"I've Got a Hunch We're Going Around in Circles": Exceptions to American Exceptionalism in Hollywood Korean War Films

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Abstract: Hollywood Korean War films primarily aimed at integrating American citizenry into national narratives of cohesion and teleology by displacing contradictions onto the exteriority of American identity. The films dismiss the Korean War as not worth fighting for, yet simultaneously propose that fighting is the only viable option to cope with the futility of war. This paper argues that this closed rationality of we-fight-simply-because-we-fight is a symptom of cold war liberalism. And the cold war subject, caught in the circular movement of finding-while-missing the meaning, prefigures a postmodern subject of drive that transcends the fundamental lack in the process of subjectivization and finds satisfaction in the endless circular movement with no destination. Crucially, American exceptionalism functions as the state fantasy in this process of denying/displacing inconsistencies inherent to the imagined national identity. This circular rationality, which constitutes the paradigmatic subject-position of late-capitalist American culture, was constructed in the early years of the cold war, and its cultural manifestations can be traced in Hollywood films about the Korean War.

Keywords: Hollywood Korean War Films, Cold War Liberalism, American Exceptionalism, Post-Cold War World Order, Iraq War Films

Representing war as a spectacle is a familiar story in the Hollywood film industry. War itself as the dominant narrative frame often serves as a theatrical backdrop for the other submerged frame of sensorial affect that resonates with contemporary culture and a certain type of American subjectivity. Threading Hollywood war films from World War I to the Iraq War is the

figure of the "American soldier," embodying the collective sensibilities of respective wars. Out of the "Doughboys," lumped together with no individuality in the horrendous trench warfare of the First World War, emerged Audie Murphy and John Wayne as the icons of American heroism, fighting in the Manichean moral universe of the Second World War where America was assumed unambiguously on the right side. Wayne, in particular, epitomizes the changes in cultural sentiments from moral confidence to uncertainty characteristic of the Vietnam War. The icon of a "perfect" American soldier in *Sands of Iwo Jima* (Allan Dwan, 1949)—no-nonsense, competent, and gritty in his moral resolve—was transposed into that of "a badly cleaned-up myth" of America's self-image—"bull-headed, unthinking and hyper-patriotic"—in *The Green Berets* (Ray Kellogg, 1968), anticipating John Rambo to rummage the badly damaged myth of heroic American manhood.[1] Soldiers in current Iraq War films generally refer back to the grunts and veterans of Vietnam rather than the unproblematic heroes of the World Wars. They are foot soldiers cynical about war's premises and frequently suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Notably, the transition from the hero to the grunt is marked by a gap, a jump from World War II to Vietnam, glossing over Korea, yet it was in fact the Korean War films that set a precedent in cinematic conventions not only for Vietnam but also for recent Iraq War films.

It is curious why Korea is routinely eclipsed in America's cultural memory of its numerous wars abroad. The war (1950-1953) caused a heavy toll of lives with more than two million Korean civilians estimated dead, more than a million Chinese soldiers killed, about 37,000 US servicemen killed or missing, and more than twelve percent of North Korean population lost.[2] Nevertheless, the Korean War is usually dubbed "the Forgotten War," or rather it is *remembered* as *forgotten*—the naming that inadvertently reveals the structuring of official memory upon what has been silenced. In fact, as Paul M. Edwards says, the war has been "identified in so many ways that it is possible to argue that it has never been identified at all": it was called

1   Martin Barker, *A 'Toxic Genre': The Iraq War Films* (London: Pluto, 2011), 45-68.

2   For genocidal aspects of the Korean War, see Dong-choon Kim, "Forgotten War, Forgotten Massacres: The Korean War (1950-1953) as Licensed Mass Killings," *Journal of Genocide Research* 6.4 (2004): 523-544; and "The War Against the 'Enemy Within': Hidden Massacres in the Early Stages of the Korean War," *Rethinking Historical Injustice and Reconciliation in Northeast Asia: The Korean Experience*, ed. Gi-Wook Shin, Soon-Won Park, and Daqing Yang (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 75-93.

the "forgotten war," "the war nobody wanted," "Mr. Truman's folly," the "wrong war," the "Communist war," the "Asian war," the "unknown war," the "emphatic war," the "war that never was," the "war before Vietnam," and Edwards himself suggests, "the ignored war."[3] Most of these are epithets of negation, betraying certain subconscious acknowledgement of contradiction in the naming of the war. Edwards suggests that it was the lack of a name—a "nonwar" definition that paradoxically enabled the war: by identifying America's military involvement in Korea as a "police action," President Truman was able to deploy US troops to Korea without the approval of Congress and without declaring war.[4] Hence, the Korean War was a war and at the same time not a war whose historicity is made visible by virtue of being invisible, present in its marked erasure.

This paradoxical denial-as-acknowledgement is in fact symptomatic of contradictions in identifying the Korean War. It was an international war involving China, Russia, the United States and UN forces comprised of sixteen nations while simultaneously it was a civil war, a national liberation war, and a war of reunification for Korea, which was divided in 1945 as part of post-World War II settlements between the United States and the Soviet Union. As a "proxy war" consolidating the cold war, it was hailed in America as a "good war" to defend "free" society, but soon it turned into an "ugly war" where Korean civilians were held hostage by porous boundaries between friend and enemy. Part and parcel of the global cold war, the Korean War was represented as a moral crusade for the containment of communist threats, but it was also an imperialist war of integrating Asia into the sphere of American interests.[5] Built upon a bipolar system, the cold war was about containing the communist alternative system on the one hand, and integrating, economically and ideologically, the so-called "free world" into a US-centered free-trade world system on the other hand. The official policy of containment was primarily expressed by militarization. The Korean War procured the United States a political economic rationale to implement NSC-68 and to grant a fourfold increase of military budget,

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3   Paul M. Edwards, *To Acknowledge a War: The Korean War in American Memory* (Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 2000), 28.

4   Ibid., 29.

5   For Cold War history in detailed relation to the Korean War, see Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945-1947*, vol. 1, 1981 and *The Origins of the Korean War: The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947-1950*, vol. 2, 1990 (Seoul: Yeoksabipyeongsa, 2002).

thereby inaugurating an era of the military-industrial complex. Integration appears on the cultural arena in diverse rhetorical shapes and ideological persuasions geared to win the hearts and minds of not only Americans but also global citizens.[6]

Hollywood war films provide a particularly interesting insight into the cultural terrain where popular sensibilities are probed and national subjectivities forged. As illustrated in its history of "conversion"[7] to propaganda films during the Second World War, the motion picture industry has been directly involved with politics, translating official policy into popular language. In modern technological society, the film industry can serve especially well as a propaganda machine since it can produce incessantly and in mass quantities "regular emotional replenishment" as a means to keep people at work.[8]Hollywood war movies, in particular, traditionally function as "integration propaganda," producing "desired values," resolving "approved contradictions" in the United States, and explaining war as "a painful, often terrible, ultimately rewarding event."[9]

In this vein, Korean War films are also primarily concerned with preserving the desired self-image of America by theatrically staging and resolving contradictions against the backdrop of the war. More specifically, they portray the American national subject as the embodiment of neo-Wilsonian liberalism who would spread democracy to the world and, coupling freedom with national expansion, construct Jeffersonian "empire of liberty."[10]

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6   For histories of the cold war, see Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1996*, 8th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997); Melvyn P. Leffler and David S. Painter, eds. *Origins of the Cold War: An International History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); and Thomas McCormick, *America's Half-Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1989). For cultural studies on Cold War politics of containment and integration, see Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2003); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001); and Leerom Medovoi, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2005).

7   Thomas Schatz, "World War II and the Hollywood 'War Film,'" *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: U of California P, 1998), 89-128. He discusses some representative World War II war movies as well as the historical context of the Hollywood's conversion to the war production. He sees *Casablanca* (1942) as an exemplary "conversion narrative" signaling the American conversion from neutrality to "selfless sacrifice."

8   Tim Blackmore, "Eyeless in America: Hollywood and Indiewood's Iraq War on Film," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 32.4 (2012): 295.

9   Ibid., 296.

10 Giles Gunn, "Introduction: The Place of Culture in the Play of International Politics," *America and the*

In doing so, these films avoid dealing with problems of the war, relegating instead those sites of war to an exteriority of American identity: that is, containing contradictions by projecting them upon the Enemy/Other while integrating America's idealized subjects into nationalist narratives of cohesion and teleology.

The Perversion of Cold War Liberalism

Hollywood produced about fifty films on Korea from 1951 with Samuel Fuller's *The Steel Helmet* to 1963 when Vietnam took the American public's foremost attention.[11] Most of them were made at the height of anticommunist hysteria, coinciding for example with McCarthyism and the Rosenberg Trial and inevitably resonating with dominant cold war ideologies and popular sensibilities. These films routinely dismiss the war in Korea as unworthy, but through a curious twist of reasoning, they simultaneously propose fighting it as the only viable option to cope with the futility of war, affirming in effect the state's war policy and bypassing the discussion of its problems. The circular logic of we-fight-simply-because-we-fight is analogous to the contradictory denial-as-acknowledgement of the war itself. In this loop of pervert repetition, the logical gap is closed, disavowing the war as meaningless, yet sparing the American audience the agency as autonomous individuals who would make a conscious "choice" to fight. The closed rationality is a symptom of the idiosyncratic cultural terrain of the cold war—a way to Americanize the Manichean universe in order to preserve the mythic landscape of the national imaginary. In other words, it marks a cold war brand of Wilsonian liberalism or America's claim that it has "not only the power but the right to transform the world into a more perfect place: that is, one more resembling itself."[12] Such contradictions in cold war liberalism constitute the principal thematic concerns of many Korean War films. The heroes are typically caught in the circular movement of finding-while-missing the meaning, affirming the war in the process itself.

Misshaping of a New World Order, ed. Giles Gunn and Carl Gutierrez-Jones (Berkeley: U of California P, 2010), 11.

11 For a filmography of the Korean War-related movies, see Robert J. Lentz, *Korean War Filmography: 91 English Language Features through 2000* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003); Paul M. Edwards, *A Guide to Films on the Korean War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997).

12 Ronald Steel, "America's Mission," *America and the Misshaping of a New World Order*, ed. Giles Gunn and Carl Gutierrez-Jones (Berkeley: U of California P, 2010), 36.

Cold war liberalism is, according to Thomas Hill Schaub and Donald E. Pease, marked by a series of inversions in its reasoning. The postwar "new liberalism" was formulated as "psychological realism" in opposition to social realism and naturalism of the 1930s Cultural Front by dismissing social reality as "totalitarian" and re-defining individual consciousness as truly "real."[13] Inverting the definition of "reality," cold war liberals also labeled any attitudes towards *Realpolitik* as pathological symptoms of a "Cold War mentality" while resorting instead to a "Cultural Imaginary" as a legitimate reservoir of political energies and counter-cultural possibilities.[14] In short, cold war liberalism inverted reality as delusional/ irreal and proposed the inner realm of individual psyche as an alternative space of the genuine/the real, de-politicizing the public sphere by abducting it into a-historical and a-political psychic realms. This logical inversion explains the cold war phenomenon of conformity since it rationalizes one's failure to make a self-conscious choice without damaging a sense of autonomy. The well-known dissenters in "gray flannel suits" of the 1950s willingly complied with the violation of their civic rights under the National Security State because the real freedom meant for them "only the inner freedom 'to choose whether to conform or not.'"[15]

Of course, this choice is not really a choice because choosing "nonconformity for its own sake would be perverse and 'anomic,'"[16] and as it turns out, they had no other freedom of choice than conformity itself. Since no one is openly "for" communism, the only real choice is "against" it. As Slavoj Žižek puts in relation to the current war against terrorism, "*precisely in such moments of apparent clarity of choice, mystification is total.*"[17]

The cold war subject, moreover, prefigures a postmodern subject, characterized among others by the transition from desire to drive.[18] The modern

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13 Thomas Hill Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison: The U of Wisconsin P, 1991), 3-49.

14 Donald E. Pease, "Leslie Fiedler, the Rosenberg Trial, and the Formulation of an American Canon," *Boundary 2* 17.2 (Summer 1990): 155-198.

15 Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1983), 40.

16 Ibid.

17 Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 54.

18 By "postmodern," I mean the condition which Fredric Jameson refers to as a "breakdown of the signifying chain," where the subject is severed from the symbolic field. The condition of postmodernity is one in which modern master narratives have been "deconstructed to the point of losing their entire symbolic weight in the meaning-making practices of subjects in the social world." See Matthew Flisfeder, "Subject of Desire/Subject of Drive: The Emergence of Žižekian Media Studies," *Reviews in Cultural Theory* 3.1

subject of desire is condemned to the state of non-satisfaction because the gap is inherent to subjectivization and the object attained is never *it*, the thing desired: "[Desire's] most elementary and ultimate aim is to sustain itself as desire, in its state of non-satisfaction."[19] The postmodern subject of drive, however, finds satisfaction in constantly missing the goal and is released from having to strive for *it* since for him the gap is closed now:

> Drive, on the other hand, stands for the paradoxical possibility that the subject, forever prevented from achieving his Goal (and thus fully satisfying his desire), can nevertheless find satisfaction in the very circular movement of repeatedly missing its object, of circulating around it: the gap constitutive of desire is thus closed; the self-enclosed loop of a circular repetitive movement replaces infinite striving.[20]

Unlike the subject of desire who remains "sutured" and becomes ever more conscious of the reigning conditions of failed satisfaction, the subject of drive is emancipated from the signifying chain and from the weight of meaning-making practices in the social world. In a similar vein, for the subject of desire, "there is choice—inclusive of the fundamental forced choice—that is, the subject *chooses*"; but at the level of drive, the act of choice is inverted into "making-oneself-chosen":

> [A]s in predestination, in which the religious subject does not simply choose God, but "makes himself chosen" by Him. Or—to put it another way—the only—but crucial and highest—freedom I am granted in drive is *the freedom to choose the inevitable, freely to embrace my Destiny, what will happen to me in any case*.[21] (italics added)

The subject of desire chooses, making a conscious choice in the field of contentious meanings, whereas the subject of drive makes his choice as

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(2012): 26.

19 Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (1999. London and New York: Verso, 2008), 359-360.

20 Ibid. For an explication of the passage, see also Flisfeder 26: "Desire involves the endless, metonymical search for the (impossible) object (*objet petit a*) that will wrest, and satisfy desire itself. But desire is self-reflexive and is, by definition, insatiable. It continues to follow along a cycle in which the object attained is never *it*, the thing that is desired. This constant search for the object produces a surplus-enjoyment: there is an unconscious satisfaction in being able to reset the co-ordinates of desire, continuing the search. Drive speaks to this other side of insatiable desire. Drive achieves enjoyment by *failing* to get the object–it is the enjoyment of failure. Desire attaches the subject ever more aggressively to the reigning conditions of domination and exploitation, while drive moves the subject in the direction of emancipation and the ends of analysis."

21 Žižek, *Ticklish Subject* 362.

something inevitable, thereby inverting "choosing" into "making-himself-chosen" and thus exempting himself from any responsibility for his act. In this way, the cold war non-choice is reversed into a choice, allowing the subject a sense of agency while releasing him from the weight of his action.

Reflecting such cultural sensibilities, characters in Korean War films seem caught in the circular reasoning in their search for the meaning of their place in the war. In willingly choosing what seems inevitable, they resemble the cold war subject of drive exercising the "higher freedom" of self-conscious submission[22] to the mandates of the National Security State. Moreover, what made this cold war subject of drive particularly American is the work of state fantasy. According to Pease, it is the state fantasy of American exceptionalism that helps the national subject to disavow the gap in the desired national image or the national Thing. The fantasy of exceptionalism supplies its adherents the "psychosocial structures" of disavowal that allow them to ignore the inconsistencies or "the state's exceptions" to the national Thing.[23] Since the national Thing causes the subject to desire it, but it is unattainable, fantasy brings in the national Other to explain the national Thing's failure to come about and to endow the national Thing with "ontological consistency."[24]

American fantasy of exceptionalism helped to hold the imagined national community together throughout the cold war by attributing this failure to the Enemy of the State. Moreover, the state fantasy enabled US citizens to disavow inconsistencies as "exceptions" required to counteract the Soviet threat. In other words, American exceptionalism allowed US citizens to construct the image of the Soviet Empire as "the threat" to the attainment of the national ideal and at the same time to construe American imperialism as "a nation-preserving measure that would prevent Soviet imperialism," thus as "an exception to US national identity that proved its rule."[25]

As such, the state fantasy provided US citizens with a psychosocial structure which enabled them to imagine themselves as agents rather than victims

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22 Ehrenreich 40.
23 Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis & London: U of Minnesota P, 2009), 12. According to Pease, the national Thing is the object cause of desire, "that which the national subject desires" and simultaneously "that which causes the subject's desire" (17). In this case, it is the idea of American exceptionalism that American people believe as their national ideal and that simultaneously cause them to want it as such.
24 Ibid., 18.
25 Ibid., 20-21.

of the cold war National Security State, willingly ceding their civic rights by identifying themselves with the state's will.[26] With American people's consent, the cold war emergency state was able to render the political domain into a biopolitical settlement which endowed the state with power over life and death of the population. In our (supposedly) post-ideological and post-political era, "we are *all* 'excluded'" as the "object of biopolitics" and reduced to administered and regulated "mere life."[27] Significantly, the cold war continues into our post-cold war world. In recent war against terrorism, President George W. Bush's declaration of a State of Exception under Homeland Security Act reminds us of the cold war National Security State, with which US citizens identified themselves as enactors of state policies and consented to the suspension of their own civic rights. They also espoused the fantasy of exceptionalism by relegating US imperial practices as exceptions to the national identity by willfully misrepresenting the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq now, and South Korea and West Berlin back then, not as violations of but as necessary means to preserve that imagined ideal.

The American liberal subject remains caught in the circular rationality in ignoring inconsistencies in the national Thing and projecting them onto the national Other—the figure of Enemy from the communist to Islamic fundamentalist, and from the Evil Empire to the "network" of terrorists. Here, "the Enemy serves as the 'quilting point' (the Lacanian *point de capiton*) of our ideological space" while "terror"—just as well as "communism"—becomes the universal signifier, "gradually elevated into the hidden universal equivalent of all social evils."[28]

Lost in the Fog of War: Hollywood Korean War Films

As a cultural mediator between political imperatives and popular sentiments, Hollywood war movies are often constructed around the central narrative concern of how to configure national coherence and legitimate

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26 Pease argues: "Rather than protesting against the state's abrogation of its rules, U.S. citizens fantasized themselves as the sovereign power that had suspended the law in the name of securing the nation." Pease, *New American Exceptionalism* 33.

27 Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert* 95-100. Under the modern regime of biopolitics, the state of exception is made the permanent rule of law and human life becomes "bare life," whose life is "included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion" and disposable with impunity. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), 8-9.

28 Ibid., 111.

citizenry. The Korean War film, in particular, showcases the evolving ways in which American state fantasy was staged and cold war subjectivity was imagined. Generic conventions of the World War II combat film are recycled yet with crucial variations, reflecting the shifting historical contours from the "good war" alliances against fascism to the cold war contentions over the emergent Third World. With Korea, the family ideology is redeployed with a modification to envision not only national but also global, "free-world" citizenry. Moreover, heralding the circular logic of cold war liberalism, cynicism pervades the general sentiment regarding the unpopular war, thereby facilitating the contradictory denying-while-acknowledging the war's legitimacy.

According to Jeanine Basinger, World War II combat films set a paradigm for later imagination by featuring a combat unit as a mixed group representing America as the "melting pot" of people across all ethnic, class, religious, and geographical backgrounds. If these films were more concerned with integrating white ethnic groups of Eastern and Southern European descent, Korean War films prominently featured African Americans and Japanese Americans, interpellating racial/ethnic others as part of national citizenry. Another characteristic she notes is a focus on the family theme concerning not only conflicts within American families but also Korea-US relationship as a metaphoric family. Women and children are frequently featured as a means to justify fighting the foreign war by appealing to American citizens' sense of responsibility for civilians and by extension for family. Basinger also points out an increased cynicism as the distinct mark of Korean War movies. Skepticism about military leadership and a justifiable cause of war was captured as a lost sense of direction, epitomized in the figure of the "Ghost Patrol of the Korean War."[29]

Thus as "a grab bag of current ideological and social problems,"[30] Korean War films often intermix the combat film with family melodrama. To the category of more traditional combat films belong Samuel Fuller's *The Steel Helmet* (1951) and *Fixed Bayonets* (1951), *Pork Chop Hill* (Lewis Milestone, 1959) and *All the Young Men* (Hall Bartlett, 1960). These films deal with "last stand" battles of American platoons whose melting-pot group dynamics highlight shifting racial/ethnic boundaries in the constitution of

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29 For Korean War film conventions, see Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2003), 46, 159-167.

30 Ibid., 161.

legitimate citizenship. The family theme is more prominently staged in *I Want You* (Mark Robson, 1951), *One Minute to Zero* (Tay Garnett, 1952) and *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* (Mark Robson, 1955). In these films, the trope of family is employed to envision a coherent America by persuading resentful wives and mothers to support their conscripted husbands and sons. *The Steel Helmet*, *One Minute to Zero*, and *Battle Hymn* (Douglas Sirk, 1957) address Korea-US relationship more directly by featuring Koreans either as infiltrating enemies or as civilian refugees—women and orphaned children to be "adopted" by the metaphoric American "family." Finally, *The Manchurian Candidate* (John Frankenheimer, 1962), regarded as one of American film classics, revisits the Korean War as a fearsome site of film noir populated by phallic mothers, Yellow Perils, and brainwashing communists only to absorb them back into the imaginary family-nation.

On this cultural stage set by Korea, the fantasy of exceptionalism evolved, accommodating cold war politics and shaping a culture of liberal consensus. The "cold war consensus" was an amalgamation of "isolationism" and "open door internationalism," the opposing traditions of US foreign policy. It was a compromise of the two contrasting cold war "global imaginaries" to "contain" a "communist bloc" with political/military "bulwarks" and simultaneously, to "integrate" the newly liberated "third world" into a "free world" of the free market system.[31] The dual politics of containment and integration illustrate a historically specific mode which the fantasy of exceptionalism adopts to reconfigure national coherence and state subjectivity. Containment concerns the national Other/Enemy onto which inconsistencies of state fantasy are projected, and integration is another way of saying that US practices are "non-imperial," merely "exceptions" to its otherwise exceptional national identity.

The political task of containment policy was to provide "a recognizable *image* of the enemy" as the "quilting point" of cold war ideological space, and Korean War films brought to light several "faces" of the enemy, illuminating "a *performative* procedure" of "enemy recognition."[32] The figure of the enemy in Korea is typically represented as spectral, invisible, and reified—as the universal signifier of transcendental "evil." In *The Steel Helmet*, a film about the typical "last stand" struggle of a "lost patrol," a ragtag group of stragglers arrive at a deserted Buddhist temple with a statue of

31 Klein 30-58.
32 Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert* 109-111.

Buddha that is "more Aztec than Oriental,"[33] where they set up an observation post. Soon they are followed by an unidentified spectral presence, looking down from the air or from behind a statue, from whose perspective the US soldiers are observed, imparting a sense of imminent/immanent threat. This fleeting shadow that sneaks in to murder a night guard finally materializes as a North Korean major hiding in the temple. The enemy in this way is figured almost as supernatural, dematerialized into a specter with indestructible power.

Moreover, the enemy is "invisible" as the North Korean major, now POW, looks just like "us" or at least like "our Asian allies" such as the South Korean boy Short Round and the Japanese American sergeant Tanaka. Indeed, the blurring of friend/enemy division is one of the most noted characteristics of the Korean War. In the early stage of the war, the allied forces had to deal with the massive flood of refugees incessantly moving southwards, and sometimes among the refugees were hiding communist guerrilla fighters in civilian clothes.

This motif is frequently picked up in a number of Korean War films, including *The Steel Helmet* where two guerrilla fighters appear as snipers hiding in ambush and later a group of refugees are searched for hidden weapons. The sardonic hero Sergeant Zack (Gene Evans) mutters: "Don't you want to know how to tell the difference? He's a South Korean when he's running with ya; and he's a North Korean when he's running after ya." For US military men, the enemy was not readily identifiable not only because they were fighting against a rather abstract ideology of communism, but also because it was a racialist war to "stop the gooks": "who 'the gooks' were, they didn't know, and they didn't want to know."[34] The cold war "enemy-ness" was thus performatively constructed as the national Other, often racially encoded, not only threatening American men in a foreign war but also infiltrating the home front as communist subversives collapsed with racial/social dissenters. The enemies are everywhere yet invisible, but who they are or why they fight is never explained; rather, they simply constitute a generalized background onto which "our story" can be projected.

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33 Nora Sayre, "Unglaring Exceptions: Dissent in the Films of the 1950s,"*Monthly Review* 53.5 (Oct. 2001): 42.

34 Captain Fred Ladd, qtd. in Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001), 81.

The spectral/invisible body of the enemy is sometimes completely dematerialized into a reified fetish object itself like a set of imaginary "bridges" in an imaginary North Korean landscape. In *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*, Admiral Tarrant (Fredric March), a trenchant Cold Warrior, tries to persuade the reluctant hero Lieutenant Harry Brubaker (William Holden) why this war is worth fighting for:

> TARRANT: You don't quit, and go on doing your job because you're here. It's just as simple as that. Son, whatever progress this world has made, it's always been because of the efforts and sacrifices of a few. [...] Nobody ever knows why he gets the dirty job, and this is a dirty job. Militarily, this war is a tragedy.
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> BRUBAKER: I think we ought to pull out.
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> TARRANT: That's rubbish, son, and you know it. If we did, they'd take Japan, Indochina, the Philippines. Where would you have us make our stand, at the Mississippi? All through history, men have had to fight the wrong war in the wrong place, but that's the one they're stuck with. That's why one of these days we'll knock out those bridges at Toko-ri.

Tarrant's speech on the domino theory completes the political structuring of the cold war enemy as communist Russia, expansionist in planetary magnitude. Against such a transcendental and omnipotent enemy, the cold war liberal hero has no other choice but the "higher freedom" of self-conscious submission because in the given terms of choice, it is simply not possible to choose transcendental "evil." The generalized enemy is reduced into "those bridges at Toko-ri" to be destroyed/contained, desymbolized into the object of a cinematic spectacle of bombing raids. In this theatrical space of the endless circular movement, what gets denied is the inherent lack—the "real" problems of the war. Also eclipsed are "real" bridges where hundreds of civilian refugees were massacred by the allied forces for the alleged fear of enemies in ambush; and bridges in North Korea which were leveled "off the map" in US bombing raids during the war.[35]

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35 Some of the most well-known sites of civilian massacres would be No Gun Ri bridges where hundreds of civilian refugees—mostly women, children, and old men were killed by U.S. forces in July 1950, and the ones in North Gyeongsang Province jammed with civilian refugees over whom U.S. warplanes strafed under the command of the U.S. Eighth Army in Korea to stop all civilian refugees from crossing the lines because there *might* be hiding "enemies" in ambush. The "military" targets of U.S. bombing raids included North Korean cities such as Pyeongyang, Sinuiju and Wonsan, as well as "strategic bridges," which often meant irrigation dams providing water for 75% of the North's food production. See Charles J. Hanley,

If containment was a strategy of disciplining the Enemy/Other, integration politics was a process of regulating "free world" subjects by winning their hearts and minds. Integration primarily concerned the attempts to co-opt the non-Western others, both foreign and domestic, into the postwar liberal capitalist world system. To win their hearts, the United States tried to distance itself from earlier European imperialism and presented its power as "non-imperial" and in fact "benevolent," as simply helping the newly liberated help themselves on the teleological path of economic progress.[36] In this sense, integration was a cold war adaptation of American exceptionalism, projecting US imperial practices as exceptions to its proposed self-image. In Korean War films, the object of integration is embodied as Koreans, Japanese Americans and African Americans, representing third-world/racial others to be adopted into liberal/American subjectivity.

If not reified as the Enemy, Koreans are otherwise represented as war orphans, women or military "pupils," who would "reciprocate" Americans' generous "gifts" from Hershey's chocolate to military aid by providing "native" services as child protégés and "nurturing natives" for American heroes. Orphaned children are exemplary objects of integration, portrayed either as metaphoric sons/pupils to be adopted by the heroes or as spectacles of sentimentality to win the sympathies of the audience. Short Round from *The Steel Helmet* is a faithful disciple of the American hero, eager for the patron's affection and admission to his world. He writes prayers to Buddha, wishing: "Please make Sergeant Zack like me," and he demands "dog tags" from Zack, desiring identity and recognition from the new Father. Chu, another orphaned boy attached to Dean Hess, the hero of *Battle Hymn*, literally calls him "*abeoji*" or "father." These children are also staged to represent Korean people as docile and resigned, offering themselves as a spectacle for the sympathies of Americans. For example, Short Round sings the Korean national anthem to the sad tune of Auld Lang Syne, soliciting a solemn moment of silence from the stunned American men. Also dozens of Korean War orphans, playing themselves in *Battle Hymn*, provide melodra-

Sang-Hun Choe, and Martha Mendoza, *The Bridge at No Gun Ri: A Hidden Nightmare from the Korean War* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2001); Kim Dong-choon, "Forgotten War, Forgotten Massacres: The Korean War (1950-1953) as Licensed Mass Killings," *Journal of Genocide Research* 6.4 (2004): 530; and Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: Norton, 1997), 292-96.

36 For the U.S.-led postwar development of the free market economic system, see McCormick 1-124; and regarding the discourse of "benevolent supremacy," see McAlister 43-63.

matic spectacles by digging garbage cans, picking breadcrumbs on the dirt, and even performing "Arirang," a traditional folk song and dance, for their white father. Implicitly, the United States is offering "imperial tutelage" under which newly liberated nations should be chaperoned out of the alleged "colonial nonage" to the mature/capitalist economy.[37]

Korea also served as a theater to stage cold war reconstitution of American nationality by integrating its racial others, most notably Japanese and African Americans. Japanese Americans are frequently featured as experienced veterans in equal partnership with the white hero, a reference to their transition from wartime enemy to postwar ally, from "yellow peril" to "model minority." Both in *The Steel Helmet* and *Pork Chop Hill*, Japanese American characters Tanaka and Ohashi are treated with respect for their experience and accepted as friends/partners of white heroes. African Americans also take the center stage, reflecting the de facto racial desegregation in the army during the Korean War as well as the dawning civil rights movement in the 1950s.[38] In *Pork Chop Hill*, Lieutenant Clemons (Gregory Peck) is in fact given a double duty—one to secure a hill from the Chinese army and the other to persuade his reluctant African American soldier Franklin (Woody Strode) to join the sure-to-lose last stand battle in return for a right to join a "pretty exclusive club" of US nationality:

> Chances are you're gonna die, like it or not. So am I, whether you shoot me or not. At least we've got a chance to do it in pretty good company. A lot of them came up here last night. They don't care any more about Korea than you do. A lot of 'em had it just as rough at home as you did. But they came up and fought. There's about 25 of them left. It's a pretty exclusive club, but you can still join up. If you want to.

The theme of racial integration evolves to become the central axis of the plot in *All the Young Men*, where the black man is now elevated to the position of a platoon leader and the racial tension between him and his mostly white men is rather too blatantly resolved by having him literally transfuse his "blood" to his wounded white nemesis. These racial others are presented as staunch American subjects, willing to ignore the gaps in national

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37 Medovoi 11.

38 Pressed both from internal demands for desegregation and from a scrutinizing eye of the international community, and largely because of desperate personnel shortages, the U.S. army was racially desegregated in a meaningful sense during the Korean War. See Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), 86-88.

identity or the historical mistreatments they suffered. Although the North Korean POW in *The Steel Helmet* attempts to persuade or "brainwash"[39] Tanaka and Thompson, an African American medic, to defect by reminding them of Japanese American internments and Jim Crow laws, the two remain unwavering as if testifying that such historical inconsistencies were in fact just exceptions to American exceptionalism.

Thus the making of cold war American subjectivity was premised upon such dual politics of containing and simultaneously integrating national others, claiming as a result American "innocence" and "purity" of intention. More specifically, it relied on the liberal principle of "reciprocity," the modern concept of political/economic mutuality, according to which "liberation" enters as a "gift" simultaneously incurring "indebtedness" on the part of "the liberated."[40] In this symbolic economy of gift and debt, violence is legitimated as "accidental," as an inevitable price to pay for "liberation and rehabilitation,"[41] and as a consequent, the American subject is insisted as "benevolent," US imperialist interventions as "exceptions," and the capitalist rationalization of political-economic hierarchization among nations as "reciprocal" relations.

Such liberal American subjects, "innocent, well-intentioned, and benevolent," often find apt illustrations in the heroes of Korean War films. Harry Brubaker from *The Bridges at Toko-ri* is not so much a militant cold warrior as a bourgeois civilian, an "innocent" family man and hard-working middle-class citizen. A lawyer from Denver and reluctant carrier pilot, he is "bitter" because he was called up again from his reserve service and had to give up his "home," his "law practice, everything." Like Harry, Dean Hess (Rock Hudson) from *Battle Hymn* is another liberal subject, a veteran bomber pilot and a pastor. He comes to Korea as an escape from his guilt of having killed 37 children on a bombing raid over Germany. His guilt, a "debt" to those he killed in the previous war, is then the primary reason for

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39 Although the POW-question was one of the most controversial issues concerning the Korean War, it is rather irrelevant to the subject of this paper, thus not discussed here. I dealt with the POW-issue elsewhere in a detailed study on *The Manchurian Candidate* and its 2004 remake. See Junghyun Hwang, "From the End of History to Nostalgia: *The Manchurian Candidate*, Then and Now," *The Journal of Transnational American Studies* 2.1 (2010): online. <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/2qt9w2hh>

40 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), 131.

41 Lisa Yoneyama, "Traveling Memories, Contagious Justice: Americanization of Japanese War Crimes at the End of the Post-Cold War," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6.1 (2003): 80.

his saving children in the present one, and it is his guilt-debt, the "central tragedy and scandal" of his failure to reciprocate, that is, to make payment for his sin, which provides the basis for his "claim" upon the orphans he "saves."[42] Recast as a spiritual journey of an American bourgeois subject's self-redemption, the story of war orphans ends up no more than a background to the myth of reciprocity by equating the hero's "debt-guilt" with his right to claim ownership and self-redemption.

These heroes also resemble cold war subjects of drive, making themselves chosen and exercising higher freedom of self-conscious submission. If Admiral Tarrant in *The Bridges at Toko-ri* represents the "seeing-man," the desiring cold war subject "whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess,"[43] Brubaker is making himself seen and chosen by Tarrant, whose watchful eye is omnipresent like God's as his radio code name "Jehovah"[44] connotes. Faced with imminent death towards the end, Brubaker turns a non-choice into a choice and finally embraces the inevitable fate of having to fight as his willful choice of submission: "The wrong war in the wrong place. That's the one you're stuck with. […] You fight simply because you're here." By "making himself chosen" and presenting his participation in the war as a conscious individual's choice of the inevitable, he seeks to exempt himself and by extension, US involvement in the war, from any allegations of imperialism, claiming his innocence and at the same time the exceptional national identity.

Similarly, Dean Hess in *Battle Hymn* places himself in the position of "being seen" by racial/national others, eliciting an absolution of his guilt and an endorsement of his planetary project. Although Hess tries to console Maples (James Edwards), an African American pilot, who agonizes over having accidentally bombed a truck full of civilian refugees, his position is reversed from "seeing" to "being seen" as it is rather Maples that ends up consoling and redeeming Hess of his guilt over having killed German orphans: "Sir, it's the way of things, I guess. I figure it's all God's making and will." Hess also puts himself in the position of being seen by Lu Wan (Philip Ahn), an elderly Korean savant in the exotic traditional costume:

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42 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 97.

43 Pratt 7.

44 Rick Worland, "The Korean War Film as Family Melodrama: 'The Bridges at Toko-Ri' (1954)," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 19.3 (1999): 364.

Yes, war is evil. […] In times like these, can a man of good conscience ask others, 'Protect me. Kill for me. But do not ask me to stain my hands'? What must one do when a choice between two evils is all that is offered? To accept the lesser sometimes can be our only choice. *In order to save, at times we must destroy, and in destruction, create new life*. (italics added)

By equating "seeing" and "being seen" as a reciprocal relation and making himself seen by his national/racial others, he posits that he is innocent of malice, that violence is accidental, even inevitable, for the sake of liberation/progress—merely an exception to the rule of American exceptionalism.

These men prefigure the coming subject of drive, trapped in the self-enclosed loop of rationalization. By turning a non-choice to a choice, Brubaker claims his subjectivity; yet simultaneously presenting the choice he makes as fate, he relieves himself from any responsibility. Hess inverts his subjective position by making himself seen by the Other, but he reasserts his authority/subjectivity by having the Other speak on behalf of him and present his act of choice as the ineluctable force of teleology. For them, the gap constituting subjectivity is closed, and they look satisfied with the self-enclosed movement of reasoning, which finally frees them from infinite striving for meaning. In *Fixed Bayonets*, Rock (Gene Evans), another veteran sergeant like Zack, heralds a new era of professional soldiering: "What makes a guy stay in the army? I wish I knew the answer. […] Maybe it's *something that just happens to you*" (italics added). He chooses to fight war because he makes himself chosen by some ineluctable external force—a soldier invested in the autistic force of drive with no destination, finding nevertheless "a perverted pleasure provided by the very painful experience of repeatedly missing one's goal."[45] Like someone from Zack's platoon says, they are "going around in circles," lost in the thick fog of war.

Epilogue: The Angel of History in the Desert Storm

The Hurt Locker, Kathryn Bigelow's 2008 film about the Iraq War, is about a man's addiction to war. Following the epigraph: "The rush of battle is a potent and lethal addiction, for war is a drug,"[46] the film depicts the dra-

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45 Žižek, *Ticklish Subject* 360.
46 This quote is taken from reporter Chris Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003).

matic life of a soldier and bomb technician Will James (Jeremy Renner), the leader of a three-man bomb squad in 2004 Iraq. He seems to embody the usual attributes of heroism: he is dauntless, tenacious, fierce yet convivial and compassionate, and above all profoundly skilled at dismantling home-made bombs or IEDs (improvised explosive devices). But he turns out to enjoy just a little too much the act of defusing the bombs itself to the point that he seems completely unconcerned about the cause of his fighting or about the circumstances of the war.

Nevertheless, he appears attached to an Iraqi boy called "Beckham," hanging out near the military camp and peddling pornographic DVDs. His affection seems genuine when he, believing the boy has been murdered, risks his life to venture singlehandedly into a dangerous Iraqi neighborhood. But when the hero later encounters Beckham alive and well, he takes no account of him. The boy has been for him just another alibi to stoke his addiction, "an excuse for indulging his taste for danger."[47] This episode is "a holographic miniature"[48] of the film that is not really about the Iraq War. The Iraqi people are always situated on the fringes of the main action as bystanders on the streets and onlookers from balconies possibly hiding potential bombers—a butcher with cell phone as detonator, a man with a video camera maybe exchanging signals with men on a minaret, a man walking down a flight of stairs and disappearing down an alley, a taxi driver mutely refusing to leave the bomb site, all to no apparent meaning—and as snipers with their draped backs to the camera and closed-up eyes staring through cross-hairs. They are just part of the background, dematerialized specters inhabiting "the desymbolized wasteland that is Baghdad"[49]—the generalized Enemy threatening to rupture the screen.

The cold war subject of the Korean War, caught in the circular movement of finding-while-missing the meaning, is refigured here in Iraq as a postmodern subject of drive transcending the lack and finding satisfaction in the circular movement with no destination. This circular rationality was constructed in the early years of the cold war as illustrated by Hollywood films about Korea. It is almost uncanny to witness how the generic conventions of the Korean War film are replicated in this movie about Iraq. For

47 Richard Alleva, "War as Narcotic," *Commonweal* Sept. 11, 2009: 25.
48 Joshua Clover, "Allegory Bomb," *Film Quarterly* 63.2(Winter 2009/2010): 9.
49 David Denny, "On the Politics of Enjoyment: A Reading of *The Hurt Locker*," *Theory & Event* 14.1 (2011): n.p.

example, the typical Korean War hero—cynical about the meaning of fight-ing, yet seasoned veteran in the battlefield—is a precursor to nonchalant but profoundly professional Will James. Beckham, an Iraqi boy attached to James, is a familiar figure in Hollywood war films, yet he originates from Short Round, a Korean orphan that tags along the gruff hero Sergeant Zack in *The Steel Helmet*. Not only that, but the use of civilians, walking the thin line between harmless bystanders and masquerading insurgents, also began in Korean War films with communist guerrillas in civilian disguise blurring the friend/enemy divide, or rather all bundled up as the inscrutable Enemy/Other, just as someone from *The Hurt Locker* mutters, "They all look the same to me."

The similarities between the two wars go beyond such cinematic conven-tions. Just as the "nonwar" definition enabled the American participation in the Korean War, the United States invaded Iraq on 20 March 2003 by declaring that it was not so much a war between sovereign nations as a police action against illegal terrorists. As the initial celebration of Korea as a moral crusade turned soon into ugly guerrilla warfare, the supposedly "good" war to spread "freedom and democracy" almost immediately turned into a "quagmire" of Iraqi sands where the demarcations between civilians and insurgents proved extremely tenuous, and America's claim to "liberate" Iraqi people from Saddam Hussein's dictatorship was criticized as nothing but a thinly veiled excuse for its interests in natural resources and political influence in the region.

Just as the Korean War was crucial for the formation and development of the cold war, setting out the contours of a post-World War II world or-der, the recent wars in the Middle East have been the central playground in shaping a "new world order," as George H. W. Bush claimed in 1990,[50] out of the shifting post-cold war dynamics of power. The end of the cold war was hailed as the dawning of a new world order—an era of globalization which would supposedly bring together divergent cultures into a harmoni-ous whole. And this singular world would assume a capitalist and demo-cratic system, whose model is to be American. "Globalization is the United States," as Thomas Friedman proudly declared in neo-Wilsonian spirit.[51]

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50 According to Giles Gunn, the senior Bush used the phrase in a speech delivered to a joint session of Con-gress on September 11, 1990, immediately following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait the preceding month, which he titled "Toward a New World Order." Gunn 12.

51 Quoted in Steel 28. Francis Fukuyama's *End of History and the Last Man* is one of the most well-known

Although *The Hurt Locker* received six Oscars including best picture and near universal acclaim as the first serious film about the Iraq War, it is criticized for failing to question the real conditions of the war.[52] What captivates the audience is something other than the "real" of war. Rather it is the rush of anxious suspension and drama—in short, "the spectacular effect of the Real."[53] The gritty "reality" of Baghdad captured by the documentary-style hand held camera is the semblance of the effect of "real" war—"decaffeinated so that I might come down from my high and get a good night sleep."[54] The movie operates in a kind of closed loop where "experience is finally about nothing but itself,"[55] generating the sense of thrill in the very circular movement without ever reaching the goal or the "real" of the war. As David Denny argues, the film is fascinating because it resonates with "contemporary western culture" as well as "a certain modality of subjectivity"—namely, the hero Will James represents the postmodern subject of drive that is caught in the circular movement of repeatedly missing its desired object, but nevertheless finds satisfaction in the endless circling itself. And this subject of drive epitomizes the subject of consumer capitalism, "endlessly [circling] around and [gaining] satisfaction by way of the impossible objects and simulacra of consumption"; simultaneously, he is the subject of American new imperialism because the only way to fight the interminable war on terror is with "soldiers fully invested in the autistic, pulsating force of a drive that has no destination."[56]

The cold war subject, going around in circles in the Forgotten War, seems to have come full circle in the storm of the Iraqi desert. In making himself chosen or exercising higher freedom of willful submission, the cold war subject seemed to retain the semblance of self-consciousness in his cynicism about pervert reasoning. For the post-cold war/postmodern subject like James, there is no sarcasm, no sense of rupture. He is the "living em-

commentaries that hailed the collapse of communism as the end of History and liberal capitalism as the only viable system.

52 A number of critics have expressed reservations about the film's stance towards the Iraq War, calling it "apolitical," "evasive," and even downright "pro-war." See Clover, Denny, and a few others such as: A. O. Scott, "Soldiers on a Live Wire Between Peril and Protocol," *The New York Times* June 25, 2009; Carla Seaquist, "*The Hurt Locker*: Hollywood's Unsettling View of the Iraq War," *The Christian Science Monitor* 29 Mar 2010: 20; Robert Sklar, "Film Reviews: *The Hurt Locker*," *Cineaste* (Winter 2009): 55-56.

53 Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert* 10.

54 Denny, n.p.

55 Clover 9.

56 Denny, n.p.

bodiment of post-traumatic stress disorder," but he is "treated by the film as not disordered at all."[57] Severed from the signifying field of social meanings and floating in the eternal present, James has just "forgotten how to be its victim, and thus becomes a poster-boy of the Iraq war generation."[58] Perhaps it is about time that we face, with the angel of history, "one single catastrophe" rather than "a chain of events," which hurls the pile of debris at us from the past.[59]

The true choice is not the one between remembering and forgetting because traumas when not properly remembered are not simply erased, but their traces will haunt us into the present. They constitute the Real Thing that guarantees the consistency of our symbolic façade, but their fantasmatic specters simultaneously constitute the inconsistency of the symbolic itself. Naming the Korean War as "a forgotten war" not so much effaces the war's existence as it evokes its continuing presence in the form of a suppressed historical knowledge. Similarly, naming of the 9/11 bomb sites as Ground Zero recovers the memories of US bombings over Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and numerous other places including North Korean cities as well as Baghdad—evoking "the specter of nation-founding violence out of whose exclusion the fantasy of the Virgin Land had been organized."[60] The true choice we have to consider is not between remembering and forgetting or between "existence" and "nonexistence." For the "opposite of *existence* is not nonexistence," as Žižek aptly sums up, "but *insistence*: that which does not exist, continues to *insist*, striving towards existence."[61] In order to truly forget, we must first summon up the courage to remember properly.

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57 Barker 157.

58 Ibid.

59 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 257.

60 Pease, *New American Exceptionalism* 162.

61 Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert* 22.