# Dark Passages: African American World War II GIs, Blackness, and Border Town Life and Cultures in 1940s Southern Arizona

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*"Much that has happened down here on the Mexican Border could not be published. It is interesting to see the hearts of Negro soldiers change and become something else."*
Shirley Graham, Fort Huachuca, Arizona, 1942

*"Think of me as Shiva, a many-armed and-legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man's world, the woman's, one limb in the literary world, another in the working class, the socialist, and the occult worlds."*
Gloria Anzaldua*, La Prieta*, 1979

Debates over citizenship and rights have always been contentious issues in United States History. From the 1880s with the Chinese Exclusion Acts through the Immigration Act of 1924 and the Mexican Repatriation program of the 1930s and the 1940s to finally, Donald Trump's 2017 Executive Order, suspending the flow of migrants from the Middle Eastern countries of Yemen, Sudan, Iraq, Somalia, Iran, and Libya, U.S. congressional leaders and presidents have sought to impose specific geo-political boundaries on matters governing citizenship. But nowhere were those matters put on vivid display than in the American Southwest during the Second World War. In Arizona in particular, there was a moment when the army's Jim Crow policies, wartime politics, and political theater met the

penetrating glare of public scrutiny. Throughout the month of February, 1943, members of the Arizona State Legislature gathered for public hearings in Phoenix to discuss what they considered to be a topic of vital importance: immigration. In the days and weeks that followed, both houses engaged in a spirited debate over proposed measures to increase police presence on the southern Arizona-northern Mexico Border in order to limit what some members of the legislature perceived to have been a burgeoning flow of Spanish-speaking populations into a region that was in midst of an immense defense buildup for war. But many of the speeches delivered by several legislative members on the border patrol issue centered on the growing presence of black draftees and recruits who were arriving at Fort Huachuca, the largest segregated military outpost in the area. During their discussion, partisan lines faded into the background as both Democrats and Republicans saw in the border issue an excellent opportunity to criticize the Army's employment of black troops, to raise the possibility of African American GIs who were stationed at Fort Huachuca as well to reassure white ranchers, miners, and members of the elite in the area that the existing racial and ethnic status quo would be preserved.

For example, no one was more outspoken than State Senators Dan Angius and James Minotto of Cochise and Maricopa Counties respectively. Tying immigration, race, and sexual promiscuity together, Angius introduced a section to a bill that linked immigration to venereal disease. In his remarks supporting the amendment, he hammered home the point that the Army's failure to cooperate with the border policies and activities of federal officials was the problem. Calling for anti-prostitution legislation, he circulated a booklet compiled by the federal security agency's health division, arguing that the rates of communicable diseases like syphilis and gonorrhea dropped sharply when such ordinances directed at certain racial and ethnic groups. Going a step forward, Angius exaggerated the threat that venereal disease posed to the effectiveness of the military and specifically charged that, by allowing black soldiers to cross the Mexican border, Army officials at Fort Huachuca were negligent in discharging their duties and responsibilities as military officers. What's more, he claimed, the Grand Canyon State bore the financial burden of providing care for soldiers who contracted venereal disease once they reappeared at the military base. Minotto echoed Angius's sentiments, proposing that the senate draft a resolution, demanding that the Nogales, Naco, and other

Mexican border cities bar the servicemen from their points of entry. “It is either that,” he said, “or have the FBI move in and clean up the areas.” Agreeing with Angius’s proposal, the senate passed the bill by a vote of 9 to 7 (“Senate Adopts New Plan for Taxing Banks,” *Tucson Daily Citizen*, February 11, 1943; “Political Ban Facing Debate in Legislature,” *Arizona Daily Star*, February 12, 1943, p. 16; Cosulich, Bernice. “Solons Afraid Time is Short to Finish Job,” *Arizona Daily Star*, February 12, 1943).

That Angius and Minotto used ideologies of race and sexual promiscuity to promote ideas about immigration is hardly surprising. The presumed sexual promiscuity of black soldiers and branding them as the culprits for infecting civilian populations with infectious diseases colored Anglo-American perceptions of blacks in the American South and Southwest, especially during the first half of the twentieth century. As Tera Hunter reminds us, discourse surrounding communicable disease provided an avenue for not only proscribing black autonomy but also marking black bodies in wider discussions on public health (Hunter ch. 9). And as Neil Foley and others point out, these stereotypical views only intensified during the Second World War. Border issues and the increasingly hostile ethnic and race relations among black GIs, white elite, miners, and cattle ranchers, and Mexican citizens in Southern Arizona-Mexican border towns and cities like Bisbee, Nogales, Sierra Prieta, and Douglas, merely provided the terrain upon which the battles between white assertions of privilege, Mexican prejudice against peoples of African descent, and black claims to equality were fought for all to see. Indeed, episodes that illuminated the troubled relationship between young black men and predominantly white city and townspeople, the diminution of black lives at the hands of white policemen, and black resistance in the face of state sanctioned police brutality were present in all of these cases. Most, if not all, focused on the war-induced wave of state and semi-state-sponsored terrorism against black males in largely northern and southern settings. We are also given a window into the public marking of the black body as dangerous criminals and perceptions of them as seemingly inexhaustible commodities for extermination. And as scholars past and present such as Howard Odum, Ulysses G. Lee, Harvard Sitkoff, Dominic Capeci (*Layered Violence*; *Race Relations*; *The Harlem Riot*,) James Burran, Neil Wynn, and Robin D. G. Kelley have well documented, the interracial violence and the demographic changes taking place on an American

southern landscape wrought during World War II have long held our scholarly attention (Foley, *Quest for Equality*).

But while such interventions have been timely, the need to understand the relations between black soldiers, Anglo Americans, and Mexican indigenous populations in settlements along the Arizona-Mexico international border continues. What's more, scholars are slow to comprehend how newcomers and inhabitants in border areas have developed their own unique set of ever-evolving customs, traditions, and practices. How black soldiers of World War II saw themselves in relation to these evolving social constructions and how they aligned their identities to adjust to the changing conditions along the international border are important if we are to seriously accept the challenges of scholars Linda Alcoff (ch. 1, 4 and 8), Mustafa Emirbayer, and Walter Mignolo. Despite the theoretical salvoes levied by a talented group of interdisciplinary scholars, the empirical research of a generation of scholars in women's, legal, and African American history, and the forays made by recent scholarship in borderlands studies, Walter Mignolo has provoked new ways of imagining the intersection of local histories and globalism when he writes that border thinking occurs "the moment you realize (and accept) that your life is a life in the border, and you realize that you don't want to 'become modern' because modernity hides behind the splendors of happiness, the constant logic of coloniality" (Preface). Border thinking, thus, becomes an analytical tool and a useful knowledge system for understanding the historical formation of identity and unlocking its potentialities for challenging specific forms of colonialism, racism, and sexism present in the modern world.

The problems underlying the tensions generated by World War II and American racism have been well chronicled but we also would be totally remiss if we overlooked the intersections of geography and racial identity in the consciousness of young blacks during periods of the war. More to the point, the tense moments of state and semi-state clashes between black GIs and military police while wearing the nation's uniform and the meaning that these encounters held for those serving in the ranks of the armed forces have largely escaped the gaze of critical scholarship. How and to what degree were the fluid notions of masculinity among black soldiers enveloped in the frustrations they felt when standing face-to-face with state-sanctioned oppression and brutality? And to what degree did they use

geography to translate those daily frustrations with state power into new definitions of self?

Examining the encounters between African Americans who served in the U.S. armed forces and military, state, city, and local law authorities in southern Arizona during the early 1940s, this essay examines the geographical identities of young black GIs as they struggled to come to terms with the social injustices they perceived both on and off-post. As young black servicemen began to shed their civilian selves in order to develop new identities as American fighting soldiers, they also had to somehow square the values encoded in the new identities with the institutional and ideological contradictions they saw taking place all around them. The hybrid and increasingly fluid traditions, customs, and practices that existed in the town and city settlements located near the Arizona-Northern Mexico border added a new dimension to the identities of these soldiers that differed from the environs from which they came. And as a result, the space-specific social arrangements based on race and gender had a major influence on their identities as they advanced through latter stages of training towards overseas deployment. Indeed, these frustrations and ruptures of the self provide us with an invaluable model for scholars who wish to understand the historical development of the black male body and those of us who are acutely aware of the need to create an instructive pedagogy for resisting and combatting such anti-immigration politics in the twenty-first century.

In order to understand the clashes between black GIs and white MPs in the Southwest, one must begin by exploring the social and political changes that buffeted American society during the wartime period. African Americans who entered the military bases of the Trans-Mississippi West came of age during the economic and social upheavals of the early 1940s. Even before the guns of war exploded in Europe and Asia, young black men had already been exposed to the uneven patterns of the American military expansion. Between August 1939 and November 1941, nearly 500,000 black Northerners and Southerners had enlisted in the Armed Forces. With the passage of the 1940 Selective Service Act, more than 1.7 million blacks between the ages of 21 and 35 appeared before their local draft boards between October and December of that year, making up approximately nine percent of their total population in the country (*U.S. Selective*

*Service in Peacetime: First Report of the Director of Selective Service, 1940-1941*, p. 77).

Most of the selectees came from the South (Alabama, Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Arkansas, Texas, Virginia, and Mississippi) with smaller numbers hailing from the Northern Middle Atlantic and East North Central states (New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Illinois) of the nation (*Selective Service System, Special Groups, Special Monograph no. 10, Vol. II: Appendices A-G*, table 43, 99; table 46, 103). By the end of 1943, the numbers of black recruits would reach nearly 2,500,000, constituting well over ten percent of all servicemen (*Selective Service System, Selective Service as the Tide of War Turns: The 3rd Report of the Director of Selective Service, 1943-1944*, table 185, 591). Among the expanding numbers of black service personnel destined for the west were the men who served as members of the U.S. Ninety-third Infantry Division. During the period, scores of Pullman coaches arrived at Fort Huachuca from regions scattered throughout the country, carrying more than 6,000 men at a rate of 200 a day.

For many whose trip to Fort Huachuca marked the first time they had ventured far from home, the experience evoked mixed feelings of trepidation and excitement. Clarence Gaines, a young draftee from Cleveland, Ohio, recalled: “I left the reception center at Columbus feeling rather low with the knowledge that we were to be so far from home when our journey ended. But when I arrived at Fort Huachuca, I remembered being pleased with the camp because it was more beautiful than anything I had ever seen. Reflecting on his departure from a Maryland induction center, a former hospital attendant similarly noted: “Most of us were excited and very eager to get under way, although we all wanted to be in Baltimore just once more before leaving. But in the days after arriving at Fort Huachuca, we spent our time getting adjusted to army routine, asking questions, and looking for fellows we knew” (Jefferson ch 3).

Upon their arrival, soldiers also found that Fort Huachuca, like so many military installations, resided in remote areas that were largely isolated from major metropolitan areas. Several of the largest military garrisons housing black troops such as Camp Wolters and Davis-Monthan Airfield were located in the Eighth Corps area, mostly along the Southern Arizona-Texas-Mexico Border. More often than not, these places were similar to the poor to deplorable military outposts that

staged black soldiers who served in the post-Civil War West during the late nineteenth century. As Edward Soulds, a soldier from Great Falls, Montana, who reported to the installation, put it at the time, “prior to arriving at Fort Huachuca, I learned that it was located miles from any town and I do mean any town. Picture if you can an army camp located at the base of some rather steep hills in an area where it never rains—hot as blazes night and day and shade is not to be found anywhere. Even dogs refused to stay around because there weren’t any trees” (Soulds 17).

It’s important to remember that the growing numbers of African American GIs who arrived at the gates of the southwestern military installation also corresponded with the burgeoning percentages of the black population in the region. Between 1940 and 1950, California, Nevada, New Mexico, and Arizona witnessed a veritable explosion in black population growth as the initiatives waged by the Congress of Industrial Organizations and the Fair Employment Practices Committee resulted in expanded work opportunities in defense industries, aircraft factories and shipbuilding. Southern Arizona underwent a dramatic transformation during the early 1940s. As the aircraft industry mushroomed, the black population in the southern region jumped from less than one percent of the state’s total population in 1935 to nearly four percent in 1942 (*U. S. Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Population, Volume II*: Characteristics of the Population, Part 1: United States Summary and Alabama-District of Columbia, 371-74).

However, the expanded work opportunities for segments of the African American community were not reflected in areas relating to housing made available to them. In the same areas, Las Vegas’s West Side, Los Angeles’s Central Avenue, and Houston’s Fourth Ward became virtual ghettoes as African Americans faced the discriminatory practices of redlining, restrictive covenants, and heightened racial tensions at every turn (Taylor ch. 9).

Even if they had the time, energy, and money to venture off-post, black GIs found the Southwestern socio-economic landscape to be very much familiar to worlds they had just left behind. Business owners in towns including Mineral Wells, Texas, and Bisbee and Flagstaff, Arizona, turned Black GIs away whenever they appeared at their establishments. In Phoenix, black newcomers who migrated to the city discovered a color line that was staunchly drawn and fiercely enforced by

townspeople and police officials. Indelible signs of racial segregation marked public housing and grocery stores as virtually all black Phoenix residents were relegated to sewer-infested shacks located in the southwestern neighborhoods of the city. In fact, Dean E. Smith, a historian of the city described it as an "area settled by ex-Confederates who were determined to build Phoenix in the Southern image." "They came flooding out here after the Civil War and they brought prejudices with them," Smith argued (Taylor 236, 265; Whitaker 58). Indeed, Southern etiquette, traditions, and practices permeated the political, economic, and social fabric of Southern Arizona in ways that were remarkably similar to how W.E.B. Du Bois and Charles Chesnutt described the white supremacist practices of the Jim-Crow South at the turn of the century.

However, in other ways, black GIs and recent newcomers found the cities and towns that dotted the southern Arizona landscape to be reflective of a strange mélange of rugged individualism, cotton, copper mining and cattle ranching culture, and what Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy have labeled as the "mudtown" milieus of early twentieth century America. They were also overlaid with a get-rich quick mentality that permeated the immediate defense buildup of the Second World War II period. When combined with the all-too familiar vestiges of Jim Crow, this environment worked to produce numerous moments of mixed emotions among those who came from the sharecropping and tenant farming backgrounds in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and other Deep South states. For example, in Phoenix, black soldiers quickly discovered municipal services and adequate housing accommodations to be virtually non-existent. What's more, the desert state capitol differentiated from the Deep South in that the city's public sphere reflected unique racial customs, traditions, and practices that were couched in multiple connotations of ethnicity. As a case in point, George Schuyler, a syndicated columnist for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, described the racial mores in Phoenix in the following manner: "while the city owns a golf course where Negroes are not barred, there were separate parks for Negroes, whites, and Mexicans. Negroes can attend the Mexican parks, but not those for whites where the swimming pools are also closed to all except Caucasians" (Bontemps Preface; Schuyler 2).

If there was a place where race relations were more rigidly stratified than Phoenix, it was Tucson. As black troops from nearby Fort Huachuca flocked to the

southwestern city, they found it to be considerably less hospitable. Elaborately built public parks, swimming pools, and bathhouses bore “Whites Only” signs and public conveyances, dime stores, eating places, and schools were declared off-limits to the uniformed newcomers. Not only did servicemen face the daily indignities of Jim Crow, but they also encountered an alchemic racial dynamite grounded in sex and caste. Throughout the division’s initial training, the reaction of people in Tucson to the massive influx of African American GIs was based in racial stereotype and sexual innuendo. As the foot traffic of black servicemen increased, the rapidly changing economic conditions, the housing shortages, and the heightened racial tensions that existed in the city created a cauldron of hostility that more than a few observers feared could boil over at a moment’s notice.

Black reporters visiting the southern Arizona desert cities throughout the wartime period predicted that a crisis was looming. After touring Tucson, for example, *Baltimore Afro-American* correspondent Henry Jethro wrote in August 1944: “Citizens here are tiptoeing around town on top of racial dynamite. The next gale that sweeps from this western city will doubtless bring the clash of whites, colored citizens, and Mexicans.” Hazel Daniels, a white Tucson resident, had earlier voiced the same sentiments. In an *Arizona Daily Star* editorial published around the same time, Daniels noted the ways that the war intensified social relations in the city and warned: “it is problems such as the ones at issue now in the city which will create unrest, antagonism, and hate on the part of Negroes causing them to commit anti-social acts” (Jefferson 107-108).

Daniels was partially correct. The social unrest and racial antagonism black troops encountered in cities like Phoenix and Tucson usually took on the appearance of law enforcement. To wear the nation’s uniform in these settings meant to face endless humiliation and abuse. City and Military policemen in both cities patrolled the streets, seeking to tighten their control over the local segregation etiquette, practices, and customs with nightsticks and guns.

Not long afterwards, the resentment, suspicion, and fear that white Arizona residents like Harriet Daniels expressed toward black civilian and military newcomers soon boiled over into acts of violence that summer. After spending most of the day searching for housing in Tucson in June of 1942, Addie Alexander and Jeannette Kinchion decided to go to a nearby American Legion Hall to order dinner. However, not long after the two women had settled into a booth for an

evening free from their frustrations of searching for a place to live, they were promptly informed by a military police officer that the restaurant was "off-limits to prostitutes and that they had to leave." Refusing to simply endure the verbal assault, however, Alexander and Kinchion decided to remain seated. After a bitter exchange of words and blows, they, along with a group of servicemen also visiting from Fort Huachuca, were arrested, charged, and sentenced to sixty days in jail for "inciting a riot" ("Trial Awaited After Battle," *Arizona Daily Star*, 17 June 1942, p. 12; "Two Women Given 60 Days for Part in Negro Battle," *Arizona Daily Star,* 26 June 1942, p. 6).

Throughout that summer, most of the skirmishes that had broken out between black migrants, soldiers and city law enforcement officials tended to reflect conflicting sentiments of personal dignity. Following immediately on the heels of the confrontation between Tucson police, Alexander and Kinchion, bystanders stood in awe during the early morning hours of July 1, as Maxine Willie Welch and Ples Elsworth Russell found themselves being taken away by Tucson city law enforcement officials and charged with assault and battery after they challenged two men who had verbally accosted them. The heated exchange of words quickly escalated into blows as the two black women proceeded to pummel the men on their heads with their fists, shoes, handbags and bottles. Less than twenty-four hours later, a Justice of the Peace ruled that the two women were guilty and ordered them to leave the city after they completed a sixty-day stint in the county jail ("Negroes Jailed in Assault Case," *Arizona Daily Star*, 2 July 1942, p. 14).

Often the clashes between soldiers and townspeople produced deadly results. On November 11, 1942, a group of eyewitnesses in Bisbee looked on in horror as Clay H. Moore—a white mining employee—whipped out a pocket knife and stabbed twenty-five-year old black GI Willie Diggs, in front of a saloon, killing him instantly. After obtaining a twenty-four leave from the desert installation, Diggs was stationed at nearby Fort Huachuca and had just arrived in the Arizona-Mexican border area to help his ailing grandmother find precious housing in the coal-mining town when he was violently accosted. From the standpoint of most black GIs training in the arid Arizona desert during the period, Diggs's fateful encounter with death was all too typical and very much reflective of the volatile relations he and others shared with whites in general and the specific moments when racial tensions periodically had bubbled to surface in the region. Frequently, GIs like

Diggs found themselves subject to ridicule, severe punishment, or worse at the hands of the press, white law enforcement officials and servicemen. However, this incident was touched off by what his assailant, Clay Moore, perceived as an egregious affront to military culture and tradition as well as to the peculiar wage work-time discipline of the region: Diggs had worn a wide-brimmed, zoot-suit styled felt civilian hat atop his standard-issued army uniform. In a world where workplace and military clothing served as signifiers of whiteness, manhood, and American patriotism, Diggs's refusal to adhere to the cultural forms and discursive practices and styles of World War II America not only annoyed white townspeople like Moore but it also flagrantly transgressed the racial and gender fault lines that existed along the Southern Arizona-Mexico border.

Immediately after the murder, one of the on-lookers contacted Civilian Aide William H. Hastie who then requested that the War Department investigate the events leading up to Diggs' death (*Letter, Gordon T. Rucker to Judge William H. Hastie*, 16 November 1942). Furthermore, the civilian aide dispatched his assistant Truman Gibson to look into the matter but to no avail. Although War Department officials assured Hastie that Moore would be prosecuted for the crime, he was later absolved of all wrongdoing in the matter (*Memorandum, Lieutenant Colonel William Slater for Judge William H. Hastie*, undated; "Murder Cases to Be Set for Trial," *Arizona Daily Star*, 23 January 1943, p. 4).

At the same time, the assistant civilian aide expressed some skepticism regarding the eyewitness accounts of the incident, claiming that they "were not fully advised of the circumstances." "You have apparently connected Diggs' death with what you deemed a concerted Fifth Column movement against Negro soldiers in Bisbee," he claimed (*Letter, Truman K. Gibson, Jr. to Gordon T. Rucker*, 26 November 1942). Despite being arrested for the murder, the Phoenix, Arizona, native was released of all charges.

Throughout the entire ordeal, however, the killing of Diggs and the refusal of the Bisbee police department to investigate the crime astonished many black migrants who lived and labored in the mining town. "I asked the Chief of Police when the trial would be held," Gordon Rucker, an observer, noted, "he said that he didn't think there'd [sic] be one. How in the name of Blackstone can a man be indicted for murder in any degree I can't guess unless a formal inquest *is* held?" (*Letter, Gordon T. Rucker to Judge William H. Hastie*, 16 November 1942). Shortly

afterwards, the concerns voiced by the bystander may have been heard by army officials, who feared further deterioration of race relations in the area. In December of 1942, Hardy placed military police personnel permanently in the town when Bisbee officials asked him to head off a future skirmish between miners and black GIs and families (*Memorandum, G. R. Michaels to Edwin Cooley, Regional Supervisor*, 17 June 1943). These measures yielded very little success, however. By the spring of 1943, the small mining hamlet had become a veritable ghost town as it experienced a considerable degree of out-migration after Bisbee town officials declared that the city was "out of bounds" to members of the U.S. Ninety-third Infantry division and requested that Fort Huachuca post officials discourage service personnel and their dependents, friends, and neighbors from moving to the area (*Letter, Wesley T. Allen, President, Bisbee Merchants' Association, Incorporated to G.R. Michaels, Secretary of the Bisbee Chamber of Commerce*, 23 April 1943; Lee pp. 281-282).

Quite often the source of the racial strife revolved around appropriate wardrobe as young black servicemen worked to create their own unique identities. During the period, three young black men, Elzie Smith, Leonard Parker, and Earlie Pierce, were shoved to the ground and arrested in Tucson for allegedly crossing the street against traffic. The incident had occurred days after the young men had arrived in the city from Fort Huachuca where they visited fellow GIs who served in the Ninety-third's 368th Infantry Regiment. While the men were released of all charges, press reports labeled the men as vagrants and local police paid more attention to the conked hairstyles and highly stylized baggy attire sported by the young newcomers more than anything else ("Police Don't Like 'Zoot Suits'; Nab Trio of Wearers," *Arizona Daily Star*, 17 March 1943). Describing them as a "band of young, bushy-haired hoodlums," Harold Wheeler, the city's police chief, directed his officers to stop migrants who adorned the colorful clothing for questioning and to have them present induction classification cards that indicated their draft status. "If they are guilty of any infraction, however small, of any city ordinance, pick 'em up," Wheeler told his subordinates ("Zoot Suit Gangs Drawing Ire of Sheriff, Checkup Planned," *Arizona Daily Star*, 16 March 1942; "Nine Are Held in 'Zoot' Round-Up," *Arizona Daily Star*, 5 April 1943).

Police surveillance of black newcomers mirrored the brackish waters that swirled around southern Arizona's racial and sexual politics. The problem that law

authorities and white citizens in Tucson had with the large influx of soldiers had more to do with the threat that they allegedly posed to the region's fragile racial and ethnic boundaries more than anything else. And more often than not, like many areas across the country, the racial etiquette, customs, and traditions practiced among the Southern Arizona city townspeople and politicians reflected their fearful images of consensual sexual relations between black men and white women. Since its inception, Arizona state law included measures aimed at controlling the social activities of African Americans and Mexicans, including premarital sex, prostitution, and juvenile delinquency as well as policies banning inter-ethnic marriage and cohabitation. Throughout the city streets of Tucson and Nogales, police officers patrolled the dance halls, cinemas, and amusement resorts of the Mexican-African American immigrant neighborhoods to enforce the separate-but-equal legislation. Over time, tensions increased as police officers rounded up many transplanted black migrants and Mexican women with loved ones in uniform, arresting them on trumped up charges of solicitation and contributing to juvenile delinquency. "My duty is to not ask persons whether or not they are juveniles or adults," asserted Maude Howard, a prominent city policewoman at the time, "but to see if they are white, Mexican, or colored." "Colored persons should have their little affairs to themselves so that they don't have to bother with white persons," Howard claimed (Elliott, Robert B. "Policewoman Separates Mexicans and Whites at USO Dances in Arizona," Baltimore Afro-American, 26 August 1944).

But it is also in the strange mix of border settlement culture and the fateful encounters between black GIs and civilian and military policemen in Southern Arizona towns that we see the forging of a new identity. For some time, scholars concerned with the intertwined life-histories of Anglo, Mexicano, Chicana/o, Black, and Chinese peoples along the Mexican-Texas border, have described the political, economic, and social processes of labor, the racial and gendered segmentation of labor, the psychological and increasingly hybrid wages of whiteness among ethnic workers, and the coalescing moments of solidarity among black, brown and white workers. These borderlands studies have greatly enlarged our understanding of life and culture in the cotton-growing areas. In a recent work edited by Samuel Truett and Elliott Young, scholars have opened new doors for researching and understanding borderlands culture and economies. As a result, the binaries of southern and western crucibles of identity have been obliterated

and where they are constructed have been sufficiently problematized (Foley, *The White Scourge;* Behnken; Delgado; Jacoby). However, few scholars have studied the intersections of blackness, borderlands, and boundaries in specific geographical locales like the towns and cities that rested along the Arizona-Mexico border.

At the same time, the conflicting and meshing of identities among these border-town inhabitants and the new levels of consciousness they engendered take on a different meaning when seen through the lens of Chicana and post-colonial feminist studies. Gloria Anzaldùa effectively reminds us that Borderlands mean much more than a specific geographical location. On this point, she maintains that

> the psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands, and spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. (Anzaldùa, Preface)

In Anzaldùa's mind's eye, the confluent streams of music, food, sex, language and religion give rise to a new trans-disciplinary consciousness and identities that are not bound by existing ritual, custom, or tradition. Thus, borderlands are marginalized physical and psychological sites where discursive practices and identities are in a constant state of flux.

Meanwhile, the politics of domination, migration, subjectivity, exile, and location have animated the writings of Black Women Studies scholars in ways that displace Old World identities and expand our understandings of home, community, and exile. From Zora Neale Hurston to Toni Cade Bambara to bell hooks to Hazel Carby to finally Carole Boyce Davies, Black Feminist writers have examined migration and female subjectivity through a polyvocal lens of trans-nationality, separation and dislocation. Perhaps Pulitzer Prize winning novelist Toni Morrison may have said it best in her masterful work titled *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* when she called for the remapping of identity by "drawing a map of critical geography and use that map to open much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the charting of the New World without the mandate for conquest" (Morrison p. 3). In the process, traditional ideas of geography and boundaries are completely dismantled and redefined as questions of race, gender, sexuality, age, and generation are brought

more fully to bear on the social calculus of how and where identities and the self are constructed. And they also raise intriguing questions about how border or liminal spaces provide incisive commentary and compelling challenges to power and dominance in the equation.

Such possibilities for re-envisioning the black military experience in the Southwest through Borderlands history and Black Feminist thought might be found through the Border city and town experiences of black GIs and their relations with civil and military law enforcement officials along the Southern Arizona-Mexico Corridor. Throughout the Second World War, there were substantial sleepy towns like Fry (present day Sierra Vista), Agua Prieta, Hereford, and Naco that lay in close proximity to the segregated military camps. For example, before the war, Fry possessed a population of less than 200. By 1942, the population skyrocketed to between 2,500 and 3,000. Part of the explanation for this growth lay in the fact that the area resided less than one mile from Fort Huachuca. Fry's growth was not unique but few border towns of comparable size could boast of serving military base housing more than 100,000 soldiers. Likewise, the towns of Agua Prieta, Nogales, and Naco lay between approximately 25 to 60 miles south of the military camp; each offering much to those who were stationed at the segregated base in the vicinity.

For soldiers like George Shuffer and others who trained at Fort Huachuca, the towns afforded rare opportunities for rest, whiskey, and women. Many Ninety-third Infantry Division soldiers took advantage of the physical space provided by the brothels, saloons, dance halls and gambling dens to pursue rare moments of intimate pleasure. But the spaces also offered them rare episodes to transgress the rigid fault lines of race and gender that pervaded much of American society. For example, years later, Shuffer offered the following description of the border towns: "sizable towns closer to the garrison were Nogales and Naco astride the United States (Arizona) and Mexico (Sonora) border. People on the Mexican side offered soldiers complete racial integration in every respect. Whites on the U.S. side, too, were friendly and respectful. Then, too, their community businesses were nurtured with Huachuca's payroll. There were very few segregated or off-limits public places" (*Memorandum, FBI Report: Fort Huachuca, Arizona, James S. Simmons to Harvey H. Bundy, Special Assistant to the Secretary of War*, August 29, 1944; Shuffer p. 42).

Even if a black GI knew virtually nothing about the consciously interracial unity that permeated the Border towns, he certainly noticed the difference in the way he was treated by civilian and military police in the region. Little did they realize it at the time but the changes were the result of a new strategy adopted by the post officials, the Roosevelt Administration, as well as several black entrepreneurs. Beginning in early June of 1942, the Provost Marshal Department, Fort Huachuca post authorities, and the Assistant Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War instructed MPs to change their arrest and detaining tactics as an evolving strategy for regulating the illicit economy in the region rather than ending it. They hoped to turn the overcrowded housing and hard-drinking and gambling establishments that made up the towns into "100 % Negro towns, to include business houses, town officials, and police departments." As one post commander put it, "in view of the fact that Fort Huachuca is isolated from civilian communities. It is my opinion that a great benefit towards the contentment and well-being of soldiers on duty at Fort Huachuca would be accomplished if there could be provided in the nearby towns, reasonable forms of amusement."

As the summer months faded into the fall of 1942, twenty Black MPs were recruited from the British West Indies and trained to aid the town-building initiative. Among the duties they performed for the GIs included offering transportation and prophylactics to those who wished to frequent the dance halls, brothels, and gambling establishments in the border towns. In exchange, the Army offered them permanent residence as United States citizens ("Naturalization Rite Planned at Bisbee," *Arizona Republic*, 6 May 1943, p. 3; "Negro Soldiers Get Citizenship Papers, *Tucson Daily Citizen*, 10 September 1943, p. 5). Such opportunities were virtually non-existent in the American South at the time. Not long afterwards, the efforts made by MPs on their behalf during payday and weekend passes off-post certainly had a salutatory effect on the attitudes of soldiers present in the area, thus resulting in relatively improved race relations between black, white, Mexicano, and American Indian inhabitants. For example, Howard Hickson, a soldier with the unit, reflected years later, "we would go to little border towns like Bisbee, Douglas, and Agua Prieta. Most military towns had places that were off-limits to military personnel. The social life we had would be over in Mexico. That's where you'd kick up your heels, there were Mexican girls, and that's where the good living was for a while. The MPs would take you down to the border and then shuttle you back

and forth. We weren't too far from the border." While we have very few extant records about how the soldiers were perceived by the women, children, and men who lived in the border areas, African Americans in uniform recounted how they were treated as the centers of attraction and how townspeople marveled at them as oddities with dark skin (Hickson, Interview with Maggi M. Morehouse, San Francisco, CA, March 31, 1995).

The modifications in the American military racial system and the syncretic cultural processes that it wrought for those who appeared in the Arizona-Mexico corridor captured the attention of black and white pundits alike from all across the country. For example, *Collier's Magazine* reporter Roark Bradford visited the border area on his way to Fort Huachuca during the summer of 1942. After witnessing the improved relations between black and white GIs, Mexican residents, and American Indian townspeople in the unincorporated city of Nogales, Bradford commented, "one or another, soldiers of all races and nationalities managed to have fun. A large number of Nogales citizens and Negro troops form friendships on the basis of character instead of color."

That African American GIs received better treatment at the hands of civilian and military police is not to say that the Arizona-Mexico border was free of racism. On many occasions, Black service personnel and close family members expressed their frustrations with the new law enforcement measures. For example, on one August evening in 1942, a light brown woman and her soldier husband—a division officer—had just arrived in Nogales from Fort Huachuca when they were approached by a police officer at the entrance of a rental development and asked to provide racial and marital identification. After a careful examination, the police officer still remained unconvinced and informed the couple that the development was for whites and Mexicans only and ordered them to leave the premises. Around the same period, the words conveyed by a twenty-one year old married Mexican immigrant woman from Agua Prieta describing her experience while returning home from a long days' work at a local drug store serve as a vivid reminder of what might happen to those who violated the city's racial and gender etiquette:

> "I was going home from work one evening when I met a soldier that I recognized. We stopped on the street to chat a few minutes and as we were about to leave, a cop came up and arrested us. I don't know what they did with the soldier but they took me to jail and told me that if I were ever caught talking with another colored person they would keep me in jail." (Jethro, Henry.

> "Arizona Cops Keep Busy Separating Three Races," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 26 August 1944)

And sometimes, hostility between black GIs and border police often spilled over into episodes of violence. Throughout the summer of 1942, American embassy officials reported a number of disturbances at Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales and Sonora, Mexico between local merchants and townspeople and black soldiers from Fort Huachuca, Arizona (Cross-Reference File, Dispatch #375 from Nogales (Armstrong), July 16, 1942, *Subject: Disturbances at Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora, involving Negro Soldiers from Fort Huachuca, Arizona*).

That the U.S. State Department filed such observations is hardly surprising. More often than not, black soldier-newcomers discovered that the racial discriminatory affronts they encountered from policemen in border settlements received the blessings of local political figures. Not only that, but their sheer presence also complicated the cultural exchanges between the State Department and the Mexican diplomatic corps during the war. For example, during the spring of 1943, Ciudad Juarez Mayor Antonio M. Bermudez, responded negatively to rumors that the U.S. Army planned to raise the numbers of black soldiers at Fort Bliss, Texas from 4,000 to 10,000. He expressed his concern that such an increase in their numbers in the area "would cause serious trouble between the negro soldiers and the Mexican residents, thereby jeopardizing the present cordial relations between the citizenry of the two border cities and its consequent effect on tourist trade." But Bermudez also pointed out that the increased numbers of black troops would overwhelm Ciudad Juarez's police force, raising the possibility of "a race riot, and other disturbances of a serious nature." U.S. Ambassador George S. Messersmith acknowledged the Mayor's reservations, agreeing to the removal of the additional troops, but he also observed that while Mexico was firmly committed to the anti-discriminatory character of revolutionary nationalism, such espoused devotion to rights did not extend to *all* people of color. "In this connection," Messersmith told the Secretary of State, "it must be noted that although the Mexican people object very strongly to any racial discrimination or any discrimination of any kind against themselves, they for various reasons are inclined to discriminate against negroes." (Airmail, Stephen E. Aguirre, American Consul, to the Secretary of State, May 18, 1942, *Subject: Rumors of Assignment of a Large Contingent of Negro Soldiers at Fort Bliss. Possibility of Disturbances*

*at Ciudad Juarez, Mexico involving such Soldiers*. Memorandum, U.S. Ambassador George S. Messersmith for the Secretary of State, May 26, 1943, *Subject: With Reference to the Rumored Intention of the War Department to Assign a Considerable Contingent of Negro Soldiers to Fort Bliss*; Foley, *Quest for Equity* ch. 1)

On the other hand, observers who watched the interaction between inhabitants on the Southern Arizona-Northern Mexico border may have witnessed a dialogue that demonstrated how regional assertions of racial identity making and geography outdistanced the political stances taken by policymakers in official Washington and Phoenix at the time. For as political scientists Jennifer L. Hochschild and Brenna M. Powell have ably reminded us elsewhere, such cultural exchanges and their implications for demographic and geographic transformation often evade official scrutiny and rarely attract the attention of the academy (Hochschild and Powell p. 90). But as Hochschild and Powell have also asserted, their potential for political identity formation are enormous. For example, in May of 1942, Nogales was the scene of a nine-day celebration where groups of regional, city, town, and civic officials stood on platforms where they witnessed waves of black GIs from Fort Huachuca and from Davis-Monthan Airfield, town residents, and Mexican Americans from the border towns of Agua Prieta, Sonora, and Naco, parade through the city streets and stood by as they participated in ceremonial dances, horse racing, bull fights and floral shows. As the soldiers, special guests, and spectators engaged in the rituals of dance, drink, and song that marked the *Fiesta de las Flores,* they gave new meaning to the imaginary borders of race, nation, and origin. A little over a year later, the Papago Indians held a fiesta celebration at a mission located nine miles southwest of Tucson during which nearly 300 guests from nearby military installations, border towns, and Sonora, Mexico, celebrated Pan-Indian culture and historic identities as Indians and to stake their claims to American citizenship. Over a series of two days and nights, they marked the event by performing ancient rituals predating the colonialist efforts of the Spanish Conquistadors (“Nogales Fiesta Will Continue for Nine Days,” *Tucson Daily Citizen*, 29 April 1942, p. 5; “Officials of Tucson Attend Nogales Fete,” *Tucson Daily Citizen*, 1 May 1942, p. 3; “Nogales Will Launch Fiesta With Crowning,” *Tucson Daily Citizen*, 2 May 1942, p. 11; “Papagos Hold Ancient Rites,” *Arizona Daily Star*, p. 3 December 1943, p. 6). In such spaces, black GIs and border

townspeople in the region created an environment that not only transcended existing debates over immigration and citizenship within the nation state but also transgressed the racial and gender strictures of the period. More importantly, they became a part of communities that allowed them to discuss and critique the former homelands from which they came. As a result, for black GIs stationed at Fort Huachuca and other segregated outposts, such geopolitical border crossings and interethnic encounters became the foundational elements of the new identities that they assumed as they began to contemplate the immediate possibilities of war and death that awaited them.

In sum, race, gender, and class have had a tremendous impact on the historical relationship between young black men, border travelling, and townspeople in the Southern Arizona-Northern Mexico region. Black encounters with border settlement cultures and the cases of police brutality against black service personnel gave rise to new hybrid identities that were grounded in historical memory, geography, wartime immigration politics, and citizenship rights. Studying the relations between all parties in border cities and towns located along the Arizona-Mexico corridor might not only be the key to understanding power relations between black, brown and white bodies, but also might provide the mental calculus for thinking about the unfixed and fluid characteristics of identity and the perplexing and seemingly contradictory crucibles in which they are forged altogether.

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