

Models of the Post-Racial World? Rhetorics of Race among U.S. Military Brats

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Abstract

The U.S. military has long been claimed as a model for racial integration, having been integrated by executive order before the general population; significantly, too, the military is constantly shuffling but organized by service branch and rank, and so installation neighborhoods are more prone to organized diversity than their civilian counterparts, which tend toward homogeneity based on race and class. For the estimated two million children growing up in this system,¹ such experiences of diversity provoke worthwhile questions of what influence those military children will have upon leaving the military system for the civilian world. Many have speculated that military children are more comfortable with constructive racial integration than their civilian peers; as third culture kids, they have been referred to as prototypes for the future due to their blended identities and global backgrounds.² Yet as sociologist Dr. Morton Ender noted back in 2006, no one has yet done a study specifically looking at race among military kids; as of 2015, as far as I can tell, this claim remains true.³ In this paper, I look at the content and quality of what now-adult military kids say about race to explore the constructive elements of their rhetoric about race in and after the system, as well as to consider the unique challenges and anxieties involved in living out racial experiences in unusual and shifting environments.

Keywords: military children, third culture kids, racial conflict, racial integration, dialogue, nostalgia

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I was sixteen and waitressing in Maryland, just outside DC. I had a cold and I'd lost my voice, so Barry—the other waiter on the floor that night—was trying to take on more of the tables. A father came in with his two daughters, and Barry asked if I wanted the table; I shook my head no, would he mind? Barry sat the family in his section. A few minutes later, the father was back up at the front of the restaurant, angry and asking me why I didn't want to wait on them. I was confused, and I tried to whisper as loudly as I could, "*I can't talk.*" He couldn't hear me, and I didn't understand why he was angry—until we both realized what was happening and were mildly horrified. We both backed away; he sat back down, and I spent the next hour with my face bright red, feeling embarrassed and guilty that he thought I wouldn't want to serve him and his beautiful little girls because I was white and they were black. I remember respecting him for letting me have it, even as I felt so misunderstood.

Maryland was the first time I remember overt racism. I remember another time there when another white waitress told me that I had to watch out for "black people around here; they're all mad and uppity and think they have things to prove." I didn't agree, but I watched, and I saw. Saw how white people looked at me as if I was automatically on their side; how black people looked at me guardedly. The other racial groups—mostly Hispanic, Vietnamese, and Korean people—seemed to move a little more easily among everyone else. But for the first time, I felt the gulf of distrust between black and white.

I'd grown up grateful for my interracial military experience. While both of my parents had grown up in rural, segregated areas, with few or no non-white friends and racist ideologies inherent enough to be invisible, my sister and I grew up in a world where our neighbors and our prejudices were determined by military rank, not ethnicity. And while the power dynamics wrapped up with the rank structure are problematic in

themselves, they allowed us kids to come together over shared identities that transcended racial distinctions. I think I'd assumed I was inoculated against racism, that having belonged to an interracial community during my formative years, I would always be able to move in that kind of world. But in the civilian world, I wasn't one of an interracial collective, I was just me—and I was white, with all the associated privilege and stigma.

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While I was waitressing in Maryland, some friends of mine were having a counterpart experience a few states south of me. My family had been stationed with the Uyenos in Germany; Kevin and Kelley (then about 15 and 13, respectively) had spent most of their young lives abroad, moving back and forth between Germany and England, always living with military communities. We all moved back to the States around the same time, and the Uyenos moved to Clarksville, TN. In preparing for this veterans conference, I emailed Kelley and Keven. Kelley noted that Clarksville was the first time she was aware of race as an issue, though looking back she can see that her mom had a harder time with it (“she never fit the mold of what people envisioned as an officer’s wife . . . I do recall several times mom was mistaken as the hired help”).⁴ Kevin, who I remember having an especially difficult time with the military-to-civilian transition, was more forthcoming:

For the first time ever, we lived in an almost all-white neighborhood, and stood out quite a bit as one of two mixed race families in the subdivision. . . . [The schools were systematically segregated into racial groups, too.] . . . Becoming a teenager when the way people viewed me (through the lens of my race or races) was changing so drastically was especially tough—I'd never considered what the implications might be of asking a Caucasian girl to a school dance versus asking an African American girl; but suddenly it mattered in a way that had not been as visible before. . . .

Whenever I went on-post for school, church, or work events, people were more likely to engage in conversation with me around shared interests [and] where I had lived previously Off-post, those initial conversations were more likely to be concerned with my family's racial makeup. No one ever asked where I had lived before because everyone had always lived in Clarksville—no need to ask.

People wanted to know what my parents did for a living and what rank my dad held. (Surprisingly, I got asked this more by civilians in Clarksville than by any military dependents in my entire life.)⁵

I remember talking to Kevin a fair amount on the phone that year, as the two of us struggled through adolescence; Kelley and I flew together back to Europe for a vacation; our families visited each other. It was a gift that we could talk easily about race together—I credit this ease mostly to their mom, who got a lot of practice over her years in a biracial marriage (her Japanese mother-in-law was not pleased for the first several years of her son’s marriage to a black woman) and who as a person is just wonderfully brash and breaks down discomfort among friends. She is a second mom to me still today.

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This paper is less formal than I intended it to be. When I first heard the theme of this year’s conference, I wasn’t sure what I could contribute. The military part of my research focuses on the kids—and really, former kids, those who have aged out of the system—and we don’t have enough accurate data on military kids and race. Sociologist Dr. Morton Ender noted back in 2006 that no one has yet done a study specifically looking at race among military kids; as of 2015, as far as I can tell, this claim remains true.⁶

For example, in 2013, Molly Clever and David R. Segal wrote an article on “The Demographics of Military Children and Families” for *The Future of Children* in which they drew on the most recent statistical data available on military service members, spouses, and children. They had access to racial demographic information on the service members, but not on the children; despite the title of this report, the authors’ analyses of racial data focuses on the service members and not on spouses or children.⁷ I have found these walls consistently as I’ve tried to seek out demographic data on military kids, both racial and otherwise—the systems in place tend to track the parents, but not the kids.

So I believe what we actually need on this topic is studies to capture accurate data, and I am not a sociologist. But what I am is a rhetorician—I study how people use

language to enact practical action—so I thought, okay, I’ll look at how former military kids talk about race and what their language choices might mean.

After all, the U.S. military has long been claimed as a model for racial integration, having been integrated by executive order before the general population. Though today the overall racial demographics among service members mirrors the general U.S. population, the difference lies in how the people are organized. The military is constantly shuffling but ordered by service branch and rank, so installation neighborhoods are more prone to organized diversity than their civilian counterparts, which tend toward homogeneity based on race. The kids, if they are segregated from each other, are separated based on parental rank, not on skin color. So if Kevin had gone to his senior prom in Germany, the skin color of his prom date would likely not have mattered, but it might have made a difference if she had an enlisted parent. As another former brat put it,

Growing up on military bases as an Army brat with an officer father I can honestly say that I was not aware of “race tensions”, but I was acutely aware of “rank tensions.” . . . I had friends of many racial backgrounds and that never seemed to be an issue, but all of us knew where our parents fell in the hierarchy of rank. Even the physical design of the base presents clear social boundaries. Enlisted families lived in apartments or duplex houses on one side of base, officers in another section with bigger houses for higher ranks. The generals had the largest homes.

I think it is wonderful, especially in light of recent race fueled tragedies, that race is not as defining a topic on military bases. But assigning another person’s worth based on their rank is really not any better. It is just another version of the same flaw in humanity: a desire to look down upon someone else who is different.⁸

Still, that rank difference disrupts class hierarchies that are so often tied to race in the civilian world. A colleague of mine who currently teaches at Tuskegee grew up in England—in a black officer family with white, British servants—told me about black NCO kids who told her she “thought she was white” because of her sense of privilege (a note that gave me a rare glimpse into intra-racial tensions inside the military system), but she said she took pride in her parents’ accomplishments. Upon entering the civilian world, she resented that

no one cared about her family's background—which included her father's being trained by Tuskegee Airmen. "I resented losing my 'black privilege' in the military to white privilege [outside]," she said.⁹ This woman isn't alone in her sense of racial heritage—Kevin, for example, told me his parents instilled a strong sense of both their black and Japanese histories; living abroad, though, their racial identity was subordinate to their identity as Americans.

In considering the rhetoric of these brat accounts, what I hear most is nostalgia, pride, and loss. Exiled from homes that no longer exist even if these now-adults were legally allowed to go back to the geographic locations associated with their pasts; separated from each other by time and transience—I don't know if things were really as nice as we remember. I'm tempted to believe it because we do have negative memories of class and rank. These speakers may be idealizing, but how can anyone tell? Regardless, maybe we can learn even from the worlds they remember into existence. The chance to enjoy each other across racial distinctions is precious in a world where we are so often separated.

Given the estimated two million children growing up in this system (and thirteen million more who are currently adults),¹⁰ this experience of recognizing identity beyond race provokes worthwhile questions of what influence former military children can have upon leaving the military system for the civilian world. Military kids belong to the broader subculture of "third culture kids" (TCKs), people who have grown up in two or more cultures and end up forging their own original, third or blended culture. Other TCKs include missionary kids and corporate kids who grow up abroad. As TCKs, military kids have been referred to as prototypes for the future due to their blended identities and global backgrounds.¹¹ Many have speculated that since military children are more comfortable with constructive racial integration than their civilian peers, they could be an important force in advancing civilian race relations.

I don't want to pretend that brats are post-racial; if that's even an ideal to pursue, our world is certainly not in a place to allow for a post-racial reality. But having glimpsed

a contrast—relationships less defined and far less bounded by race—I would like to see military brats work together to name and navigate racial issues that the civilian world often seems to struggle in discussing. In order to do that, we'll have to try to remember what we've lost, to be brave about facing the ugliness so many of us found distressing when we first left our more integrated childhoods. We may need to reconnect with childhood friends with whom we have pre-established trust, and with whom we have common histories to build upon.

But if we're going to live up to the hopes others have for us in terms of forging more positive relations across racial differences, I believe we will need to use our rhetorics of nostalgia to give us starting places for new rhetorics,¹² those that recognize our advantageous position and take on leadership roles that forge collaborative futures. I think one thing we brats learned, especially, was the power of living alongside each other, sharing common activities and goals.

Racial reconciliation efforts in the civilian world are so often overt, and that can be urgent work. Consider for example the language bound up with critical race theory, a model that addresses racial injustice by “understanding, challenging, and dismantling systems of racism.”¹³ The rhetorical approaches necessary to this kind of work—calling out systemic racism that many want to remain invisible, refusing to allow racism to parade as “color blindness,” and instead insisting that the conversation acknowledge and directly address racial issues—are crucial when racism persists through its own invisibility. In other projects, leaders facilitate explicit dialogues about racial issues, which may involve heated arguments, with the goal of promoting not interpersonal warmth but greater understanding and mutual respect.¹⁴ Again, such projects are invaluable.

These approaches seem at odds, though, with the rhetoric I see brats using, both because they focus on differences and because they speak so directly to race. The force involved in such work feels best suited for addressing immediate and pressing problems; that level of intensity seems unsustainable in the long-term. In contrast, brats tend

toward more indirect and diplomatic rhetorical approaches, building relationships based on commonalities—shared interests, backgrounds, or aims—and sidling up to racial conversations as they arise once social trust is in place. In their book on *Transcending Racial Barriers*, Michael O. Emerson and George Yancey describe this as a “mutual obligations approach,” noting the military as a primary location for such integration:

The goal of racial integration is generally not enough to foster positive interracial contact; it must additionally help such contact become productive—that is, give it a purpose. . . . There are clear common goals in the (multiracial) military . . . positive race relations are not the military’s ultimate goal but rather a means to the ultimate goal of combat readiness. . . . Sharing an ideological core is quite important for shaping productive interracial contact.¹⁵

Brats learn this approach too, whether explicitly or implicitly, and are therefore in a particularly strong position to take the lead on projects like building interracial relationships focused on shared aims.

Taking this indirect approach can also allow for attention to racial complexity. As Kevin notes,

Racial identity is something that I wrestle with to this day. It’s something that I often think about how to tackle with my daughter, who has black, white and Asian heritage (we call her our little panda). What I am thoroughly convinced of is that, had I not had the insular, American identity-focused upbringing that living on a military installation afforded me, I would have felt compelled to identify more strongly with one of my races over the other, and I would certainly have categorized others by my perception of their racial makeup much more consciously than I do now. Of the many things that I am indebted to my upbringing for giving me, this more post-racial and open viewpoint has been one of the primary factors that I attribute to success in personal and professional relationships throughout my adult life, and I am very thankful for that.¹⁶

I share Kevin’s gratitude. Integrated relationships, where our racial differences were valuable but always subordinate to the things we had in common, ultimately gave me the opportunity to know diverse people and to build the kind of trust that allows for honest and open discussion of difficult racial issues. I’ve carried that approach on after the military,

and though I often still feel racial divides, I also find myself having richer interracial and intercultural friendships than many of my peers. Whether we call it an “indirect,” “mutual obligation,” or “common goals” approach, this rhetorical practice is one brats can take pride in as part of their shared cultural heritage, and maybe one that can help us all in the post-military world.

About the Author

Heidi Nobles is a writer, editor, and scholar specializing in editorial history, theory, and praxis. She holds an MA in English Literature from Baylor University and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of South Carolina; she is currently completing her PhD in Rhet/Comp at Texas Christian University. Her forthcoming book, currently titled *Stories We Didn't Know to Tell: A Collective Memoir from a Lost Tribe*, explores key moments in world history from the perspective of adults who grew up around the globe as military children. Her creative and scholarly work appears or is forthcoming in journals including *Scholarly Editing*, the *South Atlantic Review*, *Computers and Composition Online*, *WLN Journal*, *Welter*, and *Relief*, and she serves as an active member of the Veterans Studies Group housed at Virginia Tech.

Endnotes

1. See “Who Are Our Military-Connected Children?” Military Child Education Coalition website, 2012, available online at <http://www.militarychild.org/student-identifier>.
2. See David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken, *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*, Boston: Nicholas Brealey, 2009.
3. For example, in 2013, Molly Clever and David R. Segal wrote an article on “The Demographics of Military Children and Families” for *The Future of Children*, in which they drew on the most recent statistical data available on military service members, spouses, and children. They had access to racial demographic information on the service members, but not on the children; despite the title of this report, the authors’ analyses of racial data focuses on the service members and not on spouses or children. Molly Clever and David R. Segal, “The Demographics of Military Children and Families,” *The Future of Children* 23.2 (2013), 13–39.

4. Kelley Uyeno, email interview with author, November 9, 2015.
5. Kevin Uyeno, email interview with author, November 12, 2015.
6. In *BRATS: Our Journey Home*, Donna Musil, writer and director, Eatonten, GA: Brats without Borders, 2006.
7. See Molly Clever and David R. Segal, "The Demographics of Military Children and Families."
8. Rebecca Crinean, email interview with author, November 10, 2015.
9. Rhonda [last name redacted upon request], email interview with author, November 11, 2015.
10. See "Who Are Our Military-Connected Children?" Military Child Education Coalition website, 2012, available online at <http://www.militarychild.org/student-identifier>.
11. See David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken, *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*, Boston: Nicholas Brealey, 2009.
12. See for example Michalinos Zembylas, "Reclaiming Nostalgia in Educational Politics and Practice: Counter-memory, Aporetic Mourning, and Critical Pedagogy," *Discourse* 32.5 (2011), 641–655.
13. Aja Martinez, "Critical Race Theory: Its Origins, History, and Importance to the Discourses and Rhetorics of Race," *Frame* 27.2 (2014), 9–27.
14. See for example Katherine Cramer Walsh, *Talking about Race: Community Dialogues and the Politics of Difference*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007; also see the NewGround project, NewGround: A Muslim-Christian Partnership for Change, Los Angeles, CA, online at <http://mjnewground.org/>, and the Interfaith Encounter Association, Jerusalem, Israel, online at <https://interfaithencounter.wordpress.com/>, and the Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity at the Boston YWCA, Boston, MA, online at <http://www.ywboston.org/our-work/our-programs/dialogues-on-race-and-ethnicity/>, among others.
15. Michael O. Emerson and George Yancey, *Transcending Racial Barriers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 86.
16. Kevin Uyeno, email interview with author.

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