VICTIMHOOD IN AMERICAN NARRATIVES OF THE WAR IN VIETNAM

Aleksandra Musiał

In this well-researched and engagingly written book, Aleksandra Musiał weaves an indispensable narrative of a nation's wasted learning opportunity. Exploring the canon of multigeneric American texts on Vietnam—or rather "Vietnam"—the author reveals the erasures of historical context and other obfuscations that gave rise to the paradoxical construction of the United States as the main victim of its own atrocities. A timely and courageous investigation of large-scale self-mythologizing, this is an urgent call to rethink a major historical event for the benefits of a post-heroic age.

Krzysztof Majer, scholar of North American literature at the University of Łódź and Polish translator of Michael Herr's Dispatches

In a clear, jargon-free prose, Aleksandra Musiał dissects the rhetorical strategies through which the Myth of the Vietnam War was constructed, and aggressors turned into victims. Moving deftly between history and literature, Musiał offers a definitive debunking of constructions of the war as an *American* tragedy.

Giorgio Mariani, author of Waging War: Peacefighting in American Literature

Over forty years later, the Vietnam War continues to loom large in American cultural narratives. *Victimhood in American Narratives of the War in Vietnam* explains how this war that devastated Vietnam and split the American public came to be mythologized and depoliticized in such a way that it has been uniquely available for U.S. leaders of both political parties to bolster support for subsequent military action.

Gina Weaver Yount, Associate Professor at Southern Nazarene University and author of Ideologies of Forgetting: Rape in the Vietnam War

Victimhood in American Narratives of the War in Vietnam

This book revisits the American canon of novels, memoirs, and films about the war in Vietnam, in order to reassess critically the centrality of the discourse of American victimization in the country's imagination of the conflict and to trace the strategies of representation that establish American soldiers and veterans as the most significant victims of the war. By investigating in detail the imagery of the Vietnamese landscape recreated by American authors and directors, the volume explores the proposition that Vietnam has been turned into an American myth, demonstrating that the process resulted in a dehistoricization and mystification of the conflict that obscured its historical and political realities. Against this background, representations of the war's victims—Vietnamese civilians and American soldiers—are then considered in light of their ideological meanings and uses. Ultimately, the book seeks to demonstrate how, in a relation of power, the question of victimhood can become ideologized, transforming into both a discourse and a strategy of representation—and in doing so, to demythologize something of the "Vietnam" of the American cultural narrative.

Aleksandra Musiał is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Literary Studies, University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland. She is the author of articles on the American war in Vietnam and American representations of World War II, and the co-editor, with Justyna Jajszczok, of *The Body in History, Culture, and the Arts* (Routledge 2019).

Victimhood in American Narratives of the War in Vietnam

Aleksandra Musiał

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2020
by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Library of Congress Control Number: 2020932508

ISBN: 978-0-367-43803-6 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-00589-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by codeMantra

Contents

Introduction
Secret Histories

My first contact with the American war in Vietnam was Michael Herr's *Dispatches*.

I was in my final year studying toward a B.A. in Ancient World Studies when I took a seminar in ancient Greek warfare, which spurred a general, if light, interest in the history of war. Following a friend's recommendation, I then watched the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*, about American paratroopers in World War II, which hooked me completely—I think I watched episode six daily for about two weeks. Gorging on Tumblr posts and forum entries about the show and the real-life soldiers whose story it followed, I also began looking at more and more combat photography, which soon became a hobby in the form of a small private blog where I collected pictures from all the major twentieth-century conflicts. Around the same time, I also happened to read the memoir from Afghanistan and Iraq by a British ex-soldier (and Oxford English graduate) Patrick Hennessey, *The Junior Officers' Reading Club*, in which he briefly mentions *Dispatches* as "the best writing on war, ever, period" (2010, 238). It wasn't long before I bought and read the book. I loved it.

Prior to *Dispatches*, I had no real knowledge about the war in Vietnam, only a vague awareness of it. Born and educated in Poland, I never learnt about it at school. I had seen *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*—although my father, a great lover of war films, always said that he didn't like the Vietnam War movies much, his all-time favorite being the Korea blockbuster, *Heartbreak Ridge*. The iconic Vietnam War photographs were of course lodged somewhere in my consciousness along with a sense of what they depicted, as they probably are in the minds of most people even tangentially familiar with the culture of the United States. In its globalized dimension, Polish culture is largely Americanized, so it is no surprise that whatever nebulous idea I had had about the conflict was also wholly filtered through that perspective. It is no surprise either that, once my doctoral project was underway, whenever I would mention to anyone—Polish or not, in fact—what the general subject of my research was, the follow-up question would always, infallibly, rest on the assumption that what I was actually interested in concerned in some way "the

trauma of the Vietnam veterans." Even anecdotally, the ubiquity of this assumption indicates, I think, the extent to which the notion of "Vietnam" has been fused to the imagery of the American veteran and soldier in the global popular culture, under the sway of the mighty American influence. I was assured of that one day, when I overheard a Polish student, a young man in his very early twenties, say to someone that the exams he'd just written had been so hard that he now had "flashbacks, like from Vietnam."

So, for me, *Dispatches* was the first real contact. Trudging through the dense paragraphs and the monsters of sentences, I was as enthralled with Herr's language, so unlike any other writer's, as I was with the Vietnam War he described: dazzling, mysterious, ironic, brimming with enigmatic meanings, terrible and beautiful, sexy, almost mythical. With my blog growing and the prospect of choosing a topic for my M.A., which I would write in an English department, I decided to focus on the photography from the Vietnam War.

I'm writing all this because I want to use my own story of gaining a knowledge of the Vietnam War to make a point. In *Dispatches*, Herr wrote about what he called the "secret history" of the war. What he meant was the very senselessness of the death and suffering of American soldiers, on insignificant battlefields of a bad war fought incorrectly and for wrong reasons, buried, the way Herr saw it, under the official languages of military and government propaganda, and left largely uncovered by much of the wartime press.

But what Herr probably couldn't have foreseen was that in the decades since the publication of *Dispatches* at the end of the 1970s, a different secret history of the war would come into being.

Beginning from nothing and proceeding from *Dispatches*, the research I conducted for my M.A. began, as most things do, with Google searches, and then consisted of studies of the Vietnam War–era media, and included also some brief, mostly fact-based histories of the war, and volumes and articles dedicated to its presence in American pop culture and literature. For a long time, the image of the war that Herr's book had planted in my mind continued to grow and clarify. It was only when, starting to think about my Ph.D. dissertation, I began reading other novels and memoirs of the war that I began noticing certain patterns that troubled me. Perhaps because I'm not American, or perhaps because my own politics were evolving, I could not always easily sympathize with the protagonists of these texts or see them as the victims the authors portrayed them to be, and my curiosity turned to the representations of the Vietnamese civilians, which I thought to be formulaic and instrumental. Most directly, however, the idea for this book came from an old *Time* article, titled "An American Tragedy," that I came across one day, and which described the massacre of several hundred Vietnamese civilians by an American infantry company. The title perplexed me, and

the question irked me: just *how*, and *why*, does one brand an event like My Lai *an American tragedy*?

Meanwhile, when I had familiarized myself with some of the "canon" of Vietnam literature scholarship, I made my way to other studies, which offered more critical readings of that literature. From there, my research led me finally to cultural and political studies that traced the mainstream American discourses of the 1980s that effectively rewrote the very history of the Vietnam War in the United States. These were especially those related specifically to that war, but also works that concerned Ronald Reagan's presidency, the rise of neoconservatism, the recent history of U.S. foreign policy, and so forth. The single most important transformation of the war's cultural narrative that all these studies recorded was the primacy of the American veteran as the victim of "Vietnam," at the cost of purging much of the progressive legacy of the 1960s and the war—and of the history that accounts fully for the destruction of Vietnam and the suffering of the Vietnamese people at the hands of Americans. (The same goes, of course, as I also learned, for Cambodia and Laos.) At the end of this road into the past I found histories and other accounts of the war written closer to it, often radical and by today's standards sometimes very much so, which now help jumpstart the process of uncovering this secret history of the American war. The time it took me—quite literally working backwards—to discover it, testifies, I hope, to its burial in the mainstream knowledge of the war.

I have since read *Dispatches* several times, and, frankly, if I were to take five books with me to a desert island, it would very probably still be among them. But, as I imagine, a certain disillusionment is usually the price one pays for picking something dear as a subject of a doctoral dissertation. I don't think Michael Herr should be held entirely responsible for his book's complicity in the rewriting of the war; his was, after all, only one voice, and a particularly self-conscious one at that—just one that proved particularly popular and influential. Rather, the canonical American Vietnam War literature, though problematic in itself, was inscribed into the modified cultural narrative of the war emerging in the 1980s largely through its validation in literary criticism and scholarship, an ideologically motivated process that Jim Neilson traced in his 1998 study *Warring Fictions*.

Neilson looked at the ways in which reviewers and scholars had discussed the literature about the Vietnam War, authored by American writers and published between 1975 and 1990. His overarching argument was that what those critics wrote about the books was rooted in an ideological system of judging artistic merit, compliant with the discourses of talking about the war—and about the United States—which were "permissible" at the time. The upshot of those "safe" readings was to turn the newly emerged canon of American Vietnam War literature politically impotent. On the one hand, Neilson argued, this was because

those privileged interpretations disregarded any politicized content in the books as well as ignored the problems with the narratives themselves: their solipsism, their racism, their metaphysical rendering of recent, unfinished history. On the other hand, however, the books that were published, positively reviewed, and then analyzed academically—the books that entered the canon, in other words—themselves conformed to the dominant discourses, eschewing the potential for radical criticism that the war in Indochina had once offered. Instead, the books turned obsessively inward, their torments and concerns mostly limited to American soul-searching, as well as American casualties, real and symbolic.

This book returns to the canonical texts of American Vietnam War literature and cinema to assess them as narratives engaging in establishing victimhood. The books discussed, representative of the cultural narrative and chosen on the basis of the volume of scholarly and critical attention they have received, include Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, the works of Tim O'Brien and Larry Heinemann, Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, James Webb's *Fields of Fire*, John Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley*, and Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers*. Other titles—as it happens most of them memoirs and journalist accounts—which I also analyze, sometimes to counterpoint critiques, sometimes to provide further illustration for arguments, include Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*, C.D.B. Bryan's *Friendly Fire*, Myra MacPherson's *Long Time Passing*, Gloria Emerson's *Winners & Losers*, Seymour Hersh's *My Lai 4*, and Daniel Lang's *Casualties of War.* Among the films considered are *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, *Full-Metal Jacket*, *Casualties of War*, and *Good Morning, Vietnam*. What these narratives share, apart from the praise and attention they have received, is chronology. Even those of the Vietnam-related American-perspective books that were published in the 1990s and have received some recognition, like Stewart O'Nan's novel *The Names of the Dead* (1996), have not been canonized as *the* literature of the war. In fact, all the Vietnam War books, both fiction and nonfiction, that would enter the war's American canon were published by the mid-1980s, with the exception of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* which in 1990 seemed to symbolically close the decade of vital creative rendering of the war. The contemporaneous commercial and academic critical response to these texts helped, in accordance with the mechanisms described by Neilson, to not only cement their significance as illuminating with regards to the war but also to direct the readership toward specific interpretations of the conflict and its "symbolism."

Not all academic literary criticism dealing with the Vietnam War has been along the lines disapproved of by Neilson, of course.[1] Moreover, in the meantime, other well-received literatures of the war have also emerged and entered the Vietnam War literary scholarship, their position evinced by several edited volumes dedicated in equal measure to narratives of American, Vietnamese, and American-Vietnamese

authorship, and to transnational perspectives (Boyle 2015c; Boyle and Lim 2016; Christopher 1995; Heberle 2009). The 1990s and 2000s saw the publication in the United States of important Vietnamese accounts of the war, including Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989), Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (1990, English trans. 1994), Duong Thu Huong's *Novel without a Name* (1991, English trans. 1995), and Dang Thuy Tram's *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* (2005, English trans. 2007). At the same time, several popular and bestselling postwar Vietnamese and American-Vietnamese memoirs and novels have also been released, dealing with the war's aftermath in Asia and the experiences of the Vietnamese refugees and diaspora in the United States. Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015)—a novel whose narrator, a North Vietnamese spy in the South and an immigrant to the United States, bridges several Vietnamese viewpoints and identities—is a relatively recent example, and one received particularly enthusiastically, winning several awards including the Pulitzer.

The Sympathizer assumes an interesting perspective: against the established canon. One critic notes, for example, that it "reads like the absolute opposite of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, the clipped, cool fragmentary narrative that has long served as the canonical U.S. literary account" of the war, and calls Nguyen's novel a "globally minded reimagining" of it (Boyagoda 2016). Philip Caputo, reviewing the book for the *New York Times*, observes that the Americans have tended to consider the war in Vietnam as a "solely American drama," and adds that the literature and especially cinema have "reflected" it by largely excluding the perspectives of the Vietnamese (the admonition encompasses, I presume, his own canonical memoir). Caputo concludes that Nguyen has managed to "de-Americanize the portrayal of the war" (2015). In an interview with NPR, Nguyen himself speaks about his ambivalence, as a man born in Vietnam and raised in the United States, toward the American portrayals of the war he saw as a teenager in films like *Rambo*, *Platoon*, and *Apocalypse Now*: "Wait a minute, I'm also the gook on the screen being killed" (2015a). In the novel, the narrator actually works as a consultant on the set of an epic American Vietnam film, the subplot helping Nguyen to deconstruct the Americanized image of the conflict while simultaneously delivering a criticism of it.

While the popularity of *The Sympathizer* proves a breath of fresh air to audiences and critics alike, the very fact of its determined de-Americanization speaks to the influence the literary and cinematic canons have had in weaving the conflict's cultural narrative. In fact, the past decade or so in the United States has seen something of a resurgence in literary interest in the American experience in the war, the long years of slumber ending with the publication of a number of award-winners and bestsellers: Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* (2007), Karl Marlantes'

Matterhorn (2009), and Tatjana Soli's *The Lotus Eaters* (2010). Unlike Nguyen, these authors remain securely within the bounds of the American perspective, but they are also unable to transcend the established canon and the requirements it answers to. Brenda Boyle writes that they

> replicate themes in previous works of fiction about the War; after all, American readers and writers are tutored—both by novels and films—to expect certain events and characterizations in representations of the Vietnam War era. These elements of [Vietnam] War fiction . . . focus on the victimization of, trauma to, and redemption of the individual (usually male) American.
>
> (2015b, 161)

Matterhorn is the most popular of the three books, and yet it is also the one most in line with the familiar paradigms, following rather closely, in terms of form, content, and outlook, in the footsteps of predecessors like John Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley* and James Webb's *Fields of Fire*. It does not tell its readers anything new about the Vietnam War, or the American soldiers who fought there—not anything they would not have encountered in the canon before. The reception of the novel suggests that the vision of the Vietnam War generated by these older narratives, and recreated once more by Marlantes, remains current, adequate to the expectations of the U.S. audiences, and influential, the assessment further validated by the way the conflict is portrayed and talked about in the recent, well-received PBS documentary series, *The Vietnam War* (2017), directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. For that reason, it is worthwhile to go back to the narratives in the American canon of the war in Vietnam, to examine their shared narrative strategies, themes, imageries, tropes, and interpretive suggestions; there, as in the scholarship analyzed by Neilson, we shall find certain ideological unity, overlapping across the titles to produce a specific American literary vision of "Vietnam," which will turn out to have fallen in line with other unfailingly, and to a large extent consistently, ideologically informed strands of the war's interpretation in American culture.

One context within which this canon inscribes itself is a historiographic discourse of the so-called different war. It belongs among a number of narrative and interpretive strategies that feed into the larger discourses on the Vietnam War in the United States, found in historiographical writings and other types of commentaries on the conflict, including literary studies.[2] And while this particular way of contextualization has a history going back to the times of the war (one might even wonder whether it *originated* in the crisis years of 1968 and 1969 particularly, when the conflict's turning bad began necessitating explanation and framework), it is really in the postwar period, especially the ever-important 1980s, that it gains currency—more often than not to

explain the experience of an individual U.S. soldier, and sometimes with the implication that the perceived oddities of service in Vietnam justified lapses in good conduct, also toward civilians.

The elements most usually enumerated as the factors that made "Vietnam" different include:

1 the relatively short length of an infantryman's tour of duty (thirteen months in the Marine Corps, twelve in the Army), which meant that troops worried more about surviving their "time" than about overall victory, and which supposedly undermined the typical soldierly bonding among men in units;
2 the controversial and unjust selective service practice that sent large numbers of reluctant draftees into combat, to fight, be wounded, and die in an ultimately "meaningless" war;
3 the limited war policy that had real consequences for strategy and maddeningly ineffective tactics;
4 relatedly, the lack of distinct battle lines, no front, the prevalence of small-unit engagements, such as during patrols or search-and-destroy missions, over battalion-size and larger battles, which were exceptionally rare;
5 relatedly, the lack of visible progress as "strategic" positions would be fought for and abandoned soon after, to be reclaimed by the ever-replenished enemy;
6 the ineradicable presence of the National Liberation Front (NLF, or the "Viet Cong") throughout South Vietnam, as well as the hidden presence of massive North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units in the jungles, and the continuous threat of falling victim to their ambushes, sniper fire, and booby-traps, all of which translated into a near-constant state of paranoia while in the field;
7 the passive hostility of the civilian population, the inability to distinguish innocents from the enemy, and the resultant indelible belief among the U.S. rank and file that "they were all V.C." ("Viet Cong");
8 the oppressiveness of the climate and the difficulty of the terrain;
9 the unprecedented antiwar opposition to the war at home, the perceived hostility of "hippies" toward veterans, and the lukewarm or antagonistic societal reception of returning soldiers, all of which were said to have exacerbated the trauma of homecoming, the feeling of alienation, the sense of shame at having served (and lost) in an unpopular and polarizing war, the pain caused by the people's betrayal and their denial of recognition, and so forth.

Most entries in this list deserve a nuanced dissection, since, while not really myths, they are still products of oversimplification, exaggeration, bias, or misunderstanding. But my point here is not to tackle the

historicity of the circumstances proposed in these statements. Rather, it is to highlight the fact that they have come to be favored as *the* framework for imagining the Vietnam War in the American and other popular cultures, to the exclusion of different, but no less pertinent, ways of looking at the conflict, for example as a "counterrevolutionary intervention" (Chomsky and Herman 1979b, 1) or as "a struggle between the legitimate leaders of an independent Vietnam and the usurpers protected by a foreign power" (Young 2014, ch. 4).

In this book, my overall aim is to demonstrate the process by which the dominant American cultural narrative of the war in Vietnam has been discursively constructed, as well as to consider certain crucial elements of that narrative. I will argue that the war has been mythologized, or, in other words, removed from history, in order to restore and protect the mainstream American sense of identity and ideology in the wake of the 1960s. The fundamental element of this mythologization—and restoration—has been to shift the optics of looking at the conflict so as to emphasize the scope of American victimization in Vietnam until, eventually, Americans would become the war's primary victims. Various forces were at work toward that conclusion throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and although claiming that literature had a decisive impact on the discourse of American victimization would be to endow it with too much influence, the canonized books may nevertheless be considered symptomatic of the larger processes occurring in culture and historical memory. In the case of cinema, its impact is more direct and less contentious: while the bulk of the movies provided their audiences with the imagery of the war, and particular titles like *Rambo* have long been recognized to have had observable input into the cultural narrative, it is also true that cinematic narratives employed strategies of representing Americans as victims, and that those strategies are found in literature, too. Moreover, by putting emphasis on the particular facets of the "different war" trope through narrative strategies and favoring them over other issues raised by the war's circumstances, these books and films transmitted a specific interpretation and imagery of the war to the wider public as well as critics and scholars in literary and film studies, who throughout the early period of the academic and cultural reception of the war's artistic output happily accepted the authors' largely similar visions of the war in Vietnam as truthful, often even decisive, profound, and illuminative as to the war's "nature." Thus, not only through their contents but also their obvious influence on literary and film studies—not to mention on the readers and the viewers themselves—did the narratives of the Vietnam War contribute to the mainstream cultural knowledge and memory of the conflict (Christopher 1995, 6; Neilson 1998, 7).

As mentioned, the importance of the status of victims imparted on the American veterans of the war has been pointed out often; the purpose of this book is to provide a systematic study of this victimization

as a discourse, entangled in American ideologies and in the creation of the American myth of the war in Vietnam. As such, this study seeks to join in a tradition in Vietnam War scholarship that has generally been critical of the American reception and representations of the war, and that has tended to deliberately step away from a focus on the experiences and traumas of the American combatants and people. One approach, for example, has been to look at the cultural narrative of the war in Vietnam through the lens of gender; three studies worth mentioning here are Susan Jefford's by-now classic *Remasculinization of America* (1989), Brenda Boyle's *Masculinity in Vietnam War Narratives* (2009), and Gina Marie Weaver's *Ideologies of Forgetting* (2010). Gender-related issues are also among the critiques delivered by Katherine Kinney in *Friendly Fire* (2000), whose key insight is that the central trope found in American representations of the war in Vietnam is the metaphor of friendly fire, whereby the conflict's "true meaning" is supposed to be a soul-searching struggle between Americans themselves.

With this book, I hope also to contribute to the continuing trend of recent studies that review the canon, and dominant ethnocentric discourses and narratives about the Vietnam War in the United States. These include two edited collections by Brenda Boyle, *The Vietnam War: Topics in Contemporary North American Literature* (2015), which includes essays on American Vietnam literature, with some of which the proposed volume polemizes; and *Looking Back on the Vietnam War*, edited with Jeehyun Lim (2016). Other studies have delivered critiques of the solipsistic and ideologically influenced perspectives in American Vietnam War texts; for example, in their respective introductions, both Andrew Martin in *Receptions of War* (1993) and Renny Christopher in *The Viet Nam War/The American War* (1995) present interpretations of the war's cultural narrative that parallel those of this volume. Martin, however, engages in a more theoretical analysis, delivered from the perspective of British cultural studies, that seeks to identify texts of culture that resist the dominant political discourse; while he criticizes the Reaganite and neoconservative reclaim of the war in Vietnam for "patriotic" purposes, he ultimately fails to recognize the complicity of the cultural canon in weaving broader, more generally American narratives that, though problematic, remain undetected in his study (e.g., the discourses of victimhood, or of mythological mystification of the war). On the other hand, in her compelling and instructive study, Christopher's antidote to the problems she identifies within the American canon (most notably its ethnocentrism and racism), is to deliver a "bicultural perspective" that attempts to subvert the Orientalized misrepresentations of the Vietnamese and to integrate their accounts into the American narrative of the war. In addition, certain conclusions are shared here with the works of William Spanos where they concerned the war in Vietnam

(*America's Shadow*, 2000; *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization*, 2008); however, Spanos' formal Heideggerian methodology is very far from the methods of this book.

Several studies have, of course, focused on the relationship between American myth and the war in Vietnam. One of the first was John Hellmann's *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (1986), which compared the preexisting mythical constructs of American culture to Vietnam texts. This volume, on the other hand, approaches the subject the other way round, so to speak, focusing on the complex process of "Vietnam" *itself* turning into a new myth in its own right; in addition, where Hellmann's interests remained squarely within the bounds of American studies, and invested in expounding on the nuances of American culture, I attempt to step outside of that discipline and instead, with Roland Barthes, to treat mythology as a realm of facilitation between texts of culture and politically powerful ideologies. This crucial difference is, for all the other merits of his book, Hellmann's greatest failure, and in fact later I engage in a polemic with his arguments, pointing out their alignment with the very depoliticizing, dehistoricizing discourses that I attempt to counter. Regarding myth, this book refers, of course, to Richard Slotkin's seminal work on the frontier where appropriate (*The Fatal Environment*, 1998; *Gunfighter Nation*, 1998), but again, its aim is to investigate "Vietnam" itself as a myth, not as a reimagination of the frontier.

I begin with the assumption that the canonical American narratives should be read against the backdrop of their release and publication: What they say about the Vietnam War and its participants—the image of the war they construct—should be contextualized by the shifts in the American politics and society in the late 1970s and 1980s, since this was the setting in which the books and movies became popular and eventually canonized. And if they alone cannot have been decisive in cementing the particular notions of American victimization, by endorsing a mythologized and solipsistic view of the conflict, they did become complicit in the limited permissible discourse that more easily accommodated the idea of American suffering than that of American-perpetrated oppression and mass death. Therefore, in Chapter 1, I explore the permissible discourse and its limits within the American mainstream in the relevant period. First, I discuss, after Neilson, the mechanics of cultural narratives, before moving on to the subject of the rise of neoconservatism and Ronald Reagan's presidency, as well as their use of the Vietnam War. I then turn to the liberal center and the war's cultural presence in the 1980s, especially in regard to the figure of the veteran. I will argue that the deliberate depoliticization of the conflict, and the shifting of attention almost entirely to veterans and their problems, not only allowed Americans to disregard the matter of what their country had done in Indochina (and for which it was refusing to compensate in the form of

reparations or aid) but—because the harmful capitalist ideologies behind the invasion of Indochina were carefully obscured—also enabled a resurgence of American militarism and nationalism married to both neoconservative and neoliberal visions of the world.

In Chapter 2, my aim is to demonstrate how the canonical American narratives of the war reconstruct "Vietnam" as a mythological place, understood along the lines of Barthes' theory of myth and its ideological implications. The chapter also argues that representations of the Vietnamese landscape have in turn been central to both the process of the war's mythologization and to centering American victimhood. Accordingly, the rest of the chapter is devoted to the creation of the mythical "Vietnam" by American authors and directors, and to the relationship between this recreated landscape and the U.S. soldiers embedded within it, including in particular the strategies of representation that bolster the idea of American victimization in the war. Michael Herr's notion of "Landing Zone Loon," as a particularly productive mythic construct, serves as a framework to analyze the reconstructions and reimaginings of "Vietnam" in other texts.

Having established the mythological setting of the American war, in Chapter 3 I move on to the inhabitants of the "Vietnam" of American imagination: the soldiers and the civilians. The chapter focuses on the various dynamics of victimhood developed in American narratives, and various strategies of representing Vietnamese suffering—such as naturalization, instrumentalization, equalization, and obfuscation—in relation to American suffering. One of the chapter's major conclusions is the proposition that, due to the omnipresence and centrality of the theme, the American Vietnam War literature in fact be read as *war crime literature*. Finally, the chapter turns to the common convention of referring to the Vietnamese as "they're all V.C.," and the theme of Vietnamese betrayal justifying the crimes perpetrated against them, as well as the significance of these tropes to the argument, also presented in the chapter, that the American policy and conduct in Vietnam be viewed as democidal. By the end of the chapter, it becomes clear how the view of the war's atrocity as *an American tragedy* transitions eventually into the complex discourse of American victimization at the hands of the Vietnamese. In this way, my discussion will have completed a full circle: In the Conclusion, I will discuss the rhetorical, ideological, and political uses of the notion of American suffering in Vietnam, beginning with the Gulf War and the "Support the Troops" campaign.

Considering that an ideological dimension of victimization is the central interest of this book, and that it is approached from a specific political point of view, certain qualifications are in order. This book should, in fact, be read as a rhetorical stance against the anodyne ideology that dictates the "traditional, 'liberal' empathy for everyone involved in a

war as its inevitable victim" (Ritchin 1989, 437), and against the common readings of American Vietnam War literature and film that, focusing on American traumas, leave unproblematized various issues these narratives generate and perpetuate. What I wish to offer is a look at these texts from a perspective that, even if it seems rigid, is meant as an exercise in different, "outsider" optics of reading the American Vietnam canon. In other words, a particular problem with this canon, as treated here, arises from its complicity in the notion that Americans had been the victims in and of Vietnam, an idea that by the 1980s had transmuted into a coherent, persistent myth of the war. This is the context against which this book should be read—not as an absolute statement of American non-victimization, or a denial of American suffering endured in Vietnam, but as an alternative perspective where the attention is neither shifted wholly to the American soldier and veteran nor diluted between the American people and the Vietnamese equally.

On the contrary, I balk at such relativistic tendencies of liberal discourses, and I would certainly disagree that the United States, the American people, or "America" were victims of the war. But it does not mean, of course, that certain segments of American society were not. Families of the dead are one obvious case in point, as are the wounded and traumatized veterans, even if this book will engage in much criticism of their victimhood as a cultural discourse. Draftees are another: They should undoubtedly be seen as victims on the basis of class (and race, as the two so often go inextricably together in the American context). In a specific example, Robert McNamara's Project 100,000, a low-standard recruitment scheme promoted in alignment with Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty and Pentagon's preferable alternative to abolishing college deferments or calling up the reserves, gave the armed forces "McNamara's Moron Corps," over 350,000 men who would not previously have been allowed in due to low IQ, physical defects, and similar detriments. These men were sent to Vietnam, and not to be assigned duties requiring any advanced training: As Seymour Hersh points out, many infantrymen, hailing from the Project, were the runt of the military, as much "cannon fodder" as anyone could so be called (1970, 17–18; see also Jeffords 1989, 122–123; MacPherson 2002). Another example of a group of Americans victimized by the circumstances of the conflict are those who resisted the draft: not those who did so via deferments enabled by positions of privilege, but rather protesters who chose prison or exile instead.

But, to put it bluntly, these American men, soldiers, and veterans, are not the victims I am interested in here. My interest lies not so much in the "Vietnam War" and what it "did" to the United States, as it does in how the American cultural narrative of the conflict has in its aftermath dealt with the violence, destruction, and suffering the United States had brought to Indochina.

A Note on the Text

Throughout this book I try to refrain from using the shorthand "Vietnam" to refer to the American war there.[3] The conventional American "Vietnam War" is used for that purpose, alternately with "the war in Vietnam," or the Vietnamese-perspective "American war." As for the name of the country, I use "Vietnam" rather than the Vietnamese "Việt Nam" or the in-between "Viet Nam" (except in quotations). "South Vietnam" and "North Vietnam" are similarly used following convention, even though the official names of the two states used to be the Republic of Vietnam and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, respectively. Often, the word "Vietnam" appears in the text just as this, in quotation marks, and then it refers to the American mythological construct of the country/war—though sometimes the line between the different meanings of the word blur.

The Vietnamese language uses diacritics, and the application of these varies greatly across English-language texts. I have decided to leave place names as they are conventionally printed in English, without the diacritical marks, partly due to the fact that some spellings are well-established ("Saigon" rather than "Sài Gòn"), and partly to avoid confusion in cases where the names are Americanized in the first place (the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the My Lai massacre, the fictional Ngoc Linh Province in Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers*, etc.). In the interests of consistency, the same goes for the "Viet Cong" (rather than "Việt Cộng") and the "Viet Minh" (rather than "Việt Minh"), where I choose the more common in-between forms and not the wholly Anglicized "Vietcong" and "Vietnminh"; and for Vietnamese personal names, so I use "Ngo Dinh Diem," for example, rather than "Ngô Đình Diệm." It is also worth pointing out that in Vietnamese names, the family name comes first, and the given name last, and it is customary to refer to an individual by the latter.

Notes

1 Articles and volumes critical, sometimes radically so, of American books and films of the Vietnam War had been published before and contemporaneously to Neilson's study; see, for example, Christopher (1995); James (1990); Jeffords (1989); Martin (1993); Spindler (1991); also elements in Bates (1996); Bibby (1999); Herzog (2005); Hixson (2000); Searle (1988); Ringnalda (1994). Since 1998, scholars like Katherine Kinney (2000), William Spanos (2000, 2008), and Brenda Boyle (2015b, 2016) have delivered extensive critiques of the ethnocentric and ideologically influenced perspectives in American narratives of the war.

2 For examples of comments or discussions about the war in Vietnam as a "different war," see Carpenter (2003, 32–35), Herzog (2005, 45–57), Knightley (1975, 381–382), MacPherson (1988, 54–74), Wiest (2002, 29–58).

3 See Christopher (1995, 1–7) on the impact of the widespread use of this shorthand on the mythologized cultural narrative of the war in the United States.

1 Vietnam Syndromes

The American Cultural Narrative of the War in Vietnam

In order to understand the American cultural narrative of the war in Vietnam one must look not only, and perhaps not even primarily, to the wartime experience itself, but rather to the decades following the U.S. withdrawal from Indochina. It was then, roughly speaking from the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, that the war was being reinterpreted and rewritten, its political and cultural significance reshaped to foster a particular perspective, not only on what the events of the conflict had been but also on why they happened, what they meant, and how they reverberated. In other words, what is meant by a *cultural narrative* here is the residue of notions, images, beliefs, and mental inclinations, or of ways of thinking and understanding, that attaches itself to the historical narrative of facts and events. A cultural narrative is not identical with a historical analysis and interpretation of causes and effects, though it may color them; rather, the term, as it is employed here, refers to a popular mode of explanation that operates on a level different to that of historiography or history, one nourished by the mythological and ideological—or cultural—sediments of a society. The history of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam may be extended all the way back to 1945, and a chain of political decisions may be established that through the policies of four U.S. administrations led to the repressions of the native Diem regime, the eventual American military invasion, the bombing campaigns in Laos and Cambodia, and the long-lasting devastation of North and South Vietnam. The American cultural narrative of the war in Vietnam, on the other hand, is what has seeped into this historical narrative and "flavored" the memory and understanding of it: The conflict thus came to be seen as a "symbolic war" (Hellmann 1986, 4) or a "mythic enterprise" (Myers 1988, 144).

Millions of Indochinese died in the war, and more bombs were dropped on the relatively small area encompassing North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia than ever before or since—at least twice as many as in the entire World War II, both in Europe and the Pacific. The United States pursued a near-genocidal policy during the conflict,

which eventually influenced how the Americans treated the Vietnamese all the way down the U.S. chain of command—and yet almost none of the American war criminals were prosecuted, let alone sentenced or, if this rare occurrence did happen, kept in prison for the duration specified in the original ruling; and this still applies only to infantrymen on the ground, court-martialed for rape, torture, or murder, and occasionally to junior officers giving orders, but never to U.S. policymakers, generals, and other upper-echelon strategists, none of whom were ever acknowledged in any official manner as implicated in war crime. In the decades since the American war ended, the long-term effects of the conflict in the region have been manifold and disastrous. A consideration of why—and especially *how*—such a war should come to be described as "symbolic" or "mythic" is the purpose of this book.

The answers to these questions should be sought in the American cultural narrative of the war as it emerged in the aftermath of the conflict. If the word *culture* is understood here fairly broadly, literature, and especially as narrow a genre as the Vietnam War literature, should be taken as its poignant but ultimately fairly peripheral sphere; I think it is safe to assume that Oliver Stone, or Ronald Reagan for that matter (Bacevich 2005, 117), have done more to shape the collective American image of the conflict than Philip Caputo or Larry Heinemann have. Nevertheless, because of its poignancy and often greater exploratory depth in both creative and critical activity, literature is an interesting case of focalization, especially as certain prevalent themes and narrative tendencies are given ample space for development and complexity, and may therefore offer particularly useful insights into what is bubbling below the surface of culture. Moreover, when the aim is a critique of a culture and its attendant ideologies, literature matters in so far as it reflects, criticizes, or subverts that culture and those ideologies, and as it is received. Investigating how it does either of these things may prove very enlightening.

Canons are a particular case in point here because they are the result of a dynamic that contributes to the process of weaving cultural narratives. Jim Neilson perceived the significance of the canon of American Vietnam War literature in the fact that "as part of a struggle over the representation of [the war], a struggle over what the war meant, over how and why it was fought, this literature has both reflected and contributed to the construction of recent historical memory" (1998, 2). In tracing how this canon had come to be, and which representations of the war it had promoted, Neilson's overriding aim was to examine the ideological foundations not necessarily of the texts themselves, but rather of the very culture that had received and interpreted them, and on the basis of its judgements had deemed these books particularly representative of the American experience of the war in Vietnam. He found the aesthetic tastes of reviewers to be ideologically informed, for example, even if the ideology consisted in ignoring a book's political dimension

entirely and focusing solely on its formal merits; to favor an ostensibly non-ideological reading of a text is not in itself an act beyond politics but rather an act of *depoliticization* that ends up promoting a certain ideological interpretation nevertheless. Ultimately, the Vietnam War literary canon developed according to a set of sociocultural criteria that required a restraint on explorations that would highlight the validity of the Vietnamese struggle for independence, the material capitalist motivations behind the U.S. invasion, the particulars of American policy in Indochina, or the systematic nature and colossal scale of mass death among civilians and devastation of natural environment that were among the results. These historical facets of the conflict were dismissed, and eventually forgotten in the American cultural memory of the war, in favor of narratives that instead focused virtually exclusively on the experiences of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam and portrayed various forms of their victimhood. The effect has been an Americanization, dehistoricization, and mythologization of the war, these simultaneous processes entangled with the centering of the American soldier and veteran as the most important victim of "Vietnam."

And so be it, we might say: It is not necessarily the role of the writer to provide historical education and political critique, and they are free to write about their war however they wish. The problem, however, comes from the other way round, so to speak: When the mass of canonical representations, sanctioned, legitimized, and thus perpetuated by the critics and scholars, remains so unitary and exclusive of other discourses and perspectives, it ends up shaping and limiting the popular imagination of an event like the U.S. invasion of Vietnam and making itself available for ideological uses. Because the canon formed within the limits of an "acceptable discourse" on the war, it can be seen as participating in the general cultural "persistent affirmation of dominant ideology" (Neilson 1998, 28; see also Christopher 1995, 11–20, 165–166).

Together with the literary Vietnam "classics," the cinematic canon of the war, though created via different cultural and institutional mechanisms, and responding to more pressing popular market demands, was being formed as well, and—given that back then millions of people in the United States would have watched a popular film upon its cinematic release—undoubtedly with more success. Titles such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) were being released at the same time as the novels and memoirs were being published, and for all the formal differences between each film and between the films and the books, ultimately they reiterated much of the same imagery, narrative strategies, and conclusions; they also seem to have locked the American imagination of the Vietnam War—how it looked and felt, what happened there and what it meant—for perpetuity. The blockbuster B-class movie canon that included *Missing in Action* (1984)

and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) was in the meantime, and no less memorably, wreaking its own, greater havoc in the Vietnam historical and cultural narrative.

Departing from Neilson's analysis of how cultural and dominant ideological conditions impact on the constitution of canons, it is then necessary to consider in some depth specifically these cultural and ideological conditions in which the Vietnam War literary canon was constituted in the United States during the late 1970s and the 1980s. The canonical American books about the war should be considered primarily in the context of the responses and ideological formulations of the period, precisely because they achieved their popularity and status since they were deemed—by publishers, reviewers, scholars, and perhaps ultimately the American public itself, receptive of these top-down influences—as presenting a take on the war, and most importantly on the "American experience" in it, that was unthreatening, appropriate, desired, or reflective of the specifically American needs to understand and explain the conflict.

Repudiating the 1960s

Among the objectives in American culture during the 1970s and 1980s, of which the rewriting of the war in Vietnam was part, was a repudiation of the legacy of the 1960s, because the period was considered dangerous by various influential parties, including "several disparate groups that shared little in common apart from being intent on undoing the purportedly nefarious" decade (Bacevich 2005, 6; also Aronowitz 2007; Diamond 1995; Dorrien 2004). The effort would largely succeed, and contribute to the general cultural, political, and economic movement toward the political right, in the United States and globally, that germinated at the time. In politics, on the conservative right, writes Bernhard von Bothmer, "Republicans [had] been campaigning against the 'sixties' ever since the 1960s themselves. . . . Reagan invented 'the sixties' during the 1960s and was against 'the sixties' before the decade ended"; later, "Republicans wielded painful memories of the 1960s"—political movements, demonstrations, mass protests, violence, and so forth—"as a political weapon to attack Johnson's Great Society, the antiwar movement, and the loosening of social restraints" (2010, 2–3). Liberalism, too, was moving further away from the left following the 1960s, for various reasons that included the lessened emphasis on individual liberties in socialist politics, the perceived threat to traditional middle-class privilege from disenfranchised groups now demanding equality, and the opposition to federal institutions and liberal policies on the left during the 1960s (Bacevich 2005, 69–70; Lembcke 1998, 96–97).

But new political schools of thought also developed in the wake of the 1960s that would prove even more decisive in the struggle to demonize

the 1960s. Neoconservatism was the most influential among them, its rise perhaps the most evident symptom of the rightward shift of the median of U.S. politics. The anti-welfare and free-enterprise concerns of neoconservatives, many of whom would become funded by corporations, as well as the ascent of economic neoliberalism, are also linked to the perceived need to "protect" against the legacy of the 1960s. Among the threats posed by the decade, some of the most looming were those to capitalist systems of power: a potential disturbance of global market systems, or widespread protest against corporate power in its many forms, including corporate reputations, cultural standing, and public trust. These dangers were to be protected against by a "tree-top" propaganda offensive, calculated to undermine tenets of welfare policies, taxation, unionization of workers, and so forth, that "[sought] to eliminate any articulate threat to business domination" (Chomsky 1997, 162). The campaign involved corporations funneling money to fund "'free enterprise' think tanks, university programs, and journals" (Diamond 1995, 198). Culturally, neoconservatives would thus become highly influential within this milieu, as ideologues, political advisors, opinion makers, and pundits, their philosophy "hegemonic in the public discourse" (Thompson 2007a, 2). The success of the movement against the values and politics that the 1960s represented in the eyes of their opponents can perhaps best be gauged by observing the transformations of capitalism, as well as of the global culture that it has generated, in the decades since.

Resistance to the war in Vietnam, as well as acute criticism of the U.S. intervention, belonged of course among the decade's most iconic and dangerous heritage. To rewrite the war meant, therefore, to remove some of its subversive potential. On the right, to begin tracing the permutations of Vietnam history and myth as they were being driven by various Republican and (neo)conservative agents and forces, starting with Richard Nixon in 1969, is to plunge into a rabbit hole of perversions of fact, astounding malformations of history, and outright lies. Nixon's contribution to the mythologizing of the war was significant. His fabrications were the result of the administration's wish to divert the public's attention away from the secret campaigns, incursions, and bombings, which it had conducted illegally in Laos and Cambodia, and which, once exposed, elicited a powerful wave of protest in the United States. Considering that Nixon had won the presidential election two years before with promises of ending the war—and that by the time he was finally done, over 21,000 more U.S. soldiers would die in Vietnam[1]—he needed an effective propaganda campaign to soften and counter the harsh criticism and opposition to his policies.

It was Nixon and Henry Kissinger, for example, who concocted the so-called MIA/POW issue, as leverage with which to exert political pressure on the Vietnamese during the peace negotiations in Paris. The issue would be exploited in the U.S.-Vietnamese relations, to the

detriment of Vietnam, for another two decades. Second, Nixon and his Vice-President Spiro Agnew engaged in a rhetoric campaign of distortion in order to discredit and even demonize the antiwar movement, the "dovish" liberals and "pinkos," to the extent that they came to be seen as practically directly responsible for the defeat in Indochina. The myth of the peace protester spitting on veterans was thus born, later studied in detail by Jerry Lembcke (1998), who came to the conclusion that no such occurrences had taken place, or that if a protester had ever spat on a veteran, these were isolated and unreported events, far from the widespread phenomenon it had been made out to be. Nevertheless, the spitting myth was part of a larger Nixon–Agnew campaign to disengage the antiwar protester from the veteran: to drive a wedge between the two groups and, even more importantly, to create the public image of the two as fundamentally opposed. The peace movement could in this way be portrayed as unpatriotic—defiling the quintessential American nationalist symbol, the soldier—and responsible for the failure to win the war by undermining the morale of the troops in Vietnam, as well as by weakening the national resolve to win the war.

The effects of this P.R. stunt were exacerbated by the infamous radio broadcast from the communist government in Hanoi in support of antiwar activities in the United States that aided Nixon's portrayal of the movement as communist agents and traitors. As a consequence, the antiwar organizations began losing support of some Democrat politicians and liberal supporters. A fissure appeared in the movement itself, too, between its liberal and radical wings. Thus generated, condemnation of the antiwar movement, an element of the general repudiation of the 1960s, gained traction in the 1980s and became related to the efforts of reviving the U.S. militarism and interventionism, as the notion of the defeat in Vietnam being due to the antiwar movement and liberals in Washington would weave its way into the neoconservative and Reaganite interpretations. Most importantly, Lembcke argued that by locating protesters and veterans in opposition to each other, the antiwar sentiment and activism of the latter were put into doubt, and the veterans effectively deprived of political voice and depoliticized. The potential of the veteran as a powerful voice against the U.S. policy and practices in Vietnam could be silenced if he was removed from the political context, the sometimes radical criticism now relegated to "anti-American" and easily maligned (and marginalized) peace movement. A veteran active in the antiwar movement could be portrayed as anomalous and "bad," in contrast to the "good" patriotic one.

To counter this narrative, in his study Lembcke was determined to recover the history that showed that the antiwar movement had been supportive of both U.S. soldiers in Vietnam and the returning veterans, organizing, for example, legal aid for draft resisters and troops protesting the war while in service as early as 1966, and actively working for

soldiers' rights. Opposition to the war and active dissent on the part of soldiers and veterans are also well-documented, by Lembcke and other dedicated histories (Cortright 2005; Hunt 1999; Moser 1996; Stacewicz 2008), and were more widespread than it is remembered, consisting in all manner of action ranging from publication and distribution of underground antiwar press among servicemen in Vietnam, to mutinies. The Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), founded in 1967, was among the best-known organizations in the antiwar movement and was unequivocal in its political awareness and radical criticism of the U.S. policy in Vietnam. That the Vietnamese and their suffering were always at the center of the organization's ideological stance and impetus for activism is evident in the rhetoric that addressed war crimes perpetrated by the U.S. servicemen in Vietnam and the ravage caused by the U.S. bombing, applied during such events, either organized by or involving the VVAW, as the so-called Winter Soldier Investigation (WSI) conducted in January and February 1971 in Detroit, VVAW spokesman John Kerry's statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that same year, or antiwar protests at the 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami Beach. All of these were part of the legacy—of the 1960s, of the antiwar movement, and of the veterans' political engagement—that would be distorted ten years later. Similarly, the specific complaints centered around the plight of the Vietnamese, and the criminality of the war, would soon be squeezed outside of the "acceptable public discourse" by liberal and right-wing narratives, and as a veteran concern all but disappear from common memory by the 1980s.

Obviously there were veterans who were not against the war and those who supported it: The group was certainly too large and diverse to be ideologically unified. Among veteran authors, for example, few show particular concern for the political causes and imperialist foundations of the conflict or see past the indoctrinated anticommunism. In fact, the two most conservative canonical novels to be investigated in this book were authored by veterans convinced that the war had, indeed, been a noble cause: James Webb, author of *Fields of Fire*, was in the 1980s outspoken about this belief (Hagopian 2009, 85), while John M. Del Vecchio, author of *The 13th Valley*, wrote in the preface to his book that Vietnam had been "the most moral war this nation [had] ever engaged" (1982, xi). This stance was not uncommon among groups of right-wing veterans in the 1970s and 1980s. But also in general, the progressive political impact of antiwar Vietnam War veterans should not be overstated; initiatives like the VVAW, though vocal, were in the end as marginal as they were radical.[2] In fact, historian Patrick Hagopian, although he acquiesces that during the war those ex-servicemen who espoused explicitly antiwar politics recognized publicly its capitalist and imperialist foundations, argues that many *other* veterans were not interested in these matters, that those involved in commemoration activities and

memorial projects in the 1980s were actively involved in the process of ignoring the problems of morality and the U.S. culpability in Vietnam, and that their interests were ultimately "self-serving" (2009, 407). A still harsher assessment is delivered by Kendrick Oliver, who, in a highly critical book on the distortions of history and memory surrounding the U.S.-perpetrated massacre at My Lai, argues that great numbers of the U.S. troops

> had never been much concerned by what they were called to do in south-east Asia, and following the US withdrawal, even those who were seemed to rechannel the flow of their pity away from the Vietnamese back to themselves, invoking an image of the veteran as victim rather than agent of war. . . . For the most part, Vietnam veterans have not functioned as custodians of the conflict's moral memory; they have tended to seek redemption only of the moral debts that were owed to themselves.
>
> (2006, 255, 264)

In any case, no veteran group came together to publicly support the war while it lasted, and Nixon was unable to find ex-soldiers who had served in Vietnam to promote his policies (Lembcke 1998, 53, 67). This failure to garner public support from soldiers and veterans can perhaps be ascribed to the ideological pull generated by the VVAW and likeminded activists, together with the simple fact of chronology and thus the immediacy, also emotional, of the matter: the war had not yet ended. In effect, although Nixon was guilty of inventing enemies for calculated ends demanded by the still ongoing war—the antiwar protesters spitting on veterans and evil Vietnamese keeping American soldiers in cages—it was Ronald Reagan who undertook to completely rewrite it. During his presidential campaign and in the White House, Reagan pushed an interpretation of the conflict that had for some time been constructed by the neoconservatives, clustered around a number of publications among which *Commentary*, edited by Norman Podhoretz, was the most influential (Aronowitz 2007, 59; Bacevich 2005, 71). The proponents of this interpretation insisted that the failure in Southeast Asia was attributable to wimpy leadership and liberal opposition and that the military had not been "allowed" to win. This neoconservative view had been consistent and politically useful from the beginning: In the Nixon administration, Vice-President Agnew had actually used quotations from the movement's prominent writers, such as Irving Kristol, in speeches that denounced and demonized the antiwar activists (Lembcke 1998, 96). In the 1980s, Podhoretz, in defending Nixon's policies in Indochina, considered those opposed to them to be allies to communists and "almost impossible to forgive" (Hagopian 2009, 33). The way out of the postwar funk, neoconservatives believed, was for the United States to forget the destructive

1960s, reassert its position as a superpower, and to flex its military muscle abroad. The ideology was unapologetically nationalist: The belief in the exceptional status of the United States translated into the conviction that there were no alternatives to American power globally, and that it should, therefore, be the natural order of the world (Bacevich 2005, 73–79; Dorrien 2004, 9–11; Isaacs 1997, 67; Roper 2007a, 5–8).

Reagan subscribed to a similar line of thinking, staffed his high-level administration with many neoconservatives,[3] and would spend his two terms squirming for military action. What checked his interventionist ambitions was what he himself termed the "Vietnam syndrome," and what Noam Chomsky described sarcastically as "a disease with such ominous symptoms as opposition to aggression, terror, and violence, and even sympathy for [United States'] victims" (1997, 164; see also Bothmer 2010, 86–90). In the neoconservative definition, the syndrome was an undesirable residue of the fiasco in Southeast Asia: the unwillingness of the American people to engage their forces anywhere in the world, out of fear that any intervention would become "another Vietnam," and the refusal "to accept any but the most nominal U.S. casualties in any military operation" (Isaacs 1997, 66).[4] It was a sign of weakness, and it had to be eradicated in order for the United States to resume its role as the hegemon of the free world. The international situation seemed to confirm that the United States was losing its footing: The popular revolutions in Central America and Africa, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and above all the so-called Iran Hostage Crisis that same year, were for the neocons signals of American decline in the international arena. But the syndrome would stick around for a while. Reagan was able to significantly raise military spending (a head-spinning $2.7 trillion over his two terms [Bacevich 2005, 108]) and upgrade the country's military hardware. He got his field day in Grenada in 1983, when the U.S. forces invaded the island following a coup; 19 Americans were killed in the few weeks of fighting, and afterwards Reagan awarded over 8,000 medals to the 6,000 troops who had participated in the operation. But the president was not able to do much elsewhere, except resort to covert support and financing for governments, regimes, and right-wing rebels; the "syndrome" still thwarted the public opinion's support for military interventions. This popular anti-militarism intensified in 1983 when, following Reagan's decision to send American soldiers on a peacekeeping mission to Lebanon, 241 U.S. servicemen died in a suicide bombing of a barracks in Beirut (Isaacs 1997, 73).

However, symptoms of the Vietnam syndrome from which the American public suffered could subside: In its aftermath the Grenada invasion was received positively, and soon, the Gulf War would throw masses of people into pro-military frenzy; such is the power of skillful nationalist propaganda (Ehrenreich 1997, 221–223; 63 percent of Americans supported the invasion of Grenada after it ended [Bothmer 2010, 76]; see also Chomsky 1997, 164; Hagopian 2009, 39). The syndrome was

far more interesting in how it affected the American military: it is evident that the fifteen-year break in American warring around the world between 1973 and 1990 (with the relatively minor exceptions) was ascribable in the largest measure to the armed forces themselves. The military leadership's "lessons of Vietnam" were clear, and on their basis a new set of principles was devised that held American interventionism in check, especially against politicians who might be too trigger-happy. Named after Reagan's Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who was its topmost proponent, the new doctrine, as the most concrete realization of the Vietnam syndrome, was passionately hated by the neoconservative commentariat and the militarist/interventionist opposition in the administration itself. The Weinberger Doctrine stipulated that the U.S. military power could be deployed *only* if the following conditions, each a clear echo of Vietnam, were met: The goals are vital to American national interest; political and military objectives are "clearly defined"; there is a "clear intention of winning"; the intervention is supported by the public opinion and approved by Congress; war is the absolute last resort after all other means have failed; and in case of deployment, the policy is constantly "reassessed and adjusted."[5]

Nevertheless, in the neoconservative and Reaganite opinion, even if the syndrome could not immediately be cured, it had to be at least treated: hence the idea that "it is time we recognized that ours was, in truth, a noble cause" (Reagan 1980), the somewhat infamous revisionist line delivered by the president in a speech in 1980. The phrase was an element of a broader effort to repackage the war as an admirable instance of American crusading for freedom, which the yellowbellied political leadership had made unwinnable. Yet another related element of the repackaging was the newfound admiration for Vietnam veterans, who—according to Reaganite logic—had for a decade been deprived of their well-deserved status as heroes, and thus needed to be fervently rehabilitated, even if in words rather than actions.[6] Here is a typical sample of Reagan's teary-eyed, revisionist rhetoric concerning the veterans and the nobility of the war, taken from a 1984 Memorial Day speech: "The veterans of Vietnam were never welcomed home with speeches and bands, but were never defeated in battle and were heroes as surely as any who ever fought in a noble cause" (quoted in Bothmer 2010, 70).

This insistence on the "noble cause," and the complete whitewashing of the U.S. interests and policy in Indochina, rested on an astonishing act of falsification of history. It made the notion of a "noble cause" possible by painting the U.S. intervention as uncontroversial protection of the Vietnamese people against communist aggression, rather than an invasion to support a semi-legal and oppressive regime in order to thwart Vietnamese independence. In a press conference in 1982, Reagan claimed that "when France gave up Indochina as a colony," it was decided in Geneva that "since North and South Vietnam had been, previous to

colonization, two separate countries," elections would be held there to let people decide whether to remain one country or two; Ho Chi Minh, however, "refused to participate in such an election" (Reagan 1982; see also Bothmer 2010, 70–71; Hagopian 2009, 47–48; Young 2014, ch. 15). The United States had no choice but to send in military advisers, who were then attacked and killed by insurgents from the North and so needed further military protection, and the rest was history.

Only, of course, it was not. For a start, France had not "given up" Indochina, but following the disruptions of World War II, waged a war in Vietnam to regain control over the colony, until it was defeated by Vo Nguyen Giap's Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the same year the conference at Geneva decided that the division of the country into North and South, an artificial arrangement dating only to the 1940s and resulting strictly from the French war, was to be temporary. That the elections and unification planned for 1956 did not happen was due to the refusal by Ngo Dinh Diem, South Vietnam president installed, and in this particular decision quietly encouraged by the United States. That North and South Vietnam remained at war for twenty more years was largely because of the ideological and economic motivations of the United States, and the power it had to first meddle in the internal affairs of the small country, and then to wage an illegal war against it.

Nevertheless, to Reagan, maneuvering in the cultural memory of the war had clear ideological advantages. Most importantly, it discredited not only the 1960s and the antiwar movement but also the very idea that there was anything wrong about the U.S. presence in Vietnam. It also aided the renewed and refreshed anticommunist agenda of the Reagan administration (Bacevich 2005, 105; Bothmer 2010, 70–72; Hagopian 2009, 17). Furthermore, the American neoconservative attitude was by nature nationalist and interventionist, thriving on the idea of American greatness and the underlying belief, even if not made explicit, that the country had the right to expand and protect its power and capitalist interests, even through war, worldwide. If the war in Vietnam could be turned into a moral and heroic enterprise, then the threat of "another" one would be gone and with it the poignant point of comparison that could be used to scrutinize Washington's actions abroad (Bothmer 2010, 79). By claiming the Vietnam War for themselves, in other words, the warmongers were trying to disable its political legacy. Vindication of the war and its soldiers—but also the spectacle of Grenada, in its aftermath a modest prelude to Desert Storm—aided and promoted it all, and so the need to dispel the evil aura around the Vietnam War as a symbol of possible American wrongdoing was thus a natural extension of the inherent neoconservative and nationalist outlook: Soldiers and veterans, according to Reagan's rhetoric, "made possible the rebirth of American patriotism. [They] refurbished the nation's ideals and embodied its renewed sense of purpose" (Bacevich 2005, 109).

Squandering the War's Subversive Potential

In themselves, the Weinberger Doctrine and the "Vietnam syndrome" would not end American imperialism or interventionism, of course. When needed, the Gulf War was made to meet all the stipulations of the doctrine, after all, and still several hundred thousands of Iraqis died as a result of U.S. actions.[7] Even with the syndrome gnawing at American hearts and minds, the post-Vietnam administrations continued to meddle abroad covertly, often supporting murderous, sometimes genocidal, regimes and parties on the wrong side of history: From Ford to Clinton, for example, between 1975 and 1999, U.S. administrations continued to give political blessing to and supply the Indonesian government with weapons for its occupation of East Timor, during which the local population was destroyed through killings, starvation, and terror (Chomsky 1997, 47). Carter's White House supported Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, pushing for their recognition as the official representative of Cambodia in the United Nations, even when their crimes began coming to light, after Vietnam had invaded the country and ousted the brutal regime in 1978. The Carter administration also supported the punitive war waged on Vietnam by China a year later (the Khmer Rouge had been backed by the Chinese, with whom the United States was flirting at the time), in which as many as 137,000 Vietnamese people, mostly soldiers and militiamen, died over the four weeks of conflict. Reagan famously funded and publicly promoted the Nicaraguan right-wing and antirevolutionary Contras, guilty of various crimes against civilians, including executions, rapes, torture, kidnappings, and terrorist attacks; in El Salvador, he supported ultra-right death squads, in Guatemala—a government guilty of the worst genocide in modern Latin America, and there were more places worldwide where the Reaganite blessing and money flowed, especially in southern Africa. As a result, as Sara Diamond writes, "the scope of atrocities committed by forces allied with the United States defies calculation. . . . U.S. right-wing movement activists . . . therefore share the responsibility for the death and destruction perpetrated by their fellow 'freedom fighters'" (1995, 207; see also Grandin 2007, 197–224).

But if the neoconservative attempts to rewrite the Vietnam War were more sinister and calculated in their objective of reinstating American imperial ambition and upholding the balance of power through military intervention, the more diffuse liberal cultural narrative of the war, as it crystallized throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, was perhaps more effective in colonizing people's minds as to what the war had "meant"—mostly because it proved so anodyne, its critique a form of "nonthreatening nonconformity" (Richard Ochmann, quoted in Neilson 1998, 40). Therefore, what the following account should make clear is the limitation of the centrist–liberal discourse as a mode of criticism: its failure to

identify and verbalize the real issues the war highlighted and the problems it posed, and its inadvertent complicity in restoring the nationalist and militarist tendencies in the United States in response to the conflict, and all that they entailed.

The process by which this mainstream narrative emerged from the smoke and dust of the "long 1960s" (ending in 1973) was multifaceted and indeed has been described from various perspectives: of the constitution of the Vietnam literary canon (Neilson), leftist criticism of political and corporate propaganda (Chomsky), the right-wing rewriting of the 1960s (Bothmer), the politics of commemoration and memorials (Hagopian), the U.S. foreign policy (Bacevich, Isaacs), cultural studies and discourse analysis (Beattie), the myths associated with veterans (Franklin, Lembcke), the treatment of the My Lai massacre (Oliver), cultural "remasculinization" in the United States (Jeffords), the erasure of rape of Vietnamese women by American soldiers in the memory of the war (Weaver), and so forth. Several shared conclusions may be drawn from those studies. First of all, the propaganda of Nixon especially, but also of neoconservative intellectuals and Reagan, certainly contributed to the eventual liberal narrative. Second of all, and more significantly, like the neoconservative rewriting of the war, this narrative is grounded in two particular concerns: foreign policy, in its more abstract dimensions, and the veterans. It is characterized, above all, by its deceptively non-ideological politics of victimhood: the forgetting of U.S. culpability in Indochina, "Vietnamnesia" (Beattie 1998, 28–34), the notion of "mutual destruction," depoliticization and psychologization of the Vietnam War discourse, and promotion of the discourses of healing and of reconciliation.

Above all, however, the narrative claims the absolute centrality of the Vietnam veteran as the worthiest victim of the conflict and the amplest symbol of its meaning and impact on America itself. For Reagan, Vietnam War veterans, recast as heroes, were to lead the way toward patriotic regeneration; in the liberal narrative, on the other hand, as Patrick Hagopian put it,

> the cultural construction of Vietnam veterans played a central role in shaping the remembrance of the war. The veterans were living embodiments of the war and their difficult readjustment to civilian society became a metaphor for the nation's problems in integrating the Vietnam experience into the pattern of national life.
>
> (Hagopian 2009, 49)

Similarly, the conservative version of the Vietnam syndrome extended to encompass the attempts to rewrite the conflict as heroic and noble, and the 1960s as destructive and unpatriotic—but the broader take on the syndrome had its extensions, too. For example, what was left out of that central narrative, were the other victims: the Vietnamese people themselves.

One of the paradoxes of the war was that, even as it was happening, for a decade occupying a central spot in the public agenda in the United States, the country's press and media showed relatively little interest in the people of South Vietnam—whose government was the U.S. ally, and whose liberty and welfare were ostensibly the very reasons why the Americans went to war.[8] Civilian matters, which were crucial for understanding the conflict and the roots of the eventual American failure, received little coverage, beyond conventionalized and simplifying press and television reports. These ignored matters included not only the historical circumstances of the war and its (post)colonial context, or the reasons behind the support for the National Liberation Front (NLF; the "Viet Cong") in the South Vietnamese countryside, but also issues such as economic problems and corruption brought about by the influx of the U.S. money to Saigon, or the destruction of traditional social structures, fundamental to Vietnamese life for millennia, that the American strategies were causing. The early years of the war were reported in the States much as previous wars had been: The media were overwhelmingly supportive of the war, and by convention portrayed the American soldiers as bringers of freedom and modernity and as protectors of the civilians. The other side of the war, the one in which it was clear that the GIs were racist and capable of extraordinary brutality against Vietnamese noncombatants, went largely unreported until the My Lai massacre scandal broke out in 1969 and more stories surfaced briefly; the almost total lack of interest with which VVAW's Winter Soldier Investigation was met in 1970 seems to suggest, however, that the capacity of the American public to listen about their soldiers perpetrating atrocities had quickly run out (Hunt 1999, 60–76; Lembcke 1998, 57–66; Stacewicz 2008).

Eventually, one of the most persistent images of a Vietnamese person to solidify in the American imagination of the war would be that of a treacherous and deceitful peasant, supporting the NLF and, out of hate for the American soldier, harboring the guerillas and aiding them in setting ambushes and mines; hence the phrase "they're all V.C.," the American soldiers' watchword that, through constant reiteration as a major strategy of representation in cinema and literature, would transition into a persistent trope in the cultural narrative. Following the much-publicized release of the U.S. POWs from North Vietnamese prisons in 1973, and the subsequent development of the MIA/POW myth, the figure of an evil Vietnamese communist torturing Americans also entered the imagery of the war and attached itself to notions of victimhood. Both images converged into a particular strategy of representation that not only furthered the cultural perception of the American veteran as the conflict's most significant victim but also enabled the unspoken, half-conscious suggestion that because they were ungrateful about the American assistance, all seemed to "look the same," and often harbored pro-guerilla political sentiments against the U.S.-backed and cripplingly

corrupted government, the civilians of South Vietnam were in some ways responsible for their mistreatment at the hands of American soldiers.

It actually fell to Democrat President Jimmy Carter to engage, before Reagan, in a rewriting of the war's narrative, in this instance one in which the Vietnamese were simultaneously at the center and pushed out beyond the margins. First of all, there was Carter's rhetoric itself, reflecting and supporting the U.S. policy toward Vietnam in the aftermath of the conflict. In a news conference in 1977, two years after the fall of South Vietnam, when asked whether the United States had "any moral obligation to help rebuild" the reunified country, Carter answered:

> Well, the destruction was mutual. . . . We went there to defend the freedom of the South Vietnamese. And I don't feel that we ought to apologize or to castigate ourselves or to assume the status of culpability. . . . I don't feel that we owe a debt, nor that we should be forced to pay reparations at all.
>
> (quoted in Martini 2007, 45–46)

The meaning of the proclamation—which, as Chomsky observes, was "so uncontroversial as to pass with no reaction" (1993, 252)—was of course that whatever the havoc the U.S. strategy had wreaked in Vietnam, and whatever the scale of suffering it had caused the native population, they were matched by the havoc and the suffering the Vietnamese had wreaked and caused the American people. These words, spoken in the context of Carter administration's ongoing negotiations with postwar Vietnam, which urged reparations, pushed a historical revision that recast the motivations behind the U.S. invasion as essentially good but mistaken; "this," writes Marilyn Young when interpreting the purpose of Carter's rhetoric, "did not make America a wrongdoer like Germany or Japan, who not only paid for the damage each had done but were forced to accept international constraints against recidivism" (2014, ch. 15).[9]

The interpretation of the conflict's roots and of the American failure as essentially a *mistake*, a case of either arrogance and overblown national ego, or, more often, of good traditional American intentions to bring freedom, democracy, and civilization, is of course in itself deeply suspect, and even if it has been discredited in at least some of the war's English-language historiography, it nevertheless exerted influence on the formation of the cultural narrative and created the conditions within which the Vietnam War canon flourished. This view was both conservative in nature—it called for no review of national myths or for a foreign policy of restraint, only that future engagements (invasions) abroad are better considered in light of American interest—and self-indulgent and self-forgiving. It was also safe; because it called for no profound change in the nation and its image of itself, but only that entanglements—*mistakes*—such as the Indochina debacle be avoided, it was protective

of Americans and their well-being, because it assumed that they were a good and special people after all, only that their power to effect positive change in the world had found a limit. In other words, viewed as a blunder, the war was not the ugliest reality check of the U.S. imperialism, its attendant ideologies, and the dangers of global capitalism—as radical segments of the antiwar movement had once argued—but a lesson in overreaching and the limits of the effectiveness of American goodwill. But as one end of the interpretive spectrum continued to shift rightward, so did the other end move, stopping at this anodyne point as the edge of admissible criticism. Patriotism—nationalism, in other words—could be restored and remain at the center of American identity and emotional life, enabling the restoration of other American -isms influential in post-Reagan foreign policy. It was one of the ways in which the Vietnam War's subversive potential had been squandered.

In reality, the notion of "mutual destruction," and the revisionist image of the war that lay behind it, were part of the general anti-Vietnam stance of U.S. administrations in the 1970s and 1980s. For Carter, there were realpolitik concerns at stake; his administration was, for one thing, eager for good relations with China that would strengthen its position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, and China's relations with Vietnam were very bad indeed, culminating in the 1979 war. But the roots of the claim of "mutual destruction" went further. The notion was part of a rhetoric necessary to substantiate the systematic refusal of the United States to fulfil any obligations to Vietnam after the war. While reparations were not negotiated in the Paris Peace Accords that ended the American phase of the conflict in 1973, the treaty did stipulate that the United States would "contribute to healing the wounds of war and to postwar reconstruction" of the country. Hence, in private correspondence to Hanoi, Richard Nixon promised to pay out $3.25 billion to the reunited Vietnam in aid (Franklin 2002, 322; Lawrence 2008, 168–169; Young 2014, ch. 15; corrected for inflation, the value of this amount comes to about $18 billion). The money never came. On the contrary, 1975 marked the beginning of the U.S. low-key campaign to oppose Vietnamese attempts at development after the war—a campaign whose aim was, in short, to "bleed Vietnam" (Martini 2007, 107; see also Chomsky 1993; Young 2014, ch. 15). The United States vetoed Vietnam's admission to the United Nations twice, in 1975 and 1976. Moreover, not only did Congress, during President Ford's term, expressly forbid all forms of formal and informal aid to Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos, the United States also put an embargo on all trade with Vietnam (and Cambodia), which stunted its economic development and contributed massively to the country's decades-long plunge into deep and devastating poverty, as it closed it to other foreign markets and made aid from development organizations, as well as international loans, unavailable. The troubles were made worse, of course, by the widespread wartime destruction.[10]

In the United States, a particularly bizarre, but very powerful, real-life instance of a "mutual destruction"-like concept emerged in the form of the so-called MIA/POW issue. Again, the issue is by now well-known in Vietnam War scholarship, as it was the focus of historian H. Bruce Franklin's influential book *M.I.A., or, Mythmaking in America* (1994), and has been discussed in other studies since then. The gist of the issue is the widespread belief that following the U.S. withdrawal and the release of American prisoners of war from North Vietnamese prisons, a number of captured U.S. soldiers remained in Indochina, secretly held captive by the communists. According to the proponents of this theory, these men were to be found on the list of soldiers missing in action in Indochina. Franklin's book concluded decisively that no American POWs had been left behind in Vietnam. It traced in great detail the development of the MIA/POW myth, which since Ford's presidency had been used as a block to normalization of relations with Vietnam and as justification to pressure the United Nations and other international organizations and institutions to abstain from helping the country. By the 1980s, the myth had grown into an astonishingly strong conspiracy theory and a particularly lasting legacy of the Vietnam War.

In Reagan's America the issue was validated through its political presence, the actions of the MIA/POW movement, occasional publicized rescue missions, and above all Hollywood and films such as *Rambo: First Blood Part II* and the *Missing in Action* series, whose implication in the president's rhetoric has received much academic attention. Where the first Rambo film, *First Blood* (1982), promoted the image of the traumatized, unstable, dangerous, and misunderstood veteran, the second installment—departing from its predecessor in virtually all aspects but the film's title and its star—somehow managed to pack many strands of American cultural narrative of Vietnam in the 1980s. As for the Reagan connection, the film combines anti–big-government sentiment with unabashed militarism characteristic of the president, interventionist elements in his administration, and the neoconservative foreign-policy ideology. In the first instance, the film pushes forward the later offshoot of the MIA/POW conspiracy according to which the U.S. government had knowingly abandoned the soldiers to their Vietnamese tormentors and, through the postwar administrations, continued to cover it up and to deny the prisoners' existence. In the second instance, *First Blood Part II* is perhaps the most notorious for its title character's question, upon accepting his mission to rescue the POWs: "Do we get to win this time?" Thus, the film reverts its condemnation of a secretive and treacherous government into a rehashing of the familiar 1980s' conservative insistence that Vietnam could have been won were it not for the liberals (politicians, the media, activists) who "didn't let" the military do their job. It thus joined the rhetorical stream of Reagan's calls for an invigorated, assertive foreign policy (Bacevich 2005, 111–113; Kern 1988, 37–54; Lembcke 1998, 174–180; Martini 2007, 116–130).[11]

Outside of Hollywood, the nonexistent prisoners continued to be exploited in American-Vietnamese relations. The MIA/POW lobby steadfastly opposed any suggestions of improving them, and the issue was used as justification for the aforementioned attempts to deny Vietnam U.N. membership, for the trade embargo, and for the refusal to pay out the overdue aid money; the centrality of the role played by the MIA/POW issue in the relations between Hanoi and Washington is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that it is discussed throughout Edwin Martini's (2007) history of the subject. For decades following the American war, Hanoi was pressured into "accounting for" all the U.S. soldiers missing from the war and told that the aid would come if Vietnam gave up the captured men or their remains. Thus, while the U.S. government could never openly acknowledge its "knowledge" about the existence of U.S. prisoners in Indochina, it could, exploiting the fluid line between these spectral POW/MIAs and the American soldiers whose remains had not been recovered, continue to express vague doubts and issue demands for Hanoi's accounting for these men. In the early 1990s, the Vietnamese refusal to allow American researchers use their archives to seek answers became the primary issue. In the face of international pressure from the United States, Hanoi soon relented, and the act was received in the States as "Vietnam's acknowledgement of its sins" (Chomsky 1997, 169). The Vietnamese compliance could then be used in the campaign to lift the embargo, which was done finally in 1995 by President Clinton—not because of a lessened opposition from the POW/MIA activists, but rather due to American big business' newfound interest in Vietnam (Chomsky 1997, 169; Franklin 2002, 327; Martini 2007, 162–204).

The impact, by the mid-1990s, of the prisoner issue on the American cultural narrative of the war cannot be overstated. Chomsky documented instances of the period's rhetoric that emphasized American victimization at the hands of the Vietnamese and drove home the idea that the only lasting legacies to be resolved from the war were those concerning the United States: "at the left-liberal end of the spectrum," for instance, reconciliation with Vietnam and resumption of diplomatic relations may be advocated, but always with the qualification that the Americans are ready to forgive the Vietnamese; the missing prisoners remain chief among "the humanitarian issues left over from the war" (1989, 62). In effect, Chomsky writes,

> In one of the most stunning propaganda achievements of all of history, the doctrinal managers have succeeded in portraying Americans as the pathetic victims of the evil Vietnamese Communists. . . . We can never forgive them for what they did to us, but we will magnanimously refrain from punishing them for their crimes and may even allow them to receive aid from abroad if only they confess their sins with proper humility and dedicate themselves to resolving the

> only moral issue that remains from a war that slaughtered millions of people and destroyed three countries. . . .
>
> Throughout, commentators in the press and elsewhere played their role with scarcely a slip. One can find an occasional word to the effect that the Vietnamese suffered too, but close to 100 percent of commentary keeps to the doctrine that the United States is entitled to set ground rules for Vietnam's entry into the civilized world, maintaining an embargo and blocking funds from elsewhere until our tormentors cease their abuse.
>
> (1997, 168–169)[12]

The notion of American victimization in Vietnam was not limited to the dubious claim of mutual destruction and the phantom prisoners of war, however, but rather it seeped into the very fabric of the American cultural narrative of the war, to render Vietnam decisively an "American tragedy": something traumatic that had happened to the United States which now had to be treated and cured and from which the extent of Vietnamese suffering was largely excluded. Vietnam War veterans were at the center of this shift. By the early 1980s, several seemingly paradoxical trends had emerged in reference to the societal-cultural image of "Viet vets," concerning their psychological problems, economic and social welfare, public reception, and portrayal in the media.

The public attention that these grievances began to receive in the early 1980s testifies to the shifting relationship between ex-soldiers and the American society, and the veterans' increasing rehabilitation and vindication. Myra MacPherson (1988, 67–68) enumerated some of the adverse circumstances faced by veterans in the 1970s: "chronic unemployment" among unskilled veterans and those belonging to minorities, at 20 percent among the disabled; "inferior" G.I. Bill benefits as compared to World War II and Korea; lack of adequate help for the invalids; lack of psychiatric and readjustment help; lack of representation in political offices, which were overwhelmingly filled with men who had never entered military service or seen combat; and lack of interest in veteran stories in the mass media. A particularly notorious complaint concerned the so-called Agent Orange, a toxic defoliant used by the U.S. military in Vietnam, which by the late 1970s began to be linked to a host of ailments among the veterans who had been exposed to it, including various forms of cancer and birth defects in offspring. Lawsuits started to be filed and a bitter struggle began with the Veterans Affairs Department, headed in the 1980s by a Reagan appointee, in order to persuade the extremely reluctant institution to fund proper research into the herbicide's effects. Eventually, in 1984, the president signed a bill that would issue disability payments to veterans reporting a limited range of health problems linked to their contact with defoliants during their tours of duty (MacPherson 1988, 699), and in 1991 Congress passed the so-called Agent Orange

Act that pushed for classification of and continuing research into related diseases, although compensations remained rare due to restrictive conditions needed to be met to qualify for payments. Veterans fared slightly better in a notorious class-action lawsuit against the manufacturers of Agent Orange, including Dow Chemical and Monsanto, which was settled in 1984 for $180 million. Payouts to individual veterans and widows turned out to be minimal, the highest possible sum a completely disabled soldier would receive totaling only $12,000, and the sums on the other end being significantly lower. Nevertheless, the Agent Orange issue became one of the defining problems of veterans' affairs in the 1980s, and its high publicity is evidence of the increasing popular concern for Vietnam-era soldiers.

Most importantly, however, veterans' mental health was becoming a matter of public interest. The edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*) published in 1980 for the first time included an entry for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition "discovered" and described in the 1970s through therapy work and sessions with Vietnam vets.[13] It is worth pointing out that both the methodology of the diagnosis of PTSD and its impact on the Vietnam War discourse have been criticized. In the first instance, some have argued that the disorder was "discovered" and packaged from a pool of symptoms that could be treated independently and without the need for branding a "new" condition.[14] In the second instance, the media attention to PTSD—either fed by or feeding the Hollywood and television veteran portrayals, and legitimized by academics and journalists—worked to "psychologize" the discourse on the war and its American combatants, and to effectively depoliticize them. Soldiers and veterans, as a group once most vocal and publicly visible in their antiwar, sometimes anti-imperialist stance and activism, were now being treated increasingly as psychologically troubled by their experience, even scarred, and in need of medical help. The radical politics and antiwar protests of the 1960s, as well as the alleged hostility of activists, were increasingly seen as a factor contributing to the veterans' mental problems, a perspective that inadvertently aided in the neoconservative repudiation of the decade. The sting of their political arguments was thus blunted, as veterans' politics and ideology became secondary to mental and emotional well-being, the specific political and ideological complaints now almost a symptom of trauma to be resolved and *cured* through psychological and psychiatric care. In other words, the psychologization of the discourse removed much of the necessity of confronting the political and ethical problems of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the country's actions there by insisting on confronting instead the far narrower problem of combatants' mental health, which itself now rendered veteran political engagement inconsequential (Hagopian 2009, 49–78; Lembcke 1998, 101–126; Weaver 2010, 9–11).

As a discourse, PTSD thus became the major factor contributing to the notion of American victimization in the war in Vietnam. Gina Weaver argued, for example, that the medicalized focus on posttraumatic stress, and the parallel development of trauma theory in the humanities, has indeed

> been crucial to American culture's reconceptualization of the veteran solely as a victim, which in effect erased the trauma of the veterans' Vietnamese victims. . . . The newfound interest in the veteran as a victim suffering from PTSD only proved to be another means of ignoring the war's events and the veteran's role in it.
>
> (2010, 9–10)

But beyond mental health, the traumas of the veterans eventually came to symbolize the traumas of the nation, supposedly violated not only by its wartime experiences on the home front but also by the alleged disintegration of American society in the war's wake.

Consequently, in the 1980s a "discourse of healing" became the pervasive way of speaking about the war. The group most clearly in need of healing were, of course, again the veterans, with their PTSD and Agent Orange, but on the list of possible grievances was also mistreatment by the American society, symbolized and visualized in several tropes, such as the allegedly hostile welcome given to many veterans by antiwar activists, or the unfavorable comparisons with soldiers returning home from World War II, who were supposedly received with "victory parades."[15] It was proof, it seemed, that whereas the troops of "the Greatest Generation" got to kiss nurses on Times Square and were greeted home as heroes, the troops of the Vietnam Generation came home alone to be spat on and vilified. But in fact the "discourse of healing" encompassed the U.S. society at large and thus is key to understanding the common American approach toward the war. Just as veteran denouncement of what had gone on in Vietnam as war crime became supplanted with individual trauma, so the way of talking about the war in the United States became not about the conflict per se—its history and the actual events of the war—but rather about its aftermath in America and its *meaning* to the American people, as if the conflict had significance only in relation to the events and problems it had triggered between the two American coasts.

The advantage of the discourse of healing is that it remains applicable whatever interpretation of the war one assumes: a noble cause spoiled by liberals, a mistake of policy and a case of good intentions gone bad, or even an immoral and destructive imperialist "project." In the 1980s, the Vietnam War could continue to be considered wrong, but the understanding of its wrongness shifted, as if the conflict came to be seen through a different lens: Its devastating effect was now not primarily the

destruction of Vietnam (and Cambodia and Laos) and its people, but rather the rift it had apparently caused in the American society, divided by both the conflict's politics and its aftermath as it related to the U.S. veterans. The repudiation of the 1960s, preached by the right wing but tacitly expected by the liberal center, too, was one way of healing. And again, just as veteran activism was replaced with veteran mental health, so the way of "dealing" with the war became not about drawing conclusions from its ideological and political failures but about societal healing, national reconciliation, and exorcising the suffering that the war had caused the American people.

Patrick Hagopian focused on the perceived need to heal in his study of the politics of commemoration of the Vietnam War in the 1980s. With particular regard to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM), he found that the overriding concerns of the memorial's initiators were to avoid flaring up the "old divisions" and to aid in fostering national unity, and so concessions were made toward conservative interests. In the end, Hagopian argued, the memorial, instead of giving testament to the war in its most pertinent aspects, became a site of uncontentious, innocuous commemoration void of the war's controversy and subversion—and also a site of Reaganite and neoconservative nationalist and belligerent haranguing in the name of restoring national pride and patriotism. Criticism of the American policy and conduct in Vietnam was not welcome at the VVM since it could provoke discord and cause veterans and civilians further suffering (Hagopian 2009, 10–21, 79–110; see also Lembcke 1998, 80–81).[16] Moreover, it is not coincidence, Hagopian argues, that the Washington monument is not a Vietnam *War* Memorial, but a Vietnam *Veteran* Memorial; it is an indication of what was occurring in the American narrative of the war: the repudiation, determined forgetting, washing one's hands of the war itself while simultaneously recognizing and promoting identification with the Vietnam veteran (2009, 399; see also Haines 2000, 141–156; Wagner–Pacifici and Schwartz 1991, 376–420). The discourse of healing was so pervasive that another scholar looking at this period of American rewriting of the Vietnam War, has called it an "ideology of unity," the primary and obsessive need of the people to restore the nation to its imagined pre-1960s harmony, central to their identity—*imagined*, of course, given the societal splits that traditionally fell outside the concerns of the white, patriarchal, heterosexual, middle-class mainstream (Beattie 1998). Scholars have also commented on the dominance of the metaphor of a *wound* in regard to the American imagination about the war and their own experience in it, a discourse and imagery parallel, but obviously related to, notions of healing (Beattie 1998, 11–57; Hagopian 2009, 80; Sturken 1997, 72–74; Weaver 2010, 9).

By the 1980s, then, healing was the priority, whether it was seen as symbolic, as papering over the cracks revealed in the U.S. society by the war in Vietnam or as metaphoric in relation to the image of the war as a

wound. In fact, this—the loss of unity, the national discord, the wound, the need to heal—is the *other* Vietnam syndrome, the postwar malady as it was understood in the liberal mainstream.

Walking through American Traumas

The same processes were evident in literary and popular culture, too, where veterans—and other Americans directly affected by the war in Vietnam—were similarly gaining more sympathetic recognition. Gloria Emerson's *Winners & Losers*, published in 1976 and awarded a National Book Award in 1978, concerned as a major theme the effect of the war on the United States and on veterans and their families, but the book's ultimate condemnation was directed against the apathetic American public. *Friendly Fire* by C.D.B. Bryan, published that same year, enjoyed some initial critical attention, and in early journal articles scholars were quick to mention it in lists of the emerging "best of" Vietnam literature. That it has since almost completely dropped off the radar is perhaps due to the fact that its very precise political and social concerns have been outlived. (The book may hold some residual general appeal because one of its central characters is then-Lt. Col. Norman Schwarzkopf.) Nevertheless, Bryan's nonfictional account concerned not veteran affairs per se, but rather the death of draftee Michael Mullen in Vietnam, the conviction of his parents that something in the official explanation of his death was amiss, their dealings with the Pentagon and politicians in trying to understand their son's death, and their consequent activism in opposition to the war. Bryan concluded that there had been nothing mysterious in Mullen's death or anything suspicious in the official record. But the book was ultimately a record of the small-town fringes of the antiwar movement and a denunciation of the way in which the Nixon administration had handled the war at home and the people affected by it. In its tone and sympathies, then, *Friendly Fire* fell in line with such veteran memoirs as VVAW's Ron Kovic's bestselling *Born on the Fourth of July*, also published in 1976, which was similarly as much an account of the suffering in result of war injury and death as it was a poignant condemnation of official practices—be it by politicians, the military, or the V.A. hospitals—in response to them. (Kovic was shot in Vietnam and as a result became paralyzed from the waist down; after the time he spent convalescing in what he described as atrocious conditions, he later joined the antiwar movement.) Like *Winners & Losers*, both books also shared the accusation against the conformist American public indifferent to the war being waged, and then apathetic either to the voices of the parents whose sons had died overseas, like the Mullens, or to the suffering, mistreated, and ignored veterans, like Kovic. These types of narratives had an impact that carried the Vietnam aftertaste over into the 1980s.

A popular account concerning the war in Vietnam as it was being treated in the United States in the early 1980s came in the form of Bobbie Ann Mason's novel *In Country*. The novel depicts a contemporary American landscape saturated with pop culture and pop consumerism, in which the book's protagonist, a teenage girl named Sam Hughes, begins to question her generation's lack of historical knowledge pertaining to Vietnam and the unwillingness of adults to talk about the war: an echo of the previous books' condemnation of the uninterested and apathetic public. Mason also explores the plights of veterans, especially via the character of Sam's uncle, Emmett, who exhibits antisocial and eccentric behaviors that effectively prohibit his living a normal life, and who, Sam worries obsessively, might "have Agent Orange." But *In Country* signals change as well. Jim Neilson, who praised Mason's concern for exposing the class exploitation of the U.S. draftees, ongoing in the form of their current social and health problems, as well as her acute attention to the 1980s Reaganite revival of militarism, nevertheless found fault with the novel's ending. Sam and Emmett arrive at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial—"the Wall"—where Sam finds her own name etched onto it (i.e., a dead soldier with the same name as hers). In the book's last scene, Emmett is "sitting there cross-legged in front of the wall, and his face burst[s] into a smile like flames" (Mason 1986, 245). Neilson criticized the finale, arguing that despite the socially engaged and critical nature of the plot and Sam's subversive quest to learn about the war, the last scene suggests

> reconciliation and regeneration. . . . [It] is clearly intended to signal a process of healing. Sam's sense that all the names in America have been used to decorate the Wall suggests that every American is a victim. This [is an] erasure of the Vietnamese and of the class-specific suffering caused by the war, [and a] repudiation of her own analysis for the sake of nationalist sentimentalism.
>
> (1998, 187–189)[17]

In contrast, both *Friendly Fire* and *Born on the Fourth of July* ended, or almost ended, with retrospections: having chronicled the Stateside events in the aftermath of the relevant tours of duty, both authors return to Vietnam to tell us what had happened there, Bryan to describe the circumstances of Michael Mullen's death, Kovic of his own wounding. Bryan finished the narrative of the Mullen family with the parents crying and still seething in frustrated anger, followed by the Vietnam retrospection, and then ended with a brisk paragraph of statistics: by 1973, this many U.S. dead were reported, and Michael Mullen's death simply belonged among the numbers. After the closing Vietnam scenes that describe his becoming paralyzed, Kovic ends with a lyrical page of reminiscence about his childhood backyard, as a finale to a nostalgic theme that

runs throughout his memoir. He then adds a postscript in the form of a letter a Marine lieutenant general had sent to his parents following his injury, in which gratitude for Kovic's "contribution" (2012, postscript) is offered and he himself is praised as a paragon of American pride.

It is worth remembering that both books were published in 1976, and so were presumably written at a time when the war was winding down to a close for the Vietnamese and had only very freshly ended for the Americans. Both books, then, in their retrospections bring the combat of the war sharply back into focus, and in their endings convey the indignation at the unjustified and unredeemable loss of young American life and potential. *Friendly Fire*, which has spent some time portraying Michael Mullen as an outstanding son of middle America (he had also been a promising PhD student in animal nutrition), simultaneously scales down and multiplies the enormity of his death to his family by showcasing that he had been only one among thousands. Kovic, on the other hand, concludes with an emphatic sentimental image that, following the horrors of his service and disability recorded in the memoir, wistfully underscores the loss of innocence and magnifies the profound post-Vietnam bitterness. The letter from the lieutenant general is ironic in the light of Kovic's "contribution" to an ultimately meaningless war and the treatment he received in the States as a severely disabled, but also outspoken, veteran. It is probably not at all ironic as a device to drive home the point that Kovic was representative of those among his generation whose youth and potential were misspent, and life and health sacrificed. Both books, in other words, end with anger and raw heartbreak; both throw the final accusation toward the military and politicians by putting the suffering they have recorded in the official context, by the means of the statistics and the letter.

But *In Country*—a canonical Vietnam novel—while it concerns itself with the social injustices of the draft and the postwar plight of veterans, in the chasm between its critique and its sentimental ending reveals a change of attitude, a willingness toward reconciliation and healing that surpasses lingering grievances even if it costs the novel its critical consistency. What Mason's book captures, even if inadvertently, is the moment that the vindication of the veterans had started, and with it the new urgency toward restoring national unity, regardless of what had previously been made of the war—its political and ideological motivations, or its crimes—itself. Cinema gives further proof of the spike in the interest in the war. All three books—*Friendly Fire*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and *In Country*—were made into films in the 1980s. In 1979, another veteran narrative, *Coming Home*, had received three Oscar awards out of eight nominations, the same year that *The Deer Hunter* went home with five, including Best Picture. (It was in 1979, too, that the seismic *Apocalypse Now* was released, the first film to actually take place in Vietnam during the war since its end.)

Veterans, reshaped into heroes-after-all in the Reaganite and conservative narratives, in the mainstream were instead being heard-at-last, and recognized as victims in need of attention and care. Indeed, Mason's *In Country* finds an interesting non-fictional parallel in Myra MacPherson's monumental *Long Time Passing*, published in 1984. A journalist, MacPherson conducted interviews with several hundred Americans affected by the war, including veterans and their families, members of the antiwar movement, draft dodgers, representatives of various government bodies and agencies, and so forth. The 800-page result testifies to the numerous complaints and ailments besetting ex-soldiers, ranging from specific charges against Agent Orange manufacturers to the sense of betrayal at having been deprived of the heroes' status. MacPherson also gives much space to the problem of class and the inexcusable exploitation of the underprivileged by the Vietnam-era draft, a concern that carries over into the (book's) present in the form of economic disadvantage of many veterans, often resulting from individual costs of the war, such as disability or psychological trauma. She also openly denounces Ronald Reagan's policies, militarism, and rhetorical use of the Vietnam War and its soldiers. Unsurprisingly, then, throughout the book MacPherson's sympathy remains squarely with the veterans, and her mission to let their voices be finally heard is clear.

But *Long Time Passing* is not without problems—it is, even more so than the ending of *In Country*, exemplary of what is wrong with the liberal take on Vietnam. On the face of it, MacPherson's enterprise is not at all different from what Gloria Emerson had done in *Winners & Losers*, which also consisted of interviews and political and social commentary. But Emerson had been a correspondent in Vietnam, and one invested in the Vietnamese cause; her book covers the traumas of Vietnam in equal, if not greater, measure, and if she enumerates the various forms of American victimization (real and imagined), *Winners & Losers* never loses focus of the incomparable horrors suffered by the Vietnamese and the actual ruin of their country as opposed to the symbolic, psychological devastation in American society. Emerson also stays loyal to the antiwar movement. While she is adamant in her outrage at the loss of American life in the war and remains sympathetic to the young soldiers she had met in Vietnam, she is not afraid of presenting some of the veterans and their families with whom she spends time after the war in a critical, even negative light, which exhibits her broader critique of the American society. Above all, time and time again she recounts interviews with vets and parents of wounded and dead soldiers, whom she quotes praising the war as a well-intentioned exercise in liberation and democracy, and insisting on American greatness. Emerson's ultimate message is that nobody had learnt anything.

In contrast to Emerson's experience, MacPherson's interest in the "Vietnam Generation" had been sparked late, as she herself explains, after a decade of ignoring the war, and inspired only when she had watched the TV

film based on Bryan's *Friendly Fire. Long Time Passing*, apart from providing a cross-section of the Vietnam Generation and charting the scope of veteran issues, is also a diorama of the American society in the aftermath of the conflict. But her diagnoses and prescriptions are not the same as Emerson's, whose concern is to "learn to love her country again," a piece of advice given to her by an NLF member she met in Paris during the peace negotiations. By shedding so much light on the Vietnamese suffering, Emerson is urging the need for profound change among the American people in the face of what their country had done in Indochina. In MacPherson's book, on the other hand, the U.S. society is torn, divided, jittery, bruised; it is a society, in other words, in need of *healing*, not change.

Quoting from an article by Vietnam War author Philip Caputo, for example, MacPherson writes:

> America needs to cure itself of the post-Vietnam syndrome—so often attributed only to veterans. The way to do that is by "reconciling the schism created by the war," writes Caputo. That schism he sees between "moral conviction, as represented by those who *resisted* the war—and service, as represented as those who *fought* it."
>
> That goal cannot be met by reopening the "tired old debate between right and left. . . . President Reagan's attempts to conceal the ugliness of the war under the cloak of a 'noble cause' are as suspect as the left's attempts to present it as a crime on a par with the Nazi invasion of Poland."
>
> His point is a good one. However, I have found in countless interviews that it is important for everyone to walk through his beliefs on that war—not for the sake of debate but for catharsis. Only then can they better understand one another.
>
> (MacPherson 1988, 70–71; quotations within are from Caputo 1982; emphases and ellipsis added by MacPherson)

Caputo's point is, of course, *not* a very good one. It represents precisely the squandered subversive potential of the war in Vietnam. The war's "ugliness" is here understood as the gruesome experience of American G.I.s, but the view of the conflict as a criminal and unjustifiable endeavor against the interests of the Vietnamese people is occluded. And while it is true that the American policy in Vietnam cannot be considered "on a par with the Nazi invasion of Poland," the difference between radical criticism from the left and Reagan's rewriting of the war is the difference between no more war and more war, a difference crucial for potential targets of U.S. military operations, which in Caputo's centrist discourse is rendered less than subordinate to the problem of healing the American nation and restoring its sense of unity. Moreover, Caputo's perception of the rift as running along the protester–veteran line harks back to what Lembcke's study has revealed to be an instance of mythologization.

But where Caputo sees no need to pick at the old "wounds," MacPherson's comment is particularly interesting. The political divisions are not to be ignored, but "walked through"—that is, all responses to the conflict, including the well-informed antiwar activism of the VVAW or other anti-imperialist groups, should be considered a *symptom* of sorts, a thing to be *gotten through*, and so *cured*, therapeutically. What is more, debate is made obsolete for the sake of *catharsis*. This is yet another striking instance of the substitution of the war's political significance with the language of well-being and emotion, which MacPherson enforces when she continues by observing that "ideological and political arguments are more than just historical musing for most veterans. They go to the heart of their sense of alienation or, at least, separation from others" (1988, 70–71).

The depoliticization of the Vietnam War is a principal failure of the liberal and centrist discourse, which, while disguising itself as non-ideological and benevolent toward the war's victims—the American veterans—was in fact at work to reestablish dominant nationalistic American ideologies of exceptionalism, liberal interventionism, and patriotism. The sense of unity, central to these ideologies, had been unsettled and threatened by the war in Vietnam and the 1960s in general, hence the perception that it now needed mending. This urgency to restore American positive self-image and mental well-being by returning to the traditional modes of thinking are evident in MacPherson's book, when she writes, for example, that only radicals on either the right or the left can have definitive opinions about the war, since "Vietnam was an *ambiguous* war that left us with ambiguous moral, political, and personal conclusions" (1988, 716; emphasis added). This watered-down view of the war shows another facet of liberal depoliticization, as if ten years after the destruction of Indochina by the U.S. armed forces—one might wonder what is ambiguous about it—the Americans could still be scratching their heads and pondering "what it all meant" or "where it went wrong," while the answers were already clear in the 1960s.

Elsewhere, MacPherson further mystifies the war while at the same time erasing its political significance and its consequences for the Vietnamese, giving voice to utmost American ethnocentrism: In line with the 1980s' pluralist vogue to discuss the war as something ambiguous and tangled in the American hearts, she writes that

> ideological and intellectual mind skirmishes of historians, scholars, and critics of Vietnam do not begin to touch the depth of searching for right answers these young men [U.S. veterans] went through. . . . There is no way to capsulize Vietnam. There were as many Vietnams as there are veterans.
>
> (16)

This is a particularly striking example of the wish to turn the war in Vietnam into a morally equivocal event of diluted, depoliticized culpability, achieved by giving absolute primacy and authority to veteran experience.

The problems of this liberal and centrist narrative are seen in yet another point of comparison between Emerson's *Winners & Losers* and MacPherson's *Long Time Passing*, namely both in their treatment of antiwar activism and in their approach to draft and draft resistance. Both authors see yesteryear's dodgers and deserters from the army among the conflict's most affected victims (MacPherson 1988, 397, 445). But where Emerson underscores the *pride* that should be felt in having moved to Canada or deserted as a deeply political and personally costly act of opposition to the war (see also Hagopian 2009, 35–36), MacPherson is more inclined to see the issue in its broader context, for example, by considering cowardice as another reason. She, too, notes that antiwar stance was the most prevalent cause of this form of resistance (she is very careful to separate the worthy resisters from the condemnable ones, who had played the system to get out of service rather than took the risk of prison or exile), but she approaches it in a very 1980s' fashion. The exact antiwar and political reasons of those exiles are not explored, but the phrase—"political reasons"—is used as a term sufficient to give the reader an idea of the radical rationale that had once guided these people, and as a buzzword clear enough to signify the tumults of the 1960s. These reasons, however, are unimportant, obsolete, and irrelevant, MacPherson seems to be suggesting. For instance, writing about the "ex-Americans" she travelled to interview in Canada, she is highly critical of the fact that their opinions about the war have stayed the same, framed along the lines of an illegal imperialist invasion against a "nationalistic peasant revolt" (1988, 418).

But despite the factuality of such assessment of U.S. motivations in Indochina (the strategic use of the words "nationalistic" and "revolt" notwithstanding), MacPherson, clearly disapproving of it, does not provide an explicit alternative interpretation of the war—perhaps she means the "many Vietnams" generated by the experiences of American veterans. Elsewhere, the "political reasons" of deserters and resisters are summarized thusly, in a quote from a Ford-era clemency board report: "Every deserter chose self and family over the cause for which he was asked to fight. Had the war made more sense to him, his decision might have been different" (MacPherson 1988, 393). Therefore, MacPherson presents the political and ideological motivation as either misguided and rhetorical or as *individualistic*. Also, to abstractly claim political inspiration for as radical an act as desertion or exile, and then to explain it as the war "not making sense," is an act of obscuring—the war had to make sense to a man in order for him to see it as wrong and to decide to resist it. But by the end of this part of MacPherson's book, the championed cause

becomes again the need to "mend" the wounds and bridge the divisions between those in exile and veterans, as well as between those in exile and Americans in general.

But it is in the two authors' respective treatments of the antiwar movement and its postwar fate that the divergence in the narrative that occurred between the two books' publication dates, 1976 and 1984, is most evident. Again, Emerson's attitude is more than sympathetic, and against the protesters—whom she portrays, in a series of personal vignettes, as hailing from all strata of American society and variously motivated—she pits not the soldiers dying in Vietnam or the veterans returning to the United States, but rather the patriotic and unquestioning majority who is ultimately bored with and deeply uninterested in the war.

For MacPherson, on the other hand, the antiwar movement had already become part of the problem, a polarizing force that had contributed to the confusions and divisions of the 1960s, and by the 1980s had proved largely insubstantial in its progressive commitments. Like many American ideologues of patriotism and centrist liberalism, MacPherson, too, prescribes the limits of acceptable political opposition and engagement: Comparing them to "the most outrageous black militants of the sixties," she describes "biker" veterans—"arms ladened with tattoos, in camouflage fatigues, shouting in Senate hearing for their rights in 1981"—as "tragicomic" and an "embarrassment" to the good veterans "in the professional world," "who had made constructive legislative change through years of hard, quiet work" (1988, 73). Clearly, in MacPherson's estimation, any hint of 1960s-like demand for change is by the early 1980s so passé that her objective of recognizing veterans' needs is obstructed by the ideal of effecting change over long, but quiet, years. As for the Vietnam War–era antiwar movement, the choice of interviewees, and the quotations MacPherson provides, all converge into a fairly unified—and deeply cynical—image: that the activism had in large part been a matter of privilege, that it had been idealistic and ideological, that its protests were not only disruptive and divisive but also somehow targeted at and hated by veterans, and that the passage of time verified it as mostly futile. The final appraisal of the movement in MacPherson's volume is not only cynical and disillusioned but also already in line with political centrism and the individualism and antisocialism of the 1980s. In fact, the positions of the antiwar movement are also depoliticized in the book, as is any opinion too precipitously close to being "ideological" by the 1980s' hopeful post-Marxist standards. For instance, MacPherson quotes from her interview with Jim Fallows, a notorious draft dodger who went onto a successful career as a political commentator and an editor at *The Atlantic*, writing that he "ultimately . . . feels the brigade who opposed the war may not be judged as having been right or wrong but regarded as an historical fact—as simply 'having been'" (MacPherson 1988, 181). Thus, the antiwar cause becomes incorporated into the historical zeitgeist of the troublesome 1960s,

but without the burden of engagement with it actual political content and, most importantly, without the pesky problem of having to face the consequences of the U.S. destruction of Indochina and near-genocidal policy in Vietnam. The movement against the war in Vietnam thus becomes yet another issue that was bad about the war and the decade.

* * *

Here, then, are the limits of acceptable discourse: On the one hand, a Vietnam War in which the Americans were on the right side of history poised against the unquestionable communist villain, but which they were not allowed to win decisively by yellowbellied liberals; on the other, a Vietnam War in which the two countries caused each other "mutual destruction" and suffered on a par. In the first version, the U.S. soldiers remained the largely gallant successors to World War II heroes, friends and saviors of the civilian population of South Vietnam, but their reputation was tarnished by these very same liberals and "pinkos," protesters and draft dodgers, who spread ugly rumors about massacres and drug use, and thus the troops were deprived of their heroic recognition and honor. In the second version, the war was a mistake, a misguided attempt at liberation, and the soldiers, many of them drafted in a profoundly unfair and exploitative system, continued to suffer after the war due to posttraumatic stress, the unwillingness of the American "silent majority" to pay attention, and above all the deep division in the American society that left them on one side of the painful split. According to these narratives, Americans suffered because of Vietnam as much as the Vietnamese did: their self-image shattered, their nation divided and wounded, almost 60,000 of their children dead, victims of a trauma as deep and as painful as that suffered in Indochina. In cinema, Americans continued to be tormented, in their personification as prisoners of war, by the evil Vietnamese. These prisoners remained as the only important moral problem left over from the war. The American failure in Vietnam was spectacular; since there was no recourse to triumphalism that would sustain the notions of American greatness, other methods of regaining balance had to be found. Recasting the Americans as the only victims worthy of attention proved the most successful: Much like veterans, who were deprived of heroism so they were offered pity instead, the Americans at large, too, could persuade themselves that by healing and reunifying their battered nation they could restore its greatness and its guiding ideas of exceptionality, benevolence, assertiveness, and universal love of liberty. A nation healed from its Vietnam suffering could embark once again on its global mission, now recast in neoconservative terms. Eager to forget the traumatic 1960s and concerned with patriotic (nationalist) ideas of unity, it aided the rise of neoliberalism in the United States, averse to the ideals—and eventually practice—of social

solidarity, social change, and organized opposition to oppressive and exploitative models of the free market.

Both syndromes assumed there was something wrong about the war in Vietnam, and though they gave different diagnoses, both sought the symptoms as well as cures in the war's impact on the United States only. But the manic attention given to the notion of American victimization had to be balanced by "Vietnamnesia"—the erasure of the Vietnamese from the picture of the war and its aftermath. The American cultural strategy of their own, almost exclusive victimization—and the effective depoliticization and dehistoricization of the war that accompanied it—had the added benefit that it removed the problems of reckoning with American brutal and willful wrongdoing, and the responsibility for the devastation of Indochina and the suffering of its people: "it is beyond the imagining in responsible circles that we might have some culpability for mass slaughter and destruction, or owe some debt to the millions of maimed and orphaned" (Chomsky 1989, 59; see also: Lembcke 1998, 123). A small, but grating example is again provided by Myra MacPherson, who while on the subject of Agent Orange and the birth defects it causes, laments that, the affected "children of America, Australia and Vietnam . . . may well be the most tragic and innocent victims of Vietnam" (1988, 693). She makes sure to include even the Australians, whose exposure to the defoliant was comparatively negligible, before she mentions the Vietnamese (also apparently victims *of Vietnam*), and even then only the soldiers—not the millions of South Vietnamese civilians who were sprayed with the herbicides by the Americans.[18]

While politicians continued to punish the victor on the international arena, the cultural narrative of the war in the United States eventually pushed the Vietnamese beyond the scope of meaningful and traumatic suffering. While postwar Vietnam, in addition to the harmful policies and practices of the communist government, went on to suffer the long-term consequences of the American war—the extensive destruction through bombing campaigns and air strikes, the millions of people killed and maimed, the effects of deforestation and common use of highly toxic defoliants, the dismantling of social structures and widespread displacement of persons, the poverty and denial of aid that for two decades translated into lack of basic supplies in hospitals and schools, and so forth[19]—books and films in the United States kept on boring into the core of meaning the war had had *for the Americans*, relentlessly soul-searching and seeking the symbolic senses of American mythology and self-image in "Vietnam," understood as an American place. The prevalence of this American ethnocentrism is perhaps best illustrated by Jim Fallows again, who, having gone on a short group tour of Vietnam, in a 1988 issue of the magazine, "concluded that the effects of the war on Vietnam were negligible, adding that 'the Vietnam War will be important in history only for what it did internally to the

United States'" (quoted in Beattie 1998, 31). The effect has been the removal of the war from history and so the squandering of its subversive potential. Accordingly, the rest of this book will trace particular strategies of representation in American literature and cinema of the war that, though nominally critical of the U.S. invasion of Indochina, contributed to these processes of dehistoricization and mythologization. The next chapter will begin this discussion by considering the various dimensions of the "Vietnam" of American mythology, including representations of the country's landscape, entangled with the notions of American victimization.

Notes

1 Lyndon Johnson deployed the first regular U.S. forces to Vietnam early in 1965, so technically he waged the war for three years until the end of his term in 1968; despite his campaign promises, under Nixon the war would be prolonged for over four more years, until March 1973. According to the National Archives website, between 1965 and 1968, 36,540 U.S. troops died in the Vietnam War, between 1969 and 1973—21,194; the total number of U.S. fatalities in the war since 1956 is 58,220 ("Statistical Information" 2013). Vietnamese casualty numbers are discussed in Chapter 3.

2 According to numbers cited by historian Andrew Hunt, by 1972 the VVAW had reached 25,000 members, "fewer than 1 percent of all eligible Vietnam era veterans" (1999, 197); this number was never surpassed. Hunt points out that despite such meagre representation, the organization was highly influential and ultimately successful in the antiwar movement. Likewise, the point I make is not to detract from VVAW's undeniable impact or to undermine its legitimacy but rather to highlight that very few veterans actually chose to engage in antiwar activism or speak out against the American war.

3 On the merging of neoconservatism and Reaganism, see Diamond (1995, 200–227); see also Bacevich (2005, 78–79), Dorrien (2004, 9–12).

4 The neoconservative and Reaganite take on the "Vietnam syndrome" has been discussed extensively; apart from Isaacs (1997), who devotes an entire chapter to it, see, for example, Bacevich (2005, 73–80), Bothmer (2010, 70–92), Hagopian (2009, 23–49), or Young (2014, ch. 15).

5 For discussions of the "Vietnam syndrome" in the military during the Reagan years and the Weinberger Doctrine, see the accounts in Bacevich (2005, 39–48) and Isaacs (1997, 68–75).

6 On Reagan's use of the Vietnam War veterans, see Bacevich (2005, 105–111) and Bothmer (2010, 70ff).

7 See the Afterword.

8 The reluctance to report on the Vietnamese side of the war has been discussed by scholars working on various aspects of the Vietnam-era U.S. media. According to Susan Moeller (1989, 399), in the U.S. press photography in the 1960s, for example, images of American troops overwhelmingly outweighed those of the Vietnamese, whether civilians, allied soldiers, politicians, or enemy troops or prisoners; the public's reaction to photographs of Americans was also far stronger and more emotional. Moeller (360) also describes the circumstances faced in Vietnam by Welsh photographer Philip Jones Griffiths, whose work was uniquely focused on the plight of the Vietnamese people: On assignment from Magnum, he actually struggled to find

buyers for his photos among American magazines and newspapers, because demand for work such as his was so low. In turn, the U.S. military agency responsible for issuing accreditation to reporters in Vietnam became suspicious of Griffiths, as one of the conditions stipulated that accreditation be given to journalists but not authors, which required regular publication in the press. Griffiths, while documenting the Vietnamese perspective remained his focus and resulted in the publication of a photo book in 1971, had to ask Magnum for more typical assignments that would ensure the security of his job in Vietnam. In his seminal book on the history of war correspondence, Phillip Knightley (1975, 386–400) discusses at length the unwillingness of the U.S. media to cover American-perpetrated atrocities in Vietnam prior to My Lai. Knightley, too, tells the story of Philip Jones Griffiths' difficulties in finding anywhere to publish his pictures, and he also discusses the case of war correspondent Martha Gellhorn, who reported on the systematic abuses of the civilian population as a result of the U.S. strategy, but found *no* publishers at all in the American media. Daniel Hallin (1986, 134–140), writing about American television networks' insistence to always portray American soldiers in Vietnam before 1968 as "good boys" and heroes, shows that not only did this tactic obscure the racism and sometimes violent hostility of the GIs toward Vietnamese civilians but also that it translated into a virtually exclusive interest in the U.S. soldier to the detriment of reporting the Vietnamese side of the war. Hallin (201) also points out that the U.S. ally and central cause of the war—South Vietnam—received less than 10 percent of television coverage of the conflict, of which very little concerned the country's agrarian population. A similar statistic is provided by Clarence Wyatt, who cites a report which showed that "of 187 film reports from Vietnam appearing on the evening news shows from September 1967 through January 1968, 159 dealt exclusively or primarily with American troops" (1993, 147; see also 139–142 generally on the lack of interest in the Vietnamese side in American media). An exhaustive study of the (mis)representation of the Vietnamese people in three major American magazines is provided by James Landers (2004, 225–270).

9 On comparisons with Japan and Germany, see also Chomsky (1993, ch. 10) and Hagopian (2009, 406).

10 A detailed account of the U.S. Vietnam policy during Ford's and Carter's terms is given in Martini (2007). In her study, Marilyn Young (2014) emphasizes not only the lengths the Vietnamese government was ready to go—and went—to meet the U.S. demands that were issued as conditions to normalization (which came only in 1994) and to fulfil all requirements to qualify for international aid and credit (which it could not receive due to U.S. pressure) but also the dire need for international help in which the country had found itself after the war; it should also be pointed out that the United Nations, the World Bank, and other international development organizations were ready to provide Vietnam with funds.

11 A polemic with the view that John Rambo endorsed Reaganism is offered in Hellmann (1991, 140–152).

12 See also Chomsky (1989, 60–62), where he records the sobering statistics, always brought up in criticisms of the Vietnam POW/MIA issue: The original U.S. Vietnam MIAs lists contained just over 2,500 names (of whom about a half was known to have died, but whose bodies had not been recovered), which constitutes around 4 percent of the total confirmed deaths of U.S. servicemen in Indochina. The number of American MIAs from World War II is around 80,000, and from Korea, 8,000, which are, respectively, 20 and 15 percent of total deaths reported from these conflicts. The Vietnamese still

list around 300,000 (the figure in other sources in this footnote; Chomsky gives 200,000) missing from the American war. See also Franklin (2002, 318), Isaacs (1997, 111–115, 191), Martini (2007, 22–23), and Kwon (2008, 48). A comparison with the case of the American POWs repatriated after the Korean War—who were treated as traitors rather than heroes, as was the case in Vietnam, and largely ignored—illustrates just how much the reception of POWs is a matter of propaganda and political interest (see Young 1998).

13 The crucial and direct impact of Vietnam veterans' groups and advocates in the process of the official classification of PTSD is described by MacPherson (1988, 214–230) and Bloom (2000, 27–38).

14 Both Lembcke (1998, 121) and Hagopian (2009, 76–77) include in their bibliographies entries concerned with this discussion and criticism as it relates to post-Vietnam PTSD. The "psychiatrization" and medicalization of the American society in the past four decades, fed by a host of disorders "discovered" or renamed in the 1970s and 1980s, is the subject of Robert Whitaker's popular-science bestseller, *Anatomy of an Epidemic* (2010); it is also transcribed into the core of various political and cultural processes occurring over the past half-century examined in Adam Curtis' documentary film, *The Trap: What Happened to Our Dream of Freedom* (2007). In this and his other films, Curtis also links the medicalization and psychiatrization to the dominant cultural norm of individualism, emerging since the 1970s. See also Beattie (1998, 26–27).

15 In fact, the Vietnam War homecoming practice had to do with the length of typical tours of duty abroad (twelve months in the Army and thirteen in the Marines), which meant that individuals rotated in and out of units separately—but what is not pointed out nearly often enough is the fact that as World War II was ending, the U.S. armed forces discharged their men individually, on the basis of a complex point system, and not, as the myth would have it, in unit-sized bulks that could be welcomed with floats and fanfare (Lembcke 1998, 119–120). That this myth is now ensconced not only as a painful counterpoint in the Vietnam War lore, but in the American cultural memory in general, supports as much the popular image of the Vietnam War veteran as it does the nostalgic and mythologized status of World War II.

16 Marita Sturken (1997) is far less critical of the VVM's ideological implications, arguing that the right wing's "attempts" to appropriate it are in opposition to the opportunity the Monument presents for those Americans wishing to work through the suffering the war has caused them. The VVM is also positively appraised as a "dove" triumph over "hawks" by Marling and Silberman (1987, 10); doves are understood as those who wish to see the VVM as a monument to the tragic loss of American life.

17 A similar criticism of the book's ending is offered by Beattie (1998, 2).

18 Chomsky (1989, 64–65) also observes that while the $180 million settlement with manufacturers was lauded as a victory for the "victims of Agent Orange," the Vietnamese victims never seemed to cross anyone's mind. While the United States never gave aid for Vietnamese Agent Orange victims, in 2000 President Clinton did okay funding for research on its health effects; the funding was stopped by President Bush in 2005, the same year that a class-action lawsuit by three million Vietnamese victims filed in the United States against Agent Orange manufactures was dismissed by a federal court. The reader is encouraged to look up Philip Jones Griffith's photographic book *Agent Orange*, which documents the effects of the toxin in Vietnam years after the war.

19 Many books and studies have provided ample accounts of the difficulties, sometimes dire, faced by people in Vietnam between 1975 and the normalization of relations with the United States, from the problems of Vietnamese internal affairs and the communist government, to studies of societal and cultural change, to journalistic accounts and stories of individuals. Examples are to be found in Chomsky (1989, 63–65; 1999, 10.5.9), Isaacs (1997, 163–195), Lawrence (2008, 168–169), Young (2014, ch. 15). Kolko (2007) is an economic, political, and sociological history of postwar Vietnam. Heonik Kwon has devoted much of his career to documenting the long-term effects of the American war on the Vietnamese society and culture; see, for example, Kwon (2008). A recent edited volume (Boyle and Lim 2016) also considers the legacies of the war in Vietnam and in the Vietnamese diaspora.

2 Myth and Representations of the Vietnamese Landscape

The War in Vietnam as an American Myth

"Vietnam" as Myth

This chapter begins with the assumption that the mythologization of the Vietnam War is what has enabled the foregrounding of American victimization in the country's cultural narrative of the conflict. The relationship between the war and American mythology has been discussed several times, and it is the myth of the frontier, together with associated concepts, that is most commonly linked to the war and its renderings in American culture. Richard Slotkin's (1998a, 1998b) seminal study of the mythology of the American frontier, for example, sets out to deconstruct it as a theory of development of capitalism and of American society, and charts the history of the concept's impact on foreign policy and military strategy, including the war in Vietnam. Elements of this myth are also found in Richard Drinnon's (1997) study of American imperialism, where he argues that racism, of the variety directed against the "Indians" and later the Vietnamese, has been central to American nationalism and mythical/policy formulations like the Manifest Destiny or the New Frontier; Drinnon (1997, 355ff) also devotes a part of his volume to the Vietnam War and the influence early American colonialism and Indian wars exerted on the U.S. policy in the conflict.[1]

Among the several mythical concepts and contexts analyzed in his work on American mythology and the Vietnam War, John Hellmann (1986) also looks at the connections between the myth of the frontier and American relations with, and thinking of, Vietnam, especially during the Kennedy administration. While Hellmann's work has been an influential text in the Vietnam War scholarship and thus in canon-formation, for all its well-documented analysis it is in fact a benign take on the subject, whose partial failure is especially evident when weighted against the politically charged and decidedly anti-capitalist and anti-imperial studies by Slotkin and Drinnon. As such, Hellmann's observations in fact offer an interesting insight into the early literary and cultural scholarship's complicity in the formation of the dominant discourses on the war.

To be sure, Hellmann comments on some sinister aspects of the frontier, but it seems that he cannot escape the entrapping of the very myth he analyzes, as the darkness he finds in the frontier myth, far from the material critique delivered by Slotkin, is virtually exclusively metaphysical, a reflection of dark "fantasies" and "primitive satisfactions" (86).

But this is the same darkness that haunts most of the war's American texts, forming the core of the dominant cultural narrative of the war in Vietnam. More than a literary theme, or a mode of representation, and eventually a problematic studied by Vietnam literature scholars like Hellmann, the frontier is also a specific strategy of apparent critique, in the narratives as much as some of the academic texts (Neilson 1998, 83). It has been a useful image to convey a safe type of imperialist confession: Once its myth is out in the open, it exists as a well-established discourse by which to either motivate or explain, sometimes criticize, American attitudes, especially in encounters at various borders and margins, including in foreign policy. Because of its implications of the Indian wars and "Indian country," the frontier, when used by an American Vietnam War author, effects a semiosis of well-known concepts and constructs. But the frontier, except in rigorous and securely politically and ideologically anchored cases that seek to actually deconstruct it, is not a particularly useful discourse of criticism if it is used merely as a vocabulary of analogy: Its weakness is seen as much in Hellmann's essentially toothless criticism, as in the Vietnam War literature, where it serves to mythologize rather than elucidate. An American author reimagining the war as a frontier conflict, and especially when his story is bound by genre conventions as entrenched as those of popular war literature, usually fails to become a truly progressive voice capable of stepping beyond the predictable and the expected, and of delivering an acute, material and historical diagnosis of the inequities of the war. The protagonists of Vietnam narratives most often move in circles, their units stomping around the same areas of operations, along the same little-known rivers and through the same paddies and villages, the knowledge of the land passed down from those ancient wise men, the "short-timers" and the "grunts" who had come and gone before them; often it seems that the Vietnam War literature itself reproduces this repetitive movement through its own imaginary "Vietnam," unable to transcend the limitations of genre as much as of myth. The frontier is an unreal space—whatever happens there has a conditional relation to historical reality, the significance of events and encounters arbitrary and malleable. In the same vein, when in 1982 Philip Beidler, a veteran of the war and literary scholar, wrote that "the place [the Vietnam War] became its own bizarre, hermetic mythology" (2007, 13), the statement was not a gateway to a study of the ways in which the war was being rewritten to recuperate American ideologies, but rather a proclamation of an imagined American reality of "Vietnam" and a confirmation of the constructs found in American narratives of the war.

While he essentially traces the ideological implications of the frontier (though the word *ideology* is not applied in this context in the book), and obviously the relationship between the myth and the American presence in Indochina, Hellmann mostly ignores the rather clear context of American imperialism and particularly of imperial practice that marries the psychology of "mythical speech" (Barthes 2008, 108), political rhetoric, material interest, and foreign policy and its consequences. Reading *American Myth*, one might have the impression that the United States got involved in Indochina quite simply because of a genuine desire to bring democracy and freedom to Vietnam, borne out of the country's deep cultural attachment to its mythological image of itself and sense of mission. Indeed, Hellmann goes as far as to state that the American wish to reinvigorate its sense of exceptionalism, bolstered by the mythical frontier, "was the force of the American mythic heritage articulating itself in a specific policy" (1986, 53). Such interpretation of the motivations behind American descent on Indochina is possible because his account of the war begins with John Kennedy and the New Frontier (the president's policy package) and, thus, with the United States already deeply embedded in the region and South Vietnam's politics, largely disregarding not only the French history but also the original imperial causes of American involvement and backdoor meddling since the end of World War II. Ngo Dinh Diem, for example, is mentioned only once and in passing in Hellmann's book, and, as Jim Neilson observes, other figures crucial for an understanding of what happened in Vietnam, such as Ho Chi Minh or Edward Lansdale, are entirely omitted—not to mention the complete absence of "the people and politics of Indochina" (1998, 101) in Hellmann's analysis. If the story opens with Kennedy's rhetoric in the context of American society and culture—but not geopolitics or economy, for example—as determinant in involving the United States in Vietnam, it is fairly easy to be persuaded of the primacy of myth in steering the U.S. actions abroad and so of the country's idealism (or innocence). Hellmann's work thus supports not only the dehistoricized and Americanized "Vietnam" of the texts he discusses, but more significantly the very discourse of the war in Vietnam as a tragic mistake resulting from good but miscalculated intentions. What this perspective lacks, apart from some twenty years of history, is a more nuanced view of myth implicated in ideology and politics.

This is why Roland Barthes' classic conceptualization of modern myth, not necessarily in its structure as "a mode of signification" (2008, 107), but rather in its more interesting purposes and consequences, will be much more useful for the discussion here.[2] Moreover, this approach allows for a departure from the frontier, and, instead of comparing preexisting mythical constructs of American culture to narratives about the conflict, enables an analysis of the war in Vietnam *itself* as a myth in its own right.

Barthes argues that while itself it does not originate in any "natural" order of things and is instead generated by historical processes, myth is recognized precisely in that it "transforms history into nature" (128). The consequence of this fundamental function is that myth in fact requires an obfuscation of history, and so of its own roots, even as it strives to insinuate itself as the natural status quo. In the case of the Vietnam War in American culture, the complexities of history and politics concerning the motivations behind the U.S. invasion or the particulars of wartime policy are "forgotten" so that the mythical version of the conflict may better accommodate the centrality and almost exclusive significance of the American experience. It is precisely due to the work of myth that "the Vietnam War" cannot be divorced from vocabularies and imageries of the suffering and death of the American soldier or of the traumas of the American veteran. And while the American myth of "the Vietnam War" dictates that the war's primary victims were Americans themselves, and that its only significance was in what it did to the United States internally, this re-visioning of the conflict then allows itself to be incorporated into larger mythological systems entwined with American ideologies. This incorporation was essentially the subject of the previous chapter.

Barthes' definition of myth is also helpful in better understanding the nature of the input of individual texts to the larger cultural narrative, discussed at the beginning of Chapter 1: Whatever the meanings of the original "material," writes Barthes, they are rendered insignificant once they are "caught by myth" (113). To put it in terms applicable here, while in isolation a text,[3] such as a novel or a film, is contingent on its historical circumstances and results from a specific experience, once it falls under myth, such as the American "Vietnam War" and all its attendant concepts, "history evaporates" (116)—not only the particular history of a given text but also, if we take an entire corpus of texts and discourses, the whole history that this particular myth attempts to obscure. Instead, myth imposes its own version of events and their significance on the text, so that a reading of a Vietnam War narrative, for instance, is conditioned by the primacy of American victimization, sympathy for the American soldier, and so forth. More importantly, myth is also characterized by the fact that it very easily attaches itself to its objects, so that even a text whose intention might be different will end up reinforcing its notions; this is because "a mythical concept" contains "shapeless associations" and "formless, unstable, nebulous condensation" (118). In the case of "Vietnam" as a myth, this nebula contains such ideologically charged propositions as, "Americans were victims, too, so ours is not a nation of oppressors, invaders, or perpetrators on a par with the war criminals of history"; "Americans were victims, too, so the Vietnamese are not truly innocent"; "the American dead, wounded, and traumatized are the price paid for what happened and more than enough compensation"; "the

war was a tragedy for the Americans, therefore the culpability of United States is nullified by the distribution of suffering between our people and the Vietnamese."

The effect of the way myth functions is twofold: One, a given myth is best tracked and explored across its numerous incarnations in specific texts of culture, and two, although it requires the actual history to be discreetly concealed, myth does not in fact obliterate the object that it takes hold of, but rather it "distorts" (120) it—it does not negate what a Vietnam War narrative "says," but it incorporates it for its own meanings. And finally, this very synthesis of text and myth completes a full circle, as in its turn the narrative will "naturalize" (128) and "rationalize" (129) the mythic concept by seeming to be evidence of its basic truth as "just the way things are," at the expense of historical complexity and often reality.

This means that a critique of a body of texts such as the one that will come later in this chapter and the next is not meant to necessarily discredit even radically different readings of any single book or movie in this corpus; for example, some of the novels or memoirs criticized here for their complicity in a rewriting of the war in Vietnam might be interpreted as generally antiwar or critical specifically of that conflict (see, for example, Weaver 2010, who considers the works by Gustav Hasford, Tim O'Brien, and Larry Heinemann to be "antiwar literature"). But these narratives are already "caught": Because the war has become such a potent American myth, far from existing independently of it, they are read through its lens. They are inextricable from the mythology. This point of fusion of is precisely where, as Barthes instructs, the "reader of myths" (127) can begin to demystify them. It is possible, therefore—and even required, if one wishes to engage in a demythologization as prescribed by Barthes—to assess the American books and films so as to highlight these strategies of representation employed by these narratives that have simultaneously contributed to the creation of the myth of "the Vietnam War" and ensured the narratives' engagement with this mythology.

Barthes' notion of myth is also particularly interesting as it presupposes a fundamental entanglement of myth and history and highlights how myths come to support ideologies by perpetuating their values and convictions as obvious and "commonsense." This means that, as Slotkin put it, one method of "escaping" myth and its ideological values, and of immunizing ourselves to its potentially destructive power in rhetoric, and so in politics and political action, "is through the demystifying of specific myths and of the mythmaking process itself. The center of any such effort necessarily involves the rehistoricizing of the mythic subject, and a historical account of its making" (1998a, 20). The tasks of dismantling the mythology of the Vietnam War, then, involve recovering the history of the conflict, and then tracing the process by which it has been removed from its own historicity.

The first task involves a historical narration that goes beyond shorthand statements like that the United States went to war in Vietnam because, embroiled in the Cold War, it wanted to fight communism. This is precisely the kind of simplified version of history that feeds myth, obfuscating political and material motivations, and making room for mythical concepts like "noble cause," "good intentions," "mistake," and eventually "mutual destruction" and "American tragedy." In reality, the dictate of the domino theory, to prevent the spread of communism and socialism in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, was not itself commanded by an innocent desire for "freedom and democracy," or even the necessity to protect the U.S. "strategic" or "military interests," but rather by the imperative to suppress the sovereignty of any state wishing to operate outside the systems of global capitalism, tenets of liberal economic philosophy, and, most importantly perhaps, American political and cultural influence. At stake was not simply the U.S. power, bolstered by the endorsement of the country's way of life as aspirational, but also American access to global resources and market outlets, and the protection of American potential for economic expansion worldwide. The "communist threat," in other words, should more properly be understood as "the possibility of social and economic progress outside the framework of U.S. control and imperial interests" (Chomsky and Herman 1979a, 305; see also the essays in Chomsky and Zinn 1972). Therefore, that the United States went to war in Vietnam was not an error of judgement, but a calculated, deterrent intervention. But unlike the mythical concepts of "the Vietnam War," a historical account such as this one leads to the uncomfortable conclusion that millions of people, including the American casualties, suffered and died essentially for the interests of capital.

"Vietnam" as a Place

The other task of demythologization is that of "demystifying the mythmaking process itself." In the case of the war in Vietnam, the previous chapter discussed the various public discourses at work in the United States in the late 1970s and 1980s that imposed certain interpretations on the conflict's memory that we can now recognize as essentially mythical in the Barthesian sense—some of them merely lenses distorting the "meanings" of the war, others based on deformations of historical events. But I will argue that the American representations of the war in literary and filmic renderings have in fact constituted another "mythmaking process" that ultimately contributed to the myth of "Vietnam" in which American experience and victimhood are foregrounded. This was made possible by a persistent set of strategies of recreating the Vietnamese landscape in vocabulary and imagery that turned the country of Vietnam into a mythologized and Americanized landscape, purged of any Vietnamese significance.

But before the attention turns to the "Vietnam" of American books and films, it is worth reviewing some more historically anchored contexts of interplay between Vietnam as a place and the United States: the foundation of South Vietnam and the subsequent "nation-building" effort. The "forgetting" of the historical and political genesis of the Republic of Vietnam, colloquially known as South Vietnam, has been one of the most astonishing stunts in the process of mythologization of the war (as we have seen in the previous chapter, for example, President Ronald Reagan openly endorsed a falsified version of events). The United States did not go to war to protect South Vietnam from communism: It invented South Vietnam *in order to* protect it from communism. In reality, the Republic was established in 1955 by Ngo Dinh Diem, elevated to head of state with American backing, but South Vietnam always remained, as the Pentagon Papers put it, "essentially the creation of the United States" (quoted in Zinn 2009, ch. 18).

One reason this was true was that American aid money constituted most of the new country's economy for the entirety of its twenty-year existence (1955–1975; Young 2014, ch. 3; see also Carter 2008, 93–94; FitzGerald 1972, 85ff). But another reason was even more significant. It was President Diem who blocked the 1956 elections that were meant to unify the country, but he was encouraged to do so by the Eisenhower administration, which had the intelligence that the popular support in Vietnam was overwhelmingly on the side of Hanoi, and that the Viet Minh would easily win with some 80 percent of the votes (FitzGerald 1972, 126; Franklin 2000, 30; Sheehan 1990, 138; Young 2014, ch. 3; Zinn 2009, ch. 18). In fact, the Diem government was not only illegitimate but also deeply corrupt and oppressive, so it is no surprise that it consistently failed to win popularity with its own people:

> the effort [to create a viable anti-Communist state] was always undermined by the doubtful legitimacy of the South Vietnamese government from its very inception. The fatal weakness of [this government], which survived because of repression and U.S. support, not because of the freely expressed will of the people, was a problem for which the United States never found a solution.
>
> (Hagopian 2011, 48)

But the conjuring up of the state of South Vietnam was not the only magic trick the United States attempted to perform. While American policymakers since Eisenhower

> had insisted in public that the South Vietnamese government was a genuinely national regime. . . privately [they recognized] that its legitimacy was only *potential*. The strategy of "nation-building" was

> implicitly an acknowledgement that a South Vietnamese nationality was something that had to be constructed.
>
> (Slotkin 1998b, 542)

The program, initiated in 1954, by 1960 had cost the United States $1.5 billion. But this does not mean that the attempt to create a South Vietnamese nation was "innocent" or divorced from the interests of American empire and capital. The bulk of the American aid money did not go toward nation-building projects: Until 1968, wrote Frances FitzGerald in *Fire in the Lake*, many Americans

> believed the official claims that the United States was at least making an effort to develop South Vietnam and to improve the welfare of the South Vietnamese people. But as a look at the aid budget would show, the claims were, and always had been, false.
>
> (1972, 120)

FitzGerald pointed out that 90 percent of aid money was spent on building the South Vietnamese armed forces and bureaucracy and that the U.S. policy during the Diem years was "not an attempt to help the Vietnamese, but . . . an attempt to hold the line at the 17th parallel against the Communists" (121; see also Carter 2008, 95–105).

As part of the nation-building effort, American military materiel and personnel, eventually including over 16,000 advisors, flowed to South Vietnam through military assistance units. But other American organizations and companies, from construction firms to analysis and research teams hailing from institutions like RAND or the Michigan State University, were also involved in (and often profiting from) the program, including a secret CIA contract for training the regime's police forces known to have been torturing villagers and murdering people.[4] The impact of the nation-building mission on South Vietnam's politics, social fabric, infrastructure, and landscape is described by James Carter: Beginning in 1954,

> a staggering array of specialists and technicians, from civil police, public administration, public finance, military, counterespionage, propaganda, industry, agriculture, education and more immediately descended upon Saigon. . . . These experts, along with the U.S. government and military installed Ngo Dinh Diem, removed all viable opponents, began a crackdown on dissidents killing tens of thousands and jailing as many or more, and began to physically transform southern Vietnam. United States government contractors, such as Michigan State University and the construction firm Johnson, Drake and Piper, went to work on the creation of a national communications, transportation and police network. This "mission"

> built or rebuilt hundreds of miles of roadways and dozens of bridges, dredged hundreds of miles of canals, built airfields and deep draft ports to receive a continuing and growing volume of economic and military aid.
>
> (2003)

Meanwhile, American counterinsurgency and later military strategy was also "changing the face" of Vietnam. Pacification programs run under Diem proved disastrous to the lives of the people in the countryside, and none more so than so-called Strategic Hamlet. The program, which consisted of fortifying villages against the National Liberation Front (NLF), or the Viet Cong, and thus giving the Diem government stricter military control of the population, did not take into account that insurgents often lived in those very communities, so it was practically impossible to root them out. But in southern areas of the country, where the people lived in scattered households rather than in the traditional villages of the Central Highlands and the North, the program also involved relocation of whole groups of farmers into new fortified villages, which cut them off from their land and sources of food. Everywhere in South Vietnam, in order to destroy NLF infrastructure—but also to keep civilians in check in the government-controlled areas—swathes of land beyond fortifications were designated "free-fire zones" where people could be freely shot, for no other reason than being there, while artillery pounded nightly into the fortified villages to force people to stay in their beds. For 2,000 years Vietnamese social and political life had been organized around the village, while at the heart of the farmers' spiritual life was their land, and while the structure began to be undermined in the nineteenth century under the French, the enforced population movement of the Diem regime exacerbated the process considerably, and the American war and the refugee crisis it generated would finish it.[5]

Unsurprisingly, the effect of Strategic Hamlet was largely to push mass numbers of South Vietnamese civilians toward an allegiance to the NLF (FitzGerald 1972, 123–126; Young 2014, ch. 4 and 5). Indeed, as the Americans both in Vietnam and in Washington knew perfectly well, during this first stage of direct U.S. involvement, the population of the South Vietnam countryside widely supported the NLF, partly in response to the Diem regime's repressions and to the social and economic disruptiveness brought by the American aid programs, partly because of the general sympathy for the communist government in the North and its long anticolonial struggle for Vietnamese independence, and partly due to the fact that large numbers of the NLF members hailed from that very same countryside. In the end the nation-building program failed. South Vietnam was never to become a viable state, even less so a nation. In the face of growing opposition among ordinary citizens and

organized NLF cadres to their presence, the U.S. authorities, instead of pulling out of the country or fundamentally redesigning their policy and projects, decided instead to militarize the effort in Vietnam. Although in the following quotation Carter describes the situation around 1960, still during Diem's presidency, this is already the momentum that five years later would push President Lyndon B. Johnson to first begin the bombardment of North Vietnam and then to send the first U.S. ground combat units to Indochina:

> Nearly all American officials began referring to southern Vietnam exclusively as "South Vietnam," as though the state had existed and now compelled defense from outside aggressors bent on conquest. The fiction perpetuated the powerful and politically successful idea that the effort in Vietnam was about combating aggression and that the problem stemmed from North Vietnamese aggression against a putatively independent South Vietnam. In reality, the war in Vietnam resulted not from outside aggression, but from the failure of the six-year effort to build a viable state infrastructure around the regime in Saigon.
>
> (2008, 7, see also 117–129)

The beginning of the big-unit war in Vietnam in 1965 ended the nation-building and counterinsurgency phase of U.S. involvement. But even in wartime, construction projects that transformed Vietnamese land, and policies that destroyed Vietnamese societal structures, continued. In construction, only 3 percent of the U.S. contracts went to locals. Instead, for the first time in history, private U.S. companies received highly lucrative government contracts for construction projects during wartime. The consortium of firms known as "RMK-BRJ"[6] would end up working on the remaining 97 percent of the projects, worth over $2 billion in cost-plus-1.7-percent-profit contracts (Briody 2004, 164). The environmental and infrastructural impact was huge: Jungle was cut down and waterways dredged; "RMK-BRJ was building everything from roads to entire cities for the American military" (Briody 2004, 164), their building projects including wells, latrines, and harbors (St. Clair 2005), "ammunition and fuel storage facilities; barracks; helicopter landing pads; pipelines; hospitals; communications facilities; and warehouses" (Briody 2004, 165), "six ports. . . , six naval bases, eight jet airstrips 10,000 feet in length, twelve airfields, just under twenty hospitals, fourteen million square feet of covered storage, and twenty base camps including housing for 450,000 servicemen and family" (Carter 2003). "The biggest project by far," writes Jeffrey St. Clair, was a "$220 million contract to build the mammoth Air Base at Phan Rang, which [the consortium] constructed on top of some of the most beautiful Cham temple complexes in Vietnam" (2005).

As for the conflict's impact on the Vietnamese society and civilian population, while the Strategic Hamlet program ended, havoc continued. During the war's search-and-destroy operations, villagers were deported in large numbers to government "relocation camps" (or, if a villager was particularly unlucky, to "interrogation camps"), which, like the Strategic Hamlet villages before them, were essentially concentration camps (on American euphemism: "a concentration camp. . . becomes a 'strategic hamlet'" [Roszak 1969, 143]; see also FitzGerald [1972, 125]; Gibson [2000, 232]; Neilson [1998, 117]). Some of the search-and-destroy operations, like the massive Cedar Falls of 1967, ended up being among the largest forced relocations of people during the war; photographer Philip Jones Griffiths described one such concentration "center" during Cedar Falls, where 800 people were moved to live in 40 long tents surrounded by barbed wire, and where "at the entrance was a sign saying 'Welcome to Freedom'" (2001, 89). Other "incentives" to move included the continued existence of free-fire zones during wartime, even though they remained inhabited by large numbers of villagers unwilling to leave their homes and move to the government-controlled areas, where corruption and poverty were rampant; many of these farmers would be shot by Americans on sight while, for example, working their fields. Herbicide sprayings, whose primary target was the NLF infrastructure, also destroyed the food supplies of whole villages and could be used to force the agrarian population to move "willingly" to government-ran camps and centers where access to food was promised but not always provided. Nightly artillery barrages into civilian areas also went on. The deficiencies and the dangers of living in the countryside pushed many people to relocate to the cities, where refugee and homeless slums proliferated. In the end, the American war created between at least five to as many as eleven million internal refugees (Appy 2015), and the effects of this process of societal destruction, together with the destruction of hamlets, cities, the environment, and human bodies—dead, wounded, maimed, diseased, and born with defects—should very much be considered a particular dimension of the Americanized Vietnam.

Myth and the Vietnam War Canon

A contextualized and detailed understanding of the decisions and events in the history of the U.S. engagement in Indochina is key to comprehend the true criminal nature of that involvement, as well as to appreciate its imperial and capitalist origins. But the crucial period of Ngo Dinh Diem's presidency, of U.S. counterinsurgency, and of nation-building, and the particulars of American policy regarding Vietnam, are, with rare exceptions, absent from the American cultural narrative of the war—and so from its literature and cinema. Instead, the permissible cultural interpretation of the Vietnam War accommodates the watered-down

notion of American imperialism in Vietnam rendered as mythology and mythological constructs, as indicated above in relation to the frontier. Accordingly, narratives in the war's canon express certain *imperialistic* aspects of the American presence in Vietnam through a number of strategies that are meant to create the impression of confession, admission of one's wrongdoing, and, sometimes, repentance.

The function of the literary and filmic canon in the cultural narrative of the war was considered in Chapter 1, and the annexation of canonical texts by myth earlier in this one. This discussion is complemented by the observation that the novels, memoirs, and films in the canon, though lauded by the traditional scholarship for their supposed scathing criticism of the various political and cultural incarnations of Americanism, turn out to be rather benign and compliant with the dominant American ideologies (Boyle 2016, 188; Kinney 2000, 5–6; Neilson 1998, 7, 49–54, 197–200 on O'Brien specifically). Neilson elaborates:

> Under the sway of contemporary literary scholarship, Vietnam War literature has contributed to a conservative rewriting of the war. . . . Consequently, the canon of Vietnam War narratives that has developed under the sway of prevailing postmodern/poststructuralist literary studies has depoliticized political dissent. . . . This is not to say that Vietnam War literature is uncritical of the war and U.S. policy. "Serious" literature about the war does not blame antiwar activists, and it does criticize aspects of American policy. Yet it does not challenge the fundamental morality of U.S. aims, nor does it document the large-scale killing of Vietnamese.
>
> With its focus on the suffering of individual American soldiers and its refusal to consider the war as an extension of U.S. global interests, this literature does not counter and in many ways supports the Right's ongoing historical reconstruction.
>
> (1998, 53–54)

One crucial element of the lukewarm nature of the supposed criticism contained in these texts is their staggering uniformity, or, as Brenda Boyle put it, their "[troubling] narrative homogeneity" (2016, 188; see also Christopher 1995, 10–11; Jeffords 1989, 126). Within these narratives, there is no diverse chorus of voices giving ample testament to the experiences of the war's different participants. On the contrary, the novels and memoirs most often encountered in discussions of the Vietnam War literature are nearly exclusively authored by white men, veterans of the war, serving in-country between 1965 and 1970, with military ranks no higher than a lieutenant, usually infantrymen (though in some cases, like Philip Caputo and Tim O'Brien, at some points in their deployment relegated to administrative and other rear duties), and usually college-educated at the time of deployment or after the war. The

protagonists are typically of the same stock, relatively well-adjusted to the life in their platoons and companies and well-liked by their comrades, although authors writing fiction sometimes undertake to create other types of supporting characters. And so in the Vietnam War literature we fairly often encounter cocky adolescent privates and NCOs from working-class backgrounds, redneck killing machines exhibiting signs of psychopathy (think Animal Mother), grizzled middle-aged sergeants who had fought in Korea, and the passionately and universally despised "lifers," an assortment of "chickenshit" career officers and NCOs.[7] Found less often, though no less uniform as Vietnam War literary archetypes, there are Vietnamese translators and scouts (male, defectors from the NLF or the North Vietnamese Army [NVA]); conciliatory blacks uncomfortable with or uninterested in the actions of their politically involved and vocal "brothers"; and, in postwar fast-forwards, high school friends named Mark or Eric who had chosen to dodge the draft and thus become useful narrative devices to ruminate on duty and betrayal. Women characters are rarely, if indeed ever, elevated above formulaic, symbolic, faintly Freudian functions: Here we find the repulsive Vietnamese prostitute; the Japanese, European, or Australian girl met on R&R and seduced into serious girlfriendhood; the disloyal hometown sweetheart or even wife sending a "Dear John" letter from the States; the treacherous hippie encountered back in the States, always large-breasted and free-loving, but sexually unavailable to the homecoming protagonist; and the pretty, petite teenage "Viet Cong" sniper prized as prey and object of special violence. Not every book or film includes every single one of these figures, of course, but they are common enough to be identified across the body of texts, regardless of where on the ideological spectrum a given title is supposed to fall.

In addition to being populated by the same characters, the Vietnam narratives usually follow very similar plots. Even if some formal innovations are introduced into the texts, the stories of the experience in Vietnam typically boil down to the same Ur-narrative of the twelve to thirteen months the American infantry soldier, in the Army or the Marines, spent in Vietnam, or at least contain narrative blocks and tropes that are repeated over and over in different books and films. Altogether, in the context of the dynamics of mythic takeover and the constitution of dominant discourses and cultural narratives, "even though these works [books and movies] do not adhere to a strict formula they are collectively contributing to a mythic vision of the war" (Scheurer 1981, 149).

Implicated in this mythologized version, as both its effect and one of its causes, is a limitation of perspective in the canonical body of work. The most successful canonical Vietnam War texts are not only told from the "grunts'" ground-level perspective, but they also typically rely on veteran authorship.[8] Despite the almost complete lack of diversity, many scholars and critics in the 1980s praised the "truth" of the Vietnam

War literature and gave clear preference to veteran and correspondent accounts because of their personal experience in the war. A 1982 article by Mary Bellhouse and Lawrence Litchfield, for example, gives testament to the sentiments and ideological formulations of the time, as it is clear that the authors have, for one thing, much scorn for protesters and "doves," whose input into the public discourse about the war they consider far less important than that of the American soldiers, or indeed even insignificant. And while the authors claim that the war in Vietnam had dislodged something of the mythical thinking about American past, and brought new light upon issues such as imperialism and ruthless capitalism, slavery and systematic racism, and the Native American holocaust, they then go on to endorse another form of mythologization, proclaiming "the American dead" and the "surviving veterans" to be among the war's "chief victims" (1982, 159), and gushing about the Vietnam War literature as "a more penetrating and powerful body of work than that of any other American war" (1982, 160). In their admiration for the soldier-writers, Bellhouse and Litchfield also reject political (and so historical) sources and instead give almost absolute prime to veteran accounts, on the basis of their eyewitness experience. Even though they acknowledge the rampant and homebred racism of the Americans, as well as the determining social and educational backgrounds of those infantrymen most often in direct contact with villagers, this pro-veteran-author stance leads the authors to unsurprising and familiar conclusions: American atrocities against the Vietnamese civilians are to be blamed not on the offending soldiers but rather on the war policy as much as on *the nature of the war itself*, the "attitudes" of the population, and the people's "indistinguishability." The gravest pitfall of this critical position reveals itself when Bellhouse and Litchfield mention "the absolutely foreign characteristics of the Vietnamese" (1982, 164)—an astounding statement of profound ethnocentrism, considering that it was the Americans who were the *invading foreigners* in Vietnam.

The belief that experience legitimized an author's version of Vietnam as definite and unquestionable, and that experience was the only source of the authority to make interpretations of the conflict or its significance, has contributed to the narrowing of perspective already engendered by the canon. But such limitation is not without consequences. For one thing, it has enabled what Katherine Kinney calls a "trope of friendly fire" (2000, 4), meaning the persistent strategy in the canon of representing the war as a stage of American-on-American violence, the symbolic struggle epitomized as the conflict's true "meaning." Moreover, Kinney links the friendly fire trope to, first of all, the typical imperial tendency of transferring the empire's internal conflicts and tensions to the colonized territory, and, second of all, to the aforementioned mere *semblance* of critique in the canonical texts. She observes that if the trope "testifies to the subversion of traditional American orders of meaning,

the story it ultimately tells is not necessarily subversive" (2000, 5). In the end, the omnipresence of the trope should be seen as a strategy of mystification and elision: Friendly fire is "the violence Americans are doing to each other rather than to the Vietnamese" (Kinney 2000, 110; see also Hölbling 2007, 105ff). Brenda Boyle, departing from Kinney's work and focusing on the uniformity of the Vietnam canon's authorship, adds that by rendering the war into a site of exclusively American internal struggle, the narratives evoke purely emotional response whereby all American characters, regardless of what they do, must be viewed as victims of the struggle and sympathized with. Meanwhile, the politics of waging war, and of waging this war in particular, are rendered irrelevant. This, Boyle argues, has the effect of *naturalizing* war as a matter of "human nature, not human condition" (2016, 190; on the naturalization of Vietnam see also Schlegel 1995, 53–54; Spindler 1991, 28–29).[9]

Another consequence of the canon's limited perspective is further dehistoricization of the war, as explained by Neilson in a critique of scholars and critics who have helped endorse it:

> By promoting a literature that favors individual lives over social relations, universal truths over historical contingency, and textual sophistication over social analysis, [America's intellectual class] has helped reproduce, not merely in the small audience of serious fiction writers but in general public as well, a simple and ideologically unthreatening view of the war. The conventional narrative of the war in film and TV—with its grunt's eye view (and exclusion of senior officers, commanders, and policy makers), the alienness of the Vietnamese landscape and culture, the near invisibility of the Vietnamese, the focus on isolated atrocities (and the lack of focus on the destruction caused by U.S. aerial bombardments)—derives from novels and autobiographies written by American veterans, published in the 1970s and 1980s, and championed by American literary culture.
>
> (1998, 6; see also Christopher 1995, 1–11; Spanos 2000, 137–138)

In order to properly asses the mythological dimension of the American "Vietnam" and to account for the omissions of its constructs, we need to take a long step back and disentangle ourselves from reliance on, and even admiration for, the canonical literature produced by American veterans. Because the stories focus on the experience of low-ranking American soldiers in the field, not only are other points of view, especially Vietnamese, omitted, but also the context of high-level military strategists and Washington policymakers is not considered. The U.S. destruction of both South and North Vietnam was multifaceted and involved various forms of warfare and violence. But let us take just one example: Operation Ranch Hand, the decade-long program of spraying

vast amounts of defoliants and herbicides like Agent Orange over the countryside of South Vietnam in order to deprive the NLF of cover and crops. Even excluding the effects that the toxic chemicals would continue to have on the Vietnamese population and environment for generations, the wartime operation had immediate negative consequences for both the landscape ("Only you can prevent a forest" was the Ranch Hand staff's "jokey" slogan) and the people.

As a form of chemical warfare, crop destruction, and defoliation, especially because they were to be used on allied territory, were a particularly controversial element of the U.S. strategy, but once the operation started and the first reports of its apparent efficiency came in, the initial strategic assessment was positive and the spraying would continue until 1971, despite subsequent doubts expressed as to its effectiveness against the NLF and its impact on villagers. An early U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) intelligence document noted that "in 1965 herbicides had destroyed enough food to feed about 245,000 people for one year. In many instances . . . the local civilians suffered more than the Viet Cong" (quoted in Buckingham 1982, 120). An NLF member interviewed in the report explained that

> the farmers love their land, and the things they grow. All their lives, they did not own anything better than their own little plot of land, and the few trees. The spraying in one day killed the trees that had been planted 15 or 20 years before. You see how this affects their feelings and morale
>
> (quoted in Buckingham 1982, 121)

A RAND study a year later found that "crop spraying struck at the very heart of a farmer's existence by destroying not only his food supply, but also the product of his labors" (Buckingham 1982, 134). James William Gibson in *The Perfect War* references a nutritionist who found that in Ranch Hand,

> children were the first to die when crops were destroyed. After them came old people. Babies were third in line—they died when the mother's milk dried up. Adult women had a chance of survival if they were strong enough to leave the area.
>
> (2000, 231)

Apart from causing starvation, crop herbicide also contributed to the massive wartime refugee crisis in South Vietnam, as populations moved from sprayed zones to government-controlled areas and camps, and compounded the process of destruction of traditional Vietnamese society and way of life.

Ranch Hand, apart from very likely constituting a war crime, was one way in which the American presence made the life of South Vietnamese

civilians a nightmare, but a reader of American Vietnam literature and a viewer of American films would not know it (the sprayings are mentioned briefly in James Webb's novel *Fields of Fire*). The operation does not feature in the American canon; that no Vietnamese (or Montagnard, who were also affected) civilians are given voice to provide their perspective on the spraying is one thing, but the exclusion of the entire world of U.S. strategists and policymakers results also in the exclusion at the level of actual culpability of those making decisions, signing documents, and giving orders—of those potential war criminals, in other words. This gaping hole at the center of American Vietnam canon may be the largest and most effective strategy of depoliticizing and dehistoricizing the war.

"Vietnam" as an American Place

Operations like Ranch Hand or Rolling Thunder, the latter a three-year-long bombing campaign against North Vietnam that would prove one of the most intense aerial bombardments in history, laid waste to the Vietnamese landscape, but the American cultural narrative of the war conveys little of the sheer vastness of this systematic destruction and of the scale of immediate and long-term human suffering it caused (also, of course, in Laos and Cambodia). Instead, the recreated setting of the canon becomes a crucial element of the myth of "the Vietnam War." Whichever way one looks at it, the American concept of "Vietnam" always involves the construction of some kind of place or space: In the imaginary realm, we find Vietnam visualized as a frontier so enticing to John Kennedy and his advisers, graspable as a desirable region of benevolent conquest to the American public; in the postwar literature, we find it reconstructed as a countryside and a terrain demarcated by conventional signifiers, rarely beautiful but always dangerous and hostile, and as the war itself. Consequently, one important aspect of the demythologizing process will be to investigate the ways in which "Vietnam" has been rendered in the American canon.

In fact, the Vietnam-as-frontier discourse is only part of larger strategies to claim the Vietnamese landscape for the American empire. We may, for instance, ask: What is the "Vietnam" of the American cultural narrative? In American texts one often encounters the word used as an almost abstracted noun, a signifier so pregnant with connotations that on some planes it transcends the expected meanings, the name of a state in Asia or a war that took place in the 1960s. "Victims of Vietnam," "what Vietnam has done to us," "no more Vietnams" and "another Vietnam," "the lessons of Vietnam," the "Vietnam syndrome": the colocations are well-established and dependent on the fluid, sometimes amorphous, and spacious idea of what "Vietnam" means as an American myth—"Vietnam as a war, place, and time," writes Kinney, the "categories barely distinguishable from one another" (2000, 10; see also Christopher 1995, 1–7).

Whatever happens in this "Vietnam" has significance only in so far as it has relevance to American culture, society, or "experience," or, to put it differently, this reconstructed "Vietnam" is a setting of an exclusively American story about America itself. Hence, also, the soundness of Kinney's "friendly fire discourse" thesis. To use another example, the American odyssey through the war in *Apocalypse Now* encapsulates this point perfectly: Each stop Captain Willard and the boat crew make, though nominally located in Vietnam, is a vignette of America. For instance, if we agree with the interpretation of the Do Lung bridge scene as representative of the black experience in the 1960s and 1970s' U.S. society (as posited by Hellmann 2007), the reading comes to support a form of interpretive colonization of the Vietnamese landscape for the uses of American culture—in addition, of course, to the "basic" reading of the episode as representative of the American black and "grunt" experience of the worst sites of combat in Vietnam.[10]

Perhaps such recalibration of optics is what enables the transformation of the slaughter of several hundred Vietnamese people at the hands of Americans into an American tragedy. In this light, the massacre at My Lai can be considered an American tragedy precisely because "My Lai" was an American place. It was also a made-up place. It never existed. Usually rendered as My Lai 4 or My Lai (4) in the U.S. sources to designate the specific sub-hamlet where the vast majority of the killings were perpetrated, the place was actually one of several settlements constituting the village of Son My, in Quang Ngai Province.[11] Another sub-hamlet of Son My where civilians were killed in large numbers by Americans (though by a different company) on March 16, 1968, was My Khe (4), and the entire incident conventionally referred to as My Lai in the United States is indeed known in Vietnam as the Son My massacre. Both names—My Lai (4) and My Khe (4)—were artificial U.S. military designations. The actual Vietnamese name for My Lai (4) was Xom Lang, and it belonged to the hamlet (an administrative district within the village) of Tu Cung; My Khe (4)'s actual name was My Hoi, in Co Luy hamlet (Allison 2012, 23; Oliver 2006, viii, 192).[12]

In the Americanized version of the war, one of the dimensions very much present in the memoirs, novels, and films, is a parallel physical Vietnam of U.S. military infrastructure built by American engineers as a space to be occupied by American presence, a spatial layer superimposed over the actual country. An awareness that this alternative Vietnam is constituted by the American "phenomenology of presence" (James 1990, 85) can be glimpsed in Gustav Hasford's novel *The Short-Timers*, for example, where the narrator, Joker, at one point confesses:

> In the darkness, I am one with Khe Sanh—a living cell of this place. . . . In my guts I know that my body is one of the components of gristle and muscle and bone of Khe Sanh, a small American community.
>
> (1988, 146)

The somewhat hypocritical nature of American takeover of Vietnam, on the other hand, is sometimes expressly acknowledged in ironic terms: "Ever been to Da Nang?" says a character in James Webb's *Fields of Fire*, in a conversation about the Vietnamese. "The fuckers act like they own the place" (2001, 314). In *The Short-Timers*, a masterpiece of nonchalant irony, a vampiric "poge colonel" harasses Joker over his peace symbol button: "Do you believe that the United States should allow the Vietnamese to invade Viet Nam just because they live here?" (1988, 137).

This Vietnam of the American military can still be found in wartime maps of the South, testifying to the reorganization of space, again both physical and symbolic. It is an alternative geography determined not by the terrain, history, and prewar infrastructure of Vietnam but rather by the needs of the American military (creating the new geography) and eventually the experiences of soldiers on the ground (memorializing it in the texts). As Philip Beidler put it in his catalogue of the American spaces in Vietnam, "base-camp geography alone could be a history of the war" (strictly in the context of the American experience, we should qualify, lest this point be allowed to further Americanize Vietnam; 2004, 17). Its landmarks are the place names known through frequent repetition in memoirs and novels: I Corps, the Central Highlands, the DMZ, the Laos border, Quang Ngai, Phu Bai, Hue, China Beach, Route 9, and so forth.

Some of these places were not invented but corresponded to real administrative and geographical entities, such as provinces or regions (the Central Highlands or the Mekong Delta, for example). Cities were of course not invented, but they are an interesting case illustrating the alternative geography. Saigon features in the canon far less than Danang and Hue, most likely because not many "grunts" would have a reason to visit it, their R&R's usually spent at China Beach, in Thailand, or in Sydney; the capital is prominent in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, but that is because as a correspondent Herr was actually living there. A few books contain episodes taking place in Saigon (Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, David Halberstam's *One Very Hot Day*, Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers*), but Danang, with its massive military base and proximity to China Beach, and Hue, the site of an iconic battle for the Marine Corps during the Tet Offensive, are featured more often.

Some of the places were "semi-real," or temporary, and not American-made but reendowed with meaning by the American presence there. The DMZ, or the demilitarized zone at the 17th parallel, is a case in point, or the Ho Chi Minh Trail that ran along the Laos and Cambodia borders and haunted the nightmares of American generals. The division of South Vietnam into four tactical zones of military operation—I Corps, II Corps, and so forth—had been made for the purposes of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), but was later adopted by MACV, which was an almost Herresque act of "artificial mapping that literally defined the Republic of Viet Nam as a war divided into four

parts" (Heberle 2015, 30); the first of the zones, sometimes rendered "Eye Corps," made its way into the canon vernacular, perhaps because it overlay the ever-dreaded Central Highlands.

Sometimes, these places flickered between existence and symbolic nonbeing, courtesy of the American redoing of Vietnam, such as My Lai 4.

In other instances yet, places normally insignificant rose to prominence because of the American suffering endured there: the Ia Drang Valley, Con Thien, Khe Sanh. Dong Ap Bia, in the A Shau Valley, was first renamed Hill 937, according to the dreary U.S. military designation logic that assigned hills and knolls new names derived from their heights in feet. In 1969, the American "grunts" fighting a battle there rechristened Hill 937 again, this time as Hamburger Hill. (For the terminology, and a comprehensive overview of U.S. military installations in Indochina during the war, see Kelley 2002; see also Beidler 2004, 16ff.)

Hills bearing names corresponding to their heights, landing zones, observation posts, minor firebases, and small camps—these were the smallest units of the American military space. There were also American-made and almost exclusively American places, especially the logistical installations and massive air and combat bases housing divisions of all the branches of the U.S. armed forces—the realm of the "REMFs," or "rear echelon motherfuckers," a space within the American Vietnam very much isolated from the "boonies," where the "grunts" lived and died.

But above all, the American Vietnam was the Vietnamese landscape—the land with its climate, terrain, vegetation, waterways, and sparse infrastructure—which the U.S. soldiers had once traversed with their government-issued rifles. Reimagined as an American frontier, as the narratives continued to be written and published, it would be transformed into something else still: the mythical place known as "Vietnam."

In Country

Landing Zone Loon

The Vietnamese landscape is recreated rather uniformly in American narratives of the war, so that a coherent picture, based in reality and yet mythologized, emerges from the body of texts. The strategies of representing this landscape, found across the American canon of the war, will be discussed in detail in the reminder of this chapter; one narrative, however, deserves attention before others are considered, because it actually devotes so much creative energy to deconstruct the Vietnamese frontier and to explore the topographic and mythological incarnations of Vietnam. *Dispatches* (1977), the memoir of correspondent Michael Herr, perhaps most clearly among the American texts bridges a carefully designed representation of the land with the myth of the war—among the

American Vietnam War authors, Herr is most clearly a "Roland Barthes' mythologist" (Kinney 2000, 112). The memoir will, therefore, serve as a framework within which I will read the "Vietnam" of other narratives, partly because it remains a particularly influential American rendering of the conflict that has considerably helped its mythic entanglement.

Dispatches was the result of the year Herr had spent in South Vietnam as a correspondent a decade earlier. During the war, parts of the book had appeared in several magazines, such as *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*.[13] The book was critically acclaimed at publication, and often lauded as a particularly truthful literary reflection of the war; it subsequently enjoyed a similar reception among scholars, who in addition saw its value in the link between nascent postmodernism in culture and Herr's novel language.[14] Patrick Hennessey, a British officer in Afghanistan and Iraq, in his own war memoir wrote:

> The joke [among cadets] was that they gave you the Bible and *Stalingrad* to read and told you that only the latter was important. All they should have given anyone was Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, which, quite apart from being the best writing on war, period, was probably as culturally influential as anything written in the second half of the twentieth century.
>
> (2010, 238)[15]

Dispatches consists of six clearly differentiated, achronologically delivered parts. The opening section, "Breathing In," provides the reader with initial impressions of Vietnam, the people Herr met there, and the kinds of things that went on. It is also an exposition of Herr's gradual initiation into correspondent-ship, and particularly the specific Vietnam correspondent-ship, ending with his transformation into a "shooter" (1978, 60), when during the Tet Offensive he finds himself firing a gun and possibly killing one or more of the charging enemy. "Hell Sucks," the shortest chapter and fairly conventional in terms of narrative and language style, is an account of the Battle of Hue during Tet. "Khe Sanh," as the name suggests, concerns the five-month-long "siege" of several thousand U.S. marines stationed in the remote outpost near the DMZ in 1968, as well as the subsequent relief operation known as Operation Pegasus, and follows two "grunts" stranded at the base. "Illumination Rounds" is a collection of short unrelated "scenes," especially encounters with unnamed soldiers and other personnel, each meant to convey a profound symbolic snippet of the war. "Colleagues" is a somewhat romanticized panegyric to other correspondents Herr befriended in Vietnam, as well as a meditation on the profession's nature, appeal, and inherent anxieties; it is also the section where Herr shares something of the traumatic memory that plagued him for some years after the war and of the process of healing. "Breathing Out," which closes the

memoir, offers final glimpses of the war, this time filtered through the traumatic and subsequently healed memory (on trauma as the essence of *Dispatches*, see Heberle 2015, 40–45). The themes surfacing throughout the book include the breakdown of the official language of propaganda and traditional journalism; the gruesome, embodied nature of the conflict's brutality; a fascination with the "grunts," especially the marines and their superstitions; and the irony of war as well as the absurdities specific to Vietnam, expressed in the "illumination rounds" and the soldiers' slang and stories that Herr recorded.

But one theme that is made to encompass all the others in *Dispatches* is "Vietnam" itself, which Herr treats as a cluster of entities and concepts, all of which either begin or become entangled with the land. One context within which Vietnam is incarnated in the memoir is the Ur-myth of the frontier, explicitly acknowledged, and deconstructed, by Herr (Scheurer 1981, 151–152). The memoir's famous first image is an old French map hung in Herr's quarters in Saigon, which shows the colonial division of Vietnam into three parts (Tonkin, Annam, Cochin China), and which prompts him to think about the fact that the old map could be more "current" than those used by the U.S. military during the war, if the land can be viewed in a way similar to the "haunting" presence of the dead; Herr thus draws the reader's attention to the conflict's genesis in the colonial history of Vietnam and establishes a continuum between the First Indochina War and the American one, the first a warning specter ignored in the waging of the latter. Instead of heeding the lessons offered by the historical precedent, Herr seems to suggest, by the time of his stint in the country in 1967, the U.S. warmakers have led to a situation almost beyond comprehension or resolution. It has become clear that "information"—the choice of vocabulary foregrounding one of the book's major themes, the inadequacy and deceit of official military communications—could be divorced from fact or truth, and framed differently so as to serve various purposes. As a result, the military maps fail to convey any actuality of what is happening in Vietnam: "Different pieces of ground told different stories to different people. We also knew that for years now there had been no country here but the war" (1978, 11; original in italics).

This paragraph, second in the text, establishes a framework applicable to a reading of the rest of the memoir, whether by Herr's design or through a critical lens. First of all, of all the canonical Vietnam authors, Herr is perhaps the most interested in drawing comparisons between the First Indochina War and the American war, an assessment that is later expanded on in relation to the Khe Sanh debacle, which Herr likens to Dien Bien Phu. Here, by contrasting French and American maps—traditional artefacts and instruments of empire, after all—he suggests a continuity between one colonial occupation and the other, represented by the arbitrary and ultimately meaningless cartographic reorganization

of the land by the invading powers (see also Bonn 1993, 30–31; Hawkins 2012, 70). Second of all, the arbitrariness and meaninglessness of the American maps is not only symbolic of the war's chaos (the American ignorance of the very country they were waging the war in and against), but it represents also the multiplicity of the "stories" pieces of land tell: The map is one such story. The disturbance of the authority of the map and all that may be associated with it, and the simultaneous disturbance of the certainty of meaning, not only heralds postmodernism but speaks also to Herr's preoccupation with the American mythical constructions in relation to Vietnam. And given that the map is in the quoted passage just one story told about the "ground," this deconstructive act will be linked to the myth of the frontier, of whose primacy Herr is perfectly aware. In other words, Herr draws attention to the fact that *land* may be endowed with connotations beyond its sheer physicality and that the American attitudes toward the Vietnamese land, such as revising its representation in cartography for the uses of warfare or reimagining it as a frontier, are examples of this.

More importantly, Herr is also aware of the power mythical constructions exert on the physical landscape and of the use that can be made of them in propaganda. He makes this triple connection by following the just-quoted passage with a story of an information officer responsible for telling V.I.P. visitors to Vietnam about a defoliation mission, who shows Herr—both on a map and from a helicopter—the effects of the operation, namely the disappearance of huge swathes of both jungle and fields in the area of the Ho Bo Woods, destroyed by American bulldozers, chemical sprayings, and bombs (1978, 11). The divide between reality and abstractness is disrupted when the purpose and satisfaction of touting the story to guests is revealed: The operation has clearly failed in its objectives, as in its aftermath U.S. casualty numbers in the area ("War Zone C") have again shot up due to even greater NLF presence, but at least "none of it was happening in any damn Ho Bo Woods" (12; original in italics).

The frontier-like (technological and total) destruction of the woods proceeds from the map, with its arbitrary and meaningless "War Zone C," to the actual land, now viewed from the possessive (imperial) vantage point of the helicopter. One story of the Ho Bo Woods, told in the actual vanishing of the forest and the cultivated fields and apparent from Herr's correspondent's perspective, is that in the American map–generated "reality" the destruction is meaningless, because it fails in its strategic objectives, but its significance is arbitrary—the military information office is still, unfathomably, touting the operation, thus telling a very different story of the Ho Bo Woods.

The problems signaled in these opening pages of *Dispatches* are undertaken further by Herr later in the text, where the Vietnamese landscape, as a dark frontier reworked from American myth, becomes a

literary tool to criticize aspects of the American engagement.[16] One way in which Herr explores the transformations of American myth in Vietnam is through the figure of John Wayne, a hero of American pop culture associated with his roles as a cowboy in Westerns, and as a perfect soldier in World War II films. The concept thus becomes entangled with "movies," one of the book's buzzwords, which are the contemporary vehicles of myth. The breakdown of the frontier is then conveyed through Herr's deconstruction of the films' mythical charge—through exposing their deception in creating heroic American ideals—and through his ironic inversion of the medium to use it against itself, in order to underscore the mythical dimension of Vietnam.

A passage in "Breathing In," continuing from an earlier account of the Battle of Dak To, illustrates this. Herr begins the passage by describing a "jihad" between two gods, one of the Buddhists, standing here for all Vietnamese and representative of their determination (the self-immolations and protests of 1963) and patience in waiting for independence, and the other the god of Americans, described in metaphors suggesting frontier connotations (1978, 43; the word "frontier" is also used in this paragraph to refer to the American line in the DMZ). Herr then writes that while the correspondents who actually witnessed Dak To knew how bloody it had been for the U.S. soldiers, MACV categorized it as victory and sold this version to the compliant press. Next, he describes the plot of *Fort Apache*, a 1948 John Wayne and Henry Fonda Western in which the latter plays a colonel who disregards the knowledge that Wayne's character possesses about the Apaches, which results in a high number of casualties among the colonel's men. Herr calls this plot a "mythopathic moment," meaning that the myths in a movie like this become internalized, and a "Nam paradigm." He further writes, in his signature broken syntax which in fragmentary phrases slides from the Wayne film to the actual war in Vietnam, that the latter was

> not a movie, no jive cartoon either where the characters get smacked around and electrocuted and dropped from heights, flattened out and frizzled black and broken like a dish, then up again and whole and back in the game, "Nobody dies," as someone said in another war movie.
>
> (44)

As in the opening of his memoir, Herr links myth to practice here. American myth, identified as something quasi-religious and lodged deep in culture, transfers via movies onto historical conditions like the Vietnam War and feeds the "paradigm": American men dying due to their commanders' bad decisions. But Herr splits the significance of this myth. On the one hand, it underlines attitudes and thus finds historical parallels, such as the ignorance of the Americans' enemy leading to

disaster; Wayne is here the model frontiersman, the white man who has learned the ways of the natives, but whose advice is not heeded. An additional connection is made between the invisibility of the Apache and the well-known trope of the invisibility of Vietnamese fighters.

On the other hand, Herr suggests, the movie/myth is also both deceitful and destructive. Its sanitized portrait of combat skews expectations as to what fighting will actually entail, while its projections of heroism might coax young men into enlisting or push them to behave irrationally in a fight (precisely the point whose deconstruction is the function of the John Wayne figure in the Vietnam canon). For example, Herr writes about "media freaks" (1978, 169) among soldiers, who imagined themselves to be starring in war movies and behaved differently on the battlefield if they knew they were being filmed by television reporters (see also O'Brien 1998, "The Ghost Soldiers," for similar ideas). Elsewhere, he also recalls a commanding officer who, upon hearing that Herr and his colleagues were journalists, was ready to organize a combat mission for his brigade, where foot soldiers were sure to be killed, all for publicity (15).

The movie/myth receives the harshest of reality checks when these same young men die and the war turns out to be no movie after all, a realization that Herr says took some time to sink in because people, himself included, had been immunized to the reality of warfare and combat death by television and cinema (1978, 169). The rhetorical strength of the John Wayne passage is realized at its end, where the cartoonishly grisly ways of non-dying, the reader realizes, are actually some of the ways in which people did die in Vietnam: interrogated prisoners and suspects "smacked around," hooked up to radio batteries and field telephones by their genitals, thrown out of helicopters, and deliberately crushed by armored vehicles; U.S. soldiers torn apart by mines (and also, apparently, if we are to believe Tim O'Brien's memoir that describes just such an incident, sometimes ran over by their own armored vehicles and thus really "flattened out": "most of the blood was out of him"; 2006, 153). In Vietnam, it seems, everybody dies.

As Kinney points out, the ubiquity of the John Wayne references testifies to the "solipsism" and "self-referentiality" of the narratives by American authors and endorses the discourse of friendly fire over the historical realities of the war (2000, 12); later she indeed claims that very discourse to be "part of the texture of the war" in *Dispatches* (111–112).[17] But Herr goes further. Exposing and rejecting the "mythopathic" power of movies and engaging instead in inversive mythography, Herr also uses the myth/movie parallel to describe the American experience—his own, of the other correspondents, and of the soldiers—in Vietnam. Indeed, "the movie" is one of the ways of conceptualizing that experience which forms Herr's "Vietnam" cluster. In a particularly telling example, a marine Herr met during the fighting in Hue supposedly said to him, "I *hate* this movie," and he thought, "Why not?" (1978, 153; emphasis in

original. In Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, on the very first page, narrator Private Joker states, impersonating John Wayne: "I think I'm going to hate this movie" [1988, 4], a likely reference to *Dispatches*; a quotation from Herr's memoir is also used as the motto for the first part of *The Short-Timers*, suggesting Hasford's familiarity with *Dispatches*). In another instance, writing about the "glamour" of being a war correspondent, Herr says that Hollywood would make films about reporters like those in Vietnam if it was any other war, but because the conflict is so unpopular, they each construct individual imaginary "movies" (1978, 153), like *Dispatches* itself, for example. While traditional myths could apply themselves easily to earlier conflicts, in other words, then the "awkwardness" of Vietnam necessitated new "movies": new myths. And thus, in *Dispatches* we can observe the early stages of the process of turning Vietnam into an American myth (note that both Phillip Knightley [1975], in the title of his history of the profession, and Chris Hedges [2002, Introduction], call war correspondents "mythmakers"). In Herr's Vietnam movie, as it turns out, both the setting and its spatiality play a major role. At one point, when Herr is considering the reasons someone would want to go to Vietnam, he concludes that "somewhere all the mythic tracks intersected," (1978, 24), and it is from this point of initial inspiration that the reconstructed mythical land of Vietnam springs and rolls out.

Herr, as self-aware of his mythographic process as ever, proclaims the name of this mythical land toward the end of the memoir, in a passage crucial to unlocking the meanings of *Dispatches*: "LZ Loon," a "mythical place,"

> was the ultimate Vietnam movie location, where all of the mad colonels and death-spaced grunts we'd [the correspondents] ever known showed up all at once, saying all the terrible, heartbreaking things they always said, so nonchalant about the horror and fear that you knew you'd never really be one of them no matter how long you stayed.
>
> (1978, 188)

The name LZ Loon, chosen by Herr and his correspondent friend Sean Flynn, was apparently inspired by a real place, a tiny landing zone newly erected by marines deep in the wilderness, (referred to here as "Indian Country"), and given the significant moniker. Flynn suggests that "'that's what they ought to call the whole country,' a more particular name than Vietnam to describe the death space and the life you found inside it" (1978, 204). Describing the countryside and jungles of Vietnam as "Indian Country" is of course not Herr's invention and is as widespread across the canon as it is in historical sources that capture the American slang of the war. But the terminology is not itself innocent,

as it belongs to the discourses that generally Americanize both the conflict and the country of Vietnam; Herr's use of the phrase here, even if dictated by conventional usage rather than conscious rhetorical choice, nevertheless works to locate Loon strictly within American mythology.

As a "mythical place" and a "movie location," LZ Loon is the plane on which various dimensions of Vietnam merge: It is the Vietnamese landscape, overlaid with the conditions of the war and with the American presence the war has brought, as well as all the mythical ideas and images the Americans have brought with them, filtered through, revised, and ultimately updated by the horrors and disillusions of those very conditions of the war (in an interview with Salman Rushdie, Vietnam is variously described by Rushdie and Herr as "madness," "language as well as everything else," "a drug-and-rock 'n' roll extension," "the ultimate trip," "bad craziness," "behaviour," "archetypal behaviour beyond judgement"; Rushdie 1991). It is not a Vietnamese place, but a thoroughly American one (located in the Indian Country of American myth, after all), where the native inhabitants are the U.S. soldiers, whose experience and suffering generate its very existence. Like other correspondents, Herr is but a tourist there, but this status is precisely what grants him his meta-perspective from which to not only describe, but also deconstruct, the place (Cobley 1986, 107; Hawkins 2012, 70–71; Herzog 1980, 687–688).[18]

Loon, appearing in the final pages of the memoir, also brings the reader back to the all-important beginning. Talking about the "souvenirs" he took with him from the war in "Breathing Out," Herr writes about a map of Indochina he got from a magazine, which he filled with marks indicating all the locations in Vietnam he has been to; in his memory, each spot generates a semiosis consisting of "the complex of faces, voices and movement that gathered around each one." The nature of the marked places in Herr's memory changes over time, however:

> Real places, then real only in the distance behind me, faces and places sustaining serious dislocation. . . . When the map fell apart along the fold lines its spirit held together, it landed in safe but shaky hands and one mark was enough, the one at LZ Loon.
>
> (1978, 203–204)

The French colonial and American military maps have been replaced by a map drawn by Herr's personal experience (Heberle 2015, 28–29), but over time the map—and the detailed memory it once supported—deteriorates, the "faces and places" no longer attached to their actual historical locations; Loon remains the only place still indicated on the map. Overall, Herr seems to be suggesting two slightly different interpretations of Loon. One can be identified with the understanding of it as a "mythical place" moved through in Vietnam; this makes Loon the

"spirit" of what the map represented, the spirit of the land of Vietnam: the atmosphere of the war, its sights and sounds, encounters with soldiers and officers, friendships with other journalists, its specificity. The second interpretation of Loon is similar, but differs in time and space: Loon is now not the place travelled around, but a memory, a certain "aftertaste," a feel, of that remembered place; the word "spirit" bridges the two interpretations, because it can be applied in this instance, too. To employ Herr's own imagery, the first interpretation of Loon is the set where the movie is being made and the footage recorded, while the second one is the finished product. The difference between the two interpretations is nevertheless significant, because the first Loon will remain forever inaccessible to those who were not in Vietnam, and to an extent to all those, like Herr, who were, but whose memories have inevitably faded, while the second one is the version delivered to the readers and thus the one complicit in creating a (not yet *the*) cultural narrative of the war. In fact, *Dispatches* as a whole can be read as a negotiation of the tension between the two Loons, as in his self-awareness and deconstructiveness, Herr is conscious above all of the *re-constructiveness* of his story or of his "Vietnam movie." The memoir's determined, almost total, lack of chronology and the fragmentariness of its narrative speak both to the phenomenology of the war about which Herr tries to convince his readers and to the nature of deteriorated memory he tries to convey, but they are also, even first of all, a precise stylistic, rhetorically oriented choice.

The "choice" in *Dispatches* has often been overlooked, and this is precisely what I mean when I write of scholars validating Herr's version of Vietnam with all its problems unchecked. The effect has been that "in this context, Herr's postmodern style is seen as oddly mimetic" (Kinney 2000, 112) or that the memoir's "nonlinear structure and kinetic prose in some vital way [seem] to mirror the war itself" (Neilson 1998, 136). To give just one example of how Herr's language (what Kinney calls "grunt speak," "the vernacular") could easily be translated into the very reality of the war:

> Herr's style is particularly successful in evoking the nightmare world of Vietnam through a language that reproduces the sensibilities of soldiers at the same time as it exhibits an obvious literary sophistication. . . . The overall effect of Herr's stylistic display is an imaginative recreation of Vietnam's claustrophobic mental and physical landscape.
>
> (Cobley 1986, 109)

Michael Spindler warns about divorcing from the historical context of the book's creation readings of it that consider its formal qualities and self-reflexivity as of greater significance. Rather, he argues that they should

be viewed "as an aspect of its limiting Americo-centrism"; referring to Herr's famous proclamation that for the correspondents the experience in the war was "glorious" and "wonderful," and a source of nostalgic feelings (1978, 195), Spindler further explains that in these words

> the crippling limitations of Americo-centric individualism become apparent, as the collective scale of the war and the independent experience of the Other, the Vietnamese, are denied, and the devastation of a small Asian country and the slaughter of approximately two and a half million of its people are distastefully reduced to the warm glow of personal reminiscence.
>
> (1991, 27)

To ignore the book's anchorage in a specific historical event is to overlook its ideological entrapping. Neilson also devotes much space to this problem with Herr's writing and its reception, pointing out that the memoir's representation of the war as madness and aberration, as well as its preoccupation with the states of mind of individual soldiers and of Herr himself, not only all but completely occluded the Vietnamese side of the conflict but also supported a "nonthreatening" image of the war (1998, 142). A still less benign perspective is assumed by David James in his materialist take on music and the Vietnam War, in an essay whose criticism bridges the interior faults of *Dispatches* with its reception and absorption into the cultural narrative. James argues that the American failure in the war belongs to a class of events momentous enough so that capitalist culture, for its own self-preserving needs unable to represent them but due to their impact equally unable to completely repress them, necessitates an updated vocabulary that, rather than speaking to the reality of the suppressed history, enables the reintroduction of these events into dominant myths and markets (see also Spindler 1991, 28, who makes a similar point). *Dispatches*, according to James, is just such a particularly successful vocabulary update, hence its star status in the dominant culture: it "rewrote genocide as rock and roll" (1990, 80).

In relation to its representation of the Vietnamese landscape and reconstruction of the war, the book's interior problems first appear, again, in the first page, where having considered the colonial map of Indochina and the inadequacy of contemporaneous American maps, Herr states definitively that "for years now there had been no country here but the war" (1978, 11; original in italics). This is not a mere statement of the status quo, but rather, when considered in the context of the rest of the book, a forecast of how "Vietnam" will be reconstructed and presented in *Dispatches*. That Loon is the dimension of Vietnam made up of American myth, presence, and experience has already been argued; a closely parallel dimension is the physical landscape rendered in symbolic terms for the benefit of the American participants.

Because Vietnam is war, the land and the American war are one, becoming one environment—perhaps a conquered extension of the mythical "fatal environment" that, in Slotkin's analysis, was felt among Americans to have "killed" General Custer. Indeed, writing about the nineteenth-century frontier imagery associated with "The Boy General," Slotkin observes that even contemporaneously the lands that Custer traversed were already overlaid with mythical constructs to the extent that the latter became inseparable from "real geography," "battlefield terrain," and enemy tactics (1998a, 11–12). The same process occurs in *Dispatches* and eventually encompasses the whole American imagination of "Vietnam."

In *Dispatches*, the collapsing of land and war into one is achieved also by endowing this specific environment of Vietnam with a sense of spatiality transcending simple geography: Herr describes the correspondents' frantic movement "around" the "surface" of the war and the rare instances of "occasional, unexpected penetration" (1978, 15; see also Harrison 1999, 91–93). The war thus becomes a universe unto itself, and through continuous movement one could hope to find points of entry into its deeper layers of significance. Movement, in its freedom unprecedented in the history of warfare, was of course possible thanks to helicopters, and Herr is *enthralled* by helicopters. One of the memoir's tropes is what he calls a "meta-chopper"; just like Loon was the place that all the other places Herr visited eventually merged into, so the "meta-chopper" has been formed by all the helicopters he flew in in Vietnam. In the war, "choppers" enabled air mobility, and in *Dispatches* the "meta-chopper" enables Herr to travel *through* the space of war.[19] A catalogue of the types of places found in American Vietnam and accessible by "chopper" follows: jungle clearings, landing zones and rooftops, massive city-sized bases and one-man posts deep in the wilderness, relatively luxurious "middle-class" camps distant from the fighting, isolated hills where it was unwise to alight for too long, and all places actually native to Vietnam, including its cities and hamlets, and areas of its typical terrain, like rice fields or bush (16). This is the cartography around which Herr will move for the rest of *Dispatches*: Vietnam, Loon itself.

Now, the problem here is twofold. One, identifying "Vietnam" with war, and especially by turning war into the entire environment, has the effect of naturalization of the conflict as the status quo (Spindler 1991, 28–29; see also Boyle 2016, 190; Schlegel 1995, 53–54). Two, Herr performs a total takeover of the Vietnamese landscape for America, recreating it as a mythical land with significance only in terms of the American experience and suffering (Hunt 2010, xvii–xviii; Kinney 2000, 12, 188; Kuberski 1986, 181; Myers 1988, 146–169; Neilson 1998, 142–157). Indeed, in a passage in which he dubs Vietnam both an "ideological space" and a frontier, Herr also names it an "a California corridor" cut through the jungle, a site of "a dense concentration

of American energy" (1978, 42); such re-visionings are possible only if the historical, political, social, and cultural entity of Vietnam ceases to exist to make room for an absolute and categorical symbolic colonization by the American imagination.

Because of the success of *Dispatches* and its early canonization, Herr's version of Vietnam became validated, and this helps to explain why someone could consider a vicious conflict in which hundreds of thousands of tons of napalm were dropped on civilians and millions of people died a "symbolic war," an "American ideograph" (Myers 1988, 141), a "mythic enterprise" (Myers 1988, 144), or a "postmodern phenomenon" (Carpenter 2003, 32). Philip Beidler, whose literary criticism occurs almost totally in the context of Herr's reconstruction of "Vietnam," even proclaimed that Vietnam was "the place that was the war, a complete structure of physical and psychic actuality, a whole self-defining system" (2007, 7). He also made this statement of unself-conscious and, as Neilson would put it, transhistorical ethnocentrism: Considering the continuities detectable in Vietnam literature with the American writings of previous wars, apparently "it seems almost as if our classic inheritance of native expression has prophesized much of what we now know of Vietnam, made it by self-engendering symbolic fiat part of our collective mythology long before it existed in fact" (2007, 19). Both processes—naturalization and Americanization—are of course one process of mythologization, and so of removal of the war in Vietnam from history. And hence, Vietnam in *Dispatches* is essentially purged of the political state of South Vietnam and of the Vietnamese people—who are actually largely absent from the memoir. In Herr's Vietnam, there are no Vietnamese. To turn again to James, Herr's

> phenomenology of presence allows him to elide the "realism" of the historical process as a whole. . . . *Dispatches*, after the mention of the old French map on the first page, not only contains no account of the place of the invasion in the history of colonialism—let alone as an event in Vietnamese history—it contains no narrative at all. Despite gestures toward geographic and chronological specificity (chapter titles like "Khe Sanh"), the invasion is everywhere and always the same. It exists only in the GIs' experience of it, and the GIs exist only in the perpetual present of combat.
>
> (1990, 85–86)

The dehistoricization of Vietnam in *Dispatches* might seem paradoxical given Herr's criticism of U.S. policymakers' and generals' repeating of the French mistakes. But except for pointing out the failure, Herr does not provide an account of the motivations that led the United States to Indochina beyond a paragraph in which he ponders when the war actually began, referencing Pilgrim New England, the Trail of Tears, and *The*

Quiet American (a 1955 Graham Greene novel concerning the destructiveness of American good intentions abroad). All three are enmeshed in American mythological interpretations of the country's history (exceptionalism, the Indian wars), and as we have seen in the case of John Hellmann, a criticism of the mythology in relation to Vietnam tends to validate mythological readings over materialist and (geo)political ones. Indeed, Neilson criticizes this passage in *Dispatches*, noting that "as a consequence of the postmodern epistemology and aesthetic . . . Herr cannot tell whether 1954 . . . [or] 1838 is a more likely date for the beginning of the Vietnam War" (1998, 206–207), an observation in line with Neilson's general critique of what he calls the transhistorical tendency of American Vietnam literature. The critique is persuasive given that Herr's preferred subject is American myth, which history, as we have seen, can merely provide with imagery and a vocabulary. Similarly, Herr references the pre-1965 counterinsurgency period of U.S. involvement—"spookwar," as he calls it—but describes it in the terms of the frontier again; the "spooks" are likened to pioneering European explorers on North American trails, both killing and engaging in sexual relations with native populations. A list of different types of spooks follows, including academic researchers, intelligence agents, Special Forces, and so forth, but the significance of these categories and their impact on the "spookwar" remain obscure unless one already knows what Herr is talking about.

In fact, Herr privileges what he terms "secret history" as worthy of excavation. Writing about the work of correspondents under the pressure to comply with the official line from politicians and military information officers, he states that "conventional journalism" fails in the face of the war in Vietnam, unable to transcend the nonsensical tangle of authorized "communications." These reporters thus end up involved in the weaving of the war's "secret history" that omits its most glaring reality: the senselessness of the "grunts'" suffering and, most importantly, of their deaths (1978, 175).[20] The phrase is used earlier in the book, when Herr considers the American failure to account for what made the French lose Dien Bien Phu, their war, and ultimately their Indochinese colonies, the connection and possible double significance of the word "history," referring to both the ignored pointless deaths in Vietnam and the unheeded warnings of the previous conflict, suggesting an admonishment that a proper reckoning of the French defeat would have saved those American lives.[21] Herr then writes that during the Vietnam War, despite the sheer massive volume of media content dedicated to analyses in the United States, even though the Americans were deeply embedded in South Vietnam since the beginnings of the counterinsurgency and nation-building phase of the conflict, in the end, in the shooting war, "not a single life was saved by the information. . . . Hiding low under the fact-figure crossfire there was a secret history" that few ventured to retrieve (1978, 46).

The smooth gliding from the French war history, through the counterinsurgency period of U.S. involvement, to the American war's secret history is an interesting device. The ignorance, Herr suggests, was there despite all the reports, analyses, and so forth, which were supposed to lead to victory, but ultimately it all came down to the "secret" that most, including many journalists, were unwilling to admit: the death of American soldier in a war (in a place) like Vietnam. This is just another take on the "Nam paradigm." (It is of course deeply ironic that the secret history, even once uncovered, cannot be told "straight," that Herr feels the need to construct an elaborate mythic setting in order to tell it.)

On the one hand, Herr could brand the plight of the U.S. soldier in Vietnam as hidden and unreported because, despite the common belief about the "living-room war," prior to the Tet Offensive (and so prior to Herr's stunt in Vietnam), U.S. television channels actually showed the conflict in a highly sanitized way that avoided violence and graphic imagery completely (Hallin 1986, 129–134; Hammond 1990; Knightley 1975, 410–416; Pach 1994; Wyatt 1993, 144–148). But from today's perspective it testifies also to the shift that, as we have seen, took place in the Vietnam narrative in the 1980s, when the suffering of the soldier and the veteran became the *only* valid story. But because this shift *did* occur—in some part thanks to Herr himself, perhaps—formulating the "grunts'" experience as secret, especially since Loon is constituted of that experience even as it rejects that of the Vietnamese, actually serves to further *mystify* Vietnam and its history, and so to aid the process of its mythologization. Herr also creates the impression that there was something mysterious and unknowable at the heart of the war in Vietnam, that the senselessness of American deaths was of almost mystical origin.

One mark of Herr's impact in this matter is that the notion has found its way into Gustav Hasford's writing, who in *The Short-Timers* has Animal Mother in an altercation where his experienced "gruntness" is tensely contrasted with the comfortable life of the "pogues" (rear, mainly administrative, personnel), at whom he smiles menacingly "like a man who knows a terrible secret" (1988, 39). Traces of this Herresque secrecy are also found in Tim O'Brien's work, who writes about "all the ambiguities of Vietnam, all the mysteries and unknowns" (1998, 16; in fact, Neilson 1998, 192–209, appears to consider O'Brien the most effective mystificator of the war, particularly in this collection). As for the benefits of this way of explaining the war, Gloria Emerson realized in the early 1970s already that "it is easier to claim the war impossible to understand, therefore Americans need not feel pain or guilt or the necessity to see themselves differently" (1992, 112). But this is yet another strategy of mystifying and dehistoricizing the war—and a major one at that:

> A more sophisticated and subtle denial of the actuality of the Vietnamese people and the Vietnam War comes in a package labeled "unreal,"

> "unknowable," "incomprehensible," "crazy," or "alien.". . . This package also fits neatly into fashionable late twentieth-century theories that rejected coherent and consistent narratives as anachronistic in the epoch of "postmodernism.". . . The widespread *intellectual* perception of the Vietnam experience as too alien to be comprehended has helped to establish a canon of Vietnam War literature that enshrines indeterminacy, incoherence, ambiguities, strangeness, and unknowability, with critics exalting Michael Herr's *Dispatches* as the quintessential truth about the war.
>
> (Franklin 2000, 32; Franklin is here elaborating on Neilson's [1998] arguments)

Many scholars in the 1980s and 1990s took their cue from Herr (and other Vietnam authors) and, validating this version of the war, put to paper such egregious statements as, "[The history of the Vietnam War] is interior and not available to scientific historiography" (McInerney 1981, 190). Or: "'Vietnam' is a dominant phantom whose historically complex presence still awaits demystified recognition" (Williams 1991, 117). Or: "[Vietnam authors convey] the futility of any attempt to identify, much less communicate (especially via language), any fundamental meaning or truth attaching to or derived from the war" (Carpenter 2003, 32). These scholars would also acquiesce that the war produced "too much information"; that it "resisted" narrativization; that it lacked "objective" reality; that it revealed a "dichotomy of fact and truth"; that it led to a "disintegration of the traditional structure of meaning"; that it "persistently call[ed] attention to its own abiding unreality"; that its "meanings" were "multiple"; that it was "secretive," "elusive," "insane," "fragmented," "a self-contained universe of discourse," an "irrational place," "a place with no real points of reference"; or that its essence was "the notorious ambiguity of our [American] entire involvement in Vietnam," and so forth (see Beidler 2007, 5, 16, 140; Bonn 1993, 32; Carpenter 2003, 31ff; Cobley 1986; Hansen 1990, 135; Harrison 1999, 103–106; Hawkins 2009, 131; Hellmann 1986, 151; Kuberski 1986, 176ff; Myers 1988, 142ff; Scheurer 1981, 155ff; see also the chapter on *Dispatches* in Nielson [1998], who repudiates much of the prior scholarship on Herr, arguing that there cannot be a "natural" connection between an aesthetic or narrative style, and an actual moment in history; his polemics with Hellmann [1986] and Myers [1988] are particularly noteworthy; see also Neilson's chapter on Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* for somewhat similar problems).[22]

This interpretation and criticism of secret history is corroborated by the fact that the other context in which the word "secret" is used with significance in *Dispatches* is the marines' attitude and knowledge. As we have seen, the war had a "surface" that could sometimes be "penetrated"; some correspondents could learn the war's "dark revelations"

and "hideous secrets" (1978, 175). But in Herr's Vietnam it was the marines, Loon's natives, who were the keepers of the secrets. In Herr's tales of the marines, secretness mingles with jokes, and I would argue that it is precisely at the intersection of the two that he finds the "grunts'" seemingly innate understanding of the war's irony. If Paul Fussell's (2013) classic formulation of what makes all war experience and all traditional war narratives ironic (the tripartite structure: preparation/innocence, combat/experience, reflection/disillusionment) stemmed from his work on the poetry of World War I, then in Vietnam Herr can observe the ironic process among the marines from his vantage position in the "meta-chopper."

In *Dispatches*, marine jokes are dark because the marines are both tragic, subject to "bad fate" (86) and enmeshed in their own particular superstition and mythology. Strange things tend to happen to marine units, events and situations that usually result in the troops' deaths. The marines truly know the insanity, violence, and "horror" of "Vietnam," and this understanding constitutes the core of their knowledge of the war's secrets, even as it "brutalizes" and "darkens" them (87). Among the marines in Vietnam the irony is deepened and made tragic by the war's perceived lack of sense—when the marines "laugh silently and long" (87) at Herr for staying with them at Khe Sanh when he does not have to, they have no illusions as to the pointlessness of what they are doing in Vietnam; a war with purpose, after all, would elicit a different kind of reaction. But this makes death itself into the joke, which is also on them: "It was that joke at the deepest part of the blackest kernel of fear, and you could die laughing" (87). Interestingly, Kinney quotes from *A Dictionary of Soldier's Talk* the definition of a saying, "fuck 'em if they can't take a joke": "A catchphrase often used when some dreadful military tragedy is revealed. During the Vietnam War it was most frequently used when friendly positions were accidentally bombed or shelled by our own troops" (2000, 113). If this definition supports Kinney's friendly fire trope, which is itself woven into Herr's tale of the marines, it also provides a further link between secrecy ("revealed"), fear ("dreadful"), joking, and tragedy.

Moreover, the notion of secret history, and the suffering and the death that it conceals, is in the memoir symbolized by the image of "a dripping, laughing death-face" (1978, 176), or a skull (203), lurking behind all the media coverage of the war. The trope is found elsewhere with surprising regularity. In Larry Heinemann's novel, *Paco's Story*, for example, the eponymous hero is a veteran and the sole survivor of a friendly fire incident that wiped out his entire company, and left him disabled. Frequently asked about his walking cane, Paco wonders about the responses he has given: among them, he "told it as an ugly fucking joke (the whole story dripping with ironic contradiction, and sarcastic and paradoxical bitterness)" (1987, 72). In his memoir, Philip Caputo, too, writes that "we were all victims of a great practical joke played on us by God or

Nature. Maybe that was why corpses always grinned. They saw the joke at the last moment" (1985, 231). But the trope is especially prominent in *The Short-Timers*. In the novel, a group of marines under fire realize that "Death is talking to us. Death wants to tell us a funny secret" (Hasford 1988, 98); later they find a mass grave of civilians killed by the NVA, and the narrator notes of their appearance that they "are grinning that hideous, joyless grin of those who have heard the joke, of those who have seen the terrible secrets of the earth" (126–127). An enemy skull mounted on a spike near Khe Sanh, which the marines call Sorry Charlie, is similarly said to be smiling "as though he knows a funny secret" (148). At the book's conclusion, the protagonist, Joker, hears laughter in the jungle and sees Sorry Charlie in a tree; he claims that the rest of his squad will soon laugh, too, disclosing at the same time the content of the marines' knowledge: "We live by the law of the jungle, which is that more Marines go in than come out. There it is. Nobody asks us why we're smiling because nobody wants to know" (175).

Both the secret war trope and the representation of marines, in addition to foregrounding the death of American soldiers as the core issue of the war, help Herr mystify the war. Unsurprisingly, marines are also useful in redrawing the mythical cartography of Loon: Writing about the distinctive nature of reporting on the fighting in I Corps, Herr states that this peculiarity was due precisely to the fact that from among the various U.S. divisions, only the marines were deployed there, and most correspondents found dealing with them difficult (1978, 86).

This brings us back to the landscape. The mythical nature of Vietnam/Loon is sometimes stated outright, but the reconstruction of the landscape as significant and the representation of the soldiers as usually nameless, sometimes deeply symbolic, often archetypical figures, also enforce this mythologization. The collapsing of the land and the war into one carries mythologizing undertones, which, when spelled out, make Vietnam sound downright mysterious. For instance, Herr compares finding "your place" in the war to "listening to esoteric music" of which you remain unaware "until your own breath [enters] it and become[s] another instrument"; at this point music becomes experience (Herr 1978, 58). The passage highlights both the interdependence of Loon and the Americans populating it, and Herr's fetishization of the process and ritual of "experience": While the war/land exerts its influence (as "esoteric music") on the soldiers and correspondents, eventually their own experience blends into the texture of Loon (as "breath" and "another instrument"), becoming part of its constitution and therefore helping conjure it up into being. That fundamental experience can be spiritual or existential, Herr seems to claim, and immersion into it is possible: It was "a complete process if you got to complete it"; those few who continue along this "dark and hard" path find that at some point there awaits "an inversion of the expected order" (1978, 58).

By "inversion," Herr could mean the discovery of the war's secrets—for example, the mythical foundations of the American war, and the darkness of that myth—which is made at the end of the journey (the experience of the war), and then becomes a whole new point of "departure." But this perspective favors somewhat benign mythological readings of the American motivations, which create a certain sense of inevitability, strengthened by the view of Vietnam as a theater of exclusively American drama (Hunt 2010) and by naturalizing the war as the environment. It also circumnavigates, or even disqualifies, histories of the conflict that take into account geopolitics, economy, political and economic ideology, power, racism, or international law. A true understanding of "Vietnam" cannot be obtained from outside of this perspective, or from any perspective disregarding first-hand experience, because access to the war's "secrets" turns out to be granted only to those who were there and who were moreover willing to wade deep "into the war": soldiers, and some of the correspondents. To others something inexplicable must remain at "the heart" of the war. And because the Vietnamese are excluded from this Vietnam, not only is the American war all the more forcefully yanked out of its own history—which was a development in a chain of events that had begun, lest it be forgotten, long before an average American could even point Indochina on a map—but also the ethical dimension of the American activity and culpability is obscured, from the top of the chain of command in the White House all the way down to the William Calleys and the Paul Meadlos in the provinces. Dehistoricized, naturalized, mythologized, mystified—this is, ultimately, Loon, which is to say that all of these participles really mean the same thing.

* * *

Many of the canonical narratives of Vietnam are far more conventional in terms of style and structure than *Dispatches*, with a few engaging in other forms of postmodernist play. If they operate within the framework of American myth, with the exception of Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, they usually do so less consciously or critically than Herr's memoir. This does not mean, of course, that Herr invented the entire mythology of the Vietnam War. As discussed, myth has a parasitic relationship to history, distorting historical conditions, events, and images, and so the canon's contribution to the eventual mythologization of the war in American culture originates in large part in certain similarities in the experience of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam, among them future veteran-authors. The uniformity of authorship and the resultant limitation of perspective in the narratives are similarly a factor in the recurrence of certain imageries, mythic formulations, and tropes. Nevertheless, the mythologizing recreation of the war's landscape in *Dispatches* is not only comprehensive

but also captures particularly well the "Vietnam" of the entire canon, epitomizing the major strategies of its representation. Partly because of that, I would like to formulate another proposition, namely that these texts be read as if they are all set in Loon.

There is, I believe, more to that claim than just a methodology of reading the narratives. As mentioned, Herr's memoir received widespread and relatively early endorsement of critics and scholars, and because his mythologized version of Vietnam was both very well-written and aligned with the dominant discourse that was forming at the same time, it can, I think, be assumed that his re-creation of the war should have had at least some impact on how subsequent Vietnam narratives were read (on Herr's influence on the cultural narrative, see Spindler 1991, 25). Herr's input into how the war would ultimately be remembered in American culture extended to cinema, too: He co-authored the script of Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), another title in the war's strict canon,[23] and was involved in the writing of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), "perhaps the major single 'memory' of the Vietnam War" (Hellmann 2007, 51).

Full Metal Jacket is based on *The Short-Timers* by Gustav Hasford, who worked on the script with Kubrick and Herr. In the case of *Apocalypse Now*, John Milius conceived of the script years before *Dispatches* was published, while Herr got hired only in the very final stages of the making of the film, and wrote Captain Willard's (Martin Sheen) narration. But even though Herr was not a decisive voice in creating these two texts—although it is worth repeating that the first part of *The Short-Timers* opens with a quotation from *Dispatches*—both Hasford's novel and Milius' script are distinctly Herresque, sharing the memoir's attitude, sensibility, and imagery of "Vietnam": Each narrative has more in common with *Dispatches* than they do with each other. For example, both Herr and Hasford are interested in the linguistic quality of the soldiers' subculture, finding in their vocabulary, quips, proverbs, and sarcastic slogans a key to unlocking the nature of the men's experience and with it of the war's secret meanings; this tendency to shift attention away from the ethics of the war toward language has in both cases also the effect of creating an atmosphere of nihilism, cynicism, and moral ambivalence. The parallels with *Apocalypse Now* extend beyond outlook and are to be found in the mythical, symbolic slant of the stories, as well as in certain characters and scenes.

Other canonical narratives have formally less in common with *Dispatches*—they are less Herresque, in other words. My argument is not that all these books and films are exactly the same—the differences in form and content between John Del Vecchio, Tim O'Brien, and Larry Heinemann, for example, are obvious—but rather that to a large extent they share an ideological outlook, certain discursive practices, and strategies of representing victimhood, related to strategies of representing landscape. In order to trace how the literature and cinema of the

Vietnam War have been incorporated into the cultural narrative that rewrote the conflict's history and helped reinstate nationalist American ideologies, my purpose is not to consider the nuances of literary difference between the narratives but rather to search for discourse-forming patterns. *Dispatches* is helpful here as a framework to structure my analysis, since Herr's strategies of representation will constitute the core to which examples from other texts will be added. It is in this sense that I consider Loon to be a viable setting for the American cultural narrative of Vietnam in general.

The Homicidal Environment

The elemental Otherness of Vietnam is established in the texts via two strategies of representation: the soldiers' vernacular and the reconstruction of the landscape. Americans in Vietnam spoke in a jargon particular to their historical circumstance, both time and place, and that jargon was not generally used outside of the U.S. locations in Indochina. It consisted of vocabulary and phrases, a mix of the 1960s slang ("can you *dig* it?"), references to popular culture ("Puff the Magic Dragon"), military speak ("medevac"), slangs of previous wars, especially World War II and Korea ("gung-ho," "pogue," "gooks," "mama-san"), the new dialect specific to Vietnam ("to frag," "to hump," "boonies," "hooch," "Charlie," "grunt"), and a selection of bastardized French and Vietnamese words or English words apparently as used by the Vietnamese ("beaucoup," "*di di mau*," "VC number 10"). It also included proverbs and sayings that expressed a particular nonchalant, cynical attitude stemming from the conditions of the war ("there it is," "it don't mean nothin'," "what are they going to do, send us to Vietnam?"). The function of the jargon in delineating the separateness of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam is illustrated in Webb's *Fields of Fire*, for example, where a freshly arrived lieutenant's first impression of his men includes language: "They were rough and wild and dirty, and they spoke a dialect that was geographically undiscernible, with minor variations of tone and pitch, as if they had all been recruited out of the same small town" (2001, 81). Likewise, in memoirs and novels "FNGs" ("fucking new guys"—rookies) often describe their first impressions of Vietnam by describing the landscape and climate, but proper initiation into their units sometimes involves friendly, more experienced soldiers translating some fundamentals of the dialect. In this sense, the language of the soldiers can be seen as inextricably woven into the setting of their experience; many Vietnam authors quite obviously revel in that language, but generally every narrative of the war is required to record it in at least the dialogues. Philip Beidler devoted an entire lengthy essay to the "language of the Nam" as a dimension of the war in itself (2004, 10–37). Glossaries can be found online, are often included in histories and other studies, and extensive ones are even

provided at the ends of some novels, like John Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley* (1982) or Larry Heinemann's *Close Quarters*.

An essential piece of the Vietnam vernacular that captured the Otherness of Vietnam felt by the men was the phrase "in country."[24] The ubiquity of the phrase is not only demonstrated in the canon but also stated by Beidler (2004, 14), who, in his essay on the language of the war, claims that while he never uttered or heard the moniker "Nam" during his deployment, "in-country" was used commonly. In opposition to "in country," the soldiers' slang used "the World," the juxtaposition implying that to be in Vietnam, during the war, meant being totally isolated from civilized everywhere else. The effect is that Vietnam seems almost removed from "normal" reality, the interdimensional transfer attested to by Beidler, for example, who ascribes this linguistic construct to the perception that Vietnam was "a place too incomprehensible to exist. People did not go home. They went 'back to the world'" (2007, 6).

If the slang is the native tongue of Loon, the land, as experienced by the soldiers, is the other component that demarcates Vietnam as a separate, strange world unto itself. In American narratives, the country's apparent strangeness is often conceptualized as profound and metaphysical. Herr, for example, writes about the dark, oppressive, alienating, and "saturating strangeness" of Vietnam (1978, 19). Beidler, the most Herresque of the Vietnam literary scholars, follows the mold: The war in Vietnam happened "in a strange, remote midworld where visitations of the absurd and unreal nestled with sinister ease amidst a spectacle of anguish, violence, and destruction almost too real to be comprehended" (2007, 3–4). In Tim O'Brien's (1998) story collection, *The Things They Carried*, Vietnam is turned into a darkly magical world outright: The underground tunnels and the over-ground terrains are haunted by ghosts, and the most remote wilderness can at night echo with strange, sourceless music, which reappears in several stories ("The Things They Carried"; "Ghost Soldiers"; "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong"; see also the similar imagery for Quang Ngai in *Going After Cacciato* [O'Brien 1980, 257]). "How to Tell a True War Story" even contains a description of a phantom cocktail party, heard by a small detachment of American soldiers in an isolated listening post, consisting of the sounds of conversations between rocks, vegetation, animals, the air, and so forth, summarized as "the whole country. Vietnam" (1998, 82). At the end of *The Short-Timers*, Joker and his squad experience something similar, when deep in the jungle they hear the sound of laughter coming from all directions at once: "The laughter seems to radiate from the jungle floor, from the jade trees, from the monster plants, from within our own bodies" (Hasford 1988, 175). In his memoir *A Rumor of War*, Philip Caputo also reimagines the landscape as a dark fantasyland, when he describes a valley in Quang Nam as "Shangri-La" (1985, 68), and, like O'Brien,

he too notes the strange sounds and even music in the jungle at night (drums, probably the Montagnards; 1985, 132).

The texts in the American canon do not usually dwell on the repercussions of the obverse of this ethnocentric view of Vietnam as a strange Other space—the "in country" isolated from "the World"—except for glimpses in passing. In Seymour Hersh's *My Lai 4*, for example, one of the soldiers from Charlie Company admits, reflecting on the massacre, that he "knew it wasn't right. . . but over there it makes no difference"; another says, as if referencing Loon, "When you come back, it's just like there was some sort of fantasy-land over there" (1970, 184–185). And Daniel Lang records an extension of this line of thinking, in the words of the lawyer of a G.I. charged with premeditated murder of a civilian in Vietnam:

> There's one thing that stands out about this particular offense. . . . It did not occur in the United States. Indeed, there are some that would say it did not even occur in civilization, when you are out on combat operations.
>
> (Lang 1969, 102; "this isn't civilization. This is Nam" [O'Brien 1998, 81])

Instead, the perspective is uniformly American. Virtually all texts include comments on the difficulty of the terrain and the harshness of the climate—the impenetrable walls of grass and jungle, the steep hills to climb, the murky paddies to slug through, the unbearable tropical heat and sunlight, the relentless monsoons, the leeches, the total darkness of the night. Eventually, the difficulty of the topography morphs from a metaphoric hostility into a metaphysical one, when the land—and the night—become a realm of the NLF and the NVA. Herr's words on the "saturating strangeness" of the Vietnamese landscape come in a passage where he writes about the falsity of the sense of security provided by air mobility and his failure to fully adapt to the war and its "surprises." The underlying reason is that the fight is always ongoing, and so wherever one is within this space, and however quiet it may temporarily seem, the constant threat has its source in the fact that while the Americans own the world above ground and the days, the enemy owns the underground and the nights; the hidden possession of the landscape by the NLF and the NVA is, in other words, so total that for Americans there is no hiding from danger and fear (1978, 19–20; Webb uses an effective image to convey the same idea: "Snake put his finger to the dirt. 'We are here.' He then made a circle in the air. 'They are everywhere else'" [2001, 77]). In effect, the entire environment becomes "fatal," as in Slotkin; what Herr often refers to simply as "it"—combat, death—is always happening somewhere, and it is to be expected at all times. It is worth noting that "expected" ways of dying in combat are contrasted here with the

"freaky" ones that are engendered by the very strangeness and danger of the land, inundated with "it" to the point where, as we have seen, they are collapsed into one with war. And as with the "fatal environment" that ensnared and killed General Custer, so in Vietnam the mythic nature of the land preordains the American death and suffering that will occur there (see also Christopher 1995, 5).

Herr thus makes clear distinction between American technology, represented by helicopters and air mobility, and the guerilla tactics of the native enemy, who, by often operating at night and possessing native knowledge of the land, renders it dangerous and actively hostile. This frontier-like tension is encountered everywhere in the Vietnam canon. To give just one example, Philip Caputo, upon entering the jungle for the first time with his unit, notes that "being Americans, we were comfortable with machines, but . . . we were struck with the utter strangeness of this rank and rotted wilderness" (1985, 83).[25]

But it is the day–night division that is particularly important in highlighting the strict connection between the strangeness of the landscape and the climate, and the lethal potential it carries. Caputo, stationed around Danang in 1965 as a marine lieutenant, also writes in his memoir that his soldiers soon understood that the war was "primarily a nocturnal event," as the night harbored the NLF (1985, 56–58). In *Fields of Fire*, "the black [of night] belonged to those others, the night god's children, who frolicked, even murdered in the romance of starbright" (Webb 2001, 283). When Tim O'Brien and a couple of other soldiers get their hands on a starlight scope and scan their surroundings after dark, on an occasion described in his memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, one of the "grunts" is obviously uneasy when the line between the Vietnamese and the American realms becomes disturbed by technology-gone-too-far. "You aren't supposed to see the night," he tells the others. "It's unnatural. I don't trust this thing." Seen through the device, the Vietnamese countryside is exposed as a "fairytale land," a "circus," "on fire" (2006, 38). O'Brien returns to the subject of nighttime in Vietnam when he describes marching on patrols in total darkness, in the "haunted countryside," and the terror at the thought of being separated from the rest of the squad; the line, closed off at both ends by the point man and the rear man, marks the limit of "security and sanity": "The man to the front is civilization. He is the United States of America and every friend you have ever known" (2006, 92; the same theme is to be found in O'Brien 1998, "Night Life").

The tension between Americanness and the hostility of the landscape is also explored in John Del Vecchio's novel *The 13th Valley*. In most respects, the book is as far from *Dispatches* as the canon can accommodate. Where Herr's memoir is a mere 200 pages in the small trade paperback format, Del Vecchio's novel is a gargantuan 600 in almost twice as large a size; where Herr eschews narrative coherence and traditional prose

style in favor of linguistic virtuosity and innovative form, Del Vecchio writes a meticulous and carefully chronologized epic; where Herr builds Vietnam out of the language itself, Del Vecchio does so by describing places, events, and objects down to the minutest detail, often gratuitous from the perspective of storytelling; where *The 13th Valley* is usually categorized as belonging to the conventional, "realist-naturalist," Dos Passos–Hemingway–Mailer school of American war fiction (Hölbling 2007, 107), *Dispatches* is unanimously branded as postmodernist. Del Vecchio served in Vietnam as a combat correspondent with the Airborne and came home with a Bronze Star; Herr, though in love with the soldiers, remained always aware of, and somewhat anxious about, the different quality of his status and the animosity the men could feel toward him as an outside reporter (he once overheard a rifleman wishing death to him and his colleagues; 1978, 168). Del Vecchio is blatant in his outlook on the war as essentially noble and patriotic and searches for the epic where he can find it, while Herr keeps up the screen of ambiguity in his assessment of the U.S. involvement and his attitude toward the "grunts" is more hip than semper-fi.

And yet, like in all the canon, in both texts it all comes down to the same thing—the dead American soldier—however differently the process of "coming down to" is conceptualized and represented. But it is worth paying attention to the representation of the landscape in Del Vecchio's novel, too. Near its beginning, *The 13th Valley*, set in the Central Highlands in the northernmost Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces, contains a chapter in which Lieutenant Brooks and Sergeant Egan of the novel's protagonist Alpha Company (in the 101st Airborne) attend a pre-combat operation briefing where officers of various expertise prepare the unit commanders and NCOs for the upcoming mission. First comes a topography report, which gives Del Vecchio the chance to describe the map used in the meeting. Del Vecchio has clearly taken it upon himself to educate his readers: Apart from a glossary, the novel also contains several topographic maps, a historical timeline spanning the years from "2879 to 258 BC" to 1975 (1982, 599–606), and a diagram outlining the structure of Alpha Company at the time of the action, containing the names, ranks, and occupations of all 92 men (127–129). He is no less thorough in matters of cartography. The reader is informed of the map's size ("fourteen feet wide, eight feet high"), composition ("twenty-eight smaller topographic maps, each covering a grid of 27.5 × 27.5 kilometers"), content ("northern I Corps," the DMZ, the Laotian border), the exact coloring used for different types of terrain (jungles, clear forests, lowlands, swamps, rice paddies, marshes), topographic lines and markings, and the scale of the smaller maps ("1:50,000"; 57). One point of describing, after Del Vecchio, the details of the map here is to illustrate just what this chapter contains, considering that this is only the first speaker, followed by officers from the weather service, intelligence, operations, and

so forth, each giving similarly comprehensive briefings, ending with a long motivational speech from the brigade commander.

Gina Weaver (2010, 87–88) writes that such extreme realism in the war's most conservative novels, like *The 13th Valley* or *Fields of Fire*, reinforced further by their inclusion of actual maps and glossaries, highlights the veteran-author's privileged knowledge and serves the purpose of convincing the readers that the books belong among authoritative, factual, and "neutral" historiographic sources. Reading Del Vecchio's first chapter through Herr, however, leads to interesting interpretations that begin to deconstruct the deceptiveness of supposedly stark realism. First of all, Del Vecchio's lovingly reconstructed map is, of course, one of the unrevealing American maps from the opening page of *Dispatches*. Interestingly, Del Vecchio also records that each smaller map has disclaimers printed on it, in English and Vietnamese: "DELINEATION OF INTERNAL ADMINISTRATIVE BOUNDARIES IS APPROXIMATE, and DELINEATION OF INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARIES MUST NOT BE CONSIDERED AUTHORITATIVE" (1982, 57). Del Vecchio leaves this without comment, but the statements correspond to Herr's observations on not only the maps' arbitrariness but also the multiplicity of "stories" they could tell. What does it mean, for example, and what for whom, that international borders are not set? What does it say about the context in which the map is used? The topography sergeant points out a tree on a knoll in a river valley that will be the operation's central navigational reference (Del Vecchio 1982, 58); that same precise spot is described in the novel's prologue that reads like a parable: It is about a spider living in the tree; it is a mythical introduction to the eponymous valley. Is this not a different story about this one spot of land? (In Webb's *Fields of Fire*, a lieutenant character's tour in Vietnam also begins with looking at a map, which tells a different story still, with dots representing spots where the USMC has sustained casualties: The lieutenant's AO "was a large red smear" [2001, 49].)

The descriptions of the maps are a significant point of contact between the two books, as they showcase how a relatively uncomplicated representation of a map in a text assuming an immediate relation to reality finds a hypermediated parallel in a text of postmodernist commentary. But, more importantly for my discussion, this point of contact also leads to another reading of Del Vecchio's chapter via the Herresque optic. *The 13th Valley* concerns one particular combat assault operation in the war, against the Khe Ta Laou valley where the NVA is supposed to have a secret base, and the briefing with all its technical minutiae helps Del Vecchio reproduce precisely the environment in which the action will take place. However, we might well recall Herr's ominous statement that, when it came to it, "not a single life was saved by the information" (1978, 46). The American probing into the environment reaches deep: After the topography and terrain are dissected, the weather service

officer performs the same on the climate; next—completing the triad indispensably lumped together in American narratives—the enemy force is invigilated by an intelligence major, his knowledge obtained by marvels such as "remote area monitors," "magnetic and acoustic detectors," and the "XM-3 Airborne Personnel Detector Device or People Sniffer [which] indicates a massing of human beings in the Khe Ta Laou" (1982, 61–62). This is civilization tearing into the frontier at its most fearsome: "I would like to tell you," says the operations officer to the gathered men, "what we are going to do to that valley" (1982, 63–64).

At the same time, however, all of this awesome scientific knowledge the Americans have gained, this "fact-figure crossfire" (Herr 1978, 46), pales in the face of the soldiers' pain and fails to prevent American death. Egan, one of the canon's super-soldier sergeants, tough guys from working-class and similar backgrounds, has "nothing but contempt for the briefing officers," and he is irritated by the "irrelevance of the [weather] forecast" because he knows the I Corps well enough to know what the climate there will mean for his physical well-being ("fuckin rains in the mountains all the fuckin time"; Vecchio 1982, 62). He thinks instead about his feet, the most important matter for an infantryman, and about how damaged they get by the "fuckin rains" in the mountains; his disdain for the officers is compounded by the fact that their reports are abstracted from the pain in his feet and that having to stand for so long in the briefing makes them hurt more. This is a case not only of the experience of the war being embodied by the soldiers' physical suffering and their intimacy with the environment but also of the discrepancy between that experience and the official languages of the war. Significantly, after the battle results in the deaths of almost 400 paratroopers, *The 13th Valley* ends with a brief official report of the operation—a throwback to the briefing and its deluge of details—followed by a roll call of all the dead from Alpha Company. The information did, in fact, fail to save all these lives.

The upshot is that in Loon, the landscape ably resists U.S. military knowledge and attempts at a complete takeover. But because it is a mythical American construct in the first place, it actually generates the creative tension that kills American soldiers and enables the primacy of the friendly fire discourse. This quality of the land is amplified by other strategies of representation. One, the landscape—reimagined as a "fatal," or, to borrow a word from Herr, a "homicidal environment"—thus itself becomes the source of danger and terror. Two, the enemy soldiers are not a force ontologically on a par with the Americans, but rather they exist as a feature of the landscape, part of what makes it so dangerous. Examples of both strategies are abundant. In *Dispatches*, for example, Herr writes that in Vietnam "the trees would kill you, the elephant grass grew up homicidal, the ground you were walking over possessed malignant intelligence" (1978, 58). In *Fields of Fire*, "the whole black night was a . . . killer, waiting for its moment" (Webb 2001, 92). Outside of

fiction, Tim O'Brien, deployed to Quang Ngai during the war—he hated the province—in a 1994 piece for *The New York Times* also recalled that at some point his company, "began to regard Quang Ngai itself as the true enemy—the physical place, the soil and the paddies" (1994).

But it is Philip Caputo who, in *A Rumor of War*, seems particularly preoccupied with the villainy of the environment. He admits, for instance, that sometimes the climate of Vietnam seems to be not so much weather, but rather "a thing malevolent and alive" (1985, 85) and later adds that "it is as if the sun and the land itself were in league with the Viet Cong, wearing us down, driving us mad, killing us" (106). Elsewhere he notes, "we fought the climate, the snipers, and monotony, of which the climate was the worst" (59) and attributes the "spiritual disease" blighting his men, apparently named "la [*sic*] cafard" by the French who fought the First Indochina War, to the "alien landscape" (68–69). Caputo also suggests that part of the reason why the Americans lost the war was that the soldiers were so often hindered by the difficulties posed by the terrain and climate (1985, 147). But then he goes further still in demonizing the landscape of Vietnam; Caputo is in general intent on whitewashing, through naturalization and rationalization, the conduct of U.S. soldiers in Indochina, and particularly on portraying them as victims of the war, even of their own crimes. Accordingly, in a heart-of-darkness fashion, he includes climate and terrain as a factor in determining Americans' behavior in Vietnam, especially their brutality; next on the list are diseases like malaria, the sun, monsoons, dense jungle, leeches, and so forth (xvii). Generally speaking, it is impossible to quote all instances where the landscape and climate are the villain in *A Rumor of War*, since they are so frequent (ultra-realistic and meticulously chronological, Caputo's memoir is also quite repetitive).

Another strategy of representing the deadliness of the landscape is the insertion of the enemy soldiers into it as an invisible though menacing presence. In a later part of this chapter, I will briefly discuss the parallels between Loon and Patusan, the fictional Southeast Asian land in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*. Here, it is worth quoting Padmini Mongia's reading of Patusan:

> Patusan is overlaid with images engulfing forests and gloom that threaten the loss of the features and values which define the metropolitan region left behind. . . . As a fantasy land, Patusan enables the text to create a space for ghouls and terrors, a region both haunted and haunting, engulfed in green gloom and "circumscribed by lofty impassable mountains." Even Gentleman Brown describes the effect of Patusan on him as "weird" so that "every individual man of them felt as though he were adrift alone in a boat, haunted by an almost imperceptible suspicion of sighing, muttering ghosts."
>
> (1993, 6; the in-text quotations are from Conrad's *Lord Jim*)

The resemblance to Loon, haunted by the spectral NVA and NLF, is uncanny. In "Khe Sanh," describing the seemingly dreamlike buildup of U.S. and North Vietnamese forces in the hills around the remote outpost, Herr devotes much space to recreate the atmosphere of the action's setting, the Central Highlands, as a place of eerie, menacing character: "the Highlands of Vietnam are spooky, unbearably spooky, spooky beyond belief"; "it is a ghost-story country"; "the belief that Satan dwelt in Nature could have been born here" (1978, 79–80). On occasion O'Brien uses exactly the same imagery, also describing the mountains as "spooky," as in the following example from "How to Tell a True War Story":

> You don't *know* spooky till you been there. Jungle, sort of, except it's way up in the clouds and there's always this fog—like rain, except it's not raining—everything's all wet and swirly and tangled up and you can't see jack, you can't find your own pecker to piss with. Like you don't even have a body. Serious spooky.
>
> (1998, 80; emphasis in original)

The mystical theme linking landscape to metaphysical evil is found also in Robert Stone's novel *Dog Soldiers*, where one of the characters, correspondent John Converse, talks to an American missionary, who tells him that she lives in the "Ngoc Linh Province," a fictional place that, though it is never mentioned in the book again, serves as its heart of darkness[26]: "We call it God's country," says the missionary. "It's sort of a joke" (1994, 5). Converse then remembers a story he has heard about the province, in which the local tribesmen killed a priest by putting a cage with a rat in it over his head, so that the animal, once hungry, ate into the man's brain. When he asks about the religion of the Montagnard tribes in Ngoc Linh, the missionary replies that "they worship Satan"; she later tells Converse, meaning Vietnam, that "Satan is very powerful here" (Stone 1994, 8–9). The Satanic connotations are found elsewhere. In O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, for example, an American soldier calls Vietnam a "Garden of Evil" (1998, 86); the collection also has Azar, a character very clearly symbolic of evil, or rather of boyhood innocence corrupted to the point that it becomes evil. The story "The Ghost Soldiers" involves a moment in which the fictional Tim O'Brien performs an act of psychological cruelty against another soldier with Azar's assistance. At one point, the cruelty transcends O'Brien's capacity for it: Azar assumes control, reveling in the activity and proclaiming his love of the "Vietnam experience" (1998, 237).

In this world of myth, NLF guerrillas and NVA soldiers are reduced to specters, belonging, in Hasford's words, to a race of "strange, diminutive phantoms" (1988, 153). Herr writes that on the eve of the battle of Khe Sanh, the most ominous aspect of the Central Highlands is the awareness that "Somewhere Out There . . . concealed and silent and ominous, lay

five full divisions of North Vietnamese Regulars" (1978, 82). This mighty but concealed force remains unseen, until the siege ends and the spooky mountains around the outpost are searched—and even then, except for a few dead and wounded, the Americans find none of the tens of thousands of the NVA troops that from a distance harassed them for months.

The theme of the invisibility of the enemy is ubiquitous in American narratives. Kinney argues, in fact, that it is the very prerequisite to making the friendly fire trope dominant in Vietnam narratives (2000, 4).[27] Examples are again ample. Caputo, looking down from the typical American vantage point of an airborne helicopter, describes the "Annamese Cordillera" (the Annamite Range), a mountain chain stretching down the Laos border along the full length of Vietnam, as "'Out there.'. . . The whole North Vietnamese Army could have concealed itself in that jungle-sea" (1985, 82). The American canon is full of "phantom" enemy units, resembling Caputo's "whole NVA" hiding out in the Annamites, or Herr's invisible five divisions around Khe Sanh. The most obvious case is Hasford's "Phantom Blooper," a unit of "white Victor Charlies" (1988, 58) mentioned in passing in *The Short-Timers*, but made a central subject of the novel's 1990 sequel, indeed titled *The Phantom Blooper* (where it transforms into a single traitorous American). But more examples can be found. Caputo, now looking at a map showing enemy strength in an area of operations, realizes that the NVA has deployed "the equivalent of a division out there, but we had yet to see one enemy soldier. . . . It was a whole division of phantoms" (1985, 63). O'Brien in his memoir notes that "the phantom Forty-eighth Viet Cong Battalion walked with us" (2006, 122). These enemy units seemingly had paranormal abilities; Herr recalls stories being passed out by information officers about destroyed enemy units popping up again, replenished, soon afterward (1978, 11), and Caputo confirms that "we fought a formless war against a formless enemy who evaporated like the morning jungle mists, only to materialize in some unexpected place" (1985, 95). On one occasion, the men in his company are shocked to discover they are going on an operation against a regiment they had previously destroyed (1985, 257). Hasford records a similar hearsay, in the words of one character:

> I know a guy in One-One [a marine battalion] that shot a gook and then tied a satchel charge to him and blew him into little invisible pieces because shooting gooks is a waste of time—they come back to life.
>
> (1988, 87)

Veteran authors often describe shadows moving in the forest after dark, or state outright in their memoirs that they never actually saw an NVA soldier, and if they ever did, the occasion is usually explicitly recalled in the texts as unique (e.g., Caputo 1985, 93, 99–101; O'Brien 1980,

86; 2006, 101–102). In O'Brien's novel *Going After Cacciato*, the protagonist platoon spends weeks marching along the Song Tra Bong (a river in Quang Ngai Province) in an eerie, dreamlike atmosphere that turns into anxiety and a sense of foreboding caused by the *silence* in the jungle, paradoxically taken to be a sign of the enemy's unseen presence (mainly in the chapter "Pick-up Games"; see also Del Vecchio [1982, 381] and Caputo [1985, 83–85] for similar descriptions of the land: it is eerily, worryingly quiet; the soldiers are "haunted" by a spectral presence and feel surrounded by something unseen). Later, when contact is finally made, O'Brien describes a firefight: "There was no enemy. There were flashes, shreds of foliage, a bright glare. . . . [The enemy fire] ended like the end of rain" (1980, 264). In O'Brien's story "The Ghost Soldiers," it is difficult to distinguish the spookiness of the land from the spectrality of the enemy; note also the close resemblance to Herr):

> We called the enemy ghosts. . . . The countryside itself seemed spooky—shadows and tunnels and incense burning in the dark. The land was haunted. We were fighting forces that did not obey the laws of twentieth-century science. Late at night, on guard, it seemed that all of Vietnam was alive and shimmering—odd shapes swaying in the paddies, boogiemen in sandals, spirits dancing in old pagodas. It was ghost country, and Charlie Cong was the main ghost. The way he came out at night. How you never really saw him, just thought you did. Almost magical—appearing, disappearing. He could blend with the land, changing form, becoming trees and grass. He could levitate. He could fly.
>
> (1998, 228–229)

The irony is that, exacting revenge on a medic that almost failed to save his life, the fictional O'Brien decides to frighten the man by constructing a ghost-like contraption, and in the process turns into an evil spirit of the land himself; perhaps the story is meant precisely to draw attention to its own artificial reconstruction by an American of the spectrality possessed by the Vietnamese.

The truth is that Vietnamese soldiers and guerillas—often starving, weakened by malnutrition and malaria, and in constant danger of U.S. artillery strikes and bombardment, of which the annihilatory B-52 attacks sowed terror unlike anything else—if anything suffered even more living in the wilderness, and died in far greater numbers, than the Americans did (Young, Fitzgerald and Grunfeld 2003, 100–103). *Sorrow of War*, the celebrated novel by NVA veteran Bao Ninh, also conveys much of the adversity of living in the wilderness. Interestingly enough, Ninh also reimagines Vietnamese soldiers as phantoms in the jungle—they are the ghosts of his comrades who died in battles and ambushes, haunting him across land and time.

St Vith

These strategies of representing the landscape as a homicidal environment are obviously linked to the naturalization of war as the environment of Vietnam, but they relate also to the representation of victimhood. The "grunts" are perpetually stuck in cycles of their tours of duty, spent in the mythical Loon. In the European Theater of World War II, the U.S. army advanced country by country, epic battlefield by epic battlefield, and retrospectively, in the cultural narrative(s) of that conflict, the trajectory is easily construed as linear, moving forward toward victory. And although homecoming veterans of that war were *not* met by widespread heroes' parades, as is usually claimed in comparisons of World War II with the war in Vietnam, all members of the armed forces could feel implicated in that victory because, save for serious injury or death, they remained in deployment until the end. In Vietnam, there was no victory to feel a part of. Not only was communism not defeated in Indochina, but the United States failed in its mostly self-appointed, but still fundamental, task of defending South Vietnam. The war did not even *end* until two years after the Americans had gone away. Moreover, unless he extended, an infantryman spent only twelve or thirteen months in-country, his experience torn from whatever linearity of the war's progress there was, which exacerbated the sense that the war was "fragmented," composed of the thousands of small wars each man fought during his own tour before going home.

In comparison to World War II then, service in Vietnam can be seen as corrupted, or in a way limited, in terms of both time and space, and the memoirs and novels indeed respond to that circumstance by making use of both. Some—Herr's *Dispatches*, the works of O'Brien—convey the "fragmentariness" by their lack of chronology and the scattering of events. *Dispatches*, as we have seen, constructs a realm in which the order of events does not matter, because only the totality of the text can express the mythical nature of the war/land. O'Brien's "Vietnam" in *The Things They Carried* is somewhat similar, as the stories included in the collection return obsessively to the same events, and although O'Brien's metafictional concern is with storytelling rather than mythography, each incident comes to be endowed with symbolism not unlike in Herr—indeed, in its representations of the landscape, *The Things They Carried* is, next to *Apocalypse Now* and *The Short-Timers/Full Metal Jacket*, a distinctly Herresque text in the canon. In O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, parts of the book concern protagonist Paul Berlin's traumatic memories of the first few months of service. The events he reminisces about are scattered throughout the narrative and unchronological. But, more importantly, the logic of their recollection, in Berlin's memory, also creates the impression that the company is constantly walking along the Song Tra Bong. The geographical limitation of the soldiers' service

in Vietnam is thus highlighted. The nature of that experience for most infantrymen reflects its rendering in the cultural narrative: Instead of marching on Hanoi, Berlin and his company are patrolling the same swathes of jungle, searching-and-destroying the same hamlets.

The same imagery is evoked in O'Brien's memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone,* an unchronological account of his time spent in the field in Quang Ngai, in which he comments on the fact that despite the massive U.S. force engaged in Indochina, soldiers return to their homes without the war actually ending—the absurdity means that all that is left for the men to do is to laugh as they complete their share of "walking" (2006, 129–130). Technically, the text is historically anchored by the My Lai investigation: O'Brien, a draftee private in the Americal Division, was in a battalion whose area of operations included Son My when the scandal broke, and he was working a rear job that let him witness some of the official and press inquiries taking place there at the time. Still, the events described in his memoir have no immediate relevance to the war's history or progress, but rather their significance is contained simply in what happened to O'Brien and the people around him. The absurdity and the sense of isolation from the war's larger events is revealed in the memoir when during an operation some soldiers complain that they only get a five-minute break from marching, and their leader replies: "Sooner we get to the night position, sooner we get resupplied, sooner we get to sleep, sooner we get this day over with. Sooner everything" (2006, 35). The war is not history here, but a tour of duty; time is strangely malleable. The sooner we get to the night position, the sooner our wars will be over.

This distortion in the sense of time permeates the canon. In *Dispatches*, Herr quotes a "grunt": "Far's I'm concerned, this one's over the day I get home" (1978, 200). In Webb's *Fields of Fire*, this point is made repeatedly; for example, marines from the protagonist unit walk along a stretch of land burnt by napalm "in someone else's war a week ago" (2001, 158); another time, looking at the light bursts of battle, "they watched . . . Someone Else's War a mile away" (171). To one soldier coming home, the "Vietnam War was over. It happened only to individuals, and it had ceased happening to him" (233). The in-country experience, composed of long stretches of boredom and tediousness and bursts of combat frenzy, is also described as "a timeless world. . . . Time *was* Vietnam. But it became so immeasurable in a man's emotions, some days so long and some so short, that it was irrelevant" (213; emphasis in original). In Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, a character complains that "this ain't a war, it's a series of overlapping riots" (1988, 87). Similarly, Philip Beidler, whose scholarship seems influenced by the writing style of Herr and who is a proponent of "Vietnam" as a hermetic and total world, writes that for the U.S. soldiers,

> nothing in the war, it seemed, ever really began for any particular reason, and nothing in the war ever really ended, at least as it

> concerned those still living and unwounded. . . . In the large view or in the small, there was no real beginning and there was no real end to anything having to do with the war. It just went on.
>
> (2007, 3)

Beidler returns to this subject in a later volume, this time expressly writing that "somebody once described Vietnam as a one-year war we fought ten times"; he even singles out the marines, "poor bastards," and the hermetic nature of "their" war: "They had their own war, invariably lousier than anybody else's" (2004, 34; he here echoes the marine lore and Michael Herr in *Dispatches*, of course).

Even those books in the canon that keep chronological order of events are nevertheless still limited in time by the length of tours of their authors and protagonists or are otherwise slices of time cut out from the war's duration with little relevance for its conduct. For example, memoirs like Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* and W.D. Ehrhart's *Vietnam-Perkasie* (1983) cover more or less a year. The in-country part of *Fields of Fire* spans the period from the arrival at An Hoa of two main characters, Lieutenant Hodges and "Senator," until a firefight in which the first is killed and the latter loses a leg about five months later. *The 13th Valley* takes place over a month in 1970, between the protagonist FNG's arrival and the roll call of the dead after Khe Ta Laou; unlike the massive battles of World War II, all of which were stepping stones to the ultimate victory, this operation remains a self-contained event, in a relatively small spot within the I Corps, with little impact on this area and let alone on the war in general (Del Vecchio's attempts to build up the epic in the colonel's speech during the briefing remain blatantly unconvincing).

If these limitations stem from the war's conditions, their inevitable appearance and fundamental role in the texts have the effect of removing the war from history entirely—yet another dehistoricizing process in the canon—and reducing it to, or perhaps more fittingly, fragmenting it into, those thousands of small wars of individual soldiers. Many narratives in the canon are so wholly unconcerned with the historical context, in fact, they provide no indication as to when they are actually taking place. Larry Heinemann's novel *Close Quarters*, for example, is set around the village of Trang Bang (known as the site of the napalm bombing captured in Nick Ut's iconic photograph of the running children, featuring nine-year-old Kim Phuc in the center) and the base at Cu Chi, in Hau Nghia Province (III Corps), but the war's status outside of history means that the narrative can get away with providing no chronological anchor points at all: The action can be taking place at any time during the war, and it does not matter. (It probably takes place before 1970, as this is when the 25th Infantry Division, to which the protagonists belong, left Cu Chi; Heinemann served with the 25th in 1968–1969.)

The dehistoricization of Vietnam is finalized in Heinemann's second novel, *Paco's Story*, which takes place in the United States, but includes frequent and crucial flashbacks to the war; it is not only unclear when Paco's tour in Vietnam took place, but also his company operated in places Heinemann made up (Fire Base Harriette, LZ Skator-Gator, Ham Lom a.k.a. Gookville, Phuc Luc, the punny Scat Man Do ["whatever *that* is," "absolutely and precisely where Scat Man Do is tongue cannot tell"; Heinemann 1987, 5]), their nonexistence again essentially without consequence for a war removed from history.

In this extra-historical setting, the suffering and death of the American soldier is robbed of a palpable cause or historicized significance. The anonymity of human settlements in Vietnam is acknowledged perhaps most poignantly in O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. The memoir opens mid-operation, with the platoon approaching a cluster of hamlets and about to move into a "ville." Another soldier asks Private O'Brien about the name of "this goddamn place":

> "I don't know. I never thought of that. Nobody ever thinks of the names of these places."
>
> "I know. It's funny, isn't it? Somebody's gonna ask me someday where the hell I was over here, where the bad fighting was, and, shit, what will I say?"
>
> "Tell them St Vith," I said.
>
> "What? That's the name of the fucking place?"
>
> "Yes," I said. "That's the name of it. It's here on the map. Do you want to look at it?"
>
> He grinned. "What's the difference, huh? You say St Vith, I guess that's it. I'll never remember."
>
> (2006, 14)[28]

The conversation is emblematic of the common American experience, also because it reveals the totality of the Americentric perspective from which Vietnam is appraised; after all, the "ville" is nameless only to the G.I.s, certainly not to the people living in it. Moreover, O'Brien's quip—christening the hamlet "St Vith"—is an ironic remark, designed to draw attention to the contrast between the monumental historicity of World War II and the nebulous non-specificity of Vietnam. (St Vith was a Belgian town fought over during the Battle of the Bulge in 1944; the skirmish at St Vith is mentioned elsewhere in the book, by an officer haranguing on the difference between "Chinese" wars, like Korea and Vietnam, and World War II [2006, 67].) Indeed, in his memoir O'Brien devotes much space, especially in the chapters "Pro Patria" and "Beginning," to an exploration of the extent to which the heroic mythologies of previous conflicts contributed to the initial willingness of many young American men to go to Vietnam, also because of the pressure

these youths experienced from their conservative, patriotic communities that included World War II veterans, something O'Brien felt himself in his small Minnesota prairie town. The subject returns in *The Things They Carried*, especially in the story "On The Rainy River." This is the same sentiment expressed more obliquely in the canon's continuous references to "John Wayne," a discourse that links the pressure to go to war with the eventual disillusionment of the soldiers and the denial of a heroic status to them. "John Wayne," as a synecdoche of the entire cluster of concepts and complaints associated with this discourse, thus becomes a mark of a specific cultural, social, and identity victimization of homecoming veterans.

The resultant lack of meaning and effect of the American soldier's anguish requires a tragic, rather than a heroic, framework; denied the status of a hero, the soldier can only be a victim. Moreover, if Loon is predominantly a site of Americans inflicting friendly fire on one another, it is also a war that has been naturalized into a landscape, and so the very lethality of the environment contributes to the soldier's victimization. In the bulk of the texts that are set in Vietnam, the culpability for what the soldiers endure rarely reaches further than the immediate chain of command. It is usually the "lifers" closest to the suffering protagonists who are responsible for sending the men to their deaths: the too-ambitious West-Point first lieutenants, the chickenshit sergeants, the captains, the majors, rarely the lieutenant colonels or higher. But, unless it is caused by actual friendly fire, such as miscalculated artillery coordinates, the death typically comes from the land: especially the ever-dreaded mines, tripwired and booby-trapped all over the place (O'Brien [2006, 125–130] provides a whole catalogue of landmines and descriptions of what they do to human body; see also Caputo 1985, 288). But the danger is also in ambushes, sniper fire, and other attacks by the enemy, who by his invisibility and phantomlike presence in the shadows of the jungle and in the indistinguishable, unreadable faces of villagers blends into the country's landscape as an integral part of its fatality. This enables the prevalence of the friendly fire discourse. Vietnam becomes a mythical American purgatory where each American death and severed limb is causeless, and so each is a crime, each enacted against, ultimately, a victim.

Intimate Knowledges

In Heinemann's novel, Paco's story is that he is the sole survivor of a friendly fire artillery barrage that wiped out his entire company at FB Harriette, the incident branded throughout the text as a "massacre" or even, twice, as a "holocaust massacre." That Heinemann could deploy the doomed company to invented places is because for Americans in the war's aftermath any lesser known name from Vietnam could sound made-up, or conversely, because FB Harriette, LZ Skator-Gator, and

Phuc Luc could sound as plausible as any (indeed, Tim O'Brien spent his tour around a real LZ Gator, a battalion headquarters). But in *Paco's Story*, place names, made-up or not, become a marker of veteran societal victimization, too. Crippled and scarred, Paco is back in the States, where one day he arrives in a small dusty town in Texas, his choice of location dictated by nothing else but his running out of bus fare money; there, he finds a job as a dishwasher and assumes a quiet life without friendship and with few conversations. A young mechanic who gives Paco a ride asks questions about his tour and disability, and Paco answers out of politeness but avoids going into detail about the "massacre." The owner of a shop where Paco inquires about employment also mentions his walking cane, and when Paco explains that he has been wounded in the war, the man asks what war: Paco is irritated, because, apparently, many people have asked him that, "as if not one word of the fucking thing had ever made the papers" (Heinemann 1987, 75). Later, Paco's boss, Ernest, does ask whether he sustained his injury in Vietnam, but when Paco confirms it, Ernest proceeds to tell him his *own* war stories from Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima. Ernest's recollection of the two battles is graphic, racist, vulgar, even heretical in the light of Iwo Jima's heroic national symbolism—"six guys breaking their balls, muscling that goddamn flag up" (128)—and it has a double effect. It establishes a link between U.S. soldiers' experiences across history and demythologizes World War II, thus indirectly arguing for re-inscribing the war in Vietnam into the nation's military history and memory. But, at the same time, it forces a comparison between the two conflicts and their historical memories, underscoring the unfairness Vietnam veterans have been met with: Where World War II is remembered in place names as monumental as Guadalcanal and especially Iwo Jima, the Vietnam War has unheard-of holocausts like Harriette.

Considering that many other residents of the town approach Paco with something close to resentment, and no one ever talks about the war in Vietnam, the novel should of course be categorized among texts about veteran trauma, reception, and mistreatment back home. But then another Vietnam vet, Jesse, visits Ernest's diner and strikes up a conversation with the owner and Paco. Paco tells him that he was wounded in Vietnam, "at a place called Fire Base Harriette near Phuc Luc":

> "Heard about Harriette," Jesse says. . . . "Did *myself* a tour with the 173rd *Airborneski*! Iron fucking Triangle, Hobo Woods, the Bo Loi Woods. Lai Khe, An Loc, Cu Chi—back in the days when Ben Suc was still a ville. You heard of Ben Suc!"
>
> Paco had; Ernest had not.
>
> (152; emphases in original)

Later that night, Jesse helps Paco clean up the diner before closing; they are working alone, when Jesse suddenly turns to Paco and exclaims, "It

was a shitty thing that happened at Harriette" (162). Allegiance and understanding between Jesse and Paco is thus established immediately and precisely via their shared familiarity with places and names that civilians back home have not heard of or remembered; such ignorance of these sites is symbolic of the veterans' alienation upon their returns.

But Heinemann's use of place names here underscores also the secret knowledge of the veterans. The Iron Triangle was an area in III Corps that since the times of the Viet Minh had served as a communist stronghold, notorious particularly for its immense and ineradicable underground tunnel system extending to below the U.S. military base at Cu Chi. Ho Bo and Boi Loi Woods were targets during the massive search-and-destroy operations conducted in the Iron Triangle, including Cedar Falls in 1967, when the several thousand inhabitants of Ben Suc were forcibly relocated *en masse* to local villages and refugee camps in scandalous conditions, and the town itself was annihilated with aerial bombings (a contemporary report from Ben Suc is Schell [1967], a *New Yorker* article later published as a book). Ernest—the general public—has not heard about Ben Suc, and the reader of *Paco's Story* will not learn what had happened to the people there either, but the aim of bringing up this name is not to inform, but rather to affect, to create the impression of the veterans' sharing a secret knowledge of the war and of Vietnam. Such reading of this scene in the novel illustrates yet another way in which a representation of the otherness of the Vietnamese geography—the exotic-sounding, generally unfamiliar place names in this instance—connects to the dehistoricization of the war, here in the form of literal forgetting of historical events from the war by the public.

The scene also draws attention to the dual status of the veterans, as keepers of the knowledge on the one hand, and on the other as victims of trauma associated with these places as much as of the indifference of the people back home to their experience and suffering. Philip Beidler captures this notion in his own reconstruction of "Vietnam":

> The only people who remember much about the Ia Drang, the A Shau, Hamburger Hill, the Ho Bo Woods, the Pineapple Plantation, Xuan Loc, Lai Khe, Quan Loi, Dau Tieng, the Old French Fort, and all the other names and places were those who had actually gone there and spilled the blood and the anger and the youth.
>
> (2007, 16)

As in Heinemann, the passage is not meant to be informative, but rather it uses the Vietnamese place names to convey the suffering of the soldiers and the alienation of the veterans.

The often painful intimacy between the American soldier and the Vietnamese land extends beyond knowledge of the place names and of the stories about them. One specific form of bonding is "humping," that

is marching through the country's terrains (on "humping the boonies," see Beidler 2004, 27; Kinney 2000). Many veteran texts contain whole passages dedicated solely to the mechanics and tedium of walking, the activity fundamental to the Vietnam experience, and to the hard-earned familiarity with the landscape and its many difficulties and exertions. The descriptions are often accompanied by exhaustive lists of the tremendous amounts of heavy gear the men "hump," that is carry. Examples are to be found in O'Brien's works, in Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, in Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley*, and others. In Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, a passage belonging to this category illustrates how humping becomes interwoven with the intricacies of the surroundings and the experience of it, when the narrator not only describes the oppressiveness of the jungle's flora, fauna, microclimate, and topography as the soldiers march through it but also writes that the sheer length of time spent on the activity stretches indefinitely until time itself disappears and day becomes indistinguishable from night. The ordeal is so extreme that the jungle seems to detach itself from reality and comes to be endowed with spirituality and hostility instead: "Our real enemy is the jungle. God made this jungle for Marines" (Hasford 1988, 149–150). The application of this familiar imagery renders the relationship between the American marine and the Vietnamese wilderness more than intimate: The Vietnamese setting is in fact constituted by the American presence within it. It exists to make "grunts'" life harder.

It is worth pointing out, however, that a soldier's intimacy with the physical land is not necessarily the effect of an exclusively negative experience but that the bond is more complex. In the canon, Tim O'Brien seems particularly interested in the more sentimental aspects of the relationship between an American soldier and the Vietnamese landscape. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, for example, he is taken aback by the sterile environment inside the plane that takes him back to the United States when his tour ends and strains to see the land below in his window:

> It's earth you want to say good-bye to. The soldiers never knew you. You never knew the Vietnamese people. But the earth, you could turn a spadeful of it, see its dryness and the tint of red, and dig out enough of it so as to lie in the hole at night, and that much of Vietnam you would know. Certain whole pieces of the land you would know, something like a farmer knows his own earth and his neighbour's. You know where the bad, dangerous parts are, and the sandy and safe places by the sea. You know where the mines are and will be for a century, until the earth swallows and disarms them. Whole patches of land. Around My Khe and My Lai. Like a friend's face.
>
> (2006, 201–202)

In contrast, as he descends over his home state of Minnesota, O'Brien is welcomed by a view of snow-covered prairies, now evidently more

emotionally distant to him, described as "empty, unknowing, uncaring, purified, . . . arrogantly unchanged" (2006, 203).

Precisely the same ideas return in *Going After Cacciato*, in the chapter "How the Land Was," where Paul Berlin also emphatically does *not* hate the land (O'Brien 1980, 239), and even has some special affection for the paddies, given the intimacy with them he has gained smelling and tasting them, and sleeping and urinating in them. The whole segment is, in fact, dedicated to features of the Vietnamese landscape—maze-like hedgerows concealing villages, the red soil, country and jungle trails, the flora, the poverty of the hamlets—and their relationship to the American infantryman; Quang Ngai is also described in some detail. In the eponymous story in *The Things They Carried*, the land and climate of Vietnam are the second last thing on the list of what the soldiers carry, before "their own lives," the position indicating their visceral significance to the experience of "Vietnam."

Ultimately, in *Going After Cacciato*, Paul Berlin's greatest expression for his affection for the land of Vietnam is his drinking the filthy water from a rice paddy. The theme of intimacy with the physical Vietnamese land through its corporal implications—which Minnesotan/American land has no connection to whatsoever—is also expressed, though through different imageries, in other narratives. Herr, for instance, writes about "kissing," "eating," "fucking," and "ploughing" the ground with one's own body when under enemy fire (1978, 56). The same comparison is made by Caputo, who writes that hugging the ground during a firefight, he "made love to the earth" (1985, 265).

Lurpism

The knowledge of a common infantryman like Jesse or Paco, or Tim O'Brien, has its limits, however. In the texts, common "grunts" (usually of color) sometimes have the intuition or get acquainted with the land enough to obtain almost mystical wisdom, in the manner of frontiersmen going native. In *Fields of Fire*, for example, there is Cat Man, a Hispanic man almost paranormally attuned to combat and the land, or Snake, who looking at the mountains "knew their secrets, understood their mysteries more completely than he had ever mastered anything before" (Webb 2001, 332). In *Dispatches*, there is the Entertainer, a black soldier so in tune with the land that he can raise his arm and bring it down just as the rain starts coming down, and that he can see ghosts, including his own (1978, 201; O'Brien [1998] also has a soldier who can see his own ghost in "Night Life"). In *The Short-Timers* there is Alice, the black man who wears the skin of a Bengal tiger he himself killed, who is said to truly understand the Vietnamese fighters, and who has the magical ability to detect enemy presence, mines, booby traps, punji holes, and mortar rounds coming from afar. The fictional O'Brien in

"The Ghost Soldiers," when exacting revenge on the medic with the ghost contraption and witnessing the man's terror, has an out-of-body experience:

> I was part of the night. I was the land itself—everything, everywhere—the fireflies and paddies, the moon, the midnight rustlings, the cool phosphorescent shimmer of evil—I was atrocity—I was jungle fire, jungle drums . . . I was Nam—the horror, the war.
> (1998, 235)

Harnessing the power of the spirit world to terrify, O'Brien briefly gains the ability to enter it and "fade into" Vietnam.

But generally it takes a special type of soldier to possess a special type of knowledge. One more moment from Del Vecchio's never-ending briefing in *The 13th Valley*. At one point, the map sergeant is about to say something, but is abruptly stopped. It is made clear that he is talking to the *infantrymen* standing at the back of the room, not to the officers and specialists also present; he somewhat more informally begins telling the men that, as they are about to go on a combat operation into the Khe Ta Laou valley, he has a message for them from the LRRPs ("he pronounced it *lurps*"; 1982, 58). The brigade commander interrupts him right then, instructing him to just focus on the maps, and Sergeant Egan wonders what the topography man was about to say and why the colonel stopped him. Shortly after, discussing the terrain of the offending valley, the map sergeant says that "these are the highest mountains in I Corps. It will be rough out there" (58–59), and Egan is convinced *this* is what the sergeant wanted to say before. The Lurps seem to have had something to impart to the men going into the Khe Ta Laou, but the high-ranking officer blocked the message. Why? If we are to believe Egan's intuition, it had to do with the difficulty of the terrain and the tough going to be expected, and so this may be yet another instance of a clash between experience—the Lurps' message—and the official burying of it, especially since in *The 13th Valley*, as in much of the canon, a sharp line of division is drawn between the true hero-victims, the "grunts," whom the map sergeant is addressing specifically, and the lifers, high-ranking officers, and "REMFs" ("rear-echelon motherfuckers," commonly despised for their supposedly cushy lives in Vietnam). But the exchange also draws the attention to the Lurps themselves.

After 1965, the newly formed elite Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) units filled the Green-Beret-shaped hole left in the war's symbolism at the end of the counterinsurgency phase. Formed in army and marine infantry and Air Cavalry divisions, they included leaders trained in the Special Forces, and in 1969 were grouped together into the new Ranger regiment. The so-called Tiger Force, known for its 1967 spree of war crimes against the civilian population of Quang Ngai and Quang Tin

provinces, which became exposed only in 2003, was an LRRP unit in the 101st Airborne (if anyone had any doubts about the mythological symbolism, the Force's long list of offences, next to deliberate murder of villagers, included scalping of their victims and carrying the skins as trophies; Michael Sallah is the journalist who brought the Tiger Force crimes to light and won a Pulitzer for it; see Sallah and Weiss 2006). In the canon, Lurps and the Green Berets tend to be standoffish and vaguely threatening and maintain an air of secrecy and seriousness about them; sometimes they are seen wearing human-ear necklaces, their real-life attribute (Sallah and Weiss 2006, sic passim; in the canon the accessory is not exclusive to them, as all Americans in Vietnam can collect ears and other body parts). If soldiers of regular platoons are Loon's natives, and the likes of Michael Herr are tourists there, then Lurps should be considered a cross between its shamans and its cool kids. As the post-counterinsurgency Greenies, Lurps took over the frontiersman status, minus the pacification-and-nation-building-related benevolence of their predecessors, and became in the canon the wise men in possession of almost mystical knowledge of the land, gained by penetrating deep into the enemy territory, by using, like the Greenies did before them, the autochthonous Montagnard tribesmen as scouts, and by amassing "impressive" body counts. Indeed, much like in the field, in the canon the Lurps and the Greenies serve similar purposes, also symbolic, and are represented similarly across the board. Examples include O'Brien's platoon leader described in his memoir, a Green Beret for a reason named Mad Mark, an "insanely calm" man until they are out on patrol and he begins cutting off ears and bringing them back to show his men (2006, 86–88).

Lurps are occasionally willing to impart something of their secret knowledge, and so the suppression of information in the briefing in *The 13th Valley* gains a new dimension since it comes from them and so presumably concerns particular dangers of the land. In *Dispatches*, after the opening passage with the map and Ho Bo Woods, the very first encounter Herr records is with a Lurp whom he portrays in a typical Special-Forces, heart-of-darkness fashion: The man guzzles pills, uppers and downers, so that he can see in the dark in the jungle; his demeanor of silent insanity makes other soldiers uneasy, who tell Herr "the whole fucking story" is "right there" in his eyes. Herr is nevertheless impressed as he recounts the Lurp's "resonant" story, whose meaning he understood only after spending a year in the war himself: "Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened" (1978, 13–14). Still a rookie, Herr asks the man about the fate of the patrol, but the Lurp just looks at him with disdain—clearly Herr is yet unworthy of being told such stories, and this is not the "kind of a story" that needs elaboration—and says no more.

One interpretation of the Lurp's story, or rather of Herr's repeating it, is that it is exemplary of the general Vietnam theme of privileging

firsthand experience; not only is the story profoundly meaningful ("resonant") but also Herr needs to spend his year in-country in order to get to that meaning. Here the point seems to be that, whatever happens in Vietnam, whatever "freaky" tales one hears, whatever tragedies befall marines, and so forth, in the end the story can be distilled to the death of Americans; it is a point that has been brought up often enough already (see Kinney 2000, 116). The mystical/landscape-related interpretation of the story, as a myth of what secret knowledge can be found in the wilderness, finds an intriguing reflection in O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story," where one of the characters begins a story with "a six-man patrol goes up into the mountains" (1998, 79)—the wording is too similar to be coincidental. In the story, the men in the patrol set up a week-long listening post in the wilderness, a place so deep and secret that they eventually begin hearing music and strange, impossible sounds that drive them insane, and they order annihilating air strikes over the patch of jungle. When they come back down, none of the men is able to speak, and they refuse to tell their commander what they heard:

> they just look at him for a while, sort of funny like, sort of amazed, and the whole war is right there in that stare. . . . It says, poor bastard, you'll never know—wrong frequency—you don't *even* want to hear this. Then they salute the fucker and walk away, because certain stories you don't ever tell.
>
> (82–83)

More than just evidence of the influence of *Dispatches* on *The Things They Carried* (intentional on O'Brien's part or not), this passage also demonstrates the significance of soldiers' secret knowledges in Loon.

But another reading of the fragment in Herr might be that in its structure, the Lurp's story is so skeletal that it can easily accommodate the entire mythology of Loon: There is a patrol (American "grunts"); a mountain (the land); mass death in mysterious circumstances and at the hands of disembodied agents, so that only the dying and its mythical environment matters; a secret, a darkly ironic twist at the end, and a joke. Because it arrives at the beginning of the book, and is delivered by a Lurp—always a presence as deeply significant as it is elusive—the story constitutes yet another mythical framework for *Dispatches*, and for Loon in general.

In the Vietnam canon, "Lurpism" (Ringnalda 1990, 71) has a special connection to one of its major themes, namely the "heart of darkness," well-established in Vietnam scholarship, mainly via *A Rumor of War* and especially *Apocalypse Now*.[29] Unsurprisingly, the source of the darkness is the land itself, the strategy shifting the responsibility for whatever happens there onto "Vietnam"; as in Conrad's original, so in the cultural narrative of the war in Vietnam the trope dictates that the

brutality of the invading forces stems not from systemic greed and genocidal policy but from the invaders' removal from "civilization" and the miasmic primitiveness of the landscape, including its native inhabitants. This interpretation of the U.S. conduct in Indochina is typical across the canon (Neilson 1998, 129–130), entangled with other strategies of representation that tie mythic constructs like the landscape to ideological formulations like the victimhood of American soldiers.

In *Dispatches*, Joseph Conrad's work is referenced twice. Soon after the Lurp's story comes the list in which Herr enumerates the types of places occupied by Americans in Vietnam, reachable by helicopter. Among them is a one-man post in the wilderness, which Herr happens to visit during a resupply drop; "God knows," Herr writes about the man in the post, "what kind of Lord Jim phoenix numbers he was doing in there" (1978, 16). The eponymous hero of *Lord Jim* (1900) is an Englishman who lives among the Malay natives in the backward fictional Southeast Asian country of Patusan, so Herr's reference seems clear enough—the Special Forces, their embedment in the jungle, their cooperation with Montagnard tribesmen. It is worth pointing out that in Conradian scholarship Patusan has been described as a timeless world without "historical specificity" (Mongia 1992, 182), significant only as a setting for Lord Jim's exploits and their symbolism (in certain respects, Patusan bears symbolic resemblance to Africa in *Heart of Darkness*; see Mongia 1993, 5). The parallel to Loon, though not necessarily intentional on Herr's part, is relevant in so far as Loon is a land extracted from historicity by the process of mythologization of Vietnam, so that it can become a setting of solely American stories and conflicts.

"Phoenix numbers" probably refer to the Phoenix Program, ran throughout the American war against the NLF by a syndicate of organizations, most notably the CIA, U.S. special forces units, MACV intelligence, and South Vietnamese government. Phoenix was notorious for torture, assassination, and murder of tens of thousands of people, controversial intelligence gathered during interrogations leading to major military operations like search-and-destroy missions, rampant corruption among its Vietnamese elements, and abuse of civilians resulting from all of the above. This short passage then is another illustration of how the history of the war is obscured and mystified: The offhand reference to Conrad hints at an imperial confession, given the common perception of a relationship between the author's oeuvre and late nineteenth-century British empire, and highlighted by the ironic reversal of Jim's positive leadership of the tribesmen in Patusan into Phoenix's campaign of organized murder. The secrecy of the man's "numbers" in the wilderness, in itself indicative of the mysteries at the war's core, is transformed into a secrecy of history when Herr's suggestion of "phoenix" stops at being a Vietnam-"flavored" word used for a calculated effect, not for elucidation. (Herr could probably assume that the phrase

would be commonly understood; Phoenix was a subject of Congressional hearings in 1971, and agents associated with the program were interviewed on TV during the early years of the decade. That this passage might now be read as symptomatic of the new secret history is rather an example of how Vietnam narratives could become complicit in the dominant discourse regardless of their authors.)

Herr's second Conradian reference is to *Heart of Darkness* (1899), whose narrator, Marlow, is also the narrator of *Lord Jim*; as mentioned, the internal monologue of the Marlow of *Apocalypse Now*, Captain Willard, was also written by Herr, so there is an accumulation of connections whose hub is constituted by the figure of the witness absorbed by the "heart of darkness," a narrator's role reminiscent of Herr's perception of his own transformation from a tourist in Loon to a "shooter," in possession of experience and knowledge enabling his understanding of the Lurp's story. The reference comes when Herr introduces his colleague and object of fascination, Sean Flynn: the son of Errol, a movie actor in his own right, a photojournalist in Vietnam, a trope of its own in *Dispatches* (Harrison 1999), and eventually something of a Vietnam War legend given the circumstances of his disappearance and death.[30] In the very first description of Flynn, Herr writes that "sometimes he looked more like Artaud coming out of some heavy heart-of-darkness trip, overloaded on the information, the input! The input!" (1978, 15). Antonin Artaud was a French theater director and playwright credited with conceptualizing the so-called "Theater of Cruelty," which is defined as "a primitive ceremonial experience intended to liberate the human subconscious and reveal man to himself" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2019), an experience whose aim is to get beyond "false reality" and which Herr equals with a "heart-of-darkness trip." That these references occur in this description is significant, since Flynn, "the true connoisseur of the war . . . literally embodies the knowledge Herr comes to Vietnam to claim" (Kinney 2000, 115). By the end of the book, in yet another arch that bridges the beginning of the memoir with its end, Herr divulges that Flynn, as a photographer, immersed himself so profoundly into the war that at some point he stopped taking pictures altogether (1978, 203). Flynn's trip, it seems, has taken him "deep" into the "heart of darkness" of the war, where the knowledge is esoteric and experience cannot be mediated, such as through photography; Flynn's transformation from a war photographer into a war-photographer-who-takes-no-photos is really a transformation from a documentarian recording the experiences of the war for the benefit of the un-witnessing public, into the very embodiment of that experience and the war, and so expressive of the notion that the secret knowledge of the war can only be obtained personally, individually, and *locally* in Vietnam. It is therefore unsurprising that when Herr writes about the mystery of his disappearance, he describes Flynn as "swallowed up" by the ground and claims that Flynn would "dig it" (1978, 203).

In the same passage in "Breathing Out," Herr writes that Dana Stone, the friend and photojournalist with whom Flynn was abducted and probably killed, was in the habit of photographing other reporters during firefights. Herr's photograph pictures him hiding from flying bullets in a helicopter with a (presumably) white soldier, a black soldier, and a corpse; Stone told him that he should see "what he looks like." Stone thus becomes an assistant in the process of "man revealing himself to himself" in the context of the heavy trip into the war; perhaps he is in a position to do that because, as Herr writes, he eventually became what he had initially gone to Vietnam to capture as a photojournalist (Herr 1978, 203). Like Flynn, then, Stone is in *Dispatches* an embodiment of the experience of the war. Herr's grief for his friends is evident, but at the same time, in the dimension of Loon, the disappearance becomes total immersion, the "complete process," the "distinct path to travel, but dark and hard."

Other texts occasionally make nods toward the heart-of-darkness theme, sometimes indirectly via similar concepts. Webb, for example, describes the ride of one of his characters from Danang to An Hoa as "a journey into darkness and primitivity" (2001, 49). But in some narratives, heart of darkness dominates. The theme clearly seems to influence the construction of "Vietnam" as both war and land in several stories in *The Things They Carried*, including "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" and "Ghost Soldiers" ("I was Nam—the horror, the war" [see above]). As we have seen, Caputo applies the heart-of-darkness imagery and vocabulary not as a symbolic mode of representation but rather as a valid factor in determining the American brutality against the Vietnamese civilians. For example, he makes a list of all the institutions familiar to the Americans, lacking in the Vietnamese countryside—"no churches, no police, no laws, no newspapers"—among the "the restraining influences" that in Caputo's view prevent humanity from total collapse. "It was the dawn of creation in the Indochina bush," he writes, "An ethical as well as a geographical wilderness. Out there, lacking restraints, sanctioned to kill, confronted by hostile country and relentless enemy, we sank into a brutish state" (1985, xviii).

Statements such as this reveal, of course, the deeply racist undertone of the heart-of-darkness trope. Caputo is so oblivious to the humanity of the Vietnamese agrarian population, it seems, that he cannot fathom that a culture and a society exist in a place where he would envisage the collapse of "civilization," rendered in this passage via a set of conservative, middle-class signifiers that moreover convey an implicit sense of American superiority. "The Indochina bush" does not here mean wilderness or jungle so deep that Caputo and his men would be far removed from Vietnamese villages; except in the relatively rare instances of big-unit battles against the NVA, few U.S. infantry units would be sent to truly isolated locations, and instead they typically engaged in

small-scale operations in the populated countryside. Caputo's own memoir is a testament to this, as his company moves between settlements all the time. This kind of inclusion of populated hamlets among features of the Vietnamese wilderness is not at all unique in the canon; another notable example is provided by Tim O'Brien's story "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," where the action takes place in a camp described as so remote that one of the soldiers is able to bring his girlfriend there from the United States—and yet the village of Tra Bong is in the closest vicinity of the outpost.

Later, Caputo also claims that in the Vietnamese heat and monsoon dampness, "morals" "rotted and corroded" alongside human bodies, materials, and fabrics, and as a result "our humanity rubbed off of us. . . . [It was] a war for survival waged in wilderness without rules or laws" (1985, 229; in the same passage, he calls Vietnam "an inhuman war"—as opposed to human[e] wars?). Over the course of his memoir in general, as part of a strategy typical of heart-of-darkness narratives, Caputo thus makes Vietnam into a primordial realm beyond civilization to further his explanation of Americans' behavior in Vietnam, by claiming that murderous urges are universal and natural and that the environment in Indochina allowed them to surface.

But the theme is employed most famously in *Apocalypse Now*, where Coppola's Vietnam in many respects resembles Loon, his characters—Loon's inhabitants. The opening of *Apocalypse Now*, for example, is wholly Herresque: Like *Dispatches*, the film begins in a Saigon hotel room; while in the book the city is the correspondent's base, from which the space of Loon can be travelled through in all directions, in *Apocalypse Now*, whose plot is linear rather than "spatial," Saigon is the point of departure. Herr's considerations of the map lead him to the memory of Ho Bo Woods, burned with napalm and viewed from a helicopter; in the film, the billowing flames engulf a jungle to the whirr of helicopter rotors. But most importantly, the Vietnam in *Apocalypse Now* reflects Loon in that it is a reconstructed, entirely American, and finally mythical landscape; Willard's river journey is essentially an odyssey *through* the war, the encounters along the way reminiscent of both Herr's list of American places within Vietnam and his "illumination rounds." The episodes in *Apocalypse Now* are more sustained than the short "rounds" in *Dispatches*, but their function, besides of course propelling the film's story forward, is essentially similar: to offer meaningful, profound glimpses into the nature of American experience in Vietnam. Sometimes the similarities are uncanny. Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore, for example, might have sprung up from the pages of *Dispatches*, where Herr writes about the "mad colonels," "saying all the terrible, heartbreaking things," "so nonchalant about the horror and fear" (1978, 188). The black soldiers from the Do Lung Bridge episode in the film similarly bring to mind the "death-spaced grunts" from the same passage by Herr, which

is, notably, the one in which Loon is defined. Where the memoir and the movie meet in the "heart of darkness," the film's Colonel Kurtz is basically a Lurp, symbolically if not nominally: He has trained in the Special Forces, he lives among Montagnards, the obscenity of his outpost recalls the human-ear-necklace imagery.

* * *

The purpose of this chapter has been to show the significant contribution of the reconstructions of the Vietnamese landscape in the American representations of the war to the process of the conflict's mythologization. In the memoirs, novels, and films, little is left of the history as it unfolded in Vietnam. Instead, Vietnam turns into "Vietnam"—an American landscape that is, at the same time, the war itself, backdrop to the American story as much as the individual stories of American soldiers, those thousands of small wars fought over the periods of in-country tours. There are several consequences of such rendering of the setting. First, because "Vietnam" does not extend beyond either the chronology of the American war, or indeed even beyond the chronologies of the small individual wars, the actual historical and political Vietnamese Vietnam ceases to exist. Two, because the land and the war become one and the conflict is thus naturalized as the status quo of the country, the plight of the Vietnamese natives becomes secondary, since what matters is that the American soldier may either survive his tour and escape from the throes of this "homicidal" environment, or he may fall victim to it and die. This is an instance of myth naturalizing itself and excluding other stories (histories, interpretations) that are outside the ideological propositions accommodated and supported within it. Three, beyond the dehistoricization and Americanization of the war that this landscape of "Vietnam" makes possible, it also prepares ground for further privileging of *other* stories that this particular American myth generates and upholds. In the following chapter, I look at just those stories, told by American veteran authors about themselves and the Vietnamese civilians, and at the strategies of representation that they employ in the context of the discourse on victimization.

Notes

1 For a polemic with the racial focus of Drinnon's thesis, see Neilson (1998, 98–99). The imperial dimension of the frontier myth was also described by historian William Appleman Williams (1955) in an essay on Turner's "Frontier Thesis" and the U.S. foreign policy, which, like *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959), Williams' *magnum opus*, predates the war in Vietnam, but remains instructive. Particularly interesting is Williams' tracing of the history of an idea turning into an ideology, as well as his analysis of the frontier ideology's central role in the U.S. foreign policy in the first half of the

twentieth century, its tacit acceptance of European colonialism and promotion of American expansionism, and its inextricable links to the interests of American capital. Williams was a leading figure among revisionist historians associated with the New Left, and his work, although highly influential, has also been an object of much criticism and polemic. In recent years, his theses have been revisited by Andrew Bacevich (2002, 23–31; 2009) in his studies of American imperialism. See also Michael Hunt's (2009) work on "liberty," understood in very frontier-like terms, antisocialism, and racism as the three crucial ingredients of the ideology guiding the U.S. foreign policy in the past 200 years. In the case of the Vietnam War, American racism is explored in discussions of orientalist notions attached to the Vietnamese; see, for example, Bradley (2000), Christopher (1995); see also Boyle (2015a, 1–4), Drinnon (1997, 447–451).

2 The relevance of Barthes' concept of myth to the American construct of the Vietnam War has been previously observed; Michael Spindler (1991, 28), for example, identifies and briefly discusses the "Vietnam War" as a myth in the Barthesian sense.

3 In the interests of clarity, I will refrain from using Barthes' formal semiological terminology and instead use "text" or "narrative"—hopefully terms sufficient for this more casual discussion—when referring to what he would call "meaning," "form," or "signifier," all three designations with precise definitions and functions within his model of mythic speech.

4 For exhaustive discussions of the projects that formed the nation-building effort in South Vietnam, see, for example, Young (2014, ch. 6, 7), Carter (2008, 53–79); see also Emerson (1992, 271–336) on the neocolonial aspects of the Vietnamese studies research programs associated with U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV).

5 On the history and social life of Vietnam, and the impact of the American presence on the latter, see FitzGerald (1972).

6 The consortium included the construction and project management companies Raymond International, Morris-Knudsen, J.A. Jones, and Brown & Root; the last of these, the Vietnam War's perhaps most notorious profiteer ("Burn & Loot" to antiwar protesters), had once been a major benefactor of Lyndon Johnson's political career and was by the early 1960s a subsidiary of Halliburton.

7 See Paul Fussell's (1990, 79–95) classic definition of chickenshit.

8 This problem with the canon has been pointed out several times; see Boyle (2015a, 12–16; 2016, 176), Chattarji (2007, 75), Christopher (1995, 2–6), Kinney (2000, 8). See also Jeffords (1989, 135–138), on the veteran as a "spokesperson" for the whole of American culture and society.

9 See also the chapters in Neilson (1998) on *The Quiet American* and *In Country*, where the literary criticism's insistence of forcefully ascribing a preoccupation with human nature and metaphysical evil to the two novels, against their politicized content, is discussed.

10 This is not to say that these types of readings, postulating Vietnam exclusively as symbolically rendered America, are not in themselves unproblematic: They are. The text by Hellmann (2007) mentioned here, which interprets *Apocalypse Now* solely as a reconstruction of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, performs something of a magic trick—how to talk about "Vietnam" without actually mentioning Vietnam. This is, of course, the problem with depoliticized and nonmaterialist interpretations of the war's narratives; if the books and films themselves may be said to Americanize Vietnam, as evinced in Kinney's discussion of friendly fire, then critical texts that discard of the war completely take the practice to a higher

level. To make another polemic loop, this is not to disregard Hellmann's particular reading outright, either, as that would involve denying a text's—like *Apocalypse Now*—incapacity to contain meanings and inspirations drawn from various sets of ideologically and historically informed factors. Either way, the point remains that these narratives are virtually invariably about American problems and tensions.

11 The administrative organization of what was once South Vietnam has changed: Some provinces have shifted borders or disappeared, while new ones were constituted; the changes sometimes occurred *during* the American war. I use the names of provinces as they were at the time the given event took place. Kelley (2002) provides an exhaustive account of the administrative and military geography of South Vietnam as it pertained to the American war.

12 "Pinkville," another name often associated with the massacre in American sources was applied in soldiers' slang to the sub-hamlet of My Khe in the My Lai hamlet—renamed My Lai (1) by the U.S. military—because of the pink color used for the area on American maps to signify the alleged large Viet Cong presence there.

13 On Herr's biography and publishing history, see Gordon (2000, 16), Heberle (2015, 35–45), Hellmann (1986, 150–151), Spindler (1991, 25). A rare interview with Herr can be watched in the 2001 documentary, *First Kill*.

14 This interpretation of *Dispatches* in the postmodern context was launched by Fredric Jameson's famous remark about the Vietnam War itself being "postmodern" (1991, 44), a comment prompted precisely by Jameson's reading of Herr; see a polemic in Neilson (1998, 151–152). For subsequent discussions of Vietnam as a "postmodern" or "postmodernist" war, see Bibby (1999), Carpenter (2000).

15 On *Dispatches* being the best or the best-received Vietnam book, see Beidler (2007), Bonn (1993, 29), Deusen (1983, 82), Franklin (2000, 32), Hawkins (2012, 64), Hellmann (1986, 150), McInerney (1981, 191), Myers (1988, 76), Rushdie (1991, 333), Harrison (1999, 89–90), Neilson (1998, 136), and many other sources. Exceptional praise is heaped on Herr in the form of a personal essay in Smith (2007); many of the obituaries and articles that appeared in newspapers, magazines, and online features following Herr's death in June 2016 also praised *Dispatches* as war-reporting at its best; see, for example, Shea (2016).

16 See also Hellmann (1986, 150–160), and Nielson (1998, 136–164), who polemicizes with Hellmann and other like-minded critics, and who rejects the reading of the map and of the Ho Bo Woods episode in purely literary, symbolic terms and recommends instead that they be seen as Herr's drawing the reader's attention to the historical circumstances of the war.

17 On John Wayne as a Vietnam discourse, see also Anderegg (1991a), Hallin (1986, 142–145), Herzog (1988; 2005, 17–24).

18 Even though Loon is, strictly speaking, Herr's own reconstruction of "Vietnam"; see Spindler (1991, 28), who argues that when at the end of "Breathing In" Herr admits to having picked up the gun and shot the enemy, he signals his assimilation into the "grunts'" and the military's culture; this is a convincing proposition, enforced by Herr's clear infatuation with the soldiers, especially the marines, and his final admission by the end of the book that he enjoyed the war and found it beautiful. See also Hawkins (2012, 71–74).

19 On the significance of the helicopter as a central image and symbol of the war, see Hall (1990), Sturken (2002).

20 See also Harrison (1999, 90). The definition of "secret history" in Hawkins (2012) is somewhat similar, though given a different significance; see Hellmann (1986, 153), McInerney (1981).

21 Indeed, in his memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, Tim O'Brien identifies the "buried, irretrievable history" (2006, 27) of the conflict as a factor in the American ignorance about what was going on in Vietnam, referring to the other type of "secrecy" during the war.

22 In the clearest instance of such validation, in his early study (originally published 1982), *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*, Philip Beidler, himself a veteran, claims that *Dispatches* is "the truest book" he knows about the war, but that it also maintains "stoned objectivism" (2007, xii; "stoned" as in embedded in stone, not under the influence of recreational drugs). Branding Herr's memoir as an instance of "stoned objectivism" might seem bizarre were it not for the realization that what Beidler praises is not only the vision of the postmodern Loon as a faithful rendering of the war but also the book's political "objectivism," that is its determined depoliticization. In the next sentence, Beidler claims that Gloria Emerson's *Winners & Losers*, the subjective opposite to *Dispatches*, "often gets most thoroughly lost in its own anger and polemicism" (2007, xii)—that is, its clear political stance, continuing allegiance to antiwar activism, sympathy with the Vietnamese suffering, and adamant refusal to view the American people as victims, is in Beidler's view, by the early 1980s, flawed and undesirable. The capacity to see *Dispatches* as admirably objective and to fault *Winners & Losers* for its politics and perceived emotionality betrays an unspoken ideological position, as evinced by Beidler's own take on the war (see 12–13).

23 *Full Metal Jacket* was voted "the BEST Marine movie of all-time" in a poll by the Marine Corps Association ("Which is the BEST Marine Movie" 2013; the article has been removed by August 2019), and second-best in a list compiled by an author at Breitbart, of all places (Schlichter 2009). Number one on the list is Wayne's *Sands of Iwo Jima*, which came second in the MCA poll; maybe the meaning of the "John Wayne" figure in Vietnam has become part of the new secret history.

24 I have previously written on some of the topics in this subchapter; see Musiał (2016).

25 Richard L. Stevens' (1995) virtually unknown memoir, *Mission on the Ho Chi Minh Trail: Nature, Myth, and War in Vietnam* also departs from the comparison between the war in Indochina and Leo Marx's conceptualization of "the machine in the garden." The main reason I do not consider Stevens' book here is that it appears to have made no dent on the canon; it has four ratings on Goodreads, and two on Amazon.

26 Ngoc Linh Province is fictional. Ngoc Linh is the name of South Vietnam's highest mountain, in Kontum Province in the Central Highlands.

27 On the subject of the invisibility of the Vietnamese enemy, see also Spanos (2000, 152–155), who provides long relevant quotations from several novels and memoirs.

28 Strangely, my printed copy of *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, a 2006 Harper Perennial Modern Classic reprint of a 1995 Flamingo edition, released in Britain, appears to be quite different from the e-book I also have. The e-book is the 1999 Broadway Books edition, and it comes with the following information: "A hardcover edition of this book was originally published in 1975 by Delacorte Press. It is here reprinted by arrangement with Delacorte." The online previews of the book, on Amazon and on Google Books, are both the Broadway edition and unsurprisingly correspond to my e-book. I use the printed Harper Perennial for quotations in this book; the dialogue referenced in this footnote is different in the e-book—not to the point that it changes the meaning of what is said, but nevertheless the choice of words

and people speaking differ. This kind of difference appears to be consistent across the two editions.

29 On Conrad, *Apocalypse Now* and other Vietnam texts, see Aubrey (1991), Cahir (2004), Hellmann (1986, 188–202), Herzog (1980; 1988; 2005, 25–31), Martin (1993, 117–120).

30 Sean Flynn and fellow photojournalist Dana Stone were abducted by guerillas in Cambodia in 1970 and were never seen again. Flynn's Vietnam story is recounted in a 1982 song by The Clash, titled "Sean Flynn," in the British-Australian miniseries *Frankie's House* (1992), and in the independent film *The Road to Freedom* (2011).

3 Representations of the Victims of "Vietnam"

The Horrors in Quang Ngai

An American Tragedy

On December 5, 1969, *Time* published an article concerning the so-called My Lai massacre, an event that had occurred on March 16 the previous year, but which had only recently flared up in the U.S. media. On the cover of the issue that carried the feature was the face of William Calley, the Army lieutenant in charge of the platoon that had committed most of the killings, who had recently been charged with murder at Son My, and who would ultimately be the only person found guilty and punished in the case. Inside, the article itself recounted the events at the village, providing quotations from men in the offending C Company,[1] their families, and U.S. politicians, with the aim of clarifying and contextualizing the deep-rooted causes of, or at least possible explanations for, what the U.S. soldiers had done. The headline above the article read: "My Lai: An American Tragedy."

Why did the editors at *Time* decide to go with this particular headline for the story? What—what myths, delusions, and needs—would compel one to label an event like the massacre an *American* tragedy? Why were these myths and needs so powerful as to determine much of how the Vietnam War would come to be represented and interpreted in the U.S. mainstream? Or, in other words: "how . . . did a war once perceived as a nearly genocidal slaughter to perpetuate American neocolonialism come to be viewed as an American tragedy?" (Neilson 1998, 5–6).

Time, traditionally a Republican-leaning publication and pro-war well into the conflict (Landers 2004, 108), by 1969 was growing as critical of the U.S. involvement in Indochina as the American press in general and the public opinion itself. But criticism could be directed at various objects. To oppose the war could mean, on a deeper level, opposing a number of things. Under a certain light, the American literary canon of the war, usually lauded by critics and scholars as subversive of the "official" take on the war, turns out to be subservient to the ideologies surreptitiously performing a takeover of the Vietnam War narrative. Similarly

(though much earlier), "An American Tragedy," while righteously outraged with the events at Son My—described in some horrifying detail—nevertheless applies interpretational suggestions and strategies, which steer the reader toward a particular reading of the event, its context, and the U.S. involvement in it, and thus sheds light not only on the response to the massacre but to the Vietnam War in general.

Among the strategies found in "American Tragedy" is the framing of the massacre as a matter of the nature of warfare in general, or a matter of human nature revealing its ugliest side in the behavior of Calley and his men, and not as an outcome related to U.S. policy in Vietnam or the systemic perversions of the U.S. presence in Indochina. But the article also provides certain contexts for the massacre—considered altogether as a strategy of "naturalization of the massacre" by Amy Schlegel (1995, 54)[2]—that will not simply reemerge in the war's eventual cultural narrative in the United States but in fact turn out to be one of the most common and widespread set of tropes and strategies of representation found across the spectrum of the literary and cinematic canon. These concern the experience of the American soldier in response to the environment he has found himself in in the Vietnamese countryside and his relations with the native population.

For example, there are hints in the article that the entire surround of Vietnam—its natural landscape (Americans are "weary from hours of trudging through swamp and jungle") and the country itself—is partial justification, if not of the massacre itself, then at least of the soldiers' state of mind. When the author explains that "the strangeness of Viet Nam to freshly arrived U.S. troops and the frustrations of guerrilla warfare do not adequately explain My Lai," this statement still implies that that to some extent they do. Within this environment, as in the many subsequent American veteran accounts of the war, so in *Time*'s article the National Liberation Front (NLF, or the Viet Cong) guerrillas lurk in the background as a mostly unseen but passionately despised menace. The massacre at Son My is in fact at the outset contextualized by its location in an area with considerable and entrenched NLF presence. Quang Ngai, the province where "My Lai" was located and where C Company was operating as part of a larger search-and-destroy task force, is described as "the cradle of revolution" in Vietnam, because it had once "produced and harbored" Viet Minh's best warriors in the First Indochina War, and now, in 1968, it is a "stronghold" of the "Viet Cong," especially of its "48th Local Force Battalion—an outfit with an unnerving ability to disperse, then reappear to strike again." Consequently, several quotations from U.S. soldiers are brought up to reinforce the point that the Americans entering the hamlet were convinced that the villagers were "either V.C. or helping the V.C." ("An American Tragedy" 1969).

At the same time, the "invisibility" of—the inability to find, engage, identify—the insurgent force and its members in the countryside is

explained as a major frustration for the U.S. troops, and indeed one of the reasons of the perpetrating unit's "edginess"—and so a partial reason for what the Americans did. Although the NLF is consistently referred to as invisible, the article nevertheless returns a number of times to the perception that "they're all V.C.," meaning all Vietnamese, and particularly the inhabitants of Son My. The article includes, for example, a brief interview with a woman in Quang Ngai who was wounded but survived the massacre, but whose daughter and four-year-old nephew were killed by the Americans. But as a counterbalance, immediately following her account, a U.S. lance corporal is cited, described as "unimpressed," insisting that the people of Son My harbor guerrillas in their houses and bunkers, and therefore "they gotta be V.C." ("An American Tragedy" 1969).

The American soldiers' inability to distinguish innocent noncombatants from guerrillas is thus presented not as a failure, either of individual soldiers, commanding officers, or the entire war policy, but as the status quo of Vietnam; the reality of this situation is confirmed in the article not only by using quotations from U.S. soldiers who say so but also by the authorial voice of the feature assuming impartiality and so factuality: The article talks, for example, about "the frustration of guerrilla warfare in a hostile countryside, where the enemy wears no uniform, strikes from ambush, and where women do fire rifles," and children may turn out to be "demolition experts" and planters of landmines. And because the civilians are indistinguishable from the "Viet Cong," the article clarifies again, they contribute to "those conditions [that] breed fear and paranoia, in which the young soldier sees all Vietnamese as threatening" ("An American Tragedy" 1969)

Finally, the cause of the massacre repeated numerous times in "An American Tragedy" is perhaps the simplest one: revenge. The reader is frequently reminded that the men of C Company had suffered considerable losses (about eighty-five casualties, according to the figures in the article; it is important to remember, however, that this number was likely to include men killed as well as wounded). The soldiers were "anxious to . . . even the score for their comrades picked off by an invisible enemy," be it by sniper fire or booby traps; the "lost buddies" are mentioned a few times in interviews with the soldiers. "Everyone who went into the village had in mind to kill," admits one American. "It was just mostly revenge," confesses another. The author of the article confirms this particular strand of explanation, when they restate toward the conclusion that, given the demanding terrain and climate of Vietnam, when a soldier "sees a friend killed beside him," he "can easily go wild."

It would, of course, be going too far to claim that the article suggests the innocent victims at Son My were at any fault. But something more subtle is at work here: When the civilian indistinguishability is presented as a feature of the Vietnam War reality, not only is American perspective

favored as unfiltered and natural, but the soldiers' assertion of revenge is also rationalized—and rationalizing; a vector of causality is drawn between the Vietnamese people and their relations with the soldiers, and the mindset of the latter that contributed to the massacre. Instead of drawing attention to the indefensibility of U.S. presence in Vietnam and the underlying ideological and political problems marring the country's involvement in the war, the crime is in fact downsized. In other words, presenting the indistinguishability of Vietnamese friend and foe as part of the natural surround of Vietnam, and repeating the soldiers claims of revenge at face value and not as basis for critical insight, in fact disguises the U.S.-centrism of this perspective and dilutes the critique of the war's immorality—immorality not in the universal, humanistic sense of "war is hell," but immorality in the sense of someone's tangible interests, power, and political accountability. And because these are omitted from the equation, "An American Tragedy" proves to be a liberal voice, the chorus of which would eventually come to dominate the Vietnam War's historical memory and thus interpretation, that laments the innocent victims while at the same time implicitly accepting the crime as inevitable, part of business-as-usual in war. Moreover, within this depoliticized perspective, the notion of revenge exerted on civilians for military casualties among soldiers of an invading force comes close to being legitimized; again, it is not that the article states that incidents like Son My *should* occur or that the "revenge" was justified, but it does necessitate the assumption that the brunt of responsibility is on the civilians to make themselves distinguishable so they are not accidentally killed.

The article was only a single piece among countless news reports and editorials in the American press dedicated around that time to the freshly exposed My Lai massacre; just in that particular December issue of the *Time* magazine, for example, "An American Tragedy" was one of seven features about the incident. But, apart from a very interesting title, the article also used tropes and strategies that would come to characterize the specifically American narrative of the Vietnam War—or, more properly, the narrative of the U.S. conduct and experience in Vietnam. In other words, the feature and the arguments presented in it constituted almost a boilerplate of what would be written (or told, or shown, or thought) about the Vietnam War in the U.S. cultural mainstream in the upcoming decades. The *Time* article thus shows that the prevalence of a certain frame of mind, and a certain imagination at work in the United States as to the country's own role in the war and its status as one of the victimized parties in the conflict, were already manifesting themselves just as the war was still very much raging in Vietnam but already turning "bad" in the American press. That is, long before the end of the conflict's American phase and even longer before its literary, cinematic, and critical narratives and interpretations would start pouring out a decade later, often employing the very same strategies and tropes, offering

similar interpretations, and ultimately reinforcing the view of the war as a *tragedy* for the United States.

That a mainstream magazine editorial from 1969, and a slew of fictional and creative narratives published a decade and two later, would find the same strategies to expound on the misconduct of American soldiers in Vietnam suggests a certain unanimity of thinking about the U.S. involvement, sustained over time. And if these rationalizations likely stemmed from pain and shock at what one, or one's country, had done there, the reverberations of this very sustainment would be ideological, or consequential for how the U.S. involvement and conduct in Indochina could be perceived and judged. In the remaining part of this final chapter, I move on from representations of the landscape—of "Vietnam"—onto the representations of its victims, and the ways in which they come to support the notion of American victimization. I will discuss the ways in which the notion of victimization has been handled in the American Vietnam canon in the context of the relations between Vietnamese civilians and American soldiers, the two groups most readily defined as victims. As we shall see, the bulk of the works analyzed weave a complex tapestry of the infliction of suffering and of death: While the villagers are victims of Americans and of other Vietnamese, the Americans are victims of "Vietnam" and all that it connotes, including its people as much as, as we have seen, its landscape. Again, as I have done thus far, I look for patterns and discursive similarities across the canon that can be classified as strategies of representation. And if among the effects of the mythological reconstructions of the Vietnamese landscape were the dehistoricization of the war and its total Americanization, the scope of the ideological renderings of the war's meanings made possible by the designation of victimhood is revealed at this point precisely: In the relationship of the American soldier and the Vietnamese civilian, a circumstance so intense, it would seem, that it excludes completely the upper echelons of American power and the extent and viciousness of the American-wrought destruction.

A Necklace of Tongues

The previous chapter ended with a discussion of the "Lurps," or special-training troops serving in the Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) units, and the roles they play in several American narratives of the Vietnam War. Lurps, in the guise of the Green Berets but fulfilling their symbolic function, make yet another significant appearance in the literary/cinematic canon in Tim O'Brien's short story "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,"[3] from *The Things They Carried*, a consideration of which will provide a link between representations of landscape and of "Vietnam," and representations of victimhood in American narratives of the war. In the story, told to the book's narrator by medic Rat Kiley

who claims to have witnessed it, a soldier in a small, remote first-aid outpost by the Tra Bong village (in Quang Ngai Province) manages to "ship" his Stateside girlfriend, Mary Anne, to Vietnam so she can stay with him. Mary Anne is seventeen years old, blond, blue-eyed, long-legged, and just the right amount of flirtatious. She knows that she will get married to her boyfriend, that they will have three children, and that they will die together after a happy life. But while she initially stays glued to her partner, Mary Anne is also smart and curious, so she begins to pick up phrases in Vietnamese from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers securing the outpost, to learn the traditional ways of preparing rice, to help in the emergency first-aid surgeries the medics in the outpost provide, to handle weapons. Despite the danger (the NLF entrenched in the area), she persuades her boyfriend to go down to the village, through which she strolls like an enthusiastic tourist. As her knowledge of living at the outpost and in Vietnam grows, so does her confidence; she becomes less talkative, she discards her cosmetics and jewelry, and the plans for a happily married future begin to get hazy. Finally, one night she disappears; it turns out she has spent the night out on ambush with the six Green Berets who have a base camp adjacent to the first-aid outpost. When her boyfriend wants to send her home, she leaves with the Greenies for three weeks. The boyfriend and another soldier confront her at the Greenies' shack after she returns, but Mary Anne is "gone." She talks to them briefly but it is clear she will not come with them; she is singing in an unknown language to some unearthly music, and she is wearing a necklace made of human tongues. In the end she disappears into the jungle completely. An official search is conducted to find her, but it ends after a week with no results. According to the man telling the story, Mary Anne has become a shadowy, threatening presence moving through the landscape which the Greenies still operating in the area occasionally sense.

O'Brien apparently deliberately strived to rework *Heart of Darkness* in "Sweetheart" (Bates 1996, 156), and many critics have also observed the similarity of the story to *Apocalypse Now*, both references evident especially in Mary Anne's "inward journey" and eventual transformation, but also in the description of the Greenies' shack where she is last seen resembling Colonel Kurtz's compound in the film.[4] With this connection in mind, I would propose that, in a way, "Sweetheart" constitutes an ideal American Vietnam War story. First of all, the publication of *The Things They Carried* in 1990 closed the period of canon-formation, at least in literature (in cinema, one still has to reckon with *Forest Gump* released four years later). Although some of the stories in the collection had been published earlier, "Sweetheart" was first printed in *Esquire* in 1989, which meant that O'Brien could presumably write it with most of the canon already in mind; the *Apocalypse Now* connection is one instance suggesting this awareness, and, as I have mentioned before, there

is much of Michael Herr to be found in the book, too. His decision to grapple with the heart-of-darkness theme via important earlier Vietnam texts is therefore significant as a choice of a specific Vietnam cultural narrative. Second of all, in "Sweetheart" the takeover of Vietnam and its landscape, as in the rest of *The Things They Carried*, is complete, constituting something of a culmination of the trend in the canon. In other words, "Sweetheart" is an ideal American Vietnam War story not only because it consciously engages with an interpretation of the war promoted in some of the most influential texts about the conflict but also because it thus constructs an archetypal narrative of what happened to Americans in "Nam." To accommodate the story, this "Vietnam" is removed from history and emptied of the authentic Vietnamese Vietnam. As Milton Bates observes (1996, 157), this creates a typical heart-of-darkness problem, because "Sweetheart" completes the mystification of the war by assuming a wholly American perspective and portraying the war as so extraordinary and "alien" that under the sway of its environment, an American teenage girl turns into a murderous Green Beret.

The compound where the story is set, and where Mary Anne arrives, is not only remote but also embedded deeply into the natural environment. It is no surprise that the Green Berets would find a home in this lush, complex landscape. The Lurp-like character of the men is established early on, when Rat Kiley describes them as mysterious and asocial recluses, hiding away in their fortified "hootch" (living quarters) until they "vanish" for long stretches of time, only to "magically reappear, moving like shadows through the moonlight" (O'Brien 1998, 104). The place has an otherworldly quality to it because, despite its location, it remains remarkably safe and unharassed by the war. Also, apart from the Greenies, there are no officers in the outpost, the highest rank among the medics being a mere staff sergeant. This setup gives the idea of an enlisted man bringing his girlfriend to Vietnam more plausibility, but at the same time O'Brien also clears the space to accommodate his symbolic story there, without distractions of the conflict: as one of the medics in the compound says, "no war *here*" (105; emphasis in original). Extraction of Vietnam from history cannot be more precise, and more total, than in this instance.

Mary Anne's transformation begins with the fact that "the war intrigued her. The land, too, and the mystery" (O'Brien 1998, 107). The conflation of the three items is a spelling-out of Herr's project of reconstructing Loon as much as a declaration of engaging the heart-of-darkness theme. Early on in her "journey," where she begins to show disregard to the dangers of the Song Tra Bong, the medics remark among themselves, "'She'll learn.' . . . 'There's the scary part. I promise you, this girl will most definitely learn'" (108). The irony of the statement is of course that she will, only not in the sense the men mean it—Mary Anne will gradually become, and eventually transcend, a Greenie, and possess

a complete knowledge of the land. Rat Kiley witnesses the moment she and the Greenies return after their three-week absence and describes the scene using familiar vocabulary: The group of shadows quietly emerges from the jungle "as if by magic," resembling disembodied ghosts; in the night, Mary Anne's eyes are "a bright glowing jungle green" (116).

Spectrality is usually reserved for representations of the enemy, North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and NLF fighters, so by describing the Greenies and Mary Anne in such way O'Brien signals their unity with the land and the secret threat they pose. When Rat Kiley and the boyfriend decide to enter the Greenies' shack to confront Mary Anne, in the place—similar to Kurtz's lair in *Apocalypse Now*—they find heaps of bones, burning candles, a decaying head of a leopard, a revolting smell of incense and death in the air, and a strange "tribal music" echoing in the hootch. There is also a poster saying, "ASSEMBLE YOUR OWN GOOK!! FREE SAMPLE KIT!!" (O'Brien 1998, 119). Mary Anne, wearing the repulsive necklace of dried, leathered human tongues, tells the visitors that they are "in a place . . . where [they] don't belong," meaning "the entire war," the natural environment, and the human settlements: a list of elements again reminiscent of the country-as-war-as-landscape mythography of Herr's *Dispatches*. She also tells them she wants to "eat this place . . . to swallow the whole country" and that only in the wilderness of Vietnam, at night, can she feel "close to her own body" and know "exactly" who she is (120–121).

There is more at play here than mere desire for a total possession of "Vietnam." On the one hand, the remark about self-knowledge can be read as the kind of innocuous criticism already mentioned in the discussion of the frontier in the previous chapter: The war in Vietnam revealed the true identity of the United States. In an interesting parallel, for instance, in the film *Platoon* the protagonist Chris Taylor stops a group of soldiers attempting to rape a little Vietnamese girl. The almost-rapists sneer at him, telling him, "You don't belong in 'Nam, man. Ain't your place at all"; the similarity of wording is probably accidental, but speaks to a particular reimagining of "Vietnam" as a place where Americans commit atrocious acts. On the other hand, reframing this connection between war and aggressor in metaphysical and symbolic terms, as in "Sweetheart," mystifies the politics and history of the conflict, including U.S. motivations understood properly as imperialism-plus-capitalism, not as imperialism-as-symbolism.

But this crucial monologue by Mary Anne exposes more of the American mythologization of Vietnam and the war. That Mary Anne, despite being (unauthorized) part of the invading foreign force and engaging in violence against the native population, still believes herself to "belong" there, testifies to the fact that the "Vietnam" of the story is the same with the American mythological construct of Loon, which is constituted by the significance of the American experience, including brutality and

murder. Fulfilment of this reciprocal constitution is behind the fantasy of "swallowing" the country, as it would complete the fusion between Mary Anne and the land, meaning that not only would she be immersed into the Vietnamese environment, but that it also would become embedded within her, the two entities exerting joint influence on each other. In this reading, the contents of the knowledge gained ultimately matter less, if they do at all, than its mystical source—"Vietnam," or Loon—and the effect it has on an American individual, like Mary Anne. In short, "Vietnam," far removed from any historicity, exists here solely to provide setting and generate scenarios for stories of American self-discovery.

Thus, by recognizing the nature of the secret knowledge that "Vietnam" offers, Mary Anne takes the Lurp/Greenie myth as far as it will stretch, to the point where it almost becomes parodic. But her monologue also signals that she is on the verge of transcending the Greenies, which she soon does: She discards her weapons, she starts going barefoot, and finally she begins disappearing for periods of time until she takes off into the mountains and becomes a phantom, a presence in the jungle. "She had crossed to the other side," O'Brien writes. "She was part of the land" (1998, 125). In so doing, Mary Anne "completes the process" Herr described in *Dispatches*; like Sean Flynn, swallowed by the ground before her, she "joins the missing" (Kinney 2000, 154). In fact, the imagery toward the end of the story becomes distinctly Herresque. For example, when O'Brien writes that her experience is in the end typical of Americans in Vietnam—"you come over clean and you get dirty and then afterward it's never the same" (1998, 123)—the reader is reminded of the often-quoted passage from *Dispatches:* "I went to cover the war and the war covered me" (Herr 1978, 24). In the end, the elemental passage Mary Anne undergoes is inextricable from Loon, also as the extra-historical, total-environment war. When Rat Kiley is challenged by his listeners about the veracity of Mary Anne's tale, he says: "you don't know human nature. You don't know Nam" (O'Brien 1998, 108), thus connecting, if not actually merging, the two. (The colloquial phrase that suggests itself here, "you don't know shit," is a further possible link to the knowledge that Vietnam offers.)

The value of this personally gained knowledge is confirmed in the story when Rat Kiley finally admits that he fell in love with Mary Anne, because, unlike women back in "the World," she experienced and understood "Vietnam"; others will never do, because they were not there. The introduction of romantic love points the reader toward the essential contrast between Mary Anne and the "normal" soldiers, and namely her being a woman; in fact, most academic readings of "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" have focused on the subject of gender representations. Tying this issue to the topic of privileged veteran knowledge, Lorrie Smith (1994, 32), for example, writes that Mary Anne's precious experience is still essentially "masculine," as it has to do with stealth and combat

instead of the types of jobs real American women had in the Vietnam War. While this is also a valuable line of inquiry, Mary Anne's presence in the war's literature should not be considered simply along the lines of two genders; rather, as Katherine Kinney suggests, ethnicity and Mary Anne's imperial status need to be acknowledged, as her eventual embedment in the landscape "displaces the Vietnamese," who in the story are "literally dismembered, figured only as pieces of skin and the tongues Mary Anne has appropriated to voice her own experience" (2000, 156).

In a recent article, Michael Tavel Clarke (2013) polemicizes with the readings of O'Brien's work in general which posit that his fiction fails to challenge American imperialism in relation to the war in Vietnam due to its "solipsism," its preoccupation with storytelling, and its inwardness translating into an exclusively Americentric concern (e.g., Neilson 1998, 204). Instead, Clarke argues that "Sweetheart," like the rest of *The Things They Carried*, is a *deliberate exposure* of such solipsism, that by employing such narrative strategies and imageries, O'Brien intends to draw attention to and deconstruct American imperialism in Vietnam, through the character of Mary Anne among others, whom Clarke sees as the most solipsistic in the short story collection, and also the most entangled, via her reference to Kurtz, in imperialism. The irony of the failure of his argument is that his criticism is not inaccurate, for example when he writes that "an excessive focus on the national self is at the very least a component of imperialism and arguably a central cause of imperialism. It is also significant that ["Sweetheart"] reenacts this process" (2013, 139). The failure lies rather in Clarke's persuasion that the story itself is deconstructive of the very problems it poses, simply because it "reenacts" them. The trouble is that the story nowhere reveals its deconstructive nature or exposes its ideological constructedness. Clarke's reading assumes that the reader coming to this text will be immediately, and with no help from the text itself, aware of its irony, even though it would require not an insubstantial awareness of American imperialism and its practices, also narrative practices, in the first place. The absence of the Vietnamese in "Sweetheart" is either not meant to or unable to draw attention to itself, after all, unless the reader is conditioned to look for it; because the war is not "*here*," the actions of Mary Anne and the Greenies may appear to be victimless. Therefore, when Clarke writes that, like Mary Anne's story that enacts "an imperial solipsism . . . as if to expose its own investment in that practice" (140), the whole collection in this context "explores the dangers of an excessive inward focus" (141), it is like saying that *Gone with the Wind* "explores" the racial injustices of the postbellum South. In other words, Clarke treats "Sweetheart" as a diagnosis, not as a symptom.

Given his stance, it is not surprising that Clarke can interpret Mary Anne's tongue necklace as another self-reflexive device, symbolizing both the character's unseen violence against the Vietnamese and the story's

own suppression of Vietnamese "voices" (2013, 138–139). But even if we agree, then this supposed "criticism" conveyed in the tale is impotent: The text remains a story of an American wearing human tongues as jewelry, not a story that seriously examines, or even represents, the suffering of the humans whose tongues the American cuts out; there is nothing subversive in removing the act of violence off-stage, especially if the people who are the objects of this violence are still represented as leathered strips of skin more symbolic of Mary Anne's transformation than of their own "silence." Clarke's own argument supports this privileging of Mary Anne's experience when he writes that the necklace stands in for her violence against the Vietnamese "on a surface level," while it "also represents the dangers of [her] journey into the self" (2013, 138–139), suggesting a reading in which what happens to the people is only superficially significant, while the violent ritual is what truly matters. Kinney makes a somewhat similar point as to interpretation, when she reads the necklace as testifying to Mary Anne's "violently earned right to tell war stories" (2000, 155).[5] However, instead of crediting the story with using the gruesome accessory as a symbol of the erasure of Vietnamese voices, Kinney more convincingly connects it to Herr and the land of Loon, through a fragment in *Dispatches* from the same passage in which both Sean Flynn's and Dana Stone's heart-of-darkness trips are concluded, and death is identified as the "essence" of the war/land, visualized as an image of biting off a dead body's tongue (1978, 203).

As a side note, it must be pointed out that among all canonical American authors, O'Brien is perhaps most interested in the humanity of the Vietnamese enemy as well as the Vietnamese victims of American aggression, and perhaps most ready to express compassion. In his memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, for example, he describes the opportunity he claims to have had to converse with a North Vietnamese student while himself studying in Prague, Czechoslovakia, during the summer of 1967, before going to war; the man good-naturedly counters everything that O'Brien says, voicing some rational anti-American arguments, and the two part cordially. In the same book, O'Brien recalls some soldiers' tales he has heard about prostitutes in Bangkok and Manila who are really communist agents with razor blades in their vaginas, and admits he believed the stories, "imagining the skill and fright and commitment of those women" (2006, 107). While an earlier chapter in the memoir, titled "Pro Patria," deals with the cultural pressure on young Americans to go to war to fulfil heroic ideals, ultimately deemed by O'Brien to be harmful and meaningless in the case of the war in Vietnam, a subsequent part titled "Mori" actually regards a shot NVA nurse whom O'Brien and his platoon watch die, the juxtaposition of the reference suggesting a unity of motivation between Americans and the Vietnamese, with the first expressing their patriotic love in stale, unchecked forms and the latter actually sacrificing their lives for independence. *Going After Cacciato*

contains an entire chapter dedicated to a political and philosophical, not unfriendly, discussion between a group of American soldiers and an NVA officer whom they find imprisoned in a tunnel system they have fallen into; the extended metaphor in the chapter reveals the man to be a prisoner of the land of Vietnam. In *The Things They Carried*, finally, the story titled "The Man I Killed" has the collection's narrator examine the body of an NLF fighter he has shot, imagining his entire life and circumstances on the basis of his features and the contents of his pockets.

O'Brien also frequently offers literary and representational changes of perspective regarding relations between Americans and the Vietnamese. For example, one overwhelming theme in the canon is that of Vietnamese betrayal, according to which Vietnamese peasants are harassed and killed in retribution for American casualties, the prevalence of the trope in the cultural narrative translating into a strategy to equalize both sides' suffering or to justify the U.S. troops' misconduct as the result of "their state of mind." But *The Things They Carried*, and much of O'Brien's oeuvre in general for that matter, resists this strategy. In the story collection, the Vietnamese are virtually always victims of the Americans; Americans die, but the culprits remain unseen and of secondary importance. But there are more specific instances of reversal of perspective in the book, too. In "Ambush," for instance, the narrator describes the night when he killed a man in a surprise attack. There is a reversal in the description of the act, since, first of all, the man walks out of the night and fog, like the Vietnamese enemies usually do, but instead of being a killer of Americans, he will soon himself be the victim. Second of all, O'Brien is thus now the danger lurking in the jungle and darkness. Moreover, "The Man I Killed" is a continuation, where the narrator later tries to imagine the man's identity and life, and in his projections his victim is very similar to himself, which fuels the inversion, with the man in the role (through his manner of death) traditionally reserved for American casualties, further.

Finally, O'Brien also stands out somewhat in the canon in his representations of civilian victims. Unusually for an American author, in his memoir he devotes a chapter ("The Lagoon") to a refugee camp, accidently hit by American artillery that killed thirteen Vietnamese. He then not only notes that the families received solatium payments of 20 dollars for a wounded person and 33 dollars and 90 cents for a dead one,[6] but also, virtually uniquely in the canon where most Vietnamese victims remain anonymous, records the names of the children killed that day, which means he must have noted them down at the time. In general, however, in fiction O'Brien seems to prefer to avoid portraying the physical suffering of Vietnamese civilians altogether, and to transfer the brutality of American soldiers onto their killing of animals, especially water buffalo (1980, 56–58; 1998, 85–86). But he is sensitive to more subtle (relatively speaking) forms of abuse and humiliation, or their effects.

In *Going After Cacciato*, narrator Paul Berlin's "only one truly shameful memory" is of when he was ordered to frisk villagers along the Song Tra Bong, an activity that entailed touching their entire bodies. In *The Things They Carried*, a half-page story is dedicated to a small girl the soldiers see dancing in the ruins of her village, apparently gone insane from trauma (1998, "Style"). In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, O'Brien includes an apparently real-life episode involving a seventy-year-old blind farmer helping the G.I.s wash in the water from his well, watched by children; a "stupid" soldier hits the man in the face with a carton of milk, drawing blood, and after losing balance, the man, covered in milk, continues to shower the men (2006, 104–105). By describing the old man's humiliation, O'Brien paradoxically bestows him with dignity (which the soldiers rob him of), a subject rarely undertaken when authors depict villagers, which makes the scene particularly resonant as an illustration of the relations between G.I.s and civilians.

At the same time, however, perhaps more so than in the case of other authors, in O'Brien's fiction Vietnam is removed from history and politics to the realm of metaphysics, the war rendered into an abstracted site to ponder the subtleties of difference between truth and fiction—a preoccupation in O'Brien's work that has received perhaps the most academic interest, but that has also formed the basis of some criticism (see especially the chapter on *The Things They Carried* in Nielson [1998], as well as the criticism of *Going After Cacciato* there). Writing about this aspect of O'Brien's work and articulating at the same time what is wrong with this particular way of re-visioning the war in Vietnam in general, Subarno Chattarji observes that despite the merits of O'Brien's writings,

> there is every danger that the privileging of story *qua* story will contribute to the further dehistoricizing of the Vietnam conflict. To perceive the Vietnam War purely or largely in terms of ambiguity, mystery, and endlessly multiplying narratives is to fall into a typically postmodernist trap.
>
> (2007, 80)

It is true: In his quest to be more than a war writer, O'Brien creates sometimes needlessly convoluted plots, as in *Going After Caccatio*, for example, to convey a universal message of a higher order. In other words, writing about the war in Vietnam, he tends to overlay it with new and, in the end quite insubstantial, issues, such as the mechanics of imagination as opposed to the lived trauma of the warfront in *Cacciato* (encapsulated in Paul Berlin's immaterial obsession with "what happened and what might have happened"). There it leads to the protracted race across Asian and European countries—a sort of a less compelling odyssey than the one envisioned in *Apocalypse Now*, for example—in which each stop becomes an opportunity to alight at a particular kind-of-philosophical

point to be made about Vietnam and war. As with the metafictional play in *The Things They Carried*, these techniques tend to create a sense of withdrawal from the war's visceral reality—not to mention its historical or political reality—to a degree considerably greater than anywhere else in the canon. This is precisely the problem with "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong"—but not the only one.

American War Crime Literature

In another possible reading of the necklace of human tongues that Mary Anne wears in O'Brien's "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," even the imperialistic dimension of the text is in the end less important than what is obscured and mystified in the story. The United States can get over being branded as an empire; symbolic readings like Clarke's of "Sweetheart" are in the end innocuous, since imperialism is so interwoven with American mythology that the dominant ideologies of American nationalism can take it. It is more productive to treat the necklace of tongues not as a *representation* of Mary Anne's violence but rather as strictly *evidence* of it. Mary Anne is, after all, a war criminal.

Mutilation of corpses, even of enemy soldiers, is a war crime, regardless of how often the reader encounters this practice in American Vietnam War literature as just one more thing the U.S. soldiers did. It should also not be viewed only in the context of the battlefield or as separate from other atrocities. Nick Turse, for example, in a chapter that documents the history of widespread American atrocity against villagers in Quang Nam Province, records an incident in 1967 when U.S. infantrymen cut off the ear of a woman who was still alive, while stomping on her baby (2013, ch. 4). Viewed as an obscured war crime, "Sweetheart" is the story of a radical liberation of a white American woman, who takes symbolic possession of the Vietnamese landscape, at the cost of the inhabitants of this land against whom she perpetrates violence. When in American narratives the phrase "Indian Country" is used, it suggests a link to American mythology and pop culture, especially via Hollywood's Westerns, but a story like Mary Anne's reveals the full implication of what Vietnam as Indian Country means in historical terms: mass death of the natives. O'Brien's story is not a shrewd take on the violence perpetrated in the name of empire, but a mystified and symbolically rendered reenactment of war crime and murder committed to gain land for American use—not an exposure of imperial practice or a commentary upon it, but *an imperial act*.

The poster in the Greenies' shack, advertising "assembling your own gook," referring to the fact that Americans removed various body parts from the Vietnamese (ears, noses, fingers, hands, feet, teeth, heads), also seems to have a connection to *Dispatches*, where Herr recalls rumors about an American soldier "building his own gook" (1978, 35).

Used somewhat nonchalantly as a creepy-house decoration of sorts, the poster highlights the atmosphere inside the shack—inside the heart of darkness—while at the same time again performing mystification. The word "gook" is an essential staple of the vocabulary in American Vietnam War texts, but it is also a racial slur that translates into a dehumanization of the Vietnamese that enabled the crimes against them to be perpetrated and ignored on all levels of the American military, from the generals signing orders to spray the villages with Agent Orange to the privates and corporals shooting peasant children (infamously, William Calley was originally charged with murder of "Oriental human beings"; see Hersh 1970, 180).

War crime—the mutilations, shooting civilians, torture of prisoners, rape, burning houses, killing livestock, destruction of property—is so common in American Vietnam War literature and cinema that it becomes normal and expected. For example, in an early essay on the realism and mythology of *Platoon*, Thomas Prasch somewhat unselfconsciously observes that the film features disturbing episodes (murder, burning, rape) "which audiences simply expect a 'true' account of Vietnam to take account of" (1988, 199). In another example, in the documentary *Hearts of Darkness* (1991), about the making of *Apocalypse Now*, an actor playing one of the boat crew says that once the cast had internalized the "madness" of the narrative and began improvising scenes, Francis Ford Coppola asked them to come up with "lists of things that we wanted our characters to do. I remember we all decided that we wanted to do sort of a My Lai massacre." Even looting, also considered a war crime, is recorded in the canon, even if rarely. For example, in *The Short-Timers* Joker's unit steals a large amount of Vietnamese piasters from civilian houses, and other marines are said to have taken a loaf of golden bars from the imperial palace, in the aftermath of the fighting at Hue (Hasford 1988, 86–87, 108). In *My Lai 4*, Seymour Hersh writes about an incident when, prior to the massacre, the men of Charlie Company stole a radio from some villagers, as retribution for a booby trap detonated in the vicinity of their hamlet (1970, 35–36). In fact, violence against civilians comes to define the Vietnam War canon to such an extent it should not be considered *war literature* as much as *war crime literature*.[7]

Moreover, because in most American texts U.S. soldiers are meant to be the party with whom the reader identifies and empathizes, the strategies of representing victimhood, both Vietnamese and American, are in the end strategies of handling war crime: They are strategies of mystification, neutralization, justification, universalization, and, above all, of privileging American traumatic experience and victimization, collectively feeding into the mythologized version of the war. For this reason, and because the authors are veterans or correspondents with firsthand experience, I argue that it is possible to read American Vietnam War

texts as *perpetrator literature*,[8] in addition to just "war crime literature," or as *perpetrator narratives*, if we include cinema. Accordingly, the attention will now turn to an examination of these very strategies of representing different forms of victimhood.

First, it is worth to briefly examine the price of self-discovery obtained in Vietnam, which turns out to be related to the problem of depoliticization of the war in the American cultural narrative. A particularly telling scene comes in Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers*, a novel that begins in Vietnam before moving on to the United States. At the beginning of the story, the two protagonists and old friends, Converse and Hicks—one a washed-out writer, now a correspondent in search of inspiration, the other a veteran, now a merchant marine—meet in a bar somewhere on the South Vietnamese coast and talk. Reflecting on his coming to Vietnam, Converse says,

> "I feel like this is the first real thing I ever did in my life. I don't know what the other stuff was about."
>
> "You mean you enjoy it?"
>
> "No," Converse said. "I don't mean that at all."
>
> "It's a funny place," Hicks said.
>
> "Let smiles cease," Converse said. "Let laughter flee. This is the place where everybody finds out who they are."
>
> Hicks shook his head.
>
> "What a bummer for the gooks." . . .
>
> "You can't blame us too much. We didn't know who we were till we got here. We thought we were something else."
>
> (Stone 1994, 56–57)

Converse sounds quite like Mary Anne: She, too, felt like in Vietnam she knew exactly who she was and claimed one could not feel the same way anywhere else. The sentiment of Converse the correspondent also recalls Michael Herr's ambivalence of not "enjoying" the war outright and yet somehow *appreciating* the experience of it. And the price for the self-discovery—Mary Anne's, the Americans'—is the "bummer for the gooks."

As noted, the setting of "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" is, like Loon or the Vietnam in *Apocalypse Now*, a symbolically colonized land, so that war crime can become an issue beyond morality and culpability of the soldiers, and turn into a setup for a "heart of darkness," or a matter of an "inward journey," both universalized and individualized concepts of "human nature." When her boyfriend meets her in the Greenie shack, surrounded by the smell of decay, singing unintelligibly, and wearing the tongue necklace, she tells him: "I know what you think, but it's not . . . it's not *bad*" (O'Brien 1998, 120; emphasis in original), the italics suggesting the familiar ambivalence regarding violence as the

road to Vietnam nirvana. In late 1980s, in an interview, Herr formulated a somewhat similar interpretation of the war:

> I was politicized by the war and then went to a stage beyond politics. It became critically nullified by the overwhelming experience of being there. The war was behaviour. Archetypal behaviour beyond judgement. . . . From the outside the war was perceived as an exclusively political event. On the inside it was fundamentally and eternally a human event. And it's going to be a human event much longer than a political one.
>
> (Rushdie 1991, 335)

The war is here reimagined as both a "behavior," a perspective in which, yet again, *only* the American presence and experience in Vietnam matters, and a depoliticized space insulated against the outside world, history, and politics, where that "behavior" cannot be judged: It just *was*, the way it was. Beidler again provides an example of how this attitude managed to infiltrate the early canon-forming scholarship, when he writes that "whether at a certain point Vietnam simply started looking like a second-rate *Catch-22* . . . is probably now something that is just not worth trying to figure out. Like most things connected with the war, it just happened" (2007, 12–13). This is an extremely zoomed-in view. When Herr says that the "human" dimension of the war will far outlive its political dimension, his words align perfectly with the 1980s' dominant discourse of almost hysterical attention given to the veterans with the simultaneous erasure of the history of the war and of American crimes.

The problem of "exactly knowing oneself" thus comes to be tied with the problem of victimhood. In this context, another strategy of representation is that of disregarding the toll the American presence wrought on the Vietnamese. "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" is again exemplary, as it not only rewrites war crime as a gruesome symbol of the tongue necklace but throughout it also carefully obscures the Vietnamese natives from view. At the beginning of the story, the area where the medical compound was situated, in the vicinity of the Tra Bong village, is described. The features of the setting are listed: mountains, cliffs, canyons, valleys, jungle, rivers and waterfalls, "exotic butterflies," "smoky little hamlets," bamboo, and elephant grass (O'Brien 1998, 103). The inclusion of the human settlements in the middle of a list of natural features is perhaps innocuous enough, but it also helps reconstruct the mythic "Vietnam" where Americans come to "find out who they are," while the crimes they perpetrate, and the experience of their victims, fade into secondariness.

Later Mary Anne visits Tra Bong, but the trip is not described in depth, the occasion only a step in the process of her learning and self-discovery, just as her first kill, obscured in the story, and the cutting out of tongues are subsequent steps. This is not dissimilar to the actors in *Apocalypse*

Now feeling that "a My Lai massacre" is an appropriate step in their "Vietnam" story, realized in the film as the scene of shooting three innocent Vietnamese in a sampan, a literal stop in the characters' odyssey through Vietnam and into the heart of darkness. (Perhaps Mary Anne only kills and mutilates enemy soldiers, but the story leaves this issue not even so much as unanswered, but *unquestioned*; violence against the Vietnamese, and the relationship of the land to the ritual, is what matters.) In much of the canon the peasants come to be viewed as fixtures of the landscape that exist solely for their interactions with the Americans and vanish when removed from that context, their presence reduced to mere "cameo appearances" (Hunt 2010, xix), and their function to that of a "supporting cast" (Hölbling 2007, 105; see also Boyle 2015a, 7). Indeed, it has been possible to write a praised and influential book about Vietnam without much recourse to the Vietnamese people at all, as we have seen with Herr (or, in cinema, with *Apocalypse Now*).

Another strategy of mystification occurs in regard to destruction of settlements. "You always know where the first platoon is," we read in a joke recorded in James Webb's *Fields of Fire*. "Just follow the smoke from the burning hootches" (2001, 170). In the memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, the very first scene involves Tim O'Brien's platoon searching a village, and receiving and returning fire from a treeline beyond it, destroying some of the houses as a result. Although the village is occupied—the Americans knock over some jugs of rice, for instance—it is not mentioned what the inhabitants do during the fight; in fact, their existence is not acknowledged at all. Later O'Brien describes his first "bad" patrol, when—after a firefight that resulted in a trophy in the form of one ear cut off from a dead NLF—the squad orders an air strike and later burns the village of "Tri Binh 4" (Kelley [2002] contains no place of this name). The fate of the villagers remains unknown, but O'Brien recalls the sounds of "cattle and chickens dying" (2006, 88) in the fire throughout the night. Other examples include villages in *The Things They Carried* ("afterward they burned Than Khe"; 1998, 8) and in *Going After Cacciato*, where the destruction of Hoi An with white phosphorus is described in detail without recourse to its residents. In the same book, the platoon subsequently carries out an operation along the Song Tra Bong, where the soldiers "moved through the villages . . . and searched them, and sometimes burned them down" (1980, 100); they "destroyed twelve tunnels. They killed a water buffalo. They burned rice and shot chickens and scattered jugs of grain. They trampled paddies. Tore up fences. Dumped dirt into wells, diverted ditches, provoked madness" (1980, 104). The people are invisible among this destruction.

All these strategies have the effect of naturalizing mistreatment of civilians, whose suffering at the hands of Americans becomes an essential part of the Vietnam narrative. James Webb's novel *Fields of Fire*, which belongs to texts most firmly embedded in the canon (it has been on the

Marine Commandant's Recommended Reading List for two decades), tells its story from the point of view of a host of characters. One of them is Dan, a Vietnamese man, whose thoughts often return to this point, reminiscent of Herr's "no country here but the war": "War is as natural as the rains. There are years when there is no war and there are seasons without rain. But always war and rain return. There is no difference. It is the nature of things. Thunder booms and so does artillery. … One brother died from cholera. One brother died from Marine gunfire. There is no difference" (2001, 176; Dan's thoughts are strangely Americanized, in that he uses the marines' terms and names, for example "gook sores" for a skin disease blighting the peasant population). Sitting in a bunker with his wife and children, Dan listens as American artillery rounds crash around his village; the villagers are said to see the barrage similarly to Dan, as a phenomenon akin to a storm, sometimes there, and sometimes not, and one not to be questioned or protested against since, like with weather, nothing can be done about it (182). Later, it is also said that villagers do not understand the connection between the Americans in the field, whom they view in awe as godlike, and artillery strikes that destroy their villages (215). Vietnamese villagers were probably capable of understanding where air strikes and artillery barrages came from, and that whatever their political views about Ho Chi Minh, the Americans were not viewed as equals to the NVA or the NLF in the countryside (Neilson 1998, 106–107). There is something presumptuous about Webb's, a marine in Vietnam, ascribing this line of thinking to a Vietnamese civilian, in this case a character who has lost his entire family in the war. By putting these words in Dan's mouth, a native, Webb reinforces the naturalization of the war in Vietnam and at the same time absolves the United States of their sins in Indochina—after all, the locals have gotten used to it. It has become part of the region's climate. You can complain about the Americans as much as you can about the monsoons.

A similar comparison is made by Philip Caputo in his memoir *A Rumor of War*, who, walking through the ruins of the village a platoon in his company burnt to the ground the day before, is struck by the indifference of the people still searching in the wreckage for their possessions; he writes that the villagers look like they consider what Americans had done to them "a natural disaster" and, "accepting" the destruction, "[feel] no more toward us than they might feel toward a flood" (1985, 133). Caputo is at first angry at the people for behaving in this way and thinks of them as inhuman, which cancels any pity he might otherwise feel. He goes on to admit, however, that his attitude toward these people at that time stemmed from his ignorance of their daily ordeals. He realizes later that the villagers in South Vietnam had to adapt to the war in such a way to survive and keep their sanity.

But in *Fields of Fire* Webb is not yet done with Dan. The character is milked for all the pro-marine, pro-American uses that can be found. For example, Dan is a despicable opportunist. He is a peasant forced against

his will into the NLF, from which he escapes and joins the book's protagonist marine unit as a translator; later he fights with the South Vietnamese regular forces, from which he deserts to join the NVA. He is not a particularly sympathetic character: Webb uses him not only to convey the notion of the "naturalness" of the war, but also shows him as a rapist and a calloused man extraordinarily cruel toward other Vietnamese, abusing whatever power he has as a translator with the Americans, calloused because the NLF had killed his family and he turned against the other Vietnamese. His character is also used to mystify the Vietnamese cause. Dan's brother was killed after he had joined the NLF, a decision that Dan condemns, in his internal monologue expressing bitter disdain for the fact that his brother chose to abandon his family to pursue the nationalist cause and get himself killed; moreover, while the farmers toil and starve, the guerillas "live comfortably" in their hideouts (2001, 180; the Vietnamese soldiers and guerillas did not live comfortably in the wilderness, but rather in conditions far worse to those of the Americans). Instead of resistance, Dan, the novel's spokesperson for the Vietnamese, preaches waiting the U.S. marines and the NVA out, as if the two are equal calamities. Rather fascinatingly, toward the end of his story, Dan admits that the only time he felt good and happy in the war was when he was with the marines, and he now misses them. And so, not only is the American presence in Vietnam as natural as the monsoons, but, as Webb persuades us through Dan, the Vietnamese can apparently find comfort in it, too.

In the end, civilian suffering becomes instrumental, framed so that it is not primarily the consequence of American crime exerting high toll on Vietnamese communities, but rather as a factor in the American-on-American struggle, in American soul-searching, or in American victimization by the war and by "Vietnam." In *Dispatches*, for example, Herr records one encounter—an "illumination round," so it is a very brief passage—at the Can Tho province hospital, during the Tet Offensive. A deluge of wounded civilians descends on the hospital; people are dying in the corridors, the doctors work around the clock, and the place is being shelled by the NLF. Herr takes a can of beer, given to him by a nurse, to an American surgeon working in an operating room, where he finds the man, covered in blood, working on a small Vietnamese girl whose leg has been amputated, bone protruding from her flesh and the removed limb laying on the floor. Herr cannot bring himself to look directly at the child. The surgeon, in his twentieth hour of continuous work, thanks him for the drink, and Herr describes him as so exhausted that he cannot physically bring his face to smile (1978, 150).

Clearly, Herr can barely watch the suffering of the little girl, which indicates its extent; in light of Herr's stunted ability to look at it and to represent it, the girl and her wound are signified by fragmentary images: the bone, the detached leg on the floor. Altogether this picture succeeds as a reconstruction of the act of shocked witnessing. But in the

context of the entire scene, the girl's suffering is only the background and the catalyst to the experience—exertion, dedication, humanity—of the main actor: the surgeon. This reading is supported by the fact that the Vietnamese are largely absent from the memoir, and this is in fact the *only* episode in which Herr records a specific instance of a specific Vietnamese person's victimization; because of this contextual insufficiency, this "round" illuminates not the plight of the natives, but the plight of the American surgeons (see also Neilson 1998, 143).

Another example of how Vietnamese victimization is made instrumental to the American experience is *Platoon* (1986). As Kinney (2000, 3) observes, the film is emblematic of the friendly fire discourse, since the story, told from the perspective of newbie Chris Taylor, is essentially a profoundly symbolic battle between the equally symbolic figures of Sergeant Barnes and Sergeant Elias; indeed, she expresses surprise that such an overtly allegorical film has been so often lauded as a particularly realistic view of the war in Vietnam.[9] Kinney also notes that the invisibility of the NVA soldiers, for example in the iconic scene of night ambush-turned-firefight, is vital for making friendly fire viable, by removing the agency of the enemy and relegating him to the background. But *Platoon* is also essentially a symbolic reenactment of My Lai, on a smaller scale. Because of earlier casualties as well as the internal Barnes/Elias rift dividing the soldiers and putting a strain on them, the eponymous unit has already been on edge for some time when three men from the platoon are killed by mines and sniper fire while on patrol ("somewhere near the Cambodian border"). Upon the unit's discovery of traces of enemy presence in a local village, Barnes snaps and kills the wife of the village chief. For a while, the situation seems to be close to boiling over—several soldiers urging that they "do the whole village"—with the dramatic tension rising to its peak when Barnes, in an attempt to force the chief to divulge the enemy location, puts a gun to his small daughter's head. Elias appears and stops Barnes, and the two sergeants fight, the violence thus playing out physically among the Americans. (By the time the end credits roll, two actual U.S. friendly fire artillery strikes will yet ensue, killing many in the platoon; Taylor will fight Barnes and plan to frag him; Barnes will wound Taylor and shoot Elias; and Taylor will kill Barnes. No wonder Kinney picked *Platoon* as friendly fire incarnate.) Afterwards, the spineless bad lieutenant Wolfe orders that the village be destroyed; the soldiers set the houses on fire with the iconic Zippo lighters, kick over stores of food, and round up a few middle-aged and old men and take them away as suspects.

The Vietnamese are certainly victims of gratuitous violence here, but the framing of the scene matters, too. The platoon is split between the followers of Barnes, the brutal and demoralized soldiers, and the followers of Elias, the marijuana-smoking, more empathetic (and sympathetic) ones. Taylor is an Elias man, but by the time they enter the village he

is shaken up by the deaths of his buddies; overtaken by the trauma, he shoots several times at (but does not hurt) a maimed young man the Americans have found hiding with, presumably, his grandmother in one of the huts. His status as a positive character enables an identification and empathy with his emotional distress represented in his attack on the boy in a way that the one-track brutality of men like Barnes does not. In the end, Taylor stops his assault and breaks down in tears, brutalized by the vicious circle of witnessing other Americans wounded and killed, and of the violent, but emotional, retaliation against the Vietnamese; his behavior, and the way the film's narrative frames it, is representative of what happened to even good men in Vietnam, and how it would come to haunt them. It is Bunny, one of the evil sergeant's acolytes, who kills the boy without qualms (it seems that he kills the old woman off-screen, too). Taylor gets to redeem his bout of violence by saving a young girl from being raped by a group of Americans, in a scene that Gina Marie Weaver (2010, 138) finds exemplary of the dynamic of friendly fire and its complicity in the glossing-over of American crime in Vietnam: The assault on the child itself is not the issue at hand, but rather the opportunity it presents to assure the audience of the protagonist's preserved humanity.

The exchange between Taylor and the would-be perpetrators is the final drawing of a line between Barnes' and Elias' men. This line of fundamental difference of character is important as one strategy of defining victims in Vietnam. The likes of Barnes and Bunny are abject characters. A liberal audience is not expected to identify with them, and so they become symbols of some unspecified group or groups of Americans, or perhaps of aspects of American culture and society, whose evil came to the surface in Vietnam. Elias and Taylor are, of course, the reverse of this evil. But the attack and destruction of the village, and the deaths of the Vietnamese, though in themselves horrific and eliciting compassion for the victims, are instrumentalized in the larger frameworks of the two heroes' individual narratives (Ringnalda 1990, 66). First of all, the incident becomes an occasion to cement their goodness and heroism, by having them both (good *Americans*) save the Vietnamese from the crimes and the evil of Barnes and his men (bad *Americans*). Second of all, the suffering of the villagers that Taylor witnesses becomes another way in which the war brutalizes, and ultimately teaches, him.

In the case of Elias, his behavior in the village becomes the final straw in his conflict with Barnes and determines his fate—saving the villagers will turn out to have been a sacrifice. Elias plans on reporting the unwarranted killings in the village, and so Barnes and his men plan on eliminating him. Elias' symbolic stature means that the usual way of disposing of undesirable officers and NCOs, "fragging," is insufficient for the film's plot. Instead, when the opportunity presents itself and the two

men find themselves alone in the jungle, Barnes shoots Elias, and returns to the platoon with the news of his death at the hands of the NVA; when the men, Taylor among them, are airlifted, they witness wounded Elias emerge from the forest only to be killed by pursuing enemy, falling to his knees in the iconic Christlike pose.[10] By the end of the film, a friendly fire strike kills many of Barnes' men, and he himself is shot dead by Taylor. Leaving the battlefield in a helicopter (again), in his retrospective voiceover, Taylor concludes that in Vietnam Americans fought themselves and not the enemy, that in his soul he was part Barnes and part Elias, and that "those of us who did make it have an obligation to build again, to teach to others what we know, and to try with what's left of our lives to find a goodness, and meaning, to this life." The film ends to the iconic melancholy sound of "Adagio for Strings" and Taylor's birds-eye view of the corpse-strewn battlefield. The ending is redemptive: The evil men are gone; Elias' sacrifice has been in the name of morality, human decency, and heroism, suggesting that while some Americans in Vietnam *were* bad, their actions had destructive impact on the good Americans who were there, too, and whose suffering in the war was in the final tally a deliverance from that evil. Taylor, though he admits he will carry the war with him forever—as the traumatic experience, no doubt—finds in the war a cathartic opportunity toward growth. And thus, due to its role in the narratives of all the key American players in the film, the victimization of the inhabitants of the anonymous village becomes a crucial *tool* of that redemption and education. It was hard to watch, but in the end the suffering and death, enabling American soul-searching, contributes to the ultimate "lesson" of the war (for the Americans) and the personal/national improvement (in America) that Stone preaches in the final lines of his script. The killings of the Vietnamese do not go to court martial in the end, pushed aside by the more pertinent dying of Americans, as either sacrifice or deserved and cleansing karmic retaliation; most importantly, while the Vietnamese deaths catalyze the subsequent developments of the plot, there is no doubt that the death of Elias is the single most important and most meaningful event in the film. In terms of a narrative strategy of representing victimhood, it is instrumental death versus meaningful death. (In a somewhat similar way, in the memoir *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic's accidental killing of a "corporal from Georgia" [2012] seems to be granted more significance as a source of traumatizing guilt than his involvement in a shooting of an old Vietnamese man and a group of children.)

What War Does to Men

The instrumentality of the Vietnamese experience of violence at the hands of the Americans is essential to the plot of *Platoon*, but the strategy is employed in other narratives, too, in close connection to representations

of victimhood. If anything, it is even more crucial to Philip Caputo's memoir, *A Rumor of War*, where it is employed in the context not only of the victimization of U.S. soldiers but also of the theme of the universality of atrocity in war. And while in *Platoon* the events in the Vietnamese hamlet are in the end mostly a catalyst for the central symbolic struggle between Elias and Barnes, in Caputo's book, as we shall see, the suffering of the native population is more intricately woven into the fabric of American victimization, as American brutality is in fact represented as another factor contributing to American victimhood.

A Rumor of War tells the story of Caputo's tour of duty around Danang as a lieutenant in the USMC, beginning in 1965. By the end of the book, which is a fairly conventional realist war story, Caputo faces court martial as the officer in charge of a group of soldiers accused of murdering of two Vietnamese men, one of them a teenager. Caputo describes how a patrol of troops from his unit is approached by a young man, Le Dung, who claims that two other youths from his village, "Giao-Tri (2)," are NLF, and tells the Americans about other guerillas and their caches of weapons in the area. That night, overtaken by hatred for "what war was doing to them," for the "VC," and for the land and the American deaths and wounds it has recently caused in his unit, Caputo obsesses over retribution and decides to retaliate against the two suspects in the village. That night, Caputo's platoon is to set up an ambush in the area, but Caputo, though as a lieutenant he lacks the authority to give such an order, instead decides to send his troops into the hamlet on a "revenge patrol" (Turse 2013, ch. 4) to capture or kill the men. He convinces himself that body count is what his superiors are after, and in any case, in a typical fashion of an American claiming Vietnam as his own hunting ground, he concludes that "out there, I could do what I damn well pleased" (Caputo 1985, 316). Death is clearly on everyone's mind, including, perhaps above all, Caputo's. First, he tells the patrol that if they kill the suspects in the village, they will report that the men had fallen into the ambush. Second, as the narrator of his memoir, he admits that he was aware the patrol leader would need little provocation to kill the men, and that he himself "desired" their deaths, wishing that the leader would find a "pretext" to shoot them. After entering the village and the indicated house, the patrol beats a woman and kills two men, both, it will turn out, innocent civilians. One is shot in his bed, and the other, killed while the Americans are transporting him back to their base, turns out to be Le Dung himself, murdered by mistake. Upon finding out what has happened, Caputo instructs his men how to cover up the crime if anyone asks. Eventually the killings come out only when the villagers of Giao-Tri make an official complaint. A trial ensues, and the charges against Caputo and the patrol are in the end dropped, while the actual shooter is acquitted. A few months later, Caputo receives an honorable discharge from the USMC.

A Rumor of War is a rather mediocre book in most respects, and that it is popularly considered one of the particularly important texts in the Vietnam War canon would seem inexplicable were it not for the fact that it aligns so perfectly with the dominant discourses and that its portrayal of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam is ultimately undeservedly generous. Caputo is particularly sly in the framing of the murder and of his own complicity. The overarching strategy in the book is to deflect from the American soldiers any responsibility for their actions, whose brunt is instead shifted onto a whole set of circumstances and factors, including the nature of war in general, the policies of the war in Vietnam specifically, the difficulties of the Vietnamese landscape, the conduct of the Vietnamese themselves, and so forth. Caputo achieves this by the simultaneous universalization, naturalization, and depoliticization of the war in Vietnam. He writes as much in the first paragraph of the prologue, where he announces his memoir as extracted from history and moral judgment, of his own war crime, too, presumably, since this will turn out to be just a thing "men do in war." In writing his book, Caputo states, he is not interested in politics, in any sense of the word, or in condemning "the great men who led us into Indochina and whose mistakes were paid for with the blood of some quite ordinary men"; rather, his aim is to tell "a story about war, about the things men do in war and the thing war does to men" (1985, xi).

The statement that the "mistakes" were already "paid for" with American blood is a perfect illustration of Caputo's language generally. Despite its outward compassion for the American dead and veterans, it is in fact a disguised ideological proclamation, because, like Carter's rhetoric and the mainstream liberal discourses, it posits that the Vietnam War can be safely relegated to history as a closed chapter and that the United States has no outstanding liabilities from the conflict. Most importantly, the choice of vocabulary suggests connotations with "sacrifice," and so with victimhood; that the debt is settled suggests equality of suffering and destruction endured on both sides of the war. Indeed, a close reading of the memoir and its strategies reveals not only its disguised entanglement with ideology but also the convoluted logic applied often explicitly so that the U.S. soldiers, including Caputo himself, emerge from the war as its primary victims.

In the prologue, Caputo also writes that the scale of American atrocity in Vietnam has been exaggerated and notes that the two most common explanations for American atrocities in Vietnam are racism and the dehumanization of the victims on the one hand, and "the frontier-heritage theory" and the inherent "homicidal instincts" of the soldiers on the other. He acquiesces that both contain grains of the truth but then goes on to argue that these two explanations fail to take account of the "barbarous treatment" (1985, xvi) of the civilian population by the NLF, by the ARVN, by troops of the Korean forces in Vietnam, allied with the

United States, and by the French during the First Indochina War. But a reader might rightfully wonder what the connection between the reasons behind American atrocities and the others is, except that they all happened in the same geographical location. Does Caputo mean to say that since both Koreans, as Asians, and Vietnamese could slaughter other Vietnamese, then American racism is negated? Or, in other words, that if one atrocity in Vietnam cannot be attributed to racist motivations, none can? Also, how does taking the atrocities committed by other nationalities into account contribute to the understanding of why *Americans* committed war crimes? Should the acknowledgment of the other atrocities lead to a somehow *lesser* condemnation of American atrocities? Is Caputo suggesting that the other atrocities were *worse*—and if he is, then how should one respond to that? Perhaps the purpose behind this argument is to show the reader that *everyone* commits atrocities and that what happened to the Vietnamese people during the war was a natural condition of an armed conflict—a point that would be in line with Caputo's overarching universalizing tendencies.

Incidentally, the inherent weakness of the privilege of the veteran voice is most starkly revealed in Caputo's claim that American misconduct was less common during the war than it is usually made out to be. Caputo, as an ex-soldier who fought in Vietnam, appears to have the authority to make proclamations about the war, and his judgment of it is deemed as particularly authentic and valuable. But then, his personal perspective on the war, unfiltered in the memoir by contexts broader than his own experiences, is limited to what happened to him, what he witnessed, and what he did. This is not to mention the potential interest in insisting on a given image of the war vis-à-vis his own involvement in a war crime. A more distant perspective, on the other hand, affords a broader view; a historian, for example, is in the position to take into account the evidence from the whole war, not only a sliver of it, limited in both space and time. Caputo's authorial pronouncement that American atrocity in Vietnam has been exaggerated flies in the face of collective veteran efforts like the Winter Soldier Investigation, whose participants wished to prove that it had, in fact, been seriously downplayed. In the prologue to *A Rumor of War*, Caputo writes that after his tour he became involved in the antiwar movement, but his long-term contribution to the memory of the war in Vietnam, unlike that of the WSI veterans, has been to produce his book, a self-absolutory account of a crime that he justifies. Nick Turse's 2013 *Kill Anything That Moves* is a historical, evidence-based and well-received study that also completely contradicts Caputo's "exaggeration" thesis and indirectly weakens the authority which the veteran literary voice is often afforded as "authentic."

In any case, the kind of rationalization of American-perpetrated violence as an inevitable result of the war's conditions is extended in the memoir. According to Caputo, it is not only the American strategy, like

the infamous body count policy, and the universal horror of combat that should be viewed as responsible for American atrocity, but also the conditions specific to Vietnam. In the prologue, he writes that the Vietnamese conflict, as a civil war and a revolution, was particularly vicious and that both "Communists" and "government forces" engaged in mass killings and violence. Atrocity was therefore widespread, an indelible part of the war (1985, xvii). The U.S. soldiers arriving in-country were not born killers; instead, they "learned" that they would be shown no mercy by the Vietnamese if they were taken prisoner, so they themselves succumbed to merciless brutality. In other words, and the feasibility of the argument aside, the conditions of the war are, in Caputo's view, one factor turning the Americans into war criminals.

As for universalization, Caputo begins each conceivable part of the book with quotations. The memoir's motto is from the New Testament, and then the prologue, each of the three parts of the book, each of the nineteen chapters, and the epilogue, all come with their own opening maxims, from Roman authors, other Bible passages, Shakespeare, folk ballads, Hemingway, novels about the American Revolution, famous British World War I poets, classical military thinkers, and philosophers (and one from Rudyard Kipling). This practice is an attempt at locating the Vietnam War within human history and history of conflict, which is of course not technically wrong, except that the proximity of the book's publication date to the actual war turns this practice into a rhetorical device whose purpose is to universalize the war as an event of human nature and another installment in the general history of war. Indeed, reflecting on his own ignorance and eagerness to go into battle, Caputo states explicitly that "every generation" must experience war and subsequently learn through disillusionment (1985, 81). There is an argument to be made against treating *any* armed conflict as a "normal" war, but in this specific context it seems particularly inappropriate, given that at the time of the memoir's release the United States was refusing to pay the much-needed reparations to the country it so thoroughly destroyed, and whose catastrophic situation required humanitarian aid—which the United States was blocking internationally. This acquiescence to the recurrence of armed conflict as somehow necessary in human history—and this form of engagement with traditional thinking about war—can be contrasted with Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, for example, where the verse "dulce et decorum est pro patria mori," instead of providing an unchecked motto, is woven into the entire text, only to expose the fallacies of patriotism and to subvert some ideas associated with it.

Caputo's memoir is a standard narrative of Fussellian irony—the naïve preparation for war, the experience of combat, the disillusionment—only that the final elements arrive in the form of a war crime in which Caputo himself is implicated. This way, the murders of Le Dung and of the other man, Le Du, are not crimes requiring legal consequences, but

rather the whole incident becomes a factor in Caputo's disillusionment. With Caputo as the protagonist and narrator, and with the memoir written from his particular American perspective, the reader is supposed to root for him and be relieved by the end of the book when he is freed of charges. When he accepts the court's conditions that allow him to get away with nothing more than a reprimand, Caputo makes sure to write that after the war he would travel back to Vietnam, find the families of the victims and atone to them in some way he cannot yet himself specify. Perhaps he did that; in terms of the narrative of the memoir, however, the statement is inserted there to costlessly assure the readers of Caputo's decency and free their consciences so they can feel the same relief at his walking free as he does.

To be fair to Caputo, he does criticize the body count policy in Vietnam, seeing it as the determining factor in his and his men's actions. But the concern of the book is entirely solipsistic, as Kinney or Clarke would put it, that is self-absorbed and Americentric. And when he explains why he and his men are not to be held accountable for what they did, Caputo performs an astounding rhetorical trick whereby perpetrators become victims and, thus, contributes to the discourse of American victimization—not to mention the instrumentality of the Vietnamese deaths. The criticism of body count is not there because Caputo sets out to criticize the war (in the prologue he states he is not interested in that), but it is in the book solely because Caputo is charged with murder and he judges the policy to justify the act. This interpretation is supported by Caputo's complaint about the official American rules of engagement, which dictated that Vietnamese people could be shot from a distance or bombed, but it was "wrong" to kill them at close range or to burn villages with white phosphorus grenades; or that in free-fire zones people could be shot if they ran, but not if they stood or walked. The reason for Caputo's protest against these terms is not specifically, as one would expect, that the U.S. military was responsible *across the board* for a wholesale killing of Vietnamese civilians, but rather that, to the U.S. soldier on the ground, the war was one for survival and that he did not care whom he had to kill in the process. The rules of engagement were therefore, according to Caputo, an attempt "to impose on his savage struggle the mincing distinctions of civilized warfare" (229).

All these strategies allow Caputo to portray himself and his troops as victims of the American policy—or as victims of what the Americans were doing to the Vietnamese. The memoir's stated raison d'être is to show "what war does to men," and the phrase returns again in time for the murders. Soon before they kill Le Dung and Le Du, Caputo's platoon, again in an act of vengeful rage—conveniently described as a fit of a berserk frenzy, so that the soldiers have no idea what they are doing—burn another inhabited village to the ground. In the aftermath, Caputo feels "sick of war, sick of what the war was doing to us, sick of [himself]"

(1985, 305). Shortly before he orders his men to kill in Giao-Tri, Caputo prepares the readers' sympathy by enumerating briefly the bad things that have happened to his unit in the past several weeks. After listing the incidents of American exertion and pain, he writes that several other events illustrate "what the war had done to us" (1985, 313)—these turn out to be episodes of his men shooting a wounded "VC" begging for mercy, and another one killing an old woman because she accidently spit some betel nut on him. It requires an extraordinary mental and moral leap to convince oneself, as Caputo evidently has and insists his readers do too, to view a heavily armed U.S. soldier shooting an unarmed elderly civilian woman as an example of something bad happening *to* the American.

Caputo's determination to ascribe all the acts of brutality and violence of his men to "what the war has done to them" reaches an apogee when he justifies the murders in Giao-Tri. First, waiting for his hearing, Caputo writes that his being charged with premeditated murder, like the actual shooter, is "absurd," but more importantly, even the fact that he and his men have been charged at all is "absurd," since they only did what they have been "taught" and ordered to do (1985, 322). Finally, Caputo comes to the conclusion that war itself, the body count policy, and the indistinguishability of the Vietnamese, were the "extenuating circumstances" for the murders in Giao-Tri: The loss of the two lives "could not be divorced from the nature and conduct of the war. [It was] an inevitable product of the war" (1985, 323).

Caputo continues that he understood that in a war like this one, a people's war, "killing some of the people" was unavoidable, but to treat what his men did, he goes on, as normal could lead to uncomfortable questions about the U.S. involvement, so, to keep a clear conscience and keep up appearances, the military will court-martial him and his troops "as common criminals," even though Caputo clearly disagrees with such judgment, comparing their deeds to killing people in a bank robbery (1985, 323). Later Caputo even writes an "essay" on how the conditions of the war should be considered extenuating circumstances. When his defense counsel tells him it is irrelevant, Caputo complains: "But *why*? We didn't kill those guys in Los Angeles, for Christ's sake" (1985, 327).

All of this argumentation comes across as self-serving and deceitful, since Caputo writes as if the two men were killed accidentally by stray bullets during a firefight, and not by the U.S. marines sent to their house by Caputo, who in doing so was violating direct orders. To maintain, as Caputo consistently does, that the reason the USMC has charged him and his men with murder is to conceal the nature of the war and so that other Americans do not have to face the possibility of "evil" of other soldiers and of the conflict, is dismissive of the actual criminality of their actions; killing civilians is a war crime, as is killing prisoners, whom Le Dung and Le Du could at worst be considered had they been taken

for interrogation as suspects. But this assertion also turns the two deaths into little more than a point in an argument about matters of American soul-searching. It is dismissive of the loss of two lives, and of the grief and terror of their loved ones, especially through the related point made that the Vietnamese are dying all over Vietnam anyway.

Moreover, how convincing can the argument of the "indistinguishability" of Vietnamese friend and foe be, when the crime at hand involved premeditated killing of two people accused of being NLF, but against whom there was no actual evidence? (At least one of the victims, of course, turned out to be someone else entirely.) Caputo and his marines did not make sure, by investigation and interrogation, that the men were indeed insurgents before entering their house. Similarly, how can Caputo claim that premeditated murder is somehow justified by the existence of free-fire zones and the American use of weapons "far more horrible"? This is essentially the equivalent of saying—since we've already invaded this country, and since we're already killing these people by bombing and chemicals, and we acquiesce to killing them by indiscriminate fire in zones we decided to set up in their neighborhoods, we might as well enter their houses at night and shoot whoever we want to, insurgent or civilian, and it doesn't even matter if we make the distinction. All in all, given the quality of his argument, Caputo might as well have repeated again that "out there" he could do what he "damn well pleased."

The extension of Caputo's logic is of course that *any* killing by American soldiers in Vietnam, legal or not, must be justified, because this is just the nature of war, and of this war in particular. Caputo is unable to view the murders as much more than a tool *of his own victimization*, which is revealed by his lack of concern for those uncomfortable questions the killings may have raised. In his criticism of the USMC, he does not go out of his way to explore just what might be wrong with the U.S. war in Vietnam in general, taking into account the marriage of Americanism to capitalism and genocidal imperialism, but his complaint simply stops at the extent to which the military policy adversely affects him and his men. Even when he finds out that the victims had been innocent civilians, Caputo, though he admits to feeling guilty and considers the possibility that what transpired was a homicide, still settles on the conviction that the killings were to be blamed directly on the effect of the war on American soldiers (1985, 326).

It is, again, worth keeping in mind that Caputo's goal is not to indict the those who led the United States to Indochina; "they" (as in, "they taught us how to kill," etc.) is a purposefully nebulous concept. When he writes that of his men's actions that "half" of the Vietnamese fatalities in the conflict would have to be considered murder if they were found guilty (1985, 329), the purpose is not to seriously engage with the possible criminality of the American war, but primarily to argue the "absurdity" of charging the men. Caputo is not condemning the U.S.

policies in Vietnam, but quite literally considers *war*, as a state of affairs and a timeless condition, to be the victimizer of soldiers like himself: His men might be killing civilians—civilians might be the victims of his men—but they themselves are the victims of (the) war. The war crimes Caputo's platoon commits are the effect of the troops' victimization, but also a factor: The crimes traumatize the men further and burden their souls with guilt.

It is not surprising the book proved so popular with American audiences. It provides a confession of a wrongdoing and at the same a justification of it, an exoneration, on the most benign, the least precise grounds, of the American boys who might have killed and raped and destroyed in Vietnam. *A Rumor of War* provides its reader with the most comforting interpretation of the war, given the circumstances: In Vietnam, there were only victims. By the end of the trial, awaiting verdict, Caputo laments his own "serious" victimization and gives himself absolution for his war crime, writing that he "already regarded [himself] a casualty of the war, a moral casualty," and adding that "enduring" the ruling would be "an act of penance, an inadequate one to be sure, but I felt the need to atone in some way for the deaths I had caused" (1985, 332).

Just as it reveals the pitfalls of too loyal a reliance on American veteran accounts of the war, so does *A Rumor of War* provide the most obvious instance of American perpetrator fiction and the issues it poses. First of all, the book's success encapsulates perfectly the rehabilitation of the Vietnam War veteran in American culture during the 1980s. Only in such a milieu could a junior officer who gave an unauthorized order to kill two innocent people out of revenge be seen as a sympathetic figure and given the status of an important commentator on the war. The book also illustrates how the liberal and centrist discourses of the era easily fitted alongside the reworkings of the Vietnam War on the conservative right, both phenomena that disregarded the history and politics of the conflict in the context of the Vietnamese side and, instead, favored interpretations that ultimately turned the war into an American myth. Caputo's memoir engages in an ideological framing of victimhood, stripping its significance when regarding the Vietnamese and highlighting instead the many perceived dimensions of the victimization of Americans like Caputo himself, but, by disguising its own engagement in ideology as a timeless lament over the plight of the soldier, it actually tricks readers into rooting for a lieutenant involved in a war crime who got to profit from the sales and reception of his book instead of being in jail, or at least discharged dishonorably from service, and having his reputation and trustworthiness tarnished by what he actually did to his victims.

Second of all, the memoir thus also illustrates that in order to properly assess the ideological implications of the American Vietnam War canon, the reader must resist the texts' forced identification with their veteran authors and soldier protagonists. All of us who are civilians, if we were

to find ourselves in the midst of an armed conflict raging in our homes, no matter how much death we would witness around us, we would still hope above all that our families and loved ones stay alive and safe, and grieve just as much if they did not.

I wonder about those villagers who lodged the official complaint about the two deaths, Le Du's and Le Dung's families and neighbors. In the memoir, the reason Caputo mentions them at all is that the crime came to light only because they spoke out; then they fade from view forever. How Caputo's actions that night affected these people is unimportant; the two killings matter in the story because of how they affected Caputo.

A War of Victims

Casualties of War

As soon as he mentions the villagers' complaint, Caputo writes that "meanwhile" his platoon, as well as the rest of the company and the sister company, suffered heavy casualties at the hands of the "VC" (1985, 325). When he awaits his verdict, he muses about a recent failed coup against the South Vietnamese government, which resulted in ARVNs fighting ARVNs. Meanwhile, "we," Caputo thinks to himself, had to fight the actual NLF guerrillas (1985, 333). He sounds a little bit like a captain in O'Brien's memoir, who refuses a Vietnamese scout a three-day pass to see his terminally sick baby daughter: "this here's your goddamn war. I'm here to fight it with you and to help you, and I'll do it. But you've got to sacrifice too" (2006, 185); the captain also tells the scout that when *his* child gets ill, he is thousands of miles away and his wife has to go to the doctor or the drugstore herself. (The scout goes AWOL.) Back in *A Rumor of War*, Caputo's inevitable complaint about his battalion's casualties follows, punctuated in the middle by the observation that the civilian population "suffered too" (1985, 333) during the fighting—Caputo saw smoke from villages bombed and shelled by the Americans because of their vicinity to enemy positions—before the paragraph quickly returns to American victims in a hospital Caputo visited at the time.

These examples are quoted here to illustrate a specific type of discourse, and namely the insistence, persistent whenever the United States invades another country, that mentioning the victims of the United States must necessarily be accompanied by an acknowledgement that the Americans were victims and suffered, too. To illustrate the discourse by its inversion, Americans should not need the suffering of the American soldier, dead or disabled or traumatized, to convince them that George W. Bush's war on Iraq was bad, because the dead Iraqis and the devastation of their country are more than enough. By the same token, Americans should not need to be told continuously, in all discussions of the

war in Vietnam, about the 58,000 Americans who died there or about the vilified veterans in order to understand that the U.S. destruction of Indochina was a crime.

But, perhaps in the case of Vietnam especially, the discourse dominates. The Vietnamese victims of Americans never stand alone, and images of their suffering and deaths are permissible only when they are presented alongside the American casualty statistics or, in narratives, entangled in some way with the American experience. In *Going After Cacciato*, for example, the chapter "The Things They Didn't Know" is a list of items both tangible and intangible that the Americans soldiers in Vietnam felt deprived of; among them is their total inability to understand the Vietnamese people in the countryside: their language, their values, their emotional states, and their opinions about the war. Paul Berlin, the protagonist, is haunted by his wish to understand them and to know if they "like him"; assisting a medic attending to a little girl with sores, Berlin wonders what the girl thinks and feels and is himself filled with compassion. But at the same time, the discourse of American victimization creeps in. In his thoughts, Berlin wishes that the villagers "separate him from the war" and realize that he hates it and sympathizes with them. More importantly, however, he wants them to recognize that

> he was there, in Quang Ngai, for the same reasons they were: luck of the draw, bad fortune, forces beyond reckoning. . . . He was snared in a web as powerful and tangled as any that victimized the people of My Khe or Pinkville. Sure, they were trapped. Sure, they suffered, sure. But by God, he was just as trapped, just as inured.
>
> (1980, 249–250)

Berlin then wishes he could tell the girl that he has come to Vietnam because he had no idea who was right and whether the conflict was righteous. Later, the narrator returns to the list of things the "grunts" did not know, including victory and satisfaction, and describes their complete ignorance about the war and its workings, how to think and what to feel about it.

Two things, apart from Berlin's burning desire to connect with the girl and the Vietnamese in general, are worth pointing out about this passage. One, the overarching issue is the equalization of the two forms of victimhood in the war. It is expressed not only explicitly in Berlin's thoughts but is supported by the Americentric perspective in the structure of the chapter and by the novel's plot as well. Regarding perspective, the inability to understand the Vietnamese, and the complications it brings, is presented on a par with the soldiers' deprivation of pride in victory, identity-forming knowledge, and so forth. As for plot, that Berlin is trapped inside the war is evinced most glaringly by the fact that half the story is his fantasy about following the book's eponymous deserter

to Paris and thus escaping. The second thing is the depoliticization of the war in Berlin's monologue that simultaneously naturalizes, or mythologizes, the war, and within the context thus constructed establishes the American soldiers and the Vietnamese civilians as two groups ensnared and victimized by bad luck and *force majeure*—as in a tragedy.

A pair of scholars indeed called O'Brien's soldiers in *Cacciato* "victims of the ultimate innocence" (Bellhouse and Litchfield 1982, 166), but the idea of the tragic ensnarement automatically turning the U.S. soldiers in Vietnam into victims is common across the canon. In Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, for example, one of the characters complains: "We're prisoners here. We're prisoners of the war. They've taken away our freedom and they've given it to the gooks, but the gooks don't want it" (1988, 67). Even more poignant is Joker's recollection of his first "confirmed kill" in the novel: Joker's unit comes upon an "ancient farmer" who smiles at the marines, whom, Joker tells the reader, the man views as "frantic children with their fat burden of death" and for whom he feels sorry. Joker shoots him (for no reason): "as he fell forward into the dark water his face was tranquil and I could see that he understood. After my first confirmed kill I began to understand that it was not necessary to understand" (Hasford 1988, 133). Not only does the scene force some form of identification, or understanding, between the Vietnamese civilians and American soldiers, but at the same time it makes implicit ideological statements. The man's smiling, "tranquil" acceptance of his own violent and undeserved death again relocates the war to the metaphysical realm beyond politics, the strategy reinforced by the familiar notion of the war's senselessness ("not necessary to understand").

In other instances still, the Americans are victimized by their own violence against the Vietnamese, as, for example, in the previously discussed case of Caputo and his men in *A Rumor of War*. Another instance where the plot hinges on violence-inflicted becoming violence-received is Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*, where Paco's severe trauma in large part stems from the gang rape, killing, and mutilation of a young Vietnamese girl in which he participated. While his own wounding and the deaths of his unit are described at the beginning of the book, the assault and murder of the girl are revealed only at the very end, together with the full extent of Paco's trauma and alienation, which endows the act with special significance. That the placement of the incident can lead to readings suggesting American victimization is evinced, for example, by Stacy Peebles, who finds Paco and his victim "subtly associated" (2015, 149) as symbols of the devastation of the war and laments Paco's anguish over the rape, without considering the implications of the victimization discourse that disclaims the possibility that Paco should be court-martialed rather than sympathized with. But the extent to which Peebles sees the veteran as a victim is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that in comparing *Paco's Story* with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, she claims that Paco and Sethe belong to the

same category of characters, "both perpetrators and victims" (2015, 145), with gender as apparently the main line of difference between the two. In Peebles' analysis, what slavery is to *Beloved* and Sethe, the Vietnam War is to *Paco's Story* and Paco, and it is the latter that "emerges as the bleaker portrait, one in which any kind of community proves to be a fragmenting rather than a sustaining force" (2015, 138).

The pervasiveness of the discourse that allows discussion of victims of American violence only in conjunction with American victimization is demonstrated in another critical analysis of *Paco's Story*. Gina Marie Weaver, in an otherwise compelling and necessary book on the cultural erasure of rape of Vietnamese women by U.S. soldiers, writing about the dehistoricizing quality of the friendly fire discourse states that under its sway, "forgotten are the horrible consequences of the war for the working class and people of color . . . and the costs of the war to the Vietnamese" (2010, 135). Evidently, the discourse under discussion requires that even in a book on a subject such as Weaver's the reader must be reminded that Americans suffered because of the war in Vietnam, too; the issue here is not the plight of the draftees per se, but rather the ubiquity of the rhetorical device and its ideological connotations. But Weaver also cannot resist viewing Paco and his soldier buddies as victims somehow entangled in a web of their own brutality. Commenting on the portrayal of Gallagher, the character who begins the gang rape, Weaver observes that the assault is preceded by long paragraphs about his traumatic working-class childhood and abusive father, a structural strategy that, as she argues, centers codes of "violent masculinity" as a response to the cultural disempowerment of working-class men, and therefore "makes it clear that this rape is a logical outgrowth of the trauma of the working-class oppression of which Gallagher and the other soldiers are a product" (Weaver 2010, 109). Weaver thus sees *Paco's Story* as revelatory of certain systems of oppression in the United States which engendered rape in Vietnam. What this perspective fails to take into account, however, is that rape has *always* been part of war, as one of the forms of violence soldiers exert on civilian populations. The American soldiers are not "special"; looking for reasons as to why rape so commonly occurs in wartime, one should examine the practically universal and culturally deeply embedded patriarchal structures that turn sexual violence against the enemy's women into a tool of oppression and retribution, rather than probe the specifics of the U.S. culture for explanations that ultimately draw the American assailants into the web of victimization. Weaver's arguments thus illustrate how American exceptionalism feeds into the discourse of American victimization in wars they themselves wage: It is difficult to imagine similar reasoning being applied to, or any such nation-specific explanation in fact being necessary at all for, the rapes of Chinese women by Japanese troops in Nanjing in 1937, or of German women by Soviet soldiers in 1945, for example.

When Michael Herr criticizes Americans back home who during the war claimed to feel compassion only for the Vietnamese and ignored the U.S. soldiers (1978, 60), he refers to the popular perception of the hostility to soldiers and veterans on the radical left and makes the uncontentious point that young Americans sent to Vietnam suffered because of the war, too. Similarly, when in *Winners & Losers* Gloria Emerson writes that in the war, "among the most helpless and humiliated were the soldiers themselves" (1992, 7), she argues that compassion cannot be dictated by ideological motives and that the victimization of the troops must be recognized as part of the war's landscape. Both statements are not in themselves controversial, of course, in physical as well as political sense, the latter in the context of the now well-documented racism and classism of the draft system, and especially in regard to those who were drafted against their will and lacked the resources, personal or social, to resist it. But Herr's and Emerson's assertions now testify to how the Vietnam War discourse has shifted. *Winners & Losers* was published in 1976, *Dispatches* a year later, still during the period of the public blackout of the war's memory and general inattention to veteran issues, a national attitude that was, as we know, about to change diametrically in the upcoming decade. The Vietnam War literature and cinema, in their sheer mass, contributed to this shift. But kernels of these same discourses are found even in the best American Vietnam War journalism preoccupied with the worst behaviors of American soldiers in Vietnam. This type of in-depth reporting could not always easily escape the throes of the discourse of American victimization. In the long run, and when fitted within the dominant cultural narrative of the war in Vietnam, these journalistic narratives sometimes also turn out to contain strategies significant from the perspective of how victimhood can be framed.

In *My Lai 4*, a book published in 1970 that gathers his reporting on the massacre and the scandal up to that point, Seymour Hersh delivers a factual, unforgiving account of what Charlie Company did in the village. The image of berserking soldiers, exacting revenge for their fallen comrades in an agonized fury, does not hold up particularly well when one reads about just how systematic the killing was. Some people were shot on sight or in their homes, but the Americans also went house to house bringing people out to put them in groups in which they awaited execution, some groups taken to a drainage ditch to be shot there so their bodies would fall in. The Americans also went around gathering people and placing them in bunkers until they were full, and then threw grenades in. When most villagers were dead, the soldiers took a break, and afterward went about killing off the wounded and survivors, many of them children and babies previously protected by their mothers with their own bodies as they were themselves shot. To perpetrate such a deliberate and methodical massacre surely demanded a specific mindset from Charlie Company, but the details of their crime and brutality, as

described by Hersh, leave no room for sympathy with whatever trauma may have "provoked" them. Any non-psychopathic, standardly empathetic reader of *My Lai 4* is likely to be deeply affected by the fate of the villagers, as it is described by Hersh. In the part of the book dealing with the subsequent cover-up, coming-out, and the investigation, the injustice of Captain Medina's walking free, without so much as being charged, is clear. Hersh faced some abuse for his work on the story; in her own book, Emerson writes about a box of letters in her possession, all of them hate mail Hersh received in relation to My Lai, some of them anti-Semitic, some accusing Hersh of communism and anti-Americanism, some expressing the conviction that Calley should be awarded the Medal of Honor, and one from the mother of Paul Meadlo, a perpetrator at My Lai, praying that Hersh "will suffer for what you have done to us" (1992, 38).

And yet even Hersh, seemingly, cannot quite get away from conceptualizing at least some degree of victimization of the Americans, at least while working on the material in 1969 and 1970. The final chapter of *My Lai 4* cannot be viewed as anything else than a specific choice of framing the massacre—shifting the optic away from Vietnam and onto the impact of My Lai on Charlie Company. It begins with the observations that mothers were the first to notice that the men who killed at My Lai were suffering from traumatic memories. Interestingly enough, the first person to appear in this last chapter is Mrs. Meadlo: It is unclear whether she sent her hate letter before or after the interview with Hersh. Other mothers are then quoted, expressing anger and blaming the press, the government, and the officers who gave orders. One of these women states: "So what if a few Vietnamese got shot? They've killed 40,000 of our boys over there" (1970, 182). Their reactions are one thing, but from the perspective of what the book finally communicates, the inclusion of their words is a rhetorical device that sets the tone for the rest of the final chapter, and essentially an emotional appeal for some degree of compassion with the Americans affected by My Lai. Hersh's decision to finish his story of the massacre in this way can be seen as a matter of journalistic fairness, or as a softening ploy necessary to successfully market the book in the United States. But, in the end, is it really relevant, to the people of My Lai or to outsiders judging the event, that Private So-and-So, as his mother swears, had never been in trouble with the police before? The brief life stories of Charlie Company men recounted here align, essentially, with Fussell's ironic nature of war experience: My son was a good boy, he came back traumatized and a killer; I thought the army would help get my head together, I ended up shooting a bunch of civilians.

It goes without saying that this point, the progression from a "normal" American boy to a killer, is omnipresent and overarching in much of the Vietnam canon: It is the secrets of the war brutalizing marines in *Dispatches*, the "what war does to men" in *A Rumor of War*, the

transformation of Mary Anne in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," Chris Taylor shooting at the disabled man in *Platoon*, Rafter Man celebrating his first confirmed kill in *The Short-Timers*, the destination of all heart-of-darkness trips. The examples from texts are too numerous to be systematically reviewed here, but one particularly memorable instance comes from *Going After Cacciato*: In his backpack, Cacciato carries a family photo album labeled "VUES OF VIETAM," with a hundred pictures inside arranged chronologically, beginning with a shot of Cacciato and his family in front of a Christmas tree and ending with smiling Cacciato holding up by the hair the head of a "VC" boy he has killed (O'Brien 1980, 117).

The inclusion of the final chapter of *My Lai 4* eases its American readership out of the horror of the preceding narrative; it is not a strategy of justification, but of rationalization. In the last three pages, some men from Charlie Company express their thoughts on the events of March 16. One insists that the massacre is being blown out of proportion, since incidents like My Lai happen in Vietnam all the time. Another admits he has no "feelings toward it [the massacre] one way of another" (Hersh 1970, 184). Others, in a somewhat stunted manner, admit that they know what happened at My Lai was not right. One man attempts to commit suicide after the scandal breaks out and he loses his job. Hersh writes that several of the men feel no guilt whatsoever: "I didn't care nothing about the Vietnamese," says one, while another states that he "felt no remorse for the Vietnamese civilians while watching them get slaughtered" (185). Calley, heroically, insists that he take the full responsibility, despite the advice of his lawyers; Hersh calls him "loyal" (186) and describes the physical strain the whole affair is causing him, like weight loss and bouts of vomiting. Finally, *My Lai 4* ends with the words of Herbert Carter, a PFC in Charlie Company who did himself kill innocent civilians for no reason even before the massacre (these incidents are noted in the book), but on March 16, after a few hours, shot himself in the foot and was evacuated from the village. Carter says:

> "The United States is supposed to be a peace-loving country; yet they tell them [soldiers] to do something and then they want to hang them for it."
>
> As far as he was concerned, Carter said, what happened at My Lai 4 was not a massacre, but a logical result of the war in Vietnam: "The people didn't know what they were dying for and the guys didn't know why they were shooting them."
>
> (1970, 187)

I do not wish to argue that Hersh's intention was to really make the men of Charlie Company into victims, or even necessarily to create a faint sense of sympathy toward them. I suspect that the fault of *My Lai*

4 in view of my criticism of its final chapter can be ascribed to its time of publication, almost immediately after the cover-up became exposed and before Calley's trial even began (the book was published in June 1970, and the trial started in November). I can imagine that being an American with a capacity of self-criticism in the aftermath of the My Lai scandal must have been a confusing experience, and the event itself a difficult thing to wrap one's head around, and perhaps Hersh was similarly torn, in addition to his obligation as a journalist to maintain the veneer of strict objectivism that defined the profession in the 1960s. The public reactions to Calley's guilty verdict, among which open protest against his eventual sentence was common and vocal, is one indication of the state of mind of a sizeable portion of the American society, concerning the country's involvement in Vietnam and atrocity against the Vietnamese. As an example to illustrate the scope of pro-Calley hysteria, an astonishing voice in the matter came from a Georgia reverend, speaker at a pro-Calley rally: "There was a crucifixion 2,000 years ago of a man named Jesus Christ. I don't think we need another crucifixion of a man named Rusty Calley" (quoted in Linenthal 1980, 86; "Rusty" is Calley's nickname). Eqbal Ahmad, as quoted by C.D.B. Bryan, gives an interpretation of the outcry:

> Aren't you shocked the American people are now trying to make a hero out of [Calley]?. . . Why are these Americans protesting Calley's sentence?. . . Because they sense that Calley's trial is their trial as well. They are crying to the President, "Get us off the hook, too!"
>
> (Bryan 1991, 239)

But the fact remains that traces of the eventual victimization discourse are detectable in *My Lai 4*. Carter's words, and the significance attributed to them by making them the concluding sentence of the book, are reminiscent of Caputo's conclusions as to the causes and context of his own war crime. The pairing of the victims and the perpetrators in one seemingly logical sequence, hinging on the conviction that the war was bad for everyone involved, suggests that both the people of Son My and the men of Charlie Company were victims of the same phenomenon, only that their victimization differed in degree and nature: the first because they died, the second because they killed.

Something both similar and different can be said to occur in Daniel Lang's *Casualties of War* (1969), another in-depth journalistic account of a crime perpetrated by U.S. soldiers: similar because the text inadvertently comes to support the dominant victimization discourse, different because its representation of American victimhood is more fundamental to the story and thus less rhetorical and more straightforward. *Casualties of War* was published as a long-form investigative report in the *New Yorker* and simultaneously released as a book that same year. It is

based on Lang's interviews with "Sven Eriksson" (real name Robert M. Storeby), a former PFC in the Air Cavalry, and concerns the so-called Incident on Hill 192. In 1966, during his tour in Vietnam, Eriksson was part of a five-man squad sent on a reconnaissance mission in the Binh Dinh Province in the Central Highlands. The patrol's leader, Sergeant "Tony Meserve" (real name David E. Gervase), twenty at the time, informed his men in advance that he planned to enter a village and kidnap a Vietnamese girl, so they could take her with them on the five-day mission to repeatedly rape her, and that they would kill her afterwards. That is essentially what happened, except that Eriksson refused to participate in the rape, and the girl was killed after one day, not five (on Hill 192). The squad's victim was Phan Thi Mao, around twenty years old, of Cat Tuong village, tied with rope and taken from her house. Eriksson reported the crime, and although initially his superiors took no action and he himself was threatened with death by Meserve and others, his persistent effort to bring the men to justice eventually succeeded and they were court-martialed. The soldier who actually killed Phan, first by stabbing her and then by shooting her in the head, initially received a life sentence, but after a series of commutations, he became eligible for parole after four years served (in the early 1990s, as a white supremacist, he would become implicated as an accessory in the murder of a black man by a fellow racist). Meserve's initial ten-year sentence also ended with eligibility for parole after four years. Of the two others in the squad, one was incarcerated for just under two years, and the other was acquitted.

Casualties of War is an extraordinary Vietnam text, especially because its sympathies are completely divorced from the conventional expectations of military loyalty, moral ambiguity protective of the integrity of the American presence in Indochina, or compassion with the U.S. soldiers just because they are in Vietnam. Its moral compass points unwaveringly toward the experiences of Phan and of Eriksson, not because he is an American soldier, but because he behaves so unlike an American soldier. Indeed, Lang, who studied the case files of the four court martials, uses the fact that Meserve was so highly regarded as a perfect soldier among his peers and superiors,[11] even after Phan's murder, to confer an implied criticism of the military culture as a pathology. Eriksson's mission to bring his squad to justice is met with threats, condemnation, or disbelief (that he would care for a Vietnamese person) from virtually every person in the military he has come into contact with. What is perhaps the most unique about the text is that we learn more, relatively speaking, about the victim and her world: not only her name—Eriksson always refers to her as Mao, her first name—and age, but also the name of her sister, who witnessed Phan's kidnapping and later testified in the perpetrators' trials. We learn that her father was away in a market the day she was taken, and that her mother chased after Meserve's squad to give her daughter a scarf to take with her, with which the soldiers would

later gag her. Eriksson watched the girl's suffering and terror for a day, and he relays to Lang her emotional state in as much detail as he can. We learn that Phan's mother and sister went searching for her and found her bloodied brassiere; because South Vietnamese soldiers helped them, the NLF abducted Phan's mother, accusing her of having guided the ARVN to the guerillas' ammunition dump. Eriksson tells Lang that Phan's sister was later also abducted by the NLF and that only the father remained. "Who says we don't get along with Charlie?" he says. "Between us, we've taken care of that whole family" (1969, 102).

Still, Eriksson is necessarily at the center of Lang's text, whose second strand of narration becomes the veteran's internal anguish: first, during the time of Phan's ordeal that he witnessed, all the while struggling with himself over whether he should kill Meserve and the others; later, over the death threats against him and the frustration of the chain of command's refusal to investigate his report; and finally, after his discharge from the Army, over his continued fear of reprisals from those who viewed his actions as a betrayal, and over his deep feeling of guilt, traumatic memories of Phan, and spiritual disquietude. The text's perspective and Eriksson's role in exposing the crime explain why he can say that Phan "was the big thing that had *happened* in the war *to me*" (Lang 1969, 106; emphasis added). But discursively, the statement falls into the larger strategy of representation that insists that "Vietnam" was something that *happened to Americans*, implicit in many texts but exemplified starkly in *A Rumor of War*, for example—or in My Lai envisaged as an American tragedy, for that matter. Hersh records one of the Charlie Company "grunts" saying that the massacre "was the worst thing that ever happened to me" (1970, 184). Norman Schwarzkopf, still a lieutenant colonel, interviewed in the early 1970s by C.D.B. Bryan, speaks of the rift opened among the American people by the war: "Vietnam did that to us"; he adds that the American nation itself has become a casualty of the war (Bryan 1991, 368).

In *Casualties of War*, Eriksson never foregrounds that argument, however. In the text's last paragraph, a familiar theme returns briefly when Eriksson admits that the men of the squad "were [not] beyond pity," as other American soldiers could have been in their place and behaved the same way, but ultimately, instead of engaging in the usual justifications and rationalizations, he states that he "would never cease to condemn the members of the patrol personally for their crime" (1969, 120). But Eriksson's final thoughts return to Vietnam, in his mind's eye freed of the American presence and the violence it brings. He recalls seeing an Asian woman on a bus recently, whom he imagined as a Vietnamese peasant woman on her way with others to work in the paddies near the hamlet of Cat Tuong, but in peacetime, so that they do not have to "smell the bodies that were always rotting for miles around. . . . The only thing these women had to do on their way to the stream was breathe pure mountain air" (1969, 121).

The cinematic adaptation of *Casualties of War*, Brian De Palma's 1989 film of the same title starring Thuy Tu Le as "Oanh" (Phan), Michael J. Fox as "Max" Eriksson, and Sean Penn as Sergeant Meserve, is, for a number of reasons, a particularly interesting Vietnam War text.[12] For one, among all the American Vietnam War movies, it is the one that comes perhaps the closest to being an antiwar picture. That no war film can truly be antiwar is an old adage, but in the case of *Casualties of War* the story excludes some of the important elements that make the axiom true most of the time, for example the sentimentality of the bonds between soldiers or the ultimate value of going through war's hell to gain experience and wisdom. Eriksson has no allegiance to his fellow soldiers, but rather his heroism is defined by his determined outsider status. This of course means that the film again revolves around the trope of friendly fire, but instead of endorsing the spectacularism of combat, it focuses as much on Eriksson's attempts to help Oanh as it does on her ordeal in the lead-up to her death. As a result, the amount of time the viewer spends with her, as opposed to the typical representations of Vietnamese victims usually shown onscreen long enough to be shot, also limits the viability of viewing her suffering as exclusively symbolic of the American experience.

The film was well-received by critics in 1989, but it did considerably worse at the box office than the blockbuster *Born on the Fourth of July*, released a few months later (according to the details provided in the two films' Box Office Mojo profiles as of July 28, 2019). It was met, apparently, with some complaint, the controversy testifying today to the emerging limits of critical discourse on the war, including the question of who was permitted to speak about it:

> Vietnam veterans, who are now becoming an obnoxious lobby of their own, are protesting. They say *Casualties of War* paints too bloody a picture of the American soldier. They even accuse De Palma of trying to make the soldiers look bad because [he] himself didn't serve in the war.
>
> (Fitzpatrick 1989)

Thirty years later, *Casualties of War* remains on the peripheries of canon awareness. In terms of gauging its cultural endurance, it is instructive to resort to the Internet and the number of popular ratings various movies have received as of August 15, 2017. Table 3.1 is a list of the top fifteen most watched Vietnam films, based on statistics pulled from the Internet Movie Database and Rotten Tomatoes user (but not critics') scores.[13]

While this might be an imperfect methodology[14]—for example, I am not in a position to explain why certain movies are relatively more popular on one website than on the other—I still think this is a good way of getting at a representative approximation of the movies' continuing relevance. *Casualties of War*, as we can see, has not fared too well, mirroring

Table 3.1 American Vietnam War Films and Numbers of Ratings They Have Received

	Title	*Year*	*No. of ratings (IMDb)*	*No. of user ratings (Rotten Tomatoes)*	*Total*
1.	Full Metal Jacket	1987	532,282	323,337	855,619
2.	Apocalypse Now	1979	487,257	284,296*	771,553
3.	Platoon	1986	314,950	239,172	554,122
4.	The Deer Hunter	1978	252,076	102,727	354,803
5.	First Blood	1982	184,020	138,460	322,480
6.	Good Morning, Vietnam	1987	106,107	131,119	237,226
7.	Rambo: First Blood Part II	1985	125,614	99,349	224,963
8.	Born on the Fourth of July	1989	82,161	59,091	141,252
9.	Jacob's Ladder	1990	81,284	52,696	133,980
10.	Casualties of War	1989	35,209	21,669	56,878
11.	Hamburger Hill	1987	20,030	32,946	52,976
12.	Missing in Action	1984	11,315	12,289	23,604
13.	Heaven & Earth	1994	11,345	5,484	16,829
14.	Coming Home	1978	10,037	5,089	15,126
15.	Uncommon Valor	1983	7,531	6,848	14,379

Source: The Internet Movie Database and Rotten Tomatoes.
*Excluding the 3,561 separate ratings of *Redux*.

the fate of the book it was based on. It is difficult to say whether *Casualties of War* the book sold well in 1969. The article and the book were published in October, and my edition is a second printing, still from the same year, so perhaps this means it did. It certainly would have reached a sizeable audience in the *New Yorker*. It was met with "extraordinary reception from critics," but twenty years later, it seems, it was already somewhat forgotten, except as the basis for its film adaptation, and difficult to find (Fitzpatrick 1989). It seems that it has fallen out of cultural memory, if statistics from the popular book review social network Goodreads are anything to go by—not necessarily for the critical value of the ratings but for the sheer number of readers as an indicator of continued popularity and perceived importance. On July 28, 2019, Lang's *Casualties of War* had fifty-six ratings and ten reviews; it was also anthologized in *Reporting Vietnam: American Journalism 1959–1975*, whose single-volume edition has received 137 ratings, the two-volume one—around 70–80 for each part. Gloria Emerson's *Winners & Losers* seems to have become similarly overlooked, with forty-nine ratings and nine reviews (the decline in the popularity of Emerson's book, in contrast to *Dispatches*, was observed already in Bonn 1993, 28–29). In comparison, *My Lai 4* currently has 408 ratings and 19 reviews, still a measly number considering that Hersh's place in history is pretty much assured—but maybe not surprising given the subject matter. Frances FitzGerald's 500-page hardback history,

Fire in the Lake, fares better with 1,977 ratings and 93 reviews. *A Rumor of War* has 11,829 ratings and 548 user reviews, *Dispatches*—14,671 and 936, respectively. The fictional *The Things They Carried* has 228,484 ratings and 12,964 reviews, numbers comparable to both *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *A Farewell to Arms*. Perhaps, like I suggested in the case of *My Lai 4*, the subject matter and the portrayal of American soldiers (despite Eriksson's heroism—or perhaps precisely *because* his heroism was essentially antimilitary) proved unattractive to the audience in the United States in the long run, and this is part of the reason why the story of Phan Thi Mao's death has not persisted in the cultural memory of the war.

Still, the script of *Casualties of War*, written by Vietnam veteran and playwright David Rabe (who disliked the film's final cut and distanced himself from it), diverges from the facts and from Lang's narrative. Those points of difference are significant, especially as the most important changes are made at the beginning and the end of the film, quite literally framing the events on Hill 192, presumably so as to make them more palatable or understandable to 1980s mass cinema audiences. In fact, in her study of the obfuscation of rape in American cultural memory of the Vietnam War, Weaver (2010, 123–160) argues that such tweaks are common in filmic adaptations of books that she considers "antiwar" (e.g., *The Short-Timers*, remade as *Full Metal Jacket*) and in movies about the conflict in general; she links the resulting re-visioning of the war in Hollywood both to Kinney's friendly fire trope and to Susan Jefford's (1989) well-known thesis that the aftermath of the Vietnam War served as a vehicle of "cultural remasculinization" in the United States.

At the outset of Lang's article, Eriksson explains, in the familiar vein known since the editorial response to My Lai, that "decent fellows, who wouldn't dream of calling an Oriental a 'gook' or a 'slopehead' back home" (1969, 19), began to change in Vietnam, becoming capable of abusing civilians. But Eriksson is cool about the value of this observation in the context of American-perpetrated atrocity. He recalls a conversation with a friend in his platoon, in which he told him about Meserve's plan to kidnap and rape. The friend, Eriksson claims, responded by saying that Meserve had always been "considerate and agreeable," and that his "mean streak" had developed only recently, as a result of the three years Meserve had spent in the infantry in Vietnam. Eriksson maintains a distance from the implication: "The way [he] talked about him, Meserve sounded as though he had become a kind of war casualty" (Lang 1969, 27). Another habitual point is also made, namely that the NLF *also* committed atrocity—but Eriksson refuses to engage with this line of thinking or to even accept it as a legitimate argument, saying that other soldiers tried to justify their mistreatment of the Vietnamese by claiming that

> it was no worse than Charlie was doing. I heard that argument over and over again, and I could never buy it. It was like claiming that

> just because a drunken driver hit your friend, you had right to get in your car and aim it at some pedestrian.
>
> (1969, 20–21)

Perhaps most significantly, in a reversal of the strategy found in other veteran narratives, in his interview with Lang, Eriksson explicitly foregrounds the suffering of the Vietnamese over what happened to him and his fellow soldiers, something that Lang himself notices and points out, writing that although he could focus on his own traumatic experiences, like fire fights or ambushes when soldiers in his unit were wounded, Eriksson instead "unhesitatingly acknowledges" (1969, 12) that his most important memory of the war is what happened to Phan.

The film, however, resonates differently. At the beginning, Eriksson's platoon is ambushed by the NLF and he becomes lodged in a caved-in underground tunnel, a lethal predicament from which he is rescued by Meserve. The script thus reinforces the friendly fire trope, adds a new dynamic to the relationship between the sergeant and Eriksson—and encourages a sense of moral ambiguity in the audience that will come when the patrol kidnaps Oanh. Later, when the platoon is in the vicinity of a village, an American soldier, Meserve's close friend, is killed by the unseen NLF, and it is this event that brutalizes the sergeant, in both meanings of the word; this interpretation is shared by Fitzpatrick, who in his contemporaneous review of the film argued that the film's preamble was added to "humanize" Meserve and convince the viewer that combat trauma pushed him toward madness, a rhetorical device precisely avoided in Lang's article (1989; see also Weaver 2010, 147–148). Wishing to find some respite from the grief, Meserve and two other soldiers attempt to visit a brothel, but are denied entrance and told that it is for ARVN use only. The deep sense of injustice—the fact that the Americans are losing lives and losing friends defending the Vietnamese, who refuse to show gratitude, and especially that the despised and useless ARVN are given privileges that the Americans are deprived of—pushes Meserve over the edge. He decides to rape a girl as retribution for the frustrations and pain he and his fellow Americans experience. Now, this addition to the script does not exactly make Meserve a more sympathetic character ("De Palma tilts the deck in Meserve's favor but the sergeant still comes off as a figure from your worst nightmare"; Fitzpatrick 1989). But it reveals to us what was expected, or acceptable, of Vietnam narratives at the time of canon-formation. Oanh's death cannot be *completely* senseless, the result of the actions of depraved American men, Meserve's scheme simply facilitated by the power he possessed over the Vietnamese in the conditions of the war, and the men's capacity to follow him in committing the crime enforced by the dehumanization of those people. Instead, in the film the girl's death must be accommodated into the Americanized war—and the war and the suffering it causes the "grunts"

must be made, as usual, the cause of the squad's crime, and by extension, of what happens to Oanh. Every Vietnam narrative must, after all, be about the effect of the war on Americans, about what it pushed them to do. Moreover, while Phan was in fact killed by one of the men, on Meserve's orders, in the film the entire squad, except for Eriksson, shoot Oanh with their rifles. In this light, the review *Casualties of War* received in *Los Angeles Times* exemplifies how the film could be construed in the context of the discourse insisting on viewing the American soldier as a victim on a par with the Vietnamese. In De Palma's film, the *LA Times* critic argued, "everyone is a casualty of war: not only the poor brutalized girl but the men themselves, turned by this hell into monsters or cowardly bystanders" (Wilmington 1989).

But the ending of the film is even more astounding as a rewriting. Like in real life, after Eriksson reports the crime, and is initially dismissed by his immediate commanders, he finally succeeds in having the four other squad members brought before court martial. Meserve and two of the men are sentenced to ten, fifteen, and eight years of hard labor, respectively; Oanh's killer is sentenced to life imprisonment. The story of the squad thus ends with the sense of righteous punishment, in place of the lax sentences, or lack of them, in real life: "De Palma spares us the real life ending, possibly because it would make the film much too depressing to survive as a commercial venture" (Fitzpatrick 1989). Moreover, Weaver (2010, 149–150) observes that the changed ending is necessary in a larger strategy of the adaptation: While Lang's reporting emphasizes the pathology of the military that easily tolerated crime against civilians among its men and underscores the fact that in the end Eriksson did not try to help Phan, the film rewrites the story, for example by including Eriksson's failed attempt to escape with the girl, so that it becomes a tale of Eriksson's heroism. In this new version, the perpetrators need to be adequately punished, so that the hero's mission may succeed. As such, Weaver concludes, Oanh's suffering is instrumentalized as merely a "stage upon which Eriksson's heroism is played" (149), while the script works to obscure both the widespread rape of Vietnamese women by Americans and the general lack of accountability within the military, suggesting that what happened to Oanh was an extraordinary event in the war, and one in the end amended by the admirable actions of a heroized American.

The very final scene of the film is also tweaked. In the article, Eriksson's seeing an Asian woman on the bus makes him think of Vietnamese women walking through their country freely, without the war and the danger brought by Americans, which at the time of publication, in 1969, was a political message. In the film, the woman on the bus (also played by Thuy), a student in San Francisco, forgets her scarf, and Eriksson, waking up from a nightmare, jumps out to catch up and give it to her; he speaks to her in Vietnamese, and she suggests, smiling, that

he has mistaken her for someone else and walks away. The two changes at the film's conclusion, then, have a redemptive narrative purpose, which conceal an ideological proposition: The wrongdoers have been punished, and with justice served, the war itself, and the questions of American culpability, move into the recesses of history. The Vietnamese Other, once the object of American violence, has now been accepted and assimilated in the United States. The film thus follows the pattern of simultaneous *historicization* of the war, in the sense of pushing it back as an event whose immediate reverberations have passed, and *dehistoricization*, or mythologization, that serves the purposes of American ideologies.

They're All V.C.

Let us return again to the beginning of *Casualties of War* the film, and the invention of the attack-in-the-village scene. Eriksson, only a few weeks in-country, is a typical military naïf. But what matters to my discussion is the contextualization of his ingenuousness. Eriksson's platoon arrives in the unnamed village, greeted by waving friendly children, whom the soldiers gift with candy and other goods; Eriksson is so green that, grinning, he helps an old man plough his field. The idyllic scene of the soldiers' respite is interrupted suddenly when an NLF sniper kills one of the men, the event, as we have seen, sending Meserve "over the edge." Later the sergeant and some others, while showering, discuss the betrayal of the Vietnamese and express their hatred for them. Oanh's abduction is subsequently framed as retaliation.

A scene involving an American soldier ploughing Vietnamese fields is perhaps not to be found in any other Vietnam War text, but the fact is that the setup described above is two things at once: a My Lai reenactment pattern ("we have suffered casualties, therefore we want revenge"), and a major strategy of representation in American Vietnam texts, one so omnipresent that it deserves its own trope name: "they're all VC." By this I mean the line of reasoning that American soldiers mistreated Vietnamese civilians because they either could not distinguish between innocents and insurgents (the less malevolent version), or because they had come to learn that *all* Vietnamese could potentially belong to or sympathize with the NLF (the more malevolent version). At the root of the issue is also the American frustration with the perceived impassion of the Vietnamese, and the impossibility of reading their faces, a problem mentioned often in the canon (perhaps most memorably on the very first page of Michael Herr's *Dispatches*). Both versions of the "they're all VC" trope must, in the end, come down to the same conclusion: All Vietnamese should be viewed as hostiles, the view compounded by the racially motivated dehumanization of the natives and the mythological constructs underlying the American perception.

The treacherousness of the Vietnamese is represented across the canon with uniformity perhaps surpassing all other common tropes, often relying on the inversion of the World War II model of grateful European civilians welcoming G.I.s to their liberated towns: The image is precisely that of seemingly friendly, waving children (or smiling farmers), used at an early point in some narratives only to underscore the betrayal of the villagers later on. An American wartime G.I. latrine in Saigon apparently once bore this piece of graffiti on its wall: "This is a war of the unwilling/Led by the unqualified/Dying for the ungrateful" (quoted in Pratt 1999, 153). The same sentiment is found in a letter home from a sergeant in Vietnam, quoted by Susan Jeffords as she enumerates the many sources of the perceived victimization among veterans: As the letter explains, the sergeant's platoon leader

> died fighting for a people who have no concern for the war, people he did not understand, [who] knew where the enemy were, where the booby traps were hidden, yet gave no support. People that he would give portions of his food to yet would try to sell him a Coke for $1. . . . We're fighting, dying, for a people who resent our being over here.
>
> (1989, 123)

In fact, Jeffords suggests that "perhaps the most distressing form of victimization came for American soldiers in their sense that they were betrayed" (1989, 123) by the Vietnamese, including their ostensible ally, the ARVN. In *Winners & Losers*, Emerson describes a conversation she had after the war with a veteran, who by the time of their talk had become a novelist and a graduate at Harvard. The man expressed the wish to go back to Vietnam, and, as he began explaining why, this was Emerson's reaction:

> I tried to listen, but the story was such an old one by then, the ending was never easy to take. He had asked a village girl . . . if there were any VC around, was it okay for the platoon to go down the road. No VC. The girl was sure. The platoon moved on. But she deceived them. There were mines. Some of the Americans were wounded. The veteran wanted to go back and find the girl.
>
> "I wouldn't hurt her, or do anything," the man said. "I just want to talk to her, to find out why she did it."
>
> (1992, 16)

Emerson points out that five years have passed since the event and yet the man still fails to comprehend why the girl in Quang Ngai "wanted the platoon to be blown apart" (1992, 16), even though the reasons are obvious. She leaves them unstated, but clearly the point is that the typical American perspective precludes the possibility of seeing oneself as a

villainous figure: an invading soldier of a terrifyingly destructive foreign empire, whom the native population may wish to fight against. But an understanding like Emerson's, that truly at the heart of each perceived deception, of each "no VC," were not the American soldiers about to step onto a mine or walk into ambush, but the Vietnamese themselves, is rare in American narratives. (It is also worthwhile going back to Emerson's book to read her account of why Vietnamese children would help the NLF [1992, 92–96].)

Instead, the sense of betrayal is omnipresent in Vietnam War literature and film, conveyed directly in characters' dialogues or implicitly in narrative arcs and strategies of representation. In *Going After Cacciato*, O'Brien, as he often does, acknowledges the trope by having it *reconstructed*, or performed: Soon after Paul Berlin arrives in Vietnam, his unit takes part in simulations of search-and-destroy missions in "a friendly little village," where the farmers participate cheerfully, allowing the Americans to capture, frisk, and interrogate them (1980, 45); later, the playful exercise turns inevitably into an actual, unpleasant, and humiliating practice, when the realities of the war encroach. In *The Short-Timers*, Joker learns from another marine the hard lesson of Vietnam, during an encounter with a small begging boy: "These gook orphans are hard-core. I think half of them are Viet Cong Marines. . . . That kid runs an NVA rifle company. Somebody blow him away" (Hasford 1988, 56–57). And later: "You'll know you're salty [experienced] when you stop throwing C-ration cans *to* the kids and start throwing the cans *at* them" (66; emphases in original). The apparent impenetrability of the Vietnamese faces is also traitorous. At one point, Joker and others buy cans of soda from a "mamasan," whose "magpie chatter" is incomprehensible, but whose "frozen smile" conceals profound "hatred" for the Americans; Joker remembers the rumor that "old Victor Charlie *mamasans* sell Cokes with ground-up glass in them" (76). The story recalls others of the same type, for example, the cautionary tale O'Brien heard about female communist agents, posing as prostitutes, "with razor blades in their vaginas" (2006, 107).

A dialogue in *Fields of Fire* between a rookie and a seasoned soldier also captures this aspect of the Vietnam education. The rookie is complaining (as U.S. soldiers in the canon often do) that the local children are unfriendly, but he still feels bad for them; the seasoned soldier tells him that they all work for "VC":

> Those little babysans are devils, man. No shit. Devils.
> I still can't help it. I mean it. None of this is their fault.
> Well, none of this is our fault, either.
>
> (Webb 2001, 91)

The theme of women and children being treacherous, because their husbands and fathers are guerillas, returns time and time again in Webb's novel, as it does elsewhere. But *Fields of Fire* takes Vietnamese betrayal—and American victimization—to a different level. The novel follows a marine platoon over several months in the area around the An Hoa base, in Quang Nam in Central Highlands, in 1969. Chapters are told from the points of view of different characters, each a representative of a different "type" encountered in Vietnam (the grizzled Korea-veteran sergeant, the conciliatory black, the Vietnamese translator, etc.), the main three being Lieutenant Robert E. Lee Hodges (who seems to be modelled on Webb himself), a Southerner from a family with soldierly traditions spanning most of American history; "Snake," a white-trash kid from the bad part of an unspecified city, now a short-timer sergeant and the platoon's best soldier; and Will Goodrich, a.k.a. "Senator," a philosophy student at Harvard who enlisted to play the French horn in a USMC band, and has been sent to Vietnam instead. All three men are volunteers. Hodges and Snake are positive characters, popular and loyal to other soldiers, while Senator—uncomfortable with the marines' brutality, morally tortured over killing, never quite fitting in, and openly disliked by the platoon—for the majority of the book seems to be a device of introducing a certain degree of ideological ambivalence counterbalancing the book's otherwise clear conservative,[15] pro-military slant.

In fact, Senator is the novel's most interesting character, simply because of how much he stands out from the others. Although he is something of a coward and he does not care much about the politics of the war, his repulsion to the mistreatment of the Vietnamese serves to highlight it in a narrative that otherwise focuses on celebrating masculinity and warriorhood. At the beginning of chapter 17, for example, Senator ponders the "tragedies" of the war: the destruction of the Vietnamese land, the abuse of prisoners and suspects (including burning some surrendering troops alive with either napalm or white phosphorus), shooting of animals, burning villages in retaliation of ambushes, "accidental wounds and deaths of civilians," and—the subject rarely acknowledged explicitly in the canon—the practices of denying the villagers food, like spoiling or taking away their stores, or deliberate destruction of the soldiers' own leftover rations so the starving peasants will not dig them out from the trash. Senator cannot understand why the other marines are not bothered by the cruelty, and he even quietly admonishes them for only caring about the "experience" of the war and not the meaning of it or of their behavior.

Unlike most other books and movies, *Fields of Fire* also briefly references the refugee problem in South Vietnam, in a scene where Lieutenant Hodges offers to evacuate a whole hamlet in a free-fire zone to a resettlement village. The people, for whom the journey would otherwise be too distant, readily agree, but are turned away when it transpires that the

refugee village is "full." It is explained that the village chief runs a scam, claiming he has a village-full of people, to pocket all the food supplies (2001, 221; it should be noted, however, that the scene is framed here in a way that blames the problem solely on Vietnamese corruption, not on the resettlement program itself or the conditions in the camps that discouraged people from relocating voluntarily). Moreover, the book, again unusually, mentions herbicidal sprayings, in a scene where Hodges watches an American helicopter shower a rice paddy with aviation fuel to kill the seeds, and thinks about the rationale behind the operation—to deprive the NLF of sources of sustenance—which will only end up starving the farmers; wiser with his previous experience, he also considers the fact that the people will find no food in resettlement villages. While he contemplates these things, he watches a wailing Vietnamese woman standing in the field below the helicopter with her hands outstretched toward the uncaring, unseeing machine (2001, 347).

Although, alongside their heroism, the various forms of victimization of the soldiers and veterans are foregrounded, the novel, however imperfectly, at least discloses other issues that affected the civilian population. Generally, until its third part, *Fields of Fire* reads as a flawed but diversified narrative that manages to achieve some degree of moral complexity, perhaps even surpassing the other canonical authors in this respect due to the extreme polarization between the idealization of the marines and the praise of war on the one hand, and Senator's position on the other. It could be said that *all* the major characters in *Fields of Fire* are sympathetic and potentially easy to identify with, which would translate into a determinedly centrist multi-perspective from which none of the represented attitudes is "wrong." For example, Senator's disapproval of the marines' denial of food to the people is countered by the scene in which Lieutenant Hodges, constructed in the book as a perfect officer and soldier, is aghast when a group of villagers, who after an air strike on their hamlet bring severely wounded children to the marines for medical treatment, ask for food, evidently hoping they can wager their injuries for "goodies." Hodges wonders if the children "mean that little" (2001, 217) to their mothers that they are ready to make amends with the marines for a few measly supplies. The people are refused food. (This scene, and its tone of condemnation, finds a parallel in Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, where a little girl is crushed to death by an American tank, together with the water buffalo she was riding. The observing Vietnamese civilians are said to "accept" the fact that "another child is dead," while the girl's grandfather shouts at the soldiers with tears in his eyes; one FNG's anxiety at the man's apparent grief is quelled by another soldier, who tells him that the man was screaming for a compensation for the animal [1988, 78–79].)

But the ending of *Fields of Fire* turns out to reveal its larger strategy. To understand it, it is necessary to recount the convoluted story. At one

point in the book, the platoon is sent on a mission to a dangerous territory known as Go Noi. The marines walk past many villages, local children waving to them from the first ones they pass, but as the men enter further into the land, the hamlets become either abandoned and eerie, or their populations are impassive and quietly hostile. Some of the men are wounded and killed moving into the area, but the true crisis comes after about a month in the field, when two of the platoon's most beloved troops, "Ogre" and the super-soldier "Baby Cakes," disappear when detonating a booby-trapped bomb found in the ground near a village. The platoon looks for the two, or for their bodies, but when they cannot find them, Snake decides to take a "little killer team" (Webb 2001, 285), including the reluctant Senator, to search the village once again. They finally capture a man and a woman; they hit the woman repeatedly in the face, pull her lips apart to look at her teeth (no betel nut stains), grope her breasts (too much milk for Go Noi), and so forth, and decide she cannot be local and must therefore be "V.C." The Americans then find Baby Cakes and Ogre buried next to the couple's house, obviously executed and mutilated. Despite Senator's feeble protests, the man and the woman are shot on the spot and buried. Snake tells Senator to keep quiet about the incident.

After some internal turmoil and discussion with a superior, Senator decides not to keep quiet, but to report what he witnessed in the Go Noi village. Before an investigation can get underway, however, another tragedy strikes. The platoon takes part in a large operation in the "Arizona Valley," a territory near An Hoa known to be a major NLF-held area. One night they are positioned in a field near a village. In the dark and rain, Senator and three other men are sent to investigate for enemy presence nearby. Suddenly, one of the other men brings his rifle up to shoot at a moving figure, which Senator immediately sees to be a seven-year-old girl, waving and smiling at them—he knocks the weapon out from the man's hands to save the girl, and all hell breaks loose. The girl jumps into a ditch as heavy fire opens on the Americans. The man with the rifle is killed, and Senator loses a leg; Snake comes to Senator's rescue, saves his life, and is himself killed in the process. In the continuing firefight, Hodges is killed trying to retrieve them both. Most of the other soldiers in the platoon are wounded.

Later, back in the United States, Snake's mother, in a scene saturated with an astonishing mix of irony and sentimentality, waits for her son's Medal of Honor to arrive—she knows he has been recommended by his company commander two years before for saving a friend's life. Tough luck, though; the medal will never come, because Senator's report from Go Noi prompted an investigation that was soon closed, since all the men involved were either dead or wounded now, but it means no medal for Snake. Unaware, the sergeant's mother basks in the pride that he died for his country and for his friend, not knowing, of course, that the friend was the treacherous Senator.

In case we miss the point, we also follow Senator, now an amputee, back home. And then the purpose of the entire narrative unspools, revealing just how carefully the novel has been constructed so that it reflects exactly certain ideological stances. Senator leafs through his Vietnam scrapbook, thinking nostalgically about the men in the platoon, grieving for the dead; the others' sometimes viciously expressed hatred for him is forgiven—"that was all a part of it" (Webb 2001, 394). Soon, his draft-dodging friend Mark, now a resident of Toronto, sneaks back into the States and visits Senator, who has become ambivalent about the war in Vietnam, and is now uninterested in Mark's antiwar arguments; later, Senator's father has Mark arrested and delivers a speech about why it was the right thing to do. Back at college, Senator is disgusted with antiwar students and professors, whom he condemns as impractical idealists, and he comes to view himself as suspended between the university crowd and his old platoon. He approves of Nixon's campaign against Cambodia (it "seemed rational"). In the end, two fellow students ask him to speak at an antiwar Cambodia-themed rally, obnoxiously insisting that he talks about atrocities. Senator tells them that such misconduct in the U.S. forces is neither "regular," nor "even condoned," and that in the "hell" of Vietnam killing becomes natural, even if common soldiers do not understand the reasons for the war. "That isn't murder," he tells the two students. "It isn't even atrocious. It's just a sad fact of life." He proceeds to tell them that he had lost his leg "because of a little girl. . . . If I hadn't had the shit blown out of me, it would have given me great pleasure to hunt that little girl down and blow her away" (Webb 2001, 407).

Senator attends the rally. Standing on the stage he becomes enraged because the crowd shouts pro-NLF and pro-Ho slogans (and, no doubt, because a pair of "huge" breasts, "lovelies" the size of which he has not yet "experienced," is "merrily" bouncing in front of him, attached to a girl betrayingly sitting on someone's shoulders; Webb 2001, 408).[16] Senator thinks of all his platoon buddies as he begins his speech, scolding the protesters for their antiwar activities, until one of the organizers takes the microphone away from him and tells him to scram. Senator finds his car vandalized, sprayed with the words "FASCIST PIG," but he gets in and drives away. The book ends.

There is a lot to unpack here, but it should be clear that *Fields of Fire* endorses certain opinions on the war, while it strives to refute others. Senator's story is not the only example, but it is particularly important given the prominence it has as the conclusion of the book. Senator is essentially a Sven Eriksson in reverse. His ultimate transformation not only supports the notion of military brotherhood, veteran victimization, anti-protester narration, and a right-wing-liberal position from which the war is a noble, if possibly misguided, event, but also throws a shadow over anything subversive Senator thought or said earlier in the book, making it seem as if the war experience and loyalty to his platoon

endowed him with a wisdom that now cancels out his previous positions. To Senator and his platoon, the war, it turns out, was fought for Baby Cakes. Commenting on Senator's character and its function in Webb's reconstruction of the war, Jacqueline Smetak rightly observes that it

> is as if for Webb the mere fact of war justified all actions because the war itself simply stopped making sense except on the most basic level where anyone and everyone who was not part of the primary group was ipso facto the enemy.
>
> (1991, 149)

This interpretation is particularly valuable, as it incorporates the soldierly bonds of the novel to its reconstruction of Vietnam as a war/land where killing even children is a necessity, as demonstrated in Senator's words.

At the root of Senator's transformation is Vietnamese betrayal. The steadfastness of his final conviction is as unwavering as it is unforgiving (to the Vietnamese). Webb's Vietnam is so Americanized that there exist no extenuating circumstances for the locals, responsible for the marines' suffering. The couple in Go Noi could be killed regardless of whether they were actually "V.C." or responsible for Baby Cakes' and Ogre's deaths—Snake and the others had the right to exert their revenge, and what happened was not a murder or an atrocity; Senator was thus wrong to report the men, also because he ironically deprived Snake of his deserved Medal of Honor. The little girl in Arizona Valley can be seen as responsible for what happened to Senator and his platoon, regardless of the fact that she was described as seven years old, and so her role could be nothing else but coerced; she embodies the treachery of the Vietnamese, since Senator foolishly protected her only to learn his painful lesson and be yanked out of his dovey naiveté. "They're all VC," "even the women and children were hostile"—these are remarks found frequently in American texts about the war in Vietnam, not least significantly in the My Lai editorials like "An American Tragedy," but Webb essentially concretizes the trope, spinning it out into full narrative. In another example from the novel, two men are killed and one loses an arm from a booby-trap; in the next paragraph, the Americans are walking away from a nearby village in a column, the houses behind them aflame: The fire is "the platoon's collective act of passion, a substitute for not being able to fight the enemy that had ravaged them" (Webb 2001, 250). Senator, not yet transformed and ever the dissenting voice, decides not to protest against the destruction of the village, understanding that to speak up against it would be interpreted by the rest of the platoon as dishonoring the memory of the dead.

Not that the trope of betrayal is absent from other texts, or that elsewhere betrayal is not followed by revenge. In C.D.B. Bryan's *Friendly Fire*, a veteran is quoted recounting: "We were mortared every night by

local villagers. . . . One night we went out and did our own My Lai. . . . We had to, see? Because night after night we kept losing" (1991, 230; emphasis added). In *The Short-Timers*, an entire street of beautiful colonial mansions in Hue is utterly destroyed by a tank in pursuit of a single sniper who shot some Americans dead. Villages are always being burnt in retaliation for American casualties sustained in their vicinity. In the eponymous story of *The Things They Carried*, "Than Khe" is burnt in revenge. As we have seen, both *Platoon* and *Casualties of War* the movie employ this trope. (Paradoxically, *Apocalypse Now*, whose actors actually expressed the wish to do a "sort of a My Lai massacre," ends up not following the pattern at all; in the "sampan massacre" scene the killing of the three Vietnamese is truly senseless and not framed as retaliatory.)

In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, O'Brien's characterization of villagers along the lines of betrayal is limited to the inhabitants of "Pinkville," but is otherwise as typical as any: Among Americans being blown apart by mines and shot by snipers in the area during O'Brien's own stint there, "frustration and anger built with each explosion and betrayal, [and] one Oriental face began to look like any other, hostile and black" (2006, 120). O'Brien's company grows to hate the people of Pinkville and finds much satisfaction in burning the villages; soon, prisoners and civilians, including women, are getting beaten up, and farmers are getting shot while working in their fields. After two soldiers are killed by a mine, O'Brien's unit orders a napalm strike on a nearby village. O'Brien writes that he heard screams in the wreckage of the hamlet, and knew that there were babies, children, and innocent people in there, but that given his friends' deaths "it was hard to be filled with pity" (2006, 123). In *A Rumor of War*, Caputo confesses to a similar thought process. His unit burns down a village renamed Giao-Tri (3) with white phosphorus grenades and shoots the inhabitants' animals after an NLF ambush leaves one American casualty: a lance corporal with a minor wound. When the Americans are finished, the hamlet is no longer there. Watching a woman wailing in despair over the ruin of her house, Caputo realizes that the annihilation has been not merely a bout of insanity but "an act of retribution" and a "lesson" for the villagers, and he chooses to remain unmoved by the woman's plight (1985, 109–110). When Caputo's platoon destroys the village of Ha Na, he admits that they "needlessly" (1986, 306) burnt the houses of around 200 people, and that he feels unredeemable guilt. Echoing Webb, on this occasion Caputo finds yet another way to explain the destruction and to contextualize it within the experience of the G.I.s: With the soldiers now calm,

> there was a sweetness in that inner quietude, but the feeling would not have been possible if the village had not been destroyed. It was as though the burning of Ha Na had arisen out of some emotional necessity. It had been a catharsis, a purging of months of fear,

> frustration, and tension. We had relieved our own pain by inflicting it on others.
>
> (1985, 305)

This is not to say that either Caputo or O'Brien mean to say that they approve of these retaliatory destructions; their aim is to reproduce the lead-up and the emotional state at the time they participated in them or to attempt an explanation. More importantly, the historical accuracy of this trope is in the end irrelevant, whether the mistreatment of the Vietnamese by the Americans was in fact retributory in a majority of cases (however much sense the "revenge" might have actually made), whether it has come to dominate veteran memories as something of a "postmeditated" motivation, or whether it is nothing more than a strategy of representing victimhood in Vietnam narratives, born from a psychological need and latent ideological drive. Only the last point really matters, because it is the one that remains. This "My Lai reenactment pattern" is, in its essence, as archetypal as Herr's "patrol went up the mountain story": Patrol was ambushed, so patrol went up to a village and burned it. As a crucial ingredient of the "Vietnam War" myth, this pattern mythologizes war crime, calcifies it as part of the narrative so that individual events lose significance except as *part of the narrative*, the circularity characteristic of myth. In other words, the prevalence of this pattern has established a dynamic between American soldiers and Vietnamese civilians whereby the latter *must* become subject to mistreatment and war crime in order to fulfil their narrative function; this is yet again a point about the instrumental nature of the Vietnamese characters in American narratives. This slippery-slope narration, delivered as if the escalation of hostilities was inevitable, as if the Americans and the villagers were joint in a preordained helix of spiraling hatred, thus comes to support the specific and common revenge discourse whereby the civilians' unfriendliness toward Americans, and their covert support for the NLF against the South Vietnamese government, *trigger* the abuse and crimes perpetrated against them.

Moreover, this narrative function is to represent the brutalization of the American soldier, and so the emphasis is on his experience and on the negative effect of the war on him. The soldiers are represented as victims of their own crimes, in other words. But such reading of this particular condition of the war is in the end also merely discursive. The large-scale consequences of the U.S. policy regarding the people of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—even regardless of the mass death of civilians resulting from American bombings in North Vietnam—must be also considered. The argument here is that the U.S. policy, together with the way it shaped the U.S. soldiers' conduct toward the Vietnamese, must be seen as what liberal political scientist R.J. Rummel termed *democide*. Rummel defined democide as encompassing other forms of

mass murder, such as genocide and politicide, and referring to "intentional government killing of an unarmed person or people" (1994). The concept includes also "*practical* intentionality," as when "a government causes deaths through a reckless and depraved indifference to human life" (1994), for example by implementing policy. Bombing of civilian areas and practices such as food denial are, according to Rummel, also forms of democide, as are all instances of soldiers carrying out extra-judicial killings of noncombatants, and so unsurprisingly he concludes that the United States "clearly committed democide during the Vietnam War," in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos (1997).[17]

Whether one considers the "remote" methods of targeting civilians—artillery strikes against villages, napalm and white phosphorus bombings, defoliation, and so forth—or the quick and well-documented progression of the violence of infantry units from enemy soldiers and suspects toward villagers (Turse 2013), what is fundamental to both is the indifference to civilian casualty as well as the indiscrimination of the killings. It is important to keep in mind that half of the reason that napalm—perhaps the most potent symbol of indiscriminate U.S. violence—was even developed by the U.S. military in the first place was so that it could be used against large civilian populations, as part of strategic bombing campaigns against Japanese cities in World War II. The idea of strategic bombing itself, as a type of air warfare, came from the Italian Fascists, who saw its advantages in sowing terror among civilians and who recommended the use of incendiary materials over high explosives. The Americans, FDR among them, were at first appalled by the idea, but by 1942 had scientists building paper-and-wood models of Japanese cities for the specific purpose of developing incendiary material that could be dropped on their real-life originals and cause inextinguishable fires (Franklin 2000, 72–75; for a full "biography" of napalm, see Neer 2013). American napalm would remain a weapon of choice "reserved for people of color" (Franklin 2000, 73), specifically Asians. The first people against whom Americans used napalm were the Chinese and especially the Japanese in World War II. Franklin writes that the level of destruction after the napalm attack on Tokyo on March 9, 1945, equaled that of Hiroshima, and adds that "by early August 1945, every Japanese city with a population over fifty thousand had been burned out—except for four reserved for an experimental secret weapon" (2000, 73–74). The "damage was apocalyptic": Over 1 million people in Tokyo became homeless as a result, and between some 88,000 and almost 125,000 died (Neer 2013, 81). Napalm was then used against Koreans, both North and South, in the 1950s, and a decade later, in the "perfected," more devastating form of Napalm-B, against the Vietnamese. (It was last used by the United States against Iraqis in 2003; Neer 2013, 208–222.) One of the flagship horror weapons used in Vietnam by the Americans was therefore one historically employed against Asian civilian populations.

In the case of Vietnam, the point of the indiscriminating nature of killing that encompassed civilians is, of course, glaringly underscored further by the body count and kill ratio policies, which inevitably deteriorated to the point where any Vietnamese body could be tallied as a small statistical victory for the United States. In the aftermath of the Tet Offensive alone, for example, the U.S. military engaged in a "systematic campaign of mass killing aimed at large segments of the rural population" that involved massive bombing campaigns, "the Phoenix program of mass arrests, torture, and assassination coordinated by the CIA," and the wholesale destruction of villages by infantry in search-and-destroy missions. In the province of Quang Ngai, 70 percent of settlements had been annihilated by 1967, and after Tet "this slaughter was intensified literally with a vengeance" (Gettleman et al. 1995, 410–411).

When the implication of the strategy is indiscriminate violence against the population, and it results in mass death, it constitutes democide. But more than that, claiming the "indistinguishability" of civilian from insurgent is not an extenuating circumstance that gives pardon to soldiers killing innocent people, but rather *the very factor* of reality that makes American conduct democidal. The decision-makers in the United States knew, from early on in the country's involvement in Indochina, that the guerilla forces were embedded deeply in the countryside of South Vietnam, and so the developments in strategy and the use of weaponry—free-fire zones, search-and-destroy, defoliation and deforestation, napalm, artillery strikes on villages, and so forth—had to be calculated *against* the rural population, which was "regarded as enemy or, at best, of no account" (Chomsky and Herman 1979b, 5.1.2).

In this view, then, the indiscriminate nature of the "air war" eventually made way for strategies that involved the infantry, above all search-and-destroy, now a hackneyed phrase concealing atrocity such as My Lai. If *all*, or almost all, locals come to be seen as *the enemy* by an occupying military power, the conflict transforms into a war *against the population*. The Welsh photographer Philip Jones Griffiths, who spent years documenting the Vietnamese experience in the war, disagrees that the United States engaged in genocide in Indochina for the sole purpose of deterring would-be revolutionaries in other countries, and is instead of the opinion that the Americans were led into the war by their own stupidity. Nevertheless, he goes on to make a point that underlies the indiscrimination of killing in Vietnam: Because the Americans were single-mindedly bent on forcing the Vietnamese to adopt their "total ideology," eventually, when all else failed, "it became permissible to kill off anyone sick enough to prefer the other brand—communism" (2001, 4). Michael Walzer makes this point even more empathically:

> what if the guerillas cannot be isolated from the people?. . . The anti-guerilla war can then no longer be fought . . . because it is no

> longer an anti-guerilla but an anti-social war, a war against an entire people, in which no distinctions would be possible in the actual fighting.
>
> (2006, 187)

No less crucially, once troops on one side in such a war, like the Americans in Vietnam, "become convinced that old men and women and children are their enemies," the only way to win is to "systematically kill civilians or to destroy their society and culture" (196; see also Hagopian 2009, 420).

American soldiers must therefore be seen as perpetrating, or at best participating in, democide. The canon, on the other hand, by locking the violence in a cycle of essential hatred and retribution, obscures the systemic, wholesale killing of innocent people in the interests of capitalism and the U.S. power, and portrays it instead as a mythologized, emotion-based relation between individual American platoons and companies, and treacherous natives, thereby denied the right to support politically and otherwise the cause of their own nation's independence. The actual sympathy and support of the Vietnamese peasantry for the NLF and Ho—and so, according to the tenets of U.S. ideology, reason enough to get killed—are well-documented (e.g., in FitzGerald [1972] and Young [2014]; see also Schell [2007, 23–25]). It is worth quoting Griffiths again, who writes that the U.S. activity and intentions in South Vietnam were all "against the will of the people. I have never met any Vietnamese who could relate to America's claim to be liberating him from his traditional past," and any apparent expressions of support either for the Saigon government or for the U.S. forces were calculated against safety and well-being: The people "would hang out ten foot handwoven tapestries of the face of Spiro Agnew if it ensured freedom from bombing" (2001, 13). The discourses that shift the attention away from the Vietnamese experience as a result of these policies, and recalibrate it so that it centers on the American perpetrator, are in fact strategies of mystification of the *nature* of the American conduct in Vietnam—or of the fact that the American soldiers in Vietnam were, often willingly, participants.

In *Fields of Fire*, the strategy of mystification, specifically through portraying American violence against the Vietnamese as a result of the latter's wrongdoing and treachery against the marines, is perhaps the most complete. The entire village of "Nam An (2)" is burned and bombed because marines on patrol saw lights flickering in one of the houses past lights-out. Three more hamlets are destroyed in the same night. In the morning the marines are woken up by a rooster, wondering how it has lived through the barrage, and call in *another* strike on the village to make sure that the rooster, and whatever else might have survived, is properly taken care of. A wounded woman is found in one of the houses, and while the naïve Senator feels sorry for her and tries to bandage her arm,

the more experienced Snake tells him she has herself to blame for leaving her bunker, and that she is probably "VC," anyway (Webb 2001, ch. 7). In the end, the village miraculously sustains very little damage, despite being bombed twice in the span of a few hours, and the wounded woman is the only Vietnamese casualty. It is difficult to say, of course, whether this is a likely scenario or not, but perhaps in his novel Webb wishes to simultaneously display the American firepower, show that "they're all VC," and spare the reader's, and his characters', conscience. In any case, most men suspected of being NLF or NVA in the novel turn out to be; Senator stands corrected when he attempts to refuse to shoot at people he claims are women and children, but who then shoot back (157–158). That the NLF is victimizing the civilian population is carefully and conscientiously inserted throughout the book. The novel's Vietnamese character, Dan, when he defects from the NLF to the marines, is greeted warmly with pats on the back and cigarettes, not bound or harshly interrogated. Later, as a translator with the marines, he is the person most cruel toward civilians, and he brutalizes them most often. (Race is treated in a similar manner in *Fields of Fire*: The only racists are black.)

Another major Vietnam narrative whose dramatic release hinges on betrayal is the popular Robin Williams film, *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987), set in Saigon in 1965. Williams plays an (almost completely) fictionalized version of Adrian Cronauer, a DJ at the American Forces Vietnam Network radio station. In the film, Cronauer falls in love with a Vietnamese girl, Trinh, and gradually befriends her brother Tuan, who initially opposes the relationship, but at one point ends up stealing a van to save Cronauer's life. It eventually transpires that Tuan belongs to the NLF and has used Cronauer at the very beginning of their acquaintance to gain access to a G.I.-only bar, where he planted a bomb that killed two American soldiers. Cronauer is devastated; he finds Tuan in a Saigon street, where the most unusual exchange between the two men happens—unusual only because in the entire Vietnam canon no similar conversation occurs between an American soldier and an NLF operative, and no Vietnamese is given voice to say what Tuan does, obvious though it is. While Cronauer babbles on about betrayal, broken trust, and the heartbreak at being told that his friend is "the enemy," Tuan's icy response is what makes the scene remarkable in the context of the American Vietnam narratives:

TUAN: Enemy? What is enemy? You killing my own people, so many miles from your home. We not the enemy. *You* the enemy!

CRONAUER: You used me to kill two people. Two people died in that fucking bar.

TUAN: Big fucking deal! My mother is dead. And my older brother, who be twenty-nine years old, he dead. Shot by American. My neighbor, dead. His wife, dead. Why? Because we not human to them. We only little Vietnamese.

Ultimately, the scene is ambiguous: At no point is the viewer led to assume that Cronauer is an unsympathetic figure, and so perhaps it is possible that his outrage and complete disregard of Tuan's words are the kind of sentiments the audience is expected to share, as if Cronauer's hurt feelings really equal the tragedy of Vietnam embodied by Tuan and his family and neighbors. Maybe the confrontation is meant to be a genuine take on Jimmy Carter's "mutual destruction" thesis, or symbolic of the American sense of having been betrayed by their supposed South Asian allies, as expressed in *Fields of Fire* and elsewhere. Whatever the case, against other texts in the canon, *Good Morning, Vietnam* is quite extraordinary in that when a Vietnamese is treated as an equal and given voice, his words are so scathing and accusatory, so bitter, and yet so fundamentally true.

Feasibly, the reason that *Good Morning, Vietnam* turns out to contain this subversive element in contrast to other texts, is its genre. As a (non-satirical) comedy, the movie lays no claim to be a *reconstruction* of the war or an elucidation of *what it meant*, which liberates it from the tension and reliance on Manichean symbolism or tortured exploration into hearts of darkness, as is the case with the dramas. Although the brunt of the American destruction was borne by the Vietnamese countryside, the film's setting in Saigon is also not without consequence. The story, simply put, is not set in Loon. When Cronauer visits a village, it is not as a rifle-bearing patrolman on a search-and-destroy operation with revenge on his mind, or a Mary Anne figure on her way to learn the secrets of the war, but as a guest of Trinh and Tuan's family. When he is seen eating and talking with the villagers, learning a little about their way of life, it is not to prepare narrative ground for an inevitable attack on the Americans and their innocence but to show an American man getting to know something of the culture of the woman he loves. If anything, the village scenes serve to strengthen Tuan's harsh words at the end and to reinforce his anti-American position by highlighting retroactively that normal human lives are at stake—those dead mothers and neighbors' wives not different to the people Cronauer met in the village. But Tuan's eventual "betrayal" is divorced from civilians, inscribed rather into the political context of the war. The disappointment in the relationship between Tuan and Cronauer is ultimately not mythological, not a tool in a strategy of American victimization; Tuan is neither an invisible enemy setting up ambush to propel the archetypal Vietnam narrative forward nor a civilian abused to underscore the war's effect on the G.I.s. He is Cronauer's equal, a person the American is capable of befriending intimately, a person with a complex morality illustrated in his saving Cronauer's life despite his deadly anti-Americanism, and a person with political agency. And finally, perhaps the most significant point made during the exchange is the permission to utter the opinion that, at least in a non-American context, in terms of sheer numbers and

also the circumstances, the American deaths do not matter as much as the Vietnamese deaths do. Or at least are not more meaningful in the tragedy of Vietnam.

It is a resonant "big fucking deal."

Notes

1 Of the 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 11th Brigade, Americal Infantry Division. The company's commanding officer was Captain Ernest Medina, court-martialed in 1971, but eventually acquitted.
2 Schlegel (1995, 53–54) discusses some of the same strategies in her article on the naturalization of Son My in the United States, and the significance of documentary photographs of the massacre in relation to empowering the Vietnamese voice largely silenced in public response to the incident in the States.
3 The story was made into a little-known 1998 film starring Kiefer Sutherland, titled *A Soldier's Sweetheart*.
4 On "Sweetheart" as a heart-of-darkness story, see Clarke (2013, 138–139), and bibliography there for additional sources on the subject; Kinney (2000, 155–156), Ringnalda (1994, 109), Smith (1994, 32).
5 See also Smith (1994, 35), who finds several "meanings" of the necklace, most of them sexual and gender-related.
6 On solatium payments, see Beidler (2004, 38–47).
7 Cronin (1991) writes on the subject of atrocity, specifically killing of POWs, in Vietnam War literature vis-à-vis World War II literature, although his interest is exclusively in the issue of the veteran-author's awareness of committing crime.
8 I partially borrow the idea of connecting the "perpetrator" status of some narratives to their strategies of representation and narration whose purpose is to influence interpretations of the oppression from Holocaust scholar Robert Eaglestone's (2013) article on "swerves," or the ways authors of Holocaust perpetrator fiction find to avoid engaging with the problem of evil.
9 The same point is made, and elaborated on, in Prasch (1988), Ringnalda (1990, 65–67), and Weaver (2010, 134–136); see also Beidler (2004, 81–102), for a veteran take on the subject. See also Christopher (1995, 4).
10 A pose that was actually inspired by a 1968 Vietnam War photograph, taken by Art Greenspon, of a paratrooper signaling for a medevac helicopter. The picture appeared on the cover of the *New York Times*.
11 The case of Phan's death has eerie connections to two American "Vietnam presidents." Before his deployment to Vietnam, Meserve, the model soldier, was actually chosen for Johnson's inaugural parade march in 1965. The other connection is stranger: A month after Phan's murder, Eriksson took military investigators to Hill 192 to look for her body, which they found in a badly decomposed state. She was taken to Saigon, where autopsy was performed by one Colonel Pierre Finck—one of the three pathologists who had examined John Kennedy's body in November 1963.
12 Phan's death was also the subject of a 1970 West German film, *o.k.*, directed by Michael Verhoeven.
13 I exclude films made after 1994, the year I consider to be a working caesura in Vietnam canon formation. *Forest Gump* (1994), though crucial in the canon—in fact, its release date dictates my choice of the cutoff date—also transcends it in terms of subject matter and concerns, and so is excluded,

too; it would be the most popular film on the list by far, anyway, with the numbers of its ratings exceeding one million on each website.

14 I am aware, of course, of a potential drawback in the simple method I have applied in the compilation of my list, and namely the fact that an unknown, potentially substantial, number of ratings had come from movie viewers outside of the United States. In the United Kingdom, for example, the opposition to the American invasion of Vietnam was staunch in the 1960s and 1970s, and a certain attitude of condemnation in academia and criticism, harsher than in the United States, has persisted there. The reception of these Vietnam films in countries like the United Kingdom, potentially different than in the States, could find reflection in the number of ratings. Nevertheless, I would still argue that my list is valid, for four reasons. One, irrespective of how a given film might have been received anywhere (and my list is not meant to reflect opinion), its status as a *noteworthy* film, or a *noteworthy* Vietnam film, leads to greater number of viewings in general. Two, all these films are American Vietnam films, and since the "Vietnam War" was also an American event, Americans (both directors and audiences) determine what the canon is, or which films are, in other words, noteworthy. Three, the ratings were given already in the Internet era, which means that the majority of the people dispensing their stars were most likely not the people who saw *Platoon* in the cinema in the 1980s, but rather the younger generation who has *learnt*, from the existing canon, which Vietnam films are noteworthy—or, conversely but with no impact on the validity of my list, that these particular films were in themselves noteworthy; but it also means that the ratings were given at a time when the reach of cultural globalism (or of American cultural hegemony) is in many respects unprecedented. In these conditions the national boundaries of canons naturally dissolve, and so perhaps my list should be branded as reflective of a *general* Vietnam movie canon. And four, we have to consider channels of distribution, too. For example, has a film like *Casualties of War* had the same chance over the past three decades of being broadcast on television, where large numbers of people would have watched it regardless of whether they had specifically sought it out or not, as often as one of the *Rambos*? How many young people today will stream or download something corny like *Coming Home*, versus something awesome like *Full Metal Jacket*, one of the coolest films ever made? All of these points are made to argue that the preexistence of the canons, popular and critical, is crucial to viewership, and thus making my list, I guess, into an illustration of the cultural echo chamber.

15 James—now Jim—Webb was a highly decorated marine lieutenant in Vietnam and later became a journalist and author. He served as Assistant Secretary of Defense and Secretary of the Navy in the Reagan administration and was U.S. Senator from Virginia (Democrat) until 2013. Webb considered running for the Democratic nomination for the 2016 presidential election but pulled out of the race. Patrick Hagopian, in his study of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, of whose Fund Webb was a member, includes some interesting biographical information: By the beginning of the 1980s, Webb had for example spoken out in support of leniency toward a veteran "convicted of point-blank shooting of a group of unarmed women and children in Vietnam" (2009, 85); he claimed that the victims had not been innocent, but that they supported the NLF.

16 See Jeffords (1989) and Lembcke (1998) on the theme of female betrayal in Vietnam War narratives.

17 Rummel (1997) calculated that the U.S. forces committed 5,500 democidal killings in South Vietnam; between 3,000 and as many as 200,000 in Cambodia; and 3,000 in Laos. For other, and more recent, statistics concerning civilian deaths, I turn to the figures compiled by Nick Turse: At least 65,000 were killed by American bombing in North Vietnam; as for the South, while earlier estimates hovered above one million civilian casualties in general, Turse cites what he considers the most thorough and reliable study, compiled in 2008 at the University of Washington and Harvard Medical School, that found 3.8 million Vietnamese deaths altogether to be a "reasonable" number, of which perhaps 2 million were civilians, the figure provided by the Vietnamese government in 1995 (2013, introduction). If we discount Rummel's figure of 5,500 as too low, it is still impossible to extricate the number of civilian deaths or even casualties caused directly by the Americans from the totals; the figures provided by the sources quoted by Turse include *all* casualties of the American war, in South and North Vietnam, and also those caused by the Diem and subsequent South Vietnamese regimes, the ARVN, other U.S. allies (especially South Koreans), the NLF, and the NVA.

Conclusion

Don't Support the Troops

In the American Vietnam War canon, the status of victims is at the heart of the narratives' explicit or hidden concerns. Virtually all concentrate their sympathies on the U.S. soldiers: dying and getting wounded, witnessing those deaths and wounds, suffering through the bad war, experiencing evil, and returning to unwelcoming homes. But most American texts of the war at least contain, and sometimes indeed hinge on, cases of mistreatment and atrocity against Vietnamese civilians by American soldiers. Several interpretations of the prevalence of this trope are possible. One is that the violence remains a particularly painful American sin committed in Vietnam, and the canon strives to purge it. Another is that instances of violence against villagers have become an indelible part of the war's imagery, to the point that they are a required element of the Vietnamese setting. But this view, while certainly true, is also perhaps too cynical; it is, however, not exclusory of other interpretations. The perspective I have assumed in considering the ubiquity of abuse and atrocity—and a conclusion I arrived at toward the end—is that the American canon employs strategies of *handling* war crime. This issue is, I believe, crucial to the problem of victimization in Vietnam.

For all the insistence that the Vietnam War had caused an upheaval in the ways the Americans thought about themselves and their country, and a reversal of the mythology/ideology that had guided their sense of their role in the world, encompassing the U.S. foreign policy, that subversive potential appears to have been wasted. While all these propositions are to an extent true—although, as William Appleman William's work on American international relations prior to the war in Vietnam attests, it had been possible to reach these conclusions before the debacle—it is also true that subsequent changes in the American culture and society, as well as in the military and in foreign policy, indicate that the lasting "lessons of Vietnam" had been different. The literary and cinematic canon, with its obsession with establishing victimhood, is a microscopic case in point. Although the narratives, as much as the literary criticism and scholarship they had been the subject of, make claims of iconoclasm, true American villainy is impossible, even as a device of political stance. Even if the soldiers are perpetrators of crimes against civilians,

or at least guilty of mistreatment, more important is their implication in the war as its most significant victims. Hence, the determinedly apolitical moral ambiguity prevalent in the canonized texts. Hence, also, the strategies of representing victimhood—strategies of handling war crime, atrocity, and mistreatment—which allow these problems to be woven into the complex tapestry of victimization in which the various forms of suffering tug at one another, so that, in the end, everyone becomes a victim of the war.

But because in the American canon the attention is steadfastly with the soldiers, and because among the correlated strands of the "tapestry" one form of victimization triggers another, the suffering of the Vietnamese civilians is instrumentalized so that it serves to occasion the more significant, more profound suffering of the Americans. This is the kernel of the discourse that insists that talking about the victims of the United States and its military must necessarily be accompanied by talking about the American soldiers and what they go through.

In the aftermath of the war in Vietnam, from the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, this discourse seems to have overtaken the memory of the war as the attention shifted to the veteran. From Carter's "mutual destruction" to Reagan's "noble cause," the dominant American ideologies of American patriotism were regaining momentum that, with other simultaneous transformations, meant that the center of the political spectrum moved away from the left and toward the right instead. The "lesson" of the war in Vietnam turned out to be not the destructive power of American capitalism and imperialism, but the danger of radicalism, the value of national "unity" and patriotism, and the importance of "healing" the post-Vietnam "wounds." In addition, the erasure of the history of the war in Vietnam, and both the expurgation and vilification of the Vietnamese were necessary to enable full, unchecked concentration on the American veteran and, via him, on the American people. The transference of the war's memory and significance onto the symbolic figure of the veteran meant not only the sense that the United States was a victim of the war—of "Vietnam," that the war *happened to* it—but also its inevitable obverse, namely the inability to see Americans as oppressors. The myth of "Vietnam," or the ultimate purpose of mythologizing the historical conflict and its political basis, should thus be understood as the myth of American victimization.

As it turns out, this process of "dealing" with the Vietnam War has not proven innocuous. The "Vietnam syndrome" that guided the Weinberger Doctrine of the Reagan era seemed at first a relatively positive outcome of the conflict, imposing a restraint on the Pentagon which, even if it did not stop the covert operations and support for regimes in Latin America and Africa, at least did not see U.S. forces deployed to combat or dispatched to carry out bombings, even despite the squirming of the bellicose president and the influential neoconservatives in the

administration. The syndrome was not to last, of course. By the end of the decade, the lessons were turned around on their head: Now the point was not that Vietnam had proven that unpopular wars are unwinnable, and therefore should not be waged at all; now the idea was that wars *need* popular support, and therefore popular support should be garnered if wars are to be waged and invasions accomplished. In the case of the Gulf War of 1990–1991, the rationale went both ways. The intervention was seen by President Bush and his advisors as an opportunity to raise the patriotic (nationalistic) spirit among the people by declaring the Vietnam syndrome kicked and, thus, divert attention away from the concurrent economic recession in the United States and help his dropping ratings. At the same time, to ensure the success of the endeavor—in accordance with the updated version of the military engagement doctrine, known informally as the Powell Doctrine after General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time—the war needed the public's approval. The approval came: The operation "evoked a burst of nationalist religiosity": patriotic gadgets, bearing the slogan "Support the Troops," flooded the American everyday landscape, as did yellow ribbons, first worn during the Iran hostage crisis a decade earlier and now repurposed so that they "seemed to indicate that America was once again the wronged party or victims" (Ehrenreich 1997, 223); amidst the national fervor, Bush's ratings temporarily shot up to close to a hundred percent.[1]

"Support the Troops" was a self-inflicted ploy: By pledging their unwavering allegiance to American soldiers, people tricked themselves into approving an American intervention whose basis was at the very least shaky. According to Arnold Isaacs, because the post-Vietnam narrative dictated that antiwar sentiment was in itself an offense against American soldiers, on this occasion the new war had to be received positively as an expression of "supporting the troops" (1997, 77); the same process would occur during the Afghanistan and Iraq wars (Carruthers 2014, 181). But the widespread enthusiasm for the campaign and the celebration of the conflict by the public suggest that the sentiment was also genuine, as if Americans were relieved to feel that they could indulge in patriotic activity and emotion and feel good again about their country and its role as the purveyor of freedom and democracy on the global scale. From this perspective, the effect of the Vietnam War can be understood as the sense of guilt among the people, of having failed the veterans—the war's primary victims—which could now be atoned for and expunged. Never again would the American soldier be vilified or abandoned. Ultimately, during Operation Desert Storm, the blurring of lines between the intense public feeling toward soldiers and the actual war being waged in Iraq reached such an extent that it seemed, to quote Isaacs, "as if Saddam Hussein had kidnapped four hundred thousand Americans and the United States had to go to war to get them back"

(1997, 78)—the choice of words reminiscent of Nixon's use of the POWs in North Vietnam is, no doubt, intentional.

But the "Support the Troops" campaign and its ideological implications prove deeply problematic, of course. At the time of Desert Storm, for instance, the almost hysterical emotion that attached itself to U.S. soldiers also rendered invisible and insignificant the Iraqi wounded and killed in the American war: "I have absolutely no idea what the Iraqi casualties are," said U.S. Commander-in-Chief General Norman Schwarzkopf in 1991. "We're never going to get into the body-count business" (quoted in Beattie 1998, 11). In fact, the number of Iraqi deaths during and in the aftermath of Desert Storm went into the hundreds of thousands.[2] And even if the "support-the-troops" ideology allows for a disapproval of foreign U.S. interventions and invasions, it still primarily enforces an emotional attachment of the public to the soldiers. Whatever the motivations of its proponents, it still bolsters patriotism (nationalism), impedes criticism of the military's conduct, and dilutes antiwar politics, which in the American context is usually analogous to anti-imperial politics. Perhaps most significantly, it encourages the discourse that puts the American soldier before any other concern.

Here the victimization of the American soldier finds its extension. Among the most palpable results of the war in Vietnam was the suspension of the draft by President Nixon in 1973, and the subsequent establishment of the all-voluntary force (AVF). In *Long Time Passing*, Myra MacPherson—who in Chapter 1 served as exemplary of the mainstream liberal discourse of the 1980s—advocated hotly against the draft, engaging with the arguments presented by its supporters, who pointed out that a *fair* draft, which would avoid the kind of system abuse and resultant class and minority exploitation as happened in the case of the war in Vietnam, would be a democratic measure to keep Reagan's militancy in check.

Surprisingly, for all her concern for class issues, MacPherson argued that an all-volunteer army, the model she approved of, is "an achievement center for men who might not have made it elsewhere," meaning, of course, the working class and impoverished and marginalized groups, "men who most certainly would be back at the bottom of the ladder if the middle and upper middle class were added to the mix" (1988, 198). One problem with this argument is the happy acceptance of the military rank and file as a natural domain for the underprivileged and MacPherson's rather bizarre approach to the problem of inequality in class distribution in army recruitment. For one thing, Jennifer Mittelstadt has found that even though the working class (of all races) *was* overrepresented among Vietnam War–era servicemen, "the military of that period was significantly more representative of broader American demographics than most understood" (2018, 93–94; see also Bailey 2009, 258), and the AVF, in the face of low wages and lack of governmental social benefits

for the less well-off, proved if anything even more demographically unequal.[3] But this particular issue is illustration of more profound failures of liberal argumentation in response to the war in Vietnam. Dismissing draft as inherently unfair is in reality arguing that American citizens are not *forced* to fight and die in wars waged by the state—which is problematic on a number of levels.[4] I am tempted to argue that a democratic superpower like the United States, with its imperial history, should all the more invest its demos in its war-making plans abroad, and that fair and equal draft is a natural tool for that purpose.

But even dismissing this line of thought as unfair, one has to accept that an AVF removes the business of war away from the people and with it the interests and fate of the potential targets of attack and invasion. Even in the Vietnam War era, when the protest movement and the demonstrations were combustive, the greater tide of public opinion began turning decisively against the war not because of the napalm dropped on Vietnamese villages but because U.S. costs and deaths mounted and reached a tipping point as the war began to look ever more pointless and endless, with the disastrous years 1968 and 1969 the true turning point that progressively revealed that the costs and casualties were unjustifiable.[5] Ultimately, urging no draft after the war in Vietnam was not to urge that immoral and illegal wars in the name of American ideologies and interests do not happen again, but that if they do, only those Americans who volunteer fight and die, while the rest is left alone.

The 1980s liberal dismissal of draft in reaction to the war in Vietnam in fact opened the way for an all-volunteer army, which is a neoliberal force par excellence, surpassed as a neoliberal model of a military perhaps only by a mercenary army.[6] Neoliberalism as an ideology of war does not need citizen armies any more than neoliberalism as an economy model needs societal solidarity or strong labor unions. If neoliberalism needed the repudiation of the 1960s to thrive, it would also be far better off without the disruptive danger of mass protest and unrest, such as those in opposition to the war in Vietnam, and the threat they posed to capitalist interest. The truth of the matter is that Reagan understood well that draft was unnecessary, even obstructive, to attaining the kind of national greatness military intervention could ensure and promote. What he cared for was a patriotic nation supportive of the troops, not a nation of citizen soldiers. Indeed, the plan could work so well because it "was not going to entail sacrifice on the part of the average American. . . . [Reagan] categorically rejected any suggestion of reviving the draft," while he raised military spending to the eye-watering total of $2.7 trillion over his two terms (Bacevich 2005, 107–109).

Today, the progression of the American way of waging war, a process that began with the reaction against the Vietnam-era draft and along the way gave birth to the AVF and the "Support the Troops" ideology, continues in the transformations toward post-heroic warfare.

Post-heroism has been used to refer to the notion that at the end of the twentieth-century and into the twenty-first, the ideal of sacrificing one's life for one's country on a battlefield eroded, while simultaneously the value of combat death decreased and devolved into a sense of "waste": Heroes, in other words, have become victims. The Vietnam War is, unsurprisingly, singled out as the most glaring example. In her summary of the current debates concerning "post-heroic tactics," which apart from recourse to remote and technological forms of warfare like drones also involve employment of private security contractors (PSCs), Sibylle Scheipers (2014a) observes that some studies point toward the conclusion that "casualty aversion" is not the reason why some wars are unpopular, but rather that those ongoing wars that become unpopular breed casualty aversion (e.g., Carruthers 2014). She also argues that since some post-heroic tactics, such as drone warfare, are currently subject of much controversy, and the PSCs sometimes become objects of public scrutiny and scandal (such as happened with Blackwater in 2009), post-heroism in itself does not automatically translate into unanimous public support for military interventions.

But while the long-term effects of post-heroic tactics on warfare in general and on the status of soldiers remain to be seen, within the current system the processes are underway. There are inherent dangers to the inhabitants of zones of military operations, which are made ever more remote by application of weapons that are remote-controlled and risk-free for their users, not the least because the potential victims are rendered all the more invisible to the scrutiny of the public opinion in the country that has the power. Susan Carruthers, who writes about the resurgence of the hero status of the U.S. soldier after 9/11 and during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (which, she adds, did not extend into a popular concern for the returning veterans' health or welfare), also notes that media coverage of civilian casualties of the Afghanistan conflict have tended to privilege "*intention*" over outcome, meaning that "if NATO troops did not set out to kill civilians then these deaths are *unfortunate* but not atrocious" (2014, 182; emphases in original). She also points out that during the beginning phases of that conflict, house policy at CNN required that news of civilian deaths in Afghanistan had to be accompanied by mentions of 9/11 deaths, "with the unmissable implication that these [Afghan] fatalities were acceptable losses of questionably innocent life" (182). In conclusion, Carruthers observes that these Afghan deaths "barely register" (183) among the U.S. public, which throughout American wars have always approached differently the meaningful American casualties and the easily ignored and inconsequential losses of other nations.

While drawing a straight line of causality between the war in Vietnam and the conduct of more recent U.S. military engagement might be impossible given the convoluted history of the past several decades, it is still

reasonable to argue that the aftermath of that conflict had set in motion processes that at the very least redefined the relationship between American society and its soldiers. But by recasting the war as an American tragedy, the American cultural narrative of the war in Vietnam has also allowed other, more profound and more progressive "lessons" to slip away and remain unlearnt. Permitting the war to turn into a distinctly American myth enabled it to endure as an essentially hermetic experience. The story of how victimhood in Vietnam has been represented and perceived also reveals the ways in which it can be used for ideological and political ends. In the case of the United States and the war in Vietnam, the subsurface dispute that had taken place in the American culture and politics over the questions of who were the war's victims and what meanings their victimizations carried proved so profound that it actually reworked the historical memory of a momentous, potentially pivotal event. Looking back, and working our way through the history of this problem, exposes not only the danger of a situation in which the powerful claim for themselves the status of victims but also the failure of the conviction that everyone is a victim of war.

Notes

1 On the "Support the Troops" frenzy during the Gulf War, and its subsequent effects, see also Isaacs (1997, 75–86) and Lembcke (1998, 11–26); for a history of military policy regarding Desert Storm, see Bacevich (2005, 35–56).
2 Beth Osborne Daponte found that 56,000 Iraqi soldiers and more than 3,500 Iraqi civilians died as a direct result of the war. Daponte found that in addition 146,000 Iraqi people died in the war's aftermath due to its impact, some due to postwar violence, but a vast majority (111,000) due to what she called "adverse health results," a result of the destruction of infrastructure, loss of electrical power, the vulnerability of the "weakened population" to infection, and so forth (Daponte 1993). See also Durrant and Cherni (1991, 41).
3 A 2008 article by Amy Lutz that looked at the history of demographics in military enlistment found that socioeconomic status, reflected by family income levels, is the only "significant" (2008, 185) marker of inequality, and not race, ethnicity, or immigrant status, with those from poorer backgrounds enlisting in statistically disproportionate numbers since the end of conscription in 1973. Lutz's study contradicted the 2006 report by the Heritage Foundation, still quoted by Bailey (2009, 258), which set out to refute the "conventional wisdom" that volunteer enlistment stems from fewer opportunities and poverty and to show that it stems from patriotism instead; the Foundation's report found that enlistees were in fact more likely to be well-off and better-educated (Kane 2007). The report's educational claims were in turn contradicted by the findings of a study conducted in 2007 by the National Priorities Project (NPP), which found that the number of recruits with high school diploma were dropping and educational standards were being lowered in the U.S. Armed Forces recruitment (White 2008). Mittelstadt (2018), who largely confirms the findings of both Lutz and the NPP, also points out that not only was the Vietnam War–era military far more representative of the U.S. society in general, but that following the establishment of the AVF greater numbers of working-class African Americans and

Latinos also enlisted than before, an increase that affected the demographic make-up of the U.S. military significantly in comparison with the 1960s and 1970s.

It should also be pointed out that in theory military draft remains a possibility in the United States, as since 1980 men are required to register for Selective Service System when they turn eighteen, and the congressional National Commission on Military, National and Public Service, investigating among other things the possibility of the same requirement for women, is expected to release a report in 2020.

4 On the unwillingness of the American public opinion to accept any U.S. casualties throughout the 1990s, see Isaacs (1997, 68).

5 On the decisive influence of rising U.S. costs and casualties on the development of large-scale antiwar sentiment in American public opinion in 1967 and 1968, see Hallin (1986, 2013), Landers (2004, 99–103), Wyatt (1993, 188). A wholly different perspective on those critical years is offered by Noam Chomsky, who argues that 1968 was when big American corporations turned against the war and began supporting the ending of it (1997, 166).

6 On the subject of AVF in broader cultural, political, and socioeconomic contexts, and as a market-driven military, see Bailey (2009), Mittelstadt (2017, 2018).

Works Cited

Allison, William Thomas. 2012. *My Lai: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

"An American Tragedy." 1969. *Time*, December 5, 1969. Published online March 8, 2002. http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,216180,00.html.

Anderegg, Michael. 1991a. "Hollywood and Vietnam: John Wayne and Jane Fonda as Discourse." In Anderegg 1991b, 15–32.

———, ed. 1991b. *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Appy, Christian. 2015. "40 Years Later, Will the End Games in Iraq and Afghanistan Follow the Vietnam Playbook?" *HuffPost*, April 27, 2015. Updated December 6, 2017. www.huffingtonpost.com/christian-appy/40-years-later-vietnam-iraq-afghanistan_b_7151968.html.

Arkin, William M., Damian Durrant, and Marianne Cherni. 1991. "On Impact: Modern Warfare and the Environment. A Case Study of the Gulf War." Greenpeace.

Aronowitz, Stanley. 2007. "Considerations of the Origins of Neoconservatism." In Thompson 2007b, 56–70.

Aubrey, James R. 1991. "Conradian Darkness in John Clark Pratt's *The Laotian Fragments*." In Jason 1991, 111–123.

Bacevich, Andrew J. 2005. *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bailey, Beth. 2009. *America's Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press.

Barthes, Roland. 1972. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Noonday Press.

Bates, Milton J. 1996. *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Beattie, Keith. 1998. *The Scar That Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War*. New York: New York University Press.

Beidler, Philip D. 2004. *Late Thoughts on an Old War: The Legacy of Vietnam*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

———. 2007. *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Bellhouse, Mary L., and Lawrence Litchfield. 1982. "Vietnam and Loss of Innocence: An Analysis of the Political Implications of the Popular Literature of the Vietnam War." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 16 (3): 157–174.

Bibby, Michael, ed. 1999. *The Vietnam War and Postmodernity*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Bloom, Sandra L. 2000. "Our Hearts and Our Hopes Are Turned to Peace: Origins of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies." In *International Handbook of Human Response to Trauma*, edited by Arieh Y. Shalev, Rachel Yehuda, and Alexander C. McFarlane, 27–50. New York: Springer Science+Business Media.

Bonn, Maria S. 1993. "The Lust of the Eye: Michael Herr, Gloria Emerson, and the Art of Observation." *Papers on Language & Literature* 29 (1): 28–48.

Bothmer, Bernhard von. 2010. *Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of the Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Boyagoda, Randy. 2016. "*The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen Review—A Bold, Artful Debut." *The Guardian*, March 12, 2016. www.theguardian.com/books/2016/mar/12/the-sympathizer-viet-thanh-nguyen-review-debut.

Boyle, Brenda M. 2015a. "Introduction: The War Stories We Tell." In Boyle 2015c, 1–25.

———. 2015b. "American Totem Society in the Twenty-First Century: Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke*, Karl Marlantes' *Matterhorn*, and Tatjana Soli's *The Lotus Eaters*." In Boyle 2015c, 159–182.

———, ed. 2015c. *The Vietnam War: Topics in Contemporary North American Literature*. London: Bloomsbury.

———. 2016. "Naturalizing War: The Stories We Tell about the Vietnam War." In Boyle and Lim 2016, 175–192.

Boyle, Brenda M., and Jeehyun Lim, eds. 2016. *Looking Back on the Vietnam War: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Bradley, Mark. 2000. "Slouching toward Bethlehem: Culture, Diplomacy, and the Origins of the Cold War in Vietnam." In *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism*, edited by Christian G. Appy, 11–34. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Briody, Dan. 2004. *The Halliburton Agenda: The Politics of Oil and Money*. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons.

Bryan, C. D. B. 1991. *Friendly Fire*. New York: Bantam Falcon.

Buckingham, Jr., William A. 1982. *Operation Ranch Hand: The Air Force and Herbicides in Southeast Asia 1961–1971*. Washington: Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force.

Cahir, Linda Costanzo. 2004. "Narratological Parallels in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*." In *Joseph Conrad's* Heart of Darkness*: A Casebook*, edited by Gene G. Moore, 183–196. New York: Oxford University Press.

Caputo, Philip. 1982. "The Unreturning Army." *Playboy*, January, no pagination.

———. 1985. *A Rumor of War*. London: Arrow Books.

———. 2015. "*The Sympathizer*, by Viet Thanh Nguyen." *The New York Times*, April 2, 2015. www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/books/review/the-sympathizer-by-viet-thanh-nguyen.html.

Carpenter, Lucas. 2003. "'It Don't Mean Nothin': Vietnam War Fiction and Postmodernism." *College Literature* 30 (2): 30–50.

Carruthers, Susan L. 2014. "'Casualty Aversion': Media, Society, and Public Opinion." In Scheipers 2014b, 162–187.

Carter, James M. 2003. "War Profiteering from Vietnam to Iraq." *CounterPunch*, December 11, 2003. www.counterpunch.org/2003/12/11/war-profiteering-from-vietnam-to-iraq/.

———. 2008. *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chattarji, Subarno. 2007. "Imagining Vietnam: Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*." In Roper 2007b, 72–88.

Chomsky, Noam. 1989. *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*. New York: South End Press.

———. 1993. *Year 501: The Conquest Continues*. Montréal: Black Rose Books.

———. 1997. *World Orders, Old and New*. London: Pluto Press.

Chomsky, Noam, and Edward S. Herman. 1979a. *The Political Economy of Human Rights, Volume I: The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism*. Montréal: Black Rose Books.

———. 1979b. *The Political Economy of Human Rights, Volume II: After the Cataclysm. Postwar Indochina & The Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology*. Boston: South End Press. Kindle.

Chomsky, Noam, and Howard Zinn, eds. 1972. *The Pentagon Papers, Volume 5: Critical Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Christopher, Renny. 1995. *The Viet Nam War/The American War: Images and Representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Clarke, Michael Tavel. 2013. "'I Feel Close to Myself': Solipsism and US Imperialism in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*." *College Literature: A Journal of Critical Literary Studies* 40 (2): 130–154.

Cobley, Evelyn. 1986. "Narrating the Facts of War: New Journalism in Herr's *Dispatches* and Documentary Realism in First World War Novels." *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 16 (2): 97–116.

Cortright, David. 2005. *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance during the Vietnam War*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Cronin, Cornelius A. 1991. "Line of Departure: The Atrocity in Vietnam War Literature." In Jason 1991, 200–216.

Daponte, Beth Osborne. 1993. "A Case Study in Estimating Casualties from War and Its Aftermath: The 1991 Persian Gulf War." *Medicine & Global Survival* 3 (2): 57–66.

Deusen, Marshall Van. 1983. "The Unspeakable Language of Life and Death in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 24 (2): 82–87.

Diamond, Sara. 1995. *Roads to Dominion: Right Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States*. New York: Guildford Press.

Dorrien, Gary. 2004. *Imperial Designs: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana*. New York: Routledge.

Drinnon, Richard. 1997. *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Eaglestone, Robert. 2013. "Avoiding Evil in Perpetrator Fiction." In *Representing Perpetrators in Holocaust Literature and Film*, edited by Jenni Adams and Sue Vice, 13–24. Edgware: Vallentine Mitchell.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. 1997. *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War*. London: Virago Press.

Emerson, Gloria. 1992. *Winners and Losers: Battles, Retreats, Gains, Losses, and Ruins from the Vietnam War*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2019. s.v. "Antonin Artaud." Accessed August 17, 2019. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Antonin-Artaud.

FitzGerald, Frances. 1972. *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and Americans in Vietnam*. London: Macmillan.

Fitzpatrick, Tom. 1989. "There is Yet More to *Casualties of War*." *Phoenix New Times*, August 30, 1989. www.phoenixnewtimes.com/news/there-is-yet-more-to-casualties-of-war-6445590.

Franklin, H. Bruce. 1993. *MIA, or Mythmaking in America. How and Why Belief in Live POWs Has Possessed a Nation*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

———. 2000. *Vietnam & Other American Fantasies*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

———. 2002. "Missing in Action in the Twenty-First Century." In *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, edited by Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco, 317–332. Malden: Blackwell.

Fussell, Paul. 1990. *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*. New York: Oxford University Press.

———. 2013. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gettleman, Marvin E., Jane Franklin, Marilyn B. Young, and H. Bruce Franklin, eds. 1995. *Vietnam and America: A Documented History. Revised and Enlarged Second Edition*. New York: Grove Press.

Gibson, James William. 2000. *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam*. New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press.

Gilman, Owen W., and Lorrie Smith, eds. 1990. *America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War*. New York: Garland.

Gordon, Maggie. 2000. "Appropriation of Generic Convention: Film as Paradigm in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 28 (1): 16–27.

Grandin, Greg. 2007. "The Imperial Presidency: The Legacy of Reagan's Central America Policy." In Thompson 2007b, 197–224.

Griffiths, Philip Jones. 2001. *Vietnam Inc*. London: Phaidon.

Hagopian, Patrick. 2009. *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Haines, Harry W. 2000. "Disputing the Wreckage: Ideological Struggle at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial." In *Historical Memory and Representations of the Vietnam War*, edited by Walter L. Hixson, 1–16. New York: Garland.

Hall, H. Palmer. 1990. "The Helicopter and the Punji Stick: Central Symbols of the Vietnam War." In Gilman and Smith 1990, 150–161.

Hallin, Daniel C. 1986. *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hammond, William M. 1990. *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962–1968*. Washington: Center of Military History.

Hansen, J.T. 1990. "Vocabularies of Experience." In Gilman and Smith 1990, 134–149.

Harrison, Brady. 1999. "'This Movie is a Thing of Mine': Homeopathic Postmodernism in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*." In Bibby 1999, 89–108.

Hasford, Gustav. 1988. *The Short-Timers*. Toronto: Bantam Books.

Hawkins, Ty. 2009. "Violent Death as Essential Truth in *Dispatches*: Re-Reading Michael Herr's 'Secret History' of the Vietnam War." *War, Literature & the Arts* 21: 129–143.

———. 2012. *Reading Vietnam amid the War on Terror*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Heberle, Mark. 2015. "Michael Herr's Traumatic New Journalism: *Dispatches*." In Boyle 2015b, 27–45.

Hedges, Chris. 2002. *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. New York: PublicAffairs. Kindle.

Heinemann, Larry. 1987. *Paco's Story*. London: Faber and Faber.

Hellmann, John. 1986. *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 1991. "Rambo's Vietnam and Kennedy's New Frontier." In Anderegg 1991b, 140–152.

———. 2007. "*Apocalypse Now Redux* and the Curse of Vietnam." In Roper 2007b, 51–71.

Hennessey, Patrick. 2010. *The Junior Officers' Reading Club: Killing Time & Fighting Wars*. London: Penguin Books.

Herr, Michael. 1978. *Dispatches*. London: Picador.

Hersh, Seymour M. 1970. *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath*. New York: Random House.

Herzog, Tobey C. 1980. "Writing about Vietnam: A Heavy-Heart of Darkness Trip." *College English* 41 (6): 680–695.

———. 1988. "John Wayne in a Modern Heart of Darkness: The American Soldier in Vietnam." In Searle 1988, 16–25.

———. 2005. *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost*. London: Routledge.

Hölbling, Walter W. 2007. "The Vietnam War: (Post-)Colonial Fictional Discourses and (Hi-) Stories." In Roper 2007b, 89–120.

Hunt, Andrew E. 1999. *The Turning: A History of the Vietnam Veterans against the War*. New York: New York University Press.

Hunt, Michael H. 2009. *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

———. 2010. Introduction to *A Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History from American and Vietnamese Perspectives*, xvii–xxii. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Isaacs, Arnold S. 1997. *Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

James, David E. 1990. "Rock and Roll and Representations of the Invasion of Vietnam." *Representations* 29 (Winter): 78–98.

Jameson, Frederic. 1991. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Jason, Philip K., ed. 1991. *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Jeffords, Susan. 1989. *The Remasculinization of America. Gender and the Vietnam War.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Kane, Tim. 2007. "Who Are the Recruits? The Demographic Characteristics of U.S. Military Enlistment, 2003–2005." Heritage Foundation Center for Data Analysis Report #06–09. Accessed October 28, 2016. www.heritage.org/research/reports/2006/10/who-are-the-recruits-the-demographic-characteristics-of-us-military-enlistment-2003-2005.

Kelley, Michael P. 2002. *Where We Were in Vietnam: A Comprehensive Guide to the Firebases, Military Installations and Naval Vessels of the Vietnam War.* Central Point: Hellgate Press.

Kern, Louis J. 1988. "MIAs, Myth, and Macho Magic: Post-Apocalyptic Cinematic Visions of Vietnam." In Searle 1988, 37–54.

Kinney, Katherine. 2000. *Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Knightley, Phillip. 1975. *The First Casualty: War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist and Myth Maker from the Crimea to Vietnam.* London: Purnell Book Services.

Kolko, Gabriel. 2007. *Vietnam: Anatomy of a Peace.* London: Routledge.

Kovic, Ron. 2012. *Born on the Fourth of July.* New York: Akashic Books. Kindle.

Kuberski, Philip Francis. 1986. "Genres of Vietnam." *Cultural Critique* 3 (Spring): 168–188.

Kwon, Heonik. 2008. *Ghosts of War in Vietnam.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Landers, James. 2004. *The Weekly War: Newsmagazines and Vietnam.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press.

Lang, Daniel. 1969. *Casualties of War.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Lawrence, Mark Atwood. 2008. *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lembcke, Jerry. 1998. *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam.* New York: New York University Press.

Linenthal, Edward Tabor. 1980. "From Hero to Anti-Hero: Transformation of the Warrior in Modern America." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 63 (1): 79–93.

Lutz, Amy. 2008. "Who Joins the Military? A Look at Race, Class, and Immigration Status." *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 36 (2): 167–188.

MacPherson, Myra. 1988. *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation.* Sevenoaks: Sceptre.

———. 2002. "McNamara's 'Moron Corps.'" *Salon*, May 30, 2002. www.salon.com/2002/05/30/mcnamara_3/.

Marling, Karal Ann, and Robert Silberman. 1987. "The Statue near the Wall: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Art of Remembering." *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 1 (1): 4–29.

Martin, Andrew. 1993. *Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Martini, Edwin A. 2007. *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975–2000.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Mason, Bobbie Ann. 1986. *In Country.* New York: Harper Perennial.

McInerney, Peter. 1981. "'Straight' and 'Secret' History in Vietnam War Literature." *Contemporary Literature* 22 (2): 187–204.

Mittelstadt, Jennifer. 2015. *The Rise of the Military Welfare State*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

———. 2018. "Military Demographics." In *At War: The Military and American Culture in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, edited by David Kieran and Edwin A. Martini, 87–107. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Moeller, Susan. 1989. *Shooting War: Photography and the American Experience of Combat*. New York: Basic Books.

Mongia, Padmini. 1992. "Narrative Strategy and Imperialism in Conrad's *Lord Jim*." *Studies in the Novel* 24 (2): 173–186.

———. 1993. "'Ghosts of the Gothic': Spectral Women and Colonized Spaces in *Lord Jim*." *The Conradian* 17 (2): 1–16.

Moser, Richard R. 1996. *The New Winter Soldiers: GI and Veteran Dissent During the Vietnam Era*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Musiał, Aleksandra. 2016. "Outside the World: Vietnam as a Mythic Landscape in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*." In *War and Words: Representations of Military Conflict in Literature and the Media*, edited by Wojciech Drąg, Jakub Krogulec, and Mateusz Marecki, 45–56. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars.

Myers, Thomas. 1988. *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Neer, Robert M. 2013. *Napalm: An American Biography*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.

Neilson, Jim. 1998. *Warring Fictions: Cultural Politics and the Vietnam War Narrative*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. 2015a. "A Dark, Funny—and Vietnamese—Look at the Vietnam War." *NPR*, April 11, 2015. www.npr.org/2015/04/11/398728517/a-dark-funny-and-vietnamese-look-at-the-vietnam-war.

O'Brien, Tim. 1980. *Going After Cacciato*. London: Triad/Granada.

———. 1994. "The Vietnam in Me." *The New York Times*, October 2, 1994. www.nytimes.com/books/98/09/20/specials/obrien-vietnam.html.

———. 1998. *The Things They Carried*. New York: Broadway Books.

———. 2006. *If I Die in A Combat Zone*. London: Harper Perennial.

Oliver, Kendrick. 2006. *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Pach, Jr., Chester J. 1994. "And That's the Way It Was: The Vietnam War on the Network Nightly News." In *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, edited by David Faber, 60–90. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Peebles, Stacey. 2015. "The Ghost That Won't Be Exorcised: Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*." In Boyle 2015b, 137–158.

Prasch, Thomas. 1988. "*Platoon* and the Mythology of Realism." In Searle 1988, 195–215.

Pratt, John Clark. 1999. *Vietnam Voices: Perspectives on the War Years 1941–1975*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Reagan, Ronald. 1980. "Address to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Chicago." *The American Presidency Project*, August 18, 1980. www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-veterans-foreign-wars-convention-chicago.

———. 1982. "The President's News Conference." *The American Presidency Project*, February 18, 1982. www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-1002.

Ringnalda, Don. 1990. "Unlearning to Remember Vietnam." In Gilman and Smith 1990, 64–74.

———. 1994. *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Ritchin, Fred. 1989. "What is Magnum?" In *In Our Time. The World as Seen by Magnum Photographers*, edited by William Manchester, 417–444. New York: W.W. Norton.

Roper, Jon. 2007a. "Over Thirty Years." In Roper 2007b, 1–20.

———, ed. 2007b. *The United States and the Legacy of the Vietnam War*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Roszak, Theodore. 1969. *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*. Garden City: Anchor Books.

Rummel, R.J. 1994. "Definition of Democide (Genocide and Mass Murder)." *Freedom, Democide, War*. www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/DBG.CHAP2.HTM

———. 1997. "Statistics of American Genocide and Mass Murder." Freedom, Democide, War. www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/SOD.CHAP13.HTM

Rushdie, Salman. 1991. "Michael Herr: An Interview." In *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991*, 333–336. London: Granta Books / Penguin Books.

Sallah, Michael, and Mitch Weiss. 2006. *Tiger Force: A True Story of Men and War*. New York: Little, Browns.

Scheipers, Sybille. 2014a. Introduction to Scheipers 2014b, 1–18.

———, ed. 2014b. *Heroism & the Changing Character of War: Toward Post-Heroic Warfare?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schell, Jonathan. 1967. "The Village of Ben Suc." *The New Yorker*, July 15, 1967. www.newyorker.com/magazine/1967/07/15/the-village-of-ben-suc.

———. 2007. "The Long Shadow of Vietnam." In Roper 2007b, 21–32.

Scheurer, Timothy E. 1981. "Myth to Madness: America, Vietnam and Popular Culture." *The Journal of American Culture* 4 (2): 149–165.

Schlegel, Amy. 1995. "My Lai: 'We Lie, They Die,' Or, a Small History of an 'Atrocious' Photograph." *Third Text* 31 (Summer): 47–66.

Schlichter, Kurt. 2009. "Semper Films: The Top Ten Marine Corps Movies." *Breitbart*, November 10, 2009. www.breitbart.com/big-hollywood/2009/11/10/semper-films-the-top-ten-marine-corps-movies/.

Searle, William J., ed. 1988. *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.

Shea, Neil. 2016. "What Michael Herr Meant to Me." *The American Scholar*, July 8. Accessed July 24, 2017. https://theamericanscholar.org/what-michael-herr-meant-to-me/.

Sheehan, Neil. 1990. *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. London: Picador.

Slotkin, Richard. 1998a. *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

———. 1998b. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Smetak, Jacqueline R. 1991. "The (Hidden) Antiwar Activist in Vietnam War Fiction." In Jason 1991, 141–165.

Smith, Lorrie N. 1994. "'The Things Men Do': The Gendered Subtext in Tim O'Brien's *Esquire* Stories." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 36 (1): 16–40.

Smith, Wendy. 2007. "War Weary." *The American Scholar*, March 1, 2007. https://theamericanscholar.org/war-weary.

Spanos, William V. 2000. *America's Shadow: An Anatomy of Empire*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

———. 2008. *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization. The Specter of Vietnam*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Spindler, Michael. 1991. "Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and the Cataclysmic View of War." *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 10 (1): 25–30.

St. Clair, Jeffrey. 2005. "The Making of Halliburton." *CounterPunch*, July 14, 2005. www.counterpunch.org/2005/07/14/the-making-of-halliburton/.

Stacewicz, Richard. 2008. *Winter Soldiers: An Oral History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

"Statistical Information about Fatal Casualties of the Vietnam War." 2013. *National Archives*. Last reviewed April 30, 2019. www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html.

Stevens, Richard L. 1995. *Mission on the Ho Chi Minh Trail: Nature, Myth, and War in Viet Nam*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Stone, Robert. 1994. *Dog Soldiers*. Boston: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Sturken, Marita. 1997. "The Wall and the Screen Memory: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial." In *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, 44–84. Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. 2002. "Television Vectors and the Making of a Media Event: The Helicopter, the Freeway Chase, and National Memory." In *Reality Squared: Televisual Discourse on the Real*, edited by James Friedman, 185–202. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Thompson, Michael J. 2007a. "America's Conservative Landscape: The New Conservatism and the Reorientation of American Democracy." In Thompson 2007b, 9–30.

———, ed. 2007b. *Confronting the New Conservatism: The Rise of the Right in America*. New York: New York University Press.

Turse, Nick. 2013. *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*. New York: Metropolitan Books. Kindle edition.

Vecchio, John M. Del. 1982. *The 13th Valley*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

Wagner-Pacifici, Robin, and Barry Schwartz. 1991. "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past." *American Journal of Sociology* 97 (2): 376–420.

Walzer, Michael. 2006. *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*. New York: Basic Books.

Weaver, Gina Marie. 2010. *Ideologies of Forgetting: Rape in the Vietnam War*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Webb, James. 2001. *Fields of Fire*. New York: Pocket Books.

"Which is the BEST Marine Movie of All-Time?" 2013. *Marine Corps Association & Foundation*. Accessed July 24, 2017. www.mca-marines.org/poll/which-best-marine-movie-all-time. Article removed by August 2019.

White, Josh. 2008. "Army Off Target on Recruits." *Washington Post*, January 23, 2008. www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/22/AR2008012203326.html.

Wiest, Andrew. 2002. *The Vietnam War 1956–1975*. Oxford: Osprey.

Williams, William Appleman. 1955. "The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy." *Pacific Historical Review* 24 (4): 379–395.

Williams, Tony. 1991. "Narrative Patterns and Mythic Trajectories in Mid-1980s Vietnam Movies." In Anderegg 1991b, 114–139.

Wilmington, Michael. 1989. "MOVIE REVIEW: DePalma's Dark Victory." *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 1989. http://articles.latimes.com/1989-08-18/entertainment/ca-437_1_brian-depalma.

Wyatt, Clarence R. 1993. *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Young, Charles S. 1998. "Missing Action: POW Films, Brainwashing and the Korean War, 1954–1968." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 18 (1): 49–74.

Young, Marilyn. 2014. *The Vietnam Wars 1945–1990*. New York: HaperCollins. Kindle.

Young, Marilyn B., John J. Fitzgerald, and A. Tom Grunfeld. 2003. *The Vietnam War: A History in Documents*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zinn, Howard. 2009. *A People's History of the United States: 1492–Present*. New York: HarperCollins. Kindle.

Index

Note: Page numbers followed by "n" refer to notes.