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### Publication Date

2013

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation



After the Blast: Building and Unbuilding Memories of Port Chicago

By

Javier Arbona

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Geography

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Professor Richard Walker, Chair

Professor Paul Groth

Professor Richard Cándida-Smith

Spring 2013

After the Blast: Building and Unbuilding Memories of Port Chicago

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Javier Arbona

Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in Geography

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Richard Walker, Chair

Located in the San Francisco Bay Area, Port Chicago came to international attention on July 17, 1944 when two ammunition ships exploded, killing 320 military personnel. Two-thirds of those killed were African American stevedores ordered to load munitions under a segregated Navy. It was the worst domestic disaster during World War II. Three weeks after the blast, hundreds of survivors refused to return to work in a spontaneous wildcat strike. Fifty of these men were convicted of mutiny charges by an all-white military tribunal, a catalyst for the 1948 Executive Order that desegregated the Armed Forces. When President Barack Obama signed the 2010 defense budget, he also approved a subsection that created a new national park: The Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial. While the creation of the national park could be conflated with a symbolic closure to these struggles, my research finds that the memory of Port Chicago is contested through various spatial imaginaries. Furthermore, because the site is ensconced within an active base, the military controls access to this memorial—a rare case. As such, it crystallizes usually unnoticed tensions between public space and national memory. I study these tensions at Port Chicago and other Bay Area sites of the World War II home front related to the popularized “Port Chicago story.” I find that different groups create their own narrative of the military past, sometimes challenging National Park Service narratives, and sometimes also exacerbating social and racial separation.

Para Susan Homar

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## *Acknowledgements*

Over the course of the last few years I have had the excellent fortune of counting on a large network of friends, family, mentors, colleagues, informants, funders, and more. This project was possible thanks to each and every one of them. In fact, they have also nourished me in ways that extend far beyond the boundaries of this study. Their revelations and their good humor, as well as their sharp critiques, have enriched my work-at-large. In addition, many people I encountered in the messy process of gathering data made contributions that I was unable to immediately write down for future reference. The following acknowledgements are almost certainly a partial summary. I apologize in advance for any inadvertent omissions.

I am grateful to my dissertation advisor and mentor Richard Walker for being an intellectual role model. I had encountered Walker's work while working on my master's degree at MIT; it was a thrill to be able to share my research with him and gain his expertise on what I had found. (I also admire his hat collection). I am honored to have Paul Groth as a reader on my committee. He, along with my master's adviser Anne Spirn, taught me how to understand the depth of meaning in ordinary landscapes. Richard Cándida-Smith, from the UC Berkeley history department, was my outside advisor—a role he far exceeded. He has made many important contributions to my intellectual formation. As the former director of the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) at UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library, Richard brought me into a space where I could absorb sources, methods, and expertise, as I detail further below.

The geography department at UC Berkeley has been my intellectual home since 2006. Michael Johns helped me formulate early research plans. Nathan Sayre served as my qualifying exam chair. Nathan was especially generous with his time for independent studies of texts and proposal discussion during the exam preparation, as well as being my 'teacher of teaching' in the department.

I am also very grateful to my fellow students over the course of my time there; I am lucky to be part of a supportive cohort. I am also fortunate to have a cast of peers—Berkeley geographers and honorary geographers from past and present—to count on, especially these San Francisco Bay Area and California-focused scholars (in no particular order): Lindsey Dillon, Sarah Knuth, Rachel Brahinsky, Alex Tarr, Nathan McClintock, Seth Lunine, John Stehlin, Sandy Brown, Trevor Paglen, Josh Jelly-Schapiro, Juan de Lara, David Pieper, Jenna Loyd, John Elrick, Emma Tome, Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern, Diana Negrín, Alex Schafran, Lisa Feldstein, and Haley Pollack. Additionally, I learned a great deal from the powerful conversations that arose from the Berkeley-Stanford City Group (now wisely re-baptized as Critical Urbanisms), where I also made great friends that extend beyond the halls of academia. I'm especially fortunate to have been able to work and make lifetime friendships with Austin Zeiderman, Robert Samet, Kate Chandler, and Hiba Bou Akar.

In the Fall of 2012, I was the department's instructor in UC Berkeley's Urban Field Studies of the San Francisco Bay Area. Friday after Friday, I had the pleasure of walking the spaces of the Bay Area with a brilliant bunch of undergraduate students, including some of the places discussed in this investigation. I want to thank my students in that course because their questions and observations fed my research. The group is: Vanessa Fernandez, Max Zakzook, Ellie Broadman, Michael Schefers, Megan Eckard, Marie Lefebvre, Robert Lee, Anika Rice, and Alyssa Kies.

Much that happens behind the scenes in an academic department makes our research



work seem effortless when, in fact, a number of people keep the ship steady every single day. My thanks to the (retired and current) staff of the geography department: Nat Vonnegut, Delores Dillard, Carol Page, Marjorie Ensor, Darin Jensen, Mike Jones, Dan Plumlee, and Kristen Vogt.

I am also grateful to a number of archivists, curators, and librarians. Their crucial guidance and institutional memory of the collections are the backbone of the type of work represented in this study. My appreciation goes to: Theresa Salazar and Susan Snyder, from the Bancroft Library; Robert Glass, National Archives, San Bruno; Jim Kern, Vallejo Naval and Historical Museum; and last, but not least, Isabel Ziegler and Ric Borjes, National Park Service. For access to the Port Chicago Memorial and the Rosie the Riveter National Park resources, I thank the staff and officials of the National Park Service, including (but not limited to): Superintendent Tom Leatherman, Morgan Smith, Ed Bastien, Raphael Allen, Betty Reid Soskin, and Matt Holmes. I would also like to recognize the valuable research help from Port Chicago, Concord, and Bay Point historians Dr. Robert Allen, Dean McLeod, and John Keibel. Ray O'Brien of the Bay Point Historical Society shared important sites and contacts at an early stage of research. In addition, Nancy Rowe has generously welcomed me into her daily routine and has met with me several times to share the work and archive of her father, the late artist Frank Rowe. Gratitude is also due to the Friends of Port Chicago, Spencer Sikes II, and Rev. Diana McDaniel, all of whom shared family histories, research materials, and contacts.

This work has also been made possible because I was the recipient of a Ford Foundation Dissertation Fellowship and a Bancroft Library Summer Study Award, both of which significantly allowed me more time and space to complete the research and writing.

Various professional networks have influenced this project. The Ford Foundation has given me a rewarding extended family of fellow-scholars who offered mentorship, support, and advice. At Berkeley, I was a member of the UC Diversity Initiative for Graduate Study in the Social Sciences (UC-DIGSSS), supported by the University of California and the National Science Foundation, which provided me with early funding for expenses in my doctoral program and was a key factor in my decision to attend UC. Throughout my time at Cal, I often turned to program director Gloria Chun for her sage wisdom. Beyond the financial rewards, this initiative also extended early and vital dissertation help in the form of the (fully funded) UC-DIGSSS conference in Los Angeles, where attendees focused on prospectus writing. I am grateful to UCLA's Tom Gillespie for his advice at this conference.

During my dissertation research, I had the opportunity to collaborate with the Regional Oral History Office as a specialist on the Rosie the Riveter WWII Home Front Project. I am a proud alumni of the 2010 ROHO Oral History Summer Institute, and a number of people at ROHO have made a deep impact on my work. I owe an enormous debt to David Dunham, manager of the World War II project, who I now count as a good friend. My thanks also go to Vic Geraci, Lisa Rubens, Robin Li, Martin Meeker, Sam Redman, Mark Westlye, Julie Stein, and Sarah Selvidge for their teachings, leads, suggestions, and generosity.

Several speaking venues over the course of the last few years have been important for me as spaces to explore my ideas and receive critical feedback. These opportunities always produce excellent questions, sometimes from unknown audience members. Though they may not know how much they have added to the process, I would like to thank all of them for their contribution to my work. I would equally like to thank all of the organizers of these talks for the opportunity and the valuable feedback they have given me. In April 2011, I presented at "Race, Space, and Nature," a one-day symposium at UC Berkeley organized by Jade Sasser, Rachel Brahinsky, and Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern. In May 2011, I was part of a two-day conference called "Race,

Radicalism, and Repression on the Pacific Coast and Beyond” at the University of Washington, Seattle, organized by Moon Ho Jung. I presented in the “Waterfront Confrontations” panel. James Gregory served as a respondent; his comments on my paper helped me re-evaluate the way these chapters were organized. Lynn Thomas served as the session chair, and co-panelist Peter Cole has since become a friend who always has smart advice. In October 2011, I discussed my work on the Cultural Studies panel at the Conference of Ford Fellows, moderated by Leonard Brown, who pointed out some holes in World War II data that I was unaware of. In November 2011, I talked about my work at the Bay Area Working Group dinner, organized by geography graduate students. In February 2012, I presented as part of “Lewisian Landscapes: Axioms for Reading a Cultural Geography Transformed,” a session at the Association of American Geographers Annual Conference organized by David Prytherch and Richard Schein. In November 2012, I gave a Bancroft Library Round Table talk, organized by David Kessler and Baiba Strads. In January 2013, I spoke at the California Studies Dinner, moderated by Charles Wollenberg. I have received invaluable comments and criticism from all of these events. (Crucial funds for travel and conference registration have come from UC Berkeley and a California College of the Arts faculty travel grant.)

And in 2010 I co-organized a panel on “Decoding Military Landscapes” with Bryan Finoki and Nick Sowers for the “Toward a Just Metropolis” conference at UC Berkeley. Since then, the three of us have collaborated as a group known as “Demilit” on experimental ways of understanding military landscapes, including through artistic means. The collaboration has been extremely rewarding. More importantly, Nick and Bryan have become two of my closest friends—but they’re not afraid to give me a kick in the pants when needed.

At a crucial moment in this investigation, my CCA colleague Bill Littmann joined me for a tour through the military peripheries of the Bay Area, and the resulting conversation helped shape this study more than he knows. Similarly, my friend and colleague Millie Concepción always seems to pass through Berkeley just at the right time with some words of advice. David Gissen and Rachel Schreiber have become close confidants in the last few years, always happy to share their academic seasoning, their books, and their warm home. Jordan Hale has been rooting from afar (Toronto) and it’s always much appreciated.

Finally, I couldn’t have done this without my best friends and tight-knit family. Yanni Loukissas, Cecilia Enjuto, Pedro García-Caro, Deepak Lamba, Firuzeh Shokooh, and Toma Barylak always deliver smiles, joy, and wisdom when most needed. Meanwhile, my *comuna* pals are like dear siblings: Juan Calaf, Jen Soriano, Daniel Colón, and Emily Wang. As my housemates for the first half of the PhD program, Juan and Jen always had my back. Emily and Daniel shared their New Haven home with me while I wrote part of my dissertation prospectus in the summer of 2009. And my close family has always offered unwavering support: Susan Homar, Alejandro Arbona, Rebeca Arbona, Jeff Goodman, Sofia Goodman, Marcus Goodman, Laura Homar, Andrea Pérez, Cecilia Pérez, Efraín Barradas, Iñaki Rodeño, Danny Yeung, Beverly Gaylord, Catherine Poon, Warren Winsness, Melissa Manuevo, Erik Manuevo, and the youngest of all, Cole. I know that the completion of this UC Berkeley degree especially gratifies my father-in-law Danny, who is a Cal alum. *Go Bears!* Of course, I couldn’t be happier than to share this accomplishment with my best friend—and the most ruthless of editors (!!!)—my wife, Bernice Yeung.

Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial.

– *Herman Melville*

I think it's still going to be true that what gets remembered is dependent upon those doing the remembering.

– *Betty Reid Soskin*

## Introduction – Spaces for Narrating “The Port Chicago Story”

On July 17, 2010, Representative George Miller lifted a cartoonish pair of giant scissors lent by the city of Concord’s Chamber of Commerce. Flanked by community leaders and local elected officials, Miller pretended to cut the red ribbon as cameras captured the theatrics (the outsized scissors were just for comedic effect). After a few seconds, the real scissors materialized to finish the deed. Standing on a temporary stage erected for this occasion, the group thus inaugurated a five-acre U.S. national park on the outskirts of the San Francisco Bay Area.<sup>1</sup> Miller had worked for almost two decades from his perch as a powerful Democrat from California in the U.S. House to spearhead the creation of this national park: The Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial. With the symbolic cutting of the ribbon and several speeches, he accomplished a final step, if also a largely ceremonial one, in a protracted bureaucratic process to preserve the site for posterity.

Previously, when President Barack Obama officially approved the U.S. military’s budget on October 28, 2009 for the upcoming fiscal year, he also signed the Miller-backed Port Chicago park into law.<sup>2</sup> The omnibus spending bill allocated approximately \$130 billion for two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, among other military expenditures and covert operations. Deep within the bill was a short clause, under provisions for military construction, which transferred land from the Department of Defense to the Department of the Interior. “Section 2853” established the Port Chicago Memorial—a structure that was originally built in 1994—as the 392<sup>nd</sup> national park in the United States, a permanent status as a “full unit” of the nation’s federal parks.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike other larger-than-life national parks that might spring to mind, such as the Grand Canyon or the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, the Port Chicago space is a somber and relatively small federal intervention. The site is akin to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in

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<sup>1</sup> “The Port Chicago Disaster, 66 Years Ago,” *Claycord.com*, July 17, 2010, <http://claycord.com/2010/07/17/the-port-chicago-disaster-66-years-ago-today/>.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Fimrite, “Port Chicago Gains National Park Status,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, November 11, 2009, [http://articles.sfgate.com/2009-11-11/bay-area/17179018\\_1\\_black-sailors-park-ranger-port-chicago](http://articles.sfgate.com/2009-11-11/bay-area/17179018_1_black-sailors-park-ranger-port-chicago).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*; Ike Skelton, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010*, 2009.

Washington D.C., for example, which is also a memorial protected as a national park unit. But what does the Port Chicago Memorial seek to preserve?

## The Memory of Port Chicago

The Port Chicago Memorial was ostensibly built to recognize the most serious home front disaster during World War II, when a munitions explosion ripped through this site as segregated naval units were loading ships, at a time of institutional racism under Jim Crow. During the war, the site was a portion of the Port Chicago naval magazine and continues to be part of a larger military base up to the time of this writing. The site is potentially unique in the United States territorial expanse, perhaps the only national park located on an active military installation—one that is still used to ship weapons overseas.

The 1944 Port Chicago explosion killed 320 and wounded 390. 202 of those killed were African American sailors who toiled as munitions loaders, one of the few duties that Blacks were allowed to have in the Navy. 233 Black enlisted men were wounded.<sup>4</sup>

But what—and who, exactly—is to be remembered at Port Chicago? This is the question that spurs this dissertation. While memory can be conveyed through various forms of media (memorials being one of these), if it were not for the events that *followed* this explosion, there would likely not be a federally protected public space at the site of the explosion.

Three weeks after the Port Chicago explosion, 258 African American survivors, reassigned to service in the nearby city of Vallejo, refused an order to board a vessel that would have taken them across a channel to the Mare Island ammunition dept. They resisted the segregated conditions of military labor, including the loading of munitions, in what could be called a “wildcat” strike that was long simmering.<sup>5</sup>

As has been previously studied by several others before me, hundreds of these survivors were dishonorably discharged—a marred status that was later reduced, but not reversed. The most serious punishment, however, was handed down to fifty of the men, who were swiftly convicted of a “mutiny” by an all-white military tribunal in a trial staged by the Navy to attract public favor for the punitive policies. The so-called mutiny, and the attention it garnered, became one of the main factors for the subsequent desegregation of the Armed Forces in 1948.<sup>6</sup>

Later on, despite the dangers proven by the explosion and vocal opposition from local residents for over a decade after the Korean War, the Department of Defense persuaded Congress to approve an expansion of the Concord base, by then the major transshipment point of weapons to the Pacific. Port Chicago became a vast nuclear weapons complex, the Concord Naval Weapons Station, displacing thousands from the town of Port Chicago itself, while also attracting significant anti-war protests during the Vietnam and Reagan eras.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Robert L. Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of The Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2006), 64.

<sup>5</sup> Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of The Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History*, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.; Charles Wollenberg, “Blacks Vs. Navy Blue: The Mare Island Mutiny Court Martial,” *California History* 58, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 62–75; Elaine Elinson and Stan Yogi, *Wherever There’s A Fight: How Runaway Slaves, Suffragists, Immigrants, Strikers, And Poets Shaped Civil Liberties In California* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2009); Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), 264–266.

<sup>7</sup> John Keibel, *Behind the Barbed Wire: History Of Naval Weapons Station Concord* (Concord: John A. Keibel, 2009); Dean L. McLeod, *Port Chicago, Images of America* (Arcadia Publishing, 2007); Betty Reid Soskin,

These various episodes I have briefly sketched, from World War II disaster to Cold War stage, combine together into a complex tapestry worthy of study, given the various actors who jostle for exposure in the memorial spaces reclaimed as part of a saga related, in different ways, to the spark set off at Port Chicago in 1944.



*Image 1: U.S. Rep. George Miller leads the inauguration of the Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial, Concord, as a full unit of the U.S. National Parks on July 17, 2010. (Office of Congressman George Miller, licensed under CC BY 2.0).*

## **The Many Port Chicago Stories**

Given the fact that Obama signed the park's legislation, some park rangers I met during my early research had the hope that the President himself would attend the park's inauguration ceremonies on the day of the remembrance and anniversary of the explosion. They knew, however, that there were higher priorities, such as the gushing British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, not to mention Obama's various duties overseeing ongoing wars abroad as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. But as it happened, instead of either visiting the Gulf Coast or California, the first family went on a vacation that very same weekend, coincidentally hiking in another national park at Acadia, Maine.<sup>8</sup>

It might have been especially symbolic if the President, the First Lady, or both, had attended the Port Chicago ceremonies. The Obamas are the first African American family in the White House, which is, after all, a structure built with slave labor. And the 1944 Port Chicago explosion is interpreted, including by rangers at the memorial site, as having played a catalyst role in the social changes that eventually led the way to Obama's historic election in 2008. The fact that Obama is the first African American commander of the U.S. armed forces can be traced back, coursing through a long and tortured chain of civil rights abuses and victories, to the social changes unleashed, partly, at places of military repression against Blacks during World War II. These sites of social repression—and radicalism—include installations that experienced

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Rosie the Riveter World War II American Home Front Oral History Project, interview by Javier Arbona, Sarah Selvidge, and Julie Stein, 2010, 35–36, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>8</sup> “Obama Maine Visit: First Family Heads To Acadia National Park Vacation,” *Huffington Post*, July 16, 2010, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/07/16/obama-maine-visit-first-f\\_n\\_648654.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/07/16/obama-maine-visit-first-f_n_648654.html).

uprisings, places as dispersed as Fort Lawton (Seattle), Guam, Oahu, and the main subjects of this dissertation, the San Francisco Bay Area's two ammunition depots at Port Chicago and Mare Island.

Partly to defuse any further racial strife in their ranks, the Navy was the first branch to integrate in 1946. Along with a number of other race conflicts in the military during the war, the Port Chicago strike played a central role in the change of policy.<sup>9</sup> In the words of Port Chicago historian Robert Allen: "The new political climate after the war played a part, generating popular support for change. But the rebelling by the Port Chicago seamen dramatically showed that segregation was a bankrupt policy that fueled the flames of its own destruction."<sup>10</sup> The entire military had no choice but to follow suit. President Harry S. Truman signed an executive order in 1948 integrating the military, under pressure from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, among others.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, back when Black personnel only were allowed to work jobs like messmen, cooks, and munitions handlers, and were forced to live in segregated barracks under white supervision, it would have been practically impossible to imagine an African American commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

The Port Chicago site of the national park marks a geographical coordinate—a ground zero claimed by various constituencies. Representatives of these communities seek admittance into a national heritage, or what is often referred to in different circles and the popular media, as well as throughout the interpretive retellings of National Park Service, as "the Port Chicago story." Different people vie for a kind of cultural citizenship by claiming to belong in the story and that story belonging to them.<sup>12</sup> The memorial is a gravitational center, in many ways, yet it could also be understood as a vacuum. It is, I argue, both. The memorial preserves a story—several stories, in fact—that are, for better or worse, unfamiliar to most Americans. At the same time, the memorial is like a vault that locks away various central and disputed elements within the most widely told narratives that compete for public attention. In the end, as I show in this study, the ways of telling and claiming a part of the Port Chicago story are also geographically variable, but not all the sites related to the Port Chicago narratives are equally recognized or protected. The memorial's parcel and other nearby spaces connected to the memorial site's history have repeatedly been the settings for national-headline events since the December 7, 1941 Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and U.S. entry into World War II. In my research work, I have heard and read the voices of several people who refer to an elusive place that they can locate in their memories more than in physical space. They retrieve it as the detonation spot of many disparate and lasting social changes, some positive and others not so.

As George Miller said in a statement: "Port Chicago is not just a place—it is a powerful story."<sup>13</sup> Yet as I argue in this dissertation, Port Chicago is almost nothing else *but* a geographical

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<sup>9</sup> There has been insufficient study of race conflicts—including work stoppages and riots—during the period of World War II. Incidents such as the Christmas riots on Guam in 1944 and the Vallejo riots in 1942 (further discussed in this study) remain nearly forgotten, even for archivists I spoke with during my research. For a start, consult Gerald Astor, *The Right to Fight: A History of African Americans in the Military* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of The Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History*, 2006, 146.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 145–147.

<sup>12</sup> The concept of "cultural citizenship" is elaborated in Chapter 2 – Imaginaries and Memory.

<sup>13</sup> George Miller, "Miller's Legislation Created Newest National Park," July 16, 2010, <http://georgemiller.house.gov/press-release/miller%E2%80%99s-legislation-created-newest-national-park>. See also George Miller, "Port Chicago Memorial Designated as Unit of the National Parks Service," October 29, 2009, <http://georgemiller.house.gov/press-release/port-chicago-memorial-designated-unit-national-parks-service>.

fiction of sorts. It certainly *is* a story, but one that is barely tangible, as I will demonstrate, because the places themselves have been suspiciously and systematically scrubbed from maps and off the ground—or changed irrecoverably to suit more powerful narrators. And yet, despite the losses, the scattered remnants of the past constitute allegorical ruins, to rephrase a Walter Benjamin notion, from which to construct a new memory that disrupts the tranquility with which the past has been mythologized and frozen in space and time.<sup>14</sup>

## Imaginarities of Port Chicago

This study unfolds over three major case studies. But first, three short chapters create the armature for the investigation, and precede the chapters encompassing the case studies. Chapter 1 – The Politics of Memorials explains the relevance of this project in the context of recent politics in the location and construction of memorials. Chapter 2 – Imaginarities and Memory is a theoretical framework that elucidates my conceptual approach to the geographical imagination of memory and memorials. Chapter 3 – A Brief History of the Naval Bay is a background on the historical dimensions of Navy racism in the San Francisco Bay Area. After the central case studies comes a brief concluding essay – An Archipelago of Memory. The three main chapters present case studies of urban and geographical “imaginarities.” I explain these imaginaries—a term I define further in the theoretical framework—as spaces and spatial images that transmit the memory of Port Chicago.

Although making ancillary references and connections to other places of memory, I examine most closely the following three cases: first, the designated Port Chicago Memorial; second, an artist’s impression of segregation in the military; and third, a revitalized “shoreline preserve” at Mare Island. Each one of these three imaginaries, and each chapter where they are individually taken up, corresponds to a key aspect in the sequence of events that have come to fill what various groups loosely call “the Port Chicago story.”

On the one hand, these three cases, or geographical imaginaries, have a symbolic dimension. In other words, they succinctly represent long histories of larger and more expansive social movements or political battles. On the other hand, they are, in and of themselves, material objects that were forged through struggles over the shape and appearance of each one. In the former sense, as symbols, they are registers of ongoing struggles over notions of cultural citizenship and what such citizenship ensures the bearer in terms of different categories of individual rights: civil, spatial, and labor. In this study, then, the three case studies also roughly correspond to these categories of citizenship rights, even if at times each category involves more than one of these kinds of rights claims. As collective products, the imaginaries I study are projective visions of what these rights might look and feel like on an embodied level. They are

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<sup>14</sup> Benjamin writes that: “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.” In this portion, I also draw from the work of architecture historian and theorist Naomi Stead, who explains how Benjamin’s idea of ruination constitutes a historical materialist analysis in which the ruin can be used to question its “other:” monumentality. Contrary to the atemporal view of ruins as timeless rubble, perhaps best exemplified, according to Stead, in the totalitarian symbolic ruins staged by Nazi architect Albert Speer, she writes that “the idea that ruination, conceived as a means of revealing the bare bones of truth, stripped of myth and spectacle to a positive state of ‘poverty’, remains a valuable critical tool.” Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, Art and Media Studies (Verso, 2003), 178; Naomi Stead, “The Value of Ruins: Allegories of Destruction in Benjamin and Speer,” *Form/Work: An Interdisciplinary Journal of the Built Environment* no. 6 (October 2003): 51–64.



both formal and affective.<sup>15</sup>

The entry of these imaginaries—and correspondingly, their representative members of the public—into the meaning of the Port Chicago story is often sorely contested, as I chronicle. These entries are most often disputed over the way in which racism and civil rights struggles are portrayed. Through my reading of these imaginaries, I show that such racialized struggles for inclusion in dominant narratives are often waged with the production of interdependent spaces, landscapes, memories, and images.

## Case Studies

The first of the case studies, Chapter 4 – Whiteout: The Social Production of Port Chicago Memorials, tells the narrative of the 1944 naval magazine explosion, albeit told *through* the spaces of the national memorial at the former Port Chicago naval magazine, and the remembrance of fallen military personnel at the site. It also explores the reverberations of the explosion for the sailors who survived and who went on, along with the help of family and allies, to make the memorial a part of an incomplete struggle to reclaim the stolen civil rights of penalized World War II veterans like themselves.

The second case study, Chapter 5 – “It was a Bloody Mess:” Vallejo’s 1942 Race Revolts and the Port Chicago Sailors’ Strike, corresponds to an almost forgotten antecedent to the kinds of race tensions that underpinned the decision by African American stevedores to go on strike after the Port Chicago explosion. The chapter shows how this hypothesis was first articulated through a marriage of scholarly research and images in the work of Bay Area graphic artist Frank Rowe. At the same time, the strife exposed in Rowe’s artwork is also a living document calling for urban spatial justice and equality.

The third case study, Chapter 6 – Vallejo as Port Chicago’s Anti-Memorial, revolves around the reclamation of Mare Island’s ammunition depot and shoreline as an historical park. The so-called Shoreline Preserve is a space where the Port Chicago sailors’ strike is not only remembered as a civil rights issue, but also as a labor struggle. At the same time, the original site in Vallejo where the wildcat strike took place, an alternate “ground zero” to the stories told more frequently at the Port Chicago National Memorial, has been transformed beyond recognition. It also remains unmarked and practically unknown.

Altogether, the central issue I tackle is how various people stake claims to national

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<sup>15</sup> Here, I have Derek Gregory’s work on Edward Said and “imaginative geographies” in mind. Gregory writes about Edward Said’s reassessment of the twined power of spatiality and visuality in culture: “(Said’s) are profoundly ideological landscapes whose representations of space are entangled with relations of power. They cannot be counterposed to a ‘more true and more real’ geography whose objective fixity is disclosed through the technologies of science - for example - because those technologies are always and everywhere technocultures: they are embedded in distinctive regimes (and geographies) of truth too, and their representations are also partial and situated.” That is, Gregory takes Said to mean that there is no prior fixed, material environment—or a geographical truth—that is then mapped or revealed through technology. Instead, the material and representational are both “entangled” with a partial and situated truth convenient for power to succeed. See: Derek Gregory, “Imaginative Geographies,” *Progress in Human Geography* 19, no. 4 (December 1, 1995): 447 – 485; Edward W. Said, “Invention, Memory, and Place,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (January 1, 2000): 175–192; Edward Said, “Memory, Inequality, and Power: Palestine and the Universality of Human Rights,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* no. 24 (January 1, 2004): 15–33. On the notion of affect and the built environment, see Adrian Parr, *Hijacking Sustainability* (MIT Press, 2009).

heritage and do so, in tandem with their rhetorical appeals, by making their claims spatial.<sup>16</sup> To make matters more complicated, these claims on national heritage engage uneasily, or at times even lionize, the same military power of which the claimants were victims. Moreover, the particular kind of heritage reclaimed in this case may be in the past, but the struggles of the constituencies I study are unfinished, as are the forms of cultural citizenship they seek to secure.

The lack of finality to these strains of the Port Chicago story places the role of official and unofficial memorials in tension. Memorial architecture, then, gets used to close and “interiorize” (to borrow a term from the design argot) what is actually contested and open. In other words, sometimes a memorial is attained, but falls short of inclusivity in the socially recognized heritage. For one park ranger, Betty Reid Soskin, who personally entertained some of the Port Chicago sailors in her Berkeley home on the very day of the explosion, “It has always been an unfinished story for me, kind of haunting. It’s one of the untold stories that has no ending for me.”<sup>17</sup>

In sum, in this research study, I present a geography of the major—and often competing—claims for different spaces to convey the Port Chicago story. The following investigation is a map of sorts—a diagram to show what are the different and discontinuous spaces where the Port Chicago story unfolded, and in fact, unbeknownst to most people, still unfolds.

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<sup>16</sup> On the notion of “heritage” in this project, see the theoretical framework in Chapter 2 – Imaginaries and Memory.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Fimrite, “Port Chicago Gains National Park Status”; see also Soskin, *Rosie the Riveter World War II American Home Front Oral History Project*, 26.

## Chapter 1 – The Politics of Memorials

The politics of memorials in the United States are back in the national and academic spotlights. The September 11, 2001 attacks and another decade of rebooted U.S. global wars, each in their own ways, set off new waves of national memorialization and thus a newfound interest in an old topic. As of May 2012, over 5,900 U.S. soldiers have been killed in widely opposed wars since 2001; thousands more have returned with severe physical and psychological scars.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the alarming numbers of veterans of these wars committing suicide has received national news coverage. In 2011, on the tenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, Barack Obama led the inaugural ceremonies at Lower Manhattan's September 11 memorial, the site of the destroyed World Trade Center. Of course, memorials are ever-present in the history of U.S. global military power and its triumphalist culture.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, all the way from its earliest days, the American nation has witnessed numerous disputes over the necessity of memorials.

As Kirk Savage writes:

*“Monuments are good for nothing,” a North Carolina Congressman declared in 1800. In the founding years of the United States, many argued that democracy and the spread of literacy had made commemorative rituals and monuments obsolete, a leftover from the days of monarchy and superstition. Reflecting on Congress's reluctance to fund a monument to George Washington, John Quincy Adams famously observed that “democracy has no monuments.” “True memory,” many*

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<sup>1</sup> “Global War on Terrorism: Casualties by Military Service Component—Active, Guard and Reserve, October 7, 2001 Through May 14, 2012” (Defense Manpower Data Center, May 14, 2012), [http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/CASUALTY/gwot\\_component.pdf](http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/CASUALTY/gwot_component.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

*Americans liked to claim, lay not in a pile of dead stones but in the living hearts of the people.*<sup>3</sup>

Savage reminds us that despite these objections to stodgy mausoleums seemingly unfit for a democracy, the United States has never shied away from erecting memorials. In fact, the country has what one might call an over-production of memorials—a veritable glut of commemorative structures, to the point that memory is spread like a thin veneer. To wit, on one of my research visits to an historical society in the small California town of Martinez, I walked out of the train station only to bump into a September 11 memorial made with two steel girders from Manhattan’s destroyed World Trade Center—a place 2,800 miles away, and one of many such September 11 memorials all over U.S. towns. Similarly, in a global context, the Al Qaeda train bombings in Istanbul, Madrid, and London during the decade after September 11 also have been permanently commemorated with architectural interventions. And to these 9/11 structures one can add a recent trend: the numerous, and highly contested, museums and “education centers” that often sit near a new breed of memorials, or revitalized ones.<sup>4</sup> In parallel, the Port Chicago Memorial is projected to receive its own education center for visitors in the coming years.

In this chapter, and throughout this study, I argue that despite such a kind of over-supply of commemorative architecture from different periods, one finds alarming omissions if one looks carefully at the distribution of memory at Bay Area sites related to the Port Chicago narratives. These blanks in memorial coverage are not merely due to a lack of attention. Of course, no one that I have met in the course of research tires of reminding me that there is little surprise in such omissions. After all, the entire history of the construction of memorials and monuments, especially war-related ones, is full of cases where a problematic or undesirable past is deliberately written-over through the medium of architecture and memorial space. Or as Edward Said writes: “memories of the past are shaped in accordance with a certain notion of what ‘we’ or, for that matter, ‘they’ really are.”<sup>5</sup>

My concern is neither to show that there are too many or too few memorials. Nor is the goal to point to the gaps as a way to debunk a national mythology, although there will certainly be an effort to complicate received notions along the way. I aspire to more nuances. As a geographer with a background in architecture, I want to show, first of all, how spatial discontinuity and architectural design are deliberately used in order to cement such omissions in public history. Perhaps in the process, I can ask designers and the public to rethink how such spaces are created and how they participate in their creation. Moreover, I want to heighten informal or alternate kinds of architecture (spatial tours, images, and grassroots memorials, for example) that are often created by people in their everyday lives to subvert the cemented narratives, yet usually remain unacknowledged, unprotected, and even lost over time.

In addition, without making grandiose claims about all of the history of commemoration, I would like to discuss, through study of the Port Chicago story, how I found that the military plays an often unnoticed role in consecrating memory and heritage in order to sustain their own hegemony in foreign *and* domestic affairs. In particular, even though there are countless

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<sup>3</sup> Kirk Savage, “History, Memory, and Monuments: An Overview of the Scholarly Literature on Commemoration,” *National Park Service*, accessed July 30, 2010, <http://www.nps.gov/history/history/resedu/savage.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Kirk Savage, “The ‘Education Center’ at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” May 26, 2012, <http://www.kirksavage.pitt.edu/?p=368>.

<sup>5</sup> Said, “Invention, Memory, and Place,” 177.

examples of such military narratives, I show how the latest effort to control heritage is by shuttering the World War II past, while the last living veterans of that war pass away. The case of the Port Chicago story reveals the little discussed ways in which military culture seeps into what may look to be, at first glance, public and private practices of mourning, memory, and political activity seemingly devoid of militarism.

The site where the Port Chicago national park sits and other discontinuous spaces where the overarching story unfolded—as well as the imagination of such spaces—reveal many ideas. There are three overarching findings in my research on Port Chicago. I briefly list each one below.

The spaces I have studied show, first of all, the marks of deep racial and class divides over how to recall the lost “Port Chicagos,” which I pluralized in this instance to express how various constituencies retell their story.

Second, these spaces demonstrate a larger struggle. On the one hand, they belie a certain “memorycide,” an exercise in amnesia enacted through geographical erasures.<sup>6</sup> These blind spots are comparable to what Edward Said similarly called, in the Palestinian context, a “tremendous assault on memory” through architectural means of separation and invisibility.<sup>7</sup> I often refer to these throughout my work with a medical term for partial visual obstructions: “scotomas.” And yet, at the same time, one finds fragments of sub-narratives that push back against such blindness.

Third, the spaces of the Port Chicago story show traces of David-versus-Goliath struggles of resistance to the militarism which occupants of these spaces have been ensnarled in.

Throughout the study, I show how all three of these characteristics intertwine, so that one can see how racism, memory, and militarism prop each other up, especially through spatial mechanisms—a wider lesson to take away and that might compare with other contexts beyond the scope of this study.

## **World War II, Civil Rights, and the “Post-Racial” Era**

The time is ripe for a project such as the present one. This writing comes at a moment when certain threads of U.S. national memory are commonly perceived in the public eye to be at an end point. The brackets of such “finished” memories often get placed, on one end, at the outbreak of World War II—a time when Jim Crow segregation was official policy in the military—and, on the other end, at the 2008 election of Obama as president and by extension, head of the military.

A symbolism placed in the built environment communicates that the nation has arrived at such a finish line. The landscape itself broadcasts the completed experience initiated at the outbreak of World War II. In addition, a popular concept, the “post-racial,” arrives in books and the media to define the closure of past disputes, with an increasing circulation in everyday discourses. And yet my research on memorials, both federally designated and not, reveals

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<sup>6</sup> I thank Bryan Finoki for introducing me to the idea of “memorycide.” An example of the application of the term memorycide also appears in Albert Farid Henry Naccache, “Beirut’s Memorycide: Hear No Evil, See No Evil,” in *Archaeology Under Fire: Nationalism, Politics And Heritage In The Eastern Mediterranean And Middle East*, ed. Lynn Meskell, Archaeology, Politics, Anthropology (Routledge, 1998), 140–158.

<sup>7</sup> Said, “Memory, Inequality, and Power: Palestine and the Universality of Human Rights,” 24.

otherwise.<sup>8</sup> In the following paragraphs, I would now like to survey some of the salient elements in recent memorial history that give urgency to the present work.

May 29, 2004, marked the inauguration of the World War II Memorial on the National Mall in Washington D.C. The World War II Memorial is a catch-all: a place conceived by veterans and politicians as an ambitious design that claims to honor every single one of the service members of the Armed Forces, the “support of countless millions on the home front,” and the 405,399 killed in combat.<sup>9</sup> Not only vast in scope, this memorial is controversial for its architectural pomposity and has been roundly scorned by architecture critics, who were especially opposed to the return to a classical design vocabulary.<sup>10</sup>

Designed by Friedrich St. Florian, the World War II Memorial enjoys a unique location on the national Mall, placed on a linear axis between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. Thus displayed on par with presidents and “founding fathers,” the throwback and bombast of St. Florian’s work, combined with its incredibly broad commemorative agenda, grants this piece of architecture undue certitude about the past.<sup>11</sup>

Such an approach is markedly different from the quietude of another piece on the Mall, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.<sup>12</sup> For several decades, Maya Lin’s design for the Vietnam memorial, with its foreboding descent into the ground, set the bar with which contemporary memorials were assessed. Even while conventional trappings like flagstaffs and statues were added to the memorial against the Lin’s wishes, she created a precedent that has seeped into subsequent architecture works, including the winning entry in the September 11 memorial for Manhattan that Lin herself helped to select. At the Vietnam memorial, the earth gets sliced and retained with dark granite walls, bearing the names of the deceased, a now-standard gesture, including at the Port Chicago Memorial. *New York Times* architecture critic, Herbert Muschamp, who passed away before seeing the completion of the World War II memorial, summarized the departure from solemnity and soberness embodied by this memorial when he wrote: “It represents our yearning for the timeless and eternal to distract us from the relative and the complex.”<sup>13</sup>

Another recent addition to the larger reaches of the National Mall is the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, situated on the Tidal Basin, south of the National Mall proper. The MLK Memorial opened in August 2011, and was inaugurated with several speeches, including one by Obama, on October 16 of the same year.

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<sup>8</sup> Derrick Bell, “After We’re Gone: Prudent Speculations on America in a Post-Racial Epoch,” in *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000); Derrick Bell, “Meanness as Racial Ideology,” *Michigan Law Review* 88, no. 6 (May 1, 1990): 1689–1697.

<sup>9</sup> “World War II Memorial History and Culture,” *National Park Service*, accessed May 17, 2012, <http://www.nps.gov/wwii/historyculture/index.htm>; See also: Michael Janofsky, “59 Years Later, Memorial to World War II Veterans Opens on Washington Mall,” *The New York Times*, April 30, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/30/us/59-years-later-memorial-to-world-war-ii-veterans-opens-on-washington-mall.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

<sup>10</sup> Herbert Muschamp, “An Appraisal; New War Memorial Is Shrine to Sentiment,” *The New York Times*, June 7, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/07/arts/an-appraisal-new-war-memorial-is-shrine-to-sentiment.html?ref=friedrichstflorian&pagewanted=all>; Thomas M. Keane, “World War II Memorial Fails Both Past, Present,” *Boston Herald*, June 25, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> “National Mall Plan: National Mall and Memorial Parks,” accessed May 17, 2012, <http://www.nps.gov/nationalmallplan/FEISdocs.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Maya Lin, “Making the Memorial,” *The New York Review of Books* (November 2, 2000), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2000/nov/02/making-the-memorial/?pagination=false>.

<sup>13</sup> Muschamp, “An Appraisal; New War Memorial Is Shrine to Sentiment.”

To mark the occasion of the King memorial inauguration, Cornel West, who has frequently been a vocal critic of Obama's military and economic policies, wrote an opinion piece published by *The New York Times*. West seized upon the arc from what many academics are now calling the "long Civil Rights struggle" to the ascension of Obama. West saw the temporal overlap of the Dr. King memorial inauguration and the Obama presidency as a kind of sensationalized punctuation mark to the Civil Rights struggle. Like others before him, West was suspicious of gestures. To put it in so many words, West expresses a need for a social revolution, lingering since the assassination of Dr. King—an urgency for change inversely proportional to the need for a memorial. He wrote: "King weeps from his grave. He never confused substance with symbolism. He never conflated a flesh and blood sacrifice with a stone and mortar edifice."<sup>14</sup>

These two new temples in the pantheon of memory on the nation's memorial lawn—World War II and Dr. King's—tie the past together, only to reopen a longer conversation about the U.S. role in the conflict of the 1940's, a global war overtly against the forces of fascism that had its own share of violations against human dignity and the U.S. Constitution itself. The torturous path to equality within national borders took several more decades and, as I show in this study, such a path continues to change course, slip away in places, and is met with various roadblocks.

## **Memory in the Bay Area**

A pair of directives for the National Park Service augments the relevance of this study and amplifies the braided themes of World War II and Civil Rights. Around the turn of the millennium, Congress passed laws that directed the Park Service to partner with academic institutions to develop "theme studies" that identified sites for landmarks and protection related to both the World War II home front and the struggle for Civil Rights.<sup>15</sup> On any cursory evaluation, the Port Chicago Memorial fits tightly into both of these ongoing investigations.

Meanwhile, the San Francisco Bay Area similarly shares commonalities with Washington D.C.'s newfound monumentalization of a narrative arc from World War II to the era of Civil Rights, and the storehouse of memories in the urban realm. In the Bay Area alone, the National Park Service lists twenty World War II-related sites (the Port Chicago Memorial included) on the National Register of Historic Places, in addition to the World War II memorial completed in 1960 inside the Presidio. Some of these listed historical sites are extensive and discontinuous areas that encompass numerous sub-sites within each. The Golden Gate National Recreation Area, for example, includes numerous well-known areas, including Crissy Field, the Presidio, and several World War II batteries.

In fact, while the National Park Service and partner researchers were undertaking the theme studies, Congressman Miller and his office were already ahead of both, successfully submitting legislation that created not only the initial construction of the Port Chicago Memorial, but Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park.

Richmond, California happens to be Miller's birthplace, and "Rosie" doubles as an

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<sup>14</sup> Cornel West, "Dr. King Weeps From His Grave," *The New York Times*, August 25, 2011, sec. A.

<sup>15</sup> John W. Jeffries et al., "World War II and the American Home Front: A National Historic Landmarks Theme Study," October 2007, <http://www.nps.gov/nhl/themes/HomefrontStudy.pdf>; National Park Service, "Civil Rights in America: A Framework for Identifying Significant Sites," 2008.

attempt to stir cultural tourism in a city severely impoverished by deindustrialization. Rosie was chartered “to recognize the important wartime contributions of workers, including women and minorities, and ordinary citizens, who collected and saved and sacrificed on the home front.”<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Miller spearheaded the legislation that promoted the Port Chicago Memorial to the highest status of a unit in the U.S. national park system.

By 2011, however, the push to enshrine World War II might have come to a close for the San Francisco Bay Area, holding back projects that Congress has shown little interest in funding as public amenities.<sup>17</sup> This may be an ideal moment to pause and reflect on what has been framed about the past with the post-military pieces that remain. In what came as a surprise to many locals, the Park Service declined to pursue a national park at the historic Mare Island shipyard, the first naval facility on the West Coast, and a critical area for the depressed city of Vallejo. As it happens, the rejection of Mare Island, leaving locals scrambling to find other solutions, might have capped a period of immortalizing public history in the Bay Area. The saga of Mare Island serves as a complicated finish line for this dissertation, as I detail in – Vallejo as Port Chicago’s Anti-Memorial. For it is in and around Mare Island and Vallejo that a mosaic of working and abandoned landscapes offer living stories that challenge what is most commonly drawn about race, class, and warfare at the Port Chicago national park. The breezy and informal character of open space on Mare Island, for better or worse bereft of the accouterments of a national park, nonetheless calls forth an entire history of military and racial domination. The spaces of this history could be easily swept off, either by the boom-and-bust cycles of locally entrenched developers eager to build new homes for sale or by industrialists thirsting to convert former military bases into new facilities. Other parts of Vallejo’s historic downtown already were lost during redevelopment in the 1960s.

How to study the complex social forces that produce the places for memory described here, especially remnants that lack official protection? In the following chapter, I take a step back to illustrate a theoretical framework that sustains the inquiry into Port Chicago’s spatial imaginations.

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<sup>16</sup> Jeffries et al., “World War II and the American Home Front: A National Historic Landmarks Theme Study,” 1.

<sup>17</sup> National parks, in fact, are now increasingly funded as public-private partnerships, making retail and leases an essential part of these spaces. For example, the Presidio is obligated by law to turn a profit or risk losing federal protection of the land. See: Carl Nolte, “Presidio Bridges Gap to Be Self-Sufficient,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, February 10, 2013, <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Presidio-bridges-gap-to-be-self-sufficient-4266156.php#src=fb>.



## Chapter 2 – Imaginaries and Memory

In this chapter, I explore a theoretical framework that informs my overall study of the production of spatial, urban, and geographical “imaginaries” where the contested idea of the Port Chicago story is remembered and retold. Several planks in this story jostle for exposure in the narrative of Port Chicago. In the telling of the story through discussions at public spaces and the media, a number of ideas compete for public attention. Some of the most popular narrative parts are the 1944 Port Chicago explosion, the subsequent mutiny trial, and the Navy’s demolition of the town of Port Chicago in 1968. There are other, mostly forgotten episodes, however, such as 1940s racial conflict in Vallejo, the segregated burial of stevedores after the explosion, and opposition to military activity on the fringes of the Concord base in the 1960s and 1980s. These seemingly separate episodes come together in spaces and spatial ideas that constrain what are remembered as the valid contents of this story and, most importantly, who is remembered as part of such heritage.

The individual episodes remembered as part of the canon of Port Chicago constitute a kind of unexamined network—an archipelago of memory—that ties together history and place. This network reveals some of the ways in which race and class are constructed through memory and memorials. Categories such as class and race are often understood in scholarly and popular literature through abstract social and geographic indicators that quantify or survey economic disadvantage, structural exclusion from the institutions of privilege, or spatial segregation.<sup>1</sup>

I argue, however, that the realm of culture is equally important—if not even more helpful, at times—for understanding, first, the reproduction of social and racial oppression, especially in newer iterations; second, the opposition to such oppression; and third, the criminalization or repression of the opposition itself. The interrelation of these three phenomena is seen in this project as reflected in cultural processes of recording or contesting memory, as well as acts of

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<sup>1</sup> George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011); George Lipsitz, “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race,” *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 10–23.

memorycide.<sup>2</sup> In this theoretical framework, I draw from a diverse body of literature spanning fields such as architecture, geography, sociology, urbanism, and history. My reading of these sources, coupled with my fieldwork, suggests that memory and race should be studied together, and that ideas about the past are created not only in the oral and written traditions we share, but also through cultural landscapes, both material and imagined.

## Imaginaries

In a series of lectures delivered in 1996 at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, sociologist Nestor García Canclini sketched a research agenda that draws from a taxonomy of twentieth century theories of urban culture and spatial organization. The lectures were later published under the title *Imaginarios Urbanos*, or “urban imaginaries.”<sup>3</sup> In these texts, García Canclini proposes that urban dwellers often, if not always, find themselves caught between pluralities of urban conditions, pulling from opposing sides. Some of these vexing oppositions he discusses are the rapidity of the city’s changing modes of production versus the slower adaptation of the built environment; the city as a mental construct, or a “map,” versus a series of lived social relations; and increasing class division versus homogenizing modes of mass communication, such as television and internet media.

García Canclini advances the notion that people experience these tensions in simultaneous ways, instead of living in the city as if it were a singular monolith. As the seminal urban sociologist Louis Wirth might have added, people mediate and make sense of these contradictory experiences through what Wirth called a “set of attitudes and ideas” in his classic text on the sociology of cities, “Urbanism as a Way of Life.”<sup>4</sup> Expounding in greater detail than Wirth, García Canclini proposes that these contradictions can be represented or materialized in countless ways, and he unifies these cacophonous representations of the city, existing both in the mind and in material form, under the overarching concept of “urban imaginaries.”<sup>5</sup>

While Wirth worried that urban experiences were increasingly appropriated and represented for society through the private commercial media, García Canclini is somewhat more sanguine. He asserts that urban imaginaries have existed longer than anybody can remember, and

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 1 – The Politics of Memorials.

<sup>3</sup> Néstor García Canclini, *Imaginarios Urbanos*, 3. ed. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> The “set of attitudes and ideas” is the third of three “perspectives” that Wirth brings forth in his study of “urbanism as a way of life” or a distinct urban culture. More precisely, the uniquely urban set of attitudes and ideas belongs to an urban techno-culture of which Wirth could only perceive the faintest outlines in the 1930s. Perhaps due to its brevity, this last section in Wirth’s classic article remains the most tantalizing for exploration. Although Wirth uses this third section of the essay to emphasize what he perceives as the manipulation of means of communication and technology to govern and shape ideas, it is precisely his position that ideas can be (a) symbolized, and thus, (b) apprehended for urban study, that is of interest here. See Louis Wirth, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” *American Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 1 (1938): 1–24.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, adds García Canclini, recent forms of urban fragmentation, in tandem with network technologies and what many urban geographers call “uneven development,” only accelerate the production and circulation of urban imaginaries. See García Canclini, *Imaginarios Urbanos*. On “uneven development” see: David Harvey, *Spaces Of Global Capitalism: Towards A Theory Of Uneven Geographical Development* (New York: Verso, 2006); Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, And The Production Of Space* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008). On urban fragmentation and network technologies, consult Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001).

are not likely to be easily subsumed by corporate or government power. He notes how it's nearly impossible to name a city that has been founded or transformed *without* urban imaginaries; these urban imaginaries are encoded in books, foundational myths, poems, drawings, and oral traditions. Furthermore, he argues, urban dwellers traverse the metropolis much like the fictional character of Marco Polo in Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities*, collecting and recycling urban images as they go along, making sense of the geography of the city and its social relations.<sup>6</sup> And, García Canclini adds, any improvement upon the city—especially to change one's environment for the betterment of the self and others—begins with the imagination of a new space.

García Canclini compares this material production of urban imaginaries to other forms of patrimony or heritage (*patrimonios*) that a city may contain: statuary, monuments, or buildings.<sup>7</sup> His broad approach draws together the ephemeral and the permanent, thus making the idea of imaginaries particularly apt in this project inasmuch as it relates to the study of memory and memorials, which can vary in temporal scales, spatial dimensions, and material qualities.

García Canclini's position can be summarized like this: along with the seemingly durable, solid environment of the city that collects and transmits memories and imparts notions of authority, there are other forms of remembering, agitating, and honoring that may be of no less importance to the inhabitants of a city. Once seen side by side, these two counterposed spheres begin to lose their mutually exclusive status. Both constitute such imaginaries. Nevertheless, bureaucrats and philanthropists of patrimony might not recognize—or might not be willing to accept—other forms of representation as equally valid cultural contributions worthy of protection. But these assorted representations shape personal identity and culture in meaningful ways, sometimes in even more significant ways than the designated, durable heritage might.

## Imaginaries and Individual Rights

When an urban imaginary (like a monument or a protected work of architecture, for example) is accepted as official heritage, the imaginary also underpins a group's possession of that heritage. Thus, the group possesses "citizenship" in that heritage, guaranteeing certain kinds of individual rights as members. García Canclini identifies such a connection between imaginaries and the possession of rights by joining two sets of theories: Pierre Bourdieu's "symbolic capital" and Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities." It is worth briefly revisiting García Canclini's reading of these authors in order to better delineate what these imaginaries guarantee for the bearer.

According to García Canclini, Bourdieu proposes that symbolic capital, like other forms of capital, can be accumulated, redistributed, or plundered. Heritage, says García Canclini, although promoted by some as stable, noble, and eternal, is nothing but a social process that is inherently *unstable*. Heritage, as a kind of capital in the Marxian sense, is a process built from social relations that determine who possesses the cultural authority of this heritage and who does not. In other words, social relations determine who is inside and outside of heritage.<sup>8</sup>

An example of symbolic capital could be paper money or coinage, even though those are often regarded strictly as economic capital. Money is something perhaps more immediate and graspable than heritage. Yet paper money is paradoxically virtual. Indeed, money can be touched.

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<sup>6</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974).

<sup>7</sup> García Canclini, *Imaginario Urbanos*, 88.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 112–121. See also *Thinking Space*, Critical Geographies 9 (London: Routledge, 2000).

But money also simplifies and abbreviates something that is untouchable, vast, and complex. It obscures an assemblage of unequal social relations of production and the acquiescence to a social hierarchy that sustains the validity of the coinage itself. Without its symbolic dimension, money would have no value in exchange. As a symbol, it stands for this larger assemblage of unequal relations. One can surmise that symbols like memorials, or money, conceal more than they reveal.

The imaginaries of Port Chicago have a comparable quality to them. Though seemingly stable, the federal memorial in Concord, for example, contains a whole series of unequal social relations that protect certain strands of cultural memory, while excluding other memories deemed offensive or controversial. By the same token, artwork about the 1940s riots in Vallejo presents a counterpart to the official narrative told at the memorial by highlighting social relations of segregation and racial violence.<sup>9</sup>

Heritage often appears as a fixed public possession, hardened into physical objects like an official memorial or a park with an obelisk memorializing those killed or missing in war. But Bourdieu would rather have us understand, according to García Canclini, that the form of these objects does not perfectly contain messy notions of heritage that people carry. Heritage is less fixed; it is both larger and more elusive. Heritage is made, accessed, and recognized as valid from somebody's own "subjective dispositions," in Bourdieu's terms, and relations within the social field.<sup>10</sup> To García Canclini, both the established and alternative means of communication and cultural production are parts of larger apparatuses of culture (*dispositivos*, in Spanish) that include architecture, legislation, and art.<sup>11</sup> These apparatuses can vet and dictate; they filter and reject. As such, these cultural assemblages should be studied in all of their interrelations for the ways in which people identify shared values within them, or find themselves excluded.<sup>12</sup>

In tandem, García Canclini borrows from Benedict Anderson the notion of imagined communities, an idea that has enjoyed wide circulation for explaining how national identities are constituted in part through widely held fictions of the shared origins of a people. National sovereign citizenship, then, is imparted both by a legal document, such as a birth certificate or a green card, and through an ensemble of beliefs.<sup>13</sup>

In a twist on the national imagined community, García Canclini proposes that "urban citizenship" is comparable to national citizenship because it also requires "mental maps" and imagined social relations as much as documents negotiated with the institutions that govern a city.<sup>14</sup> García Canclini explains that cities have spaces of laws: zoning laws, traffic laws, building codes, public behavior codes, and more; an urban scale of the imagined community, that is. He argues that in the interstices and overlaps with these demarcated spaces, one can also find spaces of "cultural citizenship," which are shaped by "quotidian acts."<sup>15</sup> Citizens experience daily

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<sup>9</sup> Chapter 4 – Whiteout: The Social Production of Port Chicago Memorials; Chapter 6 – Vallejo as Port Chicago's Anti-Memorial.

<sup>10</sup> García Canclini, *Imaginarios Urbanos*, 94–95.

<sup>11</sup> Also compare to the notion of apparatus, "formation that has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an *urgent need*" (emphasis in original) in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 195–197.

<sup>12</sup> García Canclini, *Imaginarios Urbanos*, 94–95.

<sup>13</sup> Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). Said also touches on a similar notion, drawing on "the invention of tradition" in Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," 178–179.

<sup>14</sup> García Canclini, *Imaginarios Urbanos*, 96 (translation mine).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* (translation mine).

interactions, whether routine or not, and they imagine, record, and remember these interactions. They circulate, reuse, and reinterpret these records as mental maps that are equally significant in the construction of cultural citizenship as the formalized codes or the maps of any city.

In the case of Port Chicago, a whole slew of works of news, art, and fiction (pictures, documentaries, films, re-enactments, and more) record orally transmitted urban memories of racial strife and violence towards servicemen at the hands of the military. These images are augmented by printed texts evincing that, for some citizens during World War II, citizenship was woefully incomplete, even under the rubric of fighting the same enemies abroad (especially for the imprisoned West Coast Japanese and African Americans under Jim Crow). Urban imaginaries, in an oppositional way, project into the future a desired map of inclusion with fully realized rights to urban space and civil equality.

The combination of the notion of a symbolic capital with cultural citizenship presents a fruitful register because the interrelated imaginaries I present defy other facile categorizations along unified lines of scale, media, or materials. In fact, they are more apt to be understood for the ways that they are circulated, like currency, than simply as fixed values. They seem to be contained in their materiality as memorials, works of art, and preserved environments.

And yet, the imaginaries of Port Chicago are more than mere storage vessels of memory. Certainly, they convey certain ideas: the struggles over the memory of segregation at various sites; the contested references to scenes of urban insurgency under the vise of labor and race exploitation; the grievances of the displaced Port Chicago residents; or, extralegal forms of segregation. But they also impact larger aspects of cultural, national, and urban forms of citizenship. I aim to show how imaginaries are more than any single one of these notions. As “apparatuses” in the sense described earlier, they challenge the monolith of conventional heritage.

In addition, although only the federal Port Chicago Memorial has a protected designation as a memorial, all of the imaginaries I document politicize memory in order to transform the present into which they exist. And though polarized, they all revolve around issues of race in the United States. Furthermore, the urban imaginations I examine are spatial, even those that are seemingly two-dimensional images and textual forms of evidence. As memorials, all the imaginaries call further to be understood as simultaneously representational *and* spatial. And as apparatuses, they rely on people’s acts of remembering to advance the acceptance of certain definitions of citizenship while objecting to others, utilizing space to define where such citizenship is enacted, enjoyed, and passed along to others.

Spatial imaginaries also hold within their forms a tense accord between the past and the future. On the one hand, my case studies communicate, each in its own ways, what happened in the past. On the other hand, each also sustains that the future should take on certain contours. I turn first to the past in the next section.

## **Memorials**

In this portion, I explore a body of literature on memory and memorials. As I argued above, my case studies reveal how spatial relations and spatial imaginaries, taken together, can be employed to contest historical and political memory. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the tension between public space and the actual presence of bodies in that space. At sites of memory, where muted battles between remembering and forgetting take place, built heritage can serve to dissipate other forms of imagining and remembering the past—and remembering the future, so to

speak. Though seemingly contradictory, the phrase “remembering the future” is intended to signal that the sites of memory can paradoxically serve to divert attention away from changing the given conditions.

Since the early 1980s, the construction of memorials has proliferated in a dizzying way, both in and beyond the United States. Memorials have become a global phenomenon.<sup>16</sup> For example, there are memorials to commemorate lives lost in the Vietnam War. Others attempt to encapsulate what happened at Holocaust sites. Others even mark entire periods of persecutions and purges under dictatorial regimes, to only name a few well-known categories. And ever since September 11, 2001 a new crop of memorials has emerged in the U.S. to commemorate those who died, even with numerous memorials far removed from the geographic locations of the attacks themselves. Alongside this memorial phenomenon we have a newfound resurgence in memory studies of late.

In part, the so-called memorial boom does not come as a surprise, if one accounts for the profound effects of World War II on the organization of American society and urban space. The San Francisco Bay Area, as a center of American wartime manufacturing and embarkation, is an extraordinary sample of this boom. In addition, the timing of the boom can be partly explained by the desire to record memories before it would be too late for those who lived through the period. But the transformation of the U.S. economy into a globalized post-industrial system has led to a large-scale abandonment of industrial and war manufacturing landscapes.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the US military, even before the end of the Cold War, reinvented itself into an off-shored base network.<sup>18</sup> Together, these factors have opened acres upon acres of land for different development rationales. These development strategies at times turn to creating memorial spaces that privilege contemplation over manufacturing as stimulus for tourism, economic activity, and cultural promotion.<sup>19</sup>

Memorial spaces are only a part of a larger culture of memory, often associated with a thriving business in memory tourism.<sup>20</sup> The direct relationship to—or the contact with—the past used to be a central feature for the continued survival of modern nation-states into their futures. As abbreviated as that formulation may be for the purposes of this general overview, scholars tend to agree that the relation of contemporary societies to their pasts has been transformed into something else altogether.<sup>21</sup> In place of a singular national past, there comes a more commercialized revelry with many versions of the past—some more historically accurate than others—and sometimes more sanitized and pleasant than may have been in reality. The result is that the recent function of memory in this boom, as some have forcefully argued, is not just to dwell on the past, but to use commercialized memory to drown out the imagination of a

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<sup>16</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Kendall R Phillips and G. Mitchell Reyes, *Global Memoriscapes: Contesting Remembrance in a Transnational Age* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008); Allen John Scott, *Regions and the World Economy: The Coming Shape of Global Production, Competition, and Political Order* (Oxford: New York : Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Catherine Lutz, ed., *The Bases of Empire: The Global Struggle Against U.S. Military Posts* (Washington Square, N.Y.: New York University Press, 2009); Lilly Goren, *The Politics of Military Base Closings: Not in My District* (New York: P. Lang, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> John Hannigan, *Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> See also John R Gilles, “Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship,” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3–26.

different—perhaps more equitable—present or future.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, memorial space as a malleable architectural medium for conveying ideas has been drastically reinvented throughout this boom period, shorn from its statuesque neoclassical vocabulary when Maya Lin won the commission for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. in 1982. After Lin's victory, and the spatial turn in monument design, the cavity of space, rather than the monumental object, has been activated or "programmed," in the architectural jargon. By gripping the occupant, contemporary memorials often are assumed to function primordially through introspective contemplation instead of a direct visual digestion of statues or ham-fisted images, or through other informal acts of rendering tribute (vernacular alters, votive candles, hand-written signs) that are frequently taken-up after tragic, mediatized events.<sup>23</sup> Although images, statues, or national iconography may be present in a supporting role, it has become commonplace to elevate a chiseled lists of victim's names to a prominent placement in the architectural experience. Given this recent state of memorial architecture as a medium charged with delivering an inner-directed moment with "pasts made present," to borrow from the oft-repeated phrase coined by Jürgen Habermas, the case of Port Chicago offers a provocative twist.<sup>24</sup> The Port Chicago imaginaries, each in its own way, stands for attempts to make *race* present, even if sometimes only to deliberately blunt its centrality to a more radical story.

The spatial mechanisms that parse a controversial past are, at the same time, facilitated by a theoretical deficit in the discipline of architecture itself. The instrumentality of space in perpetuating a racial order inherited from the past, and in curtailing visions of alternatives, goes hand in hand with the discipline of architecture's own racial exclusions. To begin with, this absence is made resoundingly apparent in Banister Fletcher's 1896 *History of Architecture* in which the image of a "tree of architecture" depicting styles from the world does not include Africa. As architect and theorist Lesly Naa Norle Lokko explains: "'History' in this instance, is clear: blacks, either as Africans or as diasporic cultures, have historically had nothing to say about architecture—as a consequence architecture has had little to say in response."<sup>25</sup>

What do race and architecture have to do with each other? In short, everything. Landscapes and space are activated in the process of racialization, an equation where architecture is a variable. Skin color and racial categories are recognized not only in the imagination, but also through the production of places that are color-coded. As put by Gareth Hoskins, in his research on the Angel Island Immigrant Station in the San Francisco Bay, "Being conscious of the mutually constitutive relationship between race and space and thinking through those

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<sup>22</sup> Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*; Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern," *New German Critique* no. 33 (Autumn 1984): 5–52; Mark Jarzombek, *Urban Heterology: Dresden and the Dialectics of Post-Traumatic History* (Lund Sweden: Lund University, School of Architecture, Department of Theoretical and Applied Aesthetics, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape*. For more on the recent transformations of the architectural vocabulary of memorials in the evolving context of responses to the U.S. wars in the Middle East, see Kirk Savage, "What Will Our Iraq War Memorial Look Like?," *The Washington Post*, May 27, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/what-will-our-iraq-war-memorial-look-like/2011/05/25/AGWRclCH\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/what-will-our-iraq-war-memorial-look-like/2011/05/25/AGWRclCH_story.html).

<sup>24</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Lesly Naa Norle Lokko, "Introduction," in *White Papers, Black Marks: Architecture, Race, Culture*, ed. Lesly Naa Norle Lokko (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Gülsüm Baydar Nalbantoğlu, "Towards Postcolonial Openings: Rereading Sir Banister Fletcher's History of Architecture," *Assemblage* 35 (April 1998): 6–17.

relationships to understand how the landscape is implicated in race-making events is crucial because it provokes questions about how immigrant processing, for example, both renders whiteness invisible and racializes others.”<sup>26</sup>

Social historian George Lipsitz devotes a study to what he explains as “how racism takes place,” in which he examines the effects of location on race relations.<sup>27</sup> Examining the persistence of historical relations of oppression in the constitution of present places and in the policies that sustain such places, Lipsitz states that, “we learn that race is produced by space, that it takes places for racism to take place.”<sup>28</sup> In addition, Lipsitz employs a notion of imaginaries consistent with the previous discussion in this chapter. He argues that a white spatial imaginary takes an historically-specific racial order—namely, Jim Crow—that is noticeable in the still-segregated spaces of American society. The “white imaginary,” as he calls it, turns the divided spatial order into something implausibly ahistorical, normal, and natural—and then seeks to preserve this ingrained spatial order.<sup>29</sup>

Geographer Richard Schein, building on an extensive body of literature on cultural landscapes, argues that we can study landscapes not just for the ways in which they coalesce as a reflection of socially constructed ideas of race, but also for the ways in which the making of space is actively used to *produce* the construct of ‘race.’ Influenced by the seminal work of Omi and Winant, Schein remarks: “Racial processes take place and racial categories get made, in part, through cultural landscapes.”<sup>30</sup> Cultural landscapes, as a texture that is molded from physical matter and social imagination, have an active role in enforcing a social order.<sup>31</sup> But how?

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<sup>26</sup> Gareth Hoskins, “Poetic Landscapes of Exclusion: Chinese Immigration at Angel Island, San Francisco,” in *Landscape and Race in the United States*, ed. Richard H. Schein (New York: Routledge, 2006), 100.

<sup>27</sup> Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*; See also Lipsitz, “The Racialization of Space”; George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> See also Allan Pred, *Even in Sweden Racisms, Racialized Spaces, and the Popular Geographical Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Richard Schein, *Landscape and Race in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 6. In addition, Schein acknowledges the foundational work of Omi and Winant in his framing of race as a construct that is socially produced. For further study, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994). When discussing race as a construct with a spatial dimension, I am also indebted to the research of Laura Pulido, who says “Race is composed of both ideological and material components that are manifest in the creation of structures, institutions, and practices.” Pulido develops the idea that spatialized notions of race are the result of racism itself; in other words, racism is experienced by different communities in particular ways that establish social and economic hierarchies. See Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (University of California Press, 2006), 21–23.

<sup>31</sup> At this juncture, I am drawing from an extraordinarily long written and oral discussion on race, landscapes, and geography that spans myriad libraries, conferences, articles, classrooms and other conversations. This extensive tradition would be impossible to completely summarize in one note. My approach to landscapes as material reality and as an ideological force that shapes social relations, taking part in the social construction of race, draws from the work of several cultural geographers, historians, and theorists. These include George Lipsitz (see discussion in this chapter), Paul Groth, Pierce Lewis, J.B. Jackson, Nancy Duncan and James Duncan, Sharon Zukin, Denis Cosgrove, William J.T. Mitchell, and Don Mitchell, among many more. For an overview of this literature, begin with: Don Mitchell, *Lie Of The Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Don Mitchell, “Cultural Landscapes: Just Landscapes or Landscapes of Justice?,” *Progress in Human Geography* 27, no. 6 (December 1, 2003): 787–796; Don Mitchell, “The Lure of the Local: Landscape Studies at the End of a Troubled Century,” *Progress in Human Geography* 25, no. 2 (June 1, 2001): 269–281; Paul E. Groth and Todd W. Bressi, eds., *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Chris Wilson and Paul E. Groth, eds., *Everyday America: Cultural*



One answer comes from Craig Evan Barton, who elaborates further how race is not only a social construction, but a spatial one as well.<sup>32</sup> In order to construct ‘race’ as a social category, it is also necessary to construct a vision, a separation, and an invisibility through architectural means. Barton, for example, explains these means by drawing upon the history of the outcome of the Supreme Court’s “separate but equal” clause and the establishment of Jim Crow statutes. He says: “The result was a complex social and cultural geography in which Black Americans occupied, and often continue to occupy, distinct and frequently marginalized cultural landscapes.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, it is through spatial shaping and the choreography of visions and movements that a social order can be reinforced. As another example, with regards to the slave-era South, Barton shows that in the carefully laid sight lines and spatial arrangements of Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, the tangible landscape ensures that slave labor could be rendered productive and yet invisible to the white plantation owner.

However, space is not always as clearly defined as in a segregated neighborhood, a slave plantation, or a memorial. Studying West Selma, Barton goes on to employ Hannah Arendt’s concept of the “space of appearance” to explain a more complicated, and less apparent, spatial relationship. He considers this “space of appearance” as an essential ingredient for social participation and to fully claim one’s rights. In this instance, Barton explains that legalized segregation resulted in multiple overlapping spaces that divorced the civic from the political realms. He tells us that the notion of the “space of appearance” means, according to Arendt, a “symbolic realm where an individual may be seen through speech and through action.”<sup>34</sup> Blacks in West Selma could move through white-dominated civic spaces. But by virtue of not having equal rights, such as voting, they were excluded from a genuinely representative space of appearance. An architecture of laws, one could say, complimented the more palpable architecture on the ground in order to maintain African American invisibility, even in the absence of distinctly separate areas or walled spaces.<sup>35</sup>

The paradox of the space of appearance is that even when people are present together in a seemingly single space, they can in fact be occupying different spaces—as sorted by a legal apparatus in the example above. One can deduce that, to Barton, a genuine space of appearance can counter—in fact, *is needed* in order to counter—an existing social and legal order embedded in landscape. As Arendt further defined the space of appearance in *The Human Condition*: “Action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere.”<sup>36</sup>

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*Landscape Studies After J.B. Jackson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); James S. Duncan and Nancy Duncan, *Landscapes of Privilege: The Politics of the Aesthetic in an American Suburb* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>32</sup> Craig Evan Barton, “Duality and Invisibility: Race and Memory in the Urbanism of the American South,” in *Sites of Memory: Perspectives on Architecture and Race*, ed. Craig Evan Barton (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), 1–12.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> The idea of a spatial architecture coded through intangible legislative and governmental edicts can also be understood through the work of Michel Foucault on spatial power and government. See, for instance, this passage: “(T)he liberty of men is never assured by the institutions and laws that are intended to guarantee them. That is why almost all of these laws and institutions are quite capable of being turned around . . . which is not to say that, after all, one may as well leave people in slums, thinking that they can simply exercise their rights there” in Jeremy W. Crampton and Stuart Elden, *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 10.

<sup>36</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 198.

But where can one actually identify this blurry, elusive space of appearance? The intellectual puzzle rests upon the fact that the concept sounds entirely immaterial: a space “between participants,” “anywhere”? A space that seems to depend on “action and speech,” rather than a concrete structure or fixed place? Where would anyone in need of this so-called space of appearance find it or know that they have occupied it? How would one go about claiming or creating a space of appearance if one can scarcely visualize what it might be? Architecture, at the end of the day, is often thought to be solid and physical in some sense—the antithesis of the space of appearance, some might argue.

Such a dichotomy between “action and speech,” on one side, and the physical realm, on the other, is what architecture theorist George Baird set out to counter in his book named after Arendt’s phrase, *The Space of Appearance*.<sup>37</sup> It’s worth briefly revisiting Baird’s words in order to, first, build upon Barton’s thesis, and second, to be able to explore how Port Chicago imaginaries could offer unnoticed cases of such a “symbolic realm” as Arendt, Barton, and Baird assert is necessary, or offer a challenge to the persistence of this idea.

In a text that held sway in the design disciplines for several years after its publication, and as a text that simultaneously took issue with the “radical subjectivity” of deconstruction in architecture at the time, Baird examined Arendt carefully for missed ideas relevant for making public spaces. He argues that Arendt’s critical examination of Karl Marx’s concept of metabolism (the dialectic between human labor and nature) and Martin Heidegger’s phenomenology (the simultaneity of dwelling and building) helped her to generate the concept of “worldliness.”<sup>38</sup>

To summarize an extensive and meticulous chapter where Baird quotes Arendt’s passages at great length, Baird contends that “worldliness” means that “the whole factual world of human affairs” cannot exist without either the appearance of others in space, or without “the tangibility of things.” Baird’s salvo posits that without a vibrant “public realm” (another phrase borrowed from Arendt), action can never make its “full appearance.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, he concludes, it is necessary to embrace the role of architecture as the underpinning of worldliness and as a setting for social justice—an idea that is reminiscent of Lewis Mumford’s notion of the city as a “theatre of social action.”<sup>40</sup>

However, if one brings to bear the near absence of race matters within the disciplines of architecture and theory, one notices that even actual appearances of racialized bodies in the public realm are subject to varying and uneven gradations of visibility and invisibility *in the written literature itself*. One must question, thus, the assumption of a facile translation from mere appearance to fulfilling justice. In the next section, the notion of architectural fictions perhaps offers alternate ways of countering such imbalances.

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<sup>37</sup> George Baird, *The Space of Appearance* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 19–21. Architecture historian and theorist Reinhold Martin adds, with justifiable skepticism, that: “This ‘presence of innumerable perspectives’ renders Arendt’s ‘public appearance’ a kind of struggle among equals for the heart and soul of the polis, which is what differentiates it from the false ‘objectivity’ of the money economy and of administrative rationality more generally.” See Reinhold Martin, “Public and Common(s),” *Design Observer: Places*, January 24, 2013, <http://places.designobserver.com/feature/public-and-commons/37647/>.

<sup>39</sup> Baird, *The Space of Appearance*, 36.

<sup>40</sup> Lewis Mumford, “What Is a City?,” in *The City Reader*, ed. Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout (New York: Routledge, 1996), 184–188.

## Fictions

In this leg of the theoretical framework, I take explore how urban imaginaries can utilize elements of fiction to politicize what is to happen in the present or future. Reminiscent of García Canclini's urban imaginaries and Lipsitz's spatial imaginaries, David Harvey uses an implicit "imaginaries" analytic in the book *Paris, Capital of Modernity*. For Harvey, the city of modernity—and its architectural follies—are, like money, fetish objects that obscure the forces and conflicts of their own development. Modernity, according to Harvey, thrives upon the propagation of ideas, not to mention representations, of temporal rupture with the past. In the case of Second Empire Paris, spatial change—or urban creative destruction at the hands of the imperial planner Haussman—is a dominant urban imagination that both exploits fantasies of a temporal rupture with the past and secures citizen consent to such landscape change.<sup>41</sup>

Drawing on Karl Marx and Walter Benjamin—both were opposed to nostalgic utopias—Harvey argues that overturning the social relations of production necessarily involves a projective imagination, one that looks forward and not back. Urban imaginaries can work to oppose a hegemonic, singular imagination of rupture and displacement of the old city. The city of modernity is both a material object, and ideas that circulate to obscure how urban space was created in the first place. The city, says Harvey, generates its own myths—of progress or hygiene, for example—that exist in built reality and in the imagination. For Harvey, Balzac's flâneur, moving through the city, much as García Canclini describes a prototypical urban dweller, is the agent that "maps the city's terrains and evokes its living qualities."<sup>42</sup> The flâneur pierces through the myths of rupture with the past, exhumes erased trajectories, and resumes with the imagination of new directions.<sup>43</sup> But even if urban imaginaries register the erasures of cities, who narrates their meanings? Where are meanings spoken, written, or articulated, and what kinds of spaces are necessary for doing so?

Architecture historian Mark Wigley wryly notes that telling stories is an elemental component of the architectural discipline itself. The studio environment for designing revolves around the architecture student's defense of the work by narrating images pinned-up on walls or displayed on screens. Architects often treat architecture *as if* images spoke for themselves; as if, that is, the work did not *require* narration.

Urban imaginaries are fictions of a sort, neither detached from reality nor antithetical to it. Urban imaginaries, one could say, are architectural fictions precisely because they are housed *within* narrative; they have to rely on what García Canclini termed "dispositivos" or apparatuses—a larger social sphere that supports meaning. Or as art historian Tom McDonough writes, "Architecture's meaning remains fundamentally a social matter, produced not simply in the individual's psyche, nor even in an internal dialogue with architectural tradition, but rather in

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<sup>41</sup> David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>43</sup> To Henri Lefebvre, the materialization of the city is similarly fetishistic. Urbanism—an ideology and a practice of real estate development—is "subject to radical critique." He says: "It masks a situation. It conceals operations. It blocks a view of the horizon, a path to urban knowledge and practice." In the *Urban Revolution*, Lefebvre's major point all along is that capitalism's revolution in the twentieth century is in making the urban a primary "circuit" of accumulation. Urbanism, as ideology, and urbanists (architects, presumably included), as professionals akin to what the political economists of his day were for Marx, facilitate this type of "revolution." If Marx's historical subject of capitalism was the worker, Lefebvre's is in turn the urban citizen whose struggles are the product of what he called "neocapitalism." Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 155.

the articulation of conflicting patterns of use and appropriation, some authorized and others resolutely illegitimate.”<sup>44</sup> McDonough explains that meaning is something produced through challenge and exchange, rather than being autonomous.

As Harvey establishes, just as the city is part and parcel of modernity, fictions—or more precisely, forms of fiction as commodities—are deeply embedded in urban modernity at large. It seems ironic, then, that fiction emerges in popular and specialized discourses over and over again as *antithetical* to architecture. Whether it were the direct correlation between mass production and built form (such as in the work of Le Corbusier); between labor and clean efficiency (such as in the discourse of Adolf Loos); between geographical conditions and place-specific materials and construction (such as in the influential writing on dwelling of Heidegger); or, between Cold War cybernetic determinism and universal forms (such as in the geodesic domes of Buckminster Fuller), architects have often tried to repress the artifice of their own work, not to mention the “constructedness” of their own personas, as sought-after commodities for ruling elites.

Architectural fiction, in fact, has a long—and sometimes, conveniently, forgotten—trajectory reaching back, for example, to Piranesi’s fantastical engravings. However, it is against the dominant forms of modern authenticity that architectural fiction re-emerged with the work of a young graduate student at the Architectural Association in London: Rem Koolhaas. Before Koolhaas became famous for his willful embrace of capitalist forces as generative of utopian conditions in his manifesto, *Delirious New York*, Koolhaas’s early graduate work provided a beacon of what architecture historian Felicity Scott calls “the embrace of the *critical* value of the fantastic or fictional.”<sup>45</sup>

Scott argues that Koolhaas’s graduate project (executed in collaboration with partners Madelon Vriesendorp, Elia Zenghelis, Zoe Zenghelis), “Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture,” used urban images as a site for political engagement; as a way, Scott says, to produce a space of “engaged withdrawal.”<sup>46</sup> Tackling several theorists, Scott advances a notion of fiction that can be summarized in three main points. First, from Foucault, fiction brings into being a political truth discovered through historical inquiry that does not yet exist. Second, from Etienne Balibar, fiction imagines places of political life. And third, from Jacques Rancière, fiction does not just imagine a space, it imagines politics themselves: A “material reorganizations of signs and images, of relations between what one sees and what one says, between what one does and what one can do.”<sup>47</sup> Scott’s main point, in extrapolating from these authors, is that, against recent “post-critical” retrenchments that dismiss representations and imaginaries as antithetical to a “real” architectural practice, fictional forms incite further discourse and, therefore, create space just as much as built form does. According to Scott, the space of fiction is a projective one, always in the process of coming forth, unlike the actual space where fictional images may be encountered, like museums, archives, parks, or publications.

Although the notion of architectural fiction has come from the corridors of the architecture discipline’s own establishment, it is not exclusive to architects. The urban is not simply what we often think about when confronted with images or statistics of cities in the popular media and discourse. My intention here has been to demonstrate how the historical condition of urbanization has simultaneously spawned insurgent forms of re-imagining what the

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<sup>44</sup> Tom McDonough, “The Surface as Stake: A Postscript to Timothy M. Rohan’s ‘Rendering the Surface,’” *Grey Room* (2001): 103.

<sup>45</sup> Felicity D. Scott, “Involuntary Prisoners of Architecture,” *October* 106 (Fall 2003): 97 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>46</sup> Scott, “Involuntary Prisoners of Architecture.”

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

urban could be. As opposed to stoic resignations of the wholesale surrender to accustomed urban social relations, urban imaginaries offer us an object of study that “always already” encode information about their past, and problematize what is expected from the future. With urban imaginaries, “alternative cartographies” (to borrow Harvey’s term) serve as a counterpart to fixed heritage—an imagined location where other spaces of urban and cultural citizenship can be charted.

## Methods

It seems appropriate at this point, having laid out the conceptual approach of this study, and before moving to the past history in the next chapter, to briefly explain the research methods chosen to elaborate the investigation into its current form. However, it would be idealistic, not to mention dishonest, to suggest that these methods were merely a reflexive result of the theoretical understanding of the problem. The reality, for me, is a much richer interplay between concepts and research. Some of the methods that I work with come from practices I was already comfortable with before beginning the project. Others were the result of the necessities exposed in the “conversation” between the authors cited in this framework and emerging realizations in the course of fieldwork.

I draw my research methods, in part, from several disciplines that I have been a part of over the years: architecture studies, history, and the social sciences. In general, I study landscape change over time and try to take apart the socio-political reasons for those changes. I combine the spatial analysis of an architect (including field notes, sketches, photography, and the use of historical maps and aerial views for comparison) with archival research, oral histories, geographic information, newspaper collections, and open-ended informant conversations. With these, I try to discern the spatial ordering and landscape history within my study sites.

Field research for this investigation began in January 2010. Since then, alone or in groups, I have made four site visits to the federal Port Chicago Memorial in Concord. Two of these visits took place during the annual commemoration ceremony. I have made at least six trips to Mare Island and Vallejo, three trips to Ambrose Park in Bay Point (on one occasion to witness the annual Port Chicago town reunion), and at least four visits to the immediate areas around the shuttered Concord Naval Weapons Station. On four separate occasions, I’ve visited the Rosie the Riveter National Park in Richmond, which temporarily holds a series of stained glass windows created as a memorial to the Port Chicago explosion. I’ve visited the graves of unknown sailors killed in the Port Chicago explosion buried at the San Bruno national cemetery on three occasions.

These kinds of site visits serve several purposes. At times, they allow me to experience commemorative practices as they happen, while opening impromptu conversations with participants. Other times, I am able to freely amble the grounds to collect observations of signage, architecture, and landscapes. On these trips, I also collect field observations that can be compared with historical photos, aerial views, Sanborn fire insurance maps, and other cartographic representations found in collections that reveal how a landscape was altered over time.

In addition, by my own estimates, I spent approximately 40 hours on open-ended in-person or phone interviews, with the purposes of collecting background information, clarifications, details, and other leads. Some of these research subjects were also generous with their time, allowing me to continue asking follow-up questions over email, phone calls, or

informal meetings.

With the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) at the Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, I worked as a graduate researcher over the course of the summer of 2010 and continued to volunteer time into 2012 collecting additional interviews. Working under the direct supervision of David Dunham, a specialist with the Bancroft Library, I summarized secondary sources for research purposes, collected original documents, prepared interview guidelines, and executed primary source oral histories related to Port Chicago—all as part of an ongoing Rosie the Riveter National Home Front Oral History Project (in partnership with the National Park Service). Transcripts of these interviews will be made available online through the Bancroft Library, along with some selected video clips. The transcripts will also be available at the Richmond Public Library and through National Park Service staff. Under the auspices of ROHO, I conducted thirteen new oral history interviews—more than twenty hours of recorded time—that substantially add to the historical record on Port Chicago. Each individual interview involved a pre-interview with the subject, preparation of a set of guideline questions, and a subsequent transcript review for accuracy. As part of this project, I collected new oral histories of two Port Chicago stevedore survivors, one Navy munitions handler who worked at the facility after the explosion, two former residents of the Port Chicago town, a former civilian employee of the base, and several more. I also interviewed Rep. George Miller and historian Robert Allen. A list of Port Chicago-related oral histories is provided in the bibliography.

This project also used a number of major, primary-source collections, above and beyond individual items that came up in searches on Port Chicago at the Bancroft Library and other historical archives. In addition, over the course of three years of research and writing, I visited historical societies in San Francisco, Martinez, Concord, and Vallejo, on top of research at the historical collections of the Oakland and San Francisco public libraries, and the University of California – Berkeley. Not all of the major collections that were central to this project are directly cited, since the great majority of documents that I reviewed never became key pieces of evidence, as is to be expected with any comparable project. But on countless occasions, perhaps a scattered letter or a provocative military document invited a new inquiry down a different path that did end up making an indirect difference in the project. The collections are: The Port Chicago Vigil Voices newsletters, Bancroft Library; The Frank Rowe papers, 1946-1986, Bancroft Library; The Jerome R. Waldie papers, Bancroft Library; the Department of Defense, Department of the Navy, Mare Island Naval Shipyard papers at the National Archives, San Bruno; the NAACP 1940-1955 General Office files, Washington, D.C. (microfilm); and, the National Park Service's Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front Museum collection (including most importantly, perhaps, the oral histories of Port Chicago sailors and survivors conducted in the 1990s by Tracey Panek). In addition, I had the enormous benefit of access to the personal collections held by Dean McLeod, Spencer Sikes II, and Nancy Rowe.

## **Conclusion**

I explored in this framework three lenses that facilitate my understanding, interpretation, and field work of the Port Chicago story: imaginaries, memorials, and fictions. To summarize: the notion of imaginaries—urban, geographical, spatial—offers an expansive category which, unlike mainstream definitions of heritage, refuses arbitrary exclusions on the basis of geographical scales, temporal boundaries, or stylistic status. Partly as exemplars of such sorts of imaginaries, memorials at various scales regulate our encounters with the past and the present,

thereby controlling spaces for appearance. Moreover, a dearth of theory on the racialization of space—and the spacialization of the construct ‘race’—in the architectural discourse, worsens the problem of invisibility. Meanwhile, the intellectual body of work on architectural fictions fills out a notion of space that is against reifications of architecture as limited to built form, and in favor of a broader study of the material, discursive, and projective dimensions of space into the future.

Taken together, these lenses facilitate the coupling of social relations with the environments in which they take place, keeping in mind that environments must be both lived and imagined. These conditions call for a reconsideration of some of the very bases of architecture and memory: Who produces or claims public space for remembering, and what forms might such a space take on? What does space ensure, if anything, for speech and action?

## Chapter 3 – A Brief History of the Naval Bay Area

In this essay, I give a brief overview of the San Francisco Bay Area’s naval expansionism from its early days as a city. I connect the racial turmoil of the 1940s to the historical racism embedded into the Navy’s roots in the Bay Area. In this context, Mare Island plays a protagonist role, as the first naval installation on the Pacific and for a time the operational headquarters of the Twelfth Naval District that oversaw the Port Chicago Naval Magazine. In addition, the naval history of monumentality and memorials in the city reaches back to key events, like the construction of landmarks such as the Dewey memorial at the center of Union Square in San Francisco.

### Whiteness, Profiteering, and the City

“In the Bay Area,” writes Roger Lotchin, “the entanglement of the city and the sword dates from the foundation of the Presidio in 1776, the year of San Francisco’s birth.”<sup>1</sup> To complicate Lotchin’s statement, the American invasion of Mexican Alta California, coming less than a century after Spanish colonization, achieved an unparalleled marriage: an alliance between racial dominance and jingoist military profiteering in a rapidly urbanizing environment, as Gray Brechin meticulously shows in *Imperial San Francisco*.<sup>2</sup>

San Francisco was to become the natural home a pairing between white, “Anglo-Saxon” superiority and imperial power, imagined as a new Rome on the Pacific by the rich and powerful “thought shapers,” as Brechin calls the ruling families of the time.<sup>3</sup> Bishop George Berkeley

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Lotchin, *Fortress California, 1910-1961: From Warfare to Welfare* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 42.

<sup>2</sup> Gray A. Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 280–330.

<sup>3</sup> See also Gray Brechin, “Pecunary Emulation: The Role of Tycoons in Imperial City-Building,” in *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, ed. James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy Joyce Peters (San Francisco:



augured in his poem, “America: A Prophecy,” of 1726, that: “Westward the course of empire takes its way.”<sup>4</sup> Crowning this empire would come to be San Francisco, where “mining, mechanization, metallurgy, money, and the military all found their headquarters in the city so rapidly growing by the Golden Gate,” Brechin writes.<sup>5</sup>

Once the Gold Rush was underway, San Francisco was immediately imagined as destined to rule an expansive hinterland much as Rome had in its past. In many ways, and at great costs to the environment, San Francisco lived up to its rulers’ fantasies. In the mid-nineteenth century, the city first amassed its wealth with distant sources of gold, silver and timber, as well as wheat harvesting and mercury mines closer to home. Decentralized manufacturing and unbridled real estate speculation quickly followed, spreading south down the peninsula and jumping over to the East Bay from “the City.” Military expansion on the federal dole entered the picture soon thereafter.

This entire urban vision, made possible through the control of news, printed media, and higher education (with the first University of California campus at Berkeley), combined resource extraction and the subjugation of indigenous people and migrant workers. In addition, a spirit of foreign adventurism throughout the Pacific and the Americas forged ahead in a hungry search for more resources, lands, and colored races as potential laboring classes.<sup>6</sup>

One clear example that best illustrates this unholy mixture between militarism, exploitation, and racism was when Naval Commodore Matthew Perry set eyes on his own private, profiteering commercial steamship enterprise. In his public orations he would cite the same Bishop Berkeley line about the westward course of empire as his justification for seizing Pacific islands and establishing the “Saxon race” on the shores of Asia.<sup>7</sup>

The combination of a white supremacist ideology with American imperialism imbued the expansion and ravenous accumulation with the infallibility of divine providence. Expansionism, backed by military aggression, was then coupled with the deployment of symbolic monuments and statues in the landscape all throughout San Francisco, directly or indirectly lionizing the military. One such monument was inaugurated in 1903 and is still one of the most visited sites in San Francisco today: a naval monument named after Commodore George Dewey at the center of Union Square, a space itself named after the Union in the Civil War, celebrating the sinking of the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay.

Later, the buildup to fighting World War II in the Pacific brought to partial fruition what was long desired for the imperial and racial aspirations of San Francisco’s white male builders, including a disastrous and uneven process of spatial segregation in California cities and the removal of the Japanese off to concentration camps.<sup>8</sup> Yet the region never regained the state’s leading economic role that Southern California had seized after the 1920s.<sup>9</sup> The geographical transformation of this vast estuary system into a constellation of (seemingly) permanent bases during World War II and in the decades after represented the completion of a naval construction

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City Lights Books, 1998), 101–114.

<sup>4</sup> Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>6</sup> Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco*, 7, 331.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald D Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); David Wyatt, *Five Fires: Race, Catastrophe, and the Shaping of California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Lotchin, *Fortress California, 1910-1961*, 42.

program that started on the barren Mare Island off the shores of a new town, Vallejo, in the northeastern reaches of the Bay on the eve of the Civil War.

Other fortifications came earlier, but San Francisco's hydrological advantage was a natural fit for a naval bastion, even before the state's annexation in 1848. Yet it was the gold nuggets and the economic boom that followed their discovery that made the region attractive to greedy merchants and naval officers as well, who saw an opportunity to enrich themselves, as I'll discuss briefly below.

## **Anchoring in the San Francisco Bay**

The Pacific Squadron, predecessor to the Pacific Fleet, ostensibly protected fueling stations and U.S. merchant ships with commercial interests as far away as Chile, Hawaii, Alaska, and China. But the squadron was also there to suppress Native American insurrections in northern California and Oregon territory.<sup>10</sup> Coincidentally, the Pacific Squadron is sometimes known in current publications as the "old navy" or the "old Yankee navy." This phrase is more commonly seen in the current era plastered on American and Canadian shopping malls and retail districts to advertise the Old Navy chain clothing store, founded in San Francisco by a more modern clan of "thought shapers," the Fisher family, best known as the owners of The Gap.<sup>11</sup>

Led by Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones, the Pacific Squadron was manned by a rowdy crew—racially mixed, in fact—of poorly compensated drifters and outlaws, as well as skilled seamen, sodden with alcohol and often suffering from sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>12</sup> Jones and his squadron are infamous for a mistaken invasion of Monterey in 1842 that likely delayed U.S. acquisition of California.<sup>13</sup> Jones was under the mistaken impression, based on poor intelligence-gathering, that a U.S. war with Mexico was already underway. He also feared, at the time, an opportunistic colonization of Alta California by French ships that had sailed out of Valparaiso.<sup>14</sup> For this two-day aggression, Jones was relieved of his duties, only to regain his leadership position during the Gold Rush six years later.

Jones gradually based his ships in San Francisco against direct orders from Washington D.C..<sup>15</sup> Presaging the important link to the federal dollar, he pressed the government for more ships and facility construction, even though Navy Secretary William B. Preston wanted Jones and his sailors out on patrol, away from the lure of gold that led to heightened numbers of desertions. Jones himself was likely involved in gold dust and land speculation in Benicia, which explains his telling obsession with bringing a shipyard to this inland location along the Carquinez Strait, far from the Golden Gate. He was court-martialed in 1850 for misuse of government funds, disobeying orders, and draconian treatment of junior officers, among other legal issues. He denied the charges, but was still suspended for five years, sealing his fate once and for all to

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<sup>10</sup> Gene A. Smith, "The War That Wasn't: Thomas ap Catesby Jones's Seizure of Monterey," *California History* 66, no. 2 (June 1, 1987): 104–113; Robert Erwin Johnson, *Thence Round Cape Horn: The Story of United States Naval Forces on Pacific Station, 1818-1923* (New York: Arno Press, 1980).

<sup>11</sup> The company officially states on its website that the name was taken from "a Paris café."

<sup>12</sup> Lorraine McConaghy, "The Old Navy in the Pacific West: Naval Discipline in Seattle, 1855-1856," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 98, no. 1 (December 1, 2006): 18–28.

<sup>13</sup> Lisbeth Haas, "War in California, 1846-1848," *California History* 76, no. 2/3 (July 1, 1997): 331–355.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, "The War That Wasn't: Thomas ap Catesby Jones's Seizure of Monterey."

<sup>15</sup> C. Norman Guice, "The 'Contentious Commodore' and San Francisco: Two 1850 Letters from Thomas Ap Catesby Jones," *Pacific Historical Review* 34, no. 3 (1965): 337–342.

never become the commander of the future Bay Area naval shipyard he dreamed of.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, Jones's vision for a naval base came to fruition in 1852 when Commodore John D. Sloat led a study to identify a site for a naval yard and munitions depot. *Isla de la Yegua* (Mare) was chosen.<sup>17</sup> The succeeding Secretary of the Navy, William A. Graham, who later represented North Carolina in the Confederate Senate, agreed: "A new empire has, as by magic, sprung into existence, a navy yard is very much needed in California."<sup>18</sup> By 1854, a purchase was completed. Commander David D. Farragut was selected to lead the yard.<sup>19</sup> Mare Island was a symbol of the increasing militarization of a Western land brimming with riches and social upheaval. With the construction of forts at the Golden Gate and on Alcatraz Island in the 1850s, military leaders sought to thwart any pirate invasions.<sup>20</sup> But Mare Island was of a different character: a well-stocked naval shipyard and depot loaded with ammunitions that could be deployed offensively, not as merely reactive defenses.

At the same time, Mare Island's location sometimes proved to be rather far from where the Pacific Squadron was demanded. The heightened role of the squadron was put into relief when Commander Farragut sent vessels, in a haphazard scramble, into the Puget Sound area to put down a Native American insurgent attack on the town of Seattle in 1856, killing several dozen Indians.<sup>21</sup> After the Puget Sound adventure, a vessel from Mare Island took part in a similar domestic operation against a very different enemy, threatening to take out the Vigilance Committee militia that had seized San Francisco.<sup>22</sup>

The Civil War brought new rationales for construction and armaments in the Bay Area. Military commanders reported apprehension about three kinds of dangers: first, a Confederate strike on gold or other shipments that were vital to the Union; second, a British or French invasion to take advantage of the national schism; and third, a secessionist act by their own military personnel stationed in California. Although the federal government made some concessions to fortifying the Bay Area during this period (mainly with additional troops, weapons, and makeshift batteries), by the time of the surrender of the Confederate South, San Francisco could hardly be considered impregnable. However, the advance preparation for war led to the procurement of San Francisco's first warship, the *Comanche*. The Donahue brothers' Union Iron Works in the south of Market Street area assembled the ship from prefabricated steel parts sent from the East Coast around the Horn. The project foreshadowed what would go on to be a Union Iron Works staple and a Bay Area boom industry that came to an apex during World War II. Launched on November 14, 1864, the vessel languished unused at a Mare Island wharf

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<sup>16</sup> Johnson, *Thence Round Cape Horn: The Story of United States Naval Forces on Pacific Station, 1818-1923*.

<sup>17</sup> Brechin notes that Mare Island, with its silty channel, was not a first choice for the shipyard, and that it was settled upon for the naval yard due to the finagling of Captain John Frisbie, who happened to have real estate interests in the Vallejo Area. Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco*, 124.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Robert J. Chandler, "An Uncertain Influence: The Role of the Federal Government in California, 1846-1880," *California History* 81, no. 3/4 (January 1, 2003): 229.

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, *Thence Round Cape Horn: The Story of United States Naval Forces on Pacific Station, 1818-1923*.

<sup>20</sup> Emanuel Raymond Lewis, *Seacoast Fortifications of the United States: An Introductory History* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1979).

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *Thence Round Cape Horn: The Story of United States Naval Forces on Pacific Station, 1818-1923*; McConaghy, "The Old Navy in the Pacific West: Naval Discipline in Seattle, 1855-1856."

<sup>22</sup> Herbert G. Florecken, "The Law and Order View of the San Francisco Vigilance Committee of 1856: Taken from the Correspondence of Governor J. Neely Johnson," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (December 1, 1935): 350-374. On the Vigilance Committee, see Philip J. Ethington, *The Public City: the Political Construction of Urban Life in San Francisco, 1850-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

until 1899.<sup>23</sup>

As the Civil War came to a close, the Donohues sold the foundry to their superintendent, Irving Murray Scott, who brought in his brother, Henry, to oversee operations. Put briefly, the Scott brothers rode a mining equipment boom to become some of the wealthiest and most influential industrialists in the city, as Brechin has extensively documented.

Nevertheless, the industrialization of the Bay created paradoxical obstacles for the very same people who most profited from its rapid growth. For instance, mine tailings silted much of the Bay, threatening the productivity of ports that the Scotts had invested in. But as the volume of silver from the Comstock Lode declined, the federal government stepped in with its largesse to dredge the Bay (foreshadowing much more federal involvement in the future), just in time for the Scott brothers to move more fully into military shipbuilding, approximately twenty years after the Civil War.

The Scotts boasted to employees in 1887 that they had found the proverbial keys to the federal coffers. The Scotts had another important key in their repertoire, moving into publishing the *Overland Monthly*, a mouthpiece they used to fan the flames of the Spanish American War, whipping up fears of a Philippine “counter-insurgency.” Over 4,200 Americans died in the war and perhaps up to one million locals. For decades, the *Overland* played up fears of a “yellow peril.” The Scotts were simultaneously busy selling armaments to Japan while simultaneously preaching the “subjugation of inferior races.”<sup>24</sup>

The case of the Union Iron Works is but one example, certainly an intriguing one, of the much larger post-Civil War industrialization—and decentralization—of the Bay Area, which has been captured by Richard Walker.<sup>25</sup> This process is important to mention here, ever so briefly, because the build-out of the northeastern interior of the Bay Area (Contra Costa County) precedes naval expansion into the region during World War II and after. Where wheat growers and manufacturers of steel, explosives, timber, and other goods laid down infrastructures during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Navy followed. For example, the Scotts own foundry in San Francisco would later change hands and eventually end up in 1939 as a Navy property.<sup>26</sup> And it was the industrial skeleton of ports, canals, and railways in Contra Costa, combined with the declining utility and capacity of Mare Island, that drew the Navy to Port Chicago in 1942. The naval magazine came to be at the site of a former lumber and boat yard with a deep-water harbor and rail connection.<sup>27</sup>

California became much more intimate with the sword during the Progressive Era. As Mike Davis says, “by stoking anti-Japanese hysteria in California to a fever pitch and producing the first ‘war scares’ with Japan in 1906 and 1913, the Progressives contributed to the geopolitical tensions in the Pacific that would eventually realign U.S. naval deployments. Indeed, the creation of a Pacific Fleet to protect California from the ‘yellow peril’ was a principal

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<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Franklin Gilbert, “San Francisco Harbor Defense During the Civil War,” *California Historical Society Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1954): 229–240.

<sup>24</sup> Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco*, 126–170.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Walker, “Industry Builds Out The City: The Suburbanization of Manufacturing in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1850-1940,” in *Manufacturing Suburbs: Building Work and Home on the Metropolitan Fringe*, ed. Robert D Lewis (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University, 2004), 92–123.

<sup>26</sup> Roger W. Lotchin, “The City and the Sword: San Francisco and the Rise of the Metropolitan-Military Complex 1919-1941,” *The Journal of American History* 65, no. 4 (March 1, 1979): 996–1020.

<sup>27</sup> McLeod, *Port Chicago*. On Contra Costa and the development of the inland Bay Area, see also James E. Vance Jr., *Geography and Urban Evolution in the San Francisco Bay Area* (Berkeley: Institute of Governmental Studies, University of California, 1964).

Progressive demand.”<sup>28</sup> By 1907, the Asiatic and Pacific Squadrons were combined into one command to form the Pacific Fleet.<sup>29</sup>

The new belligerence on the Pacific towards Japan was shown, in addition to the restructured naval force, by Theodore Roosevelt’s display of his Navy’s mighty force in a sea-going parade around the world—the Great White Fleet. The armada’s triumphal march on the high seas was not only tinged with racial hysteria towards the East; it marked a turning point at home, and in more ways than one. Influenced by the eugenicist racial ideas of the time, the Navy desired a truly white force, not only in name, but also within the ranks. They segregated the force, duplicating the Jim Crow boundaries beyond the military’s walls. In addition, the new ships were large and steam-powered, requiring more sailors than ever before. At the same time, the new recruits could work a ship with virtually no seafaring experience. The Navy set about filling its ranks with young, white men from the South and Midwest, establishing the roots for a racially homogenous and exclusionist institution for decades to come.<sup>30</sup>

The opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 also added a new rationale for a Western build-up. Meanwhile, San Francisco was losing its dominant role among Pacific cities by World War I, and Mare Island was fast becoming obsolete. Military assets, which were accruing to Los Angeles, San Diego, and Seattle, were seen by San Francisco’s elites as a vital linchpin for urban development. The Chamber of Commerce, working in concert with naval officers, spearheaded efforts to draw more military investments.<sup>31</sup> It would take almost up to the dawn of World War II to see the plums fall on the San Francisco Bay region.

In other words, at the eve of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in the Pacific Ocean, the Bay still had relatively few naval installations. This was such, despite the previous century of near-constant—but also self-interested—pleas from the business establishment and officers for more facilities and federal dollars. Scattered naval facilities, by then, included Mare Island as the oldest continuous presence of the Navy in the area and the recently purchased Hunter’s Point shipyards. In addition, the Navy had new installations and plans for expansion on Alameda island in the East Bay, a dirigible base and airfield in Sunnyvale to the south of San Francisco, and a leased airstrip on Treasure Island.<sup>32</sup> Beyond the constrained ammunition depot on Mare Island, the closest other naval ammunitions facility was far out in the desert of Hawthorn, Nevada.

## Fighting World War II at Home

Much the same way that San Francisco’s earlier frenzies for minerals seemed to change the city almost overnight, a few short years would make a world of difference for the landscape of the Bay Area and the region’s racial demographics, as historians and geographers have amply studied. Says Joshua Jelly-Shapiro: “The U.S. effort to defeat the Axis powers during the Second World War brought more profound changes to the Bay Area than to any other region.”<sup>33</sup> Cities

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<sup>28</sup> Mike Davis, “The Next Little Dollar: The Private Governments of San Diego,” in *Under the Perfect Sun: The San Diego Tourists Never See*, by Kelly Mayhew, Jim Miller, and Mike Davis (New York: New Press, 2003), 43–44.

<sup>29</sup> “Command History,” *Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet*, May 29, 2012, <http://www.cpf.navy.mil/about/history/>.

<sup>30</sup> Bernard C Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 78–86.

<sup>31</sup> Lotchin, *Fortress California, 1910-1961*; Lotchin, “The City and the Sword: San Francisco and the Rise of the Metropolitan-Military Complex 1919-1941.”

<sup>32</sup> Lotchin, “The City and the Sword: San Francisco and the Rise of the Metropolitan-Military Complex 1919-1941”; Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of The Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History*, 2006, 37.

<sup>33</sup> Joshua Jelly-Schapiro, “High Tide, Low Ebb,” in *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas*, by Rebecca Solnit

like Richmond, Vallejo, Pittsburg, Oakland, and Marin were almost instantly transformed into boomtowns of shipbuilding for the war; but they struggled to meet the demand for housing, which remained an especially segregated domain.<sup>34</sup> The Bay Area's population grew by half.<sup>35</sup> More than a quarter million African Americans migrated to California during the war, mostly from the South.<sup>36</sup> They went straight to the urban centers to work, while a majority of able-bodied white men in early adulthood were able to serve on the war front. As Quintard Taylor explains, thousands of African American men also served in the military, but mostly without the chance to fight.<sup>37</sup>

In a short time, a period of approximately 18 months at the most, the military swooped down on the Bay, making it into a Navy town, by and large. It quickly acquired several names and slogans: The Navy's lake, The American Singapore, and the arsenal of democracy. The Navy took over—literally, without asking—Treasure Island. They purchased 412 acres of land in Richmond for a fueling depot. They removed 100 families in the vicinity of Hunter's Point for shipyard expansion. They built an isolated radio communications "listening post" on a drained marsh in Sonoma (Skaggs Island), complete with a new town to keep the location in isolation from the rest of the world in the case of an attack on the Bay Area. The Navy also reclaimed an old coaling station in Tiburon for construction of a depot that produced a seven mile-long, 6,000-ton, anti-submarine net that spanned from Sausalito to San Francisco.

And finally, Port Chicago: by simply invoking condemnation, the commanders at Mare Island took over cattle ranches and farmland connected to the Southern Pacific by a rail spur and a deep water port to build the naval ammunition magazine.<sup>38</sup> Following the recommendations of a secret report drawn up by Captain Milton S. Davis in the months preceding Pearl Harbor and delivered just two days after the Japanese attack, the Navy started work on building the facility in February 1942.<sup>39</sup> With such expansion and the need for manpower, the Navy grudgingly accepted African American sailors into their ranks, but only as a servant class, and at select locations, as munitions handlers, despite dire personnel needs on all fronts.<sup>40</sup> With a segregated training facility in Illinois on Lake Michigan, called Great Lakes, Navy Secretary Frank Knox seeded the racial animosity towards Black enlistees and insolent behaviors by white officers. As one Port Chicago sailor said of Secretary Knox:

*Negro sailors, we were called Negroes, Negro sailors were not accepted as real seamen. We were considered mess attendants or something of that nature. But they were finally going to allow us in the Navy. And we felt all the racism, the prejudices that was going on. Secretary of the Navy, Knox at that time, we had to square around for two days to clean up our barracks and put everything in tiptop order and be ready for the Secretary of the Navy to come visit our camp. And he came in and reviewed every camp except the black camp. He would not. And we read the next day in the paper that the Secretary of the Navy said that it was a*

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(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 57–65.

<sup>34</sup> Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War*, 88–106.

<sup>35</sup> Jelly-Schapiro, "High Tide, Low Ebb."

<sup>36</sup> Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990*.

<sup>38</sup> Keibel, *Behind the Barbed Wire*.

<sup>39</sup> Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of The Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History*, 2006, 39–41.

<sup>40</sup> John Darrell Sherwood, *Black Sailor, White Navy: Racial Unrest in the Fleet During the Vietnam War Era* (New York: NYU Press, 2007); Davis, "The Next Little Dollar: The Private Governments of San Diego," 47–49.

*disgrace that the United States had sunk so low as to allow Negroes into the Navy.  
So that didn't make us feel very proud or patriotic.<sup>41</sup>*

The prejudice of the Navy would catch up to its brass, as Port Chicago and Vallejo events would eventually come to prove.

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Edwards, Sr., *An Oral History of Port Chicago*, interview by Tracey E. Panek, March 10, 1995, 64, National Park Service Eugene O'Neil National Historic Site.

## Chapter 4 – Whiteout: The Social Production of Port Chicago Memorials

Why does the Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial exist? What, exactly, does a national park commemorate at the Bay Area site of a World War II-era ammunition explosion—the worst home front disaster during the conflict?

Answers to such questions are not as simple as they may appear on a first brush with the memorial and its surroundings. Even before setting foot at the park, the initial encounter that someone might have with official discourse about the place offers some preliminary answers. The National Park Service web page devoted to the memorial stated in early-2012 that:

*(The) Port Chicago National Memorial is about many things. It's about the tragedy of loss of life. It's about discrimination, segregation and the very beginnings of civil rights for all Americans. It's also about the coming together as a nation to learn from our past mistakes. Please take the extra time and energy and come visit Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial.<sup>1</sup>*

If read carelessly, the statement above makes a sudden leap that could easily be missed. It goes from the idea of “many things,” followed by succinctly listing discrimination, segregation, and civil rights, and then jumps to “coming together as a nation” in the third sentence. It represents a summersault that could mislead one into thinking that the “nation” simply came together by recognizing those “past mistakes,” lacking any frictions or countless, hard-fought struggles to raise consciousness. Of course, such an abbreviated discussion could be excused as what is, for all intents and purposes, only an initial primer on a website. Any uninformed employee, junior or senior, at the federal agency, could have written the text.

But this seemingly minor instance of a leap from an undesirable past to a resolved present is not unique. Instead, it is illustrative of a larger pattern. Over time, alas, the website has

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<sup>1</sup> “Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial (U.S. National Park Service),” accessed June 22, 2010, <http://www.nps.gov/poch/>.



repeatedly changed its message. In a newer iteration, the page was rewritten to state, even more briefly, that the “Port Chicago National Memorial is not only a tribute to the 320 men who died in the WWII explosion, but it became the touchstone for desegregation in the military.” How do these discussions make their way into the actual space of the park itself?

## **Blurred Memories at the Port Chicago Memorial**

In this chapter I argue that there is indeterminacy about the role of the official Port Chicago Memorial. Far from mere happenstance, the lack of clarity is seemingly the result of compromise between different opinions among interested parties over the meaning of the site. Yet, I argue, a blurriness of memory betrayed by this spatial imaginary has the collateral result of abetting the unequal race relations that the very memorial ostensibly addresses, as well as perpetuating U.S. military and imperial power.

Through my case study of the making of this place, I show how architectural meaning is produced socially, “in the articulation of conflicting patterns of use and appropriation, some authorized and others resolutely illegitimate,” in the words of Tom McDonough.<sup>2</sup> I show that memory and meaning are not merely shaped in an individual’s mind, but are milled in the complex exchanges between the tangible environment and the socio-political realm where this spatial imaginary gets negotiated. The back-and-forth between environment and meaning shows how the memorial is part of a larger *dispositivo*, the term employed in Spanish, by Nestor García Canclini, to identify the assemblages between space, place, and politics.<sup>3</sup> In this assemblage that I am about to discuss, people find they either belong to or are excluded from culture and cultural citizenship.

In the case of the Port Chicago Memorial, a series of legal decisions at the hands of the U.S. Navy deepen the cultural disputes over the meaning of the site. The combination of the Navy’s legal determinations in the wake of the explosion and the interpretive disagreements between groups interested in the park produce a palliative, hazy tone of tribute to notions like bravery, heroism, and triumph—a vague, depoliticized remembrance. This comes across through the memorial’s visual communication features and through those who speak for the purported memories it represents. The effect, I conclude, is an encounter with a space that appears uprooted from both the virulent race politics that the military has been complicit in propagating, and the violence that the military has itself been a part of. The coup d’état of the Port Chicago Memorial is to present what is unfinished as finished. Or to steal a phrase from Carey McWilliams: the place is a “remarkable feat of capturing an experience before the experience has ceased to be.”<sup>4</sup>

The outcome of the memorial is ironic because the military can be understood, perhaps like at any war memorial, as heroic protagonist in the story of the war, and yet, in this case, as erased from the racial politics and the historic events that are cited to justify the continued preservation of the national park itself. Although the memorial was born out of different

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<sup>2</sup> McDonough, “The Surface as Stake: A Postscript to Timothy M. Rohan’s ‘Rendering the Surface,’” 103.

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 2 – Imaginaries and Memory; see also García Canclini, *Imaginarios Urbanos*.

<sup>4</sup> Carey McWilliams, *California, the Great Exception* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Apropos, McWilliams’s explains in the original passage where the quote originates that by catapulting quickly to US statehood, California recorded its frontier experience as it was happening, rather than as a neatly ordered reconstruction. Thus, the fictitious imagination of the frontier as frozen into myths, stories, and songs continued to shape the state’s conflictive politics into the present.

intentions, as I show, other forces and ongoing social compromises underpin the site's preservation in the present and future.

### **The Blast Heard Across the United States of America**

The Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial records, according to the National Park Service, the largest home front disaster during World War II. Also, as stated in the official brochure distributed at tours of the site, the memorial exists “to remember the fallen soldiers and civilians” who were killed in the disaster.<sup>5</sup> The Navy's most advanced ammunition depot was totally paralyzed in the middle of fierce combat in the Pacific by a blast felt as far as Nevada and registered on seismographs across the region. The memorial is an architectural way to enshrine what is popularly described as “the Port Chicago story,” as it were; an *umbilicus mundi* where disparate threads combine, although sometimes do not entirely connect.

At approximately twenty minutes past the ten o'clock hour, on July 17, 1944, two explosions in quick succession occurred, instantly killing 320 military and civilian personnel working at or near the pier of the Port Chicago naval magazine, and injuring hundreds of others. The twin explosions completely destroyed two ships docked at the magazine's pier, as well as a 45-ton locomotive, a smaller ship navigating in the straits nearby, an adjacent building, and a wharf that was still under construction.<sup>6</sup>

*The New York Times* reported that the blast “left a ‘scorched earth’ scene.”<sup>7</sup> The explosion is considered locally as the worst disaster to have hit the San Francisco Bay Area since the 1906 earthquake and fire. According to the Navy, the damage to government property added up to almost ten million in 1944 dollars; by other estimates even more. The federal memorial sits on the former site of ship-loading operations, adjacent to the ruins of the pier destroyed in the blast.

Gloria Magleby, an employee at the naval magazine in 1944, was at home in the neighboring community of West Pittsburg on the night of the blast. She remembered the episode in her oral history:

*I was in my house and when the explosion came, it was the loudest noise I have ever heard in my entire life. I don't think my ears will ever be the same. It was absolutely, totally so loud that you cannot explain it. That was the first explosion and then came the second one. I was in the bathroom at the time, ready to get ready for bed and I don't think I was jolted as much as I was shocked at the noise. Then here came the second explosion, and then I was truly shocked. My mother and father were in the front bedroom of our house, windows right there. Not one window was broken at their bedroom. But in this room where I'm sitting, all the windows in the front were broken. The door was blown across the room and ended up over on that side of the room. The garage door was broken and open. All*

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<sup>5</sup> National Park Service, “Port Chicago – A Critical Link,” n.d.

<sup>6</sup> “Port Chicago Naval Magazine Explosion on 17 July 1944: Court of Inquiry: Finding of Facts, Opinion and Recommendations,” 1946, Box: 7/12, Folder A17.25, Vol. 8., U.S. National Archives, Pacific Sierra Region, Record Group: 181, 12th Naval District Commandant's Office, General Correspondence Series (Formerly classified), <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq80-4.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence E. Davies, “At Least 350 Dead as Munitions Ships Blow Up On Coast,” *The New York Times*, July 19, 1944.

*the nails in the ceiling came out half way. Dishes were all broken. We knew it was bad.*<sup>8</sup>

A mile-and-a-half from the shattered dock, the small town of Port Chicago, which the naval magazine was named after, was badly shaken. Injuries ranged from slight wounds to permanent disabilities, such as blindness, mostly caused by flying shards of glass and debris. Nobody was killed, though, in the town itself, as far as anyone has ever been able to account for.<sup>9</sup>

Morris Rich and a friend were some of the lucky survivors; many of their shipmates were not. He was a gunner and part of the Naval Armed Guard crew on board of the brand new *Quinault Victory*, one of the two merchant marine ships destroyed in the blast. The *Quinault* had sailed less than a week prior from manufacturing shipyards in Portland, Oregon and arrived at Port Chicago earlier on the very day of the explosion, only to meet a quick and smoldering end.<sup>10</sup> Rich had gone on liberty out of the base an hour before the calamity. He recounted:

*We walked in a little restaurant right next to the theater. We just sat down and ordered a sandwich. Where we were sitting, we hadn't been sitting there maybe five minutes or less and this explosion took place. We found ourselves across the room. I mean it blew us out of the booth clear across the room. The first thing we thought is the Japanese were bombing.*<sup>11</sup>

The theater he mentions later collapsed from damage sustained in the shockwave. Many other people in Port Chicago and all over the Bay Area also believed, at first, that the Japanese had staged an attack.

Rear Admiral C.H. Wright, the commandant of the Twelfth Naval District that oversaw the naval magazine at Port Chicago, asserted after the explosion that those killed gave their lives in service to the country. He said: "Their sacrifice could not have been greater had it occurred on a battleship or a beach head on the war fronts. Their conduct was in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States naval service."<sup>12</sup>

As I will show, there are some commonalities between the military's posthumous tributes—a formal ceremoniousness that continues into the present—and the sustaining of military power. These can be made more permanent through architectural form, a spatial concealment of the necropolitics that ruled over the lives of the deceased.<sup>13</sup> The present-day memorial sustains the military tradition, plainly articulated by Wright, in the quote above, of rendering a blanket tribute to all of those killed, as if they had had equal agency in how, where, and when they faced mortal threats.

The myth shaped by signage and displays in the architecture of the memorial is, similarly, that all were performing a service to the country. Few would deny they were, but recognition, merit, and rewards for that service were not as equally distributed as the admiral, or the memorial, say. Furthermore, as a potential gesture that compensates for past inequities in merit

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<sup>8</sup> Gloria Magleby, *Rosie the Riveter World War II American Home Front Oral History Project*, interview by Javier Arbona, 2010, 13, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>9</sup> Folk accounts of the Port Chicago explosion also report of some deaths in Benicia, across the water from the piers of the naval base, but these are unconfirmed.

<sup>10</sup> "Port Chicago Explosion Court of Inquiry."

<sup>11</sup> Morris Rich, *An Oral History of Port Chicago*, interview by Tracey E. Panek, July 17, 1999, 3, Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial, National Park Service.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Davies, "At Least 350 Dead as Munitions Ships Blow Up On Coast."

<sup>13</sup> Achille Mbembe defines necropolitics as a "power" or a "capacity" to determine "who may live and who must die." Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11–40.

recognition, the memorial is but a faint tribute, since it represents little remedy of the lost ground in the lives of the African American sailors who survived the blast.

The brunt of the carnage was borne by segregated African American stevedores, who loaded ships day and night, a job that has been shown by scholars to have been exceedingly and unnecessarily dangerous. For example, the Navy would provide transportation for sailors to work additional hours at the Avon oil refinery adjacent to the base, a practice which allowed impoverished sailors in a segregated system with few benefits to send remittances back home. This practice, which has recently come to light in oral histories, likely exacerbated the perils of loading under intense pressure.<sup>14</sup> But it was the outcome of racial and economic inequality combined with Navy disregard for the sailors. In addition, former stevedores report that they commonly faced threats of violence, on top of racial epithets hurled at them as they performed their regular duties as enlisted personnel, sometimes even reading these insults scribbled on the walls of the boxcars that they had to unload.<sup>15</sup>

202 segregated stevedores were killed in the blast. Fifteen percent of all African American lives lost in the war, according to official tallies, ended when the two ships exploded. In addition, the unidentifiable remains of twenty-four African American sailors killed in the double-blast were buried in a segregated section of the Golden Gate National Cemetery in San Bruno, California. Adding insult to injury, the families of Black victims of the explosion received \$3,000 from the federal government—reduced from an initial \$5,000—once a Mississippi representative caught wind of the figure.<sup>16</sup> In a stark contrast to the broad-stroke tributes absent of reference to the realities of the racial inequality of the Jim Crow Navy, California State Senator Robert Wright has said: “We did not bury or have men serve together in 1944.”<sup>17</sup>

The Navy launched what they called a “court of inquiry” to examine the causes of the explosion, but in the end, they could not—or would not—conclusively identify an exact cause. Nor could the 1944 Jim Crow Navy fathom the possibility that the lackadaisical and careless attitude of white officers could play a role in the calamity. Even before the investigation started, *The New York Times* reported that a Navy officer “voiced the belief that the cause of the explosion never would be known.”<sup>18</sup> According to Congressional findings in 1991, the exact causes remain unknown.<sup>19</sup>

The lengthy and often times contradictory court report found myriad problems. Among

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<sup>14</sup> In his oral history, Ivan Herbert reports working at the Avon refinery next to the base. See Ivan Herbert, Rosie the Riveter World War II American Home Front Oral History Project, interview by Javier Arbona, 2011, 32, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Similarly, Joseph Simon also tells Tracey Panek that he would work for one dollar an hour at Avon, saving money to cover his gambling expenses and send money back home. Joseph F. Simon, Oral History Interview with Mr. Joseph R. Simon, interview by Tracey Ellen Panek, November 14, 1995, National Park Service Eugene O’Neil National Historic Site. See also Martin Easton, Rosie the Riveter World War II American Home Front Oral History Project, interview by Javier Arbona, 2011, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>15</sup> Sammy L. Boykin, An Oral History of Port Chicago, interview by Tracey E. Panek, August 14, 1999, 9, National Park Service Eugene O’Neil National Historic Site.

<sup>16</sup> Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of The Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History*, 2006, 67.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in J. Douglas Allen-Taylor, “Undercurrents: Explosion at Port Chicago Reverberates Throughout the Years,” *The Berkeley Daily Planet*, July 23, 2009, <http://www.berkeleydailyplanet.com/issue/2009-07-23/article/33393?headline=Undercurrents-Explosion-at-Port-Chicago-Reverberates-Throughout-the-Years--By-J.-Douglas-Allen-Taylor>.

<sup>18</sup> Davies, “At Least 350 Dead as Munitions Ships Blow Up On Coast.”

<sup>19</sup> George Miller, *Relating to the Naval Facility Explosion at Port Chicago, California, on July 17, 1944.*, 1991, <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c102:H.J.RES.162.>

these problems, the court cited an insufficient number of officers, as well as “a general failure to foresee and prepare for the tremendous increase in explosives shipments,” and “a failure to assemble and train the officers and crew for their specialized duties prior to the time they were required for actual loading.”<sup>20</sup> Allegedly, the longshoremen’s union had warned the Navy in 1942 that a disaster was imminent without experienced winch operators to load pallets of weapons into ships. The Navy refused to pay for union wages, even while other branches did.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, among several outright racist remarks, the report said, “the officers at Port Chicago have realized for a long time the necessity for great effort on their part because of the *poor quality of the personnel* with which they had to work. They worked loyally, conscientiously, intelligently, and effectively to make themselves competent officers and to solve the problem of loading ships safely with the men provided.”<sup>22</sup> While the investigation found systemic issues that could only be solved at an administrative level of command, the court laid the blame at the feet of the segregated stevedores, shifting attention away from patterns of neglect at the top. Such profiling of African American personnel could be anticipated. Mare Island’s top commander, Nelson Goss, held Black stevedores in contempt from the start and had requested white enlistees as stevedores, only to be overridden by the Bureau of Personnel.<sup>23</sup>

While the exact causes of the explosion remain shrouded in mystery, including the repeated surfacing of conspiracy theories that suggest the explosion was an early atom bomb, the disaster was no surprise to the stevedores working under segregation. Unfortunately, conspiracy theories, whether true or not, serve to distract from the documented mistreatment, not to mention that a deliberate detonation makes little sense if one accounts for the amount of ammunition lost that would have been put to use on the war front. At the present memorial, a curious visual tension emerges out of conveying an overall tone of honoring all the dead (and thus upholding long-standing military decorum), while failing to recognize how the segregated conditions gave rise to the volatility of the installation that was swept under the rug by a disingenuous investigation.

## Obama’s Signature

The status of the Port Chicago Memorial as a national park was ensured when President Barack Obama signed the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010. Although this bill ostensibly funds the military and its missions abroad, legislators often horse-trade to insert their own district’s pet projects. Buried deep in this legislation was a land transfer where the park is located, officially giving five acres to the Department of the Interior, which oversees the Park Service.<sup>24</sup> George Miller, with the help of fellow California Democrats, secured the long-term future of the memorial by inserting the act into the Pentagon budget and the planning for the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and additional covert operations.

Legislative maneuvering is a daily occurrence in Congress; the give and take for votes needed to lock a bill. Yet the rub is that a site that purportedly closes up the past is

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<sup>20</sup> “Port Chicago Explosion Court of Inquiry.”

<sup>21</sup> Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of The Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History*, 2006, 42; see also Martin Meeker, ed., *The Oakland Army Base: An Oral History* (Berkeley: The Bancroft Library, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> “Port Chicago Explosion Court of Inquiry” (emphasis added).

<sup>23</sup> Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of The Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History*, 2006, 42–43.

<sup>24</sup> Skelton, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010*; see also William M. Welch, “Worst Home-Front Disaster of WWII Gets Recognition,” *USATODAY.com*, December 27, 2009, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-12-27-port-chicago\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-12-27-port-chicago_N.htm).

simultaneously active in an ongoing present—the continuing effort of over six decades to seek closure to the Port Chicago nightmare. On the face of it, this legislative trajectory of the Port Chicago Memorial is remarkable enough to merit discussion in the concluding section of this chapter as a glimpse of the continued role that race plays in present day military culture.

Therein lies the complexity of this memorial. On the one hand, as seen through distributed literature and tours, the national park seems to capture a linear progression, as incomplete as that progression may be, from a divided society of the past to a better, more equitable present. On the other hand, the composition of the space itself—its architecture—skirts the completeness of that narrative. In fact, when the site was initially designated in Congress as the future home of a federal memorial in 1992, the bill itself spoke ambiguously of the “historic importance” of the site, with no mention of segregation or the complicated events that followed.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast, against the scenic backdrop of the memorial, Senator Barbara Boxer’s spokesperson delivered prepared remarks at the event of the 2011 memorial ceremony that zeroed in on the mutiny and the still-standing Port Chicago court-martial. This instance suggests that there are overlapping-but-separate spaces at the memorial: one for speech, and one for the actual deeds. Boxer says: “These men were disproportionately placed in harm’s way, and then penalized for protesting the unsafe conditions they had endured.”<sup>26</sup> To understand how this spatial separation is accomplished and how it works in such disparate ways, it is necessary to introduce, in the following section, what complicates the official story. A subsequent section further details the architectural features of the memorial, followed later by a look at the groups most vested in the memorial’s meaning.

## Remembering the “Mutiny”

As I explore in this chapter, the memorial may serve a peculiar gestural role in the military’s calculations—a way to display concern for an issue without actually resolving it. John Dalton, Secretary of the Navy (1993-1998), put it the following way, shown in a quote featured prominently on the center of the back page of the brochure handed out by the Park Service at the memorial: “...no doubt that racial prejudice was responsible for the posting of African-American enlisted personnel to the loading divisions at Port Chicago.”<sup>27</sup> The military, in other words, has found a way to instrumentalize the site by acknowledging segregation verbally and symbolically, while avoiding responsibility for its historic consequences in practice—a problem exacerbated by discourses of “post-race.” Another way to put it is that the military has found closure for Port Chicago, while other groups invested in the meaning of the memorial have not. The space, at the same time, remains a setting often saturated with military ceremoniousness, especially at each anniversary commemoration, augmented by constant military supervision. The memorial, in fact, still occupies space on an active military base where access is granted by military prerogative.

The park offers visitors other memories connected to the main theme of honoring the dead and the wounded in the 1944 blast. A part that rangers tend to address on tours of the site, as the park’s handout on paper also explains, is that before African American survivors could

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<sup>25</sup> Senator J. Bennett Johnston, *To Authorize and Direct the Secretary of the Interior to Convey Certain Lands In*, 1992, <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?c102:5:./temp/~c102ErcRcq:>.

<sup>26</sup> Senator Barbara Boxer, “Statement of Senator Boxer on the Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial, Park Dedication, and Commemoration,” July 23, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> National Park Service, “Port Chicago – A Critical Link.”

complete the usual thirty day survivor's leave, they were ordered by their officers to return back to work loading bombs at a neighboring ammunition depot on Mare Island. More than 200 of these shell-shocked personnel, some still nursing injuries, were sent to the Ryder Street barracks in Vallejo, across the Napa River from the Mare Island shipyard and ammunition depot, about 20 miles from Port Chicago. On August 9, 1944, the sailors staged a spontaneous wildcat strike at that shipyard, refusing to handle any more munitions.<sup>28</sup>

The brochure then explains, as one can confirm in several sources, that 258 of these Black seamen were confined on a barge under threat of being charged with a mutiny punishable by execution. It continues to state: "Ultimately, fifty men were singled as "ringleaders" of the mutiny." On October 24, 1944, after six weeks of hearings, and only eighty minutes of closed deliberations, an all-white military tribunal convicted the men who have come to be remembered as "the Port Chicago Fifty."<sup>29</sup> They were dishonorably discharged and sentenced to up to fifteen years behind bars, although after NAACP protest, some of their sentences were reduced and discharges were modified to "under honorable condition," a lesser status than an honorable discharge. The Navy, under pressure, abruptly commuted the sentences when the war ended. But the lesser discharges remained. The trial was harshly condemned by a young Thurgood Marshall, acting as a legal counsel sent by the NAACP from Washington D.C. to observe the proceedings. Marshall also appealed the ruling after the war and lost the first of several other attempts over the course of the second half of the twentieth century to exonerate the men.<sup>30</sup>

Briefly, it is essential to point out that these kinds of lesser discharges handed down to the Port Chicago sailors were not unique, albeit they are a largely forgotten type of punishment. The lesser status of a discharge "under honorable conditions" was a scarlet letter—a hamper on career and economic advancement, as well as a form of shaming. This category of discharge was most often reserved for gays and African Americans. These lesser discharges were known popularly as "blue discharges" or "blue tickets."<sup>31</sup> According to Phillip McGuire, out of 48,603 blue discharges issued between December 1941 and June 1945, about one fifth (10,806) of the total were issued to African Americans. This means that about 20% of blue discharges were issued to Blacks, even though they constituted no more than 6.5% of the total armed forces personnel at any given time during the war.<sup>32</sup>

Conceivably, after reading park signs and literature at Port Chicago, and listening to park rangers, a visitor could leave with the impression that not only did this site play a significant role in carrying out the war on the Pacific front, but that it also had been one of the cauldrons of what the text refers to as "the prejudice and the inequities that most Americans had fought to defeat during World War II." This statement, meanwhile, with its hyperbolic phrase of "most Americans," happens to give a glimpse of a certain amount of revisionism that could be taken

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<sup>28</sup> Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of The Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History*, 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.; see also Wollenberg, "Blacks Vs. Navy Blue: The Mare Island Mutiny Court Martial"; Tracey E. Panek, "Remember Port Chicago: The Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial Oral History Project" (California State University, 1996); Tracey E. Panek, "Challenge to Change: The Legacy of the Port Chicago Disaster," *Common Ground*, 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of The Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History*, 2006, 130. In 1977, another one of the survivors, Martin Bordenave, appealed his conviction and tried, unsuccessfully, to have the case reopened. See Ibid., 139.

<sup>31</sup> Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Free Press, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> Phillip McGuire, ed., *Taps for a Jim Crow Army: Letters from Black Soldiers in World War II* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 146.

from the memorial if one is not careful. This kind of statement exaggerates the degree of solidarity that existed among Americans during the war, and may very well reinforce the mindset that all inequities have been defeated. Precisely because these inequities persist is why there is a continuing struggle for greater consciousness and visibility as part of the rationale for protecting this site, and yet the park can sometimes communicate almost the opposite.

The National Park Service itself recognizes in other documents that pertain to San Francisco Bay Area World War II sites that the period was fraught. While *some* Americans perhaps were fighting for expanded civil rights, other Americans—Californians, notably—joined a chorus that demanded the forced seclusion of Japanese Americans, for example. The general plan for the Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front National Park, a neighboring park overseen by the same office, states that:

*With the exception of Japanese Americans who were relocated to internment camps and imprisoned during the war, World War II challenged the color line on many fronts for most minority groups in the United States. The hypocrisy of a country fighting for freedom abroad while denying it to minorities at home became increasingly abhorrent. African American groups and institutions, growing in size and militancy, consciously used the war effort to extract concessions and gains. These forces played a part in altering the status of African Americans and quickening the pace of their struggle for equal rights.<sup>33</sup>*

Most years since the Port Chicago Memorial's dedication in 1994, on or close to the exact date of the anniversary of the explosion, the park serves as a ceremonial setting loaded with military symbolism. The event counts on the participation of high-ranking officers from different branches, as well as high-ranking deputies from the NPS—all dressed in their full regalia. The ceremony brings together many veterans of World War II, including some who come to pay tribute even if they did not serve at Port Chicago, and many of whom were segregated servicemen. For several years, survivors of the explosion attended, but their numbers have steadily declined as most have passed away or become too frail to participate. The NPS coordinates with current military personnel, community organizations, and public figures, to offer a tribute to the fallen.

As I witnessed on one visit, or as one can get some images of online, the ceremony usually involves awards to public figures that have worked in favor of the park, and is filled with oral testimonies and readings from historical first-person accounts of the blast.<sup>34</sup> At a heightened moment of somber reflection, a naval chaplain invokes spiritual thoughts, while the sounds of bagpipes and a tolling bell fill the air; blast survivors lay a wreath in the water near the exposed ruins of the pier destroyed in the blast. In addition, visitors can explore historical photos and relevant books after the ceremony ends. 2010 was a special year that attracted over five hundred guests gathered under a large tent. They came thanks to the extensive outreach from the Park Service, the city of Concord, community groups, and media coverage of the ascension of the memorial to the status of full unit of the national parks.<sup>35</sup>

But the park, one must also keep in mind, is not open to all. There is another factor that further conditions who can draw meaning from the memorial—and when. The memorial is

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<sup>33</sup> National Park Service, *Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historic Park*, General Management Plan/Environmental Assessment (Richmond, August 2008), 27.

<sup>34</sup> See also Stephen Hobbs, "Memorial Honors Port Chicago Disaster Fallen," *Concord Patch*, July 24, 2011, <http://concord-ca.patch.com/articles/memorial-honors-port-chicago-disaster-fallen>.

<sup>35</sup> Jason B. Johnson, "Learning from History," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, June 28, 2002.



completely ensconced within an active military base, most recently titled the Marine Ocean Terminal Concord, or “MOTCO,” and operated by the Army to ship weapons overseas and to receive decommissioned materiel.<sup>36</sup> The Navy still holds the land title to the base, better known to locals and in news reports as the Concord Naval Weapons Station. The Navy has drawn down its activities at the site, which is divided into a coastal area (where the Army operates), and an inland portion used throughout the Cold War for nuclear weapons storage and other military operations. The inland half of the base has recently been under a process of decontamination and will begin to be transferred to the city of Concord by approximately 2013 for redevelopment and parks, not to mention a visitor’s center for the memorial.

Nevertheless, the military, for all intents and purposes, controls the access to this memorial and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future, since the coastal segment of the base is not slated for decommissioning at the time of this writing.<sup>37</sup> Only U.S. citizens are allowed through the military checkpoint. Visitors must submit their personal information in writing at least two weeks prior to visits. On one such occasion, the vehicle I traveled in was inspected inside and out for explosives and weapons. And when ship-loading operations take place, the memorial is entirely off-limits, even to Park Service employees. I have not been able to find a comparable example of a national park inside a military base—a so-called public space where only U.S. nationals with proper documents can enter. It remains a geographical puzzle that further complicates who can interpret this site, and how they can do so, under the watchful gaze of the military.

## Approaching the Memorial

The Port Chicago Memorial was designed by architect Daniel Quan in conjunction with the National Park Service, which held design workshops with so-called stakeholders. Visitors can approach the Port Chicago Memorial from two pathways, one roughly along the east-west orientation of the shoreline, and one perpendicular to the coast. The approach along the coast is more prominent, accentuated by a granite tablet that displays the memorial’s name and its dedication date (July 17, 1994). This approach consists of a long path that extends the oblique angle described by the ruins of the pier destroyed in the explosion. This line connects to the somber centerpiece that the architect describes as “a gathering spot.”<sup>38</sup> Along this main trajectory, one sees a carefully scattered piece of shrapnel to the right preserved from the explosion, “as a reminder of the tragedy that occurred there,” according to the memorial’s concept plan.<sup>39</sup>

Walking down the pathway, facing the remains of the pier, one then encounters the first of three interpretive panels. It is important to note that these panels were designed and provided by the NPS after consulting with the stakeholders involved and did not come from the designer’s hand. Each one tells a chapter of the story. The first is about ship loading operations and “what

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<sup>36</sup> Rob Edwards, “Final Destination Iran?,” *Herald Scotland*, March 14, 2010, <http://www.heraldsotland.com/news/world-news/final-destination-iran-1.1013151>.

<sup>37</sup> On difficulty of access to the memorial, see the following letter to the editor J. David Drielsma, “Letters: Port Chicago Disaster,” September 19, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/sep/19/travel/la-tr-letters-20100919>. See also Jesse McKinley, “Commemorating Those Lost Through Time,” *The New York Times*, August 27, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/28/us/28memorial.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Daniel Quan, interview by Javier Arbona, Telephone, August 11, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Daniel Quan, *Port Chicago Concept Plan*, April 28, 1993.

the site looked like prior to the blast.”<sup>40</sup> The trail then opens into the main space of the memorial, defined by a paving pattern as two asymmetrical overlapping circles. At the edge of the water, closer to the ruins, a second panel addresses “the different personnel involved in shiploading operations” and the segregated nature of the work.<sup>41</sup>

At that point, a person can turn and look to their right to fully take in the four large granite tablets facing the water that display the names of all of those killed, organized by military division, as well as a flag-pole on the east side of the space. The third information panel is located off to the northeast edge of the second circle in plan, adjacent to where the explosion took place. It describes the horror of the fireball.

Unlike less permanent aspects of the engagement with the memorial like the brochure or ranger-led tours described earlier, none of these panels that constitute the visual furnishings of the memorial display information about the subsequent work stoppage or the guilty convictions in the mutiny trial. Nevertheless, in a 2007 Congressional hearing, a Park Service official in charge of planning cited these same events as an historic part that justify the memorial’s long-term protection.<sup>42</sup>

These elements are seemingly redacted from the story that the architectural design reveals, yet still are important enough to be included in official literature and ranger interpretations of the park, or perhaps to be recounted at a future visitor center. The third panel, in fact, states that the explosion “helped push the Navy to reconsider its policy of racial segregation,” as I confirmed on a visit in July 2011. Such a statement pushes the role of the explosion through a filter that elides the wildcat strike’s fundamental role in disrupting the Navy’s official policy of Jim Crow segregation, not to mention its historic importance that led to the desegregation of all the branches of the armed services.<sup>43</sup>

The parts that are absent from the information displays happen to be, at the same time, the source of the longstanding, bitter dispute against the Navy on behalf of convicted sailors and relatives, unresolved up to the time of this writing. Several historians have asserted that the mutiny convictions, one of many such trials against African Americans in the military corps during World War II, were racially charged scapegoating intended to deflect attention away from the officers in charge of the naval magazine and a disproportionate punishment intended to staunch upheaval against an exploitative system that was reflective of Jim Crow society.<sup>44</sup> In a similar case in 2007, the Army overturned the 1944 Fort Lawton riot convictions of twenty-eight African American soldiers, the largest Army court-martial in history, and restituted a minor-yet-symbolic amount of lost pay.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> William D. Shaddox, *Statement of William D. Shaddox, Acting Associate Director, Park Planning, Facilities and Lands, National Park Service, Department of the Interior Concerning H.R. 3111, To Provide for the Administration of Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial as a Unit of the National Park System, and for Other Purposes*, 2007, [http://www.doi.gov/oc/2006/HR3111\\_092707.htm](http://www.doi.gov/oc/2006/HR3111_092707.htm).

<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in a film recently commissioned by the Parks Service, to be shown at the Port Chicago Memorial and potentially at the future visitors’ center, the voice of the narrator speaks vaguely of the “explosion and its aftermath” as leading to integration, even though the film gets into details of the uprising. Doug McCains, *Into Forgetfulness*, accessed April 13, 2013, <http://vimeo.com/36775462>.

<sup>44</sup> Wollenberg, “Blacks Vs. Navy Blue: The Mare Island Mutiny Court Martial.”

<sup>45</sup> William Yardley, “1944 Conviction of Black G.I.’s Is Ruled Flawed,” *The New York Times*, October 27, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/27/us/27punish.html>; William Yardley, “Army Pays \$725 in Set-Aside World War II Case,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/01/us/01lawton.html>; William Yardley, “Wrongly Convicted WWII Vet Dies After Apology,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 2008,

## Whose Memorial?

The space of the Port Chicago Memorial has been used primarily to narrate two overarching versions of the Port Chicago story. In this section, I discuss representatives of each of these positions in more detail, keeping in mind that, as the rest of this study shows, there are more than two angles to the story. Meanwhile, I also show that under the radar, a third group of former Port Chicago townspeople demand attention as well.

The first of the two main perspectives, one that I would call “the space of heroes,” is known for emphasizing a vocabulary composed of certain terms, including “sacrifice,” “bravery,” and “heroism,” when speaking of those killed or injured at Port Chicago. This perspective stresses the role of military and civilian personnel in defeating Japan. One can find countless takes on this version when conversing with locals or by exploring websites about local politics, sometimes paired with disclaimers of being blind to race or even of being in defense of race equality by honoring all, without mention of race issues at Port Chicago.

One especially important group in representing the “heroism” position has been the Naval Armed Guard World War II Veterans Association. The Naval Armed Guard is a defunct military division of gunners that defended merchandise ships during the war, a group that suffered thirty losses on the night of the explosion (believed to be the Naval Armed Guard’s largest losses in one single event during the entire war).<sup>46</sup> This veterans’ organization came to memorialize the site of the explosion and the deceased before the government stepped in to build a federal project.

One would be hard-pressed to find clues at the existing federal Port Chicago Memorial of a previous shrine on the site. In the late 1980s, before the federal government built the present day landscape and assigned the National Park Service to lead tours to this remote corner of the San Francisco Bay Area, the West Coast chapter of Naval Armed Guard veterans worked in cooperation with the base command to establish a small memorial to the fallen.<sup>47</sup>

Local historian John Keibel reports that in 1988, the base commander, Captain Lonnie Cagle, escorted a group of fifty veterans of the Naval Armed Guard to the site of the explosion “for a ceremony honoring the dead.” Keibel states that in the course of the next year, the veterans group raised \$2,500 to erect a memorial consisting of “a concrete slab with an embedded granite dedication plaque, viewing stand, flag pole, and a piece of twisted metal plating recovered from one of the ships.” The group returned a year later on July 16, 1989—the forty-fifth anniversary of the explosion—to dedicate this memorial.<sup>48</sup>

In 1990, *The New York Times* reported on the Naval Armed Guard memorial as part of a longer article about the efforts to exonerate the convicted Port Chicago sailors. According to the article, Carl Winder, the president of the West Coast chapter, opposed overturning the convictions and expressed the common view that “race” does not play a factor in the politics of who is to be remembered, nor how. Winder told the reporter that: “They disobeyed a direct order to go back to work. Now everyone is trying to make it a black versus white issue. The only injustice was picking out 50 of them and not censuring all of them.”<sup>49</sup>

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/30/us/30lawton.html>; Jack Hamann, *On American Soil: How Justice Became a Casualty of World War II* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2005), 301.

<sup>46</sup> J.D. Tikalsky, “Memorial Dedicated 45 Years After Historic Explosion,” *Port Chicago Explosion Memorial Souvenir Edition*, July 16, 1989, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Keibel, *Behind the Barbed Wire*, 256–257.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>49</sup> Katherine Bishop, “Exoneration Sought in Mutiny of ’44,” *The New York Times*, August 12, 1990,

Accompanying the inauguration of this disappeared memorial, the *Port Chicago Explosion Memorial Souvenir Edition* brochure spans four pages and collects a number of articles about the explosion in the style of a daily broadsheet newspaper. The back page is emblazoned with the names of all of those killed in the blast, organized by military division. Ample page space in the brochure gets devoted to the history of the two ships that blew up, the *SS Quinault Victory* and the *EA Bryan*.

Another prominent article is devoted to an explanation of the possible causes of the detonation, and titled “Repeat unlikely because of safer handling.” This article’s text continues inside the broadsheet with a header that says: “We’ve come a long way since 1944.” Below the first header, one finds a second line that reads: “Explosive handling ‘techniques’ 45 years ago” (note the emphasis on the word *techniques* with an application of quotation marks in the original). Below this second header, the page shows official Navy photos of African American seamen loading munitions, but no mention is made anywhere in the four pages of the official policy of segregating Black members of the military.

The juxtaposition of images that clearly exhibit the labor of segregated personnel at the base with a text arguing that progress has been made in handling munitions, while at the same time making no acknowledgement of segregation, can leave much to speculation. This slice of evidence could suggest that somehow the unsafe handling of munitions, and therefore the explosion, was the fault of Black stevedores, echoing the malicious findings of the 1944 court of inquiry. Perhaps this interpretation could be written off as having insufficient details about conditions at the base that came to be better known to the public after the late-1980s, such as the carelessness of naval officials who bet on the loading of ships and ignored warnings of broken equipment at the piers, key details that emerged during the mutiny trial. Perhaps the incorporation of quotation marks around the word “techniques” above the images of Black men was not meant to belittle, but it does end up doing so. After all, loading techniques at other contemporaneous ammunition-handling shipyards in the Bay Area seem to have been much more sound, such as loading operations Army shipyards in Oakland that were handled by trained, unionized stevedores.<sup>50</sup>

The article may sound to some as an objective, reasonable logic, seemingly offered as inclusive and race-neutral, thus uninvolved in bounding memories according to racial groups. The text, in this instance, repeats inconclusive Naval findings directly and matter-of-factly, explaining that: “The 350-lb. depth charges and incendiary clusters being loaded in slings and nets from boxcars into the *SS Bryan*’s two forward holds were considered as supersensitive under certain conditions: if unintentionally fused, if a casing was damaged, or if explosive material were somehow leaking.”<sup>51</sup>

But the muted presence of African Americans on these pages, lacking a chance to represent themselves or their own thoughts, allows for the military’s formalistic assertions, unmistakably drawn up under the mentality of the segregation era. These assertions thus remain valid, timeless, and true. What these military findings silence—a sleight-of-hand that the brochure regenerates—is what could never be conclusively proven under a Jim Crow culture: the

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<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/12/us/exoneration-sought-in-mutiny-of-44.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

<sup>50</sup> In contrast to an absence of shipyard training and unsafe conditions at Port Chicago, compare to the Oakland Army Base, where ships were loaded and unloaded by Civil Service workers who had “gone through advanced training down in New Orleans at Fort Polk on transportation operation,” says Charles Snipes cited in Meeker, *The Oakland Army Base: An Oral History*, 18–21.

<sup>51</sup> Tikalsky, “Memorial Dedicated 45 Years After Historic Explosion,” 3.

combined reality of racial segregation with labor repression underpinned the unsafe conditions of the naval magazine—factors that set the stage for the explosion to happen. Since no independent investigation into the causes took place, all we have is the Navy’s own self-examination.

A few years after their memorial ceremony, contractors for the Park Service demolished the Naval Armed Guard monument to make way for the federal government to build at Port Chicago. The newer memorial duplicates certain aspects of the previous, perhaps because members of the Naval Armed Guard veterans were (reportedly) at the table in the workshops that the National Park Service held. For example, the Port Chicago Park retakes a similar strategy of displaying the names of the deceased organized by military division alongside a flagpole, a design feature that echoes segregation-era paeans to equal sacrifice. Similarly, in 1980 the Navy commissioned a series of etched glass panels with scenes of the naval base for a military chapel on the base. Due to the precarious state of the chapel, and the inland area’s decommissioning, these panels will likely find a future home inside the planned visitor’s center.<sup>52</sup> At the time of this writing, the panels have been shown for several months at the Rosie the Riveter visitors’ center. Such tributes, nonetheless, ring hollow if they lack a more complete recognition of the fact that the distribution of duties and rights during life did not correlate to the unctuousness after death.

Another interpretation of Port Chicago, explicitly seizing upon patriotic themes such as “bravery” or “courage,” as in the previous case, has been spearheaded by George Miller’s office, relatives of African Americans stationed at Port Chicago, and several other state and federal legislators. This second interpretation gathers around the idea of the “miscarriage of justice,” in the words of Miller, to characterize what the Port Chicago story is about.<sup>53</sup>

The central organization that represents this remembrance is a non-profit, the Friends of Port Chicago, loosely founded after the inauguration of the memorial in 1994 to support efforts to expunge the records of the men convicted of mutiny and those with lesser charges of insubordination. In 2007, the group became a formal partner of the NPS to support the promotion of the memorial to the status of national park. The Friends of Port Chicago works closely with the National Parks Service in putting together the annual memorial ceremony and is now actively involved in the conceptual stages of the future visitors’ center.<sup>54</sup> Another organization that has been active in the efforts to clear the Port Chicago Fifty, and give continuity to the “Port Chicago story,” is the Black Hollywood Education and Resource Center.

Together, these groups were especially successful in the 1990s, locating Black survivors and reaching out to the media and politicians. Their efforts brought various types of cultural exposure to the events of Port Chicago in the form of news, documentaries, and television re-enactments. Thanks to their fundraising, Black survivors were able to visit the graves in 1999 of unknown victims buried at the Golden Gate National Cemetery—an area that was once segregated.<sup>55</sup> The year before, California Assemblyman Roderick Wright sponsored a resolution that passed unanimously, urging President Bill Clinton to pardon survivors of the explosion. To mark the occasion of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the blast, the Equal Justice Society commissioned

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<sup>52</sup> Tanya Rose, “Port Chicago Chapel’s Fate Uncertain,” *Contra Costa Times*, December 12, 2006, [http://www.contracostatimes.com/cnws/ci\\_5506730](http://www.contracostatimes.com/cnws/ci_5506730).

<sup>53</sup> George Miller, Rosie the Riveter World War II American Home Front Oral History Project, interview by Javier Arbona, 2010, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>54</sup> Pat O’Brien to Michael Wright, “Public Benefit Conveyance Notice of Interest — Concord Naval Weapons Station Surplus Land,” September 26, 2007, [http://www.ebparks.org/Assets/files/feat\\_092007cnws\\_NOI\\_pkg.pdf](http://www.ebparks.org/Assets/files/feat_092007cnws_NOI_pkg.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> See for example “Port Chicago Survivors Support Committee,” *Black Hollywood Education & Resource Center*, accessed May 4, 2012, [http://www.bherc.org/Special\\_Events/Port\\_Chicago/concept.html](http://www.bherc.org/Special_Events/Port_Chicago/concept.html).

composer and jazz musician Marcus Shelby to create a musical score as a tribute.<sup>56</sup>

Coverage of the Port Chicago story that appears sympathetic to the plight of African American survivors often underscores the facts that reveal the injustice of the episode, while demonstrating that the consciousness of violated rights at Port Chicago has been widely recognized.<sup>57</sup> But news reports and other popular forms of re-telling Port Chicago lack deeper recognition, analysis, or reflection of the social context that created this segregated and dangerous base. This lack of recognition also happens to dispense with discussions of the dimension of labor exploitation inscribed within a hardened racial hierarchy.<sup>58</sup> These simplified representations of the issues commonly overlook the existing strife that swirls around the site's narrative up to the present time. In fact, what is most often lost is a more complete picture that shows how the memorial was *but one* component of a package of legislative measures to redress the inequities left unaddressed by the Navy after the Port Chicago explosion—measures that for the most part, with the memorial as the one exception, have been deflected by the Navy.

George Miller's office took an interest in the Port Chicago cases under Chief of Staff John Lawrence, a doctorate degree-holder in history from the University of California, Berkeley.<sup>59</sup> While working for the creation of the memorial in 1991, Miller formally asked the Secretary of the Navy, Henry L. Garrett III, to review the validity of all court-martial convictions related to Port Chicago and the mutiny conviction. The Secretary declined, suggesting instead that those punished seek out a presidential pardon. Joe Small, the so-called ringleader of the revolt responded: "We don't want a pardon because that means, 'You're guilty, but we forgive you.'"<sup>60</sup>

Spurned by the Navy, Miller and fellow Democratic Representative Ron Dellums turned their attention to drafting legislation in the Armed Services Committee of the House to compel the Navy Secretary to take up the cases.<sup>61</sup> Through this law, the Secretary was instructed in 1992, around the same time that the memorial was being conceptualized, to: "initiate without delay a thorough review of the cases of all 258 individuals convicted in the courts-martial arising from the explosion at the Port Chicago (California) Naval Magazine on July 17, 1944. The purpose of the review shall be to determine the validity of the original findings and sentences and the extent to which racial prejudice or other improper factors now known may have tainted the original investigations and trials. If the Secretary determines that any such conviction was in error, he may take such action as he considers necessary to rectify any error or injustice."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Richard Scheinin, "Marcus Shelby: Commemorating Black History in Evocative Jazz Suites," *The San Jose Mercury News*, July 2, 2011, [http://www.mercurynews.com/music/ci\\_18380326](http://www.mercurynews.com/music/ci_18380326).

<sup>57</sup> See for example Carolyn Jones, "Port Chicago Historians Seek Sailors' Remembrances," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, July 22, 2011.

<sup>58</sup> George Miller, who is known as a pro-labor politician, addresses this issue in his oral history, explaining how he has mostly understood the civil rights component to overshadow the labor component of the story. Miller, Rosie the Riveter World War II American Home Front Oral History Project.

<sup>59</sup> See Nancy Pelosi, "Pelosi Announces Departure of Longtime Chief of Staff John Lawrence, Nadeam Elshami as New Chief of Staff & Senior Staff Changes - Rep. Pelosi," January 17, 2013, <http://pelosi.house.gov/news/press-releases/2013/01/pelosi-announces-departure-of-longtime-chief-of-staff-john-lawrence-nadeam-elshami-as-new-chief-of-s.shtml>; Emily Heil, "Capitol Hill Aide, John Lawrence, Retiring After 38 Years," *The Washington Post*, January 28, 2013, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/capitol-hill-aide-john-lawrence-retiring-after-38-years/2013/01/27/e5f2fbce-665d-11e2-85f5-a8a9228e55e7\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/capitol-hill-aide-john-lawrence-retiring-after-38-years/2013/01/27/e5f2fbce-665d-11e2-85f5-a8a9228e55e7_story.html).

<sup>60</sup> Carl Nolte, "House Panel Asks Review Of 'Port Chicago Mutiny'," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, May 9, 1991, sec. A.

<sup>61</sup> John Boudreau, "Breaking the Silence," *The Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 1991.

<sup>62</sup> Les Aspin, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 1992 and 1993*, accessed July 6, 2011,

In January 1994, a few months before the inauguration of the federal development of the memorial, and the fiftieth anniversary of the blast, the Navy review found evidence of racism in the posting of segregated barracks and work assignments. But “the Secretary of the Navy concluded that neither racial prejudice nor other improper factors tainted the original investigations or trials.”<sup>63</sup>

In response, flummoxed legislators in Miller’s alliance wrote a letter to President Bill Clinton pleading for overruling the Navy, backed by a letter-writing campaign from the public.<sup>64</sup> Clinton’s chief legal counsel, Charles Ruff, advised the group that the President did not have the power to reverse a court decision, but the convicted sailors could request pardons. In the end, only one punished veteran agreed to pursue this route, which was, notably, the only avenue proposed by the Navy when striking down appeals of the court-martial.

Freddie Meeks received a Presidential pardon from Bill Clinton in 1999. Meeks expressed a sense of personal sacrifice for the good of all those convicted, reflecting a mixed sense that the pardon was an imperfect victory; he employs the first-person plural in his statement: “It makes a big difference to know the president gave us a pardon. We’ve been waiting a long time.”<sup>65</sup> Along with the memorial, Meeks’ triumph remains a fragment of a larger agenda that is missing from view at the memorial and most other places. How did the larger community of veterans and the general public interpret these fragments?

## **The Time to Right the Wrong is Overdue**

Even after the Department of the Interior built the federal memorial and Clinton’s pardon of Freddie Meeks was given, the acceptance of the innocence of the convicted sailors did not sink in. A controversy over interpretations bubbled over in the pages of *The Pointer*, the Naval Armed Guard Veterans Association national newsletter.

In 2005, *The Pointer* reprinted a copy of an article called, “Isn’t it time to right the wrong?” by Tom Seligson. The article was a reproduction submitted by a veteran and newsletter subscriber, along with that veteran’s letter to the editor of the newsletter, Charles A. Lloyd. “Isn’t it time to right the wrong?” had originally appearing in *Parade*, a nationally syndicated Sunday magazine delivered in hundreds of local newspapers, which can still be found as an archived copy on the web. The article essentially summarizes the inconsistencies in the court-martial’s case, along the lines of Robert Allen’s analysis in *The Port Chicago Mutiny*. It also calls on the public to support an effort to issue a U.S. postage stamp “to further honor the memory of those men.”<sup>66</sup>

In the accompanying letter, Van C. Mills, a veteran of World War II with the Naval Armed Guard, accuses Seligson of being “racially-biased” (against whites, presumably), and of “trying to rewrite history.”<sup>67</sup> From Mills’ point of view, the postage stamp would be akin to making a “dishonorable act honorable,” and places the courage of the strikers in doubt by stating that other

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<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d102:HR02100:>

<sup>63</sup> Carl Nolte, “House Panel Asks Review Of ‘Port Chicago Mutiny.’”

<sup>64</sup> Richard C. Paddock, “A Question of Honor,” *The Los Angeles Times*, July 17, 1994.

<sup>65</sup> William Glaberson, “Sailor From Mutiny in ’44 Wins a Presidential Pardon,” *The New York Times*, December 24, 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/12/24/us/sailor-from-mutiny-in-44-wins-a-presidential-pardon.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Tom Seligson, “Isn’t It Time To Right The Wrong?,” *Parade.com*, February 6, 2005, [http://www.parade.com/articles/editions/2005/edition\\_02-06-2005/featured\\_1](http://www.parade.com/articles/editions/2005/edition_02-06-2005/featured_1).

<sup>67</sup> Van C. Mills, “Letter to Charles C. Lloyd,” *The Pointer*, February 18, 2005.

military personnel faced worse risks fighting on the frontlines (he omits that the survivors had wanted nothing less than to also have had the opportunity to fight on the front). This kind of continuing criminalization of what the surviving sailors decided to do—steps taken in the face of an oppressive system that has been largely outlawed today—is quite common. Such views often take on various colloquial forms on web boards and the comments to online news articles about the annual memorial. In one case, for instance, a text posted by one “Jimjams” to *The San Francisco Chronicle’s SFGate* website says, “This was wartime. They refused orders. They all did indeed deserve to be court-martialed for mutiny. In most militaries in the world, they would have been executed on the spot for refusing orders. Only in the U.S. did they get off so lightly.” The commenter adds: “Stop glamorizing these mutineers. I don’t care what race they were.”<sup>68</sup>

In *The Pointer* issue that came after Mills’ letter, two more letters appeared, along with a two-page “Tribute to those lost at Port Chicago,” showing photos of the Port Chicago Memorial and four Naval Armed Guard veterans posing in one shot. The letters again brought to the surface the disputes over who could occupy the space of memory and who could not. In response to Mills, Kelly A. Metz, the daughter of a World War II veteran, speculates that the resistance by Black sailors could have saved lives by drawing attention to unsafe practices, and that by resisting, she wonders, “weren’t these men heroic?”<sup>69</sup> In fact, a concomitant result of the seamen’s resistance was drastic improvement to loading procedures, making naval shipyards safer for workers of all skin colors—and for munitions needed in combat.

Another letter instructed: “Honor the dead, but not the Mutineers.” Allen F. Ives, in this missive, advances a hypothesis similar to other anti-mutiny attacks, which is that cowardice was the motivation of the rebellious soldiers. Ives claims that the strikers paid the consequences of insubordination, not of being discriminated against. He writes: “Did ‘racism’ play a part in the treatment of the Black sailors who were charged with mutiny, court-martialed, and sent to prison? I don’t think so.”<sup>70</sup> Ives suggests that the home front duty these men had to perform was safer, adding that he himself was “overjoyed” to be transferred to Port Chicago in November of 1944, along with 124 fellow seamen, and that, “To give these disobedient men recognition now would not be fair to all those sailors who were just as scared, but did their jobs anyway, often under terrible conditions.” Ives says, “Most of those guys would have gladly traded places with the Mutineers at Port Chicago.”<sup>71</sup> He insinuates that a white person would have willingly taken the role of a Black person, an implausible assertion even in 2005, but even more so in 1944. In this sense, the veteran is suggesting that Black survivors should be grateful for segregation as some kind of privilege.

The charge of cowardice must have been uttered commonly in the wake of building the federal memorial. In an oral history from 1995, Port Chicago survivor and Korean War veteran Spencer E. Sikes addressed such sorts of accusations. Taking into account his own dual experience as a segregated munitions handler in World War II and a sailor in the Korean War, he asserts that the mutineers “were not cowards.”<sup>72</sup> In a follow-up question, interviewer Tracy Panek asks Sikes what his thoughts are about the significance of the memorial. He then answers by calling upon the familiar theme of bravery:

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<sup>68</sup> “Comments Page: Port Chicago Historians Seek Sailors’ Remembrances,” *SFGate*, accessed July 22, 2011, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article/comments/view?f=c/a/2011/07/21/BAE91KDIV8.DTL>.

<sup>69</sup> Kelly A. Metz, “Explosion at Port Chicago,” *The Pointer*, October 2005.

<sup>70</sup> Allen F. Ives, *The Pointer*, October 2005, sec. Letters from the Crew.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Spencer E. Sikes, An Oral History of Port Chicago, interview by Tracey E. Panek, November 11, 1995, 141–142, National Park Service Eugene O’Neil National Historic Site.



*Well, I would say this: In any war there is going to be loss of life. The guys that fought up on the front lines, had we not been able to supply them with the ammo, they wouldn't have had the chance to fight and get to point Z. Whatever they dropped, they had us behind them as support because we were funneling the ammo to them. In view of the fact that life is lost either on the front, the ones in the back deserve just as much credit, and if there's any accolades to be passed out, I think they deserve on both sides because still the loss of life.<sup>73</sup>*

## **A Lost Port Chicago**

In addition to the two opposing claims for the heritage of the Port Chicago Memorial—the space of heroes and the remembrance of injustice—a third presence looms over the site, and it has to do with the name of the memorial itself. Where does this site get the name of “Port Chicago”? This question, which I often get when I try to explain my work in social settings, demonstrates that people find the name confusing, thinking first of the state of Illinois and its most well-known city.

The combination of *port* and *Chicago* might immediately hit a geo-fictional note, as if it had come purely from the mind of an author who combined two real places into an imaginary one. Or was the generic term for an infrastructure, *port*, joined with the name of one of the most famous cities in the world, *Chicago*, in order to deliberately mislead and confuse? Being nowhere near the state of Illinois, one couldn't be blamed for mistakenly assuming that the residents of Port Chicago wanted to devise a way to disorient an outsider. If only their plight were so romantic. The amnesia that trails the Port Chicago story has yet another disturbing chapter.

Web navigators can retrieve information, some of it inaccurate, about various aspects of Port Chicago history, logging in from almost any location on Earth that has an Internet connection. Yet there is no geographic place called Port Chicago that anyone can visit. The Geographic Names Information System of the United States Geological Survey website classifies Port Chicago as “historical.” Moreover, the single geographical feature that preserves the name, the memorial itself, can contribute to confusion. The chiseled inscription on the memorial technically records the place name, but there is no identifiable origin for the name among current addresses in the vicinity or spatial features of the design. No one inhabits Port Chicago. But they once did.

Although the base was originally the naval magazine hit by the explosion, the Navy shed “Port Chicago” from the base's official name in the late 1950s. In 1957, Naval Magazine Port Chicago became Naval Ammunition Depot Concord.<sup>74</sup> The name change was an exorcism of sorts, perhaps a way to dis-associate the military from the explosion. Moreover, expunging Port Chicago from the growing depot's name was a convenient way to grease the wheels for big changes that the Navy desired. Thirteen years after the Navy first attempted to take the town of Port Chicago, they finally managed to win Congressional approval in 1967 to expand the base under a thin reasoning of a safety zone around the piers. The Navy would neither confirm nor deny the obvious—that they were storing nuclear weapons at the base.<sup>75</sup> The Navy finished

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 142–143.

<sup>74</sup> Keibel, *Behind the Barbed Wire*, 11.

<sup>75</sup> Ken Rand, *Port Chicago Isn't There Anymore—But We Still Call It Home* (Fairwood Press, 2008).

leveling the town in 1969, during the Vietnam War, coincidentally displacing anti-war protesters who had gotten a toehold on a zone outside the base.<sup>76</sup> Port Chicago can only be traced in the present from a few remaining ruins of roads in aerial photographs. The misty name seemingly prefigured an imagined ‘elseplace,’ a ‘where’ that can only exist in memory.

The name Port Chicago was itself a re-branding during the Great Depression, devised by town fathers as a futile strategy to reignite the manufacturing economy in shipbuilding. The businessmen would have preferred simply to call the town “Chicago,” but the U.S. Post Master objected. In 1908, the later-Port Chicago was founded with the name “Bay Point” as a company town for the Coos Bay Lumber Co.<sup>77</sup> After the town’s destruction at the hands of the Navy, it seemed to return to the realm of the imagination it came from, except that for Port Chicagoans, it was all too real a loss.

But the long struggle to save the town of Port Chicago from bulldozing is generally not integrated into the better-known—and contested—story of the explosion and mutiny trial. Although rangers point out its location on the way to visiting the memorial, no official markers point to where the town was, and this remains a sticking point for some locals. There is no federal ceremony to remember the Port Chicago eviction or to honor what their sacrifice contributed to the often-secretive cause of national security. The clues of domestic life at Port Chicago can be found scattered in various local historical societies, California archives, and a few publications of regional interest.

Nevertheless, every year, on the last weekend in July, former residents of the town of Port Chicago gather to play sports games, have a picnic, and raffle prizes. They come along with their descendants, other relatives, and friends to take part in their own unofficial memorial ceremony. On that one day in the middle of summer, they gather at Ambrose Park, the location of a memorial obelisk that honors war veterans from the town—an alternate Port Chicago memorial that few know about. Ambrose Park becomes the setting for the residents to gather their dispersed community for an afternoon. Some travel to the event from regions far afield. When prodded, they readily share remembrances of life at Port Chicago before and after the explosion, under the Navy’s gaze.<sup>78</sup> Although it may have been hypothetically possible that the Navy would have had them evicted even if the explosion had never happened, the 1944 disaster seemingly played a persuasive historical role in the minds of politicians who approved the land transfer.

On the surface, it may seem to many observers that the town of Port Chicago had no choice but to make way for the naval expansion because of safety issues demonstrated by the tragedy of 1944. But the Navy gave several contradicting accounts about why they needed a larger perimeter around their ammunition piers and about what, if anything, posed a life-threatening danger to local residents. After all, it seemed to many residents that Port Chicago survived the 1944 explosion in decent shape.<sup>79</sup> Many found it contradictory to remove the town, but not the volatile refineries that were even closer to the piers (and still are up to the present day, even though hazardous materials ship through the base). For former resident and community organizer Dan Colchico, the entire affair seemed all too much like a land grab from which naval officials and local elites would be able to profit after decommissioning the base.<sup>80</sup> Colchico’s

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<sup>76</sup> Keibel, *Behind the Barbed Wire*; Port Chicago Vigil, “Vigil Voices,” 1968–1967, Bancroft Library.

<sup>77</sup> McLeod, *Port Chicago*.

<sup>78</sup> Rand, *Port Chicago Isn’t There Anymore—But We Still Call It Home*, 282–283.

<sup>79</sup> Jerome R. Waldie, *Public Hearing Contemplated Acquisition of Port Chicago by the United States Navy* (Board of Supervisors’ Chambers. Administration Building, Martinez, California, 1967), <http://oskicat.berkeley.edu/record=b11237025~S1>.

<sup>80</sup> Dan Colchico and Ken Rand, Handwritten Notes, February 2, 1985.

reasoning evokes documented land grabs by naval commanders during the Gold Rush.<sup>81</sup>

But this lost Port Chicago, as a spatial imaginary, is sometimes reconstructed in memory on the basis of intertwined place memories and white racial identities, even if not explicitly spelled out as such. The memory of the lost Port Chicago town agglomerates core American values with aesthetic qualities of place that often draw from a white, nativist identity, and an idealization of a small town scale, one that at times could count on hostility towards outsiders, such as the Vietnam protesters, even when the town owed its very founding to outside capital. Like many other towns on the edges of military bases, Port Chicago was often portrayed, both before and after the demolition, as a timeless place.<sup>82</sup> But much like Vieques, the island with a former Navy bombing range that I have previously researched in detail, the character of these places is a product of the military's chokehold on any development that could infringe upon the military footprint, all the while using many of the town residents as soldiers and employees of the base.<sup>83</sup>

### The Eschatological Memorial

At the Port Chicago Memorial, the Park Service attempts to simultaneously project the idea of bravery (that disparate constituencies frequently call upon) and the idea of injustice, especially in its annual role of setting an agreeable tone at the commemorative event that brings together current military officers, personnel, veterans, politicians, and families. Nonetheless, the memorial itself lacks identifying plaques, as I discussed, that bring-up the court-martials or the mutiny, as one might be led to expect from common and official explanations about the importance of the site. As one planner confided on a phone call, "We had issues about how much we could tell about the mutiny; the overall impact of the mutiny."

Meanwhile, rangers and reporters often encounter some grievances from various angles when it is perceived that they're not sufficiently presenting one perspective or the other—or that of the townspeople. But one result of averaging out these competing narratives of the site is to produce an eschaton: a kind of space where the end of a history is projected. In this case, the memorial appears total, as if to deny the existence of an open struggle over equality, as the reactionary expressions of some veterans and defenders of "heroism" demonstrate. The persistence of racial oppression, moreover, often intertwines in bewildering ways with the newest American global incursions that rely upon dehumanizing views of foreign People of Color.

In its neutral design outcome that attempts to average all interpretations, the memorial silently drags along its own haunted past, standing as an idle monument while African American survivors of the explosion continue to be routinely criminalized in colloquial expressions against them and through actual Navy fiat. Sometimes, the old survivors are even blamed for the erasure of the town from memory. One local called the mutiny story a "red herring" in a meeting we had.<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, the memory of the deceased is sometimes invoked in order to shame those

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<sup>81</sup> For more on land values and opportunism in the Navy, see Chapter 3 – A Brief History of the Naval Bay Area.

<sup>82</sup> Rand, *Port Chicago Isn't There Anymore—But We Still Call It Home*.

<sup>83</sup> On Vieques, see Javier Arbona, "Vieques, Puerto Rico: From Devastation to Conservation, and Back Again," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* XVII, no. 1 (Fall 2005): 33–50.

<sup>84</sup> On the wider criminalization of blackness, see Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

who survived and who drew a line against naval segregation—or to quiet those who defend their fellow comrades. This position duplicates the notion that all died as equals, not as two separate groups, one as full servicemen, the other as Jim Crow laborers. Furthermore, while the defamation most often appears to come from rank-and-file veterans, like the Naval Armed Guard, or at times from members of the general public, the Navy can seem impartial in its own muteness. For example, the Navy refuses to answer questions from journalists that work on stories about Port Chicago, instead referring them to its last written statement in 1994. Nevertheless, the Navy’s refusal to overturn the punishment of the strike is where the buck ultimately stops. Furthermore, the Navy’s recalcitrance validates the biases of white veterans and likeminded folks.

My claim in this chapter has been that the memorial, as a spatial imaginary, is an eschaton with a cautious appearance of being above politics or race strife, framed as a finished narrative. As a part of a larger apparatus, this eschaton cannot be understood independently from the legal decisions made by the Navy. Nor can this memory and military fusion be separated from the town, which the memorial got its name from, and the further militarization of the site that came about with the razing of the town. This background presence of the Navy gets brushed aside, as if the town demolition were the fault of the sailors. In total, one cannot fully understand the memorial as a cultural landscape without digging further into the commonly invoked ideas of “bravery” and “heroism” that come to unify the meaning of the site for all parties involved in a sort of tenuous, common-sense accord.

The Navy’s persistence over time in upholding both its investigation of the explosion and of the court-martials as untainted by segregation imbues the memorial with coexisting, divided spaces for African American survivors (most of whom have passed on) and their surviving families, in an echo of Craig E. Barton’s thesis about West Selma’s co-existing spaces of racial separation.<sup>85</sup> While African American survivors have been called upon and have justifiably been willing to appear in the space of the memorial, they face persistent aspersions, even after death, for their less-scripted practices of remembering. Their positions are also excluded from the visual communication elements of the memorial, which itself is tightly watched by the military at all times.

Most especially, African American memory seems acceptable to mainstream memory as long as the Port Chicago Fifty and their strike alongside hundreds more, all of whom were marked with unjust discharges for their life-spans, are not invoked. Even with the names of the deceased displayed, the gestures of representing them fall short of having a space where their experiences can be recorded in lasting ways (albeit this might change in the future), complicated by the fact that the memorial and its ceremonies continue to happen in a highly surveilled, controlled military environment. The two dominant positions on interpreting the memorial remain caught in a Manichean struggle, but the Navy steps back as if it were uninvolved. Meanwhile, the park, in turn, comes across as an instrument that groups as disparate as white veterans, advocates of civil rights, and the townspeople, even with seemingly opposing views, can refer to. But without full equal justice, the African American sailors only have an incomplete representation, lacking what Hannah Arendt called a space of appearance. Public use of the memorial space in most acceptable ways constitutes a veritable whiteout, since speaking about the Port Chicago Fifty or about historically-documented Navy racism is itself attacked as “racist.”

Therefore, to finalize, the question bears repeating: Why does this memorial exist? Does

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<sup>85</sup> Barton, “Duality and Invisibility: Race and Memory in the Urbanism of the American South.”

it exist to commemorate heroism and observe past inequality, as is most commonly heard in formulations that try to even out differences over the storyline? Its outcome as a historical punctuation mark produces other results for contemporary society that may or may not have been anticipated. I take these up in the following concluding thoughts.

## Conclusion

Coincidentally written into the Pentagon budget, authorized by the first African American commander-in-chief, and cocooned by a military base, this national park represents something unique—a proto-architectural space of an uncharted new era in a “post-racial” empire. Since September 11, 2001, the United States has had a massive deployment of troops abroad, a newfound persecution of undesirables within, an escalation of covert assassinations, and an economy convulsing at frequent intervals. These conditions all particularly affect the poor in acute and complex combinations. These conditions are also compounded by what some scholars and activists are calling “the new Jim Crow:” people of color churned through the prison system, stripped of their voting rights, and exploited as a labor under-class.<sup>86</sup>

These factors, among many other assemblages, combine to prey upon established racial divisions, while downshifting the ever-escalating costs of a decade-and-counting of wars to underserved and underprivileged groups, and to criminalize communities of color as religious radicals, border-crossing invaders, gang members, or welfare frauds.<sup>87</sup> Meanwhile, race categories at the battlefronts reappear, in the words of geographer Derek Gregory, as “biopolitical” strategies where the military also removes itself from the strife it leaves behind in newly ethnically-divided cities like Baghdad, bifurcated by Sunni-Shia factions actively created and exploited by the invasion.<sup>88</sup>

The Port Chicago town eviction, at the same time, awkwardly fits into a larger pattern of village destruction and local community displacements around the world during the same period, in accordance with U.S. military doctrines and global base network expansionism. The seeming egregious violation that the Port Chicago demolition presents in the minds of some former residents, one of whom unfairly characterized the event for me in a phone conversation as “what they did to us was worse than what they did to the Native Americans,” reveals two points.

First, academic writing often (inaccurately) portrays post-World War II and Cold War urbanization as a period of voluntary white flight from urban cores; a period when an idyllic, suburban family life was filled with consumer products churned out by reinvented war manufacturers.<sup>89</sup> Often, the Cold War is imagined as a war with no battles, merely monumental

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<sup>86</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

<sup>87</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, “The War - A Trillion Can Be Cheap,” *The New York Times*, July 24, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/25/weekinreview/25bumiller.html>; *Same Hate, New Target: Islamophobia and Its Impact in the United States* (Berkeley: Council on American-Islamic Relations; Center for Race and Gender, University of California, Berkeley, January 2009), <http://crg.berkeley.edu/content/islamophobia-report-0910>.

<sup>88</sup> Derek Gregory, “The Biopolitics of Baghdad: Counterinsurgency and the Counter-City,” *Human Geograph* 1, no. 1 (2008), [http://www.hugeog.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=86:polbagh&catid=34:hgissues1&Itemid=64](http://www.hugeog.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=86:polbagh&catid=34:hgissues1&Itemid=64); see also Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004).

<sup>89</sup> Beatriz Colomina, Annmarie Brennan, and Jeannie Kim, eds., *Cold War Hothouses: Inventing Postwar Culture, from Cockpit to Playboy* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004); Beatriz Colomina, *Domesticity at War* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

preparations, as if no one directly suffered the consequences.<sup>90</sup> Further, the other side of the suburban idyll was a period filled with the dread of nuclear annihilation, searching for mental peace in the suburbs or in the architecture of fallout shelters.<sup>91</sup> In short, it was a period of economic prosperity for a booming, predominantly white middle class that also happened to come along with various social and psychological discontents. Meanwhile, for communities of color living in urban cores like West Oakland or the Fillmore district in San Francisco, history shows that urban renewal schemes and highway construction, to name a few forces, destroyed entire neighborhoods with abandon, displacing these communities.<sup>92</sup>

At Port Chicago, the fact that a predominantly white, suburban community—predominantly segregated—living in what is often portrayed as a picture-perfect American town, was displaced by the might of federal government, counters the ways academics tend to frame white flight.<sup>93</sup> This exception, however, does not mean that displacement was more egalitarian than thought of before. It wasn't. Instead, Port Chicago represents a small, yet glaring, deviation from the usual assumptions about American urbanization in the wake of World War II.

But the fact that some locals perceived the town condemnation as a violation of the sacred tenets of property rights and the American Dream reveals how deeply whites embraced such rights as natural and as the core to a native white identity. The exception of Port Chicago reveals the mythology behind the accepted norm of property—more of a construct than an infallibility—guaranteed through monetary policies in the form of government-backed mortgages, through forms of territorial force, and through cultural knowledge that transforms merely advantageous politics into a natural entitlement.<sup>94</sup> Understanding Port Chicago's interpretive lens in these ways provides a different frame for the violence encoded, yet less visible, in the rest of the suburban landscape of the post-war period.<sup>95</sup>

Second, while Port Chicago may seem exceptional when seen against the backdrop of average experiences in baby-boomer white America, there is also something entirely unexceptional about Port Chicago. The demise of the town, a blip in the United States map of states and territories, is a crack in the windshield. Although understood by some locals as a violation of citizenship and property rights, or as an abusive use of eminent domain, a look through the crack reveals that it was only the normal workings of building an American empire during the 50s and 60s. Port Chicagoans, though often represented by vocal wealthy local

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<sup>90</sup> See for example Tom Vanderbilt, *Survival City: Adventures Among the Ruins of Atomic America* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002).

<sup>91</sup> David Monteyne, *Fallout Shelter: Designing for Civil Defense in the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

<sup>92</sup> Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Rachel Brahinsky, "'Hush Puppies,' Communalist Politics, and Demolition Governance: The Rise and Fall of the Black Fillmore," in *Ten Years That Shook the City: San Francisco 1968-1978*, ed. Chris Carlsson and Lisa Ruth Elliott (San Francisco: City Lights Foundation Books, 2011), 141–153.

<sup>93</sup> One former resident of Port Chicago reported that, "Well, first of all, there was a lot of bigotry in the town. Blacks were not welcome. Even when the blacks came with the war and worked at the base, and Knox Park was built, and the blacks all lived in Knox Park, the town was segregated. The twains never got together." Kenneth Tye, Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project, interview by Javier Arbona, 2012, 5, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>94</sup> Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); B. T. McGraw, "The Housing Act of 1954 and Implications for Minorities," *Phylon (1940-1956)* 16, no. 2 (June 1, 1955): 171–182.

<sup>95</sup> See also Matthew Farish, *The Contours of America's Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

landholders, were inherently tied to a larger world by their social class. In this sense, Port Chicago was connected to the land struggles of communities such as those of Pacific islanders or of Puerto Ricans fighting against the Goliath of the United States military might. These struggles are, in fact, still being waged well into the present day, as several local communities oppose American bases in their midst all over the world.<sup>96</sup> A new narration of the Port Chicago story that can incorporate the town displacement in all of this inter-connection to global militarization could be one with more contemporary relevance.

Race and class identities shape the construction of the memory of the missing town of Port Chicago and the erasure of its demolition from memory. Some locals complain that the civil rights message expressed at the memorial and often repeated in the media has infringed upon their own claims for equal representation in the Port Chicago story. Port Chicagoans experienced what was usually reserved for racial subalterns, but rarely is it recognized in such a way. In fact, newspapers show that a localized, nativist, and place-based imagination was the basis for violent opposition towards protesters that came to the area in to target the military base and its shipments during the Vietnam War. What happened to Port Chicago, cutting across race, class, and national identities, reveals how militarism becomes mis-recognized. Unresolved questions about the “true” reasons for the town condemnation get conflated with the preservation of an idealized, singular place, closed to outsiders and imagined as independent from the military, yet patriotic and nationalistic at the same time. But the plural stories of Port Chicago offer a long history of race and class oppression, as summarized in previous pages, and demand a different spatial imagination that can integrate the legacies of militarism near and far, and its imbrications with unseen oppression.

Drifting away from its sibling projects of racial atonement, the Port Chicago Memorial runs the risk of getting pulled into a culture where invocations of a fallacious completeness to the project of racial harmony work to facilitate new forms of aggression, militarization, and racial isolation of the Other, while many of the nation’s fighting grunts are of color or of mixed descent—those now most rapidly excluded from the educational system and the labor force.

In addition, the very notions of “bravery,” “sacrifice,” and “heroism” emerge by default as an overlap between the two dominant ways of seeing the memorial. Bravery is a concept that veterans on both sides draw upon, and that politicians render tribute to. But how to avoid explaining such signifiers like bravery and heroism without noting their historical employment even in periods that the Navy itself has acknowledged were biased? Spelling out the longer history of these terms reveals that they are eschatological—they serve to forget the past, silence dissenting views, and override the wishes of the deceased. Once someone is buried, bravery works to counter personal representation and to silence political claims, and thus operates, in the Port Chicago case at least, to discredit charges of racism. In addition, the unjustified defense of the Navy’s trial also guards what was a policy of necropolitics—the monopoly on the decision-making authority over what populations are exposed to deadly hazards, where they are exposed, and with which privileges for their sacrifice.

In contrast, a passage from the oral history of Port Chicago sailor Robert Edwards, Sr. helps to partly make more palpable the combined force of militarized culture with eschatological memory. Says Edwards:

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<sup>96</sup> The forgotten places of the Bay Area also hold a relationship to the ongoing control of the exurban West, comparably scrubbed of human habitation for the advancement of nuclear testing. See Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Hidden Wars of the American West* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994).

*On the night of the explosion I was supposed to have been on liberty. I was suppose to have come to San Francisco again. But I was actually afraid to leave the base and come out. I mean, I felt 'Gee, here I'm in the Navy and I have to be afraid of the sailors who are suppose to be buddies. We're suppose to be fighting on the same side.' So I laid in the barracks that particular night reading myself a book. I loved to read. No need me going on liberty and getting myself in a lot of trouble.<sup>97</sup>*

Abstract personal qualities like bravery, glory, or heroism are not performed uniformly across racial lines; they can be embodied in different ways according to one's position in a racial and labor hierarchy, as Edwards' words suggest. Such are the kinds of nuances that can get lost in a hazy, unifying tribute at the yearly memorial ceremony, occluding the additional dangers persistently faced by African Americans who were used as a servant class with disposable lives.



*Image 2: Gravestone of an Unknown U.S. Sailor killed in the 1944 Port Chicago blast, located in what was then a segregated part of the U.S. National Cemetery, San Bruno. (Photo by author).*

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<sup>97</sup> Edwards, Sr., *An Oral History of Port Chicago*.



## Chapter 5 – “It was a Bloody Mess:” Vallejo’s 1942 Race Revolts and the Port Chicago Sailors’ Strike

What exactly were segregated Navy stevedores who survived the 1944 Port Chicago explosion revolting against on August 6, 1944 when they disobeyed orders to load ammunition onto a ship moored at Mare Island? In the face of a staid narrative that often excludes the sailors’ strike from normative retellings of “the Port Chicago story,” this question brings up an uncomfortable twist to the tale for many. But the question is essential. The answer affects how one might weigh the historic importance of the so-called mutiny. Moreover, the answer can inform how government and activists may respond to the Navy’s continued defense of the mutiny conviction of fifty sailors and the additional blue discharges of hundreds more.<sup>1</sup> With better answers than we have at present, one may rethink how the story is told at national parks and beyond these.

Segregation, as often mentioned by locals, veterans, or rangers at events I have attended at Port Chicago and Mare Island certainly was part of what the sailors were opposing. But summoning segregation alone says little about how, first, the Navy utilized this hierarchical caste system as an opportunistic way to exploit labor while criminalizing dissent. Second, the actual day-to-day ways in which segregation worked demonstrate the confluence of official Navy policy and extra-official, socially-organized forms of violence outside of military bases that the Navy accrued economic benefits from (in the form of savings from paying union wages, for example) and was active in encouraging. The “mutiny,” I argue, responded to both conditions: the official policy and the extra-official abuses. Sailors rebelled against immediate Navy policies and also against diffuse forms of repression that sought to “keep them in their place,” as the popular expression goes.

While there is no singular “Port Chicago story” to complete the knowledge about the

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<sup>1</sup> See section “Remembering the “Mutiny””, Chapter 4 – Whiteout: The Social Production of Port Chicago Memorials

strike, spatial clues can be misleading. The places of the work stoppage have virtually disappeared—or have been made to disappear—while representation of the event gets vivisected from the permanent features of the official memorial.<sup>2</sup> Popular retellings and official memory handed down by the Park Service have landed on a succinct narrative that focuses solely on the situation faced by the Port Chicago sailors.

### A Common Narrative

The most common understanding of the Port Chicago sailors' strike draws from, and to some extent over-simplifies, Robert Allen's seminal book, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*—the best and most widely consulted source on the explosion, the strike, and the trial. Allen's book, in turn, was thoroughly researched and was based on extensive original interviews with Black survivors. As Allen takes care to note in the book, the Port Chicago rebellion was not isolated, although certain conditions precipitated when and where the strike took place. As Joe Small, singled-out by the Navy as the ringleader of the protest, explained:

*The work stoppage was inevitable. It would have happened. But something else had to happen to give it a shove. The explosion was the instrument by which all this injustice was brought to light. Had the explosion not happened, 320 men would not have lost their lives, but eventually something would have happened to bring about this work stoppage—that the conditions might be exposed.*<sup>3</sup>

Allen's public appearances, his work as a board member of Friends of Port Chicago, and his book have gone onto influence the representations transmitted through television, radio, and film, as well as discourses in the field of politics at the state and national levels. These representations, however, often enclose the strike and the trial as exceptional events, usually extracted from the larger conditions that the strikers were revolting against. Often times, reactionary dismissals of the strike as disloyal and illegal tend to also duplicate the work stoppage in the same fictitious isolation, with deliberate obliviousness. But in fact, the work stoppage was not a unique event during the tenure of Mare Island commander, Captain Nelson Goss, who oversaw Port Chicago at the time of the explosion, as I will discuss further.

A common narrative extracted from Allen's book, even in sympathetic retellings, brings attention to the lack of survivors' leaves for the stevedores after the blast and the fear of another explosion.<sup>4</sup> This explanation convinces many people. The sailors were "shell-shocked," a condition that can persist for decades after war. They had been, for all intents and purposes, in combat without going to the war front.

According to Captain Merrill T. Kinne, the Commanding Officer in charge of Port Chicago, four sailors braved great dangers to put out fires that threatened to blow up boxcars loaded with ammunition.<sup>5</sup> Several more collected scattered body parts of their own barrack mates. Black sailors who survived the explosion lost hundreds of comrades, and in the segregated Navy, many of their interpersonal ties stretched back to their collective experiences as

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter 4 – Whiteout: The Social Production of Port Chicago Memorials.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of The Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History*, 2006, 139.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Elinson and Yogi, *Wherever There's a Fight*, 142–145.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in "Commanding Officer Praises Negro Personnel Who Served at Port Chicago After Explosion Monday Night," July 20, 1944, <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq80-3f.htm>.

trainees together at the segregated boot camp at Great Lakes, Illinois. Some even knew each other all the way back in the towns of the segregated South they came from. Furthermore, they were intimately familiar with the myriad signs that pointed to the inevitability of a calamity, like broken winches, competition between officers over ship-loading speed, and even a lack of work gloves. Adding to their collective sense of avoidable dangers, two weeks after the explosion, two divisions ended up on Ryder Street in Vallejo, placed in the segregated barracks of the Mare Island shipyard and ammunition depot.

### **The Vallejo “Race Riot” and the Waterfront**

Quartermen of the surviving sailors at the Ryder Street barracks came with some baggage. Vallejo had been the scene of a late-1942 “race riot,” instigated by white locals, aided and abetted by the Mare Island officers, and perhaps even the Twelfth Naval District command that oversaw Mare Island and Port Chicago. In the so-called riot, a loaded term that places the responsibility of violent acts at the feet of those with the fewest avenues for recourse, at least two unarmed African American sailors were shot and wounded. Details of the riot remain cryptic. Reports about the duration of the episode vary. It may have spanned two or three nights. The Navy did little to investigate the event—some alleged that the Navy knew well that white mobs awaited Black sailors on liberty—and perhaps even covered-up worse offenses against Black sailors, as I discuss further in this chapter.

Armed military and local police responded to the revolt with over two hundred men shooting live bullets. They fanned out onto the streets of downtown Vallejo, driving Black sailors back to confinement in the Ryder barracks. Port Chicago personnel, therefore, had good reasons to feel they had found themselves “out of the frying pan, and into the fire,” as the expression goes. There are even reasons to believe that at least one of the Black sailors involved in the Port Chicago “mutiny” had previously escaped the shootings in the streets of Vallejo. As I show in what follows, the leave time and the fear of another explosion were the straw that broke the camel’s back. I discuss in this writing how letters to the NAACP in 1942-43 about the atmosphere after the Vallejo revolt prophesied the strike or a similar insurrection.

The 1942 Vallejo riot is nearly a lost chapter in history. Surely not an isolated incident—it preceded the Los Angeles zoot suit riots by about five months—few sources, nevertheless, treat this enormously significant episode in 1940s racial violence, even though it was headline news at the time. But it was not entirely forgotten. I explain in what follows how an artist, Frank Rowe, did research on the uprising in the 1960s, narrowing down the connection between urban conditions in wartime Vallejo and the Port Chicago sailors.

Rowe’s exploration of these conditions worked its way into a woodcut print he made of Marines shooting into a group of Black sailors. He later encapsulated his research in a short article about those whom he called the “Mare Island Mutineers” for a local newspaper, printed to coincide with the thirty-seventh anniversary of the Port Chicago explosion in 1981.<sup>6</sup> Rowe’s work stands as a spatial imagination of the environments in which Black sailors found themselves before and after the Port Chicago explosion. In contrast, the few geographical references that can be pieced together to find the sites of the shooting and the strike lead to downtown blocks razed during 1960s redevelopment in Vallejo. As I show, the settings of the revolt seem to be suspiciously scrubbed, a contrast with the designed character of the official

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Rowe, “The Case of the Mare Island Mutineers,” July 17, 1981.

Port Chicago Memorial.

Unlike prevalent ways of understanding the strike either as an immediate reaction to racially disproportionate treatment or as an act of cowardice and insubordination, Rowe's counter-memorial stresses the dual dimensions of systematically oppressive race and labor treatment that the sailors faced. Rowe's art piece and scholarship offer a different narrative outside of the cowards-or-victims debate, while also pedagogically exemplifying an artistic mode of research practice that others could take up as well.

## Enter Frank Rowe

One day, some time in the 1960s, Frank Rowe drove out to Contra Costa county "looking for interesting subjects to photograph," as he put it. The artist inadvertently wandered near the site of the 1944 Port Chicago explosion, perhaps scouting for attractive scenery that would appear in a future woodcut print. Little did Rowe realize that this meandering drive out to the urban periphery would reveal what was, at that time, an almost entirely lost chapter of Pacific home front history.<sup>7</sup>

Rowe (1921-1985) would eventually come to fastidiously pore over Port Chicago events. He later went on to research the ammunition detonation and the subsequent mutiny trial, recording parts of what he would find through writing and visual production. His investigations eventually took the form of a front-page article for the *Berkeley Express*; his detailed woodcut of the Vallejo violence was used to illustrate the article. But on his initial jaunt, Rowe was taking in a scene of tule grasses and cattails, some of the typical vegetation in the damp lowlands that inch up and down the Carquinez Strait, blissfully unaware of the tragedy that had taken place in the area. When Rowe drove up to a chain link fence with a sign that said: "keep out—military installation," but he did not yet know that he had come up against the property of the naval magazine where the Port Chicago explosion had occurred on the night of July 17, 1944.

Rowe was a highly decorated veteran of the Second World War who was twice wounded in combat on the Atlantic front, and a recognized, socially committed artist during the post-war period. McCarthyism, however, stunted his career. He was one of nine faculty members who refused to sign the Levering Loyalty Oath at San Francisco State College in 1950.<sup>8</sup> In total, 890 California state employees also refused to take the oath.<sup>9</sup> As Lincoln Cushing writes, "Frank Rowe was one of the few artists to stick his neck out at the time, and he paid the price."<sup>10</sup> Ironically, the military called Rowe up from the reserves to serve in the Korean conflict after his "treasonous" act.<sup>11</sup>

Carey McWilliams wrote about Rowe and those who did not sign the loyalty oath. He said that "(...) the record—and the memory—is redeemed by the gallant behavior of a half dozen men and women who decided to take a stand in defense of the Bill of Rights. They paid heavily

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Rowe, *The Enemy Among Us: A Story of Witch-Hunting in the McCarthy Era* (Sacramento: Cougar Books, 1980); "Frank Rowe (1921-1985)," n.d., Courtesy of Nancy Rowe; "Frank Rowe, 63, Dies; Opposed Loyalty Oath," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 1985, [http://articles.latimes.com/1985-03-30/local/me-29594\\_1\\_frank-rowe](http://articles.latimes.com/1985-03-30/local/me-29594_1_frank-rowe); "SFSU Centennial History: 1950," *San Francisco State University 1899-1999*, March 20, 1999, <http://www.sfsu.edu/~100years/history/1950.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Elinson and Yogi, *Wherever There's a Fight*, 236.

<sup>10</sup> Lincoln Cushing, *All of Us or None: Social Justice Posters of the San Francisco Bay Area* (Berkeley: Heyday, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> "Frank Rowe (1921-1985)."

for the privilege but that is all the more reason to honor them.”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps informed by his own experience with persecution, Rowe’s perspective on the Port Chicago story digs into suppressed narratives of the events that transpired both before and after the explosion, and thus opens a deeper understanding of the tragedy.<sup>13</sup>

Curators and academics have too often overlooked Rowe; he remains an under-explored figure in Bay Area graphic and activist arts movements due to his sabotaged career.<sup>14</sup> But his work does surface from time to time. One of his political posters calling for a boycott of Yellow Cab for discriminatory hiring was included in a large survey of social justice posters in 2012 at the Oakland Museum of California exhibition, “All of Us or None: Social Justice Posters of the San Francisco Bay Area.” Rowe’s shortened output was further complicated by a car accident in 1983 that left him quadriplegic. He died of complications at 63 years of age.<sup>15</sup> One objective I have in the following text is, in part, to contribute to a larger re-contextualization of Rowe’s work that yet needs to take place.

## Stumbling onto the Memory of Port Chicago

Rowe did not leave a precise record of what date he bumped into the boundary of the military naval base in Concord, the larger area within which the ammunition explosion took place at the base’s shoreline frontage. It would be safe to suppose, though, that by the time of Rowe’s excursion, the small town of Port Chicago had been demolished for expansion of the military base. The prohibited space aroused Rowe’s curiosity. Although he was a veteran, he did not know any information about the disaster and the Black uprising that followed. With his interest piqued, Rowe later went around casually inquiring about the installation and apparently he learned a few initial details of the blast that sustained his interest further.

Rowe’s quest would lead to a library search where he made the fortuitous discovery of a book that was by then likely out of print: *No Share of Glory*, written by journalist Robert Pearson.<sup>16</sup> In Rowe’s words: “It told the story of the devastating explosion—but almost half of Pearson’s account was about a mutiny trial that had followed. By that time, I was truly interested.”<sup>17</sup> Throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s, *No Share of Glory* was the only printed source solely devoted to the Port Chicago explosion and subsequent mutiny trial.<sup>18</sup> It wasn’t until the late 1970s and early 1980s that a handful of historians and others started to study Port Chicago and the aftermath of the trial more carefully, not to mention the speculations that the

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<sup>12</sup> “Foreword,” in *The Enemy Among Us: A Story of Witch-Hunting in the Mccarthy Era* (Sacramento: Cougar Books, 1980).

<sup>13</sup> On the Levering loyalty oath and the faculty affected, including Rowe, see also Elinson and Yogi, *Wherever There’s a Fight*, 233–239.

<sup>14</sup> For a news overview of the Graphic Arts Workshop, see Jesse Hamlin, “The Graphic Arts Workshop Presses Forward,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, November 25, 2002, [http://articles.sfgate.com/2002-11-25/entertainment/17571001\\_1\\_diego-rivera-political-posters-david-siqueiros](http://articles.sfgate.com/2002-11-25/entertainment/17571001_1_diego-rivera-political-posters-david-siqueiros).

<sup>15</sup> “Frank Rowe, 63, Dies; Opposed Loyalty Oath.”

<sup>16</sup> Robert Pearson, *No Share of Glory* (Challenge, 1964).

<sup>17</sup> Rowe, “The Case of the Mare Island Mutineers,” 8.

<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, when the town of Port Chicago faced condemnation at the hands of the Navy, news articles would often mention the Port Chicago explosion for context. See for example George C. Collier, “Scrapbook Relating to Port Chicago, Nichols and Clyde, California, Circa 1956-1969,” n.d., Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

blast was caused by an atom bomb.<sup>19</sup>

Short texts that summarized the explosion and mutiny case came out in the 1940s, such as Florence Murray's *The Negro Handbook* and a pamphlet published by the NAACP to draw support for an appeal of the court-martial.<sup>20</sup> But the trial account and its effects on people's lives had never gained insights from any first-hand accounts of the stevedores themselves. That omission began to change when Studs Terkel published *The Good War*, for which Frank Rowe was apparently courted (but his interview was not included).<sup>21</sup> Terkel interviewed the so-called ringleader of the mutiny, Joe Small. After *The Good War*, Robert Allen's exhaustive tome, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*, appeared in 1989, and has since been reissued twice (1993, 2006).<sup>22</sup> In his time, however, Rowe had little to reference, except for Pearson's book. What kind of images could Rowe shape from what was available to him?

Pearson's work is paradoxical: a remembrance that pulled the Port Chicago Fifty off the edge of the abyss of time only to judge and convict them anew. In Pearson's privileged practice of memory, the abstract idea of glory replaces an active remembering, thus sustaining and upholding long-standing militarism and racism. *No Share of Glory* foretells similarly vacuous cultural remembrances centered on shallow notions of glory that the Port Chicago story can come to crystalize for some. Such forms of aggrandizing often turn the wildcat strike into a smear on military bravery and glory. *No Share of Glory* is not only an act of erasing the rationale that gives rise to the very need for memory. It also replaces inquiry with a desired past.<sup>23</sup> The erasure rests upon racial privilege, and perpetuates it. Rowe's artistic process, on the other hand, provides a model of an active practice of remembering. Rowe demonstrates a lesson in critical memory and art that challenges the genealogy of hegemonic heritage.

In the pages that follow, I discuss Rowe's counter-memory, remarkable in light of what was available to him. I show how he uncovered interwoven labor and civil rights struggles that persistently get excised from official heritage, even up to the present. He accomplishes this through the production of an artwork *about* the larger oppression that African American sailors confronted and he provides further context for the events of the work strike. In this way, I illustrate how Rowe created an alternative urban and spatial imaginary against dominant forms of official memory and memorycide—practices of memory that persist to this day. His

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<sup>19</sup> Wollenberg, "Blacks Vs. Navy Blue: The Mare Island Mutiny Court Martial"; Robert L. Allen, "The Port Chicago Disaster and Its Aftermath," *The Black Scholar* 13, no. 2/3 (Spring 1982): 2–29; Peter Vogel, "The Last Wave from Port Chicago," *The Black Scholar* 13, no. 2/3 (Spring 1982): 30–47.

<sup>20</sup> Florence Murray, *The Negro Handbook* (New York: Macmillan, 1947); Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of The Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History*, 2006, xviii.

<sup>21</sup> See Studs Terkel, "*The Good War: An Oral History of World War Two*" (New York: New Press, 1984); See also Frank Rowe, "Frank Rowe Letter to Studs Terkel," March 1, 1983, Frank Rowe papers, 1946-1986 (bulk 1970s-1980s), Bancroft Library. In this letter, Rowe writes: "Enclosed is a copy of my East Bay Express article on Port Chicago. Perhaps it gives an idea of the drama of that event, plus some previously unpublicized things that preceded and followed." On journalist Robert Pearson, he goes on, "Old timers in this area tell me that Pearson was a reporter from the Martinez newspaper on the scene of the Port Chicago disaster." Rowe says in the letter that he found only one person from his phone calls that said that he had been at Port Chicago and was willing to talk. "I set up an interview but when I arrived I found him unwilling to discuss the mutiny. In fact several details of the little he told me seemed somewhat contradictory." The subject may have been Rowe's source for his Berkeley Express article. Rowe also speculates that some Black sailors may not have wanted to speak to a white artist. See also Rowe, "The Case of the Mare Island Mutineers."

<sup>22</sup> Robert L. Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of The Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History* (New York: Amistad, 1993); Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of The Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History*, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> See also Introduction – Spaces for Narrating "The Port Chicago Story".

imaginaries of Vallejo and Port Chicago serve as an alternative pedagogy of artistic research practice.

## No Glory to Share

Frank Rowe's spatial imagination can help to puncture through the misconceptions of the Port Chicago mutiny, but first we have to go back to his source, journalist Robert Pearson's way of remembering the Port Chicago "mutineers" in *No Share of Glory*. According to the back cover of the book, Pearson was "a native of Vallejo."<sup>24</sup> The book itself has been nearly forgotten. Only one non-circulating copy at UC Berkeley can be found in the Bancroft Library collection, which may inadvertently prove to be a loss of certain insights into the materials that contributed to the construction of the Port Chicago story.

In recent decades, scholars have rightly diagnosed Pearson's book as inaccurate and a racially biased account of the events surrounding Port Chicago.<sup>25</sup> Pearson's errors are partly due to a lack of records at the time of its publication (1964), but also to Pearson's failure or apathy to seek out interviews with any African American survivors of the blast, let alone the strikers. More of a sensationalist page-turner, it offers no citations or bibliographical leads, but it was not short on accusation. *No Share of Glory* ends with the following words: "The fifty men were swallowed up into the anonymity of the armed forces and eventually into the mass of the American public. How they fared after their discharge from prison, we may never know."<sup>26</sup>

If the book is no longer a reliable source about the incident, it remains as a record of how a white journalist in the 1960s tried to reconstruct memory from his own vantage point two decades after the blast. Hardly anyone was discussing the mutiny trial by that point, at least in any public forums. Contrary to Pearson's expectations, much did, in fact, come to be known about some of the convicted fifty and other survivors of the explosion. But we may never know what motivated Robert Pearson to exercise his own practice in memory. The following is Pearson's conclusion:

*The men who were convicted in this historic trial disappeared from view after leaving their broad mark on the record. The U.S. Navy remained as before: a gallant mass of ordinary men called by their country to cut a bloody swath through the Japanese Empire to glorious victory.*

*A few did not share in the glory.*<sup>27</sup>

Pearson deliberately wanted to stamp the insurgents as deserving their status as outcasts, deserving "no share of glory," and thus the title of the book. Pearson constructed memory, as he implies, to situate the men outside of canonical memory itself. The strategy offers a peek into a larger condition in which mainstream and collectively unquestioned memories can sustain forms of domination inherited from the past. Oddly, the author was oblivious to the fact that without his attention, the men were already forgotten—their actions largely unknown even to their own families, in most the cases. It is an addition of insult to injury. But ironically, he ended up paving the way for the forgotten to be remembered. He could not anticipate that someone like Frank

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<sup>24</sup> Pearson, *No Share of Glory*.

<sup>25</sup> Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of The Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History*, 2006, 178.

<sup>26</sup> Pearson, *No Share of Glory*, 153.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

Rowe, a white veteran of combat in two wars, decorated with medals of glory—a silver star, two bronze stars, and a purple heart—would subvert the “no share of glory” formulation. Rowe, on his part, preserved the voices of anonymous African Americans facing their own race war on the misleadingly labeled “home front.” Understanding the exposition in *No Share of Glory*, and how Rowe subverts the memorialization therein, requires a step back to briefly explore the different context of this so-called home front for African Americans.

## Racism on the Home Front

Over one million African Americans served in the Armed Forces during World War II. African American populations in cities like San Francisco and Oakland grew by a factor of more than four. The perverse cruelty of fighting a form of fascism that preached racial supremacy abroad, while Jim Crow and Japanese internment went on at home, was apparent to many.<sup>28</sup> African Americans, not to mention Japanese Americans shipped off to remote concentration camps, viscerally experienced these new mutations of old racism.

Even while facing persistent disappointments, Blacks fought the Double-V campaign. For African American leaders, joining the fight for victory over enemies abroad was seen as a chance to simultaneously fight for victory over bigotry on the home front. Nonetheless, World War II and the years leading up to the Brown decision in 1954 were a contradictory period. Confrontations and activism won some victories, only to be countered with cunning new forms of racism.<sup>29</sup> The Port Chicago drama and the outcome of the trial was a reminder, looking back, of the ground yet to be gained.

Even though A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and other Black leaders successfully pressured Roosevelt to issue the 1941 Executive Order 8802 that mandated “no discrimination” in defense industries and government hiring, the armed forces were not required to follow suit.<sup>30</sup> Randolph, along with Walter White of the NAACP and T. Arnold Hill of the National Urban League, initially demanded that the military be included in the presidential order, expressing that: “We loyal Negro-American citizens demand the right to work and fight for our country.”<sup>31</sup>

But the armed services called the request “impossible,” under the rubric of not burdening the military with correcting, in the words of Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall, “a social

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<sup>28</sup> Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Marilyn Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); See also Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990*, 254–255.

<sup>29</sup> Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck, *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2012); Harvard Sitkoff, *Toward Freedom Land the Long Struggle for Racial Equality in America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> To give a clearer picture of what the Roosevelt Executive Order 8802 meant, as Delores Nason McBroom explains: “Prior to World War II, African Americans made up no more than three percent of the West Coast’s shipbuilding industries at most. By 1945 there were more than 700,000 workers in West Coast yards with approximately seven percent (50,000 people) comprised of African-Americans.” Among the four largest shipbuilding companies in the Bay Area, the percentage of African Americans was even higher, at thirteen percent by 1943. Delores Nason McBroom, *Parallel Communities: African-Americans in California’s East Bay, 1850-1963* (New York: Garland, 1993), 92; See also Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990*, 254–256.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Richard M. Dalfiume et al., “Papers of the NAACP. Part 9, Discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces, 1918-1955” (University Publications of America, 1989).



problem” beyond its control.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the American Red Cross would not accept blood donated by Blacks—a decision that was supported by the military. At the time, the surgeon general, Major General James J. Magee, wrote to Secretary of War John J. McCloy that, “For reasons not biologically convincing but which are commonly recognized as psychologically important in America, it is not deemed advisable to collect and mix Caucasian and Negro blood indiscriminately for later administration to members of the military forces.”<sup>33</sup>

The Navy and Marines did not accept Black enlistees until 1942, and only did so under a policy of segregation at barracks, recreational facilities, training grounds, and work assignments—all under the supervision of white officers.<sup>34</sup> More broadly, both inside and outside military installations, African American servicemen faced all manner of hostilities and harassment, which became a practical problem, and yet was neglected.<sup>35</sup> The official policy was detrimental to the war effort. Not only were capable soldiers being kept outside of the theatre of war, but also morale was low and inevitably unsafe, as Port Chicago disastrously proved. William Hastie, an aide to the Secretary of War, prophesied the unrest that was to come if the official policy of Jim Crow segregation did not end:

*This philosophy is not working. In civilian life in the South, the Negro is growing increasingly resentful of traditional mores. In tactical units of the army, the Negro is taught to be a fighting man...in brief, a soldier. It is impossible to create a dual personality which will be on the one hand a fighting man toward the foreign enemy, and on the other, a craven who will accept treatment as less than a man at home. One hears with increasing frequency from colored soldiers the sentiment that since they have been called to fight they might just as well do their fighting here and now.*<sup>36</sup>

Hastie resigned in January 1943, saying: “It is difficult to see how a Negro in this position with all his superiors maintaining or inaugurating racial segregation can accomplish anything of value.”<sup>37</sup>

It is certain that Roosevelt’s executive order for manufacturers and the increasing numbers of African Americans in defense industries did not automatically translate into a non-discriminatory work environment in practice. For instance, the unions that controlled shipyard work found ways to shift African Americans into non-voting “auxiliaries” and maintain racial hierarchies on shipyard floors. Likewise, African Americans faced persistent limits through residential and commercial segregation. But Executive Order 8802 was still a milestone. At the very least it offered the promise of fair treatment, and it was one of several changes, including the diversification of the East Bay’s Draft Board, that shaped newfound expectations of having an actual recourse for unfair practices.<sup>38</sup>

However, if expectations and realities did not match in areas like housing and labor, the military was even worse, not taking the grievances of enlistees seriously, let alone taking steps to

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., xi–xii.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Astor, *The Right to Fight*, 158.

<sup>34</sup> Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 184.

<sup>35</sup> In fact, not only was it a neglected issue, but as I argue in this essay, the military leveraged the social power of these extra-military kinds of abuse to maintain, and exploit, the racial hierarchy within it.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Dalfiume et al., “Papers of the NAACP. Part 9, Discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces, 1918-1955,” xiii.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> McBroome, *Parallel Communities*, 114–115.

address them. Between 1941 and 1945, numerous outbreaks of large-scale violence occurred in several cities, most infamous of all, the race conflicts in Los Angeles, Detroit, and Harlem.<sup>39</sup> By one count, there were 242 outbursts of racial violence in 47 cities and at least 50 Black sailors killed in these events during the war.<sup>40</sup> Later in the same year as the Port Chicago strike, segregated sailors on Guam confronted white marines and military police who had shot and killed members of their ranks. With chilling similarities to the Port Chicago case, forty-three sailors were jailed and ultimately discharged without privileges.<sup>41</sup>

In another case, as author James Campbell has uncovered, almost one year prior to the Port Chicago explosion, segregated stevedores stopped loading ships at Port Chicago in protest of a suspicious drowning off of the pier during ship-loading. When Black sailors charged the mess hall for food, in flagrant disregard for a bristling lieutenant's order that they go back to work before they could eat, Mare Island's Captain Goss sent eighteen of them to the brig for twenty days. He added that they would be subject to court-martial for any further insubordination.<sup>42</sup> With this panorama in mind, then, we can move forward to see a more complete picture of what Black sailors in the Bay Area faced.

### The “Bloody Race Riots”

Reading Pearson's writing anew, alert to its inaccuracies and racial slant, can nonetheless begin to uncover some of the social conditions that drove the members of Port Chicago divisions to stage their insurgency. Several passages in *No Share of Glory* captivated Frank Rowe.

Robert Pearson, with his Vallejo roots, seems to have known deep inside that the Ryder barracks, where two loading divisions were housed after the Port Chicago explosion, had a deeper history than has been recorded. The walls could speak. Black soldiers housed there could share stories of being threatened by white locals, barred from commercial establishments in town, and being shot at by fellow American troops. In Pearson's view, it was the built-up resentment transmitted through the Ryder Street barracks that explained the conditions for the mutiny. Pearson says: “In nearby barracks were some seamen who had duties at Mare Island and had been involved in the bloody race riots that had shaken Vallejo a year previously.”<sup>43</sup>

Pearson's account does not, by any means, contradict what others, such as Allen, have excavated in more recent years as the final aggravation before the revolt. But if one looks further into Pearson's claims, a more detailed account emerges of how these conditions worked *in toto*, adding pressure to the kettle. Pearson's narrative, slanted against the African American soldiers as it was, suggested that there were other structural forces at play in the consciousness of the resisters that as of yet have not been well connected.

Pearson added more details of the “bloody race riots” he mentioned, but possibly inserting imaginative details. The following passage is quoted at length to give a sense of both his pejorative language and the violence that took place. He says:

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<sup>39</sup> Nat Brandt, *Harlem at War: The Black Experience in WWII* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997); Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 87–115.

<sup>40</sup> Kruse and Tuck, *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement*, 168.

<sup>41</sup> Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 195–196.

<sup>42</sup> James Campbell, *The Color Of War: How One Battle Broke Japan And Another Changed America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012), 66–67.

<sup>43</sup> Pearson, *No Share of Glory*, 89.

*In 1942, the Navy established a “boot camp” for Negro seamen by building the Ryder Street barracks. The sudden influx of Negroes, both service men and civilians, created racial tension which exploded into violence in April of 1943. The situation deteriorated to the point where the commandant of Mare Island ordered four companies of Marines armed with Reising sub-machine guns to sweep through the town and gather all Negro service men. Vallejo was virtually under martial law. The Negroes were gathered in bunches, ordered to stand in formations and then marched in platoon-sized groups back to the Ryder Street barracks. They were accompanied by heavily armed Marines through the downtown area of Vallejo. As they marched along under guard, the Negroes shouted defiance at the mobs of whites held back by Marines. The Negro service men in turn were pelted with rocks, bricks, orange crates and any other kind of missile the people in the mob could lay their hands on. It was a bloody mess and much damage was done to the businesses in the downtown area.<sup>44</sup>*

That was not all. Pearson’s vivid words would make their way as an artistic element onto the edges of Frank Rowe’s untitled woodcut print that depicted a scene of the riot, an image he consciously tied to the Port Chicago story in his article for the *Berkeley Express* in 1981. In one edition of the print found in Rowe’s daughter’s collection, exhibited in galleries and museums, Rowe transcribed the passage that follows, by hand with pencil, around the edge of the image. The scene described in the passage would serve as the inspiration for the visual image he depicted. The text can suggest a small measure of what inspired African American outrage that many stationed in the Bay Area would have felt. Says Pearson:

*On the corner of Santa Clara Street and Virginia Street, the Marines opened fire with their machine guns on a mass of Negro seamen who defied the order to stand formation. It has never been established how many men died during the riots. News stories concerning the riots were few or non-existent.<sup>45</sup>*

To Pearson, despite the fact that no serious Navy investigation followed, and even though he implies that a number of African Americans died, the violence was called for: “The action of the Marines quelled the rioting.”<sup>46</sup> If the ends justify the means, as Pearson argues, there was, nonetheless, a lingering resentment that he also seemed to sense: “(T)he Negroes were restricted to their barracks that the men from Port Chicago were ordered just a year after the riots.”<sup>47</sup>

There are factual inconsistencies in Pearson’s account. For one, the April 1943 date he uses is likely incorrect. Perhaps, as he alleges, the event never made it into the local newspapers. A short *United Press* wire report mentions a riot in early March 1943, perhaps the same one that Pearson recollects. The report, however, says that no shots were fired, in contrast to Pearson’s account—although not all shootings, especially those against Black sailors, made the news at the time.

More likely, however, the “bloody race riots” that *No Share of Glory* captures was an episode that happened on the weekend of December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1942. This earlier event resembles what Pearson describes, as Frank Rowe also seems to have confirmed later on. The weekend riot garnered extensive coverage in the local papers on the following Monday, December 28<sup>th</sup>,

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 89–90.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

including cover headlines in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Examiner*, *The Sacramento Bee*, and other papers. This so-called riot was so shocking that it drew the attention of the NAACP in Washington, D.C. for several months, leading to calls of a city-level race reconciliation committee.<sup>48</sup>

In my own writing, it should be noted, I prefer to avoid using the term “riot” in the way that Pearson applies the word. On the one hand, one could call the actions of Black sailors a ‘revolt,’ a ‘rebellion,’ or an ‘uprising.’ On the other hand, armed white personnel and their supervising officers behaved, on their part, as if they were waging a race war—against Blacks. Meanwhile, in *No Share of Glory*, with a pose of neutrality, “riot” connotes irrational and criminal violence by out-of-control masses of colored people, who thus happen to bring upon themselves the wrath of angry mobs pelting them with anything they could get their hands on. Even if Pearson happened to notice the violence of white mobs as part of the totality of the episode, the punishment for the violent behavior only has one target, from his perspective. The riot is a violent upheaval, one to be “quelled,” in Pearson’s view, through an aggressive, overpowering use of firepower towards Blacks—a conclusion he arrives at without all the facts in the case.

By categorizing violence in such schematic and simplistic ways, Pearson seems to want to extinguish any other possible readings of the events as a justifiable defense against attacks or, potentially, as a way of resisting a public shaming in front of rowdy white spectators. Whatever the causal role of segregation or racism was, these factors are not discussed. Furthermore, although the Vallejo “riot” has been consigned to the dustbin of history, it was not an isolated event. To better understand the actions of African American sailors in the Bay Area, it is necessary to take into account the background of this and similar upheavals that demonstrate a complete lack of institutional channels, as will be shown in what follows, for African American personnel to seek redress for grievances.

### **Combined Civilian and Military Racism**

Racial conflict in Vallejo was not out of the ordinary. The so-called riot was, in fact, a reaction against a longer, historical, xenophobic, made-in-California racism that bubbled throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>49</sup> During the war years, non-Californian white migrants who came to find work, as well as white soldiers hitting the town on their liberty passes, could tap into a deep-seated, nativist white identity that was well engrained in California. They were able to exploit this identity for their own social and labor advantages.

Besides, the Navy’s attitude was well set in place. Since the days of Teddy Roosevelt’s 1905 Great White Fleet that flexed the naval muscle in the face of the Pacific “yellow peril,” the Navy had excluded Blacks from its ranks.<sup>50</sup> The particular conditions of the Vallejo upheaval point to some of the underlying and historic tensions important to understanding the Port Chicago strike, as Frank Rowe also intuited.

The exact spark that set off the revolt remains submerged under innuendo and the lack of candor in the investigations that followed. *The San Francisco Chronicle* reported the allegation that an unnamed “Negro sailor” stabbed a white sailor, as other sources also allude to, without

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<sup>48</sup> “NAACP 1940-55. General Office File. United States Navy, Vallejo, Calif. Riots, 1942-43. 1980.,” 43. 1980 1942.

<sup>49</sup> Richard Walker, “California’s Collision of Race and Class,” *Representations* Summer, no. 55 (1996): 163–183.

<sup>50</sup> Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*.

adding further detail as to who was stabbed or the name of the purported aggressor.<sup>51</sup> *The Sacramento Bee* reported that four white sailors “were treated for slight wounds” on the first night of disturbances; no names or treatment locations were given.<sup>52</sup>

After one night of skirmishes, or possibly two, depending on the version of the events, violence escalated during the night of December 27<sup>th</sup>. Sailors and civilians fought in the downtown Gold Coast district of Vallejo, where bars and entertainment clustered. During the melee, Marines and shore-patrolmen armed with sub-machine guns and other weapons converged on a crowd of Black naval personnel, who allegedly had armed themselves with pipes and bottles.<sup>53</sup> The local press reported that over 200 military and local police backed-up Marines seeking to restore calm or, perhaps, to take vengeance on insubordinate Black sailors who failed to “heed orders.” Near the Knotty Pine Bar on Branciforte Street, “a marine fired seven slugs from his tommy gun. Two Negroes were hit. A Marine non-commissioned officer fired three pistol shots over the Negroes’ heads.”<sup>54</sup> The fighting apparently went on for at least an hour and spread to four different downtown corners.<sup>55</sup> In the end, *The San Francisco Chronicle* described a scene that reads like *No Share of Glory*, verbatim: “the city was virtually under martial law.”<sup>56</sup>

Several newspapers repeated Navy allegations without independent verification. Troops shot two cooks, Leo A. Shaw and George Carpenter, one in the arm and the other in the leg. A handful of civilians were taken into custody and fined small amounts for failing to obey.<sup>57</sup> No sources reported any fatalities, contrary to what Pearson wrote in *No Share of Glory*. But then again, there seemed to have been little independent investigation into the episode and no other sources have, as of yet, been located. When Frank Rowe researched the Pearson account, he found these same two names of the wounded sailors, as I was able to verify in undated copies of newspaper clippings from his files.<sup>58</sup>

The confrontations climaxed when somewhere between 200 to 400 African American sailors gathered on the night of December 27<sup>th</sup>. What exactly these sailors wanted is unknown. “Clean up the town” was how an anonymous source explained the situation to the *Oakland Tribune*.<sup>59</sup> But other clues point to the need for some degree of self-defense from the combined mob attack of white civilian and military personnel. Some key details of the conflict come into a degree of relief in local news reports, although they bring up more questions than definitive answers. *The Vallejo Evening News Chronicle* reported that Victor Teach, 18 years old, faced “police court charges” and “admitted being with a group of Marine friends “looking” for a Negro who had knifed a marine Saturday night.” He pled guilty. Another presumed friend, Samuel Dyer, 21, “also received similar treatment.”<sup>60</sup> The officer who arrested Teach later told a newspaper that he found the young man “leading a group of marines who paraded through the streets shoving groups of colored sailors off the street and challenging them to fight.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> “Vallejo Riot!,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, December 28, 1942.

<sup>52</sup> “Two Are Shot as White, Negro Service Men Riot,” *The Sacramento Bee*, December 28, 1942.

<sup>53</sup> “Vallejo Riot!”

<sup>54</sup> “Two Are Shot.”

<sup>55</sup> “Vallejo Quiet After 300 Battle in Race Riot; Navy Opens Investigation,” *San Francisco Examiner*, December 27, 1942.

<sup>56</sup> “Vallejo Riot!”

<sup>57</sup> “Youth Leading Marines in Local Riot Fined \$100,” *Vallejo Evening News Chronicle*, December 30, 1942.

<sup>58</sup> Copies of undated newspaper clippings provided by daughter Nancy Rowe on October 19, 2010.

<sup>59</sup> “Two U.S. Sailors Shot in Vallejo Race Riot; Marines Quell Flareup,” *Oakland Tribune*, December 28, 1942; “Two Are Shot.”

<sup>60</sup> “Negro Sailors Confined to Quarters in Riot Aftermath,” *Vallejo Evening News Chronicle*, December 28, 1942.

<sup>61</sup> “Youth Leading Marines.”

According to the local paper, Teach's defense was that he was only trying to quell the tensions. *The Evening News Chronicle* stated: "Teach contended he had not led the marines into fights, but was attempting to get them to return to their barracks. He also remarked that they were looking for a colored sailor who had knifed a marine in a previous brawl."<sup>62</sup> The African American sailor who purportedly stabbed a white sailor was never identified, nor was his alleged victim. But if Teach truly was leading a group of Marines and friends, prowling the streets for an outlaw sailor, what could best describe the cause of the riot is nothing but white vigilantism.

The files that the NAACP kept on this revolt paint a different picture from the one in newspapers. In letters sent to the national headquarters, whites typically enforced Jim Crow segregation at leisure and recreation spots. Walter White, national secretary of the NAACP, wrote a telegram to Frank Knox, the Secretary of the Navy, that reads: "It is ironic and disheartening to read press statements that the disturbance was quelled when Marines turned machine guns on the Negroes. It is also significant that only Negroes were injured when the evidence seems to establish that white Southerners were the aggressors in attacking Negro patrons of tavern."<sup>63</sup>

A letter to the NAACP about the revolt from a Vallejo resident, a civilian employee at the Navy yard, stands out as an eerie foretelling of the sailors' strike following the Port Chicago explosion. In the letter dated January 14, 1942 (about two weeks after the rebelling), Eddie Jones Jr. writes: "Just a few lines to tell you that if something is not done soon to prevent it, we are going to have some more trouble & plenty trouble in this town. Our colored sailors are still being mistreated." Jones then goes on to say: "Our boys are being used as labor in the (Mare Island) Ammunition Depot. These sailors are worked by white civilians in the Ammunition Dept." In this frame that draws together the combined effects of race and labor domination, Jones then adds: "They are call N\_\_\_\_\_ & Blacky. I know this to be true because I work with these colored sailors."<sup>64</sup>

Jones's letter tells NAACP assistant secretary Roy Wilkins that one sailor was shot in the back as he was "marched out of theatre. Not knowing what had happened outside & was slow in coming out." He claims that after the revolt, some sailors had relayed requests back home to send them their guns. Jones also recounts the disparities in the length of work shifts between racial groups—Blacks having to start earlier and work longer than whites. And after the revolts, sailors came to work at the depot with "blood in their eyes." Jones says: "Our boys refused to work," suggesting that a work stoppage following the Port Chicago explosion was no surprise, nor was the Port Chicago strike unfamiliar territory to the Navy. These warnings were not far fetched, and the Port Chicago strike was indirectly a response to these kinds of preceding events.

Port Chicago survivor Spencer E. Sikes began his Navy career at the Mare Island depot. In an oral history, he tells of a work stoppage at Mare Island that occurred in the early fall of 1942. He describes how the nearest rest rooms for Black stevedores at the Mare Island ammunition depot were about a half-mile away from their work site, which eventually drove the men to stage a spontaneous strike:

*So it was a segregated bathroom. And all it was was a trough so to speak with water running down. And that's all it was. We had to sit down on it. That's all it was. It was no gold, no silver, no nothing. But we couldn't use it. And sometimes the guys didn't make it, and it was hard. It was a rough life, feeling the wrath of*

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Walter White to Frank Knox, "NAACP 1940-55. General Office File. United States Navy, Vallejo, Calif. Riots, 1942-43. 1980."

<sup>64</sup> Eddie Jones Jr., letter to Roy Wilkins, January 14, 1943, Ibid.

*segregation at its highest. You had military officers that showed no sympathy whatever. Just do it.*<sup>65</sup>

Robert Routh survived the Port Chicago explosion but lost his sight in the blast. His first assignment was at Mare Island, after enlisting in Tennessee and spending his boot camp time at Great Lakes, Illinois. At Mare Island they assigned him to ammunition manufacturing. Navy service did not meet any of his expectations: “(W)e were complaining because we thought that we would be going into the Navy to be assigned to ships and rather than to the kind of work that we were assigned to. So this brought a lot of murmuring and so forth, but to no avail.” Ironically, the only lodging the Navy had for Black sailors when Routh arrived at Mare Island was a decommissioned riverboat that the sailors dubbed “the USS Neversail.”<sup>66</sup>

Despite these routine and demeaning forms of segregation in Vallejo and on the Mare Island base, the causes of the so-called riot were placed squarely outside of the control of the military, blamed instead on Southern mores carried over to the West. “The chief cause of this trouble appears to be the fact that most of these colored sailors are from the South, and likewise most of the white sailors and civilians participating in the disorders are from the South,” was how Vallejo Police Chief Earl Deirking put it.<sup>67</sup> Deirking said to another newspaper that, “These men resent the liberties the Negro sailors are receiving in Vallejo, and never miss an opportunity to lord it over colored men. The Negroes, for their part, are attempting to go into areas the whites have regarded as exclusively theirs since the colored men came here some weeks ago.”<sup>68</sup> From yet another perspective, Rear Admiral W.L. Fridell, the commandant of the Mare Island Navy Yard and Port Chicago, said, “I don’t call it a riot. One or two sailors got a little drunk,”<sup>69</sup> a statement that gives further credibility to common allegations from sailors that officials were indifferent.

Whether this episode could be characterized as a small melee or a full-blown riot, the Navy, like all the military, was a segregated institution, and what the words of Naval officers reveal are a subtle, but powerful, ideology. This upheld the view of the military as not implicated in any way, shape, or form in the everyday racial clashes taking place in the streets of Vallejo or on the Mare Island depot, a position contradicted by the documented participation of enlisted personnel themselves in inciting the fracas, to mention one example.

By contrast, in Jones’ letter to the NAACP, he accuses the Navy of purposefully looking the other way after Marines shot at Black seamen, whom, Jones alleges, were given leave under the full knowledge that white mobs were “waiting for them with guns.”<sup>70</sup> The reality was that African Americans had to struggle just to be allowed into the military, even a low-rank stewards and cooks, let alone be treated more as servicemen than as indentured servants forced to work longer and harder at the same jobs as white personnel, while lacking the possibility of promotion. The Vallejo revolt, despite predominant accounts, announced that Black sailors would not take the abuse indefinitely.

None of the newspaper reporters cited above spoke to any African American personnel to

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<sup>65</sup> Sikes, *An Oral History of Port Chicago*, 122.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Routh Jr., *An Oral History of Port Chicago*, interview by Tracey E. Panek, July 16, 1999, 6, National Park Service Eugene O’Neil National Historic Site.

<sup>67</sup> “Two U.S. Sailors Shot.”

<sup>68</sup> “Two Are Shot.”

<sup>69</sup> United Press, “Sailors Riot in California,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, December 28, 1942.

<sup>70</sup> Eddie Jones Jr., letter to Roy Wilkins, January 14, 1943, “NAACP 1940-55. General Office File. United States Navy, Vallejo, Calif. Riots, 1942-43. 1980.”

understand their version of what happened or to understand their larger grievances—not that such an omission came as a surprise. These exclusions constitute a vast pattern of silencing the voices of those with direct accounts of historical events, and one that has troubling echoes when white veterans demand silence in regard to insurgency or rebellion around the Port Chicago explosion, shifting the focus to the vaunted glory of troops, as Pearson does. They also present a formidable catch-22 for historicizing these events, since direct sources are quite difficult to find, feeding into a cycle where structural racism frequently gets dismissed because Jim Crow society, at best, neglected to record in a systematic way and, at worst, obliterated the evidence of symptoms of its own dysfunction. Nevertheless, Robert Pearson seemed to know in his gut that history was much more complex than the overt sanctimonious paeans of *No Share of Glory*.

### **The Vallejo Revolt Through the Eyes of Frank Rowe**

Rowe's square woodcut showing the scene of Marines cutting down Black sailors with their tommy guns was meant to be hung on the bias. In other words, on a gallery wall, the print would be exhibited as a diamond with two of its corners pointing upwards and downwards, instead of a conventional square picture hung parallel to the ground. Rowe intended to hang it in this unconventional way. Within the diamond, Rowe etched geometric forms that define a near-perfect circle. The oblique orientation of the picture takes attention away from the edges of the piece and, instead, draws the viewer into this circle. Inside the circle, a figure in a sailor's uniform stands with outstretched arms, his head bowed down, standing above two bodies splayed on the ground. The figure is rendered in a crucifix pose, Christ-like, simultaneously underscoring with this vulnerable position that he is not armed. In the background, Rowe shows a steeple with a cross and, along the sides, a white mob gestures in fury, much like Pearson described in *No Share of Glory*.

Looking more carefully at the details in the piece, in the space between the circle and the edges of the diamond, cast in the shadows, are the profiles of armed Marines with their helmets and their machine guns. At the bottom corner, the barrel of a machine gun points towards the sailors, cut off by the edge of the frame. As all the elements of the scene begin to cohere in one's mind, it becomes clear that the circle, without being too obvious, implies a shooter's scope. Therefore, the person who stands from the vantage point of the artist, or oneself as the viewer of the piece, would be standing at the helm of the machine gun.

As clear as Rowe's print is about who is perpetrating the violence, it was not an artwork that came about without context. It emerged from a process of research and thought. What Pearson did not investigate was left for others to trace; that is where Rowe began his work. At some point in the late 1970s, the exact dates of which I have not been able to track down, Rowe took it upon himself to find people named in Pearson's book. "Several oldtimers in Martinez and Concord remembered the explosion well. When I asked about the black ammunition loaders who were defendants in the mutiny trial, I drew a near blank," said Rowe.<sup>71</sup> But he did find one defendant.

"The Case of the Mare Island Mutineers" appeared in the *Berkeley Express* on July 17, 1981 (the 37<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the explosions), along with a reproduction of the woodcut print. In the article, Rowe ruminates:

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<sup>71</sup> Rowe, "The Case of the Mare Island Mutineers," 7.



*Some of the ammunition loaders may still live quietly in Oakland, in Berkeley's flatlands, or in the Western Addition. Ollie Morgan is still alive. If his grandchildren crawl onto his lap and ask, "What did you do in the big war, Grandpa?" it may be that the survivor of machinegunning in Vallejo, the explosion in Port Chicago, and the mutiny trial on Treasure Island will pour a beer, tune in to the Giants or the A's and tell the grandchildren to go outside and play Star Wars.<sup>72</sup>*

Rowe's article tells the story of an individual he calls "Ollie Morgan," a man who allegedly hid in a church basement to escape the bullets flying over his head in the Vallejo riots, only to find himself later running away from the blast of the Port Chicago explosion. "Ollie Morgan" was a pseudonym for someone Rowe interviewed. And when Rowe describes the scene of the grandfather who avoids sharing memories of the war with his grandchildren, telling them to play outside instead, Rowe was evoking parallels with other Port Chicago survivors, especially the convicted sailors, who kept their experiences a secret, even from their own families.

African American survivors of Port Chicago did not have the same comfort of recollecting and remembering in public ways that officers or white veterans had. Along these same lines, no African American survivors seem to have expressed any reaction to Pearson's book, if they had read or heard of it—a step that would have necessarily brought them out of anonymity to face renewed social persecutions. They were too concerned that they would be adversely affected at work, at a bank, in a business affiliation, in familial relationships, or in other social circumstances. Perhaps some felt that the trauma was unspeakable. But the case of the pseudonymous Morgan is particularly remarkable because he seems to have lived the thread between the uprisings in Vallejo, the explosion, the court-martial trial, and the conviction.

Meanwhile, in Pearson's account there is an "Ollie" as well: "Seaman 1/c (first class) Ollie Green." Green, according to Pearson, and as corroborated in the trial proceedings and in Allen's research, was the first to assert at trial that officers would bet on the loading of ships, making the men race and load unsafely. Could Ollie Green be Ollie Morgan in Rowe's account? It might never be known. There is no other trace of him, up to the present writing. Rowe concluded in his article that for "Morgan" and others, "history later exonerated them."<sup>73</sup> While history may have exonerated them, the Navy has not, nor have many fellow veterans. They have yet to receive an equal share of glory.

### **The Revealing Case of Thomas Flanagan**

Even though the Navy told reporters covering the Vallejo upheavals that an investigation into the revolts would follow, very little was done.<sup>74</sup> But an odd episode draws attention to Navy handling of the situation. The following story shows how far the Navy would go to evade scrutiny into their role in such kinds of incidents, and demonstrates an absence of fair forums for the grievances of African Americans in the military during World War II.

After the December conflicts in Vallejo, 1800 African American sailors had their liberty

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> "Negro Sailors Confined to Quarters in Riot Aftermath."

passes cancelled and were confined to their barracks, as Pearson said.<sup>75</sup> A handful of civilians, as told before, received slaps on the wrist for inciting other civilians and military personnel to riot. Did any personnel face disciplining for taking part in the attacks?

Thomas Flanagan was out on liberty playing pool at the Knotty Pine Bar when he heard the commotion outside the bar on the night of December 27, 1942. He stepped outside and saw the Marines shooting into the crowd of Black sailors. An African American sailor himself, he reported the incident to his superiors and asked “what could be done about it.”<sup>76</sup> Instead, the Navy singled Flanagan out as the ringleader of the riot. He was given a choice: either take a dishonorable discharge or face a mutiny court-martial, perhaps with the not-so-veiled threat of facing a sentence of execution, as the Port Chicago sailors were threatened with. In 1979, acknowledging racial bias, the Naval Discharge Review Board struck down Thomas Flanagan’s dishonorable discharge, and granted him an honorable status that was 36 years in coming.<sup>77</sup>

Flanagan’s case is significant for several reasons. Flanagan, who died in 1988 at the age of 64, spent his final years battling for lost wages and reparations for a career that was taken away from him. In 1986 he told *The Los Angeles Times* that: “I’m still not free. All these years of washing dishes—I could have been somebody.” On one level, his discriminatory and vindictive discharge, later overturned, gives further credence to the calls for justice of the Port Chicago Fifty. The Twelfth Naval District unfairly disciplined all of these men, under the same roughshod system that coerced Flanagan, and the same system that was supposed to have been responsible for granting a fair hearing to the Fifty. This episode suggests a larger pattern among Navy officers committed to maintaining racial hierarchy through a mutually reinforcing mechanism of diffuse repression outside the military and concerted techniques of oppression within.

## Conclusion

As I have shown, in Vallejo, at best, the Navy turned a blind-eye to socially policed segregation in places of nightlife, and at worst, pushed Black sailors to walk directly into harms way. They then used violence against their own personnel to put down the predictable unrest, or worse, to teach a lesson to sailors who were getting too vocal and confrontational. After the violent reprisals, the Navy would then turn to coercion, such as discharge threats, in order to discourage transparency and dissipate any calls for reform.

Meanwhile, on military bases, the Navy not only segregated the spaces of work, but made inadequate provisions for African Americans, such as in the case of segregated restroom facilities. When Port Chicago’s sailors acted against all such inequities of the everyday experience of segregation, the Navy would once again turn to coercive mutiny charges. And if servicemen still worked up the courage to stand-up to all of this, they would be harshly punished with tarnished records, prison sentences, and economic reprisals in the form of lost wages. In the long run, memory itself would come to be weaponized, as was the case with Robert Pearson’s book, in order to re-criminalize those who were “Jim Crowed laborers,” in the words of one interview subject.

With regards to the Port Chicago Fifty, the threat of fabricated mutiny charges had

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Lee May, “Finally Is Given Honorable Status but Can’t Collect Damages : WWII GI Still Battling Over ‘Bad’ Discharge - Los Angeles Times,” *The Los Angeles Times*, November 17, 1989, [http://articles.latimes.com/1986-11-17/news/mn-4002\\_1\\_black-sailors](http://articles.latimes.com/1986-11-17/news/mn-4002_1_black-sailors).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

already been tested on Thomas Flanagan by the same command, and perhaps many more. On another level, since Flanagan tried to seek justice through the sanctioned channels, his punishment begs the question of what recourse would African American sailors have had in the 1940s, except for turning towards insurgent actions that later come to be criminalized with terms like “mutiny” or “riot.”

In retrospect, the sequence of events of the Vallejo insurrection—shot at by their own military force during a violent confrontation with a racist mob, quarantined into the very barracks where the Port Chicago seamen would eventually end up, only then to be punished, in Flanagan’s case, for demanding that officers look into the whole episode—served as an obvious alert that further unrest would take place, as Jones’ letter to the NAACP, or William Hasties’ warnings to the War Secretary, anticipated.

It is in Frank Rowe’s woodcut of the Vallejo insurgency where one can find an ur-space against what has become acceptable as the standard speech and action performed in the setting of places like the Port Chicago Memorial—a fixed and hardened form of official heritage. Turning to Frank Rowe’s image production and his writing informs what an unconventional form of activist memorial practice may look like. By employing an urban imagination and a research-informed practice, Rowe creates a political space wherever his work is shown, in the vein of an architecture fiction. With such an urban imagination, his work contests sanitized memories of Port Chicago.

Many of the mainstream interpretations of the Port Chicago work strike only go up to a certain point. These interpretations tend to hold the Navy responsible for “going too far,” so to speak, in their treatment of the survivors of the blast. These survivors, then, are understood as having been afraid of another explosion, frustrated with their shortened leave for recovery, and angry at their commanding officers.<sup>78</sup> None of these understandings is wrong. But taken through Rowe’s wider lens, one is able to uphold that the insurrectionary strike was not *only* a response to any of these factors. The strike was the only choice left—an entirely necessary step in the face of such an institutionalized mechanism of oppression. In this latter sense, the Port Chicago strike comes to be indirectly memorialized in Rowe’s print as heroism in the face of enormous intimidation and danger.

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<sup>78</sup> On the manipulations of the idea of cowardice as a characteristic of the Port Chicago mutineers, an idea that was integral to the Navy’s strategy in weakening the consciousness of the strikers during their resistance, see Steve Estes, *I Am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 27–30.

## Chapter 6 – Vallejo as Port Chicago’s Anti-Memorial

In *No Share of Glory*, Robert Pearson claimed that World War II-era race riots in Vallejo reached their apex when white Marines shot an untold number of Black sailors outside a downtown watering hole.<sup>1</sup> The location he identifies—the intersection of Virginia and Santa Clara streets—no longer exists in any semblance of what it would have looked like during the revolts of 1942. Such are the scotomas of Vallejo.

In the 1960s, the Vallejo Redevelopment Agency razed 600 downtown structures—around 125 acres, all told—including treasures like the Progressive Era’s Carnegie Library, a 1904 landmark. At the northwest corner of Santa Clara and Virginia, once stood another landmark, the Astor House, a popular hotel built at the height of the Gold Rush.<sup>2</sup> Vallejo’s urban renewal scheme is reported to have been the largest of all such municipal undertakings in California during the frenzy to clear entire areas deemed to be “blighted,” after passage of the 1954 Housing Act in the U.S. Congress.<sup>3</sup> Even the York Street hill was flattened, where early in California’s statehood, a capitol building stood for a short time.

At the purported site of the 1942 riot shootings, municipal authorities installed a dull, pedestrian micro-plaza by closing Virginia Street to automobile traffic. When last I visited the neighborhood, accompanied by a group of University of California undergraduate students, a grimy, broken fountain with standing water decorated the lethargic walkway. In the present day, the site appears as if it had jumped out of a modernist architectural daydream, but lacking much of the openness and airiness of those kinds of blueprints. On the north side of the space, where the Astor House used to be, stands a tall prototypical “tower in a park” that looks somewhat painfully stuffed into an average downtown lot, too small to be an ideal modernist *tabula rasa*, casting an inescapable shadow over the public space outside its surrounding iron fence. The

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 5 – “It was a Bloody Mess:” Vallejo’s 1942 Race Revolts and the Port Chicago Sailors’ Strike.

<sup>2</sup> James E. Kern, *Vallejo* (Charleston: Arcadia, 2004); See also “Sanborn - Vallejo Sheet 1,” 1941.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Rohrs, “For Better or Worse, Urban Renewal Has Helped Shape Modern Day Vallejo,” *Vallejo Times Herald*, July 26, 2009, <http://www.calpropertyrights.com/pdf/7-26-09TimesHerald-ForbetterorworseurbanrenewalhashelpedshapemoderndayV.pdf>.

tower houses senior citizens, rising up several stories braced with exterior steel trusses in case of earthquakes. The other side of the plaza is bordered by a one-story services building for area seniors.



*Image 3: Downtown Vallejo's site of the 1942 shootings of unarmed Black sailors, according to Robert Pearson's account. (Photo by author).*

The two streets that Pearson names in *No Share of Glory* as the scene of the shooting also appear as a traditional four-corner intersection open to vehicular traffic on fire insurance maps from the 1940s. But nowadays, Virginia dead-ends a block before—at Sacramento street. The inglorious pedestrian promenade occupies what was once the bustling stretch between Sacramento and Santa Clara streets. During redevelopment, the city closed both Georgia and Virginia streets to divert traffic away from an expected double-decker freeway along the waterfront that was planned, but never built.

The lower Georgia Street area, two blocks to the south of Virginia Street, was also renowned as a rowdy haunt during the war. The shootings Pearson discusses were well documented at the time in several newspapers, except that the dates Pearson cited do not coincide with those news reports and subsequent letters. It is not clear how many individuals were struck by bullets (two Black sailors were reportedly injured), nor if anyone died, as Pearson suggested in his book. If some of the newspapers from the time are accurate, contradicting Pearson's account, the Marines unloaded their weapons on Brancefort Street on the night of

December 27, 1942. The episode constituted a major rebellion against the segregationist policies of the Navy's Twelfth Naval District and the Navy's tolerance for Jim Crow attitudes in the racist environment of nighttime entertainment.

In order to bring light to the revolt and its often unspoken connections to the Port Chicago strike, Bay Area political printmaker Frank Rowe, following Pearson's account, made a depiction of the shooting scene as said to have taken place at the corner of Santa Clara and Virginia streets. The existing pedestrian plaza at the site, a disfigured counterpart to the space represented by Rowe, becomes a suspicious *anti-memorial*—a silent nod to all the other exclusions from vision, memory, and verbalization that undoubtedly are latent all over Vallejo's lost downtown.

The individual stories of Port Chicago—the naval magazine having been a sub-command of Mare Island—often course back to the many sites of the Navy-sanctioned violence on the streets of Vallejo and the segregation of the Mare Island base. The Black sailors that survived the explosion went on strike at the very same Ryder Street barracks, one mile south of the downtown where sailors challenged mob violence and segregation. A number of inter-personal connections linked the two sites. After the 1942 rebellions, the unheeded calls from the NAACP for reform of the Twelfth Naval District and the staging of other work stoppages anticipated the historic events of the Port Chicago strike. The “mutiny” has attained a historic status, but one that is, for the most part, disconnected from the rest of the struggle against the Navy in Vallejo and on Mare Island. The slippages of memory in relation to the Port Chicago strike are related to the same phenomenon of the vanished downtown. The Ryder barracks, like the forgotten and destroyed streets of downtown Vallejo, are also gone.

But before entering this case study about Vallejo's anti-memorials in full, it is necessary to flesh out the notion of an *anti-memorial* that is at the core of this chapter. The Port Chicago story has its own protected memorial, as well as other community-funded ventures to preserve memories related to various parts of the Port Chicago story. A memorial can be an instrument that deliberately prevents controversial reckonings from taking place on an important spot. At the same time, undercurrents that challenge the norms of memory—narratives that can be made palpable in other forms of unofficial representation—can be categorized as *counter-memorials*. These constitute a challenge to government-accepted forms of memorializing (for example, Frank Rowe's woodcut of the Vallejo street fighting). But here I turn to *anti-memorials*.

The term “anti-memorial” has come to attain a certain meaning in architecture and landscape studies. To designers and design scholars like Sue-Anne Ware and Ellen Handler Spitz, an anti-memorial, despite its oppositional intentions, is still a designated, designed monument—even if one that rejects the typical trappings of monumentality, celebration, or hagiography.<sup>4</sup> In the wake of famed and quizzical interventions in the landscape like Horst Hoheisel's ghostly sculptures that frame the guilt of Nazi Germany, or Peter Zumthor's unbuilt proposal for the *Topographie des Terrors* at the site of the Gestapo in Berlin, anti-memorials have come to be understood as a design vocabulary onto its own. These interventions are designed in order to spur uncomfortable discussions. Many of the most well known address Holocaust memory. They attempt to capture the ultimate unknowability of human terror by using opaque representations and deconstructed forms.

Anti-memorials, in this vein, also eschew traditions of monument-making as insufficient, even incompatible with, the guilt of atrocities in the modern era. In the case of Sue-Anne Ware's

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<sup>4</sup> Sue-Anne Ware, “Memory Slips: Speculations in Australian Anti-Memorial Designs,” *The Landscape Architect, IFLA Conference Papers* (May 2006): 171–181; Ellen Handler Spitz, “Loss as Vanished Form: On the Anti-Memorial Sculptures of Horst Hoheisel,” *American Imago* 62, no. 4 (2005): 419–433.

memorial to the victims of heroin addiction, the anti-memorial confronts the persistent rejection of addicts in the dominant culture.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, recent landscape interventions such as Peter Eisenman's memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe and Daniel Libeskind's Berlin Holocaust museum, with their barrage of elaborate geometries, challenge the unity of vision itself. They break with the idea that any architecture could absorb the absence left by those killed.

In turn, I use the term "anti-memorial" differently. Even though I am indebted to the discussions that surround the projects mentioned so far, those designs have authors who are deliberate in their solipsistic approaches. Needless to say, the increasing number of projects that subvert ideas of memorials is important for me to be able to attune my sights to similarly difficult spaces, yet ones that have no hired architects.

I treat the anti-memorial, instead, as a product that emerges from the confluence of unrelated forces interacting with each other over space and time. The sites I identify as anti-memorials, much like the elusive site of the shooting of Black sailors in downtown Vallejo, could be appropriated to counteract the tide of forgetting. These sites could serve to imagine new spaces of political memory. But left as they are, these sites are products of intentional, careless, or accidental amputations of memory from the landscape. The anti-memorials in this chapter have, as of yet, zero cues to the past. Nevertheless, they are loaded with possibilities for reclamation.

In this chapter, I look at the disappeared site of the Port Chicago work strike as an antipode to the official commemoration and the structures that support the dominant discussions of the Port Chicago story. In addition, I explain how the remembrance of the work strike takes place at the shuttered Mare Island shipyard and ammunition depot, which has a close proximity to the rebellious streets of downtown Vallejo. Through the efforts of local citizens, visitors use the former base as a space to tell orphaned stories, outside the designated geography of official narratives.

## **The Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve**

The Mare Island Naval Shipyard was the first U.S. Navy installation on the Pacific Coast, opening in 1854 on what was, back then, an island, and has since become a peninsula thanks to periodic filling of shoreline areas. Soon after the founding of the installation in 1857, the Navy set aside a separate ammunition depot on the southern tip of the elongated landmass that juts into the San Pablo Bay (an inland water body coextensive with the San Francisco Bay).<sup>6</sup> In 1917, an explosion at this depot killed six men. Albeit much less dire, it foreshadowed later perils at Bay Area installations like the Port Chicago blast.<sup>7</sup> During World War II, the busy shipyard turned out a destroyer in a record seventeen days and employed up to 40,000 people.<sup>8</sup> But the ammunition portion of the island was too small to cope with the tonnage the Navy needed for fighting the

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<sup>5</sup> Ware, "Memory Slips: Speculations in Australian Anti-Memorial Designs"; James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meanings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> "Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve," *Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve*, accessed April 12, 2012, <http://www.mareislandpreserve.org/>.

<sup>7</sup> "Explosion Kills Six in Mare Island Yard," July 10, 1917, <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F50815FA385F157A93C2A8178CD85F438185F9>.

<sup>8</sup> "Mare Island Specific Plan," 2007, 11, [http://www.cbre.us/oakland/AssetLibrary/SpecificPlan\\_MareIsland\\_031511.pdf](http://www.cbre.us/oakland/AssetLibrary/SpecificPlan_MareIsland_031511.pdf).

war—a problem long-anticipated—and was augmented with the construction of the naval magazine at Port Chicago in 1942, under the oversight of Mare Island’s Commander Nelson Goss.<sup>9</sup> Later, after decades of building ships and Cold War nuclear submarines, Congress closed the Mare Island base in 1996 as part of the Base Realignment and Closure Program, never to have another turnstile revolve or crane move on almost the entire yard (today, private contractors use some slips to strip down discarded ships for scrap metal).

Fast-forward to 2008: a portion of the former Mare Island ammunition depot re-opened as the Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve. The opening of this park-cum-preserve followed closely on the heels of a swift defeat of an industrial development proposal for the site. Historian Richard White has waxed romantic about the scrappy shoreline park:

*The preserve is so well intentioned, earnest, and cheerful that it’s hard not to like it. It values the California that we have, and the people who run it expect the best of the people who visit. They assume visitors will pay admission whether the gate is manned or not, and that they will, of course, pay for the water bottles placed in coolers along the trail. These are not people expecting to make money; these are people who see something in this torn-up place and value it.<sup>10</sup>*

The California State Lands Commission granted the lands of the ammunition depot at the end of the Navy’s lease to the city of Vallejo for its conversion into a rambling park, as White describes. Industrial reuse was not brought up in early post-military transition negotiations with the community, but city officials were tempted by the tax revenues that could be gained from less idyllic uses. Meanwhile, over the last few years, in order to comply with the Base Realignment and Closure Act, the Navy has contracted private companies that have been removing munitions and toxic substances; work that has been taking place all the way up to the time of this writing.

Prior to the 2008 renaissance of the ammunition depot, a partnership of Shell and Bechtel (the San Francisco-based infrastructure engineering firm) secretly pushed the Vallejo City Council to open negotiations to build a liquefied natural gas terminal and a 1,500 kilowatt power plant at the former depot.<sup>11</sup> The backroom meetings between the developers and city officials in the summer of 2001 soon became public knowledge. Meanwhile, the Chamber of Commerce and trade unions gave their blessings to industrial redevelopment. But an opposing coalition of homeowners and other Vallejoans rapidly formed under the umbrella of Vallejo for Community Planned Renewal.

The alliance of opponents emerged from the community channels already connected through the meetings of the Mare Island Restoration Advisory Board, an official body created for citizen participation in the reuse of the naval facility. Such boards take part in the oversight of military installation cleanups across the U.S. and its territories. The opposition defeated the natural gas project by forcing Vallejo’s mayor to examine the fire risks of other similar terminals across the country, citing the close proximity (less than a mile) between the tip of Mare Island

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<sup>9</sup> Keibel, *Behind the Barbed Wire*, 19–21.

<sup>10</sup> Richard White, “Deconstructing Mare Island: Reconnaissance in the Ruins,” *Boom: A Journal of California* 2, no. 2 (June 1, 2012): 68–69.

<sup>11</sup> Hilary Schaffer Boudet and Leonard Ortolano, “A Tale of Two Sitings: Contentious Politics in Liquefied Natural Gas Facility Siting in California,” *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 30, no. 1 (September 1, 2010): 5–21; Alan Doyle, “Bechtel Freezes \$1 Billion Vallejo LNG Project,” *San Francisco Business Times*, February 2, 2003, <http://www.bizjournals.com/eastbay/stories/2003/02/03/story1.html?page=all>; George Raine, “Shell Pulls Out of Mare Island Gas Project,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, January 17, 2003, <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Shell-pulls-out-of-Mare-Island-gas-project-2640854.php#src=fb>.



and the mainland. In the mean time, activists continued building support for overturning the city's underhanded negotiation agreement with the multi-national developers, while trying to recruit four city council-members to vote as a block against final approval. In the end, after reading the writing on the walls, Shell and Bechtel pulled out in early 2003 before the city could take the matter to a vote.<sup>12</sup> With the project defeated, the mayor had to sheepishly convene a citizen's taskforce to create a new plan for the ammunition depot.

Vallejo is "the nation's largest city to declare bankruptcy and a poster child for municipal calamity."<sup>13</sup> The city is not able to look after the park. Instead, it grants access to the community-constituted Shoreline Preserve. Volunteers open the chain-link gate to the site, mostly on weekends, and some times on weekdays or for special events. Myrna Hayes, who also served with the Mare Island Restoration Advisory Board and the citizen's taskforce on the regional plan, is the unofficial leader of a group of dedicated volunteers that sustain the Heritage Preserve. Progress continues on opening some parts of the south tip that continue to be too dangerous for public uses. As Richard White alludes to, the volunteers prune the total 215 acres, they keep hiking trails clear of brush, and they maintain informational signs posted. They also clean the portable toilet by the side of the entrance to the park, offer tours, host pumpkin carving for Halloween, stock provisions, organize fundraising cookouts, maintain a website and newsletter up to date, and keep the entire operation chugging along.

The park is an emerald in the rough landscape of the rusting shipyards and crumbling buildings of Mare Island. Few of the urbane residents of San Francisco and the East Bay realize that a short drive or ferry ride can get them to idyllic views of the San Francisco and San Pablo bays from the top of the two hundred foot hill on the southern tip of Mare Island inside the Preserve. Fewer tourists still know that they can wander the rambling grounds of a naval cemetery within this area, bike around, or climb over derelict bunkers without much other foot or vehicle traffic.

As an all-volunteer operation, the oldest ammunition magazine on the Pacific Coast retains an up-by-the-bootstrap aesthetic quality wholly different from National Park Service sites, having the stamp of a ruinous sublime that people have come to romanticize in paintings, novels, or films like Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*—the highest reference of post-military landscape aesthetics. A repurposed storage magazine running a string of lights from a diesel-powered generator serves as a visitors' center in which a maze of cardboard displays communicate the fragmented history of the depot. In one corner, visitors can help themselves to coffee or snacks. Donations are on an honor system. One volunteer, who otherwise reports that he does not have another place to call home, spends nights at the magazine to prevent the robbery of copper and other valuable metals.

## Remembering the Mutiny

Situated across the waterway that separates the former military zone from the mainland, the Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve is not far from the site of the 1944 Port Chicago mutiny, and yet it is a world away. Despite certain structural obstacles to visiting the site of the work strike, members of the Shoreline Preserve, along with guests, including Park Service

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<sup>12</sup> Boudet and Ortolano, "A Tale of Two Sitings: Contentious Politics in Liquefied Natural Gas Facility Siting in California."

<sup>13</sup> Carolyn Jones, "Vallejo Begins to Recover from Bankruptcy," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, March 4, 2012.

rangers, military buffs, union members, Port Chicago survivors, other veterans, and scholars such as myself, have all come to the Preserve in order to discuss the Port Chicago stevedores' strike on the anniversary of the event.

The first time I ever went to Mare Island was thanks to a daylong schedule of activities listed on the calendar of the San Francisco Labor Festival, which included an informal lecture on the Port Chicago saga that I had been investigating. This seemingly minor detail reveals a larger reality. On the one hand, the stevedores, whether living or deceased, still have a criminal status under the Navy. On the other hand, mainstream memories of the strike elide the labor sub-class status of the strikers. But at the Shoreline Preserve, the episode is memorialized as part of a history of Bay Area labor struggles that fill the Labor Festival calendar and sometimes at other events throughout the year. However, the exact spaces of the work strike are elusive.

To make matters more complicated for the future of Mare Island and public memories connected to it, especially the memory of the 1944 strike, the National Park Service rejected an application to assume some form of authority over the depot in 2011 and protect public grounds on the peninsula for posterity.<sup>14</sup>

In the interaction of these complex factors, the retelling of aspects about the Port Chicago story becomes difficult. The strike was a forceful, effective stand against the segregation of the Armed Forces. The stevedores played a significant role in the steps that led to integration, paving the way for the Civil Rights struggles of later decades. At the Memorial, the geographic location of the strike is absent from the permanent memorial communication furnishings, leaving these geographies uncharted at the putative hub of the story. The work strike is present at the Port Chicago Memorial site only as an oral tradition (at the moment of this writing), and at the same time, the memorial itself becomes a displacement—separated—from the actual site of the strike. Also, the strike is part and parcel of the documented reasons for the Park Service protection of the memorial at the site of the explosion, even though the explosion and the strike did not occur in the same place.<sup>15</sup> Underscoring the fog that can surround Port Chicago, I have heard junior volunteers for the National Park Service slip into describing the strike as taking place *at* the official memorial site.

At Mare Island, the labor resistance angle is more commonly invoked and visually conveyed—however informally—through makeshift displays and books located at the Heritage Preserve headquarters. But these displays are similarly disconnected by not affording an exact overlap with the physical space where the mutiny took place. In sum, the story of the Port Chicago stevedore strike jumps from one location to another, like a parade of orphaned facts, spilling off the tongues of different narrators, but often denied a clear visual presence, while being uprooted from the exact strike location. This condition is perhaps at the core of much historical and geographical disorientation about the events, something I have personally experienced when conducting research.

On one of my subsequent visits to Mare Island after the Labor Festival, as my interest in the specific landscape of this installation grew, I arrived with a flawed mental map of where to find the site of the Port Chicago strike. As I recall, during that early stage of my work, I knew that crews of sailors that survived the Port Chicago explosion were ordered to work at the ammunition depot and had staged their wildcat strike a mere steps outside their barracks.

I went on one of these field expeditions enticed by an opportunity to enter areas that technically still posed a risk to the public, which the Navy was working on to remove explosives

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Fimrite, "Vallejo's Mare Island Denied National Park Status," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, March 3, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> See – Whiteout: The Social Production of Port Chicago Memorials in this investigation.

and toxins within. There were some grumblings among the locals of how slowly the cleanup was going. Thanks to a Sierra Club volunteer and a civilian contractor of the Navy's, a group of us could walk abandoned parts of the base that were normally closed. We would be able to see the first buildings placed for the ammunition depot before the Civil War. I went with the curiosity and hopes that the site offered clues to my project that, perhaps, I had not yet pondered. Among other items on a mental checklist, I had a notion in my head that I might get a glimpse of the docks where a barge was moored for the strikers to be incarcerated after they struck.

I quizzed one of the members of the Shoreline Preserve. He told me that he did not know where that barge had been moored, but that Hayes (of the advisory board) might know. I set aside further questions. My attention shifted to other matters I was more interested in at the time, such as imagining how ships would have plied the waters of the Carquinez Strait, just off of Mare Island, during the Vietnam War. Most of the bombs the Navy dropped on Vietnam came out of the Port Chicago magazine, although the name "Port Chicago" was by then dropped from the official name of the base. A smaller portion of the weapons also came, I was told, from the depot we were standing on. Standing at a pier off the coast of the island, I could squint and imagine anti-war protesters sailing the waters in front of me during the blockades of the 1960s. Pondering these images of Mare Island's working landscape—from early days supplying ships against Native American insurgency to the recent times of toxic work as a Cold War nuclear submarine manufacturing line—I became more drawn into the many stories of the site. I brought friends on several visits, exploring bunkers and hiking trails.

On another visit, I brought up the work strike question again, sitting on the ledge of an abandoned storage magazine on the ammunition depot with Hayes, the most seasoned of all the activists involved in the efforts to reclaim Mare Island. For whatever reason, I had not paid enough attention to a particular detail in my early readings. Her response caught me by surprise. Ryder Street, as any astute reader of Port Chicago history knows, is located on the other side of the channel from where we were sitting. It immediately struck me that, while white Navy officers lived in well-tended neoclassical mansions on the Mare Island base, they had the channel as a useful line of apartheid—a moat to keep the Black sailors as far as possible.

### **Situating the Work Strike in Vallejo**

Further adding to my productive disorientation while conducting research, the work strike is often called by different names. Some articles and media refer to it as the Mare Island Mutiny or the Mare Island Court Martial, while others have called it the Port Chicago Mutiny, as Robert Allen does. And these names, albeit perfectly useful as a common argot, are not entirely accurate in terms of the location. The court martial trial took place on Treasure Island. The original insurrection, if based purely on geography, should technically be called something like "the Vallejo Mutiny" or the "Ryder Street Mutiny."

Furthermore, much like the term "riot," the name "mutiny" is problematic, although generally accepted by advocates for the exoneration of the sailors. The so-called mutiny, a loaded term that emerges out of the Navy legal code, would have been called a "wildcat strike" in the manufacturing spaces of the time. African Americans were disproportionately excluded from stable manufacturing jobs and had few avenues to collectively demand their rights in either the private or military sectors. A telling detail worth mentioning is how one can consult the seminal work on wildcat strikes during the war period, George Lipsitz's *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and*

*Culture in the 1940s*, and not find a reference to the Port Chicago strike.<sup>16</sup> While the case of the Port Chicago “mutineers” is perhaps the most famous from the time, it might take an entire book, yet unwritten, to recount the lost history of work stoppages by African Americans in the military during the period.

*Mutiny* was also the name of a 1999 made-for-television movie adaptation based on aspects of the Port Chicago story.<sup>17</sup> The two-hour program (including commercials) re-enacted and dramatized the story in three parts. The beginning covers the naval training station at Great Lakes, Illinois where Port Chicago sailors went through boot camp under the command of bigoted drill sergeants. Then, work scenes of Port Chicago follow, climaxing with the explosion, as the second act. The movie’s third act closes with the work strike, the mutiny trial, and the guilty verdicts.

The first act delicately touches on officers’ racism and the unfair distribution of duty assignments. In the second act, scenes of work at the Port Chicago base highlight the lack of training the sailors received in explosives-handling, the unsafe working conditions, and the punishing labor, as well as depicting moments of leisure that present the sailors as average-Joe American servicemen. The trial portion focuses on the unreliable defense provided by the Navy for the sailors, plus the structural racism that secured a speedy verdict with little deliberation.

The movie stresses the competitive and reckless nature of shiploading at the discretion of white officers who would bet on the loading intervals of work units. The overall storyline is familiar to anyone who has read about the strike or perhaps has looked at some of the National Park Service brochures at the Port Chicago Memorial, for instance. At the heart, the film portrays the Port Chicago strike as a sensible reaction to a broken system.

Similar representations of the Port Chicago sailors’ strike duplicate the same isolation of the events that led up to the strike and followed it. Even in works of non-fiction, these dramatizations offer a requisite, sometimes all-too-quick, nod to the larger picture of Jim Crow and racism in the military. They then go onto a familiar point of convergence. They adjudicate sailor frustration to one miscalculation by the Navy.<sup>18</sup>

As Robert Allen says: “Several men recalled the denial of survivors’ leaves as a particular source of dissatisfaction and anger.”<sup>19</sup> One anonymous interviewee that Allen spoke with summarized the attitude: “(T)hey were letting them white boys go home for thirty-day leaves and we wasn’t getting nothing.”<sup>20</sup> As another sailor told *This American Life*, the beloved National Public Radio documentary program: “We felt like just we were getting a raw deal because we were the ones that were doing the dirty work. We were the ones that were fooling with the ammunition. So why shouldn’t we have a leave of absence to get away to get your nerves settled. But that didn’t happen.”<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, another survivor, Robert Routh, noted that they had to collect body parts of their dead brethren, but in their grief, were treated differently from their white counterparts:

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<sup>16</sup> George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Hooks, *Mutiny* (NBC Studios Inc., 1999).

<sup>18</sup> See also – “It was a Bloody Mess:” Vallejo’s 1942 Race Revolts and the Port Chicago Sailors’ Strike.

<sup>19</sup> Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of The Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History*, 2006, 76.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> “Port Chicago Worker 3” quoted in “The Job That Takes Over Your Life,” *This American Life* (PRI, September 27, 1996), <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/37/The-Job-That-Takes-Over-Your-Life>.

*To give you an example, no bereavement leave was given to the enlisted personnel and yet this was the same personnel that had to pull decapitated bodies from the bay. As you know we've got 320 graves and I doubt whether any of those caskets went into those graves with a full body in there.*<sup>22</sup>

And as Percy Robinson, one of the sailors who were discharged for his role in the stoppage, told the Los Angeles Times: "After you were wounded, you were supposed to go home for leave. After we were wounded, they made us go back to work. That's why I struck."<sup>23</sup>

African American survivors of the explosion, as extensively documented, were taken to several places. Some ended up at military hospitals, while two divisions found themselves at the Ryder barracks on the waterfront. Interpreting—correctly—that an order to march towards the pier outside their barracks was a ticket to load ammunition onto a newly moored ship on the ammunition depot, the sailors stood dead in their tracks, disobeying a white officer. It was not the first time that sailors at either shipyard had staged a work stoppage, but this time was different. This was after the blast. The Navy's usual admonishments did not break down the sailors, who had seen first-hand what the carelessness of the shipyards could lead to.

Joe Small, the accused ringleader, later in his life recalled what happened in front of the Ryder Street barracks on the Vallejo shoreline when the sailors refused to go back to work loading bombs. Three divisions were given the order to march towards the docks to take a ferry across the Napa River. They knew that the boat only made one stop: the ammunition depot on Mare Island, thus spurring the work stoppage:

*At the end of the street was a podium. Right was toward the parade grounds, left was toward the docks. When the lieutenant said, 'Column left!' everybody stopped dead in his tracks. He called me up front. He said, 'Small, are you going to work?' I said, 'No sir.' When I said 'No sir,' somebody in the ranks behind me said, 'If Small doesn't go, we're not going.'*<sup>24</sup>

The Navy punished the famous Port Chicago Fifty of the larger group of striking sailors with a more serious charge of mutiny, levied at the Treasure Island trial staged for media consumption. The Navy opened the court to reporters as a gesture of feigned transparency that went on to backfire when some people, including Eleanor Roosevelt, decried the proceeding as biased. It remains the largest Navy court-martial in history, a verdict that the Navy has upheld well into the present day, despite legal appeals as recently as 1992, and overwhelming evidence that the proceedings were vindictive, and marred by segregation.<sup>25</sup> One of the fifty, Freddie Meeks, received a presidential pardon in 1999. Jack Crittenden, another survivor who was located, declined to pursue the pardon, saying, "If a pardon means freedom from punishment, I've already served my time and been punished."<sup>26</sup>

After the court-martial in 1944, the NAACP's legal counsel, Thurgood Marshall, described the trial as "one of the worst 'frame-ups' we have come across in a long time. It was deliberately planned and staged by certain officers to discredit Negro seamen."<sup>27</sup> And by "certain officers," Marshall likely was referring to, among others, the chief naval prosecutor, James F.

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<sup>22</sup> Routh Jr., *An Oral History of Port Chicago*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in John Boudreau, "Breaking the Silence."

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Wollenberg, "Blacks Vs. Navy Blue: The Mare Island Mutiny Court Martial."

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Carl Nolte, "Clinton Pardons Wartime 'Mutineer'," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, December 24, 1999.

<sup>27</sup> Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of The Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History*, 2006, 130.

Coakley, who later became Alameda County's infamous District Attorney, best known for the prosecution of the Black Panthers in Oakland.

These pieces that came after the blast—the work stoppage, the Navy court-martial, and the President's pardon—are elements of the Port Chicago story that remain absent from much of the visual landscape that accompanies retellings of the mutiny story. Speakers at the anniversary of the explosion frequently cite the strike as a sign of the conditions during the times. The fact that the wildcat strike started a chain of events that first led to the Navy's grudging integration, mostly out of fears of further African American activism, and then led to President Harry S. Truman's executive order that integrated all branches of the Armed Forces, casts an additional pall of doubt on the fairness of the trial.

### **Mare Island as Site for Radical Remembrance**

White veterans and like-minded individuals often times express a common sentiment about the wildcat strike that can be summed up in this casual statement from an oral history:

*I remember reading a lot about it because they did put some of those people, what they called—they said they were mutinous, and so on. And they wouldn't load the ship. I found that quite strange to think about it, because they wouldn't go back to load up the ship, yet they were putting the shells on us and we were going into the war zone! I mean how much more can you be subjected to dangers than we were?*<sup>28</sup>

But as one unidentified sailor responded to similar arguments used by the Navy in order to persuade the resisting men to relent from their strike in the summer of 1944: "In the foxholes, a man has a chance to fight back!"<sup>29</sup>

The points of view above capture the different positions in the ongoing debate over how to remember the strike—for some, an act of cowardice; for others, of necessity; and for some, of resistance. But these opposites can nevertheless miss the Navy's hidden hand that shapes memory. The Navy's intransigent position on the trial is difficult to make sense of in light of the overturning of similar racist court-martials and dishonorable discharges from the same era, some from the very same Mare Island command. This position overlays the memorial with a space sanitized for paying sentimental tribute. Navy influence upon the narrative blunts subversive forms of retelling the Port Chicago story.

Alternate or radical ways of remembering the strike exist, albeit in a less recognized geographical tapestry of erasures in the landscapes, and can be found in these other "else spaces." Less formal tours given at the Mare Island Shoreline Preserve and the annual anniversary event marking the strike bring a modicum of attention to these otherwise invisible geographies.<sup>30</sup>

These events, although less well known than ceremonies at the official memorial, draw attention to the mutually-reinforcing historical dimensions of labor and race exploitation that

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<sup>28</sup> Alfred Granzella, Rosie the Riveter World War II American Home Front Oral History Project, interview by Nadine Wilmot, 2006, 19, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990*, 266.

<sup>30</sup> For an example, view the testimonial given by survivor Rutherford B. Hyde at Mare Island. Rutherford B. Hyde, *Port Chicago Mutiny – 2009 Anniversary*, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmJBKfODtJg>.

propelled the work stoppage. What is often revealed at the memorial or in many other forms of media, in contrast, tends to stick with a more narrow focus on segregation during the war.

Meanwhile, the site where the strike took place has been completely transformed. For practically all intents and purposes, it is unusable for public commemoration. A municipal facility that is off-limits occupies the footprint, making it a perplexing anti-memorial, marked primordially by an urban scotoma.

### **The Anti-Memorial on Ryder Street**

As I persisted with my visits to Mare Island, while completing other portions of this study, I decided to drive over to Ryder Street in Vallejo to see what I could find. The landscape posed some vexing clues. Ryder Street ends at a secured gate. On the right hand side, as one faces the river and Mare Island in the distance, are the offices of the Vallejo Water Sanitation District. Beyond the gate is an ample, flat work yard. Odd, windowless structures dot the flatness. I could hear the voices of a couple of workers somewhere beyond the fence. No sign of any old military barracks.

Turning around, I could see that a few hundred feet from the low-slung building of the sanitation district, on the other side of the perpendicular roadway (Sonoma Boulevard) is an antiquated structure, although newly painted, with a neatly pruned outdoor area. I could stand just outside of the locked parking area that had a bare flagpole.

For a moment, I was startled. I thought to myself that these must be *the* barracks—the Ryder barracks I had read about. Perhaps I was standing on the patch of ground where the sailors struck. On the side facing Sonoma Boulevard, modern lettering spelled out “Iglesia Ni Cristo.” An old barracks building was clearly being reused for a Christian Filipino congregation. A card on the mailbox had a phone number, but nobody answered my calls. I rang and rang doorbells, but no one answered. A bit dejected, I left after taking several photos.

But even though the church occupies what was once housing built for the war, I was wrong to assume that those were the Ryder Street barracks of the mutiny scene in the documentation of Port Chicago. As a historian at the Vallejo Naval Museum and Historical Society informed me, the building in question was not as close to the ferry dock as we read about in Robert Allen’s work.

Officers commissioned barracks for the African American sailors, who were hastily and grudgingly accepted into the war effort in 1942, on a sliver of land as far away as they could keep them. The location was between the water and a rail spur, two clear boundaries that apparently would have kept Black sailors apart both from the naval officers and the white workers presumably housed where the church sits in the present day. Moreover, a glance at Sanborn fire insurance maps from the era reveals several military buildings on the waterfront side of the disappeared tracks where the thoroughfare now runs. Altogether, all these details added up to something that was not exactly the outcome I was anticipating. The site of the Port Chicago sailors’ strike had been swept away and was replaced by a sewage treatment plant.

From some vantage points on Mare Island, it is possible to locate the two large tank structures on the far shore of Vallejo, across the river. These tanks, at 450 Ryder Street, belong to the city of Vallejo’s Sanitation and Flood Control District. In other words, the exact location where the sailor’s strike took place was buried under the undignified structures of wastewaters. Originally built in 1959, and remodeled twice in the subsequent decades, the sewage treatment plant takes over the entire area where the sailors refused the order to turn and march towards the

ferry waiting to take them to Mare Island.

The clearing of the site of the work strike doubtfully was a singular, malicious act. This erasure, instead, is a hint of a larger pattern. Together with the *tabula rasa* demolition of parts of downtown Vallejo, the wholesale transformation of these landscapes shows the slow accretion of a structural exclusion from space, memory, and territory. These accumulated exclusions are a testament to the luxury of creating landmarks without a fear of public reprisals, as would have been the case for the Port Chicago survivors. But even if these are careless erasures, the loss is highly significant. Mare Island and the greater urban context of Vallejo outside the boundaries of the base are the original U.S. Navy footprint on the Pacific Coast—an early test bed for the imposition of racial ideologies that one can hardly get a clear sense of in the current state.



*Image 4: The end of Ryder Street, Vallejo – site of the Port Chicago sailors' strike against segregation. (Photo by author).*

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explored a geographical confusion. In other words, retracing some of my own wandering footsteps on the shores of Vallejo and Mare Island, the Port Chicago story is often approximated through an unexamined disorientation caused by the haphazard caretaking of the city and its history. However, the sites of the Vallejo riots and the Port Chicago strike can be



reclaimed, in all of their banality—an anodyne pedestrian plaza and a sewage treatment plant—to underscore the persistent exclusions from memory endured by African Americans. These sites expose, in fact, the continued surfeit of Black memory from the memory boom of the last two decades.

At the same time, the Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve deserves further attention. The site reveals an unexpected example of community organizing and resilience to overcome the influence of industrial manipulation in city chambers of power. Activists created a hybrid park that integrates open space conservation with radical forms of remembering. The memories of radical action are harder to identify under the military’s stern gaze at the official Port Chicago Memorial. The Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve is the closest devoted space one can get to the location of the 1944 stevedore strike, a place where the event is openly remembered and discussed. Therefore, the continuing struggle to make a case for an exoneration of the “mutinous” stevedores gains strength and continuation here.

## **Conclusion – An Archipelago of Memory**

Put simply, this study charted an archipelago of memory sites related to the World War II past in the San Francisco Bay Area. In other words, the spatial transmission of the Port Chicago disaster’s narratives to the public relies upon a mnemonic infrastructure of discontinuous sites. Most people never visit the archipelago as a whole. In a way, the physical sites of this archipelago are not distant from each other. But in some places, it is also intangible and elusive—parts of the archipelago are gone and other parts are prohibited. From these spaces, the public usually takes away a version of the story based on singular exposures that excise the radical dimensions of a struggle for rights that congealed after the 1944 explosion, but actually started before that fateful day.

In fact, a depoliticized remembrance of Port Chicago gathers strength from a geographical imagination that keeps separate that which should be taken as a whole. This collection of geographically isolated sites, when studied together, as has been done in this project, reveals an unresolved past that most often goes by without attention to the continuing ways in which some people are fighting to resolve it.

The Port Chicago archipelago of memory is made up of sites connected by human trajectories—a history these have in common that has been excavated through this investigation. The underlying fabric of this archipelago reveals systemic oppression against African Americans on the Bay Area’s World War II home front, leaving an ignored residue into the present. The sites of this so-called archipelago should—indeed, need—to be taken together in order to comprehend the ongoing struggles by groups to attain full equality, justice, and visibility in public spaces, almost seventy years after the end of the war. In addition, as a whole, the archipelago of Port Chicago memories reveals the fallacies of proclaiming the arrival of a “post-racial” era in which oppression is over. It also calls into question the purported agency that architecture and places can have by themselves in providing an abstract “space of appearance,” in the words of Hannah Arendt.

Meanwhile, the persistent amnesia—memorycide, even—that takes place at the sites of this archipelago belies a hidden architecture of power. In the spaces of this archipelago, military

authority plays a winning hand. The study of this architecture of power is an important rejoinder to the canon of architectural theory that most often ignores, at its peril, the spatiality of race and militarization. This project has been an opening into such questions, but requires further work from scholars.

To be sure, the U.S. military has made great advances in terms of diversifying their institution and has gone to great lengths to exemplify best practices of accomplishing integration—all of which greatly contrasts with their dismal record during the 1940s. However, the findings of this study can be summarized in two main points that complicate the accepted wisdom of upholding a post-racial period in American history.

First, the U.S. military has embraced the cause of Port Chicago, leveraging an annual event of paying posthumous honor to those killed by the Port Chicago explosion, a remembrance filled with pomposity and the highest military ceremoniousness at the federal park. Nevertheless, the practice of rendering a tribute to the dead is not new. It was not neglected in 1944, right after the incident, despite the institutionalized racism of the time. Yet memory becomes an emblem of progress for the military today. In such a way, the military is able to make invisible the continuing struggle for lost benefits and opportunities, and for overturning the Jim Crow trial against Port Chicago's survivors. The spatial practices of honoring deceased individuals blur the fact that a radical resistance was necessary in order to integrate the institution itself and change the segregationist rules of the time. The strike serves as one of the major reasons for the historical preservation of the explosion site, if not the only reason for federal protection.

Second, the symbolic capital that the military accrues from the memorialization of Port Chicago hints at a present contradiction. When one looks, for instance, at the rise of Islamophobia in the United States, not to mention the recent criminalization of dissidents within the military, there are persistent echoes of Port Chicago—from the imbrication of race with warfare to the silencing of voices that call for change inside the military. In addition, the symbolism of the memorial is sometimes perceived by locals to overshadow the persistent suffering of the Port Chicago community, a town that lost a fight against the expansion of militarization (and continues to suffer the health effects of military pollution in the area). These factors together raise questions about the military triumphalism present at the memorial site. The experiences of survivors and townspeople are difficult to discern if one assumes a mono-dimensional view of the monumental landscape that only sets sights on hagiographic sites.

In addition to these overarching findings, my project adds new chapters to the study of the San Francisco Bay Area geography and World War II history. This examination tied together the Port Chicago personnel strike, the forgotten Vallejo riots of 1942, and the case of Thomas Flanagan (an African American sailor who was threatened with a mutiny charge by the Twelfth Naval District for demanding an investigation into the shootings of African Americans by military personnel). The work on these riots was inspired by the previous research of Bay Area artist Frank Rowe into the shootings of unarmed Black sailors during the nighttime melee and, later, the Port Chicago strike. Rowe's artistic work is upheld in this investigation as an alternate practice of memory that challenges dominant narratives of Port Chicago. Moreover, the community efforts of Vallejo residents and other locals at Mare Island recover insurgent strands of Port Chicago stories that are commonly swept aside from both the official memorial and the exact site of the work strike.

Nevertheless, the research herein can still benefit from further expansion in several ways. The site of the Navy court martial trial on Yerba Buena Island, although obviously a part of this Port Chicago archipelago I discuss, awaits a closer look. A deeper exploration of the trial

geography could expose new ways of understanding the experience that the defendants went through. According to all expert accounts and reports I have reviewed, the buildings where the trial proceedings took place have been demolished, which only underscores the argument of an amnesia trailing the memory of Port Chicago—but I have yet to verify this. Nonetheless, one way or another, historical research could construct a radical memory of Yerba Buena Island. For example, where would the defendants been imprisoned while on trial? What were the conditions like for them? How were they treated? And since the trial was open to the public, what was their contact with the outside world like? Any previously undisclosed evidence of hardship needs to be brought to bear on the Navy's insistence of upholding the mutiny convictions. Furthermore, one might ponder how this knowledge could be made relevant in the future urban development plans for Yerba Buena and Treasure Island.

During the course of this investigation, I discovered that it was necessary to complicate the given geography of the Port Chicago story. I studied different groups of people that lay claim to spaces and memories of Port Chicago, often at the expense of intertwining their causes. Memory practices need not abandon, nor should they, the site of the explosion itself. But a yet unfolding story that is inclusive of civil, spatial, and labor rights is amplified by moving beyond the space of designated memory.

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