Yusef Komunyakaa was born and raised in Bogalusa, Louisiana near the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, where race and war were the most crucial issues of the time ("Yusef Komunyakaa"). During the Vietnam War he served as a correspondent in the United States Army from 1969 to 1970 ("Yusef Komunyakaa"). Although most of his subjects for writing happened previously, it was in 1973 that Komunyakaa began writing his poems that would eventually be recognized for their creativity ("Yusef Komunyakaa"). The subjects of Komunyakaa’s poems were often set during times when segregation was alive and rampant, during his horrific time serving in the Vietnam War, and after. In the poems “Facing It” and “Tu Do Street,” the themes of separation but equality and of his ever-present war memories are reoccurring.

In the poem “Facing It,” Komunyakaa demonstrates the theme of being separate but equal through his experience at the Vietnam War Memorial. In the first two lines “My black face fades, / hiding inside the black granite” (1-2) the speaker realizes that he is now one and equal with the memorial. His black face fades, hiding inside the granite just like his past in the war is now symbolically hiding inside the memorial. All that he has done in the war now equates to this black granite located in Washington D.C. Komunyakaa expresses the theme of separation in the poem in a racially charged manner.
In “Facing It,” he states, “his pale eyes / look through mine. I am a window” (27). During the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans struggled for their freedoms and were often treated like they were lesser than white people (Carson). This is significant because Komunyakaa grew up during this racially inclined time; therefore, he feels as if he were a window, just as most African American men did at this time. They were simply looked over and barely acknowledged. Although he feels separated by race, he finds equality with the white veteran that floats closer to him. The speaker notices that “he’s lost his right arm / inside the stone” (28-29). He realizes the vet and his own equivalency when he sees they have both lost things to war, whether it is mental or physical. The vet has lost his arm, and Komunyakaa has lost his freedom of thought, his friend, and the ability to carry on. In addition to this, Komunyakaa and the vet have lost their lives because it will always be plagued by war. Cherished possessions that were once dear to both have vanished inside the stone forever. There is significance in this equality because by the time the war memorial was built, the government established the African American’s equality legally, but people reach a milestone when they realize their freedom themselves (“The Memorial”).

The passionate poem “Tu Do Street” emphasizes the themes of separation and equality when Komunyakaa describes his experience in the bars and outskirts of Vietnam. The separation is clear and vivid when Komunyakaa flashes back to his hometown in Bogalusa, Louisiana. Segregation was alive and rampant in Louisiana at the time of his childhood (Brown). He reminisces on “white only signs and Hank Snow” (6-7). The flashback reinforces the separation of whites and blacks, which was congruent with the time during which Komunyakaa was living. The separation continues when he
remarks that “We have played Judas” (15), which is a reference to the well-known Bible story highlighting the betrayal of Jesus by a man named Judas Iscariot. Komunyakaa is showing the separation between the white and African American soldiers after war whenever he makes the Bible reference. They had metaphorically betrayed one another once they separated themselves into whites and blacks after they had experienced the terrors and camaraderie of war. Despite the separation shown in the poem “Tu Do Street”, there is also equality shown in different ways. Although the soldiers “played Judas” with one another, when they went back to the real world, “only machine-gun fire brings us / together” (16-17) illustrates the equality aspect of the poem. The black and white soldiers were equal whenever they were in combat together; they worked hard, fought hard, and shared experiences one could never imagine. They formed bonds that are unique to only those that experience the camaraderie of war together. The equality they shared is important because during the Vietnam War they had to set aside their differences and do what was best for the country. Equality was also experienced in a more promiscuous way when Komunyakaa says, “There's more than a nation / inside us, as black & white / soldiers touch the same lovers / minutes apart” (27-30). He realizes that there is more to each of them than what society says; he sees his comrades as more than black and white.

Throughout many of his poems, Komunyakaa is haunted by his memories and can never seem to mentally be in one place all at once. He is constantly reminded of his service throughout daily life and his remarkable time spent in war will be one that plagues his mind forever. In the poem “Facing It,” the memorial is a place where the past, present, and future all meet, where the living come to visit with the memories of the dead,
and veterans come to assess their losses (Marvin). Visiting the memorial elicits strong memories for Komunyakaa and makes him feel like he is back in Vietnam again. For example, “I turn / this way--the stone lets me go. / I turn that way--I'm inside / the Vietnam Veterans Memorial / again” (8-12) shows that all Komunyakaa has to do is look at the black granite to feel as if he were in the war again. He continues his investigation of the memorial and looks through the list of names, coming across a friend’s. “I touch the name Andrew Johnson; I see the booby trap's white flash” (18-19), says Komunyakaa. He immediately reflects on the unpleasant memory of his friend’s death merely upon seeing his name, showing how he consistently reflects on his past and how it refuses to escape him. “Facing It” is a poem filled with memories and the ghosts of Komunyakaa’s past that will always reoccur to him.

“Tu Do Street” and its passionate ambiance provide Komunyakaa with a gateway to some of his memories. The poem starts off with Komunyakaa reflecting on his childhood. “America pushes through the membrane / of mist and smoke” (3-4) refers to the atmosphere of Tu Do Street, but it also describes the delicate line between the past and the present, memory and consciousness, and the United States and Vietnam (Marvin, Tom). Because it can refer to the delicate line between the past and the present, it also indicates how easy it is for Komunyakaa’s mind to be detached from the present and sent right back to the past with his war memories. Komunyakaa refers back to his past once more when he says, “Back in the bush at Dak To / and Khe Sanh, we fought / the brothers of these women / we now run to hold in our arms” (23-26). He refers back to a time when the black and white soldiers were segregated in reality, but shared the same lovers when they were in war together. Even while trying to be intimate with another person he still
thinks about the brothers of these women that they fought with the intention of killing. Because of his war memories, Komunyakaa cannot be fully present in many situations and lacks the ability to be fully engaged in normal life.

Important things in one’s life often affect their writing. For Komunyakaa, growing up in a segregated area and his time serving in the Vietnam War were what gave his writing the character that is unique to himself. The themes of separation but equality and of his ever-present war memories are shown throughout the poems “Facing It” and “Tu Do Street.” These themes are reinforced by segregation of where he grew up and his inability to be one hundred percent present in his daily life because of the memories of war. Komunyakaa’s poems not only give us a peek at what life was like during segregated times, but they also give us a glance into the mind of a life torn apart by war.
Works Cited


