Innocence and Loss

Innocence and Loss:
Representations of War and National Identity
in the United States

Edited by

Cristina Alsina Rísquez and Cynthia Stretch

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Putting together this book has taken a long time and, as with all projects that accompany us for so long, *Innocence and Loss* has become inextricably intertwined with our lives. We have many people and institutions to thank for their support along the way.

The seeds for this book were planted by the Fulbright Commission when they awarded Cindy a Fulbright Grant to teach at the Universitat de Barcelona in the fall of 2005. That was the first time we worked together and shared our views on literature; it was also the time we discovered our shared passion for certain novels, our shared worldview, and our desire to continue working together. The Fulbright Commission made that possible by granting Cristina a Scholar-in-Residence fellowship to teach at Southern Connecticut State University in the fall of 2008. Our ongoing collaboration would not have happened without the vision and the resources of the Commission.

We would also like to thank the European Association for American Studies (EAAS) for accepting our 2010 workshop proposal "'Hell No, We Won't Grow!': Innocence and Responsibility in US War Literature." This volume was inspired by the passion and the insights of our panelists: Cristina, Elisabeth, Laura, Lena, Nerys, Walter—thank you for getting us started. And to those who joined us later—Carme, Constante, Jochem, Michael, Stipe, Víctor—you have our heartfelt gratitude for having believed in the project and in us. We have learned from your work and believe that it is in good company. We also appreciate the guidance of Carol Koulikourdi, our editor at Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Thank you all for your patience during the long and winding road to publication. We hope you enjoy the result of the wait as much as we do.

Along the way we have also been honored by the generous contributions of people we respect and admire and who, in signing on to the project, reinvigorated us. Geoff and Jan were there at the beginning, when we were taking our first uncertain steps and encouraged us to continue. Cary, Bill, David, and Cindy helped us to frame the work for a broader public. To all of you, thank you for the gift of your time and words. And a very special mention should go to photographer Martha Rosler, whose work on the cover of this volume powerfully anchors the main ideas that weave the contributions together.

Lots of friends helped us along the way: Kiko, who was there, as always, when needed to take care of everything; Steve and Simon, who provided baseball games and food and laughs when we needed a break; Joana, who welcomed us home; and lots of others who made life possible with their company and love: Rodrigo, Roger, Bill, Maria, Silvia, Isabel, Elena, Helena, Amparo, Jaume, Pablo, Trapo, Cristian, Albert, Àngels...

There is one person without whom this book could not have been completed. Dolores Resano was there to edit, correct, comment, and provide insights, work and good vibes; in short, she not only organized us and told us when and how to do things, but she also asked the right questions about the texts and helped us to think more clearly. Lola, your commitment, your independence of thought, your bright mind, your skills, and your caring ways have made this collection possible, and you know you can count on both of us for anything you might ever need.

INTRODUCTION

INNOCENCE? ETHICS

> Billy suspects his fellow Americans secretly know better, but something in the land is stuck on teenage drama, on extravagant theatrics of ravaged innocence and soothing mud wallows of self-justifying pity.
> —Ben Fountain, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*
>
> We can be alive or dead to the sufferings of others,—they can be dead or alive to us, depending on how they appear, and whether they appear at all; but only when we understand that what happens there also happens here, and that "here" is already an elsewhere, and necessarily so, that we stand a chance of grasping the difficult and shifting global connections in which we live, which make our lives possible—and sometimes, too often, impossible.
> —Judith Butler, "Precarious Life and the Obligations of Cohabitation"

In "Self-Reliance," that ur-text of American identity, Ralph Waldo Emerson provocatively asks, "why should you keep your head over your shoulder? Why drag around this corpse of your memory…?" Although Emerson himself likely would have objected, US hegemonic culture seems to have taken his exhortation literally. By insisting on a national identity based on ideals rather than on history, mainstream American culture maintains a veneer of future-oriented optimism. The resulting rejection of history understood as something other than an endless march toward progress supports the myth of national innocence. At least from the moment the Puritans personified their relationship to England as that of a child to its mother, Americans have had access to this myth: like children, Americans are "without history"—or at least without the kind of history filled with corpses. American imperialist discourse posits that past struggles and sacrifices have made Americans stronger but have not made them responsible for the damage they have caused under the cover of their idealism. Yet as Howard Zinn reminds us,

> [t]he history of any country, presented as the history of a family, conceals the fierce conflicts of interest (sometimes exploding, often repressed) between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and

workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex. And in such a world
of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking
people, as Albert Camus suggested, not to be on the side of the
executioners. (10)

Especially, we might add, when the executioners are most vehemently
protesting their own innocence.

　　The collection that follows grew out of a desire to understand the trope
of innocence as it has accompanied and facilitated US aggression from the
Civil War to the present. Although the philosophical debates about
innocence as a state or condition are beyond the scope of this project, the
concept itself is fascinating in its malleability, its capaciousness, and its
apparent usefulness. Marita Sturken, author of *Tourists of History:
Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*,
provides a useful overview of America's ongoing "investment in the
notion of innocence." As she explains, "American national identity, and
the telling of American history, has been fundamentally based on a
disavowal of the role played in world politics by the United States not
simply as a world power, but as a nation with imperialist policies and
aspirations to empire. This disavowal of the United States as an empire has
allowed for the nation's dominant self-image as perennially innocent" (7).
For her, the innocence that is repeatedly "lost" is found again each time
the aggression of the state abroad or at home sparks a national crisis. Thus,
the United States enters successive armed conflicts buoyed by an inflated
sense of perpetual innocence that offers each new generation the
possibility of a fresh start in its defense of liberty, morality, and justice
abroad. This ideal projection is challenged by the repeated occasions in
which US political and military practices cannot be reconciled with such
idealization—the revelations of torture at Abu Ghraib are only the starkest
example from a disastrously long list. After each of those unsettling
revelations, the country manages somehow to resurrect its foundational
belief in its own radical innocence.

　　American war literature suggests a complicated relationship between
the reveries of national innocence and the trials of history. In the
conclusion to *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization: The
Specter of Vietnam*, William V. Spanos argues that since the fall of Saigon
in 1975, Americans have been obsessed with "the systematic and
increasingly nuanced forgetting of the Vietnam War, or, more precisely,
the tellingly insistent remembering of the war that was intended to
obliterate its singular history from the consciousness of the American
cultural memory" (243). Spanos's argument resonates with Michael
Rogin's claim in "'Make My Day!' Spectacle and Amnesia in Imperial

Politics" that "amnesiac representation" succeeds in "[r]esuscitating the center rather than disintegrating it." According to Rogin, "[a]mnesia disconnects from their objects and severs from memory those intensified, detailed shots of destruction, wholesaled on populations and retailed on body parts." From that disconnect emerges "[a]n easily forgettable series of surface entertainments—movies, television series, political shows—[which] revolves before the eye." These spectacular displays favor forgetting by pointing "to an identity that persists over time and that preserves a false center by burying the actual past" and thereby "heals the rift between present and past" (507-509). This healing via "motivated disavowal" (506) allows for the establishment and reinforcement of a reassuring narrative of the past, which justifies the devastation of war in part by insisting on the innocence of its intentions.

From Melville's poems about the Civil War to the reportage and photographs documenting the experiences of soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, the texts analyzed here presuppose the pervasive discourse of innocence in American culture traced by Spanos and Rogin. In so doing, they implicitly substantiate Sturken's claim that "[n]ational innocence must be actively, constantly maintenanced by narratives that reinscribe it" (7). In these cases, however, the texts themselves apply pressure to the trope of American innocence precisely because that trope contributes to the ubiquitous and constitutive discourse of national identity without which the wars that the texts represent would be unsustainable or possibly even inconceivable. Our contributors discover the texts' deep concerns with intersecting questions of experience, responsibility, and guilt. Their analyses explore the means by which representations of war can themselves provide sites of resistance, spaces of dissent where the "rift between present and past" is reopened as a reminder of the negative lessons of history in a call for ethical witness. At some point, each text looks over its shoulder and juxtaposes a version of innocence with the corpses of our shared history. The resulting destabilization of identity—national, as well as racial, gender, and class—challenges the efficacy of the trope of innocence as disavowal. The texts complement and sometimes contradict one another in ways that lay bare the complexity of the questions of innocence and responsibility that ripple beneath the surface of US identity as well as the difficulties inherent in the representation of atrocity and trauma in cultural texts.

In "From Battle Fields to Mounts of Stone: The Failed Promise of National Renewal in Herman Melville's *Battle-Pieces* and *Clarel*," Laura López charts a trajectory in Melville's poetry that shows an initial—and unusual—optimism. "In the tragedy of the war," writes López, "the poet

locates a way out of collective self-deception and thus the potential for meaningful maturation—both of the nation and of Melville's readers" (2). However, by the time he wrote *Clarel* ten years later during the country's centennial celebration, Melville's rhetorical purpose had shifted: instead of thematizing a collective, national maturation process, the poet offers readers the narrative of individual struggle in a hopeless world. According to López, Melville seems to be responding to the public discourse in the postbellum United States that had turned its attention to territorial expansion and capitalist exploitation and discounted the possibility that experience could lead to "a real democratization of society" (13). Instead, experience leads the poem's protagonist to an "unironic 'unlearning'" (13), a shedding of illusions that had previously anchored him to a national identity and a shared dream of reconciliation.

Whereas for Melville the loss of innocence after the Civil War led to a kind of national ethical impasse, other writers seized on the project of national reconciliation as an opportunity to codify the individual and social changes that the war had wrought. In "Ellen Glasgow's *The Battle-Ground*: The New Woman Emerges from the Ashes of the Civil War," Constante González Groba demonstrates how Glasgow explores the cultural imperative pressuring women to disavow the experience and knowledge they had gained during the war in exchange for a return to an antebellum identity as vessels of essential femininity. Through the struggles and victories of her young female protagonist in *The Battle-Ground*, Glasgow ultimately "urged [readers] to reject the evasive idealism of Southern tradition as an indispensable precondition to navigating the uncharted waters of the modern South" (44). González acknowledges Glasgow's use of sentimental narrative patterns and tropes, but he argues that her trenchant satire of the Old South's gender roles undercut their conservative thrust. Women who retreat into the idealized world offered by the plantation tradition may be shielded from the harsh realities of the Reconstruction South, but as Glasgow insists, they are infantilized and incapacitated in exchange.

Since the Revolutionary War, people of African descent have fought America's wars in hopes that their valor and sacrifice would somehow "earn" them recognition of their full humanity on the home front. Almost two hundred years later, Martin Luther King, Jr. agonized that in Vietnam the US government was instead "taking the black young men who had been crippled by society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southwest Georgia and East Harlem" ("Beyond Vietnam," paragraph 10). Although Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* and Ralph Ellison's

Invisible Man are not typically considered "war novels," Carme Manuel and Jochem Riesthuis find in their treatments of the Spanish-American War and the First World War, respectively, further evidence to support King's denunciation of racist exploitation as a correlate to US militarism.

In "Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* and the Spanish-American War: The Battle for Black Constitutional Nationalism," Manuel locates the novel's intraracial conflict between accommodationist and more radical tendencies within the African American community in the wake of the United States' first explicitly imperialist war. Whereas Griggs's attempts to identify a "third way" to avoid the extremes of either position, for Manuel "[t]his claim for a third way does not consist of constructing a utopian, segregated black nation, as many of his readers have believed, but rather of seeking a middle ground which questions black radical nationalist separatist projects and imagines a reattachment to the nation through a shared commitment to the Federal Constitution" (53). Ultimately, with its formal ambiguities and the inclusion in the plot of a "paranoid organization" that leaves both its protagonists dead, Griggs's novel urges its readers to consider the possibility of "black constitutional nationalism" through a character who has been accused of treason by his African American compatriots.

Such an ambivalent ending seems optimistic compared to the scene analyzed by Jochem Riesthuis in "Innocence and Insanity: The Golden Day Episode of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man.*" Riesthuis turns our attention to the encounter between the unnamed protagonist and the "short fat man," a veteran of the First World War and an inmate at the local asylum, and argues that this surreal scene "sets in motion the series of events that push the Invisible Man underground" (133). Here, Riesthuis argues, we see the extent of the protagonist's "stubborn innocence" even when confronted with evidence of "the central taboos of American history as it relates to African Americans: slavery, interracial sex and sexual fascination, crime, insanity, violence, repressive charity, and the actual history of black World War I soldiers" (121). Inside the Golden Day bar, the veterans transmogrify from decrepit relics into decision-making and message-bearing speakers who are fully aware of the extent to which their history has been silenced. Although the short fat man's admonitions—and the whores' high jinx with the white trustee—fail to jolt the protagonist out of his thrall to discourses of racial uplift and meritocracy at the time, the implicit and explicit violence of the episode echoes throughout the rest of the novel as the protagonist trades his innocence for invisibility.

Although both Mercè Cuenca and Michael Podolny analyze literary texts concerned with apparatuses that reduce individual subjects to

anonymity, they come to different conclusions about the consequences—formal and ideological—of that anonymity. Cuenca situates her reading of Cold War science fiction as "one of the cultural repositories of a society's worst fears" (136). In *Fahrenheit 451*, Cuenca argues, Ray Bradbury imagines a future world where innocence—understood as the absence of history and culture—is *enforced*, not only through the burning of books but also through the replacement of knowledge and experience with consumerist hysteria. The state is clearly the entity manipulating citizens' desires through appeals to conformity and the avoidance of pain; the firemen burn books infrequently because, for the most part, the citizens have voluntarily replaced them with screens. Perhaps paradoxically, when the protagonist and his allies assert their individual agency by resisting the state's ideological and material force, they do so in order to salvage and preserve the archive of collective experience, seen as the antidote to vacuous and gullible innocence. Thus, Bradbury implicitly formulates a notion of subjectivity in which individuals' lives have authentic meaning to the extent that they contain the culture of a shared past. If Bradbury, writing in 1953, offers an unproblematized picture of "culture," he at least recognizes that the knowledge contained in the books that are memorized is itself contradictory and contested. He accounts for the likelihood that what is remembered will be uncomfortable at best. For Cuenca, Bradbury's challenge to the Cold War status quo is both laudable and prescient as she marks the parallels between Bradbury's imagined future and the technocracy of contemporary American culture.

In Podolny's analysis of James Jones's *The Thin Red Line*, the state's attempts to appropriate soldiers' individuality in order to give sanctioned heroic or strategic meaning to the battles of the South Pacific during the Second World War are short-circuited by formal and stylistic choices that reveal a "war machine" at work. Using the concept of the war machine elaborated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Podolny traces Jones's attempts to "create a text that is at once unflinchingly honest about all the 'negative' aspects of warfare without the kind of judgment that seems inescapable from the position of overarching, sedentary, retrospective knowledge" (108). In the war machine, Podolny finds a framework within which the characters' recognition of their status as "cogs in a machine," as mathematical iterations of a nomadic force, registers neither as tragic dehumanization nor as a sentimental "band of brothers" community. This reframing of war as prior to and productive of politics challenges readers to resist positions of self-congratulatory critique wherein we argue against particular justifications for particular wars rather

than against states' "appropriation and politicization of continuous war" (118).

The photographs by Nina Berman and the activism of Cindy Sheehan and Lila Lipscomb also focus our attention on state-sanctioned meanings of war—in this case, the meanings ascribed to dead or wounded soldiers. In "'Mourn the Dead. Heal the Wounded. End the War.' The Contribution of Women to Protest Culture during the Iraq War," Elisabeth Boulot reads their work in the context of Joshua Goldstein's concern that women anti-war activists ultimately have "a limited impact on the war system because their actions may feminize peace and thus reinforce militarized masculinity" (qtd. in Boulot, 170). Rather than downplay the effects of gender on their politics, the peace activists channel it for emphasis: the primary thrust of their work is to make public the private grief of individual mothers mourning the deaths of individual sons. Though their appeal to the polity is thus sentimental, it mobilizes that sentimentality in order to challenge official state discourses of "noble causes" and "heroic sacrifice." For Boulot, Nina Berman's portraits of wounded veterans depend on a similarly jarring irony made evident by the juxtaposition of the portraits with the texts of interviews with the veterans themselves. Berman demonstrates the disconnect between the interpretations of their suffering that the soldiers have accepted (and only in some cases begun to question or reject) and the visual representation of that suffering that has been largely absent from the mainstream media. While the soldiers use the hegemonic concepts of "duty to country" and "pride" to frame their experiences, the pictures themselves bring home the tragic consequences for the men who have embodied those concepts. The real and material bodies captured by the pictures are disfigured, mutilated, scarred—unquestionable signifiers of the national investment in the war and of the individual prices those men had to pay. When the soldier, "the icon of masculine potency, physical prowess, and heroism in American culture, is represented as disfigured, devastated, and pathological because he has encountered the reality behind the myth of American power and must carry that burden in his body" (Bibby, 151), his repetition of the state-sanctioned meanings paradoxically fails to reinforce those meanings; on the contrary, it underlines the uncanny presence of the penetrated body and the state's own responsibility for the incontestable reality of such pain and loss.

For Lena-Simone Günther, questions of shifting responsibility are central to texts written by veterans and the reporters embedded with their units in Iraq. In "Innocents Abroad? *Generation Kill* in the Three-Block War," Günther reads veteran Nathaniel Fick's memoir *One Bullet Away:*

The Making of a Marine Officer alongside Evan Wright's narrative of his own experience as an embedded reporter with Fick's company, *Generation Kill: Living Dangerously on the Road to Baghdad with the Ultraviolent Marines of Bravo Company*. She first argues for a reexamination of the process of "soldierization" in which military training before deployment ostensibly prepares recruits for the tactical and ethical challenges of asymmetrical warfare as waged in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Although a thorough examination of the role of "Just War Theory" in contemporary American military training is beyond the scope of her project, Günther suggests that the theory's ethical categories delineating responsibility and innocence are inadequate for those "strategic corporals" and other soldiers who find themselves whipsawed by constantly changing Rules of Engagement and shifting missions. For these combatants, the realities of what Charles Krulack calls the "three-block war" in which soldiers face "the entire spectrum of tactical challenges (…) within the space of three contiguous city blocks" (qtd. in Günther, 164) prove that legal responsibility is not the same as moral responsibility. Both Fick and Wright attempt to explain the difficulty—and necessity—of grappling with that difference.

Cristina Gómez Fernández offers another perspective on Evan Wright's *Generation Kill* as well as on a set of photographs that—in contrast to those examined by Boulot—have gained traction in the public sphere. In "'Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?' Ideological Identification and Ethical Responsibility in Contemporary Images of American Postmodern Wars," Gómez leverages Jean Baudrillard's provocative argument in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* in order to analyze the photojournalism and embedded reporting that were offered as correctives to the overly technological, almost surreal visual representations of the first Gulf War. Gómez points to examples of what she calls "journalistic reductionism" and argues that ironically the "ideological architecture of war is precisely sustained by a deliberate textual and visual disengagement from its most barbaric and traumatic manifestations" (198). Her conclusions intersect neatly with Podolny's attention to manifestations of the "war machine" and resonate with Rogin's arguments mentioned above as she shows how those "journalistic articles that claim to reveal the reality of the battlefield" by foregrounding humanistic details of soldiers' daily experience, in fact "divert the gaze from the big ('real') picture of war: the intricate political and economic motives that historically mark the origin of any episode of authorized violence" (197). By attending not just to the sanctioned representations of the war, but also to the ironized and parodied replicas that circulate in popular culture, Gómez outlines an active and

critical ethical viewership "alert to the interstices of reality and representation" and to the fact that by "focusing on the banal aspects of disconnected human experiences" journalism contributes to our disremembering the reality of the war (197).

In "'Huge protests continue, protests without alone and against alone': Situating Juliana Spahr's Antiwar Poem *this connection of everyone with lungs*," Nerys Williams focuses on contemporary poets whose work wrestles with the distancing effects of news media and internet reports of 9/11 and the subsequent war in Iraq. According to Williams, Juliana Spahr, Eliot Weinberger, and Michael Palmer each experiment formally in efforts simultaneously to break the mesmerizing rhetorical and linguistic trance created by twenty-four-hour news cycles and endless bureaucracies and to mobilize poetry as a means of ethical witness. Yet, each poet is attuned to the dangers of the antiwar poem assuming a tone of self-congratulation in which the noncombatant speaker claims a position of innocence *cum* distance. This creates ethical and artistic dilemmas that for Spahr, especially, are themselves posed as conflicts "between distance and activism, observation and involvement." Williams argues that Spahr's work pushes the lyric into a "search for documentation and information" mixing impulses toward intimacy with what Spahr calls "moments of connections with the mass" (224). The resulting poems seek to establish a kind of ecosystem in which the barrage of information and sensory detail is gradually reconfigured as a pattern of connection between daily life and geopolitical events. The aim, according to Williams, is to move readers from a sense of hopelessness in the face of overwhelming information to a political agency born of collectivity.

Víctor Junco looks to poets whose collectivism took them into battle rather than into war resistance. In "'Say of them, they are no longer young': The US Left and the Cultural Response to the Spanish Civil War," Junco reminds us that the disavowal of histories of conflict is not unique to the United States, that in fact, a wave of mid-twentieth-century US literature bore witness to a moment in Spanish history that official state discourse actively encourages its citizens to forget. As Junco explains, any enunciation regarding the Civil War is immediately so contested in Spain that the result is a kind of cultural paralysis; meanwhile, Spaniards confront the fact that most of the representations of the war have been produced outside their borders. Using the poetry of Edwin Rolfe as a touchstone, Junco reads poems and narratives by US writers who drew on their own experiences as members of the International Brigades and/or on their ideological commitments in their depictions of the Republican cause. At least in part because of those ideological commitments—anti-fascist

and socialist or communist—the writers have largely been erased from the canons of US literature in a gesture of "enforced innocence" that would have made the firemen in *Fahrenheit 451* proud. Junco is conscious of his own ideological investments and is careful to avoid romanticizing his subject. He warns that "[d]espite the fact that the legitimate frustration at the evident call for oblivion emanating from the official discourse since the end of the Spanish Civil War may sometimes lead us to the danger of idealization, we must reject the idea that this is an immaculate story" (100). Still, he wonders whether, with the help of poets like Rolfe, nostalgia—in opposition to state-sanctioned amnesia—might be reconfigured as a radical act.

All of our contributors have, at some level, taken issue with the cultural imperative in the United States to forget the country's history of aggression, to take refuge in a belief (however ambivalent) in its own innocence. In "Amnesia and the Geographies of Innocence and War," Stipe Grgas traces that imperative through the history of American Studies as a discipline. He reminds us that many scholars in the early years of the discipline actively promoted a narrative of exceptionalism that distracted attention from the country's history of near constant warfare. While Grgas recognizes the important work of revisionist readings produced in recent scholarship, he warns that we risk echoing an amnesiac paradigm if we neglect the role of geography in our analyses. From Grgas's vantage point in Croatia, America's geography—not the frontier whose closing Turner lamented, but the oceans that insulate it from its enemies—matters as much as its ideology in maintaining hegemony. "Although the discourse of innocence is clearly an ideological construct," he argues, "it nevertheless has a material, geographical foundation which has served to keep the polity severed from the reality of war" (242).

In addition to the perspectives of academics from seven countries, this volume includes a coda that asks more directly, "what's at stake?" We have invited writers and activists whose work we most respect to weigh in on the theme of innocence as it has been deployed in the United States as a cover for military intervention and state-sanctioned aggression. William V. Spanos, Cary Nelson, David Zeiger, and Cindy Sheehan have provided less formal meditations on the theme as it has shaped their own thinking about their experiences, their art, and their politics.

As readers of literary and photographic texts about war, our contributors contend with the often painful, sometimes ironic, but never disengaged labor of witness undertaken by the authors of the texts they scrutinize. As readers of this collection, we in turn have access to their interpretations of the artists' representations of certain episodes of the history of US

aggression, both at home and abroad. We thus become, through our contributors, witnesses of the artists' own act of witnessing. Without forgetting that we have neither experienced the trauma described nor seen it first hand, and without ignoring the mediating effects of language, fiction, or the photographic frame, we as readers of war still find ourselves in a web of witness. That act of witnessing should never come, as the extensive work in trauma studies reminds us, without its share of responsible listening and the adoption of a clear ethical subject position toward the pain of others. As Robert Jay Lifton explains in Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*,

> the witness is crucial to the entire survivor experience. The witness is crucial to start with because it's at the center of what one very quickly perceives to be one's responsibility as a survivor. And it's involved in the transformation from guilt to responsibility (…). But carrying through the witness is a way of transmuting pain and guilt into responsibility, and carrying through that responsibility has enormous therapeutic value. It's both profoundly valuable to society and therapeutic for the individual survivor. (138)

Psychoanalyst Chaim Shatan goes further in his groundbreaking 1973 essay "The Grief of Soldiers: Vietnam Combat Veterans' Self-Help Movement" when he argues that the "talking cure" alone is worthless. During veterans' rap sessions, verbalizing grief and pain allowed the veteran to start "bear[ing] witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially *not available* to its own speaker" (Felman and Laub, 15, italics in the original). Crucially, the testimony of the veterans was addressed to others, the witnesses, who in turn would testify to what had been said *through* them. "Because the witness has said 'here I am' before the other" (Levinas, qtd. in Felman and Laub, 3), he has established with the person giving testimony a bond of co-responsibility and emotional support which enables the speaker to tentatively look for the words which will bring order to his memories and help him find meaning in the traumatic experience. That dialogical relationship between the testimony and the witness creates the conditions for healing. In fact, Shatan and his team concluded that in order for testimony to intervene effectively, it must gear those participating in the act of witnessing to "active participation in the public arena, active opposition to the very war policies they helped carry out" (Shatan, 649). For Shatan, the postwar rap group experience was successful because it staged a therapy based on language, verbalization and narration to empower the GIs to enter the "cultural war" over the meaning of the conflict.

The act of testifying and bearing witness is, ultimately, a socially relevant and communal act:

> The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein cognizance, the "knowing" of the event, is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party of the creation of knowledge *de nova*. The testimony of trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time. By extension the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. (Felman and Laub, 57, italics in the original)

Thus, the nature of the bond between testimony and witness is one of shared responsibility, of acknowledging in an ever expanding net of connections that, as Sontag reminds us, "our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering" (103-104).

As readers of this volume, we participate, then, in an act of witnessing that is "a particular form of ethical solicitation" (Butler, 3). The cultural texts analyzed in this collection of essays problematize the processes of "motivated forgetting," the official postwar strategies of silencing needed to restore a sense of national innocence and freedom from guilt (Rogin, 503). They do so by reminding us of our responsibility as readers of the testimonies around which the fictional or documentary worlds in those texts are constructed. For our contributors, the stories and poems and photos ask us to

> negotiate questions of proximity and distance. They do implicitly formulate ethical quandaries: Is what is happening so far from me that I can bear no responsibility for it? Is what is happening so close to me that I cannot bear having to take responsibility for it? If I myself did not make this suffering, am I still in some other sense responsible to it? (Butler, 3)

Paul Berlin, the narrator in Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, faces the need to honor his responsibility to the suffering of others and he does so by trying, on the one hand, to answer the questions "Who were these skinny, blank-eyed people? What did they want? (…) what did they long for? Did they have any secret hopes?" On the other, he wants them to see him for what he is:

> a scared-silly boy from Iowa [whose] intentions were benign. He was no tyrant, no pig, no Yankee killer. He was innocent. Yes, he was. He was innocent. He would have told them that, the villagers, if he'd known the language, if there had been time to talk. He would have told them he

wanted to harm no one. Not even the enemy. He *had* no enemies. (…)
Guilty perhaps of hanging on, of letting [him]self be dragged along, of
falling victim to gravity and obligation and events, but not —not!— guilty
of wrong intentions. (248- 249, italics in the original)

Berlin acknowledges the humanity of the enemy and clings to his own as
he tries desperately to establish a human communication that supersedes
the framework of war. The acknowledgement of the enemy's humanity
generates Berlin's need to disentangle himself from the official
justifications of war and ultimately to present himself in all of his human
vulnerability. Establishing dialogue with the other as human leads to an
ethical relation that makes aggression toward that human being
intolerable; the ethical solicitation to which Berlin feels drawn wakes in
him what Levinas calls "a fear for all the violence and murder my existing
might generate, in spite of its conscious and intentional innocence" (82).

Berlin's empathy and vulnerability are also that of the witness who,
when faced with the pain of others, understands that such pain calls for an
ethical response because "we are also bound to one another, in passionate
and fearful alliance, often in spite of ourselves, but ultimately for
ourselves, for a 'we' who is constantly in the making" (Butler, 24). As
visual and textual representations of war so often thematize, "being alive
to the sufferings of others" is especially complicated when the suffering is
inflicted by or on those who fight "on our behalf." We hope that reading
the analyses that follow will help sustain the "we" in Butler's formulation,
a "we" who reject the false promise of perpetual innocence and instead
accept the challenges of responsibility.

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CHAPTER ONE

FROM BATTLE-FIELDS TO MOUNTS OF STONE: THE FAILED PROMISE OF NATIONAL RENEWAL IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *BATTLE-PIECES* AND *CLAREL*

LAURA LÓPEZ PEÑA

> Historic reveries their lesson lent, / The Past her shadow through the Future sent.
> —Herman Melville, "Lee in the Capitol," *Battle-Pieces*

> Let us pray that the terrible historic tragedy of our times may not have been enacted without instructing our whole beloved country through terror and pity; and may fulfillment verify in the end those expectations which kindle the bards of Progress and Humanity.
> —Herman Melville, "Supplement," *Battle-Pieces*

> How "Uncle Sam" ever came to be represented as white-haired and white-bearded is a mystery wrapped in a paradox.
> —C. Vann Woodward, "The Aging of America"

Since his earliest writings, Herman Melville consistently laid bare America's self-deceiving mask of innocence and guiltlessness, providing in his works insightful analyses of the problems and contradictions of fundamental contemporaneous issues such as freedom, equality, democracy, progress, imperialism, colonialism, militarism, violence, slavery and other systems of human oppression, racism, and even Christianity and any form of religious dogma and fanaticism. It was precisely this political voice, a manifestation of his belief in "the Great Art of Telling the Truth" ("Hawthorne and His Mosses," 53), which put an end to Melville's career as an acclaimed writer and established a predisposition on the part of his fellow Americans—readers belonging to the class of citizens whose

behaviors Melville critiqued—to attack any piece of writing signed by Herman Melville.[1] The Civil War challenged America's narrative of innocence because, as Robert Milder claims, the war served as "an initiation into the general phenomenon of suffering, unknown by Americans on a monumental scale" (1989, 188). As such, it could be seen as a trial of experience through which the young and still hopeful nation might become a mature and responsible country. This religious, even Puritan-inflected, perception of the war as a "purifying" agent was widespread among Melville's contemporaries in the North. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, considered the Civil War as a forge which would test the nation's weaknesses and make it greater: "The heavenly must dive into the impure, purify and raise it, whilst itself suffers thereby. (...) There never was a nation great except through trial. A religious revolution cuts sharpest, & tests the faith & endurance. A civil war sweeps away all the false issues on which it begun, & arrives presently at real & lasting questions" (297-298). Though not all shared in this conception of the war as divinely ordained, Emerson's wishes for the renewal of the United States appear in much literature of the Civil War. Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps*, for example, published in 1865 and based on the poet's experiences as a volunteer in the hospitals of Washington DC during the years of the conflict, dwells on the belief that the Civil War might be a traumatic experience with a potentially cleansing component. Depicting the harshest side of the war but also moving moments of brotherly love in the midst of suffering, Whitman takes his readers closer to the authentic social democracy the poet himself claimed to have experienced in the hospitals. Searching for a means to dress the wounds of his country, Whitman ironically found it in the midst of war itself: "curious as it may seem, the War, to me, proved Humanity, and proved America" (*Memoranda during the War*, 107).

Herman Melville departs from and problematizes the conception of the Civil War as divinely ordained, but *Battle-Pieces*, his volume of Civil War poetry published in 1866 soon after the conflict ended, shares—even if prudently—in Emerson's and Whitman's hopes for a reinvigorated United States. Given Melville's reputation as an author whose writing regularly skewered the young nation's optimistic conventionalities, the conservatism of Melville's poetic rendering of the Civil War and the optimism that permeates his depiction of the event is certainly astonishing to readers familiar with Melville's antebellum literary production. In the tragedy of the war, the poet locates a way out of collective self-deception and thus the potential for meaningful maturation—both of the nation and of Melville's readers. Thus, in *Battle-Pieces*, the poet's hopes for national renewal are

positive, if hedged. In "Misgivings" for example, one of the first poems of the volume, the poet refers to the United States as "the world's fairest hope,"[2] but not without connecting this hopeful America with "man's foulest crime" as well (*Battle-Pieces*, 13). However, Melville's expectations for the maturation of his country would change dramatically in the ten years separating the publication of *Battle-Pieces* and that of *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (1876), since, by the time he was engaged in the composition of *Clarel*, Melville knew that a renewed and better America was not in fact materializing. Over that period, Melville's hopes evolved from the optimism of *Battle-Pieces* to the pessimism of *Clarel*, as America's expected renewal actually became, not the promising opportunity for self-regeneration that Melville expressed in *Battle-Pieces*, but a negative "arrest of hope's advance" (*Clarel*, 4.21.155) which would bring the United States in its presumed youth to an unpromising, static, coming-of-age.

Melville's literary representation of the conflict in *Battle-Pieces* marked a turning point in the author's career. Published in August 1866, about a year after the war ended, *Battle-Pieces* was Melville's first published volume of poetry,[3] inaugurating more than two decades in which—with the exception of an unfinished book of combined poetry and prose and the posthumous novella *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1924)—the author would almost exclusively write poetry. Writing about such a popular topic as the Civil War, Melville might have had wishes for the recognition of *Battle-Pieces* and of himself as a poet, for, as he writes in the poem "On Sherman's men who fell in the Assault of Kenesaw Mountain, Georgia," one of the short epigraphic poems in the section "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial," "battles can heroes and bards restore" (*Battle-Pieces*, 174). The poet may have also hoped that *Battle-Pieces* could renew his image as a writer in the eyes of fellow Americans who, in the best of cases, continued associating his name with novels of adventures in the Pacific like *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), and, in the worst, remembered him as the crazy author of *Pierre* (1852).[4] In "The Rhetoric of Melville's *Battle-Pieces*," Robert Milder explains that

> For Melville the poet, the Civil War provided a subject and a complex of themes worthy of heroic treatment, but the impulse that shaped *Battle-Pieces* into a vehicle for persuasion arose from a more private belief that the imaginative writer might yet guide the nation in a time of crisis and in so doing rescue himself from impotence and obscurity. (1989, 196-197)

There is no documentary proof of Melville's expectations for *Battle-Pieces*. However, the more conservative political voice that emerges in

this volume (both in the poems and in the prose "Supplement" bound with them) clashes with that of Melville's previous literary production and is likely an indication of the type of readers to whom Melville intended to appeal. Noted by Dennis Berthold, Carolyn Karcher, Carme Manuel, and Deak Nabers among others, this conservative voice surprises readers who are used to Melville's exultation of human brotherhood in his fiction,[5] as it seems to express conservative views on racial politics during the Civil War and Reconstruction, the most important and transformative national event in Melville's lifetime. As Carme Manuel claims, in the "Supplement" to *Battle-Pieces*

> Melville addresses a victorious North and demands clemency and generosity toward the defeated South so that the Union can be reestablished and national reconciliation carried out. Nonetheless, the South Melville has in mind is a white South; thus, the existence and future of slaves who have been emancipated are relegated to a second status, since the only thing that matters is the restoration of what Lincoln had called "the house divided in two." (46)[6]

Though Melville's conservative political voice in *Battle-Pieces* is undeniable, his views can be contextualized, perhaps even explained, by his desire to appeal to an audience who, for the most part, is conservative. The poems are poised to move readers through recognition of the transformative effects of the war to personal maturation ensuring responsible citizenship. This potential reader is thus essential to the volume's careful construction of a critical patriotism which, while expressing support for the Union and pride in its victory, also warns against the potential dangers of an excessive Northern rule ("Patriotism is not baseness, neither is it inhumanity" [*Battle-Pieces*, 263]), feels for the defeated South, and encourages readers to avoid racist hatred toward the freed slaves because blacks too are America(ns) and part of the nation's future. As Robert Milder points out, "[t]he reader that *Battle-Pieces* implicitly assumes is Northern, white, middle-class, and almost assuredly male; educated but not necessarily intellectual; patriotic to the Union (overzealously at times) yet fundamentally humane; and 'empowered' in the sense that he and his like will define the moral character of the postwar America-to-be" (1989, 175). This ideal reader is the target of the maturation process that Melville may have expected that both the Civil War and his poetry volume might bring forth.

To this contextualization, Melville's own political views, as well as his family's political sympathies, must be added. Melville's sister Augusta stated that "Herman has never been a politician, but he belongs to a

Democratic family, & one which has done much for its party" (qtd. in Garner, 22). Examining the circle of Melville's relatives and friends, together with the ideological sympathies of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where Melville was living at the onset of the Civil War, Stanton Garner argues that

> [w]hether or not it is fair to call Herman a Democrat, it is nonetheless true that he saw the events of the war largely through the Democratic eyes of his family and friends. (...) And, indeed, the most telling evidence of Herman's political thought, the "Supplement" to *Battle-Pieces*, is clearly a Democratic treatise. That is not to say that Herman was active in any other way in the partisan struggles of the wartime years, or even that he engaged in normal political activity—Gus said that "it is well known that he has never voted in Mass., or taken any part in state matters." He was independent and politically negligent, but Democratically so. (24)

Melville was opposed to slavery, but he stopped short of abolitionism because he believed that social reform should not be approached through radical violent action.[7] In the face of secession, Melville supported the Union. In Garner's words again, Melville's "position was not very different from that of Abraham Lincoln, who, although privately opposed to slavery, was willing to defer emancipation if doing so he could preserve the United States" (27). Melville's prioritizing of the Union over the imperative of emancipation is problematic for twenty-first-century readers. However, Melville's decision not to champion the civil rights of emancipated blacks does not of itself constitute a white supremacist vision of America. Whether Melville was conservative or not in his personal opinions about the emancipation of slaves, *Battle-Pieces* could not favor blacks over Southerners if it wanted to engage a Northern readership in the maturation process the volume encourages implicitly in the poems and explicitly in the "Supplement."

Melville's representation of the American Civil War in *Battle-Pieces* promotes the belief in a potential enlightenment of America as one of the few positive aspects to be obtained from the otherwise terrible effects of the war. Such maturation through tragic experience is also expected from the reader, whose journey through the poems and the prose "Supplement" might hopefully and eventually dispose him to embrace the views on national reconciliation the volume presents. In such a learning process Melville's war volume intends to act as a guide for readers who must navigate the challenges of Reconstruction, newly aware that "the glory of the war falls short of its pathos—a pathos which now at last ought to disarm all animosity" (*Battle-Pieces*, 265). As Milder observes, the Civil

War was "a historical breach (...) that the writer might enter to help refound America upon a worthier ideal of character" (1989, 174-175). Milder summarizes the character of Melville's patriotic reader:

> Where the "good American" of prewar days had staked himself on personal and national innocence—on the evils he and America *did not* know, the acquaintance with suffering and tragedy they *had not* made— Melville's "good American" of the future will draw strength from a full participation in the human lot. He will be the exemplary democrat and missionary to the world because his native political idealism has been deepened by tragic knowledge and has been transmuted from righteousness to compassion. (1989, 199, italics in the original)

The Civil War is understood as an occasion for the United States to grow in knowledge and responsibility in the poems "The College Colonel" and "America," both of which juxtapose images of youth/innocence to images of age/experience. Based on the return of the Berkshire Regiment to Pittsfield in August 1863, "The College Colonel" describes the homecoming of a regiment and their captain after two years in the battlefields. However, this is not a victorious return presented in a celebratory way: the men do not march exultantly, as they probably did when they left for battle,[8] and the colonel—himself maimed in war—leads a regiment whom the narrator compares to a group of "castaway sailors" (*Battle-Pieces*, 120) who have survived the overpowering forces of the sea. Both physical and psychological suffering impregnates the lines of the poem, but also deep maturation: the colonel and his men have "lived a thousand years / Compressed in battle's pains and prayers" (120). This exposure to the tragedies of war has made the men acquire what the poetic voice calls "truth":

> But all through the Seven Days' Fight,
>   And deep in the Wilderness grim,
> And in the field-hospital tent,
>   And Petersburg crater, and dim
> Lean brooding in Libby, there came—
>   Ah heaven!—what *truth* to him. (121, italics in the original)

It is precisely this learning they have acquired that makes the returned soldiers unable to join the patriotic welcome celebration of their fellow villagers. Their worn out clothes or the evident impact of the war on their bodies does not diminish the dignity and heroism of these "castaway sailors." In fact, Melville's decision to portray the returning soldiers in