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## "[H]earing beyond what we are able to hear: Reframing Grievable Lives in Thomas Pynchon's V. and Stephen Wright's Meditations in Green

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“[H]earing beyond what we are able to hear”: Reframing Grievable Lives in Thomas  
Pynchon’s *V.* and Stephen Wright’s *Meditations in Green*

by

F. Tyler Elrod

Under the Direction of Christopher Kocela, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2022

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how Thomas Pynchon and Stephen Wright challenge Western imperialism in *V.* and *Meditations in Green*, respectively. Both works, whose initial publication dates bookend the Vietnam war, are critical of the West's efforts to whitewash colonial violence: *V.* in Southwest Africa, and *Meditations in Green* in Vietnam. These criticisms call into question how historical events are (mis)remembered in the West, whose agencies have historically been recognized within Western discourses, and whose lives the West has traditionally considered grievable. Both novels work to undo these 'misrememberings' of history. Ultimately, in this undoing, both works can be read as rejecting American exceptionalism—defined by William V. Spanos as “an ontological interpretation of the American national identity” which feels a transcendental right to the domination of space. *V.* and *Meditations in Green* look to disrupt that identity.

INDEX WORDS: Imperialism, Colonialism, Thomas Pynchon, Stephen Wright, Grievable Lives, American exceptionalism, Vietnam War

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by

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May 2022

## **DEDICATION**

To G: Here's to spilling entire bags of peanut M&Ms in crowded movie theaters for the rest of our lives. Thank you, thank you, thank you for lending your ears, eyes, and thoughts to both my broader research and various iterations of this thesis over the last two years. Saying it too much is never enough: I love you. To my four-legged companions, Junior, Bobi, and Bug: you all made working from home (mostly) joyful.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Mom, Paul, Carol, and Ryan—you all have made this possible. To Chris, for being the advisor I needed—I owe my research, thinking, and writing to your guidance. To Mark, for your mentorship and guidance (and getting me hooked on *S: SDT*). To Dr. Schmidt, for always giving me hope. And to all the professors who helped shaped me as a student, scholar, and teacher: Drs. Renée Schatteman, Tanya Caldwell, LeeAnne Richardson, Melissa McLeod, Eddie Christie, and Michael Harker. A special thank you to Lori Howard for giving me the opportunity to work with her on such short notice. Finally, to Sung Park: I really couldn't have done this without your friendship.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines how Thomas Pynchon and Stephen Wright challenge Western imperialism in *V.* and *Meditations in Green*, respectively. Both works, whose initial dates of publication bookend the Vietnam war,<sup>1</sup> are critical of the West's efforts to whitewash colonial violence: *V.* in Southwest Africa, and *Meditations in Green* in Vietnam. These criticisms call into question how historical events are (mis)remembered in the West, whose agencies have historically been recognized within Western discourses, and whose lives the West has traditionally considered grievable. Both novels work to undo these 'misrememberings' of history. Ultimately, in this undoing, both works can be read as rejecting American exceptionalism—defined by William V. Spanos as “an ontological interpretation of the American national identity” which feels a transcendental right to the domination of space (188). *V.* and *Meditations in Green* look to disrupt that identity.

Chapter nine of Pynchon's *V.* details Germany's violent early-twentieth-century colonization of Southwest Africa—modern day Namibia—which resulted in the German empire systematically killing off “approximately 80,000 indigenous people”—most prominently, the Herero and Nama people—as well as stealing 57 million hectares<sup>2</sup> of land in Southwest Africa (“Herero and Nama Genocide”). David Olusoga and Casper Erichsen have described the Herero and Nama genocide as a sort of precursor to the holocaust—as an atrocity indicative of “a larger phenomenon: the emergence from Europe of a terrible strain of racial colonialism that viewed human history through the prism of a distorted form of Social Darwinism, and regarded the earth as a racial battlefield on which the ‘weak’ were destined to be vanquished” (Olusoga & Erichsen 361). Given this assertion, it is quite easy to see how the past actions of both colonial and Nazi

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<sup>1</sup> *V.* was published in 1963; *Meditations in Green* was published in 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Roughly 220,000 square miles. See: Olusoga and Erichsen 347.

Germany fit into the notion of earth as a “racial battlefield,” in which they have committed mass murder based on racialized categories. Further adding to this line of thought, some scholars have remarked on the similarities between colonial violence in Southwest Africa, fascist violence in Nazi Germany, and neoimperial violence in Vietnam—that is, there are stark similarities between colonial and fascist Germany and, more broadly, the Anglo-Saxon West.<sup>3</sup> In *Thomas Pynchon & the Dark Passages of History*, David Cowart points out that Pynchon “depicts fascism in its full etiology, including its source in a twisted millenarianism that the Protestant West has collectively embraced” (59). Olusoga and Erichsen’s connection between colonialism and fascism is important here, as it allows us imagine Cowart’s analysis of fascism in Pynchon’s work as also extending to Pynchon’s deployment of colonial German history. To Cowart, Pynchon isn’t attempting to “taunt” Germany for “playing host to fascism” (75). Rather, he sees Pynchon as pointing to the congeniality between German history and the rest of the West. This congeniality is evident in both the French-colonial conditions that led to the Anti-French Resistance War in Vietnam from 1946 to 1954 and the subsequent Vietnam War beginning in 1955, in which American-led imperial violence beginning in 1965 resulted in the death of approximately 2 million Vietnamese civilians, 1.1 million North Vietnamese soldiers, and 250,000 South Vietnamese soldiers. In short, violence and power has followed a trajectory from colonial Europe to the American empire.

Western discourses have often whitewashed these acts of colonial and imperial violence: until recently, both the genocide of the Herero people and Nama people from 1904-1907 and the Bondelswarts Rebellion in 1922 have largely been ignored by Western audiences, while popular

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in “The Politics of Literary Reinscription in Thomas Pynchon's *V.*,” Mark Sanders draws on a letter Pynchon wrote to Thomas F. Hirsch which claims that “South East Asia and Africa are roughly equivalent; the German campaign against the Herero is the same as Vietnam” (84).

U.S. film representations of the Vietnam War have produced a particularly disingenuous “regime of truth” that has served to embolden American exceptionalism (Storey 99). Literary fiction has often resolved to rebuke these regimes and remind readers of those histories from which they’ve been sheltered. More specifically, the postmodern turn has sought to teach us that “both history and fiction are discourses” which find meaning and facts not in specific events, but in the systems that have recorded history; the postmodern “reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge” (Hutcheon 89). In short, postmodernism puts to question what we remember and how we remember it.

I draw on theories of representation to explore trajectories of colonial and imperial violence within *V.* and *Meditations in Green*. Specifically, I examine the unstable narrative frameworks deployed by Pynchon and Wright, which problematize popularized Western histories and remind us of the “meaning making function of human constructs” by questioning who has traditionally been granted a voice in those constructs and whose life is considered grievable (Hutcheon 89).<sup>4</sup> Both authors have seemingly anticipated Judith Butler’s question of grievable lives, or simply put, “whose lives count as lives?” (*Precarious Life* 20). Thus, I hope to address several key questions related to the work these novels are doing: How do colonial and neoimperial criticisms in *V.* and *Meditations in Green* succeed in re-historicizing Western-enacted violence in both Southwest Africa and Vietnam for Western audiences? How do these novels disturb the hegemonic framing of history? How do their narratives challenge American exceptionalism? How does problematizing history-making in both novels force readers to encounter their own complicity in the historical process?

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<sup>4</sup> See: Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*.

I lean on several theorists as I approach these questions: Edward Said’s thinking in *Culture and Imperialism*; Spanos’s *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization: The Specter of Vietnam*, a genealogy of American exceptionalism; Judith Butler’s theories of framing and grievable lives in *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*; and John Storey’s chapter (“The Articulation of Memory and Desire: From Vietnam to the War in the Persian Gulf”) on memory industries in *Memory and Popular Film*. I map Judith Butler’s notion of grievable lives—first mentioned in *Precarious Life* and (somewhat) expanded on in *Frames of War*—to *V.* and *Meditations in Green*. Butler suggests an answer as to what Pynchon and Wright’s narrative techniques are accomplishing—specifically, that *V.* and *Meditations in Green* push readers into questioning “what makes for a grievable life” (*Precarious Life* 20). Butler’s critique is often centered on narrative, pointing to the ways narration and mediation have centered US Anglo perspectives while disenfranchising others. To Butler, a decentering of popular US perspectives is necessary to “hearing beyond what we are able to hear” (*Precarious Life* 18). Additionally, I use John Storey’s “The Articulation of Memory and Desire” from *Memory and Popular Film* to inform my writing on filmic mediation and representation in chapter two. Storey develops the notion of memory industries<sup>5</sup> within this piece, or those mnemonic artifacts which embody collective memory. Notably, Storey considers film and mass media to be the most powerful of these memory industries due to their reach and dispersion. Novels, given their form—which requires a reader participate in *making*, rather than witnessing, meaning—provide the opportunity to resist the incomplete collective memory created by film and mass media. In this resistance, fiction can serve as a site to re-remember the lives of those lost to colonial and imperial violence in Southwest Africa and Southeast Asia.

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<sup>5</sup> Storey’s arguments call to mind William Spanos’s notion that “an entire culture industry has made its priority to erase [Vietnam] from the American national memory” (14).

Spanos's *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization: The Specter of Vietnam*, a genealogy of American exceptionalism, underwrites all the above theoretical frameworks and allow me to more closely examine the effects that hegemonic discourse has on memory. This work will provide me with a language and history with which I might more effectively challenge both Western imperialism and American exceptionalism throughout my project. Spanos's work and influence will be ever-present throughout each thesis chapter, perhaps most notably in chapter two, as I apply his application of Louis Althusser's notion of the problematic to the US 'forgetting' of the Vietnam War.<sup>6</sup> In brief, Spanos offers an analysis of the historical conditions that have led to American 'exceptionalism,' or

an *ontological* interpretation of the American national identity whose origins lay in the American Puritans' belief that their exodus from the Old World and their 'errand in the wilderness' of the New was, on the prefigurative analogy of the Old Testament Israelites, divinely or transcendently ordained and which became hegemonic in the course of American history with its secularization as Manifest Destiny in the middle of nineteenth century and as the end of history and the advent of the New World Order at the end of the twentieth century. (Spanos 188)

Using his ontological interpretation of identity as a framework for thinking about American intervention abroad, Spanos critiques the ways in which the US has chosen to 'remember' (or, perhaps more accurately, misremember) the Vietnam War. That is, the narratives the US has told about the Vietnam War strategically forget the paradox between "its [America's] genocidal conduct of the war" and its self-described identity as a paradigm of freedom and sovereignty (Spanos 145). This paradox, Spanos argues, left a cultural cloud—a spectre—hovering over the

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<sup>6</sup> Please see page 29 herein.

American psyche that has obfuscated the insidious designs of more recent US imperialism and global violence.<sup>7</sup>

As one might infer from the frameworks described above, this thesis is mostly concerned with the implications of storytelling and narrative. How do these narratives (a frame narrative in the case of *V.*, and a fragmentation in the case of *Meditations in Green*) question the idea of an objective history? How do they highlight misrepresentation? How do they point out who is allowed to speak, and whose life—drawing from Judith Butler—is grievable? Spanos’s and Butler’s respective literary and social theories provide a foundational framework for my thesis; that is, they will allow me to address how the West records and remembers history, how such hegemonic recordings frame the ‘Other,’ and how Wright and Pynchon problematize the historical process.

In chapter one, I analyze the political implications of ‘Stencilization’ in Pynchon’s *V.*, specifically as it applies to the chapter, “Mondaugen’s Story.” Here Pynchon points to a Western narrativization of history as an explicitly imperialist endeavor. In short, mediating colonial histories has allowed for Western powers to whitewash history and, as Spanos has demonstrated, obfuscate future violence. I argue that Pynchon’s parodic frame story, presented as ‘Stencilization,’ is intended to bring readers to a closer understanding of their complicity in the historical process. That is to say, the narratives we create based on the stories we hear carry with them a “particular bundle of silences” (Trouillot 27).<sup>8</sup> *V.* does not give a voice to these silences

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<sup>7</sup> Specifically, Spanos points to America’s ‘war on terror’ and demonization of Islam.

<sup>8</sup> Trouillot’s work on the historical process finds itself examining “not what history is” but “how history works. For what history is changes with time and place or, better said, history reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives. What matters most are the process and conditions of production of such narratives” (Trouillot 25). As I will argue, Pynchon’s *V.* is *very* much interested in parsing out the process and conditions behind the production of historical narratives.

so much as highlight their existence—a strategy which, I argue, is the first step in deconstructing Western historical narratives.

In my second chapter, I examine Wright's *Meditations in Green* using Butler's grievable life theory in conjunction with Storey's notion of memory industries to highlight the ways in which Wright's novel problematizes the Western framing of the Vietnam War. Western discourses of the Vietnam War—supported by popular film and mass media—have done much to whitewash the nuanced and convoluted history of the war itself, creating what Storey has described as a disingenuous “regime of truth” (“The Articulation of Memory and Desire” 99). This regime of truth has often framed the conflict in such a way that it has determined for Western audiences whose lives are considered grievable; specifically, these discourses have privileged the mourning and memorialization of white lives over Vietnamese lives. *Meditations in Green* speaks back to this whitewashed history and attempts to act as a critical reframing of American discourse surrounding the Vietnam War by initially framing the narrative from an American G.I.'s imperialist point of view, then shattering that frame. This reconfiguring highlights the ways in which Griffin's role as a soldier and imperial subject has been framed and internalized. Like his perception of the jungle, Griffin's conditioning is totalizing; he cannot escape it. In making this point, the novel attempts to give readers an out-of-body experience of Griffin's ideological conditioning. In doing so, *Meditations in Green* problematizes popularized cultural imaginings and representations of the Vietnam War.

## 2 “FACTS ARE HISTORY, AND ONLY MEN HAVE HISTORIES”: THE POLITICS OF MEDIATION IN THOMAS PYNCHON’S *V.*

Thomas Pynchon’s representation of the Herero-Nama genocide in his 1963 novel, *V.*, is a contrapuntal<sup>9</sup> reading of Germany’s “short-lived foray into colonialism” in Southwest Africa (what is modern-day Namibia); rather than take German documentation of the genocide at its word, Pynchon tries to imagine the effect colonial violence had on the Herero and Nama people (Olusoga and Erichsen 11). As Ariel Saramandi has observed,<sup>10</sup> Pynchon astutely avoids appropriation of the Herero voice: instead, the novel confronts Germany’s colonial atrocities through the voice of a German engineer, Kurt Mondaugen, by way of a retelling by Herbert Stencil, an Englishman searching for the titular *V.* who has a habit of mapping his consciousness onto the stories of others. A pseudo-detective novel spanning some sixty years, *V.* is focalized through both Stencil and Benny Profane. The narrative is complex in both content and form—it includes time jumps, consciousness swaps, dream sequences—and any attempt to summarize the novel in service of nailing down any one ‘meaning’ would be an injustice. As such, this thesis chapter will focus on an analysis of Stencil and his penchant for appropriating the stories of others—an act dubbed ‘Stencilization’ in the novel. There are quite a few instances of ‘Stencilization’ throughout *V.*, and it is a process frequently framed as an imperialist endeavor. For instance, in Chapter 3, Stencil uses “veiled references” from his father’s (a British spy) journal to imagine the past murder of his father’s colleague, Porpentine, in British-occupied Egypt (Pynchon 63). In this imagining, which consists of a series of vignettes based almost

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<sup>9</sup> My usage of contrapuntal takes a cue from Edward Said, who has defined contrapuntal reading as “a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (*Cultural and Imperialism* 51). In other words, to read contrapuntally is to read both the experiences of the colonizer and the colonized as “play[ing] off one another” (*Cultural and Imperialism* 51).

<sup>10</sup> Page 13 herein.

solely on “impersonation and dream,” Stencil invents various personas (most of them native Egyptians) who bore some amount of witness to Porpentine’s spy games and eventual death (Pynchon 63). These vignettes have been described as “mere expansions of the stereotypes of imperialist fiction” (Cooley 312). Taking up scholarly assertions of imperialism in *V.*, I will examine another such instance of ‘Stencilization’ as an act of and commentary on Western imperialism: “Mondaugen’s Story.”

According to John Krafft and Luc Herman, “Dudley Eigenvalue’s often-quoted description of Mondaugen’s story as ‘Stencilized’ would be a later addition [to *V.*], perhaps made during the spring 1962 revision” (Herman and Krafft 263). Though a seemingly innocuous revision, I argue there is great value in this small addition. The very act of ‘Stencilizing’ a narrative, much like an actual stencil, creates an image using an intermediate object in which the shape or content being copied has been cut out. In the case of *V.*, “Mondaugen’s Story” has been stenciled through the intermediaries of Herr Foppl (a former German soldier who settled in Southwest Africa), Mondaugen, and Stencil. Conspicuously missing from this list are any actual Herero or Nama people. Ronald W. Cooley has described this ‘Stencilization’ as the “tyrannical imposition of one consciousness upon another’s experience—a process with clear imperialist overtones” (314). While I wouldn’t go so far as to describe Stencil as a tyrant, the process of Stencilization does represent a violent erasure. In fact, I would argue that banal and casual appropriation, a main feature of Stencilization, is precisely what makes the process so insidious. In this way, Pynchon has identified nonchalant imperial strategies for waging war and violence against nonwestern people at the sociocultural level.

Pynchon’s spotlight on cultural imperialism serves a dual purpose: on one hand, it reveals the limits of historical documentation and problematizes the idea of objective historical

knowledge;<sup>11</sup> on the other, *V.*—written during the early stages of the Vietnam War—seems to both recognize and warn against the neoimperial white-washing of historical events. In so doing, Pynchon anticipates Judith Butler’s proposal to decenter Western narratives of supremacy, which they portrayed as a result of US efforts to obfuscate global violence against people of middle eastern descent in the wake of September 11, 2001. In *V.*, Pynchon provided Vietnam-era readers with a timely insight into the trajectory of colonial discourse and subjugated histories—a trajectory that, I argue by way of Butler and Spanos, can be traced from Southwest Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through misrepresentations of the Vietnam war in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In tracking down such misrepresentations, contemporary readers might reimagine their relationship to harmful Western historicizations of colonial and neoimperial endeavors—both past and present—in ways that subvert the American exceptionalist ethos defined by Spanos in the introduction to this thesis.

## 2.1 “What’s Going on in the World these Days”

Chapter 9 of *V.*, “Mondaugen’s Story,” is a frame narrative within a frame narrative within a frame narrative.<sup>12</sup> The story, which comes to readers by way of Stencil by way of Mondaugen by way of Foppl, details colonial violence committed against the Bondelswarts (a Nama ethnic group) in 1922.<sup>13</sup> Pynchon uses this opportunity to highlight the genocide of the Herero and Nama people committed by colonial Germany from 1904 to 1907, in which General Lothar von Trotha was brought in to repress “the Great Rebellion” (Pynchon 245). Historically, rebellion has been the word used by colonial Western powers to describe violent reactions of formerly

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<sup>11</sup> Based on Linda Hutcheon’s work in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. Quoted on pg. 3 herein.

<sup>12</sup> And, in typical Pynchon fashion, includes a dream sequence.

<sup>13</sup> Though Stencil tells the story within the novel, I will attribute the tale to Mondaugen throughout this chapter.

colonized people to colonizers. That is to say, rebellion strikes me as the language of the colonizer. Pynchon seems attuned to colonial discourse, with Mondaugen remarking that “every time a Bondel speaks back to you people [whites in Southwest Africa], it’s rebellion” (232). The attention to a sensitivity over the word ‘rebellion’ here reveals a European weaponization of the word: whites in Southwest Africa—across a period of only 15 years—rely on the word as a justification for violence against indigenous Africans, despite the European colonizers being responsible for the root cause of unrest in the region. Pynchon’s European colonizers are fully aware of their complicity. Willem van Wijk, “a minor extremity of the Administration in Windhoek,” accuses Mondaugen of being “under certain delusions about the civil service. History, the proverb says, is made at night. The European civil servant normally sleeps at night. What waits in his IN basket to confront him at nine in the morning is history. He doesn’t fight it, he tries to coexist with it” (229; 233). Essentially, van Wijk acknowledges here that a European government enforcing European laws over indigenous Africans was bound to fail; there is no fighting—no prevention of—unrest. Rather, there is only a detached coexistence. Responsibility would require Pynchon’s European subjects to prevent violence and unrest by leaving Southwest Africa or speaking out against the government’s actions. Instead, van Wijk espouses a *laissez-faire* approach to settler colonialism that—it would seem—enables European reactionary violence.

Throughout the chapter, Mondaugen spotlights colonial violence by detailing anecdotes and numbers from von Trotha’s early 20<sup>th</sup> century “‘Vernichtungs Befehl,’<sup>14</sup> whereby the German forces were ordered to exterminate systematically every Herero man, woman and child they could find. He was about 80 percent successful” (Pynchon 245). Mondaugen asserts that

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<sup>14</sup> Annihilation order.

64,870 Herero were killed during this period. Mondaugen's account, despite being fictional, is fairly historically accurate. Official accounts detail 80,000 Herero deaths as a result of Germany's 'annihilation order,' a staggering 80% of the Herero people.<sup>15</sup> The sources for Pynchon's fictional retelling of the Herero-Nama genocide are detailed in Mark Sanders's essay, "The Politics of Literary Reinscription in Thomas Pynchon's *V*." Here Sanders discusses in great detail some of the historical documents from which Pynchon pulled his information, including "a British propaganda pamphlet" and *Report on the Natives of South-West Africa and their Treatment by Germany*,<sup>16</sup> which served as the main source for "Mondaugen's Story" (82). As Sanders points out, Pynchon's reliance on ethnographic sources leads to his Herero characters becoming "representative Africans" who can only ever serve as stand-ins for real people with their own historical truths (82).

Pynchon, recognizing these difficulties, turns to a frame narrative. In so doing, Pynchon doesn't include a Herero perspective of the Herero genocide and instead weaves their history into an Englishman's yarn about a German engineer's experience in Southwest Africa during the Bondelswarts rebellion in 1922. Mondaugen's story, itself containing Foppl's story, is mediated by way of Stencil. This mediation opens the piece up to questions about who is allowed to speak and share their own stories. These questions, I suggest, get to the heart of what it means to be 'Stencilized,' or to have one's story narrativized<sup>17</sup> by another. The Herero-Nama genocide, thus mediated through three Western, imperial characters, succumbs to an imperialist framing within *V*. Here my definition of imperialist framing is inspired by the work of Said, who has previously

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<sup>15</sup> Which remain "difficult to confirm" due to improper burials and incomplete records ("Herero and Nama Genocide").

<sup>16</sup> Published in 1918, some four years before the Bondelswarts rebellion in 1922.

<sup>17</sup> The distinction between narrated and narrativized here is an important one: to narrativize implies a more active agency in the storytelling process. In other words, to narrativize an account requires interpretation. The West often narrativizes non-Western stories in service of *creating*, rather than accounting, history.

claimed that there is no way of “apprehending the world from within American culture (with a whole history of exterminism and incorporation behind it) without also apprehending the imperial contest itself” (*Cultural and Imperialism* 56). In other words, Pynchon’s decision to mediate African genocide through several Western lenses makes its telling and retelling an explicitly imperialist endeavor—with each character surely layering their own version of history, each with its own set of biases and revisions, over the initial historical event. All of this is to say, the Western mediations of “Mondaugen’s Story” further detach the Herero and Nama people and their own stories from Pynchon’s historicization.

However, Pynchon is attuned to the irony behind ‘Stencilizing’ Mondaugen’s story, which, of course, is comprised of more than Mondaugen’s story. Chapter 9 ends with Mondaugen being unable to understand the “Hottentot”<sup>18</sup> dialect of a Bondelswarts man who offers Mondaugen a ride on the back of his donkey when he finds Mondaugen travelling the road alone (Pynchon 279). To my mind, this sequence is crucial in exhibiting Pynchon’s retelling of Southwestern Africa’s history. As Saramandi points out in “Thomas Pynchon Shows Us How White Writers Can Avoid Appropriation,” Pynchon explicitly avoids colonizing the Herero trauma. That is, Pynchon refuses to speak *for* the Herero or Bondelswarts or Nama peoples. Instead, he is careful to make it quite clear that this is very much a German’s “detached voice” that’s been “Stencilized,” one belonging to a man who cannot understand his African savior’s dialect (Saramandi, “Thomas Pynchon Shows Us”; Pynchon 228). This breakdown in communication between Mondaugen and the rider demonstrates Pynchon’s admission that a white man trying to understand the colonial African experience is a fool’s errand. On a more practical level, it reveals

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<sup>18</sup> This is a derogatory term that was used to describe non-Bantu speaking indigenous South Africans; it is now considered offensive. Their preferred names are Khoi, Khoekhoe (previously Khoikhoi), or Khoisan. Pynchon was most likely referring to the Nama people here, as they were called ‘Hottentot’ by much of Europe (Olusoga and Erichsen 22)

Mondaugen's lack of effort in accepting the native African way of knowing, seeing and speaking. The African language quite literally means nothing to Mondaugen—and so the Bondelswarts man must travel with two asses. This passage acts as a reflection on one tactic colonial powers use to assert hegemonic power over colonized peoples; as Frantz Fanon put it, “To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 25). Thus to deny a language is to assert a (false) notion of cultural dominance.

It might be argued, based on Said's earlier-referenced critique of the imperialist perspective, that Pynchon's version of the Herero genocide is itself an imperial endeavor.<sup>19</sup> As Cooley points out, and as this chapter has argued, imperialist narrative “silences the culture it purports to explore” by centering a Eurocentric perspective and marginalizing indigenous people who are the “very center of life” in their native lands (311-312). Pynchon certainly straddles this line: his fictional violence, though drawn from real-world instances, is borderline voyeuristic. His text runs the risk of further colonizing the Herero and Nama people not because it totally erases their experience but because it almost positions their genocide as torture porn rather than human experience.

However, I believe Pynchon's decision to mediate the story through Mondaugen et. al is so over-the-top that it succeeds in caricaturizing popular Western historicizations of colonial atrocities while forcing readers to recognize their position in the historical process. Mondaugen explicitly questions his role as a voyeur during the siege party, notably when confronted with violence against indigenous Africans as they are hung, ridden like horses, and beaten with sjamboks by those attending the 1922 siege party (Pynchon 244; 265; 278). Further, the chapter closes with the party watching a small, poorly armed group of Africans trying to defend

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<sup>19</sup> Further, this very chapter may be accused of being an imperial endeavor.

themselves against white colonizers: “Such was their [the siege party] elevation that they could see everything spread out in a panorama, as if for their amusement” (Pynchon 275). Mondaugen never finds the courage to confront the siege party’s acts of violence. His failure to act mirrors van Wijk’s theories on eschewing responsibility for history; Mondaugen himself acknowledges that his voyeurism is determined “purely by events seen, and not by any deliberate choice” (Pynchon 275). Mondaugen’s passivity and the question over whether he has been a “successful” voyeur in the face of debauchery and violence also begs questions of his complicity in these occurrences (Pynchon 258). This complicity is extended to the reader, who has, in a way, been entangled in the historicization of the Herero-Nama genocide by reading the novel. Said’s criticism in *Culture and Imperialism* seems aimed at those who “exonerate” culture from its “entanglements with power” (57). Pynchon’s usage of ‘Stencilization,’ a parodic narrative technique, while forcing readers to engage with an oft-ignored history displays a keen awareness of the bonds that knot together culture and imperialism. Further, Pynchon goes to great lengths to retell both the Bondelswarts Rebellion and Herero Genocide without colonizing an African voice. He succeeds in doing so by adopting a cold, detached narrative style from the historical documents in which he initially learned of the Herero-Nama genocide. The result is writing that reads in part like the German and British reports referenced in Sanders’s piece. Other sections of Pynchon’s chapter oscillate in and out of Mondaugen’s narrative consciousness during a fever dream in which he imagines himself committing atrocities as Foppl during the Herero genocide. This sets “Mondaugen’s Story” up as a frame story with an embedded dream narrative. In so doing, readers are both asked to question the reliability of Western narratives, as well as face a disgusting history that is rarely referenced.

As I have argued, *V.* very much served as an explicit warning against Western narrativization and whitewashing of history. In a letter written to then graduate student Thomas F. Hirsch in January 1969, Pynchon described the prospect of a “full scale book”<sup>20</sup> on the Herero-Nama genocide as “vitally important” to an understanding of “what’s going on in the world these days” (Seed 242). Pynchon drew parallels between the Vietnam War and Germany’s colonial violence in Southwest Africa: “I don’t like to use the word but I think what went on back in Südwest is archtypical [sic] of every clash between the west and non-west, clashes that are still going on right now in South East Asia” (Seed 242). David Cowart’s *Thomas Pynchon & the Dark Passages of History* elucidates Pynchon’s comparisons between the United States and colonial Germany. To Cowart, Pynchon’s writing is itself a warning that Germany’s fascist past is “profoundly congenial” to “Western and especially Anglo-Saxon culture” (75). Cowart dedicates much time in “*Streben nach dem Unendlichen: Germany and German Culture in Pynchon’s Early Work*” to exploring the protestant, Anglo-Saxon traces between colonial Germany and America—especially in regard to racism and fascism. Cowart’s analysis provides a lens through which I will examine the “siege party” in *V.* To my mind, holing up in a fortress and calling it a party illustrates that whites did not take the threat of African violence seriously; they were content with partying and living off their riches while black men died outside their gates. What’s more, the scene is described by both Pynchon and Cowart as being a parodic “burlesque” of the League of Nations (Cowart 81).

This parody is a direct criticism of colonial powers by Pynchon; that is, Pynchon is asserting what *V.*, who—as Cowart has argued—represents “an embodiment of the *Zeitgeist*, an emblem of the age’s love affair with carnage,” echoes later in the novel in conversation with

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<sup>20</sup> See *The Kaiser’s Holocaust* by Olusoga and Erichsen.

Sidney Stencil:<sup>21</sup> “we are on the same side” (Coward 45; Pynchon 487). Pynchon is challenging history by intimating that all colonial powers are culpable for the rise of fascism, despite how history has remembered them. He does so by examining the barbaric violence committed against the Herero and Nama people by Foppl and an imagined league of nations, which mirrors—but does not nearly scratch the surface of—real world violence conducted by Germans across Southwest Africa. The following section will discuss and analyze how these trajectories of violence force readers to recognize their complicity in historicization, in turn anticipating Butler’s proposals to decenter Western narratives.

## 2.2 Mediating “Mondaugen’s” Story

In *Precarious Life*, Butler theorizes grief not as “a cry for war,” but as a powerful tool towards understanding our lives as entangled with the lives of others—in other words, as a power tool toward thwarting violence (XII). However, Butler’s analysis first focuses on identifying how, to this point, we have come to privilege the US perspective only. They point to dehumanization and obfuscation as a strategy for privileging Anglocentric narratives that render the lives of nonwhite people invisible. To Butler, this dehumanization often comes as a result of misrepresentation or no representation at all: “the violence that we [the United States] inflict on others is only—and always—selectively brought into public view” (*Precarious Life* 39). This tactic of underreporting (i.e., *framing*) is, more broadly, congenial with—and perhaps part and parcel of—imperialism.

For instance, the violence committed by colonial Germany in Southwest Africa has, until recently, been woefully ignored. Germany refused to officially acknowledge the act as genocide

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<sup>21</sup> Please note that Sidney is Herbert Stencil’s father. Further references to Sidney will use his full name.

until May 2021. Even then, Germany's language has been careful; as opposed to reparations, Germany is using the words "development aid" to describe the over €1.1 billion they plan to pay the Namibian government for "infrastructure" over the next thirty years (McGreevy). In an interview with the BBC, Laidlaw Peringanda, chairman of the Namibian Genocide Association, has "insisted that Germany should buy back ancestral lands": "People are getting impatient, especially the minority black people who [don't] have a piece of land" ("Germany officially recognises colonial-era Namibia genocide"). In June 2021, Namibian Vice President Nangolo Mbumba claimed that "No amount of money in any currency can truly compensate the life of a human being" (qtd. in "Germany colonial-era genocide reparations offer not enough – Namibia vice president"). Therein lies the problem that Butler identifies: the West's conception of "whose lives count as lives" has historically excluded nonwestern, nonwhite peoples (*Precarious Life* 20). This exclusion and framing—brought about through carefully selected language and representation, as demonstrated by Germany's occlusion of the word 'reparations' from their payments to the Namibian government—excuses imperial, Western violence against others. Pynchon anticipated this and sought to forewarn Western readers of the dangers inherent to misrepresentation and the dehumanization of human beings, which often relegates persons from subject to object.

The fetishization of objects and a move away from the subject is a general theme in *V*. For instance, early on the narrator through whom most of the 'narrative' is focalized, Benny Profane, claims that "love for an object" was "new to him," implying a cultural turn from subject to object (Pynchon 23). We might also look to Rachel's pseudo-sexual relationship with her car or *V*'s posthuman, cyborg-like body modifications as further examples of what Fausto Maijstral calls "a non-humanity which was the most real state of affairs" (Pynchon 317). Much scholarship

has been written on Pynchon's decision to privilege objects in *V.*; this chapter does not intend to restate those arguments, but rather uses them as a baseline for understanding how Foppl and the parodic league of nations treats black Africans in "Mondaugen's Story."<sup>22</sup> Colonialism is itself a process whereby people are conceptualized as objects; the colonizers commodify indigenous people by framing them as material goods in the service of increasing capital. In turn, this process of dehumanization and detachment makes it easier for the colonizer to rationalize<sup>23</sup> violence; it allows the colonizer to privilege their own desires at the cost of human lives.

Pynchon demonstrates these theories of violence and colonization through Foppl, a wealthy farmer in Southwest Africa and former German soldier. Foppl is introduced in Mondaugen's story as the Bondelswarts Rebellion begins in 1922; his house is described as "the best fortress" in the region, and he invites his neighbors to wait out the war in his home (Pynchon 234). Comprised of English, Dutch, Italian, Austrian, Belgian, French, Russian, Spanish and "one Pole," the "siege party" is described by Foppl as "creating the appearance of a tiny European Enclave or League of Nations" (Pynchon 235). This siege party is meant to represent both the active and passive violence carried out by Europeans against nonwhite people, with Foppl serving as the "siege party's demon" (Pynchon 255). Previously an army recruit under von Trotha, "it didn't take him long to find out how much he enjoyed it all," with 'all' in this instance being the systematic extermination of the Herero and Nama peoples (Pynchon 245). Describing the extermination of ethnic groups as 'all' trivializes genocide and privileges an anglocentric desire to conduct violent acts against the Herero and Nama peoples. Foppl takes

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<sup>22</sup> Please see: Ronald W. Cooley's "THE HOTHOUSE OR THE STREET: IMPERIALISM AND NARRATIVE IN PYNCHON'S *V.*"; Stefan Mattesich's "Imperium, Misogyny, and Postmodern Parody in Thomas Pynchon's *V.*"; and Christopher Breu's "Vital Objects: Materiality and Biopolitics in Thomas Pynchon's *V.*" from his book *Insistence of the Material: Literature in the Age of Biopolitics*.

<sup>23</sup> Which, of course, is ironic given how mass violence committed by governments against whole groups of people is completely lacking in rationality. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.

sadistic pleasure in bringing physical and mental anguish to indigenous African peoples; he explains that he would find wounded Herero people by the side of the road and, not wanting to “waste the ammunition,” would bayonet or hang them (Pynchon 245). Perturbed by Foppl’s anecdotes, the bloodthirsty violence of 1904 invades Mondaugen’s fever dreams. Oscillating between 1904 and 1922, Mondaugen (possibly inhabiting a form of Foppl’s consciousness) imagines a “glorious day” wherein a group of German soldiers tortures a chained Herero man before clubbing “him to death with the butts of their rifles” and tossing his body behind a rock “for the vultures and flies” (Pynchon 263). This leads the narrative consciousness (Pynchon here is very careful to blur the boundaries separating Mondaugen and Foppl)<sup>24</sup> to rationalize violence against the Herero people:

Usually the most you felt was annoyance; the kind of annoyance you have for an insect that’s buzzed around you for too long. You have to obliterate its life, and the physical effort, the obviousness of the act, the knowledge that this is only one unit in a seemingly infinite series, that killing this one won’t end it, won’t relieve you from having to kill more tomorrow, and the day after, and on, and on...the futility of it irritates you and so to each individual act you bring, something of the savagery of military boredom, which as any trooper knows is mighty indeed. (Pynchon 263-64)

The move from human to bug and individual subject to invasive, ‘annoying’ whole here demonstrates Pynchon’s anticipation of the imperialist dehumanizing project. By framing the Herero and Nama peoples as an “infinite series” of insects whose killing only requires more killing, Pynchon reveals Germany’s refusal to acknowledge the Herero or Nama people as human.

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<sup>24</sup> Pynchon 255.

Pynchon's treatment of violence, though fictional, is steeped in historical research. Take for instance the "old woman digging wild onions" who appears shortly after Foppl's conflation of the Hereros and insects (264). The woman, who is murdered on the spot, thanks her killer for ending her life. As Sanders points out, Pynchon took this passage—almost verbatim—from a historical account in *Report on the Natives*. Sanders makes a compelling case that Pynchon's fictionalization—which necessitates interpretation—possibly "stages the woman in our theater, making of her a representative other who will fit into all the stories, both critical and otherwise, with which we comfort ourselves" (95). This critique supports my earlier postulation that *V.* runs the risk of succumbing to the very imperial discourse it seeks to criticize. While I do recognize the validity of Sanders's argument, I also wonder how many readers actually find comfort in the old woman's words—"I thank you"—however empowering their representation might be (Pynchon 264). In light of the layers of mediation and self-consciousness that Pynchon highlights in "Mondaugen's Story," I propose that Pynchon's appropriation of this woman's allegedly 'real' words and representation in *V.* produces not comfort but concern. As I have argued, "Mondaugen's Story" very much brings readers to an awareness of their complicity in the historical process. If, as readers, we are complicit in the historicization of the old woman's story from *Report on the Natives*, it follows that we are also complicit in the kinds of historicization that render people as objects—representations instead of humanity. Yes, Pynchon toes the line—but he brings his readers with him to the edge.

There is a certain *discomfort* in recognizing one's own proximity to the imperial edge. It is precisely in this discomfort that, I believe, Pynchon's ideology strikes close to Butler's. In *Precarious Life*, Butler proposes we try and hear "beyond what we are able to hear" (18). They

outline a need for “collective responsibility”<sup>25</sup> as part of an “international community based on a commitment to equality and non-violent cooperation” (*Precarious Life* 17). For Butler, the way to achieve this endeavor is through a “decentering” of Western [American] supremacy.

Similarly, *V.* decenters supremacy—or exceptionalism—by making readers hyperaware of their complicity in the imperial project. This awareness puts the onus of responsibility on readers of *V.*

In other words, readers are to encounter and then reject van Wijk’s theory that the Western subject is a bystander who can only ever react to history; we are, in fact, completely and totally entangled in the historical process. This certainly isn’t to suggest that readers undertake neoimperial mission trips to faraway lands, as such an endeavor only reinforces the American exceptionalist ethos. It is, however, to suggest—following Butler’s suggested responses to 9/11—that the Western subject must be open to “narration that decenters us from our supremacy” (*Precarious Life* 18). While *V.* certainly does not decenter the Western mediator, it does caricaturize such a mediator. In doing so, Pynchon asks readers to recognize the absurdities of the historical process—of ‘making’ history. This recognition is the first step in destabilizing totalizing Western narratives.

### 2.3 Conclusion

As Butler has pointed out, mediation often determines whose lives are seen as lives.

Pynchon was especially attuned to this, choosing to mediate the Herero-Nama genocide through four Western storytellers and calling it “Mondaugen’s Story.” Pynchon’s ironic approach to

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<sup>25</sup> Prominent German historian Jürgen Zimmerer has also spoken of bearing responsibility for past violence, notably as it pertains to the Herero-Nama genocide. See page 49 herein. Please also see “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors,” wherein Said asserts that US citizens have a responsibility for “what goes on between the United States and the rest of the world” (215). Said’s criticism isn’t to say Americans should take up the mantle of exceptionalism; rather, that Americans should understand their entanglements with other cultures and make an effort to acknowledge—rather than marginalize—narratives outside the West.

historicization points to his belief in history as a narrative rather than an objective truth; in turn, the questions Pynchon's narrative asks of history destabilize what readers think they know about history and storytelling. As noted in his letter to Hirsch, Pynchon believes the Herero-Nama genocide in Southwest Africa can be likened to the US war in Vietnam. As such, his focus on 'Stencilizing' narratives can be read as a warning about imperialist propaganda techniques meant to dehumanize the Western 'enemy' and privilege a totalizing Anglocentric discourse. In this way, readers might map the violence and ideology Pynchon critiques onto the Vietnam War and Western imperialism more generally.

Pynchon also anticipates Butler's points on visibility and representation in *Precarious Life*. Written as a response to violence against middle eastern lives in the wake of 9/11, Butler identifies visual images from the Vietnam War as an example of successfully galvanizing the public *against* US-led violence:

In the Vietnam War, it was the pictures of the children burning and dying from napalm that brought the US public to a sense of shock, outrage, remorse, and grief. These were precisely pictures we *were not supposed to see*, and they disrupted the visual field and the entire sense of public identity that was built upon that field. (*Precarious Life* 150, emphasis added)

*V.* was published two years before the US officially waged war in Vietnam. The images of which Butler speaks weren't yet released to the public, meaning *V.* was written and published at a time *before* the disruption of public identity by images that were later rendered invisible by history's narratives after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and what Spanos has referred to as "a virtually systematic forgetting of [the Vietnam War's] corrosive reality" (Spanos 145).

The graphic violence and genocide Pynchon describes in Southwest Africa was perhaps—like the images of children burning about which Butler speaks—his attempt at disrupting what Butler calls “public identity.” However, knowing his images could only ever be representations, Pynchon focalized his stories through intermediaries. This decision foregrounds the historical process by pointing to its absurdities, forcing readers to reckon with their complicity in the creation of historical narratives. Pynchon’s criticisms of Western historicization also anticipated the cultural forgetting Spanos points to in *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization*. Similarly, Stephen Wright anticipated the US cultural forgetting of Vietnam in his 1983 novel, *Meditations in Green*.

Published at the opposite end of the Vietnam War, Wright warns against whitewashing of US violence through Hollywood’s mediation and narrativization of events. Like Pynchon with “Mondaugen’s Story,” the cinematic world against which Wright’s novel seems to position itself is guilty of appearing as a narrow discourse constructed using only the Western perspective: it tells an exclusionary history. As Hutcheon has pointed out, history is not objective. There are an array of other voices and perspectives. Like *V.*, *Meditations in Green* often avoids humanizing colonized people (through a lack of speaking roles or otherwise) in an ironic way. Through the stencilized and fragmented narratives, readers are able to see that Western historical narratives often silence the voices of subjugated people by “excluding one or another version of history” (“Representing the Colonized” 221). I explore Wright’s critique in the following chapter.

### 3 BRINGING DOWN THE HOUSE: SUBVERTING COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN STEPHEN WRIGHT'S *MEDITATIONS IN GREEN*

References to the Vietnam War often conjure familiar images in the minds of United States citizens: stories of soldiers who succumb to madness when faced with the jungle, helicopters soaring to Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Run through the Jungle," and bullets screaming from the trees at American<sup>26</sup> G.I.s as if the jungle itself were conducting a surprise attack. Western discourses of the Vietnam War—pushed by popular film and mass media—have done much to revise and whitewash the nuanced, convoluted history of the war itself. Stephen Wright's 1983 novel, *Meditations in Green*, speaks back to this revisionist history: at its most ambitious, it attempts to act as a critical reframing of Western representations of the Vietnam War by disrupting its own American imperialist framing of Vietnam and its people. I explore how *Meditations in Green* attempts this reframing by putting it into conversation with John Storey's "The Articulation of Memory and Desire: From Vietnam to the War in the Persian Gulf," Judith Butler's *Precarious Life and Frames of War*, and William V. Spanos's *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization: The Specter of Vietnam*.<sup>27</sup> First, I map Storey's notion of "Hollywood's Vietnam" onto *Meditations in Green* as a means of establishing film and media as a major influence on American discourses of Vietnam; that is, I examine the impact film has on how people in the United States collectively (mis)remember Vietnam. Further, I explore the idea that American filmic representations of Vietnam privileges an American (and often Anglocentric) perspective while silencing others. This chapter then analyzes *Meditations in Green* to explore how the framing involved in being a soldier might reflect a larger cultural

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<sup>26</sup> Please note that the usage of "American" in this essay refers to the United States.

<sup>27</sup> Both Butler and Spanos lean heavily on Michel Foucault's sociocultural theories. As such, one might also be able to conduct a Foucauldian reading of my arguments here.

framing that anticipates both Butler's grievable lives theory and Spanos's assertion that American cultural memory obliterates memories of Vietnam.

*Meditations in Green* is focalized through the consciousness of Specialist 4 James Griffin, a drug-addled soldier in the US 1069th Intelligence Group. While the narrative oscillates between depictions of Vietnam and Griffin's post-war life stateside, most of the novel centers on the exploits of the 1069th, with Griffin serving as the intermediary for their stories. This is fitting, as Griffin's role as a soldier is to scan aerial images of the Vietnamese jungle for enemy troops. Put simply, Griffin mediates images—a theme that finds itself front and center in *Meditations in Green*. The novel, appropriately referred to as a "collage" in its back-page blurb, specifically challenges the power of film in driving discourse. In doing so, *Meditations in Green* decenters Western constructions of Vietnam, refusing to accept what Storey has called Hollywood's "regime of truth"<sup>28</sup> surrounding the Vietnam War (99).

In "The Articulation of Memory and Desire: From Vietnam to the War in the Persian Gulf," Storey argues that representations of Vietnam in Hollywood (Hollywood's Vietnam) were used to create a revisionist account of the war. In doing so, Hollywood's Vietnam altered the discourse in such a way that it has framed contemporary memories of the Vietnam War from a purely Western point of view. According to Storey, "the political and historical revisionism of the 1980s produced a mythology about why the US had been defeated in Vietnam. Moreover, it was a mythology that had more to do with preparing for the future than it ever had to do with explaining the past" (100). This revisionism conducted by Hollywood's Vietnam, Storey argues, helped to create a disingenuous memory of the war. Further, this disingenuous memory

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<sup>28</sup> Storey borrows the term from Michel Foucault and deploys it in much the same way—that is, Hollywood is a power structure that produces certain knowledges and truths. Storey asserts that Hollywood's regime of truth has refused whole accounts of the Vietnam War and produced a knowledge wherein the United States was the victim. This essay takes up that argument.

multiplied into disingenuous *memories*, as they became widely accepted as truth within American discourse and “collective memory” (Storey 101). Storey adapts French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs’s concept of collective memory to make his argument, touching on four overlapping claims of Halbwach’s theory. Of these claims, Storey’s fourth appropriation is most relevant to this essay: “Collective memory is embodied in mnemonic artefacts, forms of commemoration such as shrines, statues, war memorials and so on” (Storey 104). Storey goes on to expand Halbwach’s list by including “memory industries” among the “mnemonic artefacts” that reify memory; while memorials and museums can certainly be considered memory industries, Storey is quite clear that he very much considers mass media a large (if not the largest) producer of memories. To Storey, “these representations do not embody memory as such, they embody the materials for memory; they provide the materials from which ‘collective memory’ can be made” (Storey 104). Storey’s belief in the totalizing power of Vietnam War cinema is not unfounded: Francis Ford Coppola once famously claimed his film, *Apocalypse Now*, was more than a Vietnam War Film—that “it is Vietnam” (qtd. in Woodman 99). Coppola’s claims of Hollywood-as-History support Storey’s assertion that Hollywood’s Vietnam has produced a harmful collective Western truth about the Vietnam War.

Storey resists popularized Western truths by pointing out those histories Hollywood’s Vietnam seemed to forget: counterculture and the anti-war movement, mutinies, discrepancies in the death toll of women and people of color, and the extent of the US firepower deployed in Vietnam.<sup>29</sup> I would add to this list the overwhelming number of Vietnamese casualties versus the amount of US dead: approximately 2 million Vietnamese civilians, 1.1 million North Vietnamese

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<sup>29</sup> For instance, the casualty numbers for Latinos. In his 1970 study, “Mexican-American Casualties in Vietnam,” political scientist Ralph Guzmán estimated that, despite making up only 11.9% of the population, Latinos accounted for 19.4% of all US casualties during the Vietnam War (“Soldiers in la Guerra”).

soldiers, 250,000 South Vietnamese soldiers died in the Vietnam War, compared to 58,000 US soldiers (Ronald H. Spector, “Vietnam War”). As Storey points out, these realities are all too often forgotten by memory industries. These memory industries—most notably, film—can only ever be a representation of original events. An inaccurate or incomplete representation risks the loss of historical fact. Hollywood’s Vietnam can be seen as the loss of the local in lieu of a totalizing message. If we understand a film as a language—that is, as made of signs—trying to communicate a message to its viewers, we might then see this American cultural ‘forgetting’ or “obliteration”<sup>30</sup> of Vietnam War memories, as Storey and Spanos put it, as a disappearance of the original historical moment. In this disappearance, the totalizing message becomes normalized and the representation becomes ideology. Michel Foucault once declared that discourse would become “the vehicle of the law” (112). Similarly, as Storey has established, film and popular culture played a massive role in allowing discourse to become the vehicle of American historical revisionism as it pertained to the Vietnam War.

In *Meditations in Green*, Wright writes with an awareness of the power filmic images and framed perspectives hold over memories of the Vietnam War. Hikaru Fujii asserts that, through the fragmented, hallucination-filled narrative of Griffin, Wright’s novel looks to subvert the “composition of the self” created by the cinema world that frames his consciousness; that is, Griffin’s experiences are an attempt at transforming<sup>31</sup> and freeing himself from his subjectivity (Fujii 132). Though I agree with Fujii, I would take it a step further and argue that Griffin’s hallucinogenic visions, awakening, and subsequent mutation of perspective instead calls for a larger cultural awakening as opposed to a reflection on self. Butler has touched on themes of

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<sup>30</sup> In the parlances of Storey and Spanos, respectively.

<sup>31</sup> Fujii here is referencing Foucault’s ideas of freedom as presented in Foucault’s essay “Structuralism and Post-structuralism” from *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*.

perception and collectivity in *Frames of War* in ways that prove useful when put into conversation with *Meditations in Green*.

For Butler, “interpretation does not emerge as the spontaneous act of a single mind” (*Frames of War* 34). In the context of Wright’s novel, we might see Griffin’s interpretations of images as the act of many minds. As a trained soldier, Griffin has been conditioned by the military industrial complex to think—that is, to interpret—in certain ways. The actions Griffin takes based on these interpretations have more to do with Griffin *performing* the role of soldier than they do with Griffin *being* a soldier. His actions eventually bring him dangerously close to ideological awareness, resulting in hallucinations which challenge his interpretations of Vietnam. I contend that these hallucinations—which slowly ‘infect’ Griffin’s vision over the course of the narrative before coming to a crescendo during the ‘final battle’—destabilize American Anglocentric interpretations of Vietnam. I attend to scenes in which Griffin’s ideology as a US soldier is shaken: in particular, I focus on his respective interactions with the Vietnamese jungle and Mamasan (his base camp’s head hootch maid).

Both scenes work against the Western erasure of Vietnamese agency—a product of what Spanos, drawing on Louis Althusser, describes as the problematic. In the glossary of Althusser’s *For Marx*, Ben Brewster defines the problematic as the notion that “a word or concept cannot be considered in isolation; it only exists in the theoretical or ideological framework in which it is used” (qtd. in Spanos 42). For instance, “Vietnam War” does not have a fixed or closed meaning. Each problematic produces its own meaning. For Althusser, this meaning is defined just as much by absence as presence. As a pertinent example, American representations of the Vietnam War often lack Vietnamese soldiers; instead, bullets are let loose by the jungle, unseen mines lie in wait beneath the ground’s surface, or friendly fire claims US lives. Vietnamese agency is

rendered invisible in these images. Spanos centers his reading of the problematic on such a symptomatic reading, asserting that the “national anxiety” of the Vietnam War has been left unattended by most critics,<sup>32</sup> whose “critical inquiry has been conducted according to the logical imperatives of the frame of reference of the American symbolic order” (37). In short, critiques of the Vietnam War within the “American symbolic order” often fall short of addressing deeper cultural anxieties.

Thus the American problematic is haunted by the *unseen* spectre of Vietnam. Spanos interprets the problematic as a totalizing, hegemonic discourse wherein “everything outside its proper structural space does not properly belong to the problematic, are not problems, that is have no being, are, so to speak, nothing” (63). For Spanos, this truth—the “forgetting” of the Vietnam War—“has been enabled by a metaphysical thinking” that “privileges visual perception” over all other modes of perception (Spanos 39). The result of this visual privilege has reduced the production of knowledge to an inquiry into physical space “to be dominated” (Spanos 39). Given Spanos’s explication of Althusser’s problematic as it pertains to the Vietnam War, one can see how the American problematic might deny both the unseen anxieties driving a desire for spatial domination and the unseen—from the American perspective—historical realities of the Vietnamese people inhabiting Vietnam. According to Spanos, Althusser’s analysis of the problematic best explains “the imperial hegemonic discourse and practices that compelled the United States to intervene in the ‘wilderness’ of Vietnam, to conduct the war in the violent way it did, and to represent ‘Vietnam’ in the long aftermath of the war in order to ‘obliterate’ ‘it’ from the American cultural memory” (47).

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<sup>32</sup> In particular, Spanos takes aim at the so-called “New Americanists.”

There is a congeniality between Storey's, Butler's, and Spanos's respective works. As Storey has established, Hollywood has played a large role in obliterating Vietnamese agency in American collective memory. For Butler and Spanos, Hollywood is merely part of a more totalizing Western discourse that obfuscates the "violence that we [the United States] inflict on others" (*Precarious Life* 39). *Meditations in Green* is interesting in that it anticipates the problems these scholars would later address in the 2000s—most notably by recognizing the dangerous role mediated images (Hollywood's Vietnam) play in collective memory. Griffin's narrative consciousness, which oscillates between his year-long deployment in Vietnam and his post-war civilian life, often questions Western representations of Vietnam. If physical vision is seeing what's in front of you, then hallucinations are quite literally a decentering of the physical act of seeing. In decentering Griffin's vision through hallucinatory sequences, the novel subverts collective Western representations—driven by film and media—surrounding the Vietnam War.

### **3.1 "A Dreary Film Buff's Satisfaction:" Framing Vietnam**

Filmic allusions in *Meditations in Green* are pervasive from the start. Near the beginning of the novel, Griffin is shown a State Department-funded movie during basic training that alleges to explain the history of the conflict in Vietnam. The film closes with a repeated comparison, hypnotic in nature, of Ho Chi Minh and Adolf Hitler. This propaganda is intended to blur the line between Adolf Hitler—arguably the face of evil in America from the 1940s on—and Ho Chi Minh. Implicitly, this comparison includes the People's Army of Vietnam (NVA). Ho Chi Minh is Adolf Hitler, and the NVA are Nazis. Clearly, when situated historically, this comparison is bogus. But it does its job: before even touching down in Vietnam, Griffin and his fellow G.I.s have been trained—through the use of media—to dehumanize Vietnamese; they have been

interpellated into a hateful ideology by visual representation and the commodification of human lives. That is to say, human lives in *Meditations in Green* are often framed as object. Though the objectification of human lives is not limited to Vietnamese people, they do bear the brunt of the narrative's focus in this regard. Griffin constantly assails readers with descriptions of Vietnam that conflate consumer capitalism with the Vietnam War. As early as the first chapter, Griffin laments that his post-service civilian life is “not a settled life,” drawing connections between banal American products and culture—“a women’s perfume named Charlie; and the radio sound of ‘We gotta Get Out Of This Place’ (The Animals, 1965)” —which fills Griffin with melancholy (*Meditations in Green* 8). Shortly thereafter, the narrative takes Griffin back to Vietnam and the privileging of material goods over human lives, as the 1069<sup>th</sup> discusses the bombing of “people and elephants” and whether “anyone ever picked up the ivory” (*Meditations in Green* 31). The conversation then pivots to reveal an ideological creep between nation and soldier:

‘That’s what I’d like to know, where are the jewels. The jewels and the women. What do you think I came over here for? What good is a war without pillage and plunder? Where’s our share? The only women around here are these smelly dog-faced hootch maids and they sure as shit don’t wear any jewels. Where the fuck are my jewels?’ (*Meditations in Green* 31-32).

This conversation perhaps best reveals Wright’s thesis: American economic interest, insofar as the Vietnam War is concerned, trumps human interest. To the US government, the representation of Ho Chi Minh as Hitler justifies chopping “up the ground with explosives, see what rises to the surface” so as to discover tungsten for lightbulbs, keeping stateside homes “clean and well-lit” (*Meditations in Green* 215). This ideology bleeds into the psyche of the 1069<sup>th</sup>. Just as the US is in Vietnam to secure economic and political interests, so too are the soldiers there to “pillage and

plunder” for personal gain. Elephants are good for ivory, and people are good for jewels. This objectification of human life anticipates Butler’s central question in *Precarious Life*, written in the wake of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing US aggression towards Afghanistan, Iraq, and Middle Eastern people across the globe: “who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives?” (20).

According to Butler, this dehumanization can be understood as a derealization of lives through “violence as omission” (*Precarious Life* 34). Butler points to the lack of an “image” or “frame” for the 200,000 Iraqi children who lost their lives during the Gulf War and its aftermath: “There are no obituaries for the war casualties that the United States inflicts, and there cannot be” (*Precarious Life* 34). For Butler, an obituary is a humanizing representation of life. What’s more, Butler sees it is an “act of nation-building” (*Precarious Life* 34). Representing the ‘enemy’ as possessing a life worth memorializing would counteract both the nation-building efforts of obituaries *and* the nation-building efforts of going to war.

Though Butler’s critique is specific to the Gulf War and US War on Terror, Wright’s novel seems to anticipate the ideological dangers of misrepresenting—or not representing at all—countries and people with whom the US is at war. Wright’s critique is perhaps best exemplified by Griffin’s job: Griffin is tasked with determining the enemy position by combing through photos of the Vietnamese landscape taken during flyovers of the jungle. His job explicitly requires him to interpret Vietnam through a American lens. By positioning Griffin as an interpreter of film, *Meditations in Green* directly privileges Western sight over a land that does not belong to them. Since the end of World War II, the US government has had a vested

economic interest in war.<sup>33</sup> Griffin's role speaks to the US military's interest in imperial domination of the Vietnamese landscape for both economic and cultural gain. Further to this point, Fujii suggests that the US army's operations in Vietnam "range over the dimensions of seeing, saying and time – the army organizes these domains so as to produce a certain type of man, soldier, as the end-of-chain product" (Fujii 118). That is to say, soldiers are created or conditioned according to military specification to act as an arm of the government. As Fujii points out, the condition of the "end-of-chain" soldier doubles as a cinematic space in many ways. Discussing *Gravity's Rainbow*,<sup>34</sup> Fujii asserts that the "cinematic world fundamentally rejects the integrity of the free individual," as each soldier (or person) plays the role in which they were cast (118). Griffin's framing as a US soldier prevents him from truly seeing, with respect and empathy, Vietnam and its various agencies.

The notion of framing is reflected in the amount of film and media present throughout Wright's novel and falls into conversation with Judith Butler's *Frames of War* and *Precarious Life*, specifically as they pertain to the formation of subjectivity in times of war. In the introduction to *Frames of War*, Butler draws attention to epistemological issues related to framing: "the frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable) are politically saturated. They are themselves operations of power" (1). Coppola's claims that *Apocalypse Now* was Vietnam resonate powerfully here; as an operation of power, *Apocalypse Now* (as well as most Western Vietnam War films) entirely obliterates Vietnamese people from Vietnam. If a film about Vietnam

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<sup>33</sup> "In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists, and will persist." Dwight D. Eisenhower.

<sup>34</sup> Of which author Stephen Wright was a huge fan. See: "An Interview with Stephen Wright" in *Contemporary Literature*.

without Vietnamese people “is” Vietnam, what does that say about American framing of the Vietnam war? In this removal, Hollywood’s Vietnam has become part of “the continuing paranoid and massively mobilized representational effort of the culture industry...to ‘heal the wound’ opened up in the collective American psyche by the United States’ brutal and contradictory conduct of the war” (Spanos 14).<sup>35</sup> This healing of the American psyche through an erasure of Vietnamese representation explicitly centers the US in such a way that Vietnamese lives are “sustained by no regard, no testimony, and [are] ungrieved when lost” (*Frames of War* 15). This is the effect of a culture industry interested in centering a American (mostly Anglo-Saxon) framing: Hollywood’s Vietnam has, largely, imparted a tacit message that Vietnamese lives don’t matter. I argue that the hegemonic American-centric discourse surrounding the Vietnam War has shaped—and continues to shape—subject-formation in the US with regard to memories of the Vietnam War. As Butler points out, “Our affect is never merely our own: affect is, from the start, communicated from elsewhere. It disposes us to perceive the world in a certain way, to let certain dimensions of the world in and to resist others” (*Frames of War* 50).

*Apocalypse Now*, but one of many critically and culturally successful Vietnam War films, has grossed nearly an estimated \$100 million across four separate box office releases.<sup>36</sup> Hollywood’s Vietnam has undoubtedly had a massive influence on US culture, especially where discourses of the Vietnam War are concerned.

Even pieces of war fiction that would seem to evince a rabidly anti-imperialist attitude, such as Coppola’s film, suffer from an inability to represent Vietnamese agency. Though

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<sup>35</sup> Included under this culture industry umbrella is the Vietnam Wall, which, as Donald Pease has argued, “was erected during the second year of Reagan’s presidency [and] was intended to achieve two outcomes,” the first of which being “The erasure of the negative chain of recollections associated with the Vietnam syndrome” (qtd. in Saldívar 224).

<sup>36</sup> Data taken from *the-numbers.com*.

*Apocalypse Now* presents images of US military power ironically and might instill some US viewers with a sense of grave guilt, it suffers from a lack of Vietnamese representation. Author Linh Dinh has noted this lack of representation, evoking Coppola's declaration that *Apocalypse Now* 'is Vietnam' before asserting that the movie is "really about a bunch of pale guys... wading into their own hearts of darkness" that features a single line spoken by a single Vietnamese character (Dinh, "Apocalypse Lies"). Dinh goes on to note that "Of the three major offensives of the war - Tet (1968), Easter (1972), and Spring (1975) - US ground troops participated in only one. You would never know that, however, from watching any American Vietnam war flick, be it *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, *The Boys in Company C* or *Apocalypse Now*" (Dinh). Dinh's piece drives home both Storey's and this essay's point: most Western film representations of the Vietnam War have helped to create a dangerous 'regime of truth' that fails to represent the scope of agencies involved in the conflict. *Meditations in Green* begins much in the same way as these film representations, but ultimately subverts their revisionism as Griffin awakens to 'the horror' of trying to frame and speak for bodies and lands that do not belong to the speaker. This awakening is most evident in Griffin's interactions with Mamasan and his reaction to the Vietnamese jungle, both of which will be further analyzed later in this chapter. Wright's prescient warning against framing the lives of others serves as an important historical counter in recognizing what has been revised by (or completely left out of) Western filmic representation.

Wright's *Meditations in Green* seemingly anticipated Hollywood's eventual whitewashing of the Vietnam War. Filmic allusions are littered—and soundly criticized—throughout the text. Such criticism is perhaps best represented by allusions to the fictional Captain Natural, "who appeared to have undergone a bizarre version of the famous imperialist breakdown celebrated in film and print and who was last seen parachuting bucknaked into the

jungle” (*Meditations in Green* 51). This character is one of many examples of the cinematic domination and framing within *Meditations in Green*. The novel displays a clear intent to assign arbitrary roles based on tropes we have been conditioned to view as the ‘normal’ state of things by the media we consume. *Meditations in Green* forces its characters to embody these kinds of filmic representations that boil characters down to tropes through the focalization of Griffin. For example, Captain Natural represents Katherine Kinney’s idea that, throughout popular American representations of the Vietnam War, “Americans are portrayed as the victims of their own ideals, practices, and beliefs” (4). Captain Natural, suffering from a “famed imperialist breakdown,” flees a ‘tainted civilization’ to seek freedom in the jungle he once waged war against. As Kinney goes on to point out, “imagining the war as something Americans did to each other displaces the Vietnamese as historical agents in the war” (5). Though Kinney is specifically attending to the trope of friendly fire, I believe there are similarities between her logic and the idea that imperialism commits psychological violence against those who act on imperial orders. Specifically, Griffin’s military job as an interpreter of film bleeds into other areas of his life; Griffin interprets everything as film—as an object, a mere representation of historical reality. Griffin’s interactions with Vietnamese people are mediated—filtered—through this ideological lens. Hollywood’s Vietnam often celebrates this narcissistic logic by erasing the violence US imperialism committed against Vietnam and instead focusing on the downfall of imperialism from an American perspective.

During one scene in particular, the novel subjects Griffin to a sort of filmic casting, despite his knowing and *feeling* that it’s wrong. Wendell, the 1069th’s resident creative, film director and soldier, begins to shoot footage of Griffin and Lieutenant Mueller as they return from a flight

mission.<sup>37</sup> Griffin, carrying a bag of breakfast barf in his hands,<sup>38</sup> sees Wendell “aiming that obnoxious lens at his face and he smiled, he smiled and waved cheerfully, so absorbed in impersonating Charles Lindbergh or Errol Flynn” (*Meditations in Green* 218). Deep down, Griffin *knows* how obnoxious the whole scene is: he is playing a soldier exiting a plane with a bag full of barf and impersonating public figures he’s only seen represented by memory industries (film). Griffin is aware of his dissonance, but he poses anyway. Here *Meditations in Green* plays with what a cinematic world is capable of doing to character: Griffin feels wrong about what he’s doing, but he performs these roles as if he never had a choice. It’s the way he’s been conditioned by the cinematic world—the way he’s been cast. This cinematic framing serves to create a certain “regime of truth” (Storey 99).

As previously mentioned, Butler has raised concerns surrounding framing as an operation power that produces ‘regimes of truth.’ Subjects recycling the same misrepresentations of Hollywood’s Vietnam will ensure that those misrepresentations become an unquestioned part of the discourse.<sup>39</sup> And so Griffin’s narrative consciousness performs its role; that is, Griffin falls into his role as a US soldier, an interpreter of images, and sets about projecting his framed perspective onto both the jungles and people of Vietnam.<sup>40</sup> In doing so, Griffin is interpellated into the cinematic world that renders Vietnamese agency invisible through a privileging of the American perspective. To Butler, such framing works “to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot” and “not only organizes visual experience but also generate[s] specific ontologies of the subject” (*Frames of War* 3). Similarly, Wright seems to posit that the

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<sup>37</sup> During which they *shoot* (emphasis added) photographs of the Vietnamese jungle.

<sup>38</sup> Induced by flying upside down, and which certainly adds a sense of absurdity to this scene.

<sup>39</sup> “Foucault wrote about the relation between knowledge and power. He argued that we internalize patterns of expectation from the surrounding culture” (Robert Dale Parker 270).

<sup>40</sup> As Fujii notes, “the soldier is nothing more than a role that the bad film called Vietnam provides” (121).

American soldiers' ideology renders Vietnamese citizens invisible. According to Spanos, this invisibility is a result of existing outside of a totalizing Western discourse: "that [which] does not properly belong to the problematic has *no existence*—is not, therefore, an object 'visible'—to the subject" (49). Vietnamese citizens are not American, so they do not register to US soldiers. They are rendered living spectres. This spectrality is made explicit through the unnamed old beggar, who attempts to solicit money outside of a US basecamp for the majority of the novel: the US soldiers largely ignore the beggar until he's run over by an American G.I. who is hurriedly leaving camp to "buy a bag of M&Ms" (*Meditations in Green* 204). This scene is particularly on the nose, as Wright continues to frame US soldiers as overwhelmingly apathetic. This apathy is an outright refusal to see Vietnamese lives as grievable. In this refusal, the US soldiers are performing their roles: they are acting on an ideology that does not consider either the land or the people of Vietnam. It is a framed perspective of Vietnam that crops out the Vietnamese.

### 3.2 Shattering the Frame

Butler proposes questioning the frame "to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of *the inside possible, recognizable*" (*Frames of War* 9; emphasis added). *Meditations in Green* succeeds in this line of questioning by distorting Griffin's military frame. The transmutation Griffin undergoes after his encounters with violence begins to shake up the American imperialist frame and highlights the agency that filmic memory industries often withhold regarding the Vietnamese land and people. Griffin's role is mostly administrative; as such, he does not bear witness to violence committed against imperialist US forces throughout much of the novel. However, there are two instances in which Griffin does have a personal encounter with violence.

These scenes, both of which involve helicopters, force Griffin to question the cinematic framing that conditions his perception. In the first instance, Griffin is aboard a helicopter flying to Saigon for R&R. The helicopter comes under attack, and the gunner is killed. Griffin quite literally sees “silver cracks” in the deceased gunner’s helmet, which reveals to Griffin the “unrecognizable reflection” of his “horrified face” (*Meditations in Green* 254). Griffin is shaken, but his perspective of Vietnam remains stable as, shortly after the attack, he uneventfully boards a Marine Chinook headed for Saigon. Weeks later, two members of the US military who possess key intelligence have their helicopter shot down over the jungle. Griffin volunteers for the rescue mission and, upon finding the grotesque, mutilated remains of the men and helicopter, sees a “square of blinding sun... a fragment of unexplainable wonder so often left behind by the universe of catastrophe as a sort of perverse signature” reflected from one of the helicopters windows (*Meditations in Green* 279).

This second encounter with violence, wherein the helicopter crashes, produces a much different result: Griffin’s visual perception is overwhelmed by the jungle’s density. The light reflected across the downed chopper’s window serves as an awakening to Griffin, whose experience with the jungle while searching for these remains takes on familiar western shapes:

As he moved deeper and deeper, he had the eerie sense of vegetation thrusting itself at him for inspection and comment... and there was no end to it. You pressed through one layer to arrive at another just like it and then beyond that and another and another like passing through doors in an estate of measureless dimensions. The hallways opened into other halls, the tall ornate stairs led to identical stairs even higher – jungle as architecture – pillar after pillar, arches framing arches, rooms connected one to the other in receding series, drapes and rope and tiered balconies, Gothic ornamental expanding geometrically

in every direction... The effort to bring down this house, of which Griffin was a part, seemed at this close distance to be both frightening and ludicrous. (*Meditations in Green* 276-277)

And so Griffin's role as a soldier is completely shaken—his frame shattered. This questioning of the military's effort to bring down the jungle reveals exactly how shaky the cinematic frame is; that is, “the frame never quite determined precisely what it is we see, think, recognize, and apprehend. Something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality; in other words, something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things” (*Frames of War* 9). Griffin's military framing, as a soldier privileged with administrative (as opposed to combat) duties, is troubled by the violence that he sees. Further to this, it seems to be the attempted domination of the Vietnamese jungle by US forces that most troubles Griffin's perception. Stylistically, Wright draws on antithesis to describe the jungle as simultaneously collapsing and regenerating, decaying and repairing. This use of parallelism is important in that it makes the jungle feel invincible. It doesn't matter how much of the bush Griffin might whack—the bush will never stop. As Griffin awakens to the unnecessary horrors of the conflict that he has so far managed to avoid, he finally understands how “ludicrous” US attempts at neoimperial domination really are (*Meditations in Green* 277). Wright has masterfully used these techniques to draw parallels between US soldiers physically defeating the jungle and the US metaphysically defeating ‘rogue states’ through the “the imperial practice of imposing liberal capitalist democracies” on them (Spanos 51). As Fujii notes, Griffin's slow awakening allows him to eventually alter the role in which he's been cast by the military: “his perception is distorted so drastically that he becomes unable to perform his duty as the image interpreter; his body, heretofore captured by the military machinery, begins to mutate, and the cinematic world of

Vietnam reveals an unexpected landscape” (124). To Fujii, this distortion in perception serves as such a radical rearrangement of Griffin’s self that he can no longer be contained within the American imperialist frame, which serves to make “him a different character within the film” (124).

As Griffin’s character changes, so too does the reader’s experience of the novel change: Griffin’s acknowledgement of the horrors of war provides readers with an insight into the futility of an imperial mindset, which, in tandem with his coeval mutations in vision, serve to reveal the Western problematic. Despite breaking out of his role as a soldier and entering into the civilian world, the jungle never leaves Griffin. I argue that this is not because Griffin is a ‘trauma hero,’<sup>41</sup> but because the jungle as we know it, based on representations manufactured by mass media, can only be interpreted from inside of the American problematic. That is, Western perceptions of the jungle are merely a projection of Western discourse. Griffin isn’t horrified by violence allegedly inherent to the jungle, but by the violence that Americans have constructed and applied to the jungle through the privileging of American representations of Vietnam. In this way, Griffin’s horror anticipates the eventual ‘truth’ behind Coppola’s claims that his film—and Hollywood writ large—would *be* Vietnam. That is to say, Hollywood’s Vietnam—and its American Anglocentric images—has obliterated Vietnamese representation in most Western representations of the Vietnam War.

Griffin’s hallucinogenic visions, which are marked by “a vegetative force” infecting Griffin’s narration, are generated by the whitewashing of Vietnamese representation (Fujii 130). He begins to see his fellow soldiers turn into vegetation, as Ingersoll’s remains are described as

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<sup>41</sup> I am invoking Roy Scranton’s definition of the trauma hero myth, which determines that “the truth of war, the veteran comes to learn, is a truth beyond words, a truth that can only be known by having been there, an unspeakable truth he must bear for society” (Roy Scranton, “The Trauma Hero: From Wilfred Owen to *Redeployment* and *American Sniper*”).

“glowing a fungus green” during the final battle (*Meditations in Green* 336). Back home after the war, he turns his “apartment into a garden” and sleeps in botanical gardens (*Meditations in Green* 287). He imagines dark spots in his apartment as flowers that erupt “into blossom, unfolding moist petals of unbelievable color” (*Meditations in Green* 143). Griffin avoids falling into the trauma hero myth because his trauma is not some imperceptible internal rage or wisdom, but a distinct change in vision. This new perception is shared with the reader—the civilian—giving them insights into the destructive imperialist discourse of which they are, as US citizens, a part. However, this perception also fails to adequately represent Vietnamese agency.

It should be noted that, although *Meditations in Green* does well to warn against framing the ‘Other,’ it neither includes the Vietnamese perspective nor presents readers with particularly respectful descriptions of Vietnamese characters. Some of these depictions are outright inflammatory. Though this caricaturizing of Vietnamese characters is used ironically, it still begs the question as to whether or not there was a better way of presenting this social commentary. Like Thomas Pynchon in *V.*, Wright avoids attempting to appropriate the Vietnamese experience. Instead, he seems to present his Vietnamese characters as he imagines (and likely experienced) US soldiers representing them. Given the novel’s criticism of (and inescapability from) imperialism, this depiction can be read as Wright criticizing the Western framing of Vietnamese people. Such criticism can be found in Griffin’s reflections on his treatment of the Vietnamese hootch maids. One scene in particular warrants attention, as Griffin scrutinizes his overreaction to catching the head maid, Mamasan,<sup>42</sup> stealing money from him:

He wanted to dash out into the hallway now, beat her black and blue with his fists, crack a couple ribs with his boot. The urgency, the strength of this impulse. What was

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<sup>42</sup> Which is, itself, a racist moniker.

happening to him? Totally unbuckled by noon? This wasn't the real Griffin. The real Griffin bought pencils from blind men, listened politely to old women's troubles. Where was he? What was wrong with her? Why would she jeopardize her job? She should be grateful she was working, grateful she even had an opportunity to be exposed to criminal temptation, grateful to the army of the United States whose gargantuan needs provided her with a salaried position to fill, a position she required, of course, because the armed presence of that army has also deprived her of a husband and a son and converted the family farm into a field of poisoned mud puddles. (*Meditations in Green* 170)

Griffin's reflection speaks to the effects of performativity as it relates to his role as a US soldier. Though not officially, the US army was sent to dominate Vietnam due to what Spanos refers to as *Pax Americana*—that is, the previously referenced imperial mode of bringing liberal democracy to 'rogue states' (51). It was sent to raze the land and assert a position of power over all Vietnamese citizens, regardless of ideological position. As an US soldier whose job it is to scan images of the Vietnamese jungle for NVA troops, Griffin has been interpellated by an anti-Vietnamese discourse. As a result of this interpellation, Griffin's gut instinct is to ruthlessly beat Mamasan because of her position as a Vietnamese woman. However, this instinct does not go without question. This is where *Meditations in Green* looks to subvert traditional war narratives that render Vietnamese people completely invisible. Griffin recognizes Mamasan. What's more, Griffin realizes that his attitude is not "self-generated, but conditioned" (*Precarious Life* 16). He recognizes that his performance based on his role as a US soldier is dangerous and wrong. It *isn't* him—it's the discourse acting through him.

Griffin's recognition of the old beggar and Mamasan's lives is at odds with Western constructions—both intra- and extra- *Meditations in Green*—of Vietnam. This is where the

transnational element of the novel comes into play. The dehumanizing representation of Vietnam as an economic resource does not match the images he's faced with once physically in Vietnam; that is to say, the ideology framed by these images is an inaccurate representation of Vietnamese people that has been used to generate a specific performance from Griffin (that of the heroic liberator acting under *Pax Americana*). Griffin was trained to bring democracy to a 'rogue state,' but is faced with the idea that it is his own forces sowing destruction across Vietnam. The inconsistency in representation speaks to Griffin's hallucinations later in the novel. What's more, these inconsistencies nearly render Griffin's ideology visible. Griffin almost becomes aware of his performativity—how he's 'supposed' to treat Vietnamese people—when confronting his reaction to Mamasan, although he isn't ultimately able to escape his framing: the jungle, which represents Griffin's experiences (including his awareness of the US as a bad faith actor), haunts Griffin after he returns stateside. As readers, we might see Griffin's haunting as an opportunity to question our complicity in misrepresentations—our own framing—of the Vietnam War. Though Griffin is never able to explicitly link his training to his anger towards Mamasan, his questioning of his violence passes some amount of personal responsibility onto the reader and implores them to question how their own memories of Vietnam might be framed. The novel's focus on Griffin's interaction with Mamasan pushes towards "the insight that our very survival depends not on the policing of a boundary—the strategy of a certain sovereign in relation to its territory—but on recognizing how we are bound up with others" (*Frames of War* 52). To Butler, this leads us to reconsider our conceptions of bodies within the field of global politics. Griffin's recognition of his clear overreaction to Mamasan shakes the American collective memory of Vietnam by inviting readers to remain hypercritical and cynical regarding popular

representations (especially in film) of the Vietnam War. More specifically, it asks readers to remember whose lives have been forgotten in these accounts.

### 3.3 Against a “Regime of Truth”?

In asking readers to question their complicity in who has been historically silenced in narratives of the Vietnam War, *Meditations in Green* sets itself up as representative of the counterculture movement that opposed the war. As well as being concerned with who has been forgotten by collective memory, the novel seems to be concerned with what feelings have been conveniently left out of films like *First Blood*. Wright, who served a year in Vietnam operating in essentially the same role as Griffin, said that by the time he got to Vietnam, “no one gave a damn about anything” (“Stephen Wright” 12). Wright served in 1969, which he notes is well after the time when people were “still swallowing certain ideals about America saving the world, about being do-gooders” (“Stephen Wright” 12). Without leaning too heavily into questions of authorial intent,<sup>43</sup> it is fair to say that the disposition Wright displayed towards the Vietnam War in his interview leaked into his novel: in many ways, *Meditations in Green* serves as a recontextualization of the Vietnam War that speaks back to Hollywood’s representation of the conflict. Where Hollywood’s Vietnam looks to assert a regime of truth that often strictly privileges American mediated images,<sup>44</sup> *Meditations in Green* opts for a representation that subverts this idea and attempts to shatter the American frame with a stark change in narrative consciousness. This move leaves readers with questions of complicity that tend to be left out of Hollywood’s Vietnam.

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<sup>43</sup> Which intentionally does not take up much space in this essay.

<sup>44</sup> For example, *Apocalypse Now* only has a single Vietnamese speaking role throughout the entire film: a dying soldier asking for water.

In becoming a civilian, Griffin's role change parallels him with the condition of the reader. He is quite literally recast in the role of a civilian. He represents the impact that framed discourse can have on how readers view the other. The initial reaction to Griffin may be that he is a trauma hero (or, more closely, an anti-hero). I argue, however, that Griffin's visions are not a result of a trauma or condition that is impossible for civilians to understand, but rather a reaction to the dissonance he feels from nearly recognizing his conditioning. More broadly speaking, Griffin's dissonance is a reaction to the dominant American collective memory regarding the Vietnam War. *Meditations in Green* drives Griffin (and, by extension, readers) to question their own conditioning as a result of this collective memory. *Meditations in Green*, through Griffin, continues to try and wake readers up to the notion that, like US soldiers, our consciousness has been framed by the film and media we consume, by the cinematic worldview that dominates our collective memory. Every action-packed marine commercial we see serves the same purpose as the film Griffin watches in Kentucky. We've been hailed by the same system. While Wright's telling of the Vietnam War does serve as a balance to the regime of truth pushed by Hollywood's Vietnam, it seems unable to decenter its own ideology. Though we might—drawing on Said and Althusser, respectively—read *Meditations in Green* either contrapuntally or symptomatically, Wright's novel is ultimately guilty of lacking representation. This isn't to negate the novel's message; however, the effectiveness of that message can be located outside of its pages.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

As Spanos summarizes in the conclusion to *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization*, “the essence of American cultural history since the fall of Saigon in 1975...has been...the systematic and increasingly nuanced forgetting of the Vietnam War” (243). I risk foregrounding Spanos’s arguments over my own here to both highlight the ways in which the Vietnam War continues to be historicized within the American cultural memory, as well as to point out that Pynchon, writing on Western colonialism at the beginning of the Vietnam War, and Wright, critiquing imperialist American endeavors in Vietnam after the fall of Saigon and at the onset of the Reagan administration’s attempts to obliterate ‘Vietnam Syndrome,’<sup>45</sup> were attuned to the insidious historicizations Spanos attempts to deconstruct in *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization*. This is not to say that Pynchon and Wright did so flawlessly (as I have pointed out in the respective chapters addressing their works), but it is to say that Pynchon’s and Wright’s contestation of the historical process and cultural memory from the beginning of United Statesian involvement in Vietnam—from minor conflict to full-blown war—proves the ‘spectre’ of Vietnam’s roots to be deeply embedded within US culture.

V. seemingly brings readers close to what I have called the ‘imperial edge,’ making them aware of their complicity in the historical process. The novel draws comparisons and congenialities between German colonialism in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and American imperialism in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. In so doing, V. provides readers with an imaginative space with which they might tease out their complicity in the dehumanization of America’s contemporary ‘enemies.’<sup>46</sup> What Pynchon did not, however, specifically account for was the dispersion of such messaging through what Storey has dubbed ‘Hollywood’s Vietnam.’

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<sup>45</sup> Please see footnote 37.

<sup>46</sup> In particular, the intense distrust and hatred shown towards Muslim people over the last two decades.

*Meditations in Green*, published twenty years after *V.*, does account for Hollywood's impact on the dehumanization and the "obliteration" of Vietnam in the American cultural memory (Spanos 243). Through a series of vignettes—which might even be called scenes—Wright undermines cinematic representations of Vietnam by pointing to the ludicrousness of it all.<sup>47</sup> Griffin's trend towards self-awareness serves to bring the reader closer to an awareness of how ridiculous the violence wrought upon Vietnam by US forces was. As parody itself, however, this representation can never truly capture the complete and total illogical violence rendered by the West.

What Pynchon's and Wright's respective works, in their warning against Western historicization, are successful at, however, is in prefiguring Butler's points on representation as a determination of grievability. That is, by trying to outdo the absurdity of the real-life violence committed in Southwest Africa and Vietnam, respectively, Pynchon and Wright bring readers to an encounter with their own perceptions and representations of colonized peoples. During this encounter, readers might reconfigure how and whose lives are privileged. In putting the novels into conversation with Butler, we might begin to untangle the Anglo-, US- centric narratives we have historically told or heard. In Butler's parlance, we might hear "beyond what we are able to hear" (*Precarious Life* 18).

In writing this thesis, I found a key word that cut across both Butler's and German historian Jürgen Zimmerer's<sup>48</sup> thinking: responsibility. Butler insists "that speculations on the formation of the subject are crucial to understanding the basis" of non-violence and "perhaps most important, to a theory of *collective responsibility*" (*Precarious Life* 44, emphasis mine). In other words,

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<sup>47</sup> Page 41 herein.

<sup>48</sup> Zimmerer's work on colonialism and imperialism addresses contemporary German responses to the Herero-Nama genocide.

Butler—like Pynchon and Wright—urges us to think of other humans from other places not as objects, but as people. Zimmerer, speaking specifically on German cultural responses to the Herero-Nama genocide, proposes a way to reimagine a collective responsibility without the spectre of guilt:

Guilt is a moral category. How can I be guilty for something that happened 100 years before I was born? That's why I call it responsibility. You can be born after the crime – 100 years, or 200 years after enslavement or colonisation – but you bear responsibility for those people who were disenfranchised at the time or killed or put in poverty. (qtd. in Wells)

Zimmerer's proposed responsibility model, though perhaps simple in its rhetoric, is quite radical. It seems to me that guilt is often the primary factor in turning people away from a collective responsibility, a line explored in both *V.* and *Meditations in Green*. As well as representing a staunch critique of the historical process, both Pynchon's and Wright's ironic points on the mediation of historical narratives bring about an encounter with guilt. In *V.*, Mondaugen feels guilt—acknowledging himself as a voyeur—but never takes responsibility; instead, he remains passive to the violence committed against indigenous Africans. *Meditations in Green* sees Griffin feel guilty and accept a modicum of responsibility for his violent outburst towards Mamasan, but he is never able to reconcile those feelings and is haunted by his actions upon his return to the US. It would seem both novels point toward a need to move past guilt toward a collective responsibility—for Western subjects to decenter the “narrative ‘I’ within the international political domain” (*Precarious Life* 7).

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