Racism and Unity in Post-War Minority Literatures

A case study of William G. Smith, Leslie M. Silko and Andrew Lam

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7/04/2021

Table of contents

Introduction

"Books are weapons in the war of ideas"

W.W. Norton

World War II has influenced (and continues to influence) artists all over the world, from the creation of artwork, to cinema and literature. In particular, David Lundberg highlights how "World War II has had a profound impact on American society" and its "literary treatment continues to influence present concepts of war and its nature" (373). As scholar Jonathan Vincent points out, "war literature occupied a privileged place in the national imagination" (361). Its "representative weight and intellectual seriousness" surpassed that of the "culture industries", encompassing radio, cinema and television, therefore gaining a privileged position through which to influence the public opinion and spread culture (Vincent 362). In particular, since "the Nazi rise to power was in-famously associated with book burnings", reading became an "inherently patriotic activity, even the reading of texts that challenged mainstream thinking or expressed a socialist tinge" (368). Ethnic minorities in the U.S. used literature as a vehicle to express dissent and to denounce social injustices, both during and after the war. Literature became a subversive medium through which they could influence a vast reading public, predominantly white, which was now more interested in understanding the reality of ethnic minorities' members they lived with (Brown 19).

The focus of this thesis will be a comparative analysis of three novels that share a major common topic, which is World War II. In particular, the authors of such novels belong to specific minority groups in the US: William Gardner Smith, with his novel *Last of the Conquerors* (1948), is part of the African American minority; Leslie Marmon Silko, with

Ceremony (1977), is part of the Native American minority; finally, Andrew Lam, with *Repentance* (2019), is part of the Japanese American minority. This study wants to be a contribution to ethnic minority studies, with particular focus on the variegated scenario that formed after the upheavals of the second global war. As we will see in the next chapters, World War II was crucial in the advancement of ethnic minorities' rights, for they had stronger grounds to make their claims for equal rights. This comparative analysis will show that, among other messages and purposes, these three novels notably seem to share a common tendency: to highlight the shared humanity that characterizes the worldwide population.

The choice of these three books was guided by an attempt to depict the evolution of World War II-related literature from the point of view of ethnic minority novelists. As Lundberg points out, "literature written after 1945 often takes a critical view of America's role in the war, questioning what was gained by winning" (385). Therefore, "the moral differences between the Americans and their enemies, between the victors and the defeated" was blurred (385). But this does not mean that the attention will be focused solely on the immediate post-war years. On the contrary, we will see how the events of the global conflict came to influence even contemporary literature, keeping a prominent place in the literary sphere for more than 70 years.

Smith's novel, published in 1948, is a clear response to the war, even if it does not discuss the war directly. Generally, as Lundberg points out, African Americans "were less concerned with the battlefield than with their treatment on the homefront and in the military. Their enemy was not so much the Japanese or the Germans as it was racism" (386). That is why war-related literature written by black writers almost never concerns the fighting itself but focuses more on the social consequences evolving from these fights. Smith's work refuses also the categorization of the "protest novel", the most common genre for black writers in the postwar

years.[1] Instead, as Smith himself writes in his essay, he is concerned with topics of universal interest, to which any suffering people in the world could relate ("Negro Writer" 299). In this resides his formulation of cosmopolitanism, in his vision a movement guided by African Americans that would finally offer an alternative model to the oppressive situation in which colonized or racialized people were forced into.

Silko's novel, written in 1977, was not only a response to the Civil Rights struggles that were going on in the US; its context is also that of the ongoing Cold War with Russia, a war that "muddied the once-clear distinction between war and peace" (Lundberg 387). *Ceremony* is a denunciation of violence on all levels, and its final message of union and non-violence is in contrast with "the threat of nuclear annihilation" that became so prominent during the Cold War years (387). As Aaron DeRosa states, "Silko thematically interweaves the distinction between public and private trauma into her text through the lens of an atomic ennui within American culture" (42). Silko herself never experienced this cultural trauma, but "the social environment" in which she grew up "was heavily scarred by the traumatogenic event of the atomic bomb, a scarring that invariably had an effect on her own literary production" (DeRosa 48). Her novel shows the total destruction that the atomic bomb signifies, and Silko advocates for union as the only possible form of survival for the human species. In an interview, she explains how the healing of her novel's protagonist is fundamentally tied to the coming together of all human beings: "Tayo's healing is connected to the belief that it's human beings, not particular tribes, not particular races or cultures, which will determine whether the human race survives" (in Seyersted 32). Silko, by her own admission unable to participate "actively"

[1] The "protest novel" is defined as a vehicle, for black writers, "to articulate dissatisfaction" in the postwar years. As Stephanie Brown writes, "the protest novel sought not artistic innovation or philosophical complexity but simply the expression of the 'black experience'" (31).

in the protest movements, chose to fight with her words instead, using "her writing as an act of subversion" (Weaver 214).

Lam's book, published in 2019, shows that World War II still plays a central role in the contemporary American society. In particular, *Repentance* is part of the "postredress movement", a literary movement that tries to resume undertreated issues tied to racial injustices that the Japanese Americans suffered (Robinson 54). Artists and activists participating in this movement are trying to bring back to light an undiscovered or undervalued past of suffering and heroism that was never duly recognized to people of Japanese descent. According to Michael Omi, "Arguably, there has never been a more appropriate time to consider the issue of Asian American racialization", since "the Asian population grew faster than any other race group in the United States between 2000 and 2010" (40). According to race and ethnic scholars, this exponential growth is leading to a change in race relations and has to be kept in high consideration in the new classification of the "social order" in the US (Omi 41). It also has to be taken into account that the growing Asian American population is generally younger and comprised of new immigrants (41). Therefore, Lam's work assumes an even greater relevance, being a modern work of art that focuses on crucial past events in the history of the Japanese American minority.

After a first introductory chapter about the historical and cultural context in which the three books are situated, a close reading of the texts will ensue. The goal is that of showing how these three novels, pertaining to different ethnic minority groups and totally different epochs, still share many significant traits. Through close readings it will be possible to highlight specific passages in which the three authors dealt with a same topic. Specifically, three main themes have been identified, and each chapter will focus on a particular WWII-related theme discussed by each author in different, even if converging, ways.

Chapter 1 will introduce the historical and literary context, which is crucial for the understanding of the texts. As Patell notes, any literary text should be read in its historical context, but ethnic texts "remind us forcefully" about this reality, since the historical influence is absolutely necessary if we intend to understand them ("Comparative" 170). Chapter 2 will delve deeper into the explanation of the concept of "race war" and how this theme has been covered by Smith, Silko and Lam. The three authors treat different aspects of this topic; therefore, it will be possible to note how the concept of "race war" can adapt and encompass a wide variety of themes. Chapter 3 will focus on the return of war veterans and their readjustment to civilian life. While people enlisted and fought in the war with the hope for change, the analysis of the three novels will highlight how the war did not necessarily bring improvements in social and living conditions. Ethnic minorities' veterans experienced racism even upon their return from battle. Finally, Chapter 4 will explore the most predominant aspect that the three books have in common, which is their call for recognition of a common humanity that both ethnic minorities and the "predominant" white majority share.

The methodology of the close readings will be useful in highlighting both common and differing ways of exploring the same themes on the part of Silko, Smith and Lam. Single excerpts of the novels have been taken into consideration, in an attempt to highlight those which had more similarities of intent, in order for a comparison between the three texts to be drawn. Still, as Patell argues, "the literatures produced by minority cultures" pose a bigger challenge ("Comparative" 170). This is because the "subtext" of such works draws from a cultural context which is generally not fully disclosed by minorities' members nor taught in schools and universities. For example, Paula Gunn Allen, teacher and writer of Native American descent, expresses this "ethical dilemma" in teaching texts like that of Silko, because she feels torn between "professional ethics" and "native ethics" (84). Such teaching presents her with the moral "obligation as a professor" to give students essential information about the Native world,

in order to fully understand the text, while also being reluctant in giving them because her Native "traditions require her to remain silent about such material" (Chavkin 10). Keeping such a discourse in mind, an extra effort in contextualizing these texts, both culturally and historically, has been made. The close readings of single book parts presented in this study are thus accompanied by a critical analysis that tries to locate them into a broader cultural and historical context, from which they are "inseparable" (Patell, "Comparative" 170). With the help of the words of Silko, Smith and Lam, it will be possible to show how the so much professed idea of America as the greatest defender of democracy was threatened by America's own behavior and policies during World War II. Scholar Josephine Hendin highlights how postwar literature in the States "joins in serving and contributing to a global ideal: the power of art to inspire recognitions and dialogues across cultures" (18).

Some minor literatures, like Asian American and Native American literatures, became more prominent during the 60s and 70s, in consequence of the visibility obtained with the Civil Rights Movements. This does not mean that no minority literature had been produced until then, but only that they were finally given more recognition and reached a wider public. This led to a slow but steady canonization of ethnic texts (Patell, "Emergent US" 6). However, to the present day, there is still a long way to go before finally including African American and Native American texts in university curricula under the sheer label of "American literature", thus surpassing the "impasse of hyphenation" (Patell, "Emergent Ethnic" 353). Patell underlines that "a number of scholars" have been calling for "a reconstituted discipline that might be called 'Comparative American Literature'" ("Comparative American" 167). The "remapping" of American literature on the part of these emergent literatures is "exciting" because they "promise to produce new vantage points from which to survey the 'American' scene" (167). Therefore, this attention to "cultures once marginalized by mainstream cultural

historians is proving to be a hallmark of the new American studies" ("Comparative American" 169).

The approach of this study has been inspired by this fairly recent, and still ongoing attempt of establishing the field of comparative race studies.[2] It represents an attempt to give equal importance and to put on the same comparative level three texts pertaining to different ethnic minorities. Scholar Shu-Mei Shih brings to attention the tendency of forgetting or putting into margins specific racial questions or literatures when new ethnic groups come into play in the U.S. panorama (1351). For example, she notes how Native American studies started losing their prominence in the "color battle" "with the increased visibility of other colors in different historical periods—black, yellow, and brown" (1351). By bringing together texts of African, Native and Japanese American authors, this study aims to highlight their shared themes. Indeed, scholar Ania Loomba emphasizes that "comparison, as a perspective and a method, has historically served to shore up Eurocentric and discriminatory ideologies and practices. The most productive potential of comparison is that it can establish connections and relations across seemingly disparate contexts and thus challenge provincialism and exceptionalism" (501).

[2] Joseph Keith describes comparative race studies as "new analytics of comparison emerged as critical and necessary efforts to render legible and combat the new racisms and shifting structures of racial difference that at once underwrite – and are masked by – the colorblind discourse of our contemporary multicultural age of global capital" (187).

Chapter 1

Historical and Literary Introduction

In order to better illustrate the context of the three novels here analyzed, this chapter will offer an historical and literary introduction. The first part will focus on the historical period in which the three novels are set, World War II. The literary introduction will explain the specific milieu in which the authors operated. This is essential in order to understand what pushed them to write their novels and to contextualize their significance. Finally, the last section of this chapter will introduce the authors and their position in the US literary and cultural panorama.

1.1 Introducing the Historical Context

When hearing the news of the Pearl Harbor attack, every American citizen reacted in different ways, but one thing was for sure: it "was one of those days, where everyone ten years of age and older would always be able to recall exactly where they were and what they were doing when they received the shattering news of the Japanese raid" (Gerstle 191). Between disbelief and outrage, Americans of every descent felt now vulnerable in their own houses, something that would not happen again until the infamous 9/11 2001. This general sense of fear is what sparked the enormous support of the American population, of every race, gender and age, to their government's engagement in the Second World War. Such support seems astonishing when thinking that "only six months before the attack, public opinion polls showed that 79 percent of Americans expressed a desire to stay out of the war" (Takaki 14). After the

attack on American soil, the then-president Roosevelt did not have to make a great effort to persuade the American population: people were ready to sacrifice everything in order to defend their country and their homes.

Given the attack, World War II could be propagandized as "the good war", one waged to defend democracy at home and to expand it abroad. The consensus after Pearl Harbor was virtually unanimous. America and its inhabitants were depicted as innocent victims of a vile attack, and the fact that "this act had been executed, with brilliance, by a nonwhite people deepened the outrage, for it struck at Americans' belief in the racially superior and unassailable character of their civilization" (Gerstle 191). Therefore, the war took on prominent racial connotations and is remembered still today as the "race war".[3] It assumed these connotations because the war in Europe was fought against racist Nazis, while the war in the Pacific was reconfigured in racist terms. As Ronald Takaki has argued, during World War II the U.S. had to come to terms with the "'incongruity' between our professed principles and our practiced prejudices" (6). This "incongruity" includes, among other things, fighting a democratic war with a racially segregated army and the interment of 120.000 Japanese Americans in detention camps (5).

For all ethnic groups, the enrollment in military service was among the highest ever. Many historians[4] have already posed the question of why members of racialized groups, like Native Americans and African Americans, joined the war effort so willingly. The answers, of course, are many and varied, and we can make only some generalizations, which cannot include the single individuals' choices.

[3] Gary Gerstle uses the definition of "race war", a phrase used by John Dower in his book "War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War" (202).
[4] See Ronald Takaki and Takashi Fujitani, for example.

Starting in the early 1930s, Germans had infiltrated Native tribes in order to learn their languages and eventually convince them that Germany would give them back their lands if they fought for them (Bishop 41). However, Nazis underestimated the attachment of Native Americans to their land and country. Despite the Nazi propaganda during the 1930s, "Native Americans responded in unprecedented numbers to America's call for volunteers immediately after Pearl Harbor and continued throughout the war years, because they clearly understood the need for defense of one's own land" (Bishop 41). Among the reasons why Natives joined the army so numerously, there were not only their attachment to the land; many joined because of the expected economic retribution, or because war was seen as a prestigious duty that brought honor to the individual and the entire tribe (63). Of course, it has to be kept into consideration that Native American populations do not constitute a homogenous group: each and every tribe has its own rules, beliefs and personal history with the US government. Some tribes, like the Hopi, for example, were prosecuted for draft evasion; others, like the Navajo, fought hard in order for its members to be considered for draft even after exclusion (Bishop 54).

People of Japanese descent living in America faced perhaps the most dramatic contradiction: as "hysteria quickly swept the West Coast", where the large majority of Japanese people lived, the government forced 120.000 Japanese to detention camps, in an atrocious parallelism with Hitler's action against Jews (Gerstle 191). Japanese Americans were forced to leave everything behind, sell their properties and lands, and be relocated in designated camps, where they would spend the rest of the wartime. When they were asked to enlist in the army, "many refused either because they had never believed claims about America as the nation that uniquely guaranteed freedom, equality, security, and happiness to all regardless of race or because the internment experience had convinced them that such claims were groundless" (Fujitani 195). Despite the disillusionment of many, a great number of Japanese Americans from the camps joined the war effort, in an attempt to redeem their people's name and pride

(182). As scholar Fujitani highlights, "they stressed that this was a dramatic opportunity to prove their loyalty and that the voluntary character of their acts heightened the drama of this demonstration" (183). The majority of draftees were Nisei (second generation immigrants), who wanted to make their parents proud and gain a place in America for themselves. If, at first, the American government did not want to accept the "enemy" amongst their ranks, later they decided to use them as a further weapon against Japan, in order to show that their policies were not guided by prejudice. Since Japan was accusing America of being racist, trying to use this discourse to gain consensus among Eastern populations, "Japanese Americans could be used in a global propaganda campaign to prove that the war was not a racial war to preserve white privilege in Asia" (Fujitani 105).

For African Americans, the war was a vehicle to fight for their own rights as citizens. The columnist George Schuyler wrote that "our war is not against Hitler in Europe, but against Hitler in America. Our war is not to defend democracy, but to get a democracy we have never had" (Takaki 24). Reactions among the African American population varied, spanning from isolationist positions to patriotic feelings. Some were convinced that the situation for black people could not have been worse and compared Hitler's action to the Jim Crow South (Takaki 24). Others feared that with Hitler's victory, their conditions would worsen, foreshadowing, with the disappearance of democracy in U.S., even the disappearance of the few benefits they enjoyed: "without democracy in America, limited though it be, the Negro would not have even the right to fight for his rights" (Jefferson 35).

Disenchanted by the empty promises made during World War I, this time the black community was ready to fight back and hoped that their participation in the war "would enhance the political, economic, and social status of blacks in the country" (Jefferson 39). African Americans set the goal of a "Double Victory", as it was defined by a cafeteria worker in a letter to the *Pittsburgh Courier*: "The first V for victory over our enemies from without,

the second V for victory over our enemies from within" (Takaki 20). This became a war not only for democracy, but, as defined by W. E. B. DuBois, a "War for Racial Equality" (Takaki 7). Later, this concept would be used by civil rights fighters of all ethnicities, not only blacks. Minority groups started demanding some actual change before conceding their bodies to the war machine. For example, as Takaki reports, "blacks challenged whites" by writing open letters: "Prove to us that you are not hypocrites when you say this is a war for freedom" (24). Similarly, "the editor of the *Chicago Defender* declared: 'We are not exaggerating when we say that the American Negro is damned tired of spilling his blood for empty promises of better days'" (24). If they had to give their lives, it did not have to be in vain: they were fighting also for their rights as American citizens.

Of course, not all minority groups were fighting together on the same front: differences arose and, in some cases, hardened the discrepancy between ethnic groups, as with the case of Japanese American people set against African Americans. During and after the war, Japanese Americans were depicted as the "model minority" because, "despite infringement on their civil rights and forced relocation to internment camps", they remained loyal and less problematic than African Americans, who "were growing increasingly militant in their calls for social equality" (Fujitani 6; Patell, "Emergent" 48). With the construction of the model minority myth and the fact that "especially Japanese Americans had succeeded through their own efforts despite racial prejudice", it could be argued that "minorities who failed had only themselves to blame for their miserable circumstances" (Fujitani 230).

Even though black people were no longer eager to accept discriminations and strongly fought back, both intellectually (by writing on newspapers and journals) and physically (protesting in the streets and military camps), the army remained mainly segregated during the war. African Americans formed the 93rd Infantry Division, "the first segregated division created in that war", a division "composed of white senior staff officers and African American

junior officers" (Jefferson 6). Jefferson exhaustively points out how African American soldiers were not deemed intelligent enough or physically apt for fighting. They saw action only in rare cases of extreme necessity: "the division saw limited action in the Pacific during World War II and spent much of its time relieving other units as they advanced toward the Philippines during the latter stages of the war. For much of the war, the unit was relegated to noncombat roles" (6).

Not all minority groups were deemed unfit to fight: racial prejudices hit different ethnic groups in different ways. Natives, for example, were considered natural fighters: "the 'inherited talents of the Indian' made them 'uniquely valuable – endurance, rhythm, time, coordination, sense perception'" (Takaki 61). Jennifer James' discourse about African American inclusion in the war machine as "predicated on the prospect of black death sparing white life" is a discourse that can be applied to all minority groups: the "total war regime could not afford to ignore even its most abjected populations" (17; Fujitani 10). Indeed, Japanese Americans were sent to fight in Europe mainly for propagandistic purpose.

Ultimately, also for black people the military was seen as an opportunity to escape an unhealthy environment and as an occasion to lift the burden of poverty. Not only the military paid well, but they also offered benefits when returning home, including study loans and house benefits under the GI Bill (Wynn 83).

Therefore, it is clear that one of the most common reasons to join the army was the expected economical relief. The U.S. were coming from one of the worst economic crises it ever faced, the Great Depression, that of course hit minorities more than their white counterparts. Another very common reason to join, even if articulated in different manners, was to claim a space in the American society. Fighting, showing value and courage and,

ultimately, giving one's life, were considered the ultimate sacrifices for recognition and acceptance into society.

1.2 Introducing the literary context

The books here analyzed are part of three different minority literatures. Minority cultures and literatures are defined in comparison with a "dominant" counterpart. As scholars JanMohamed and Lloyd write, "the 'inadequacy' or 'underdevelopment' that is ascribed to minority texts and/or authors by a dominant humanism in the end only reveals the limiting (and limited) ideological horizons of that dominant, ethnocentric perspective" (8). Minority texts are deemed as such because someone in a position of power classified them as inferior or pertaining to a "minority" tradition. Therefore, taking into consideration the cultural panorama of the USA, the white, dominant culture has always relegated different ethnicities' literatures to a "minority" position, by "making minority texts literally unavailable - either through publishers or through libraries - and, more subtly, by developing an implicit theoretical perspective which is structurally blind to minority concern" (8). World War II shook this scenario. As writer Josephine Hendin states, "the growth and prominence of ethnic literatures are one of the remarkable features of postwar American writing" (9). The question is, why now?

The activism of minority groups during the war and post-war years for the recognition of their rights as American citizens gave rise to a multitude of texts, either in the form of journal articles or in that of novels and poems. Given the racial connotations that the war took on and that Nazism was "ideologically grounded in racial inequality", "civil-rights advocates (had) a whole new arsenal to take on discrimination at home" (Höhn, "Germany" 611). Consequently,

the “American society as a whole (was) more open to reading about minority cultures and differences” (Nguyen 294).

As literary scholars Jo Bona and Maini write, “with the publication of a large number of works by ethnic writers, it was inevitable that there would be a growth in the scholarship and research of these writers and their works” (4). From there, the step to reach universities was brief, even though not yet easy. But even if in small pieces and minor courses, “ethnic studies (entered) into university curricula”, which implied some degree of canonization and recognition (Hendin 10). At the same time, the anthropologist Franz Boas argued that if race was considered "immutable, genetically inherited, natural, and hierarchical”, culture was “malleable, learned, conventionally arbitrary, and relative” (Douglas 2).

This shift was crucial, since it opened the doors and the minds to the possibility of evolution and change: single ethnic groups were no longer deemed to be inferior because of their “genes”, but it was recognized that their culture could be influenced and transformed by the environment in which they were situated. This gave rise to new forms of cultural hybridity, one in which authors tried to negotiate a new space, where their own traditions and cultural heritage could meet and live together with the “dominant” American environment. Thus, authors “find themselves deeply influenced by canonical traditions of American, English, and European literature, and the literature they produce is almost necessarily a hybrid of mainstream and ethnic forms” (Patell, “Emergent Ethnic” 357).

Patell identifies a common trait between these emergent literatures: “the desire to negotiate the borderlands between traditional cultures, to live without frontiers, to become a crossroads” (“Emergent Ethnic” 359). Minority writers are aware of their position of “mediators” and often write in response to, or to gain a position in, the main literary panorama. Patell points out how their “goal is not to enter the mainstream but to divert and transform it:

they seek to add their own distinctiveness to the stew of U.S. culture" ("Emergent US" 14). They have a responsibility to integrate their culture of origin and the target one, often given "the role of interpreters for white readers of the experiences of racial minorities rendered 'unknowable' by de facto and de jure segregation" (Walker 28).

The authors that will be analyzed in this thesis come from very different cultural, social and temporal background, but share a common trait: they try to give voice to a part of history often forgotten in the miasma of literature produced in the U.S. Through their stories, they function as mediators, bringing to light experiences and facts that tend to remain in the margins, forced there by the dominant discourse.

1.3 Introducing the Authors

William Gardner Smith was born in Philadelphia in 1926, graduated with honor in high school and soon after was drafted in the military, in 1946.[5] He was drafted as clerk-typist in Germany and, after a brief return in America, he moved permanently to France (Boyd 26). He played his role as cultural mediator by becoming an icon of the black cosmopolitan, and wrote for several American journals regarding his experience as an American black writer in Europe. All of his novels reflect in some way his experiences, and he explores "the difficulties and complexities of intercultural understanding", with particular attention to the theme of racism (von Mossner 167).

[5] Smith's date of birth is actually uncertain, since some sources report 1926 and others 1927. (Boyd, The New York Amsterdam News).

His first novel, *Last of the Conquerors*, published in 1948, is deeply autobiographical, since it recounts his experience in the military in Germany. Even if some parts are fictionalized, the basic experience on which the novel is constructed is true: like Smith himself, the protagonist, Hayes Dawkins, is a clerk-typist in post-war Germany. He is first assigned to a truck company in Berlin and later moved to the more rural Bremburg. This will allow Hayes to make comparisons between his experience in two different cities, and to introduce several themes, like the segregation of the army and the racial violence triggered by white GIs' racism and prejudice. Hayes reports on his military life, made of work during the day and fun at night: in Berlin, it is possible to choose among a range of activities, like going to the cinema, or the opera, or just drinking and dancing at the bar. During the weekends, with his girlfriend Ilse and their friends, they can go on a day trip to the beach or to visit some neighboring cities. The situation is completely different once he is moved to Bremburg: there, his freedom and range of movement are much more limited, especially because all the facilities surrounding the military camp are segregated. Ilse, incurring in great dangers, will manage to join her beloved illegally, and they will spend the rest of Hayes' term together. The book ending remains open, since the protagonist expresses the desire of moving to Germany permanently, but is not sure of how and if this will actually happen.

Even if Smith was "once believed to be on the verge of a great literary career", after his death in 1974, he was unjustly forgotten and his works received very little critical attention (von Mossner 167). Scholar Weik von Mossner reputes this to be very strange, considering that his novels are, in some cases, the only testimonies to historical events of some importance, like his report on the Algerian revolt in France (167). *Last of the Conquerors* is "the first novel about World War II written from the perspective of an African American", which recounts in detail the racism perpetrated at the expenses of black military by white GIs, a racism he experienced in first person (Brown 102).

Like the majority of literatures in the post-war era, also African American literature took over a political and social role. Many critics and artists of the time "insisted that (black writing) must have a clear political function" (Byerman 91). Stephanie Brown, in her book *The Postwar African American Novel*, notes how valid literary figures like Chester Himes and William G. Smith have been obscured by a wrong categorization of African American literature of the postwar years. She argues that, still to date, there has been a significant "absence of attention to black writing of the late 1940s and 1950s", which led to the dismissal of those years as just "the golden age of protest fiction" (8; 12). Brown claims that this act of 'forgetfulness' is a voluntary one, made in order to "throw both the avant-garde glamour of the Harlem Renaissance [of the 20s and 30s] and the politically engaged brilliance of the Black Arts movement [of the 60s and 70s] into sharper relief" (14). Therefore, despite wrong "critical renderings of the era", the postwar African American novel was not only a protest one, but "took varied forms and was open to vibrant, earnest debate" (39). To date, a number of scholars, among which Brown and Höhn, is making an effort to rehabilitate texts like that of Smith, trying to show the crucial importance they had and the legacy they transmitted.

As we will see in the following chapters, Smith originally "appropriated the war novel to produce a sophisticated if idealistic exploration of his nascent cosmopolitanism" (Brown 6). With his book, he is contributing to the wave of African American activism that had raised during the war years and that nurtured on the war testimonies and racist episodes endured by African American troops abroad. Activists saw in the war a renewed opportunity to advance claims for racial equality (Kinchy 292), often denouncing the racism perpetrated by white American soldiers and the segregated army system. By reporting on this exact situation, Smith is thus strongly denouncing the racism and advocating for change, a change that he saw possible in Germany, a land torn by a racist war. In his essay "The Negro Writer", Smith makes a comparison between the American capitalistic system and the Russian, communist one. He

comes to the conclusion that none of them can be deemed the ideal system, since each one has its faults, in its own way trampling "on freedoms and rights" (303). Instead, he envisions a system where black writers lead the change, and in this revolution, they are supported by all suffering populations: "repelled now by both contending systems, the Negro writer of strength and courage stands firmly as a champion of the basic human issues - dignity, relative security, freedom and the end of savagery between one human being and another. And in this stand he is supported by the mass of human beings the world over" (303). Therefore, "Smith sees African American literature as possessing an inherent cosmopolitanism based on its writers' marginalized status" (Brown 17). His aim is that of bringing to the fore this characteristic and basing on that not only a literary, but also a social revolution.

Leslie Marmon Silko, born in 1948, Old Laguna, New Mexico, began her education at an Indian boarding school and ended up receiving a B.A. from the University of New Mexico (Chavkin 4). Even if it is author N. S. Momaday who is considered the propeller of the so called "Native American Renaissance" for the assignation of the Pulitzer prize in 1969 to his book, Silko's book *Ceremony* in the end received more critical acclaim. The influence of the white hegemonic environment on her writing is clear, even though she mastered the ability to put into communication "American Indian and European narrative", showing an impressive "cross-cultural ability" (Chavkin 3). Silko herself is of mixed ancestry, as the protagonist of her story, which strengthens the autobiographical basis of her novel. While she was in Alaska, suffering from depression for being far away from home, she started writing this book and the same act of writing was her own "ceremony" to heal. Indeed, she declared: "When I was writing *Ceremony* I was so terribly devastated by being away from the Laguna country that the writing was my way of re-making that place, the Laguna country, for myself" (in Nelson 139). In the Preface to her book, she writes: "Fortunately, as the main character, Tayo, began to recover

from his illness, I too began to feel better" (xv). Therefore, the author herself traces an intimate connection between her fictional world and her real one.

Ceremony is the story of the war veteran Tayo, who is half white and half Laguna, who comes home deeply traumatized. However, his trauma is not exclusively tied to the war experience: his sickness is linked to a general one, that affects Natives and whites alike. It is a disorder, an imbalance that Silko defines as "witchery", that affects the entire world, the same imbalance that allowed for a destructive invention like the atomic bomb to be conceived and deployed. Tayo spends his days either alone at the ranch or dragged by his friend Harley to drink at the bar outside the reservation. His grandmother understands his sickness and the necessity to restore his place in the community and calls on a series of medicine men to help cure him. Tayo will finally start healing thanks to an unorthodox medicine man, who symbolizes the union of white and native worlds, and will guide Tayo towards restoration. The protagonist will have to go through various stages of a ceremony that will finally heal both him and his community, and restore the balance of the world. Among these stages, there is the crucial resistance to kill his virtual nemesis, Emo. Since violence of any form is condemned in the novel, the "not-killing" action is situated as a positive inaction (Nelson 164). The book will end with Tayo's full recovery and acceptance into the community, as he will take his place among the kiva priests: thanks to the ceremony, his knowledge of the world expanded, and he becomes a wise elder that guides the Native community.

The critical acclaim that this book received goes hand in hand with its inclusion in university and high school studies. The reasons of its success can be found in the fact that in her narrative Silko provides Native American elements, while still embedding them in a typical modernist structure. As we have seen, this appealed to the non-native public, exactly because it gave some notion about her people's mythology and traditions but in understandable and familiar forms. As professor Nancy Peterson writes, "In approaching Native literary texts, one

must keep in mind that social, cultural, and historical contexts are crucial" (99). The 60s saw the rise of the Red Power Movement, the most important civil rights association for Native Americans. Writers of this period responded to these movements, and in their texts, they engaged with postmodernism and "articulate(d) the contradictions and opportunities of living indigenously in the contemporary worlds", while still giving great prominence to their Native traditions (Peterson 100).

With her book *Ceremony,* Silko fits in this cultural panorama of struggle for recognition and for equal rights. Unable to be an activist, Silko preferred to contribute with her writing, by offering through her narrative a model for survival. She declared that "the most effective political statement I could make is in my art work. I believe in subversion rather than straight-out confrontation" (in Coltelli 250). Even if she did not experience the war herself, she saw the effects of it all around, her own father and uncles being war veterans. Growing up in the reservation, she saw the devastating effects of the war on some veterans and "she wondered why some veterans could return from the war to the community and function again within it, while others could not" (Chavkin 5). This is what prompted her to write *Ceremony* and to find an explanation and a "cure" to this widespread illness that hit reservation life in the postwar years.

Native American writers, especially those of the generation of Momaday and Silko, used postmodernist literary techniques not only as a way of appropriating western cultural forms, but especially as a way of claiming sovereignty (Peterson 100). As scholar James Gray points out in his essay, Native authors use this technique in order to engage both a Native and non-Native public, that in this way "must actively seek coherence and continuity out of the scattered and sometimes deeply intermixed material" (148). They do not try to impose a vision or a scheme on either part, but they "force readers to engage in their own mediation of story realities, a practice these writers perceive as at the heart of contemporary American Indian life"

(Gray 150). In this lay their success of mediators between cultures. Usually, they "present protagonists who are caught between Native traditions and white mainstream expectations, but they reject the typical modernist narrative ending of alienation" (Peterson 100). Rather, they present native cultures as a nurturing place where Native Americans who feel lost can get back their sense of identity. Therefore, the main motif of these novels is that of "coming home", "in contrast to the 'leaving home' journey to find one's identity typical of the Euro-American novel" (100).

The last author to introduce, Andrew Lam, is himself actively engaging in a discourse of remembrance of an important and obscured past. Lam, born in Philadelphia in 1978, majored in history at Yale University but later attended medical school, where he became a retinal surgeon and ophthalmologist (Pfarrer, Gazettenet.com). Despite being very busy with his work and family, he managed to find the time to start his career as a writer too. *Repentance* is his third and last book, published in 2019, and Lam's goal as a writer is exactly to "find aspects of American history that aren't that well known but really deserve to be" (Lam, Connecting Point).

Like the other two books, *Repentance* too has some degree of autobiographical basis: the protagonist, Daniel Tokunaga, is a doctor in cardiology. This aspect seems easily to have been influenced by the fact that Lam's own father was a cardiologist and Lam's own decision to attend medical school "was partly inspired by his father's career" (Pfarrer, Gazettenet.com). Lam is of Chinese descent but decided to write a book about the Japanese American war experience after he met some veterans of the 442nd regiment during his medical internship in Hawaii (Pfarrer, Gazettenet.com). Having always been interested in military history and U.S.-East Asian relations, it was not difficult for him to identify with a Japanese character to write this book. Indeed, he declared that "as a member of a racial minority, I know what it's like to be and feel different" (Lam, Gazzettenet.com).

Repentance is a family drama that follows the story of a Japanese American war veteran, Ray Tokunaga, and his son, Daniel. Because of continuous discussions and disagreements, Daniel does not talk with his father for more than 10 years. He is brought back to his childhood home because his mother Keiko has a car accident and is hospitalized. In this way, the plot develops in a series of dramatic turns of events that bring Daniel to discover more and more about his family's past and hidden secrets. Eventually, his father Ray dies, and his mother is forced to confess a long-hidden truth: Ray was never his real father. Daniel's biological father was Hiro, Ray's war friend, who died in France during the war. Ray never wanted to talk about his war experience because he felt guilty for not managing to save his best friend: it was his cowardice that led to Hiro's death. In order to repay his debt towards his dead friend and to save Keiko's honor, Ray decided to marry her (who was already pregnant) and became Daniel's father. This dramatic travel into the past will allow Daniel to find out more about the war adventures of his two fathers.

The "narrative of the 'intergenerational conflict'" (Ninh 114) is a typical genre of the Asian American literature. Japanese American literature is part of the Asian American literature, that came to be defined as such in the late 60s and early 70s, when "activists began to organize as Asian Americans and started to make claims about a history of writing that had largely been obscured" (Song 3). Therefore, the concept of Asian American literature was basically invented and produced by the joint efforts of Asian American activists and writers, that were trying to claim and reorganize their writing tradition (9). Up to that moment, Asian American writers were believed to write only "immigrant narrative" (4). Therefore, the new generation of activists and writers tried to avoid this genre, viewing "stories about immigration something to be suspicious of, as they seemed repeatedly to cast Asians in America as perennially new arrivals" (9). Instead, they focused on other themes, like cultural conflict, the experience of the internment camps and the intergenerational conflict (Ninh 114).

As scholars Srikanth and Song note in their essay, "Asian American literature has unavoidable political origins and makes only incomplete sense without an understanding of these extraliterary beginnings" (2). As Patell argues, it is not that "in six generations of Asian-Americans there was no impulse to literary or artistic self-expression", but mainstream American publishers were only interested in publishing works written by Asian Americans that were "actively inoffensive to white sensibilities" ("Emergent Ethnic" 369). Again, here we find the role of a largely white public that influences and shapes the notoriety and circulation of an emergent ethnic literature.

However, after the Civil Rights Movements of the 60s and 70s, Asian Americans started to demand more strongly recognition for their contribution to the country and to reject "the ways in which Asians in the United States are socialized into being passive and compliant, perceived as being effeminate, made to forget their own manly history" (Srikanth and Song 7). Cast in the role of the model minority, they were pressured "to hold their silence about their wartime experience in order to concentrate on fitting into mainstream society", a pressure that was coupled by "the erasure of the wartime events in postwar public discourse" (Robinson 48). Scholar Greg Robinson points out how "It was not until the tail end of the 1960s, amid a larger climate of contestation surrounding the Vietnam War and Civil Rights, that the wartime treatment of Japanese Americans became a subject of renewed public discussion" (52). Consequently, there was a proliferation of literary texts that formed the "redress literature", whose main goal was that of "breaking the silence that prevailed over the wartime camp experience" (Robinson 52). The redress movement "triumphed in the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, under which Congress issued an official apology" for one of the nation's biggest shame, the internment of Japanese Americans, "and awarded a $20,000 redress payment to each surviving former inmate" (54). Robinson notes how "In the twenty-first century, a new explosion of postredress historical and sociological literature appeared" (54). Produced by

scholars of diverse backgrounds, the new scholarship generally "took the injustice of mass confinement as a given and expanded the field of inquiry in time and space as well as in thematic terms" (54).

Lam seems to be clearly part of this most recent movement: he often states how important it is "that people remember this history", because "we are doomed to repeat if we don't" (Lam, Connecting Point). He wrote this book to sensitize especially young generations to the difficulties that minority groups can encounter (Connecting Point). His goal, therefore, matches exactly the post-redress literatures' one of "making the wartime events more familiar to a mass audience and conceivably in rendering them safer for general consumption" (Robinson 56). Lam, also part of an Asian minority, functions as mediator between Asian Americans and white Americans, trying to engage them into dialogue over a part of history which is often forgotten or not given due representation. Furthermore, by inserting in the book battle scenes in which Japanese Americans are shown as brave and physically strong, Lam is also enacting a reappropriating gesture of Asian American masculinity, denied or ridiculed for decades.

Hence, we can see how all the minority literatures here analyzed (Native, African and Japanese) are inevitably connected with a larger historical and political purpose. In their definition of "minor literatures", Deleuze and Guattari point out that one of their prominent characteristics is "the connection of the individual to a political immediacy" (Addis). In their formulation, minor literatures encompass not only "marginal literatures" and "secondary literatures", but also experimental ones (Addis). But what is essential here is the idea that, in this formulation, the individual is inextricably tied to the political. The three authors here studied are given or take upon themselves the role of "mediators" between cultures, and here stands their historical relevance and prominence.

Chapter 2

The Multifaceted Representation of the "Race War" in Minority Literatures

2.1 Why "Race War"?

World War II is considered to be a "race war" because of the way the conflict developed abroad and for the significance it acquired at home. As it has been shown in the first chapter, minority groups saw this war as an occasion to redeem themselves, to prove once again that they were proud American citizens and that they deserved to be respected and treated as such. Importantly, "America's entry into the war allowed civil-rights activists to step up their rhetoric significantly and to call for an end to segregation" (Höhn, "Germany" 605). It is also important to remember that Americans were surprised by the success of the Pearl Harbor attack especially because it was perpetrated by a racial "other", Japanese in this case.

World War II actually included two parallel wars: one in Europe, against German Nazism and Italian Fascism, and the other one in the Pacific, against the Japanese Empire. The U.S. main interest was in fighting the war in the Pacific against Japan, the country that had dared to attack them. However, "unlike the fighting in Europe, the armed conflict in the Pacific was a race war, powered by mutual hatreds and stereotyping" (Takaki 168).

The conflict took on racial connotations not only for the propaganda made at home, but also for the way it was fought abroad. The racial violence in the Pacific, which was aimed not only to kill but to disfigure the body of the killed, was "a combat savagery far exceeding that engaged in by American and German troops" (Gerstle 188). The final decision made by Truman of dropping the atomic bombs in Japan was guided by his "racialized rage against the "Japs"" (Takaki 173). In his book *Race for Empire,* Takashi Fujitani makes a compelling comparison of the U.S. and the Japanese empire, putting on the same level their "new

postcolonial models of imperialism" and their attempt to reinforce and extend their hegemony, basing their agenda on a racialized propaganda (7). Each empire accused the other of being racist, trying in this way to gain consensus and mobilize people to fight and support the war. To do so, "both the U.S. and Japanese total war regimes shifted decisively toward the strategy of disavowing racism and including despised populations within their national communities" (7).

Fujitani also points out how both regimes tried to reach their goal by shifting from a form of vulgar to one of polite racism. The more explicit, vulgar racism, had to be "veiled" because the war regimes needed supporters and consensus on all levels. U.S. policymakers expressed the need to denounce racism and include racial minority groups in the military because Japan started doing so: "Japan had been appealing to Asia to unite in a race war against white America. Its propaganda had been condemning the United States for its discriminatory laws and for the segregation of the Chinese in ghettos" (Takaki 119). The Japanese empire was uncovering the real reasons for the U.S. joining the battle: "'Far from waging this war to liberate the oppressed people of the world,' Tokyo argued on the air waves, 'the Anglo-American leaders are trying to restore the obsolete system of imperialism'" (Takaki 119). Therefore, the U.S. government decided to recruit Japanese Americans in the army in order to respond to Japan's accusations of racism, thus tying "the fate of all U.S. minorities to a larger propaganda campaign that tried to represent the United States as a nation that did not discriminate against any racial or ethnic minority" (Fujitani 13).

2.2 'True Americans': The Paradox of the Japanese Internment Camps

Even if it is based on fictional characters, *Repentance* can be classified as a historical novel because it revolves around real historical events. Two plotlines alternate: the first one follows the story of heart surgeon Daniel Tokunaga in 1998, L.A., California; the second one recounts the story of two war heroes, Ray and Hiro, while fighting the Germans on the Vosges Mountains, France, in 1944. Ray will be the only one to survive and will become Daniel's father, a contradictory and closed figure. The first plotline is based in '98 because that is the year in which the U.S. Department of Defense actually concluded its war medals revision, a project started in 1996 "to review the records of Asian Americans who may have been denied the Medal of Honor due to racial discrimination" (Lam 285). This revision brought the number of medals of honor for Japanese Americans from 1 to 23, therefore assigning 22 new medals for heroic acts (285). In the book, Ray is contacted by the DOD, who wants to upgrade his Service Cross to a Medal of Honor for his heroism in France, but he will refuse to talk about his war experience and will bring his war time secrets with him in the tomb.

The 442nd Japanese regiment was formed by merging the Hawaiian 100th battalion, the first all Japanese battalion formed by Hawaiian volunteers, and the battalions formed with recruits from the internment camps in the mainland. Ray comes from Hawaii and expresses disbelief to the idea that in the States there would be internment camps for his people: "it was still hard to imagine the government could throw thousands of people, including children, and old people, into prison just because they were Japanese. There weren't any camps for German Americans or Italian Americans. The Japanese in Hawaii hadn't undergone mass imprisonment, but that was probably because there were too many of them" (Lam 47). Ray's stupor was a generalized one at the time. The incarceration of Japanese Americans was the endpoint of the racialization of the conflict, "a policy without precedent or parallel in American

immigrant history" (Gerstle 188). The fact that the majority of internees were actually Nisei, therefore American-born people of Japanese descent, but with an American citizenship, made the act even more problematic to justify. Additionally, Japanese Americans were incarcerated even though the U.S. government knew they did not pose a threat (Takaki 145). Meanwhile, Germans and Italians on U.S. soil "were not subjected to mass exclusion or detention", even though U.S. secret services were aware that at least Germany had sent spies to America (Takaki 132). The reason for this lies in the fact that Germans "were important economically as businessmen and workers. Assimilated into mainstream society, Germans were regarded as Americans" (132).

This difference emerges also in *Last of the Conquerors.* When the protagonist Hayes Dawkins is asked by his German girlfriend if he liked Germans in America, he cannot answer sincerely, because he should have "told her that when Germans come to America they are no longer German but American" (Smith 23). It seems clear then that the pattern for integration into American society requires a white skin and a European name. Thus, "even the blatantly racist act of removing Japanese Americans from the West Coast had been motivated only by military concerns" (Fujitani 13).

Lam depicts how uncomfortable, filthy and dangerous to health the Japanese internment camps were. When Ray, returning from the war, goes to Manzanar (the most (in)famous Japanese internment camp) to bring back his dead friend's stuff, he noticed that toilets and showers were open, with no division for privacy. Living conditions were very poor, with several families living in a single block and placed in a dangerous landscape: "barracks were built off the ground because of tarantulas that sometimes traveled in large numbers" (Lam 175). These camps, indeed, were built in the midst of deserted areas, often near Indian reservations. For a people whose traditions impose rigid customs of honor and privacy, such living conditions were particularly disruptive. After years of struggles for recognition of the deep

injustice and suffering that the camp experience signified, it was finally recognized, "at least in education and by the U.S. federal government" that "the forced removal and confinement of Japanese Americans during World War II (is) a lesson on how racism can operate during a national crisis with lasting consequences for the affected group and society as a whole" (Takezawa and Okihiro 1).

The camp and war experience increased the sense of what can be defined "internalized racism" of the Japanese people. As Ray's friend, Hiro, says, "the shame was a burden that all Nisei silently bore, a burden every soldier in the 442nd was fighting to be free of" (Lam 47). The shame of coming from the land that had attacked the U.S. coupled with years of racism these people had already endured in America. In many instances, Japanese people in the camps accepted their destiny as something inevitable that they could not change and that to some extent they deserved. Instead of being indignant for a totally unjust treatment, people just felt the burden of demonstrating their loyalty to the US.

When talking with Ray about his life in America, Hiro remembers how in the States there were signs that said "'Only good Jap is a dead Jap', 'Jap not welcome', 'Don't serve Japs'" (116). Hiro underscores how these things at some point "get to you. After a while, part of you feels like you deserve to be insulted, or worse. All because you're basically, from birth, inferior" (116). This is an accurate definition of internalized racism: even if one does not fully believe to the insults, their repetition and ubiquity put into question oneself and his sense of identity and righteousness.

Ray is deeply embedded in this sense of internal shame and, conversely, gratitude towards the United States, and shows this on several occasions. Before his son Daniel went to college, he wanted to marry Anne Mikado, a Japanese girl whose parents had come to America after the war. Ray is absolutely against this marriage because Anne and her family are Japanese.

When Daniel reminds him that they are Japanese too, he says “No. We are Americans” (Lam 90). This process of “racial self-hatred" that results in the “rejection of both Japanese and Japanese American identity” was strengthened by the participation in the war and a subsequent internal (and external) fight to gain acceptance in America (Kim 92).

2.3 Battlefield Trophies and Racialized Rage: The Confrontation in the Pacific

Even though Leslie Marmon Silko’s book *Ceremony* has rarely been classified as historical fiction, the deep ties it has with the historical settings make it a good fit for this classification (Akins 5). Silko deeply engages with the thematic of the “race war” in her book. The protagonist of the novel is a half-white, half-Laguna Indian, Tayo, who participated in WWII in the Pacific and came back home deeply traumatized. Since his stay at the veterans’ hospital in Los Angeles was not fruitful, his family decides to send him to a series of medicine men who could help restore his mental and physical stability.

Even if partially dysfunctional, the protagonist Tayo is good-natured. He never expressed a desire to participate in the war: he joined the army because his cousin Rocky, who had deeply interiorized white dictates, fervently wanted to join. Tayo and Rocky are sent to fight to a nameless Pacific island and in the jungle, they witness unprecedented violence: it is not only a matter of killing the enemy, but one of hate. Both Native and white Americans desecrated the bodies of the Japanese soldiers they killed, and Japanese did the same in return. This is the demonstration of the racialized rage that developed in the Pacific, the result of the profoundly racist propaganda conducted by both the American and Japanese regimes. While Japan depicted Americans as “brutes and demons”, Americans portrayed the enemy as “savages and beasts” (Takaki 169). As Nancy Hartsock points out, the process of constructing the “other” is

a dehumanizing one: “the colonized is both wicked and backward, a being who is in some important ways not fully human” (192). In particular, for their societal structure, Japanese (and Asians in general) were assigned beastly characteristics: “Japanese propaganda about the seamless unity of their people, their ‘hearts beating as one’ in loyal service to the nation and emperor, reemerged in the United States as racial stereotypes about the herdlike or insectlike mentality of the enemy” (Fujitani 14).

In the book, Tayo is depicted as deeply traumatized by this excessive hate and disfigurement. But even though he feels pressured to hate the “Japs”, he cannot do it. In his “non-hate” he feels misunderstood especially by his war fellows: “They don’t know that he doesn’t hate the Japanese, not even the Japanese soldiers who were grim-faced watching Tayo and the corporal stumble with the stretcher” (Silko 40). Indeed, Tayo is a survivor of the Bataan Death March, during which his cousin Rocky was shot dead by a Japanese soldier because too sick to continue walking. As scholar Alyssa Hunziker claims, “his sympathy for the Japanese, while troubling, serves as a powerful critique against imperial projects as a whole” (7). Silko portrays her hero as basically incapable of hate, because she does not want him to be dysfunctional, since “hating whites mirrors and feeds the Indian's own misery” (Lincoln 52). Silko is aware of the internalized racism and self-hatred that Indians are pushed to feel. Emo, another war veteran, expresses this thought when he says: “us Indians deserve something better than this goddamn dried-up country. What we need is what they got” (50-51). That is exactly why she offers a model of self-acceptance and love for the community in line with her Native traditions, a model that does not wish white things, actually questioning their desirability when saying “Maybe Emo was wrong: maybe white people didn’t have everything” (51).

In direct opposition to Tayo’s behavior, Emo, his virtual nemesis, really enjoys killing: “Emo fed off each man he killed, and the higher the rank of the dead man, the higher it made Emo” (56). Emo personifies the war veteran that feels unjustly rewarded by the white

government, who aims to have all things white people have and that ultimately thinks exactly like a white racist: “We blew them all to hell. We should’ve dropped bombs on all the rest and blown them off the face of the earth” (56). Not recognizing that this is the same racist attitude that white people have towards the Indian populations, he re-enacts that same racism towards Japanese people. As Hunziker writes, “Silko is interested in whether (a character) willingly operated as an imperial aggressor and embraced the military’s colonial ideologies” (7). Therefore, it results that “not only is Emo a military occupier through his role in the army, but he also reinforces the genocidal logics of imperialism” (7).

Emo also participates in the collection of “battlefield trophies”, like “scalps, skulls, bones and ears” taken from the dead enemy soldiers (Takaki 170). One night, while Tayo and his friends are drinking at the bar, Emo is playing with his “war souvenir”, a dead Japanese colonel’s teeth in a pouch. The sound of the teeth clattering reminds Tayo of the inhumanity of the war, and he is abruptly set off and has a violent outburst against Emo. However, even if “he should have hated Emo; he should have hated the Jap soldiers who killed Rocky”, “the space to carry hate located deep inside was empty” (Silko 58). Therefore, Silko depicts Tayo as incapable of carrying hate even against his worst enemies.

Regarding the practice of disfiguring the dead bodies of the enemy, historian John Dower affirmed that “it is virtually inconceivable...that teeth, ears and skulls could have been collected from German or Italian war dead and publicized in the Anglo-American countries without provoking an uproar; and in this we have yet another inkling of the racial dimensions of the war” (Takaki 170). This disfiguring practice is the most violent representation of the effect of the racialized hatred that marked the Pacific war. It inevitably reminds of the wars and battles between Native people and white colonizers when fighting in the American West. Therefore, white military were now encouraging their soldiers to use practices for which, in the past, Natives were condemned as barbarians and savages. Plus, the fact that Indians now performed

these practices on a racialized other is significant of the degree of internalized racism and their desire to become part of the white society, forgetting that they were once in the Japanese position. As Mire Koikari reports, ‘‘indigenous men’s military service also needs to be understood as complicit in hegemonic orders, as it re-circulates the colonial image of native men as primitive and savage-like ‘warriors’ on the one hand and serves to reinforces the institution that has played a central role in EuroAmerican imperial expansion and domination on the other hand’’ (Tengan in Koikari 562). Therefore, Silko is condemning not only the whites for conducting a violent and racialized war, but also Native people who participated in this savagery and in the role of colonizers.

2.4 Racialization through Segregation: The Segregated Army in World War II

William Gardner Smith makes a strong denunciation of racism in *Last of the Conquerors*. The book is a fictionalization of Smith’s own experience in Germany in the post-war, occupation period of 1946, and it is one of the very few books documenting the experience of black soldiers in segregated units abroad. Like Smith himself, the protagonist Hayes Dawkins is a clerk typist and is part of an all-black truck company. He reports the everyday lives of the soldiers on duty, while giving very interesting insights about the racial situation developing in post-war Germany. Central to the development of the book is Hayes’ relationship with Ilse, a blonde German girl from Berlin, with whom he falls in love. This relationship is what will give Smith the opportunity to explore the racism as experienced in the States and as virtually absent in Germany.

During his stay in Germany, Hayes is first assigned to a truck company in Berlin, and later moved to a smaller one in Bremburg, in the countryside. In both cases, it is noteworthy that for all black companies, the captains are white. The institutionalization of racism was anywhere sharper than in the segregation of the army and in the fact that black troops were rarely led by black officials: "the War Department belie(ved) that southern white officers possessed far better leadership qualifications to command black troops than did northern white and black cadres" (Jefferson 83). The racial line that separates white and black people does not allow for a black person to ever come into a position where he could command a white soldier: "African Americans were expected to follow the Jim Crow laws and accept the racial mores of the South without question, no matter where they came from" (Wynn 46). White officials were put to command black units also for fear of insurrection: "Blacks leading themselves, after all, meant slave rebellions, mutinies, uprisings, riots" (James 174). Foreign governments expressly requested that "no black troops be sent to their countries for fear of the impact on local populations" (Wynn 51). This prejudice was deeply racialized too: while it was feared that black soldiers could incite the subjected populations towards an insurrection, on the other side, as Lam shows in his book, the 442nd regiment was comprised entirely of Japanese Americans, also at captains and officials' level. What is absurd is that, in a war fought against the Japanese empire and that led to Japanese Americans' interment, nonetheless people of Japanese descent were given more freedom and trust than blacks.

More than once Hayes reports how, even if German people stare at him, it is without hatred and "because they had not seen many Negroes before" (Smith 9). On the contrary, the violent racism is brought on them by white American soldiers. Later, in an interview, Smith "acknowledged that the racial landscape in Germany after the war was, of course, much more complicated than the one he had depicted in *Last of the Conquerors*. Germans were 'no angels', he recalled. 'They were racists, but we were conquerors and the look in their eyes was respect'"

(Höhn, “Germany” 619). Therefore, this exaggeration is made more to highlight the insidious racism in America than the innocence of Germans. Furthermore, by declaring that they were “conquerors”, Smith is also overtly and voluntarily enjoying his role in the perpetration of hegemonic and imperialistic practices, the same role that was strongly condemned by Silko.

The white captain Polke of the company in Bremburg is a Texan, southern racist: the military outpost is known as “niggers hell” because of him (Smith 111). The Jim Crow rules are imported and adapted to the new situation: “the American South is geographically distant, but its impact is psychically (and often physically) felt despite the central protagonists' geographical dislocation from it” (Mitchell 27). In Bremburg, rules are way stricter than in Berlin because the captain is overtly racist: “Bremberg became a site where illegal regulatory measures specifically directed at African American soldiers could be issued without reference to race, and therefore without legal repercussions” (James 202). One of the most striking differences with Berlin is that in Bremburg also all forms of entertainment outside the garrison are segregated. The segregation is brought by white GIs, who forced local bar owners not to serve blacks, by threatening of boycotting the clubs if they did. As Höhn reports, “In response to this, black soldiers also sought out their own places. In this manner, all establishments in close proximity to American military bases that catered exclusively to American GIs were segregated by race” (*GIs* 97).

The irony of the situation was that “the very presence of the military and the white GIs’ efforts to introduce Jim Crow into German communities allowed many other Germans to channel their own racism by drawing on the American model of segregation” (*GIs* 101). Germany, of course, was not a country void of racism, but the system of segregation was an American peculiarity. Furthermore, “because of America's self-appointed mission of denazification and democratization there, Germany was also the place where the U.S. was most vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy” (Höhn, “Germany” 631).

Another important episode to which Hayes testifies is that of the discharge of black troops under a provision enforced by General Eisenhower. This provision gave captains the power to discharge any "troublemakers" inside the military, giving ample interpretative space to what a troublemaker actually was. Plus, "all requests for re-enlistment on the part of Negro personnel" started to be rejected (Smith 182). The cause for all this was the result of the Gillem Report, which "determined that blacks were overrepresented in the military as a percentage of the general population" (Brown 101). This report stated that black personnel had to be reduced to 10% of the entire military personnel "through selective enlistment and reenlistment. When these strategies proved insufficient, the army instituted policies that facilitated the early discharge of African American soldiers" (101). In practice, this provision was used as an excuse to get rid of black soldiers that exceeded the black quota in the army.

Hayes reports how captain Polke orders to produce false dishonorable discharges for more than half of the company, under the accusation that soldiers were "insubordinate, dirty and lazy" (Smith 181). Through this episode, Smith includes also the very common experience of violence outbursts that arose between black and white soldiers. His sergeant, refusing to sign these false discharge statements, which would not allow the soldiers to ever re-enlist or work for the military again, is court-martialed and condemned to six months of prison. Driven mad by this injustice, the sergeant will eventually try to kill the white captain Polke. Hayes, accused of helping the sergeant to escape, will be forced to ask for an early discharge in order to avoid being court-martialed.

The discourse of race and racism in Germany is inevitably associated with Hitler and the Nazis. More than once Hayes' comrades express the feeling that what Hitler did to the Jews in Europe was not so different from what whites were doing to blacks in the US. As Jennifer James states, "What happened to Jewish bodies in Nazi Germany offered African Americans one means, however horrendous, to position their issues within the broadened context of human

rights, rather than within the local geopolitical space that 'civil rights' denotes" (200). When Hayes' best friend, Randy, starts prattling about how he hates all the Germans for what they did, the girl next to him reminds him that not everybody agreed and followed Hitler, and that "in your country you may not walk down the street with a white woman. The white Americans hang you from trees if you do" (Smith 27). News of American racism reached Europe via radio and newspapers, but most importantly, German people could see with their eyes how white American soldiers treated black soldiers. During a walk with Ilse, Hayes is insulted by some white GIs passing by in a jeep and Ilse wonders "Darling, why do they *hate* you so? I cannot understand it" (84). But Smith is careful in making too wide generalizations, and lets Hayes note that "only some of them" do hate him (84).

The debate on white Americans' racism remains open in the novel. Some, like Randy, think that not all white people are fully racists, bringing as a proof his own experience in the army with some white soldiers: "I've known a lot of rotten white guys and also a lot of swell white guys" (Smith 59). Others, like Hayes' comrade Homo, think that "there ain't no swell white guys. Not Americans, there ain't" (59). According to him, the only difference is how much they show their prejudice: "Some of them smile in your face, but don't none of them think you're as good as they are" (59). Thus, for him the only difference between North and South in America is that "the South is more honest with its prejudice" (58). In the Southern states it is easier to spot the racism because the division between blacks and whites is literally written on every sign. In the North this is not allowed, but they use the "sneaky way", refusing to serve or accommodate black people by finding some odd excuse (58). Overall, Homo prefers "the way the South does. No double talk. Just like Hitler and the Jews. That's the way a *man* does" (58). Again, the association between American South and Hitler is drawn here, but it is also introduced a discourse that could be compared to that of polite/vulgar racism made by Fujitani. In this case, the North has adopted a form of "polite" racism, while the South sticks

to the vulgar one. Furthermore, also a discourse about masculinity is introduced, hinting to the fact that the South is more "manly" than the North for its blatant racism. In their discourse about racism in America, Audrey and Brian Smedley posit that "a fact denied by none of the experts is that race in the American mind was and is tantamount to a statement about profound and unbridgeable differences. In whatever context race comes to play, it conveys the meaning of social distance that cannot be transcended" (Smedley 19). According to them, American society is constructed and based upon this principle that is "expressed in all kinds of situations and encounters between peoples" (19). In this way, it would seem that Homo's discourse in *Last of the Conquerors* is the most correct one: "even though individuals may not always be conscious of this fact", race is the defining principle of all social interactions in American society, thus affecting everybody's daily life (20).

When Hayes meets a former German prisoner of war, the paradox of depicting Hitler as a desirable leader reaches its highest point. The German guy tells Hayes that in America "you need a Hitler. Someone who is strong enough to make sure everyone is treated alike. Hitler would have made sure" (Smith 147). The democratic government of the U.S. is critiqued by an ex-Nazi because considered weak, not capable of guaranteeing an equal treatment to all its citizens, thus failing in the very principle of the definition of "democratic". The ex-soldier thinks like this because, while being prisoner in the American South, witnessed the paradoxically racist situation where prisoners were treated better than black guards: "I had to go to the town sometimes with other prisoners to work. At time to eat the soldiers would take us in a restaurant. But you know what? We could eat in the restaurant, but the soldiers could not. Because they were black" (146-147). These experiences of course were not positive for the image the U.S. were trying to construct abroad, something Germans found "very funny" and that "even some white Americans found contradictory" (Smith 147; Wynn 47).

Contradictions are at the basis of the U.S., the same contradictions that allowed for a marked shift in representation of the conflict from a "good war" to a "race war".

The U.S. had to justify throughout the war years the paradox of going to fight a racist war in Europe against Nazism, whilst keeping a segregated army and framing Japan as the enemy in racist terms. Smith, Silko and Lam all make a powerful denunciation of the racism that characterized this conflict and that was nourished by the U.S. itself. With their novels, they want to expose the incongruency of such behavior on the part of a country who entered the war in the name of democracy, who made of this principle its own basis to construct support and propaganda. By perpetrating a racist behavior, Americans lost the opportunity to "realize their most deeply cherished ideals—equality, freedom, democracy", the very ideals the Nation was built upon (Gerstle 193).

Chapter 3

Living the Dream: (Dis)illusion Before, During and After the War

In the first chapter, it has been illustrated how reactions to war and to military conscription varied and generally led to a high response on the part of ethnic minorities. However, white Americans, "aware that military participation carried implications regarding claims for equal citizenship", opposed minorities' participation exactly for this reason (Wynn 1). Nonetheless, the necessities of the total war regime forced the U.S. government to employ every single abled body in the war machine. Therefore, by 1939 ethnic minorities "found themselves in a better position to advance their claims to equal citizenship" (Wynn 12). Still, the path towards this goal was long and uphill. In this chapter, it will be analyzed how the authors faithfully depict the uneasy readjustment of veterans coming back home and how often their hopes and illusions that something would change were disappointed when met with blatant demonstrations of racism.

3.1 Survival Through Adaptation: The Return to the Reservation

The representation of Indian war veterans in Silko's book is very realistic. The original project of the author, indeed, was to write "a funny story about Harley, the World War II veteran whose family tried but could not keep away from liquor" (Silko xvi). The sad images of drunken war veterans were under the eyes of everybody living in a reservation and Silko seems to find one of the main causes for this behavior in the lack of activities for homecoming soldiers. Harley is actually the name of a veteran friend of Tayo's, who always tries to keep

him busy with drinking. He is restless and is driven to drink by the absence of any other activity to dedicate to. He complains with Tayo how they "got it easy, huh? All the livestock down at Montaño and nothing for us war heroes to do but lay around and sleep all day" (Silko 20).

Traumatized and fatigued by the war, veterans came back to the reservation only to find that nothing had changed, if anything, conditions got worst. In a scenario where there were no jobs, lands were continuing to be sold to the U.S. government and more and more people were fleeing the reservations in order to find better opportunities in the cities, war veterans had nothing else to do that spending their military pensions in liquor and try to forget their traumas. Therefore, it was not only a question of "cultural and psychological difficulty of readjusting to reservation life after experiencing battlefield stresses", but also a material absence of jobs and activities to do (Takaki 81). Indeed, it is not a coincidence that part of Tayo's ceremony to heal from his past traumas is that of recovering his uncle's lost cattle. Recovering the cattle is not only a way to fix his mistakes and keep a promise he had made to his dear uncle before leaving for the war, but most importantly it gives him something to be occupied with. It is an activity that keeps him busy mentally and physically and that re-establishes his place into the community and his connection with the earth. Earth and land are crucial in Native Americans' cultures. As scholar Rachel Stein points out, "Tayo realizes that Rocky's emulation of the white mainstream image of success, and even the veterans' self-destructive envy of white entitlement all stem from the omnipresent loss of ancestral land" (183). Given the centrality of the land for Native cultures, the community disruption is attributed mainly to this loss.

Indians coming back to the reservation felt deeply the discrepancy between the freedom and power they had experienced as soldiers, and the misery they were left to deal with. For example, one of the main issues was the purchase of liquor (Bishop 195). Since "reservation Indians experienced many problems with alcoholism, most tribal leaders favored liquor control" (195). This is why no alcohol was sold on Indian reservations and Natives had to go

buy it outside its borders. All the bars that Tayo and his friends visit, indeed, are outside the reservation and, when they do not have a car to reach them, they are willing to travel great distances by mule in order to drink. This situation, of course, did not help veterans' mood, who felt "more than a little patronized when they were still unable to purchase alcohol in stores" (Bishop 194).

Drinking was a main issue for Native war veterans. As Tayo himself realizes while drinking with his friends at the bar, they were fooling themselves in trying to recreate the same conditions of privilege they had while wearing the uniform. In this unhealthy ritual "They spent all their checks trying to get back the good times, trying to bring back that old feeling, that feeling they belonged to America the way they felt during the war" (Silko 39). When wearing the U.S. uniform, they had everything: a job, money, respect, women. They deluded themselves of finally being part of the white world, but they knew it would not last. Tayo remembers how one day he was walking in the street with his cousin Rocky and "an old white woman rolled down the window and said, 'God bless you, God bless you,' but it was the uniform, not them, she blessed" (38). The uniform gave them power, a power which they now try to get back while drinking and telling stories of war. As Stein notes, "The other full-blooded Laguna veterans enjoyed this fleeting taste of white power, white acceptance, and white women, and now that they are once again second-class citizens confined to the reservation, they drown their sense of the white world's betrayal through drinking, fighting among themselves, and feeling gnawing envy of white entitlement" (181).

Several testimonies confirm how the disillusionment after the war led veterans to find solace in alcohol. In his book, Ronald Takaki shares the testimony of Ira Hayes, who reported being filled with "emptiness" after the war ended: "He had hoped his people would be able to take care of themselves on their own land. But the war had made no difference in their lives: their reservation still had little water to irrigate the fields. Unemployed and depressed, Hayes

drifted into alcoholic delirium" (Takaki 77).[6] In order to write about this dire situation, Silko draws from testimonies like this one and from her own witnessing the despicable conditions in which Indian veterans ended up after their homecoming.

In her depiction of the traumatized and broken war veterans, Silko offers an innovative solution for their cure and reinstatement in the community. Tayo cannot be cured either by the white doctors, nor in the traditional Indian way. Both methods are ineffective because they are intrinsically wrong. White doctors dismiss Tayo's illness as battle fatigue and shellshock, warning him and his family not to rely on traditional medicine to cure him, deeming it ineffective. According to them, "a pattern of drinking and violence, not previously seen before, is emerging among Indian veterans" after the war (Silko 49). At the same time, not even the most traditional medicine man can cure him, because "the old man would not have believed white warfare, wouldn't have believed anything so monstrous" (33). What Silko suggests, then, is an evolution of the old ways: the medicine man that will guide Tayo towards restoration embodies the Native who managed to survive through adaptation. Postwar purification ceremonies were quite common for homecoming Indian veterans (Takaki 78). The ceremony employed by this innovative medicine man has never been used before, because it has to be adapted to the needs of the sick subject and to the new, post –atomic world. In order to survive, Natives have always had to adapt: those who stay grounded to the old ways are doomed to die out. Silko explains how "the reason the Pueblo people have survived as long as they have and intact is because they were real thoughtful about how to outlast people who come along and hassle you and push you around. There was the sense that if you learned enough about the whole wide world, especially the western European way, you might be able to survive" (in Akins 7).

[6] Ira Hayes was an Indian Marine become world-wide famous for being in the picture of the flag-raising on Mount Suribachi, on the Pacific Island of Iwo Jima (Takaki 75).

Significantly, Tayo will be the only war veteran presented in the book to survive. He "survives where the other Indian war vets do not because he has this faith in the old stories and ceremonies" (Dasenbrock 76). Thus, Silko is clearly condemning Natives who despise their ancestral culture and traditions in order to fully embrace the white one. She does not even suggest the opposite, which is to remain stuck in the old ways without somehow progressing. What she proposes is that in order to continue evolving, the two cultures and ways of thinking have to find a compromise, to merge and create something new and unique.

3.2 Bringing Democracy Abroad, Expecting Democracy at Home: The Return of Black GIs

In *Last of the Conquerors*, all the main characters are soldiers who, at the end of their assignment, have to face the hard truth that the adventure of living abroad is over and they have to go back to the States. Soldiers react in different ways to this: there are those who think (and hope) that once back, things will be different for them, "because everyone had sacrificed together during the war" (Smith 72). Others just do not expect anything to have changed, especially when they are headed South.

One of Hayes' first friends to be discharged, Murdock, is not happy at all about going back to Georgia, because in Germany he learned to be free: "It's the first place I was ever treated like a goddamn man" (Smith 57). He learned that "a nigger ain't no different from nobody else. I hadda come over here and let the Nazis teach me that, they don't teach that stuff back in the land of the free" (57). Thus, Smith unveils the paradox of finding more democracy in Germany, just come out of the Nazi domination, than in the country that wants to export that

democracy. As Neil Wynn reports, postwar America saw a rise in violence because black people, both at home and abroad, had experienced more freedom and enjoyed more rights during the war: "The war seemed to strengthen white prejudice and brought new levels of violence to the North as well as the South: black military service was disparaged, and returning black servicemen were seen as a threat" (8). Going back to the prewar situation seemed unthinkable and even if "at the end of the war, black soldiers were congratulated on their service but warned not to expect things to be different when they got home" (Wynn 7), they were no longer eager to accept the discriminations. Wynn points out how "Increasingly, a new mood could be detected as a 'new Negro' emerged, one prepared to fight back, to insist on rights, and no longer to simply turn the other cheek" (8).

The greatest irony of all is that American occupation's mission in postwar Germany was to bring institutional democracy to the Nazi country. While talking at the bar in Berlin, the white Captain Doyle asks his fellow soldiers how they think the mission is going, and the Professor, one of Hayes' comrades, replies that "it's failing miserably as far as converting the people to the American way of life is concerned" (Smith 90). We can read in this sentence a clear condemnation of the irony of exporting democracy with a segregated army. On the contrary, it seems that "despite the influence of Aryanism, the 'average' citizen of Germany held no particular prejudices against black Americans" (James 201). It is implied that even if Germany was controlled by Nazism, it still had more "democracy" than America: here no one was lynched just because of the color of his skin.

Since "there was little recognition of the contribution that African Americans made to the war effort" and many "realized that, despite the war, Jim Crow racism and discrimination in American society remained unchanged", some soldiers preferred to desert instead of going back to the States (Wynn 8; Jefferson 219). It is the case of Homo, one of Hayes' comrades, who prefers going AWOL and hide in the Russian sector where American troops cannot reach

him, instead of being shipped back home. Taking such a decision was not easy: it meant not being able to ever go back to the States, where friends and family were. But Homo prefers that and is willing to do any menial jobs in order to survive in Europe because "If I dig ditches over here it'll mean that there just ain't no other jobs of my type open – for nobody, white or colored. It won't be because of my skin. And if I know that, I feel okay inside" (Smith 94). The military experience in Germany was an illuminating one for black GIs; it "expanded their world and helped them reimagine their own place in the world" (Höhn, *GIs* 93). Therefore, this view was relatively common: Homo prefers being poor but free in Europe than poor and discriminated in the States. There is more dignity in being poor in Europe, but still feeling human and be treated as such.

Later, Hayes reflects about this situation and considers the pros and cons of going back to the States: would it be better to go back home but having to endure racism knowing what real freedom would be like; or rather living as an exile, forever torn from one's roots, but with dignity and free? In the end, it seems that Hayes opts for a middle path: he will be shipped back to America but will try as soon as possible to go back to Germany. And that is exactly what the author, William G. Smith, will do: after going back to the States, he will move permanently to France. It is a decision guided by self-respect, by the desire of not having to risk one's life just for being himself.

Smith indicates how one of the main problems for soldiers going back to the States was that of finding a job: especially in the postwar years, with a new Depression hitting the country, opportunities for black people were again very low. Following the golden years of the economic recovery that had triggered the Great Migration of black people from the South to the North of the country, where more job opportunities were offered in cities and factories, now black people were again "'last hired, first fired' and experienced unemployment at more than twice the rate of white workers" (Wynn 16). Smedley stresses how "employers preferred to

hire immigrant Europeans over blacks" (272). At the beginning of the book, Hayes informs us how his best friend, Randy, was basically forced to re-enlist in the Army after fighting in the war, because once at home he "was unable to find a civilian job" (Smith 9). This was not an isolated case: "Massive unemployment in the auto, steel, and electronics industries and the defeat of permanent fair employment practice legislation left many civilians and former black servicemen jobless and embittered as the country began to demobilize the armed forces and accelerate its reconversion from wartime to peacetime production" (Jefferson 226).

As it was the case with Silko's war veterans, Smith too reports the desire of getting what was felt as being deserved, a sense of entitlement to better conditions and no discrimination: "African Americans come to embody a postwar white American desire for the outsider as insider" (Brown 24). Despite the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (GI Bill), many ex-soldiers "found the adjustment to civilian society to be quite difficult. Much to their chagrin, many black 93rd veterans found that the social fabric of American society had changed very little from what it had been before they left. Some were put through a series of humiliations and assaults on their dignity from the moment they left their separation centers" (Jefferson 225). Smith reports on this too: all the black soldiers in his unit read an article from the American newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier* (incidentally, the same newspaper the author himself works for) that recounts an episode of violence perpetrated against a homecoming soldier. The soldier went back to his hometown in South Carolina with a renovated feeling that things would be different and on his day of arrival, at the station, entered a toilet marked "White Only". Just for this, the police chief blinded him with a gun. The Professor comments on the episode calling it "A coming home present" (Smith 72). The discouragement that black soldiers had to feel when knowing of such episodes can only be imagined. They survived abroad just to be killed at home.

Lynching, segregation, Jim Crow laws, poor housing and job conditions: this is what black people were escaping when joining the army. With *Last of the Conquerors,* Smith tries

to communicate the disbelief in finding better living conditions in a country devastated by a racial war rather than in the land of the free.

3.3 Escaping Prejudice and Fighting for Honor: Pressures for Japanese Americans

In *Repentance*, Lam is particularly interested in depicting Japanese people's sense of honor and loyalty to the U.S. When he joined the Army, Ray (the protagonist's father) knew that "every Nisei soldier was out to prove that he was just as good as any other American soldier. Prove it to himself and to his family. Prove it to all the white people" (Lam 46). As scholar Jeanne Sokolowski points out, "This avenue to proving one's national loyalty became a double-edged sword for Japanese American males and radically impacted how this group envisioned and reconceptualized their relationship to the nation during and after the crisis of citizenship and national identity forced by the war" (69). Ray came from Hawaii, where Japanese Americans were the first to voluntarily join the army, but he had originally no intention to sign up. He had to because his family was suspected of passing information to Japan and the escalating "anti-Japanese sentiment" put a pressure on all Nisei sons "to enlist and show their patriotism" (Lam 119). Interestingly, Sokolowski points the attention to gender roles and how women had far less opportunities to show their patriotism than men. Japanese American men held an "advantage in demonstrating loyalty to the nation. Men proved their loyalty by serving in the military" (78). If Japanese American men could enlist, thus performing a deeply patriotic act, women could not. Therefore, while some Issei mothers strongly opposed to the enlistment because they felt outraged by such requests in that situation, others pushed their sons towards enlisting as an act of 'indirect patriotism', proving "their loyalty by avoiding conflict and confrontation" (78).

In *Repentance*, Ray had to enlist because joining the Army was the only thing to do to save his family's honor. On the other hand, his friend Hiro came from the internment camp of Manzanar and reports a totally different situation: in the camps there was much more resistance to enlisting, especially on the part of Issei, the Japanese parents who had come from Japan. But young Nisei like Hiro, second generation Japanese Americans, felt they were more American than Japanese and wanted to join the Army even just to get out of those camps. Additionally, Japanese American men faced a crucial dilemma, since they were "forced to choose between enlisting or going to prison, even while their siblings and parents remained detained in government-run 'concentration camps'" (Douglas 131). The government posed it as a choice, but actually it was not a free choice, since in any case Japanese American men would have been forced in a direction that limited their freedom. When Ray asks Hiro why they did not protest when being interned, Hiro replies: "what good would it do? You can't fight the whole government, plus all the neighbors who hate you" (Lam 47).

Significantly, in an interview Lam expresses this same line of thought. He says he would do exactly the same if the U.S. ever entered a war with China:

> If that happened, I would suddenly feel like a bright spotlight had been shined on myself, on my family. I would wonder if all the friends that I made at work, in my hometown would suddenly look at me with suspicion and you can bet I'd do everything I possibly could to prove I was a good and loyal American. I am a third generation American, but how much would that count for if we went to war with China? (Connecting point)

From this declaration, we can draw a series of conclusions. First of all, even if Lam is overall very critical of the act of interning Japanese Americans (a fact that emerges both in the novel and in the interviews), he still thinks it is normal to be suspected in case of a war with

his ancestral country. Second, this kind of thought can be considered as a prolonged form of internalized racism and self-hatred against which minority people are fighting since decades. As Srikanth and Song highlight, being an Asian American writer "means more than writing as a person who happens to live in the United States and have Asian ancestry. It is, rather, a specifically political act, one that calls attention to a history of oppression - whether just racial or combined with other kinds of inequalities of power" (11).

Of course, the news of military conscription and the enlisting of Nisei during WWII were met with different reactions. As Hiro recounts, some parents tried to calm down the youngster who were outraged for the imprisonment in the camps: "the old folks tried to cool us down. 'Endure with dignity', a lot of them said" (Lam 48). While others could not conceive why they would fight for a country that did not respect them: "Some Issei called us traitors. Just for enlisting" (116). The question of enlisting was a problematic one: the U.S. government pressured greatly Japanese Americans to enlist from the camps because they needed them for propagandistic purposes. Therefore, the irony was that the US "formally welcomed Japanese Americans into the nation more aggressively than at any previous time precisely at the moment when they seemed so obviously to be targets of special racist discrimination" (Fujitani 162).

In the book, Hiro decides to enlist anyway, even if he does not believe in the war cause, because "The choice was, go back to Japan or stay in America. I could never live in Japan. I don't even speak the language. But I knew if I was going to stay I'd need to prove to other Americans that we were just as good as them. Maybe if I do this, and prove I can kick ass with the best of 'em, then maybe, just maybe, my kids will have a better life" (Lam 116). Hiro wants to fight for a brighter future. But the very fact that in the last sentence, when he expresses his hopes, he uses the word "maybe" three times, is evidence that he thinks this will be a very hard goal to reach.

With this discourse, Hiro is once more highlighting his belonging to America: he never considered Japan his home. He has almost no tie to that country and does not even know the language. As Koikari shows, the lack of knowledge of the language was quite a problem at the time: "the number of Japanese Americans who possessed sufficient language ability turned out to be disappointingly small, posing an obstacle to wartime national security and intelligence operations as well as challenging the dominant racial presumption of Japanese Americans' natural affinity with the Japanese language" (552). Hiro is not fighting for the cause of democracy that the U.S. government is flaunting, but because he believes he "can make (his) country better for (his) kids" (Lam 118). The discourse made by Ray's dad is more or less the same. He tells his son that "we owe America a lot, and we've got to earn our rights as citizens, for the next generations, if not ours" (118). The general feeling one has while reading these declarations is that the chances for this generation that something actually changes and to become American citizens is very dim. All the hopes are placed in the future.

In any case, even after the war, the racism against Japanese people persisted, and war veterans found themselves disillusioned. When Ray is finally back from the war, he is met by a racism which is "malicious and without heart" (170). Even though he walks through the street in his pluri-decorated uniform, "white people still stared at him with hatred in their eyes. More than one mumbled, 'dirty Jap', under his breath" (170). The kind of racism he faces is very similar to that encountered by African American people and war veterans: when entering a barbershop, Ray is refused because the barber "didn't cut jap hair" (170). This parallelism between Japanese and African Americans was reported by several sources and newspapers of the time. David Wright shows how the government feared that the return of Japanese Americans from internment camps and from war would cause "racial animosity", since during the war the houses they had abandoned were occupied by African Americans (151). However, upon their return, Japanese Americans "discovered African Americans were sympathetic to

their cause and shared a sense of kinship that transcended racial barriers" (Wright 152). Likewise, Japanese Americans who survived the camps "compared the sorrow of living in prison camps as citizens of a country they were born in, to the sorrow of the African American people who were denied democratic rights in a country they helped build" (152). This wholeheartedly acceptance and reception of the other was, unfortunately, a limited case. In *Repentance*, Lam depicts this situation very well. In another example of vulgar versus polite racism in the quotidian, daily life, Ray notes how "polite people, if you could call them that, had a way of not looking at him, pretending he wasn't there. However, their children often stared with eyes brimming with hate and fear" (Lam 170). The parent's own racism is exposed by innocent children who just react in the way they have been taught to. On the contrary, when he arrives at the Manzanar camp, some kids are playing outside, that "were Japanese and paid him no mind" (170). That same uniform which did not prevent white people from looking bad at him, makes him recognizable to Manzanar's internees, who were "proud of their regiment" (173).

The war had undoubtedly an effect on American people's racism, even if only in the long run. The construction of the model minority myth, even if done mainly for propagandistic purposes, influenced and shaped the way Asian Americans related to the rest of society. They became a model minority because considered resilient and self-sufficient, not requesting the government aid. This was "held up, especially to Latino/as and African Americans, as desirable and something to emulate. Asians were compliant; they did not make a great deal of noise in the public sphere" (Srikanth and Song 15). If, on the one hand, this definition could be seen as a "positive" one since it praised Asian Americans, in reality it was "a devastating and pernicious label that once again grossly simplified the experience of vast numbers of Asian Americans and drove a wedge between Asian Americans and other groups of color" (15). This definition tended to oversimplify a "heterogeneous and diverse community fragmented by

class, region, and other kinds of difference" (Koikari 549). As Koikari writes, "The veterans' articulations of war, nation, and masculinity are far from uniform or coherent, often containing voices that deviate from, challenge, and even subvert the dominant discourse that attempts to contain Japanese Americans as 'model minority'" (549). Writers of Asian American descent have tried to retake control over the narrative pertaining to their people, depicting characters that have to confront this stereotyping and still try to make sense of their own identity. As we have seen, Lam offers different models of reactions to the war, therefore complicating the narrative of the "model minority" so widespread in the U.S.

Ethnic minorities in the U.S. saw the war as an opportunity: it was deemed that if they showed patriotism and support to the war effort, they would be repaid dutifully with equal rights and equal treatments. This was their chance to ask for complete and unconditional citizenship, not divided in first and second class (Jefferson 171). Even if activist organizations did not immediately succeed on all counts, the participation of minorities to the war effort did not go wasted. The activism and the experiences of these years lead to some victories later, like the postwar desegregation of the army authorized by President Truman in 1948 (Gerstle 231). Therefore, there was hope that not all was wasted. It would take time, but the battles fought abroad and within the country, after a while, seemed to bore their fruits.

Chapter 4

A Global Model of Union

In the previous chapters, it has been analyzed how Silko, Smith and Lam insert in their books prominent historical and political issues, often unmasking the U.S. racists policies against ethnic minorities living inside and outside its borders. The previous chapters' analysis has been done in order to come closer to what is retained to be the central tendency that is shared by all three books: a tendency to overcome racial and geographical boundaries, in a call for setting aside the differences and highlighting the common features that link the global population. May it be called cosmopolitanism in Smith, shared humanity in Silko or historical remembrance in Lam, what ultimately these three authors are doing, even if in the span of time of decades, is the same: trying to reconcile the human diversity. Sharing awareness that in the end it does not matter the color of the skin, because we are bonded by something greater, that transcends time and space. Since "literature is heavily implicated in this transmission process as a primary source through which we pass on information" (DeRosa 42), it is important to underscore its role and its potential in this matter. Literature is one of the main places where it is possible to analyze and put together past, present and future, making "sense of new situations" and interpreting "past experience" (Dutton in DeRosa 54). Literature, in this case, has the power to guide the readers towards a greater scope, to show them the world full of possibilities which lays ahead of the boundary imposed by fear (fear of the new, fear of the different, fear of change).

So, it will be shown how Silko reconnects, through the land, two countries which are literally separated by an Ocean (America and Japan). Lam reminds how, through remembrance, it is possible not to risk destroying the entire humanity with another war. Ultimately, Smith finds the good in a war-torn country, setting a destroyed city as an example to follow.

4.1 Mirror effect: Recognizing Humanity in the 'Other'

In *Ceremony*, Silko draws a connection between Native Americans and Japanese people in several ways. On the very first page of the book, she describes how Tayo's sleep is troubled by feverishly dreams. He is haunted by Japanese voices that "would become Laguna voices, and he could hear uncle Josiah calling to him" (5). In these haunted dreams, the Native and Japanese voices mix in a blur that in the end becomes undistinguishable. Laguna words suddenly break into "a language he could not understand" (5). Of course, this could be attributed to the fact that Tayo is traumatized by his experience in the Pacific. After all, he spent a long time in the Japanese jungle and was a prisoner during the Bataan March. But the fact that the Japanese shouts and orders mix with his uncle's voice is particularly significative. A few pages later, indeed, when Tayo recalls a moment where they had to execute a platoon of Japanese soldiers, he is convinced that one of the killed soldiers was his uncle: "while they fired at the soldiers, he watched his uncle fall, and he *knew* it was Josiah" (7). When his cousin Rocky forces him to stare into the dead Japanese face to show it was not as he thought, "Tayo started screaming because it wasn't a Jap, it was Josiah" he was seeing (7). Tayo is aware of the impossibility that his uncle was actually there, because he was thousands of miles away from home. At the same time, he cannot get rid of the feeling that his uncle died there. The white military doctors dismissed this episode by calling it "battle fatigue", saying that "hallucinations were common with malarial fever" (7). But this is something that cannot be explained with facts and logic. Indeed, as Rachel Stein points out, this "madness and confusion in which the Japanese and Laguna people are identical" can be reinterpreted "as an alternative vision of genuine interconnections" (204).

In the interconnected world that Silko is showing, Josiah, who actually died in the reservation while Tayo was fighting in the war, can be considered an incidental war casualty.

Josiah died for the stress of having to deal with the farm and the cattle alone. If there had not been a war and Tayo had not gone to fight it, probably he would not have died. That is why Tayo feels he is responsible for his death, and that is why he saw him in the Japanese soldier. Plus, Silko underlines how in death, all bodies, Natives and Japanese, are alike: "There was no difference when they were swollen and covered with flies" (7). This is an important statement, given how much racial hatred and stereotypes were diffused during World War II propaganda. Later, Tayo will realize "that in a crucial sense the executed man actually was Josiah, that all men and women are one and all phenomena inextricably interrelated" (Owens 98). The message that Silko wants to communicate is that "what is dismissed as a form of insanity is the only sane view of the world. The alternative is universal death" (Owens 98).

The theme of the resemblance between Japanese and Natives is resumed many times throughout the novel. When Tayo is going home and is waiting for his train at the station, he feels sick when he sees a little Japanese boy in the arms of his mother "because it was Rocky's smiling face from a long time before, when they were little kids together" (Silko 16). So, in the little Japanese face, he sees his little cousin face, once again overlapping the images of Japanese and Natives in his mind. During the Death March towards the prison camp on the Pacific island, Tayo notices how one of the Japanese guards, "the tall one looked like a Navajo guy from Fort Defiance that Tayo had known at Indian School" (40). Immediately after, Tayo undermarks the common humanity that connects them by thinking: "They looked tired too, those Japanese soldiers. Like they wanted this march to be over too" (40). As Hunziker underscores, "While Tayo's empathy for the Japanese Imperial Army here is surprising, Silko's reversal complicates previous narratives of war and seems to imbue her transnational character with the motivations to make alliances across cultures, across colonial states, and across battle lines" (123). This intention is heightened a few lines below. When Tayo stops walking for a moment, "the tall soldier pushed Tayo away, not hard, but the way a small child would be pushed away by an

older brother" (40). This passage is extremely important, because here Silko starts also delineating her message of common brotherhood, especially among enemies.

Betonie, the unorthodox medicine man who will be the key to Tayo's healing, gives him an explanation for why he saw Josiah in the Japanese jungle: "it isn't surprising you saw him with them. You saw who they were. Thirty thousand years ago they were not strangers" (Silko 114). The old man is hinting to a theory that some origin stories of Native populations recount, which is that Natives first arrived in America from Asia. Silko's use of this theory might come as problematic since "The Bering Strait theory and the ways in which it has been appropriated in attempts to legitimize white claims to Indian land have been criticized and challenged by many American Indians" (Akins 9). But Silko uses it anyway, not only because it was one of her aunt's tale, but also because this theory serves her goal of showing the ultimate interconnection of the world: "Betonie incorporates the Bering Strait theory into his treatment of Tayo, not to downplay the importance of American Indian claims and connections to ancestral lands in the American continents, but to stress the common humanity of the Japanese among whom Tayo sees his uncle Josiah" (Akins 10). Tayo, indeed, realizes "how thousands of miles, high ocean waves and green jungles could not hold people in their place" (Silko 17). Distance has never been an insuperable obstacle for the movement of people, either thousands of years ago or in the present, and things happening on one side of the hemisphere can influence the opposite side.

Indeed, the protagonist's sickness is "part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything" (Silko 116). Tayo starts healing thanks to the old man Betonie because he makes "Tayo take responsibility for what is: his own life mediating several cultures, races, tongues, and times" (Lincoln 53). Tayo's function as a mediator is emphasized by his being of mixed ancestry: he symbolizes the fusion that transcends cultural and geographical divisions. Tayo realizes the magnitude of this when, in

the final stage of his ceremony, he ends up in an abandoned uranium cave, Trinity Site, a Native land sold to the U.S. government to extract the mineral useful for the atomic bomb.[7] This place, so important because is the visual representation of the lost Native lands, "becomes in *Ceremony* an icon of the humanly created, unstable conditions of existence that threaten not only our ability to dwell peacefully but also our place of dwelling itself—the earth" (Rainwater 132). Similarly, also African American critics highlighted and condemned "the relationship between colonialism and atomic weapons" and "the extraction of resources from Africa" (Kinchy 292) that finally served to destroy Japanese population, thus showing the bond between colonized landscapes.

In that uranium cave, Tayo sees the connection between the Native land and the Japanese one: something extracted from their land would be used to destroy another land thousands of miles away. Nelson notes how "The uranium mined here during the early years of the Manhattan Project was fed into the stream of uranium supplied to scientists at Chicago, Oak Ridge, and (later) Hanford for conversion into enough fissionable uranium to fashion into an artificial New Mexico sun, one designed to destroy rather than to nurture" (163). The uranium cave represents "the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid" (Silko 228). Silko's goal is not only to show in particular that Natives and Japanese's "fates are intertwined" (Stein 204), but theirs is just an example of the entire world's interconnectedness. Indeed, what Silko does with this novel is going one step further in her attempt to bring together all populations, both white and non-white. She theorizes that a "witchery", which is pure evil and fools everybody, is the cause of all their problems. White people are not bad, they are just tricked by this witchery that does not allow them to see the

[7] Trinity site is a land for which "The Laguna Pueblo nation received paltry royalties in exchange for its leases to mining operations, and many Laguna individuals labored in the site's toxic environments. Moreover, the mining companies left behind open pits and 'piles of virulently radioactive slag,' making it almost impossible for the Laguna Pueblo people to return to an agricultural economy" (Premoli 182).

truth and to understand "what had been done to them or what they were doing to each other" (Silko 177). The Indian war veterans would like not only to have all things whites have, but "they wanted white people for their friends" (Silko 39). Whites are not depicted as the enemy to fight, but they too are victims of this witchery. Finally, the threat of "nuclear holocaust confounds divisions between races, nations, species, and geographical distances, reuniting all earthly entities into a global 'circle of death'" (Stein 204). Humanity is brought together by its own fragility, by the very recognition of the impermanence not only of life, but of earth itself.

Still, Silko also hints to the role of personal responsibility when she makes Tayo reason: "If the white people never looked beyond the lie, to see that theirs was a nation built on stolen land, then they would never be able to understand how they had been used by the witchery; they would never know that they were still being manipulated" (177). Silko tries to create a world in which all people are linked and recognize the other's humanity. At the same time, she also implies that white people have to take accountability and to wake up from this slumber where they continue being manipulated and perpetrate the evil, because "Humanity must unite to act against the work of the Destroyers" (Ruppert 185).

4.2 Valorizing the Past: The Importance of Remembrance

The physical resemblance between Japanese people and Native Americans is a theme also explored by Lam in *Repentance*. While being on the Vosges Mountains, Hiro and Ray are trying to save a French family upon a hill, the perfect spot to bomb the city below. The Germans have occupied the farmhouse and are killing the parents, while the young daughter manages to escape. She ends up exactly in the bushes where Hiro and Ray are hiding, and they see "her expression turn from abject fear to total surprise" (Lam 122). Ray supposes that she was

shocked because they had the same aspect of the invaders. However, later in the book we have the opportunity to listen to the old woman's own story. Daniel and his wife go to France to visit the area where his father was supposedly killed, and they meet the aged girl who tells them her version of that story. She admits she was very confused when she saw the Japanese soldiers because at first she thought they were "native American Indian" (233). Even if it would be hard to say that Lam drew this comparison on purpose as Silko did, it is nonetheless significant to see how this stereotype is still very common. The resemblance of Natives and Japanese people was an actual problem during the war. For example, Takaki points out how "to many fellow soldiers on the battlefields, the Navajos did not look American" (69). This was even more of a problem for Japanese American soldiers, who shared the same physical traits with the enemy, distinguishing themselves only for their military uniform. They fought in constant fear of being shot and killed by mistake by their own comrades (Takaki 69).

Lam's book main purpose is that of remembering a painful past in order for tragedies not to be repeated and for a due recognition of the heroism of a minority population who fought under unique and dramatic conditions. Fujitani reminds how crucial this act of remembrance is. Despite the numerous "reunions and celebrations of Japanese American veterans of World War II (that) continue to be held throughout the country" (5), remembering this painful past acquires more and more importance, especially in a time when forgetting seems to be quickly prevailing. This is why the protagonist's trip to France undertakes very important connotations. Daniel and his wife decide to go to France after receiving an invitation for the annual veterans' reunion in Bruyères. These meetings are hosted specifically for Japanese American veterans. They decided to participate in this reunion hoping to find out more about Ray's and Hiro's past and their war adventures, and their expectations will not be failed.

The crucial point of this section is the act of remembrance: French people of this town are so grateful to Japanese soldiers, who saved them and liberated them from German

occupation, that they never stopped remembering. The entire celebration is very emotional, and in her speech, the mayor of the city remembers how she "personally witnessed the cost of liberating our town, almost one thousand killed or wounded. This is a debt we can never repay. We will never forget what you did here" (Lam 243). When Daniel speaks with the French woman who was saved by the Japanese soldiers, she underscores how "many families wouldn't exist today if your soldiers had not helped us" (235). In this way, Lam is comparing the recognition that the 442nd regiment has abroad versus the struggle to be recognized at home. To be fair, attempts to remember in the years following World War II were made in the U.S.: "university and community groups sponsored myriad commemorations, lectures, oral histories, websites, and museum exhibitions" (Robinson 52). As Robinson reminds, it was "amid a larger climate of contestation surrounding the Vietnam War and Civil Rights, that the wartime treatment of Japanese Americans became a subject of renewed public discussion" (52). But Fujitani points out how "the failure of some Americans to remember the World War II valor of Japanese Americans, coupled with the force of ongoing anti-Japanese and anti-Asian sentiments, continues to push Japanese American veterans, their children, and their admirers toward more retellings and commemorations of Nisei heroism" (5). Lam enters this scenario, contributing with the retelling of an often-forgotten history, thus being an example of how "the narrative of Japanese American soldiers fighting heroically for freedom at home and abroad, even in the face of racism and incarceration in camps, has achieved a notable if not always comfortable place in mainstream narratives and memories of the war" (Fujitani 6).

Of course, it could be argued that it is more natural for French people to care about this celebration because they were personally involved, and their lives, and those of their families and friends, were at stake. Nonetheless, Lam puts into stark contrast this heartfelt celebration, perpetrated throughout all those years, against the tendency of Americans to forget some minority groups' heroism and he suggests that this is due to the racial bias that seeps into the

American community. He is part of those supporters of Japanese Americans veterans who, "challenging the silence and invisibility surrounding minority soldiers' contributions to the war, have been excavating, documenting, and memorializing their stories of valor and heroism for decades" (Koikari 548). With this hint to international recognition and collaboration, Lam claims that in order for wars not to be repeated, it is necessary to remember, not only on national ground, but worldwide. Giving such an important space to the French veteran reunions, the author wants to remind American people that they should do the same and celebrate the diversity that composes their country (and their military) equally, not forgetting the efforts made by non-white people. Lam, together with many other Asian American writers, is trying to rehabilitate a history which has been overshadowed in the post-war years by the creation of the narrative of the "model minority", being part of a literature that "expresses kinship with other people of color in America, especially blacks and Native Americans" (Kim 101).

In an episode towards the end of the book, Lam also highlights the importance for white and non-white troops to fight together, implicitly condemning segregated units. While he is talking with a patient he just operated, Daniel finds out that the man is a former World War II veteran from Texas. In particular, he was part of the famous "Lost Battalion", a Texan battalion that was considered lost in France because they had ended up completely behind enemy lines. As the story goes, a unit of the 442nd regiment bravely went to rescue their fellow soldiers, suffering 800 casualties in order to save 200 Texans. This is "one particularly costly mission that undoubtedly reveals as much about the low regard in which some high-ranking white officers held the lives of Japanese Americans as it does about the latter's heroism" (Fujitani 208). The result of this tremendous act of bravery is that now the Texan veteran thinks that Japanese are "Wonderful people. Just wonderful" (Lam 207). With this comment, Lam wants to show how the army could have been the place where new bonds and friendships could have formed, that would have helped to knock down discrimination and facilitate minority people's

integration in American society. This is the side effect of the war, of fighting next to each other, the same goal that black leaders aimed for when they requested the desegregation of the Army. Indeed, as Jefferson reports, "some black 93rd GIs and their white comrades developed a better appreciation of each other after making close contact on occasion" (210). Activists were convinced with good reason that if white and black people fought alongside, they would recognize each other's humanity and facilitate inclusion. We cannot know how things would have gone had the military not been segregated, but, as Gary Gerstle suggests, it is clear that "an opportunity had been lost" (236).

4.3 'Racial Paradise': Locating the Site for an Emergent Cosmopolitanism

As Smith shows with *Last of the Conquerors*, not only segregated army units do not help with integration, but they also fuel even worst resentment feelings among the soldiers. Episodes of violence were not an exception, and the military officials were informed to keep high guard especially when in the U.S. there were some Civil Rights protests (Höhn, *GIs* 98). Smith depicts how the American military system imported to Germany was actually importing also the Jim Crow laws, transforming the camp in "a microcosm of the South" (Mitchell 13).

In contrast, the author shows how well integrated black troops are with white Germans: the protagonist and his comrades all have white girlfriends and when in need, Germans are willing to help them. When some episode of racism happened, it was generally "marked 'made in the United States'" (Höhn, *GIs* 108). Germans and African American soldiers created real bonds of friendships: many black GIs testified of "the empathy that German friends extended when black soldiers experienced racism at the hands of white Americans" (Höhn, "Germany" 21). In the book, we see how Hayes gets so close with an old couple who is renting her

girlfriend a room that starts calling them “Mom and Pop”, thus even creating familial bond with these people. Höhn argues that this happened because “Black GIs did not approach the defeated Germans with the sort of arrogance that many of the white soldiers displayed. Because of the humiliation of their defeat, Germans also experienced a certain kinship with the black GIs, convinced that black GIs, just like themselves, were treated as second-class citizens by the white Americans” (*GIs* 91).

Black soldiers also have a better capacity for befriending English and Russian soldiers. Hayes reports how they "visited the British often because they liked ‘brown Americans’" and “Russians were friendly to the American Negroes” (Smith 48). Because of their ‘outsiders’ status, “the black soldiers find themselves in an intermediary cultural position; their marginalization in American culture offers them the liminality abroad necessary to go anywhere, communicate with anyone, and forge cosmopolitan links between dissimilar and even combative participants in the nascent Cold War” (Brown 124). The protagonist Hayes shows this cosmopolitan tendency since the very beginning: he never felt superior and learned the German language in order to better understand and communicate with the local people. He asked his girlfriend Ilse to teach him all the German dances and even showed a taste for the opera. Berlin comes to represent the center of a “racial paradise”, which is Germany, the perfect place to build up a cosmopolitan identity (von Mossner 6). Berlin becomes a mythical city “in which difference, simultaneously literalized and metaphorized as difference of skin color, is not an excuse for bloodshed but rather an impetus for conversation”, an “alternate space in which issues of race can be contested and rendered irrelevant” (Brown 105; 109).

In this ideal city, Hayes can lay on the beach next to his white, blonde girlfriend without being bothered because “everyone was blue or green or red. No one stared as we lay on the beach together, our skins contrasting but our hearts beating identically and both with noses in the center of our faces” (Smith 35). With a hint of irony, Smith is highlighting how human

beings are all the same in the end; even if the external appearance changes, that does not change the level of humanity. Hayes notes how "odd that here, in the land of hate, I should find this all-important phase of democracy" (35). Democracy, therefore, is praised not so much as a political institution, but as the freedom of living the small, everyday joys, like being able of bathing in the sun. Hence, "Berlin becomes a space that provides for the articulation of the civilian cosmopolitanism the novel argues is the true heart of democracy and the only way to avoid also future wars" (Brown 110). Berlin is seen as a fresh setting where "investigating the cosmopolitan response to blackness, a setting that American cities, with their ossified racial dynamics, cannot provide" (109).

One of the most important ways through which Smith shows the racial tolerance in Berlin is a mixed-race child, Sonny.[8] Hayes is very impressed to discover that the kid is not discriminated, on the contrary, he "is liked by all of the little boys, and the girls think he is wonderful. Everyone near this house knows him, and always they want him to come to their houses" (Smith 79). This is all the more incredible considering that Sonny is the walking representation of miscegenation, the product of the love of a black American soldier and a white German girl. Such a lovely acceptance would seem almost unimaginable in America. As Stephanie Brown writes, "Sonny represents the chance for cosmopolitanism to emerge from and triumph over the wreckage and national rivalries and resentments caused by war and occupation" (128). Paul Gilroy "sees *Last of the Conquerors* as an especially valuable text for the manner in which the interracial affair comes to express the potential 'value of love and the possible significance of common humanity sexual desire brings into focus'" (in James 203).

[8] Sonny is the son of a black American soldier and a German woman. As Maria Höhn reports, such mixed children were very common in postwar Germany, and it was also quite common that, after the soldiers went back to U.S. and the mothers could not keep the children alone, they were adopted by older German couples (*GIs*, 78).

Interracial love is a way to achieve a global cosmopolitanism, love being seen as one of the strongest forces that can overcome racial and social barriers.

In an interior monologue, Hayes expresses the desire of writing a book about how "the Germans listen attentively to speeches on democracy and then look around at the segregated camps and race riots over white women and laugh at the Americans who preach a sermon on what they, themselves, do not yet know" (Smith 125). This accusation is tied to the idea that, exactly for their marginal position, African Americans constitute the ideal leaders of a cosmopolitan revolution. In his essay "The Negro Writer", Smith finds that African Americans and Europeans share a common sensibility which is lacking in the white American. This is due to the amount of suffering experienced by these populations, while white people in the States have always lived in a position of privilege. That is why black and European authors in their texts can "treat problems of real significance, which can strike a cord in the heart of basic humanity. For the basic fact about humanity in our age is that it suffers; and only he who suffers with it can truthfully convey its aches and pain" ("Negro Writer" 301). What is essential for Smith is that these texts are imbued with a "universal element" (299), capable of reaching people of all colors, all around the world. Indeed, "the Negro writer of strength and courage stands firmly as a champion of the basic human issues – dignity, relative security, freedom and the end of savagery between one human being and another" (303).

Therefore, Smith's vision is not 'limited' to a call for civil rights in the States, but he calls for a recognition of human rights around the world, the basis of a civilized life: "out of a society fractured and devastated by war, he posits, may be born an impetus toward recognition of an essential shared humanity and of our obligations to our fellow human beings—the basic components of the cosmopolitan outlook" (Brown 104). Hollinger defines cosmopolitanism as characterized by "recognition, acceptance, and eager exploration of diversity. Cosmopolitanism urges each individual and collective unit to absorb as much varied experience

as it can, while retaining its capacity to advance its aims effectively. For cosmopolitans, the diversity of humankind is a fact; for universalists, it is a potential problem" (in Patell, "Comparative" 181). The very essence of cosmopolitanism is union and acceptance of differences. In fact, diversity is seen as a strength rather than a weakness. Cosmopolitanism seems to be the necessary way towards a "'planetary community' bound by its respect for 'human rights'" (Rorty in Patell, "Comparative" 181). At the core of cosmopolitanism stand not the interests of the single individual, but the basic needs of humanity. Smith believes that black people, and in particular black writers, are the ideal spokesmen of this new approach because they know what it means to be denied basic human rights.

In this chapter, it has been possible to see how Smith, Silko and Lam hint to a common theme even if by taking totally different paths. Silko draws from her Native American heritage to show that an alternative to violence and divisiveness is possible; that if we want to continue existing, "the power to live must not be used to destroy" (Nelson 164). Lam, through the vicissitudes of a fictional Japanese American family, suggests that if we give due value to the past, it will be possible to preserve the future. Through his text, he tries to make "the wartime events more familiar to a mass audience", by "rendering them safer for general consumption" (Robinson 56). Smith, drawing from his own personal experiences, demonstrates that the American way of facing differences is not the best one, thus suggesting a valid alternative in the construction of a "cosmopolitan outlook", of which a war-torn Berlin can be a leading example (Brown 104).

In conclusion, we can see that a common thread and denunciation emerges from these three books in quite a clear way: it is no longer possible to deny that the world is interconnected and that actions have consequences, even miles away from home.

Conclusion

As the comparative analysis of the novels of Smith, Silko and Lam has shown, any discourse about World War II is inextricably tied to the discourse of race in the United States. This is particularly prominent in the context of this thesis, since the focus was on showing how ethnic minorities were affected by the war and how it influenced the ethnic literary sphere in the US. Audrey and Brian Smedley argue that the US is a nation whose structure is based on racial distinctions, therefore "our interactions with other individuals are influenced, whether we admit it or not, by a racial identity that we attribute to others and to ourselves" (1). Race is the main structural differentiation that regulates any aspect of American life and "it cuts across and takes priority over social class, education, occupation, gender, age, religion, culture (ethnicity)" (Smedley 17). Over the years, this ingrained system has adjusted in order to accommodate changes in the economic and political realities, "that from time to time have incorporated or advanced the interests of the low-status races" (24). A relevant example is the position of Japanese Americans, that in the span of a few years during World War II saw their status changed from "yellow peril" to "model minority", a change caused by the political needs of the time (Hsu 4). Ethnic minorities, aware of being object of scrutiny, racialization and racism, have always tried to affirm themselves, and to gain respect and a place in the American society. One of the main ways through which they continue expressing dissent and affirmation is the written medium.

This study has claimed that books maintain a privileged place in the circulation of ideas and social, cultural and political awareness. In particular, "creative writing is granted enormous powers to undo oppressive representations and to shed greater light on structural inequalities" (Song 5). For its role, literature continues being one of the main vehicles for cultural transmission, where new ideas are introduced and debated, and new (or older) information is

passed on (DeRosa 42). Ethnic minority groups are well aware of the crucial role that literature has, and started appropriating this medium for their purposes, often using it in order to subvert common imaginary and the pre-established order in a society which did not fit their needs. Minority writers in the U.S. have often been attributed (and sometimes taken upon them) the role of mediators between two cultures. In the post-war years, William G. Smith identified African Americans as ideal spokesmen of a new cosmopolitan outlook, because they could have a deeper understanding of the basic needs of human beings ("Negro Writer" 303). In a similar way, Srikanth and Song highlight how "Asian Americans are uniquely positioned to mediate a conversation between the United States and the world beyond", given especially their position in between closed communities in America and overseas (21). James Ruppert underscores how Native American texts serve the scope of mediating between two apparently incommunicable worlds and ways of living, "in order to help non-Native readers" better understand cultural differences (182).

It is possible to observe this clearly in *Last of the Conquerors*, where the protagonist Hayes Dawkins becomes the perfect example of the cosmopolitan that adjusts to live in a continent different from his own. Similarly, in *Ceremony*, Tayo, importantly being of mixed ancestry, "becomes an international figure" for his capacity of understanding and of connecting people on the opposite sides of the planet (Hunziker 117). In *Repentance*, Daniel's is a model minority success story, he being a world-wide famous Asian-American doctor that "made it" despite experiencing racism and discrimination. Thus, the position of liminality that Smith attributed to African American is the same position that can be attributed to Native and Asian Americans, defined occasionally as outsiders or insiders according to the political and social needs of the historical moment.

The comparative analysis of these three novels has shown how a common theme can be reinterpreted and bent for the needs of the single author. In *Last of the Conquerors*, Smith used

the concept of the "race war" and portrayed examples of returning soldiers to the U.S. in order to make a profound and impactful statement, i.e., that the U.S. had to live up to their description of themselves as a nation, and show that they were truly a democratic society. His novel is a denunciation of this incongruency, and by making a parallelism between American and German societies, he wants to generate shock and outrage, especially in white Americans. The accusation of being less democratic than Nazi Germany was greatly shameful, especially for a country who prided itself for exporting democracy (Höhn, "Germany" 631).

Silko experienced on her own skin the consequences of the world conflict. The racism and the poor conditions that Native Americans war veterans were forced to endure are reflected in her work. When she wrote *Ceremony*, she was in a phase in which she believed change was, and had to be, possible. She was aware that a conciliatory solution had to be found if the human race was to survive, impressed by the annihilating power of the atomic bomb (Lincoln 58). Her denunciation of the race war is tied to a broader anti-violence stance. In her novel, she intertwines the personal trauma of the war with a general, global trauma of the menace of annihilation of the human species (DeRosa 53). Responding to the rising tide of the Civil Rights movements, and in particular to the Native American movement "Red Power", she offered a non-conflictual position in which people could overcome the normal categorization of good and evil. Therefore, she puts the entire humanity in front of a choice, the choice between preserving life or destroying it (Ruppert 185).

Lam is a Chinese American of third generation and, nonetheless, he felt the urge to write about the war experience of Japanese Americans. This is very telling of the cultural identity that Asian Americans share. His claim that, would there be a war against China, he would feel compelled to do the same as Japanese Americans did in the '40s (Connecting point), means that, despite all, the racial situation in the U.S. did not change so much in the past eighty years. Lam himself grew up in central Illinois and in *Repentance,* he makes a reference to the fact that

growing up "in the middle of nowhere", being "probably one of the only Asian kids", must be tough (278). This is telling of how Asian Americans are still subject to racism, especially in those areas where the Asian American population is significantly smaller. Lam is convinced that the only option to ensure that the past is not repeated, is to give it importance and understand it, remembering that once extreme racism almost risked the world's destruction.

In the present day, this statement seems extremely relevant, since global events have led to a consistent rise in discrimination against Asians. Many people of Asian descent in America are reporting cases of more or less overt racism and prejudice against them, after it was acknowledged that the virus that led to the current global pandemic originated in China.[9] Darryl Jones defines viruses coming from the "edge of empires" (i.e., the colonial outskirt) to be perceived by the racist imagination as "the dangers of cosmopolitanism" (44). Jones traces back the definition of this deadly virus to the "imperial racist taxonomy" of "the Yellow Peril" (44). The past year's events, the racist rhetoric resumed also by some politicians, are warning signs underlying the necessity to bring up the past.[10] It is crucial, at this point, to resume themes tied to World War II racism, in order to remember that that mentality almost led to the annihilation of the human species. This is one of the reasons why it is important to recover such works as those of Smith, Silko and Lam, because their messages, even if written in different eras, converge towards the same direction: we cannot allow differences to take over, but it is vital for humankind to concentrate on the similarities and work together, embracing and accepting different cultures and ways of life.

Audrey and Brian Smedley argue that, in the U.S., "one of the tragedies of the racial worldview is that certain differences in physical appearance (especially among blacks and

[9] A quick browse on the internet will result in the finding of numerous Asian American testimonies of such personal assaults. See, for example, Victoria Bekiempis' recent article about this topic: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/feb/20/anti-asian-violence-us-bigotry.
[10] See Trump rhetoric, for example (Jones 44).

whites), the insignia of race, are so powerful as social dividers and status markers among Americans that they cannot perceive the cultural similarities that mark them all as Americans to outsiders" (29). The fact that American society is fundamentally based on and divided by the concept of race, makes it impossible for its members to see past it. The comparative analysis of these three works allowed to draw the conclusion that they tend to transmit messages of fraternization and shared humanity, bringing attention to the awful consequences that come from hatred and discrimination. However, these three minority authors are going one step beyond, by calling not only on the American population, but the worldwide one, to come together.

Patell argues that historically, the tendency towards individualism of the American society is what damaged and made impossible for it to be open and make more universal claims: "the problem with liberal individualism is the way it gets to its universal claims: in its movement from the many to the one, liberal individualism loses track of the role that specificity and plurality play in achieving the universal" ("Comparative" 176). Both Smith, Silko and Lam try to get away from this old scheme of individualism and recover a wider universalism, in their attempt to reverse the tendency and make sure that what happens to the individual one, i.e., the single protagonists, can apply to the many, the universal plurality. This study has shown that it is necessary and possible to use a comparative approach for texts that seem incomparable, originating in three different periods and relating to three different cultural backgrounds. Such comparative approach allows for a wider and better understanding both of the national and of the global situation.

Ultimately, as Leslie Marmon Silko affirmed, we cannot deny that for "black Americans, Native Americans or Asian Americans... America is strange" (in Coltelli 251).

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