



Completing the Odyssey: Exploring the Homecoming Journeys of Black and Latino Student Veterans

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ABSTRACT

Transitioning from military service to civilian life presents a range of interwoven challenges for veterans, especially for Black and Latino student veterans whose experiences are profoundly shaped by the convergence of their military backgrounds with the dynamics of race and cultural identity. This manuscript explores the academic journeys of Black and Latino veterans, with special emphasis on war and homecoming, through evocative engagements with creative storytelling, poetry, and visual art within a transformative learning framework. The thematic findings—categorized as insider-outsider dynamics, a call for critical conversations, bridge-building efforts, and collective support akin to a Hoplite Phalanx—underscore the importance of intercultural competency in addressing the specific needs of student veterans of color. The discussion calls for more inclusive higher education environments that promote critical dialogue to deepen the understanding of veteran identities.

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Transitioning from military service to civilian life presents a range of interwoven challenges for veterans, especially for Black and Latino student veterans whose experiences are profoundly shaped by the convergence of their military backgrounds with the dynamics of race and cultural identity (Castro & Kintzle, 2014; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Flowers & Banda, 2015). This manuscript contributes to the growing body of research that explores the academic journeys of Black and Latino veterans, focusing on how our participants navigate higher education amidst the interplay of their identities and experiences (Arminio et al., 2015; Edwards et al., 2022).

While emerging research has enhanced our general understanding of student veterans' experiences, there remains a significant gap in recognizing how the intersection of race and ethnicity within the transitional processes from military service significantly influences the educational paths of Black and Latino veterans (Ghosh et al., 2020; Hunt et al., 2022). Historically, the veteran experience has been simplified into a monolithic narrative, overlooking the diverse realities that arise from the intersection of race, ethnicity, and military service (Vaccaro, 2015). Additionally, the portrayal of veteran identity is often dominated by the trope of "White American masculinity" (Najmi, 2011, p. 57), which fails to capture the full spectrum of experiences within the veteran community.

This study delves into the experiences of Black and Latino student veterans through evocative engagements with creative narrative, poetry, and visual art within a transformative learning framework that resists common oversimplifications and enhances our understanding of the diverse needs of veterans. Special attention is given to their personal reflections on war, homecoming, and higher education. The following research questions guided our exploration:

1. What are the lived experiences of Black and Latino student veterans as they transition from military service to civilians attending higher education?
2. How do Black and Latino student veterans perceive, navigate, and communicate civilian life's cultural and institutional landscapes, including higher education?
3. What challenges and opportunities do Black and Latino student veterans encounter throughout their odyssey from soldier to (civilian) student, and how do they respond to them?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the transition from military service to civilian life, particularly for Black and Latino veterans, requires an

examination of how military identity can often overshadow individual and cultural identities. During a 2008 reading in Fresno, California, war poet Brian Turner reflected on this phenomenon, noting that Iraqi civilians perceived him not as an individual but as "an armed and uniformed American" (Najmi, 2011, p. 56). His experience illustrates how the uniform, a symbol of military identity, can eclipse the diverse identities that soldiers bring with them. Military conditioning has, after all, refined itself for centuries (Grossman, 1995/2009) with the expressed goal of creating a unified force through shared socialization (Cooper et al., 2018). This bonding is not merely a matter of camaraderie but a necessary step to overcome the inherent human resistance to intraspecies violence, a necessity in security competition (Mearsheimer, 2014). Psychologists refer to this as a "diffusion of responsibility" (Grossman, 1995/2009, p. 152), where the group's collective identity diminishes individual accountability in acts of war. The resulting bonds between soldiers are reportedly closer than matrimonial relationships (Grossman, 1995/2009) and reflected on as 'family' among diverse veteran identities (Young et al., 2022, p. 178). These deep connections highlight how military experiences shape individuals profoundly, instilling a sense of unity and shared purpose that transcends typical social bonds. The rigorous training, shared challenges, and collective missions foster an environment where soldiers develop a unique camaraderie and trust, profoundly impacting their identities and worldviews.

Military bonds and conditioning extend far beyond active service, influencing veterans long after they leave the military (Bulmer & Eichler, 2017). As civilians, former service members often embody and enact aspects of military culture—a phenomenon researchers Cooper et al. (2018) and Young et al. (2022) describe as a 'military habitus.' This habitus encompasses "unconscious thoughts and behaviors acquired through military training and service" (Young et al., 2022, p. 178) that persist in civilian life. This ingrained military mindset often clashes with systems primarily designed for non-military-affiliated individuals, such as higher education (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017), where veterans may find it difficult to relate to the experiences and perspectives of their non-military peers and instructors.

Universities have recognized these challenges by introducing intercultural training programs, such as 'The Green Zone Initiative' (Kastle et al., 2019). Although the content of these programs varies, they share a common goal—to educate peers, staff, and professors on "the needs of student veterans and the military-connected community" (Kastle et al., 2019, p. 1). Despite these efforts, significant social disconnects persist in the integration of student veterans (Ghosh et al., 2020). Non-military-affiliated peers may appreciate veterans, but "the truth is

most ... have a poor understanding of the lives of service members” (Schiaivone & Gentry, 2014, p. 36). This lack of understanding is associated with a reduced ‘sense of belonging’ among student veterans on campus (McAndrew et al., 2019), which can negatively impact academic success and persistence (Morris, 2023).

The disconnect between military and non-military-affiliated individuals on college campuses (McAndrew et al., 2019) and in broader civilian society (Young et al., 2022) underscores the persistence of a strong military habitus. Historically, military habitus conditioning has fostered deep camaraderie (Elder & Clipp, 1988), but it is essential to recognize that it did not emerge from blending diverse cultures into a unified force. Instead, Western military culture developed within a Eurocentric colonial framework and expanded through a slave-based economy. As a result, the military habitus embodies a *coincidentia oppositorum*, characterized by both profound unity and support and a legacy of domination and division.

Foucault’s reversal of Clausewitz’s (1989) maxim asserts that “politics is the continuation of war by other means” (Foucault et al., 1997/2003, p. 15) and highlights how power imbalances established through conflict persist through political structures. Wooster’s (2021) book on the U.S. Army’s foundational role in shaping American society confirms the Foucauldian assertion that armies shape policy, serving as the “tangible manifestation of the will of ... society” (p. xi–xii). Early American colonial will, driven by the desire for security dominance, relied on militarized territorial expansion underpinned by racial superiority. This ideology not only justified violent actions against people of color but also perpetuated segregation within the military, treating servicemembers of color as second-class soldiers—a status that persisted into their lives as veterans (Dilbert, 2023; Wooster, 2021).

Despite promises of post-service social mobility, racism in America has historically blocked veterans of color from accessing their earned benefits (Boyd, 2021). For example, the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly known as the GI Bill) was ineffective for veterans of color due to racial disparities in segregated public school infrastructure, preventing GIs of color from utilizing their education benefits (Jolly, 2013). This history speaks to the longstanding issue of higher education not only preferentially treating non-military-affiliated individuals but, specifically, White men (Thelin, 2019). Boyd (2022) notes that the resulting monolithic White education culture has “limited the space” (p. 13) for other identities to thrive outside those of “a white, able-bodied, cis-gendered, heterosexual, English-speaking American male” (p. 14). Thus, despite policies like Brown v. Board of Education (1954) and the Higher Education Act (1965, 2008), which

aimed to reduce racial disadvantages, “cultural alienation and racism on college campuses” (Hunt et al., 2022, p. 769) persists. The resulting cultural incongruence for students of color has been shown to negatively impact academic outcomes and persistence, similar to student veterans writ large (McAndrew et al., 2019).

Therefore, the gap in literature reveals itself as a compound issue—student veterans of color face an academic structure designed primarily for non-military-affiliated individuals (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017), which has historically privileged a White male identity (Thelin, 2019). With the projected increase in student veterans of color from 21% to 34% by 2027 (Hunt et al., 2022), it becomes increasingly urgent to move beyond uniform assumptions about student needs that pressure those outside the dominant cultural framework to conform (Boyd, 2022). Instead, research must deliberately create space for the diverse identities that characterize student veterans. Exploring these issues calls for recognizing the dynamic interplay of unity and diversity within military and civilian contexts. Art provides a valuable tool for exploring this *coincidentia oppositorum*, allowing for a deeper understanding of how these intersecting identities shape the veteran experience.

ARTS-BASED TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

Arts-based Transformative Learning Theory (ABTL) provides a framework for selecting methods and analyses that value rational and extrarational knowledge. This approach is useful for unpacking the contradictions of a community that is “similar, but at the same time, different” (Young et al., 2022, p. 176), i.e., how a community can be simultaneously bound together and yet separated by social conditioning. Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) posits that social conditioning shapes knowledge, i.e., points of view accumulated from social experiences become habits of mind that act as lenses through which we view the world (Mezirow, 1994). Mezirow (1994), the originator of TLT, recognized the potential for these mental habits to become rigid, thereby restricting adult cognitive development, emphasizing that new viewpoints must emerge to disrupt existing rigid thought patterns before intellectual growth can occur (Kokkos, 2022).

Initially, TLT addressed disruptions through rational and cognitive approaches (Blackburn Miller, 2020). However, a growing body of research has shown that art can be an effective catalyst for disrupting habits of mind, as it “supports dialogue, encourages critical reflection, nurtures authentic relationships, and fosters creative and expressive ways of knowing and being” (Mantas & Schwind, 2014, p. 75). The following discussion program, Touchstones,

utilizes creative narrative, poetry, and visual art to approach and explore the inherent contradictions that veterans experience, fostering critical and disruptive conversations about the tensions between unity and separation, as well as belonging and alienation.

Touchstones: Art-Based Praxis

The Touchstones discussion program, *Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home* (CTO) (Zeiderman & Takacs, 2020), was created in 2017 and funded by a National Endowment for the Humanities grant. Its primary goal is to empower individual voices by cultivating critical reflection and active listening among veterans while examining themes related to military service, integration, belonging, and identity formation. The discussions incorporate a variety of texts and artworks within the Arts-Based Transformative Learning paradigm, with the primary text being Homer's *The Odyssey*. Jim Garrison (1997) underscores the concept that "Poetry, in the classical Greek sense of poesis, or calling into existence, is about constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing the world (p. 59)." *The Odyssey*, therefore, is poetry uniquely suited to serve as a touchstone for veteran groups' critical reflection on their transition from soldiers to student-civilians—the construction and deconstruction of their military identity and the cultural differences they encounter on their journey home (Homerus, 8th century B.C.E./2018).

METHOD

Qualitative research is essential for gaining a nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences of specific populations, such as Black and Latino student veterans, who often face significant challenges in higher education due to systemic racial disparities in wealth, community safety, and inequitable discipline and funding in the K-12 education system (Mason, 1998; Sáenz et al., 2018). This approach is particularly effective in capturing rich, complex narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018) through evocative engagements with creative storytelling, poetry, and visual art within a transformative learning framework. Utilizing qualitative methods allowed the researchers to delve deeply into the personal and emotional aspects of Black and Latino student veterans' experiences, providing a more comprehensive and empathetic understanding of their journeys and the unique obstacles they face. Thus, the study employed intentional sampling to recruit 4–6 Black and Latino student veterans from a public research university in the southern United States. The primary researcher, who was actively involved in military-affiliated organizations and research at the university, recruited

participants directly from this student veteran network. The selection criteria required participants to identify as Black or Latino, male, and have served in the military. Four participants who met these criteria were contacted and agreed to participate; recruitment concluded once the minimum number was reached.

The study included four cis-gendered male veterans, aged 30 to 50, from diverse backgrounds. Three served in the Army, one in the Marine Corps. Ethnically, participants were Black/African American, Latino/Hispanic American, and mixed race. Their ranks were Sergeant, Specialist, and Captain, with three deployed and all having served on active duty.

Four focus group discussions were held via Zoom, utilizing texts and artworks—primarily Homer's *The Odyssey*—as crucial reference points to guide reflective dialogue and deepen the discussion through thematic and symbolic perspectives. Participants formulated critical questions, reflected on them, and concluded each session with reflections on their overall discussion experience. The focus groups were open-ended but loosely structured around four units: (1) forming a discussion group, (2) implications of service and war, (3) returning to a place, and (4) creating home.

We used Zoom's recording and transcription software to document the discussions. The dataset was stored and processed using the knowledge management software Obsidian. This software was chosen for its end-to-end encrypted cloud data storage and multifaceted, flexible analysis tools, facilitating a thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure. During the familiarization phase, the primary researcher immersed himself in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and listening to the recordings multiple times while cleaning the transcripts. Initial codes were generated as 'backlinks,' embedded in the transcript, allowing immediate reference by clicking the 'backlink.' The canvas feature of Obsidian was then used to place all the codes onto a visual data map for collating into potential themes.

Using the visual data map, the primary researcher collated groups of codes into themes. This inductive process applied to all 208 codes, producing themes directly tied to the data. After processing all the data, four themes were identified as most related to the research questions: 1) insiders and outsiders, 2) calling for critical conversations, 3) bridge building, and 4) Hoplite Phalanx.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

While we aimed to move beyond monolithic views of the veteran experience, the Touchstones Discussion units had limitations in exploring racialized identities. As study

participant Rafael noted, “These articles and images really honed us into our veteran identities.” Despite this, the program’s goal to empower participant voices led to the emergence of racialized and individualized experiences within broader generalizations of the veteran experience. Participants expressed feelings of racialized betrayal from friends who saw joining the military as supporting a racially oppressive force and reconciled their pride in serving their country as men of color with the military’s history of racism. Thus, the study’s strength lies in highlighting the diverse experiences of Black and Latino student veterans by continually grounding our findings in participants’ own words (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therein, we found an emphasis on the need for greater intercultural competency in higher education to address unique needs beyond simplistic stereotypes (Ghosh et al., 2020).

FINDINGS

The findings below are based on participant responses (pseudonyms used throughout) to the texts and visual art included in the program. Specific sessions are mentioned in relation to the emergent themes rather than in complete or chronological order.

INSIDER-OUTSIDER

A section from Clausewitz’s *On War* was the initial art-based touchstone used to evoke critical reflection, particularly around themes of uncertainty and change. The questions that arose primarily addressed disparities between civilian work environments and the military, leaving veterans feeling like ‘outsiders.’

When transitioning from a military workplace to a higher education setting, Marcus observed that “in higher education, nothing happens quick,” whereas in the military, “It’s gotta be done like before you go home.” Elijah, building on this sentiment, asked, “How can military strategy that we learned be adapted to changing circumstances since nothing we learned stayed the same since moving to civilian life?” The following discussion highlighted a crucial issue—these challenges were not due to deficiencies in veterans’ skills but rather to a lack of organizational intercultural competency in recognizing the relevance of military-acquired skills in civilian contexts. Elijah described the personal impact of this cultural incompetency, stating,

“Whenever I attempted to either apply any military strategy to solve any issues in the workplace, it has been met with some form of resistance, and then from there it leads to me just question[ing] whether or not ... I have a place here.”

The shared experiences of Marcus and Elijah highlight a critical gap in organizational intercultural competency, where the failure to recognize and adapt to veterans’ unique strengths not only hinders their integration but also reinforces feelings of exclusion and uncertainty.

In session two, arts-based prompts included Brian Turner’s *Eulogy*, a passage from Book IV of Homer’s *The Odyssey*, Picasso’s *Guernica*, George Steer’s photographs of the Guernica bombing, and the accompanying 1937 *London Times* article. These works sparked critical discussion about the ‘realness’ of war versus its ‘media portrayals,’ leading participants to reflect on their unique perspective as ‘insiders’—those who understand warfare in ways unfamiliar to those without direct military experience.

Reflecting on the contrast between Picasso’s abstract rendering of *Guernica* during the bombing and Steer’s sobering capture of the leveled buildings in the aftermath, Rafael noted that true knowledge of war comes from direct experience. He emphasized that proper understanding of these conflicts “culminates with our experiences ... walking through those villages or communities,” in contrast to “what we see on TV.” Participants generally agreed with this media driven gap in understanding, with Elijah comparing Picasso’s rendering of *Guernica* to the loudness often found in media portrayals of war, which seek “to kind of sway public opinions about the effects of war.” As Marcus noted, the resulting disconnect between civilian and military perspectives can be deafening, stating, “It is really sometimes ... very lost on them ... not understanding how to understand.”

These discussions underscore a cultural divide between the lived realities of war and the civilian perceptions shaped by media portrayals. This gap, as participants noted, created intercultural barriers that further complicate our participants’ conveyals of their military experience to those without firsthand knowledge.

CALLING FOR CRITICAL CONVERSATION

In the discussion prompted by Clausewitz’s *On War*, another key military-civilian cultural incongruity emerged—the perceived lack of cultivated resiliency in higher education. The participants noted how routine exposure to uncertainties and discomforts in the military fosters an acceptance of hardship as essential for growth. Marcus emphasized that civilian problems are “... really not that bad ... You go home, and you sleep in a freaking bed,” contrasting this with the military experience of “sleeping on the ground or not even know[ing] where you are gonna get to sleep.” Mateo echoed this, broadening the sentiment when referring to typical civilian challenges with, “We’ve all been through worse. So why let things like that get to me?”

Higher education, however, was seen as smoothing over these uncertainties, failing to prepare students

for discomfort-driven growth. During session two's conversation on Picasso's and Steer's representations of *Guernica*, Elijah noted that "... we are not fostering dialogue on campus, and then just kind of, you know, handicap higher-ed for what it is designed for," suggesting that fostering critical consciousness should be a primary goal of education. As a result, our participants did not sense an opportunity to share their (multifaceted) identities in the higher education setting. Rafael agreeingly said, "Yes, we are veterans. We are men of color. We're examples of pillars within our communities. However,... [despite] having those spaces [classrooms]... you can't really do it because now you're going to be classified as ... that disgruntled vet or whatever." His multifaceted identities are being swallowed up by accusatory stereotypes, due to uncritical examinations of militarism in the higher education setting.

Discussions on Odysseus' homecoming in *The Odyssey* (Book XXIII) led to a dialogue on various stereotypes and how participants dealt with them. Stereotypes ranged from insidious accusations to benign presumptions of leadership. Mateo described troubling encounters with non-military-affiliated individuals who viewed him as "part of Satan's Army" and a "baby killer," even recalling instances where he was attacked by people at churches. On the other hand, Elijah shared more benign assumptions, like being automatically deemed the group leader once others learned he was a veteran. These discussions highlight shared stereotypes our participants face, underscoring the challenge of navigating identities often reduced to simplistic labels and the need for a more nuanced understanding of veteran identities.

BRIDGE BUILDING

Despite the perceived insider-outsider divide and the lack of critical conversations about veterans' experiences, participants felt a strong obligation to disclose their veteran status. Their goal was to help non-military-affiliated individuals broaden their understanding of war, international affairs, and the privileges of American higher education, thereby building a bridge between those with firsthand military experience and those without.

Reflecting on Picasso's and Steer's *Guernica*, Rafael felt a duty to guide his mother in how she consumed media, advising her, "Don't let what you're getting on the news worry you as much as you need to be." His firsthand experience in an international conflict fueled this motivation, stating, "through those past experiences and those clearances we got, and being there, you're able to identify what is BS [bullshit] and what's not." Rafael's reflections highlight the deep sense of responsibility some veterans feel to use their firsthand experiences to help others navigate and critically assess conflicts abroad.

Participants also saw value in sharing their unique perspectives on campus. After a poignant reading of Brian Turner's poem *Eulogy*, Marcus noted his tendency to share stories from his service with peers in higher education who are "freaking out about something or an email that they just saw," aiming to raise awareness of their "privilege to work at this level [higher ed], and maybe the privilege of not having to serve [in the military]." Marcus's reflections underscore the importance some veterans place on sharing their military experiences to foster a greater awareness of the privileges and perspectives that come with higher education, highlighting a commitment to bridging the gap between military and civilian life on campus.

After reading *Shallow Hands* by Michael Poggi and *What It Is Like to Go to War* by Karl Marlantes, both of which explore veteran homecoming, participants were asked about their experiences rebuilding bridges that may have been burned by their decision to enlist. Mateo shared a success story with a touch of irony, stating, "One person reached out because he ended up joining the military. He sent me a letter saying, 'I completely understand why you are the way you are now.' I was like, yes." Elijah also shared his experience, offering insight into the proverbial burning of bridges.

As a veteran of color from the Black community, Elijah reflected on the sense of betrayal that some members of his community felt when he enlisted in the military, stating, "I think before I joined the military, I lost a few friends because some of them ... would bring up historical trauma and ... didn't understand why I should be loyal to a country that marginalizes them." When asked if he ever had the opportunity to reconnect with those individuals after his service, Elijah admitted he initially hesitated to reach out but has since found solace in drafting letters "in order ... to feel at peace."

These reflections emphasize the participants' collective commitment to bridge-building between military and civilian life, using their unique experiences to foster greater understanding and connection. Despite the challenges posed by stereotypes and misunderstandings, their efforts highlight the importance of creating pathways for dialogue and reconnection within their communities and on campus to address the gaps created by a lack of intercultural competency between civilians and the military.

HOPLITE PHALANX

The final theme, named after the Greek infantry formation, Hoplite Phalanx, illustrates the mutual protection and unified support observed among participants. In this formation, soldiers stood shoulder to shoulder in ranks, each carrying a shield in their left hand and a spear in their right, providing mutual protection and unified support

(Hanson, 1989). This metaphor aptly illustrates the shared trust and mutual support observed throughout the four focus group sessions.

In the first session, Rafael volunteered to read Clausewitz's *On War* despite revealing, "I have had a reading disability most of my life." Marcus later acknowledged Rafael's courage, revealing that he too has a reading disability, and expressed solidarity by saying, "I feel you on that ... I know where you're at on that, coming out and sharing that ... with us." This moment of shared vulnerability reflected the image of soldiers standing shoulder to shoulder. Marcus added, "It shows our resilience and just that, you know, like we're not gonna let you [U.S. education system] keep thinking that we're not strong enough to get through certain challenges that we face."

In session two, Rafael returned the support to Marcus after he read Brian Turner's *Eulogy*, a text on soldier suicide. Marcus admitted, "It was hard for me to read through it because of my memories," but noted how Rafael encouraged him, saying, "You were good ... good job ... you got through it ... and you allowed us into the actual passage," affirming Marcus's vulnerability and recognizing its value to the group. Elijah also reflected on the supportive group dynamic, noting that their discussions moved beyond the typical meritocratic comparisons common among veterans, allowing for deeper, more personal exchanges. He expressed comfort in sharing, saying, "I feel okay if I share certain things." He then recounted a powerful story about how the National Guard rescued him and his sister from starvation, which inspired his "insatiable desire ... to serve this country."

In a later session, Rafael encouraged Elijah to keep sharing his story, saying, "Keep up with that journey because tomorrow [is] never guaranteed for any of us. We're fortunate enough to be sitting here having a conversation now ... where some of our brothers and sisters don't have this opportunity anymore." This exchange not only underscored the fragility of life, particularly for those who have experienced the harsh realities of international conflict, but also emphasized the profound privilege and responsibility of sharing these stories.

In that same session, Mateo reflected on why "veterans ... just come in hard hitch" for one another. He noted how "They'll come with their friends. They'll come to back you up. They'll come with food. They'll come to fight for you." He speculated that this bond exists because "If we're deployed and we're about to be killed, and your friend sneaks up out of nowhere and saves your life ... it's ... trauma bonding." The solidarity and mutual support displayed by the participants throughout the focus group sessions reflect the deep bonds formed through shared experiences, much

like the Hoplite Phalanx formation, where soldiers relied on one another for protection and strength. This collective experience underscores the power of interdependence, where vulnerability is met with trust and support, allowing veterans to connect on a deeper level.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The focus group discussions provided valuable insights into the experiences of four veterans of color as they transitioned from military service to civilian life within the context of higher education. These discussions revealed four key themes—an insider-outsider mentality, a call for critical conversations, a desire to build bridges of understanding, and a display of unified support reminiscent of a Hoplite Phalanx. Practical guidance for educational leaders seeking to better understand and support this unique population is interwoven throughout the discussion, which concludes with participant instances of transformative learning (Meca et al., 2021).

INSIDERS-OUTSIDERS

The participants described feeling like 'outsiders' in higher education, where their military-acquired skills and experiences are often misunderstood or undervalued. This aligns with Cooper et al.'s (2018) and Young et al.'s (2022) concept of Military Habitus, which suggests that the socialization of military personnel creates a distinct cultural identity ('insiders') and how it can clash with civilian norms (McAndrew et al., 2019). Our findings expand this concept by emphasizing a key normalizing factor in civilian perception through media portrayals.

Transformative learning scholar Kokkos (2022) warns "... contact with entertainment artworks prevents the development of contemplative reflection, as it addicts the learners to simplistic mental functions, idealized messages, and conventional symbols, entrapping them in the given, common ways of making sense" (p. 100). Our participants echoed this concern, particularly when reflecting on the stark contrast between their lived experiences of war and its portrayal in the media. The discussion on Picasso's *Guernica* versus Steer's photographs gave way to critical questions and conversations on how media can oversimplify or sensationalize multifaceted realities, leading to a superficial understanding among civilians. This disconnect not only deepens the insider-outsider divide but also inhibits genuine dialogue between veterans and their civilian counterparts. When non-military affiliated persons only have media portrayals of war as understandings of

military life, it is difficult to convey the depth and nuance of the veteran experiences, as expressed by Marcus, who stated, “It is really sometimes ... very lost on them ... not understanding how to understand.” This highlights the broader challenge of reintegrating former military members into civilian settings.

However, the strong connection formed through what Mateo called ‘trauma bonding’– the life-and-death circumstances and shared experiences that tie veterans together–provided a sense of solace for veterans navigating civilian life. This finding supports the importance of veteran-only spaces, such as workforce development and health care services found in the surrounding community (Ahern et al., 2015). As well as the student veteran-only lounges found in institutions of higher education (Sitzes & Thompson, 2021). However, having spaces that recognize the insider-outsider cultural divide is not the same as working to mitigate the divide and open better relations between those who have served in the armed forces and those who have not. We will now explore why increased critical conversations about militarism would be another step in the ‘right’ direction.

CALLING FOR CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

The theme of calling for critical conversations underscores the participants’ desire for more meaningful dialogue about the realities of military service and the unique perspectives they bring to the classroom. This need for deeper, more critical reflection aligns with reports of problematic interactions between university employees and student veterans, where staff often display a limited understanding of military culture (Evans et al., 2015; Jones, 2017; McAndrew et al., 2019; Moore, 2017; Persky & Oliver, 2010). Although initiatives like ‘Green Zone’ training aim to address this issue, the knowledge provided has been described as ‘cursory’ (Kastle et al., 2019, p. 7) and therefore inadequate for fully understanding the diverse experiences of veterans, especially veterans of color navigating multiple intersecting identities.

Participants expressed frustration with the higher education system’s failure to foster environments that encourage critical conversations. Rafael noted that sharing his perspectives often led to being labeled the ‘disgruntled vet,’ a stereotype that stifles authentic dialogue and marginalizes veterans, particularly veterans of color who have the additional burden of countering racial stereotypes within academic settings (Hunt et al., 2022). This issue is compounded by the contrast between the resilience cultivated in military life and its perceived lack in civilian academic settings. All participants emphasized that military training normalizes dealing with discomfort and uncertainty, an approach rooted in Seligman’s (1972)

theory of learned helplessness, which suggests that exposure to controllable stressors can build resilience. In contrast, higher education was perceived as avoiding challenging situations, which can impede personal growth. Therefore, academic institutions have an opportunity for improvement by fostering environments that encourage students to face discomfort as a critical part of their development rather than shielding them from it.

Increased critical conversations around militarism would benefit not only the civilian community but the military-affiliated community as well. Individuality and racial diversity are not concepts often explored in veteran circles. As Elijah noted, the focus of military-related conversations is usually uniform meritocracy. Consequently, when veterans of color are asked about racist remarks encountered in the military, these comments are sometimes dismissed as part of the communal practice of meritocratic testing, where they are viewed as jokes or challenges rather than severe instances of racism (Hunt et al., 2022). Educational leaders should thus work to create spaces that de-emphasize militarized meritocracy, allowing for more meaningful dialogue on race and identity within the student veteran community. This can be achieved by implementing frameworks like Veteran Critical Theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017), which encourages critical reflection on the intersection of race, identity, and military experience.

BRIDGE BUILDING

While our participants reported feeling like ‘outsiders’ in non-military affiliated communities and ‘insiders’ within military-affiliated circles, the desire to connect with those who have not served remained strong. The perceived lack of space for critical conversations about military service was seen as the main barrier to understanding, rather than a preference for staying within their ‘insider’ group. This ‘bridge-building’ theme challenges non-veterans to recognize that many veterans are eager to share their experiences and connect with others. However, it is essential to approach these conversations with cultural sensitivity, especially when engaging with veterans who navigate multiple identities.

Phrases like ‘Thank you for your service’ are not always appreciated in the veteran community, as not every veteran is outright thankful for having served. Many civilians, as Elijah noted, “don’t understand the individuality part of [being in the service].” To foster more meaningful connections, especially in higher education, it is crucial to approach conversations with veterans as individuals rather than relying on generalized statements. In contrast, phrases like ‘thank you for your service’ can oversimplify a veteran’s experience, reducing it to a civilian perspective (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) shaped by media tropes (Coker,

2008), which can obscure each veteran's unique and personal story (Kokkos, 2022).

This lack of individuality shown toward veterans' service narratives is further complicated for veterans of color. Such as those in our study who reported facing stereotypes suggesting they should be anti-military due to the historical racism within the military. This assumption overlooks the diverse motivations for service and the pride some, like Elijah, feel in their loyalty to the United States and his decision to "be a part of [the] system to fix" historical injustices his ancestors faced (Dilbert, 2023). By fostering environments that encourage open, respectful dialogue, institutional leaders can facilitate proverbial bridge building between veterans and non-veterans, fostering a deeper understanding of the varied reasons behind military service and the multifaceted identities veterans carry into civilian life. This approach supports the reintegration of veterans and enriches broader societal conversations on military service and its impact.

HOPLITE PHALANX

In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey (1916/1997) argues that dependence is a form of power rather than weakness, emphasizing that excessive personal independence can erode social capacity and lead to a harmful illusion of self-sufficiency. This perspective contrasts sharply with American liberalism's long tradition of valuing individual autonomy, a concept deeply rooted in the nation's cultural and political discourse (Hinchman, 1990; Queen et al., 1956). Despite recent shifts from a unipolar to a multipolar world order, the foundational principles of American liberalism continue to uphold individualism (Appiah, 2001; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Hofmann, 2020).

Military experience often shatters the illusion of complete independence, with veterans like Rafael recognizing the deep interdependence that defines military life. He noted how those on the front lines rely on others for essential needs, e.g., "... somebody fed my ass ... somebody built a tent for me", highlighting the collective effort that sustains military operations. However, when veterans transition to civilian life, they frequently encounter the stark individualism of civilian society, a contrast that is particularly pronounced in higher education, where autonomy is highly valued (Borsari et al., 2017).

The epidemic of loneliness in America (Demarinis, 2020) is a problem student veterans are particularly vulnerable to, as the abrupt transition from a tightly knit military community to civilian life often leaves them feeling isolated, confused, and without a clear sense of identity (Young et al., 2022). Mateo captured this sentiment, observing, "I think, like, one of the biggest barriers that veterans have

going back into civilian [life] is that civilians don't know what true loyalty is" (e.g., trauma bonding).

The cohesion and mutual support evident in this focus group exemplify true loyalty—relationships characterized by interdependence. Rather than measuring success by individuality and independence, American society could learn from the approach in this group, where vulnerability and interdependence are strengths that welcome deeper connections and understanding. This kind of mutual support is crucial as we confront increasingly interconnected global challenges, such as climate change, nuclear threats, and the safe integration of large language models into society. In short, civil society and academia could learn from these veterans how trauma can unite rather than divide.

INSTANCES OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Jack Mezirow posits that encountering and critically reflecting on one's habits of mind provides an opportunity to move beyond limiting perspectives (Mezirow, 1997). In session two, Rafael noted early signs of this process among participants, saying, "Since our first meeting, I do see more self-reflecting." Ensuing shifts in perspective follow along the main themes, including Marcus' observation that, "We're supposed to be a veteran community, right? But our communities are still divided"—and how such divisions like deployed and non-deployed are unnecessary (insider-outsider). Elijah entered the discussion, stating, "with like a little bit [of] bias ...[thinking] we're going to talk about veteran stuff. But ... we're broadly discussing a lot of things that we don't always have an opportunity to kind of sit down and talk about." Seeing the vulnerable conversations among veterans as a new possibility (calling for critical conversation). Also, Rafael's understanding that, "... our military experience ... didn't minimize our other identifiers", communicating renewed confidence in being a veteran, man of color, and pillar within his community all at the same time and of equal value (bridge building). In this way, the individual transformation of limiting beliefs transferred into the larger themes, emphasizing how shifts in personal frames of reference can foster broader societal changes as individuals apply their transformed perspectives to social action (Mezirow, 1997).

CONCLUSION

This study sought to explore the experiences of Black and Latino student veterans on their journey from soldier to student, with an emphasis on war, homecoming, and higher

education. Using arts-based transformative learning, our findings highlighted the importance of dialogue and critical reflection in understanding and supporting the unique identities of student veterans of color. The results of this study advocate for a heightened emphasis on intercultural competency and a more nuanced understanding of the specific experiences and needs of this demographic within higher education and beyond, suggesting that such measures are essential for fostering their academic and personal success.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

This study was conducted per ethical standards and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The University of Texas at San Antonio under IRB Approval Number FY23-24-47.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Cole Caudle, secondary author, serves on the board of the Touchstones Discussion Project. To ensure impartiality, this individual was not involved in participant recruitment, data collection, analysis, or interpretation of findings. The authors declare no other competing interests.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

- **Bryce Kyle:** conceptualization, IRB application, recruitment, data collection/storage, data analysis, write up, edits.
- **Cole Caudle:** focus group co-leader, manuscript editor.
- **Alonzo M. Flowers III:** manuscript editor and high level oversight – as the senior researcher.

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