses a profound sense of compassion and responsibility for others, especially because of the suffering she endured. This, along with her ability to imagine a different view of the world, empowers Lin and those around her.

As a Vietnamese character in a narrative of the Vietnam War, Lin’s sense of agency and resiliency is significant, especially given that People of the Whale is a non-Asian American authored novel. In this body of literature, Lin is one of few complex characters given the opportunity to show depth and growth. Lin’s narrative is one of doing. She is not, in other words, a passive victim despite the suffering she endures; rather, she actively seeks to make her world a better place—even as a young child alone in a violent and complex world. After wandering the streets of Saigon, Lin finds herself a beggar in a city where the “people were too poor to give anything away” and where there were “too many beggars.” Consequently, she decides to stay on one street: “even hungry. She would make herself useful there. They would get to know her. She would make them want to keep her, to feed her, to give her small jobs. She used a broom that had been kept outside a shop that no longer existed” and begins sweeping, washing windows, and
picking up trash (190). Lin cleans this one street in “a town half bombed and filthy” until she is recognized and gains the attention of shopkeepers, who initially give her small meals and later welcome her to live and to work in their flower shop and care for her like their own daughter, who was killed during the war. Lin recognizes the fortune brought to her through the shopkeepers’ willingness to “adopt” her and, as she begins to establish herself, she maintains a sense of compassion for the shopkeepers and the other children who remain on the streets: she continues to clean the streets, even as a young woman, and watches her “world grow back and be rebuilt, hearing the sounds of it, a nail at a time, a stone” (199). Lin takes pride in the community around her but often feels guilty about her good fortune, which has come about in part because Lin has hidden the truth of her identity, knowing that, if people knew that she was the child of an American, “it would change their view of her” (195). She acknowledges the suffering that still exists, particularly for the other half-American children, who “had no place to stay, no food,” and she does what she can to assist them, giving them “coins and hard-boiled eggs” (195). Unlike Thomas, Lin’s guilt does not consume her; instead, she focuses on what she can do for herself and for others to maintain hope for a better world.

Lin’s ability to perceive the suffering of others, even those who cause her distress, serves as a model for how individuals within a community absorb the pain and suffering of others. Lin hears the stories of others during her work translating for people looking to find their loved ones, and her empathy derives from having “seen what they have seen, the wounds, parts of bodies, fires, the lost families and villages and crying children everywhere. She is one of them” (213). However, Lin’s ability to empathize also extends to those who might be considered others or even enemies. For example, throughout her
narrative, Lin recalls a red fish Thomas bought for her and which she tried desperately to keep alive during her escape from the village. The fish perishes when an enemy soldier, one of the boys with guns threw it out of her hands. The fish lay on the ground, twisting, flopping. She would always remember the eyes of the boy. They were filled with hatred of life as he stepped on it. And now she thought more, that maybe the boys and men had a fear of life, for to hold it dear and to lose it was a burden to carry, vulnerable as a fish in bottle and water, carried by the little girl in the middle of a war. (234)

Lin comes to understand how war had hardened even the young boy soldiers and forced them to suppress their vulnerability and to see others only as enemies rather than as human beings. She recognizes that “the child she had been was an enemy to someone. Everyone was one kind of enemy or another. Even a child, a little girl who carried a jar with a red goldfish in it” through the war (196). Lin’s sensitivity stands in sharp contrast to the boy’s aggression. The elders in her childhood village perceive that “Lin had been born as a different child” who “saw everything” and “learned quickly” because she had “watching eyes as a baby” (209). The people believe that, “if they were still tribal, she would have been set in a special place in the tribe and trained for a future” (209). Lin seems to take on this responsibility for herself and, as a young woman, realizes that “she has made for herself a fortunate life” (206).

Lin’s ability to see the power she possesses to effect change in herself and in her community helps her to see beyond the roles that people are expected to play out and to

58 The novel creates a parallel between Lin and her half-brother, Marco, Thomas’s son with Ruth. Marco, also considered a special child, goes to live with the elders of Dark River to be trained in A’atsika ways and to carry on these traditions into the future. Because both Lin and Marco possess these unique attributes, the novel emphasizes Thomas’s role as a special and empowered individual.
focus on the relationships that she establishes with and between others. This facet of Lin’s identity works in contrast to Thomas’s resistance to the relational component of his identity; where Thomas turns inward, Lin turns outward, finding comfort in those around her and in the comfort that she can bring to them. In keeping with the novel’s focus on community, Lin’s narrative depicts a wide array of characters who influence Lin’s ability to remain optimistic about her situation, but she also possesses the ability to soften those who have been hardened by the loss and trauma of war. In particular, Lin’s life with the florist and her husband proves to be mutually beneficial. The shopkeepers initially provide Lin with the bare necessities, but over time they become her new family. Although the florist first suspects that Lin is stealing from the shop, her husband eventually convinces her to allow Lin into their shop to stay. The florist’s reluctance gives way to a growing desire to care for the girl, offering her small tokens of appreciation for her hard work and increasingly providing her with more space to live in their shop alongside of them. When the woman witnesses Lin suffer from a nightmare, she comforts Lin and experiences a new affection for the girl that allows her to confront her own pain by offering solace to another:

She began to think, for the first time, of the girl’s history, and for the first time, that Lin was just a child, not a threat or a problem. She considered where she might have come from, what she might have seen. One part of her thought, well, hadn’t they all? But then, instead of thinking that the girl, like everyone else, was just another taker, a small contriving adult, the woman picked her up and held her against her heart, feeling a movement of her own grief, how small Lin was, a girl like her daughter
had once been. Now only a picture on her altar. The man watched, his own eyes with tears, thinking of the child they had lost when the communists stormed Saigon and everyone tried to escape. (193)

Following this episode the florist finds that her “compassion bloomed like her plants” and, though she frequently grows suspicious of Lin, she ultimately comes to depend on Lin for her work in the shop as well as for her companionship (194): “Lin offered the woman human comfort, the older woman who loved flowers and had spent years hating being alive, while Lin was surprised to have lived and had been thrilled when she remember the bursts of fire and the rockets like falling stars, thrilled she had survived them and proud of her abilities to live on streets” (204). Lin reassures her adopted mother that she will stay with her and care for her when she is old, knowing that “she had her losses, too, this mother did, too many to talk about” (200). Lin’s reassurance brings the old woman relief and their relationship parallels the burden-sharing in Native American ceremonial culture. What emerges out of their relationship is resilience in a place that has been destroyed by the forces of war. The florist’s husband, for example, “built things now. Especially he built birdhouses and he imagined them richly and elegantly. They were loved, pieced together by things he found thrown out on streets, pieces of cars, but somehow they always looked new and perfect” (204). Like the shopkeeper’s birdhouses, Lin’s life has been pieced together in a similar fashion—out of people and places lost, tossed away, and redefined. In one of the final exchanges the novel captures between Lin and her adopted mother, the florist “had [Lin’s] future read by the woman who burns leaves on stones” (205), highlighting the narrative’s focus on the future and the potential that Lin brings as result of the community she embraces.
Part of the fortune told by “the woman who burns leaves on stones” indicates that Lin will “go a long ways” and foreshadows Lin’s resolve to put together some of the fragments of her own life by finding her father. Lin travels to the United States after her wedding and immediately takes notice of the similarities between Vietnam and “her father’s world,” which is “not as green as home, but green” and where the “waves remind her of life and history, enormous and without end” (217, 216). Almost as if a continuation, or perhaps a renewal, of history, Lin stops to purchase a red goldfish just like the one Thomas gave her as a small child as “an offering to her father, to show him how much she remembers” (216). Placing the fish in its bowl, Lin sings an “old song” to it: “But it is more than just a song. It praises the golden scales and the red flowing tail, its beauty. ‘Oh, you swam the river of perfume, the river of my mother world in the current.’ […] The song praises the world it came from” (217). Lin’s singing for the fish echoes her father’s people’s whaling songs. Her respect for a store-bought goldfish stands in sharp contrast to the hunters who desecrated the whale in Dark River. Nonetheless, her praise for the fish illuminates the parallels that the narrative has drawn between the people of Vietnam and the A’atsika people of the United States. The narrative re-emphasizes these parallels when Lin asks for Thomas by name at one of the buildings at the boundary of the reservation. Lin does not realize that her father’s name was designated by the “namers of the Indians,” and that names like “Only” or “Little” were given as a way to demean the people […]. She thinks ‘Just’ means [Thomas] is the balance of scale of what is right, that America was built on fairness and justice. She doesn’t know it shares the same history as hers. The people in this place
were once massacred, infants bayoneted on these beaches and mounds. The land is full of the blood of their ancestors. She has read of this country, America, but she has read another history (218).

The novel calls attention to narratives that have been covered over, simply forgotten, or repurposed, as has happened with the history and image of the Native American soldier in representations of the Vietnam War.

These parallels create commonalities between the Vietnamese and the Native American peoples, but the novel does not purport that the suffering is the same or that one group suffered more than the other. Instead, the novel provides a point of access for expressions of empathy and indicates that human connection drives a sense of interconnectedness between diverse times, peoples, and places. Both Lin and Thomas’s wife Ruth possess this sense of empathy and so it is no surprise that, when Lin arrives in Dark River, Ruth comes immediately to care for her, telling Lin, “We’re related, you and I” (221). The narrative acknowledges that the relationship is complicated but notes that “It’s true, in some odd way they are [related], but she can’t say how. It confuses even her, but she wants Lin to stay with her. ‘Our family will help you. You can stay with us’” (221). Ruth’s concern for Lin and her attachment to Lin is somewhat atypical, given that Lin is the child born of Thomas’s relationship with another woman but, as previously alluded to, Ruth has always known of Lin through the visions that she had while Thomas was missing and still after he was pronounced dead: “She also saw her once, in a dream, on his lap. She has seen her running about the green fields as a child. She has seen her surrounded by flowers without knowing the meaning of it, but she can smell them now, as if Lin’s skin is made of flowers. She has known Lin a long time, in her dreams, even in
brief waking moments, but she doesn’t tell Lin that” (222). That Ruth has had visions of Lin surrounded by flowers makes clear that her dreams have continued into the present time and, therefore, that Ruth’s connection to Lin goes beyond a connection to knowing what has happened to Thomas. In other words, Ruth’s relationship and sense of kinship with Lin derives from a human connection that extends far beyond her own immediate community. Ruth’s visions encompass her spirit wandering and they, along with her own painful experiences, give her the capacity to empathize with those who might normally be considered others. Upon seeing Lin for the first time, Ruth notices on Lin “an expression that says sweetness but also says she has seen a world broken to pieces” (221). At the same time, however, Ruth recognizes that “No matter what Ruth’s life has been, she can’t imagine the life of this girl […]. She has traveled far” (221). Through Ruth’s realization that she cannot fully access Lin’s suffering, the novel indicates that provisions of human comfort can more significantly impact the transformation of memories and thus the ability to heal from traumatic experiences like war.

Unlike Lin, who expects to find the same man that had been taken away by American helicopters when she was just a small child, Ruth understands that Thomas has changed and that seeing his daughter again will likely bring back painful memories. Initially, Ruth wants to protect Thomas from the pain that will accompany seeing Lin again: “She tries to think of how to deal with Thomas and all of the pain that is about to hit him. Then she thinks, It is time. He has been protected too long” (223). Ruth understands that, for Thomas to move forward, he must face his memories and on the night before they go to Thomas, the natural world confirms Ruth’s choice and offers a sign of hope: “Above them a night bird flies, calling out names, talking to the ocean and
all the other currents moving with life: hope, need, desire, like being human” (223).

Initially, Thomas becomes paralyzed by Lin’s presence and utters hardly a word to her; he realizes that he is “locked in, a key turned somewhere in [his] heart” (233). When Lin returns to Witka’s house to see Thomas for a second time, his transformation is already underway and the shift is palpable, even in the quiet between Lin, Thomas, and Ruth. Although the three sit in silence, “it is like the old days when the traditional people came together. They would sit for days in silence and decisions would be made in that way, knowledge passed, relationships renewed. Now it is like that. In silence, much is said” (234-235). The narrative does not specify what exactly has been said, but when Lin reaches out to touch Thomas, “something has come to fullness” (235). The passing of knowledge is much like the transference of burden expressed by waktogla; following Thomas’s visit with Lin, he goes to Washington, D.C., where, as previously discussed, he begins the process of articulating his memories and, consequently, transforming their meaning. Moreover, when Lin returns to Vietnam and to her husband, she has a sense that Thomas will be coming to Vietnam, a trip which had been part of his sacrifice to bring the rain following the drought. Thomas never shared his plans with anyone, indicating that this knowledge may have been passed in silence just as the elders of the A’atsika community communicate without words. Finally, upon her return to Vietnam, Lin gives her husband a “carved wolf, yellow cedar. It is becoming the moon and the moon is becoming a whale.” Her husband describes the carving as “transformation” and tells Lin, “That is your father” (238). Lin’s husband senses the shift that is forthcoming, and the narrative’s attention to the carving, which was crafted by Thomas’s grandfather,
foreshadows Thomas’s return to the traditions of the whaling culture and to a community focused on restoring peace.

Structurally, the narrative places Thomas’s visit to the Vietnam War memorial wall after Lin’s narrative, both of which emphasize Thomas’s potential for transformation. Indeed, his visit with Lin, followed by his visit to the Wall, provides Thomas with a new perspective that leads him to restore his connections with his family and A’atsika community. The novel’s emphasis on humanity and Thomas’s eventual willingness not to let the past rest but rather to move forward from it toward a better, more peaceful future becomes clear through Thomas’s vow to renew himself and, consequently, to renew the spirit of his native community. The narrative posits Thomas’s transformation as a rebirth, generated by his return to the ocean, where he practices holding his breath in the depths of the water. Ruth secretly watches over him to ensure his safety; following one of Thomas’s visits to the ocean, Ruth watches as Thomas “walks out of the fog, a ghost becoming real, taking on a body” (268). No longer willing to be one of the “walking dead,” Thomas’s “dead heart falls away and there is a new one, alive and beating” (268). With this new pulse comes Thomas’s ability to face his past with Ruth, to whom he goes after coming out of the fog. Still in the process of “becoming real,” Thomas’s body is “full of voices” and Ruth “hears them talking. Maybe they mumble, or maybe they are all talking at the same time, but she thinks it is A’atsika they speak and it makes a chill rise up her spine to hear a man’s body speak so” (268-269). Ruth senses that “it is not the right time to meet and face one another” and so she leaves Thomas at the door. When he leaves and she opens the door, Ruth finds water on the steps and knows that it “has fallen from Thomas’s body. It is all of his uncried tears.”
Before long, though, Thomas is ready to face Ruth and to confront the pain that he has brought to her. When he returns to her, Thomas’s “face is relaxed” and, “his eyes [are] not haunted” despite the painful memories that he is about to share with Ruth. Indeed, when Ruth sees Thomas, she thinks “our brave people […] we have continued” (269). Thomas confirms Ruth’s feeling by telling her that he is “changing history now” by choosing to be “like the ancestors” and returning to the whaling culture (270). The narrative illuminates how the past provides renewal through continuity rather than through detachment or fixation. Thomas’s ability to heal, though grounded in his return to the ways of his ancestors, signals a transformation for the future through his desire to change history.

However, Thomas’s declaration alone will not suffice as the basis for this transformation. As he does in Washington, D.C., Thomas first must share his wrongdoings—this time with Ruth. In Ruth, he finds the right audience, the listener who can help Thomas reshape and transform his memories. Guiding him, and perhaps Ruth who can hear their voices, are the ancestors’ voices that emanate from Thomas’s body. Noting that “nothing is ever finished,” Thomas tells Ruth what happened in Vietnam and what happened on the whale hunt during which their son was murdered (272). He admits to her his complicity in the violence that both events perpetrate: “I am sorry to be a man. […] I am sorry to be a human being. I used to think it was other people. But I am one of them. I became one” (275). Thomas is fully aware of his ability to change and his actions from this point become intentional; he no longer will be swayed by others but will choose his own path, thereby changing history by defining how he will be remembered. Although Ruth is angered by Thomas’s participation in the violence, she “doesn’t hate
what he did. If she hates, she hates the men who sign the papers. On their own land, too. She thinks, I am capable of hatred. Suffering is our history.” Ruth’s forgiveness of Thomas is based in her understanding of his actions as part of a much broader historical context, but, more than that, she understands that Thomas’s actions have been based in love. He tells her, “I loved you. I loved them. I loved. I tell myself that is what matters” (276). Ruth’s responds, “it is” what matters. Through this conversation, the narrative illuminates the power of love and acceptance to transform an individual’s suffering and, in turn, the individual’s power to effect change in community.

The novel further emphasizes this power by initiating the novel’s conclusion with Thomas’s going to live with the elders in the white houses. He paddles his canoe and the physical labor that Thomas endures in this solitary journey comes to embody the pain and suffering that he and his people have endured through history: “he feels it in his muscles, sinew, where things meet in the body. It hurts at first. Not just tendons but whole histories. He doesn’t hear them speaking, but he follows what they tell him to do, as if now, he, too, hears the voices inside of him” (277). Although Thomas is physically alone, the spirit of his people joins forces with him and through him and their insistence on being present disallow Thomas from avoiding the past. The voices are silenced in the company of the elders and Thomas “feels clear” and that “it is right that he is there” with the elders (279). No longer taken away, Thomas feels a sense of clarity and belonging among the elders, who “live near the wall. A stone wall. It has a whale carved into it and the whale is giving birth to a human. It is their ancestor. There are no names of humans on the wall. Few people know it is there” (278). Thomas’s journey to this wall, textually paralleled with the memorial wall and Thomas’s journey to D.C., marks yet another
turning point for Thomas. In the company of the elders, Thomas hears the story of his birth; they remind Thomas where he came from and tell him, “We love you, son. This is your home. You came back like the salmon come back. We wanted you. We sang for you. We called for you” (279). The elders tell Thomas that he will remain with them for a while in order to learn the songs of the ancestors and to gain strength, because there is another plan to go whaling. Thomas join an “old singing man,” whose “wrinkled old dry darkness” contrasts with the “almost newness of Thomas” (279). The men “sit in silent council, meeting together for a long time, and much is said through the silence, more than all the voices inside him could have said” (279). After this meeting, Thomas remains with the elders and, as he did in Vietnam, he commits to working and fishing for them. Eventually, Thomas reaches a tranquil space, experiencing once again the sounds of the ocean and feeling that “he is free because of truth” (281). Thomas finds that he “wakes alive, as if something is happening in his life” and finds that he “is not a halfhearted man” (281).

With this fullness of heart, Thomas prepares for the whale hunt by going to the depths of the ocean, where “time changes” (282) and gives Thomas a greater perspective than he had during the first whale hunt, which he had hoped would be a quick fix to what ailed him. Returning to the traditions of his people, Thomas comes to see “how small a human is” by observing and watching the ocean life around him, yet the potential for change seems quite large. When he listens to the ocean from the white houses of the elders, he hears confirmation that “we are going to be a better people now” (283). He takes his cues from the elders and the ocean, which breathes “an exhalation of a conquered world and it is being breathed away and the spirit of the place is breathed back
This notion of the ocean “exhaling” the ailed spirit of a conquered people and accepting new life so keenly captures the simultaneous letting go and taking in of the past. Thomas is taken away by his immersion in the community of the elders, but this time he is taken willingly, as when he “sings an old whale song he has never learned.” The song “comes to him from out of a hole opened in time” and Thomas feels “shifting life” and knows “he is part of it” (284).

Eventually, Thomas does lead a ceremonial whale hunt but his efforts are thwarted when his son’s murderer also shoots, and presumably kills, Thomas. Thomas falls into the water, into that fluidity that, like a story, has the power to “birth new worlds” (288). His death unites the community, to which Thomas knows the ancient spirits will come and help in “becoming better people” (287). As the main story line comes to a close, the community that refused to come forward after the murder of Thomas’s son joins together with law enforcement to tell the truth, assuming responsibility for their own actions and those of others, and thereby “breathing life” back into the community. At the same time, however, the ending is not a perfect one: the community has much to overcome in terms of both individual and collective conflicts. As such, the novel indicates that passivity is not an option in the development of a space in which individuals take responsibility for themselves and for others, sharing both the burdens of a traumatic experience and the healing process. Through the overlapping and interconnection of people, surfaces, and stories, the novel creates a more fluid space and imagines a place of hope in which “the spirit world searches for us. It wants us to listen” (301). The novel ultimately suggests that listening to the past grants renewed hope for
the future, especially when the stories are articulated within a community willing to share responsibility for the individuals who comprise it.
Chapter Four: “an articulation of the heart:” Alfredo Véa’s *Gods Go Begging*

Alfredo Véa’s *Gods Go Begging* creates a narrative convergence of people, times, and places to disallow the separation of past, present, and future and connect people and places otherwise at odds. By collapsing the space between normally oppositional entities—here/there, us/them, now/then—the novel demonstrates that the Vietnam War experience is not something relegated to the past but, rather, a force that metaphorically and materially has been woven into the fabric of American identity. The war has often been referred to as a “spectre” that continues not only to lurk in the imagination of the United States but also to surface as fragments of the past in the experiences of even those who did not live through the era. In Toni Morrison’s novels, the spectre of slavery is often represented as “rememory,” which “impels one to reconstruct” these fragments “through an ‘imaginative act’ to yield up a kind of truth” (Morrison, qtd in Sandin and Perez 7). Morrison’s concept of “rememory,” the space in which what seems to have been forgotten or lost is remembered or regained through the convergence of individual memories, is useful in thinking about Vietnam War representation. Given that the manifestation of rememory comes in both the form of the real and the fantastic, the concept resonates especially well with Véa’s *Gods Go Begging*. Through dreamscapes and magical powers, Véa’s central characters revisit people and places of the near and distant past as they work to make sense of their very real current situations. Likewise, rememory requires piecing together fragments of the past within the present time. For the person or group performing this piecing together, rememory becomes more than a mere flash of the past: it becomes an active and integral formation within the present that
manifests materially—in people, places, things and sensory experiences—and remains present to revise and reshape notions of history and identity. As Caroline Rody suggests with respect to Morrison’s fiction, “‘rememory’ as trope postulates the interconnectedness of minds, past and present, and thus neatly conjoins the novel’s supernatural vision with its aspiration to the communal epic,” emerging as a form of “collective memory” that disallows forgetting while at the same time creating a space in which communal bonds can be shaped and strengthened (28). While rememory often involves collision with traumatic pasts (such as slavery, colonialism, and war), it also creates a transformative space of comfort and healing through the communal act of creating new narratives by “open[ing] the ‘interior life’ of the individual into the ‘anterior life’ of the people” (Rody 25).

Accordingly, this chapter explores how the fragmentary and often contradictory nature of personal identity has the potential both to suppress and to empower those who live within intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender. Véa’s narrative considers race and ethnicity through the Chicano perspective of Jesse Pasadoble, a Vietnam War veteran turned defense lawyer. While Pasadoble is the central character and provides the novel’s primary voice, the narrative begins and ends with characters representing several other racial and ethnic perspectives. In order to consider why a Chicano author writing a novel from a Chicano perspective would decenter the Chicano voice, I first examine the social and historical context within which the novel is set, namely the Vietnam War and the Chicano Movement. While the novel itself does not depict the Chicano Movement, the movement and its anti-war activism reflect and reveal significant tensions not only within this particular ethnic and racial community but within American society at large and,
therefore, demonstrate the inextricable connection between the war, race, and identity. Véa’s novel, by linking the war period to the novel’s present time, carries this connection further into the reader’s present time and thus participates in negotiations of both Chicano identity and history by revealing the parameters of each as more fluid than static. It is therefore important to note, at least briefly, some of the particular concerns of the Chicano Movement and its influence on anti-war activism before engaging in a discussion of how Gods Go Begging remembers the Chicano experience of the Vietnam War through its magical realist impulses. These impulses alter the reading experience by first exposing “a fundamental discontinuity in communal versus institutional memory, bringing to the fore the violent foundations of social life,” and then challenging the notion that “reality” is a sufficient “barometer of lived experience” (Sandin and Perez 4). Refusing to articulate only a Chicano perspective by offering a window into the “lived experience” of other Others, the novel confronts illusory representations of a Vietnam War fought by a multiethnic and multiracial band of brothers and engages the larger institutional forces that disallow that illusion from becoming a reality.

I. The (Re)emergence of Chicano Identity in the Vietnam War Era

Hardly a decade after earning military honors for their service in World War II, being exploited through the Bracero Program, and enduring racial violence and opposition evidenced by the Zoot Suit Riots and Operation Wetback, the Mexican American community suffered disproportionate casualties during the Vietnam War and participated in one of the group’s most significant demonstrations—the National Chicano Moratorium
March Against the War in Vietnam, held on August 29, 1970. The increasing and disproportionate Vietnam War death toll for Mexican Americans, as well as other racial and ethnic minorities, gave rise to the Chicano Movement’s anti-war activism, likely because the issues surrounding the war and the Mexican American community also reflected and emphasized concerns already being addressed by the larger Chicano Movement. Contemporary Chicano literature, including Véa’s *Gods Go Begging*, often revisits this period of history and the components of Chicano identity, such as gender, race, and nation. Writing about the sixties allows contemporary writers to reexamine issues of Chicano identity such as lack of access to education, poverty, discrimination, and political underrepresentation that were “precluded by [the] politics” of the Chicano Movement (Cutler 584). Underpinning these concerns was the broader issue of the history between Mexico and the United States.

59 The Bracero Program was a contract agreement between the United States and Mexico that enabled Mexican laborers to work legally in the U.S., shifting United States citizens from labor to military positions during WWII. The program exploited laborers, who were paid very little and often the targets of racism. For two weeks in 1943, military personnel violently attacked Mexicans/Mexican and black Americans who dressed in zoot suits. These attacks have come to be called the Zoot Suit Riots and, according to Richard Griswold del Castillo, “interpreted by Chicano historians as one in a long series of anti-Mexican reactions motivated by wartime frustrations and racial stereotyping against Mexican-American youth” (367-368). In 1954, hundreds of thousands of Mexican immigrants working in the United States were gathered in a massive deportation lead by US Immigration and Naturalization Services. The campaign was dubbed Operation Wetback. In addition to Griswold del Castillo, see Oropeza’s *Raza Sí!, Guerra No!*, and Mae M. Ngai’s *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton, N.J. 2004.

60 Leading up to this particular event, the Mexican American community faced high numbers of casualties, as studies conducted and circulated by Rafael Guzman in 1967 and 1969 and more contemporary surveys of the number of Spanish surnames on the Vietnam War Memorial Wall reveal. Oropeza’s “Making History: The Chicano Movement” quotes from Guzman’s study: “American servicemen of Mexican descent have a higher death rate in Vietnam than all other GIs” and then summarizes that according to Guzman’s study, “while Spanish-surnamed men of military age made up only 13.8% of the Southwest’s total population, Spanish-surnamed soldiers during the time period accounted for 19.4% of the war dead” (2). In his prefatory marks to *Aztlan*, Mariscal suggests that, while such studies do exist, it is impossible to determine the number of Mexican American casualties: the military abandoned the category “Mexican” and all Mexican Americans are listed as Caucasian. However, as he and others have claimed, Spanish surnames, “Rodriguez” in particular, appear more frequently and corroborate the disproportionate rate of Mexican American casualties.
Revisiting this history (re)called attention to issues of colonization and served to complicate notions of identity for Mexicans in the United States and Mexican Americans. Specifically, the (re)emergence of a Chicano identity and the Chicano Movement’s role in anti-war activism revealed how the past shapes the present. The Chicano Movement separated itself from a politics of assimilation, choosing to forgo “Mexican American” as an identity marker and adopting the term “Chicano” instead. The label was initially employed by younger generations “to identify an ethnic, nationalist individual or position, one opposed to accommodation and assimilation with United States culture and society” (Limon, qtd in Saldivar13). Ruben Salazar, Vietnam War correspondent and active member of the Chicano Movement, stated that “a Chicano is a Mexican American with a non-Anglo image of himself,” pointing to the movement’s growing attention to racial difference, an attention very much illuminated, but also complicated, by the efforts of African Americans in the Civil Rights movement. The black revolution, suggested Salazar, “crystallized” an “ambivalence felt vaguely and in silence for so long” by Mexican Americans who were considered white only by name and yet were not black either (240). The Chicano Movement’s emphasis on racial difference complicated the black/white conflict that in many ways defined American racial identity and left many Mexican Americans on a quest to define themselves as both separate from yet still part of the nation.

One of these attempts at such a definition is located in the Chicano Movement’s cultural nationalism as embodied by an allegiance to Aztlán, postulated as the land belonging to the original ancestors in early Mexican writings and with a presumed location in what is now the Southwest of the United States. During the Vietnam and Civil
Rights era, Aztlán came to represent both “the stolen homeland and future nation of the Chicano people” and became important both politically and socially through the movement’s efforts to restore both land and a collective identity to a people marginalized by and subjected to United States government, history, and culture (Mariscal 1). By claiming Aztlán, the Chicano Movement called attention to Mexican American history, one that includes imperial conquest by both the Spanish and the Anglo-Americans. Inhabiting both the real and mythical space of Aztlán also demonstrates how Chicanos live in a place that is “elsewhere, in here,” to borrow a phrase from the title of Trin T. Minh’s collection of essays on borders, refugeeism, and boundaries. As a place that enacts a collision with the past, Aztlán might be read as a vehicle for rememory, serving to tease out the complex connections (and disconnections) between people, places, and times. In many ways, the space of Aztlán is neither and both “ours” and “theirs” and exists both “now” and “then”; thus, the Chicano movement’s use of Aztlán signals a challenge to geographical and temporal boundaries even as it aligned itself with a particular place and past (the native or indigenous) and thereby with specific, and often limiting, values with respect to race, gender, and class. While Aztlán has been called a “durable image […] in the Chicano imaginary,” its durability also points to the ever-shifting complexity of Chicano identity (Torres-Perez103). Aztlán refers both to a place and to a diverse set of ideas, a duality that complicates its use in Chicano discourse. For example, calls to Aztlán signify a community rallying around loss by working to recuperate the past while also envisioning a future free of oppression, but such calls also highlight the issue of proximity for Mexican Americans. Unlike many other immigrants to the United States, Mexican Americans, especially those living in the Southwest, are
not distanced from their “homeland” by vast oceans, which, as Salazar has suggested, makes it “difficult for Mexican Americans to think of Mexico in the abstract” (238).

Aztlán, as a term that has been challenged, reconfigured, and repositioned, signifies a complex and textured history of people and place. It represents the interaction of the past with the present or, as Rafael Perez-Torres notes, “a realm of historical convergence and discontinuity.” In this regard, “Aztlán represents not a singular homeland, but rather a borderland between sites of alliance.” Aztlán’s historical consciousness retains value through its identification as a borderlands that “acknowledges the fluid mending and blending, repression and destruction of disparate cultures” and “allude[s] to an illimitable terrain marked by dreams and rupture, marked by history and the various hopes that history can exemplify” (114). Conceptualizations of Aztlán have shifted “from homeland to borderlands” and thus from “origin toward an engagement with the ever-elusive construction of cultural identity” (117). As a shifting signifier, Aztlán’s ties to history are particularly important, as are moves toward the future: “Aztlán is at once the evocation of a painful and violent history and the invocation of a utopian ideal” (118). It therefore provides “a starting point for the struggle to articulate and enact an absent unity and empowerment” within a diverse culture (119).

As a participant in dialogues concerning Chicano identity, Gods Go Begging similarly challenges notions of borders that demarcate oppositional forces between individuals and groups locally, nationally, and globally at the same time that it recognizes the very real effects of geographical difference and the value of historical consciousness. While it never names Aztlán, the novel nonetheless evokes Aztlán’s attention to contestations of power and calls attention to the constructedness of categories of
identification beyond the territorial. *Gods Go Begging* creates a space something like Aztlán, a space that reaches back into the past while moving toward a more powerful and liberated future. The novel creates this space in part through magical realist impulses, and thus it may be tempting to view it, and expressions of Aztlán, as a reaching for a utopian ideal. Yet, this leaning is precisely what makes the novel appealing: it dares to hope and simultaneously refuses to ignore reality. Véa’s novel engages in important cultural work through its willingness to imagine other Others by decentering the Chicano perspective without dismantling the significance of borders and boundaries entirely. In other words, the novel calls attention to the arbitrary and constructedness of borders but does not dismiss the role that national boundaries play in personal identification. *Gods Go Begging* acknowledges the interconnectivity not only of diverse groups of people in terms of location but also with respect to race, gender, and class. The novel emphasizes the ways in which notions of national identity inflect and are inflected by these other subjectivities and positions within a specific historical context.

What underpinned the Chicano Movement’s attention to racial difference, allegiance to Aztlán (whether considered abstractly or concretely), and separation from U.S. society and culture were the very real conditions that continue to disempower many in the Mexican American community. Perhaps the most relevant of these issues in terms of the Vietnam War is the simple fact that Mexican American men were underrepresented on college campuses and thus more often drafted by the military. Additionally, given their generally lower socioeconomic status, they saw enlistment in the military, with its “provisions” of employment, education, and respect, as a path toward upward mobility. Military service, however, particularly during World War II and
in the midst of Project 100,000, was not only viewed as a path not only to American
citizenship, patriotism, and rights but also appealed to a sense of Mexican male
identification with the masculine courage labeled machismo. Mariscal indicates that
“the drive to assimilate through military culture is exacerbated by one of the most
pernicious legacies of Mexican culture: warrior patriotism. The idea that masculine
behavior must include a readiness to die for ‘la patria’ is powerful in Mexican nationalist
ideology” (27). Salazar notes the power of this legacy by explaining that, “when called
to war, Mexican Americans showed how ‘macho’ or many they were and never
questioned the justification for the war” (244). The Chicano Movement’s antiwar
activism initiated a challenge to this particular notion of masculinity.

While war and its representation often hinges on associations between masculine
propensity for violence and physical bravery, the Chicano Movement aimed to redefine
machismo as the courage to “as[k] the establishment the tough question: ‘Why are we
dying overseas when the real struggle is at home’” (Chicano activist, qtd in Salazar 244).
The question intensifies when the rhetorical claim to a “readiness to die” “becomes a fatal
reality once it is linked to U.S. imperialist projects” like the Vietnam War (Mariscal 27).

This focus on masculinity—regardless of attempts to vary its meaning—became a source
of contention within the movement, particularly from women whose perspectives were
not represented in the Movement’s decidedly masculinist discourse. As I will illustrate
later, Véa’s novel works to unravel, even decades after the height of the Chicano

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61 Project 100,000 was a Great Society program designed to increase military enrollment by targeting those
men who were unable to pass the necessary exams. These men were generally under-educated members of
minority groups who also fell below the poverty line and thus saw the recruitment attempts as opportunities
to climb the social ladder. See Mariscal (20), Oroyeza (69).
Movement and the end of the Vietnam War, the relationships between gender, race, and nation that were established during this period.

At the same time, these complications in defining the parameters of Chicano identity provided the foundation for transcultural dialogue. Many Chicano antiwar activists “identified with the invaded rather than the invader, in Vietnam as well as Aztlan” (Oropeza 89). In addition to drawing connections between the ways in which both Vietnamese and Mexican Americans had been objectified by territorial and political conflicts in which they had been given no voice, the Chicano Movement often included references of brotherhood between these two groups. The Movement drew its parallels through connection to the land, roles as farmers and peasants, and positions as targets of oppression. Many, were convinced that “the Chicano plight was not unique but part of a bigger, systematic oppression by a brutal empire. The bombing of Vietnam reminded him of the U.S. invasion of Mexico more than a century before [and] the mounting Chicano combat casualties as an eerie echo of the unexplained deaths at the hands of police at home” (Oropeza 90). Such identification with the supposed enemy influenced a more global perspective, an attempt to unite all of those oppressed by imperial forces like the United States. In a letter to the draft board in which he refused to serve in the military, for example, activist Manuel Goméz used the term “la raza,” or the race, “to signify something closer to ‘the human race’” (Oropeza 91-92). Goméz wrote, “In my veins runs the blood of all the people in the World. I am a son of La Raza, the universal children, and cannot be trained and ordered to shoot my brother” (qtd in Oropeza 92). Connections based in racial marginalization influenced thinking that “Chicanos and Vietnamese were
both members of the Third World in that both were non-white people suffering from the exploitative nature of U.S. imperialism and capitalism” (Oropeza 94).

Unfortunately, such efforts toward unification were short-lived as the power of the Chicano Movement and its anti-war activism waned with the August 1970 Moratorium March, during which key leaders of the Movement were killed by police fire in what was otherwise believed to have been a peaceful demonstration against the war. While anti-war activism did continue, the Chicano Movement’s focus turned toward issues of police brutality and urban redevelopment while resistance from more traditional Mexican American activist groups still advocating for assimilation and integration increased. Divisions from within the community in many ways outweighed efforts toward a more global perspective, but the efforts of the Chicano Movement, particularly its role in protesting the Vietnam War, left a legacy upon which more contemporary negotiations of Chicano identity continue to grow. While this brief history of the Chicano Movement’s involvement in anti-war activism and its battles with unity and division suggest a search for authentic identity, more recently Chicano discourse has moved away from notions of authenticity and toward new articulations of identity created out of situational and relational environments and experiences.

As I have previously noted in my discussion of Aztlán, a shift from the idea of a homeland to a more fluid notion of a borderlands, a space described perhaps most notably by Gloria Anzaldúa, as a space of inbetweeness, marking not only the plurality—rather than duality—of the mixed race person but also the plurality within other markers of identity such as gender and sexuality, which creates what Anzaldúa calls a “mestiza consciousness.” While the terminology referring to this type of space abounds—border
zones, contact zones (Pratt), third spaces (Bhaba) and is reflected in discussions of transnationalism, transculturalism, and cosmopolitanism--Edwina Barvosa’s reading of Anzaldua’s mestiza consciousness creates a framework of multiple identity that is particularly useful for its (relatively) concrete attention to the potential of multiple identity to impact personal and collective subjectivities.

Specifically, Barvosa argues that, because “multiple identities are often the product of political conflicts, then […] the ways in which people choose to grapple with conflict-induced identity contradictions can have potentially significant implications for those political conflicts” (212). Building from Anzaldua’s theory and drawing upon others as well, Barvosa defines multiple identity within her understanding of “subjectivity as composed of various identities related to different communities within which a person is identified. The self is de-centered, in that no single identity is considered a priori, to be central or the most important identity of the collection within” (59). As Anzaldua, and others such as W.E.B DuBois, have argued, the journey toward such a non-hierarchical multiple-self is difficult—potentially traumatic—particularly in a society in which racial and ethnic hierarchies create conflict and confusion not only between the self and the larger community but also within the individual. Yet, within this framework of multiple identity comes the potential to shift ways of thinking, acting, and experiencing the world. Building on Anzaldua, Barvosa regards “identity contradictions,” such as those experienced by mixed race persons, as creating productive tension when contradictions are recognized and managed (82). As such, Barvosa’s framework of multiple identities involves an active “self-crafting” that entails stages of self-inventory, discernment, and revisionary living that empowers individual and collective subjects and creates the
potential for broader political change by placing value on the impact that individuals can have on changing the status quo. Self-inventory involves the “task of searching out and learning the history of the elements of one’s subjectivity […] with attention to the politics […] and the possible atrocities and/or beauties involved in their construction,” according to Barvosa, while discernment is what “Anzaldúa describes as the difficult step of differentiating among the elements in oneself that are inherited from valued and valid traditions, those that are imposed or associated with forms of social subordination or exclusion, and those that have been acquired for oneself” (177). Examined through Barvosa’s frame of multiple identity, Véa’s characters illuminate the contradictions and conflicts in the United States and within notions of Americanness that pervade Vietnam War representation, particularly with respect to race, ethnicity, and gender. At the same time, the characters’ willingness to open themselves up to the fluidity (and the contradictions) within themselves and others creates the space for cross-cultural conversations and movements toward community, action, and social justice.

II. Supposing New Versions of the Vietnam War

Those who do not have power over the stories that dominate their lives, power to retell them, rethink them, deconstruct them, joke about them, and change them as times change, truly are powerless because they cannot think new thoughts.

S. Rushdie

As Rushdie indicates, individual and group empowerment comes from the ability to recast the stories that have been told, to change them, and to create new ones. In the case of Vietnam War narratives, recasting involves shifting perspectives and, in the case

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62 from Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism (480)
of Véa’s novel specifically, revising the cast of characters typically depicted in Vietnam War representation so as to de-emphasize the role of white males and instead call attention to the soldiers of color whose service has often been relegated to the margins of both history and fiction. Contemporary Chicano fiction that depicts the Vietnam War works to reclaim the role that the Mexican American community played in the war and, in revisiting this past, also to renegotiate what it means to identify as Chicano. Thus, the novel illustrates Barvosa’s notions of identity frames not only by highlighting the multiple identities of individual characters but also by revealing the multiple and often contradictory notion of a national identity. These narratives insist on the potential that Rushdie sees in valuing the process of becoming that emerges when new stories are created: they interrupt static ways of seeing the self and others and thus enable the self-inventory, discernment, and revisionary living that Barvosa outlines and suggests has both creative and political potential. This potential in part rests in the creation of a space within which the recognition of the Other and of multiple histories provides a foundation upon which cross-cultural coalition building can occur. Véa’s protagonist, whose surname, Pasadoble, evokes the Latin dance of the bullfight, a two-step that usually features a dominant male, is aptly named inasmuch as Jesse Pasadoble walks doubly through multiple times and places, but the name also belies Pasadoble’s vulnerability—a trait that aligns him against the resistance and machismo characteristic of the Vietnam era Chicano Movement’s ideas regarding Chicano identity. By de-centering Jesse Pasadoble’s narrative and de-emphasizing his Chicano identity to instead focus on his relationships with other Others (such as the black youth of Potrero Hill, the racially diverse soldiers deployed with him to Vietnam, a Cham prisoner of war, and Vietnamese
refugees and immigrants in the United States), the novel strategically places Pasadoble in a narrative that moves beyond superficial multiculturalism or melting-pot diversity and focuses on difference and conflict. This is not to say, however, that the novel dwells in negativity or victimization. Though marked by degrees of tension, Jesse’s encounters instill the characters, and readers, with a sense of hope that is mobilized in part by the casting of Jesse as a lawyer enacting real change in the world around him.

Additionally, Véa’s novel directly correlates the racially motivated violence occurring in the late twentieth century with the violence Pasadoble witnessed in Vietnam to highlight the ways in which the legacies of Vietnam were shaped by and continue to shape American society, especially with respect to marginalized peoples. In particular, Pasadoble encounters memories and people from the war in Vietnam as he works on his defense for two cases whose defendants have each been accused of atrocious and hate-filled crimes. The first of his cases, the murder trial of Calvin “Biscuit Boy” Thibault finds its connections to the war through its victims, Persephone Flyer and Mai Adrong, a Black American and a Vietnamese woman respectively, who have been widowed by the war and through a series of associations that Jesse makes between Calvin’s community and the minority soldiers with whom he served in Vietnam. The second case, less directly connected to the war but with narrative parallels nonetheless, finds Jesse working on the defense of Bernard “supreme being” Skelley, a white supremacist who stands accused of sexually molesting his niece.63 Intertwining the progression of these cases with Jesse’s

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63 While space does not allow for an in-depth discussion of the narrative strand focused on Skelley, it is worth noting that together with the other narratives, the casting of a white supremacist as rapist in Véa’s novel speaks alongside recurring images of Vietnam as having been “trodden upon and raped by [American] men and military technology” in an imperial war (Nguyen 115). Skelley’s lack of education,
memories from the war, the novel mixes very real, graphic scenes of violence from both
times and places with dream sequences and unexplainable occurrences, a technique of
magical realism that simultaneously highlights the capacity that human beings have for
both horror and hope.

While much Vietnam War representation attempts to represent the
incomprehensibility of the experience and the inadequacy of language to portray the
chaos and trauma endured, thereby highlighting the alienation of returning soldiers or the
disunity of time and space, *Gods Go Begging* insists on piecing together the fragments
left after historical and traumatic events such as were experienced during and in the
aftermath of the Vietnam era. The novel does so by bringing characters to an in between
space with respect to time and place through magical moments and the aforementioned
trope of rememory. While the characters within the novel encounter rememory, the novel
itself serves to re-member the historical moment more inclusively than earlier novels and
to envision a more peaceful future. Like magical realms, rememory upsets perceived
ways of knowing by relying on the reader to “accept both the realistic and magical
perspectives of reality on the same level” (Bowers 4). The extent to which the reader is
willing and/or able to suspend disbelief and perceive in new ways determines the
potential of the novel to shift methods of thinking. Readers of *Gods Go Begging* must not
only suspend disbelief on several occasions but also draw connections between characters
and incidents in the novel in order to sustain that suspension of disbelief. This active
engagement can function as a “cultural corrective” that “require[s] readers to scrutinize
accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, and motivation” (Farris 3). In

his fear of the Other, and his parodistic warrior mentality provide a sharp critique of the social and political
systems that create and maintain hierarchical structures of gender and race.
other words, the magical realist text places normally opposed categories—the magic and the real—on equal terms, unravels their usually hierarchical relationship and calls attention to how one has arrived at notions of reality or truth. Once drawn into this world where “the category of truth has been brought into question and the category of the real broken down or overturned, the boundaries of other categories become vulnerable” (Bowers 67-68). The novel provides an opportunity to examine the ways in which perceptions of self and others are constructed myths and depicts alternative ways of being and thinking in the world. In Véa’s novel historically held assumptions about peoples and places break down, creating spaces for the disempowered to voice their own realities (either as characters within the text or respondents to the text). As the genre’s very name suggests, magic realist texts enable “an activation of differences” (Farris 185) that requires new constructions of reality, where the reality of marginalized peoples previously may have been “obscured or erased by political or social injustice” (Farris and Zamora 9). Much like the Chicano Movement’s calls to Aztlán activated difference and enabled new constructions of Mexican American identity, Véa’s novel presents a plurality of worlds where time and space often collapse, leaving readers and characters “on liminal territory between or among these worlds” in a place where “transformation, metamorphosis, [and] dissolution are common” (Farris and Zamora 5). In such a space, alternative ways of knowing and understanding the world are posited as valid and freeing. This potential for change is as open for the readers of the novel as the characters within it; as both encounter new stories of the past, they have the ability to re-member history and constructions of identity in the future.
Magical realism’s attention to the construction of narrative interrupts notions of grand narratives that predominate and exclude. Véa’s novel incorporates storytelling to challenge established concepts of gender, race, and nation. On the one hand, the battle stories Pasadoble and his colleagues tell bring comic relief to the harsh realities of their legal cases. While the stories create a sense of community and shared grief, they also suggest a sense of the mundane: the inevitability of the offenses they are charged to defend is due to inherent human flaws that will continue to perpetuate a cycle of senseless violence and crime. On the other hand, in flashbacks of the war, *Gods Go Begging* depicts Jesse amongst his fellow soldiers—predominantly Latino, African American or Native American—as they decompress in moments of quiet by telling stories. The soldiers’ storytelling, which they call “supposing,” envisions a different future by revising significant moments of history. The supposings begin with the soldiers’ questions regarding particular historical moments—one soldier asks what America would be like if there had been no slaves, for example, while another wonders why no Mexicans had ever been to space—and follow with Jesse initiating an answer upon which the others build and create a new reality. The series of events that follow in these supposings often seem absurd, yet the stories clearly indicate the arbitrary nature guiding the characters’ perceptions of reality and thus work to deconstruct hierarchical systems based in race and ethnicity. More importantly, the stories create a space in which these men envision a world in which they are not relegated to the margins. The ability, as Rushdie notes, to “think new thoughts” empowers the soldiers. The narrative’s juxtaposition of these storytelling episodes also issues a call to action to readers—will they choose to maintain the status quo or act in response to the novel’s call for an
interconnected world? If readers can inhabit this magical world of Jesse Pasadoble, they can envision a world in which human beings are connected across times, places, and cultures and consequently have a greater responsibility for one another; they can envision, too, a world in which social justice actually can be achieved.

Through these supposings, Véa’s *Gods Go Begging* calls attention to the role of the imagination, and of art more broadly, in altering and creating new notions of personal, national, and global identities and relationships. The novel thereby challenges the limits of more canonical narratives of the war that focus on individual white male perspectives and destruction and, perhaps more importantly, conveys a sense of interconnectedness between peoples and places that reaches beyond the geographical and temporal boundaries of the war within the United States as well as between America and Vietnam. By destabilizing oppositional constructs (especially self and other, past and present, dream and reality), the novel works to defamiliarize normative categories of identity and thus to alter modes of inhabiting such identities in ways that promote a sense of interconnectedness between and responsibility and love for humankind. The novel contrasts war’s association with aggression and the suppression of fear, grief, and love, favoring characters who are vulnerable and in need of a community where creation, rather than destruction, takes precedence. In their ability and willingness to feel their own pain as well as that of others and to imagine alternative modes of existence, Véa’s characters ultimately realize that, despite the impurity and pain inherent in human life, beauty exists in the growth and transformation that comes from suffering, especially when that suffering is met with the open hearts and minds of a larger, cross-cultural community.
The novel establishes its focus on the interconnectedness of humanity through magical realism, which ultimately brings the narratives of men and women from three separate countries and times into a single space where both the living and the dead converge. By collapsing the distances, Véa’s novel questions the validity of borders and boundaries that separate and cause conflict between individuals, communities, and nations. The novel begins and ends in 1990s San Francisco, primarily in the Potrero Hill community where gang violence predominates and Jesse Pasadoble works to uncover the truth regarding the murder of two women, Mai Adrong and Persephone Flyer, in his defense of the suspect, Calvin Thibault. Woven into this contemporary narrative are Jesse’s memories of the war in Vietnam, specifically of a firefight on a hill near Laos where he fought alongside young men from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds and also befriended a military chaplain known for most of the novel as “the padre.” The padre’s boyhood on a small hill in Chihuahua, Mexico comprises a third and crucial component of the novel. Within each of these three narrative strands, however, lie multiple other stories that enable the story worlds of complex and diverse characters to converge and interact, often in ways that seem unlikely or unrealistic, in moments of recognition of self and other that inspire collaboration and acceptance rather than conflict and rejection.

*Gods Go Begging* depends upon the connectedness of time and space to establish the ongoing relevance of the Vietnam War and its aftermath to a contemporary audience and to develop notions of transnational, cross-cultural community. The novel immediately establishes this collision of time and space by opening in late twentieth-century San Francisco with images of urban violence and crime that echo aspects of the
war in Vietnam decades earlier. For example, the murder scene that opens the novel depicts two unidentified dying bodies “gasp[ing] softly, whisper[ing] feverishly, and bleed[ing] profusely” and, though they lie “like warriors abandoned on the field,” the bodies belong not to soldiers in the midst of a war but to two women (later identified as Persephone Flyer and Mai Adrong) “pronounced dead on a cold city sidewalk” while the first descriptions of Jesse locate him engaging in “foxhole laughter” while eating lunch with colleagues gathered in “a formal gathering of warriors” to tell “war stories” in the law office’s cafeteria (Véa 1, 28). Such textual linkages work to demonstrate how the war has left a legacy of embattlement upon individuals and communities. Furthermore, the embrace in which the two women lie dead finds a companion image later in the novel when their husbands’ bodies are depicted in a similar manner at the moment of their deaths on the hill near the Laos border; the repetition of images works to unsettle the distance between such binaries as here and there and now and then. The parallels drawn between Jesse Pasadoble’s experiences in San Francisco and Vietnam further indicate that time and distance have not changed the circumstances that put Pasadoble in a state of emotional distress; the war’s ability to strip innocent people of their humanity continues to haunt Jesse through his encounters in the present.

While the continuity of conditions might indicate stasis, as Patrick Hamilton suggests it does in his reading of the novel in Of Space and Time: Cognitive Mappings of Contemporary Chicano/a Fiction, Jesse’s reactions to and interactions with others affected by this violence work to interrupt the violence and dehumanization that has become normalized in both the past and present settings of this novel and depicted in Vietnam War representation more broadly. Consequently, despite such seeming
continuity, the narrative and its characters constantly shift and thus ultimately appear future-oriented. In particular, the novel’s opening image of Mai and Persephone’s death embrace significantly moves all of those who encounter it. For Pasadoble’s assistant Eddie Oasa, the “double death grip … spok[e] so much more eloquently about life” than it did about death (66). Despite having been horrifically murdered, the women are interlocked in a beautiful embrace in which “they had become wholly entwined—their arms, their fingers, their final breaths, even their histories had become entangled” (1-2). Joining the two women at the breastbone, this embrace provides the only clue as to the women’s identities. In many ways, the embrace comes to define the role the women play in the novel: as two women from opposite sides of the war whose husbands have killed one another, Mai and Persephone’s unlikely bond disrupts the norm within the Potrero Hill community before and after their deaths. Moreover, as women of color from the United States and Vietnam, Mai and Persephone’s narrative gives voice to a perspective of the Vietnam War rarely represented.

Because the image of the embrace haunts those who encounter it, the women remain present in the narrative and in the characters’ lives. The pressure that their continued presence places on the novel both propels the plot (much of which rests on determining why and by whom they were killed) and provides the impetus for the growth of several characters, whose transformations come from their increasing awareness of their connections to and responsibility for others. For many characters, the women’s continued presence remains uncanny but nonetheless compels them to act. This is particularly true in the case of one of the coroners who perform the women’s autopsies. In the autopsy room, “the dead women watched in nonchalance and saw in the swelling
dimness the chief coroner and his assistant doing their lonely work. Unashamed, they saw themselves stripped naked in an airless, comfortless room and they felt dispassionate probing and bloodless cutting as if it were being done to bodies far, far away” (2). The shamelessness of the women’s spirits suggests their strength, while their dispassion suggests a disturbing familiarity with the destruction of human life. Later in the narrative, the women reflect on the ways in which the wars in Vietnam and on the streets of Potrero Hill exacerbate what they see as a male desire for aggression and violence. Though minor characters in the novel, the coroner and the assistant medical examiner play an important role in the novel inasmuch as their scientific discourse stands in sharp contrast (especially since it is often italicized) to the unexplainable events of the novel and the heightened and often poetic language used to narrate them. The tension between the two types of discourse reflects the paradoxes inherent in the magical realist mode and thereby helps to call attention to the problematic dichotomies embedded in the social and political worlds and thinking of characters and readers alike. Furthermore, the sterile and empirical descriptions (interspersed throughout the opening chapter and in various other places in the novel where Mai and Persephone’s deaths are revisited) of the women and their cause of death are contrasted thematically with the assistant’s desire and the chief coroner’s fear and inability to experience life more fully, particularly with respect to love. Thus, their role in the novel’s opening scenes establishes the novel’s concern with the paralysis of emotion caused by the Vietnam War and its legacies of violence. Providing the first bit of dialogue in the text, the assistant reflects that, while his wife suggests “music happens when you take the time to look carefully at another human being,” he has “yet to hear a single solitary note, much less a melody” (2).
Ignored by the chief coroner, “the sound of [the assistant’s] own voice coming back to him again and again never failed to make him dolorous. […] so many echoes, yet no voices ever overlapped in this room; no matter how many spoke at once, each voice always sounded alone” (2). The assistant’s attention to the loneliness of the silence signals the novel’s emphasis on a need for communication and community, a need for the kind of personal interaction invoked by Mai and Persephone’s embrace. While the assistant is a reflective man, the chief coroner stands in sharp contrast both as a man of science and a veteran of the Vietnam War; yet, in Mai and Persephone’s presence, he is compelled, if only momentarily, to break the silence and engage the assistant’s contemplation by remarking that his “wife never lets [him] touch her anymore” (4). The coroner soon regrets his decision to break the silence and proceeds with his “empirical” and “quantifiable” recording because “he disliked looking beyond the bodies to the people who were once there” (5). His ability to dehumanize others causes him to move through life in a disconnected state. In contrast, the assistant continues to reflect and wonder and, within the final moments of the autopsy at the novel’s end, he has made the decision to leave a job that threatens his passion for life and love. Although the chief coroner’s inability to be vulnerable and open himself to the lives of others is echoed throughout the novel in Jesse’s character as well as in several other minor characters, those who “look beyond the bodies” and recognize the people open themselves to a transformative power developed within such recognition. Consequently, while the narrative allows the coroner to continue with his recording without further interruption from the assistant, it refuses to provide readers with such comfort, instead abruptly shifting the scene and perspective away from the present moment of the examination.
room and into the past, where Persephone Flyer and Mai Adrong prepare spaghetti sauce in the kitchen of their small luncheonette.

In addition to having a profound effect on the characters who encounter it, the death embrace also transports readers into the lives of Mai and Persephone, thereby engaging them in an encounter with figures not usually captured in canonical representations of the war: both are women of color widowed by the war and the novel’s inclusion of Mai’s narrative in particular voices a perspective—that of a Vietnamese woman—often obscured, flattened, or objectified in Vietnam War representation. Through the discomfort caused by such encounters, however, the narrative creates space for readers to re-envision their conceptions of ethnic and racial identity and of the effects of the Vietnam War era on American society. While the coroner’s dislike for looking beyond the bodies directly connects to his profession, it also points to the novel’s attention to racial (as well as gendered) difference, especially since the most powerful relationships in the novel form cross-racially, such as with Jesse and the soldiers he encounters in Vietnam. However, because the novel foregrounds and uses Mai and Persephone’s death to establish a model for such relationships, I examine the women’s relationship before exploring Jesse’s encounter with other Others during and after his service in Vietnam.

Having established the power of the women’s embrace in death, Vêa’s novel uses a series of flashbacks and memories to look beyond the bodies by examining the women’s lives. This foregrounding of a relationship between women of color in a genre of literature (war narrative) generally focused on white men is noteworthy for several reasons. In Gods Go Begging, Mai and Persephone’s relationship demonstrates the far-
reaching effects of war and serves as a model for the openness and vulnerability that enables the kind of cross-racial relationships that create the space for social and systemic change. Initial descriptions of the women focus specifically on the “magic” of their cooking, the scents of which “pus[h] in over the usual smells of Potrero Hill and the housing projects and overwhelm[m] everything with the combined perfume of Palermo, Baton Rouge, and Saigon” (6). Such descriptions highlight the women’s ethnic differences and the intermingling of cultures present in their cooking has a profound effect on the community. Potrero Hill has been dubbed “Tourette’s Hill” for the effect it has on outsiders: “The closer you get to the top of this terrain, the less control you’ll have over your faculties, your senses, even your conscience,” Jesse’s assistant tells him (166). Though the warning sounds like an urban myth exaggerated, Jesse exhibits an uncontrollable twitch in his upper body and begins “cursing like a soldier” (167). The effect that the San Franciscan hill has on Jesse seems supernatural but the textual parallels between it and the Vietnamese hillside from which Jesse’s most traumatic memories of the war stem indicate that there exists an underlying cause based very much in reality. As he approaches Potrero Hill, Jesse breathes in “the syrup, salt, and acid scent of death” that thirty years later still “smelled like the boys that he had once known; people like Roosky and Cornelius” (165). Among others, Roosky and Cornelius represent the young men Jesse fought with in Vietnam, described elsewhere in the novel as uneducated “sons of the poor” with dreams of being “like John Wayne, wading through Japanese soldiers on Iwo Jima” (103, 94). While Roosky’s “John Wayne” tattoo suggests his motivation for being in Vietnam, Jesse, like his sergeant Amos Flyer, knows that John Wayne is “a judas-goat lie” upon which young men are lead to their deaths, the reality of
which “would never be shown in any war movie. No actor would suffer these wounds” (94, 90).

On Potrero Hill, Jesse reflects that the gangs are afflicted by the same myth: “The boys on this hill were wearing their uniforms and waiting for a mission. […] Over the years one or two of their predecessors had managed to use their athletic ability to escape this place, only to become transformed into strutting, megalomaniacal Judas goats for various clothing and fortified beer companies. They were the new John Waynes, peddling the myth” of masculinity (163-64). Both criticized and maintained in Vietnam War representation, this myth, according to Micheal Anderegg, is “simultaneously a potent symbol of toughness and bravery and a grim joke. The point about John Wayne as hero is the impossibility, the sheer fantasy of his heroic image; to be like John Wayne, to mimic his words, his mannerisms, his actions, is to imitate an imitation, and to reenact as a simplicity something that was always undeniably complex” (28). Anderegg’s reading of the John Wayne figure to which the soldiers in Véa’s novel look for motivation in their service points to the patriotic, and often white-washed, images of heroism that obscure the harsh realities—of racism, imperialism, and brutality—of the Vietnam War. Additionally, Tobey Herzog, prolific critic of Vietnam War representation, argues that the John Wayne figure came to represent an ideal manhood based in a “happy-warrior mentality” in which “fear, doubt, or self-reflection have no part” (“John Wayne in a Modern Heart of Darkness” 21). Véa’s novel works to complicate this type of masculinity through a war story that reaches beyond the masks of the soldiers fighting it and into the people there. Such an unraveling of common images of American men found in the literature of war becomes most concrete in Véa’s narrative through its
foregrounding of Mai and Persephone’s role in Potrero Hill as they work together to heal the trauma they suffered after losing their husbands in Vietnam.

The allusion to John Wayne in Vietnam War representation calls attention to the ways in which war narratives construct particular and exclusionary images of manhood. *Gods Go Begging* depicts these images as part of a larger illusion of American society (its pledges of freedom for all, the pursuit of happiness, etc.) that often guided—or, by the virtue of the draft, sent—men in minority populations into the military and to the front lines of Vietnam. These same illusions delude the citizens of Potrero Hill, where mothers “prayed fervently that perhaps their dear sons were languishing in a jail in some distant county, that maybe some racist cop was refusing to let them call home. On this hill the American Dream was out there beyond the yellow tape” (Véa 164-65). The unexplainable power that Potrero Hill has on those who traverse it, however, is met by an equally powerful force from the women’s luncheonette. The “sublime aroma” from Mai and Persephone’s cooking has the power to interrupt the usual activities of an impoverished community plagued by crime and violence and leads the street gangs, or “small armies,” to “an uneasy armistice in order to breathe in a few molecules of the sauce. For a moment no one on the south side of the hill looked warily over his shoulder, then checked his waistband for the comforting bulge of a gun” (6). While the calming effect of a home-cooked meal on the neighborhood’s normally aggressive men might seem clichéd, Véa’s novel complicates this notion with the ambiguity of the women’s sexual orientation, already called into question by the assistant medical examiner. Although the children of Potrero Hill refer to the women’s restaurant as “that lesbian place,” Persephone’s comment to Mai that “all the folks on the hill think we’re lesbians”
(9, my italics) indicates an error in the folks’ thinking, further corroborated, it would seem, by her incomplete statement, “My God, Mai, if they only knew what it is that you and I have in common … if they only knew” (9). At the same time, Mai gazes at Persephone in such a way that might be conceived as sexually charged and precludes reading the women as either hetero- or homo-sexual. So, while the narrative clearly locates the women’s power within their roles as women, it also refuses to posit traditionally feminine or domestic spaces as necessarily providing an antidote to male aggression. Rather, the bond between the women and the mingling of their beings—whether physically or emotionally—has subversive power. Unhindered by their differences, the women’s ability to fuse their cultures and backgrounds, in both their food and their life together, strengthens their bond and the power they have to disrupt the norm in Potrero Hill. More importantly, their relationship provides a microcosm of the kind of boundary crossing that the novel demonstrates the power to disarm oppositional conflicts that promote and sustain wars.

The women’s spaghetti sauce—a blend of foreign cuisines, layers of spices from Italy, the Louisiana Bayou, West Africa, and Vietnam—stops time and brings peace to the streets of Potrero Hill, but it also transports the women, and thus readers, deeper into the past, revealing lives that are seemingly more disparate than the secret ingredients of their magical sauce but nonetheless entangled by the as yet unexplained connection between their husbands, soldiers on opposite sides of a war long since ended. Refusing to reveal the nature of the husbands’ relationship to one another until the novel’s end, the text instead engages readers in a portrait of the suffering endured by two women long after the war’s end, expanding the scope of the war narrative beyond soldiers and
veterans and into homes and communities and thereby working to create a sense of empathy through the reading experience. While readers remain uncertain as to how Mai and Persephone came together in San Francisco, the fragments that the narrative provides of the women’s lives prior to finding one another reveal that the women’s shared dream of owning a restaurant with their husbands connected them before either knew the other existed. Just as the smell of death connects Jesse’s past and present when he enters Portrero Hill, the scents inside their luncheonette bring Mai and Persephone into the past. The scents send Mai back to her father’s café in Saigon, a place vibrant in its sights, sounds, and smells that “fil[l] her nostrils and her stunned soul” (8). Mai remembers Vietnam in the present tense, suggesting a beauty and grandeur that persist even after a war that destroyed much of the country. At the same time, however, her recollections are littered with evidence of war, such as mentioning the street oft-referenced in American narratives of the war, Tu Do Street, which provides the somewhat ironic name of Mai’s father’s café, the “Tu Do Café, the Liberty Café,” and an allusion to Mai’s brothers who leave the café to fight in the war as “mortal enemies” (9). With these fragments, the narrative hints at the complexity of a war that divided not only the American public but also the Vietnamese people and thus complicates the static image of Vietnam as a country lacking culture and civilization often present in Vietnam War representation.

The novel disrupts static notions of time and space by bringing both women and their missing husbands into a place between the past and present, between Vietnam and the United States. For example, the novel’s characterization of Mai gains depth from a

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64 The street provides, for example, the setting for many of Yusef Komunyakaa’s Vietnam War poetry, which also focuses on race relations during the war and suggests an interconnection not only of white and non-white American soldiers but of American soldiers and the Vietnamese via their relationship with the native women.
“handmade frame of lacquered bamboo and hammered brass” that “traps” the “last photograph ever taken of Trin Adrong,” Mai’s husband (14). This photograph, sharing space with one of Persephone’s husband, causes Mai to smile as she realizes that “Two soldiers from opposite sides of a terrible war were now sharing space in the same bedroom in San Francisco” and that Persephone has also been transported to the past. The men’s spirits live through the women’s insistence on remembering them. The women’s memories of their husbands also further unite the men, in some ways revising the violence of their deaths by joining them in the peaceful and loving space of Mai and Persephone’s shared memories: “All of the thoughts that were flooding back to Persephone had also caught Mai in their thrall. As it always happened, the deluge of thoughts was hers, too” (14). By shortening the separation between each woman’s memories until they become indistinguishable, the text portrays the convergence of the women’s memories textually as well:

Mai cooking in the kitchen and Persephone dressing in the bedroom were soon loving at once, swaying softly at a heart’s rhythm and pace to supple patterns, edgeless shadows, enchanted glimpses of times long past. Here, in this memory, is a click of a heel on pavement, the dissolving ghost of a warm breath on glass, the confident taste of a man’s voice, now the sharp pinch of bamboo grass beneath her naked back, now the wistful shadow of an unknowing glimpse…graceful, graceless, awkward…suddenly over.

There is a glimpse of Hong Kong and of the French Quarter. Here, in this memory, are the faces of four sisters: a bride and her bridesmaids. There, in that recollection, is a tattoo in the shape of a spider and violin. Candles
flicker on pavement in this burst of memory. There is asphalt and heat and
the blinding flash of reflection from a passing windshield. (14)

The passage, providing clues as to the connections later drawn between additional
characters and events, mimics the effect of memory recollection with an elliptical and
fragmented syntax. The recurring markers “here” and “there” emphasize the conflation of
time space. 65 These conflations lessen the apparent distance between the two women and
their historically opposed nations, thus blurring the boundaries that might normally lead
to conflict and insisting on the kind of interconnectivity between human beings.

The women’s narrative strand is full of such paradoxical constructions, denying
either/or dichotomies and insisting instead a both/and perspective: for example, the
description of the gradual simultaneity of the women who become “sighing, sweating
lovers […] surrendering simultaneously to the living, dying thing above them, beneath
them, between them. In their ears are the voices of two recumbent males, two separate
tongues whispering promised things into the cooling darkness of the two bedrooms,
worlds apart, and into two sets of symmetrical, unremarkable ears” (15). Drawing upon
the language of the coroner’s reports that interrupt the narrative of the women’s
memories, this passage contradicts the empirical and distant observation of the human
body with a glimpse of the women’s most intimate moments—separate, yet shared,
distant, yet close. The ambiguous “thing” that encompasses the women is both living and
dead, defying the coroner’s scientific approach and corroborating the assistant’s closing
words that perhaps the women are still dreaming or that “their spirits could be searching

65 Scenes from Hong Kong later in the novel are attributed to Mai, while Persephone is associated with the
French Quarter. The “four sisters” represent Mai and Persephone’s funeral, organized by Persephone’s
sisters, who realize that Mai has no one to claim her body and claim her as their sister too, preparing the
bodies themselves. Thus, this memory actually transports the women into the future as well as the past.
for each other, maybe even linking up” (27). Taken together, the women’s memories and the assistant’s medical curiosity about the possibility that Mai and Persephone might be watching him cut into their bodies create a tone of otherworldliness that defies reality and insists on the simultaneity of reality and magic.

This notion of spirits linking up helps to explain Mai and Persephone’s relationship, within which the women individually connect with their husbands; the text implies that the women not only imagine their husbands but also connect with them physically and mentally. This magical moment offers an alternative way of understanding the women’s worlds and the war’s effect on them. For example, at the same time that Mai recollects Vietnam, Persephone gazes at herself in the mirror and seeing Mai finds instead “her young husband standing at the threshold and taking in her beauty with his eyes” (12). Because Mai’s gaze becomes one and the same as Persephone’s husband A.B. Flyer’s, the narrative uses the desire within that gaze to complicate the nature of the women’s relationship with one another. Persephone’s thoughts of her husband are intensified when her eyes fall on the reflection of a photograph of him and she “raised her hand to touch the reflection of the photo in the mirror. In truth she was reaching beyond the paper, beyond the developer, the fixer, the stop bath, and finally beyond the image.” (12). The photograph transports Persephone to the past, to Flyer’s involvement in the war; the text collapses time and space through shifting tenses, so that, when Persephone looks at the photograph, “It is Christmas 1967” (a phrase repeated in the paragraph to denote this collapse), even though she continues her conversation with Mai in the present, some thirty years after the moment Persephone recalls.
This simultaneity of the past and present enables the interconnectivity between Mai and Persephone, acting as a form of rememory in the way that the women remember their individual pasts, which collide with one another’s; this collision creates a space for shared memories and collective healing. The novel develops further this idea of a collision of past and present and here and there when Persephone’s narrative is interrupted by the italicized recording of the coroner, who, in the same moment that Persephone, in “a soft dreamy voice,” comments on the beauty of Mai’s body with a tenderness evoked by her longing for her husband but with an attentiveness that also suggests her love for Mai, records his findings in examining Mai’s corpse. Like Persephone, the medical examiner notes the beauty of Mai’s skin but immediately realizes his lapse in empirical observation and indicates that he must “delete last sentence from written text” (13). Any hint of the wonder exhibited within each woman’s appraisal of the other’s body must be removed from the medical examiner’s description of the women, both of whom he determines to have “unremarkable” features. These echoes of the coroner and his assistant interrupt the women’s flashbacks and sharpen the contrast between two men engaged in the sterile business of literally disentangling the women from their death embrace and the women who even in death are intimately connected. The contrast between emotional sterility and intense passion resonates throughout the novel, calling attention to the vulnerability that eventually empowers several of the characters. Further, by intertwining moments of Mai and Persephone’s past and present lives with the moment of their deaths through the coroners’ reports, the narrative insists on a continuity of their presence, pointing to some truth behind the assistant medical
examiner’s statement that the women may in fact be dreaming in their deaths and maintaining the novel’s magical realist impulses.

This continuity is further highlighted by the narrative’s suggestion that Mai and Persephone’s “spirits meet” in their inability to access the moment of their husband’s deaths, in their desire to know what happened and be in the moment of those deaths, and perhaps most of all in the “hatred” that the women share for “that moment in their memories, that moment when young men left to prove themselves, to prove something” (17). Here, the narrative more explicitly articulates a critique of the aforementioned John Wayne figure by suggesting that, regardless of their national allegiances or politics, Mai’s and Persephone’s husbands entered the war for reasons far removed from the war itself: to achieve a notion of their masculine selves, what Persephone calls “some kind of macho sexual license,” which the novel reveals to be the hidden desire of war, an attempt to fit into social norms of masculinity “by using daring and violence to skirt around acts of intimacy, words of communication and commitment” (17). This lack of intimacy and inability to communicate resonates with the narratives of the coroner and his assistant and appears as a particularly male trait, one that needs to be diminished since both Jesse’s and the assistant medical examiner’s development hinge upon such a transformation.

Affected as he is by the women’s embrace, the assistant’s final recording, that “the heart weighs two hundred eighty-three grams,” causes in him a “sudden rush of terror” that his career “would take careful aim at his native curiosity, his romanticism, his passion” and, for the “first time in his life, he felt the weight of his own heart” (27). The assistant medical examiner’s ability to feel the limitations of his physical and emotional existence
foreshadows his (and Jesse’s) eventual change and reaffirms the power of Mai and Persephone’s relationship to effect change outside of their own lives and relationship.

The strangeness of the women’s relationship stems in part from the power that their presence in Potrero Hill has on the community residing there. The women neither remarry nor resort to the solitude of widowhood; instead, they are empowered through the loss that connects and strengthens their bond. Through this power, Mai and Persephone refute stereotypical images of victimization and helplessness that often typify female characters in other forms of Vietnam War representation, particularly of Vietnamese women who are generally cast as prostitutes, bar maids, or mistresses used and abused by American soldiers and of American women who betray their soldier husbands or boyfriends while they are at war. Mai, despite being sexually exploited in a refugee camp after the war, exists as a far more complex character, particularly with respect to her relationship with the padre, whose story comprises the novel’s third narrative strand and will be discussed later. Perhaps most importantly, the women’s role in the novel highlights the capacity for love and connection despite difference in a genre that typically portrays dehumanization and hate. Mai and Persephone’s story provides readers with an initial point of access to the more traditional war narrative within Jesse’s narrative strand; their narrative prepares readers to meet a Chicano soldier who in many ways does not fit the paradigm for masculinity articulated by the Chicano Movement and subsequent literature. Readers encounter a man who resists white American hegemony, including, but certainly not limited to, exclusionary patriarchal structures. In the place of

66 For the ways in which Vietnamese women have been portrayed in American representations of the war, see Christopher, Pelaud, and Nguyen. Also see Lawson’s “‘She’s a pretty woman...for a gook’” in Fourteen Landing Zones and Karen Stuhldreher’s “State Rape: Representations of Rape in Viet Nam”.

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a macho Chicano soldier or protestor, *Gods Go Begging* offers a man who is tortured by his inability to love himself or anyone else after witnessing the meaningless death of a Vietnamese soldier. Jesse’s ability to identify with an Other comes not only from his divergence from stereotypically male characteristics but also from the complex intersections of gender, race, and class.

In sharp contrast to the lively Vietnam that Mai remembers, the Vietnam Jesse recollects emerges as a country and people divided and destroyed. Conveyed through a more traditional realistic mode, Jesse’s narrative often differs from the other sections of the novel by insisting on its connection to a very specific time and place. This strategy locates the war as a central core of the novel and insists on the materiality of the experience for both the living and the dead: it calls attention to “the unfortunate truth […] that the Vietnam War was the work of no one’s imagination; it was, rather, a devastating reality—a series of events taking place on a physical rather than symbolic level” (Tal 224). Jesse’s Vietnam narrative begins with a scene at the dumping ground of Vietnamese corpses on the side of a village road where “a ghastly line of bodies had been hastily arranged by the side of the road” for “the edification of the villagers,” who were told that these people had all been killed by firefight (75). The narrative highlights the disconnect between the reality and representation by depicting war correspondents who, in photographing the scene, transform and shape reality, creating their own narrative of the scene. Likened to “human shoppers” the war correspondents “mov[e] up and down the row of the dead like careful browsers at a weekend garage sale” taking pictures of the carnage. Through the camera’s zoom lens the image becomes detached from a larger moment of this death pile as well as from the lives of the people who comprise it:
every now and then one of the human shoppers would spot a potential gem and bend down to squint at it, to place it within a frame, to consider it through a zoom lens. Here was a featureless grimace, gaping and frozen forever by a tide of napalm. There was a genderless, timeless gray child whose body might have been pulled from the ashes of Pompeii. A small eruption had just opened near the child’s belly and liquid secrets had begun to boil out. The rest were the generic indigenous dead, their bodies twisted and insulted by a variety of high-speed metals and phosphors. (75)

This description inserts the reader into a very particular Vietnam, one where human bodies serve an educational purpose to both the native people and others a world away. By aligning the correspondents with an American (consumerist) pastime—browsing at a garage sale—the description points to the consumption of war, the seemingly leisurely taking in and ingesting of dead bodies of the enemy Other through the camera lens and its resultant image. With this description of such photography, Véa’s novel highlights how particular images of Vietnam have come to signify the experiences of a period of time that should not be encapsulated into a tight package of words or images. The text’s focus on the image also indicates the ways in which the body of the enemy Other has been dehumanized through this kind of documentary. While recurring images of the atrocity and violence in Vietnam were often used by anti-war activists, the photographs

67 While the image is not identified as such, Véa’s description of this scene resonates with Ron Haeberle’s well-known images of the aftermath of the My Lai massacre (which portray a line of bodies, many belonging to children) and his attention to the propagandistic aims of the photography in the Stars and Stripes conjures those images of Kim Phuc and the role that the image [television, newspaper, etc.] played in shaping the nation’s perception of the war. Visual imagery creates another discourse or language of war and, in the scene that depicts the firefight on the hill near Laos in particular, Véa creates sharp images—often somewhat surreal—to illuminate the consequences of war on both humans and their environments.
themselves, rather than the horror they depicted, were often the source of domestic conflict between war protestors and supporters. In other words, the body in these images becomes “powerless” depicting “a silent figure whose presence is only of isolated significance in the movements of armies, nations, and capital, and one that is ultimately an object of others’ politics. […] Vietnamese bodies have been the silent spectacle on which American discourse has been staged” (Nguyen 108). Including the image and the correspondents in the novel reflects the dangers inherent in framing a particular moment, locking it in time and memory and betraying the specificities of the people and places it captures, allowing, in other words, for the image and its subject(s) to become objectified and silenced.

Through such focus on voices silenced or relegated to the margins, Gods Go Begging calls into question the closed structures that have come to represent the Vietnam War by insisting on the stories behind them. The particular image Jesse watches being captured—the pile of corpses—demonstrates the scope of the destruction, but the correspondents’ seeming desensitization to this gruesome site is equally, if not more, disturbing. The pile is already dehumanized, lacking structure and distinguishing features—it is organic material destroyed by inorganic metals and chemicals—but the photographers’ actions and reactions to the scene add another dehumanizing layer. The novel depicts the American Stars and Stripes photographer as recognizing the potential for his images to tell a larger story, to articulate the horror and the lack of humanity, but he succumbs to the pressures of his employer and readership when he “finally gave in to the reality of his constituency and backed away to take a long, sterile shot. His newspaper was not interested in photojournalism, only in raw numbers and morale-boosting photos” (75). On
the other hand, the female correspondent for *Paris Match* “lingered pensively over the child, the smoke from her cigarette curling up and around the body of her camera and into her face. An ash from her Gaulois [*sic*] fell and melted into the child’s body. Her eyes scanned the charred form for an unburned clearing in the landscape, for a poignant contrast, a mole or birthmark or a single indication of gender.” While the female photographer does seek out the humanity in the image, she simultaneously disregards it, allowing her cigarette ash to further damage the already desecrated body. The image of the child’s body as a larger landscape is particularly haunting given the utter destruction it has endured, but perhaps even more disturbing is the “group of silent children, orphans dressed in torn and dusty clothing” who stand just “across the road from the spectacle” and for whom “the face of death was nothing new.” Stripped of a normal childhood, of the “security of family and village,” the children are more curious about the female photographer’s blond hair—a marker of racial difference—than they are about the profound loss before them (76). The female photographer does not fill the maternal role that might be expected of her; rather, distant and disconnected from the scene, she seems more interested in capturing a particular type of image than in actually establishing the individual identity of the child. The sterility of the correspondents’ images—similar in many ways to the aforementioned coroner’s refusal to look beyond the bodies to the people who were once there—is juxtaposed with Jesse’s reaction to the pile of corpses.

The pile of corpses triggers Jesse’s recollection of his encounter with one of the deceased Vietnamese and reveals to readers a powerful vulnerability. Jesse immediately directs his attention to “the body of a particular young man” with movements full of “speed and purpose” that strike the photographers as “unusual” and they wonder why “an
American NCO [would] be interested in the corpse of a North Vietnamese regular[.] Was he one of those wild-eyed, catatonic GIs who collected ears?” (76). The photographers capture the trope of the excessively violent soldier, which does not appear in Véa’s novel. Instead, Pasadoble kneels beside the dead man and “carefully began to undo the buttons on the man’s tunic. There were two entry holes in the man’s chest but there was no blood, not on his skin or on his shirt.” He then “moved his face to within mere inches of the other’s. [...] Their faces were so close that he could smell what had once been the breath of the other. Something he saw there made him shiver and sigh. He exhaled deeply, then let the body drop. He buttoned the shirt, stood up and slowly walked away.” Jesse’s interest in the body, and his care in examining it, unsettles the photographers, particularly the woman, who wonders, “Could that be sadness in his eyes. C’était impossible” (76).

While the inclusion of French serves a particular purpose—identifying that the questioning comes from the Paris Match correspondent’s perspective and later advancing the plot by providing Jesse with a translator for a particular French word that haunts him—it also emphasizes the incredulity with which both photographers meet Jesse’s reaction to the Vietnamese man’s body. The flashback (really a flashback within a flashback and thus maintaining the novel’s testing of temporal boundaries) that follows this scene is worth discussing at length, both because it highlights Véa’s emphasis on the willingness to know the Other, but also because it is the only narrative strand not directly connected to those involving other characters in the novel.68 A series of Jesse’s other

68 The encounter with Hong Trac, the prisoner, forms one of Jesse’s nightmares. It is clearly a source of the traumatic suffering Jesse endures throughout the novel, but, unlike the events of the second nightmare, which focus on the larger group of racially diverse soldiers in combat with Jesse and tie into Jesse’s present day role as defense attorney for Calvin/Biscuit Boy, this encounter with the enemy all but disappears from the text. Véa’s refusal to more closely connect it with the other narrative strands points to its significance in
memories follow this particular encounter, but those focus on the racially diverse American soldiers in combat with Jesse. However, this particular encounter further intervenes in a discourse of war that is traditionally white and American by refusing to dehumanize the enemy Other; instead, this encounter reframes the war in such a way that acknowledges it not only as an American one in a place called Vietnam but also as a war that took place between the diverse peoples of Vietnam and has shaped that culture as much as the culture of the United States.

Jesse’s reaction to the pile of corpses ultimately leads to a flashback to what is a common trope in Vietnam War representation, a structure of experience that George Mariscal argues is crucial for understanding race relations in the context of the Vietnam War: the encounter with the enemy. The pattern includes a pronouncement by the Vietnamese soldier—“You same-same me”—often followed by gestures toward brown skin. The pronouncement ignites self-reflection by the American soldier, who grows increasingly aware of the similarities between himself and his so-called enemy in both appearance and experience of life.69 This moment of recognizing the self in the Other is seemingly unique to soldiers of color, who were more likely to “bridge the cultural distance between themselves and the Vietnamese. For many GIs of color, the reality of daily life in Southeast Asia was hauntingly close to what their own lives had been in the United States” (Mariscal 36). Mariscal notes, for example, that many soldiers “came from

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69 See Mariscal's “Reading Chicano/a Writing about the American War in Vietnam” as well as his book Aztlan.
families of first- and second-generation Mexican agricultural workers” and were thus able to recognize similarities in the rural life of Vietnamese peasants who performed the country’s backbreaking cultivation of rice. Mariscal recounts that, while the end result of this recognition of the self in the Other ranges from simple curiosity to short-lived connection that loses meaning in a desensitization to violent surroundings, “in its most extreme form” the recognition “between the U.S. soldier of color and the Vietnamese could produce a ‘crossing over’ in which GIs considered abandoning or did abandon” the military to live alongside the Vietnamese (as Thomas Just does in Linda Hogan’s *People of the Whale*). In literary representation of the war, this moment of recognition is often fleeting but nonetheless provides an opportunity for characters and readers alike to question the separation between us and them that maintains support of a war based in notions of nationalism or patriotism and thus works to “interrogate traditional U.S. ethnocentrism and discourses of white supremacy” (Mariscal 42). Discourses of democracy used to rationalize the war become further undermined through the Vietnamese’s assertion “you same-same me” and the soldier of color’s recognition of their parallel conditions of racial and economic exploitation; the moment crystallizes the irony that American soldiers of color were, to use the words of historian James Westheider, “fighting on two fronts” as they fought against the Vietnamese to protect the same democratic ideals that were being denied to them by American political and social systems. For soldiers of color this recognition of and with an other Other often emphasized the racialized and racist undertones of the war and prompted the realization that “racism was as real an enemy” as Communist Vietnam—or perhaps even that the real enemy was not the Vietnamese, but their own country (6).
The flashback begins when the French photographer inquires of Jesse, “Do you know this soldier?” (Véa 77), a question that places him in a prison yard where a Vietnamese prisoner physically alienated from the other prisoners who taunt him captures Jesse’s attention and leads to their encounter: “Sergeant Jesse Pasadoble removed his helmet and flak jacket. [...] the North Vietnamese regular rose to his feet [...] and] without taking his eyes from those of the American soldier [...] began walking directly toward him.” The respect with which the men approach each other suspends all movement in the prison yard; prisoners and guards alike “focu[s] all their attention on two soldiers meeting at the fence” (78). The scene’s silence marks its significance and the encounter ultimately draws attention to the intersections of gender, race, and class. Jesse’s encounter with the enemy provides a complex depiction of a familiar trope. Although Jesse’s initial explanation—that he has “never seen an NVA this close and alive”—to the guards who question his increasing proximity to the prisoner indicates that Jesse’s gaze upon the prisoner will objectify him, the moment of “two soldiers meeting at the fence” begins with Jesse’s awareness of his own gaze and his recognition that the man he normally “glimpsed through the lens of a starlight scope” had previously existed only as a myth:

This was the man who could run full speed in the highland blackness with a rocket launcher on his back. Here was the man who ate next to nothing, who sent no letters home and received none. Here was the man with the better mythology: Americans are sent here to fight against an evil and indefinable thing called Communism; to fight for blue jeans and convertibles and full-color foldouts of big-breasted blondes. This man was
sent here to die—to expel the Japanese, the French, the Americans from the soil of his ancestors. His mythology contained less myth. (79)

Jesse’s reflection on the mythology that has brought two very different men to war directly addresses the flaws of the John Wayne mentality by exposing the superficiality of such a myth. In place of the Vietnamese enemy Jesse had been taught to see as “evil and indefinable,” he now sees a victim of a long history of imperial conflict and, in place of a heroic mission to end communism in favor of democracy, Jesse sees the superficiality of the freedoms (blue jeans, cars, and pin-up girls) used to rationalize the destruction of other human beings. Furthermore, the repetition of “here,” a word signifying both Jesse’s presence in Vietnam and his subsequent engagement with a particular human being, intensifies the moment in which Jesse comes to see the man behind the myth as a reality. Its opposite—there—does not enter the textual construction but, like its assumed referent (America), maintains a clear presence. For Jesse, the falsity of this constructed opposition between an American us and Vietnamese them becomes clear in his encounter with the prisoner, and the novel further criticizes such constructions through the soldiers’ supposings that follow in Jesse’s recollections of the war. While Jesse and the prisoner cannot transform the real barrier between them—the wire fence—they do begin to transgress the one constructed of myth, first by overcoming the language barrier that limits conversation to the prisoner’s “you same-same me” and disallows the kind of empathetic and identity-shifting conversation that Véra’s depiction of Jesse’s encounter with the enemy possesses. The friendship initiated from this conversation and the prisoner’s execution leads at least in part to the trauma and guilt haunting Jesse through much of the novel. Jesse’s perception of himself is grounded in his recognition
that, despite his awareness of his own and others’ marginalization, he cannot truly know the Other.

After discovering that they have French as a common language, Jesse grows excited and “an electric intensity” is visible on the prisoner’s face; the men’s reactions to their ability to communicate with one another transform the atmosphere and the two are soon laughing, “forgetting for a moment the war that had brought them together as combatants” (80). Véa takes the trope of the encounter with the enemy further by allowing Jesse a series of visits with the prisoner during which the men talk about “lighter subjects” such as “Mexican food, American jazz, and Brazilian soccer” until the fourth and final visit, during which the prisoner “asked something he had always wanted to ask an American” (80-81). This final encounter provides a view of the myth of America from the Vietnamese perspective, again insisting on the war as more than only an American experience. Specifically, the prisoner asks about conditions in the United States for people of color:

I am sorry to ask this question, mon ami, but I must. I know that we will never meet again, and I believe you to be an honest man. So I must ask. In the north of my country, the children are told in school that all the people of color in the United States live in a separate country. They are told that white Americans are rich and they throw thousands of gallons of milk into the ocean to spite the poor of the world. They are taught that teachers are not allowed to teach their students. Ces choses-là, sont-elles vraies? Are these things true? (81)
The apologetic tone of the question evokes sympathy and a genuine desire to separate fact from fiction and to unravel the myths that have guided the prisoner’s understanding of Americans. Jesse’s response, affirming American overabundance and waste and teachers who strike as “both protest and labor tactic,” leads to his summation that “what [Vietnamese] children have been taught is true, but it is not the truth” (81). Clearly, the conversation speaks to the difficulties in knowing and understanding the other without actual experience, which Véa’s novel works to counter by positing the role of the imagination in creating spaces for empathetic communication that enable knowledge of the other to exist beyond the realm of myth. Renny Christopher notes the problematic ways in which this myth has been captured in the canonical (white American male) representations of the war: “A mythology around the war has become the sum of American cultural understanding. Americans experienced only what their culture prepared them to experience,” which amounts to renditions of “the war in familiar terms—the Americans are the good guys in a cowboy mode, and the Vietnamese are evil ‘Japs’ or little brown brothers. Viet Nam becomes the heart of darkness, seen exclusively in terms of jungle […] ‘Vietnam’ the war becomes a personal experience, devoid of political content and devoid of sense” (6). Véa’s narrative, however, takes an encounter between two individuals and uses it to expand personal connections outwards. War provides a context within which personal and national myths collide, and during war—especially in moments like Jesse’s encounter with the prisoner—can shatter these myths through the traumatic reality of the experience.

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70 The novel’s use of languages other than English is important. Here, the french phrases remind readers that the characters are not conversing in English and gestures toward the longer history of Vietnam’s wars, including that against French colonialism.
In particular, the trauma that Jesse suffers from this experience comes from his inability to protect the prisoner from further alienation or, as Jesse discovers upon seeing the prisoner’s body in the pile of corpses, from an unjust execution. Equally as traumatic is Jesse’s realization that, despite his ability to connect with the prisoner on the basis of their Otherness, as an American he is complicit in the prisoner’s death and as an individual he is powerless to change the larger systems that alienate and destroy. Jesse’s response to the question about whether he lives in a separate country, to “place his right index finger on the center of his own forehead [and say] ‘We do,’” establishes the men’s mutual feelings of alienation within their own communities and nations. Though Jesse actually lives in the same geographical space as other Americans, he mentally exists in a much different space.\(^71\) He is aware of his marginalized status, just as the prisoner’s empathetic response derives from his identity as a Chàm, a people “subjugated by the Vietnamese,” and thus the cause for his feelings of alienation as well as the reason why fellow prisoners do not converse with him and why the prisoner believes he will be targeted for interrogation leading to his death (81). This moment of encounter highlights racial and ethnic diversity within Vietnamese culture, dispels the American myth that “Vietnamese do not value life” by emphasizing the prisoner’s fear of death, and establishes a connection between the dead body in the pile and the flashback that contains this encounter. However, having met and befriended the man behind the myth does not separate Jesse from his role as an American: Jesse struggles to see any truth behind the

\(^{71}\) Jesse’s feeling of living in a separate space is directly connected to his “supposings,” the survival tactic that temporarily takes the soldiers out of the war in Vietnam and, as indicated by the supposings that continue in America after the war with Padre, Jesse, Calvin and Carolina, places Jesse’s mental/emotional location in the imagination, which contributes to the novel’s magical realist impulses. He (and the others) exists in a space that does not actually exist—a separate country.
prisoner’s belief that his impending death will be an unjust one at the hands of American soldiers. Jesse reflects that “the anonymity and heat of combat were one thing, but to kill an unarmed prisoner in a secured area was murder. There was no hot blood here” (83). The prisoner, on the other hand, has accepted as fact that he will be interrogated, tortured with a screwdriver “plac[ed] into the ear and driv[en] through the brain with a carpenter’s hammer”; he thus “us[es] all his powers of concentration to shift his memories around so that the first to go as the hammer fell would be his days as an officer, his rousing stupid days of ambition and war lust” and the last would be images of his wife (84). The prisoner chooses to focus on his love for his wife and to transport himself to her through his memories, ultimately leaving him unable to continue his conversation with Jesse: “The words and visions in his mind were too scrambled now for communication with the living.” The final images of the prisoner provide readers an image of a usually objectified enemy that evokes compassion before the text returns to the pile of corpses on the side of the road, where the man Jesse so attentively observes in death is revealed to be the prisoner with whom he developed a friendship. 72 Returning to the pile of bodies and to the French correspondent’s question as to whether Jesse knew the soldier, the novel depicts the impact of the encounter on Jesse. The bodies left on the side of the road for the “edification” of the villagers and Jesse’s discovery of the prisoner’s body among them leads Jesse to his own revelation, expressed in his answer to the correspondent’s question regarding whether Jesse knew the man: “No […] but he surely knew me” (85). Jesse’s response is somewhat cryptic but implies Jesse’s recognition of his own naïveté,

72 The bullet holes in the body were “meant to simulate the effects of a firefight somewhere out in the bush” and Jesse notices “a narrow rectangular slot,” caused, it can be assumed, by the screwdriver during interrogation by the Americans and which signals that Jesse’s promise to the prisoner that he would not be killed proved false.
his belief that some semblance of the order and justice upon which the war had been justified would be maintained.\textsuperscript{73}

This encounter with the Other leads to Jesse’s recognition of his lack of awareness of much of what was happening during the war as well as to a loss of innocence and a distrust of humanity. This shattering of his personal myths—upheld subconsciously in his belief in the possibility of American democratic ideals or national myth—contributes to the trauma of war experienced by so many soldiers as they work to reconcile their dual roles as citizens and soldiers. For Jesse, however, this duality is further complicated by Jesse’s identification as a Chicano. As noted previously, Barvosa indicates that “social hierarchies of race and ethnicity can structure multiple identity and render some combinations of identities so contradictory that they are painful to live and experience” (56). Jesse mourns his loss by walking through a Vietnamese village, where he sees an old woman who, upon meeting Jesse’s gaze, “shivered at what she saw and quickly turned away,” as if disgusted or fearing what she sees (86). When Jesse says hello to the woman in Vietnamese, however, she hears a different intonation and realizes that “the simmering redness in his eyes had not been hatred” and says a “silent prayer” for Jesse. Her gesture reinforces the humanity of the enemy and suggests that what “had not been hatred” in Jesse’s eyes may have been love. Such a notion of love shared by those expected to be enemies parallels the sense of comradeship Jesse seeks as he prepares to enter heavy fire on a hill in Laos. While images of his Chàm friend fill his

\textsuperscript{73} John Alba Cutler suggests that the meeting with the prisoner “underscores Jesse’s complicity in the violence of war” and that “no amount of intercultural sympathy […] can erase the stain of ‘American’ from Mexican American” (595). While I largely agree with Cutler’s analysis in terms of Jesse’s realization of his complicity, I read Jesse’s larger sense of responsibility is toward the relationships between others and that he is able to reimagine identity through “supposing” with the other soldiers.
mind, Jesse realizes that “the thoughts weighing upon his soul were far too much to bear alone” and, while unclear whether Jesse “would ever confide in” his comrades, the narrative clearly emphasizes the need for community and the potential it has for providing solace (86).

The trauma that Jesse suffers is multifaceted, including the trauma of witnessing war’s violence and dehumanization as well as the trauma that comes from a shattering of personal and collective myths. Trauma narratives often retell the specific incidents of the traumatic experience, working to arrange the seemingly incomprehensible into a knowable form. Creating narratives to explain the trauma has at least two functions: to help the survivor make sense of what has happened to him/her and to bear witness or to testify to the truthfulness and atrocity of the trauma. Kali Tal suggests that trauma survivors often view “the process of storytelling as a personally reconstitutive act and expres[s] the hope that it will also be a socially reconstitutive act—changing the order of things as they are and working to prevent the enactment of similar horrors in the future” (230-31). The challenge of narrating trauma, however, is that the trauma itself cannot be adequately represented—it is beyond words and images. This is why, according to Tal, “the impact of the survivor’s message—that his or her traumatic suffering was seemingly without purpose, arbitrary, outside the framework of meaning—simply cannot be absorbed” by the audience (231). Perhaps this is why in Gods Go Begging Jesse never recounts his full experience with the Vietnamese prisoner and instead engages in a type of storytelling that works to uncover the arbitrariness of the conditions—those intersections of race, class, and gender—surrounding and influencing the experience and its effect on his sense of self.
Jesse’s immediate method of coping with what he witnesses involves re-joining his fellow soldiers in another traumatic experience, the previously alluded to firefight on the hill near Laos. Embedded in that trauma, however, are Jesse’s supposings, a form of storytelling that works to rearrange and revise the collective trauma experienced by people of color in the United States from its inception. The supposings reveal the arbitrariness of the scientific, social, and political discourses that have upheld systems of racism, but they also serve to reveal the ways in which “those who have experienced trauma see it as connected across history to other atrocities” (Tal 243). Véa’s novel, by portraying a predominantly non-white group of soldiers who establish a community based on the shared trauma of war and communicate that trauma through their imaginative revision of history, exposes the dominant culture’s erasure of the suffering of people of color. Often in trauma narratives, as Tal suggests, “the pain of marginal people is not American pain; the American character is male, white, able-bodied, and over twenty-one […]. National myth does not have to encompass atrocities against marginal communities, it can simply ignore them” (246). Véa’s novel, however, refuses to ignore the suffering of marginalized communities and uses the soldiers’ supposings to draw connections between them, to make them more visible, and to depict a model of a cross-cultural community engaged in a creative process that offers an alternative to white American individualism. In other words, the supposings work toward Barvosa’s notion of “self-craft” since the stories provide an opportunity for the soldiers to use inventory and discernment as they accept or reject certain elements of their personal and national identities. As Jesse reflects, their “conversations after great sorrow were now a necessity of life. They often took strange and unforeseeable twists. The discussions had a life of
their own. They had to” (Véa 102). That the supposings have “a life of their own” suggests that they are living entities and possess the power to combat the reality of war and its underlying forces.

The men’s revisions of history begin with the elimination of slavery, the effect of which is an absence of jazz as it is currently known. Instead, “jazz would have been born in Morocco, where French, Spanish and African rhythms would have collided. Billie Holiday, under another name, would’ve sung her songs in French” (Véa 99). From this imagining comes one of the novel’s repeated phrases, “everything turns on jazz,” which is connected to another key concept of the supposings involving Jesse’s assertion that “Mexico is a mestizo culture, a racially mixed cultura and the United States is not” (113).74 In other words, the creativity of jazz music (as a genre fused of multiple other genres) comes from its ability to incorporate diversity and to embrace the fluidity (or improvisation in jazz music) that comes with the uncertainty of a group made up of individuals who all inhabit multiple identities. Cutler argues that “connoting syncretism, jazz becomes a metaphor for irreducible complexity, which relates to the concept of mestizaje” (595). The supposings “revers[e] the deleterious consequences of both Spanish colonialism and American frontier mythology” (Cutler 596) and imagine cross-cultural coalitions between oppressed people of Mexico, Scotland and Ireland that undermine notions of white supremacy that position the United States as a superpower (Véa 117). While Tal indicates that audiences can never fully understand the experiences of the traumatized, Véa’s novel’s focus on communally shaped narratives posits

74 Cutler also discusses the novel’s incorporation of jazz music as an important motif with respect to the diverse communities in the novel. See “Disappeared Men: Chicana/o Authenticity and the American War in Viet Nam”
storytelling as possessing a particular power to shift in awareness and provide a point of access to understanding the kind of suffering endured in traumatic historical moments, especially by those whose voices have been previously silenced. Finally, because the supposings work to integrate the vast backgrounds of this diverse group of soldiers without privileging any one of their respective racial, ethnic, religious, or any other element of identity, they position Jesse and his soldiers within a process that Barvosa terms revisionary living, which stresses “motivational self-constructs in a way that avoids the subordination of others” (178).

Jesse carries this rearrangement of the suppressed memories forward when defending his clients and, in so doing, works to restore the ideals that were for him non-existent in the Vietnam War. An advocate for multiply marginalized people (almost all of his clients reside on the margins of society by virtue of their race and/or socioeconomic class, often marking them as doubly oppressed, and they are all accused of violent crimes), Jesse asserts that his profession as a defense attorney is as much a matter of choice as it is a matter of his racial identity. To his case investigator, Edmund Kazuso Oasa, a Hawaiian man of Japanese descent, Jesse remarks, “We start doing our jobs—sometimes hating the client, but doing our jobs. Then something happens. We stumble upon the humanity in even the worst people” (255). Oasa, however, suggests that stumbling upon humanity is not necessarily accidental since it first requires a choice: “you have to believe in the principle first. Somebody’s got to disbelieve the evidence” (255). Oasa’s statement is thematically important: it highlights the role that critical attention to perceived realities (or, in other words, the ability to imagine otherwise when faced with truth or fact) plays in actualizing change, but this statement also signifies an
act of will and the possibility of agency and thus stresses the work that must be done to energize the potential in multiple identity. Jesse’s response expands on this mentality: “It still boils down to one thing: Where in the world do I want to sit? I can’t go sit with the prosecutor and the cops and the immense power of the state. I can’t sit with the bailiff, putting dark people, people like you and me, in and out of holding cells day in and day out” (255, my emphasis). While perhaps just a rhetorical question to mark the immensity of his decision to constantly defend those suspected of horrific crimes, Jesse’s questioning of his place in the world posits his subject position within a larger context, one predicated upon systems of power that maintain racial difference. Further, Véa’s construction of Jesse’s response first in terms of desire (where he “wants” to sit) and then ability (where he “can’t” sit) signals a tension between allowances and inclinations as well as between whites and nonwhites, given that Jesse appears to align himself and Eddy with criminals, as “dark people,” in opposition to the “immense power of the state,” presumably white. Though grounded in very real limitations placed upon racial minorities, Jesse’s “can’t” reads more like “won’t,” as if aligning himself against “dark people” would be unnatural.75 Jesse’s ability to “disbelieve the evidence” is thus both a choice and an inclination based in what seems to be a connection based in racial

75 Importantly, the novel reflects further ambiguity through Jesse’s (appointed) defense of Richard Skelley, aka the Supreme Being, a white supremacist. Though Jesse rejects Skelley’s racism, his ability to follow the evidence reveals Jesse’s ability to compartmentalize, avoid stereotypical thinking and recognize that, while guilty of racism, Skelley is not guilty of the crime with which he has been charged. In his daily interactions with his clients and coworkers, Jesse enacts what Barvosa argues is a form of “interpersonal politics [that] requires no broad public forum in order for it to produce effective contributions to collective political life” (224). In his conversations with others, Jesse chooses to confront the larger forces that have lead to his own and others’ marginalization and thus continuously engages himself and leads others in the processes of inventory, discernment, and revisionary living. I would argue that, in addition to other and perhaps more obvious examples discussed throughout this chapter, Jesse’s interactions with Skelley lead him to notify the prison guards that Calvin is being attacked by fellow prisoners, despite the fact that Calvin, as a black American, belongs to the racial category Skelley despises. Though his reasoning is skewed and he maintains his racist views, the scene reveals a moment of resistance to his usual mode of thinking and testifies to the potential Jesse has to effect change.
difference, despite the fact that his clients are often not likeable, as evidenced by his
genralization about his typical client: “There he is, disheveled, toothless, smelly, and
inarticulate. He’s been accused of something horrible. Maybe he’s an old time heroin
addict, or maybe he’s a lost peasant from Guatemala or he’s a seventeen-year-old black
kid who’s been stripped of his cultural memory. Next to him is an empty chair. I know
where I belong” (255). At the same time, however, Jesse’s defense of the Supreme Being,
a white supremacist, points to Jesse’s dedication to the truth and his ability to examine
the many layers of a story. Jesse’s sense of where he belongs, then, is also related to his
awareness that he has the ability to help others, particularly those who have lost
something.

The sense of belonging that Jesse finds defending his clients, however, eludes the
Padre, the chaplain assigned to Jesse’s platoon in Vietnam. The Padre’s lack of a sense of
belonging resonates in the many identities he takes on in the novel: born as Guillermo
Calavera, he is also known as Guillermo Moises Carvajal, Lieutenant William Calvert,
Vô Dahn, and Mr. Homeless. These variations of his name, and the histories that they
capture, allow the Padre to function in the novel as a testament to the complexity of
identity. Like Jesse, the Padre also experiences a shattering of personal and national
myths embedded not only in the trauma of war but also in personal trauma directly
related to his emerging sense of identity. The Padre’s identity is always suspended in
uncertainty—for himself inasmuch as he rejects and/or forgets several of his identities
and for readers because the narrative does not fully establish that his multiple identities
are indeed one person until the closing chapters.
The novel’s first lengthy characterization of the Padre comes in a moment of crisis during the war, at which point his several identities come into conflict and lead the Padre to assume more identities. The Padre has a confrontation with his Colonel regarding the violence on the hill by Laos and his desire to be removed from the line of fire. Readers learn that he is a Unitarian, once was a Catholic, and several other vague tidbits about his background, including that he had “once lived on a hill,” terrain that in the novel has come to represent violence and suffering and that thereby suggests that the Padre has experienced similar violence and suffering prior to Vietnam (125). Cloaked in a rant about the soldiers’ supposing, the Padre’s conversation with the Colonel reveals important hints about his true identity: “Can you speak a single goddamn word of Gaelo-Aztecan? Can you? Do you have any idea what happened to Oliver Cromwell’s heart? Did you know I was never a Catholic? I am an insect. That is my denomination! Does someone like you know the first thing about Moroccan jazz? Can you write a poem in Ladino? I didn’t think you could. I was never a Catholic, sir. I was never a Mennonite. I was a spider. It’s a blue ballet out there, colonel, and it’s men like you who are the perverts” (128). The rant offers a direct criticism of the notion that war makes men out of boys: the “blue ballet” referenced here is earlier explained by A.B. Flyer as “a French phrase that means lewd acts with underage boys” and as “all the war adds up to” and simultaneously repeated in Vietnamese by a Montagnard soldier, who refers to the war as a “form of pornography,” while Jesse alters the phrase in reference to one of his defense cases (96, 65). Repeating the phrase here, the Padre joins a diverse community of men who oppose the war as a trauma that defiles humanity and destroys innocence. Opposing the war as a blue ballet rejects the notion of the war as securing democratic principles
such as freedom and equality, especially considering that each of these men inhabits the margins of their respective societies and all suffer immensely. Perhaps most importantly, this initial characterization reveals the Padre’s mental state. As the Padre questions the colonel’s knowledge base with respect to the histories created through the soldiers’ supposings, the Padre’s conceptualization of himself as a spider positions him as a man who has lost touch with concrete reality, a notion emphasized in later narrative strands depicting the rest of his time in Vietnam and his eventual return to the United States. The narrative eventually portrays this split with reality as a positive influence on the Padre’s sense of self and on his ability to reach out to other Others within his world. Delaying this recognition for readers, however, forces them to tease out the nature of the Padre’s state of mind and to piece together the meaning of the Padre’s multiple identities. The narrative positions the Padre in several categories simultaneously, suggesting the potential (both productive and traumatic) within a fluid and shifting identity.

The Padre’s experience of reality is crucial to understanding how the novel positions him and develops his self-recognition. The fragmented rant points to how the violence Padre witnesses on the hill in Laos evokes the identity trauma he continues to endure. In reprimanding the Padre for leaving his post without permission, the colonel indicates that the Padre’s “ethnic origin seems to be a bit muddled” and warns him about his participation in the soldiers’ supposings, suggesting that he stick to the soldiers’ “naïve questions about sex before marriage” lest “folks in the chaplains’ corps will begin to think you’re one of them effete papists who’s lapsed into linguistics…or maybe they’ll think you’re a Jew” (122, 127). The warning, highlighting the Colonel’s white ethnocentrism, strikes a nerve in the Padre, who, the novel later reveals, is a Jew, forced
for much of his life to hide this aspect of his identity. The Padre’s role as a closeted Other within the military is an important aspect of his characterization. Like Jesse, the Padre’s ability to identify with those who have been marginalized enables him to empathize with other marginalized figures, such as Calvin and other Potrero Hill youths and Mai. Further, the colonel’s insistence that the Padre forget about the “reason” for the war and instead focus on “a rationale…something you can put into a sermon” (126), like telling parents of deceased soldiers that “their son died bravely and with a movie star’s sneer on his lips” (127), sends the Padre into a new reality “beyond reason and beyond hope” (126). The Padre essentially refuses his order to propagate the aforementioned John Wayne mythology of a “happy warrior mentality” in which “fear, doubt, and self-reflection have no part” and by which the colonel himself seems to live (Herzog 21).

After the firefight on the Laos hillside, the Padre concludes that “none of this hellhole adds up to democracy, and none of this means God” (Vea 126). He refuses, to use once again Anderegg’s interpretation of the John Wayne myth, “to reenact as a simplicity something that was always undeniably complex” (28). While the Padre does return to the field temporarily, he soon after abandons his men when he walks away from the war and begins a long, primarily solitary and somewhat bizarre, journey back to the United States.

Associated with the unreal, the surreal, and the unexplainable, the Padre’s character serves as a point of connection between characters and creates a community across times and places. He also represents the transformative space between the magic and the real where re-memory functions. Indeed, the primary section of the novel narrating a typical battle scene is told through the Padre’s perspective, and his perspective embraces a warped reality that calls into question boundaries and the status quo. For the
Padre, the hill in Vietnam—and war more generally—represents the place where “the sensate had been placed in the same space as the senseless” (90), where past and present, life and death converge. Inhabiting these multiple geographical, temporal, and personal positions enables the Padre’s narrative to draw connections between the Vietnam War and other historical moments; as such, the parameters of the war’s aftermath increase, reinforcing the novel’s attention to the perpetuity of the war’s legacies. For example, the firefight on the hill is described as causing damage to the physical landscape that mirrors the effect it has on the Padre’s mental landscape:

ephemeral flowers of concussive flame like red trumpet vines [to flash] into bloom, then [to recede], to quickly wither shut in accelerated time, in savage salvos of impossible time. […] Somehow the age-old laws of geological time had been reversed in an unnatural, confounding instant. […] two groups of men had met on one face of this hill, and their savage intentions had left every tree limb and twig disfigured. Unwatered since the last monsoon rains, the small hill of dry and cracked earth had been sickened to nausea by this force feeding of burned sulfur and human fluids. Here and there intrepid flowers persisted between fissures and foxholes, their soft petals and thin stems choked shut by the savage spray, the crimson effluence of exit wounds. Against their will, the living poppies masqueraded as roses. (87-88)

This scene sends the Padre into despair and causes him to leave his men dead and dying without ceremony. The scene encapsulates war’s ultimate destruction, yet flowers emerge from the blood-soaked land; there is a sense of the extraordinary, where time progresses
unnaturally, both forward and backward, in way that evokes beauty. The Padre’s
narrative takes readers through the atrocity of war in a conflation of time and space. For
example, after the death of one of the young soldiers, the Padre reflects that “someday,
 somewhere, fingers were already reaching out to touch cold, dark marble, to follow the
deep, chiseled letters of his engraved name. Somewhere a flag was being folded, corner
to corner. Now it is being placed into the hands of a woman” (92-93). The Padre’s
narrative simultaneously moves between the present and the future and the general and
the specific. The ceremony described in this portion of the Padre’s narrative—the ritual
of the American flag given to a mother or widow as a symbol of the lost soldier’s
sacrifice—is one of many empty gestures that prompt the Padre to re-evaluate his role in
the war and abandon his men. These gestures include the form letters sent to grieving
parents and spouses, the ceremonies on Memorial or Veteran’s Day, and, though it causes
the Padre considerable anguish not to perform them, the last prayers for the dying and the
dead. The concrete reality of these ceremonies contrast the surreal effect that the firefight
has on the landscape; whereas the physical devastation is described with poetic beauty,
the personal devastation is met with empty language and gestures.

The Padre’s suffering and inability to perform his duty derives not from disbelief
in faith, however, but rather from a growing recognition that his own life, his own faith
“was nothing but a lie” (92). So while Cutler suggests that the Padre’s walking away
from the war “attests to […] a tenuous agency, the power of an individual to resist the
narratives imposed upon him,” the Padre’s disappearance can also be read as a response
to the trauma he suffers in Vietnam as well as to the suffering he endured as a child
forced to hide his Jewish identity (597). This suffering causes the Padre to lose control
over himself, denying him the kind of agency necessary to act in a positive way for himself and the others he is charged to assist. While Cutler describes the Padre as performing a type of resistance, his desertion is completed in a state of confusion and pain. Consequently, his ability “to resist the narratives imposed on him” comes first from a collision with his past, in a prolonged act of rememory that eventually enables him to resuppose his identity. The Padre must first confront and interrogate the narratives that have been thrust upon him before he can reject them. The Padre seems to be circling between stages of self-inventory and discernment, not yet able to participate in the same kind of deliberate revisionary living in which Jesse participates.

Faced with the horror of war, the Padre literally walks away from it. The Padre’s collision with his past begins when finds himself floating in a dreamstate on the Mekong River. He realizes that “His world back home in America was a land obsessed with comfort; with the avoidance of pain…at any cost” whereas in war,

there was no comfort […] and those boys, like the slaves from Africa, like the hopeless Indians, like true artists and the poor, had been chosen to bear the discomfort of their country, to bear the loss. He was intimate with it. After all, the Unitarian had been born in Mexico, a land whose primary sensibility is that of profound loss. Everyone in Mexico felt it. The sense of loss had its roots in the time of the conquest: the loss of a hundred native religions, the loss of an entire race of peoples” (196). Ruminating on the loss deeply felt by the “the colored boys, the Okies, and the spics” who were “far behind, still fighting Vietnam and America at the same time” (197), the
chaplain’s state of mind moves from the present to the past as he draws connections between various marginalized groups.

Near death and emotionally and spiritually drained, the Padre finds that “memories and conceits sprouted and died within his mind in random but natural order, flowering in a single instant and gone to seed in the next” (195). In his current mental state and surrounded by destruction and violence, the Padre’s previously suppressed memories emerge and alert the reader to the Padre’s past identity, one which he is still unable to integrate into his present sense of self. For example, as he passes a “hastily hidden pile of NVA dead” the Padre

blessed them all with sweeping motion of his hand. It was not a learned but an uncommitted wave. That would have been a staunchly Unitarian gesture. The pain behind the movement of the hand was not the staid, bloodless echo of an ancient passion—it certainly was not Catholic. Rather, it was a calm gesture of acknowledgment and acceptance—as though the horror of these fields was little more than yet another blow struck by an old, familiar foe. For some unknown reason the chaplain felt like singing, but singing was not the word that properly described his desire. He wished to chant. There was a dyslexic song of stilted, unfamiliar rhythms and unrhymed words that stuck in his gorge and could not rise. (195)

The desire to chant signals the suppression of the hidden and forbidden religious services practiced by his family in Mexico. Significantly, the Padre’s rememory is initiated when he recognizes the suffering of another Other—the pile of NVA dead—and when he
remembers the soldiers of color he has abandoned. While not immediately able to recognize the desire to chant as linked to his Jewishness, the Padre realizes that “hiding had been passed down in the blood, as had the ability to spin homonyms in three languages” (214). The Padre and his family had been forced to hide beneath rumors started by the Mexican community and to speak in code to hide their religious affiliation: “Now he knew that tesoro meant Torah. [...] The old well on his father’s farm, the aguada, had, in truth, been the hiding place of the Haggadah. Culture had been buried in those holes, artifacts of the chosen” (214). This “spinning of homonyms” accounts for the “dyslexic” and “stilted” song that emerges as the Padre blesses the NVA dead. For the Padre, a sense of identity is dependent on his relationships with others. This dependency is first evident in his youth when the town gossips spin fabulous stories about the boy “descending from a line of insects,” born to his spider-turned-human father and a butterfly mother (205). The gossips’ stories, the narrative indicates, were inspired by the family’s secrecy, their difference, and their rumored miserliness—all factors that place the Padre and his family on the outer margins of an already marginalized community—but as a child the Padre internalized these stories and his narrative thus presents them as his reality. The Padre’s lack of belonging causes an erasure of identity through hiding and forgetting; he is unable to come to terms with his identity until his sense of himself unravels in the wake of the trauma he suffers at war. Yet, the experience of war is traumatic in part because the Padre becomes part of a more supportive community in the company of Jesse and the other soldiers. The soldiers’ stories, their supposings, function as a coping mechanism for the Padre but they also serve to complicate the Padre’s sense of self: as they revise and recreate various histories, the supposings reveal the
constructedness of categories of identity based on nation and religion and lead the Padre to conclude that “his own religious education [was] naïve and insulated” (117).

Consequently, the Padre collides with the past via the stories of his childhood and the soldiers’ supposing in a way that is both disruptive and productive. The Padre’s identity is perplexing, both to him and to readers, because it resists a definitive shape and constantly moves between the real and the unreal, frequently presenting the bizarre as ordinary—he communicates with wild animals, has a “hopeless discussion” with a decapitated Korean man, and relives the myths created about his family in Mexico, for example (205). Readers experience plural worlds simultaneously as the Padre moves forward and backward in time and shifts perspectives as he encounters fragments of his multiple personas, both real and imagined.

More than adding narrative interest, these magical realist impulses in the Padre’s story connect distant historical moments to one another and blur boundary lines the novel works to establish as confining. As Farris and Zamora indicate, magical realist texts “often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among” plural worlds and are thus able to envision a more fluid existence (5). The Padre exists in a liminal space encompassing not only multiple temporal and geographical planes but also multiple identities; thus, he is constantly crossing different nations, ethnicities, and languages. As the Padre faces the trauma of Vietnam and encounters re-memory, this constant shifting of time, place, and subjectivity enables him to free himself from the kind of personal and national myths that close individuals off to one another and prohibit collectivity and cross-cultural community. Although the Padre initially compartmentalizes the various aspects of his identity, he is eventually able to embrace a position of multiple identity that puts
him at ease with himself and others. As Edwina Barvosa-Carter suggests, “the openness and durability of multiple identity allows people to create, internalize, and inhabit new and/or transformed identifications while maintaining their existing identities. This, in turn, enables a synergistic process of identity (trans)formation and community building. In this process, new or transformed identifications and communities can become the basis for political coalitions aimed at social change” (123).

Multiple identity requires a fluidity that is represented by the setting of the Padre’s initial encounters with rememory: the Mekong River. The river sets the stage for the meandering sense of time and space that defines the Padre’s narrative. It absorbs much of what passes through and above it: “The river that flows beneath American gunboats has seen the Mongols, the Burmans, the Toungoo and Chakri dynasties. It has heard the names beneath the names: ancient Upper Chenla, Lower Chenla and the eternal Kingdom of Champa. Now it has heard of Watts, Echo Park, Buttermilk Bottom, and Staten Island. Now the river has heard Janis Joplin and Smokey Robinson” (193). The description of the river highlights the historical diversity of Southeast Asia and the cultural mixing that influences those passing over and through it. Infusing the music of Janis Joplin into the river’s history, the description alludes to the cultural mixing within and evolution of blues music as well as war protest associated with music of the Vietnam era. Even more importantly, however, this allusion echoes the novel’s recurring phrase, that everything turns on jazz, and thereby emphasizes the potential in the spaces where multiple groups meet, fuse, and produce powerful cultural forms. Also notable, the description of the river references the Cham people, thus drawing a connection to the prisoner of war in Jesse’s narrative, as well as American places that represent diverse
spaces and highlight racial and economic turmoil. The river thus illuminates the ways in which the Padre’s journey underscores the complexity of personal identity and calls attention to the danger of myths often propagated in war (the John Wayne myth, for example, or the reduction of the Vietnamese people into two groups: North and South, or, more abstractly, good and evil. These myths oversimplify or altogether ignore the nuances of racial and ethnic identities and often devolve into stereotypical and racist generalizations that interfere with cross cultural community building.

While the descriptions of the river point to its symbolic nature and serve aesthetic purpose, the Padre’s narrative—linked to various times and places through such symbols and allusive language—is simultaneously grounded in a material reality where race, violence, and suffering often intersect. A prime example of this intersection is evidenced by a rememory that takes the Padre “beyond Chihuahua, beyond the hill near Laos” where he dreams of a future “long sea voyage in an overcrowded boat. He had visions of salt burning in his wounds, of thin chicken broth, wretched sea sickness, and the acrid smell of living bodies pressed against one another” (205). Though the narrative indicates that the Padre’s visions are dreams, it later presents them as a reality: the Padre spends several years as a refugee in Thailand, to which he, like thousands of Vietnamese victims of the war looking for a fresh start, traveled by boat in harsh conditions. This journey of the so-called boat people is familiar in Vietnam War representation, which often depicts desperate Vietnamese who seek refuge in the United States and go on to live the

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76 Watts, once Mexican farm land, became a predominantly black neighborhood in Los Angeles during the migration of the 1940s and was the site of race riots during the Vietnam era. Buttermilk Bottom, also known as Blackbottom, an historically poor black neighborhood in Atlanta, was devastated by crime and urban redevelopment during the same period. Staten Island looks out to the symbol of U.S. freedom and diversity, the Statue of Liberty, while Echo Park is known for its diversity and creative output.
American dream. Importantly, this description of the boat journey is not immediately (nor ever definitively) identified as the Padre’s experience in Thailand; coupled with the descriptor “beyond,” the passage instead invites readers to think beyond the geographical or temporal boundaries of the Vietnam War to its aftermath and to other moments in history and groups of people. In *Gods Go Begging* the journey of the boat people parallels that of the Middle Passage, complete with images of wailing and dying children, “breasts drained dry and of burials at sea,” “of concertina wire and tents, of overseers and the overseen,” and “the cruel dominion of male flesh over female flesh” (206). Especially in American literature, images of the Middle Passage have come to underscore the horrors of slavery and to represent the utmost in transnational human destruction. By participating in this literary tradition, *Gods Go Begging* inserts itself as a novel belonging to this category but also insists that pieces of American history do not belong to particular groups. Instead, those pieces of history are shared not only by the overseers and the overseen but by the larger community, which must take responsibility for the outcomes and aftermath of the historical moment. The slaves who survived the Middle Passage did not enter into an American or any other dream but rather experienced a relentless nightmare of objectification and violence, the repercussions of which continue to be felt. Like the Vietnam War, slavery lurks as a spectre in American nationhood. Linking these two distant moments troubles notions of a comfortable American identity because of the violence and domination at its core, making clear that these forces remain present as markers of American identity, as indicated by the way in which the legacies of Vietnam are reflected in the violence and marginalization of Portrero Hill’s youth. For the Padre—
and for readers—this narrative of American identity is not one that can be ignored and the narrative does not allow for it to be suppressed, deflected, or otherwise minimized.

*Gods Go Begging* depicts its characters as survivors of historical traumas linked at the intersection race and violence. Thus, Kali Tal’s suggestion that “survivor narratives are linked across topic lines” and marked by three characteristics, “the experience of trauma, the urge to bear witness, and a sense of community” (217-218), is useful in considering why the novel decenters the Chicano perspective and incorporates other diverse peoples, places, and times. By positioning the Padre’s experience of postwar suffering on the same temporal plane as slave trafficking of earlier centuries, the novel does not suggest that his suffering is the same as or equivalent to that of slaves; instead, it provides a point of access for others to enter into the pain and suffering so as to broaden the community of empathetic understanding and move toward collective healing. In the novel, this community is comprised not only of Chicano/as but of African Americans, Jews, Vietnamese, and Vietnamese Americans, as well as a host of other racial, ethnic, and religious communities. As such, the characters are able to reimagine their identities and move into, or at least toward, communities that can resist the power dynamics that divide and conquer by creating cross cultural coalitions.

Rather than reducing the war to comparative metaphors, as Tal claims Vietnam War literary critics and non-veteran writers often do, the historical parallels and cross cultural comparisons in the Padre’s narrative instead expand the reality of the war so as to include the diversity of those who fell victim to it. In so doing, the novel does not merely depict soldiers of color and their experiences; rather, *Gods Go Begging* calls attention to the ways in which myths of national identity are grounded in the same discourses of
power that initiate and maintain war, both at home and abroad. These power dynamics also relegate people of difference to the margins where they are often forgotten and disempowered. Myths of American national identity are built upon false notions of democracy, and commonplace myths in Vietnam War representation—like that of the frontier and John Wayne—presuppose male whiteness and aggression, neither of which the Padre feels he possesses or desires. For the Padre, however, his separation of self from these myths, enabled once he faces the trauma he has experienced, allows him to reposition himself and assume a position of agency for himself and for others. As the Padre inhabits these various spaces, he bears witness to and experiences the suffering of a diverse range of people. This experience means that the Padre inhabits an “open, fluid, yet durable identity structure” and as such positions him in a space where “new identifications can be strategically generated to unify previously unconnected groups of people” (Barvosa-Carter 123). In other words, the Padre finds the ability to reject some structures of identity and embrace others, enabling him to reach out to other Others in ways he found himself unable to do during the war.

Interestingly, this repositioning happens for the Padre after a bout of amnesia, during which he enters into a relationship with Mai, who calls herself Cassandra and names the Padre Vo Dahn, meaning “nameless” in Vietnamese. As he enters a stage of remembering, the Padre no longer avoids or works to hide aspects of his identity. In some ways, his uncertainty of identity—indicated by Cassandra/Mai’s name choice and later by his Potrero Hill label of “Mr. Homeless”—enables the Padre to learn more about himself and to open himself to the emotional vulnerabilities that eventually lead him to effect
change in his world.  

Despite the destruction he has endured, the Padre’s relationship with Mai allows him to find “new beliefs to believe” (Véa 206), a statement that echoes Rushdie’s notion that power comes from the ability to retell and rethink the “stories that dominate [one’s life]” (480). With new beliefs to believe, the Padre retells the story of the war by including a “glance between lovers [that] will rebuild all that radar and artillery can detect and destroy” and the power of “the small people who would come out to rebuild when the machines of war were stilled” (Véa 206). The novel’s sequencing suggests that the Padre’s ability to think new thoughts comes in part from his cross-cultural relationship with Mai. By pairing the Padre’s revision of the war’s aftermath with a memory of lovemaking with Mai, the novel highlights the power that comes from the Padre’s ability to love another and the creation of a space in which both the Padre and Mai are able to face the trauma of their pasts together and thus able to move into futures in which each comes to play a supportive and empowering role for other Others in the community of Potrero Hill.

Specifically, Mai fills in the details that the Padre has lost during his bout of amnesia and the two engage in a series of confessions. For Mai, these confessions include her having taken as many names as the Padre has and been “a whore for the Thai guards” (210) while the Padre confesses his abandonment of the troops in Vietnam: “It was a hill—it wasn’t just terrain […] there were young men out there—not just ground units,

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77 The Padre’s identification as Mr. Homeless is multifaceted. As a literal indicator of the Padre’s identity in Potrero Hill, the name brings to bear the ways in which class exacerbated many of the conditions faced by soldiers of color returning to the U.S. after the war. Figuratively, the name positions the Padre as without a racial or ethnic home, a theme highlighted by his constant travel. The Padre is a character who “belongs” both to the past and present, to an us and a them; as such, his character recalls the aforementioned role that Aztlán played in the Chicano Movement’s efforts to redefine and reclaim Mexican American identity during the Vietnam War.
grunts. There were trees, stands of elephant grass and deep ravines—living things not
goddamn lines of fire and killing zones. They were not just soldiers, they were my flock.
What became of them, Cassandra? Where are they now?” (210). When Mai/Cassandra
indicates that the Padre’s flock is “lost in their own homeland,” the Padre wonders
whether they still need him and indicates his desire to resume his position of
responsibility for these other Others through “the pain in his voice” (211).
Mai/Cassandra’s response further validates Padre’s desire to tend to his flock, since she
reminds the Padre of how he “tended to” her and the other “women who gave their
bodies, and to the children” in the Thai refugee camps, teaching them what love was and
how “to suppose, and [they] passed so many nights supposing world upon world, better
worlds than this one” (211). In order to suppose a new world for himself, however, the
Padre once again must revisit the past in order to accept the personal identity narratives
he has suppressed. With Mai/Cassandra he finally reconciles his Jewish ancestry with “all
of those strange rumors” his father and grandfather had encouraged in Chihuahua (212).
The Padre articulates his identity out loud for both himself and Mai/Cassandra to hear: “I
once said that I was nobody. Toi khong la gi ca. It isn’t true. I once played the fiddle in
secret. I am a Mexican brown recluse. No, I am violin spider. No, no, I am Jew” (213).
This admission gives the Padre courage to return to the United States and search for the
soldiers he abandoned in Vietnam. At the same time, it gives Mai/Cassandra strength to
search for the person “who might answer [her] most heartfelt question” (212). Piecing
together the details from earlier narratives, readers identify this person as Persephone.
Mai and the Padre will separate, sacrificing their love, in order to restore connections
with others who may need them more. This portion of the Padre’s narrative concludes
with both the Padre and Mai/Cassandra leaving Hong Kong separately but returning to the same place: Portrero Hill, where Cassandra becomes Mai and the Padre becomes Mr. Homeless.

Both characters undergo transformation as the result of their encounter with one another and because, as Kali Tal suggests, “trauma is a transforming experience” (229). For the Padre and Mai, the ability to speak their trauma and their need to return to the other Others, those who have also suffered, becomes empowering. While Mai and the Padre’s traumatic experiences overlap, those who endure a traumatic event enter into a community of understanding whether or not they experience the same trauma. Moreover, for Mai and the Padre, their traumas contribute to their fluid identities and lend them the emotional proximity to others who are also suffering. The empathy that they find with one another aids them in articulating their own trauma, and helps them resist and reject some of the narratives (like those that link inferiority with race or ethnicity) that cause and intensify their suffering, which in turn compels them to reach out to others. A community of understanding subsequently develops in Potrero Hill, where Mai and the Padre join Persephone and Jesse. While Mai finds comfort and the ability to reach out to others in her relationship with Persephone, the Padre finds the soldiers he left behind in Vietnam. Living in the homeless encampment with the other veterans, the Padre is able to reestablish his duty to some of these men as well as to the youth of Potrero Hill, like Calvin and Little Reggie. The Padre finds that these young men suffer in the same ways that the soldiers in Vietnam did; they are relegated to the margins of their community and live as victims of the same systems of race, poverty, and power and amidst the same
levels of violence. With a renewed sense of self that incorporates his Jewishness, the Padre remains committed to serving these other Others.

This commitment to others serves as the catalyst for reuniting Jesse and the Padre decades after the war: recognizing that Mr. Homeless is the Padre, the two men recall their last encounter during the war and the Padre tells Jesse “his bizarre tale of three hills: one in Laos, one in Chihuahua, and one in San Francisco. As he spoke the padre slipped almost absent mindedly from English to Spanish and occasionally into Cantonese, Ladino, and even Yiddish” (312). The Padre moves fluidly between his identities during his reunion with Jesse, indicating an ease with his multiplicity that he had not experienced before. Somewhat paradoxically, this new empowered sense of self is coupled with vulnerability. The Padre and Jesse have struggled throughout the novel to make sense of the expectations placed on them as men in war; this struggle has been exacerbated by their marginalized status as men of color whose historical and cultural identities are at odds with the perceived norm. Their difference, however, presents them with a much more desirable form of power than that afforded by adherence to myths of white American masculinity so commonly depicted in Vietnam War representation. For the Padre and Jesse, their willingness to see and feel the pain of others, and to accept responsibility for those others, enables them to become part of a larger community in which love and creation predominate over hate and destruction. In response to the Padre’s request for forgiveness, Jesse tells the Padre, “you had to remain human. You were our template. We could look to you and see our former selves. We could see what we might once again become” (311). Jesse articulates the Padre’s role in the novel: despite his own feelings of uncertainty, the Padre embodies the sense of humanity at the core of a
peaceful community. The Padre’s ever shifting sense of self enables others to find in him a “template” for humanity. Jesse’s forgiveness is cathartic for the Padre and “tears, like rivulets, had washed away the layers of dirt beneath [the Padre’s] eyes” (311). At the same time, however, the Padre is not satisfied with his own transformation. Sensing Jesse’s ongoing emotional turmoil when he asks the Padre, “Was [Oscar] Wilde right? Do we kill the things we love?” (312), the Padre responds with a sense of connection and responsibility to others: “‘Alleh bridder,’ said the chaplain. He rose from his seat and threw his arms around the shoulders of the Chicano sergeant. ‘Aren’t we all brothers? Don’t things die around us because we can’t love them? That’s the same as killing’” (312). The Padre thus challenges Jesse to open himself up to loving others.78

This reunion, leaving both men to reflect on the destructive power of the inability to love, catalyzes positive change in both Jesse’s and the Padre’s worlds but the positioning of the reunion is also significant. Preceded by scenes that move between storytelling and harsh realities, the reunion represents a moment of vulnerability in a chaotic environment. The reunion is nestled in the middle of the final chapter, which moves from Jesse and his colleagues sharing stories of their cases, listening as “[…] magic incantatory words were spoken” (296); to Calvin’s supposing, in his first moments of newly found freedom, that, “if that there library over in Alexandria, Egypt, was still around here today, there sure as shit could be plenty of homeboys on the moon[…] Brothers on the moon” (301); to Calvin being shot, found too late by the Padre,

78 Barvosa calls attention to the juxtaposition of love and (racial) hatred as crucial to the integration of multiple identity (and thus to the potential for broader political implications of self-craft) she explicates in reading Minnie Bruce Pratt’s “Identity: Blood Skin Heart,” a personal essay. While her argument on love is more specific to this text, it nonetheless speaks to the role of the intrapersonal in effecting systemic or institutional change. See Wealth, Chapter 6).
who is also shot as he begins Calvin’s last rites; to several flashbacks of the Padre’s testimony during Calvin’s trial; and, finally, to Jesse’s yielding to his love for Carolina before flashing back to the Padre and Jesse’s reunion. The narrative disjunction maintains tension, keeping binary relationships unstable and thus unable to lapse into unproductive stasis.

Of particular note in this series of seemingly disconnected episodes is a scene that returns readers back to where the novel began—the coroner’s lab—but this time under different circumstances. As if to breathe life into the ghosts of Persephone and Mai that previously haunted the lab, the final scene in the coroner’s lab depicts the assistant medical examiner witnessing a miracle, “one of the rarest events in the field of forensic medicine” on his last day of work. He feels the warmth of the corpse on his table just after “the thought of cutting open another deceased human body made him ill. The feel of life beneath his gloved fingers today had been exhilarating, overwhelming. Like a newborn baby, Calvin Thibault had coughed and cried before filling his lungs with life-giving air. […] Today he and a young black boy had both risen from the dead” (313-314).

The scene thus re-engages the novel’s opening themes, embodied by the women and their “wholly entwined” lives and “entangled” histories, and highlights the power released through destabilized boundary lines—like those between the living and the dead. The assistant medical examiner leaves the building despite having forgotten to finish his report of Calvin’s case and he justifies this lapse by exclaiming, “Anyone could write a cause of death. Who on earth could write a cause of life?” (314). As if to answer the question, the narrative abruptly returns to Jesse and Carolina in the bedroom. This narrative sequencing implies that love is the answer to hatred and violence and thus
seems to present an easy and clichéd resolution; however, the narrative also complicates this notion by insisting that, with the newfound ability to love, Jesse also experiences pain. In other words, the novel does not allow Jesse to enter into the space of comfort that the Padre previously indicated was a trait of American society: “America was a land obsessed with comfort; with the avoidance of pain…at any cost” (196). Jesse does not seek comfort; nor does he escape pain through intoxication, as he has throughout the novel. Véa’s narrative instead presents a war veteran who confronts his pain by reaching out to others and allowing others to reach out to him.

Ultimately, and seemingly paradoxically, within this pain Jesse finds the power to embrace the love that leads him to greater self- and other-awareness. As aforementioned, Calvin’s resurrection is immediately followed by a return to Jesse’s narrative, in which Jesse allows himself to be vulnerable to his feelings for Carolina. This sequencing both draws parallels between Jesse’s and Calvin’s “resurrections,” or transformations, and also reveals how the novel’s many narratives are as intertwined as Persephone and Mai’s embrace depicted in the first pages. While the dialogue between Carolina and Jesse focuses on what they both still believe to be Calvin’s unfortunate fate—being “found innocent and dead on the same day”—the narrative draws readers’ attention back to Jesse’s experience of war:

As they kissed he sobbed a full stratification of tears; a wrenching, rippled core sample of himself: There was belated proof of a sentient childhood, then a silvery stratum of innocence; a green layer of budding sexuality veined by lines of nascent romance; a deep cobalt layer formed by the pressurized brutality of the infamous blue ballet; then a coal black layer,
denser and deeper than all the rest combined, for all the dark years that followed—years of life without loving (314-315).

The passage highlights the depth of Jesse’s trauma by indicating that the war buried the core of Jesse’s being and intensified his trauma by destroying his ability to love and trust. The passage and its placement within the conversation about Calvin also emphasizes the connection between Vietnam and Portrero Hill, both of which have been described throughout the novel in terms of “the infamous blue ballet.” Strengthening this connection, Jesse simultaneously wonders whether his belief in Calvin’s innocence is justified and whether the “hillside near Laos—the huddle of scared boys who gathered to suppose another world—never existed at all” (315). Readers, however, know that Calvin is still alive and that, just prior to being shot, Calvin had been supposing, something Jesse taught him as they worked on his defense, by introducing his client to novels that reveal new worlds and give him the power to imagine himself in a different world than that of Portero Hill. This irony draws attention to the power of supposing another world, or to use the phrase repeated in the Padre’s narrative, “finding new beliefs to believe.”

Moreover, Jesse evokes this power in the courtroom during his closing remarks. Jesse

79 Among the eleven novels that Jesse has Calvin read are A Gathering of Old Men, Invisible Man, and an unnamed James Baldwin novel, all of which depict racism against black men. Jesse tells Calvin not only to read but to “look carefully at the language. Read each word aloud. Feel each word on your tongue.” (69). Jesse’s goal is twofold: improve Calvin’s ability to speak so that he is not prejudged during trial and open his eyes to the oppression of black men in America so that Calvin might see how he has been written into a narrative that privileges white over black, rich over poor. Jesse’s goals are successful and Calvin, recognizing how he has been victimized, refuses to allow these narratives to continue to dominate his life. To put Calvin’s transformation in terms of Barvosa’s framework of multiple identities, Calvin’s reading of the novels provides him with the ability to conduct a “self-inventory,” which in turn begins the process of “discernment,” or weeding out the piece of identity that are valued and self-chosen from those that are imposed and limiting. By “supposing” new worlds in the moment just prior to being shot, Calvin is able to choose a different ending for his story, which includes an allusion to the soldiers supposing of Mexicans in space. Though interrupted by the shooting, Calvin’s “supposing” and walking away from Potrero Hill place him within reach of the final stage of Barvosa’s frame of self-craft, “revisionary living,” which involves putting into practice elements of self that are “self-endorse” and rejecting aspects of the self that have been constructed by an oppressive society.
tells the jury that teaching Calvin to read helped Calvin find his “heart’s lyric” because the heart “must have a grammar or it can never hear itself. The heart must articulate or it will never be heard.” He implores the jury to look at “Calvin’s newfound ability to name the things within his own soul, to give them voice. You have to know that your life is empty before you can begin to fill it” (273). Thus, when Jesse threatens to slip back into numbness, Carolina reminds Jesse that he has a choice by encouraging him to imagine what would happen if he were to choose life: “‘You didn’t die on that hill, Jesse. Your life went on. I can feel you. I can touch you. You’re here with me. The heart just needs some lyrics,’ she said, ‘recalling Jesse’s own words. It needs to articulate. You can’t keep hiding among the living; you can’t keep forcing your soul to mumble in code. No one can ever answer you. Not me, not anyone’” (316). In her repetition of the words Jesse used in his summation of Calvin’s trial, in which he tells the jury that Calvin’s “spirit was a riddle, an unbreakable code,” Carolina’s challenge to Jesse links both men’s suffering. Calvin’s code is that of the ghetto, while Jesse’s is of war, but both suffer from witnessing the violence perpetrated against those who reside on the margins of American society. More concretely, their lives intersect throughout the narrative by way of the people with whom they both come into contact: Calvin stood accused of murdering Mai Adrong and Persephone Flyer, the wife of A.B. Flyer, one of Jesse’s best friends in Vietnam and whose military dog tags Jesse has carried since leaving Vietnam. A.B. Flyer died in the arms of Trin Adrong, just as Mai and Persephone died in an embrace. The connections between the characters seem forced, but those narrative connections underscore the entanglement of past, present, and future. These strangely interconnected
lives are marked by similar racism and violence, yet out of this diverse group come empowering tales of transformation.

While Jesse’s suffering in war enables him to understand on a personal level the suffering that Calvin faces as a young black male without an education or supportive community, Jesse’s position as a lawyer grants him the potential to engage with the institutional structures that maintain racism and violence. His summation in Calvin’s defense directs the jury “to take the path of most resistance: true impartiality and reason” by looking past Calvin’s lack of education, his poverty, and, though he does not call it by name, his race (274). The direction Jesse gives to the jury doubles as the text’s direction to readers as they move into the novel’s concluding narrative strands: readers must take the path of most resistance in putting aside their expectations and instead suspending disbelief and accepting bizarre events as reality. This pairing of the courtroom scenes with supernatural and bizarre encounters functions to call attention to the range of discourses necessary to make sense of the complexity of a society that pledges equality at the same time it relegates those who are different to a subordinate position. Resisting the urge to follow habitual ways of thinking enables readers to imagine a different kind of reality, the kind that Jesse describes to Carolina in the empty courtroom after the jury has returned a verdict, hoping that she will “hear the story behind the story” and that “she would believe” (275). What would logically follow such a statement are the details of Calvin’s case that Jesse is not able to share as a servant of the court, but what actually follows is a narrative of the firefight on the Laos hillside, this time from the perspectives of A.B. Flyer and Trin Adrong, respectively. These men remember their wives, Persephone and Mai, and see the women’s futures (280-281).
This shift in focus from Calvin’s experience on Potrero Hill to the Vietnam War further not only articulates the similarities between the violence and suffering that happened decades apart but also to insist on their simultaneity. Jesse tells Carolina that the war “reached across time” and claimed Mai and Persephone’s lives in the “same microsecond” that their husbands died in war (283). Here, the narrative suggests that rather than a mere thematic connection between the violent deaths, Mai and Persephone’s death embrace actually joins that of Flyer and Adrong, providing the women with a moment of insight and knowledge regarding the manner of their husbands’ final moments. More importantly, the death embraces enable the four strangers to meet in the same space, despite the time and geographic space that separate their deaths, and allow “two marriages, worlds apart, [to result] in two more” (290). These unexpected unions defy the rules of space and time and open up connections between individuals whose nations have been in conflict. Despite his own reservations, Jesse nonetheless believes the convergence to be true. Since such an experience would be viewed as fiction in a court of law, Jesse is unable to describe it to the jury; he reserves his description for Carolina, the empty courtroom, and, of course, readers. While Jesse’s summation in the courtroom is emotionally powerful, it nonetheless focuses on the tangible facts rather than the supernatural, transnational transport of four deceased men and women. Accepted ways of knowing and understanding the world are posited as constricting. The jury loses out on the story behind the story.

However, Jesse’s second and more private summation insists on sharing the story behind the story, to which he is granted access by a jade stone that he places in his mouth. The jade stone appears throughout the novel, particularly during the hillside firefight near
Laos, where it is found in the mouths of the NVA dead and said to have special powers. The interpreter assigned to one of Jesse’s cases, a Vietnamese American named Hong, notices Jesse place the jade in his mouth and comments, “I have not seen that done in many years. I didn’t think anyone believed in that anymore, especially here in America” (158). Jesse’s response is ambiguous: he reports that “something unbelievable” happened when he put the stone in his mouth during the war and though it has never happened again he continues to try to make the jade “work.” During this conversation about the jade, readers never quite learn what the jade does, but Jesse learns that it “works on very few men” and only in “very special circumstances.” Even Jesse, for whom the jade worked before, is not able to determine what those circumstances are exactly. All Hong is able to tell him is what he was told by his father: “the jade will only work for women, certain priests, or for men who are drowning” (158). The conversation offers only hints about the actual power of the jade, but it speaks to the established norms that impose a binary relationship between the old and modern (as well as between Eastern and Western) methods or systems of belief. That Jesse is able to make the stone work speaks to his ability to walk doubly, like his name suggests, and inhabit multiple identities: his character challenges gender norms, and in some ways, he performs the role of priest in how he counsels Calvin. Jesse most closely fits the characteristics of one who can make the jade work in that he is often described as drowning (in both despair and alcohol). As the most vivid case in point, after learning that Calvin had been shot, Jesse cries “unstoppable tears; a long belated deluge for the children on the hill, pour les enfants dans l’enfanterie, for the infants who had always made up the infantry. At long last, after twenty-eight dry years, he shed his salt tears for skinny Cornelius, Indian Jim-Earl, the
sergeant, and all those boys in both uniforms that had littered that hill so long again” (308). Following this flood of tears, Carolina challenges Jesse to choose life; his response is to find the jade stone that had impassioned him during his second summation and to place it in his mouth.

The jade has a physical effect on Jesse: “After a moment of immobile silence he went limp, as though the skin and features of his outer body had suddenly been deprived of its skeletal framework. His eyes squeezed shut and his lungs collapsed as something within him took leave. A moment later he was coughing and heaving huge breaths like a drowning man who had been pulled from a deep, cold river” (316). The jade’s effect on Jesse transports him to another time and place, where he becomes a man named Hollis, a veteran of the Vietnam War, as well as a friend, former client, and bartender to Jesse. Hollis, earlier in the novel, encourages Jesse to open himself up to love by sharing his own inability to love his wife Evie without beating and consequently losing her.

Experiencing the effect of the jade, Jesse lives out Hollis’s dream: “Jesse saw Carolina dimly […] and he] strained with all his might to touch Evie’s arm as she lay soaking in the hot bathtub. ‘Thank you so much for the lemonade and tamale pies,’ he said as he seized Carolina” (316). While the narrative indicates that Jesse reaches for Carolina, Jesse seems to act as Hollis. The jade enables him to think and experience somebody else’s feelings and, in this case, to fulfill both his own and another’s desire to love freely: “Probing here, retreating there, Jesse, in full light, in coequal rapture and dance without strength moves, in choreography without dominion, relented finally to his own human desire, and suffered the impact—the painless penetrations—the living heat of friendliest fire.” The novel depicts Jesse’s lovemaking with Carolina as a partnership, something Hollis never
experienced with his wife because of his abuse and Jesse never experienced with Carolina because of his inability to let himself feel. Allowing himself to be vulnerable, Jesse rejects the death and destruction the previously dominated his thinking and believes that Calvin “had loved Mai with all his heart” and that “Sergeant Flyer loved us all with that airstrike. He loved us all” (317). Rather than doubt or cynicism, Jesse chooses life by choosing love.

Upon learning that Calvin has survived, Jesse’s emotional reactions intensify; he laughs and celebrates that “there were boys who had pulled through. Neither of them would ever go back to the hill” (318). Seeing hope for Calvin, and for other boys like him and the soldiers Jesse fought with in Vietnam, Jesse revises his hopes for the future. As if the outside world has responded to the supposing of these young men, the narrative reveals that high above the bed,

an Afro-Mexican deespace probe, launched from a newly supposed world and fitted with sensitive recording devices, was the next start system for soundless scat and alien rhythms. One unusual section, built by Nigerian scientists, was specially designed to respond to fourthstream music and permutations of bop, to alien melismatics and to embouchure without humanoid lips. If ever were such detected, the entire craft would pivot and go seek out the source. Guidance rockets would roar to life at the sound of subtly dissonant bars and semi-quavers […] The sensors and gauges aboard would dance at the faintest presence of countermelodies and descant lines and barely measurable traces of the Ellington effect.

(318)
The space probe gestures that the imaginative supposings—their hopes for a world in which music reflects unique transcultural fusions and previously marginalized racial/ethnic groups are successful in scientific fields—that have become reality. This envisioned world, which is presented as actually existing in the narrative moment, is one in which the Vietnam War would never had happened and thereby offers a remedy to many of the negative legacies that the narrative demonstrates contributed to the war.

The narrative returns from this larger, more global portrait, to Jesse and Carolina, “back on earth” where “the sliver of jade slipped from Jesse’s smiling mouth into Carolina’s” and provides Carolina a point of access to enter a different time and place. Like it had for Jesse, the jade causes Carolina to experience other people’s histories and emotions. While the narrative does not clarify exactly whose perspective the jade lends Carolina, the details of what she sees, hears, and does relate directly to those contained in both Jesse and the Padre’s narratives: “She saw the restless dead on every hill, the hellish rolling orange fire of gelatinous petroleum as it engulfed whole platoons of young men. For a timeless moment she squinted over the sights of a rifle and squeezed the trigger as Trin Adrong staggered by” (318). Able to witness the suffering and participate in the war that has haunted Jesse for so long, Carolina, with the magical effect of the jade, is given an other perspective and is subsequently able to hear “the last confession of a young Chicano soldier.” She witnesses as a reality many of the events that the soldiers had supposed during the war before eventually hearing “the faint signals from an Afro-Mexican space probe” and spitting out the jade, which shatters (318). Yet, even without the jade, Carolina continues to feel its effects as the sounds of war are “diminished in favor of the beat of her swelling heart” and the sounds of the fused music that the space
probe has been seeking out continue. Further establishing the reality of these newly supposed worlds and the power of the jade to provide access to those other perspectives, Carolina tells Jesse, “Ecoutez moi, mon amour,” […] without realizing that she was speaking in an unfamiliar tongue. “The dead can sit out eight bars while the living love. Let them rest” (319). Combined with the effect of the jade, Jesse’s ability to love and believe in life allow him to enter into a peaceful sleep.

This uplifting scene ends Jesse’s narrative but does not end the novel. While Jesse sleeps, the Padre, again referred to as Vo Dahn, despite having been shot and operated on with a failed anesthetic, has returned to Potrero Hill and to his homeless encampment, where he hugs the soldiers and bids them farewell before they follow him down the hill to the river bank. Mirroring the scene in which the Padre walks away from the war and into the Mekong River, the Padre steps off a rotting pier as one soldier who has dared to follow him as Jesse had decades prior, asks, “Where are you going, Padre? Where are you going?” The Padre points up to the sky after he “slipped quietly into the dark waters and, face up, began to float away. The waters would heal his wound. Years ago he had found Cassandra…Mai…in just this way. Now he would find her again […]. Cloaked in forgetful remembrance, they would love again” (319). The narrative, through the Padre’s desire to reunite with Mai, suggests that the Padre’s actions are suicidal. At the same time, however, the narrative maintains the hope of the previous scene as the Padre calls out to the homeless veterans, “Look up. […] All of the electronics—all of the mechanics and hydraulics aboard that Mexican starship way up there…tournent sur le jazz!” (320). Ending the novel with the Padre, rather than with Jesse, emphasizes the significance of the Padre’s character and disallows a perfectly resolved ending without dissipating the
hope. It does this first by privileging alternative ways of knowing and understanding the world by maintaining the presence of the deep space probe and depicting it as real and visible to the veterans on the ground and second by ending the novel with the phrase, “Everything turns on jazz,” spoken either by the Padre or by the veterans, and thus point to the creativity and cultural blending that jazz has come to symbolize throughout the novel. The emphasis thus remains on the creation and renewal made possible within the emergence of a unique cross cultural community, whose potential is ultimately found within the multiple identities that the characters have learned to embrace within themselves and others.

This unique community reflects differently than does a more normalized representation of the United States. The novel, through magical realist impulses such as those in its conclusion, interrupts and intervenes in the status quo, not only in terms of Vietnam War representation but also in terms of the relationships between and among the diverse peoples who make up the United States but whose stories are not always heard. Sandin and Perez suggest that “magical moments or irruptions deepen narrative meaning and signal breaks with the hegemonic constitution of everyday American reality, which often hides colonial histories of race, class, and sexuality behind a realism that promises a straightforward representation of the myriad situations and conditions of contemporary life” (1). By bringing to the fore what has been hidden, veiled, or ignored, *Gods Go Begging* reveals the intersections between a diverse group of people and functions as what Sandin and Perez call “uncanny entries into the layered consciousness of minority, ethnic, and postcolonial subjects in the United States, whose psychic recesses are often compulsively concealed under the facades of systems of power such as capitalism,
colonial histories, and social marginalization” (3). War and its representation have the potential to erase some differences in order to highlight others, but novels like Véa’s also have the potential to expose the dangers in these erasures through the re-membering of a vast array of peoples, times, and places. Moreover, this strategy energizes the reader’s imagination and entertains alternative ways of seeing (and hopefully being in) the world in which embracing the multiplicity of one’s own identity opens points of access that create the space from which more peaceful communities can emerge. Having provided the space for the silent and silenced to speak “articulations of the heart,” Véa’s novel challenges readers to listen, to reflect, to hope, and “to find new beliefs to believe.”
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