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Full Length Research Article

The Fall of the American Myth of Collective Consciousness in the War Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks and Yusef Komunyakaa

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the war poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks and Yusef Komunyakaa in order to explore the complex relationship between war and racism in twentieth century black poetry. The paper emphasizes the existence of a strong link between war and racism in the poetry of Brooks and Komunyakaa which undermines the American myth of collective consciousness during war which assumes that in wartime American army becomes the location for the eradication of ethnic and racial barriers among white and black soldiers. By creating an analogy between white racism in the battlefield (abroad) and its counterpart in the American society (at home), the two poets seek to redefine the concepts of "war" and "the enemy" reaching significant conclusions in this respect. For example, in Brooks' Second world War poems, black soldiers realized that they were involved in two simultaneous wars – one against Hitler in Germany and one against the Hitlers of the United States. Equally, in Komunyakaa's Vietnam War poetry, black soldiers in the American army identified themselves with the Viet Cong (the enemy) because the Viet Cong forces, like the Black power movement in the 1960s and 1970s, were engaged in revolutionary struggle against the same oppressive /racist system which attempted to annihilate both of them.Within this context, Brooks and Komunyakaa redefine "the enemy" not as Germans holding machine guns or Viet Cong carrying hand-grenades but as fellow Americans with white skin. Both poets equally reconstruct "war" as a complex tissue of meaning where the battlefield exists simultaneously on foreign grounds (abroad) as well as at the black ghetto (at home). In their poetry as recorded in Brooks' A Street in Bronzeville (1945) and Komunyakaa's Dien Cai Dau / They Are Crazy In The Head (1988), war becomes the trope for the equally injurious institutionalized racism in the American society itself. By drawing such an analogy between war and racism , the two poets attempt to narrow the gap between military and racial , between soldier and civilian in order to undermine the American myth of collective consciousness during war and emphasize the fact that American racism against blacks in wartime is an extension of the same racism which characterized life in America for centuries. In addition to the subtle treatment of the peculiar link between war and racism in the Afro-American poetry of Brooks and Komunyakaa, the paper equally aims to locate the war poetry of these two poets in its appropriate place within the tradition of twentieth century war poetry by exploring the racial and ethnic elements of their poetry and by illuminating many other aspects (in terms of content and poetic techniques) which distinguish their poetry from the war poetry written by any other poets.

Introduction

In *No Bugles No Drums*, a Vietnam war novel, Jinx, a black soldier, who is frequently humiliated by white soldiers during the war, denounces the racial politics of the American army in Vietnam as an evidence of American racism during war. Realizing the inherent racism of the military and suffering from intense guilt feelings as a result of being tricked in such a vicious war, Jinx tells his friend Hawkins:

> They [white people] finally figured a way to kill spades [blacks] and slopes [Vietnamese people] at the same time .. If we was smart we'd get together . Niggers of the world unite (123) .

At the climax of the novel, Jinx escapes from the American army and joins the enemy, the Viet Cong forces. He prefers to become a soldier in the enemy army because "Ain't no VC (Viet Cong) ever called me a nigger" (184).

During the Second World War and Vietnam War, thousands of black soldiers fighting in the battlefield side by side with white soldiers were subjected to the same oppressive and racial practices they have witnessed in the American society for many years . Lured by the false promises of the American dream – the promise of democracy , freedom , wealth and equality – black soldiers , during the Second World War were surprised to realize that they were involved in two simultaneous wars – one against Hitler in Germany and the other is against the Hitlers in the United States . Furthermore , black soldiers in the American army in Vietnam were shocked by the racial system of the American army and the brutality of the American war machine . Consequently , they became sympathetic with the poor Vietnamese villagers /citizens who, like blacks, were victimized by white racism .

These facts about racism in the American army were ignored by the American culture industry which has attempted to falsify history by creating what John Del Vecchio calls "the collective consciousness of America" (213) . "the collective consciousness of America" is the prominent motif in many films about the Second World War as well as Vietnam in personal narratives , novels and analyses . According to this motif , the American military unit in wartime becomes the location for the eradication of social, class , ethnic and racial boundaries . Within this context American soldiers fighting in the battlefield are usually able to eliminate hierarchal differences by subordinating them to the broader value system of survival . For example , in many Hollywood movies about the Second World War and Vietnam War , the boundaries of race , class and ethnicity do not exist among soldiers in the battlefield . The basic aim of the American culture industry in this respect is to show how these barriers are overcome in the face of battle . For example , *The Boys in Company C* , a Vietnam movie directed by Sidney Furie in 1969 , concludes with Tyrone Washington , a black soldier from Chicago's streets , forcing the white Billy Ray Pike , from Galveston , Texas , into an ambulance so that Pike can return home safely to his new baby . Like all fabricated movies about American war history , this movie implies that war provides a separate and more real world in which true human nature – caring and collective , not aggressive and divisive – can surface . In such a rationale , war becomes not only a necessary but a beneficial complement to society .

Furthermore , some Vietnam war novels , personal narratives and analyses were created to promote the myth of the "collective consciousness of America" . For example , Wallace Terry's *Bloods* , a collection of narratives by black soldiers , who were in Vietnam , contains numerous references to black soldiers claiming that , in battle at least , there were no color lines . One of the black narrators in *Bloods* says : "I use the term 'brother' because in a war circumstance , we are all brothers … racial incidents didn't happen in the field" (249) . In William Huggett's *Body Count* , a Vietnam novel , Red "a white boy from Minneapolis" (35) becomes close friends with Big John , a black soldier whose father had been a Southern sharecropper . Both part of a listening post overrun during a Vietnamese attack , they are found lying dead the next morning holding hands , Red having crawled to Big John and taken his hand . It is obvious that books like *Bloods* , *Body Count* and others were designed by their authors to fit the requirements of the American culture industry in order to enhance the "collective consciousness of America" motif by asserting that there were no real racial boundaries separating blacks and whites in the battlefield . This is the way Vietnam war as well as World War II is being retold and re-appropriated into American culture and literature .

Moreover , William Eastlake's *The Bamboo Bed* , another Vietnam War novel , where racial tensions are openly acknowledged , concludes by subsuming them to the "brotherhood" of the battlefield . The novel introduces Pike , a black sergeant , who "had led the Detroit race riots" and who now plans to surrender his squad of white soldiers to the enemy : "there is no greater honor on this earth to a black man than to hand white men to yellow men for killing" . Pike , at this point in the novel , articulates a different set of bonds than those suggested by collectivity , bonds that link him to other races oppressed by whites , for , he asserts "there is no stronger bond than the bond of suffering , the bond that binds people of color the whole world over , the bond of pain" (62) . But when the fighting starts and a white soldier sacrifices himself to protect Pike , the racial black sergeant from a mortar round , suddenly "there was not a god damn white guy in the outfit who was not a human being . Whitey had become people" (63) . In combat , Pike finds , it is not race that is the problem , but survival , "the problem of remaining alive" (64) . At this moment , Pike discovers that " a man cannot help being born the color he is born . That a man has no control over being born white" (69) . During the Viet Cong attack , Pike insists on staying alone to defend his squad of white men so that they can escape . According to the novel , the satisfaction that would come to Pike from handing "white men to yellow men for killing" now becomes the satisfaction that "if a man can't make it himself , then he must see someone else make it" (72) . As the mortar rounds come in Pike dies defending "his boys . His whiteys" (72) . This naïve and over-exaggerated representation of white/ black relationship in the American army is an attempt to impose the illusion of collectivity within a hierarchal system based on racism and differentiation. Such representation ignores the fact that inside and outside the battlefield black soldiers were subjected to the same racial ideologies they have experienced in the American society four decades . Inside the battlefield , black soldiers were given dangerous or inferior jobs and outside the battlefield they were even forbidden to enter the white soldiers' bars and brothels . It is acknowledged that during the Second World War and Vietnam conflict , there was very little contact between blacks and whites off-duty . There were separate bars patronized by whites and blacks in Europe (during World War II) and in Saigon (during Vietnam War) as well as two different categories of prostitutes in Hong Kong for whites and blacks . These facts undermine the myth of "the collective consciousness of America" which indicates that the fight for survival done by whites and blacks in the American army has "wiped out color lines in the foxholes and rice paddies" (Halloran 87) .

The myth of "the collective consciousness of America" is equally undermined in the war poetry of Brooks and Komunyakaa . Unlike other writers , these two black poets reject to falsify the history of American racism during war and their poetry becomes a testimony of the fall of the American myth of "collective consciousness" during war . Thus , in the poetry of Brooks and Komunyakaa the concepts of the "enemy" and "war" are redefined . For example , the enemy is not introduced as foreigners "Germans /Viet Cong" but as fellow Americans with white skin . Both poets reconstruct war as a complex tissue of meaning where the battlefield exists simultaneously on foreign grounds as well as in the black ghetto . In other words , war in their poetry , becomes the trope for the equally injurious institutionalized racism in the American society itself . By creating an analogy between war and racism , Brooks and Komunyakaa seek to narrow the gap between military and racial , between soldier and civilian in order to undermine the myth of collectivity popularized by the American culture industry and emphasize the fact

that racism against blacks in the army is an extension of the same racism blacks have experienced in a pre-dominantly white /hostile culture.

A Critical Analysis of the War Poetry in Brooks' *A Street in Bronzeville*

Examining the war poems in Gwendolyn Brooks' *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) and in Yusef Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dau* / *They Are Crazy in the Head* (1988) , the researcher aims to explore , in many ways , the paradoxical situation of black soldiers in a white man's army establishing an analogy between war and racism narrowing the gap between military and racial (Stanford 197), between soldier and civilian in order to undermine the myth of the "collective consciousness of America" which is created by the American culture and industry to falsify history by emphasizing that during war , the American army becomes the location for the eradication of social , ethnic and racial boundaries .

In *A Street in Bronzeville* , Brooks composed a group of war poems depicting the experience of black soldiers during the Second World War . These poems were written from the viewpoint and in the voices of black soldiers in the battlefield . In their multi-voiced interrogation of racial politics in America, Brooks' war poem delineate the enemy not as foreigners/ Germans holding howitzers but as fellow Americans with white skin . While the poems treat the human conditions of alienation , bravery and honor that are integral to war , they also give form and shape to the less visible but no less dangerous , war that blacks have experienced in a predominantly white racist culture . In this context , Brooks' war poems seek to undermine the myth of the "collective consciousness of America" in order to emphasize the racial status of the American army . Thus , in her war poetry , Brooks rewrites war as a complex tissue of meaning and signification where the battlefield exists simultaneously on foreign fronts , in the trenches , on Chicago streets and at the black ghetto . Unlike other war poems and unlike the war fictions , promoted by the American culture industry , Brooks' poetry does not elevate the courage or sacrifice of soldiers or focus on physical injury or sentimentalize the relationship between blacks and whites or look back longingly on women and children at home . Brooks' war poems express a profound anger neither denouncing war nor valorizing those who fight in it . War becomes the trope for the equally injurious institutionalized racism in the American society . In her war poems Brooks displaces both the site and meaning of war and war becomes a civil struggle fought on the terrain of white racism . In other words , Brooks' war poems , analyzed in this paper , reconstruct the enemy and resituate the locus of war emphasizing that the real battles are fought both within the hearts and minds of black soldiers and on the ground of social and cultural struggle .

In his attempt to undermine the myth of the "collective consciousness of America" , Robert Mullen argues that black soldiers in the Second World War "were involved in two simultaneous wars – one against Hittler in Germany and the other against the Hittlers in the United States" . Mullen observes that during the Second World War blacks were fully aware that they were not Americans:

> *When they were often turnd away while trying to contribute blood to the Red Cross Program , when America , "the last bulwark of democracy," was planning separate air-raid shelters for Blacks and whites in Washington , D.C. , when lynchings continued unabated uring the war , when race riots broke out against Black GIS trying to use the same facilities as their white counterparts , it was only natural that blacks should feel that they were involved in two simultaneous wars – one against Hitler in Germany and the other against the Hitlers in the United States . This attitude was embodied in the "Double V" concept among Blacks during the war – that the war must end in two victories , one against Hitler , one against American racism (54) .*

Brooks' war poems in *A Street in Bronzeville* scrutinize what Mullen calls "the double V" concept – war and racism and in this context they consequently deflate the American cultural mythology about collectivity . In *Bronzeville* , Brooks also links the war poems to the material conditions of military combat while she simultaneously establishes the war on home ground as well . The credibility of the war poems in *Bronzeville* (1945) stems from the fact that the book was written at a time when real black soldiers were fighting in real wars and were enduring conditions of racism while serving their country . For example , black soldiers , during the war , suffered from denial of combat roles and exclusion from many leading positions .

Bronzeville starts with a famous poem , *"The Negro Hero"* , which , according to Henry Taylor "is among the strongest poetic responses to World War II" . *"Negro Hero"* is a dramatic monologue of a black soldier who took up a machine gun and used it effectively when his ship was attacked at Pearl Harper despite regulations of the strictly segregated navy of the era in which black personnel did not handle firearms (Taylor 119) . Dorie Miller , a black soldier who , as mess man , was confined to the galley of his ship as a cook , but broke through the color line to save his ship from attack . In this dramatic monologue , the speaker mediates on his rash act of defiance (Greene 202) . The poem's tone is by turns reflective and mutedly angry as the speaker recounts his emergence from the underground of his galley . It was an act that violated the strict rules of segregation maintained aboard ship , but one that allowed the speaker to save himself and his shipmates as he seized a machine gun and shot down attacking Japanese aircraft . The black soldier says :

> *I had to kick their law into their teeth in order to save them.*
> *However I have heard that sometimes you have to deal*
> *Devilishly with drowning men in order to swim them to shore.*
> *Or they will haul themselves and you to the rash and the fish*
> *Beneath.*
> *(When I think of this , I do not worry about a few*
> *chipped teeth.)*

it is good I gave glory , it is good I put gold on their name.
Or there would have been spikes in the afterward hands
But let us speak only of my success and the pictures in the
Caucasian dailies
As well as Negro weekies . For I am a gem.
(They are not concerned that it was hardly The Enemy my
fight as against
But them.)
It was a tall time. And of course my blood was
Boiling about in my head and straining and howling and singing me on (19) .

In this poem , two wars occur simultaneously : one with the Japanese and one on board ship . And it is the latter war with which the speaker is all too familiar and which poses the greater threat . The speaker knows the risks he ran in shifting momentarily , the balance of power on board ship . Throughout many lines he asserts the necessity , the thrill , and the good will behind his action . He knows , however , that had he not given "glory" had he not "put gold on their (white) name" he would have paid dearly and "there would have been spikes in the afterward hands" . Fully aware that the risk was grave , the black speaker also knows that "it was hardly the enemy my fight was against / But them (whites)" . Here , he speaker approaches one of the primary points of the poem which is the concept of the enemy . For the black soldier , enemy ground exists not across the ocean , on hostile territory , not in the Japanese aircrafts , but persists whenever he is in the presence of white American soldiers . The notion of heroism , like the notion of war , undergoes radical redefinition and revision in Brooks' poetry as she layers it with multiple associations . The most important thing in "the Negro Hero" is the speaker's own heroic – but halting – struggle toward understanding the racial dynamic that underwrites the response of the white community to his heroism . The hero who is "a gem" who has his "pictures in the Caucasian dailies / as well as the Negro weeklies" understands , though , that his act was complicated by his own mixed motives . In lines that diminish the glory of masculine aggression (war is not "manly" but "boyish") the speaker ruminates further about the reasons for his actions :

Of course I was rolld on whels of my boy itch to get at
the gun.
Of course all the delicate rehearsal shots of my childhood
massed in mirage before me.
Of course I was child
And my first swallow of the liquor of battle bleeding black
air dying and demon noise
Made me wild.
It was kinder than that , though , and I showed like a banner
my kindness.
I loved . And a man will guard when he loves.
Their white-owned democracy was my fair lady.
With her knife lying cold , straight , in the softness of her
sweet-flowing sleeve .
But for the sake of the dear smiling mouth and the stuttered
promise I toyed with my life.
I threw back ! – I would not remember
Entirely the knife (20) .

The speaker points out that he "was rolled on wheels of his boy itch to get at the gun" and that his "first swallow of the liquor of battle bleeding black air dying and demon noise / Made (him) wild" . But it was more than that, he says : "I loved . And a man will guard when he loves . / their white–gowned democracy was my fair lady" .

The speaker of ***"Negro Hero"*** finds himself in an absurd position , wanting to believe in a "white-gowned democracy" that has "her" foot on his neck and a "knife lying cold" up her sleeve . Although he is pulled toward the public dream of democracy , the central question of the poem erodes his attempt to maintain his faith in white American democracy (Friere 28) . He says :

Still – am I good enough to die for them , is my blood bright
enough to be spilled,
Was my constant back-question – are they clear
On this ? Or do I intrude even now ?
Am I clear enough to kill for them , do they wish me to kill
For them or is my place while death licks his lips and strides
to them
In the galley still ? (20)

The speaker's dream is not fulfilled as he stays in the galley – at the bottom of he social ladder – forever . While the speaker tries to answer the initial questions affirmatively , his language undermines his attempt to believe the good will of his white compatriots . The number of qualifiers in the text – however , but , of course , still – suggests that the speaker is trying to convince himself about a truth which remains evanescent . It is obvious that the questions are not about the speaker's anthological worth but instead , they are attempts to see as clearly as possible his own status in the eyes of the white soldiers .

Furthermore , the black soldier's questions are not so wistful and self-doubting as they may first appear . They represent , rather , the beginning of an intense critique of white racism . These questions point to the very structure of enclosure upon which a

racist system depends to maintain itself , and the speaker's restriction to the galley epitomizes this structure . When the black soldier thinks of the possibility of "spikes in the afterward hands" , he quickly interdicts the thought : "but let us speak only of my success" . However , the "possible horror" that whites might prefer "their law in all its sick dignity" to "their lives" becomes probable , a likelihood the speaker himself deduces as he considers the various possibilities . At play in he text also is the dynamic of desire and revulsion : I want to believe in democracy / I can not possibly believe in democracy . It is a dynamic that will be continued and augmented in the other war poems by Brooks .

Nevertheless , Brooks' *"Negro Hero"* does not stop with racial enclosure , but instead the text becomes a fence or frame for a dangerous white man's voice , heading in and entrapping the only white lines in the entire poem . The white man's voice which personifies the racial attitude of the white soldiers comes as follows :

(In a southern city a white man said
indeed , I'd rather be dead ;
indeed , I'd rather be shot in the head
or ridden to waste on the back of a flood
than saved by the drop of a black man's blood.)
naturally , the important thing is , I helped to save them, them
and a part of their democracy (21) .

Strictly rhymed and metrically regular , these lines aggregately provide an answer to the speaker's central question of the status of his black heroism. The almost sing-song , mostly iambic tetrameter lines sound much like a school child's playground song even as the words themselves simultaneously speak the skewed logic and horror of white racism . These rhymes are simply , silly and dangerous . They employ a double voice : childish playfulness and malicious hatred . But instead of fighting , tolerating , forgiving or laughing at this double voice (which historically has been a voice of power) , the text upsets the power balance by surrounding the white man's voice with the speaker's more mature , more searching , more logical and more heroic discourse . The ramifications of the speaker's need to silence or interdict an oppressive voice before being able to create or discover his own is obvious . The black voice , in the poem , attempts to establish his identity in a place that denies selfhood . Thus , the process of silencing the oppressive white voice is an specially important factor in understanding the black hero's quest in the poem . The black speaker is facing the racism embedded within his own discourse perhaps internalizing , and unmaking the heroism imposed upon him by the white community to remake it in a truer more real context of self-knowledge . It is this making of the black identity – or more appropriate to the poet's task , making of a voice – that is first figured in *"Negro Hero"* and continues , in different forms , in Brooks' other war poems in *Bronzeville* .

In *"Negro Hero"* , the speaker concludes by restating the poem's central motifs . He says :

Even if I had to kick their law into their teeth in order to
do that for them.
And I am feeling well and settled in myself because I believe
it was a good job ,
Despite this possible horror : that they might prefer the
Preservation of their law in all its sick dignity and their
knives
To the continuation of their creed
And their lives (21) .

According to the poem , the real heroism does not reside in the action that was profound as the speaker's "blood was / Boiling about in my head and straining and howling and singing me on" , or in the "wheels of my boy itch to get at the gun" but in his resistance of white racism and his refusal to accept entirely his status as a hero . The true heroic gesture is the move toward an un-bandaging of his eyes , and a concurrent articulation of his sense of truth . The black soldier, the speaker in the poem , ends his monologue with a clear look at his actions , at the risks behind them , and most painful of all at the persisting horror of white racism which attempts to marginalize him and erase his identity as he fights side by side with other white soldiers during the Second World War . These issues are equally emphasized in Brooks' sonnet sequence *"Gay Chaps at the Bar"*.

Brooks started her sonnet cycle *"Gay Chaps at the Bar"* – gay here means outwardly cheerful – when she received a letter from her friend and colleague William Couch who included the title phrase as he described he soldiers he had seen and known on the front in the Second World War . In *Report From Part One* , Brooks argues that when she realized "there were other things to say about what was going on at the front she wrote more poems , some of them were based on the stuff of letters she was getting from several soldiers" (156) . The result was the sequence of twelve sonnets spoken in the voices of black soldiers in combat . The epigraph to the first poem of the sequence – the title poem – quotes some lines from the letter of William Couch :

... and guys I knew in the States , young
officers , return from the front crying and
trembling. Gay chaps at the bar in Los
Angeles , Chicago , New York ...
Lieutenant William Couch
in the South Pacific
(Brooks' Blacks 64) .

By contrasting extreme battle fatigue "crying and trembling" with joviality and bravado of the soldiers before war , the epigraph depicts the anguishing effects of war and its painful realities . Like "Negro Hero" , the "Gay Chaps" sequence foregrounds war only to undo and remake it in order to undermine the myth of the "collective consciousness of America" . These sonnets represent the halting progress toward truth-seeing and knowing , toward dismantling a rhetoric of lies . They too insist on multiple signification – that war is both a military war and a racial war . In all twelve sonnets , the situation of the black soldier on the front is exactly like that of the black civilian at home . The poems deal with the loss of black dreams and identity in the face of a hostile /white racism . The speakers in the sonnets demonstrate that black soldiers suffered the same terrors and hopes as the other white soldiers in addition to feelings of inferiority imposed on them by white racism . The sonnets emphasize the paradox that black soldiers who were defending their country were subjected to various forms of racism in the battlefield . Read not so much as stanzas in a long poem , but as separate poems retaining their separate integrity , these sonnets form a polyphony of voices , perspectives and new methods of looking at the relationships between war and racism .

In Brooks' sonnet sequence , the first sonnet *"Gay Chaps In the Bar"* with its oppositional epigraph ("gay chaps" versus "trembling and crying" men) structures a dialectic between the soldiers' experience before war and the changes that come over them after war . The difference in behavior and understanding before war and after the eruption of the war is as vast as the difference between being a "gay chap" and one who is "crying and trembling" . The war – both military and racial – radically changes the black soldiers' relation to the world dismantling familiar language and experience . The octave describes the ease with which the pre-war black soldiers were looking at the world :

We know how to order . Just the dash
Ncessary . The length of gaiety in good taste
Whether the raillery should be slightly iced
And given green , or served up hot and lush .
And we knew beautifully how to give to women
The summer spread , the tropics , of our love .
When to persist , or hold a hunger off .
Knew white speech. How to make a look an omen (22).

The black soldiers know how to posture , how to function with ease and grace in a white man's world – they "knew white speech" . Although the next several lines undercut the ease with which the black soldiers flaunt their maleness , it is in these lines that Brooks establishes the power nexus of war and racism . The black soldiers knew the "necessary" dash and raillery , knew "good taste" "when to persist , or hold a hunger off" . Having adapted and adopted acceptable cultural patterns including masking their blackness just enough to practice "white speech" they are well-versed in survival . The black soldiers know how to survive by posturing and speaking "white" language . This process depends on the response of the white side to black attempts of survival . But blacks know that in order to function within the constraints of white racism they have to dissociate from themselves an appropriate black self – to deny or conceal their blackness . However , in a declared war , the black soldiers' language and epistemology fail them , much as the acquired behavior of "a good Nigger" would fail him during declared domestic wars – race riots , lynchings and violent enforcement of segregation . As long as war's oppressive systems dehumanize black soldiers , blacks can function in war but in a tenuous manner . Susan Schweik argues that Brooks' rhyme scheme underscores this tenuousness (128) . Schweik argues that while the abba / abba structure of the octave rhymes loosely – "dash" / "lush" , "taste" / "iced" , "women" / "omen" , "love" / "off" – even loose rhyme falls apart in the sestet . It employs slant or non-rhymes ("islands", "hour" , "stout" , "brought" , "talents" , "air") to signal a kind of dissolution or disjuncture of language. The sestet , leading out of the octave , turns from the black soldiers' use of "necessary" language "survival – both literally and with one's identity intact) to the radical failure of language and acquired knowledge in the "chat with death" that war occasions . The sestet is as follows :

But nothing ever taught us to be islands .
And smart , athletic language for this hour
Was not in the curriculum . No stout
Lesson showed how to chat with death . We brought
No brass fortissimo , among our talents ,
To holler down the lions in this air (22) .

Schweik also observes that the absence of power in language becomes a metaphor for the powerlessness of the black soldiers in battle . Nothing has prepared them for being thrust into the "air" of war wherein bravado and cool are lost "and language is literally obliterated in the roar of airplanes flying overhead" (131) . Moreover , the poem shows that this is not only the "air" of foreign war , but it is also an atmosphere typical of "black people's lived experience" in a racist culture which refuses to see them as human beings maintaining "the illusion of centrality" by defining them as an inferior race . Thus , the poem reflects the racial attempts to erase the black identity both in war and in society . The black soldiers in the battlefield , like black citizens at home , are invisible in the sense that their identity and their language are obliterated by a more powerful and silencing entity (airplanes / racism) . In both war and racism the black identity is undermined and the black language (voice) falls apart , and what is left is a harrowing poverty of history and culture that constitutes "the many aspects of the black identity / self" .

In her sonnet *"The White Troops Had their Orders But the Negroes Looked Like Men"* , Brooks undermines the racist ideology of the American army . Here , the speaker's focus shifts from his black comrades to the white soldiers who "had supposed their formula was fixed" who "had obeyed instruction to devise / A type of cold , a type of hooded gaze" and who were given instructions to separate white and black corpses for burial : "a box for dark men and a box for other" . The white soldiers in battle have to adhere to the rigid restrictions of racism which is a part and parcel of their military life . However , the white soldiers , the bearers of racism , observe that the "Negroes looked like men" and they realize that the effort of maintaining racism is costly . These feelings temporarily freed them from the "cold .. hooded gaze" that blinds them to the humanity of their black

compatriots . Nevertheless , the poem mocks the white soldiers and the racist system in which they are captive . Those who "boxed / their feelings properly" (26) and expected a correlative boxing of the "dark men" in one coffin and the white men in another "would often find the contents had been scrambled . / Or even switched" . In fact , the poem like *"Negro Hero"* shifts the balance of power by making the white soldiers "other" – "a box for dark men and a box for other" (26) . Instead of defining black as "other" in relation to a central white presence, the poem - (in post-modern terms) - reverses the terms of hegemony , dislodging the center of white authority . The white soldiers' bodies become "other" defined against the bodies of "dark men". This notion is linked with the wry conclusion : "neither the earth nor heaven ever trembled . / And there was nothing startling in the weather" (26) . Moreover , the title of the sonnet *"The White Troops Had their Orders But the Negroes Looked Like Men"* reveals both the absurdity and contingency of racism . With the crush of war and death upon both black and white soldiers in the battlefield , racism constrains both the bearer and the receiver of its consequences . As a whole , Brooks' sonnet sequence , *Gay Chaps At The Bar* scrutinizes the bond between war and racism . Here , war functions not only as a trope for racism but as the crucible within which her speakers grope toward an unveiling of sight – the stripping away of America's cultural mythology about collectivity as well as those elements that bandaged the eyes , occluding unpleasant realities .

It is also obvious that the central mode of voicing in each one of Brooks' sonnets is dialectic . Each sonnet articulates a desire – "I want my dreams to wait until after hell (war)" (23) . Each sonnet articulates an oppositional reality , a pull toward the truth (war and racism erase my identity , my dreams may not survive the war , white democracy is an unfaithful lover and civil religion a blinding , numbing force) . Like ***"Negro Hero"*** whose speaker wants to love democracy but cannot avoid seeing it for what it is , the sonnets also resist the impulse to believe in the desire at the expense of the unpleasant reality . It is also obvious that in Brooks' sonnet sequence , the situation of the black soldier on the front is like that of the black civilian at home . The sonnets , as a whole , deal with the loss of language and identity in the face of a hostile "other" . The sonnets affirm that war and death fail to annihilate racial differences . The sonnets also affirm the dissolution of belief in a patriotic god "firstly inclined to take what it is told" (26) . The sonnets also underline the emergence of a deepening consciousness of the absurdity of war – and by extension , racism .

Finally Brooks' sonnets cover highly significant notions in a range of voices that bridges the difference between war and racism . Nevertheless , the sonnets do more than simply posit a relationship between war and racism . In this respect , Maria Mootry argues that Brooks' sonnets represent a collective consciousness that gropes toward a critical and reflective stance – one that in "fractured ways approach truth" (81) . The sonnets are also prophetic warnings : they look back at the devastation of war and look forward toward a time of black revolution and rebellion that was to come in the 1960s .

A Critical Analysis of Komunyakaa's Dien Cai Dau

Like Brooks' war poetry , Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dau*/ *They Are Crazy in the Head* , explores the relationship between war and racism from an Afro-American perspective . Based on Komunyakaa's Vietnam War experience , the book details an inward turning , "a way of dealing with the images inside my head" , a means to put in order a private history that exists , in Komunyakaa's words , "as much outside f history as within it" (Houghtaling 220) . Komunyakaa's war poetry in *Dien Cai Dau* , according to John Pratt , deconstructs the traditional idea that Vietnam war only includes the rice paddies , the landing zone and the jungle (8) but it touches the psyche of soldiers particularly blacks who participated in war revealing their revulsion against the racist practices of the American army in Vietnam . His poetry is not limited to the soldiers in the battlefield but it includes civilians , bar girls , Red Cross workers , prisoners and army nurses (Ringnalda 25) as well as other significant issues such as racism . Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dau* operates within an essentially dialogic structure in which the poet carefully directs a dialogue between the communal history of war – history that flickered in America's living rooms on the nightly news – and the personal accounts of black soldiers who took part in the war events . As a black American , Komunyakaa – a war correspondent from Louisiana – (Gotera 216) exists on the margins of official war history , grouped with those whom Wallace Terry has called "the forgotten fact" of the war "the black Americans who fought there" (89) . His collection , *Dien Cai Dau* , however provides a perspective on the war that is completely different from the other books written by white writers . In his book , Komunyakaa , to a great extent , relies on the elements of media associated with the war's communal experience – music , television , drama and film – to reveal how these elements were perceived often quite differently by black soldiers . In his collection of poems , Komunyakaa reveals the disparity between the history of war as recorded by white Americans and the history he (a black man) immediately experiences . Still Komunyakkaa's book differs considerably from earlier poetic texts devoted to the war . Because the book comes thirteen years after the war's ending , its manner is more retrospective and ruminative than collections published during the war . Furthermore , in *Dien Cai Dau* , Komunyakkaa uses surrealism to depict the absurdity of Vietnam combat experiences especially as they involved black and white American soldiers together in situations where , despite the combat survival value of camaraderie , the black soldiers suffered from the differential burden of racial , and off-times racist , inequities . In this context Komunyakaa's poems undermine the myth of America's "collective consciousness" . Most of the poems in *Dien Cau Dai* simultaneously deal with the holocaust of the Vietnamese people burning under napalm and the holocaust of black soldiers burning in the white hell – white racism .

Like Brooks' war poetry , Komunyakaa's poems redefine "the enemy" since he depicts the Viet Cong , "the enemy" , as "soul Brothers" and the poet associates himself , in one of the poems for example with a fragile Vietnamese woman burning like a torch under American napalm . Both the black poet and the Vietnamese girl are victims of white America – he is victimized by racism and she is victimized by the brutal war machine of America . In the poem which is entitled ***"You and I Are Disappearing"*** , Komunyakaa uses repetition , a technique associated with the jazz music of the black composer , Thelonious Monk , (Matthews 660) in order to emphasize he atmosphere of suffering and death as well as the havoc created by the American war machine in Vietnam :

The cry I bring down from the hills

Belongs to a girl still burning
Inside my head . At daybreak
she burns like a piece of paper .
She burns like foxfire
in a thigh-shaped valley .
A skirt of flames
dances around her
at dusk .
We stand with our hands
hanging at our sides ,
while she burns
like a sack of dry ice .
She burns like oil on water .
She burns like a cattail torch
dipped in gasoline .
She glows like the fat tip
of a banker's cigar ,
silent as quicksilver .
A tiger under a rainbow
at nightfall .
She burns like a shot glass of vodka .
She burns like a field of poppies
at the edge of a rain forest .
She rises like dragonsmoke
to my nostrils .
She burns like a burning bush
driven by a godawful wind (17) .

The poem focuses on the violent effects of the war on innocent civilians and undermines the American cultural mythology about American heroism in war . The black speaker in the poem realizes that the American army did not go to Vietnam to spread Western democracy but to kill innocent Vietnamese people . The speaker is at loss to describe this scene fittingly . The charged language , according to V.F. Gotera , in *"Killer Imagination" ,* "grapples with a view that is both unimaginably beautiful and incredibly horrible , all at the same time" (369) . The black speaker struggles to find a metaphor that could convey the horror of watching a beautiful girl in fire but he fails to find the appropriate phrase . Finally the black speaker simply has to stop at this point of his description . Obviously the poem dramatizes a speaker who struggles through human language to describe the indescribable – the brutality of the American war machine in Vietnam.

The black speaker in *Dien Cai Dau* , condemns the vicious war in Vietnam in many poems revealing his feelings of guilt for participating in that war , a notion which undermines American mythology of collectivity during war . For example , in *"Straight Scope Myopia"* , the black speaker recalls , in a surreal manner , the memory of an ambush aided by the night scope's "deft" technology of death .

Gray-blue shadows lift
shadows onto an oxcart
Making night work for us
the starlight scope brings
men into killing range (9) .

Not only does the scope make the Vietnamese targets visible in the dark night of that distant past but it also serves as the agent of the return of that memory to the speaker in the present as the ironic use of "myopic" in the title indicates . The speaker's feelings of guilt have haunted him for a long time stretching from the past to the present moment . Even though the speaker tells the story of these Vietnamese victims – who were brought by American war technology "into killing range" – in past tense he acknowledges later in the poem , the event's continuing presence in his life "years after" the war . Like the memory of the innocent Vietnamese woman who is still "burning inside my head" , the memory of the ambush victims still vibrates "inside our lowered heads / years after this scene ends" (8) . Komunyakaa's speaker describes the scene as follows :

Viet Cong
move under our eyelids ,
lords over loneliness
winding like coral vine through
sandalwood & lotus
inside our lowered heads
years after this scene
ends .

Realizing that he was a part of the American war machine which served the diabolical objectives of a bloody and deceptive system , the black speaker identifies himself with the Viet Cong soldiers deflating the myth of American collective consciousness during war . He identifies himself with these "shadows" because as a black man the speaker himself is a mere shadow in a dominantly white society . The black speaker begins painfully to see the Viet Cong forces , the enemy , as human beings and he begins to despise himself because his job is to kill them . The essential dialogic structure of the poem , and of much of the book ,

first manifests itself here , enabling the speaker to address his past in his attempt to purge his consciousness of the Vietnamese nightmare and exorcise the evil spirits of the war . The speaker's dialogue between duty and a kind of moral humanism is expressed in his choice of the pronoun "you" which enables the speaker to distinguish between two selves : the one who is purging the past nightmares and the one who participated in the war experience in Vietnam . In order to enhance the effect of the poem on the reader , Komunyakaa uses the pronoun "you" which engages the reader in the horrible scene :

You try reading ghost talk
On their lips . They say
'up-up we go,' lifting as one .
This one , old , bowlegged ,
you feel you could reach out
& take him into your arms . You
peer down the sights of your M-16 ,
seeing the full moon
loaded on an oxcart (9) .

In *"Straight Scope Myopia" ,* Komunyakaa personifies how black soldiers resent the use of violence against Viet Cong combatants emphasizing the moral ambivalence of blacks toward the Vietnam war .

In another significant poem , *"Recreating the Scene"* , the black poet shows that the use of violence against innocent civilians during the Vietnam war is a sign of the fall of the frontier myth of American heroism and the dubious aims of the Pentagon . The speaker in *"Recreating the Scene"* comes to realize that the American war in Vietnam was an attempt through violence and slaughter to achieve a heroic victory over an inferior race – "an Indian country" . The speaker rejects the notion that like the American pioneers / settlers , American soldiers in Vietnam believe that the slaughter of Vietnamese people is a national victory , a triumph of civilization over brutish nature . The black speaker identifies himself with Vietnamese people , an inferior race , "an Indian country" and reveals his awareness that America itself is full of its own evils and corruption particularly racism . In *"Recreating the Scene"*, Komunyakaa evokes the story of a Vietnamese woman raped by three American soldiers but the woman suddenly and mysteriously disappears before their trial . As a war correspondent , Komunyakaa uses his journalistic skills to narrate the incident with ostensibly detached journalistic precision . This rhetorical strategy helps the reader understand that the poet recounts the incident much like a journalist whose job is to recreate "the scene" of a crime for his readers . The speaker pieces together a narrative replete with careful details that enlarge the context of the incident to encompass the present and the past – the violence of American war against Vietnamese as well as the dehumanizing effects of American racism against blacks .

The metal door groans
& folds shut like an ancient turtle
that won't let go
of a finger till it thunders .
The Confederate flag
flaps from a radio antenna ,
& the woman's clothes
come apart in their hands
Their mouths find hers
in the titanic darkness
of the steel grotto ,
as she counts the names of dead
ancestors , shielding a baby
in her arms (19) .

The poem describes how American soldiers transfer their sadism into innocent civilians outside the battlefield . The American soldiers do not have mercy at a helpless woman – from a poor country – carrying a baby "in her arms" . Torn from her largely agrarian society , the Vietnamese woman is pulled through the "metal door" of an armored vehicle representing the brutal war machine of a mechanized white culture . Not only is the woman desecrated by the white soldiers' actions , but so too are her past , in the figure of the ancestors she recalls , and her future , embodied by the child she protects in her arms –all of them simultaneously wounded inside "a machine / where men are gods" .

It is significant that *"Recreating the Scene"* is not only a poem about rape and violence but it is also a poem about racism and the fall of America's myth of "collective consciousness" . The poet manipulates subtle and telling details to expand the context of the Vietnamese woman's fate and liking it with the fate of the black poet / narrator and his race . The black speaker's reference to the "confederate flag" that flies above the vehicle underlines the racial context of the poem and enhances its racist overtones . Historically the "confederate flag" refers to the confederate forces of the racial American South which were defending slavery and racism challenging the army of the north which came to liberate the South from racism during the American civil war . This significant detail underlines the black identity of the speaker and evokes the implicit racism of the incident affirming the link between war and racism , between soldier and civilian , between the Vietnamese woman and the black poet – both of them are victims of white violence and racism . It is obvious that the black speaker recognizes in the Vietnamese woman's plight a version of his own struggle for respect and equality and he discovers that skin color is an important issue in the Vietnam war which is an apparent example of American racism . The black speaker , in the poem feels sympathetic with the raped woman because like him and his ancestors , she is repeatedly dehumanized by the same evil forces of white America . The white soldiers , according to the poem deny the humanity of both the black speaker and the raped woman . The white American soldiers do not call blacks or Vietnamese by their proper names but by humiliating terms . For example , Vietnamese are called "gooks" , "dinks" , "slants" ,

"slopes" , "zips" and "slopeheads" and blacks are called "niggers" . The black protagonist of *No Bugles , No Drums* echoes Komunyakaa's notion about American racism – at home and abroad – against black soldiers during Vietnam war :

> *We were s'posed to be out here killin' people*
> *so what was left could live with .... What?*
> *Dignity ? The right to choose their own*
> *government ? Shit , if we still go round callin'*
> *each other niggers , kikes , wops , spics ,*
> *frogs , krauts , honkies , wha' the fuck's the*
> *good of killin' people because they're*
> *communists (183-184) .*

In *"Recreating the Scene"* Komunyakaa emphasizes the absence of any moral purpose for the American army in Vietnam undermining the frontier myth of the heroism of the American warrior with its inherited images of war and soldiership . In its exposure of war crimes such as rape and slaughter , Komunyakaa's poem condemns the brutalities and atrocities committed by the American army with its military arsenal of mass destruction against an under-developed country . The poem also emphasizes the fall of the American cultural mythology about democracy, justice and human rights. The Vietnamese woman , in the poem , is released after being raped on the premise that she will have a fair trial – the woman is momentarily filled with a sense of promise for justice as "for a moment the world's future tense" . The poet/narrator says that he listens to the woman's complaint and "*I inform the Overseas Weekly*" . But a surprise happens in the trial's day – the woman disappears forever . There are rumors surrounding the woman's disappearance on the day of trial : some people say that the poor woman was bribed , others believed she was killed . The most important thing is that the Vietnamese woman like the poet's own race , has become invisible :

> *on the trial's day*
> *she turns into mist –*
> *someone says money*
> *changes hands ,*
> *& someone else swears*
> *she's buried at LZ Gator .*
> *But for now , the baby*
> *makes a fist & grabs at the air ,*
> *searching for a breast .*

The poem , with its brutality and personification of American evil , is a witness condemning American violation of human rights in a third world country . The poem strikes the note that the Vietnamese war involved more than the all too familiar argument about American democracy versus communist expansion which characterized America's falsified history of the conflict . Komunyakaa , here , makes a link between the fate of the Vietnamese woman who was raped and brutalized by white American soldiers and the fate of his own people who were raped and lynched for more than three centuries by the same oppressive system symbolized by "the confederate flag" and the "metal door" of the armored vehicle . Both of them , the poet and the woman , were victims of a powerfully and racially mechanized culture . The poem illustrates that Americans "lived with violence and bloodshed" for many years in Vietnam looking forward to the triumph of white Americans over an inferior race "an Indian country" as "a validation of [their] national manhood" (Gerzon 119) . However , the poem demonstrates that Vietnam War has created a cultural crisis in the American national identity bringing America's myth of collectivity to complete ruin . By establishing an analogy between American violence in Asia and its counterpart at home – institutionalized racism – Komunyakaa narrows the gap between war and racism , between military and racial struggle between soldiers and civilians . Komunyakaa's relevant argument about war and racism in *Dien Cai Dau* is supported by the political commentators of the 1960s .

In 1968 , George Liska , a famous political commentator, referred to the salient "domestic implications" of the Vietnam war clarifying that "the domino theory had real and pertinent influence over issues in the United States" (87) . Liska asserts that the key domestic issue affected by the Vietnam war in the sixties and early seventies is quite simply America's racial turmoil , a situation he succinctly describes as a "crisis" (87) . Liska explains , in details , why opposing camps of interventionists (those who support the American intervention in Vietnam) and anti-interventionists (those who reject the American intervention in Vietnam) disagree vehemently on what is at stake domestically through America's foreign policy initiatives in Vietnam . Liska , then , offers a summary of the interventionist or imperial viewpoint which he adopts . In his argument he justifies the use of all forms of violence and aggression against "Hanoi and its allies" as a way of scaring the Black Power Movement (hostile force) at home . Liska points out that any collapse of the American strategy of mass murder and genocide abroad would encourage blacks demanding for equality to advocate violence against the American government . Liska says :

> *There is an interdependence between affirmation of American prestige and power vis-à-vis Hanoi and its allies and the prospect for semi-orderly integration of American society in the face of Black Power . In the last resort , whatever order exists in the United States depends on the governmen's known will and ability to deal firmly with hostile force . A collapse of this reputation abroad would strengthen the appeal and increase the credibility of domestic advocates of violence as a safe and profitable way to "racial equality". Any administration conspicuously threatened abroad would be bound to have the greatest difficulty in dealing with domestic crises . The consequence of default in the exercise of the imperial role might very well be a second American Revolution for the "independence" of a hitherto "colonized" group (87) .*

Liska's argument , though unfair , reinforces the paper's thesis about the strong bond between war and racism in the poetry of Komunyakaa . Liska establishes an analogy between the prosecution of war and violence in Vietnam and the maintenance of

amenable social order in America . In Liska's argument , as in Komunyakaa's poetry , there is no difference between the American war for colonization in Vietnam and the American racial war against blacks "a colonized group" at home . Liska illustrates that America should deal with the Viet Cong firmly otherwise , America will never be able to crush the Black Power movement for equality at home . Like Komunyakaa , Liska , in a different manner , affirms the link between the Viet Cong forces in Vietnam and the revolutionary black movements in America . The fact that the Vietnam war coincided with the rise of black revolution in the 1960s and early 1970s and the fact that the speaker in Komunyakaa's poems is black American undermine the myth of the America's "collective consciousness" . The black speaker identifies himself more with the Viet Cong army seeing them as a revolutionary force , like the Black Power movement at home , fighting against a brutal /racial system . Liska himself underlines the notion of revolution which links blacks with the Viet Cong warning that the Black Power movement may turn into "a second American revolution" if it is left without control or restraint .

It is noteworthy to point out that Komunyakaa's war poems signify that American culture industry has manipulated racial arguments similar to Liska's in order to justify American involvement in Vietnam (as an inevitable step in its war against communist expansion) and its violence against revolutionary black movements calling for equality (as necessary repressive measures to maintain order at home) . However , Komunyakaa's poems , on another level seek to undermine both the assumptions of the American culture industry and the American myth of collectivity . Thus , in *Dien Cai Dau* , Komunyakaa manipulates music as a technique to undermine the American myth of "collective consciousness" during war . It is known that in American movies music is usually used as a kind of unifying force among American soldiers . For example , the American movie , *Good Morning Vietnam* , uses music as the common denominator bringing American soldiers , blacks and whites, together . But Komunyakaa's poem *"Tu Do Street"* presents music not as the unifying element one finds in American movies but as a dividing agent :

Music divides the evening .
I close my eyes & can see
men drawing lines in the dust .
America pushes through the memberane
of mist & smoke , & I'm a small boy
again in Bogalusa . White Only
signs & Hank Snow . But tonight
I walk into a place where bar girls
fade like tropical birds . When
I order a beer , the mama-san
behind the counter acts as if she
can't understand , while her eyes
skirt each white face , as Hank Williams
calls from the psychedelic jukebox (29) .

The black speaker in the poem is an American GI who is immediately identifiable as such but who "also has a penchant for invisibility" (Aubert 69) . The poem explores the theme of racism during Vietnam war and its influence on black soldiers fighting in the battlefield . The black persona enters a Saigon brothel frequented by black and white soldiers who enter the area through separate doors as they seek relief from the stress and strain of combat . White and black soldiers have two different groups of mama-sans and their attendant bar girls . A clear distinction is drawn in the poem between the soldiers' quest for sexless or pre-sexual socialization in the bars and their quest for sexual satisfaction in other rooms . The poet's reference to the notion that the black soldiers are shunned by the mama-sans and bar girls in the bars frequented by white soldiers "deeper into alleys" underlines the racial overtones of the poem . The speaker identifies himself with Vietnamese prostitutes who offer their services on a non-discriminatory basis "there is more than a nation inside us" .

In the first line of the quotation above , music , instead of unifying , "divides" as surely as those "lines" drawn in the dust by men "behaving like bullies in the schoolyard" . The quoted lines are racial and political dividing the American army into separate and unequal parts . The irony here is important particularly for America , a country based on the doctrine of equal rights to all , and especially poignant when that country has called its citizens , both black and white , to offer themselves in sacrifice at war . The black speaker gives the betrayal of these political and moral dogma a Biblical context – "we have played Judas" to each other where "machine gun fire" fails to bring "us together" . The speaker broadens the culpability for such racism : "down the street / blacks GIS hold to their turf also" .

The racism of the white soldiers is answered , not surprisingly , by black racism as the poem illustrates . Nevertheless , Komunyakaa makes it clear that one of these groups – whites and blacks – holds more power to act upon this kind of racism and prejudice . But , the poem does not stop here at this ironic sense of whites and blacks at war amongst themselves . Komunyakaa pushes the poem's argument further into the darkened recesses of human relationships , discovering in the Saigon brothel neighborhood an even greater irony : soldiers kill the brothers of the women they "run to hold" in the bar / brothel :

Back in the bush at Dak To
& Khe Sanh , we fought
the brothers of these women
we now run to hold in our arms .
There's more than a nation
inside us ,
soldiers touch the same lovers
minutes apart , tasting
each other's breath ,

without knowing these rooms
run into each other like tunnels
leading to the underworld (29) .

The poem's black speaker comes to an epiphanic understanding of "shared humanity" that links him with the Vietnamese women . He identifies himself with these women regardless of differences in skin color and politics . The speaker recognizes a common humanity whose roots cross the superficial boundaries of nations ; a common humanity which runs deeper than ideological differences connecting those of black and yellow skin . Surely , the Vietnamese women the black American soldiers "run to hold" as well as their brothers who fought the American colonizers understand what it is to be human upon the globe and what sentence awaits each one in death's "underworld" . However , this revelation does not come without its share of ominous undertones , for the symbolic / figurative "tunnels" that link the black soldiers and the Vietnamese women in their humanity (bodily contact) also have a literal reality in the deadly maze of tunnels the Viet Cong used to ferry supplies, to fight and quickly disappear and into which many American soldiers ventured never to return . On another level , Komunyakaa points out that the physical contact between black soldiers and Vietnamese women take place in "rooms" that invoke a transformational combat landscape : They "run into each other like tunnels / leading to the underworld" . Implicit in these conduits is a common humanity , linked to a common death , figuratively in physical contact and literary in war . What is "more than a nation / inside us" blacks and Vietnamese is there shared humanity and shared suffering .

The black persona in the poem goes into the Saigon bar through the opposite door purposefully and perhaps ritualistically subjecting himself to the rejection and racial grounds he knows he is sure to get . When he enters the bar frequented by the white soldiers , where the music is different from that in the bars where the black soldiers go , the bar girls "fade like tropical birds" in their evasiveness . This experience triggers a memory involving an ironic representation of music that separates rather than unites by virtue of its inherent harmony : "Music divides the evening / America pushes through the membrane / of mist & smoke & I'm a small boy / again in Bogalusa" . The impulse that motivated Komunyakaa as a small boy in his Louisiana home town of Bogalusa impels him at this moment as a GI in Vietnam . And as it was at home, so it is on the warfront – at least in the rear echelon in Saigon where the soldiers go for rest and recuperation after fighting "the brothers of these women / we now run to hold in our arms" . It is important to note the respect Komunyakaa ascribes to Vietnamese women . The poet emphasizes the humanistic aspect of the embrace virtually annulling the sexual import of the situation and betaking the generally humanistic portrayal of women we find in Komunyakaa's anthology as a whole . This humanistic aspect is totally absent in similar works about Vietnam by white American writers .

In most of the literary works by white authors on Vietnam war , Vietnamese women are racially treated as cheap sexual objects and as "one dollar prostitutes" who are frequently raped and tortured by white soldiers. For example , Charles Taylor , an American soldier in Vietnam and the white protagonist of Donald McQuinn's popular novel *Targets* sadistically participates in the torture and rape of a Vietnamese woman , Tuyet , whom he refers to as a bitch . The woman is tied up to a chair and tortured with an electric current. The white soldier watches the scene in a sadistic manner: "the unnaturally erect position vividly outlines the musculature of her stomach and her breasts pointed tautly upward , the nipples in constant tremor from her ragged breathing and shivering" (109). The torture , rape and brutalization of Vietnamese women by white soldiers during the wars as reflected in fictional and autobiographical works by American authors underline the racial politics of the conflict as well as the racism of the colonizers . On the contrary , the bar girls and prostitutes of Saigon in Komunyakaa's poems , are metonymically depicted as victims : their "voices / wounded by their beauty and war" (29) . The Vietnamese women (the enemy) in Komunyakaa's poems become a part of the "nation/ inside us" because "the same lovers" are touched by black soldiers by the virtue of their capacity for motherhood , for bringing life into the world and as the primary sources of nurturing – they become the confreres and common denominators of the universal , of the common humanity that populates Komunyakaa's poetry .

In *"Hanoi Hannah"* Komunyakaa identifies himself with the Viet Cong radio propagandist who in the poem bearing her name strives to induce homesickness among American troops by reminding them of their women left behind . Playing black music and singing *"Georgia on My Mind"* the Viet Cong radio station attempts to break the spirit of the black soldiers by evoking in them memories of a racial past .

Ray Charles ! His voice
calls from waist-high grass
& we duck behind gray sandbags.
"Hello , Soul Brothers . Yeah,
Georgia's also on my mind." ...
"It's Saturday night in the States.
Guess what your woman's doing tonight.
I think I'll let Tina Turner
Tell you , you homesick GIs (34) .

Hannah's tactics are basically directed to black soldiers . She uses Ray Charles and Tina Turner to attract the black soldiers' attention to her message . She reminds them of their women waiting for them back home or even having dates with other men : "It's Saturday night in the States / Guess what your woman's doing tonight" . The messages of Hanna unleash "a white arc" of artillery fire in a vain attempt to silence her . The poem might easily fall prey to cliché if it ended here , but Komunyakaa surprises his readers by presenting an account of these propaganda tactics ignored by other poets of war . His poem becomes politically and racially charged as he offers a black American perspective on psychological warfare strategies that accentuate racial division in the army . Hannah in her attempt to emphasize the spirit of division and the racial politics in the American army in Vietnam , presents some of her brutally cynical punch lines while attempting to mimic black dialect . She calls blacks "soul brothers" indicating that like Vietnamese , blacks are racially brutalized by the white system . She urges blacks to leave the battlefield

otherwise they will be killed like Martin Luther King who was killed in Memphis – "as King in Memphis" . The propagandist message is clear : blacks should not die for a racial system which dehumanizes hem :

"You know you're dead men,
don't you? You're dead
as King today in Memphis." ...
"Soul Brothers, what you dying for?"

The question "What you dying for?" preys upon the black American soldiers' ambiguous position in the Vietnam war . It also calls to mind the famous response of the black American boxing champion Muhammed Ali who , when asked about his reasons , other than religious , for not fighting in Vietnam , said : "No Viet Cong ever called me a nigger" . As a whole the poem enhances the theme of war and racism showing the vulnerability of black soldiers subjected to psychological war strategies which operate on their racial consciousness . By underlying the dangers of propaganda strategies which take advantage of American racism against blacks fighting with the American army , the poem undermines the myth of American "collective consciousness" during war .

The connection between war and racism is a crucial issue in Komunyakaa's poetry . He seizes this issue and examines it via a wide variety of media , employing television, drama and even painting as portals to the human psyche . The most significant thing about each one of these examples is the location where these events take place – inside an individual soldier's or ex-soldier's mind . The paradoxical effect of this existential mode , rather surprisingly , is to interrogate the common reader's own assumptions about the interplay of Vietnam war and racial politics and its startling results .

In *"One-Legged Stool"* , Komunyakaa illustrates how the Viet Cong manipulates the potential value of America's own latent racism using it during war to achieve terrifying results . The poem is a rambling dramatic monologue set in prose and prefaced by stage directions . It reads like a one-man play invoking all of the racial politics and psychological warfare tactics the book as a whole alludes to elsewhere . The poem presents a black American prisoner who is forced to squat all day on a one – legged stool . In his hallucination , as the stage directions indicate , the black soldier struggles to subvert his captors' psychological war tactics by standing up literally and figuratively for himself and America . In his monologue he attempts to reject the Viet Cong's argument about racism in America but in vain because American racism, according to Jack Foner , is "the sorriest chapter in the story of the war" (133) . The black soldier , in the Viet Cong prison , painfully struggles to defend America's national unity which , in fact , is an illusion:

> *Don't you know I'll never cooperate? No, don't care what you whisper into the darkness of this cage like it came out of my own head. I won't believe a word. Lies, lies. You're lying. Those white prisoners didn't say what you say they said. They ain't laughing. Ain't cooperating. They ain't putting me down, calling me names like you say. Lies. Lies. It ain't the way you say it is. I'm American. (Pause). Doctor King, he ain't dead like you say. Lies ... You didn't see that. I'm still sitting on my stool (36).*

The poem moves at a frantic pace , as the black speaker shifts from reality to fantasy , from the present to the past , from Vietnam to America – all of it punctuated by the periodic appearance of a shadowy-faced Viet Cong at a peephole in the hut's door . Near the breaking point in the poem , which is reduced to eating "dung beetles" , "pinched" from the door , the black soldier repeated his name , rank and serial number as if they are a "mantra" , a way to pull back so far inside himself. The Viet Cong's psychological manipulation achieves its results near the end of the poem because it is based on racial realities in America and is directed toward a black American soldier who has been subjected to racism both in war and at home . It is obvious that during American war abroad , black soldiers were actually aware that they were not Americans but blacks . Like Brooks , Komunyakaa observes that various types of racism were practiced against black soldiers in war which were extensions to white racism at home. Thus , the black soldier in *"One-Legged Stool"* has to acknowledge the existence of racism in the American society particularly in the South . He refers to Georgia , Alabama and Mississippi, states associated with racism and violence against blacks . Moreover , the argument of the Viet Cong about American racism hurts the black speaker severely making him aware of his blackness awakening feelings of inferiority in him. He tells his captors that their psychological war strategies, which manipulate the racist issue to break his spirits, are even worse than racial politics practiced by whites "rednecks" against him :

Yeah, VC. I've been through
Georgia. Yeah, been through 'Bama too. Mississippi,
yeah. You know what? You eye me worse than those
rednecks.

Such a sense of the perilous nature of racial and national identity pervades Komunyakaa's book . It appears in various forms and in several poems undermining the American myth of "collective consciousness" affirming the dangers of racism to America's national unity during war . In *Dien Cai Dau* , Komunyakaa , like Brooks , in *Bronzeville* , explores , in a highly sophisticated and subtle manner , the peculiar position of black soldiers fighting side by side with white soldiers in a battle where they confirm the reality of their loss (many blacks were killed and injured during the war) , the reality of white racism and the reality of hostile psychological war strategies – "red bordered / leaflets" printed with the reminder "VC [Viet Cong] didn't kill / Dr. Martin Luther King" . The black speaker in the book , therefore , can not escape from the realities and memories of that war regardless of the barriers of time and place which separate him from that time in history . Coming across the Vietnam Veterans Memorial many years after the war , the black speaker's personal history of that war brings back all the memories :

My black face fades,
hiding inside the black granite.
I said I wouldn't,
Dammit: No tears.
I'm stone. I'm flesh.

My clouded reflection eyes me
like a bird of prey, the profile of night
slanted against morning. I turn
this way – the stone lets me go.
I turn that way – I'm inside
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
again, depending on the light
to make a difference (63).

The insistence on using lexical items such as "my black face" , "the black granite" , "the profile of night" and other terms affirm the ethnic identity of the speaker as a black man who participated in a white man's war where he was subjected to various forms of racism . The black speaker can not avoid the Vietnam war memories "I'm inside the Vietnam Veterans Memorial" where his "clouded reflection" reminds him of the brutal history of war . Given the racial context of the war and the moral ambivalence of the black speaker /poet toward the Vietnamese people (he sympathizes with them because like his race , they are subjected to white violence and racism , yet , he has to fight them for stupid ideological differences) , the speaker's pronouncement in the lines quoted above becomes one version of the dialectic between war and racism which animates both Brooks' *Bronzeville* and Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dau* extending them beyond the traditional question of the atrocities /brutalities of a military conflict to larger and more fundamental questions – the dangers of white racism on national unity and the non-existence of the American myth of "collective consciousness" whether in war overseas or at home.

Conclusion

In the war poetry of Brooks and Komunyakaa , the two black poets succeed in creating an analogy between war and racism in order to undermine the American myth of "collective consciousness" which assumes that in wartime , the American army becomes the location for the eradication of ethnic and racial boundaries among white and black soldiers . The war poetry of Brooks and Komunyakaa emphasizes – with evidence – that racism in the American army which exists even during war , is an extension of racism at home . Within this context , the war poetry of Brooks and Komunyakaa undermines the assumption of the American culture industry which attempts throughout movies , personal narratives and novels to argue that racial/ethnic barriers are usually overcome in war because black and white soldiers fighting in the battlefield are usually able to eliminate hierarchal differences by subordinating them to the broader value system of survival . In their attempt to deflate the assumptions of the American culture industry as well as the American myth of collectivity during war , both poets redefine "the enemy" and "war" itself . For example , in their poetry , the enemy is not introduced as Germans (in the case of Brooks' poetry) or as Viet Cong (in the case of Komunyakaa's poetry) but as fellow Americans with white skin . Equally , both poets reconstruct war as a complex tissue of meaning and signification where the battlefield exists simultaneously on foreign grounds as well as at home in the black ghetto . By establishing a link between war and racism , Brooks and Komunyakaa attempt to narrow the gap between military and racial , between soldier and civilian in order to undermine America's myth of "collective consciousness" and emphasize the fact that racism in the army during war is an extension of the same kind of racism blacks have experienced in a predominantly white culture for decades.

The most peculiar thing about the war poetry of Brooks and Komunyakaa is that the treatment of the war issue is completely different from many other poetic texts – (particularly by white writers) – devoted to war . For example , Brooks' Second World War poems challenge the premise that war poetry up to the 1940s was written by male writers and was accorded value on the basis of authority of experience not available to women . This kind of writing in 1945 when Brooks' anthology was published , was a literary taboo "because women are exterior to war , men interior , men have long been the great war-story tellers , legitimated in that role because they have been there or because they have greater entrée into what it must be like" (Elshtain 212) . Nevertheless , Brooks adopts the persona and voices of male soldiers with remarkable ease . She also rewrites "war" as a complex issue of meaning and signification and in her poetry the battlefield exists simultaneously on foreign fronts , in the trenches and on Chicago streets . In addition to "the traditional themes of victimization and suffering" (Smith 37) and "the betrayal of white promise" (Stanford 173) Brooks' war poems underline the issue of resistance to white racial hegemony in a peculiar way . Therefore , Dan Jaffe reveals his admiration for Brooks' treatment of war in *Bronzeville* . He argues : "It is curious that a gentle woman should have written this sequence of war poems . They are poems of dignity , skill and empathy . What we get here is the painful awakening of men to the threats of war" (95) .

Brooks' war poems equally challenge the premise that women poets have not written many good poems : "bereaved women are , next to the permanently wounded , the main victims in war , their dead men having been removed beyond suffering . Yet , the elegies are written by men , the poems registering a love of soldiers are written by men , and it is not women who seem to be the custodians of the subtlest sort of anti-war irony" (Fussell 213) . Brooks' poetry in , *Bronzeville,* however , does not include elegies for male soldiers . Instead , Brooks appropriates the voices of black soldiers in order to extend and develop the racial possibilities inherent in war . In doing so , Brooks creates "the subtlest sort of anti-war irony" that Fussell does not find in the poetry of other female poets . For Brooks , it is a re-visionary gesture , one in which war becomes the means to explore not just the story of war but other stories as well such as the link between war and racism . Moreover , the basic aims of Brooks' *Bronzeville* seems to "write the black soldier into war poetry", to affirm the existence of the black soldier at the Second World War fronts and "to force her readers to notice the terms of black men's exclusion from both heroic and ironic modern mythologies of war fare" (Schweik 158) . Nevertheless , by writing in male voices , and by revising "the old stories" Brooks resituates herself , moving from the peripheral "woman's" place of observing war , to the center of the action . In so doing Brooks (in post-modern / feminist terms) de-centers the traditional male voice and re-inscribes war with her multi-leveled meanings , resisting and refuting the traditional notion of women's exteriority to war as well as the traditional treatment of the war theme itself .

Unlike the war poetry of male poets , Brooks' poetry deals more with psychological injury and pain than with bodily injury . Her war poems for example , bear little resemblance to a poem like Wilfred Owen's "Mental Cases" describing badly shell-shocked World War I soldiers for whom "might comes blood black , / [and] dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh" (169) . Neither do Brooks' soldiers resemble Randall Jarrell's World War II soldier who "woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters" and who reports with a remarkable economy of detail the horrible disposal of his body: "when I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose" (144) . Brooks' war poetry does not resemble the morale-boosting "patriotic drivel" Fussell attributes to World War II poems by Macleish , Sandburg and others (Fussell /75). Instead , Brooks' war poems demonstrate the sustained "fracturing" of the psyche that war in all its multiple meanings causes . Brooks' war poems focus on the psychic injuries caused not only by war but by racism as well . Starting from the premise that the social , cultural , ethnic , political and religious rhetoric on which American life is based is just essentially blinding , numbing force , Brooks' poems seek to undermine American cultural mythologies about equality and collectivity . In her poems , the black speakers struggle with this blinding force which "bandage" their eyes in a racist society .

The process of coming to terms with the truth of American political/ racial rhetoric is underlined in Brooks' poems . Brooks' poems reveal that the wounds of racism must be uncovered in order to undermine America's myth of collectivity and put an end to the American mythology about equality and justice . For Brooks, this process may be the beginning of finding a suitable solution for the racial issue , a notion which requires extreme efforts . Thus , while Brooks' poems remake the enemy and resituate the locus of war , they also demand that the real battles be fought both within the hearts and minds of individual soldiers and on the ground of social and cultural struggle .

Like Brooks' Second World War poems , Komunyakaa's Vietnam War poetry is different from earlier poetic texts devoted to war as it involves "the integration and aesthetic instillation of cultural material from both his African American and his European American sources" (Aubert 119) . His poetry is equally distinguished from earlier poetic texts as it reveals the disparity between "the communal history of war" as recorded by the American culture industry and the private war history" as Komunyakaa himself experiences (Stein 542) . Moreover , Michel Fabre argues that the genuine details of Komunyakaa's poetry are due to the fact that the poet himself was a Vietnam War correspondent who depicts in his poetry the experience of soldiers caught up in an absurd war , of images of horrible bloodshed , of comrades lost in action and "his vision of a dead soldier still holding the photograph of a woman in his hand" (5).

In Brooks' poetry , black soldiers were subjected to different types of white racism , "the model for Hitler's racial laws" (Baraka 151) . Black soldiers in the American army during the Second World War were involved in two simultaneous wars – one against Hitler in Germany and one against the Hitlers of the United States . Komunyakaa's poetry equally reveals that blacks in the American army in Vietnam , despite the dangers of war, were subjected to the horrible dangers of racial inequities. The racial practices against blacks in addition to the brutalities committed against Vietnamese people alienate them from the aggressive American army and push them to the side of the Viet Cong . Thus , in his poetry Komunyakaa redefines the "enemy" not as Viet Cong forces struggling for independence but as racist /white American colonizers who seek to annihilate an entire country simply because of ideological and ethnic differences . Identifying himself with the Vietnamese people who , like his own race , were subjected to white racism , the black speaker in Komunyakaa's poetry calls the Viet Cong "soul brothers" the same way Hannah addresses the black soldiers in her messages to them .

In his attempt to undermine American cultural mythology about collectivity , Komunyakaa's speaker equally identifies himself with the Viet Cong radio propagandist "Hanoi Hannah" who attempts to break the spirit of the American soldiers in Vietnam by inducing homesickness among them reminding them of their women who were left alone in the States . The speaker's memories of a racial past in the American South where his ancestors were frequently lynched and castrated by white authorities , were evoked when he heard the Viet Cong broadcasting station playing music and songs with racial overtones such as *"Georgia In My Mind"* . Thus , in his poetry , Komunyakaa manipulates music as a technique to undermine the American myth of "collective consciousness" in wartime . In American media , music is usually used as a kind of unifying force among American soldiers in war linking the troops in a shared cultural heritage . But in Komunyakaa's war poems , music is associated with racial differences separating blacks and whites from each other. In this context , neither music nor "the machine gun fire" can bring "us together". Komunyakaa argues that in a racist army where blacks were dealt with as an inferior race inside the battlefield and where black and white soldiers (outside the battlefield) enter Saigon brothels from two separate doors sleeping with different groups of prostitutes ; in such an army there is no place for what is called "the collective consciousness of America" which indicates unity between blacks and whites during war . Thus , in his Vietnam poetry , Komunyakaa argues that American racism is effectively manipulated by the Viet Cong to undermine the roots of the American national unity during war . In other words , the Viet Cong , during Vietnam War , took full advantage of the potential value of America's own latent racism and used it , in an effective way , achieving terrifying results .

As a whole , Komunyakaa's Vietnam War poetry in *Dien Cai Dau* 1988 , like Brooks' Second World War poetry in *A Street In Bronzeville* 1945 , creates an analogy between war and racism . Komunyakaa's poetry links between the struggle of the Viet Cong fighting the American war machine which attempts to erase their country from the map of Asia and the revolutionary Black Power movement struggling against the racial forces of the white police which attempt to eliminate the black race simply because of black demands for equality and justice . This notion is augmented by the fact that the Vietnam War and the Black Power movement took place at the same time in addition to the fact that both of the Viet Cong and the Black Power were revolutionary movements . Thus, in Komunyakaa's war poetry , the black speaker who appears in all the poems , identifies himself with the struggle of the Viet Cong drawing an analogy between American colonization in Vietnam and American racism against a colonized group (blacks) at home . In this context Komunyakaa's poetry undermines the American myth of "collective consciousness" during war because one of the major strategic aims of the war was to annihilate Vietnam and the Viet Cong in order to frighten the emerging revolutionary Black Power movement calling for equality at home . Thus , Komunyakaa's poetry demonstrates that in the 1960s and early 1970s , black Americans were involved in two simultaneous , though contradictory wars :

one abroad in which black soldiers had to fight against a tiny country seeking independence from American colonization and one at home where the black majority were engaged in a kind of civil war against the same racist system which colonized Vietnam. Within this framework , Komunyakaa's poems about Vietnam emphasize the existence of a kind of moral ambivalence on the part of black soldiers fighting in Vietnam . The black soldiers , as the poems indicate , find it difficult to fight against a small country which like them, was subjected to American violence and racism . Thus , instead of killing the Viet Cong forces , the black soldiers in the American army identify themselves with the struggle of the Viet Cong who like the black revolutionary movement at home seek to liberate themselves from the claims of white American racism and oppression . In so doing , Komunyakaa , like Brooks , succeed in undermining the myth of "the American collective consciousness" during war and deflating the assumption of the American culture industry which attempts , throughout movies , personal narratives and novels , to falsify history claiming that American soldiers fighting in the battlefield are usually able to eliminate hierarchal , ethnic and racial differences by subordinating them to the broader value system of survival.

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