

Veteran Politics and Memory: A Global Perspective

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Indigenous Veterans – Keeping The Vietnam War Alive Through Mnemonic Practices

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This paper is about Indigenous Vietnam veterans and how they utilize their own mnemonic practices to keep the memory of their experiences alive. In so doing, they put forth a strong counterhegemonic narrative that undermines dominant narrative while also providing a bridge into their own cultural heritage.

During the Vietnam War, Native Americans served in overwhelming numbers in relation to their overall population.¹ As previous generations during WWI, WWII, and Korea, Indigenous men joined the U.S. military, largely for their own culturally-based reasons as well as a patriotism that was both Native and American.² As colonial soldiers for Empire, Indigenous men were complicit in perpetuating American hegemony at home and abroad. At the same time, Indigenous soldiers utilized the U.S. military –an essentially foreign institution– to carry on their own cultural and warrior traditions. As one of the last minority groups within larger encapsulating culture, Indigenous veterans have begun to receive belated national recognition of their military service record from the American nation state –most recently through the dedication of the National Native American Veterans Memorial at the National Museum of the American Indian (NNAVM) at the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

This paper seeks to shift into the center of its focus the unique ways in which Native Americans themselves remember and commemorate the Vietnam war experience through their own cultural mnemonic practices and not necessarily those of dominant culture. More specifically, this paper explores how and why Native Americans have utilized mnemonic practices that provide a bridge into their cultural past. For example, Indigenous Vietnam veterans have reinvented traditional mnemonic practices by painting tipi hides with iconographic images of their wartime experiences, thus revitalizing cultural traditions and transplanting them into their specific temporal context. According to cultural studies scholar Astrid Erll, cultural memory involves three dimensions: material, mental, and social.³ In following this categorization, this paper explores how Indigenous veterans and communities have kept the memory of the Vietnam experience alive through mnemonic artifacts and symbols (material dimension); ceremonies, rituals, and oral histories (social dimension); and, finally, through cultural values, norms, and beliefs (mental dimension). In following this approach, I explore counterhegemonic practices of memorialization that serve to provide a bridge into the cultural heritage and historical past, thus putting forth a powerful counternarrative to dominant narratives that continue to marginalize Native veterans. In so doing, this paper seeks to provide new perspectives on America's "forgotten warriors" and the ways their overseas experiences have shaped Indian Country to the present day. With regard to its theoretical foundation, this paper draws from the fields of Indigenous studies, memory and gender studies. Thematically and methodically, it falls into the field of ethnohistory, emphasizing decolonizing methodologies and Indigenous perspectives and voices.

¹ During the Vietnam-era, an estimated 62,100 Native Americans served, 90% percent of them as volunteers; of these, 42,500 were in Southeast Asia. These numbers represent a sizeable amount in relation to the Indigenous population as a whole. According to estimates, one in four Indigenous men served during the Vietnam War era, as compared to one in twelve of the general American population. Tom Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War* (University of Texas Press, Austin 1996), 122-123.

² Holm, *Strong Hearts*, 18-25, 117-123; Meadows, William C. *Kiowa, Apache, and Comanche Military Societies: Enduring Veterans, 1800 to the Present* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), xi-xiii; Carroll, Al. *Medicine Bags and Dog Tags: American Indian Veterans from Colonial Times to the Second Iraq War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 2; Paul Rosier, *Serving Their Country: American Indian Politics and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 9.

³ Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 101-105.

Matthias Voigt finished his doctoral degree at the Goethe University of Frankfurt in April 2019. His doctoral dissertation, entitled *Re-Inventing the Warrior, Race, Gender and Nation in Contemporary Indian Country*, examines the ways in which Indigenous men reinvented self and society within the struggle against colonial domination during the 1960s and 1970s. More specifically, the dissertation examines particular constructions of warrior masculinity that emerged within the context of the American Indian Movement (AIM) and against the larger backdrop of the Vietnam War. The dissertation seeks to shed fresh perspectives on complex processes of gendered nation-building of a marginalized minority within American society. The dissertation was part of the DFG-funded project "Marginalized Masculinities and the American Nation," supervised by Prof. Dr. Simon Wendt at Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany.