

**Villages without People: A Preliminary Analysis of  
American Views of Melanesians during World War II  
as Seen through Popular Histories**

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When I visited my parents in April 1988, my father showed me the travel supplement of a local paper, thinking that I'd enjoy the feature article on Papua New Guinea. From the title alone, "Welcome to the Stone Age," I could imagine the contents, the usual stereotyped images of Papua New Guinea: jungles, headhunters, cannibals. The author fulfilled my expectations, conjuring up the image par excellence of Melanesia: "The natives are friendly, despite their well-deserved reputation as headhunters, a practice that is only a few generations in the past" (Handley 1988, 1).

Can we escape this image, this myth? I doubt it. Myths give particular meaning to events, "transforming complex affairs into simple but crystal-clear 'realities' that explain and justify how things are now" (Horne 1986, 57). They guide our vision and fix our perspective. Probably, two centuries hence, travel writers will still write of "friendly New Guinea natives, only a couple of hundred years removed from headhunting and cannibalism." Myths and images, having frozen our vision, possess a self-perpetuating ability to live on long after reality changes. Ghosts of the past influence our perceptions of the present as the travel supplement stereotype of Papua New Guinea demonstrates.

In this paper I talk about myths, images of the past, shadows of a war that ended more than four decades ago. The ghosts of the World War II live on, as the *National Geographic* knows (Benchley 1988). Images of the war still command our attention: witness the number of new books about the war (eg, Toland 1982; Terkel 1984; Spector 1985; Dower 1986), and the reprinting of old books (Smith and Finch 1987 [originally 1948]; MacDonald 1978 [originally 1947]). This flood of printed pages reflects the continuing importance of the war in American thought, history, and mythology.

### History and Images

With rare exception the expanding literature replicates and perpetuates a stereotype of indigenous Melanesians that is as inaccurate as the stereotype of Americans that many Melanesians hold (see eg, Gegeo, chapter 3). The people of Melanesia found themselves caught in the crossfire of a foreign war, a war that generated for them images and myths of powerful, generous, and egalitarian Americans. With my colleague, Hisafumi Saito, I've described the images held by one group of people, the Kilenge of West New Britain (Zelenietz and Saito 1986). The Kilenge experienced the war firsthand; they provided labor to build an airstrip, first for the Australians and later for the Japanese; they hid from the bombs and shells as the First Marine Division invaded Cape Gloucester on 24 December 1943; and they served as carriers for MacArthur's forces on Bougainville and New Guinea. From such experiences the Kilenge fabricated indelible images of the combatants. To this day the images provide local stereotypes to guide Kilenge interactions with foreigners.

In trying to put the Kilenge view into a broader context, to ground the Kilenge images and memories in the larger events of the Pacific, and to see how the combatants felt about the indigenous peoples of the region, I thumbed through several readily available popular histories of the war. What I did not find in them struck me as being far more revealing than what I did.

What was missing? Two lacunae captured my attention. First, I discovered, historians almost totally ignore the battle for Cape Gloucester. Although the War Department released a film in 1944 called *Attack: The Battle for Cape Gloucester*, that battle never captured the public's imagination, never spawned the images and press copy generated by battles like Guadalcanal (eg, Tregaskis 1943; Kent 1972; Hoyt 1983) or Buna (Mayo 1974).<sup>1</sup> At best, Gloucester rates a few paragraphs (Spector 1985, 247) or pages (Davis 1962, 168-188; Berry 1982, 64-65, 84-85, 102-105) in books that deal mainly with other events and campaigns.

The second thing I couldn't find was *local people*. The Americans were important to the Kilenge; the Kilenge, as far as I could see, *did not exist* for the Americans. The more I read about the Pacific War, the more it struck me: references to the indigenous peoples of Melanesia were few and far between. When mentioned at all, Melanesians usually fit a particular Western stereotypical image of "the native." Soldiers and historians recalled the mud, the malaria, the mountains, and the monsoons, but not the Melanesians. Writers make abundant reference to places and villages, but rarely to the inhabitants. In my search for Melanesians, I was chasing images of invisible people, shadows of nonentities.

The invisible Melanesian contrasts sharply with the flesh-and-blood civilian in the European theater of the war (see eg, Mauldin 1945; MacDonald 1978). Americans came out of the war with a clear image of a Europe brought to its knees by the war's devastation, a land teeming with dispossessed, destitute refugees. Ultimately America responded to this image with the Marshall Plan for European reconstruction. No such plan benefited the war-ravaged people of Melanesia. Why, I asked myself, should one group leave such a visible and memorable image, and the other group fade into oblivion like a photograph left in the sun?

That question forms the basis of this presentation. Although I deal with matters of what we call history here, I am not a historian. Rather I am an anthropologist. As such, I'm accustomed to gathering my information by living with people, participating in their lives, talking with them, and learning from them. Their views, after all, reflect their culture. This is how I learned the meaning of World War II for the Kilenge. For this paper, however, I have had neither the resources nor the time to travel and interview survivors of the war, to explore the images they hold of the people of Melanesia. But these images are not inaccessible: literate people generate and record their myths in writing. Trade paperback books, written primarily by Americans for an American audience, became my informants. These books represent American myth-making, and because they sell successfully and continually in the popular market, I presume they reflect, at least in part, the American worldview. Undoubtedly there is something of a dialectical process at work here. These books not only mirror the values of the culture that spawns them, they also shape the images that culture holds. I want to show how they feed our stereotypes of Melanesians. I make no claim to have examined the popular and scholarly literature thoroughly and exhaustively. My research, really in its infancy, has only scratched the surface of a wealth of written material. My aim is to examine how American fighting forces, and those who record their deeds, their mythmakers, saw or failed to see the indigenous people of Melanesia during World War II, to explore American images of the Melanesians, and in contrasting those images with images held of Europeans, to account for why those images exist.

But before I talk of the people of Melanesia, I must first talk of the land itself, because before they saw the people, the Americans saw the land, and the land etched indelible images on the American psyche. American perceptions of, and experiences with, the Melanesian landscape profoundly influenced what and how they later saw the people.

### Images of Melanesia

American forces went into the Southwest Pacific not knowing what to expect, or for that matter where they were going. For the most part they never understood the geography of that vast oceanic area. "To this day, few GIs and Marines have the remotest idea of where they fought" (Manchester 1980, 94). We may understand civilian and enlisted personnel's bewilderment over the North and South Pacific (Manchester 1980, 94; Terkel 1984, 527), but MacArthur's apparent confusion between New Guinea and Papua (1964, 164), and Spector's inappropriate description of Lae as a "village" and Buna a "town" (1985, 216) reveal the underlying and persistent depth of American ignorance of Melanesia.

Unlike the Philippines, or Guam, or Hawai'i, Melanesia did not form part of the American colonial experience in the Pacific. Here was a world most Americans had never before seen, never before experienced. A landscape totally alien, its awesome beauty overwhelmed their senses; its hidden dangers could cost them their lives. Their first long look at this land impregnated their senses with ambivalent and contradictory responses:

O, lost tropic beauty of sea and cocopalm and sand.

It is scarcely believable that I can remember it with pleasure, and affection, and a sense of beauty. . . . The pervasive mud, and jungle gloom and tropical sun, when they are not all around you smothering you, can have a haunting beauty at a far remove . . . .

But, God help me, it was beautiful. I remember exactly the way it looked the day we came up on deck to go ashore: the delicious sparkling tropic sea, the long beautiful beach, the minute palms of the copra plantation waving in the sea breeze, the dark green band of jungle, and the dun mass and power of the mountains rising behind it to rocky peaks. . . . The jungle stillnesses and slimes in the gloom inside the rain forest could make you catch your breath with awe. From the mountain slopes in mid-afternoon with the sun at your back you could look back down to the beach and off across the straits to Florida Island and one of the most beautiful views of tropic scenery on the planet. None of it looked like the pestilential hellhole that it was.

(Jones 1975, 37-38)

In 1976, as a neophyte fieldworker in Kilenge, I went on a tour of local "war sites" (mainly bomb craters and shell holes) with a friend. We scrambled up and down slippery slopes, following a track barely six inches wide. Hemmed in by dense green foliage, I couldn't see eighteen inches beyond my nose. As the sweat poured off me, my soaking shirt clinging to my back, I knew I couldn't get any wetter than this. I was wrong, as a cloudburst soon

taught me. Gasping for breath, wrapped in the bosom of the jungle, I thought "How the hell could anyone fight a war here?"

It isn't the action that stands out the most to me about Cape Gloucester though, it is the awful weather. Rain, rain, rain, every day and night . . .<sup>2</sup>

You'd be trying to move through the jungle when you'd find yourself up to your knees, or deeper, in a mudpit. There was a joke floating around that went like this:

This captain is looking at one of those mud pies when a helmet appears moving through the mud. Then it comes up a little higher and the captain sees a head.

"Jeez," the captain says, "you must be in real deep."

"Real deep," the Marine replies. "Wait 'till you see the bulldozer I'm driving!"

Then there was jungle rot. You couldn't possibly keep your socks dry, much less your boondockers. This knocked the devil out of your feet. By the time we left New Britain many of our men could hardly walk.

Another menace was those big trees. They were rotten. The shelling and the lightning were always knocking them over. Our division actually had several men killed from either lightning or falling trees. (Berry 1982, 64-65)

Melanesia surprised the Americans; they were ill-prepared for the landscape, climate, and conditions. At Buna the camouflage dye in their uniforms reacted with the tropical heat and sweat, causing great discomfort and skin rashes, and the infantry never seemed to have the right weapons at the right time (Mayo 1974). Guadalcanal was a "vision of beauty, but of evil beauty" (Manchester 1980, 192), a "loathsome, lethal island where the malarial mosquito became as great a danger as the machine gun and the mortar" (Winton 1978, 71). In this first tropical battlefront, "[while] battle casualties [by September 1942] had not yet reached 1000, twice that number were suffering from malnutrition, the aftereffects of dysentery, virulent fungal infections, and exhaustion. Malaria, shortly to strike down so many, was just beginning to appear" (Griffith 1963, 159). And at Cape Gloucester, "the damn diseases ran rampant. Malaria came back, and so did dysentery--just think what happened to your bowels in weather like that. Even our ponchos began to disintegrate" (Berry 1982, 54-55).

Melanesia, for the Americans fighting there, was a world full of contradictions. A fecund, verdant land teeming with lush growth and abundant life, it was also a shadowy world with the stench of ever present death and rot. What Mayo said for Buna applies to Melanesia as a whole: "The battleground had been a vast, primitive, almost unknown wilderness of towering mountains and steaming coastal jungles, burned by the equatorial sun and drenched by

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tropical downpours" (1974, 171). As the land was alien, primitive, and unknown, so too were its people.

### Images of Melanesians

What kind of people did the hundreds of thousands of American troops who served in Melanesia expect to find there? Understandably, but regrettably, few authors delve into the troops' expectations: men going into combat would hardly spend their last hours of peace philosophically discussing the nature of the inhabitants of their battleground. Most likely they hit the beaches in blissful ignorance, as unknowing about the people as about the land. Manchester wrote: "In the view of World War II GIs and Marines, most of what they had heard about the South Seas was applesauce. They had expected an exotic world where hustlers like Sadie Thompson seduced missionaries . . . and wild men pranced on Borneo . . . and lovely native girls dived for pearls wearing fitted sarongs, like Dorothy Lamour" (1980, 101).

At best, their expectations were parodies of reality. Tregaskis recorded this story: "In the hours before the first wave landed on Guadalcanal, Dr Malcolm V. Pratt, the senior medical officer aboard, who won distinction in the First World War, told me an amusing story this afternoon. 'I went below to look around last night,' he said 'expecting to find the kids praying, and instead I found 'em doing a native war dance. One of them had a towel for a loin cloth and a blacked face, and he was doing a cancan while another beat a tomtom'" (1943, 32). At worst, their ignorance was absolute. "Nobody had ever heard of it [Guadalcanal] . . . the guys had a thousand queries for their officers. What was the target island like? Any bars? Any tail?" (Manchester 1980, 204).

The few images of Islanders readily available to the Americans came mainly from two sources, both cut from the same cloth. Missionary tales and explorer exploits formed the raw material, the basic myth, for American preconceptions of Melanesians. Book titles such as *Cannibal Land* (Johnson 1929), *Cannibal Caravan* (Miller 1939), *The Heart of Black Papua* (Taylor 1926), *John G. Paton, Hero of the South Seas* (Byrum 1924), *Erromanga, the Martyr Isle* (Robertson 1902), *The Savage Solomons . . .* (Knibbs 1929), and *The Isle of Vanishing Men* (Alder 1922) indicate the ready-made stereotype of Islanders as savage, headhunting cannibals that pervaded the thoughts of those in the know. Thus an American correspondent commented that he flew "over Malaita Island, home of cannibals and of a few hardy missionaries" (Lee 1943, 350), and a popular historian records the tribulations of a downed flier who feared his would-be rescuers would put him in a cannibal pot (Lord 1977, 192). Griffith, who fought on Guadalcanal as a Marine officer, found this use

for the quintessential stereotype: "Henderson-based aircraft had their own troubles. They were kept operable by maintenance crews who cannibalized a badly shot-up plane with the same loving care the Solomon Islanders had a century previously bestowed on dismembering a plump missionary" (1963, 123-124).

Many Melanesian societies *did* practice headhunting and cannibalism in the past, but most societies had abandoned those practices long before World War II. Read's (1986) recent reflective study of Susuroka shows us the possible speed, depth, and impact of cultural and social change: what people did a generation before may not relate in the slightest to their contemporary actions. We cannot impute behavior to a people based solely on what their ancestors did. But myths live on.

Perhaps, from a historical and relativistic position, we can understand the use, during the war, of the cannibal image. Cannibals are, after all, everything that civilization is not, and the war was (among other things) a war for civilization. What becomes hard to excuse is the historical perpetuation of the cannibal image, the almost pornographic and voyeuristic fascination with the savage. Do we really benefit from Mayo's passing description of the Orokaiva? "They were only fifty years removed from cannibalism, and that in a peculiarly revolting form--the practice of 'living meat', in which they tied their prisoners to a tree and as meat was needed cut slices from buttocks or legs, plaster pandanus leaves over the wounds . . ." (1974, 15). But the prurient interest in cannibalism lingers: Horton (a former district officer and coastwatcher in the Solomons) captions one of his photos "Former cannibals train hard to defend their island against the invading Japanese" (1971, 16) and notes that "exploits such as these [coastwatcher Kennedy's] soon stirred up the warlike spirit of the local people which was never far below the surface. They had been famed in the not so distant past as headhunters" (Kennedy 1971, 39). Kent meanwhile reminds readers that the vicious fighting on Guadalcanal "made the headhunting exploits of the old days seem tame by comparison" (1972, 9). Ultimately the savage image carries into the present and we encounter the inexcusable remark, "Stealthy cannibals still flourish in Papua" (Manchester 1980, 115).

Within this context, what kinds of images and myths emerged from American wartime contact with Melanesians? How did the Americans see and describe the Islanders?

Some accounts suggest that the Americans did not even see Melanesians as being distinct peoples, different from other Pacific Islanders. American servicemen appeared uninformed about or indifferent to distinctions between various Pacific peoples (cf Saito, chapter 19). Americans, by labeling various island people "gooks" (Terkel 1984, 60; Berry 1982, 36; Manchester 1980,

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101) imposed a generic nativehood on the people of the Pacific.<sup>3</sup> Cultural distinctions mattered little: natives were natives.

Americans rarely saw Melanesians as whole human beings, people with houses, families, beliefs, and day-to-day concerns. Detailed American depictions of Melanesians are few and far between. Fahey's firsthand account uses relatively neutral language in a bare-bones description of people and a village in the Solomons, and of Islanders on Efate and New Caledonia (1963, 86, 23, 32). Manchester comes close to depicting Melanesians as Rousseauian "noble savages," innocents of the jungle (1980, 101-102). Tregaskis supplies a lengthy passage about Savo Islanders, their appearance, their villages and churches (1943, 191-194). He describes his scouting party's guide as "typical native pattern: stumpy, dirty teeth, red hair, childish manners" (192). Later writers, if they even describe the "natives" at all, evoke similar images of short, childlike people. Melanesians were "wiry little men" (Hoyt 1980, 113), "small, black natives . . . afflicted with malaria, dengue fever and fungus infections," "stocky, muscular black men with six-inch shocks of dirty red hair" (Davis 1962, 109, 129) who could barely count past ten (Hoyt 1983, 105). Some authors use more neutral terms, such as "local inhabitants" (Hess 1974, 88) or "tribesmen" (Cortesi 1985, 45). For the most part, though, information on the island people and their way of life is sadly lacking, with only a few writers providing even minimal historical and anthropological background (see Horton 1971, 8-11; Kent 1972, 9-10; Manchester 1980, 110-111).

American writers, if they acknowledge the Melanesians at all, tend to see them primarily in terms of how they helped or hindered the war effort. MacArthur cited "friendly co-operation from the New Guinea natives" as an important contributing factor in his Southwest Pacific campaign (1964, 165). From the first day Americans landed on Guadalcanal and recruited Melanesian guides, Melanesians made substantial contributions to the Allied cause (Manchester 1980, 206). They served as carriers and bearers on the Kokoda trail (Mayo 1974), in New Britain (Davis 1962, 129, 180), and in many other combat areas. As part of the Australian coastwatching service, they were scouts and guerrillas, gathering vital intelligence, harassing and misleading the Japanese (see eg, Lord 1977; Horton 1971; Kent 1972; Tregaskis 1943). They guided American patrols into enemy controlled territory and safely extricated them (eg, Griffith 1963; Hoyt 1980, 73, 98; Horton 1971, 47, 51). Villagers flocked to join the coastwatchers and aid the war effort (Lord 1977, 245; Horton 1971, 39). Manchester even reports that tribesmen in Papua walked 200 miles to Port Moresby to aid that town's Australian defenders (1980, 103). Whether as part of the organized coastwatching service or simply as villagers, they rescued dozens of downed American airmen (eg, Hoyt 1983, 125; Horton 1971, 52; Hess 1974, 56, 88). Even in the New Guinea Highlands,

far removed from battlefield action, Melanesians "did their bit" for Allied success: Cortesi relates Chimbu contributions in locating a site for, and then constructing, an advanced aircraft base at Tsili Tsili (1985).

The saga of Sergeant Major Jacob Vouza epitomizes American respect for Melanesian aid and loyalty during the war. Vouza, who was tortured, stabbed, and left for dead by the Japanese as punishment for carrying an American flag, dragged himself back to American lines on Guadalcanal and insisted on giving his report before being hospitalized. His courage, bravery, and devotion earned him an undying place in American war lore (see Berry 1982, 132-133; Griffith 1963, 107-111; Horton 1971, 19; Hoyt 1983, 96; Kent 1972, 61; Lord 1977, 69-73; Manchester 1980, 221ff; Tregaskis 1943, 149-50). Vouza, for the Americans, symbolizes the best of their stalwart Melanesian allies, sorely mistreated by the Japanese. The exploits of Vouza and his island compatriots, their indomitable will and loyalty in the face of Japanese oppression, earned high praise. Those exploits also served as a moral tale, a legend demonstrating the "rightness" of the American way (Horne 1986, 59). The emergent image and myth shows people who were "loyal soldiers for the allies" (Hoyt 1980, 113). "The natives avoided them [the Japanese] as they would men stricken with the plague"; "[t]he natives, all of them, were loyal to the Allied cause" (Griffith 1963, 41, 127). "There was no love lost between the natives of the Solomons and the Japanese" (Berry 1982, 119). "The Allied forces could count on the complete co-operation of the Solomon Islanders whereas the Japanese were detested" (Horton 1971, 17).<sup>4</sup>

Despite these testimonials to their fortitude, and despite the obvious role they played in the war, Melanesians are often overlooked by those commenting on the war. Spector slights both the war's impact on Islanders and their participation in the hostilities. Although he examines the effect of American servicemen on states and colonies of the Pacific rim, he chooses to concentrate on Australia and India, dismissing Melanesia in a single sentence: "In remote parts of New Guinea and the New Hebrides, they [GIs] inspired bizarre "cargo cults" among the local inhabitants, some of which have continued to the present day" (1985, 400). He mentions a number of campaigns, such as Kokoda-Buna (189), the fighting on Guadalcanal (192), and the construction of the Tsili Tsili air base (240), all without acknowledging the presence let alone contribution of the Melanesians involved (in contrast, see Mayo 1974 for Buna; Griffith 1963 for Guadalcanal; and Cortesi 1985 for Tsili Tsili). Spector is not unique: a pattern emerges from the literature, a pattern of villages without people, natives without substance. Americans portray unidimensional Melanesians--allies in war, but nothing else. If the Islanders were not actively assisting the Americans, they were not "there."

Two oral histories of American recollections of the war are nearly devoid of mention of Pacific Islanders. Berry's book (1982) on the Marines contains infrequent references to indigenous peoples, while Melanesians are totally absent from Terkel (1984). Winton's book (1978) has *one* photograph of an Islander as its sole Melanesian content. Numerous other accounts of the war cite many village names, but usually fail to mention the inhabitants of those places (eg, Mayo 1984; Hoyt 1980; Hoyt 1983; Griffith 1963; Lee 1943; Jones 1975). Melanesian villages were targets, objectives, or landmarks but not places where people lived. Accounts of the air war also ignore Islanders. Morrison's book (1986) contains *one* mention of Melanesians, and Hess (1974), in his history of Pacific aerial combat, only twice mentions them, both times in connection with rescuing downed airmen. Apart from that, Melanesians seem absent. Where were they?

Many, no doubt, fled the conflict and hid in the bush. In the Solomons district officers ordered the villagers to leave the coast and make their homes and gardens in the mountainous island interiors (Horton 1971, 34; Kent 1972, 29). Mayo describes Papuans fleeing as the Japanese came ashore at Buna (1974, 16), and Lord takes us into a village deserted after American shelling (1977, 139). In Europe too people fled at the first sign of battle, but returned shortly after (MacDonald 1978). The Kilenge I studied remembered going back down to the coast to meet the Americans after the shooting stopped, and the legendary Marine, "Chesty" Puller, returned "1700 natives" to their villages on New Britain (Davis 1962, 182). Somehow, though, the return of Melanesians never made the impression on Americans that the return of Europeans did: it did not leave an image, it did not contribute to a myth.

Careful reading of the various accounts shows that, in truth, the Melanesians were there, on the spot, seeing and being seen by Americans. We already know from Manchester that Islanders met the Americans the first day the latter were on Guadalcanal. Tregaskis' firsthand account of Guadalcanal is notable for its lack of reference to Melanesians, excluding his description of Savo Islanders. Why, then, does he relate the incident of a patrol that found the raped and mutilated body of a young girl by the side of a trail (1943, 172), and then pass on without further remarks? Were Melanesian women *that* common a sight that only a hacked torso called for comment?<sup>5</sup> Again, if Melanesians weren't there, why does Tregaskis, on his way back to civilization, rejoice at seeing "dusky maidens swimming in the surf," a welcome relief "after looking at marines, Japs and betel-chewing Melanesian men" (1943, 262), unless, of course, he'd seen (but never mentioned) his fill of Melanesian men on Guadalcanal?

Were American servicemen barred from contacting Melanesians? Non-fraternization rules were certainly in place (eg, Fahey 1963, 57, 86), but the

Kilenge fondly remember many American visitors to their villages, and the nonfraternization rules did not pose any barrier to soldier-civilian interaction in Europe (eg, MacDonald 1978, 347).

From the air it seems Melanesians were as invisible as they were at ground level. Thus Cortesi (1985), who praises Chimbu contributions to the Tsili Tsili air base, never even suggests that Melanesians could have been the victims of American bombing attacks at Wewak. Jablonski (1971) too never mentions the possibility of Melanesian casualties of the air war. This starkly contrasts with his frequent mention of European civilian casualties of American and British bombing attacks.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps we don't hear more of Melanesians because the Islanders interacted more with garrison and service troops than with actual combat troops. As soon as the combat units secured their objectives, garrison units and service outfits relieved and replaced them. The overwhelming trend in popular histories of the war favors either command personalities or combat units and conflict situations. Life in garrison or service units paled in comparison, and similarly would probably make for dull reading. Books on noncombatant units, in other words, wouldn't sell; hence, they aren't published. The same situation holds true, of course, for Europe. Yet civilians on that continent figure prominently in the war literature.

American servicemen viscerally understood the differences between the European theater of operations and the Pacific theater. "In the Pacific, there were none of the European diversions. What you tended to see were miserable natives and piles of dead Japanese and dead Americans" (Terkel 1984, 64). "Our jungle rot was the equivalent of their trench foot. But we didn't have much in the way of female civilian population, or wine cellars" (Jones 1975, 121). Americans "liberated" European towns and cities (eg, Mauldin 1945; MacDonald 1978; Terkel 1984), but only once did I encounter the term "liberated" used in connection with Melanesian communities (Davis 1962, 182).

For the GI, the Pacific had "natives," while Europe had "civilians." The images of Melanesians that Americans carried into the islands, and the images they subsequently formed there, differ sharply from their images of Europe and Europeans. The wild, savage land and its wild, savage people stood a world apart from the cathedrals and civilians of Europe. The GI could barely understand or comprehend the land and people of Melanesia: they were a foreign, alien enigma. But the GI could empathize with the plight of the Europeans caught in a war-torn continent. With very little difficulty American soldiers could see themselves mirrored in the wretched, miserable, displaced continental civilians.

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It would take a pretty tough guy not to feel his heart go out to a shivering, little six-year-old squeaker who stands barefoot in the mud, holding a big tin bucket so the dogface can empty his mess kit into it . . . .

It chills a man to see a young girl, with a haunted hopeless expression in her eyes and a squalling baby which must go on squalling because she is hungry and has no milk for it. Not only does he pity her, but he thinks that this could possibly have happened to his own sister or his wife.

(Mauldin 1945, 66, 69; see also MacDonald 1978, 220-221)

The GI ability to empathize with Europeans, to insert himself into the role of the civilian other, and the inability to similarly empathize with or absorb the role of Melanesian villager, is not terribly hard to comprehend. In part the explanation lies in the American orientation toward Europe, an orientation based in bonds of blood and culture. "Virtually all Americans were descended from European immigrants. They had studied Continental geography in school. When commentators told them that the Nazi spearheads were knifing here and there, they needed no maps: they all had maps in their minds" (Manchester 1980, 49). Their cognitive maps of the world, in which the "Old Country" loomed large, told many Americans as they crossed the Atlantic that they were headed "home." "I was in Fulda [Germany], where my namesake, Saint Winfrid, converted the tree-worshipping Germans to Christianity. My family came from this area" (Terkel 1984, 158). The roots of American cultural values stretched across the ocean to Europe. Americans identified strongly with their Old World origins, but felt no such affinity toward Melanesians, whose land, cultures, and customs were totally alien.

Understanding the American ties to Europe, and the lack of similar feelings toward Melanesia, helps us to explain the different images of those parts of the world conveyed in and by the war literature. This understanding, however, provides us with only a partial explanation of the differences. If we look into mainstream American society itself, into then-prevalent American beliefs and attitudes, we can more fully account for why Americans saw Europeans one way, and Melanesians another way. I contend that Americans failed to identify with Melanesians, failed to see them as whole human beings, because Melanesians have black skin. The issue is a matter of race.

### Images of Black and White

Racial discrimination, racial segregation, and white supremacist attitudes were all well-entrenched in society in general, and the military in particular, as America entered World War II. A nation supposedly united to win the war systematically excluded black citizens from participating in a labor force crying out for workers: only one black worked at the General Motors plant in

La Grange, Illinois, and only nine blacks worked for Lockheed in Los Angeles, all as sweepers. Eventually, under threat of a march on Washington led by A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the Roosevelt government issued Executive Order 8802, authorizing the Fair Employment Practices Commission (Terkel 1984, 9, 33-38).

The military, a microcosm of American life, reflected general social feelings. Racist attitudes dictated that blacks could only make mediocre soldiers (Spector 1985, 386), that "blacks were not to be trusted in combat" (Terkel 1984, 9; see also MacDonald 1978, 200, 333, 337). Thus on the eve of the war only four thousand blacks served in the US military, less than in 1900 (Spector 1985, 386). Racist belief so pervaded society that, even in the face of a growing need for troops and a nondiscrimination clause in the Selective Service Act, local draft boards chose married whites and white fathers over eligible single blacks (Spector 1985, 387).

Once in the military, blacks confronted a system little changed from the prewar Jim Crow days. For all intents and purposes they lived in a world separate from their white brothers-in-arms. "I think of two armies, one black, one white. I saw German prisoners free to move around the camp, unlike black soldiers, who were restricted" (Terkel 1984, 149). Black servicemen rode in separate railway cars and were excluded from white PXs and servicemen's clubs without having their own comparable facilities (Terkel 1984, 150). They formed separate units, mainly labor battalions "with dressed-up names like engineer, quartermaster, what have you" (Terkel 1984, 365), and their camps were strictly segregated on military bases, out of sight to most base visitors and personnel (Terkel 1984, 263; Williams 1983). The Red Cross even segregated blood from black and white donors (Terkel 1984, 566). Segregation ran so deep that one black air unit, the 332nd Fighter Group, isolated on their air base, had to take off in the wrong direction down the runway. When blacks did form combat units their training was often so prolonged and so intense that they ended up being elite units (Terkel 1984, 344). Williams' fascinating book, *Hit Hard* (1983), documents the trials and tribulations faced by one black tank outfit. The 761st Tank Battalion faced racism and discrimination at home, abroad, and after the war; it took them thirty-five years to get a Presidential Unit Citation (Terkel 1984, 231; Williams 1983).

Just as blacks fought to join the civilian war effort, so too did they fight the discrimination and racism in the military. A race riot broke out at Camp Shenango, Pennsylvania, over separate but unequal facilities. Only after the deaths of soldiers did the situation improve (Terkel 1984, 150). Similar riots were barely avoided at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana (Williams 1983, 80-83) and Camp Lucky Strike, France (Terkel 1984, 369), but naval personnel did

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riot in Guam (Spector 1985, 391-393). Naval stevedores at Port Chicago, California, mutinied after two hundred black ammunition loaders died in an explosion (Terkel 1984, 392-401). In most of these incidents inquiries white-washed the military, concluding that the blacks were too sensitive. They consistently failed to recognize the racism inherent in the structure of the services (Spector 1985, 393).

Blacks recognized the irony of their situation. They were fighting a "race war" (Dower 1986, 4) against America's enemies, while America still systematically exploited and discriminated against its own black citizens. "The struggle against both the Germans and the Japanese was accompanied by attacks on master-race theories in general, and thus cut at the roots of white supremacism and discriminatory laws and institutions in the United States" (Dower 1986, 175). Dower, in his provocative book, argues that the Pacific War was, for both sides, a race war. He maintains that Americans judged their German and Japanese enemies by different standards. While authorities incarcerated Japanese Americans, they were far less systematic in incarcerating German and Italian Americans. The "bad guys" in Europe were not the German people as a whole, but rather just the Nazis. The entire Japanese nation, in contrast, served as the villain in the Pacific. The press played up the difference between the war against Germany ("a family fight . . . between white nations"), and the war against Japan (a war of Occidental and Oriental ideals and civilizations) (Dower 1986, 165).

America had long feared the "yellow horde" across the Pacific Ocean, and American colonial policy in the Pacific contained more than a tinge of racism (see eg, Lee 1943, 24; Dower 1986, 148ff). Colonized peoples, like domestic Blacks, lived under the burden of such labels as *primitive*, *monkey*, *savage*, and *wild*, terms meant to dehumanize them (Dower 1986, 149). Propagandists revived these terms for the war against Japan. The rhetoric of the Pacific War "called for 'the almost total elimination of the Japanese as a race', on the grounds that this 'was a question of which race was to survive, and white civilization was at stake' " (Dower 1986, 55). The American propaganda machine depicted the Japanese as either superhuman or subhuman, but *not as human*.

Here lies the final clue to understanding American attitudes toward Melanesians. Domestic racism not only pervaded American society and the US military establishment; a virulent, xenophobic, and patriotic racism dominated the Pacific battlegrounds. Many Americans saw themselves fighting a race war, a "war without mercy," against a savage, primitive foe. They fought their first land engagements in the islands of Melanesia, a land already stereotyped in myth as wild, savage, alien. Fighting and horrendous conditions

of heat, mud, rain, and insects, as well as a merciless foe, reinforced the image of Melanesia as a savage land.

In this latter-day version of hell, the Americans encountered people with alien and savage customs, strange cultures, and black skins. Not all, perhaps not even most, Americans held strongly racist views: many individual Americans came to know and respect Melanesians as whole people. But insofar as the American mythmakers, those who recorded the war and generated our images of the war, saw those Melanesian people at all, they identified the indigenous inhabitants with the land, saw them through the lens of racial prejudice, and connected them with the death and destruction of a racial war. Rightly or wrongly, Americans associated the Melanesians with the Japanese enemy. Although the two differed from one another, both were foreign people: strange, alien, primitive, and savage. American commentators did not see Melanesians as whole people, as human beings. At best, Melanesians became curious, primitive, and cannibalistic allies. At worst, being not quite human and not the enemy, Melanesians were not even there. Innocent victims of a foreign war, Melanesians became caught in the trap of historical oblivion.

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### Notes

1 As a rule of thumb, the early ground battles in Melanesia drew more attention than the later battles. Progress in the Central Pacific, North Africa, and Europe tended to overshadow the Southwest Pacific campaign.

2 The First Marine Division invaded Cape Gloucester during the height of the monsoon season. "Sixteen inches of rain fell in a single day" (Manchester 1980, 98).

3 This phenomenon is similar to that of European settlers creating the category of "Indian" when they lumped together the various indigenous peoples of North and South America.

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4 Reality in Melanesia, of course, differed from the preceding hyperbolic rhetoric, which serves as myth-reinforcing legend. Local people in the Buna-Gona region turned over Australian and American civilians and soldiers to the Japanese (Mayo 1974, 25-26). Some Solomon Islanders displayed active hostility to Australians hiding from the Japanese, "betraying" their former colonial masters, and the Japanese made some headway in winning Islander loyalty (Lord 1977, eg, 223-224).

5 Perhaps they were, perhaps they weren't. By the time Manchester arrived at Guadalcanal, he could record the parenthetical comment: "(The only native woman I saw on Guadalcanal had a figure like a seabag. She was suffering from an advanced case of elephantiasis. Hubba Hubba.)" (1980, 22).

6 There are just two references to Melanesians in his entire volume on the Pacific air war, while the first fifty pages of the companion volume on the European air war contain no less than six references to civilians and civilian casualties.

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