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The Militarization of Education Post 9/11: An Examination of Black Veterans and Contemporary Uses of the GI Bill

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Education

by

Nina Monet Reynoso

2022

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Militarization of Education Post 9/11: An Examination of Black Veterans and Contemporary Uses of the GI Bill

by

Nina Monet Reynoso
Doctor of Philosophy in Education
University of California, Los Angeles, 2022
Professor Daniel Solórzano, Chair

Within a decade following World War II, more than two million veterans attended college using the GI Bill, with an additional almost 5.5 million taking advantage of vocational training (Mettler, 2005). Now, over fifty years later, "Only one in ten veterans using GI Bill benefits enrolls in institutions with graduation rates above 70 percent, while approximately one in three veterans using GI Bill benefits attends a for-profit institution" (Bond Hill et. al, 2019). During that time, the armed forces have consistently had Black adults enlist at the rate comparable if not disproportionate to their population percentage, despite recent down trends in enlistment (Segal & Segal, 2005). Through opportunities like the GI Bill and Yellow Ribbon Funds, this dissertation aims to examine how Black youth and veterans are able or unable to reach their educational goals based on legislation, resources provided by the military, and anti-Blackness.

Previous research studying the effectiveness of the GI Bill, recruitment efforts, and the integration of the armed forces into K-12/ post-secondary education, guides my methodology. As such, I utilize a mixed methods approach to collect oral histories as well as Geographical Information Systems (GIS) open-source data on college and university endowment, racial demographics at institutions of higher education, the locations of military bases and racialized

violence, and related statistics to measure engagement between Black communities and the armed forces through an educational pipeline. The goal of this research project is to inform how educators, policymakers, Black veterans, and youth recognize and respond to the influence of the armed forces in education to make choices that are well suited for future generations and not just those currently enlisted.

The dissertation of Nina Monet Reynoso is approved.

Veronica Nelly Velez

Tyrone C. Howard

Robert T. Teranishi

Daniel G. Solorzano, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to share my deepest gratitude to my maternal grandmother and paternal great-grandmother for my earliest lessons in education and critical literacy, the building blocks for my path towards this degree. Along the way, I have met several mentors including but not limited to Dr. Kenjus Watson and my committee members, Dr. Daniel Solórzano, Dr. Veronica Velez, Dr. Tyrone Howard, and Dr. Robert Teranishi for their continued support and thought-provoking questions. During my time with Million Dollar Hoods, I have learned so much from my colleagues, Dr. Danielle Dupuy, Eric Lee, and Mariah Tso.

I am also thankful to my parents for allowing me to take chances and always having confidence that I would use my love of education and pedagogy in ways beyond what is traditionally encouraged. My partner, Amalea, has been a constant grounding force throughout the process and a reminder to take time for joy during the struggle.

Finally, I want to thank my younger brother for always motivating me to push beyond whatever limits have been placed on us. His presence in my life shows me what is possible for the next generation and the enormous obstacles our family has overcome since I was his age.

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FIELD OF STUDY

Black studies, labor studies, militarization of education

PUBLICATIONS

Reynoso, N. M., Foxx, K., Tadesse, A., & Mack, C. (2022). Patching the Pipeline: Reimagining the Roadmap to Higher Education. *In African American Leadership and Mentoring Through Purpose, Preparation, and Preceptors* (pp. 266-289). IGI Global.

CHAPTER 1:

Introduction

Otis, 43, sets aside his son's homework as he turns to me, "You want to know about my time in the Navy and how college was after that?" Nodding to himself, a recollection of memories washes over his deep complexion. He absentmindedly glances over the photos in his room, pausing on one of a young Otis and his daughter the day they met. "The military gave me the three things I needed at that time in my life: discipline, time to make important decisions for my future, and the opportunity for more education." Otis Dancy enlisted in the Navy IN 1994 at the age of 18 following the birth of his daughter. Eligible after having completed high school, he was sent to Japan and across countries touching the northwest Pacific Ocean for four years. At the end of his four years of active duty and four years of reserves, he would immediately enroll in classes at his local community college to earn an associate's degree in communication and business, until a supportive college counselor urged him to transfer to Arizona State University. $30,000 in loans to subsidize what his iteration of the GI Bill would not cover, and one semester short of a bachelor's degree later, Dancy does not regret his decision to join the military. Rather, he acknowledges it was a temporary solution to larger problems. "I had a friend who joined at the same time as me and still hasn't left, I don't think he's had an exercise in free thought in the last two decades."

For Otis Dancy in 1994, attending schools in neighborhoods like Youngstown, Ohio without funded college prospects and a baby to care for, meant that the Navy proved to be a satisfactory answer to a question posed by underserving educational institutions. Institutions which left him and his peers wholly unprepared for career or higher education prospects ultimately required another sacrifice when his GI Bill funding was insufficient. Many military recruiters fill in roles

that may be absent from the resource-poor schools that they often target. McDonough and Calderone in a 2006 study on the economic impact of college counselors in high schools, focused on the military presence in schools. They write:

> Implicit and explicit strategies, as articulated within the U.S. Army Recruiting Command (2004) Army School Recruiting Program Handbook, are designed to efficiently position on-site military recruiters as important sources of support for non–college-tracked, low-income students who are fundamentally unclear about their postgraduate options. (McDonough and Calderone, 2006).

In 2006, the year of McDonough and Calderone's study on the role of college counselors and economic impact, approximately 14,000 U.S. military recruiters were deployed with the goal of recruiting and enlisting at least two new recruits per month, resulting in over hundreds of thousands of new recruits annually. Included in their tactics is the motivation to be the first post-graduation contact for many high schoolers, referred to as a "first contact, first contract" approach. Moreover, instances of nefarious and abusive tactics are numerous with stories of recruiters threatening potential recruits with jail time if they change their mind and male recruiters sexual assaulting female recruits (Nava, 2010). Altogether, the strategies challenge the very notion of an All-Volunteer service when the most vulnerable communities and situations are exploited to meet yearly recruitment quotas and more closely resemble the draft of the 20th century.

Dancy's recollection of his time in the enlistment office offers the lived experience of this research as he details not fully understanding the terms under which he was signing what would be four years of active duty and four years on the inactive reserves. "They're looking for warm bodies, they don't care what happens after you enlist. If you come to them with empty hands,

they will milk you for all you're worth," Otis details to me as he explains how testing (e.g. the initial Armed Forces Qualification Test) and contract negotiating operate as part of the larger bargaining for what will eventually become your benefits package. Implicit within the process of enlistment is the social capital of understanding how to ask for a shorter service term, better benefits, potential opportunities for officer programs, and other such advantages typically not afforded to those in vulnerable positions. As mentioned above, it is not only lower income, non-college tracked students but disproportionately African Americans who make up the armed forces; Black Americans are roughly 12% of the population but comprise 17% of military personnel. Furthermore, women in the armed forces represent about 16% of the total Department of Defense personnel, with the lowest numbers represented in the Marine Corps (8.6%) and the highest represented in the Air Force at a little over 20% (Department of Defense, 2018,). Black women are a fast-growing number of the military, representing 30% of women in the armed forces as of 2016 (Melin, 2016). Historically, the disproportionate numbers of Black people within the armed forces presents the argument that the military is one of the most diverse private institutions in the nation—particularly salient for Black Americans wary of discrimination in the workplace. However, if we compare Dancy's experience to those of men like Charles Rabb, a World War II veteran who had lost hearing in one ear following an artillery explosion:

> Yet for Rabb, and despite his postwar successes, memories of his experiences in the VA still evoked memories of bitterness and anger... the dual burden faced by disabled Black veterans. While considering the role of disabled black veterans in postwar society, medical doctors, psychiatrists, government officials, and pundits devalued the severity of wounds by employing language that combined longstanding racist stereotypes associated

with African Americans with the ambivalent feelings harbored by the nondisabled (pity, fear, embarrassment, and antipathy) (Jefferson, 2003).

If Rabb were to undergo testing and psychiatric evaluation to receive necessary benefits or assistance like programs for sign language, they were subject to pathologic labeling like “hypersexuality”, “paranoia”, and “mental instability” (Jefferson, 2003). When entering an institution of higher education, these initial barriers to an equitable educational experience speak to Black Veterans' persistence to attain an education as Rabb did when he graduated from Cleveland City College in 1949. Comparing the experiences of two Black veterans across almost five decades demonstrates pervasive challenges to access, retainment, and adequate services geared towards ensuring success for a subset of college students who comprise over 30% of financing for schools like University of Phoenix under Title IV funding (Iloh & Toldson, 2013). Understanding the unique challenges for Black adolescents striving for higher education and career opportunities will in turn help education policymakers and practitioners understand the circumstances that allow for-profit institutions and the military to continually benefit from these vulnerable populations over generations. I, myself, the daughter of Otis Dancy, seek to better understand that for myself as I understand the opportunities afforded to me through my father’s choice to enlist.

Purpose

My familial connections to the armed forces through the experiences of my father, grandfather, and other loved ones encouraged me to apply to West Point and serve in the armed forces. I chose not to because of the trauma, loss, and pain they dealt with, and our family continues to deal with as a result of our relationship to the military. However, my access to educational opportunities and navigational capital following their services allowed me to

circumvent a direct relationship with the armed forces for most of my life. This research is done in acknowledgment of this, and in solidarity with Black veterans across the US who view service as a potential path to more options than provided in the private sector and higher education. Moreover, the purpose of this overview is to examine the process that begins in an early exposure to the armed forces throughout K-12 curriculum and programming, and ultimately leads to veterans of color having high rates of school loan default, primarily due to their disproportionate enrollment in for-profit institutions (Iloh & Toldson, 2013). This dissertation will cover three primary themes, encompassing several stages along the funnel from K-12 recruitment to the ending stage of veterans experiencing lack of job opportunities and high amounts of debt. These three stages will be recruitment, enlistment, and assessment culminating in a discussion of the gaps in the literature which fail to address the overall damage military service can do to communities of color and how recruitment efforts to higher education access ultimately resemble a neocolonial project domestically and abroad.

Research Questions and Significance

To steer the direction of this inquiry into education militarization, there are three questions focusing on the themes being investigated. They are as follows:

- How does current literature discuss (or not) the intersections of race, sexuality, and ability within institutions of education for Black Veterans utilizing the GI Bill?
- What are the recruitment experiences of Black youth and adults who seek education as one of the many possible goals of their military service?
- What relationships exist between the GI Bill and the funding of public and private educational institutions in a post- 9/11 education landscape?

- How does the military utilize class, race, and space within schooling as a function of empire?

Each question speaks to the existing literature or lack thereof, and the discourse surrounding the militarization of education for Black youth and veterans. The broad review of this topic provides a better understanding of the many facets of urban schooling, veterans' education, and the for-profit education industry. By unpacking these various areas and themes, scholars and researchers can better understand concepts such as college access, recruitment practices, college choice, and other topics in education as they pertain to subjugated and underserved groups like Black and LGBTQIA+ people. Currently, the research focuses on two disparate narratives surrounding the militarization of education in urban communities. Studies published from the twentieth century to today on veteran's education generally follow a pattern of evaluating the outcomes of the GI Bill and other benefits focused legislation, but do not trace its origins from recruitment efforts and other strategies aimed at positing urban populations as the primary target for militarized education. The others are largely empirical and generalize the experience of veterans even when the data disaggregates for social identities such as race and class. By creating a gestalt of both and configuring an analytical perspective through various critical theories, a more holistic narrative will highlight the insidious role of the armed forces in education. Gaps in research will then be addressed as a means of unpacking both the limitations of the studies and introducing new scholarly prospects for future studies aimed at addressing some of these limitations. As I continue to explore the literature and relevant theories surrounding the armed forces, imperialism, racism, and education, I believe the aforementioned gaps in understanding demonstrate how historical and sociological forces contribute to the current state of educational opportunities for Black youth and veterans. The strengths of the theories used largely deal with

the diversity in the populations and the time periods they seek to encompass, namely Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics*. Like Foucault's contribution to *biopolitics*, literature on Necropolitics deals with both history and power, concepts that are applicable to all subjects across disciplines. The same is true for Critical Race Theory considering race and racism are an important nexus for understanding most dynamics and dialects (Delgado& Stefancic, 2017). The major deficits present in current theories fail to address the specific situations of Black individuals as they face opportunity and subjugation within the armed forces. The military purports to be one of the primary equal opportunity employers in the United States given the disproportionate amount of people of color and Black adults enlisted in the various branches. Most of the literature either addresses this phenomenon as the main reason to declare integration within the military a glowing success, or a condemnation that calls to question the methods that are used to achieve these numbers.

My position as a scholar seeks to address both the material realities of these individuals: urban youth that are not college tracked, Black veterans looking to utilize the GI Bill, etc., and the theoretical perspectives on their experiences as well. Theory for theory's sake is insufficient for the purposes of this study and the approach to the gaps in the literature seeks to address the lack of practical approaches. For example, if the disproportionate amount of Black youth in the military presents a theoretical problem in terms of a colonial and imperialist project, what are the practical implications for counselors in resource poor schools who recognize that many of these young Black students are not college bound? The continuation of this research seeks to address some of these questions.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Recruitment

The focus on recruitment historically begins as early as the passage of the National Defense Act of 1916 which provided government funding to provide resources and military trained instructors to lead programs (Pema & Mehay, 2009). However, for the purposes of this investigation, the seminal study is Lutz and Bartlett's (1995) study that evaluated the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) program in public schools for a few reasons. To begin, the study covers several areas pertinent to the scope of this literature overview: the history of JROTC, the demographics of its participants and the implications of its target populations, and finally an evaluation of the program's curriculum in comparison to a civilian public-school curriculum. The timing of this study also fits within the historical niche that this overview is attempting to focus on, mainly during the period before the proliferation of high school shootings (e.g., the Columbine High School shooting of 1999) that led to what other studies will argue was an increase in the militarization of education (Saltman, 2007; Kellner, 2015). Additionally, the Clinton administration implemented Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) in 1994 and had only been repealed as recently as 2011, essentially allowing LGBTQIA+ citizens to enlist and serve in the armed forces under the pretense that they not engage in what could be perceived as "homosexual activities" under threat of dishonorable discharge. Situating Lutz & Bartlett (1995), during this historical period creates a frame of reference for subsequent discussions of queerness as it operates in schools and within a militarized context and curriculum (Canady, 2003; Quinn & Meiners, 2009). Due to the limited scope of this study in terms of the overall recruitment

practices, other research will cover the context and details surrounding other strategies used within schools to encourage enlistment.

This 1995 study begins with a brief history of JROTC which then follows-up with an evaluation of the purported benefits of enrollment. The illustrated aid through scholarships does not cover the vast majority of JROTC graduates and further relates to the opportunities available to individuals that enlist afterwards and then attempt to take advantage of provisions like the GI Bill. Understanding a discrepancy between what students believe they can receive from enrolling in a JROTC program and then utilizing it through enlistment helps track the progression of what seems to be a failed project. In the militarization of education, the mission of these programs is to assist "at-risk students and provide both educational and occupational benefits for program graduates (Lutz & Bartlett, 1995). Following studies such as Tannock (2005) focus more specifically on legislation like the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) which allows the armed forces access to student information like name, age, addresses, and phone numbers for the purpose of recruitment. Since then, the Pentagon has created a database used to promote recruitment of youth aged seventeen to twenty-five (Nava, 2010). For parents, their only option to evade this policy remains via individually "opting out" of this information release. However, community members are routinely left out of the conversation regarding the dissemination of students' names, phone numbers, and addresses and therefore often miss the opportunity to waive inclusion into this database. Failure to comply with this subsection of the legislation was met with political and financial consequences for the schools, particularly those financed through Title I funds, more colloquially understood as resource-poor schools (Abajian, 2018; Tannock, 2005). What is also left out of the conversation regarding opting out of this information release, is that tied to the list of potential recruits is also the list of potential scholarships and financial aid

for college. Given the change in administrative control from Lutz and Bartlett's study published in the mid-90s, these studies provide further historical accounts and a specified focus on how external pressures like broad aimed education legislation can specifically target low-income communities of color for military service. Prior to the implementation of NCLBA, the Family Education and Privacy Act of 1975 protected students and their families from breaches of privacy and disclosure of information to military recruiters and other third parties interested in collecting high school students' information without parental consent (Nava, 2010). Furthermore, litigation has been inconsistently successful in both allowing students and their families the agency to protect their privacy as well as providing K-12 schools with guidance on counter-recruitment groups and strategies.

The rest of the studies falling under the purvey of this overview analyze the implementation and impact of military academies in public schools, sometimes as an extension of JROTC programs. One such example is Senn High School's transformation into Rickover Naval Academy in 2005, an effort acclaimed by many for its ability to shift the educational landscape of Chicago. Then Mayor Richard M. Daley wrote of these decisions:

> We started these academies because of the success of our Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (JROTC) program, the nation's largest. JROTC provides students with the order and discipline that is too often lacking at home. It teaches them time management, responsibility, goal setting, and teamwork, and it builds leadership and self-confidence (Galaviz, Palafox, Meiners, & Quinn, 2011).

Implicit within Mayor Daley's words are a deficit framing of the neighborhoods where military schools replace or co-opt public schools. These words challenge the strategy of recruitment mainly because recruitment is not necessary in spaces where militarization and dominant

nationalist ideology supplants the desire to solicit enlistment. This supplantation is possible through the dream of post-secondary education or culturally relevant tactics (Giroux, 2008; McDonough & Calderone, 2006). Senn High School, now Rickover Naval Academy (RNA) is mentioned in a prior study to discuss the dangers of creating public military academies during a time when DADT was the law of the armed forces (Quinn & Meiners, 2009). The effect is to emphasize not only the adamant refusal from parents, teachers, and community members, but also the larger social forces at play. Explicit in the Quinn and Meiners (2009) detail of community backlash to RNA's creation, was the concern that DADT would create a culture of anti-LGBT bullying and intolerance amongst students and staff. The creation and fulfillment of the academy and further academies are a signifier of Mayor Daley's words that students and, as an extension, their families need to be disciplined (Canady, 2003; Quinn & Meiners, 2009).

Enlistment

Once recruited, the educational experiences of Black veterans vary historically. Scholars John Bound and Sarah Turner (1999) and Suzanne Mettler's (2005) book broadly investigate whether the GI Bill had a significant increase in tertiary education attainment for veterans across race and class. Unlike the subsequent studies covered in this review, this study did not specify the experiences of veterans of color, particularly Black veterans although the effects of segregation and the limitations of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) on their ability to accept and enroll veterans ("How the GI Bill", 2003). As previously mentioned, a piece authored by Robert F. Jefferson describes the role of disability and its effects on Black Veterans post-WWII (Jefferson, 2003). What does this mean for Black students who deal with or "overcome" their disability and the larger discourse around the intersection of CRT and disability studies? Wendy Harbour, a disability studies scholar, argues that overcoming disability

might negatively affect Black students as they work to pass as non-disabled or “normal”. She writes, “...overcoming exacts a high price because the individual with a disability must constantly strive to be something that is impossible to achieve (i.e., nondisabled) and meet a socially constructed standard that does not exist (i.e., normal),” (Harbour, et.al, 2017). She further goes on to write that African Americans have historically used the idea of “overcoming” circumstances or obstacles such as racism as the basis for great personal triumph as opposed to critiquing why these obstacles exist in the first place. Disability studies as it coincides with veterans’ education is not prevalent throughout the literature and is something that requires further inquiry. Harbour’s study, although important in addressing the lack of literature speaking to the experiences of Black students dealing with differences of ability, does not speak to the specific experiences of veterans who often exhibit symptoms of PTSD and other combat-related mental health issues. However, when contextualizing the story of Charles Rabb’s experience as a veteran attempting to attain higher education, understanding the cultural positioning of Black veterans can better inform approaches to providing resources.

Over time, as changes were made to the GI Bill with each successive war, veterans became more and more disenchanted with the benefits provided because of the lack of funding set aside by the federal government. More specifically, the 1966 version of the GI Bill allotted only $100 per month to cover their tuition and living expenses in comparison to the $110 received by the Korean conflict veterans, and the full tuition and living expenses covered in the bill's original inception following World War II (Boulton, 2007). With the rise of inflation, lack of widespread support to challenge Congress for increased funding to returning Vietnam veterans, many struggled to utilize their benefits. In turn this affected their ability to achieve a college degree without assistance from other means. Furthermore, it is important to note that these men and

women were only eligible for benefits if they were able to receive an honorable discharge following their service. Racial tension was a looming factor during the Vietnam War, and as morale declined, Black servicemen and women found themselves at odds with commanders who were handing out dishonorable discharges at disproportionate rates. “In the Air Force, African Americans comprised 11.7 percent of personnel in 1970, but received 28.9 percent of "other-than honorable" discharges,” (Boulton, 2007). This problem altogether eliminates the possibility for these citizens to return and take advantage of the educational benefits following their time overseas. For some, the rising cost of college tuition presents a challenge, and makes military enlistment an enticing option for subsidizing the cost of attendance as well as potentially providing credit towards their degree. For example, training provided by the Air Force can sometimes be applied towards the technical training needed for an associate degree granted by the Air Force Community College; similar programs exist across the other military branches (Kleykamp, 2006). The Air Force Community College relates to the previous theme of recruitment only since community colleges provide an accessible form of education, like public schools for low-income communities of color given the demographics that typically enroll in community colleges. Therefore, this is also an area of study worth investigating when thinking about the proliferation of military presence in higher education. Finally, the demographics focused on within studies about enlistment and veteran education for people of color, briefly touches on demographics but does little to discuss patterns or implications. According to 2006 Census data,

> As of September 2006, African Americans were 31.3% of enlisted women, compared to 17.2% of enlisted men. Moreover, African American women constituted 16.0% of female

officers and 42.9% of female warrant officers, compared to only 7.2% and 15.1%, respectively, for African American men (Segal et. al, 2005).

When thinking about enlistment, and the high proportion of Black women it is important to keep in mind that these women are enrolling in the armed forces with the intent of utilizing their benefits. The harassment and sexual violence experienced by women and specifically Black women is a compounded trauma outside of the combat and other violence soldiers experience during their service. Many of the studies that focus on race do little to mention the experiences of Black women despite their large numbers of enlistment and subsequent presence within the pool of potential GI Bill candidates. When faced with the reality of hand-to-hand or deadly long-range combat, people of color are more likely to see action given their higher proportion as enlistees whereas white GIs are more likely to be officers, lowering their chances of combat. Additionally, low-income enlistees accounted for almost seventy percent of casualties during the Iraq War regardless of racial identity (Nava, 2010).

Assessment

To understanding how Black veterans are tracked or encouraged into joining particular colleges and universities, the third and final theme of this review is assessment. Understanding the opportunities presented to soldiers during and following their service can help unpack the motives of institutions, as well as the outcomes of these students given the resources and prestige of these higher education institutions. Although none of the studies included have investigated the expansion of for-profit institutions and its direct relation to the enrollment of veterans, specifically Black veterans, several studies exploring the role of for-profit institutions implicitly highlight how the GI Bill is a major source of funding for these organizations. President Obama cautioned about the issues associated with attending institutions such as University of Phoenix,

which awarded the largest number of bachelor's degrees for Black students yet often targeted veterans and other populations with strategic marketing (Iloh & Toldson, 2013). The marketing towards veterans is strategic. Federal funding and aid under Title IV accounts for over 70% of the financing for schools like University of Phoenix, with the remaining 36.5% coming from the Post 9/11 GI Bill (Deming et. al, 2012). Moreover, the overrepresentation of Black women in the military and for-profit institutions makes this population particularly vulnerable when it comes to the pitfalls associated with for-profit schools like loan defaults, and lack of employment opportunities following degree conferment. These pitfalls have the potential to further widen the wealth gap between Black women and their counterparts within the military who choose to take advantage of their GI Bill benefits, particularly if these women choose the armed services and for-profit schools as an alternative to a discriminatory civilian workforce with no post-secondary education. Further studies are needed to explore the role of for-profit institutions in both assessing the educational goals of veterans' vis a vis what type of degree they are seeking, how many educational expenses the GI Bill will cover, and if colleges and universities cater to these populations in any particular way if at all via recruitment and retention practices.

Looking forward, I am interested in bridging the work that is done between historical accounts of veteran education like (Mettler, 2005; Humes, 2006) with contemporary issues of higher education like the rise of predatory for-profit institutions (Iloh & Toldson, 2013). Furthermore, there are mentions of social identities like race and gender within the current literature, but most of the work lacks a critical perspective on systems of oppression. In fact, the landscape of work on militarized education in Black neighborhoods and schools looks like two streams of information. One, focuses on the empirical work that details the experience of Black veterans (Bound & Turner, 1999). The other, offers theoretical contributions on how the armed forces

influence everything from recruitment in public schools to career day fairs (Giroux, 2008; Abajian, 2018). I attempt to merge the two with this work, beginning with a theoretical framework through which I define and connect the phenomena I will observe.

Theoretical Framework

Necropolitics, a theory conceptualized by Achille Mbembe, positions itself in conversation with scholars such as Arjun Appadurai and Michel Foucault. Necropolitics seeks to explore the foundations of sovereignty and within that understanding, who holds the power to prescribe both life and death. Unlike essays focused on the conquest of foreign lands through the process of colonization, Mbembe's work looks at sovereignty within the construction and executive function of a nation-state. A response to Michel Foucault's conceptualization of *biopolitics*, which concerns itself with the confluence of power through life, necropolitics focuses instead on the creation, transference, and usurping of power through organizing and enacting death. This follows a historical tradition of colonialism, imperialism, and genocide which Mbembe invokes in his examples of the Holocaust of the 1940's as well as slavery. More specifically, he describes the power relationship and the creation of object and subject,

> "As an instrument of labor, the slave has a price. As a property, he or she has a value. His or her labor is needed and used. The slave is therefore kept alive but in a state of injury, in a phantomlike world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity. The violent tenor of the slave's life is manifested through the overseer's disposition to behave in a cruel and intemperate manner and in the spectacle of pain inflicted on the slave's body. Violence, here, becomes an element in manners, like whipping or taking of the slave's life itself: an act of caprice and pure destruction aimed at instilling terror. Slave life, in many ways, is a form of death-in-life, (Mbembe, 2008, p. 21)."

For the purposes of my research, there are two portions of Mbembe's work that are central to my understanding of the experiences of Black youth who are recruited for military service, and Black veterans who seek post-secondary education through the GI Bill. First, as an arm of the United States government, the military acts as an enactor of force which dictates the status of life and death. By doing so, the nation-state, in this case, the United States of America dictates dialectal statuses of subject and object to citizens through its recruitment of soldiers, beginning as early as elementary school (Abajian, 2018). The bodies and persons categorized as objects have a price calculated by the relative value they can provide the armed forces through their service, in exchange for relative economic benefit. Access to funding for post-secondary education, various other purported incentives like discipline, sense of belonging, and value driven enticements, help motivate members of communities that are viewed as culturally deficient. Next, the concept of power of sovereignty coming from within the construction and executive functions of the nation-state leads my research to an understanding that implementing educational programs replicates and expands this sovereignty and helps to create subjects, the creation of the subject is limited to the boundaries demarcated by the sovereign's social imagination.

As the armed forces send these troops out of the country, I would supplement this theory with Jasbir Puar's *Right to Maim* which intersects Foucault's *biopolitics* with imperialism, debility, disability, and sovereignty. Contextualized within the history of Israel's relationship with Palestine and United States global military interference, Puar's text situates itself in a contemporary globalized context:

> As various overlapping yet progressive stages of market capitalism and governmentality, the telos of discipline to control might function as a recasting of neoliberal modernity.

> Certain bodies are more subject to persisting disciplinary institutions (prisons, mental hospitals, military service, torture, factory work), relegating disciplinary sites as part of the primitive in a modernist telos (Puar, 2017, pg. 24).

Puar's theory offers a look into how Black youth entangled in militarized education and exposure to the armed forces creates a limited social imagination both domestically and abroad— namely one aimed at discipline and punishment. This social imagination thereby determines the kind of educational experience, and as a result the identity the object can construct. Missing from much of the existing literature on youth of color and their military participation, are the lasting effects of engaging in violent behavior both domestically and abroad. Puar asks questions regarding the creation of disposable populations and the multitude of ways liberalism contributes to debility and disability. Further, the categorization and use of race as a way to explain or justify the process of debilitating populations:

> Public health practitioners, for example, understand racism as a risk factor. Race is "a marker of risk for racism-related exposures. Race is useful in that it enables the identification of persons at risk for exposures that vary by racial category (e.g., discrimination)." Thus the biopolitics of debilitation informs the biopolitics of disability with the understanding that the frame of inclusion and exclusion is already infused with economies of risk. Such frames are therefore foundational to the regulation of the categories of disability and ability that delimit an acknowledgment of debilitation as a distribution of risk. Debility is thus understood as a process rather than an identity or attribute, a verb and a doing rather than a happening or happening to or done to. It complicates the notion of a workplace injury or accident by understanding the statistical

likelihood by which certain populations are expected to yield themselves to bodily debilitation, deterioration, and outright harm (Puar, 2017, p. 73).

The profane nature of recruiting Black youth with a history of subjugation, and prescribed death to undergo training to enact violence on other people of color in other nations is a form of this debilitation. Calls for inclusion and adaptive modern economies create opportunities to further control over populations rendered as objects. With the implementation of legislation and rising opportunities like the GI Bill, Black Americans have the chance to then participate in a necropolitical project themselves. An important thing to note is that although these soldiers are violent domestic and abroad following the orders of the armed forces, and assuredly as a result of trauma they face during their time served, they do not hold the same amount of necropolitical power as they still live in the phantomlike world of horrors and are living as objects of the state. Their options to participate in society are limited based on the nation-state's limited social imagination. As Black GIs hold the potential to enact debilitation as members of the US military, they are also part of a project of which the telos calls for their own debility and disability.

Discussed in Mbembe's piece, these dynamics are deeply rooted in a racialized history of power dynamics which relates to Derrick Bell's concept of interest convergence. Derrick Bell, a legal scholar and one of the founding contributors of Critical Race Theory (CRT), viewed the surge in civil rights legislation like the integration of schools as a means to prevent mass domestic unrest given the foreign conflicts brewing such as the Cold War, Korean War, etc., (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). If Americans were to maintain our exceptionalism to the larger world, we could not send our citizens abroad to fight our wars, then return to segregated schools, subpar wages, and the Jim Crow policies that no longer fit with the "American Dream" all citizens were promised. Despite major pushback from other scholars, eventually many came to

see Bell's claim as valid and conceded that foreign and domestic conflicts merging with civil rights legislation were our government's interests converging. Certainly, as the US continued in its struggle to be a world superpower, it simultaneously worked to control the means of death both domestically and abroad; Mbembe's slave/master metaphor expands just as globalism does. The administrators, school district board members, and other stakeholders who then participate in the project to militarize public schools subsequently subject students, in this case, students of color and low-income students to this psychic and often physical violence should they choose to enlist. Looking at the numbers of homeless veterans following service, or the number of Black men who are incarcerated instead of serving in the military, demonstrate the disparity and dire dialectic these citizens operate under. In fact, veterans represent almost 11% of the houseless population in the US, and almost half of those veterans are either Black or Latinx (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2019).

Returning to the focus on neoliberal interventions in education, *Schooling In Capitalist America: Educational Reform And The Contradictions Of Economic Life* reintroduces the argument that schooling in the US has largely not benefited Black people economically (Bowles & Gintis, 2011). Following a large increase in the numbers of higher education attendance post-World War II, the education gap between nonwhites and whites was 3.3 years or 38 percent of median white education. Roughly three decades later, the gap had closed significantly but the income gap remained:

> The income gap for young men is 30 percent, despite an education gap of only 4 percent. Clearly as blacks have moved toward educational (and regional) parity with whites, other mechanisms—such as entrapment in center-city ghettos, the suburbanization of jobs, and perhaps increasing segmentation of labor markets— have intensified to maintain a more-

> or-less constant degree of racial income inequality. Blacks certainly suffer from educational inequality, but the root of their exploitation lies outside of education, in a system of economic power and privilege in which racial distinctions play an important role (Bowles & Gintis, 2011, p.35)

Moreover, the role of the American school doubly serves as a function to continue the deficit framework of poor and underserved families. Failure to succeed in a capitalist economy no longer becomes the problem of failing economic structure or a labor force that works beyond its capacity to produce surplus-value. Instead, lack of capital accumulation and therefore immorality or savageness comes as the result of familial, hereditary issues that technology cannot supplant:

> The social roots of this transformed concept of the family-school relationship have little to do with any alteration in family structure, and less to do with any heightening of the public morality. The impetus stems rather from the professional educator's profound mistrust of, and even fear of, the families of black and poor children, and in an earlier period, of Irish and other immigrant families. Nor is this mistrust alien to the logic of social control. For all its nobility, the noble savage remains savage, and integration into the world of adults requires regimentation (Bowles & McGintis, 2011, p. 38).

With higher education as one of the possible byproducts of their service, understanding how Black veterans navigate class and the capitalist structure of US schooling can help educators better understand the role between schooling and economy. More specifically, the role of family and their ability to afford college largely determines access to higher education and economic opportunities. As such, analyzing Black veterans' pathways to the armed services and subsequent higher education enrollment can unpack the effectiveness or lack thereof of policies like the GI Bill.

Given the aggregate and disaggregate data on Black women's representation within the military, Black feminist epistemology provides a unique opportunity to alter the dominant state-sanctioned narratives of "equal opportunity". Patricia Hill Collins and other thinkers conceptualized Black feminist epistemology with the intent that it could upend traditional notions of white-centered and male-centered discourse (Collins, 2003). As a Black woman who, at one point desired my own career in the armed forces, want to discuss and engage with other Black women to learn more about the context and results of our participation in the Military Industrial Complex (MIC). This desire is not separate from my experiences and lends itself to the subjugated position that dominant white scholarship places Black women's knowledge and experience. These notions are especially true for organizations and systems that are rife with a history of violence and racialized terror as has been the case for the US military and all militarized nation states. Black feminist epistemology harkens not only to my positionality as a researcher, but also the real material effects of which knowledge claims we view as justified, and which ones are discarded, or worse weaponized. The exclusion of Black women from narratives of military service motivates my use of oral histories to continue the storytelling tradition used by Wallace Terry during the Vietnam War (Terry, 1985).

CHAPTER 3

Methods

The research questions will be addressed through three different methods. Fig.1 below depicts the organization of those methods. The first question will be answered through a literature review on the militarization of education, focusing in particular on legislation and policies beginning with the implementation of the GI Bill and its effects for post-9/11 veterans and

students. I employed oral histories and GIS mapping to answer the final three questions. Throughout the studies featured in this review, both quantitative and qualitative research contribute to the body of literature covering military interventions in education starting from recruiting and ending at the numbers of veterans enrolled in various post-secondary institutions. As such, it is hard to determine whether or not one is more appropriate for the purposes of this topic. To explain further, there is value in conducting interviews as done in studies like Dill and Ozer's (2016) study that utilizes both participant observations and individual interviews with the Brown and Black youth that were the focus of the study. Their approach was similar to that of Abajian's (2018) who relied heavily on previous connections to the community in order to facilitate entry, as well as a deeper understanding of the context underlying observations. The main focus of this paper is the study of Black veterans and the historical success or failures of the GI Bill at bridging the gap in educational opportunities between Blacks and whites. That said, I am also largely interested in the factors influencing the armed forces and education or vice versa. Within my research, there will be discussion of disability studies, military recruitment techniques, for-profit higher education institutions, and public policy, all of which play a role in a veteran's ability to fully utilize their benefits or not. Moreover, these factors can push Black adolescents into enlisting with the promise of the GI Bill and associated economic uplift when compared to the uncertainty of the private job market. In order to study the history of these experiences, I applied a multi-method approach, each aimed at illustrating a different aspect of the deep gap between educational and economic opportunities between Black and white veterans (Bound & Turner, 1999; Herbold, 1994). I began by conducting ten oral history interviews with Black Veterans who have served between the time of the Iraq War until now, with the original goal of equal numbers represented amongst self-identified men, women, and non-binary

individuals. Although there are gendered presumptions about military service, the high numbers of Black women and femmes in the military make it imperative that they are represented in this study. Moreover, I am aware that this study comes almost a decade after the end of DADT and am still aware of the stigma and rampant abuse that can occur when enlisted members and officers disclose their sexuality to their fellow soldiers or commanding officers. The research questions are again as follows in Fig. 1 and below:

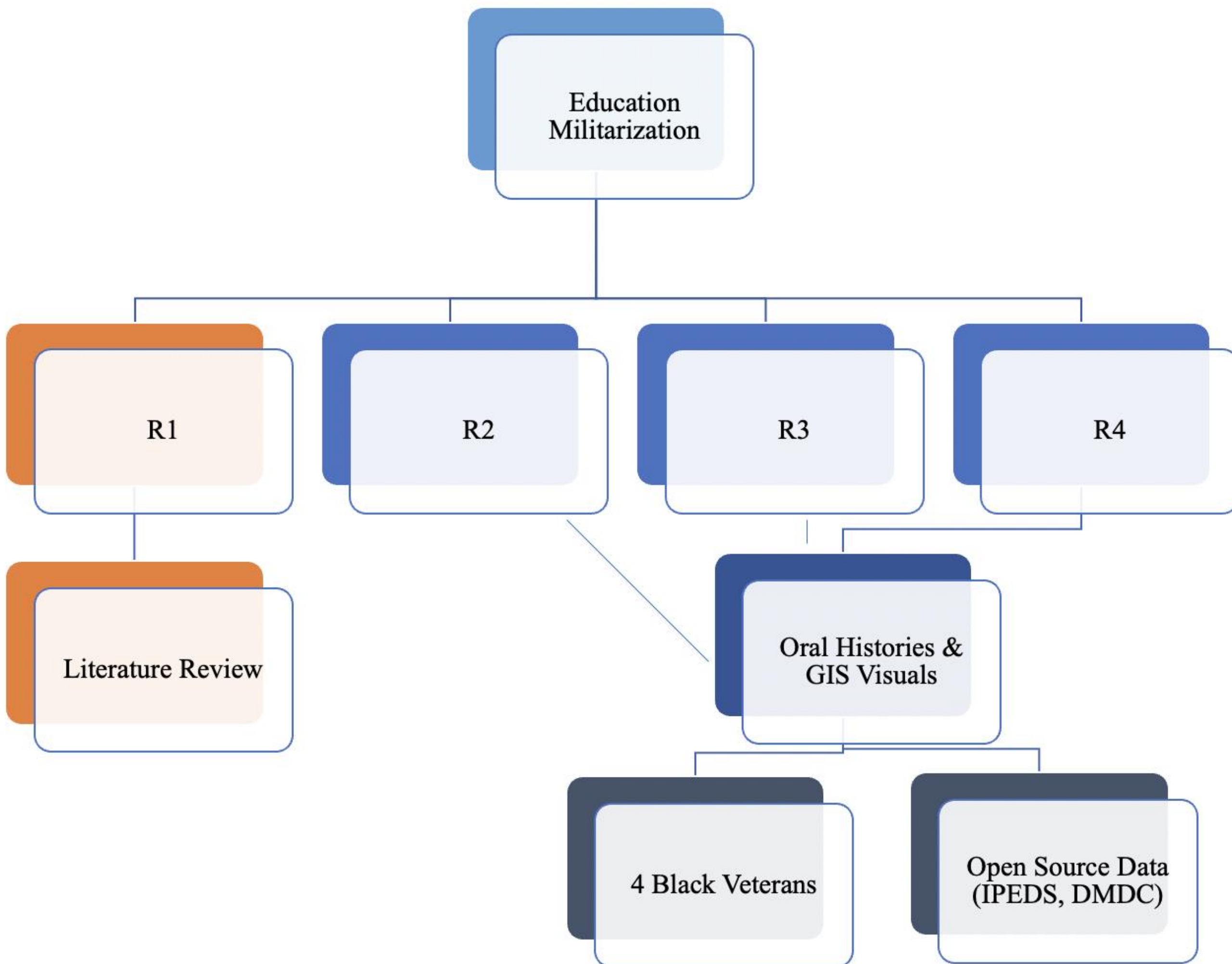


Fig. 1

How does current literature discuss (or not) the intersections of race, sexuality, and ability within institutions of education for Black Veterans utilizing the GI Bill?

- What are the recruitment experiences of Black youth and adults who seek education as one of the many possible goals of their military service?
- What relationships exist between the GI Bill and the funding of public and private educational institutions in a post- 9/11 education landscape?
- How does the military utilize class, race, and space within schools as a function of empire?

The purpose of the project is to provide greater insight into the modern landscape of educational pathways provided in urban schools, considering McDonough and Calderone's (2006) study highlighted some of the armed forces tactics and the circumstances leading to Black and Brown students electing for military service. However, no present studies illuminate the perspectives of students who navigate the prospective funding challenges with tuition prices and student debt soaring nationally (Ettachfini, 2019). Moreover, GIs who take advantage of their benefits to enter tertiary education often take on more student debt than their non-veteran counterparts; average student loans for veterans in 2012 were almost $25,000 over the course of a four-year degree. This is in comparison to the national student debt average of $31,000 for students who do not enlist in the armed services (Zarembo, 2015). These discrepancies lead me to my research questions about the mechanisms that entice these students and subsequently leave them financially destitute after years of service — enlistment that is often rife with sexual abuse and resulting Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Buchanan, Settles & Woods, 2008). The oral histories of post-9/11 Black veterans will address some of these questions as both veterans and Black students are particularly likely to attend for-profit institutions (Ettachfini, 2019; Iloh & Toldson,

2013). Researching the intersection of those identities and investigating gender within these nuanced experiences of tertiary education and military service addresses some of the gaps in the cannon narratives about diversity in higher education and the armed forces, both spaces that increasingly purport statistics of inclusivity and opportunity (Fullerton, 2016; Mettler, 2005). Additionally, I intend on utilizing GIS to track shifts in educational, economic, and sociopolitical ways. To explain further, given the use of military funding as an impetus to alter public schools into military academies, GIS provides the tools necessary to make sense of the demographic shifts. For example, when white flight occurs post-military takeover as well as subsequent defunding or changes to educational opportunity for students of color and Black students in particular (Abajian, 2018; Tannock, 2005). Moreover, historically the US government has used the promise of opportunity in the armed forces as a replacement for adequate funding in the nation's leading Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Today, some of the most prestigious institutions of higher education with the largest amount of state and federal funding began as land-grant institutions (Thelin, 2004). Comparatively, HBCUs with similar beginnings as government allotted institutions now possess dramatically smaller endowments. Shortly after the implementation of the GI Bill, the chronic lack of funding and support provided to HBCUs often meant that prospective Black veterans were unable to use their benefits at some of the few US institutions of higher education that would admit them as students. To put it plainly, the increased demand for higher education overwhelmed already encumbered institutions and wait lists for admission eventually turned away prospective students. The use of maps will also help answer questions regarding the availability for Black veterans to venture into educational spaces outside or farther than the for-profit institutions and community colleges they have been historically and contemporarily tracked to (Iloh & Toldson, 2003). Finally, the name and location

of many military bases has a profound impact on those that serve. Initially meant to appease Confederate sympathizers, the renaming and dedication of several military bases in honor of Confederate soldiers and Ku Klux Klan leaders has continued to draw ire and revive questions around the meaning making of naming and its effects today (Thompson, 2015).

Participants

The veterans recruited for this study were from various regions across the US and all had differing geographical journeys when it came to pursuing higher education (e.g. coastal hometown to southern HBCU institution vs remaining in-state). Given the status of the pandemic, recruitment took place through social media sites like Twitter and Instagram as well as email. There is a large community of veteran's online support groups, podcasts, and more, that are directly aligned with helping support Black veterans. More specifically, organizations like the Black Veterans Project are aimed at correcting the historical mistakes of the past through advocacy, education, and policy. Connecting with their founders proved to be an incredibly insightful grounding for the work, reminding me of my positionality as a non-veteran and the possibility of the work moving beyond the academy. Local organizations like UCLA's Veterans Center were invaluable in directing me towards potential leads or other institutions of higher education that had veterans' centers or similar resources. The participants were all Black veterans, from any branch of the military, who utilized the post-9/11 GI Bill to achieve post-secondary education or training. For the purposes of this study, there is no necessary minimum level of tertiary education achieved; it is only required that the post-9/11 GI Bill was used to fund educational or vocational pursuits. Considering that 66% of the Department of Defense personnel hold a high school diploma or equivalent, the baseline for post-secondary education is anything above a GED level certification (Department of Defense, 2018). The type of

educational pursuit, whether it be community college, for-profit college, or trade school is part of the data analysis completed given the historical sillowing of Black veterans into trade schools or educational pursuits outside of their own educational dreams. Additionally, because I am interested in studying the effects of gender, sexism, and heterosexism, most of the participants are women placing focus and emphasis on the experiences of Black women and femmes in the armed forces. When contacting participants, it is vital they understand that this process is bound in the co-creation of knowledge central to Collins (2003) work on Black feminist epistemology. As such, recruitment flyers and correspondence informed participants that following their interviews, transcripts would be sent to ensure that participants did not feel misrepresented and could correct or clarify their initial statements. The same will be true for excerpts taken from the transcripts and the method utilized to eventually write the final dissertation. The intent behind these steps is to not only build trust with the participants, but to empower them in the knowledge creation process that they are directly involved in.

Data Analysis

Although not exhaustive in its overview of current research on militarized education, a literature review will be used to answer the first research question. As mentioned before, the empirical and theoretical streams of literature at times mention social and political ideologies and identities but not as a function of larger systemic forces. Rather, the use of data disaggregation for empirical studies is seen as an ability to track the progress made in the military post-integration (Mettler, 2005). Therefore, it is imperative that both me and the readership have a clear understanding of how the field of education currently conceptualizes the role of the military in K-12 and higher education. Having finished data collection, I will use narrative analysis on the oral history interviews to gather the stories of the veterans, analyze each one for insights, compare them, and

create a central narrative that connects them. As such, that requires reading and looking for similarities between participants' experiences, as well as framing those experiences within the previously discussed theoretical framework.

GIS Analysis

The mapping of public schools requires that I utilize open-source data and access tools like Google Earth and QGIS. From there, spatial analysis will overlap and merge layers of data to answer research questions two, three, and four. For example, data from census or American Community Survey demographics can be layered on top of the endowment of the nation's most elite schools over time to show demographic changes in schooling across zip codes and neighborhoods. Moreover, hearing from the participants further informed potential spaces of interest including the Confederate military bases located in the Southern part of the US. Organizations like the Southern Poverty Law Center have conducted their own studies and created maps demonstrating the remaining Confederate iconography, monuments, and symbols according to their location (schools, state buildings, etc.) as well as who they are named after, and other important historical information. Utilizing this information during the creation of GIS and other visuals helped bolster the narratives of participants who shared experiences of racialized harassment or violence like that of the Black veterans featured in Wallace Terry's *Bloods* (1984). Certain technology allows the addition of added file types, which creates the potential to attach oral histories to maps if the experiences of veterans correspond to maps of higher education experience, namely how much funding or lack thereof was attributed to their college/university. Doing so would demonstrate to viewers a story of how militarized education cycles from higher education issues of policy, rising college tuition, can lead to debt from loans and trauma from military service. To maintain a narrower focus, I selected the top ten

universities and the top ten HBCUs with the highest national endowments to demonstrate the historical tie between imperial educational policy like the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1890 and the current status of those institutions. The mapping component of the dissertation will be a secondary component to add a visual and portion to the data, and the participants' stories with the purpose of adding explanatory power.

CHAPTER 4

D.J.
Lieutenant Colonel, Marine Corps
Served 1996-2017

> But the thing that really hurt me more than anything in the world was when I came back to the States and black people considered me as a part of the establishment. Because I am an officer. Here I was, a veteran that just came back from a big conflict. And most of the blacks wouldn't associate with me. You see, blacks are not supposed to be officers. Blacks are supposed to be those guys that take orders, and not necessarily those that give them. If you give orders, it means you had to kiss somebody's rear end to get into that position. *First Lieutenant Archie "Joe" Biggers* (Terry, 1984, p.117)

Wallace Terry's focus on Black male veterans introduced a rare perspective on how Vietnam veterans saw the GI Bill as a potential pathway to higher education in the midst of a controversial war (Terry, 1984). Decades later, without the pressure of the draft, the promise of a funded path to college still entices many youths of color to enlist. D.J., a former Lieutenant Colonel in the Marine Corps, experienced an educational journey that began at a liberal arts college in Washington state and is heading toward a doctorate in education. For D.J., a high school counselor guided him and ensured that he took the necessary courses, even convincing

him to attend a summer program at a nearby liberal arts college aimed at recruiting more students of color. By his senior year, he was living on his own and was coping with a parent who struggled with substance use, making it difficult at times for D.J. to focus on the next step towards higher education:

> I guess there was this, this expectation from my parents that we were going to go to college, but there wasn't any real talk about it. My dad was a cop. And then my parents got divorced when I was really young. And so my mom hadn't gone to college, but she had addiction issues. But she kind of straightened herself out by the time I was in ninth grade. And she went to college. So she got her undergrad done. And so that kind of became for me, it was like, yeah, I mean, I just assumed I was gonna go to college. The real influence, though, was from my counselor, my guidance counselor at my high school, she, and ironically, so, you know, I'm half Black, half white, and she was married to a Black man, and her kids were mixed. And so I think she took real, you know, she looked out for me, way more than I realized at the time, because I was such a, you know, minority already in this school. But I was ready to join the Army right out of high school, that was my plan to join with a bunch of my friends, but she helped me, you know, apply for scholarships. She helped me kind of navigate and I had teachers that helped me too, like, put together my application. So I went through some summer camps at the college where I went to undergrad, and that kind of got me motivated to go to college, too.

Although D.J. was not a first-generation student, the extra help from the summer program ensured that he would not only be able to apply for college but would have a way to pay for it as well (Ackerman, 1990; Slade, Eatmon, Staley, & Dixon, 2015). For some students, simply having a support system through their academic journey can be a strong indication that they will

persist to degree completion. Much of the current literature on Black male academic success postulates a deficit model or approach, harkening to low recruitment and retention rates for the aforementioned demographic. Tinto's (1984) social integration theory argued that in order for youth of color to thrive in higher education, they needed to leave the nuclear family behind. Since then, there are echoes of a need for support from the nuclear family during adolescence to help determine Black male youth academic success (Maton, Hrabowski, & Greif, 1998). To be more explicit, many of the attempts to examine models of parenting style with student achievement levels for white families have not had the same success when studying Black families and students. The theory of Community Cultural Wealth aims to challenge dominant narratives around how youth prepare for higher education, as well as destigmatizing the type of community that youth have around them, nuclear family or otherwise (Yosso, 2016). Yosso's piece on Critical Race Theory outlines six forms of cultural capital that ultimately represent a subversive idea of wealth, or as Yosso defines, "... community cultural wealth is an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression (Yosso, 2016, p. 77). The six forms of cultural capital are as follows: aspirational capital, familial capital, social capital, linguistic capital, resistant capital, and navigational capital. In this instance, D.J. benefited from aspirational, familial, navigational, and social capital. Aspirational capital came both from his own desires to succeed as well as the drive in his mother to work through her struggles with substance use to complete her bachelor's degree. Their relationship proved to be a continued source of inspiration, important memory, and history for D.J. even as he lived by himself and leaned heavily on school administration for support during his senior year of high school. When

asked about the inspiration to pursue higher education and study civil rights and law, he named his mother's conversations and lessons around her own experiences as inspiration:

> I will say part of it was my mom. She did civil rights stuff in Chicago back in the day when she was young. And so when I was in fifth grade, I was chosen to play Martin Luther King, Jr. for elementary school. Now, granted, I was the only Black kid in the school. So I thought it was because of my awesome ability to speak in front of crowds. But it may have been because I was the only Black male in the school. And I remember when I was working on that whole experience with her, I was doing the Montgomery Bus Boycott speech. And she would, you know, work with me and help me out to practice. And then she would start talking about some of the things that she did in Chicago. And so I think I just started thinking about this stuff young.

D.J. 's memory of his mother's civil rights work in Chicago became an early influence that was further nurtured by open and engaging educators later in his adolescence. In the broader literature, among other differences, non-nuclear familial structures and other factors make comparisons difficult and do not fully encapsulate the types of support or lack thereof Black males may receive on their post-graduate path. The success of the summer bridge program and added support from high school counselors bolstered his confidence that he could and would complete his dreams of attending a higher education institution:

> I drove by that college, probably hundreds of times, and I didn't even realize it was a college there. I mean, growing up, and so she told me about this camp for kids of color, who were maybe struggling in school, but could show we're showing potential. And she's like, you need to go to this. And then I went there, and I was around all these other kids of color. So it was kind of the first time I had been around a bunch of kids of color so I

> was like, whoa, this is cool. And counselors are people of color. I mean, they talk to us, like it was you're going to college, it was no longer you should it's like, you all do your part, and you take care of your academics we'll make sure the funding is taken care of. And so I believed that I remember when I came back, and I was telling my dad and he kind of laughed, he's like, yeah, you're not going to a liberal arts college, he didn't think I'd get in.

More determined than ever, D.J. applied to the college he had grown up driving past and was accepted with a full ride scholarship. The navigational capital provided by his school counselor and larger school community grew larger following his participation in the summer bridge program. Through the individualized attention she and others gave to D.J., he had a better understanding of the college application process, providing an alternative to the Army enlistment plan he previously held onto. In particular, the summer program at his future undergraduate institution included potential mentors of color, playing a pivotal role for many youth of color in their ability to succeed in predominantly white institutions of higher education (Reynoso, Foxx, Tadesse, & Mack, 2022). Unfortunately, complications with paperwork ensured that D.J.'s counselor would have to go above and beyond the call of a typical school administrator:

> There was just so much that she had done, but kind of the peak of it was when I applied and I got into the liberal arts college, they ended up losing my financial aid work because this was before everything was online. They told me, hey, you know, we're sorry, we got your application, you're gonna have to wait. Then they ended up finding it, it slid behind the desk, but they had already given away their funding. They said, I was gonna have to wait a year before I could get funded, they would hold my admissions.

> Well, I told my counselor, and I'm like, you know, and I'm not going to wait a year, I'm gonna join the army. I went to an army recruiter and got everything lined up. Crazy enough the Army recruiter actually talked me out of joining. He's like, 'Look, you got college man, you don't need to worry about this stuff. Try and figure this out with the college you can always join the Army'. Which is mind-blowing to me, especially in eastern Washington so she knew the president of another four year school in the area. She just took me to that college and introduced me to the President and they got me in with full funding to start. Then she contacted the original school I applied to, and she's like, you need to fix this, or he's just going to start here. And, they fixed it. So I don't even know what she did. But, they got my funding back. And I was ready to start that same year. That's the type of person she was.

Like many other incoming recruits, D.J intended on moving forward with his post-K-12 plans whether they included higher education or not. From 2010 to 2018, the highest degree level attained for active duty enlisted members has been a high school diploma with the percentage decreasing from 4.3% to 7.2% of enlisted members holding undergraduate degrees respectively over the survey years (Department of Defense, 2018). However, the option of a fully-funded undergraduate education positioned D.J. to move forward with his plan and if desired, later enlist

with a greater chance at becoming an officer, an underrepresented position for people of color in the armed forces.

Fig. 2 originates from the Department of Defense (DoD) partner site, Military One Source, a resource for active and veteran DoD personnel as well as their family members. From the Defense Manpower Data Center Active Duty Military Family File (2020), the site offers the option to peruse the most recently published demographic and survey data from active duty and reserve forces across all branches. From the infographic, the data indicates that in the last two years, Black officers account for roughly 5.2 percent of Marine Corps Officers and 86.2 percent

Marine Corps Officer Demographics

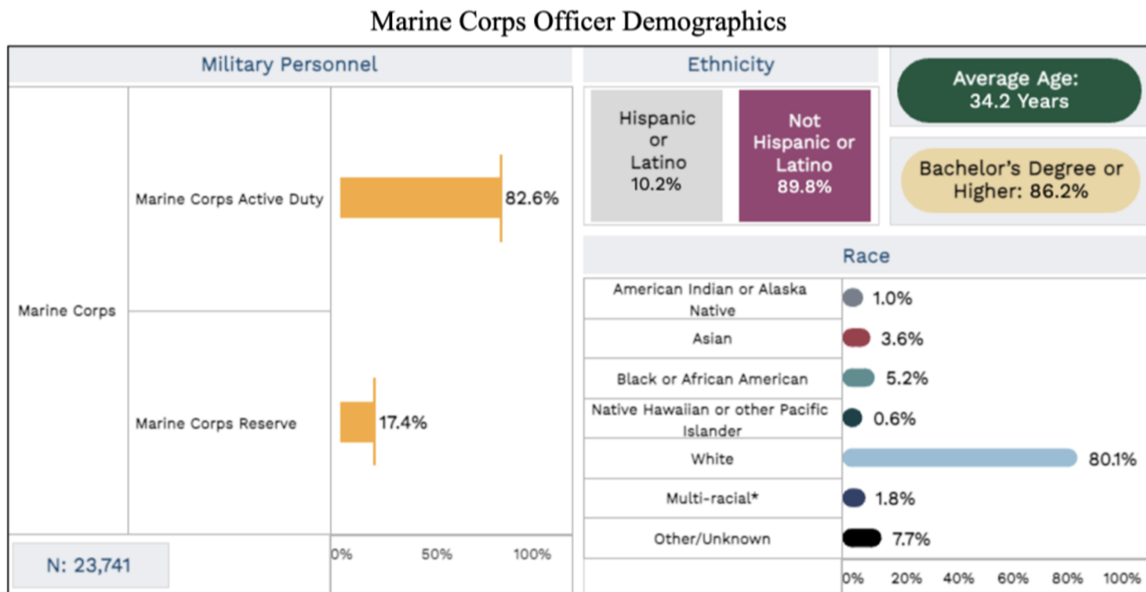


Fig. 2

hold a bachelor's degree. For an institution that is largely diverse due to its recruitment tactics and robust benefits packages, the Marine Corps remains one of the most predominantly white branches in the armed forces. The opportunity for enlistment as an officer

came soon after while D.J. was searching for a summer job to help pay for expenses between his third and fourth year of undergraduate study. D.J. recalls:

Yeah, so it actually started between my junior and senior year of undergrad, there was a Marine officer recruiter in our Student Union building, and that summer, I needed a job. I just needed to make like $3,000, so I could pay my bills for the fall. And so I had no, I wasn't planning on joining the Marine Corps. I just see this guy there. And I'm like, what is this about? They're like, yeah, you could go to OCS, Officer Candidate School for 10 weeks. If you make it, you have no obligation to join the Marine Corps, which is true, and, and you make this much money. And I'm like, well, is it hard? They're like, yeah, it's hard. I'm like, you know, what do I learn, they're like, you learn all these leadership things. And I'm like, sounds cool. So I signed up for it. It's a process, you have to go through this application and screening for officer selection.

I made the cut, went to OCS for 10 weeks. Probably by week three, I thought I made the biggest mistake of my life, because I went from being that kind of hippie, liberal kid, you know, because I had a lot more hair. And I wasn't, this isn't like the 70s. But I had more hair though. And I had earrings, I had like six earrings. You know, my goatee and all this stuff. And I'm, you know, coming from the liberal arts school. So I questioned a lot of things. I got there. It's rough for about a week. And then I just learned to keep my mouth shut and go with the flow. Physically, there wasn't an issue. I was strong, and I could run, then I did my 10 weeks and I got out. And I'm like, yeah, you know, this isn't for me. I declined my commission and I decide I'm going to graduate school. I got a scholarship to go to the UW School of Public Policy. And so I started my master's in public administration, and about two quarters in, there was a guy who is in my class, and he's a retired Army guy. And so I talked to him a lot about stuff. And I don't know, like after two quarters into this program, I'm like, yeah, I need to do something

else. I'm burnt on school. And so I saw I was going to go back to the Army. So this is my second attempt to enlist in the Army. And I go to the Army, and I'm like, hey, I want to enlist as quickly as possible, because the Marine Corps said, when I declined my commission, I would never get it back.

So I'm like, whatever, go to the army recruiter, get everything lined up, I'm ready to go to boot camp. And they have to contact the Marine Corps to get some of my records from when I went to Officer Candidate School. Well, there was a new person who was recruiting for the Marine Corps, and he called me up the day before he's like, do you still want to be a Marine officer? I'm like, yeah, I just thought I didn't have that chance. He's like, don't sign your Army paperwork. We can make you a Marine officer. Then the other thing that's to my advantage is eastern Washington has a mission of like one Black officer a year so if they can get that one, they're like superstars. That's the reality. I mean, they were nice people, but I understand reality too. That's what happened. I dropped out of grad school a month after the second quarter in good standing and then went through that process to get reinstated and accepted my commission. Then I dropped out during winter quarter, and then by May, I was commissioned as a second lieutenant, and then I would go to the basic school for basic Marine infantry officer course. It was in November that fall or that year, so November of ‘98.

Although now enlisted as a Marine infantry officer, D.J. still had every intention of completing school and pursuing a future in academia. Earlier in his life, influences from his mother’s work with the NAACP and his own experience with speech and debate in high school guided him towards an interest in law, history, and civil rights. Having now completed a bachelor’s degree in

history, D.J. 's time in the Marines alters his timeline and his pathway to continue past an undergraduate education:

> When I actually was leaving grad school, and my advisor there was like, don't leave, you know, and don't do this, you're gonna ruin your career, like, I just want to leave for I just need like, the four years, and then I'm going to come back and finish my program, because I had like, the six year window. And so as you know, I joined in '98. So by the time I got through all my schools and got to my first unit, it was '99. And then I, we just started working up, and then eventually, September 11 happened. And then I would deploy with that unit in 2001. And so, so then, when I got back, I was like, I'm not ready to leave the Marine Corps yet. So then I upped for another two more years. But I stayed in contact with that grad school the whole time, like with my advisor, and with some of the faculty, I would check in with them almost once a year. And if I came home, I would stop by the school and see them. So the plan was still to get me to go into the plan was still to get me to go into graduate school when I got out. I think when I first got out, I definitely was thinking more in terms of maybe going into some sort of political city type job, I think I was thinking more about government at that point, just because of my time in the military. And plus having a family.
>
> Some of the shift was, you know, I had gotten married, we had kids, and I wasn't used to the idea of like, going on and getting a doctorate seems so unrealistic in terms of timeframe. Yeah, it's kind of a long haul when I got off active duty in 2004 and I joined the Reserves. When I was on active duty I actually finished my master's program down in California. I ended up working at the graduate school that I had dropped out of… Once I started working at the University of Washington, their idea of like, I could go back and

still get a doctorate, like, it's not so crazy, because I could, you know, I'm working at the university, I could start taking classes. So I started taking classes as a nonmetric graduate. Because you could transfer the programs, you can transfer up to 12 credits into it. I've taken two classes. I'm like, alright, I'm getting excited about this again. But then I got mobilized to go to Iraq. Then I went to Iraq, and I was gone for about a year. I came back, took another class, and then I got mobilized to go to Liberia.

At this point, the Marine Corps demands a greater share of D.J. 's time and energy now, having deployed overseas for combat missions several times. Despite having a consistent academic home in Washington, the unsettling juxtaposition between combat zones and home does not allow him or his fellow Marines much reprieve. From the initial enlistment in ‘98, he left approximately every two years for another deployment until his final deployment in 2011, in between this time working at the administrative level in higher education. Juggling family, work, and recovering from the trauma experienced overseas made it difficult for D.J. to fully commit to his graduate studies and the idea of completing a doctorate or law degree as he originally imagined:

It's within our group, you know, we're tight like the guys I deploy with. I still talk to them all the time. In fact, we just had a, you know, Veterans Day Zoom just to get together. And, and so there's groups of us that we connect with. A lot of people don't necessarily want to initially, at least during that time frame, we weren't so much talking about what was going on, except for a few, there are a few people that you would talk to, but from the institutional point of view? Definitely not. There's a lot of misinformation. I think in the early years, there was a lot of fear that if you had anything in terms of post traumatic stress, which is the reality of anybody who goes to war is going to deal with levels of post

traumatic stress, it doesn't matter who you are. But there was always this fear that we would be non-deployable, or we would lose our security clearance. And so people would avoid doing anything like that, seeking help out of fear of eroding their career. And so for me, and I fell in that category. I mean, I definitely was. That's why, like, you see a lot of times guys that are hit the hardest, and I use guys in the generic sense, but Marines who are hit the hardest, it's easier to deploy again, because then you stay in that environment. When I'm in Iraq, I'm perfect. I, you know, I have no emotion, I handle stress very well, in terms of chaotic situations. But when you're back in the US, I'm like, having no emotions is not a great thing.

When I think about the decisions I made, I made decisions based on not letting down friends, and you know, not losing face in this idea of what it means to be a Marine’s Marine. And that's why, you know, I have arthritis in my back and my knees and my elbows, and the body of an 80 year old and I, you know, I look good, but hey, you know, cool story. The Marine Corps convinces you that, you know, it's like an abusive relationship, essentially, they, they beat the hell out of you. And then just when you're ready to quit, they offer you something or they tell you how great you are, you get an award. You start questioning, well, you know, I don't want to let the Marines down. And so then you get caught back up into it. And then the same cycle happens over and over again. So being able to really stand away and be like this institution, whether I made it or not, is going to continue to function. Why am I stressing myself out? Like, I am the one person who's going to ruin the Marine Corps if I don't take this deployment?

The struggle between commitment to an institution and what is best for oneself proves to be all the more difficult when benefits, income, and other incentives D.J. mentioned come into play.

From a disability studies and Critical Race Theory lens, D.J. 's concerns around the ability to redeploy center around ideas of "overcoming" which are pertinent both for race and disability . To be more explicit, while some members of the Black community have a long standing tradition of thinking of race as something to be transcended of "overcome" like the song, *We Shall Overcome* which has often thought to be an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement.The same being said about disability can often leave disability advocates and organizers with a sour taste in their mouth, overcoming disability inherently determines that it is a pathology, a hindrance (Harbour et. al, 2017). Moreover, the experiences of prior Black veterans is sufficient to uncover why Black people, more specifically Black veterans would avoid conversations and experiences that would associate them with disability or being labeled with one. Jefferson (2003) writes:

> Under the GI Bill of Rights, World War II veterans could purchase a home, go to college, learn a trade, finish high school, and obtain civil service work, and were eligible for government subsidized loans and life insurance pensions. Yet VA physicians and administrators implemented a means tests that combined racial perceptions of African Americans with cultural views associated with people with disabilities. The socially constructed definition of disability was not new. As scholars such as Deborah Stone, Richard Scotch, and K. Walter Hickel have convincingly demonstrated, the history of the development of service-related disability policies in the twentieth century often reflected nonclinical evaluative practices couched in cultural and racial values…
>
> In a similar vein, the popular media and veterans' organizations viewed Williams and other disabled black ex-GIs in a derogatory light and felt that they should be grateful for any assistance that they received. In examining World War II veterans for service-related disability, the findings of physicians regarding certain injuries and disease were often

filtered through a socially constructed lens enveloped in gender-specific cultural and racial notions of moral depravity, physical and mental weakness, and stereotypical behavior (Jefferson, 2003, p.1104).

Whether intentional or otherwise, D.J. 's eventual decision to seek treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder interrupts the cycle of overcoming and provides new opportunities for D.J., his family, and D.J. 's students to make meaning of his service in the Marine Corps.

Now having time to focus on his doctoral studies, D.J. 's job as an educational administrator provides a unique perspective on the role of being a Black man in leadership. As a civilian in the workplace, he no longer has the explicit title and rank afforded by the armed forces which can often mitigate issues around decision-making and roles. Like the earliest tensions created due to Black veterans' inability to fully utilize their GI Bill, the institutional guarantees given by the armed forces, namely the Marines, do not always guarantee a smooth transition into civilian life. In a study examining the earliest cohort of GI Bill recipients, graduate student Adrian L. Oliver interviewed twenty-five Black veterans who enrolled in training programs from 1946-1947. In an overview of Black veterans' experiences using the GI Bill in the South, Onkst (1998) writes,

> Interestingly, Oliver observed that even though the veterans felt abused, they were still hesitant to leave their programs because they "believed that the compensation received from 'on-the-job' training far exceeds any salary that they could receive from jobs that were open to them." Oliver learned that government subsidies "enabled them to draw more money per month than they had ever received on any type of job previously." Some men even doubled their pre-war salaries. Still, given most black veterans' prewar jobs, such increases were probably minimal, at best (Onkst, 1998, pg. 526)

When D.J. finally decided he was ready to take advantage of his GI Bill benefits, his experience with paperwork and bureaucracy both from his time in the Marine Corps and as a higher education administrator prepared him for any hurdles he had to jump through. Outside of the hurdles associated with paperwork and ensuring that his tuition payments went through, returning to civilian employment and school reminded D.J. of some of the social and organizational differences between being a Lieutenant Colonel in the Marine Corps and a Dean at a community college. Namely, he recognizes the privilege of holding gainful employment at an institution of higher education makes it easier to navigate missed payments:

> Now, I guess the difference though, for me, is that I already have a job and income. So if something's delayed for me, it doesn't really throw me off that much. And, because I worked in the college system, it's also easy for me to just reach out and ask people, like, I'll be very proactive if I'm not sure about something. I'll just contact somebody at financial aid or all contact somebody in the vet's office, but I'll go above so I can get a quick answer.

Given the relative ease of navigating benefit use post-enlistment, the question of organizational environment also comes into play. Bureaucracy notwithstanding, there is still little understanding if Black veterans are able to confidently navigate a post-9/11 higher educational landscape amongst their non-Black and non-veteran peers. As students, Black males already feel significant social pressure to perform and combat stereotypes on their college campuses (Harper, 2009; Harbour et.al, 2017). Having returned to Washington for graduate studies, D.J. has the dual perspective of both working as a higher educational professional and being a student. When asked about how he is perceived as a student and staff member on campus, he responded:

> I mean, people all the time would be in conversations, and they'd like, say, like, well, we don't want to, you know, you know, we don't want you to, you know, go and get PTSD on us, or we don't want you to, you know, shoot us I mean, they would, they would say things like that on a regular basis about, you know, worried about me going postal, because of my time in Iraq or they would assume I'm some ultra conservative, because I served in the military.
>
> I would say it actually has felt more challenging. In particular, my biggest challenge was when I was a dean, and faculty would undercut a lot of things and questioned a lot of things that my white colleagues were not getting. And it became this, I saw so much more things happening to me. It was just a totally different experience, like just the level of what I would have to justify to prove why I deserve to be here, or why I have to deserve why I'm making this decision. I think that was what was so different in the military. I was never questioned and not that questioning itself is bad. But I'm saying once we've had our discussion, and everybody's alright, this is the decision, we're going. Okay, we'll go forward with it. But what I was running into on the civilian side is we would have those discussions and we'd move forward and everybody would say, okay, we're good. And then they would try and undercut you or they would try and or they would always talk about, well, the 'Dean before was so great', and the guy was horrible. That's why I have this job.

As an institution based on structure and tradition, the US military has the option of relying on its own manufactured hierarchy of offices, titles, and positions. For Black enlisted members, the armed forces in some ways promise some temporary relief from the questioning and uncertainty of status and place in what is often a world of hard-and-fast sociopolitical race rules. Despite any

objections or nuances of political thought and ideation, participation in the military renders D.J. to an archetype of a combatant in the eyes of his peers. Ironically, the fear of many American leaders regarding the integration of armed forces rests heavily on the idea that once trained, subjugated peoples would use their skills to revolt against the US government.

On a federal level, provisions like the GI Bill absolutely guarantee that all veterans regardless of identity can take advantage of their benefits. However, the state tracked dissemination of those benefits leaves the state government and its entities responsible for any discrimination and issues that occur. Shortly following the implementation of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, the NAACP was forced to create its own 'Veteran Affairs Department' by December 1944 to address the overwhelming number of complaints and testimonies from Black veterans alleging mistreatment (Woods, 2013). In its own way, the same structure that affords Black veterans the ability to take advantage of programs and capital for educational and occupational gains also resists social changes. As a Marine, D.J offers the unique perspective that his branch lends to systemic change or lack thereof:

> Marine stuff is usually if it's something crappy, if it's something dangerous, sending the Marines we consider ourselves bullet sponges, because we soak up that's a term we use. But that's the reality of it. So we knock down doors, and then the Army is the occupation force. So the Army is really meant to be, you know, to hold positions, the Marine Corps is meant to breach and take positions, the Army's meant to hold and maintain position, because they're so much larger than us. And they have a much larger logistical footprint and all those things. The Air Force is really the you know, they're high in the sky, they're meant to provide air support. They're not supposed to get too dirty. I mean, they'll have some units that will be attached. But most of the time, you know, Iraq and Afghanistan

have changed a little bit about that. But it's not that much. The Navy lives the good life out at sea.

Part of it too, is every Marine is trained as a rifleman. We all go through it, whether officer, enlisted, we all go through the same basic training and then we go to our specialty school. When I went through, I went through six months of a basic infantry school with all Marine officers, whether you're a pilot, whether you're artillery, whether you're in logistics, and then we go to our specialty schools. So a lot of the other services let you know, you can go to your training specific for your service. So you'll have your specialty. So that's more appealing to a lot of people from the beginning. It's also just history. It's also just history. So like, the Marine Corps was last to integrate. The Marine Corps fought hard to try and keep Blacks out. The Marine Corps is fighting hard to keep women out of combat arms. The things that you love about the Marine Corps and one aspect is also the worst part about the Marine Corps. But, and that's the history that I say there's still institutional racism and sexism that exists. The Army though, has been the other way where they have fought hard to, you know, to bring in and integrate and the Navy, but the difference is that when the Marine Corps recruits you, they don't recruit you, they don't sell you the like, you're gonna do cool, you know, get college and do all this other stuff. They say, if you want to fight, you join the Marines. That's it. Like, they want people who want to be tough, they want people who want to be savages. So it creates a different mindset from that from the beginning. But other services target people of color and sell them with, you know, education benefits. And you know, you learn these skills outside of the you know, become a logistics person, you'll be able to do all this other stuff. They're successful in doing that. But at the same time, there's still, it's still the same issue of like,

you're preying upon people who are in these tough situations, and selling them a way out. The Marine Corps just says, we're not even trying to sugarcoat it, it's gonna suck, but you're gonna be a Marine. And that's cool.

As previously mentioned, the Marine Corps has historically been a majority white branch of the armed forces and continues to be one. Knowing the history of his branch, the Marine Corps began the integration of Black troops in 1942 and did not fully incorporate Black GIs into previously all-white boot camps and facilities for over a decade later (Browning, 2013). Similarly to the efforts made to integrate schools, the process through which institutions decided to integrate largely came at the behest of government officials. The argument to integrate convinced many that this was ultimately good for developing educated and morally sound adults, building a strong military, and conclusively growing the economy. At one point in his life, D.J. recognized himself as the recruit being singled out for opportunity when offered a second chance to enlist as a Marine officer. The revolving door of inclusion insists that the fair chance for capital and abundance is the same chance to be relegated to the most difficult forms of obtaining it. Given his experience as a Marine Corps officer and his time at a private liberal arts college, D.J. had plenty of time around the administrative and bureaucratic processes that made it possible for him to fully utilize his GI Bill and other benefits. For others, seeking help and even advocating for oneself came at a much higher cost. During the summer of 2017, Brian Easley, a former lance corporal and Marine, created a bank robbery hostage situation as a means to call attention to the delay on his veteran benefits after having tried to navigate the VA (Gell, 2018). Like D.J, Easley was deployed to Iraq in the early 2000s until eventually earning an honorable discharge in 2005. In the years following his discharge, Easley struggled with the physical and mental strain that his time with the Marines left him little coping skills to deal with. After

moving home with his mother, beginning his own family, and being formally diagnosed with PTSD Brian Easley at times checked himself into the VA seeking treatment. When his mother died in 2011, many of his family members and his partner lost contact with him until he resurfaced in 2014 moving in with one of his brothers. It was at this point that Easley began to create a consistent relationship with his daughter, Jayla, and sent whatever money he could from his VA benefits to her. On the day of the bank robbery, he had called the VA's Veterans Crisis Line several times, claiming that a few times he had been "hung up on" regarding the status of his check. The amount in question was for $892.

Brian Easley was also a beneficiary of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and had used a portion of his benefits to attend computer classes at a nearby for-profit college. Unfortunately, a stipulation in the legislation led Easley's account to go into overpayment which happens when a veteran's enrollment status drops below the required amount thereby triggering a notification to directly contact the student for repayment of the "lost tuition". Although most institutions typically inform veteran students of the impending notice, students like Easley would have only needed to miss six days of school in order to qualify for repayment of their GI Bill. Given his inconsistent housing situation and PTSD diagnosis, it would be more than reasonable for Easley to miss up to six days of classes as well as any notices provided by the school and VA. In fact, the occurrence of overpayment is so common, it is estimated to happen to a quarter of veterans who utilize their GI Bill benefits for education (Gell, 2018). Although the problem compounds when individuals like Brian Easley are unable to fully navigate the bureaucracy of a large institution like Veterans Affairs, for-profit institutions have no financial incentive to intervene on students' behalf. 36.5% of funding utilized by for-profit institutions like the Lincoln College of Technology comes from

the Post 9/11 GI Bill (Deming et. al, 2012). According to a 2019 study by Bond Hill, Kurzweil, Davidson Pisacreta, & Schwartz,

> Only one in ten veterans using GI Bill benefits enrolls in institutions with graduation rates above 70 percent, while approximately one in three veterans using GI Bill benefits attends a for-profit institution. According to another recent analysis, of the nearly 900,000 veterans enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs using post 9/11 GI Bill and Yellow Ribbon funds, only 722 undergraduate veterans are enrolled at 36 of the most selective private, non-profit colleges in the United States (Bond Hill et. al, 2019, p. 2).

By the time Brian Easley was able to contact both Lincoln and the VA regarding his benefits, he owed a little over $200. On the day of the hostage situation, Easley remained friendly and made it clear he did not intend to harm anyone, only drawing attention to his issue with the VA. The hostage negotiator, another former Black Marine, was intent on bringing Easley and everyone in the bank home safely. However, when Easley presented himself in plain view away from the bank hostages, officer Dennis Ponte, took a single sniper shot, killing Brian Easley following three hours of negotiations with the local police (Gell, 2018).

Although D.J. and Brian come from different parts of the country and ultimately took divergent paths in the Marine Corps, D.J. 's testimony regarding the aftereffects of service ring true across their lived experiences. Moreover, D.J. recognizes that his time as an officer provided needed navigational capital to understand and ultimately utilize his GI Bill and other benefits to their full potential. Puar (2017) and Mbembe (2018) call attention to the profane nature of utilizing those on the margins for capital accumulation and then pathologizing the symptoms of subjugation. Once returning to higher education full-time, D.J. discussed feeling apprehensive

around his peers because of the perceptions that he would go “postal”, or perhaps just display any dissatisfaction he may have as a result of his physical ailments and changed perspective being a Black combat veteran on a predominantly white campus.

From a liberal socio-political perspective, policy and educational reforms can eradicate social ills like racism, sexism, and homophobia when accounting for limitations in technology and human nature. However, the inherent capitalist nature of schooling dictates that the overarching needs for capital accumulation override any and all interventions to subvert the hierarchical structure; efforts to recruit young Black men like D.J. serve the function of diversifying institutions like the US and ‘challenging’ aforementioned social ills whilst still producing wanted labor. Ultimately, it is the ephemeral promise of benefits that leads D.J. to offer this advice:

> I would recommend it with the understanding that they need to be willing to serve and be willing to, you know, potentially go to war I, what I don't what I tell students or young folks all the time is don't join the military just for opportunities in terms of you just want college benefits or things like that. If you join, you have to understand that you could go to war. If you're not willing to go to war, don't join, and it's, I don't dictate whether war is right or wrong or anything. It's just that is the reality of what we're there for. I've met too many people who joined the service, and then were shocked when they actually got deployed and thought that it was wrong and unfair. And like, why did you join? That's why when I tell my sons don't join the Marine Corps, unless you really want to do Marine stuff, like, you know, if you want something that's going to be potentially less dangerous, and less whatever, join the AirForce.

Outside of the focus on branch enlistment, D.J. ultimately warns interested youth that the purpose and reality of the armed forces is for war. For his own children, the concept of joining means doing so with the hopes of potentially taking a different and less dangerous path than their father did. His influence from his grandfathers who were World War II vets and his father who worked as a cop served as an impetus to a life in some sort of police or military labor. The emphasis on being more explicit and informative in the conversations with the new generation offers promise that the decisions of Black youth does not rely on economic precarity and the forceful will of neoliberal education and workforce policies.

CHAPTER 5

Lupita
GIS Specialist/Analyst, Army
Served 1996-2020

> He was from Arkansas. Ark-in-saw in the mountains. And never seen a black man before in his entire life. He never knew why he hated black people. I was the first black man he had really ever sat down and had a decent conversation with. Since I grew up in a mixed race neighborhood, I was able to deal with him on his terms, and I guess he learned to deal with me on mine. And once you started to go in the field with an individual, no matter what his ethnic background is or his ideals you start to depend on that person to cover your ass. Arkansas and me wind up being best friends. *Specialist 4 Arthur E. "Gene" Woodley Jr.* (Terry, 1984, p. 239).

Although scholars often name education as a driving force for enlistment amongst Black and brown youth, there are numerous other factors that drive the desire to enlist and pursue a career in the military. Arthur E. Woodley Jr.'s oral history within *Bloods* captures one of the many

perspectives of Black Vietnam War GIs who both enlisted and were drafted into the war. Among them, the idea that an emphasis on shared goals and troop cohesion can sometimes outweigh intergroup differences. For Lupita in particular, her transition from United Kingdom born misfit to US immigrant army careerist follows a journey to find and eventually secure a sense of belonging. Growing up in a middle class family, education and higher education was already woven in the fabric of her upbringing and considered a natural progression towards adulthood. Her mother worked in publishing and her father was a college professor, his job then provided visa sponsorship for the family's eventual immigration to the US when Lupita was fifteen.

Lupita's K-12 experience included the liberal ideologies of educational theorist and scholar John Dewey, who her high school modeled their curriculum and many of their educational policies after. As such, the lack of a robust athletic program and acceptance of anti-nuclear demonstrations amongst 80s high school students left military recruitment on her campus out of the picture. Despite the tolerant attitudes around grades and college preparation at school, Lupita understood the need for higher education until an incident her senior year eventually caused her to drop out:

> In 12th grade, I dropped out halfway through my 12th grade. I was coming home one day and three boys from my high school jumped me on the subway. Mild beating, it wasn't physically bad. I mean, I didn't have you know, no bruises or anything, but they were verbally abusive, and harassed me on the subway and just, you know, just tapping me. They weren't punching me with a closed fist. It was just kind of hitting me with an open hand. And no one on the subway did anything. Everyone kind of looked away and pretended they couldn't see classic New York and I was like, I'm never going back to that school. So halfway through my senior year, I never went back. They were Black and

> Hispanic. And I think, you know, I had a shaved head. I was a punk rocker. I wore funny clothes. And I didn't fit into what was the acceptable box for a Black girl in 1982. The world has a bigger box for us today. But in 1982, it was like yay, big. Yeah. And I didn't fit into it. I mean, I had a funny accent. My English accent was very strong as I was fresh off the boat. You know, I shaved my head completely bald, you know, wore crazy makeup and combat boots and fishnet stockings. I mean, like, totally. Yeah, the whole punk rock thing. 1980s smoke cigarettes and the whole nine yards. And they were like, no, no, you need to be taught a lesson about conformity.

Following this incident, she worked briefly as a secretary until earning her GED and earned her associates by her early 20s. At this point in her life and academic career, Lupita has accepted entrance into an oceanography program at an institution of higher education in Washington state. Four years later, she works in a lab utilizing the science learned from her studies and begins to pay off some of her student debt. It is not until her early 30s that she joins the reserves, at this point with a bachelor's degree and no family history of service in the US. When asked about her motivations to enlist, Lupita offered this:

> I joined the Reserves when I was 31. Let me say that that's a very unusual age to join the military pre 9/11. And being over 30, we're talking so we're talking about '96, I joined the Reserves. And so I had never, I didn't have anybody in my family who was military. But I've grown up watching all of those old World War II movies as a kid. I mean, I lived and breathed BBC, two old Black and white movies and World War Two, I watched all of them Bridge Over River Kwai, all of those old movies and, and MASH too. So I, you know, I had this view of the military. Not about not as an educational path, but certainly as kind of like a heroic and sense of community. The military gave a sense, it was a sense

of community and sense of family, and I think maybe at 30 I was looking for that. So I joined the Reserves. And I did it for about two years and realized how much I love how much I loved that sense of belonging. And for me, it was about belonging, about finding a group that I finally fit into. Yeah, you know, I was all in.

But I felt as if I, you know, the, whether you fit or not everybody, the army makes you all fit together. So even if you don't fit, even if you come from different backgrounds, they push you all together. And then they make a dress and do the same things at the same time. So you start feeling like you do fit together. And all of a sudden, I finally found a group that I fit into. Course, I didn't really fit but it worked out. So I left the Reserves and actually went active duty in ‘99, and then did a full 20 years, 21 years. And obviously, that and I felt like I had a family the whole time. Like they were, the military was like a surrogate family, wherever I was, I could walk into any base in uniform. And people would know who I was, I would know who they were just because we wear our names, you know, your history is on your uniform. So without having to introduce myself. We could very quickly size each other up or know where we fit in within the hierarchy. And I think that was the first time I'd ever had that where I… Yeah, finally fit in and after, but I think high school was the ultimate not fitting in. And then getting to the military. It was the ultimate fitting in and I just yeah, just stuck it out.

Within the last five years, 79% of army recruits stated that they had a family member who served with almost a third of those family members being parents (Phillips & Arango, 2020). Although her background bucks traditional portrayals of army recruits with her level of education, age of entry, and reasons for enlistment, Lupita still embodies a legacy of Black veterans who remain overrepresented compared to the US Black civilian population see Fig. 2. To illustrate, training

and methods for social cohesion used in the military can only do so much work to smooth over

Army Personnel Demographics (Women)

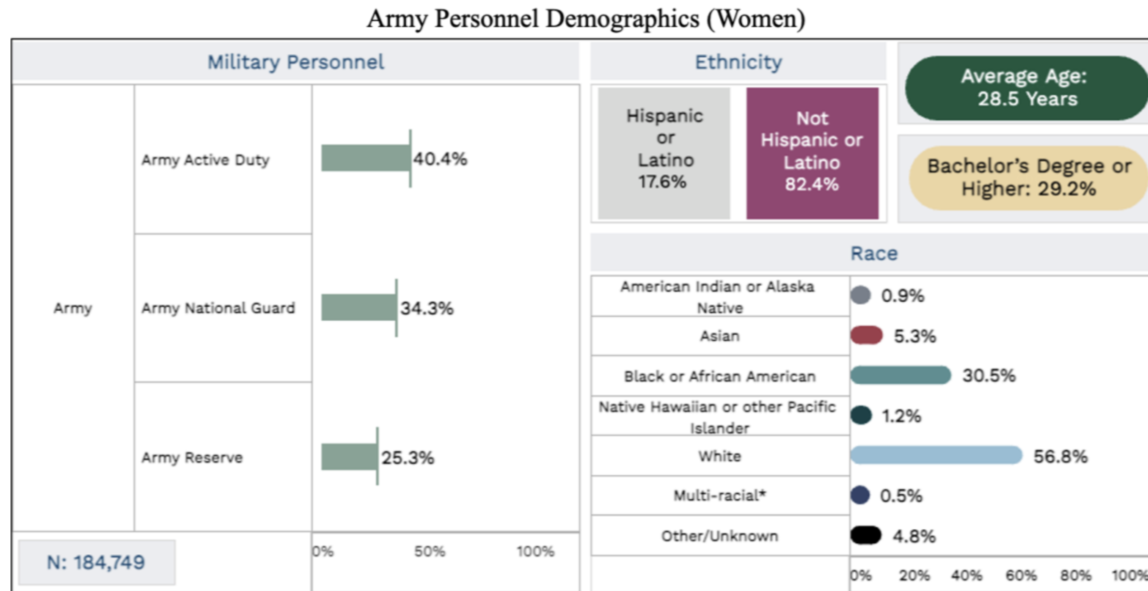


Fig. 3

sometimes large differences amongst troops and the military's history. The geographical legacy in particular looms in the names of many bases named after Generals with sordid pasts including but not limited to Fort Gordon in Georgia named after Lt. Gen. John Brown Gordon, often believed to be a strong supporter of the confederacy and head of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in Georgia. Gordon was elected to the US Senate in 1872 (Ward, 2020). Consequently, Lupita strategically spent most of her career choosing contracts that allowed her to serve on bases overseas:

> I certainly think I experienced less racism in the military than I would have outside of the military. Especially living in some of the locations, there were times when I didn't want to leave base. I remember one time, I spent a month in Alabama like no. I just didn't want to drive around Alabama. This was not my environment. Through the 80s, there was a lot of criticism of institutional racism and how that impacted senior Black officers and senior Black NCOs. Through the 80s and 90s there was certainly a lot of work done by the

> military to sort of equal opportunity to level the playing field. So you can have someone like Colin Powell, one of the first Black combat arms, four star general…
>
> One of the things that I spent, I spent a good half of my career overseas. And I loved being overseas. I didn't want to be at those bases named after Confederate Generals in the South. Fort Bragg. Fort Hood. Probably because of racism. But when we are stationed overseas, maybe because we are the only Americans we are closer to each other. We are much closer and tighter overseas, than those in the South. So I made a point to stay overseas as much as possible.

Lupita's strategic avoidance of historically racialized bases may have contributed to the fact that she was able to stay in the military for such a long time and feel a strong sense of cohesion with her colleagues. Nonetheless, lack of geographical proximity to the racist history of the US Army did little to tamper with the present day microaggressions that she would face as a Black woman officer (Solorzano & Velez, 2015; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). If the bases in the domestic US represent a legacy of fought and won color lines for a growing empire, casual instances of racism were clear reminders of that legacy in spite of the equal opportunity efforts of the 80s and 90s. The history of confederate military bases comes several decades following the Civil War, in 1918 and then around the 1940s. Many in fact were named as bases were constructed during both world wars, which also saw the beginning of the Jim Crow Era and later the new Civil Rights Movement (Thompson, 2015). Nationally, the Southern Poverty Law Center reports over seventeen hundred Confederate monuments, symbols, and other place names across the US (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). Figures 3,4, and 5 demonstrate the relative lack of change that has taken place over the last 150 years with regards to racist, Confederate iconography in the same state that Lupita stated she avoided when choosing her bases for new contracts.

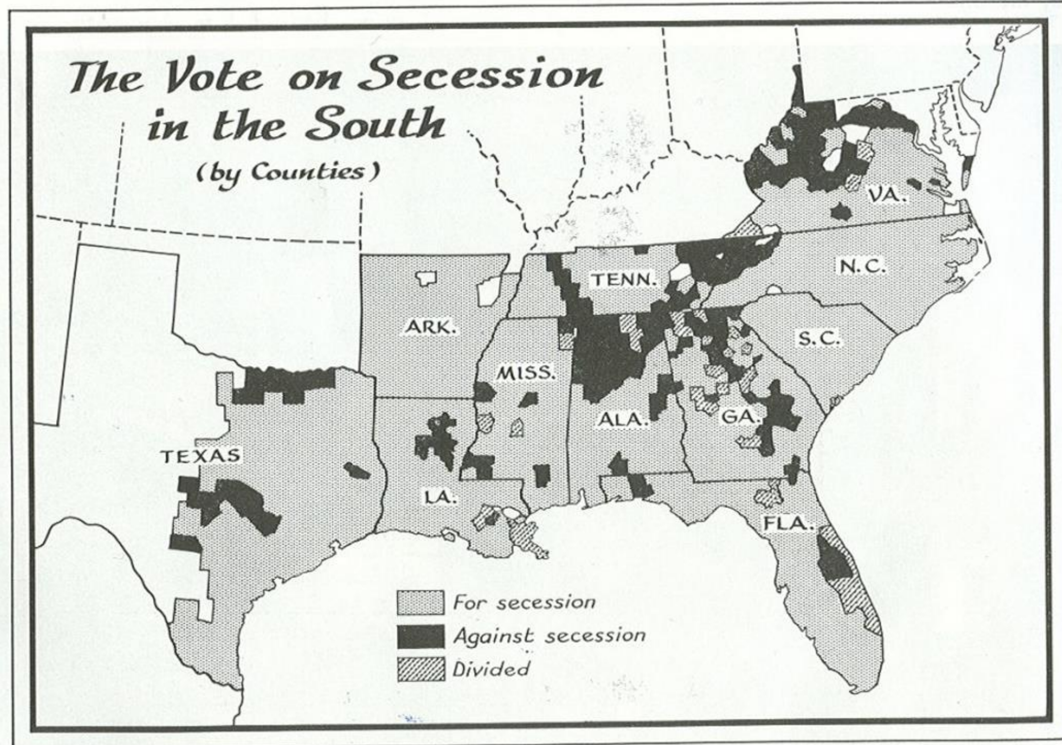
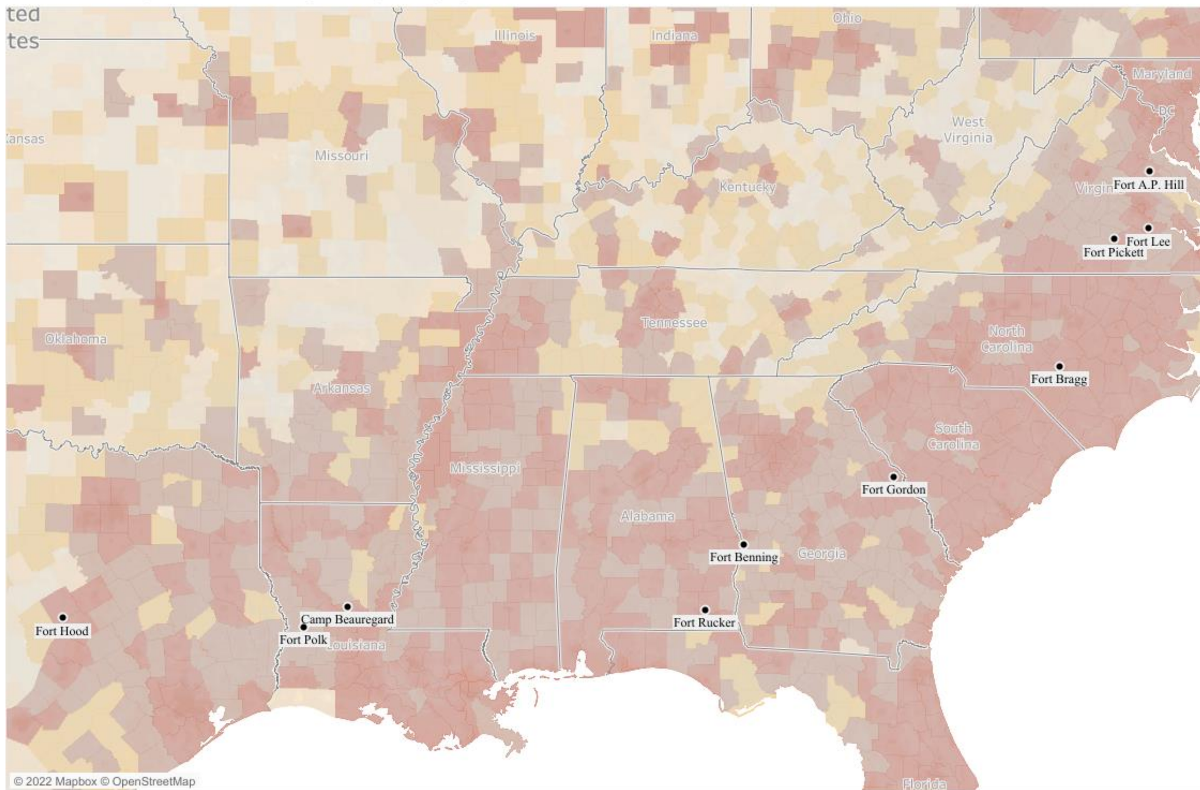


Fig. 4

Confederate Military Bases & US Black Population By County Fig. 5



Southern Poverty Law Center Map of Confederate Iconography, Monuments, & Symbols

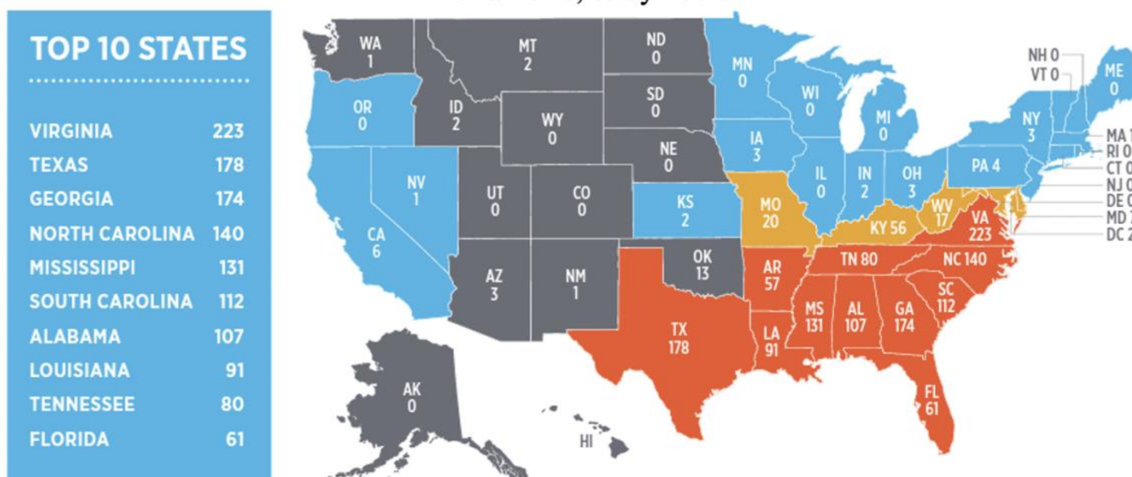


Fig. 6

Now, following the COVID-19 pandemic and George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other police brutality related uprisings, many organizers and Black veterans have called for the renaming of these military bases. Jasbir Puar's *Right to Maim* (2017) speaks to the contradictions laden in calling for the state to intervene in matters of subjugation and terror they create:

> The shooting and killing of five police officers during a Black Lives Matter rally in Dallas had only amplified the lines of battle between civilians and law enforcement. The June 12 shooting in an Orlando queer club magnified a homonationalist discourse that posits Muslim homophobes as the primary danger to queer liberals of all colors, resulting in increased policing of LGBTQ pride events during the summer. Bombings by ISIS in the previous month had targeted Nice, Istanbul, and Dhaka. Protesters started gathering at Standing Rock to fight the Dakota Access Pipeline. There were more shootings of black bodies to come (Puar, 2017, p. xi).

Discourse around racialized violence and a nation state's collective memory means something different when those calling for action are at times both the subjects and perpetrators of violence, existing in the liminal state Puar sometimes refers to as debility. At the outset, renaming and perhaps repurposing some of the seventeen hundred monuments and symbols seems like the solution, Lupita's avoidance of bases like Fort Hood have far more material implications. In 2020, Spc. Vanessa Guillén was found murdered at Fort Hood following a series of sexual harrasment complaints that Guillén made to her loved ones regarding a seargent. Although her family encouraged her to report, she was skeptical that it would lead to any substantial resolution and she shortly thereafter went missing from the military base until her remains were later found. According to a RAND report, women stationed at Fort Hood are more likely to experience sexual assault than at any other base, an alarming detail considering that as a whole roughly 1 in 4 women in the military have experienced sexual harassment, and 1 in 16 have experienced sexual assault (Matthew, 2021; Schwartz, 2020).

Lupita's rank as an officer placed her above the general enlisted troops. However, her white and male colleagues often used microaggressions as a reminder of her place:

> I'd start speaking and you could just see their faces go. And I'd always get the, "Oh you're so articulate!". That is a microaggression that Blacks get all the time. The expectation is that we're stupid and that we can't speak or that we can't write. Oh but you write so well and you're so articulate! Oh you mean the billions or the rest of us can't do that? Oh it's because of your accent. No, because I've been living here for a long time now. No, it's not the accent. So ooh I hate that one. Oh I hate that one. Yeah. You're so articulate or you write so well. I'm like and they would say it to my face and there would be other Black officers sitting right there and I'm like looking at them thinking yeah I'm

> sorry I'm the house negro today, you get to be the field hand, you know? That's not an encouraging comment.

Originally situated in an academic context, Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso's (2000) piece on the experience of Black undergraduates and campus racial climate speaks to the history of how unconscious bias creates a dominant environment of white supremacy. Lupita's social identities and level of education made her an outlier in terms of the typical army officer, something that she was well aware of throughout her career. However, in an army that demonstrates overrepresentation of Black people in comparison to the general US population, a Black woman with an undergraduate degree should not draw surprise for proven skill in written or public speaking formats (Department of Defense, 2018). In this instance, Puar's (2017) *Right to Maim* reminds us of race as a "risk factor" proximal to exposure to debility and disability. The workplace injury in this instance is not a slip or a fall rather an intentional and habitual reinforcement of biopolitics or rather *necropolitics*. Lupita's mentions of plantation dynamics are not incidental and in fact visceralize the aforementioned terror she and other GIs sought to avoid with contracts and deployments abroad. Moreover, her upbringing allows for a political framework to understand and intellectualize certain slights. As the daughter of middle class academics and professionals, Lupita knew that others' perceptions of her were ultimately a reflection of the deficit frameworks they employed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In response to microaggressions and other forms of discrimination, she adopted a depersonalized counter or coping skill:

> Coming from not necessarily an academic background, but a background where we talk about politics, we talk about how small aspects of life are political decisions. The food you eat, where you live, your past education, expectations, all of these are political

> decisions. Sometimes, you may not realize the options given to you are only given to you because of your race or your class or your gender. Sometimes the plate that has everything is not shown to us. You might have great options but you might only be seeing half of the plate, or a quarter of the plate. These are things that I heard my parents, that I heard my family talk about. We had these discussions around the dinner table. Whether I was partaking in these discussions or not, that was the framework of where I was seeing the world. Recognizing that, my dad had a subscription to the Economist, so I had a subscription to the Economist. While other friends were reading the Daily News. I'm recognizing that these are all personal decisions that influence the political and cultural framework in which you exist. Being in the military and seeing all of this and knowing that I could exceed beyond the expectations and the framework I had set for me or knowing that I see that you've given me three choices there but I know that this white man has six choices. You're only giving me three because I'm a Black woman. This is the one that I want, this is one that's outside the limit that you've set for me. But I certainly meant that I could always talk about it, I felt comfortable talking about racism and sexism…So having a framework with which to analyze interactions I think is a coping skill. It made it easier for me to cope.

Although the intent of the slights are ultimately meant to create a sense of "othering", a strong political identity and sense of self counteracted much of the discrimination Lupita faced during her twenty year career in the Army. Communication about the realities of race and racism helped buffer some of the discrimination that Lupita met during her career in the armed forces. As a middle class Black youth, having access to publications like the *Economist* also provided insight to social imaginations and realities that extended far beyond service as a means for class and

racial uplift. Additionally, she concludes that her experiences are tame in comparison to stories heard from fellow Black GIs throughout her service. Combined with a realistic grasp on the nature of race relations in America, a sense of community provided Lupita the framework to cope with the institutional and individually racist residue:

> I wasn't married with kids. I wasn't on the mommy circuit but you know what, we could always bond over racism and sexism. Because I knew they were experiencing it. Sometimes it would be those quiet conversations where it's three or four Black folks standing around chit-chatting like mmm-hmmm. You know what he meant when he said that, didn't you? We'd share the look, you know? We knew the look. Sometimes it was an explicit conversation like, "He is a racist SOB". Sometimes it would just be that shared look, even the look is supportive…
>
> I mean, there's always gonna be somebody out there who's racist, I'm always gonna be you know, America's not gonna suddenly wake up one morning and stop being systematically racist. That's not going to happen, not in my lifetime. So that's always like the background noise. It's that constant drip, it's always there. I know it's there. But I don't want that to be the drumbeat of my life.

Lupita's example works as both a coping mechanism and a counter-narrative to the idea that the racist thoughts and behaviors of others is the responsibility of those healing from racist violence. Moreover, the power of such micro affirmations further the strength of in-group relations or "moments of shared cultural intimacy" such as the knowing look Lupita references when isolated from the rest of civilian life domestically or abroad due to deployment or living on rural military bases (Huber, Gonzalez, Robles, & Solórzano, 2021). Another important factor in Lupita's statement is the permanence of racism, the idea that America could not and would not stop being

a racist nation lest not in her lifetime. Participation in a racist institution becomes less remarkable when one recognizes the governing bodies that create the institutions, espouse and promote white supremacy. In fact, understanding the history of the US and the armed forces in particular could help explain why Lupita knew the political implications of her and others' decisions. Moreover, knowing that others would continue to be racist helped defeat the "stereotype threat" or idea that because others perceived her as less due to her identities as a Black woman and immigrant, she would be capable of less (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). On the contrary, understanding the political and personal implications and history of the discrimination she and others received instead helped her push through and continue on her career. That history included the legacy of previous Black veterans who served but were barred from fully realizing the effects of their GI Bill benefits:

> In one of my classes we were talking about urban planning, post World War II veterans and one of the things I talked about in discussion was you know Black Veterans didn't get to use a lot of those benefits post World War II. They were supposed to have them on paper they had them but in reality they were oftentimes turned down for loans because of redlining because they met their quota of Black students or local VA offices simply wouldn't process their paperwork because they were Black.
>
> I think about that, I represent that legacy. I know my family didn't come from America, my family wasn't here in the country at that time but still as a veteran. It's important for me as a veteran, as a Black veteran it's important for me to use the benefits that those veterans were not able to use. You know for female veterans you frequently don't self-identify as a veteran. You know I get that. But at the same time I'm a veteran and proud of my service. You're not going to diminish my service because I'm a woman or

> minimize in any way my service because I'm a woman. No, my service is just as good as any man who ever wore the uniform. I feel very fortunate, I mean I earned those benefits every single one of them but I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to earn them and now to use them.

The ability to travel during her military career also allowed for momentary reunions with her family, who at this point had relocated from New York to Texas. Despite earning a bachelor's degree and having support from her family to continue a career in the Army, Lupita still felt an internal motivation and pressure to continue on her educational journey post-bachelor's:

> I was the only person who didn't have a graduate degree. Everyone else you know. My stepsisters had graduate degrees. My mom and dad had graduate degrees. I didn't. I was like oh I'm not the smart one in the family. That felt like I had something to prove.

Rather than being motivated by the disparaging acts of colleagues, Lupita used the legacy of previous Black veterans and the success of her family's educational journeys to propel her forward. Now having fully immersed herself into Army life, Lupita continued her studies for a master's degree in Geographical Information Science (GIS). Working as a GIS Analyst within the Army allowed her the work experience to apply her knowledge in the classroom twenty years after completing her first post-secondary degree. Despite the motivation she felt from the high level of academic achievement from her mother, stepfather, and stepsiblings, she chose not to tell them of her decision to apply. Instead, the pressure of finishing during an allotted amount of time given to her by her command in the Army further mobilized her. At this time in her career, utilizing the GI Bill while on active duty would financially detract from the benefits received for housing and tuition assistance. Completing her masters in GIS within a short amount of time

while still working for the Army allowed her to keep her GI Bill benefit for use when she later decided to pursue a PhD.

CHAPTER 6

Amber
Calibration Technician, Navy
Served 2016-2020

> I come from a very religious family. So, I'm carrying my sister's Bible, too. All my letters that I saved. And a little bottle of olive oil that my pastor gave me. Blessed olive oil. But I found it was a lot of guys in basic with me that were atheist. When we got to Vietnam there were no atheist. When we got hit, everybody hollered, "Oh, God, please help, please." And everybody want to wear a cross. Put a cross on their helmet. Something to psych you up. *Specialist 4 Richard J. Ford III* (Terry, 1984, p.35)

Following in the tradition of many enlisted GIs, Amber is the daughter of two former Navy veterans currently living in Los Angeles, California and attending a nearby community college. Her mother, a white woman from the Appalachian region of the United States, raised her amongst her white family while she visited her father in San Diego from time to time, a Black man originally from New York. As a biracial child, Amber received mixed messages from her parents regarding race and racism.

> I didn't really gain my confidence in being African American. So I came to live with my dad because you know, being with my mom, she's white and you know, and my whole family is white on her side. And you know, you're not taught to be proud of yourself in your blood. I mean, they don't, it's not that they will teach you that they just mean you

> know, -it's maybe not a priority for them because they don't it's not brought in and your blackness you know, they teach you to be a good person and not to be racist and stuff like that. You know what I mean? But when I lived with my dad, that is when I kind of got like, you know, you're Black you're proud! Like, when I was there he turned into like this militant pro-Black.
>
> He went through this phase where you would never date another white woman again. I remember as a kid getting into an argument with him, cuz, you know, I'm in the backseat, He's driving me to school, and he's behaving. Like if he's gonna send aid anywhere, he's going to send it to Africa first, before he sends it anywhere else. And that kind of bothered me because I'm biracial. And you know, I was taught you don't look at color from my mom. It was like, my mom raised me that way. You don't look at color. So to say something like that, you know, it kind of offended me a little bit. You know, my dad was like, you know, I remember we got into it on the way to school that day, you know, he turned in his super pro-militant Black. He used to have me read this book called The Black 100. And it was 100 different stories of Black people that did something or invented something, right? And then he would ask me like, okay, you know, I'm gonna, I'm gonna have you read about Marcus Garvey.

In a study conducted by Stepney, Sanchez, & Handy, (2015) they examined the relationships and processes involved with ethnic and racial identity formation for multi-racial individuals. Important for them was a foray into how the strength of a parent-child relationship may or may not impact the racial and ethnic identity formation for a child. Based on 275 participants, they found that greater self-identification as white was predictive of holding colorblind beliefs; those with colorblind beliefs deny the enduring legacy of racism and white supremacy, ignore the

impacts of white privilege and other hegemonic ideals, and impede progress for equity-based initiatives like affirmative action (Stepney, Sanchez, & Handy, 2015). Participation in the armed forces can necessitate adopting a colorblind attitude, especially when the benefits afforded to enlisted members are guaranteed regardless of social and political identification. However, ignorance of the sociopolitical factors driving enlistment like poverty, do little to temper colorblind attitudes when there is overrepresentation of Black GIs. To be more explicit, the same reasoning that rationalizes poverty and neoliberal solutions to it (e.g., military service) is rife with explanatory power for doing away with civil liberties. For most of her childhood, Amber lived with her mother and mother's family, arguably prompting her to strongly identify with the white side of her family. When family circumstances forced her to move with her father, his views on race and racism challenged both her perception of the social construct as well as how she identified. Her father's encouragement to engage with thinkers and organizers like Marcus Garvey swiftly departs from colorblind and hegemonic ideology—understandably, his vow to stop dating white women hits personally to Amber, sounding both like an insult to her mother and a dig at her identifying as white whether intentional or not. Now as an adult, her feelings on the role of race and racism in her everyday life remain conflicted:

> I don't, because my family is white, and I don't look at like, where I think some Black people. I get it, you know, like, yeah, there is systemic racism, there's all this stuff going on. But I don't necessarily look at every white person as an enemy. Because my family wasn't like that and stuff. So it's hard for me to like, lump that all in there. Yeah, I mean, I kind of see two sides to the coin. I mean, some of these neighborhoods I'm for gentrification, because I'm like, they need to get cleaned up. You know, I don't know any

other way. You know, but I don't really. Now that the older I get, I just, I mean, I don’t judge people, I really don't care.

Again, her close identification with her family and their treatment of others shapes her racial beliefs and attitudes even with her knowledge of Marcus Garvey and the protracted struggle for liberation. In naming gentrification as a method of “cleaning up” neighborhoods, Amber calls on a racialized term often used when describing the overall purpose of displacing families and businesses. Likewise, a purpose of the armed forces is to “clean up” and displace the unsavory and noncompliant populations who are incapable of using the resources allotted to them for their betterment. Relating back to the literature review, the growing number of relationships between the armed forces and the most resource- poor schools and educational institutions in the country marks a similar trajectory of displacement. The Solomon Amendment is a federal law passed in 1996 that provides the US military access to student information as long as they are 17 or older. The information they are able to receive from academic institutions includes but is not limited to: name, address, telephone (not specific if local or permanent), age and date of birth, place of birth, level of education, and institutional email address. Moreover, the power of the Solomon Amendment allows for the federal government to subsequently freeze funds from colleges and universities that ban ROTC and military recruitment from their campuses (Galaviz, et.al, 2011). Worth noting are the ongoing attempts to revisit the case following its 1996 passage from universities like Stanford, who disagree with the moral and political implications of the law. Following the implementation of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”, a neoliberal educational response to anti-gay policy and practice in the military was to prohibit or severely limit the presence of recruiters on campuses. Viewing the issue as both an academic freedom and civil rights issue, many employees of the university found fault in the idea that National Institute of Health funds

could be revoked even if the law school protested recruitment (Field, 2006). Moreover, despite the court cases aimed at preserving the power of the Solomon Amendment, loopholes in the law allow for colleges and universities with large endowments to shirk any scrutiny or funding issues. As it stands, schools are not required to report on whether they allow military recruitment and the military often refrains from asking—most of their litigious battles have revolved around the right to recruit law students, a highly sought-after group in the armed forces. This loophole allows schools like Stanford to continue operating with idealized notions of what it means to support LGBTQ+ students, staff, and faculty whilst the military can target and clean up populations they seek (Canady, 2003).

Growing up between two households on either side of the country, her parents made it clear that higher education should be a priority in her life whether the military provided the financial means or not. The high school Amber attended provided SAT preparation courses and guidance counselors also encouraged seniors to pursue higher education. Influenced in some part by the conversations and lessons of her father, Amber decided to attend a HBCU for Seventh Day Adventists for a portion of her undergraduate education:

> So at first, I remember, my mom and I were kind of struggling because my mom didn't go to college. So it was all new, like, you know, finding out what we had to do, and like, you know, filling out your FAFSA and applying and waiting to hear back and but my mom helped me, kind of bridge that road like we wanted it together. You know, and I ended up going to a HBCU, actually, in Alabama. And, yeah, that's where I ended up going. Um, it was really, I loved it. I went because it was a Seventh Day Adventist, it's like the Black Seventh Day Adventist school to attend. And my dad and I, I was brought up Seventh Day Adventist so my dad…I probably loved it too much. And I partied out,

> and I already knew Adventists that go there for like, because, you know, it's supposed to be God centered and stuff. And I was down there partying, so.

For Amber, the juxtaposition of having independence as a young woman and the promise to honor her religious beliefs sometimes clashed. During her adolescence, the stark differences of her parents closely resembled the internal struggle she faced with her own choices:

> Okay, so, like, my mom growing up with my mom. She believed in God, but we didn't go to church and then she never read her Bible. You know, I never really saw her pray. And my mom used to like, drink and smoke and she had some influences probably around that weren’t the greatest. And so, I always had that and then living with my dad, it was like, night and day, like, you know, my dad, I had this set of rules I had to follow. My dad was that family worship like he would get up before he went to school and the whole family would have worship, you know, and that night you have family worship again. And you kept the Sabbath and you honored God.

The influences Amber mentions included an abusive boyfriend that her mother dated for years, eventually leading Amber’s father to remove her from the situation, keeping her for three years. Previously, Amber had lived full time with her mother and only visited her father and stepmother during holidays and the summer months. The time spent during those three years further cemented what was already a close relationship between Amber and her father’s side of the family. Adding to a difficult family situation, Amber often felt as if her father had less control of his finances than her mother did, a situation that was supported by the love and generosity of their local Black church community:

> And I didn't like living with my dad, I felt for the first time like poor, you know, I never felt poor and so I live with my dad. And outside of that, I was like, happy cuz, you know,

> I was growing up in the church, and I have this awesome church family. You know, that was just phenomenal, it was nothing like growing up in a Black church. It's the best feeling, especially a close knit one. Like, like the one I was at, where there's really like, your family and stuff.
>
> What my dad did, he still worked for the government. They were in the Navy. He was like an optical electrician. Okay, but he just was bad with money. My dad can make a million dollars. And you know, he was still struggling because he didn't know how to manage his money like my mom. My mom went back to West Virginia. She started working in the steel mills. And she was just better with her money. Like, you know, my mom's gonna pay your bills on time. My dad? No.

The partying that began at the Seventh Day Adventist HBCU in Alabama, continued on the other side of the country in San Diego where friends of hers made money in the vibrant party scene near the beach. Amber felt the struggle to choose between the freedoms associated with being on her own, dating women, and testing her limits made it difficult to finish out her degree in Alabama; she eventually left her HBCU institution to live and work full-time in San Diego. The option to revisit higher education later presented itself in the form of Amber’s aunt, a lifelong champion for Amber and her education as well as her dream to pursue law school:

> I knew my mom's sister, she was always in my ear, okay. And she kept telling me because she was deputy chief to the Attorney General in West Virginia for 20 years. And she kept telling me come back, you know, and you work, I'll get you a job at the state and the state will finish school, pay your school, you've just gotta make good grades.
>
> And she kept telling me that and I finally was like, I, you know, like, I knew I needed to graduate. And I knew the opportunity wouldn't be there. Like if the judge loses his

> election. And now he's out, and the opportunity is gone. So I finally gave in, and I think at the time I was dating this girl, and she ended up moving out, and I was like, dang, I never really lived on my own and didn't really know. So I was like, alright, you know, it's time to go back. So I went back, and it was a blessing because I finished my degree. I went back to West Virginia for a year and finished my degree. And I came back to San Diego again.

After completing her bachelor's degree, Amber returned to San Diego, moving in with two exotic dancers and began selling party drugs with the help of her roommates. The time spent in San Diego not only took her away from pursuing the law degree she had previously desired, but she also increasingly became worried that she would be caught dealing like some of her friends. Now in her 30s, she felt it was time to choose a path that would less likely lead to imprisonment:

> I thought I was because I knew to be honest, like I started watching my homeboy start getting federal indictments. And I kinda got scared. And then I knew. You know, you can't keep taking risks like that. And I think when you're hungry when you're hungry for something, at one point, I didn't care about the risk. I just wanted the money. But then once I had the money, and I was living really comfortably, I didn't want to take any more risk. And you can't, you can't be like that. Not with that field of work. You can't, you can't get comfortable with it. You can't get to where you don't want to take risks anymore. And I didn't want to take any more risks. I didn't want to go to jail. I didn't want to. And I knew I was getting older. You can't, you can't. It's that there's no longevity. Yeah. So I knew that I needed to do something I needed to really…

Similarly, to Lupita, Amber chose to enlist at almost the oldest eligible age in search of direction and something that would provide longevity and purpose. The Navy as her branch of choice was

obvious to her given both of her parents' prior pathways and continued use of trade skills provided by their time served. Once she enlisted, the Navy almost strictly became a place for professional development and a pathway towards a future career, not to make long-term friendships and bonds with her fellow GIs. Now having earned a degree in history, Amber felt that the skills learned in higher education would not adequately equip her for a long-term career:

> Prior to joining the military, I tried to get in, I wanted to go out and they have this electrical apprenticeship because I understand there's a great opportunity. They would work Monday through Friday. And they will pay you. But then in the evening on Tuesdays and Thursdays you would go to class where they would teach you the trade. So you're getting on the job training, and you're getting paid, and you're not having to pay for the schooling, right? And then every so many months, they bump your pay up. And basically at the end of the program, I think it was like a two or two to three year program. At the end of the program, you're a certified electrician. And the union, you get hired on with Union. So I was like, man, that's, that's awesome. I applied and I got a, they called me, you got to go take a test, I passed the test. And they called me in for the interview. I did the interview. And I was like how long ago I heard anything back and they said, Oh, it could be so many months. But at the time I was at the cutoff age for the military. So I was like, man, I ain't got too many months to play, you know. And that's how I knew where the trades were at. I had a couple friends that were doing construction. And I knew, like real money and doing these specialized trades, you know. And then when I went to the military, they gave me a job as a calibration technician, which is another specialized kind of trade. And I just knew getting out. And after speaking to some of the officers, I had a really good command and our XO (Commanding Officer) at the time.

Having missed the opportunity to train in a trade outside the US military, Amber secured an alternative future in the Navy, one she knew was secure given her family's history of learning trades and continuing them after their contracts. In her description of the training program, one of the largest appeals of the program is the combination of higher education and practical application of skills to a field while being paid, something that traditional higher educational degree programs often lack. Having enlisted after the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) in 2011, Amber no longer had to worry that her participation would draw any scrutiny from fellow GIs or her commanding officers. Furthermore, Amber saw her time in the military strictly as a means to an end and as such, did not focus on the family-like bonding that some come to rely on during their time in the armed forces:

> I think the military now is a lot more accepting of that, because they see it so much. I didn't know. I was because I was older going in, I wasn't, I don't open myself up to everybody. And not everybody needs to know my personal business. So you know, a lot of them to me, you're just a coworker. And you don't know what I will do when I leave up outta here. It's not your business, you know, so it wasn't even necessarily something that was germane. It wasn't important to the job. It was just we're here to do a job and then when I leave if I do what I gotta do.

Like her earlier experiences with her parents and inconsistent messaging around race and racism, Amber's social identity formation stopped her from fully engaging with the exploration of her race and sexuality. Now an adult, Amber's reflections on her sexuality embody some of the similar tensions present in her descriptions of her racial identity formation and current feelings about racial issues in the US. Moreover, viewing her contract as a means to an end evoked many of the requirements of DADT even if her enlistment followed its repeal, to serve without

engaging in either the personal or political aspects entrenched in the very idea of military service. If anything, Amber's struggle with her identity may have made the armed forces an ideal place to work without having to be open about her lived experiences:

> And I remember the first time going into like a gay bar I remember like, the spirit like fell on me. And I remember God saying, like Amber, what are you doing here, you know, you're a child of God, get out of here. And I remember looking at all the people and the fog, it's going off in the club. And I remember like, thinking they're dancing their way into hell, but they don't know, you know, the path to hell is wide, but the path to heaven is narrow. Not a lot of people do it, you know. And it's something I struggle with, but now, I'm at a point in my life where I don't I don't go to the gay bars, anything, I don't do that anymore. Because I'm trying to like, I don't want that. I don't want to lose my soul. You know, I don't want to lose my soul behind it. But I'm in a rock and a hard place. Because there's this one girl, that, you know, that I dated for so many years that, you know, I genuinely care about her.

Similarly, to the racial upbringing of her early adolescence, Amber's coming out generated mixed responses from her family. Her mother adopted a similar colorblind attitude towards her sexuality as she did her race and accepted her with little explicit discussion of what it meant for Amber to identify as a lesbian. Amber's father relied on teachings from the Seventh Day Adventist doctrine focused on the belief that same-sex relationships are sinful. That said, Amber maintains that they hold a close relationship and he continues to be an example of spiritual leadership in her life. When attending school in Alabama, the ability to date women conflicted strongly with what Amber heard and personalized in the daily co-curricular teachings from the Christian Bible. Unlike the ways that Amber had little control over the perceptions of others in

her church community and in her family, Amber could use the skills afforded in the military to create a solidly middle-class life for herself, blending the lessons learned from her mother and father. Now working in aviation mechanics, Amber is debating between using her post-9/11 GI-Bill benefits to continue a career in aviation and earn a degree in electrical engineering or pursue nursing. At the onset of using her benefits, Amber had trouble navigating the bureaucracy of the VA and the community-college system:

> It’s been a nightmare. Their school um, so I registered for classes. I applied and registered back in like, maybe April. April, May. Um, I wanted to be you know, I was like alright class starting August. It was just a nightmare. Being there not in person I don’t know if it was due to COVID. But you know, you couldn't talk to, couldn't get a hold of anybody you called, you'd always get an answering machine. That's frustrating as hell. Especially when you're out, you need some questions answered as to you know, you never use your GI benefits. And, you know, so that was one thing. Second, like when I registered for the school, I signed up for my classes, the Dean of the department, because it's a specialized trade, you have to get on this list, and the Dean has to approve it. Or the department head has to approve it. Well, he never sent the names over to admissions. So I don't get to register for classes. I have to keep calling back. And it's now becoming a merry go round making me feel, you know, why am I having to put this much effort into going to school, I've gone to plenty other schools and it was never this hard.

Equipped with a bachelor’s degree, Amber had some previous experience navigating institutions of higher education. Moreover, having started and finished her degree in history at more than one college, she was more than familiar with the process of transferring paperwork and the necessary credentials to a new campus and administrative system. However, now the combined lack of

communication from the community college and the VA left Amber frustrated and at risk of being unable to use her benefits outright given the complicated changes following COVID-19. For many, the confusing nature of financing a higher education journey while simultaneously choosing and adhering to a degree pathway leads many to the easy sign-up options offered by for-profit institutions despite the chronic loan default rate and lack of degree completion at those institutions (Iloh & Toldson, 2013).

CHAPTER 7

Jordan
Aircraft Electrician, Navy
Served 2014-2018

> Everybody knew how I felt about equal opportunity. I pushed actions on board ships. I used to write to people back here and make suggestions on doing things in equal opportunity. I felt that the system was set up in such a way as to perpetuate racism, and we were not doing anything about it. Other than symbolic things like trying to recruit blacks or work with a civil rights group. But the substance was not being done.
> *Lieutenant Commander William S. Norman* (Terry, 1984, p.187).

As the youngest oral history participant, Jordan's educational pathway and experience in the Navy might most closely resemble other Black veterans who are eligible and utilizing post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to pursue higher education.

Navy Demographics (Women)

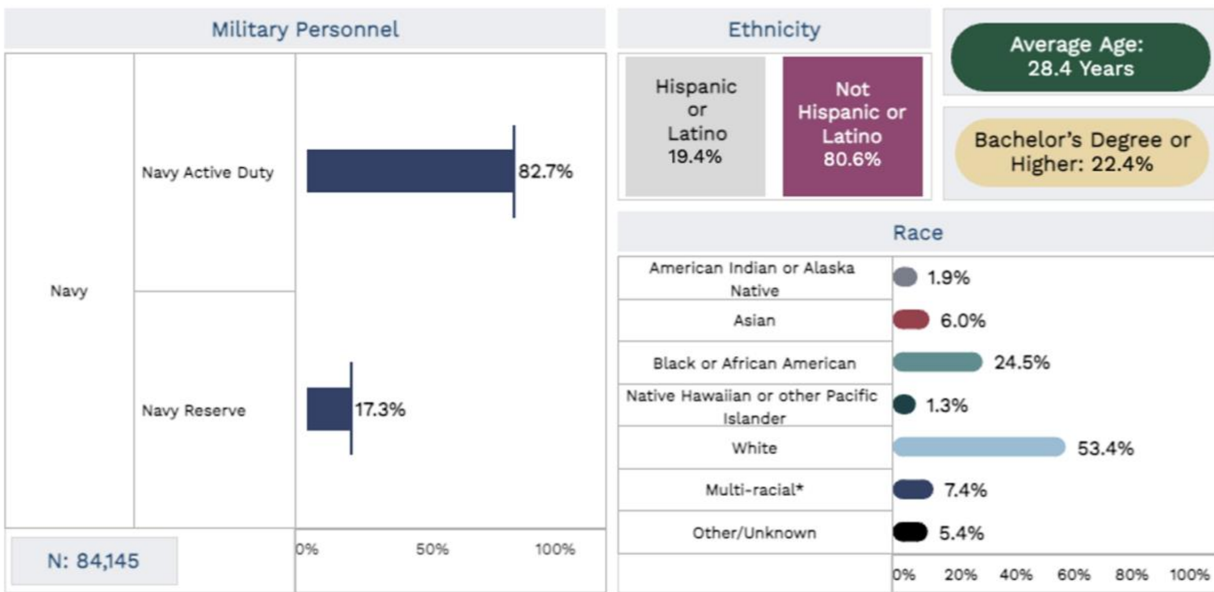


Fig. 7

Born in 1994, her parents met in Harlem and eventually settled in Chicago, making her family one of the few on the south side that had not descended from generations of Black families in Illinois. Despite meeting in New York, discrimination from the Small Business Association prompted Jordan's mother, an immigrant from Belize, to try her luck opening a Subway franchise in Chicago instead. Time off from school and a first job during high school were guaranteed for Jordan who helped at the store with other members of her family. No different than the other parents mentioned thus far, education was severely emphasized for Jordan, sometimes even more strictly for herself than her older brother:

> Both of my parents are very serious about academics. So really no surprise that I was at Spelman and I just graduated from Columbia, because they are just like, their expectations, academic wise, were always very high. Sometimes too high. But I don't know if I'd be that strict on my kids…
>
> So my brother is older, so I'm not sure. And we also have different fathers. I'm not sure what the expectations were for him, I have my own opinions about just like the black

> community and like the expectation that they have for their sons versus their daughters. I don't really feel like the expectations for him were the same. But that's my personal opinion. But as far as like, for me, you know, it was just like, my parents were just very, like, serious about grades like, like, they really didn't want me to have Bs either. Like, they really kind of wanted me to be like, straight A, I remember, I went to a math competition, I didn't win anything. And my mom was upset because I didn't win nothing at the math competition. And like, it was, like, very, very serious. You know, I didn't really have room for like, a lot of error. And they just expected me to grasp things very quickly.

Situated in Chicago, Jordan's options for public education in the late 90s and early 2000s typically would have relegated her family to enroll in a school located in white and wealthier neighborhoods. Attending a private, Catholic institution for K-8, Jordan's family opted to have her enroll in a public high school. Both of her primary school institutions were predominantly Black and working-class, reflecting the neighborhood that Jordan grew up in. While in high school, she was enrolled in the International Baccalaureate program (IB), a dual-diploma high school program similar to Advanced Placement (AP) coursework meant to create a clear pathway for students to higher education. Created in response to the Ford Foundation program that provided high school students with funding and support for post-secondary education, the AP program was rolled out to a slow start in the mid 1950s. Initially, only five percent of high school students matriculated into the program and 130 colleges accepted AP credits towards university course completion. Roughly fifty years later, the number of students taking AP placement exams increased by over 100,000% (Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2007). Different from the AP program, IB focuses on a holistic and complete course of high school

study rather than select courses and exams; the rising trend in enrollment has not been as steep as that of the AP program, partially explained by IB's more recent introduction to K-12 curriculum and instruction in the 1970s.

In the broader Chicago public educational landscape, there exists rampant militarization in the past two decades. As recently as 2009, Chicago has six public military high schools with all of the branches of the military represented amongst the K-12 schools. Moreover, over 10,000 students take part in JROTC, some as early as junior high in what is known as the Cadet Corps (Galaviz, et.al, 2011). The military public schools are located in predominantly lower-income Black and brown neighborhoods where AP and IB programs are less likely to be offered to youth following historical trends in the educational and future occupational offerings for students of color:

> More broadly, military training in schools has been used since the early 1890s as a way to regulate difference, with an initial emphasis on tracking toward race- and class- "appropriate" occupations and behaviors (Bartlett & Lutz, 1998). This push aligned with the prevailing political and economic interests of those in power, for example, white southerners who supported black high schools on the condition that the schools would train black youth—for work that did not compete with white labor and for qualities (including "respect, obedience, and submissive acquiescence") that lessened the likelihood that these youth would demand equal treatment (Bartlett & Lutz, 1998, p. 121). After the start of war in Europe in 1914, there were more calls for universal military training in public schools and colleges as a way to resolve perceived social problems, including "moral rot" associated with increased national wealth, increases in the numbers of immigrants who were seen as

> insufficiently loyal, and demands by labor made especially through strikes (Bartlett & Lutz, 1998).

Like the calls made in the early and mid-twentieth century for the naming of military bases to honor Confederate soldiers and Ku Klux Klan leaders, the implementation of militarized schooling sought to "ameliorate" any problems found within immigrant, Black and indigenous communities. Jordan's upbringing around fellow Black, working-class families helped encourage her to pursue higher education at a predominantly Black institution, a space that would be familiar to the educational spaces she had attended for her K-12 schooling. During a HBCU tour, the highlights among the different colleges and universities made an impression on her:

> You know, the expectation was already there that we were college bound. I'm not really sure. I always knew I wanted to go to HBCU though. I'm not really sure how I knew about HBCUs. I know it didn't come from my mom because my mom is Spanish, she doesn't know about it. Well she does now, but I don't think she knew about HBCUs. It might have been my dad's side. I'm not sure but I do remember going on an HBCU College tour because I wanted to go to Clark Atlanta. It's actually so funny now because I actually love Spelman to this day even though I didn't finish. I still love Spelman and will forever love Spelman. But I was so against it. I was so against it I had prejudged Spelman. I thought Spelman wasn't like an institution for me. I thought Spelman was like an institution for the upper class. Like yeah, it's already toyed with but it's not just for it's not just for them. People from all walks of life went to Spelman, but I went on a college tour. And I liked Clark's campus, I really liked Clark's campus, but I think it was the tour guide. Like just what she was highlighting about the school didn't excite me to send my application to Clark Atlanta, you know, she was she was talking about, you know, this is

> where they filmed *Stomp the Yard* and like *Drumline*, which I thought were amazing facts. I didn't know that about Clark, but I wasn't interested in going into film. So I didn't want to apply to Clark anymore. But with Spelman it was such an amazing presenter, she was like, "I was the student in the back of the class that was shy and became close with my professor and I like my students in my class…", like we had, it was just like, it was just a completely different presentation. And I was like, "Oh my gosh, I'm going to Spelman".

After deciding on attending Spelman, Jordan claims that she "manifested" her acceptance letter, checking the college website daily and ignoring acceptance letters from other colleges and universities until finally receiving her letter from Spelman around Christmas. For her family, being accepted in Spelman was a joyous occasion as well as a sobering moment; Jordan's father wanted assurances that his financial investment in her education would help guarantee the lucrative job her parents imagined for her following a four-year degree. As such, he demanded that she major in computer science, a major that Jordan herself was not passionate about and ultimately went against despite her father's wishes:

> You know that I'm older, I guess I could see my dad's viewpoint. So my dad, because he was paying for Spellman the first year he was very involved and very vocal, that, you know, like, this is a lot of money. So I'm expecting you to major in something, that I'm 100% sure, you're going to get employment for this. We have to take out these loans. So he forced me to major in computer science. And I did not like computer science. I did not like it at all. I actually went undecided. I think 18. That's like, that's a very, very early age to tell someone to major in something and pick what you want to do. Because I struggled. I had no idea where I wanted to major. And it was so hard. I remember just being so

> confused, because I'm trying to hide from my dad that I went undeclared. My second semester, the first week, probably still doesn't know that.. But I remember I had a psychology course though, because I took this HIV AIDS risky behaviors course. That was very interesting. It was the first class that I got an A in at Spelman, so I decided to major in psychology.

Unwilling to bow to the pressures of her father and the larger looming pressure that higher education places on youth to decide their futures once they arrive, Jordan instead relied on her successes at Spelman to point her in a direction academically. In comparison to D.J., family conflict made the process of smoothly transitioning into higher education a difficult one; her parents were unable to decide who would pay for the remainder of her tuition after her father covered the initial year. Eventually, unwilling to deal with her parents back and forth fighting over who would cover the expenses, Jordan returned home to Chicago, transferring to DePaul University and moving back home with her family. Once back at home, the temporary freedom Jordan experienced as an undergraduate was quickly rescinded as her mother expected her to follow a curfew and adhere to the same rules she had before leaving to Spelman. Her sisters at Spelman, a source of support, were also a reminder of the educational experience she was unable to have:

> It was just like, it was a very stressful time and when I had to drop out, I just couldn't come up with the money. I remember when I had to drop out I was so devastated. Like very very, very devastated. Crying a lot. When I flew back from Atlanta to Chicago, I broke down at the airport. Just laying in bed for the week. All my Spelman sisters were all texting me like, "Jordan so sorry, you know, you had to leave but like, you know, I really enjoyed meeting you". You know, that was like, nice and comforting and stuff. But

> it also made me cry even more. And so now I'm back home so that I was in Atlanta, doing whatever I wanted to do. So now I'm back home. And my mom's trying to like, restrict me again. But now I'm doubly irritated. Like, I had to drop out of my dream school. My mom's trying to, you know, I think she was I think she was like trying to give me like curfew and stuff and like okay. But so I was to a point where I wanted to move out, I was trying to move out, while I'm working at a grocery store making like $8.25 an hour, can't move out, can't you know, can't pay for rent. I actually transferred to DePaul. And I couldn't, I couldn't afford to go full time, I thought I would get more money because I'm going to a state school. That was false. Couldn't afford to go to DePaul. I was only going part time and working at a grocery store. And then all my high school teachers shop there. So every time they saw me, they were like, What are you doing home from school? I had to keep reliving it like, "Oh, I had to drop out. Oh, I had to drop out." So I just went into survival mode. I feel like, you know, I was like, Where can I go? Where can I go where I can have my own place like to basically just provide for myself. I was like, I had to go to the military. Nobody in my family ever went. So I'm the first to go.

Faced with the inability to afford a full-time private education in her home state or monthly rent with the pay offered at her part-time grocery job, joining the military seemed like the quickest option to provide consistent income, housing and educational benefits on her terms. Additionally, Jordan was tired of having to explain to former educators that she was no longer able to afford the dream school she had briefly attended. Her choice of branch in the Navy came down to a very simple decision regarding the uniform and an inability to reach the Air Force recruiter:

Though, all right, I want to make it clear. My reasoning for joining the military was what I said. But my reasoning for picking my branch was very basic. I just liked the uniform. I'm like, “Oh, I like their dress whites”. And I liked at the time the Navy was wearing blue camouflage, like navy blue camouflage. And I was like, I'm gonna look good, you know, so I think I'm gonna go to the Navy. I actually wanted to go to the Marine Corps first. And if I could go back, I think I would go to the Marine Corps. Now I'm not going to anybody's military again. But I wanted to do Marine Corps first, but I saw how scared my mom looked. And my friend was like, “Excuse me, oh, you go to the Marine Corps, you're going like you're going to combat?” I don’t know if that's necessarily true, but I mean, whatever. So I was like, okay, I think I was actually trying to go to the Air Force, but the Air Force recruiters are never in the recruiting office. I don't know how people join the Air Force. I have no idea. They're never in the recruiting office. So I wound up going into the Navy.

I feel like I like the skills that they taught them. I think they, you know, the Marine Corps, like it just taught them like a lot of life skills and like self defense skills that I just didn't get in the Navy, like, just their training was just there. And, you know, like, you're a marine first, regardless of what your job is. Like, like the training that they got, versus, like, when I talked to people that went to the like, the Marine Corps, like they took their gun training seriously. I was in an accelerated boot camp. And I don't feel like they took my gun training quality, like, serious. I didn't. I didn't even pass my gun quals while they kind of rushed us through the process and just took us to the gun range. I never shot a gun before. So I'm scared like yeah, did they have us like standing outside of the gun range, just replaying this video that if you cross your thumbs like you'll get the Beretta bite,

> because like the kickback of leaving it open, so that scared me. And it was just rushed. But like they take that I felt like their training was just different and basically all our training was like shipment stuff. And the Marine Corps, it felt their training was like actual transferable, self-defense type of stuff I didn't get in the Navy.

Jordan's reflection on her choice to join the Navy has three important points regarding the type of training made available to her, the fear present in her loved ones, and the availability of the Air Force recruitment officer. Like D.J. mentions within his oral history, the specialized and thorough training offered to those enlisted in the Marine Corps provides an incentive outside of the overall benefits. That said, D.J.'s prior use of the term "bullet sponges" to describe a Marine's position in establishing a military position elicits the same response that Jordan's friend and mother had at her initial desire to enlist as a Marine, a position not typical for a woman or Black woman. Moreover, having now reflected on her time in the armed forces Jordan has already decided that if given the option to enlist again she would choose not to regardless of the training or opportunities provided to her. Some of the explanation for her decision comes in her experience during boot camp:

> I was saying bootcamp first, which that was like, that sucked. It was more irritating if anything else. But once I made it through that, then I got flown out to Pensacola. I had to get my technical training. Um, and that was also strict as well. I mean I just felt like, well, I was on the fence about staying in. But once I went on deployment, like that combat experience kind of just solidified my decision, and I was gonna get out that I was not going to stay in and retire and go do deployment again. I guess I kind of felt like, no, because some people or a lot of people join the military as a last option. And for some people in the military, like, their experience in the military is the best experience that

> they've ever experienced. And I think that's why some people choose to stay. And then people started having families and stuff and the benefits are good. But I was fortunate enough where the military wasn't my best experience. My best experience at that time was Spelman. And I felt that I knew that there were better experiences than what I was experiencing during my time in service. And that contributed to me getting out.

Now having gone through basic training and experienced combat during her deployment, Jordan is confident that her original decision to pursue higher education at an institution like Spelman was a more suitable option than the armed forces. Jordan mentions the role that family plays in necessitating the benefits structure, or as Lupita previously recalled "the mommy circuit" where the role of a military family becomes the most important driving force behind reenlistment for some GIs. However, as a young woman confident in herself having attended a predominantly Black institution meant for Black women, the Navy did not provide the same social space for Jordan to flourish and find connection and purpose as it did for Lupita in the Army. The mere fact that Jordan attended an institution created to serve Black women did not sit well with fellow GIs:

> I remember I didn't really talk a lot when I got to my command. When I first got there I'm in a shop with all white men. Not comfortable at all. I'm the only female and I'm the lowest rank. So like, stick to myself. So one of them decides to try to have a conversation with me. He's like, "Oh, you know, Jordan are you fresh out of high school?" Because they don't know how old I am. Nobody ever really knows how old I am. And so I say I went to school first. He goes "Where?" I say Spelman, like oh what's Spelman, of course never heard of Spelman, whatever. So, Spelman is an all black women's college for African American young girls, you know. It's a very prestigious school. You know, in the

black culture. That's how I explained Spelman. And this, I will never forget his name, I'm name dropping AT Burros. There's a college for all black women? "That's the dumbest shit I've ever heard." He was like, then he said, "I'm gonna make an institution for all white men. And it's only going to be for all white men." And like, all the white man in the shop are laughing and I'm just like, you are just dumb. You had already had that. Like theres schools were founded when like, black people had to sneak to get education, but it was just like, things like that. I mean, it's around MLK Day, like, "Oh, he didn't do anything to deserve a day.

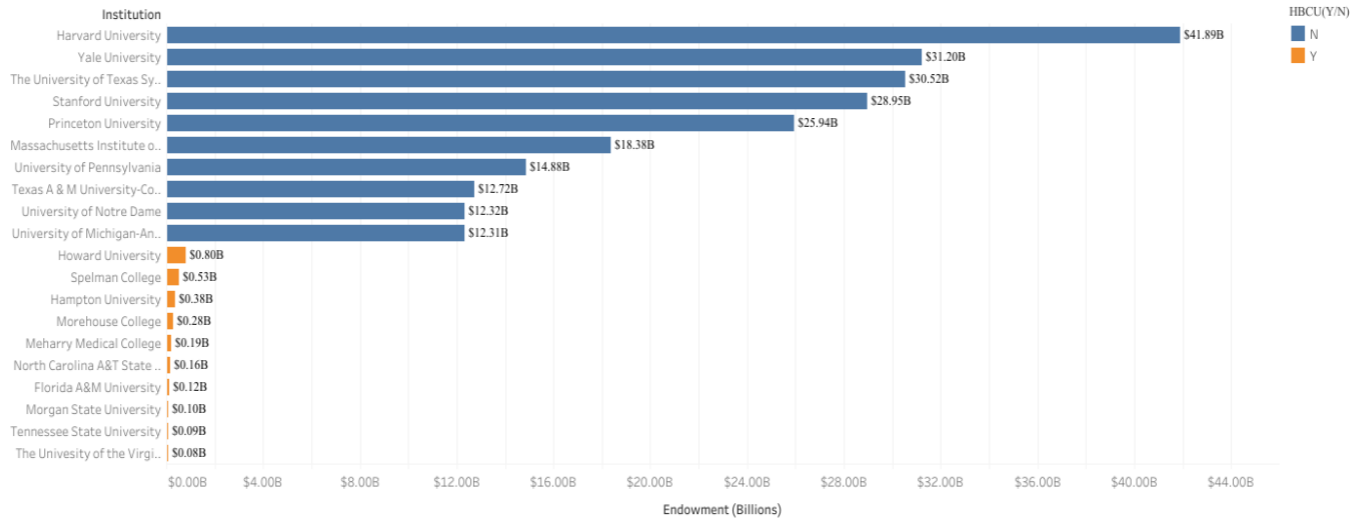
And you still see Confederate flags. Because they feel like it's southern pride. You know, just very disrespectful to like, our historical like leaders like I remember, I toured with somebody on deployment, because Reverend Jesse Jackson, he was on the screen, and he said, "Man, that guy's face looks messed up." And I was like, don't you ever, like disrespect. Jesse Jackson like that. Like, what is wrong with you? I mean his face probably looks like that because your ancestors beat him up when he was fighting for equal rights. Like, what are you talking about? And then of course, I'm speaking up and they're like, "Why are you always being offended about stuff?" Because y'all need to watch what you're saying! He's like, "All I said was that guy's face looks fucked up."

You're missing the point like, it's Jesse Jackson. Like that's just disrespectful.

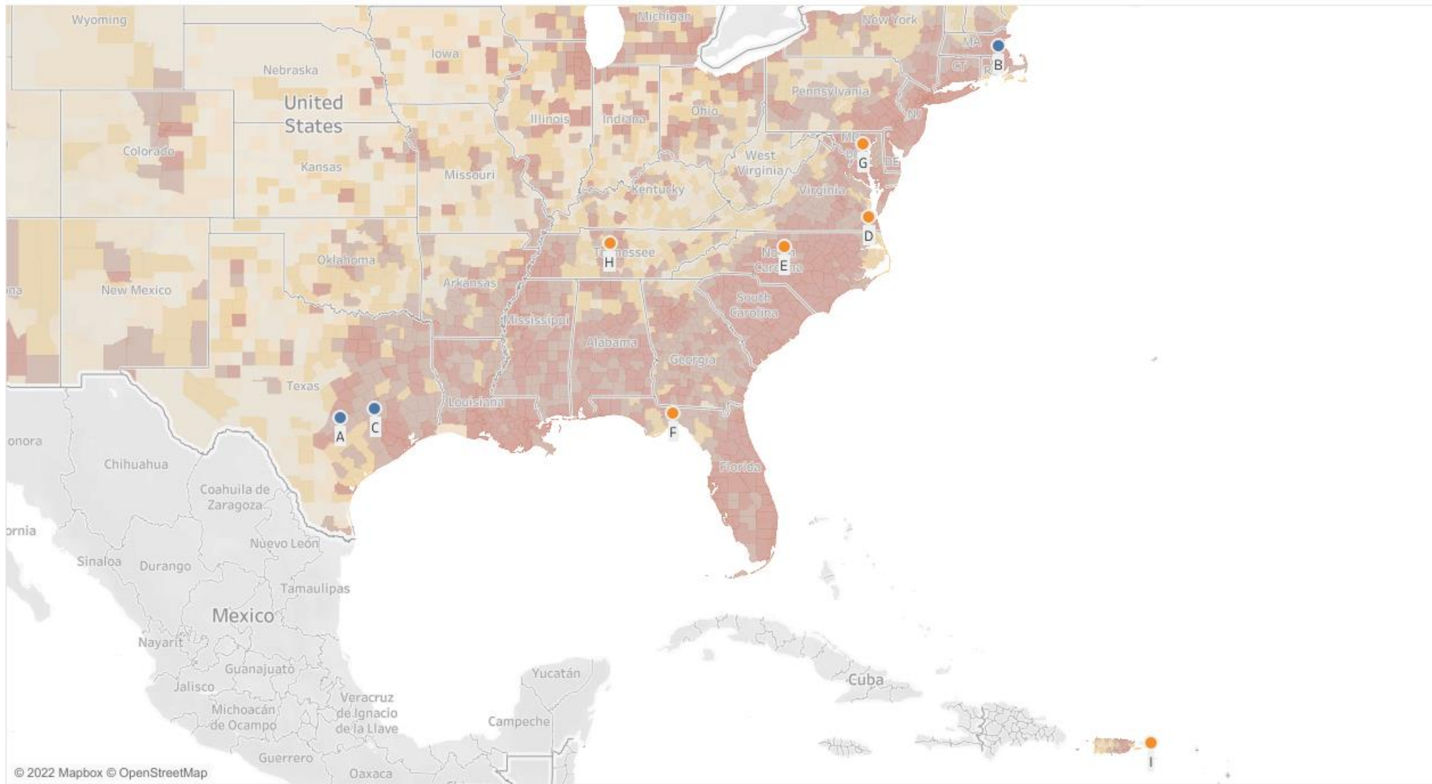
HBCUs originated in the late nineteenth century close to the conflict of the Civil War, when many Black Americans believed that schooling was a clear solution to accessing some of the broader human rights unaccessible to them at that time. One such institution was Lincoln University, formerly the Lincoln Institute, located in Missouri and funded by the 62nd Colored Infantry regiment of the US Army. Following the war, the few Black institutions in existence,

Lincoln, Cheney, and Wilbeforce, were tasked with educating the recently freed Black population of over four million people. In the subsequent years, religious organizations, the federal and state government and private donors created colleges that were more akin to primary and secondary schools than the universities and institutes they were named. Almost three decades later, the Morrill Land Act of 1890 took Indigenous lands and determined if states were to create segregated colleges and universities, they had a duty to provide institutions for Black Americans. As such, many agricultural and technical institutes were founded for predominantly Black student bodies with inferior funding and resources in comparison to other "land grant" colleges and universities who benefited from the legislation. Over 150 years since the founding of the first HBCU, the funding and resourcing for today's most competitive HBCUs remains disparate in comparison to other land grant institutions that serve the broader US population. Although endowments are not exclusive indicators of a college or university's wealth and ability to serve its student population, it is a sign of its resources and overall strength as an institution (Thelin, 2009).

Top 10 Endowments Colleges, Universities, & HBCUs Fig. 8



US Land Grant Institutions (Top 10 Highest Endowments) and US Black Population By County Fig. 9



POINT	INSTITUTION	HBCU (Y/N)	BLACK STUDENT POPULATION (%)	TUITION/FEES

A	**The University of Texas System Office**	N	7	$46,498.00
B	**Massachusetts Institute of Technology**	N	3.93	$57,986.00
C	**Texas A & M University-College Station**	N	5.2	$40,504.00
D	**Hampton University**	Y	93.15	$29,162.00
E	**North Carolina A&T State University**	Y	87.4	$22,783.62
F	**Florida A&M University**	Y	83	$22,254.00
G	**Morgan State University**	Y	79.6	$18,480.00
H	**Tennessee State University**	Y	74.1	$20,720.00

I	**Tennessee State University**	Y	74.8	$13,892.00

From the endowment data and the corresponding map, there is a clear gap between the growth of land grants like the University of Texas System and even combining all of the subsequently listed HBCUs. With the history of the HBCUs starting through the efforts and funding of the 62nd Colored Infantry, the investment and efforts of Black veterans today continue to go unrecognized as they are continuously funneled into institutions where the resources are relegated to predominantly white colleges and universities. Moreover, the legacy of the Morrill Land Act of 1890 is one rife with imperialist violence, having taken Indigenous land for the purposes of expanding the US empire and in the process, furthering the wealth gap and opportunities for both Black and Indigenous populations here and abroad. Several generations later, Black veterans like D.J, Lupita, Amber, and Jordan are some of the few who have been able to take advantage of universities with prestige. Jordan in particular, an alumnus of Spelman College, had her heart set on the institution and the combination of pressure to choose a financially lucrative major and lack of financial support made it impossible for her to complete her studies there. The initial investments made by Black veterans during the Civil War did not make the same financial impact due to similar mechanisms of racial domination and a necropolitical, necroeconomical framework that led Jordan to enlist to subsidize her bachelor's degree.

The microaggressions and more overt racial aggression directly mirrors some of the same issues Black GIs experienced over forty years ago in the barracks during the Vietnam War (Terry, 1984). With two years remaining in her contract as an inactive member, Jordan can still be called back if needed for service. Since her last deployment, she earned her real estate license

and located to San Diego; like Amber, many in the Navy favor the location close to the base there. Unsatisfied with her career in real estate, her support system reached out to her about the opportunity to finish her bachelor's degree:

> I'm very, very grateful for my friend, one of my friends from high school. When I was getting out [of active duty], and I was telling her I was getting out, I was kind of just working in San Diego. Honestly, I had given up on school, I was not going to go back. I was living in San Diego, and I was just working. And I was also a real estate agent as well. I would do open houses on the weekends. I never sold any houses or helped anybody to buy a house. So I went through all that whole process and spent all that money and really didn't get nothing back. But yeah, I was just living in San Diego. My friend went to Barnard and told me about the school of General Studies, which is the non-traditional undergraduate program for people that took a break, and they have a large military veteran population. So they kind of really like walked me through, like using my GI Bill and, how I can get access to like my benefits and basically, I went to Columbia for free. Well, my friend was telling me about applying. And I was like I'm not about to get into Colombia, like why she's wanting to apply why? Why are you telling me? But then I also have my cousin. She called me and she was like, "Jordan, what are you doing? Like, what are you doing out there in San Diego, like your whole plan was to go to the military because of the GI Bill, and use it for schools like, what are you doing?" So my cousin kind of called me on it because I thought I was too old.

Looking back at her time in San Diego, Jordan laughs at thinking she was too old to return to a bachelor's program emphasizing her thoughts about the 18–22-year-old narrative most higher education institutions push for its enrollees and graduates. Her thoughts reflect earlier musings

about the pressures she faced as a young woman at Spelman, eager to learn and forced to take coursework in a subject she had no interest in to appease her family’s worries about an economically sound future. Now with her bachelor's degree paid for through Columbia University’s partnership with Barnard College and her eight years in the Navy, Jordan could finish the liberal arts education she intended on having, albeit in a different social setting. The role of endowments becomes important here as well because endowments enable institutions like Columbia and their partner institutions to fund programs like the one that walked Jordan through the application process. Moreover, the funding and bureaucratic structure of the elite university system helps buffer some of the more annoying instances of utilizing benefits like the experiences of Amber or the late Brian Easley. However, the microaggressions Jordan experienced in the hierarchy-driven Navy persisted in the elite, predominantly white Barnard:

> Oh, well, being black and a woman in the military is… I don't care what no one says, You. You're you. What am I trying to say? I don't care what anyone says. You did not have a bad experience in the military compared to someone who was black who was Black and a woman that's crossing the intersectionality of that. And I don't care what you went through in the military. You did not have it as bad as someone who is a Black woman. And I stand on that. I don't care what anybody says. It was. It was very hard. You know, I just met some very nasty people in service like just very nasty people. Um, and this is my experience, so some people don't experience that, but I can't say anything but just repeat that I had some very nasty experiences. In theory, I just had no choice but to push through that stuff. But being like a Black woman in higher education, at least at Columbia. I mean, there were like, some type of like questionable experiences. Definitely not as bad as the military. But there were like, some questionable and it's like, I felt like I

would talk and then somebody would ask me, like, where, where am I from? I'm like Chicago, and they're like, “What part?” And I'm like, “Are you familiar with the area?” You know? And they're like, “Oh, no, I don't, I don't know the area.” You know? And I tried to explain this to a friend one time and she was telling me, I was being like, overly sensitive, and stuff, but like, you just, you just don't understand, like, the vibe I'm getting, when someone you know, it's like, they're trying to like, put me in a box. Then I actually had a weird experience with a dean. We had some very wealthy guest speakers come for a class. And so we were at her office hours. And she was asking me like, how did I think the presentation went. I was like, “Oh, it was very good. It was very good. Like, to meet them. They were super nice. No, I was not expecting them, you know, to be so open you know, inviting and stuff.” And I was like, “Man, they smell really good.” I said they smell really good. I was like, they smell really rich. And she was like, what does that mean? I was like, they smell good. Like they smell rich. It has a very distinct smell. And she called me prejudiced. And she's like a very senior dean. And I didn't like when we, after every class, at least at Columbia. I don't remember this being any other school. I don't know, maybe I didn't pay attention. But like, they asked you to, like write the class and like, what's your experience with them? I really wanted to put that there, but I knew she was gonna know it was me. Because if this was I was the only person that did that to. And I was like, I wasn't trying to be prejudiced. I was like, it was actually a compliment.

I honestly, I felt like for her to be a senior Dean. I definitely felt she was racist. So that was like that, but I didn't really have many of those experiences with professors. But I was shocked, like for her to be like a very senior dean at that school. Definitely. So she was racist. You know, like, I was getting very low grades on my own, like my writing

> assignments in her class. And there was, there was like, another Black guy in the class. And I was like, hey, you know, what did you get on the paper? I knew him. And he was like, yeah, I got he got like, a real low grade like C's too like, we're getting C's and like, this isn't like our first semester as Columbia, like the the lowest writing grades that we have gotten since we've been here, like no one else has given us this low of a writing grade. And she said, like, go to the writing center. And then we had a group assignment for the class. And when I knew I was talking to people, the group I'm like, What are y'all getting on the papers? And they're all white men and they're getting A's and B's. But nothing as bad as the military. I passed the class.

Comparing her experiences between her time at Barnard and in the military, the racial campus climate felt more manageable than what was possible for a Black woman in the armed forces. Of the four participants, Jordan speaks the most explicitly regarding the racial climate and the difficulty navigating the desire to attend higher education and the real costs associated with it. The senior dean, in her ability to act as a commanding officer (XO) in higher education, used her rank to separate both Jordan and another Black student, potentially driving them to become one of the many Black undergraduates who do not complete their degree (Reynoso, et. al, 2022). Jordan's perseverance, support system, and knowledge that there were still better experiences out there pushed her to complete her degree and begin working with an organization that focuses on the needs of Black veterans. When asked if the journey through the armed forces to secure higher education was worth it, Jordan offered this:

> I always feel like I get this question often, but I have no regrets. But like, if I can go back would I do it again? I mean, what choice do I have, you know, like the time has passed. But, um, I think that I do think that yes, I am getting the benefits now like the GI Bill,

> and, you know, whatever the benefits that I'm getting now. You know, like I'm working with, like, the organization that serves Black veterans. And, you know, it's put me in a unique position to like, tell my perspective of serving. But all of that is good. And I'm very grateful for Columbia, and like GI Bill, and my role at the nonprofit, but I just don't think you can put a price tag on mental health. Like, I don't think I should have. Why did I have to go through all of that just to get higher education? And everyone says the same thing, like all the time, like, well, "Look at where you're at now." And like, you know, still I should not have had to go through all of that, to get higher education. Like, yes, yes, you see the end result, but like all of that in between. I know, I keep repeating myself, but like, I just can't stress enough, you should not have to go through all of that to get higher education. Like it's just I don't know, I don't know, if you do if you could put a price on that. Especially when you're still dealing with certain things, you know. The deployment was like five years ago and I'm still dealing with things from that.

Although both her and D.J. agree on the physical and mental price of service, Jordan differs in that she disagrees in the comparative trade of financial security or higher education. Her emphasis on the term "price" highlights the necropolitical and therefore necroeconomic project, in order to obtain capital or other opportunities afforded to the oppressive class; one's labor and body have a price, Jordan, looking back is now unwilling to name hers considering some of the same racially violent experience took place while at Barnard. Rather than focus on subjugation, her reflection offers serious contemplation for Black youth who face limited funding options for higher education and are unwilling to pay the price up to their lives in exchange. In doing so, Jordan's repetition and adherence to her opinions generates strong resistance capital as the first, and perhaps the last in her family to serve (Yosso, 2016).

Conclusion

All four participants had vastly different journeys through higher education and the armed services and perceived their service as Black veterans through lenses often influenced by where they grew up, their racial identity formation, and their chosen military branch. That said, as Black veterans utilizing the post-9/11 GI Bill, their narratives have several throughlines that echo sentiments present in the stories of veterans from generations ago (Terry, 1984; Thompson, 2003). At points in their oral histories, many pointed out that although they themselves may not have experienced overt racism, sexism, or homophobia, they were aware of fellow Black GIs and other marginalized troops who had suffered during their service. Consistent across all four stories is the need for secure options as Black youth transition from K-12 education to higher education. Every Black veteran had some sort of support outside of the nuclear family to help each participant secure their post-secondary education. D.J. and his family relied heavily on the support of school administrators, a school counselor in particular, who saw her children in D.J. 's experience as a mixed race child in their predominantly white neighborhood of Washington state. Whereas Lupita utilized the navigational capital earned in the Army and the support system she had always looked for to find her purpose and used that as motivation to push towards a graduate degree, following in the footsteps of her middle class, academic family. Both Amber and Jordan shared similar experiences in the Navy, having started and stopped their bachelor's degrees either due to financial inability to pay or the social stressors of finally having independence. Amber's aunt and Jordan's cousin eventually convinced them that their age and the time gap between attending institutions was not a hindrance to their participation in higher education and that moving forward with their earlier goals was the best course of action. After D.J. and Jordan

spoke the most candidly regarding the real harm that service can pose to one's body and mind, there are more lingering questions regarding the necropolitical project of trading military service for the opportunity of higher education or vocational training. Given the opportunity to engage with more Black veterans and hear their stories, the literature and policies surrounding access to education would include the narratives of those who have largely been involved with the expansion and success of the political economy of Black education.

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