

## *Introduction*

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In Arna Bontemps' historical novel *Black Thunder: Gabriel's Revolt: Virginia 1800* (1936), the enslaved titular character overhears a conversation about the French Revolution:

They were all just words, but they put gooseflesh on Gabriel's arms and shoulders. He felt curiously tremulous. . . . [H]e was bewitched. Here were words for things that had been in his mind, things that he didn't know had names. Liberty, equality, frater – it was a strange music, a strange music. And was it true that in another country white men fought for these things, died for them?<sup>1</sup>

Unaware that people in the United States fought for freedom before the French brewed their Revolution, Gabriel uses the knowledge that violence can facilitate a better future to lead his fellows in an uprising intended to change the legal and social order of slave-holding Virginia. Near the end of the novel, however, an unnamed character, a veteran of Toussaint's uprising in Haiti, watches the captured Gabriel pass through the streets and meditates on the costs of war: he knows that “words like *freedom* and *liberty* drip blood” (196, emphasis in original). In American ideology, freedom demands sacrifices, including dying, seeing comrades die, and living with the act of killing. As Bontemps suggests, the full consequences of violent conflict may be apparent only after the event. Further, while Bontemps' novel reaches back to explore a forgotten historical moment, *Black Thunder* also spoke to its contemporary context: in the 1930s, as fascism flourished overseas, Bontemps was keenly aware of oppression against blacks across the diaspora – and of movements to unite and resist. Thus this representation of an aborted skirmish in a war that took another sixty-one years to be declared shows how imaginative renderings of one conflict may in fact have much to do with another.

As part of the Cambridge Themes in American Literature and Culture series, this volume addresses the subject of war across American literature

from the Revolutionary War, the US federal government's wars with Native Americans, the Civil War, the twentieth-century World Wars, the Vietnam War,<sup>2</sup> to the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with an eye toward understanding the role that ideas about war play in US culture. Within the broader topic of war on which this volume is focused, essays too take themes rather than specific wars as their subject. This volume's approach provides a strong foundation in the literature and scholarship of US writing about its major wars; illuminates how texts, authors, and themes resonate across time and conflicts; and, as with the example of *Black Thunder*, presents multiple contexts in which texts and a war's literature can be framed. By focusing exclusively on American writing, the volume illuminates the unique role representations of war have in the US imagination. Significantly, war is both cause and subject of one of the most resonant pieces of US writing, the Declaration of Independence. This document's justification for the use of force has permeated American identity, and the narratives Americans tell about themselves and their reasons for war wend themselves back to the Declaration's contradictions: the claim for freedom from tyranny is laid against the definition of who counts as an individual and whose rights must be protected.

While the stories Americans tell about war shape ideological and everyday experience of US life, the sheer scale of warfare can often overwhelm our understanding; we can better "respond to one man in his war," as Samuel Hynes puts it.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the individual (male) war story – from Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) to Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) to the blockbuster film *American Sniper* (2014) – serves as a significant touchstone in the American imagination, delineating and essentially intertwining our understanding of both combat and (white) masculinity. Yet despite the popularity of the individual narrative, "[w]ar is colossal and chronic in its effects," Kate McLoughlin maintains: "it reconfigures nations, displaces peoples, disrupts families, razes cities, devastates landscapes."<sup>4</sup> Consequently war appears far more pervasively in literature than well-known combat narratives might suggest: writing about the home front, families, social change, and national identity reflect and spring from the United States' involvement in wars. As Viet Thanh Nguyen insists, "A true war story must not be only about what happens to combat soldiers and their guts but also about the nation and its guts, about running one's refrigerator, which might use a refrigerant made by Dow Chemical, the company that manufactured Agent Orange."<sup>5</sup> Even during peacetime, war is an unavoidable, if often hidden, aspect of American life. "The complete domestication of war," Nguyen continues,

“is part of war’s identity” (231). Attending to war’s larger functions, as many essays in this volume do, reveals dynamics of power and meaning-making in American culture.

That meaning-making is rarely straightforward or singularly determined. Americans can be profoundly idealistic: they fight for independence from tyranny, abolition of slavery, “making the world safe for democracy,” the overthrow of fascist regimes, and protecting fledgling democracies from the “red menace” of Communism. Yet they also go to war to take land from people of color who inconveniently live on it, protect and expand their economic interests, secure the outreaches of their empire, and ensure the flow of oil. Sometimes they go to war to make money off violence itself. And they often find few contradictions among these reasons. To take another example of how a narrative about one war can be appropriated for representing the character of another, in May 2019, as Hulu prepared for the release of its adaptation of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961), General Motors Corporation (GMC) released a commercial for trucks that includes clips from the new series and a voice-over narration promoting professional excellence and leadership: “Celebrate the pros who step up every day,” we are inveighed, as well as to find – or rather, buy – the “conviction to lead when others choose to follow.”<sup>6</sup> As anyone who has read Heller’s darkly satiric World War II novel knows, *Catch-22* rabidly sends up the failures of leadership in the US Army, its rewarding of incompetence and self-interest and its complicity in American economic imperialism. GMC’s reliance on this text demonstrates a self-serving narrative selectivity that knows it can tug on any connection to early twenty-first-century American consumers’ pride in its military, particularly when the war deployed for commercial ends is the “Good War,” fought by the “Greatest Generation.” At a time when US moral and military leadership abroad seems ambiguous at best, drawing on American confidence in its past strength and virtue seems a sure-fire strategy. If even *Catch-22* can be read as supporting a narrative of US exceptionalism, this advertisement demonstrates the malleability of any given war narrative and how such narratives reach across time, in this case to further fluid and paradoxical political, commercial, and cultural ends.

As of this writing, we’re almost a generation past 9/11, the United States has been at war for eighteen years, and war stories remain immensely popular. In 2019, Martin W. Sandler’s postwar history, *1919: The Year that Changed America*, won the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature, and Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, a coming-of-age tale written as a letter to the narrator’s mother, a Vietnamese

immigrant, was a finalist for the National Book Award for Fiction. Ray Lambert and Jim DeFelice's *Every Man a Hero: A Memoir of D-Day, the First Wave at Omaha Beach, and a World at War* appeared on the New York *Times*' bestseller list. And the films *Midway* and *1917* spoke to American viewers' interest in the World Wars. *Avengers: Endgame* became the highest-grossing film ever, and Disney released the last installment in the *Star Wars* core series, indicating the central role of war in American fantasy life. Literary and other creative impulses continue to find war to be a compelling subject in the American arts.

The term "war" requires attention, deployed as it has been for such state-sponsored but hazy efforts as the "war on poverty," the "war on drugs," even the "war on terror." In the early nineteenth century, in what is still considered the standard dissertation on modern war, the Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz defined war as "an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will."<sup>7</sup> What he describes is state-sanctioned violence, enacted by individuals disciplined into military institutions. Further, as Elaine Scarry has so influentially demonstrated, war inherently depends on language; it is, she observes, "based on a simple and startling blend of the real and the fictional."<sup>8</sup> Governments must convince individuals to fight and support a war; the internal processes of war require both formal and informal languages; and eventually what Scarry calls the "unanchored issues" of the war must be transformed into a future reality through a linguistic and imaginative process that ties those issues to damaged and destroyed bodies. Today, the Clausewitzian view of war fades into the "war on terror," a war enacted not against governments but against an idea, embodied by stateless organizations often acting in the name of religion, carried out less by opposing armies and more often by state-sponsored, human-directed technology against targeted individuals. Still, however inadequately, the term "war" calls to mind two clearly defined sides seeking to advance national interests through acts of violence committed by institutionally disciplined individuals. For this volume, contributors largely explicitly or implicitly employ Clausewitz's and Scarry's definitions as essays interrogate what war means, and has historically meant, for American citizens, culture, and society.

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Essays in "Aspects of War," Part I of this volume, address issues that appear throughout US literature in representations of war in their particular American context. Examining the principles of US just-war theory, Ty

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Hawkins shows (Chapter 1) that American war writing returns to the same questions and contradictions articulated in the Declaration of Independence as the United States faces new moral situations throughout its history. As Nicholas J. Cull demonstrates (Chapter 2), literature and other artifacts that encourage war-making – that is, propaganda – have been essential and culturally constitutive aspects of the American experience of war. My essay suggests (Chapter 3) that while representations of soldiers, from heroes to common men, tend to dominate the American imaginary when it comes to war, the historical arc of these representations shows fractures and disruptions that compete for the public’s attention and allegiance.

Literature about war engages, too, with the consequences of mass violence, including, most immediately, the destruction of the body. “War is injuring,” Scarry insists, and, as Michael Zeitlin establishes (Chapter 4), American war writing must include works by authors who attempt to bring this fact home, often in graphic, realistic detail. Facing the injury of war, he notes, requires also that writers and readers consider those who care for and attend to injured and destroyed bodies. Philip Beidler expansively demonstrates (Chapter 5) that war writing often confronts the long reach of violence for veterans, who must re-adapt, or not, to civilian life and cope with the lingering psychological, logistical, and social consequences. Of course, not everyone returns: Americans mourn their dead, as Steven Trout explains (Chapter 6), in a rich tradition of literary commemoration that resists an easy understanding of the production and reception of individual and communal memory. And Lawrence Rosenwald suggests (Chapter 7) that the significant body of US antiwar writing points to an ever-growing resistance to violent conflict, a trajectory with hopeful possibilities.

Part II, “Cultural Moments and the American Literary Imagination,” works both thematically and chronologically. Some of these essays focus on writing about one war; others track ideas raised by two or more historically proximate wars, addressing aspects of influence, continuity, and change. Although the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution secured privileges for white land-owning men, James J. Gigantino II argues (Chapter 8) that abolitionists, native peoples, and white women also employed the rhetoric of liberty and freedom from tyranny to claim their places as citizens, yet with significantly less success. As Tammy Wahpeconiah shows (Chapter 9), the hundreds of years of US violence against indigenous peoples has produced a rich vein of literature by Native writers that speaks to suffering, loss, and cultural resilience and

continuity, from the founding of the nation until present day. The Civil War, a convulsion through which the US government insisted on the indissolubility of the nation and, by the end, the abolition of slavery, was the eruption through which the flaws of the founding documents forced their way in blood. The war had stakes of nationhood and individual liberty on both sides and was not easily understood or forgotten, Sarah E. Gardner argues (Chapter 10), and she illuminates how writers constructed the meaning of the war from its beginning and ever since. And while the Civil War was not the first occasion on which African Americans put pen to paper to claim their equal place in the nation, David Davis explains (Chapter 11) how it spurred black writers to explore the connection between military service to citizenship as they saw two wars' worth of promises and subsequent backlash.

The first major twentieth-century war had far-reaching and unexpected effects on US society, Pearl James shows (Chapter 12): World War I ushered in an era of literary innovation that both applauded cultural shifts and fostered strategies for representing the horrific experience of new technologies for violence. Looking particularly at writing about the home front in the early to mid-twentieth century, Karsten Piep explains (Chapter 13) that the two world wars fomented social and political unrest, even while actual changes were slow in coming. Homefront literature, he demonstrates, offers a window into the debates, changes, and regressions in American social and political life, as women and members of racial and ethnic minorities found new opportunities that pushed against existing values and institutions. World War II, a massive conflict spread across the globe, captured the American imagination in part through its seeming repetition of the first, with the magnified threat of fascism. The United States emerged from this war as a global leader and thus confronted questions about what to do with this power, in a world re-made with one other "superpower," the Communist Soviet Union. The geopolitical power balance elicited literature interrogating American identity and its scope, Jonathan Vincent explains (Chapter 14), as US individuality and manhood in particular were tested against the arenas of American influence. As Diederik Oostdijk argues (Chapter 15), producers of cultural memory in the 1980s inscribed World War II as the "good war" fought by the "greatest generation" to prevent the spread of tyranny, even while, as he shows, much literature persistently questioned and undercut this popular national mythology. And the United States soon found itself in two more wars, in which the stakes were dubious at best, in Korea and Viet Nam. Literature of the US experience of

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the Vietnam War, Mark A. Heberle demonstrates (Chapter 16), paints a darker picture of the consequences of American power, for individuals and the nation.

The Vietnam War left Americans anxious about their standing in the world and reluctant to engage in another armed conflict, in any war in which they could not be assured of victory. After 9/11, President George W. Bush promised revenge for the attack on American soil while also reassuring civilians that terrorists could not change the American way of life. With the declaration of a “war on terror” and invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration set in motion what’s now considered the Forever War, in which the state perpetually engages in hostilities somewhere on the globe, sanctioned by the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Terrorists, passed by Congress on September 14, 2001, and which, as of this writing, is still in effect. As Stacey Peebles argues (Chapter 17), even as writers investigate the complex realities of these wars, Americans seek out blockbuster superhero movies, in their ever-expanding universe, for their representations of soldiers and heroes, in wars that always set up for a sequel.

War in American literature is a pervasively broad topic, one that invites and demands a variety of perspectives and approaches to see how war weaves its way through the American imagination. Part III, “New Lines of Inquiry,” offers essays that outline a relatively recent theoretical development in literary and cultural studies, employ that approach to examine several cultural artifacts, and suggest future possibilities for examining American literary representations of war. Queer studies, Eric Keenaghan demonstrates (Chapter 18), allows us to recognize that LGBTQ+ individuals’ demand for civil rights comes with a price, that is, the implication of all Americans in the nation’s martial identity and actions, even as, or because, war lends itself to the expression of queer erotics. Through disability studies, as John M. Kinder shows (Chapter 19), American literary texts reveal complex framings of the injured body, framings that illuminate our thinking about normality as well as the costs of war. Ecocriticism, in Laura Wright’s handling (Chapter 20), illuminates two American authors’ exploration of the environmental consequences of US war-making and individualist ideology. Examining war through whiteness studies, Roger Luckhurst raises questions (Chapter 21) about the centrality of war to defining white identity, and possibly vice versa, particularly in the persistent trope of the traumatized white male veteran of recent wars; literary time itself, he suggests, reifies whiteness. Posthumanism, in Tim Blackmore’s framing (Chapter 22), offers complex visions of American

selfhood and its relationship to the state in futuristic representations of war and human potentiality.

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War stories can be powerful, aesthetically pleasing, personal, and revealing – that is, they can evoke pleasure. Some of this comes from beauty that writers see in war itself, such as the journalist Michael Herr’s memory of “how lovely .50-caliber tracers could be, coming at you as you flew at night in a helicopter, how slow and graceful, arching up easily, a dream.”<sup>9</sup> Other aspects of beauty may come from the power of an author’s language or the carefully crafted structure of their narrative. With the pleasure in war stories comes troubling ethical questions: how do we enjoy a story in which individuals die, are maimed, traumatized, displaced, diseased, lose their families – a story grounded in historical realities? It’s a question worth considering, even as we might counter that war stories teach us about violence; show us how we continue to ignore the lessons of earlier wars; reveal complexities in our social, economic, and political order; expose who counts as what Judith Butler calls “recognizable’ persons.”<sup>10</sup> Here, scholars address war in literature and other aesthetic forms, works that may be judged for their beauty, their authors’ attention to and skill with craft. In other words, we must consider the costs of transforming the ugliness and waste of war into what Philip Beidler calls “a dreadful fascination”: he insists that we recognize “that modern war . . . continues to give aesthetic inspiration; and that representations of war in art, history, and memory . . . provide aesthetic experience while serving ends as various and complex as ideological or geopolitical history, the production of popular memory, and even mass-culture entertainment.”<sup>11</sup>

War stories matter, often vitally for those who have seen combat, who may be driven to tell their experiences or be utterly unable to do so, or who turn to those who seem better prepared to tell. We believe telling can heal, as manifested in groups like the Veterans Writers Project, the volume *What Was Asked of Us: An Oral History of the Iraq War by the Soldiers Who Fought It* (edited by Trish Wood, 2006), and the HBO documentary *We Are Not Done Yet* (2018). And we believe war stories can shape the future. In Omar El Akkad’s futurist novel *American War* (2017), in which the United States plunges into a second civil war, this time amid and about climate change, a minor bureaucrat assigned to peace negotiations expresses his frustration that the victorious North agrees to the fallen South’s condition that both sides elide the reason for the war: his



government bosses “didn’t understand, they just didn’t understand. You fight the war with guns, you fight the peace with stories.”<sup>12</sup> By ceding control of the narrative, he knows, the North once again sets the stage for an ongoing cultural divide and possible violent conflict. War stories are especially important in understanding gender, violence, power, and nation, and such stories also form a fabric of meaning through which Americans understand themselves, their lives, and each other. The essays in this volume explore, analyze, and investigate the stories Americans tell about their wars and their implication for US values, memory, culture, and its future.

### Notes

- 1 Arna Bontemps, *Black Thunder: Gabriel’s Revolt: Virginia, 1800* [1936] (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992), 21. Subsequent references to this work are given in the text.
- 2 The Vietnamese people call this war “the American War” and refer to their country as Viet Nam. This volume will use that spelling when referring to the nation. Yet “Vietnam” has become an American shorthand not only for the period of violent hostilities in which the United States participated but also for the national perspectives on this war, including the imperialist sensibility that drove it; the political corruption that facilitated it long past any hope of victory; and the seismic experiences of the cultural resonances of self-doubt, despair, and individual and national crises of self-understanding. In this volume, “Vietnam” refers to the American perception of the war and its cultural significance.
- 3 Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York: Penguin, 1997), xii.
- 4 Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 51.
- 5 Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 230. Subsequent references to this work are given in the text.
- 6 I saw this commercial on Hulu on May 16, 2019. A version of the ad with poor sound quality is available on YouTube at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BR\\_p5N3h1E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BR_p5N3h1E), accessed August 5, 2019.
- 7 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Col. J.J. Graham. New and Revised edition with Introduction and Notes by Col. F.N. Maude, in *Three Volumes*, Vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1918), 2. [oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2050](http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2050), accessed July 9, 2019.
- 8 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 62. Subsequent references to this work are given in the text.

- 9 Michael Herr, *Dispatches* [1977] (New York: Vintage, 1991), 132.  
10 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2010), 6.  
11 Philip D. Beidler, *Beautiful War: Studies in a Dreadful Fascination* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016), 7.  
12 Omar El Akkad, *American War* (New York: Vintage, 2017), 347.