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"An American Tragedy"
Strategies of Representing Victimhood in American Narratives of the War in Vietnam

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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 6 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* (1977) as "the best writing on war, ever, period." 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 Vietnam movies much. The iconic Vietnam 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 Westerners. But *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 Vietnam. As this thesis proves, I have stayed with that war for some years.

I'm writing all this because I want to use my own story of gaining a knowledge of Vietnam 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. consisted of studies of the Vietnam-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 Vietnam that Herr's book had planted in my mind continued to grow and clarify. It was only when, starting to think about my PhD 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 thesis comes from an old *Time* article, titled "An American Tragedy," 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, like Jim Neilson's *Vietnam and American Cultural Narrative*, Katherine Kinney's *Friendly Fire*, and the recent volumes edited by Brenda Boyle, which offered more critical, sometimes radical, 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, like H. Bruce Franklin's *MIA*, Edwin Martini's *Invisible Enemies*, Jerry Lembcke's *Spitting Image*, Patrick Hagopian's *The Vietnam War in American Memory*, or Kendrick Oliver's *The My Lai Massacre*, 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 Vietnam 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. This is now the secret history of the war in Vietnam, and 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. Going back to the histories and other accounts of the war by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, James William Gibson, Frances FitzGerald, Gloria Emerson, or Philip Jones Griffiths jump-starts the process of uncovering this secret history.

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 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 which 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 Vietnam—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.

The present thesis returns to the canonical texts of American Vietnam War literature and cinema to assess them as narratives engaging in establishing victimhood. The books discussed 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*, Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, and Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*; 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 books, both fiction and non-fiction, 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] In the meantime, other well-received literatures of the war have also emerged and entered the Vietnam War literary scholarship, their position evinced by recent edited volumes dedicated in equal measure to narratives of American, Vietnamese, and American-Vietnamese authorship (Boyle 2015c; Boyle and Lim 2016; Heberle 2009). The 1990s and 2000s saw the publication in the U.S. 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 post-war 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 U.S., bridges several Vietnamese viewpoints and identities—is a 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 U.S. as a child of refugees, towards 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).

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. 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 post-war 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 towards civilians.

One finds accounts of the "different war" in historiographical writings and other types of commentaries on the conflict, including literary studies. Indeed, Tobey Herzog, who in his study of American Vietnam War literature noted several important ways in which it continued the traditions and conventions of the literary output from previous conflicts, nevertheless pointed out that it is important to keep in mind that

> each war also has its own character—images, political ideology, battlefield strategy, geography, participants, and technology influencing soldiers', civilians', and artists' reactions to the war. (...) [One of the contexts in which to read the literature about Vietnam is that] several special characteristics, real or perceived, of the Vietnam War affect how American foot soldiers responded to this war and how soldier-authors created themes, images, and psychological conflicts within their stories. (Herzog 2005, 45)

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 which 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 (for examples of comments or discussions about Vietnam as a "different war," see: Carpenter, 2003, 32–35; Herzog 2005, 45–57; Knightley 1975, 381–382; MacPherson 1984, 54–74; Wiest 2002, 29–58).

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 thesis, 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 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 (Neilson 1998, 7).

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 Vietnam (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 in Vietnam fell largely in line with the permissible public discourse, supporting its view of the conflict as a primarily American affair and primarily a cause of profound American suffering and trauma, a polarizing wound inflicted on the American nation in need of mending. In light of the transformations of the Vietnam historical memory in the 1980s discussed in Chapter 1, I return to the very beginnings of the war to recount its history with an emphasis on the relationship between ideology and material interests of the United States. Next, I move on to what repressed that history: myth. I devote some space to its definition and application to the American war in Vietnam. I then begin my discussion of the American canon by recognizing the fact that in the narratives, "Vietnam" was first of all reconstructed as a *place* (an *American place*),

and that the strategies American authors employed to achieve that had fundamental significance to the process of turning the war into myth. Michael Herr's notion of "Landing Zone Loon" serves as a framework to analyze the reconstructions and reimaginings of "Vietnam" in other texts. I pay particular attention to the strategies of representation that bolster the notion of American victimization in Vietnam, symbolized in the ways in which the U.S. soldiers are harassed and killed by the Vietnamese "homicidal" landscape.

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 begins with an in-depth analysis of the aforementioned editorial in *Times*, "An American Tragedy." In the subchapter, I show that the article already attempted to contextualize the ongoing conflict in the terms of the "different war" trope, and that it employed several strategies regarding the U.S. conduct in Indochina which would come to dominate the war's American canon, amongst which the focus on the American soldier and his suffering was foremost. The subsequent investigation into the representations and strategies in post-war texts will establish a continuum in interpretive and contextualizing practices running from the moment during the still ongoing war in which My Lai could already be branded *an American tragedy*, to the working-through the war in memoirs, novels and films, and to the emergence of the American cultural narrative of the war by the end of the 1980s. Within the bounds of this continuum, 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 thesis, and that it is approached from a specific political point of view, certain qualifications are in order. This thesis should, in fact, be read as a rhetorical stance against the anodyne ideology which 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—but, I believe, no less legitimate—"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 thesis 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. Draftees are an obvious case in point. 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. 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 the violence, destruction and suffering the United States brought to Indochina—in the American war in Vietnam, that is—and in how the U.S. cultural narrative of the conflict has dealt with them in the aftermath.

Chapter 1

Vietnam Syndromes:
Symptoms & Contexts

The war in Vietnam was a war nobody won—a struggle between victims.
Stanley Karnow

What rules the world is ideas, because ideas define the way reality is perceived.
Irving Kristol

1.1. The American cultural narrative of 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 on what the events of the conflict had been, but rather 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 William Calley remains the sole American war criminal of the conflict acknowledged by a court sentence. 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 thesis.

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 Vietnam than Tim O'Brien or Philip Caputo 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 (pop)

culture. Secondly, 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; deconstructing this dynamic translates into a fuller appreciation of how a cultural narrative operates. In 1998—and in the context of a publishing industry that has since changed much, but which was the milieu at the time when the Vietnam canon was constituted—Jim Neilson discussed precisely these mechanisms in relation to the conflict's literature. He perceived its significance 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 the Vietnam 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 Vietnam. For that end, Neilson discussed in detail the system of institutions with vested interest in the production and reception of literary texts, whose preferences and judgements are decisive in the constitution of canons: a two-pronged structure consisting of what he called commercial literary culture (publishing houses, book review magazines) and academic literary culture (academic journals, college course syllabi).

With regards to commercial literary culture, Neilson observed two processes that had occurred since the 1970s, firstly the increasing corporatization of the publishing industry, accompanied by an increasing concentration of the ownership of publishing houses by major corporate players. In acting as the initial gatekeeper for books, Neilson argued, the ever-consolidating publishing industry was responsible for "a marginalization of views that dissent too loudly or depart too radically from the status quo. (...) Such marginalization occurs not through overt censorship but through institutional sympathy between a publishing house and its corporate owner" (1998, 21). This was because "large commercial publishing firms with ties to multiple corporate enterprises do not feverishly pursue books critical of capitalism, let alone

those that advocate its dismantling" (Neilson 1998, 23–24). Moreover, as corporations, publishers are driven primarily by profit—and not just any old profit, but maximized profit, which puts pressure on the houses "to anticipate and reflect broad public sentiment (...). Commercialism itself, then, is a significant filter, marginalizing and even excluding books thought insufficiently reflective of popular interest (...)" (Neilson 1998, 24). This trend was compounded by the diminishing buyers' market, with consolidation of corporate bookstore chains and elimination of independent competition resulting in the preference to purchase titles with broader appeal and greater chance of profit. Effectively, the limits of "acceptable discourse" were established through the "persistent affirmation of dominant ideology" (Neilson 1998, 28) which became internalized—through, for example, institutional pressure, imitation of industry trends, experience with rejection of manuscripts or exposure to general cultural currents—by agents, editors, and buyers. In these conditions, Neilson contented, and in the face of the "public sentiment" in general shifting toward the political right, the chance of a leftist text getting published and widely distributed in the period in question was perhaps not impossible, but limited.

In the case of magazines, Neilson observed that reviewers in general are "likely to share, in broad outline, the ideology of the periodicals for which they write, and these periodicals are likely to fit within the spectrum of acceptable public discourse" (1998, 31). Moreover, the American press was also influenced by the shifts toward the right occurring at the time, reflective not only of the institutional and corporate pressures, but also the public culture at large.[2] Additionally, Neilson found that the most influential book review magazines, such as the *New York Times Book Review*, had tended to promote big (corporate) publishing houses by choosing their products for review disproportionately more often than smaller and independent publishers, a correlation, he argued, due to "the shared class and cultural backgrounds of reviewers, editors, authors, and agents" (1998, 31), but also to the fact that these big firms paid for a lot of advertisement on which the magazines depended for survival.

But Neilson found the aesthetic tastes of reviewers to be ideologically informed, too, even if the ideology consisted in ignoring a book's political dimension entirely; to favor an ostensibly non-ideological reading of a text is not in itself an act beyond politics, but rather an act of *de-politicization* that ends up promoting a certain ideological interpretation nevertheless. This is a

problem of various liberal approaches to the conflict that will be returned to later in this chapter. In an assessment of reviewers' practices, Neilson argued that

> Reviewers and critics (...) likewise function as an ideological barrier. By privileging imagery and language, experts can downplay a text's social dynamics (...). A book's political import can be hindered obliquely, by downplaying its social commentary and praising its formal qualities, or overtly, by repudiating its ideology. In other words, reviewers by and large reinforce modernist assumptions of critical value, championing complex and sophisticated narratives (...) and valuing the individual and timeless human struggle over social struggles against specific injustices (1998, 32).

Moving on to the academic literary culture—the final gatekeeper to the canon—Neilson discussed the various ways in which radical discourse was curbed at universities: specialization and disciplinarity, hierarchical structures and career design, demands of proficiency in "professional" discourses, the economic precariousness of academic workforce, and so forth. One might add that many scholars would also come from the same "class and cultural backgrounds" as the aforementioned reviewers and editors, or aspire to the professional-managerial stratum of society, which had traditionally served as a hotbed of capitalist and often liberal ideologies. Finally, at universities the institutional interest was overriding:

> Society needs help from the schools to justify its present divisions, including much inequality. (...) The ruling classes want a culture, including a literature and a criticism, that supports the social order and discourages rebellion, while it sanctions all kinds of nonthreatening nonconformity (Richard Ochmann, quoted in Neilson 1998, 40).

Therefore, "for the canon to be sanctioned by the academic literary establishment (...) neither its content nor its dominant interpretations should challenge liberal-pluralist belief" (Neilson 1998, 40).

Neilson went on to criticize two dominant schools of criticism in the U.S. during the time of the Vietnam War and afterwards, the formalist New Criticism and poststructuralism, and their "implicit ideologies" (1998, 47), charging both with latent promotion of liberalism, either in the more obvious New Critical guise or in the disguise of contemporary theory—crucially, responsible for determining much of the Vietnam canon—with its emphasis on politics of identity and

representation, its foregrounding of linguistic play, and its primary attention to discourse. Contemporary theory was thus guilty of superficiality of its purported political edge (again: "nonthreatening nonconformity"), and of reducing the concept of freedom to matters of individual expression and a subjective sense of lack of oppression:

> [t]he result of this [poststructuralist] attempt to revise American literary culture without overturning its economic configurations or structures of power (...) has been the application of a representative gloss to an unrepresentative and exploitative system. (...) Ultimately, the social critique made by contemporary literary studies fails to address the systemic causes of social injustice and economic exploitation and thus reproduces (...) an individualist (or identity group) ethos and nationalist ideology (Neilson 1998, 51–52).

Together with the literary Vietnam "classics," the cinematic canon of the war, though created via different cultural and institutional mechanisms, 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 the wonderfully titled *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 literary canon was constituted in the United States during the late 1970s and the 1980s. The canonical American books about Vietnam 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.

1.2. Repudiating the 1960s

> Imagine a room full of Communists who are furiously debating the meaning of Marxist ideas. Shouting and screaming, the Communists would see themselves as deeply divided. But to an outsider, things might look very different: This is a room full of ideologues who all share the same basic view of the world.
>
> In the same vein, people in the United States are struck by what divides Americans. But foreign observers often see, instead, what unites Americans. (...)
>
> Are we really saying that Americans are ideological in the sense that the Soviet and Chinese Communists were ideological? Of course not—that would be ridiculous. Americans are far *more* ideological. In other words, liberalism is deeper-rooted and more universally accepted in the United States than communism was across the seas (Tierney 2011).

Thus writes Dominic Tierney about liberalism in the United States. "Americans have a national ideology," he explains, "and it's called liberalism. (...) To be American is not to claim a particular ethnicity, but to profess the liberal creed" (2011). Crucially, "remarkably few Americans question the basic [liberal] assumptions. We are indoctrinated so profoundly that we don't even realize we are ideologues. Liberalism just seems like the natural order of things" (Tierney 2011). Moreover, the presumed polarization of political options between conservatives and segments of influential liberals, especially centrists, liberal internationalists or neoliberals, in fact precludes the possibility of politics and solutions outside of this quite narrow range. This center-to-right polarity thus effectively establishes the "limits of acceptable public discourse" of which Jim Neilson wrote, and which Noam Chomsky called "the narrowing of the ideological spectrum" (1997, 154; see also Thompson 2007a, on the liberal roots of neoconservatism and the capitalist, anti-social character of neoliberalism).

The process of rewriting the war in Vietnam in the 1980s neatly illustrates those limits, with everyone in the mainstream political range in the U.S. at the time agonizing in the contest to establish the conflict's "meanings," vindicate its veterans, and use it—and them—for various ideologically motivated ends. This circumstance creates the perfect environment in which to study the responses to the war from various political perspectives of the 1980s milieu.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the larger objective in American culture, of which the rewriting of Vietnam was part, was to repudiate the legacy of the 1960s, with their movements and demonstrations, because the period was considered dangerous by various influential parties. In his discussion of the rightward turn following that decade, Chomsky argued that the ascendant ideologies gained momentum in response to the upheavals of the 1960s and the rapid democratization and activization in U.S. political life, which threatened entrenched political authority and capitalist power: "[e]rosion of discipline under the impact of the popular ferment of the 1960s elicited renewed hysteria and (...) dedicated efforts to establish doctrinal controls" (1997, 162). On the conservative right, wrote 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. (...) Republicans wielded painful memories of the 1960s as a political weapon to attack Johnson's Great Society, the antiwar movement, and the loosening of social restraints (2010, 2–3; on Reagan and "the sixties" see 28–44).

In relation to big business, "the 20th century has been characterized by three developments of great political importance: the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy" (Alex Carey, quoted in: Chomsky 1997, 156). This "protection" against the legacy of the 1960s is linked to both the anti-welfare and free-enterprise concerns of neoconservatives, many of whom would become funded by corporations, and the ascent of economic neoliberalism:

> [t]he inhabitants of 'enemy territory' at home [the '60s popular movements] had to be controlled and suppressed, so as to restore the ability of U.S. corporations to compete in the more diverse world market by reducing real wages and welfare benefits and weakening working-class organization (Chomsky 1989, 56).

> [B]y 1978, American business was spending $1 billion a year on grassroots propaganda. These efforts were supplemented by (...) "tree-tops propaganda," targeting educated sectors and seeking to eliminate any articulate threat to business domination. Methods ranged from endowed Professorships of Free Enterprise in universities to huge propaganda campaigns against the usual run of targets: taxes, regulation of business, welfare (for the poor), pointy-headed "bureaucrats" interfering with the creative entrepreneur, union corruption and violence, evil apologists for our enemies, and so on (Chomsky 1997, 162; "[j]ust as

> corporations sought partisan influence by pouring millions of dollars into New Right political action committees, they also financed the growth of 'free enterprise' think tanks, university programs, and journals" [Diamond 1995, 198; see also 109–139]).

Conservative historian Andrew Bacevich in his 2005 book on the "new American militarism" stated outright that its rise had been "the handiwork of several disparate groups that shared little in common apart from being intent on undoing the purportedly nefarious 1960s" (2005, 6; see also 70–72 on the neoconservative intellectual "counterrevolution" against the 1960s; see also Aronowitz 2007; Diamond 1995; Dorrien 2004). Bacevich also documented the origins of one of these groups, the nationalistic and interventionist neoconservatives, eventually influential as ideologues and pundits,[3] in their adverse reaction to the decade.

Neoconservatives, many of their leaders emerging from Jewish intelligentsia and New York literary circles, were evolved Cold War liberals, united by shared anticommunism and opposition to the New Left; they would eventually come to endorse Ronald Reagan and cohere under the mantle of his foreign policy (Aronowitz 2007, 58–59; Diamond 1995, 178–180; Dorrien 2004, 7–10). But the rise of neoconservatism was only the most evident symptom of the rightward shift of the median of U.S. politics. Liberalism itself was moving further away from the left; during the 1960s and in relation to Vietnam, the New Left had "launched a sustained assault against allegedly repressive institutions, beginning with the university but ultimately including the federal government and the armed services, and by extension the premises underlying a liberal internationalist foreign policy" (Bacevich 2005, 69–70). Therefore, after the war and the fateful decade, liberals reacted with recoil:

> the social movements of the 1960s were very threatening to certain occupational groups in the middle class, many of whom were also the social base for liberal politics. The middle class generally feared the loss of privilege it saw coming as a result of the rising tide of entitlement movements (...). The strategies of the left, focusing as they did on group rather than individual rights, added to the estrangement of liberals from the Left (Lembcke 1998, 96–97; see also Bothmer 2010, 82: by the 1980s, "white liberals [...] had regarded the working class with suspicion, if not outright hostility, since the sixties").

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 U.S., leading to the infamous Kent State shooting at a college campus in Ohio in 1970, where four students were killed by National Guard. 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[4]—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 U.S.-Vietnamese relations, to the detriment of Vietnam, for another two decades. Secondly, 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 (Lembcke 1998, 49–70).[5] Jerry Lembcke studied this myth in detail, and 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.[6] 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. As Lembcke writes, "the corollary (...) was that anyone who

opposed the war was, in the eyes of Nixon-Agnew followers, also disloyal to the soldiers and, by extension, disloyal to the country" (1998, 51; on the ties between American nationalism and militarism, see Ehrenreich 1997, 216–223).

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 U.S. 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 U.S. militarism and interventionism. 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.

But in fact, as Lembcke was determined to show in his study, Vietnam veterans were largely supportive of the antiwar movement and vice versa (1998, 27–48).[7] 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 thesis 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 reported among groups of right wing veterans in the 1970s and 1980s (Hagopian 2009, 11, 49; Lembcke 1998, 67; MacPherson 1988, 69). Nevertheless, Lembcke's

study provides compelling evidence that the soldiers' and veterans' opposition to the war and active dissent were more widespread than it is remembered—and other dedicated studies support the thesis that G.I. resistance was, if not universal, then still on a massive scale, consisting in all manner of action ranging from publication and distribution of underground antiwar press among servicemen in Vietnam, to mutinies (see Cortright 2005; Moser 1996).[8] Lembcke's book also shows that the antiwar movement was supportive, 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.[9] For one thing, while the conflict lasted, no veteran group came together to publicly support the war and Nixon was unable to find ex-soldiers who had served in Vietnam to promote his policies (Lembcke 1998, 53, 67).

On the contrary, among the best known organizations in the antiwar movement was the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), founded in 1967, which went on to organize the notorious medal-throwing event at the Capitol in 1971. And although in the 1980s the veterans' cause would be reduced to grievances concerning their treatment and reception in the U.S., the VVAW was unequivocal in its political awareness and radical criticism of the U.S. policy in Vietnam—and the Vietnamese and their suffering were always at the center of the organization's ideological stance and impetus for activism, a veteran concern that would all but disappear from common memory by the 1980s. For example, a video clip available on YouTube from the 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, where the VVAW and other groups protested the war, shows veterans, among them young Ron Kovic (author of *Born on the Fourth of July*) in his wheelchair, shouting for Nixon to "stop the bombing" (MediaBurnArchive 2009). Lembcke cites another veteran remarking on that same occasion, in response to Nixon's "Vietnamization" policy that would shift the burden of the fight to South Vietnam forces, that the veterans wanted "an end of the Vietnam war, not a changing of the color of the skins of those who are dying" (1998, 66).

In another particularly famous instance, in a statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on April 22, 1971, VVAW spokesman John Kerry began by addressing the war crimes perpetrated by U.S. servicemen in Vietnam and the ravage caused by U.S. bombing, also pointing out that the Vietnamese "had for years been seeking their liberation from any colonial influence whatsoever," and that they simply wanted the Americans "to leave them alone in

peace." He identified the U.S.-backed and financed South Vietnam government as a "corrupt dictatorial regime" and stated that "America placed a cheapness on the lives of orientals," adding that he did not believe the Americans would "dream of" using against Europeans the kinds of weapons used to kill people in Vietnam. Kerry also said that the United States was "more guilty than any other body of [violating] the Geneva Conventions" (Kerry 1971).

A few months before, in January and February 1971 in Detroit, the VVAW had organized the so-called Winter Soldier Investigation (WSI), a public hearing in which over a hundred veterans revealed the sometimes hair-raising war crimes—including murder, mutilation, rape, and torture—against Vietnamese civilians and prisoners perpetrated by American soldiers, which they had witnessed or participated in. The stated purpose of the investigation was to draw a direct link between U.S. policy and the crimes. There was no response to the veterans' accounts: the testimonies were entered into Congressional Record and discussed at the Foreign Relations Committee hearings, but no investigations into specific crimes were pursued, and, a mere two years after the My Lai scandal, there was virtually no mention of the WSI in the media. Video footage of the Detroit hearings was later made by the VVAW into a documentary film titled *Winter Soldier* (1972), but television stations declined to broadcast it, and the press hardly acknowledged it, the very few papers that picked it up doing so only to cast doubt on the veracity of the testimonies ("About the Film" 2006; Hunt 2001, 60–76; Huston 2005; Lembcke 1998, 57–66; Stacewicz 2008; *Winter Soldier* was rereleased in 2005 to universal acclaim; the WSI hearings may, of course, be watched in the film; otherwise, a full transcript is available in "Winter Soldier Investigation" 1999). All of this was part of the legacy—of the 1960s, of the antiwar movement, and of the veterans' political engagement—that would be distorted ten years later, even as the veterans' activism was depoliticized. Similarly, the specific complaints centered around the plight of the Vietnamese, and the immorality and criminality of the war, would soon be squeezed outside of the "acceptable public discourse" by liberal and right-wing narratives.

Perhaps Nixon's failure to garner public support from soldiers and veterans should 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 a group of intellectuals defined as neoconservatives, clustered around a number of publications among which *Commentary*, edited by Norman Podhoretz, was the most influential (Aronowitz 2007, 59; Bacevich 2005, 71).[10] 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, and would spend his two terms squirming for military action (Diamond 1995, 179; see 200–227 on the merging of neoconservatism and Reaganism; cf. Bacevich 2005, 78–79; Dorrien 2004, 9–12). What checked his interventionist ambitions was what he himself termed the "Vietnam syndrome," and what 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; 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; Young 2014, ch. 15). 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 U.S. 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 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; sixty–three 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 15-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 own 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" (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; Isaacs 1997, 68–75).

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," the somewhat infamous revisionist line delivered by Reagan in a speech in 1980 (Reagan 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 (on Reagan's use of the Vietnam veterans, see: Bacevich 2005, 105–111; Bothmer 2010, 70ff). 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: "[t]he 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).[11]

This insistence on the "noble cause," and the complete whitewashing of the United States' 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 2015, ch. 15). The U.S. 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. That North and South Vietnam remained at war for twenty more years was largely due to the United States' ideological and economic motivations, 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 Vietnam for themselves, 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).

1.3. Squandering Vietnam'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.[12] 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 U.S. 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 (Chomsky 1989, 173–174; Chomsky 1999, 10.5.8; Young 2014, ch. 15). 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 ultraright 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. That is why, Sara Diamond wrote,

> [t]he collaboration of [anticommunist, interventionist, and militaristic] right-wing movements with Reagan's policymaking apparatus was no mere academic question. During the 1980s, the U.S. government used proxy armies to wage the East-West struggle on Third World battlefields, particularly in Central America and southern Africa. In Guatemala, El

> Salvador, Nicaragua, Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa, hundreds of thousands of people were killed. The scope of atrocities committed by forces allied with the United States defies calculation. In all of these countries, U.S. right-wing movement activists enlisted on the side of the anticommunist military and paramilitary forces, and 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." 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 U.S. 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), U.S. foreign policy (Bacevich, Isaacs), cultural studies (Beattie), the myths associated with veterans (Franklin, Lembcke), the treatment of the My Lai massacre (Oliver), and so on. Several shared conclusions may be drawn from those studies. The propaganda of Nixon especially, but also of neoconservative intellectuals and Reagan, certainly contributed to the eventual narrative. More significantly, the narrative is likewise 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" and 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, 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. As Patrick Hagopian puts it,

> [t]he 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).

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 U.S., the country's press and media showed relatively little interest in the people of South Vietnam—whose government was the United States' ally, and whose liberty and welfare were ostensibly the very reasons why the Americans went to war.[13] 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 support for the National Liberation Front (NLF) in South Vietnamese countryside, but also issues such as economic problems and corruption brought about by the influx of 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 the 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 in 1969 broke out and more stories surfaced briefly; the almost complete lack of interest with which VVAW's Winter Soldier Investigation was met in 1970 seems to suggest that the capacity of the American public to listen about their soldiers

perpetrating atrocities had quickly run out. Nevertheless, the image of a Vietnamese person, a peasant, solidified eventually into the image of a brutalized passive victim, physically violated and destroyed. This image was enforced particularly powerfully in war photography, such as Nick Ut's picture of napalm-covered running children with the naked girl in the middle, and in film, such as *Platoon*. It was also dominant in literature.

However, at the same time as the Vietnamese peasants were seen as brutalized victims, they were also considered treacherous and deceitful: "they're all VC" was the slogan of the war's trope that was emerging and feeding the larger American cultural narrative, seen in reports from Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, but, as we shall see in further chapters, given most attention in literature and film. As I will argue, these images converged into a particular strategy of representation which 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.

More openly, however, it fell to Democrat President Jimmy Carter to engage, before Reagan, in a rewriting of the war's narrative 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 U.S. had "any moral obligation to help rebuild" the reunified country, Carter answered that,

> [w]ell, 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 (Carter 1977).

The meaning of the proclamation—which, as Chomsky observes, was "so uncontroversial as to pass with no reaction" (1999, 10.5.7)—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. Discussing these words in the context of Carter administration's negotiations with postwar Vietnam which urged reparations, Young interpreted the idea that lay behind this statement thus:

> [The United States would not agree to any precondition or advance assurances] that in any way implied a debt, moral or otherwise. One does not pay reparations for mistakes, even tragic ones. The United States considered that it had intervened in Vietnam with excellent motives which had then gone bad. This 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; on comparisons with Japan and Germany, see also Chomsky 1999, ch. 10; Hagopian 2009, 406).

This turn of phrase, 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 '80s. For Carter, there were realpolitik concerns at stake; his administration was, for one thing, eager for good relations with China which 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 U.S. 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 United States' lowkey campaign to oppose Vietnamese attempts at development after the war—a campaign whose aim was, in short, to "bleed Vietnam" (Martini 2004). A number of American history books have discussed this subject in depth, including Marilyn Young's seminal *The Vietnam Wars* (2014, ch. 15), and a dedicated study by Edwin Martini, titled *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000*; it will suffice here to list the major points in U.S. post-war Vietnam policy. First of all, twice, in 1975 and 1976, the United States vetoed Vietnam's admission to the United Nations.

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 U.S. 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 by the widespread wartime destruction (Chomsky 1999, 10.5.9; Young 2014, ch. 15).[14] Both Young and Martini agree that "although the brutal American embargo did not *determine* the fate of a Socialist Vietnam, it did limit the range of possibilities available to the state and its people" (Martini 2004, 49; emphasis in original) and "greatly exacerbated the economic crisis in Vietnam" (Young 2014, ch. 15).

As far as the symbolism of these acts went, much like Carter's notion of "mutual destruction," they signified to the rest of the world and to the American people at home that the war in Vietnam was a definitively finished chapter with which the United States wanted nothing more to do. These actions and statements were, in other words, a declaration of political and historical closure.

But this closure concerned the war as an event in which the United States and Vietnam were both entangled, and it did not necessarily apply to "Vietnam" as something that had happened *to* 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."[15] Again, the issue is by now well-known in Vietnam War scholarship, as it was the focus of historian H. Bruce Franklin's *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 (POWs) 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 (MIA) 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 (the political uses of the MIA/POW issue are discussed throughout Martini 2004).

Though largely accepted in academia, Franklin's findings never made it into the American mainstream, where the conviction that soldiers had been left behind in Indochina remained widespread. The largest government investigation into the possibility of live American prisoners in Southeast Asia was the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA affairs in 1991-1993, chaired by Vietnam veterans Bob Smith and John Kerry, and including others such as John McCain. The issue, given the public sentiment about it, proved so inflammatory, however, that participation in the committee was considered politically dangerous. In fact, another Vietnam vet senator, Al Gore, refused to be a member, while a participant, Senator Bob Kerrey, is reported to have said that, "[n]obody wanted to be on that damn committee. It was an absolute loser. Everyone knew that the P.O.W. stories were fabrications, but no one wanted to offend the vet community" (quoted in Kline 2002). Political caution may indeed explain the vagueness of the committee's findings, the conclusion being that there were no surviving American POWs in Asia *at the present time*, and thus allowing the possibility that these soldiers may conceivably have been there before. Senator Smith, in any case, soon publicly rejected the unanimous decision of the committee he had vice-chaired. The conspiracy theory thus continued to be fanned. By the mid-1990s, the myth

> had evolved to baroque intricacy. By 1992, there were thousands of zealots—who believed with cultlike fervor that hundreds of American POWs had been deliberately and callously abandoned in Indochina after the war, that there was a vast conspiracy within the armed forces and the executive branch—spanning five administrations—to cover up all evidence of this betrayal, and that the governments of Communist Vietnam and Laos continued to hold an unspecified number of living American POWs, despite their adamant denials of this charge (Malcolm McConnell and Theodore Schweitzer III, quoted in Wikipedia 2016b; the quotation comes from the two authors' book titled *Inside Hanoi's Secret Archives: Solving the MIA Mystery* [1995]).

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 United States government had knowingly abandoned the soldiers to their Vietnamese tormentors and, through the post-war 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, 174–179; Martini 2004, 265–281; a polemic with the view that John Rambo indorsed Reaganism is offered in Hellmann 1991, 140–152). And the Rambo movie series did resonate and leave a mark: as Andrew Bacevich observes, "[a]s measured by the response [the] film evoked, it seems fair to say that Stallone, like Reagan, had a far more accurate feel for what made ordinary Americans tick than did elite observers who dismissed *Rambo*, as they did Reagan himself, as either menace or a buffoon" (2005, 113; see also Lembcke 1998, 180; Martini 2004, 258).

But *First Blood Part II* veered toward the center, too, playing up to the emerging dominant imagery and narrative tendencies of the war. In his second incarnation, the buffed-up and bandana-wearing John Rambo is still a disturbed Vietnam veteran broken by his wartime experience and reception at home. Although he exerts his revenge, he remains a victim of ineffective American leaders as much as of the bad war itself. Furthermore, the film, like the 1980s POW genre in general, marries this form of victimization to another one by following *The Deer Hunter* in emphasizing the image of the incontestably evil North Vietnamese communist

torturing Americans. U.S. POWs did, of course, suffer abuse in captivity; the point here concerns rather the volume and amount of cultural airtime these matters received, even as they turned into tropes in the American cultural narrative of the war, to the exclusion of other problems the war continued to pose. In the early 1970s, the POW issue—the administration's insistence on the missing soldiers as much as the widely publicized PR stunt that was the return of the 591 prisoners actually freed from Vietnam—served to divert the public attention away from the American dead and from the disgruntled veterans, who sometimes voiced their dissatisfaction with the disproportionate publicity of the event. Now the filmic Vietnamese Red and his American victim served to strengthen the imagery of American victimization and suffering in the war at the hands of the Vietnamese.

Outside of Hollywood, the nonexistent prisoners continued to be exploited in American-Vietnamese relations. The POW/MIA 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 (Franklin 2002, 317–322; Isaacs 1997, 114, 129–130; Kwon 2008, 47; Martini 2004, 75ff, 111, 362ff). For decades, 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. But of course if there were no men and no bodies to give up, there was no proof to give and the accused party was left in an impossible position.[16] 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 U.S., 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 2004, 334ff; see also Martini 2004, 387ff on 1995 and the

normalization process; the epilogue of Martini's text discusses American–Vietnamese relations after 1995). The impact, by the mid-1990s, of the prisoner issue on the American cultural narrative of the war cannot be overstated, even if a summary is delivered in Chomsky's less-than-subtle style:

> [I]n 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, who, not satisfied with assaulting U.S. military forces defending Indochina from its people, now fail to open their country and archives totally to American investigators seeking remains of pilots maliciously shot down by Vietnamese aggressors. (...) 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 [Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia]. (...)
>
> 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).[17]

Elsewhere, Chomsky documents instances of the rhetoric in the 1980s and early '90s that further 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 U.S.: "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).

The notion of American victimization in Vietnam was not limited to the dubious claim of mutual destruction and the phantom prisoners of war, 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.

By the early 1980s, several seemingly paradoxical trends had emerged in reference to the societal-cultural image of Vietnam veterans, concerning their psychological problems, economic and social welfare, public reception, and portrayal in media. Perhaps most importantly, 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 (the crucial and direct impact of Vietnam veterans groups and advocates in the process of the official classification of PTSD is described in MacPherson 1988, 214–230, and Bloom 2000, 27–38).

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.[18] In the second instance, Lembcke and Patrick Hagopian independently argued that the media attention to PTSD, either fed by or feeding the Hollywood and television veteran portrayals, and legitimized by academics and journalists, worked to further "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 which 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:

> The legitimation of PTSD was an enormously important development because it increased the availability of needed mental health resources for thousands of Vietnam veterans. (...) But [it also] reached far beyond the boundaries of the mental health professions. In turn, the "discovery" of PTSD (...) had broad political implications. What had also been

> discovered was a mode of discourse that enabled authorities to turn the radical political behavior of veterans opposed to the war into a pathology, thereby discrediting them in the public mind. It was the media's discovery as much as the psychiatric profession's (Lembcke 1998, 110).

> Once veterans were wrapped in society's healing embrace as objects of public sympathy and acceptance, their role as bearers of a political critique quietly fell away. When the Vietnam veterans "problem" was redefined in psycho-sociological terms, an ameliorative vocabulary replaced the language of political critique (Hagopian 2009, 18).

In other words, the psychologization of the discourse removed much of the necessity of confronting the political and ethical problems of 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, 16–18, 49–78; Lembcke 1998, 101–125; see also Beattie 1998).

The image was replicated in popular culture, where the ex-soldier was frequently seen as a deeply traumatized "nutcase" and a possible menace to society. The epitome of the archetype arrived in 1982 in the muscly form of Sylvester Stallone's John Rambo in *First Blood*, but Lembcke, who studied over a hundred films involving veteran homecomings as main and sub-plots, traced the trope's evolution back to as early as the 1960s. The upshot, he argued, was that by their sheer volume and persistence, these films promoted an image of a politically uninvolved veteran. Incredibly, despite the high visibility of antiwar veterans during the conflict, the bulk of these movies (with a couple of notable but not unproblematic exceptions) never portrayed soldiers involved in the protest movement or even vocal about the political issues of the war. Instead, the veteran's mental wellbeing, and by extension the safety of the American people threatened by the troubled madman, was made in these films the focal concern in the war's aftermath (Lembcke 1998, 145–181; see also Katzman 1993, 7–24). Similarly, none of the canonical films which take place in Vietnam, and involving soldiers on deployment there, portrays them as participating in organized, politically-motivated protest against the war.

But veterans' psychological state was one among several specific grievances that their advocates voiced. The public attention which 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 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 mass media (MacPherson 1988, 67–68). 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 '80s 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 which 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 dollars. Payouts to individual veterans and widows turned out to be minimal, the highest possible sum a completely disabled soldier would receive totaling only 12 thousand dollars, 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.

The same process was evident in literary and popular culture, too, where veterans—and other Americans directly affected by 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, also published in 1976, 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 non-fictional 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, nor 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* (originally published 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.) Both books shared, moreover, in the accusation of 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 U.S. in the early 1980s comes in the form of Bobbie Ann Mason's novel *In Country* (1985). 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 U.S. draftees, ongoing in the form of their current social and health problems, as well as for 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 the wall (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 criticizes 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 (...). [The scene] 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 (...). The problem with the conclusion of *In Country*, this moment of personal and national healing, is that it is false and sentimental and at odds with almost all that Sam has learned about the war (Neilson 1998, 187–189; similar criticism of the book's ending is offered in Beattie 1998, 2).

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 (Bryan 1991, 465). After the closing Vietnam scenes which 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" is offered and he himself is praised as "the type of young man of which Americans and free men everywhere can be proud" (Kovic 2012, postscript).

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 Vietnam 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 Ph.D. 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 deal with the actual war in Vietnam since its end.)

Alongside the newfound interest in the conflict and veteran narratives, 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, the veterans, with their PTSD and Agent Orange, but on the list of possible grievances was also mistreatment by American society, symbolized and visualized in several tropes. One concerned the image of allegedly hostile welcome given many veterans by (sometimes spitting) antiwar activists, discussed in the previous subchapter. In another example, in veteran accounts Vietnam continued to be compared with the World War II, and the soldiers and their advocates continuously referred to the "victory parades" which their fathers had been given and which they themselves had been refused—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 and to, at best, indifference.[19] In fact, the Vietnam 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 veteran as it does the nostalgic and mythologized status of World War II.

But, as indicated above, changes were afoot: the 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 nonfictional parallel in Myra MacPherson's monumental *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation*, 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 painting 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 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, U.S. society is torn, divided, jittery, bruised; it is a society, in other words, in need of *healing*, not change. As indicated, the "discourse of healing" has been recognized as an important mode of imaging and understanding Vietnam in the 1980s. It is obviously related to the psychologization discussed above, and the shifting of concern toward PTSD and veterans' psyches. But in fact it encompasses U.S. society at large and thus becomes key to understanding its approach toward the war. Interestingly, 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 U.S. 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 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 U.S. veterans. As Lembcke shows, much of the blame of the discord and upheaval was put on the radical left and the antiwar movement, whose consistent demonization and uncoupling from the veterans' cause first aided Nixon's wartime propaganda and then helped repudiate the 1960s. 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 which 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 '80s. 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).[20] 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 Vietnam, 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 (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).

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 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. Quoting from an article by Vietnam author Philip Caputo, 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).

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 GIs, but the view of the conflicts 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 wellbeing and emotion, which MacPherson enforces when she continues by observing that "[i]deological 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 Vietnam and the 1960s in general, hence the perception that it now needed mending. This urgency to restore American positive self-image and mental wellbeing by returning to the traditional modes of thinking are evident in MacPherson's book, when she writes, for example, that "confusion-free conclusions may be the reward for only the doctrinaire on the right or left. 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 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, she 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 "[i]deological 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" (MacPherson 1988, 16). A particularly striking example of this wish to turn the American war in Vietnam into a morally equivocal event of diluted, depoliticized culpability, where responsibility for atrocity may be easily divorced from Washington, is quoted by Chomsky from a 1995 *Washington Post* review of a book on the My Lai Massacre: "[a]ny book on this subject ultimately shirks its responsibility unless it clearly tracks the fault down to the complex light and dark of the individual human soul" (Chomsky 1999, 10.5.11).

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 avoidance. Both authors see yesteryear's dodgers and deserters from the army among the conflict's most affected victims: "most deserters today are among the last permanent victims of Vietnam" (MacPherson 1988, 397). As for draft resisters and deserters living in exile in Canada, "the war scarred and changed them permanently, too" (MacPherson 1988, 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 '60s. These reasons, however, are not important, obsolete, irrelevant, MacPherson seems to be suggesting. Writing about the "ex-Americans" she travelled to interview in Canada, she states that

> [d]uring the sixties they often espoused hatred for corporate America and sympathy for the victims of its inequities (...). But past positions are seldom matched by any intelligent criticism of existing inequities today. What is more, Vietnam is often discussed in the same 'aggressor-imperialist' versus 'nationalistic peasant revolt' sloganeering of yesteryear: ideas caught in the rhetoric of their time. It is as if, once they crossed the border, their thinking on American politics stopped, like a smashed watch forever telling the same time (1988, 418).

MacPherson does not explain here what an "intelligent criticism" of her day's inequities would entail, nor does she provide an explicit alternative interpretation of Vietnam against the "sloganeering of yesterday." Elsewhere, the "political reasons" of deserters and resisters are summarized thusly, in a quote from a Ford-era clemency board report: "[e]very 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*, a strange interpretation of the politics of the left. 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 U.S., 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 '80s had proved largely insubstantial in its progressive commitments. Like many American ideologues of patriotism and centrist liberalism, so does MacPherson prescribe 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 '60s-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-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, as yet another issue that was bad about Vietnam. The final appraisal of the movement is not only cynical and disillusioned, but also already in line with political centrism, and the individualism and anti-socialism of the 1980s.

Here are some examples of how MacPherson rhetorically denounces the antiwar movement. A conversation with a wartime dove who went on to a career in the State Department gives MacPherson an opportunity to air the man's views on the movement's more radical wings as having gone too far in their leftism. He concludes that the ultimate lesson of Vietnam is that there are no "right or wrong" situations. But on this occasion MacPherson also writes that "[t]here remains one vast division in the generation"—the old activists are now not interested, she claims, in "push[ing] for veterans' causes," because the war experience is not theirs. She also cites Cohen saying that he personally benefited from his activism, which had given him lots of political experience, but that he did not pay "any real price for it" (1988, 151). Another ex-activist with a political career post-Vietnam, on the other hand, "feels he paid a price. 'There are times (...) when I feel, God, if I hadn't *wasted those years on unfocused anger*'" (MacPherson 1988, 195; emphasis added). Jim Fallows, a notorious draft dodger who went onto a successful career as a political commentator and an editor at *The Atlantic*, "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). The most striking conclusion to the 1960s activism, however, comes in quotations from a man who upon receiving a draft notice in 1970 had chopped off his finger—"as a protest statement, as well as to get out of fighting in Vietnam" (MacPherson 1988, 134). At the end of the chapter devoted to him, he says,

> "[i]dealism doesn't have much substance. The force and power of idealism usually come from self-interest." He sees as universals "a desire to be well-fed, secure, and love—and preserving something of value."
>
> We talk of those who railed against capitalism in yesteryear and are furiously competing in that same market today. "I think you're taking the myth too seriously," he says. "Those people are in the myth of idealism—but on the other side of it. A cynic is nothing more than a person who feels there still ought to be idealism. I don't see the polarities. (...)

> "*If* something can be done to make things better for people, that's nice, but it's not the controlling value now" (MacPherson 1988, 140).

Finally, there is yet another dimension to the liberal and centrist narrative of the war, one which precedes even the rewriting in the 1980s: 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, civilization—turning out to be insufficient to sustain free Vietnam: "an act of imprudent idealism" (Bacevich 2005, 77) or the result of "cultural myopia (...) blinding U.S. leaders to the subtleties of the Vietnamese society" (Lawrence 2008, 176). 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—as well as self-indulgent and self-forgiving, recasting the United States as the world's good guy whose crime was that of too much goodwill and optimism, not of imperial ambition and neocolonialism. Consequently,

> [a]t the outer limits of tolerable dissidence, the war came to be seen as an "error" based on misunderstanding and naiveté, yet another example of "our excess of righteousness and disinterested benevolence" (...). U.S. intervention began with "blundering efforts to do good," but "by 1969" (...) most people realized that it was "a disastrous mistake," that the United States "could not impose a solution except at a price too costly to itself" (Chomsky 1997, 166; the inner quotations are from John King Fairbank, "a leading Asia scholar," and Anthony Lewis, a "*New York Times* dove," respectively; see also Hagopian 2009, 12; Isaacs 1997, 67–68).

Polls indicate that until the mid-1980s, American people in vast majority tended to view the Vietnam War not merely as a mistake or a blunder, but rather as fundamentally "wrong and immoral," which led Chomsky to proclaim that they had understood more about the nature of the conflict than the intellectual liberal elites had. Perhaps this is true; in any case, by the mid-'80s, the popular opinion became split evenly, at around 35 percent each, between "wrong and immoral" and "a noble cause," an impact no doubt of Reagan's tinkering with the historical memory, and a trend that has persisted until the 2000s (Hagopian 2009, 13–14 provides tables that demonstrate the changing attitudes among polled Americans between 1975 and 2000). But,

as Hagopian observed, either *despite* or *because of* the commonly held understanding, the mainstream, most encompassing American cultural narrative of the Vietnam War has been thoroughly liberal, influenced by the interpretations which these intellectual elites—journalists, commentators, editors, authors, scholars—had woven around the war's history (2009, 16). And whatever the privately held beliefs of the American people (the "wrongness and immorality" may, after all, refer only to the draft and the American deaths, and not the roots of the intervention or the policy in Indochina), Chomsky also criticized the intellectual and liberal mainstream for favoring the view that the war in Vietnam had been a blunder, a mistake: that the well-intentioned United States, wishing to bring democracy and freedom to the country, stumbled into a war that turned out to be unwinnable against the evil forces of communism (1989, 57). In this view, the war was not the ugliest reality check of U.S. imperialism, its attendant ideologies, and the dangers of aggressive 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.

This view of Vietnam as a mistake was safe: 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 wellbeing, 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. But as the other 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. Here was one of the ways in which Vietnam's subversive potential had been squandered. Perhaps no event has been more revelatory as to the eventual shape of the Vietnam War cultural memory and the limits of admissible public discourse than the outcry at John Kerry's 2004 presidential bid and the charges of his supposedly unpatriotic, un-American activities in the 1970s: the radical antiwar and anti-imperial stance in the VVAW (Hagopian 2009, 406–407; Lawrence 2008, 183; Franklin, who documents the Kerry backlash at some length, is nevertheless tentatively optimistic: "the fact that a prominent activist against the Vietnam War came very close to being elected President of the United States in 2004 suggests that the war in America over the Vietnam War has another side and has not yet been decided"

[2007, 48]). The war's "lessons," meanwhile, so hotly debated throughout the 1970s and '80s and expected by the liberal side to be on the theme of "no more Vietnams," are evident in the U.S. foreign policy as it eventually developed. This subject will be picked up again the Conclusion.

And thus, in the United States the potential of the lessons of Vietnam, an imperialist endeavor, to safeguard in the future against similar abuses of power, was squandered in the name of licking American wounds and the simultaneous rebuilding of American nationalist ideologies and positive self-image.

* * *

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 post-traumatic 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. The Americans suffered because of Vietnam as much as the Vietnamese did: their self-image shattered, their nation divided and wounded, almost sixty thousand 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, so the Americans at large 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 U.S., 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 what a scholar termed "Vietnamnesia"—the erasure of the Vietnamese from the picture of the war and its aftermath (Beattie 1998, 28–34). 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: "[i]t 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, "[t]he [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.[21]

While politicians continued to punish the victor on the international arena, the cultural narrative of the war in the U.S. eventually pushed the Vietnamese beyond the scope of

meaningful and traumatic suffering. While post-war 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 on[22]—books and films in the U.S. 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 James (Jim) Fallows of *The Atlantic*, 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).[23] The effect has been the removal of the war from history and so the squandering of its subversive potential. The rest of this thesis will trace the particular strategies of representation in American literature and cinema of the war which, though nominally critical of the U.S. invasion of Indochina, contributed to these processes of dehistoricization and mythologization.

Chapter 2

"War is as Natural as the Rains": Myth and Representations of the Vietnamese Landscape

It must have been a beautiful area, Quang Ngai Province, before the war.
Seymour Hersh, *My Lai 4*

Gentlemen, I would like to tell you what we are going to do to that valley.
John M. Del Vecchio, *The 13th Valley*

2.1. History

The Vietnam War historian H. Bruce Franklin writes that next to the two "American stories of the Vietnam War"—the "Noble Cause" and the "Quagmire"—it is the third one, "Imperialism," that is "the only one that adequately accounts for America's half century of military, political, and economic warfare against Vietnam" (2000, 42). Following this line of reasoning, it might be added that the best explanations for the American engagement in Vietnam are both ideological and pragmatic. They are exemplary, in other words, of how American mythology, closely bound to ideological constructs as it is, and the protection of U.S. political, economic, and business interests, have often intertwined, the two facets of history-shaping decisions and actions which flicker alternately, depending on the optics by which one wishes to interpret events.

A brief history of the United States' involvement in Indochina is as follows. In 1945, the Japanese were forced to leave the region following their wartime occupation, and the U.S.-supported, anti-Japanese resistance, the Viet Minh, proclaimed the establishment of the Democratic Vietnamese Republic (DRV), with a Declaration of Independence that mirrored its American predecessor. (The Viet Minh had grown out of independence movements active in Vietnam for decades, and was led now by Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap, nationalist and communist activists since late 1910s and late 1920s respectively.) The Potsdam Conference in 1945 divided the country into its northern part, to be temporarily controlled by China, which recognized the Republic; and its southern part, temporarily controlled by the British, who soon handed the territory back to France, the colonial power in Indochina, now eager to move back in. The French were determined to keep their colonial holdings, and Ho was determined to reunite Vietnam under independent communist rule. Following a famine in northern Vietnam in 1944 and '45 in which up to two million died, caused partially by French misadministration and blamed on it by the Viet Minh, the communists urged the people to rebel against the colonial power and raid stores of food; the French bombarded Haiphong in the north in 1946, and finally the two countries went to war (the First Indochina War), which ended in 1954 with the total French defeat by Viet Minh under Giap's military leadership.

As for the Americans, in 1945 and 1946, the U.S. President Harry Truman left without reply a series of letters sent to him personally by Ho, asking for assistance and reminding him that the Vietnamese struggle was one for self-determination against imperial claims of a foreign power. Instead, as early as October 1945, the United States provided the French with several of their own troopships, as well as the money to finance them and the arms to fight with, which were then crewed, in addition to the French, with German soldiers, including former members of the SS, forced into the Foreign Legion. The ships were sent to Vietnam to end the country's new freedom under Ho, achieved with the first declaration of independence by a previously colonized nation after World War II, at that time merely a month or so old. As Franklin reminds us,

> [a]lthough this invasion army was under French command and its purpose was to restore French colonial rule, it was implementing part of Washington's global strategy. We need to remember that all this took place prior to the so-called Cold War, a chronological fact with immense historical significance. (...) [W]e need to recognize that the U.S. war against the

> DRV was not a sequel to the French war but an essential component of it" (2007, 36; Franklin also notes that this moment marks the beginning of the American movement against war in Vietnam—all the American enlisted men on those troopships diverted to Vietnam in 1945 began a campaign of letters and petitions against "imperialist policies" in Indochina; opposition stemming from that first initial spark continued throughout the 1950s and early 60s).

But the American involvement in Indochina would, of course, come to be linked inextricably to the developments of "the so-called Cold War." In 1949 and 1950, a string of circumstances—the Communist takeover in China, the outbreak of the Korean War, the wish to secure French support in Europe against the Soviets—pushed Truman to continue backing France, in the form of financial and military support. By the end of the war, the United States had financed "80 percent of the French war effort" (Zinn 2009, ch. 18).

The 1954 Geneva Accords, which followed the French defeat that same year, stipulated that the territory of Vietnam would remain divided, with the border at the 17th parallel (the area around which would become the American war's notorious Demilitarized Zone, or the DMZ), that the French would temporarily remain in the South and the Viet Minh in charge in the North, and that the country would be reunited in 1956 following a free election of government. The United States never signed the agreement and nor did the American-backed South Vietnam. Instead, with the French withdrawn from Indochina, the United States had asserted its influence in the South. In Saigon, the Americans placed Ngo Dinh Diem as the prime minister, who, after the U.S. then helped steer a referendum that deposed the French-installed president and made him head of state instead, in 1955 established the Republic of Vietnam (colloquially referred to as South Vietnam), which would remain the United States' ally against the North for the duration of the upcoming war. As part of the "[c]overt American subversion of the Geneva Agreements" (Young 2014, ch. 3), 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 the election with some 80 percent of the votes, encouraged and fully supported Diem's decision to block the 1956 elections, which eventually never happened (FitzGerald 1972, 126; Franklin 2000, 30; Sheehan 1990, 138; Young 2014, ch. 3; Zinn 2009, ch. 18). Howard Zinn provides a quotation from the Pentagon Papers that states succinctly what

that meant: "South Viet Nam was essentially the creation of the United States" (Zinn 2009, ch. 18).

American aid money and military materiel and personnel flowed to South Vietnam from that point on. Indeed, for the entirety of its existence, between 1955 and 1975, "the economy of [South Vietnam] was sustained almost entirely through American aid" (Young 2014, ch. 3; see also Carter 2008, 93–94; FitzGerald 1972, 85ff). The numbers of military advisors to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) rose steadily to reach over 16,000 by the end of 1963, and the Americans began engaging, covertly and illegally, in combat operations in Indochina. But the Diem government 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)

It is also worth pointing out that the American policy-makers since Eisenhower "had insisted in public that the South Vietnamese government was a genuinely national regime while recognizing privately 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). In perhaps the most glaring example, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman quote from a 1965 memorandum by John Paul Vann, the star of early pacification efforts in South Vietnam:

> A popular political base for the Government of South Vietnam does not now exist. (...) The existing government is oriented toward the exploitation of the rural and lower class urban populations. It is, in fact, a continuation of the French colonial system of government with upper class Vietnamese replacing the French. (...) The dissatisfaction of the agrarian population (...) is expressed largely through alliance with the NLF (1979a, 5.1.2).

The National Liberation Front for South Vietnam (NLF), a guerilla revolutionary organization supported from Hanoi, was founded in the South in 1960, partly in response to the regime's repressions (including torture and murder) and corruption, and the social and economic

disruptiveness of the American aid programs in the countryside. The organization's better-known moniker, Viet Cong, is a derogatory term meaning "Vietnamese communists" and was apparently introduced by Diem. The NLF would come to be widely supported by the Vietnamese peasantry. As we have seen, declaring the United States' invasion of Vietnam as a "mistake" carries dangerous ideological implications—but if any aspect of that involvement should be seen as such with any validity, it is precisely this:

> the struggle to represent those longings [of the Vietnamese people for independence] had almost certainly been won by first the Viet Minh and then the North Vietnamese Government and the National Liberation Front in the South long before the first American soldier ever appeared in Vietnam, indeed before the first French soldier appeared after the Second World War to reconquer the country. At the very least, the political story had reached its conclusion with French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954—or maybe even earlier, with the expulsion of the Japanese in 1945. The American war was probably lost before it started (Schell 2007, 24).

This reading of the war's history reveals its particular tragic dimension—tragic for the Americans who would die and be wounded in Vietnam, for sure, but, on a scale unimaginably greater, tragic especially for the Vietnamese people and landscape. The decade of the American war concluded, after all, with what could have happened in 1954: unification and communist takeover.

As for President Diem, his unpopularity (and his growing willingness to reach an agreement with Hanoi, against the bellicose directives from the U.S.) ultimately cost him his life: when a sixty-six-year-old Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc set himself on fire on a Saigon street in 1963 to protest Diem's repressions against the Buddhist majority—a seismic event which exposed starkly the extent of the president's unpopularity—his act was followed by similar suicides by other monks, mass demonstrations, and brutal reaction from the government forces. In light of the crisis of Diem's credibility—which was undermining the legitimacy of the American patronage in the South—a coup was carried out, with the knowledge of the CIA, the American diplomats in South Vietnam, and President Kennedy. It ended with Diem and his brother dead, shortly before Kennedy's own assassination.

There are several reasons to which the American intervention may be attributed. First of all, war is, as always, good for business. As historian James M. Carter observes, what is often

forgotten is that the American military intervention was preceded by a failed nation-building program in South Vietnam, initiated in 1954, which by 1960 had cost the United States $1.5 billion. American organizations and companies profited from the program, from construction firms (Carter 2008, 88–91) to analysis and research teams hailing from institutions like RAND or the Michigan State University, which between 1955 and 1962 "deployed over one hundred full-time staff and channeled approximately $25 million in US funding to defend the government organized under Ngo Dinh Diem" (Latham 2002, 438), including a secret CIA contract for training police forces known to have been torturing South Vietnamese villagers (Young 2014, ch. 6, 7; for an exhaustive discussion, see: 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]).

In the end the nation-building program failed. Among the reasons were the native population's resistance to the U.S. program and the Americans' failure to recognize the crucial importance of the people's enduring sympathy for the revolutionaries. 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 cadres to their presence, the U.S. authorities, instead of pulling out of the country or fundamentally redesigning their policy and projects, decided to protect Diem's presidency, counter the opposition, and thus militarize the effort in Vietnam:

> The United States had created South Vietnam and its leader [Ngo Dinh Diem]; it was now clear that any opposition to Diem would be understood as a hostile act, an attack on America's baby. (...) But, in fact, what the United States had labored mightily to produce was not a democratic, independent new nation state but an autocratic ruling family held in place by foreign power (Young 2014, ch. 3).

> Ultimately, and almost imperceptibly, U.S. officials glossed over the fact that the state-building project was deeply troubled and failing and instead began justifying greater military involvement and authorizing greater use of force by the regime in order to stamp out the Vietnamese resistance to that effort and as well as to mask its deficiencies. At the same time, 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 (Carter 2008, 7, see also 117–129).

With Kennedy dead at the end of 1963, the newly-sworn Lyndon B. Johnson "inherited" South Vietnam. Despite its recent and American genesis, the conviction that the country was a legitimate state in need of protection from the North was already deeply ingrained as the rationale guiding the U.S. policy. In response to the perceived need, Johnson deliberated between military solutions to the "problem" and political ones that could lead to a "peaceful coexistence" between Hanoi and a neutral South, a proposition which had by then appeared among the new authorities in South Vietnam (the junta generals who had assassinated Diem, to be precise). Solutions guided by historical accuracy, that the South and North Vietnam were artificial and originally temporary creations of the Geneva Convention and that the Vietnamese people were one nation with the right to reunification and independence, were now beyond the realm of consideration in Washington. Instead, Johnson agreed with the advisers that the United States needed to persevere in Indochina and thus reassert its power and determination before the world, and that "abandoning" South Vietnam would seriously jeopardize American credibility: to honor the promises to stand by Saigon was the word. In the end, when Hanoi demanded that the United States withdraw from South Vietnam entirely, even in the face of American bombings of the North that had already begun, Johnson let himself be persuaded by advisers left from the Kennedy administration (notably Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, McGeorge and William Bundy, Walt Rostow) to push toward military action against North Vietnam to force it—that is, the NLF, which the Americans insistently believed to be steered from Hanoi—out of the South (Young 2014, ch. 6). Eventually, when the bombs did not yield results, in early 1965 President Johnson sent the first American combat units to Indochina, having duped Congress into assenting and without legally declaring war.

In his work on American ideology and foreign policy, historian Michael Hunt argues that one of the constant components in American thinking about its foreign exploits during the country's first two hundred years was the concept of liberty, which through a convoluted intellectual and rhetorical process had by the end of the 19th century transformed into the idea of a "dynamic republic" and "national greatness." These were to be obtained through expansion, be it of actual

territory or decisive influence overseas (2009, 19–45, 125–159; Hunt's working definition of ideology is derived from Clifford Geertz's broad cultural model, 12; see Geertz 1973). Coupled with the ideals of capitalism and economic liberalism, this notion of liberty-by-expansion translated also into the deeply ingrained sense that American freedom and greatness depended, first, on the acquisition of land to supply the needs of American agriculture and growing population, and then on the availability of desirable free markets worldwide, open to American businesses and vital to the growing American economy. As historian Richard Du Boff argued in 1972:

> [The ideology that promotes the interests of the corporate business class, which has supplied most of the personnel to man the major foreign policy posts in Washington] constitutes the vital link between economic interests and political actions. The reason is that the key inputs into foreign policy ideology are derived from the general outlook of the American business community, which regards the external world in terms of actual and potential threats to free-wheeling, open-ended profit maximization. (...) While not "*each and every* act of political and military policy" can be tied to economic motivations, the general thrust of American foreign policy over the past seven or eight decades comes from the "growth"-propelled search for control over major resource areas and the effort to keep an open door everywhere else for potential *future* expansion. The enlargement of capital values and market outlets is the first condition of capitalist production itself. The development of a *worldwide market* to assure the continuity of the expansion process is also part of the first condition of capitalist production—by no means can it be called extrinsic to the survival of the system (1972, 17; emphases in original; see also Hunt 2009, 29ff, 37, 43, 135–136; Neilson 1998, 207).[24]

In this context, the mid-20th-century domino theory—the reason behind the United States' involvement in Indochina—is split open for deeper excavation. The domino theory straddles both pragmatic, ideological, and "popular" explanations behind American involvement. Crucially, the security experts, analysts, and policymakers in Washington and Pentagon in the 1950s and early 1960s did not question the basic, profoundly internalized assumption that, if left unharassed, communism would spread in the Third World and Asia, and wrangle such strategically critical states as Thailand and Japan away from U.S. influence. Moreover, in the national security circles in the late 1940s, 1950s and beyond, it was believed that the string of crucial U.S. military bases in East and Southeast Asia—and with it the United States dominance in the Pacific—could be jeopardized if indeed more countries in the region came under Soviet

control or installed communist governments. Thus, the (potentially infectious) proximity of Southeast Asia to countries fundamental to U.S. security and geopolitical interests endowed the region, and Indochina particularly, with "cosmic significance" to Cold War planners (Chomsky and Herman 1979a, 306). Additionally, its strategic importance was also in its natural resources and products such as rubber, tin, and petroleum, or, as a National Security Council document dubbed them in 1952, "strategically important commodities" (Zinn 2009, ch. 18; see also Du Boff 1972, 21–27; Kolko 1972, 3–5). And finally, the argument of honoring the promise to South Vietnam so that American superpower credibility could be preserved was not without ideologically-legitimized import to national security and geopolitical strategy either:

> Nonintervention and an NLF takeover [in South Vietnam] were unacceptable [to Americans] for reasons that had nothing to do with Vietnamese interests; they were based on an assumed adverse effect on our [American] material and strategic interests. It was assumed that an American failure would be harmful to our prestige and would reduce the confidence of our satellite governments that we would protect them from the winds of change (Chomsky and Herman 1979a, 304).

> At stake in (...) various wars of suppression (...) is not just the investments in any one country but the security of the whole international system of finance capital. No country is allowed to pursue an independent course of self-development. None is permitted to go unpunished and undeterred. None should serve as an inspiration or source of material support to other nations that might want to pursue a politico-economic path other than the maldevelopment offered by global capitalism (Parenti 1995, 50).

One can attempt to account for the fervent anti-communism of Cold-War-era American decision-making elites by referring to more culturally entrenched notions associated with American history and thinking. Hunt, for example, attributes the anti-communist zeal to another ingredient of the American foreign policy ideology which he considers fundamental, and namely a deep distrust of revolutions; communist movements were seen as bad, he explains, precisely because they were communist movements. Hunt argues that this sentiment was the result of the success of the American Revolution, which was to remain an ideal of peaceful and legalist change, and the failures and horrors of subsequent ones, culminating with the events of 1917 in Russia, which horrified Americans (Hunt 2009, 92–124; see also Du Boff 1972, 16; Slotkin 1998a, 35–36; see Spanos 2000, 128–144, on the "end-of-the-Cold-War discourse" throughout

the 1990s and its conviction of "the universal illegitimacy of the founding principles of socialism" and "the *universal* legitimacy of the *idea* of American [liberal capitalist] democracy" [emphases in original]). In the case of Vietnam, the anti-socialist instinct which had led the United States on a counterrevolutionary crusade, was compounded by Hunt's third ingredient of American foreign policy ideology, racism (Hunt 2009, 46–91), as well as orientalist notions (for a detailed history of American orientalism in relation to Vietnam, see Bradley 2000; see also Boyle 2015a, 1–4; Drinnon 1997, 447–451).

But the Cold War ideology of anti-communism also had behind it the protection of concrete American geopolitical interests—which were themselves informed by older ideas translated into policy, and namely the various tenets of American political, economic, and social culture, or the American way of life in other words, whose promotion and cultivation globally ensured American prosperity and security of its enterprise. Among these interests was, of course, the protection of the free market and the liberal economic philosophy; the struggle against the Soviet Union and communism was a struggle for a global economic vision, and the rewards it offered the United States, as much as anything else: "[i]t is impossible to divorce the economic and strategic components of the so-called domino theory (...) involving raw materials, military bases, and the commitment of the United States to protect its many spheres of influence" (Kolko 1972, 4–5; see also Adas 2003, who compares capital- and influence-oriented U.S. policies in Indochina to the conducts of 19th c. European imperialism). In the words of Marilyn Young, if there were misgivings among U.S. Indochina policymakers and strategists concerning the political nature of the conflict, especially the lack of support for the Saigon government among the people, they were always trumped by "an overarching axiom: a world ordered by the principles and practices of the liberal capitalist system that governed America was good for America and good for the world" (2014, ch. 7). The "communist threat," in other words, far from simply posing risks to democracy and freedom—as the rallying cries of American propagandists at the time would suggest—was understood by the decision-making elites as "the possibility of social and economic progress outside the framework of U.S. control and imperial interests" (Chomsky and Herman 1979a, 305). As historian Gabriel Kolko observed,

> translated into concrete terms, the domino theory was a counterrevolutionary doctrine which defined modern history as a movement of Third World and dependent nations—those with economic and strategic value to the United States or its capitalist associates—away from capitalism or colonialism and toward national revolution and forms of socialism. (...) [Vietnam was part of the] effort to expand America's power by saving vast areas of the world for its own forms of political and economic domination (1972, 2; see also Hunt 2009, 152–153).

To allow these exploitable countries to topple into communist arms was not only to diminish the sphere of Americanism as the ideal, but also to allow the world of business opportunity and profit to shrink. Here, too, the appeals of Indochina are many, as listed in 1963 by a Kennedy administration bureaucrat in a semi-official address: "Why is [Southeast Asia] desirable, and why is it important? First, it provides a lush climate, fertile soil, rich natural resources, a relatively sparse population in most areas, and room to expand. The countries of Southeast Asia produce rich exportable surpluses such as rice, rubber, teak, corn, tin, spices, oil, and many others" (Zinn 2009, ch. 18; see also Du Boff 1972, who analyzes the national security documentation in the Pentagon Papers to give a clear picture of all the factors that made Southeast Asia and Indochina vital to the geopolitical interests as perceived by U.S. Cold War planners).

But the ideology worked in shallower dimensions too, offering readily consumable rationale and slogans: "Stop Communism!" For Kennedy, as for Johnson (at least initially), Vietnam was a PR opportunity to advertise both the American benevolence as a patron helping a backward nation stand on its own and join civilization, and the determination of the United States to fight against the evils of communism in the name of democracy and freedom.

2.2. Myth

The above considerations point toward three, closely related reflections. One, the period between World War II—and particularly beginning in 1954—and 1965 is crucial to understand the very nature of American involvement in Vietnam, even more so than the period of military intervention itself. Two, the events of those years show more fully, and with a scope of consequence, what is meant when the American war in Vietnam is called an *imperial* endeavor. And three, both this crucial period and the historical (political, economic, cultural, military)

particulars of American imperialist policy regarding Vietnam are, with rare exceptions, absent from the American cultural narrative of the war—and so from its literature and cinema.

The first two points are perhaps the cause of the third one: to focus on the years of American involvement directly preceding the war could too plausibly lead to some very uncomfortable conclusions, at odds with the dominant discourse. There, the nature of American imperialist war in Indochina cannot be seen in terms of invasion, political suppression and oppression, outright exploitation, human rights' violation, or inhuman violence and war crime perpetrated in the name of precise political and material geopolitical and economic interests. 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. The canonical texts—novels, memoirs, films—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. Though lauded by the traditional scholarship for their supposed scathing criticism of the various political and cultural incarnations of Americanism, these narratives 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). Jim 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).

In other words, beyond language and form, in their content and commentary on the war these texts almost never stray beyond complaint over the plight of the American soldier or the "pointlessness" of the war, and they almost always remain loyal to either the ideal of soldierly

brotherhood, which morally and emotionally trumps all other concerns, or a sentimental attachment to a patriotic vision of America, or both. In fact, the past forty years have shown that the criticism of the war in Vietnam expressed by the left-most of the antiwar movement has not been surpassed.

One crucial element of the lukewarm nature of the supposed criticism contained in these texts is their staggering uniformity ("the canon's narrative homogeneity is troubling"; Boyle 2016, 188; see also Jeffords 1989, 126; Gibson 2000, 467–469, and the Appendix in general for a discussion of the impact of rank, profession, and "social stratification" on the production of different "knowledges" of the war[25]). Within these narratives, there is no diverse chorus of voices giving ample testament to the experiences of the war's different participants, despite what many scholars claim (see for example Hölbling 2007, 114, who discusses only books authored by white male veterans published before 1990 and yet concludes: "[a]s this survey has tried to indicate, American discourses and stories of Vietnam exist in dazzling variety and multitude (...). The prolonged and painful soul-searching has yielded a rich, if diversified, harvest"; or Carpenter 2003, 32: some of the Vietnam writers "exploded the conventions of American war fiction to produce a diversity of works that demonstrate the multi-perspectival, relativistic nature of America's Vietnam experience").

On the contrary, the novels and memoirs most often encountered in discussions of Vietnam 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 Vietnam 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 (see Paul Fussell's classic definition of chickenshit; 1990, 79–95). Found less often, though no less

uniform as Vietnam literary archetypes, there are Vietnamese translators and scouts (male, defectors from the NLF or the North Vietnamese Army [NVA], narratively used as mouthpieces for opinions concerning Vietnamese-American relations); conciliatory blacks uncomfortable with the actions of their politically involved and vocal "brothers"; and, in post-war 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 (limited) 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 which are repeated over and over in different books and films, sometimes to the point of replaceability. The fact that this meta-story is a story before it becomes anything else—a discourse, for example—it may very productively be considered as a myth (Scheurer 1981, 149: "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").

But this particular mythic story, powerful and enduring as it has proven, is only the end product of the cultural narrative effected in literature and cinema of the 1970s and 80s. In a way, the American history *in* and *of* Vietnam has always been mythical, paradoxical as this noun-adjective combination may sound. In 1982, in their article on the American notion of "innocence" in relation to ideological interpretations of the war, Mary Bellhouse and Lawrence Litchfield wrote that "Americans especially tend to live in a timeless and mythical world in which

reality is not allowed to intrude very much upon the Walt Disney epic which insists that we are heroes, the defenders of freedom and justice, and the protectors of the weak and oppressed" (1982, 158–159). They then claim that Vietnam 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. While that is true, Bellhouse and Litchfield go on to endorse another form of mythologization, at the time of their writing only just beginning, and so not yet recognized, yet alone understood to be deeply problematic. Their article, like many published in the same decade, gives testament to the sentiment and ideological formulations of the time (they have much scorn for protesters and "doves," for example, whose input into the public discourse about the war they consider far less important than that of the Vietnam soldiers, even insignificant). Proclaiming "the American dead" and the "surviving veterans" to be among the war's "chief victims" (1982, 159), and gushing about Vietnam literature as "a more penetrating and powerful body of work than that of any other American war" (1982, 160), they 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 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.

To assess the mythological dimension of the Vietnam War, 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. As for the pitfalls of the canon, Nielson writes: "both reviewers and critics have emphasized textual strategies over historical and ideological content and have understood this literature almost exclusively through a liberal ideology that has found in

American military policy in Vietnam error rather than intent, tragedy rather than calculation" (1998, 8; see also 217–221 for Neilson's appeal to a re-historicization of the literary discourse on the war in Vietnam; it should be noted that Neilson clearly differentiates the materialist and ideologically-anchored critique, which he promotes, from analyses of "cultural myth," which he views as insufficient and "transhistorical"). The point about ignoring the history and politics of the war is important in light of the well-known definition of myth pertinent to the current discussion—which itself will become useful when reading the canonical texts. Roland Barthes' classic conceptualization of modern myth—not necessarily in its structure as "a mode of signification" (2008, 107), but rather in its far more interesting purposes and consequences—was that

> it transforms history into nature. We now understand why, *in the eyes of the myth-consumer*, the intention, the adhomination of the concept can remain manifest without however appearing to have an interest in the matter: what causes mythical speech to be uttered is perfectly explicit, but it is immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as a motive, but a reason (2008, 128; emphasis in original).

Myth, in other words, as a phenomenon or force in culture, strives to insinuate itself *before* history, to elbow it out of the way, to throw its shadow over it. Or, as Richard Slotkin, elaborating on Barthes' propositions, explains,

> [m]yth is invoked as a means of deriving usable values from history, and of putting those values *beyond the reach of critical demystification*. (...) Myth does not argue its ideology, it exemplifies it. (...)
>
> [M]yth has a paradoxical way of dealing with historical experience: although the materials of myth are historical, myth organizes these materials *ahistorically*. When historical memory is carried by mythological metaphors, it is falsified in the most fundamental way. (...) The past is made metaphorically equivalent to the present; and the present appears simply as a repetition of persistently recurring structures identified with the past. Both past and present are reduced to instances displaying a single "law" or principle of nature, which is seen as timeless in its relevance, and as transcending all historical contingencies.
>
> (...) The most important consequence of [the myth's dehistoricization] is the concealment of human authorship and intention in the creation of ideas and values and the shaping of material conditions (1998a, 19, 24; emphases added; Spindler 1991, 28, identifies the

> "Vietnam War" as a myth in the Barthesian sense; Kinney 2000, 112, considers Michael Herr as a "Roland Barthes' mythologist").

From this perspective, a historical event or condition—a village of people's homes burning from napalm bombs, say, or a young man considering self-imposed exile to escape a draft he deems unjust—ceases, once subjected to "mythical speech," to be a contingent cluster of tangible causes and culpabilities, subject to assessment and thus capable of effecting consequence or change. It instead becomes locked inside a story that *naturalizes* it, or, in other words, gives it justification in the guise of an explanation of the status quo. And at this point myths come in to support ideologies, by perpetuating their values and convictions in the highly effective form of stories. To quote Slotkin again,

> most of the time the assumptions of value inherent in a culture's ideology are tacitly expressed as 'givens.' Their meaning is expressed in the symbolic narratives of mythology and is transmitted to the society through various genres of mythic expression. (...) Myths are stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing the society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness (1998b, 5; "genres of mythic expression" are narrative and metaphoric).

And thus the young man considering moving to Canada now becomes an image in a discussion regarding concepts such as duty, his predicament an element in a mythic story of the war which supports the ideology of American patriotism by making it the natural state of reality, where the condition the man finds himself in is a source of moral and emotional agony and shame, and not, for instance, a different sense of duty or even pride.

The American war in Vietnam has eventually been transformed into a myth itself. This myth of "Vietnam" may be understood as a cultural narrative of the war. If the cultural narrative of Vietnam dictates that the war was fought for essentially positive reasons, that its primary victims were the American veterans, and that its only significance was in what it did to the United States internally, then the mythological dimension of this interpretation is its easy translatability into stories and its relationship to history. We find this mythical rendering of Vietnam (re)produced in American books and films; and we may not only observe the ways in which this myth rewrites

and obscures the history—the "material conditions"—of the war, but also trace the process by which "Vietnam" has been removed from its own historicity.

The third factor which endows the cultural narrative of Vietnam with the properties of myth is its prolificacy of connotations (Slotkin 1998b, 6): the ugliest "memories" of the 1960s; discord and riot; patriotic duty and betrayal; drugs and rock 'n' roll and napalm; trauma; the disenfranchised veteran; the abandoned POW; the heartbreak of the Memorial. Viewed from this perspective, Vietnam becomes an interesting case study to observe not only how history is mythologized, but also how this new mythic structure interweaves itself into ideologies and political speech. And so, when in 1982 Philip Beidler, Vietnam vet and literary scholar, wrote that "the place 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. In the end, as we know, the war had a seismic effect on American foreign policy and military strategy and culture, but it was its mythic quality that enabled its absorption into the realms of American neoconservatism and patriotism, and the transformation of the post-Vietnam sentiment into, for example, the Gulf War "Support the Troops" movement which has by now solidified in American culture and continues to exert powerful influence on the societal relationship to war.

"The sins of the forest are alive in the jungle"

But first, older powerful myths operating at the time of the United States' entry into Indochina must be briefly examined. One particularly important case to consider is the frontier, a central—and perhaps the oldest (Slotkin 1998a, 15; 1998b, 10)—construct of American mythology, the constant dependence on which so permeates the Vietnam authors' minds that in the literary renditions filtered through their memory it comes to saturate the very land they had once traversed with their government-issued rifles: the physical country(side) of Vietnam. But, more than a literary theme, or a mode of representation, and eventually a problematic studied by Vietnam literature scholars, the frontier is also a specific strategy of apparent critique, in the narratives as much as some of the academic texts (Neilson 1998, 83). The cultural links between the American rendering of Vietnam and the mythical frontier are well-known and have been

described exhaustively. Although this chapter is not meant as a reiteration of these earlier studies, but rather an attempt to trace and deconstruct the ways in which the Vietnamese landscape is recreated in the American narratives in general, a consideration of this topic must necessarily begin at the frontier—before it can move away from it.

In *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, John Hellmann (1986) analyzes the deep connections between the myth of the frontier and the influence it exerted on the American relations with, and thinking of, Vietnam in the early years of open "cooperation." Hellmann explained that, beginning with the well-known genesis of the frontier myth at the very foundations of the United States, as the new settlers were eager to cut off all cultural links with Europe and instead turned west, such land-based continuity eventually embraced Asia and morphed it, in the American mind at least, into an extension of America itself. Consequently, the Asian—the inhabitant of the land that was the ultimate, westernmost, final frontier to be won—was seen as a friendly Indian, a little brother to whom the American would bring progress and freedom, and in whose well-being the American destiny would be fulfilled (see also Beidler 2007, 19–28; Drinnon 1997, 402–403; Melling 2007). The frontier myth would also become closely related to the idea of American exceptionalism (1986, 4–15; Slotkin 1998a, 33–34).

In a soon-to-be-related development, as Hellmann observes, towards the end of the 1950s there was in American society the feeling of moral degeneration, of resting on laurels, of consumerism-induced conformity and indulgence, and of the breakdown of the old American enterprise and spirit. To discuss this process, Hellmann chooses *The Ugly American*, a bestselling novel by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer published in 1959. The book's action takes place in Indochina, and its scathing criticism concerns the conduct there of the American CIA agents and diplomats, who—according to the authors of *The Ugly American*—are close to losing the Cold War for the United States due to precisely the vices and failings just enumerated. The heroes of the book, on the other hand, go out to the countryside, helping and working with indigenous populations, thus winning their hearts and minds, and ultimately the Cold War, as modern reincarnations of successful, all-American frontiersmen (Hellmann 1986, 19–30). Therefore, Hellmann goes on to argue, as the theme of Asia as the next frontier had already resurfaced, Vietnam then presented itself as an opportunity for the renewal of traditional American values and virtues: "Americans entered Vietnam with certain expectations that a story, a distinctly

American story, would unfold" (1986, x); "[w]hen they thought about Indochina, Americans generally saw themselves entering yet another frontier, once again 'western pilgrims' on a mission of protection and progress" (1986, 15); in effect [when it finally happened, the war in Vietnam turned out to be] a symbolic war in which the true terrain was the American character and the ultimate stakes world history" (1986, 4).

The Ugly American was extraordinarily influential at the time of its publication. Among its millions of enthusiasts was young Senator John F. Kennedy, who, in a gesture of protest against the perceived political and societal stagnation, at one point mailed a copy of the book to every single member of the U.S. Senate (Hellmann 1986, 17; see also Carter 2008, 97–100).[26] As president, Kennedy ran a policy program known precisely as the New Frontier, introduced upon his inauguration in 1961 and continued until his death two years later, that promised national regeneration and new hope. Hellmann argued that, although far from being the most important issue, Vietnam had for the Kennedy administration the function of bolstering people's confidence in the United States' position as the champion of democracy and freedom, the protector of the oppressed, and the world's all-around "good guy" (cf. Slotkin 1998b, 489, who argues that halting Communism in the Third World was "Kennedy's deepest concern and the one he regarded as the ultimate test of his capacity as a leader").

Moreover, Vietnam was attractive to Kennedy in a very pragmatic sense. By 1962 the competence of his administration and his own personal ability as the leader of a Cold War party had been undermined by a string of international incidents, the most important of which were the humiliating meeting with Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna in 1961, the failure of the Bay of Pigs Invasion that same year, and the 1962 peaceful (ergo, in Cold War logic, somewhat "surrender-ish") settlement of the crisis in Laos. Kennedy is indeed reported to have said to a reporter: "Now we have a problem in making our power credible, and Vietnam is the place" (Karnow 1983, 248; see also: Hellmann 1986, 50–1; MacLear 1982, 80–1).

According to Hellmann's analysis, it is evident then that Vietnam's rather down-to-earth political role at home, preconceived by the president and his advisors, was to be played out on a symbolic, or at the very least rhetorical, plane. The country's status as the new frontier, in tangible connection to the policy program, was further enforced by the highly symbolic figure of the Green Beret, to whom Hellmann devotes an entire chapter. The Greenie—Kennedy's favorite

and the militant brother to the member of the president's other flagship New Frontier organization, the Peace Corps—was a quintessential modern frontiersman, and he took the role to new heights, inserting himself firmly not only in the imaginary landscape of American mythology, but also in the material Indochinese country (Hellmann 1986, 44; MacLear 1982, 61; Slotkin, 1998b, 503–504; for a discussion on Kennedy and the Special Forces in the context of actual strategy, see Gibson, 76ff). As what a journalist once called "the Harvard Ph.D. of warfare" (quoted in Hellmann 1986, 46), but also as what Kennedy had envisaged as part-Peace-Corpsman, the Greenie, a gentleman killing machine, became the perfect man of the frontier, balancing the symbolic features of city and country, civilization and wilderness, technology and nature (Hellmann 1986, 37–48; Drinnon 1997, 462–463). In the books and long features in magazines and newspapers, he eschewed the disgraced European colonialist even as he befriended the native; as a development of the landscape theme, a frequent enough conclusion in these stories was that the Green Berets *improve* the lands of the primitive people they visit, for example by showing them how to turn infertile fields into pastures (Hellmann 1986, 48–9; Slotkin 1998a, 34). Therefore, Asia-as-new-America is not only conquered by the sheer force of goodwill and brotherly sentiment, progress and democracy, but is in fact *perfected*, made into a useful, prosperous landscape. Hellmann saw in this, during the nation-building stage of U.S. presence in South Vietnam, an expression of the wish for the history to repeat itself to a happy ending, where the American, instead of wrestling the land through bloody war away from a hateful Indian, whom he eventually kills with his diseases and guns, and whose buffalo (a creature of the land, no less) he decimates, this time around finds a successful conclusion to his endeavor; this time, it all works out (1986, 30–8).

Hellmann's study, an influential text in Vietnam scholarship and thus canon, for all its well-documented (and frankly interesting) analysis and interpretation, is in fact a benign take on the subject.[27] 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," 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). 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.

Hellmann's interpretation of the motivations behind American descent on Indochina is possible because his account of the war begins with Kennedy and the New Frontier, 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). 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 U.S. actions abroad and so of the country's idealism (or innocence). What this perspective lacks, apart from some twenty years of history, is a more nuanced view of myth implicated in ideology and politics. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, the United States went to war in Vietnam for a number of security- and economy-related reasons, or rather a matrix of interlocked interests informed on a profound level by the need to preserve a set of American and capitalist ideologies, and so the country's status as a superpower (and so, to close the circle of this reasoning, the benefits this status brings; see also Kuberski 1986, 171, on the U.S. government's supposed denial of its own interests "encouraging" the country "to make its critical intervention in Vietnam in the service of ideological, but ultimately metaphysical assumptions about its own identity and the identity of its oriental, marxist other."). Hellmann's mythological interpretation is in this context not wrong or even parallel, but complementary: the frontier, like the other exceptionalist mythical concepts, is implicated in this matrix of reasons both as a foundation of the rhetoric explaining and justifying foreign policy (the imperial practice), but also as a profound cultural foundation begetting American ideologies, like

exceptionalism, and the political actions these ideologies in their turn influence and sometimes dictate.

The imperial dimension of the frontier myth was described by historian William Appleman Williams (1955) in an essay on Turner's "Frontier Thesis" and U.S. foreign policy, which, like *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 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 U.S. foreign policy in the first half of the 20th c., its tacit acceptance of European colonialism and promotion of American expansionism, and its inextricable links to the interests of American capital.[28]

Richard Slotkin, in his seminal study of the frontier myth, similarly perceives it as residing at the core of American ideology, its significance far exceeding the realm of popular culture and representation:

> Although the Myth of the Frontier is only one of the operative myth/ideological systems that form American culture, it is an extremely important and persistent one. Its ideological underpinnings are those same "laws" of capitalist competition, of supply and demand, of Social Darwinian "survival of the fittest" as a rationale for social order, and of "Manifest Destiny" that have been the building blocks of our dominant historiographical tradition and political ideology (1998a, 15).

Slotkin sets out to deconstruct the frontier myth as a theory of development of capitalism and of American society. Departing from the classic 19th c. formulations, which have been variously developed and polemicized with by economic historians since, Slotkin works his way through the thick sediment of myth that had conventionally linked westward geographical expansion with the simultaneous rapid economic development. Having explored the internal contradictions of the frontier thesis, smoothed over by typical mythological mystification, Slotkin ultimately arrives at the conclusion that from the outset, based on the specific conditions of the American frontier radically different from those of European colonies (its physical proximity), America was a site of *internal* imperialism. Moreover, the Metropolitan benefit from the frontier depended less on the values and pioneer virtues myth associates with it, and more on development in the Metropolis itself as well as on exploitation of both the land, and so on the removal of the natives, and on exploitation of labor, the imported African slaves and dispossessed European

immigrants. In the end, Slotkin argues, the "Frontier Myth and its ideology are founded on the desire to avoid recognition of the perilous consequences of capitalist development in the New World" and the class strife it inevitably brings, but which the American project was supposed to have eliminated (1998a, 47).

Beginning at around the turn of the century and the "closing of the frontier" in the United States, the theory was developed further and the frontier moved abroad, in formulations of Frederick Jackson Turner (the very famous version) as well as Brooke Adams and Theodore Roosevelt (less famous, but equally influential; Slotkin 1998b; Williams 1955). By the time of John Kennedy's presidency and his flagship policy program, an "assertive" international frontier was back in vogue. Slotkin argues that, apart from the president's particular care for U.S. activity in developing the Third World and protecting it from the Soviets, a particularly Turnerian vision of the frontier could be seen in the Peace Corps, and a particularly Rooseveltian one in the Green Berets and in Kennedy's outlook and presidential style, and the Johnson administration inherited much of this dual ideology (1998b, 490ff; see also Drinnon 1997, 371). The beginning of the shooting war in Vietnam in 1965 ended the counterinsurgency phase and ushered in the "Big-Unit War," which in terms of media representation, and to a considerable extent also the military self-presentation and explanation of strategy, continued to make use of another element of the frontier imagery and vocabulary known from the Westerns, and namely the Indian wars, with the NVA and NLF fighters filling the parts of the bad Indians, South Vietnamese civilians—of the Indian women and children in need of protection. The critical years of 1968 and 1969, however, quickly inversed or confused the roles—if American soldiers were capable of shooting babies and old men at My Lai, in a vicious and destructive war that seemed to be nowhere near ending, then who could say for sure who the Cowboys were, and who the Indians, or if even the rules of the game still applied? (Slotkin 1998b, 536ff; on Kennedy, the New Frontier, the Green Berets, counterinsurgency, etc., see also Drinnon 1997, 364–373) The rupturing of the confidence generated by the frontier myth and its application to Vietnam, which began in that tumultuous period, is next to the treatment of veterans the most frequent and acute complaint in postwar American narratives.

Elements of this myth are also found in Richard Drinnon's study of American imperialism in relation to what he calls "Indian-hating," where he argues that if Turner posited the closing of

the frontier in his time and thus initiated a second period of American history, then that second period ended with the failure in Vietnam—the first instance of the Anglo-American empire being turned back (1997, xiii; he also writes that "Turner added his monumental chapter to the national metaphysics of Indian-hating"; 1997, 462–463). In contrast to Slotkin, Drinnon sees race, not class, as the core of American experience and sociopolitics, and sets out to prove that racism, of the variety directed against the Indian and later the Vietnamese, has been central to American nationalism and mythical/policy formulations like the Manifest Destiny or the New Frontier (1997, xxvi). In the part of his volume devoted to Vietnam, he also discusses the ways in which U.S. policy contained traces of early American colonialism and Indian wars (1997, 355ff; for a polemic with the racial focus of Drinnon's thesis, see Neilson 1998, 98–99).

Slotkin finds specifically American violence to be at the root of the American conception of the frontier and so the country's progress. He thus also sees parallels between the Indian wars and the military strategy in Vietnam, which, as essentially a war of attrition visualized as a "savage war" and aimed at rooting out the enemy entrenched among the civilian population, resulted in "deployment of genocidal violence" (1998a, 6) and verged precipitously on becoming a "war of extermination" (1998b, 545). Drinnon, who considers the entire concept of counterinsurgency as well as the ideology of the New Frontier to be inherently imperial, in a similar strain writes that "'Westernization,' 'Americanization,' 'modernization,' 'nation-building,' or 'progress'—under whatever name the process was always an assault on family structures and on the village. Natives who resisted these assaults on their persons and cultures provoked exterminatory attacks in a continuing tradition of Indian-hating (...)" (1997, 372; see also 461–464).

Hellmann, to be sure, also comments on some sinister aspects of the frontier, but his observations, unlike the highly politicized and explicitly anti-imperial works of Slotkin and Drinnon, offer instead an interesting insight into the early Vietnam literary and cultural scholarship's complicity in the dominant discourse. Hellmann continues his discussion of the Green Berets by pointing out that the Special Forces, in their second function in counterinsurgency and death by stealth, provided one more link to the land of Vietnam. On the eve of the war and with Kennedy still alive, the Greenie was perceived as a master warrior who had taught himself the ways of the jungle guerrillas and knew the land better than the natives did, like a frontiersman, a John Wayne, fighting the Indian the Indian way in order to protect

the Indian (1986, 37, 49). In his analysis of another bestseller set in Vietnam, Robin Moore's 1965 *Green Berets*, Hellmann explores the darker side of the frontier mentality, which he places opposite the "liberalism" of *The Ugly American* and claims, based on Moore's book's spectacular sales, to have "mirror[ed] the fantasies of a significant portion of the populace" (1986, 56). The book, he argues, is a masculinist celebration of symbolic and material exploitation of the natives, complete with its anti-social tendency, its thinly veiled sense of racial superiority, and its desire to "return" to Southeast Asia, to "the alluring landscape of primitive satisfactions, a dark frontier where the psyche may contemplate eternally having a communist to kill and a native woman to lose oneself in" (1986, 65). It seems that Hellmann cannot escape the entrapping of the very myth he analyzes. The darkness he finds in the frontier myth is again metaphysical, a reflection of a "fantasy," and divorced from the imperial practice of the United States as well as its material motivations, political acts, and consequences (as Neilson points out, missing from Hellmann's mythological analysis of American foreign policy in Indochina are "such figures as Ngo Dinh Diem, Ho Chi Minh, Allen Dulles, and Edward Lansdale. (...) Hellmann [also] ignores the people and politics of Indochina" [1998, 101]).

But this is the same darkness that haunts most of the war's American texts, forming the core of the dominant cultural narrative of Vietnam. The frontier 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 moniker, like the mythically or culturally related figure of John Wayne, is so often evoked in Vietnam books to refer to NLF- and NVA-held territories that it requires no reference), the frontier, when used by a Vietnam author, effects a semiosis of well-known concepts and constructs. But the frontier, except in rigorous and securely politically- and ideologically anchored cases,[29] is not a particularly useful discourse of criticism: its failure is seen in the Vietnam literature, where it serves to mythologize rather than elucidate. A Vietnam 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 "grunts" (infantry soldiers, especially in the Marine Corps) who had come and gone before them; often it seems that the Vietnam 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.

And so be it, we might say: it is not necessarily the role of the writer to provide historical education and political critique, and he is free to write about his war however he wishes. 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 as to shape and limit the popular imagination (memory, understanding) of an event like a military invasion. Dominant discourses are born this way. It becomes, in other words, a problem of ideology—perpetuated by reiterations of the same mythic story.

This problem is related to two additional matters: the limitation of perspective in the canonical body of work, and the "friendly fire" discourse. First of all, the most successful canonical Vietnam texts are not only told from the "grunts'" ground-level perspective, but rely with very few exceptions on veteran authorship (Boyle 2015a, 12–16; 2016, 176; Chattarji 2007, 75; Kinney 2000, 8; see also Jeffords 1989, 135–138, on the veteran as a "spokesperson" for the whole of American culture and society). Like Bellhouse and Litchfield in the article discussed above, so in many of the 1980s literary studies and reviews scholars and critics praise the "truth" of the Vietnam literature, and give clear preference to veteran and correspondent accounts because of their personal experience in the war, as if that experience legitimized an author's version of Vietnam as definite and unquestionable, as if that experience were the only source of the authority to make interpretations of the conflict and what was important about it. Other voices, those of the antiwar movement for example, may be disqualified as ideological and biased because of both their lack of personal experience in the war and the disparagement of the protesters expressed in many canonical veteran-authored texts. This limitation is not without

consequences for the political and ideological dimension of the canon and the dominant cultural narrative:

> 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 (Neilson 1998, 6; see also Boyle 2016, 188; Kinney 2000, 6; Spanos 2000, 137–138).

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 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 frequent doubts expressed as to its effectiveness against the NLF and its impact on villagers. An early 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

> [t]he 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; this source is an official Air Force history of Operation Ranch Hand). James William Gibson in *The Perfect War* references an involved 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 *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.

Instead, as already suggested above, the war has been mythologized. An integral aspect of the myth of the Vietnam War is what Katherine Kinney has called a "trope of friendly fire": Americans killing Americans being "virtually the only story that has been told by Americans about the Vietnam War. In novels, memoirs, oral histories, plays, and films the image of friendly fire, the death of one American at the hands of another, structures the plotting of both realist gestures toward 'what really happened' in Vietnam and symbolic expressions of what Vietnam

meant" (2000, 4). 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 *Platoon*, for example, which Kinney discusses as exemplary of friendly fire, "the moral struggle at the heart of the film trades on a racialized imperial memory without ever critically engaging its terms" (2000, 6). 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).[30]

And thus we arrive back at myth. If Slotkin is right when he contends that "the 'internal' location of the American colonizing enterprise made for a relationship between colony and Metropolis that was closer and more significant for domestic politics" (1998a, 47) than in the case of European states and their imperial possessions, then the disrupted Vietnam frontier as a location where Americans are continuously inflicting friendly fire against one another becomes more understandable. The problem, as ever, is that while agonizing over the mythical and symbolic frontier, the canon and the dominant narrative leave out matters such as the actual destruction of the actual Vietnamese landscape and the lives of the people who inhabited it. But, since in the decontextualized and dehistoricized war there is no concrete political causality, it also becomes clear how "Vietnam" can so unselfconsciously be considered a calamity that befell the American people—an American tragedy.

2.3. "Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam"

The massacre at My Lai can be considered an American tragedy because My Lai was an American place. It was also a made-up place. It never existed.

My Lai, in the U.S. sources usually rendered as My Lai 4 or My Lai (4) to designate the specific sub-hamlet where the vast majority of the killings were perpetrated, was actually one of several settlements constituting the village of Son My, in Quang Ngai Province.[31] 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 U.S. 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 (administrative district within the village) of Tu Cung; My Khe (4)'s actual name was My Hoi, in Co Luy hamlet. "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—re-named 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 (Allison 2012, 23; Oliver 2006, viii, 192).[32]

I allowed myself to open this subchapter as I have, with a somewhat poetically paradoxical statement, in order to be playful with the way 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. "Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam—we've all been there": so ends Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1978, 207), and indeed we may ask, what is "Vietnam"? 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).

The My Lai example is a particularly poignant illustration of two facts. The first is that 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 the recalibration of optics that transforms the slaughter of several hundred Vietnamese people at the hands of Americans into an American tragedy. 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 70s United States 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.[33]

The second fact is that whichever way one looks at it, the American concept of "Vietnam" always involves the construction of some kind of place or space. This should not be surprising, of course; if "Vietnam" is understood primarily as a myth, a specific story, it is only expected that it should have a setting, even if this setting changes—moving not from place to place, but between dimensions. 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, as an abstracted space travelled through and across, and finally as the war itself.

But historically, too—in the physical dimension, so to speak—we see Vietnam redefined as an American place. It is there, firstly, as the imaginary but tragically consequential state of South Vietnam, created by the United States for their own geopolitical interests. This creation was political and symbolic, as an attempt to launch a viable government and to force the population into forming a South Vietnamese nation, but through the processes of aid and "nation building" it was also material. The United States moved in immediately following the Geneva Conference 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, the southern city made the capital of the whole project. 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. They built roads connecting all parts of Vietnam to Saigon, which they promised would result in greater access for both government officials and peasants to sell their crops to a larger market (Carter 2003).

From the moment when the engagement in Indochina became militarized in 1965, throughout the war, and for the first time in history, private U.S. companies received highly lucrative government contracts for construction projects during wartime. Vietnam's perhaps most notorious profiteer, the construction company Brown & Root ("Burn & Loot" to antiwar protesters), once a major benefactor of Lyndon Johnson's political career and by the early 1960s a subsidiary of Halliburton, was among a consortium of firms who received advantageous and highly profitable cost-plus contracts from the U.S. government—"a bonanza of contracts" for "billions of dollars [*sic*] worth of bases, airstrips, ports, and bridges" in the country. The consortium, known collectively as "RMK-BRJ," in addition to Brown & Root included "three other construction and project management behemoths," Raymond International, Morris-Knudsen and J.A. Jones, "to form one of the largest civilian-based military construction conglomerates in history," and in the end worked on construction projects worth over $2 billion (Briody 2004, 163–164; see also Carter 2003; 2008, 182–205; St. Clair 2005). In effect,

> RMK-BRJ literally changed the face of Vietnam, clearing out wide swaths of jungle for airplane landing strips, dredging channels for ships, and building American bases from Da Nang to Saigon. (...) RMK-BRJ was building everything from roads to entire cities for the American military. (...) RMK-BRJ built two 10,000-foot jet runways and two deep-water piers in Da Nang; a permanent jet runway in Chulai; two jet runways in Phanrang; ammunition and fuel storage facilities; barracks; helicopter landing pads; pipelines; hospitals; communications facilities; and warehouses. In short, the construction conglomerate built

> everything the American military needed in Vietnam. They did 97 percent of the construction work in the country during the seven years they operated there. The remaining 3 percent went to local Vietnamese contractors.
>
> They were moving enough dirt to dig the Suez Canal and paving enough roads to surface the Jersey Turnpike every 30 days. They had a small army of their own in the country, 51,000 at the height of operations in 1967, the largest employer in Vietnam (Briody 2004, 164-165).

> Halliburton employees were a common sight across South Vietnam—digging wells, building latrines, managing commissaries, excavating harbors and constructing barracks—from Da Nang to Cam Ranh Bay. The biggest project by far was its $220 million contract to build the mammoth Air Base at Phan Rang, which Halliburton constructed on top of some [of] the most beautiful Cham temple complexes in Vietnam (St. Clair 2005).

> [RMK-BRJ] built six ports with 29 deep-draft berths, 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. In short, they put on the ground in southern Vietnam nearly $2 billion in construction of various kinds of facilities and infrastructure. Military commanders called it the "construction miracle of the decade" (Carter 2003; see also Carter 2008).

But despite the self-satisfaction of the New Frontier, 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 American liberals (...) 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" (1972, 121; see also Carter 2008, 95 -105).

Meanwhile, American counterinsurgency and later military strategy was also "changing the face" of Vietnam and its social fabric. 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 NLF and thus giving the Diem government stricter military control of the population, did not take into account that insurgents often hailed from and 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. (Gustav Hasford includes an example, the scene of a type generally familiar from the canon, in his novel *The Short-Timers*: the narrator is aboard a helicopter, whose door gunner fires his machine gun on a farmer in a paddy: "[t]he hamlet beneath us is in a free fire zone—anybody can shoot at it at any time and for any reason. We watch the farmer run in the shallow water. The farmer knows only that his family needs some rice to eat. The farmer knows only that the bullets are tearing him apart. He falls, and the door gunner giggles"; 1988, 75.)

Unsurprisingly, the effect of Strategic Hamlet was largely to push mass numbers of South Vietnamese civilians toward supporting the NLF (FitzGerald 1972, 123–126; Young 2014, chapters 4 and 5). For two thousand years Vietnamese social and political life had been organized around the village, while at the heart of the farmers' spiritual life was their land, but the structure began to be undermined in the 19th 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 finished it. While the Strategic Hamlet program ended, during the war's search-and-destroy operations deportations of villagers to government "relocation camps" (or, if a villager was particularly unlucky, to "interrogation camps") continued, in addition to "incentives" to move willingly such as the herbicide sprayings; some of the operations, like the massive Cedar Falls of 1967, ended up being among the largest forced relocations of people during the war. Both the Strategic Hamlet villages and the relocation camps have been called 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; Griffiths 2001, 89: in one such "center" during Cedar Falls, where 800 people were moved to live in 40 long tents surrounded by barbed wire, "at the entrance was a

sign saying 'Welcome to Freedom'"). Free-fire zones continued in wartime, too, and remained inhabited by large numbers of villagers unwilling to leave their paddies and 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. 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 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 Americanized Vietnam.

Civilian relocation and camps, let alone the policies and strategies that authorized them, are rarely encountered in the American canon of the war (examples include a minor incident in Webb's novel *Fields of Fire*, and a chapter dedicated to a refugee camp in Tim O'Brien's memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (originally published 1973), accidently hit by American artillery which killed thirteen Vietnamese; O'Brien notes that the families received solatium payments of twenty dollars for a wounded person, thirty-three and ninety cents for a killed one [2006, 167]; on solatium payments, see Beidler 2004, 38–47). Search-and-destroy missions, burning villages and killing civilians are of course integral to this canon and its imagery, but, as will be discussed further on, mainly as an element of the U.S. soldiers' experience and not as a dimension of the war.

A "Vietnam" very much present in the memoirs, novels and films, on the other hand, is the parallel physical American 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 Vietnamese Vietnam. An awareness that this alternative Vietnam is constituted by the American "phenomenology of presence" (James 1990, 85) can be glimpsed in Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, for example, where the narrator, Joker, at one point confesses: "[i]n 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 novel *Fields of Fire* (originally published 1978), in a conversation about the Vietnamese. "The fuckers act like they own the place" (2001, ch. 29). 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, "[b]ase-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 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 officers. The division of South Vietnam into four tactical zones of military operation—I Corps, II Corps etc.—had been made for the purposes of the ARVN, but was later adopted by MACV, which 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 non-being, 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. And then there were the American-made 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. "In the rear," writes Tim O'Brien about his reassignment to an administrative position at the battalion headquarters, "protected from the war by rows of bunkers and rolls of barbed wire, I rejoined the real United States Army" (2006, 177).

But above all, the American Vietnam was the Vietnamese landscape—the land with its climate, terrain, vegetation, waterways, and sparse infrastructure—reimagined as an American frontier but, as the narratives continued to be written and published, transformed into something else still, the mythical place known as Vietnam.

Landing Zone Loon

The Vietnam 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. But one narrative in particular deserves attention before others are considered, firstly because it remains a well-known and appreciated American book of the war, and secondly because it actually devotes so much creative energy to deconstruct the Vietnamese frontier and to explore the landscape and space of Vietnam.

Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, published in 1977, 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* (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*). *Dispatches* was published to critical acclaim that praised the book as "the first" accurate representation of Vietnam in literature; this view was then confirmed in much subsequent academic criticism that furthermore validated the text's significance by linking the novelty of Herr's linguistic style and structure to the advent of postmodernism (either as a cause or a symptom[34]). 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; on *Dispatches* being the best or the best-received Vietnam book, see Beidler 2007; Bonn 1993, 29; Deusen 1983, 82; 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).

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 5-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 Haberle 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 which Herr recorded (*Catch-22* was "a Nam standard because it said that in a war everybody thinks that everybody else is crazy"; 1978, 169).

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 apartment in Saigon, which shows the colonial division of Vietnam into three parts (Tonkin, Annam, Cochin China), and which prompts the author to ponder:

> If dead ground could come back and haunt you the way dead people do, they'd have been able to mark my map CURRENT and burn the ones they'd been using since '64, but count on it, nothing like that was going to happen. It was late '67, even the most detailed maps didn't reveal much any more; reading them was like trying to read the faces of the Vietnamese, and that was like trying to read the wind. We knew that the uses of most information were flexible, 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, 1; 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.

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 VIP visitors to Vietnam about a defoliation mission:

> [He] showed me on his map and then from his chopper what they'd done to the Ho Bo Woods, the vanished Ho Bo Woods, taken off by giant Rome ploughs and chemicals and long, slow fire, wasting hundreds of acres of cultivated plantation and wild forest alike (...). And if in the months following that operation incidents of enemy activity in the larger area of War Zone C had increased "significantly," and American losses had doubled again, none of it was happening in any damn Ho Bo Woods, you'd better believe it... (1978, 11–12; 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, becomes a literary tool to criticize aspects of the American engagement (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). Commenting on the perceived difficulty of, or disagreement about, determining when "it began (...) for us" in Indochina, Herr acknowledges the influence of both American colonial origins and American mythology when he writes that, "might as well say that Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along (...); might as well lay it on the proto-Gringos who found the New England woods too raw and empty for their peace and filled them up with their own imported devils" (1978, 46; "the Indian wars have yet to be concluded for a nation that refuses to publicly atone for the sins of Vietnam. In Michael Herr's *Dispatches* the

sins of the forest are alive in the jungle" [Melling 2007, 139]). Herr even envisions the Trail of Tears ending in Vietnam and doubling back "to form a containing perimeter" (1978, 46), echoing the idea of the frontier extending ever westward, while simultaneously delivering the unavoidable conclusion that it would end up where it had started. In the same paragraph Herr also suggests that, "[m]aybe it was already over for us in Indochina when Aiden Pyle's body washed up under the bridge in Dakao" (1978, 46).

Pyle is the protagonist of Graham Greene's 1955 novel set in Vietnam, *The Quiet American*, concerned with U.S. counterinsurgency and "nation-building" activity there, and widely considered to be a criticism of American exceptionalism and liberal progressivism in the Third World as destructively idealistic. Lederer and Burdock's *The Ugly American* was of course a pro-American response. *The Quiet American* was panned by American critics at publication, but has since been thoroughly rehabilitated in American Vietnam scholarship, laudatory of Greene's prescience and acute insight. But, as Neilson observed, it is worth keeping in mind that Greene's supposedly scathing criticism of American ideology still envisions it as a matter of innocence, idealism, and good intentions, which perhaps helps explain the enthusiasm of the post-1975 liberal scholarship to embrace it since it remained safely within the bounds of the permissible discourse (Neilson 1998, 56–88). In a 1988 interview, Herr described the U.S. soldiers in Vietnam as "simultaneously so innocent and evil (...), like Alden Pyle" (Rushdie 1991, 335).

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 WWII 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, "who would hold the coonskin to the wall while we nailed it up" (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 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 Indians ("If you saw them, sir, they weren't Apache"), 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 further explains (in his signature broken syntax): "More a war movie than a Western, Nam paradigm, Vietnam, 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" (1978, 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[35] 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 on the battlefield (precisely the point whose deconstruction is the function of the John Wayne figure in the Vietnam canon). "I keep thinking," Herr admits,

> about all the kids who got wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good. You don't know what a media freak is until you've seen

> the way a few of those grunts would run around during a fight when they knew that there was a television crew nearby; they were actually making war movies in their heads (1978, 169; see also O'Brien 2009, "The Ghost Soldiers," for similar ideas).

Elsewhere, Herr recalls a commanding officer who, upon hearing that Herr and his colleagues were reporters, "wanted to throw a spontaneous operation for us, crank up his whole brigade and get some people killed. We had to get out on the next chopper to keep him from going ahead with it, amazing what some of them would do for a little ink" (1978, 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 which 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 which 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"; O'Brien 2006, 153).

As Kinney points out, "[t]his obsession with John Wayne exemplifies the solipsism of American narratives of the Vietnam War, the self-referential quality that displaces the historical struggles within Vietnam with a spectacle of American culture at war with itself" (2000, 12; she is talking about her concept of the friendly fire discourse, which she later claims to be "part of the texture of the war" in *Dispatches*; 2000, 111–112; on John Wayne as a Vietnam discourse, see also Anderegg 1991a; Hallin 1986, 142–145; Herzog 1988; 2005, 17–24). 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; 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], an obvious reference to *Dispatches*, which also serves as the source for the motto of the novel's first part). In "Colleagues," writing about the "glamour" of being a war correspondent, Herr says that

> in any other war, they would have made movies about us, too: *Dateline: Hell!*, *Dispatch from Dong Ha*, maybe even *A Scrambler to the Front* (...). But Vietnam is awkward, everybody knows how awkward, and if people don't even want to hear about it, you know they're not going to sit there in the dark and have it brought up. (...) So we have all been compelled to make our own movies, as many movies as there are correspondents, and this one is mine (1978, 153).

While traditional myths could apply themselves easily to earlier conflicts—"old and corny" (1978, 153) to Herr and his posse of correspondents—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, from the lowest John Wayne wetdream to the most aggravated soldier-poet fantasy" (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 [Landing Zone] Loon, the mythical place where it got dark so fast that by the time you realized that there wouldn't be another chopper in until morning, you'd already picked a place to sleep for the night. Loon 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: "brand new no-name Marine lz in the heart of Indian country (...). Just before I flew back to Danang they named it LZ Loon, and Flynn said, '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).

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 the 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; even though Loon is, strictly speaking, Herr's own reconstruction of "Vietnam"; cf. 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).

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] *National Geographic* map of Indochina with about a hundred pencil marks, every place I ever went there (...); attached to every mark and the complex of faces, voices and movement

> that gathered around each one. Real places, then real only in the distance behind me, faces and places sustaining serious dislocation, mind slip and memory play. 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—deteriorated; Loon remained 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 "[i]n 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. (...) [T]he 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 that "Vietnam was what we had instead of happy childhoods" (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, "fit well with a nonthreatening view of the war" and "[shift] concern away from the Vietnamese" (1998, 142). And from a less benign perspective still, one that bridges the interior faults of *Dispatches* with its reception and absorption into cultural narrative (see also Spindler 1991, 28, who makes a similar point), in his materialist take on Vietnam and music, David 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 which, rather than speaking to the reality of the suppressed history, enables the reintroduction of these events into dominant myths and markets. *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 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 19th-century frontier imagery associated with "The Boy General," Slotkin observes:

> The Frontier in whose real geography Custer moved and acted was already in his own time a space defined less by maps and surveys than by myths and illusions, projective fantasies, wild anticipations, extravagant expectations. (...) The landscape of myth was no less important than battlefield terrain and Indian tactics in creating the "fatal environment" in which Custer was enmeshed (1998a, 11–12).

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: "[s]ome of us [correspondents] moved around the war like crazy people until we couldn't see which way the run was even taking us anymore, only the war all over its surface with 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"—the "sexiest thing going" (1978, 15)—has been formed by all the helicopters he flew in in Vietnam. In the war, "choppers" enabled airmobility, and in *Dispatches* the "meta-chopper" enables Herr to travel *through* the space of war (on the significance of the helicopter as a central image and symbol of the war, see: Hall 1990; Sturken 2002). A catalogue of the types of places found in American Vietnam and accessible by "chopper" follows: jungle clearings and rooftops, massive bases "as big as cities with 30,000 citizens" and one-man posts deep in the wilderness, "posh fat air-conditioned camps like comfortable middle-class scenes" distant from the fighting, "camps named for commanders' wives, LZ Thelma, LZ Betty Lou," "number-named hilltops in trouble" where it was unwise to alight for too long, "trail, paddy, swamp, deep hairy bush, scrub, swale, village, even city" (1978, 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; on the naturalization of Vietnam 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 "unnatural East-West interface, a California corridor" cut through the jungle, where "[t]here was such a dense concentration of American energy (...), American and essentially adolescent, if that energy could have been channeled into anything more than noise, waste and pain it would have lighted up Indochina for a thousand years" (1978, 42).

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 unselfconscious 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 (the same is largely true for Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, a book clearly influenced by *Dispatches*). 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 the brief references to Pilgrim New England, the Trail of Tears, and *The Quiet American*, all three of which 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 the relevant 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" were "elevated crazies of older adventurers who'd burst from their tents and bungalows to rub up hard against the natives, hot on the sex-and-death trail" (1978, 47). A list of different types of spooks follows: "Ivy League spooks," "ethnologue spooks," "spook deities" like "Edward Lansdale himself," "executive spooks," "bureau spooks," "Air America spooks," "Special Forces spooks" (1978, 47); 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 says: "[c]onventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it, all it could do was take the most profound event of the American decade and turn it into a communications pudding, taking its most obvious, undeniable history and making it into a secret history" (1978, 175). By this he means, essentially, the experience of the "grunts" and the *senselessness* of their suffering and, most importantly, of their deaths: "in back of every column of print about Vietnam there was a dripping, laughing death-face; it hid there in the newspapers and magazines and held to your television screens for hours after the set was turned off for the night, an afterimage that simply wanted to tell you at last what somehow had not been told" (1978, 176; see also Harrison 1999, 90; the definition of "secret history" in Hawkins 2012 is somewhat similar, though given a different significance; cf. Hellmann 1986, 153; McInerney 1981).[36]

The phrase is used earlier in the book, where describing the American failure to account for what made the French lose Dien Bien Phu, their war, and ultimately their Indochinese colonies, Herr writes:

> for all the books and articles and white papers, all the talk and the miles of film, something wasn't answered, it wasn't even asked. We were backgrounded, deep, but when the

> background started sliding forwards, not a single life was saved by the information. The thing transmitted too much energy, it heated up too hot, hiding low under the fact-figure crossfire where was a secret history, and not a lot of people felt like running in there to bring it out (1978, 46).

The smooth gliding from the French war history, through the counterinsurgency period of U.S. involvement (being "backgrounded, deep"), 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" (2009, "The Things They Carried"; 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." (...) [T]his package also fits neatly into fashionable late twentieth-century theories that rejected coherent and consistent narratives as anachronistic in the epoch of "postmodernism." (...) [T]he 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 90s 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" etc. (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; Myers 1988, 142ff; Kuberski 1986, 176ff; Scheurer 1981, 155ff; cf. the chapter on *Dispatches* in Nielson 1998, who repudiates much of the prior scholarship on Herr: "any assertion that there is a natural and direct connection between Herr's aesthetic and the war, that there exists a correspondence between narrative strategy and historical period is itself shaped by historical and cultural imperatives" [1998, 138]; 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).[37] [38]

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 classic formulation of what makes all war experience and all traditional war narratives ironic (the tripartite structure: preparation/innocence, combat/experience, reflection/disillusionment; 2013) 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 and enmeshed in their own particular superstition and mythology ("Eat the Apple, Fuck the Corps," "What's the difference between the Marine Corps and the Boy Scouts?" and so on; 1978, 86–87). In "Khe Sanh," Herr writes of a song some "grunts" composed, "a letter to the mother of a dead Marine, that went something like, 'Tough shit, tough shit, your kid got greased, but what the fuck, he was just a grunt'" (1978, 87). The lyrics are funny because they are true, because for the marines "[s]omething almost always went wrong somewhere, somehow. It was always something vague, unexplainable, tasting of bad fate, and the results were always brought down to their most basic element—the dead Marine" (1978, 86). This is the knowledge of the war's secrets that the marines possess: "the madness, the bitterness, the horror and doom of it. (...) They got savaged a lot and

softened a lot, their secret brutalized them and darkened them and very often it made them beautiful," because they knew "where true violence resided" (1978, 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" (1978, 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: "[i]t was that joke at the deepest part of the blackest kernel of fear, and you could die laughing" (1978, 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.

As we have seen, one of Herr's images associated with this subject is the "dripping, laughing death-face" (also "a laughing lucent skull"; 1978, 203), and the trope is found elsewhere with surprising regularity. In Larry Heinemann's novel, *Paco's Story* (originally published 1986), 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 "[w]e 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" (Hasford 1988, 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"

(Hasford 1988, 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: "[w]e 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" (Hasford 1988, 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: "If the war in I Corps was a matter for specialization among correspondents, it was not because it was inherently different as war, but because it was fought almost exclusively by the Marines, whose idiosyncrasies most reporters found intolerable and even criminal" (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: "the war made a place for you that was all yours. Finding it was like listening to esoteric music, you didn't hear it in any essential way through all the repetitions until your own breath had entered it and become another instrument, and by then it wasn't just music anymore, it was experience" (1978, 58). That experience could be spiritual or existential (cf. Hawkins 2012, 69–74), Herr seems to claim, and *immersion* into it was possible: it was

> a complete process if you got to complete it, a distinct path to travel, but dark and hard (...). Some people took a few steps along it and turned back (...) A lot went further than they probably should have (...) And some kept going until they reached the place where an inversion of the expected order happened, a fabulous warp where you took the journey first and then you made your departure (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.

2.4. In-country

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 *The Short-Timers* and *The Things They Carried*, they usually do so less consciously or critically than Herr's memoir. Nevertheless, as has been argued at the beginning of this thesis, the historical context within which they should be read is not primarily the one of the war itself, but rather of their publication and canonization in the 1970s and 1980s, along with the transformations of the cultural narrative. 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). Moreover, Herr co-authored the script of Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), another title in the war's strict canon.[39] He was also 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 novel *The Short-Timers* by Gustav Hasford (originally published 1979), 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, 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?"). 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* or Larry Heinemann's *Close Quarters*. 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. Among the many things Tim O'Brien learnt about the war in his first month in country was the vocabulary: FNG, REMF, to be "short," to "waste," a "frag," "dinks and slopes" (2006, 84–85). In *The 13th Valley* (1982), the FNG,

"Cherry," soon after arriving at his battalion headquarters meets his first friend, a short-timer named Silvers, who advises him not to ask people how long they have been in-country. Somewhat embarrassed, Cherry explains that he does it without thinking:

> "Hey, I know," Silvers laughed. "It don't really mean nothin."
>
> "That's another thing. Everybody I've met around here says that. 'It don't mean nothin. It don't mean nothin.' Why does everybody say that?"
>
> Silvers winked and shrugged. "I don't know. You know. It don't mean nothin." He laughed. "That's what happens when guys live together. Everybody says the same things" (Vecchio 1982, 51).

Another example comes from *The Short-Timers*:

> "You listen to Joker, New Guy. He knows *ti ti*—very little. And if he ever does know anything, it'll be because he learned it from me. You just know he's never been in the shit. He ain't got the stare."
>
> Rafter Man looks up. "The what?"
>
> "The thousand-yard stare. A Marine gets it after he's been in the shit for too long" (Hasford 1988, 65).

In James Webb's *Fields of Fire*, a freshly arrived lieutenant's first impression of his men also includes language: "[t]hey 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. Groovy. Wow. Number One. Number Ten. There it is, man. A bust for your dust. What a bummer. But it don't mean nothing" (Webb 2001, ch. 6).

An essential piece of the Vietnam vernacular also captured the Otherness of Vietnam felt by the men. At some point, it became common among the Americans to refer to Vietnam by using the multi-functional "in country," sometimes hyphenated when used as an adjectival compound. Philip Beidler, Vietnam veteran and literary scholar, in his essay on the language of the war, explained:

> although you still hear 'the Nam' bandied about by people who affect to know something about the war, I do not remember using that piece of alleged GI shorthand, nor do I recall

> hearing anyone do so. I suspect that, for most of us, even to speak the name of the place was some kind of bad magic. Like most people I think I probably just used the phrase "in-country"—as in, 'How long you been in-country?'" (2004, 14).

The full implication of the construct is revealed when set against its polar opposite: "the World," the United States or home, with "World" usually capitalized in writing and always preceded by the definite article, which makes it *the* place in relation to which whatever it is that is "in-country" is totally outside. Beidler ascribed 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). In *The 13th Valley*, for example, a character returning from R&R in Sydney reminisces that when he had first arrived "in-country (...) [t]he contrast between Nam and the World did not seem immense. Now the contrast was numbing" (1982, 19). In the idiosyncratic vernacular of the Vietnam soldier, a man would say, for example, when his in-country tour was almost up, that he was returning to the World; or the other way round, the FNGs or rookie reporters were "just in from the World," "fresh in from the World."

If the slang is the native tongue of Loon, the climate and terrain, as experienced by the soldiers, the land is the other component constituting the perceived elemental foreignness of Vietnam. Often the observations are fairly mundane, as the one from a veteran recorded by *New Yorker* journalist Daniel Lang: "[j]ust seeing an Asian country, for instance, was an adventure (...), its landscape so different from the frozen plains of his corner of Minnesota; he had never before splashed through paddy fields, he told me, or stood blinking in the sudden sunlessness of lush, entangled jungle, or wandered uncertainly through imprisoning fields of towering elephant grass" (Lang 1969, 12). In *The Short-Timers*, Cowboy admits to hating the country, because "there's not one horse in all of Viet Nam" (Hasford 1988, 41).

But the strangeness of Vietnam can also be conceptualized as more profound and even metaphysical. Herr describes it in terms of the impossibility of "getting used to the jungle or the blow-you-out climate or the saturating strangeness of the place which didn't lessen with exposure so often as it fattened and darkened in accumulating alienation" (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 story collection, *The Things They Carried* (originally published 1990), Vietnam is turned into a darkly magical world outright. The underground tunnels and the over-ground terrains are haunted by ghosts ("The Things They Carried," "Ghost Soldiers"; see also the similar imagery for Quang Ngai in *Going After Cacciato* [O'Brien 1980, 257]). The most remote wilderness can at night echo with strange, sourceless music, which reappears in several stories, and the sounds of a cocktail party: "[n]ot human voices, though. Because it's the mountains. (...). The rock—it's *talking*. And the fog, too, and the grass and the goddamn mongooses. Everything talks. The trees talk politics, the monkeys talk religion. The whole country. Vietnam. The place talks" (2009, "How to Tell a True War Story"; emphasis in original; see also "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong"). 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 "[f]rom nowhere and from everywhere. (...) [T]he source of the laughter is all around us. 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, that fictional land of eternal youth. But night always brought the sound of artillery, a practical reminder that this was Vietnam, where youth was merely expendable" (1985, 68). 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* (1970), 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: "[t]here'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 2009, "How to Tell a True War Story"]).[40]

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. These features of the landscape, in themselves belonging in the realm of the NLF and the NVA (the land and the night; see below), are labelled "the true enemy" of Americans in Vietnam with a frequency that requires no references. The difficulty of the land morphs eventually from a metaphoric hostility into a metaphysical one. Herr's words on the strangeness of the Vietnamese landscape come in a passage where he writes about the falsity of the sense of security provided by airmobility, and his failure to fully adapt to the war and the land and their "surprises." The underlying reason is that

> [t]he ground was always in play, always being swept. Under the ground was his, above it was ours. We had the air, we could get up in it but not disappear in *to* it, we could run but we couldn't hide, and he could do each so well that sometimes it looked like he was doing them both at once (...). All the same, one place or another it was always going on, rock around the clock, we had the days and he had the nights. You could be in the most protected space in Vietnam and still know that your safety was provisional, that early death, blindness, loss of legs, arms, or balls, major and lasting disfigurement—the whole rotten deal—could come in on the freakyfluky as easily as in the so-called expected ways, you heard so many of those stories it was a wonder anyone was left alive to die in firefights and mortar-rocket attacks (Herr 1978, 19–20).

The strangeness of the landscape and the climate, then, is strictly connected with the lethal potential it carries. Herr draws a sharp line of division, encountered everywhere in the Vietnam canon, between American technology, represented by helicopters and airmobility, and the guerilla tactics of "Charlie"—the "he" of the passage, the NLF and the NVA—who, by often operating at night and possessing native knowledge of the land, renders it actively hostile and dangerous. Philip Caputo, upon entering the jungle for the first time with his unit, notes that "[b]eing Americans, we were comfortable with machines, but (...) we were struck with the utter strangeness of this rank and rotted wilderness" (1985, 83).[41] Concerning the separateness of the land belonging to the enemy, Caputo also notes that moving into NLF-controlled areas was "like

sliding over the edge" (1985, 252). Webb describes these territories as "a wounded countryside swollen with anger" (2001, ch. 3), within which American bases and camps are oases.

The day-night division is particularly important. Caputo, stationed around Danang in 1965 as a marine lieutenant, also writes in his memoir that his soldiers soon "learned that the Vietnam War was primarily a nocturnal event. (...) The landscape, so bucolic on daylight, gradually assumed a sinister aspect. (...) [T]he war and the Viet Cong were here all right, waiting for us" (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. Night for the platoon was hiding time, time to dig deep holes and wait in fear for the loneliest of deaths (...)" (Webb 2001, ch. 27). 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": "[t]he 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 2009, "Night Life").

In effect, the entire environment becomes "fatal," as in Slotkin; "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 which 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.

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 ("Those fucking guys," he once overheard a rifleman say about him and his colleagues, "I hope they die"; 1978, 168). Del Vecchio is far more 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. And then there is the landscape. 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 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 organization and personnel of Alpha Company" at the time of the action, containing the names, ranks, and occupations of all 92 men (1982, 127–129); and 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 27.5x27.5 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"; 1982, 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 on, each giving similarly comprehensive briefings, ending with a long motivational speech from the brigade commander.

Reading this chapter through Herr leads to interesting interpretations. 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 which 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, ch. 3].)

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, present at the briefing, belongs to the specific category of characters in Vietnam literature, super-soldier sergeants, tough guys from working-class and similar backgrounds. They fall on different spots on the spectrum of repulsiveness: *Fields of Fire's* Snake is an embodiment of marine perfection; *The Short-Timers'* Animal Mother is a rampant racist who exhibits pedophiliac tendencies. But they are ultimately excellent fighters and loyal comrades, which in the canon is always the final mark of sympathy. At the briefing, Egan 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 wellbeing ("[f]uckin 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 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 the protagonist 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 itself thus 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. In *Dispatches*, Herr writes: "Forget the Cong, the trees would kill you, the elephant grass grew up homicidal, the ground you were walking over possessed malignant intelligence, your whole environment was a bath" (1978, 58). In *Fields of Fire*, "the whole black night was a killer, waiting for its moment" (Webb 2001, ch. 7). Philip Caputo in *A Rumor of War* admits that sometimes he "could not think of [the climate] as heat—that is, as condition of weather; rather, it seemed to be a thing malevolent and alive" (1985, 85) and adds that "[i]t is as if the sun and the land itself were in league with the Viet Cong, wearing us down, driving us mad, killing us" (1985, 106). In general Caputo seems particularly preoccupied with the villainy of the environment.[42] In "Speaking of Courage," Tim O'Brien famously has a character literally swallowed by a "shit field" (an actual field where local villagers go to defecate), symbolic no doubt of the war/land, described as "[e]vil ground"; the swallowed man "was folded in with the war, he was part of the waste" (2009, "Speaking of Courage"; cf. Sean Flynn's swallowing by the ground in *Dispatches*). 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; this is not from a canonical text, of course, but it is a further illustration of the attitude American soldiers could develop in Vietnam that infiltrates the canon).

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 surreal buildup of both American and North Vietnamese forces in the hills around the remote outpost, Herr treated at length about the setting of the action, the Central Highlands, as a place of magical, mysterious and menacing quality: "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: "it's spooky. This is mountains. 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" (2009, "How to Tell a True War Story"; emphasis in original). In *The Short-Timers*, Khe Sanh is described as an "erupted pimple of sandbags and barbed wire on a bleak plateau, surrounded by the end of the world" (Hasford 1988, 146). A similar description is delivered by Caputo, aboard a helicopter looking down, about the mountain range stretching parallel to the Laos border along the full length of Vietnam:

> There it was, the Annamese Cordillera, hostile and utterly alien. The Vietnamese themselves regarded it with dread. 'Out there' they called that humid wilderness where the Bengal tiger stalked and the cobra coiled beneath its rock and the Viet Cong lurked in ambush. Looking down, I wondered for a moment if the operation was somebody's idea of a joke. (...) The whole North Vietnamese Army could have concealed itself in that jungle-sea, and we were going to look for a battalion (1985, 82).

The mystical theme linking landscape to metaphysical evil is found also in Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers* (originally published 1974), 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 which, though it is never mentioned in the book again, serves as its heart of darkness[43]:

> Converse had never been to Ngoc Linh Province; he knew very few people who had. He had flown over it, and from the air it looked thoroughly frightening, a deep green maze of iron-spine mountains. The clouds were full of rocks. No one went there, not even to bomb it, since the Green Berets had left.
>
> "We call it God's country," the lady said. "It's sort of a joke" (1994, 5).

Converse 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). Likewise, in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, an American soldier calls Vietnam a "Garden of Evil" (2009, "How to Tell a True War Story"). 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 was in command now"; Azar revels in the activity and proclaims his love of the "Vietnam experience" (2009, "The Ghost Soldiers").

In this world of myth, NLF guerrillas and the regular NVA soldiers constitute the unseen danger, reduced to ghosts, specters and phantoms in their own land. To Herr, the by-far worst thing about the Central Highlands, at least in the weeks leading to the battle of Khe Sanh, is that "Somewhere Out There, within artillery range (...), within a twenty-mile radius, a day's march, (...) concealed and silent and ominous, lay five full divisions of North Vietnamese Regulars" (1978, 82). The terror posed by this invisible force is then often evoked throughout the rest of the chapter—the enemy is constantly expected to attack (but, as it turns out, will restrict

his harassment to non-stop artillery barrage)—and when the siege is finally lifted and the spooky hills surrounding Khe Sanh thoroughly searched, none of the tens of thousands of the North Vietnamese regulars are to be found but for a few corpses and wounded.

Herr is, of course, not the only Vietnam vet author, or scriptwriter, to exploit the trope of the enemy as invisible; Kinney argues, in fact, that the invisibility of the enemy is prerequisite to making the friendly fire trope dominant in Vietnam narratives (2000, 4; 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). And so, in *The 13th Valley*, during a march one of the protagonists, Cherry, feels "uneasy," as if "somebody [is] watching" him and "something [is] about to reach out and grab him" (1982, 381). Caputo notes that on one occasion, following a firefight, his men "searched the tree line but found only a few spent cartridges. The phantoms had pulled off another vanishing act" (1985, 95). In another instance, Hasford calls the NVA and the NLF a race of "strange, diminutive phantoms" (1988, 153). The American canon is also full of "phantom" enemy units, resembling the invisible five divisions around Khe Sanh in Herr. 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, looking at a map showing enemy strength in the area, realizes that "the Communists had the equivalent of a division out there, but we had yet to see one enemy soldier. (...) [I]t 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" (O'Brien 2006, 122). These enemy units seemingly had paranormal abilities; "[t]he Mission was always telling us about VC units being engaged and wiped out and then reappearing a month later in full strength," writes Herr (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 previously "wiped out at Chu Lai" (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).

In memoirs, ex-soldiers commonly admit to never having seen an NVA fighter, or having seen one once—or, alternatively, they describe the shadows they had seen moving in the mists in the jungle at night (e.g. O'Brien 2006, 101–102: "[i]t was the first and only time I would ever see the living enemy," upon spotting three silhouettes in the darkness; the same wording is used for Paul Berlin's experience in O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* [1980, 86][44]; also in Caputo 1985, 93; 99–101). We see the trope of the invisible enemy famously employed in *Platoon.* In *Fields of Fire* they are "shadowed apparitions" (Webb 2001, prologue; see also ch. 25 for an extended scene involving invisible enemy). In *Going After Cacciato*, the protagonist platoon spends weeks marching along the Song Tra Bong 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 Caputo, for a similar description of the jungle: it is eerily, worryingly quiet; the soldiers are "haunted by a presence intangible yet real, a sense of being surrounded by something we could not see" [1985, 83–85]; in the jungle, "guerillas were everywhere, which is another way of saying they were nowhere" [1985, 113]; Webb: "Snake put his finger to the dirt. 'We are here.' He then made a circle in the air. 'They are everywhere else'" [2001, ch. 6]). Later, when contact is finally made, O'Brien describes a firefight: "[t]here was no enemy. There were flashes, shreds of foliage, a bright glare. (...) [The fire] ended like the end of rain" (1980, 264). In O'Brien's "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 (2009, "The Ghost Soldiers").

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.

In the aftermath of the siege of Khe Sanh, Herr describes U.S. soldiers pulling some left-behind NVA troops out of shelters, and notes that finding these people made the Americans realize "what must have been suffered and endured that winter" (1978, 128) on the other side. This is all of what Herr has to say on the subject. Reading the accounts of NVA troops and NLF insurgents reveals the full extent of what indeed was "suffered and endured." Despite the almost paranormal nature attributed to them by Herr and other American authors, they found living in the jungle as close to unbearable as anyone else would, especially as they were notoriously malnutritioned, even "semistarved," and malaria was rampant; then there was also the almost constant American bombing of suspected enemy positions. "[F]or all the privations and hardships," one NLF fighter recalled,

> nothing the guerrillas had to endure could compare to the stark terrorization of the B-52 bombardments.[45] (...) From a kilometre away, the sonic roar of the B-52 explosions tore eardrums, leaving many of the jungle dwellers permanently deaf. From a kilometre, the shock waves knocked their victims senseless. (...) Hours [after a hit] we would return to find (...) that there was nothing left. It was as if an enormous scythe had swept through the jungle, felling the giant trees like grass in its way. (...) It was not just that things were destroyed, in some awesome way they had ceased to exist. (...) The first few times I experienced a B-52 attack it seemed, as I strained to press myself into the bunker floor, that I had been caught in the Apocalypse. The terror was complete. One lost control of bodily functions as the mind screamed incomprehensible orders to get out (quoted in Young, Fitzgerald and Grunfeld 2003, 101–102).

Sorrow of War, the celebrated novel by NVA veteran Bao Ninh (originally published 1991), also conveys much of the adversity of living in the wilderness. Interestingly enough, Bao 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, SVN

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 towards 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 Vietnam (see Chapter 1), 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.[46] Not only was communism not defeated in Indochina, but the United States failed in its most 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 the 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 novel *Going After Cacciato* (originally published 1978), 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 (a river in Quang Ngai). The geographical limitation of soldiers'

service in Vietnam is thus underscored. 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: "Patent absurdity. The troops are going home, and the war has not been won, even with a quarter of the United States Army fighting it. (...) [Because the war is absurd and cannot be won], a soldier can only do his walking laughing along the way" (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 AO included Son My when the scandal broke, and he was working a rear job which 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 sense of fragmentariness 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: "[s]ooner 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. 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 "blackened dike that had been charred by a napalm drop in someone else's war a week ago" (2001, ch. 13); another time, looking at the light bursts of battle, "they watched Someone Else's War a mile away" (2001, ch. 14); to one soldier coming home, the "Vietnam War was over. It happened only to individuals, and it had ceased happening to him" (2001, ch. 20). 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 (...)" (Webb 2001, ch. 18). In Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, a character complains that, "[t]his 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 Michael 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: "[t]hey 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).

Other books in the canon, which 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* 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 FNG's (Cherry'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 tries to build up the epic in the colonel's speech during the briefing—"This is the last NVA stronghold in I Corps. We can kick the enemy out of our AO, out of this valley, out of I Corps and out of this country" [1982, 69]—but the attempt remains 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. Larry Heinemann's novel *Close Quarters* (originally published 1974) 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) 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 non-existence 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. How long's it gonna take me to forget *your* name?" (2006, 14).[47]

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 versus 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 exploring 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 which included World War II veterans, something O'Brien felt himself in his small Minnesota prairie town; the subject returns in *The Things They Carried*, where it is said that the soldiers "killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to" (2009, "The Things They Carried"), and 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.[48]

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 which 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, trip-wired and booby-trapped all over the place (O'Brien 2006, 125–130 contains 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.

Fire Base Harriette to Ben Suc

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 an unknown state (perhaps 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; the same complaint is made, most emphatically, in Webb's *Fields of Fire*: "you'd hardly know there was a war on. It's in the papers, and college kids run around screaming about it (...) but that's it. It's like nothing really happened, except to other people. It isn't touching anybody except us. (...) We been abandoned" [2001, ch. 18]; the insistence that the Vietnam War was no big deal in the United States is a measure of how determined Webb is to victimize the soldiers and veterans). Later, Paco's boss, Ernest, begins a conversation in a similar manner—"You wounded in Vietnam, eh?" (Heinemann 1987, 125)—but when Paco replies that yes, in Vietnam, 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—"[s]ix guys breaking their balls, muscling that goddamn flag up" (Heinemann 1987, 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 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, Vietnam 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 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 (Heinemann 1987, 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'—as if he's been turning that event in his mind—the news of it and the impact—and has been trying to think of something to say about *it*, and Paco, since he walked into the place" (Heinemann 1987, 162; emphasis in original). Allegiance and understanding between Jesse and Paco is thus established immediately and precisely via their shared familiarity with places and names which 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 ("Cu Chi, Cu Chi, worst place I ever did see," according to a song by the infantrymen stationed there; "Cu Chi" [1968?]). Ho Bo and Boi Loi Woods were described in 1968, in the 25th Division's Vietnam newspaper, as "treacherous battlefields with funny names" ("Proud Past" [1968?]), and were evidently still "ever treacherous" (Toulouse 1970) two years later. Both Ho Bo and Boi Loi 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": "[t]he 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*, in Hasford's *The Short-Timers* and others, but an excerpt from the latter will suffice to illustrate how humping becomes interwoven with the intricacies of the surroundings and the experience of it:

> Humping in the rain forest is like climbing a stairway of shit in an enormous green room constructed by ogres for the confinement of monster plants. Birth and death are endless processes here, with new life feeding on the decaying remains of the old. The black earth is cool and damp and the oversized greenery is beaded with moisture, yet the air is thick and hot because the triple canopy holds in the humidity. The canopy of interwoven branches is so thick that sunlight filters through only in pale, infrequent shafts like those in Sunday-school pictures of Jesus talking to God.
>
> Beneath mountains like the black teeth of dragons we hump. We hump on a woodcutter's trail, up slopes of peanut butter, over moss-blemished boulders, into God's green furnace, into the hostile terrain of Indian country.
>
> Thorny underbrush claws our sweaty jungle utilities and our bandoliers and our sixty-pound field packs and our twelve-pound Durolon flak jackets and our three-pound camouflaged helmets and our six-and-a-half pound fiberglass and steel automatic rifles. Limp sabers of elephant grass slice into hands and cheeks. Creepers trip us and tear at our ankles. Pack straps rub blisters on our shoulders and salty water wiggles in dirty worm trails down our necks and faces. Insects eat our skin, leeches drink our blood, snakes try to bite us, and even the monkeys throw rocks.
>
> We hump, werewolves in the jungle, sweating 3.2 beer, ready, willing, and able to grab wily Uncle Ho by his inscrutable balls and never let go. But our real enemy is the jungle. God made this jungle for Marines. (...).
>
> Hours pass. Many, many of them. We don't know what time it is anymore. In the jungle there is no time. Black is green; green is black—we don't even know if it's night or day (Hasford 1988, 149–150).

In this exemplary passage, the infantryman's deep embedment in the jungle boils down to the exertion caused by the equipment and even more so by the conditions of the setting. The discomfort is so extreme that the jungle seems to detach itself from reality, and comes to be

endowed with spirituality and hostility instead. 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. Caputo writes that the "foot soldier has a special feeling for the ground" (1985, 288), meaning that he is in contact with it at all times, marching, fighting, and sleeping. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, Tim O'Brien is taken aback by the sterile environment inside the plane that takes him home 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).

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 memoir, in contrast, O'Brien is welcomed by the landscape, now evidently more distant to him, of his snow-covered home state, Minnesota: "an empty, unknowing, uncaring, purified, permanent stillness. (...) In return for all of your terror, the prairies stretch out, arrogantly unchanged" (2006, 203). In *The Things They Carried*, land is the second last thing on the list of what the soldiers carry, before "their own lives," the position indicating its visceral significance to the experience of Vietnam:

"[t]hey carried the land itself—Vietnam, the place, the soil—a powdery orange-red dust that covered their boots and fatigues and faces. They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity" (2009, "The Things They Carried"; note also the Herresque syntax). 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 a different imagery and with a different force, in *Dispatches*. Herr writes that when you made contact ("Contact") with the enemy, "it was you and the ground: kiss it, eat it, fuck it, plough it with your whole body, get as close to it as you can without being in it yet or of it (...). Pucker and submit, it's the ground" (1978, 56).[49] The same comparison is made by Caputo, who, during a firefight, writes that, "lying in a shallow dip in the ground, I 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, ch. 31). 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 also has a soldier who can see his own ghost in "Night Life" [2009]). In *The Short-Timers* there is Alice, the black-man who wears the skin of a Bengal tiger he himself killed, and who is said to truly understand the Vietnamese fighters, and who has the magical ability to detect mines, booby traps, punji holes, enemy presence, 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" (2009, "The Ghost Soldiers"). 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, "easily distinguishable from the staff and rear personnel by their worn rumpled uniforms. 'I spoke personally'," he begins, "'with several LRRPs (he pronounced it *lurps*) and they asked that I convey to you...'" The brigade commander interrupts him right then, instructing him to "stick to the topography," and Sergeant Egan wonders what the topography man was about to say and why the colonel stopped him ("Fucken typical," Egan thinks to himself). 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..."; Egan is convinced *this* is what the sergeant wanted to say before (1982, 58–59). 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, 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 a 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 to maintain an air of secrecy and seriousness about them, and sometimes they are seen wearing human-ear necklaces, their real-life attribute (Sallah and Weiss 2006, 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, the autochthonous Montagnard tribesmen as scouts, and by amassing "impressive" body counts. 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 that old jungle at night like he was looking at it through a starlight scope"; he makes other soldiers uneasy—"he's just too crazy for me," says one—and they claim "the whole fucking story" is "right there" in his eyes, but they advise Herr to look in quickly and not be caught by the man while doing it. Herr, scared of him, looks into his eyes once and writes that it "was like looking at the floor of an ocean" (1978, 13). What depths lurk in the Lurp's eyes and soul? What deep knowledge has he possessed?

> But what a story he told me, as one-pointed and resonant as any war story I ever heard, it took me a year to understand it:
>
> "Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened."
>
> I waited for the rest, but it seemed not to be that kind of story; when I asked him what had happened he just looked like he felt sorry for me, fucked if he'd waste time telling stories to anyone dumb as I was (Herr 1978, 13–14).

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 "freakyfluky" tales one hears, whatever tragedies befall marines and so on, 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 (cf. Kinney 2000, 116). But another reading 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, the story constitutes yet another mythical framework for *Dispatches*, and for Loon in general. 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 *The Things They Carried*, where one of the characters begins a story with, "[a] six-man patrol goes up into the mountains"—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 "[y]ou hear stuff nobody should overhear" there, and eventually begin hearing music and strange, impossible sounds which 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" (2009, "How to Tell a True War Story").

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* ("the trope has infiltrated so deeply into Western consciousness that the phrase 'heart of darkness' resonates for people who have read no Conrad at all. The trope and phrase are also dangerously elastic, capable of being stretched to cover any Western exploit in a non-Western country, as Francis Ford Coppola stretched it to cover Vietnam" [Clendinnen 2007, 1]; 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). Unsurprisingly, the source of the darkness is the land itself, the strategy shifting the responsibility for whatever happens there onto "Vietnam":

> To Conrad, the barbarism of Kurtz and of the Belgian enterprise in the Congo is the result of being stripped of one's civilization and exposed to primitive Africa. Conrad argues that even the most civilized of us, when removed from civilization, will revert to the savagery of Africans. Reading the Vietnam War through *Heart of Darkness* can thus serve to excuse the excesses of U.S. militarism—which become not the results of a calculated policy but the product of a hostile and uncivilized landscape and people, a jungle fever in which Americans degenerate to the level of Vietnamese. This is a common understanding of the war, both in popular entertainments like *Apocalypse Now* and in Vietnam War novels and memoirs (Neilson 1998, 129–130).

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: "once we dropped in to feed supply to one man. God knows what kind of Lord Jim phoenix numbers he was doing in there, all he said to me was, 'You didn't see a thing, right Chief? You weren't even here'" (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 perhaps worth pointing out that in Conradian scholarship Patusan has been described as a timeless "world of romance; its historical specificity is denied precisely because it is only a stage upon which Jim's heroism can be played out" (Mongia 1992, 182; 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 homoerotic fascination, Sean Flynn: the son of Errol, a movie actor in his own right, a photojournalist in

Vietnam, a trope of his own in *Dispatches* (Harrison 1999), and eventually something of a Vietnam legend given the circumstances of his disappearance and death.[50] Here is the very first description of Flynn by Herr:

> Sean Flynn could look more incredibly beautiful than even his father, Errol, had thirty years before as Captain Blood, but sometimes he looked more like Artaud coming out of some heavy heart-of-darkness trip, overloaded on the information, the input! The input! He'd give off a bad sweat and sit for hours, combing his mustache through with the saw blade of his Swiss Army knife (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" (Wikipedia 2017), an anti-Western and determinedly experience-, rather than language-, based concept, 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 book with its end, Herr divulges that Flynn, as a photographer, "was in so deep he hardly bothered to take [pictures] after a while" (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.

In the same passage in "Breathing Out," Herr writes that Dana Stone, the friend and photojournalist with whom Flynn was abducted and probably killed, "used to do a far-out thing, he'd take pictures of us under fire and give them to us as presents"; Herr's gift photograph pictures him hiding from flying bullets in a helicopter with a (presumably) white soldier, a black soldier, and a corpse—"while Dana crouched down behind the camera, laughing. (...) [H]e said, 'I thought you ought to know what you look like'" (1978, 202). 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 "after three years he'd turned into the thing he came to photograph" (Herr 1978, 203). Like Flynn, then, Stone is in *Dispatches* an embodiment of the experience of the war. It is therefore unsurprising that when Herr writes about the mystery of their disappearance, that "the ground swallowed [Flynn] up," "no one I ever knew could have dug it like you, Sean" (1978, 203). 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" (discussed above).

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, ch. 3). The theme clearly seems to dominate the construction of "Vietnam" as both war and land in *The Things They Carried*, not only in "Sweetheart," but also in "The Ghost Soldiers" ("I was Nam—the horror, the war" [see above]; O'Brien also calls Vietnam "some kind of soft black protoplasm (...) the blood and the flesh" [2009, "Night Life"]; Hasford calls it "a narrow strip of dried dragon shit" [1988, 49]). 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, which, as a strategy, shifts the responsibility from the soldiers onto the very land they have invaded. Caputo 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:

> [t]here was nothing familiar where we were, no churches, no police, no laws, no newspapers, or any of the restraining influences without which the earth's population would be reduced by ninety-five percent. It was the dawn of creation in the Indochina bush, 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).

Later, Caputo discusses the ethics of the war and—strangely, but not unsurprisingly considering all the self-absolutory strategies of his memoir—complains about the imposition of rules of engagement in Vietnam.[51] On that occasion he also claims that "[e]verything rotted and corroded

quickly over there: bodies, boot leather, canvas, metal, morals. Scorched by the sun, wracked by the wind and rain of the monsoon, fighting in alien swamps and jungles, 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?).

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 as well as 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. This is as clear-cut an example of myth obscuring, even obliterating, history as one can imagine. 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 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 etc.) which 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 which 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 which they employ in the context of the discourse on victimization.

Chapter 3

The Horrors in Quang Ngai:
Representations of the Victims of "Vietnam"

What's a civilian?
An officer at Fort Benning, 1969[52]

The North Vietnamese had dug in (...) and there was a battle for the town. We went in on the tanks next morning and the enemy had fled. Left in the marketplace were five bodies, a woman, looked like three kids, and a man, [who] had sort of been all fused together by napalm.
Peter Arnett, 1970[53]

3.1. My Lai

On December 5, 1969, three weeks after the story's flare-up in U.S. media and almost twenty-one months after the actual event, *Time* published an article concerning the so-called My Lai massacre. In the event, several hundreds of Vietnamese civilians—as is usually the case in wartime incidents labelled 'massacres,' mostly women, children, and the elderly—had been killed by U.S. Army soldiers. On the cover of the issue that carried the article was the face of William Calley, the Army lieutenant in charge of the platoon that committed most of the killings, who had recently been charged with murder at My Lai, and who would ultimately be the only person

found guilty and punished in the case. Above the photograph of Calley, the single cover line asked: "THE MASSACRE. Where Does the Guilt Lie?" The feature itself opened with a pre-My Lai quotation from Richard Nixon, in which the president stated that "North Viet Nam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that" ("American Tragedy" 1969; all quotations in this subchapter come from this source, unless otherwise noted). History, of course, would prove at least half of that statement wrong—the Vietnamese would eventually force the U.S. out of Indochina—but the *Time* article focused on the humiliation part, which the author now considered fulfilled:

> Yet almost as chilling to the American mind is the character of the alleged perpetrators. The deed was not performed by patently demented men. Instead, according to the ample testimony of their friends and relatives, the men of C Company [of the 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 11th Brigade, Americal Infantry Division] who swept through My Lai were for the most part almost depressingly normal. They were Everymen, decent in their daily lives, who at home in Ohio or Vermont would regard it as unthinkable to maliciously strike a child, much less kill one. Yet men in American uniforms slaughtered the civilians of My Lai, and in so doing humiliated the U.S. and called in question the U.S. mission in Viet Nam in a way that all the anti-war protesters could never have done.

The article also quoted from a statement by the White House, in which the massacre was deemed "abhorrent to the conscience of all the American people"; it cited various committee members, with one senator referring to the event as "one of the darkest days in American history," and another responding to a television witness report by asking, "What kind of country do we have when that kind of garbage gets put on the air?" Senator William Fulbright was quoted as raising "a more pertinent question": "This incident can cause grave concern all over the world as to what kind of country we are." Finally, the author of the feature concluded the response paragraph in their own words: "Countless U.S. citizens, whether foes or critics of the Administration's Viet Nam policy, were simply shocked and bewildered at the unfolding story, so alien did it seem to the America they thought they knew."

Next, the article developed several paragraphs, each seemingly aimed at clarifying and contextualizing the deep-rooted causes of, or at least possible explanations for, what the U.S. soldiers had done. The reader learns that the "inexperienced" men of C Company had only been

in Vietnam for a month at the time, and had yet to engage in direct combat with large enemy forces. 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, was known 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 was 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."

The soldiers of C Company "were also angry. Repeatedly lashed by booby traps and sniper fire from unseen "Viet Cong," the company's strength had already been cut from 190 to about 105." Effectively, the massacre was perpetrated by men of an "edgy company, expecting a firefight and anxious to at last even the score for their comrades picked off by an invisible enemy."

A horrifying description of the events at "My Lai (4)" (Xom Lang), consisting of recollections of the U.S. soldiers involved or present at the scene, follows. One sergeant appears almost perplexed still: the men thought they were going against enemy troops; the Americans were not "aware of the fact that [they had] run into civilians." Suddenly to the sergeant, the huts went up in flames, and children began to be shot and killed. Other troops describe in grisly detail some of the killings they performed or witnessed, including that of babies and toddlers and of a group of villagers forced into a hut and destroyed with a hand grenade thrown in with them, the orders they received, an attempted rape of a 13-year-old girl, piles of dead people. Sometime after the main phase of the massacre, wounded and maimed people left among the dead bodies were "finished off."

The question of motive returns, and a choice of quotations from men in the perpetrating outfit is offered:

> Everyone who went into the village had in mind to kill. (...) We had lost a lot of buddies and it was a V.C. [Viet Cong] stronghold. We considered them either V.C. or helping the V.C.
>
> It just seemed like a natural thing to do at the time. My buddies had been getting killed or wounded. What it really was—it was just mostly revenge.

> You can't just blame Calley's platoon; you've got to blame everyone. It was a fire-free zone. And you know, if you can shoot artillery and bombs in there every night, how can the people in there be worth so much?

The corporal cited last above, who was not among the perpetrators, is later quoted again: "I can't figure out why everybody is so upset."

In situ in Quang Ngai, a correspondent has interviewed a woman who was wounded but survived the massacre, but whose daughter and four-year-old nephew were killed by the Americans. Immediately following her words, a U.S. lance corporal is cited, described as "unimpressed":

> They're all V.C., you can just tell. (...) You don't see many young men in there, do you? All women, children and old men. Where'd all those guys? Out with the V.C., that's where. We come in at night and sneak into one of their hootches and you know where they are? All in their bunkers. They gotta be V.C.

The article reported that there was some resistance among the soldiers, few of whom refused to participate in the killing. A few lines are dedicated to Hugh Thompson, a warrant officer and helicopter pilot who arrived at the scene at some point and with his crew carried a number of civilians to safety in their craft, and who was later awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for this—for "'disregarding his own safety' to rescue" the survivors, even though, as the *Time* feature observes drily, "[t]he only danger to him that day was from the free-firing U.S. infantrymen" (Thompson had made complaints about what happened at "My Lai," but his reports were initially dismissed, and later only perfunctorily investigated). Some space is devoted to Ronald Ridenhour, a Vietnam veteran who had heard about the massacre from other soldiers and eventually sent a letter disclosing the incident to a number of influential figures, including Nixon and several Congressmen, which finally led to larger-scale investigation and charges being brought against Calley.

Finally, "An American Tragedy" throws its subject into an ever wider, and more unsettling, context. Firstly, the readers—many of whom "are seeking comfort in the claim that the massacre at My Lai was an isolated incident, unexplainable, and wholly out of character with U.S. military activities"—learn that indeed Americans seem to be killing Vietnamese civilians "often enough,"

as evinced by surfacing recollections of soldiers and correspondents, concerning sometimes extremely brutal forms of torturing and murdering suspects and innocents.

Next, the author of the feature, making a disclaimer that neither point is an excuse for the massacre, nonetheless observes that "the U.S. in Vietnam faces an unusually brutal enemy who uses terror deliberately." The next point is even more perplexing: other "Western nations have been guilty of wartime atrocities," including the French in Algeria, the British in India, and Germans in "Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Dachau."

The following two paragraphs are worth citing in full:

> Yet a deliberate national policy of genocide is not the same as the unlawful actions of groups of soldiers running amuck. The U.S. as a nation bears no guilt equivalent to that of Nazi Germany, though perhaps the individual soldier in the American Army who commits an atrocity should be judged more harshly than a storm trooper. All the sanctions of his state, his education, his training were brought to bear on the Nazi soldier to obey an order, including the killing of civilians: it was more difficult for him to disobey. An American butchering noncombatants must act against all he has been taught.
>
> Some of the men of Charlie Company say that their act was no different from bombings carried out by high-flying pilots—and for peasants the outcome is often deathly similar. This argument raises a troubling ethical question about the nature of war; yet it clearly takes greater savagery to kill a defenseless human being when one looks into his face than when one never sees him.

The racism of the American soldiers toward the Vietnamese is provided as another factor contributing to the events at My Lai, as well as "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.

Consequently,

> [t]hose conditions breed fear and paranoia, in which the young soldier sees all Vietnamese as threatening. When he is also weary from hours of trudging through swamp and jungle and then sees a friend killed beside him—and friendships are highly emotional bonds in combat—a soldier can easily go wild.

The parents of one of the perpetrators were interviewed to express their shock and disbelief: "Why did they have to take my son and do that to him? (...) I raised him as a good boy, and they made a murdered out of him."

In the final paragraph of the story, the author mentions guilt, shame, and conscience, and concedes that they will have to be shared by the American nation and Army, which raised and trained the soldiers of William Calley's platoon—but in some vague, undetermined future. At the moment,

> Above all, the event weighed on the individual soldiers (...). When Private [Paul] Meadlo [one of the killers] stepped on a land mine shortly after the massacre and it ripped away his foot, he screamed: "God has punished me for what I did in the village." Other men of the company have recurrent nightmares about My Lai. The scene itself is quiet now. All that remains today is a low pile of red-brick rubble, scorched black by fire and surrounded by fields filled with graves.

There is a good reason for summarizing the old *Time* article, even though it was, after all, 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 articles 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 Unites States' 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 resultant understanding of the conflict is precisely that: of Vietnam as an American tragedy.

The *Time* article shows that the prevalence of a certain frame of mind, and a certain imagination at work in the U.S. 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.

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 at Son My 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).

"An American tragedy"

Time, traditionally a Republican-leaning publication and pro-war well into Vietnam (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 narrative. Similarly (though much earlier), "An American Tragedy," while righteously outraged with the events at Son My, 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 shed light not only on the response to the massacre, but to the Vietnam War in general. To anticipate much of the discussion in the remaining part of the chapter, here is a list:

1. *Humiliation*. The sense of humiliation and shame open and close "An American Tragedy." Neither feeling is, of course, synonymous with guilt, and although the problem of guilt appears in the feature and the massacre is said to have "called in question the U.S. mission in Viet Nam," highlighting the "pertinent question" ("American Tragedy 1969"; all quotations in this subchapter come from this source, unless otherwise noted) of Senator Fulbright—what the world will now think about the United States—suggests that the shame is externalized and bound to

the concern for the country's outlook and status as a benevolent superpower. Moreover, the emphasis on the emotional response among Americans serves to substitute sentiment for the problem of political accountability, and diverts attention away from the actual events occurring in Vietnam, the nature (and perhaps even the ideological foundations) of the U.S. policy there, and the urgency of political action, toward less politically dangerous and less potentially subversive emotion, and toward the American people themselves, whose emotional wellbeing is now considered in a political vacuum alongside the experience of the Vietnamese victims.

2. *Everymen and the war itself.* Another emotion expressed several times in the story is shock: people in the U.S., the author says, are stunned because the perpetrators in Son My are "almost depressingly normal" and "decent in their daily lives." At several points, the article veers close to the banality-of-evil argument, for instance when the mother of one of the killers is quoted bemoaning that "they" took her son, a "good boy," and "made a murderer out of him"; we shall see this sentiment rehashed in postwar literature and cinema in the form of the "what the war did to us/heart of darkness" theme. The problem with this argument, however interesting a proposition it might be philosophically, is that it is universalizing. In this instance, it posits the importance of external conditions, or indeed agents, without actually naming and exploring these conditions and agents, which are, again, specific and rooted in power and politics. Consequently, the idea of the war itself being the cause of the mass killing at Son My, while not technically untrue in the most general sense possible, is advocated: "You can't just blame Calley's platoon; you've got to blame everyone." But the issue here is that "they," "everyone," remain unnamed; instead of zeroing in on specific underlying problems of the U.S. involvement and policy in Vietnam, the article instead opts for the vaguely universal. Indeed, it explicitly denies any iniquity in the U.S. intentions and general policy when it does a tricky about-face: firstly, it contextualizes Son My by enumerating other war crimes perpetuated by Western powers so as to universalize war atrocity and perhaps diffuse something of the American-focused guilt in this case; but then the article points out that that "a deliberate national policy of genocide [the Holocaust] is not the same as the unlawful actions of groups of soldiers running amuck." The statement—while, again, not technically and generally untrue—nevertheless distracts from the possibility that U.S. policy in Vietnam may be flawed to the point of criminality or entirely morally wrong, and simultaneously makes a second about-face in that the "everymen" are now

an anomaly dissociated from the state as soon as the article gets too close to the notion of political culpability. By the end of the article, where the problem of collective American guilt returns, the killers are again embraced as having been raised by the nation and its military, both of which must somehow share in the responsibility. But this is yet another turn toward the universalization of Son My, diffusion of accountability, and diversion of attention toward the Americans and their soul-searching—perhaps the cause of the eponymous tragedy.

Hints of the same reasoning and practice may also be seen in the article's use of quotations from soldiers who claim the killings at Son My were not fundamentally different from Vietnamese deaths as a result of artillery barrages and bombings—the latter essentially the core of the U.S. military strategy in Indochina that resulted in the most destruction, death, and suffering, in South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The article acquiesces that "for peasants the outcome is often deathly similar," but immediately it re-focuses the attention on Americans, the U.S., and the universalized problem of culpability. Firstly, it is stated that the soldiers' argument "raises a troubling ethical question about the nature of war"; it is worth pointing out that the moral disquietude suggested here refers to warfare in general, not, it seems, to *the* war in question and the U.S. conduct in Vietnam. Secondly, the article continues to counterpoint the soldiers' argument by observing that "it clearly takes greater savagery" to kill an unarmed person face-to-face than to do it from the distance of a bomber jet. But this is so beside the point—again, the article turns to a personal quality, savagery, which is a universal concept that may be attributed to any individual or group, but which here obscures the systemic perversions of U.S. presence in Indochina. Death of noncombatants at the hands of Americans in Son My is worse than death of noncombatants from napalm burns caused by a pressing of a button only in so far as the first is less palatable for the American audience at home because it gets too close to dislodging the nation's feeling good about itself, its comfort, its myths, and its power.

3. *Un-American*. Closely related to both points above is the staunch insistence that the massacre was un-American. Again, although the killers of Son My are shocking because of their outward "normality," their actions were markedly uncharacteristic for the people of the U.S. If Son My cannot be compared with a state policy of genocide such as the Holocaust because it was the fault of a group of savage soldiers and not the U.S. state, it follows that where a German

soldier in the Nazi regime was indoctrinated to kill civilians, an American soldier partaking in such a crime "must act against all he has been taught." The belief in the essential goodness of the U.S. armed forces, at least in their personification in the form of soldiers on the ground, stems from the myths of World War II, which had not yet been dismantled by the experience of Vietnam; the image of a smiling G.I. handing out chocolate bars to European children in 1944 or 1945 explains the shock in "An American Tragedy" that his successor might be butchering Asian children in 1968, as well as the desperate conviction that the killing is wholly out of character. Still, dark clouds are beginning to gather over the G.I., as the article informs its readers that indiscriminate killings by American soldiers appear to be common in Vietnam, and somewhat meekly points to reports of the U.S. soldiers' racism toward the Vietnamese. Hence, Son My is turning out to be "abhorrent to the conscience of all American people" and "one of the darkest days in American history." This, perhaps, is another dimension of Son My as an American tragedy, even if self-inflicted.

The allegorical G.I. would not come out unscathed from the Vietnamese jungle, of course. In popular culture and memory, the hero of Normandy and Guadalcanal would soon be replaced by the psychopath and the paraplegic, the pathetic Vietnam veteran. The change of the image of the country's soldier is one of the most profound cultural outcomes of the Vietnam War in the U.S., and a reflection of the change of attitude towards wars and American involvement in them. Despite claiming that Calley and the rest had to overcome their American natures to kill the people at Son My, "An American tragedy" simultaneously marks the beginning of this shift: "many Americans are seeking comfort in the claim that the massacre at My Lai was an isolated incident, unexplainable, and wholly out of character with U.S. military activities. (...) But inevitably, the My Lai revelation has started a flood of other horror stories."

4. *The "Viet Cong" and Vietnamese civilians*. As in the many subsequent American veteran accounts of the war, so in *Time*'s article the NLF guerrillas lurk in the background as a mostly unseen but passionately despised menace. In terms of enemy representation, the feature again foreshadows developments in the future dominant narrative and imagery. Several distinct but interconnected themes may be found in "An American Tragedy" with respect to the NLF and the U.S. adversity in Vietnam in general.

First of all, the article seems to wish to make clear that, apart from the Americal Division, it was not only the Germans, the French and the British who had been guilty of war crimes. Closer to the matter at hand, "the U.S. in Vietnam faces an unusually brutal enemy who uses terror deliberately." In fact, this is an "argument" used often in the U.S. press in response to Son My. In that very same December 5 issue of *Time*, another feature was dedicated entirely to the subject of the "Viet Cong" and Communist "terror policy": "For shocked Americans, what happened at My Lai seems an awful aberration. For the Communists in Viet Nam, the murder of civilians is routine, purposeful policy" ("On the Other Side" 1969). *Time* was not alone in this practice, as other U.S. newspapers and magazines also reported on crimes against civilians by the Vietnamese (Landers 2004, 107; Oliver 2006, 67–68). One purpose of this strategy of guilt competition must be, of course, dimming some of the negative spotlight on U.S. actions in Vietnam and at Son My in particular, demonstrating, however misguided the points of comparison (the Nazis, for example), that atrocity is simply a part of war. But Kendrick Oliver, in his book on the American response to the Son My Massacre, suggested another possibility as to why emphasis was put on the enemy's practices of terror, and namely that doing so further stressed the un-Americanness of Calley's platoon, which they proved by their Vietnamese-like behavior (Oliver 2006, 68–69).

Second of all, the massacre at Son My is contextualized by its location in an area with considerable and entrenched NLF presence, a circumstance brought up a number of times to reinforce the point, repeated in the soldiers' quotations, that the perpetrators were "expecting a firefight," not "aware of the fact that [they had] run into civilians," sure that they were entering a "V.C. stronghold" and convinced that the villagers were "either V.C. or helping the V.C."[54] 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.

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 85 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"; 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."

Indeed, 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 "[t]he 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 did.

The subject of the perceived hostility of the Vietnamese landscape and its identification with the native enemy has been explored in the previous chapter. But, as "An American Tragedy" and the subsequent canon make clear, part of that Vietnamese surround was the civilian population. Although the NLF is consistently referred to as invisible, the article nevertheless returns a number of times to the perception that "[t]hey're all V.C.," meaning all Vietnamese. The American soldiers' inability to distinguish innocent noncombatants from guerrillas is thus presented not as a failure but as the status quo of Vietnam; again, the reality of this situation is confirmed not only by using quotations from the U.S. soldiers who say so, but also by the authorial voice of the article assuming impartiality and so factuality: because the civilians are indistinguishable from the "Viet Cong," the article clarifies again, they contribute to "[t]hose conditions [that] breed fear and paranoia, in which the young soldier sees all Vietnamese as threatening." It would, of course, be far too far to claim that the article suggested that 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 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 made comprehensible and downsized to the level of emotion and individual culpability. 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 (see also Schlegel 1995, 53–54).

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.

All of the above strategies of representation—the invisibility of the enemy, the indistinguishability of the Vietnamese civilians, the notion of retaliation—are all instances not only of contextualization, but of what Amy Schlegel calls "naturalization of the massacre" (1995, 54). In 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.

5. *Redemption and the final scene.* The *Time*'s article leaves its readers with a curious final image: a little too-good-to-be-true scene in which one of the killers from Son My loses his foot after having stepped on a mine and screams: "God has punished me for what I did in the village." Having just concluded that the guilt and responsibility for the massacre would have to at some point be shared by all Americans but that they are for the moment borne by the "individual soldiers," the feature thus again removes the events at Son My from the political realm and moves them into the personal; the need for accountability is replaced by the need for redemption. This impression is reinforced stylistically by the closing of the story, where "[a]ll that remains (...) is a

low pile of red-brick rubble, scorched black by fire and surrounded by fields filled with graves." The problem is, of course, that this melancholy image is meant to not only suggest an ending where there is none, but also to nullify something of the legitimate political and activist outrage that might be occasioned by the Son My Massacre, by indulging in an aesthetic and emotional form of response—that moreover symbolically clears the Vietnamese countryside, leaving a quiet afterimage of graves and ruins, suggesting the opportunity to move on.

3.2. A war between victims

That a mainstream magazine editorial from 1969, and a slew of fictional and creative narratives publishes 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 chapter, I 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 Vietnam. 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," from *The Things They Carried* (the story was made into a little-known 1998 film starring Kiefer Sutherland, titled *A Soldier's Sweetheart*). 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 (Quang Ngai) 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, "bubbly," just the right amount of flirtatious, "good for morale" (2009, "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong"). 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 ARVNs 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 (VC!), 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.

Most academic readings of the story have unsurprisingly focused on the subject of gender representations. Moreover, O'Brien apparently deliberately strived to rework *Heart of Darkness* in "Sweetheart" (Bates 1996, 156), and additionally 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 ("Sweetheart" has been called a "bizarre female heart of darkness story" [Ringnalda 1994, 109]; see also Clarke 2013, 138–139 [and bibliography there for additional sources on the subject]; Kinney 2000, 155–156; Smith 1994, 32).

In a way, "Sweetheart" constitutes an ideal American Vietnam 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.

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:

> The Greenies were not social animals. Animals, Rat said, but far from social. They had their own hootch at the edge of the perimeter, fortified with sandbags and a metal fence, and except for the bare essentials they avoided contact with the medical detachment. Secretive and suspicious, loners by nature, the six Greenies would sometimes vanish for days at a time, or even weeks, then late in the night they would just as magically reappear, moving like shadows through the moonlight, filing in silently from the dense rain forest off to the west (2009, "Sweetheart").

The place has an otherworldly quality to it, however, because, despite its location, it remains remarkably safe and unharassed by the war. Also, apart from the typically standoffish and enigmatic Greenies, there are even 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*" (2009, "Sweetheart"). Extraction of Vietnam from history cannot be more precise, more total, than in this instance.

Mary Anne's transformation begins with the fact that "[t]he war intrigued her. The land, too, and the mystery" (O'Brien 2009, "Sweetheart"). 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'" (O'Brien 2009, "Sweetheart"). 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:

> off to the west a column of silhouettes appeared as if by magic at the edge of the jungle. At first he didn't recognize her—a small, soft shadow among six other shadows. There was no sound. No real substance either. The seven silhouettes seemed to float across the surface of the earth, like spirits, vaporous and unreal. (...) [H]e picked out Mary Anne's face. Her eyes seemed to shine in the dark—not blue, though, but a bright glowing jungle green (O'Brien 2009, "Sweetheart").

Spectrality is usually reserved for representations of the enemy, 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 and the boyfriend decide to enter the Greenies' shack to confront Mary Anne, in the place—reminiscent of Kurtz's lair in *Apocalypse Now*—they find heaps of bones, burning candles, a decaying head of a leopard, a revolting smell ("joss stick and

incense (...) blood and scorched hair and excrement and the sweet-sour odor of moldering flesh"), and "a weird deep-wilderness sound—tribal music—bamboo flutes and drums and chimes" (O'Brien 2009, "Sweetheart"). There is also a poster saying, "ASSEMBLE YOUR OWN GOOK!! FREE SAMPLE KIT!!" (O'Brien 2009, "Sweetheart"). Mary Anne, wearing the repulsive necklace of dried, leathered human tongues, tells the visitors:

> "You're in a place (...) where you don't belong."
>
> She moved her hand in a gesture that encompassed not just the hootch but everything around it, the entire war, the mountains, the mean little villages, the trails and trees and rivers and deep misted-over valleys.
>
> "You just don't *know*," she said. "You hide in this little fortress, behind wire and sandbags, and you don't know what it's all about. Sometimes I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country—the dirt, the death—I just want to eat it and have it there inside me. (...) When I'm out there at night, I feel close to my own body (...). I know exactly who I am. You can't feel like that anywhere else" (O'Brien 2009, "Sweetheart").

By understanding the nature of the secret knowledge which Vietnam offers, and recognizing it as deeply personal, Mary Anne takes the Lurp/Greenie myth as far as it will stretch, to the point where it almost becomes parodic. But this monologue also signals that she is on the verge of transcending the Greenies, which she soon does: she starts going barefoot, she discards her weapons, she seems to be moving "in the dense terrain of a nightmare" (O'Brien 2009, "Sweetheart"), 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" (2009, "Sweetheart"). 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: Vietnam is likened to a drug; in Vietnam, "you go wherever the trip takes you" (O'Brien 2009, "Sweetheart"). When O'Brien writes that "[w]hat happened to her (...) was what happened to all of them. You come over clean and you get dirty and then afterward it's never the same" (O'Brien 2009, "Sweetheart"), the reader is reminded of the often quoted passage from *Dispatches:* "I went to cover the war and the war covered me; an old story, unless of course you've never heard it" (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 2009, "Sweetheart"), 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.)

To reiterate, "Sweetheart" is an ideal American Vietnam story because it consciously engages with an interpretation of the war promoted in some of the most influential texts about the conflict, thus constructing 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, this creates a typical heart-of-darkness problem, because "Sweetheart" completes the mystification of the war: "it suggests that the war is so alien, so unprecedented in ordinary human experience, that it can transform an innocent young woman into a remorseless killer almost overnight" (1996, 157). 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. Lorrie Smith adds that this precious experience was still "conceived in masculine terms—fighting—rather than any of the other role women actually did play in Vietnam" (1994, 32). But Mary Anne's presence in Vietnam 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: her "identification with the land displaces the Vietnamese even as it makes manifest the gendered construction of the imperial landscape. The Vietnamese are literally dismembered, figured only as pieces of skin and the tongues Mary Ann [*sic*] 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 Vietnam due to its "solipsism," its preoccupation with storytelling and its inwardness translating into an exclusively Americentric concern (for example: "it is precisely the postmodern elements of *The Things They Carried* that contribute to its solipsism and ethnocentrism. (...) [O'Brien] details the uncertain effects of an unreal war upon an unknowable self but fails to examine its all too real effects upon the Vietnamese" [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, "[a]n 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 which enacts "an imperial solipsism (...) as if to expose its own investment in that practice" (2013, 140), the whole collection in this context "explores the dangers of an excessive inward focus" (2013, 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 of 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 "[o]n 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 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; see also Smith 1994, 35, who finds several "meanings" of the necklace, most of them sexual and gender-related). 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 "pure essence of Vietnam": "the moment of initiation where you get down and bite off the tongue of a corpse" (1978, 203).

American war crime literature

In another possible reading of the necklace of human tongues which Marry 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 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 which documents the history of widespread American atrocity against villagers in Quang Nam, records an incident in 1967 when "a living woman (...) had an ear cut off while her baby was thrown to the ground and stomped on" (2013, ch. 4) by soldiers of an infantry company. 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, but a story like Mary Anne's reveals the full implication of what Vietnam as Indian Country means: 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 writes that "we'd all heard about the man in the Highland who was 'building his own gook'" (1978, 35; it is a passage in which Herr interweaves marijuana consumption with atrocity, like ear-collecting, and composes a list of smokers: "Lurps, seals, recondos, Green-Beret bushmasters, redundant mutilators, heavy rapers, eye-shooters, widow-makers, nametakers, classic essential American types"; it is interesting that Lurps, Green Berets, and the other SF "types" are listed alongside the others, as if Herr is suggesting that all belong to the same category). 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 texts, but it is also a racial slur which 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 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 "which audiences simply expect a 'true' account of Vietnam to take account

of. These include such major events as the murder of civilians, the torching of a village, and the near-rape of some Vietnamese girls" (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 [Coppola] had us write up 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." Violence against civilians comes to define the Vietnam canon to such an extent it should not be considered *war literature* as much as *war crime literature*.[55]

This has 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 *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": "[w]ar 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, ch.15; Dan 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). Watching a crowd of disfigured, napalm-burned children outside of a hospital, Lieutenant Hodges thinks to himself that "the Marines in the convoy [passing the children] did not mangle them. Buddha merely turned his head. Some days it rains rain (...). Some days it rains other things" (2001, ch. 34). Sitting in a bunker with his wife and children, Dan listens as "rounds crashed in unexpectedly all through the village, slowly, one round at a time. (...) [The villagers] viewed the rounds as one would view a rainstorm. Some nights there were artillery rounds. Some nights there were no artillery rounds. It did no good to question it. Questions would not change it any more than they would change the pattern of rainstorms" (2001, ch. 15). 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 (2001, ch. 19). 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: "[i]t was as if they regarded the obliteration of their village a natural disaster and, accepting it as part of their lot, felt 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 ("Americans would have done something" [1985, 134]) and thinks of them as inhuman, which cancels any pity he might have otherwise felt; he admits, however, that his attitude toward these people at that time stemmed from his ignorance of their daily ordeals. Realizing later that the villagers in South Vietnam had to adapt to the war in such way to survive and keep their sanity, he again makes a nature-based comparison: "[l]ike the great Annamese Mountains, they endured" (1985, 134; see also Webb 2001, ch. 19: the "pains" of the war were "as inevitable as old age").

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 used 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 towards 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 had joined the NLF and was killed: he "had left his family to starve so that

he could *die for his people*" Dan thinks bitterly and with sarcasm; while the farmers toil and starve, "in the mountains the men live comfortably in caves and thatch shelters" (2001, ch. 15; emphasis added; the soldiers and guerillas living in the wilderness did not live comfortably, 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: he misses them! And so, not only is the American presence in Vietnam as natural as the monsoons, Webb persuades us through Dan, but the Vietnamese can find comfort in it, too.

Moreover, in *Fields of Fire* as in other American texts, because the U.S. soldiers are always meant to be the party in the stories with whom the reader identifies, the 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 "Vietnam." In American texts, 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 of all of privileging American traumatic experience and victimization. For this reason, and because the authors are veterans or correspondents with firsthand experience, I argue that it is possible to read American Vietnam texts as *perpetrator literature*, in addition to just "war crime literature," or as *perpetrator narratives*, if we include cinema.[56]

In Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers*, a novel that begins in Vietnam before moving on to the States, the two protagonists and old friends, Converse and Hicks—one a washed-out writer, now a correspondent in search of inspiration, the other an ex-marine and 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."

Let us return to the story of Mary Anne. As noted, the setting of "Sweetheart" 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 "friendly fire" or a matter of an "inward journey" or a "heart of darkness," 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 2009, "Sweetheart"; emphasis in original), the italics suggesting the familiar ambivalence regarding violence as the road to Vietnam nirvana. In late 1980s, in the Rushdie interview, Herr formulated a somewhat similar interpretation of the war:

> [Herr:] "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." But is there such a thing? Isn't that a kind of exoneration? "I don't want to exonerate them. It's just that 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: "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 the veterans with the simultaneous erasure of the history of the war and of American crimes.

It is worth returning briefly to the beginning of "Sweetheart" and the description of the area where the medical compound was situated, in the vicinity of Tra Bong: "[t]o the north and west the country rose up in thick walls of wilderness, triple-canopied jungle, mountains unfolding into higher mountains, ravines and gorges and fast-moving rivers and waterfalls and exotic butterflies and steep cliffs and smoky little hamlets and great valleys of bamboo and elephant grass" (O'Brien 2009, "Sweetheart"). The inclusion of the human settlements in 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. Indeed, 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 ("[p]opular conceptions of the war have little room for the Vietnamese, even though the war was fought on their soil, resulted in deaths and injuries in the millions, and imposed lasting societal costs. Vietnamese appear at best on the periphery, limited to cameo appearances" [Hunt 2010, xix]; "in practically all American novels about Vietnam, the Vietnamese characters, especially—if they appear at all—those of the 'other side,' remain abstract, and function as a supporting cast for American protagonists" [Hölbling 2007, 105]; "in most American Vietnam War representations the Vietnamese are not even supporting characters as they disappear and the Americans take center stage" [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, Hodges was fond of joking," we read in *Fields of Fire*. "Just follow

the smoke from the burning hootches" (2001, ch. 14). In *A Rumor of War*, a hamlet is simply "burned out with white-phosphorus grenades" (1985, 72). 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* ("[a]nd then they burned Than Khe"; 2009, "The Things They Carried") 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. In general, in fiction, O'Brien seems to prefer to avoid portraying the suffering of Vietnamese civilians altogether, and to transfer the brutality of American soldiers onto their killing of animals, especially water buffalo (1980, 56–58; 2009, "How to Tell a True War Story").

As a side note, it is worth pointing out here that O'Brien is sensitive to more subtle (relatively speaking) forms of abuse and humiliation, or their effects. In *Going After Cacciato*, Paul Berlin's "only one truly shameful memory" was of when he was ordered to frisk villagers along the Song Tra Bong, an activity that entailed touching their entire bodies (recalled later as a specific memory, not described together with the platoon's journey through the hamlets along the river); part of a chapter ("The Things They Didn't Know") is dedicated to the Americans' inability to understand the Vietnamese villagers. 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 (2009, "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—one can, as the canon convinces us, go berserk or get accustomed to killing people, but it is another thing entirely to be capable of hitting a disabled elderly person in the face with a heavy milk carton.

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 oeuvre 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 O'Brien's "stories have greater integrity and truth than the ones told by Hollywood or Washington, but [that] 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 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

quasi-philosophical point to be made about Vietnam and war, many of which can be tedious to read and indeed skipped completely if one wishes only to learn about the "grunt" experience of the conflict.[57] 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.

"Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" not only self-consciously reworks the American Vietnam mythos, but also carefully obscures the Vietnamese natives from view. 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.)

Elsewhere the suffering of civilians is made visible, but still instrumental to American victimization. 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 Tet. 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:

> A little girl was lying on the table, looking with wide dry eyes at the wall. Her left leg was gone, and a sharp piece of bone about six inches long extended from the exposed stump. The leg itself was on the floor, half wrapped in a piece of paper. The doctor was a major, and he'd been working alone. He could not have looked worse if he'd lain all night in a trough of blood. His hands were so slippery that I had to hold the can to his mouth for him and tip it up as his head went back. I couldn't look at the girl.
>
> "Is it all right?" he said quietly.
>
> "It's okay now. I expect I'll be sick as hell later on."
>
> He placed his hand on the girl's forehead and said, "Hello, little darling." He thanked me for bringing the beer. He probably thought that he was smiling, but nothing changed anywhere in his face. He'd been working this way for nearly twenty hours (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 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 (2000, 3; the same point is made, and elaborated on, in Prasch 1988 and Ringnalda 1990, 65–67; cf. Beidler 2004, 81–102, for a veteran take on the subject). 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 film's village scene is successful because it is powerful and unambiguous; it is impossible not to sympathize with the villagers, or to have any sense of identification with Barnes, who is represented as unequivocally evil. There can be no doubt—or at least there *should* be no doubt since the film does not seem to suggest otherwise—that what happens to the villagers is undeserved and wrong to the point of criminality. The Vietnamese are certainly victims of gratuitous violence here. But the framing of the scene matters. 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 offscreen, too). Taylor gets to redeem his bout of violence by saving a young girl from being raped by a group of Americans; the exchange between him and the would-be perpetrators is the final drawing of a line between Barnes' men and Elias'. Taylor, in a rage, screams calling them "fucking animals" and telling them that "she's a human being"—a banal sentence that in the context of the village scene, once uttered, rings significant. The almost-rapists sneer at him, telling him, "You don't belong in 'Nam, man. Ain't your place at all." Their verdict is interesting

in light of the earlier parts of this chapter, as if the two groups within the platoon operated within different Vietnams.

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.[58] 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 voice over 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; and 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) which 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 the "corporal from Georgia" 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).

The instrumentality of the Vietnamese experience of violence at the hands of the Americans is central to the plot of *Platoon*, but the strategy is employed in other narratives, too, in close connection to representations of victimhood. Philip Caputo's Vietnam memoir, *A Rumor of War* (originally published 1977), is the story of his 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 charged with the murder 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 of other guerillas and their caches of weapons in the area. That night, overtaken by hatred for the land and the American deaths and wounds it has recently caused in his unit, for "what war was doing to them," and for the "VC," 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; he tells the patrol that if they kill the suspects in the village, they will report that the men had fallen into the ambush, and as a narrator of his memoir he admits that he "knew [the patrol leader, Allen] was going to kill those men on the slightest pretext (...). It was my secret and savage desire that the two men die. In my heart, I hoped Allen would find some excuse for killing them, and Allen read my heart. (...) [B]lood was to be shed" (1985, 317). After entering the village and the indicated house, the patrol beats a woman who wakes up, 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 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 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 the simultaneous universalization, naturalization, and depoliticization of the war in Vietnam. Caputo writes as much in the first paragraph of the prologue, where he announces his memoir as extracted from history and moral judgement, of his own war crime, too, presumably, since this will turn out to be just a thing "men do in war":

> [This book] has nothing to do with politics, power, strategy, influence, national interests, or foreign policy; nor is it an indictment of the great men who led us into Indochina and whose mistakes were paid for with the blood of some quite ordinary men. In a general sense, it is simply a story about war, about the things men do in war and the thing war does to men (1985, xi).

That the "mistakes" were already "paid for" with American blood is a disguised ideological statement, 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.

A familiar argument also makes appearance in the prologue. Caputo writes that the scale of American atrocity in Vietnam has been exaggerated,[59] and notes that the two most common explanations for American atrocities in Vietnam are racism and the dehumanization of the victims, and "the frontier-heritage theory" and the inherent "homicidal instincts" of the soldiers. He acquiesces that both contain grains of the truth, "yet both ignore the barbarous treatment the Viet Cong and ARVN often inflicted on their own people, and neither confront the crimes committed by the Korean divisions, probably the most bloody-minded in Vietnam, and by the French during the First Indochina War" (1985, xvi). But what is the connection between the reasons behind American atrocities and the others, except that they all happened in the same geographical locations? 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 acknowledgement 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.

This kind of rationalization is extended. According to Caputo it is not only the American strategy 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

> [t]wenty years of terrorism and fratricide has obliterated most reference points from the country's map long before we arrived. Communists and government forces alike considered ruthlessness a necessity if not virtue. Whether committed in the name of principles or out of vengeance, atrocities were as common to the Vietnamese battlefields as shell craters and barbed wire. The marines in our brigade were not innately cruel, but on landing at Danang they learned rather quickly that Vietnam was not a place where a man could expect much mercy if, say, he was taken prisoner. And men who do not expect to receive mercy eventually lose their inclination to grant it (1985, xvii).

Moreover, 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 is doomed to fight its war, to endure the same old experiences, suffer the loss of the same old illusions, and learn the same old lessons on its own" (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 U.S. was blocking internationally (cf. O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, where the verse "dulce et decorum est pro

patria mori" is woven into the entire text, only to expose the fallacies of patriotism and to subvert some ideas associated with it).

In fact, this urge to universalize war, and the Vietnam War specifically, is shared by a book which supposedly falls elsewhere on the ideological spectrum, namely James Webb's *Fields of Fire*. The difference is that where Caputo sees the universality of soldiers' suffering, Webb sees the universality of patriotic duty and masculine ritual. The novel is a treatise on the universality of war. One of the book's unquestioned heroes, Lieutenant Robert E. Lee Hodges, embodies it: his entire male lineage had fought in America's conflicts, and in the end, to Hodges the politics of the war do not matter. Being a soldier in the nation's conflict matters: "I fight because we have always fought. It doesn't matter who. (...) It was a continuum, a litany. Pride. Courage. Fear. An inherited right to violence. (...) If there had been no Vietnam, he would have had to invent one" (2001, ch. 2, part I; it goes without saying that this particular view of war not only universalizes it, but also mythologizes it as *necessary*—bummer for the "gooks"!). Even the novel's token wishy-washy liberal, "Senator," having lost a leg and inadvertently caused the deaths or wounding of all the heroic soldiers in his platoon, at the end of the book rejects the antiwar movement and comes to the conclusion that the marine camaraderie in the field, and the loyalty that it requires, trump all other issues related to Vietnam.

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 element arrives 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 which 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. Importantly, this strategy also allows 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 "[o]ther episodes reflect what the war had done to us" (1985, 313)—which 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; yet it is not surprising, of course. But 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, "the fact that we had been charged in the first place was absurd.

They had taught us to kill and had told us to kill, and now they were going to court-martial us for killing" (1985, 322). Finally, Caputo comes to the following conclusion:

> the explanatory or extenuating circumstance [for the murders in Giao-Tri] was the war. The killings had occurred in war. They had occurred, moreover, in a war whose sole aim was to kill Viet Cong, a war in which those ordered to do the killing often could not distinguish the Viet Cong from civilians, a war in which civilians in "free-fire zones" were killed every day by weapons far more horrible than pistols or shotguns. The deaths of Le Dung and Le Du could not be divorced from the nature and conduct of the war. They were 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, the military will court-martial him and his troops "as common criminals, much as if we had murdered two people in the course of a bank robbery during peacetime" (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 U.S. marines sent to their house by Caputo, who in doing so was violating direct orders, specifically to be killed for no other reason than the Americans' satisfaction. One, to maintain, as Caputo consistently does, that the reason the USMC charges 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. In order to properly assess the ideological implications of American Vietnam 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.

Two, 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. Three, 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, it doesn't even matter if 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, 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 "had not been committed in a vacuum. It was a direct result of the war. The thing we had done was a result of what the war had done to us" (1985, 326).

It is, again, worth keeping in mind that Caputo's goal is not to indict the those who led the U.S. to Indochina; "they" (as in, "they taught us how to kill," etc.) is a purposefully nebulous concept. When he writes of his men's actions that "if it was murder, then half the Vietnamese killed in this war have been murdered" (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: "I already regarded myself a casualty of the war, a moral casualty, and like all serious casualties I felt detached from everything. (...) I would endure and accept whatever happened with grace. For enduring seemed to me 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).

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.

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, "were left to fight the Viet Cong" (1985, 333). He sounds a little bit like a captain in O'Brien's memoir, who refuses a Vietnamese scout in the officer's company 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.) In Gustav Hasford's novel *The Short-Timers*, Cowboy is outraged when, following a fight between the U.S. marines and the NVA in Hue, the Americans raise the old glory, in a gesture reminiscent of the iconic Iwo Jima scene, only to have it taken down and replaced by "the stinking Vietnamese flag" as if the ARVN scored the victory: "fuck the Vietnamese people" (1988, 109). Back in *A Rumor of War*, Caputo's inevitable complaint about his battalion's casualties follows, punctuated in the middle by the observation that "Vietnamese civilians suffered too" (1985, 333)—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 the insistence 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 Vietnam, about the 58,000 Americans who died there or about the vilified veterans in order to understand that the United States' destruction of Indochina was a crime.

But, perhaps in the case of Vietnam especially, the above mentioned 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, in the chapter "The Things They Didn't Know," the narrator devotes some space to the total inability of the American soldiers to understand the Vietnamese people: "[n]ot knowing the language, they did not know the people. They did not know what the people loved or respected or feared or hated" (1980, 248); included in the list of incomprehensibilities are also Vietnamese emotional states and the villagers' opinions about the war. The soldiers' frequent failure to distinguish friend from foe is frequently attributed to this impossibility of communication. Paul Berlin is haunted by his wish to understand the people 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 is sympathetic to them. More importantly, however,

> 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 came to war 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, as well as and by the novel's plot. 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 a 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.[60] A pair of scholars indeed called O'Brien's soldiers in *Cacciato* as "victims of the ultimate innocence" (Bellhouse and Litchfield 1982, 166). The same point is made by Caputo: "[w]e were all the victims of a great practical joke played on us by God or Nature" (1985, 231). Webb actually dedicates his *Fields of Fire* to "the 100,000 Marines who became casualties in Vietnam. And for the others who became casualties upon their return" (2001), emphasizing both types of victimization of the soldiers and veterans present in American cultural memory of Vietnam. The same idea is found in Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, where 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): "[a]s 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 case of Paco in *Paco's Story*, whose 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" 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 (2015, 149).[61] More examples of this final strategy will be found below.

When Michael Herr writes that "those people who used to say they only wept for the Vietnamese never really wept for anyone at all if they couldn't squeeze out at least one for these men and boys ["grunts"] when they died or had their lives cracked open for them" (1985, 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 criticizes the women's liberation movement for its, in her opinion, inadequate response to Vietnam,[62] and 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 discourse has shifted. *Winners & Losers* was published in 1976, *Dispatches* a year later, still during the period of the public blackout of the war and general inattention to veteran issues, a national attitude that was, as we know, about to change diametrically in the upcoming decade. Vietnam 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 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 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 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 the now footless Paul Meadlo, praying that "you [Hersh] will suffer for what you have done to us" (1992, 38).[63]

And yet even Hersh, seemingly, could not 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. When he describes his meeting, prior to writing the first story on the massacre, with Calley at Fort Benning where the latter was awaiting his trial in 1969, Hersh makes a curious admission: having heard from Calley "a little about the operation," Hersh writes that, as he began to work

on his article, "I did it somewhat reluctantly, my thought being that Calley, perhaps, was as much a victim as those infants he and his men murdered at My Lai 4" (1970, 134). As nothing more than an illustration of Hersh's state of mind at the time, the statement is that of an American trying to reconcile what he is learning with what his nation's sense of identity. But then the sentence is left without qualification; is it meant to suggest Calley presented himself as a victim in his testimony to Hersh? Is it meant to showcase the difference in Hersh's assessment later on, once he has learned more details? Hersh never clarifies that thought, or follows up on it; it remains in the book as an unchecked and uncontradicted proposition.

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—who laments that she "gave them a good boy (...) and they made him a murderer" (1970, 181), the quotation familiar from the *Time* article. Hersh then cites other mothers who express anger and blame 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, including 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 U.S. 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 footless and 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" (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. "Only a few of them," Hersh writes, "seemed totally unmoved by the massacre, even in retrospect," and he quotes them ("I didn't care nothing about the Vietnamese," "[h]e had felt no remorse for the Vietnamese civilians while watching them get slaughtered," etc.; 1970, 185). Calley, heroically, insist that he take the full responsibility, despite the advice of his lawyers; Hersh calls him "loyal" and describes the physical strain the whole affair is causing him, like weight loss and bouts of vomiting (1970, 186). 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, presumably] 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. 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 longform 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 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 behaved so unlike an American soldier. Indeed, Lang, who had studied the case files of the four court martials, used the fact that Meserve was so highly regarded as a perfect soldier among his peers and superiors,[64] 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 it 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. The soldiers gagged her with it. 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; O'Brien makes a similar point when he records an incident in which three old villagers were tortured because the Americans had found an AK-47 in their hamlet, and yet they did not talk: "[t]hey talk to us, tell us where the rifle came from, and ol' Charlie will get to them. They don't talk and our interrogation teams rough them up" [2006, 132]).

Still, Eriksson is necessarily at the center of Lang's text, whose second strand of narration becomes the veteran's internal anguish: firstly during the time of Phan's ordeal which 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 which 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: Eriksson "would never cease to condemn the members of the patrol personally for their crime (...) but that didn't mean they were beyond pity. Other soldiers, he said, might just as easily have betrayed the weakness that the four men had

betrayed on Hill 192" (1969, 120). He adds that Meserve's squad behaved in an expected manner, perhaps suggesting, like others, that the war made American G.I.s into murderers. But these points are made perfunctorily. Eriksson's final thoughts return to Vietnam, in his mind's eye freed of the American violence, when he recalls seeing an "Oriental" 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, no one knew where, when I was in the Central Highlands. 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 text.[65] For one, among all the American Vietnam movies, it is the only 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, as already noted, his heroism is defined by his determined outsider status. The plot also avoids the allegoricality of *Platoon*, for example, since there are no "good Americans" and "bad Americans" overtly construed as symbols of the Manichean struggle between American values and evil; Eriksson's morality is tied to his humanity, not to his Americanness, in the same way that Meserve's and the others' depravity is not made into a symbolical commentary on American culture. Instead of endorsing the spectacularism of combat, the film focuses as much on Eriksson's attempts to help Oanh as it does on her ordeal in the leadup to her death, which cancels out the possibility of any appeal on the part of Meserve and the others. 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 symbolic of the American experience. All in all, the film can be used to argue that only pictures concerned with the plight of the civilian victims can truly be said to convey an antiwar message.

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 August 17, 2017). 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 DePalma [*sic*] 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 resolve to the internet and the number of popular ratings various movies have received as of August 15, 2017. I have compiled the following 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[66]:

	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[67]	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

I realize of course that this is an imperfect methodology; for example, I am not in a position to explain why certain movies are relatively more popular on one website than on the other. Still, I do 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 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 August 14, 2017, Lang's *Casualties of War* has 36 ratings, although it was anthologized in *Reporting Vietnam: American Journalism 1959–1975*, whose single-volume edition has received 99 ratings, the two-volume one—around 60 for each part. Gloria Emerson's *Winners & Losers* seems to have become similarly overlooked, also with 36 ratings (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 313 ratings, 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 1,600 ratings. *A Rumor of War* has close to 9,500 ratings and 500 user reviews, *Dispatches*—around 11,500 and 750, respectively. The fictional *The Things They Carried* has almost 181,000 ratings and well over 10,000 reviews. Like in the case of *My Lai 4*, I would argue that the subject matter, and the portrayal of American soldiers (despite Eriksson's heroism—or perhaps precisely *because* his heroism was essentially anti-military), proved unattractive to the audience in the United States in the long run.[68]

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, not the least because while the abuse

and murder of Oanh—the middle—stay true to the horrific facts, the 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.

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 aggregable," 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 foregrounds the suffering of the Vietnamese over what happened to him and his fellow soldiers, something that Lang himself notices and points out:

> An infantryman, Eriksson saw a fair amount of action, so, if he chose, he could reminisce about strong points he helped take and fire fights in which he was pinned down, and one ambush, in particular, in which half his unit was wounded. But, as Eriksson unhesitatingly acknowledges, the fact is that when he thinks of his tour of duty in Vietnam it is always a single image that comes to his mind. The image is that of a Vietnamese peasant girl (...) (1969, 12).

But the film 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 the sense of moral ambiguity in the audience. 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 contemporary review of the film argued that the film's preamble was added to "humanize" Meserve and convince the viewer that "he was really a decent sort who merely went off his rocker after too much combat" [1989]). 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 war—the war and the suffering it causes the "grunts," as typically, must be made the cause for the squad's crime, and by extension for 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. (...) Meserve is more heroic and sympathetic in the movie than he was in Lang's book; he saves Eriksson's life and staunchly ministers to a dying black buddy (both fictitious episodes). We don't have the satisfaction of regarding Meserve as a coward, a hypocrite, a phony; he's a good soldier who's come to believe he has the right to rape and kill innocents (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). The very final scene 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 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 he helps an old man plough his field, grinning. 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 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, but perhaps most memorably by Herr: "trying to read the faces of the Vietnamese, and that was like trying to read the wind" (1978, 1). Jim Neilson points out the racism of this statement, noting that the simile is "strikingly reminiscent of the stereotypical inscrutability of Asians" (1998, 156). 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 with some uniformity across the canon, 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 while she enumerates the many sources of the perceived victimization among veterans:

> [My platoon leader] died fighting for a people who have no concern for the war, people he did not understand, [who] knew where the enemy where, 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. (...) This country is no gain that I can see, Dad. We're fighting, dying, for a people who resent our being over here (quoted in 1989, 123).

In fact, Jeffords suggests that "[p]erhaps 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.[69] In *Winners & Losers*, Emerson describes a conversation she had after the war with a veteran, at the time of their talk a novelist and a graduate at Harvard, who expressed the wish to go back to Vietnam:

> 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—she wore earrings, he remembered that, perhaps they were gold—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.' The reasons seemed clear but the man could not understand them. Maybe he knows more now, but that day in Cambridge, it was already five years since he spoke to the girl with the earrings in Quang Ngai who had wanted the platoon to be blown apart (1992, 16).

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 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, "they simulated search-and-destroy missions in a friendly little village just outside the Combat Centre. The villagers played along. Always smiling, always indulgent, let themselves be captured and frisked and interrogated" (1980, 45); later, the playful exercise turns inevitably into an actual, unpleasant, and humiliating practice. Hasford's reconstruction is more cynical: he has U.S. marines posing for hometown newspaper photographs with a Vietnamese orphan, who for the purposes of the picture-taking is being handed the iconic Hershey bar, but made of rubber, which the child at one point snatches and tries to bite into, only to have it yanked out of its hand by the photographer. "Don't you guys want to be famous?" the photographer asks the marines, telling them to keep moving and be faster. "Some of you dudes probably wasted this kid's family, but back in your hometown you gonna be the big strong Marine with a heart of gold" (1988, 56).

Elsewhere in *The Short-Timers*, Joker learns from another marine the hard lesson of Vietnam, during an encounter with a small begging boy: "[t]hese 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, when it turns out that the child with the rubber chocolate bar bit one of the Americans: "There it is, New Guy. You'll know you're salty when you stop throwing C-ration cans *to* the kids and start throwing the cans *at* them" (Hasford 1988, 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" (Hasford 1988, 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, ch. 7).

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 POVs 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,[70] 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 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 not raised elsewhere in the canon—the practices of denying the villagers food, like spoiling or taking away their stores on the premise that the NLF will use them anyway, 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 village 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 chief runs a scam, claiming he has a village-full of people, to pocket all the food supplies (2001, ch. 19; 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, unusually, mentions herbicidal sprayings:

> Far into one paddy a helicopter hovered in the rain, soaking a rice seedbed with aviation fuel that had been rigged to shower down in the rotorwash. In a few days the seedbed would be dead. The helicopter, remembered Hodges, was a part of Operation Rice Denial. If We Kill Off All The Rice, the logic ran, There Won't Be Any To Give To The Enemy. If The Enemy Doesn't Have Rice, It Will Have To Quit Fighting.
>
> Hodges shook his head, watching the helicopter. Not a totally bad rationale. But, meanwhile, the villagers will starve. Ah, he remembered ironically. But they can always move to the resettlement villages if they really care. Ri-i-ight. Underneath the hovering monster a mamasan stood, squarely in the middle of her seedbed. She peered through the gasoline rain, reaching both hands toward the inanimate machine that soaked her and her life source. Hodges watched her chest heave. She was either crying or screaming. The helicopter did not hear her. Nor did it see (200, ch. 34).

Generally, until part three, the novel 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 undeniably valid position on the other. 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. 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 the perfect Lieutenant Hodges 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."[71] "How in the name of God can she prostitute her grief, declare a clean slate, for twelve C-ration meals?" Hodges thinks, horrified. "Did the kid mean that little to her? (...) [W]hat the hell right do they have to bitch, anyway?" (2001, ch. 19). 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: "The little girl's grandfather? He was yelling about how he needs his water bo. He wants a condolence award. He wants us to pay him for the water bo"; 1988, 78–79.)

But the ending of the novel reveals 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, ch. 27), including the reluctant Senator, to search the village once again. They finally capture a man and a woman; they hit the woman repeatedly in her 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 on, 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.

Back in the U.S., Snake's simple-minded 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 ("must have been a hell of a friend," the mother thinks; Webb 2001, ch. 40), 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, "lamenting their loss and so lamenting himself"; the others' sometimes viciously expressed hatred for him is forgiven—"that was all a part of it" (Webb 2001, ch. 42, part I). Soon, his draft-dodging friend Mark, now a resident of Toronto, sneaks back into the States and visits Senator, who has become ambivalent about Vietnam, uninterested in Mark's antiwar arguments; later, Senator's father has Mark arrested and delivers a self-righteous speech about why it was the right thing to do. Back at college, Senator is disgusted with antiwar students and professors, whom he calls "vaporous intellectuals" (Webb 2001, ch. 42 part II) and 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 it is not true:

> "(...) it's a bunch of shit to say it's regular or even condoned. (...) What you guys are missing is the confrontation. It loses its simplicity when you have to deal with it. (...) You drop someone in hell and give him a gun and tell him to kill for some goddamned amorphous reason he can't even articulate. Then suddenly he feels an emotion that makes utter sense and he has a gun in his hand and he's seen dead people for months and the reasons are irrelevant anyway, so pow. And it's utterly logical, because the emotion was right. That isn't murder. It isn't even atrocious. It's just a sad fact of life. (...) You know why I'm all fucked up?" He waved his stump, forcing them to look at it. "Because of a little girl. That's right. A little babysan sucked me right out into the open so the NVA could start an ambush. (...) And I'll tell you what. 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, ch. 42, part II).

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, ch. 42, part II; see Jeffords 1989 and Lembcke 1998 on the theme of female betrayal in Vietnam narratives). Senator thinks of all his platoon buddies, imaging that they are imploring him to "Set the Bastards Straight" (Webb 2001, ch. 42, part II). He begins his speech, scolding the protesters for their antiwar activities, until

one of the organizers "stripped the mike from his nerve-damaged hand without effort" (Webb 2001, ch. 42, part II) and told 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).

At the root of Senator's transformation is Vietnamese betrayal. The steadfastness of Senator's 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 naivete. "They're all VC," "even the women and children were hostile"—these are remarks found frequently in American texts about 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: "[b]ehind it, like random torches, the hootches (...) spent themselves in orange rages. The flames rose anonymously, but it was the platoon's collective act of passion, a substitute for not being able to fight the enemy that had ravaged them. The hootches burned like funeral pyres." Senator, ever the dissenting voice, decides not to protest against the destruction of the village, understanding that a "vote against burning a hootch would have been a vote against the memory of those who had been hit" (Webb 2001, ch. 23).

Not that the trope of betrayal is absent from other texts. Betrayal is followed by revenge. In *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" (Bryan 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. 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.) "Than Khe" is burnt in *The Things They Carried* (2009, "The Things They Carried").

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 in the area during O'Brien's own stint there, "[f]rustration and anger built with each explosion and betrayal, one Oriental face began to look like any other, hostile and black (...). 'Where are the VC?' Captain Johansen would ask, nicely enough? 'Where are all the men? Where is Poppa-san?' No answers, not from the villagers. Not until we ducked Poppa's bullet or exploded his fine mine" (2006, 120–121). 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). Caputo confesses to a similar thought process. His unit burns down the 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 "hit superficially in the hand." When the Americans are finished, the hamlet "no longer exists." Watching a woman wailing in despair over the ruin of her house, Caputo, realizing that the annihilation has been not merely a bout of insanity but "an act of retribution," says: "I harden my heart against her cries. You let the VC use your village for an ambush site, I think, and now you're paying the price. (...) These villagers aided the VC, and we taught them a lesson. We are learning to hate" (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 two hundred people, and that he feels unredeemable guilt. On the other hand, once they finish, the soldiers—channeling both the heart-of-darkness and "normal kid to killer" themes—cannot believe their transformation "from disciplined soldiers to unrestrained savages and back to soldiers" (1985, 305). Caputo, echoing Webb, 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, "[t]here 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 leadup 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 also 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), or 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. In fact, 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 this way of reading this particular condition of the war is also merely discursive. There is another argument to be made here, namely 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" (Rummel 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 non-combatants, and so unsurprisingly he concludes that "American forces (...) clearly committed democide during the Vietnam War," in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos (1997).[72]

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 even 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 March 9, 1945, raid on Tokyo was as devastating as the Hiroshima atomic bomb," and that "[b]y 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 "[d]amage 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,

> [t]he United States counterattack in the countryside was a systematic campaign of mass killing aimed at large segments of the rural population. It took three main forms: (1) massive assaults from the air, including saturation bombing by B-52s and concentrated napalm strikes by fighter bombers; (2) systematic destruction of villages by ground troops; (3) the Phoenix program of mass arrests, torture, and assassination coordinated by the CIA. (...)
>
> Intelligence gathered during interrogation [as part of Phoenix] was often used to direct "search and destroy" missions aimed at wiping out whole villages or groups of villages. In some areas where the population was believed to support the NLF strongly, entire provinces were subjected to campaigns of destruction and mass killing. Thus by late 1967, even before the Tet Offensive, 70 percent of the villages in Quang Ngai province had already been destroyed.
>
> In response to Tet, this slaughter was intensified literally with a vengeance (Gettleman et al. 1995, 410–411).

This, precisely, is the argument: when the implication of the strategy is indiscriminate violence against the population, and it results in mass death, it constitutes democide. Similarly, 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. Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman give some argumentation in this regard:

> The decision to employ technologically advanced conventional weaponry against the southern countryside made a certain amount of sense on two assumptions: first, that the revolutionary forces were predominant in the rural areas, so that the war had to be a true anti-population war to force submission (...). The first assumption was true in fact and must be assumed to have contributed to the gradual emergence of a full-fledged policy of search-and-destroy and unrestrained firepower, whatever the human consequences. (...) The character of U.S. policy was also influenced by the gradual recognition of two additional facts: first, that the South Vietnamese victims of "pacification" were essentially voiceless, unable to reach U.S. or world opinion even as effectively as the North Vietnamese, with the result that the population being "saved" could be treated with virtually unrestrained violence. The second fact was that relevant U.S. sensitivities (i.e., those of politically significant numbers of people) were almost exclusively related to U.S. casualties and costs. Both of these considerations encouraged the development of an indiscriminate war of firepower, a war of shooting first and making inquiries later (1979a, 5.1.2).

Moreover, Chomsky and Herman present evidence which shows that artillery strikes and other forms of attack against villages were often okayed on flimsy intelligence and unverified

information, since there was the willingness up the chain of command to, in the words of an Army Chief of Staff, to "'act with ruthlessness, like a steamroller, bombing extensive areas and not selected targets (...)." "This," Chomsky and Herman continue, "is an expression of indiscriminateness as a principle—deliberate, calculated and discriminate indiscriminateness—and it is a perfect complement to the other facets of a policy which was from the beginning semi-genocidal in purpose and method, resting in large part on the fact that the civilian population has been regarded as enemy or, at best, of no account" (1979a, 5.1.2; see also Gettleman et al. 1995, 411). In this view, then, the indiscriminate nature of the "air war" made way for strategies that involved the infantry, above all search and destroy, now a hackneyed phrase concealing atrocity such as My Lai, "a codification of the indiscriminate violence *mandated* by the reactive military strategy" (Spanos 2000, 159; emphasis in original). 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*. Michael Walzer makes this point: "what if the guerillas cannot be isolated from the people? (...) [T]he 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" (Walzer 2006, 196; see also Hagopian 2009, 420).

The Welsh photographer Philip Jones Griffiths, who spent years documenting the Vietnamese experience in the war, writes that his "view of American's involvement in Vietnam is, admittedly, at variance with the commonly held one that sees the whole venture as a simple case of the American military-industrial complex practicing genocide" (2001, 4) in Indochina for the sole purpose of deterring would-be revolutionaries in other countries. 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; Griffiths is of the opinion that what led the United States to Indochina is its "stupidity rather than evil, an observation accentuated by comparison with the Vietnamese").[73]

But if "they're all V.C."—they are all potential targets. Hence, once the killing of civilians, even if not specifically ordered, becomes norm, the war turns into democide. 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 (for example in FitzGerald 1972 and Young 2014). It is worth quoting Griffiths again: "anything America is trying to achieve is being done 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. [...] [Any outward signs of allegiance to the Saigon regime and the American invaders result from] expedience: [the Vietnamese] 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 (Webb 2001, ch. 7; the rooster lives). 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; the woman explains, through a translator, that she went out to relieve herself, and is told to "shit in [the] bunker" from now on). 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 (ch. 13). 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 my best friend is the goddamn 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 29 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 born 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 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."

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 of the thesis—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 which had guided their sense of their role in the world, encompassing 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 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 corelated 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 which 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 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 which, 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 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 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 Vietnam 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 U.S. 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 that (...) seemed both spontaneous and deeply felt. Flags appeared everywhere, along with bumper stickers, T-shirts, and buttons urging Americans to SUPPORT OUR TROOPS (...) joined by yellow ribbons, which had been originally displayed in solidarity with the U.S. hostages held by Iran from 1979 to 1981 and seemed to indicate that America was once again the wronged party or victims"; Bush's ratings shot up to "over 90 percent" (Ehrenreich 1997, 223; see also

Isaacs 1997, 75–86; Lembcke 1998, 11–26; for a history of military policy regarding Desert Storm, see Bacevich 2005, 35–56).

"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 "opposing the *policy* in Vietnam had been interpreted (particularly after the fact) as dishonoring the soldiers who fought there, this time support for the soldiers would have to be expressed as support for the policy as well" (1997, 77; emphasis in original; the same happened 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 "as if Saddam Hussein had kidnapped four hundred thousand Americans and the United States had to go to war to get them back" (Isaacs 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). 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 which puts the American soldier before any other concern.

Here the victimization of the American soldier finds its extension. Among the most palpable results of Vietnam was the suspension of the draft by President Nixon in 1973. 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 Vietnam, would be a democratic measure to keep Reagan's militancy in check. MacPherson presented this standpoint as occupied solely by the privileged draft dodgers like Jim Fallows, whose actions she condemned passionately and considered relevant to dismissing their argument: "[t]here is seldom a moment of chagrin at asking another generation to do what they were unwilling to do" (1988, 198).

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, "[m]en 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). The first problem in 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.[74] On the other hand, Vietnam era draft evasion by the middle and upper classes did translate into disproportionate representation of the working class and racial minorities on the Indochinese battlefields. Therefore, following MacPherson's trail of thought, one must assume that the underprivileged must always end up actually fighting in wars: either because enlisting is a viable career option for them, while it is so far less often for the more privileged, or because in case of draft they are going to have far fewer opportunities to evade service, as happened with the Vietnam War.

But this particular issue is illustration of more profound failures of liberal argumentation in response to 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 (on the unwillingness of the American public opinion to accept any U.S.

casualties throughout the 1990s, see Isaacs 1997, 68). 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 all-volunteer force 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 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 '69 the true turning point that progressively revealed that the costs and casualties were unjustifiable.[75] Ultimately, urging no draft after 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 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. 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 towards 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. Vietnam is, unsurprisingly, singled-out as the most glaring example (Scheipers 2014a). In her summary of the current debates concerning "post-heroic tactics" such as the "use of PSCs [private security contractors], reliance on air power as an independent tool in military operations, the use of drones and robotics and the introduction of new technologies such as nanotechnology and biotechnology" (2014a, 11), Sybille Scheipers 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 points out 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 civilian casualties of Afghanistan conflict

> have become a profound irritant to the AfPak [Afghanistan and Pakistan] campaign. Being American no longer means never having to say sorry for killing civilians in wartime. But US media generally have treated *intention* as everything in this regard. In short, if NATO troops did not set out to kill civilians then these deaths are *unfortunate* but not atrocious. Tellingly, CNN's senior manager insisted in the early days of "Operation Enduring Freedom" that

> mention of Afghan civilian deaths always be "balanced" by a reference to those killed on 9/11, with the unmissable implication that these fatalities were acceptable losses of questionably innocent life. As is often the case, "their" deaths barely register. That the vast discrepancy between "our" losses and "theirs" in every war America has fought should rarely be commented upon constitutes its own form of casualty avoidance (2014, 182–182; emphases in original).

While drawing a straight line of causality between the war in Vietnam and the conduct of more recent U.S. military engagement is impossible given the convoluted history of the past several decades, it is still reasonable to argue, as I have done, that the aftermath of that conflict had set in motion processes, which 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 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] Articles and volumes critical, sometimes radically so, of American books and films of the Vietnam War had been published before and contemporaneously to his *Warring Fictions*, e.g. James 1990; Martin 1993; Spindler 1991; also elements in Bates 1996; Bibby 1999; Herzog 2005; Searle 1988; Ringnalda 1994. Gender, for example, has been one particular approach applied to this literature frequently (e.g. Jeffords 1991; chapters in Hixson 2000; Smith 1994; Kinney 2000). 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 sources on the "right turn" as a response to the 1960s, see the next subchapter. "['New conservatism'] has become hegemonic in the public discourse, has displaced a waning postwar liberalism as a public philosophy, and has succeeded in attaining political and ideological power in many branches of government and within many of the organs of the public sphere" (Thompson 2007a, 2). See also Ferguson and Rogers 1986.

[3] "[Neoconservatives] became beneficiaries of economic and political elites: funded by big business, influential within corporate–backed think tanks, and appointed to government agencies under the Reagan–Bush (and Clinton) administrations. (...) [They] operated primarily in the realm of ideology, through conferences, books, magazines, and newspaper columns, in efforts to influence political opinion" (Diamond 1995, 179).

[4] 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).

[5] Lembcke located the origins of the "inside threat" version of why the United States had lost in the "ultraright" John Birch Society, and described Nixon's approach as "Birchesque" (1998, 91–93). The notion of the defeat being due to the antiwar movement and liberals in Washington would weave its way into the neoconservative and Reaganite interpretations.

[6] In his research, Lembcke found that the only confirmed incidents in which anyone was spat on concerned war supporters spitting on antiwar activists. He also pointed out that there had been instances of confrontation

(but not spitting) between *individual* members of the public, not representatives of the peace movement, and antiwar Vietnam vets, and that much reported hostility was directed at the latter from *pro*–war groups, including the conservative veteran organizations, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and the American Legion (1998, 77–78). For example, in 1970 the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) organized a 90–mile march from New Jersey to Pennsylvania, conducting guerrilla theater performances and an educational campaign of speeches and leafleting on the way, the whole event recorded on tape which Lembcke watched and summarized. Upon reaching their destination, the men were greeted with "the menacing hostility of older, pro–war veterans of previous wars," with VFW members taunting them: "Why don't you go to Hanoi?," "I don't blame those fellows for not being proud, because we won our war and they didn't; from the looks of them, they couldn't"; "as a maimed [Vietnam] veteran on two crutches move[d] slowly by, a voice wonder[ed] if the wounded '[had] been shot with marijuana or shot in battle'" (1998, 57–58).

Lembcke also argued that the image of spitting on soldiers and veterans had been used in other modern Western nations in the wakes of lost wars as an element of scapegoating various parties for the defeat: as in the case of the American right blaming the antiwar movement, so in these instances did other right–wing and nationalistic forces pin the blame on "traitors" from within who, the scapegoating logic went, had sold out the armed forces or lost the war on the home front; this tactic and the attendant image of abused veterans could also serve to foster "ultrapatriotism" and belligerent fervent. Lembcke's examples include the American South following the Civil War; Jews blamed for the French defeat in the Franco–Prussian War in 1870; Germans opposed to the war accused of helping the country lose World War I; and French considered by the country's right wing to have "sold out the military" at home which led to the defeat in Indochina in 1954 and in Algeria in 1962 (1998, 7–8, 84–87).

[7] Lembcke also points out that "[o]ne of the little–known dimensions of the anti–war movement is that veterans of previous wars, World War II in particular, were early participants in the opposition to the war in Vietnam and instrumental in initiating outreach to Vietnam–era soldiers and veterans" (1998, 4). In fact, veterans of World War II, organized as Veterans for Peace, had been the first to burn their discharge papers and mail their medals back to President Lyndon Johnson in protest over the Vietnam War, their practices later copied and adapted by draft resisters and the VVAW (Lembcke 1998, 30–31). See also Hagopian 2009, 18.

[8] Lembcke also cites a 1975 study which had found "that *75 percent of* [Vietnam veterans] *were opposed to the war*"; he also noted "the affinity of these veterans for anti–imperialist politics and the cultural critique of

capitalism" (1998, 106; emphasis in original). On the other hand, although he acquiesced that during the war "*antiwar* veterans denounced [it] as imperialism necessitated by the interests of a capitalist system" and that they "were in the forefront of denunciations of the war, bearing witness to what they claimed was a pattern of indiscriminate violence and criminal conduct by U.S. forces," Patrick Hagopian suggested 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 U.S. culpability in Vietnam, and that their interests were "self-serving" (2009, 12, 18, 76–77, 407; emphasis added). A still harsher assessment of veterans was delivered by Kendrick Oliver, who argued that "[m]any American soldiers (...) 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).

[9] It should also be pointed out that the socialist and Marxist elements in the antiwar organizations opposed draft evasion on the grounds of the class- and race-based exploitation and privilege inherent to the practice, and, they believed, its ultimate futility as a means to end the war; instead, soldiers' rights were to be promoted, protected, and expanded (Lembcke 1998, 40–41; MacPherson 1988, 203).

[10] For the record, Bacevich considers the designation *neoconservatism* to be a misnomer, as the ideology had, in his opinion, more to do with the transformative ambitions of the left, rather than the preservative urges of the right. The movements allegiance to the right wing was due to its origins in the opposition to the New Left. Sara Diamond agreed: among various post-World War II American movements on the right, "neoconservatives fit least comfortably into a 'right-wing' category" (1995, 179).

[11] It should be pointed out that for all his ultrapatriotic rhetoric exulting the Vietnam vets, Reagan did very little to actually ease their various social and health ailments: "[b]ehind the ceremonial flag waving (...) it is hard to find anything constructive that either Reagan or Congress has done for Vietnam veterans," wrote Myra MacPherson in 1984, following with a list of failures, including Reagan's budget cuts that had adversely affected the veterans, his plans to roll back the funding for the so-called vet centers, and the Vietnam Administration's (VA's) continued refusal to carry out research into the effects of Agent Orange under its Reagan-appointed director.

[12] 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, etc. (Daponte 1993). A Greenpeace International 1991 report stated that "100,000–120,000 Iraqi soldiers lost their lives in the war (...). From 49,000–76,000 Iraqi civilians have died, about 10–20 percent directly from allied bombardment and attacks, and the remaining 80–90 percent since the ceasefire" (Arkin, Durrant and Cherni 1991, 41).

[13] 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. In U.S. press photography in the 1960s, for example, "[p]ictures of the Vietnamese (...) did not call up the same level of inspired concern [as pictures of the American soldiers]; the American press consistently emphasized coverage of the American GIs over the Vietnamese allies, civilians, and enemy" (Moeller 1989, 399; see also 373–374, 399ff on the representations of various groups of Vietnamese in American war photography). Moeller 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 (Moeller 1989, 360). In his seminal book on the history of war correspondence, Phillip Knightley discusses at length the unwillingness of the U.S. media to cover American-perpetrated atrocities in Vietnam prior to My Lai: "In short, until the My Lai massacre story, American coverage was weak on the racist and brutalising nature of the war and on the way Americans treated the Vietnamese" (Knightley 1975, 388; see also 386–400). Knightley, too, tells the story of Philip Jones Griffiths' difficulties in finding anywhere to publish his pictures, and he also discusses the case of the famous war correspondent Martha Gellhorn, who reported on the systematic abuses of the civilian population as result of the U.S. strategy, but found *no* publishers at all in the American media. Daniel Hallin, 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

GI toward the Vietnamese civilian, 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 1986, 134–140). Hallin also points out that the U.S. ally and central cause of the war—South Vietnam—with its "government, politics, and economy took up something under 10% of television coverage during the war (...). But this figure exaggerates the attention television paid to the South Vietnamese: most of this coverage was in its own way very American centered. (...) Most coverage focused on the South Vietnamese government and its urban political opposition; the peasant figured in the news mainly as a victim and prize of the conflict" (1986, 201). A similar statistic is provided by Clarence Wyatt, who cites a report which "found 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" (Wyatt 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 in Landers 2004, 225–270.

[14] A detailed account of the U.S. Vietnam policy during Ford's and Carter's terms is given in Martini 2004. In her study, 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. See also Chomsky 1999, 10.5.9.

[15] The "MIA/POW issue" gained prominence with Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, who used the subject of U.S. prisoners of war and of the missing in Vietnam to promote their various propaganda schemes, to divert people's attention away from the situation in Vietnam and the political problems the war presented, and to exert pressure on the North Vietnamese during peace negotiations; it was the Nixon administration which first encouraged and promoted the organizations that would later become the MIA/POW movement and lobby. See Franklin 2002, 319ff; Isaacs 1997, 117ff; Lembcke 1998, 94.

[16] To begin with, the MIA/POW "truthers" never explained sufficiently *why* the Vietnamese—who always denied the charges—would hold on to the captured men for decades after the war, without ever using them as leverage; the reasons why the U.S. government would have known and kept the existence of these prisoners secret are even less clear. In an example of the logical conundrum posed by the lobby's impossible demands, Isaacs quotes a position paper, published by the National League of Families of American Prisoners and

Missing in Southeast Asia in 1992, which states: "Americans are known to have been left behind, in captivity, in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, it can only be assumed that these Americans remain alive in captivity today" (1997, 121). Furthermore, in his study, Martini points to the extensions of this absurdity: some U.S. citizens claim that the Vietnamese withheld the American remains *because* they are not getting the aid, thus locking the circular logic of this particular catch-22 (2004, 124). See also Franklin 2002, 318–322.

[17] 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 c. 80,000, from Korea—c. 8,000, 20 and 15 percent of total deaths respectively 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 2004, 112, 120–122; 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).

[18] Both Lembcke and Hagopian include in their bibliographies entries concerned with this discussion and criticism as it relates to post-Vietnam PTSD; see Hagopian 2009, 76–77, and Lembcke 1998, 121. 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. The anti-psychiatry movement—or at least criticism of the psychiatric profession and practice—itself reaches back to the 1960s and the work of influential practitioners such as R.D. Laing and Thomas Szasz (*The Myth of Mental Illness*, 1961; *The Manufacture of Madness*, 1970), or the French philosopher Michel Foucault (*Madness and Civilization*, first English edition 1964).

[19] Jerry Lembcke, who argues that the veterans were not welcomed in as hostile a manner as it would be "remembered" by the late 1970s, also pointed out a historical pattern of veterans of lost and humiliating wars returning to their countries with feelings of alienation and rejection; moreover, in these instances, as in Vietnam, hostile agents at home are often blamed for aiding the enemy and their own nation's defeat. As examples, Lembcke discusses Confederate soldiers after the American Civil War, German soldiers after World War I, and French soldiers after both Indochina and Algeria. "The fact," he writes, "that we seldom, if ever, hear stories about soldiers in winning armies returning home to abuse suggests that these tales function specifically as alibis for why a war was lost" (1998, 75–89).

[20] Marita Sturken is far less critical of the VVM's ideological implications, arguing that the right-wings "attempts" to appropriate it are in opposition to the "textured and complex remembrance that allows the Americans affected by this war (...) to speak of loss, pain, and futility" (Sturken 1997, 84). The VVM is also positively appraised as a "dove" triumph over "hawks" in 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.

[21] Chomsky 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 (1989, 64–65). 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 3 million Vietnamese victims filed in the U.S. 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.

[22] 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 U.S., 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; Chomsky 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 also considers the legacies of the war in Vietnam and in the Vietnamese diaspora; see Boyle and Lim 2016.

[23] Beattie follows with another quotation, Chomsky's response to Fallows' conclusion, which the latter thought similar to a "German liberal saying that it is now clear that the Holocaust will be important in history mostly for what it did, internally, to Germany, not what difference it made to the Jews" (1998, 31).

[24] Hunt, who in his study devotes far less attention to economic details and whose writing betrays lesser allegiance to a leftist discourse, even within his Geertzian framework notes the crucial importance of social class: "The sponsoring 'ideologues' in the case of U.S. foreign policy [in the late 19th and 20th c.] were usually white males possessed of at least a modicum of wealth from birth. Privilege not only smoothed their way to positions of political prominence but also left its stamp in some significant ways on their views of the world" (2009, 12–13, see also 137, 150), and in his conclusion acquiesces that from the end of the 19th c., "the greater power of corporations and the rise of a strong U.S. state had implications for policy ideology" (2009, 213).

[25] Gibson's overall argument in the Appendix of *The Perfect War* (2000) is that "the warrior's knowledge," i.e. the "truths" of the war contained in fiction and non-fiction written by veterans, should have a claim to legitimacy as valid source material alongside the assessments and histories written by high-level officers and military analysts. This is in response to what Gibson, originally writing in 1986, sees as the omission of veteran accounts in "official," "scientific," "socially accepted" knowledge about the war produced within the upper echelons of the U.S. military itself, which supposedly rendered the war in Vietnam ultimately as "Technowar": a conflict fought according to rational, logical, and efficient rules of good management. Gibson argues that "the warrior's knowledge," located in the category of first-hand experience rather than calculated abstraction together with the "knowledges" of the Vietnamese peasantry or the Vietnamese enemy, contradicts "Technowar" and exposes its absurdities, cruelties, personal dilemmas, and so forth, but that it has not been integrated into the "official" version of the war. I would argue that over time the opposite has happened, and "warrior's knowledge," at least in the realm of cultural narrative and memory and of mainstream discourses, has come to eclipse other forms of knowledge about the war; this is, after all, what this thesis is largely about. But my own argumentation is not entirely in opposition to Gibson's, whose historical study concerns the formulations and theories as to what happened in Vietnam within military and foreign policy circles and historians, not culture. The "lessons" of Vietnam that the Pentagon had learned—as seen in the 1970s and 80s, the Gulf War, and into the 21st century—have been traced and described by many scholars (including Gibson in the 2000 Introduction to *The Perfect War*), and elements of this history are reproduced in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

[26] Drinnon calls Burdick and Lederer's novel "the bad book" due to, as he claims, its racism, its unchecked sense of American superiority, and its agenda of imperialistic handling of the natives; it probably does not help that one of the book's heroic and positive characters is one "Colonel Edwin Hillandale," a rather thinly veiled laudatory version of real-life Edward Lansdale, whom Drinnon perceives as a colonialist frontiersman *par excellence* and as an agent of empire, and whom he singles out as a figure as influential in Diem's South Vietnam as he was exemplary of the vices of New Frontier counterinsurgency (Drinnon 1997, 374ff). For another in-depth criticism of the book and particularly its reception, including a polemic with Drinnon, see Neilson 1998, 90–134.

[27] Hellmann's study, as pertaining to Kennedy and the New Frontier, is evoked here in favor of the fuller and more historically-anchored Slotkin 1998b, because it is representative of the discourse under scrutiny. The reader is encouraged to read Slotkin's chapters.

[28] 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 in his studies of American imperialism (2002, 23–31; 2009).

[29] Slotkin, for example, notes that in *Fire in the Lake*, Frances FitzGerald saw the frontier myth "as an ideological cause in American war policy" in Vietnam, but that she also "use[d] it herself as a way of defining a critical position against that policy" (1998a, 17–18). He also argues that one method of "escaping" myth, and of immunizing ourselves to its potentially destructive power in rhetoric, and in so 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).

[30] 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. In a similar vein, Chomsky summarizes the gist of several reviews in mainstream American newspapers in the 1990s of a book on My Lai, concerning the understanding of the massacre itself: "[i]t was all some natural disaster, inexplicable, except by musing on the darkness of the individual human soul, perhaps" (1999, 10.5.11).

[31] 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.

[32] *Pinkville* is also the title of Oliver Stone's film project that seems to be perpetually stuck in a cycle of being cancelled due to lack of funding, and being announced to be back in the making. Stone's February 13, 2014, tweet stated that the film is "still on the agenda" but "not in the climate of the time."

[33] 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 mentioned here, Hellmann 2007, which interprets *Apocalypse Now* solely as a reconstruction of the 1960s and 70s in the U.S., performs something of a magic trick—how to talk about "Vietnam" without actually mentioning Vietnam. This is, of course, the problem with depoliticized and non-materialist 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 which 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.

[34] This interpretation of *Dispatches* in the postmodern context was launched by Fredric Jameson's famous remark about Vietnam being "the first terrible postmodern war," a comment prompted precisely by Jameson's reading of Herr (1991, 44–45; see a polemic in Neilson 1998, 151–152). For subsequent discussions of Vietnam as a "postmodern" or "postmodernist" war, see Bibby 1999, Carpenter 2000.

[35] As something of a commentary of this sanitized portrait of World War II in Hollywood, in *The Short-Timers* Hasford includes an ironic scene where a group of "bearded, dirtied" (1988, 38) marines, muddied survivors of months in the jungle, watch Wayne's Vietnam vehicle, *The Green Berets* (1968), laughing at the movie-soldiers' cleanliness, their clean-shaved faces and shiny boots.

[36] Death in itself is among the largest themes and tropes in the memoir's first four parts. Elsewhere, Herr comments on the perhaps most iconic phrase of the Vietnam vernacular, "there it is," used as a response to encounters with corpses of American KIAs: "pure essence of Vietnam" (1978, 203). 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.

[37] In the clearest instance of such validation, in his early study, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (originally published 1982), Philip Beidler, himself a veteran, claims that *Dispatches* is "the truest book" he knows about the war, but that it is also "first and last, the work of an observer, enclosed in its own stoned objectivism like an insect in amber" (2007, xii). 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, "experiential" opposite to *Dispatches*, "often gets most thoroughly lost in its own anger and polemicism" (2007, xii)—i.e., 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 Beilder'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: "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). The book's index does not contain a single Vietnamese name, no U.S. president except for one mention of Johnson, no entry for Lansdale or any American politician, advisor, or diplomat—which is understandable in a book of literary criticism, but one would think proclaiming the war to have "just happened" would have warranted at least a footnote to account for all those missing names.

[38] In his relatively recent reading of *Dispatches*, Ty Hawkins argues that in writing his memoir Herr set out on a "two-fronted quest, one both deconstructive and profoundly essentialist" (2012, 74), or, in other words, that *Dispatches* is primarily an excavation of the war's "essence"—namely the "secret history," which Hawkins identifies as "the war's Truth (...) the destructive horror *and* reconciliatory allure of violent death" (2012, 66). But Hawkins also positions himself explicitly in opposition to (among others) radical critiques of the book, exemplified, according to him, by Jim Neilson (1998) and Katherine Kinney (2000), which, accusing *Dispatches* of postmodernist language play and self-conscious constructivism, point out and ultimately focus on the absence of the Vietnamese; instead, Hawkins proposes a methodology that rejects "skipping from text to text and dismissing an organic conception of artistic development" (2012, 65). What Hawkins seems to be

overlooking, however, is that where his methodology considers *Dispatches* hermetically as a unique work of art—which, in literary studies, is more than valid, of course—Neilson and Kinney consider it from the outside, by tracing the ways in which a text like Herr's becomes complicit in a discourse, something the present thesis is preoccupied with, too. Hawkins reads *Dispatches* against Chris Hedges' admission of the attractiveness of combat, and promises that an analysis of how Herr dealt with this problem "constitutes a critical facet of our larger thesis as to how combat proved sufficiently alluring to American policy makers, military personnel, and the general public as to engender two guerrilla conflicts just a generation removed from the war in Vietnam" (2012, 66).

[39] *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), 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.

[40] O'Brien offers another, more strictly literary and representational, type of change of perspective. In "Ambush," a story in *The Things They Carried* (where the Vietnamese are virtually always victims of the Americans; Americans die, but the culprits remain unseen and of secondary importance), 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 enemy 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, he later tries to imagine the man's identity and life ("The Man I Killed"), 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.

[41] Richard L. Stevens' virtually unknown memoir, *Mission on the Ho Chi Minh Trail: Nature, Myth, and War in Vietnam* (1995) 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.

[42] Caputo also includes "the conditions imposed by the climate and country" as a factor in determining Americans' behavior in Vietnam, especially their brutality: "[f]or weeks we had to live like primitive men on remote outposts rimmed by alien seas of rice paddies and rain forests"; next on the list are diseases like malaria, the sun, monsoons, dense jungle, leeches, and so forth (1985, xvii). Later he notes, "we fought the climate,

the snipers, and monotony, of which the climate was the worst" (1985, 59), and attributes the "spiritual disease" blighting his men, apparently named "la cafard" by the French who fought the First Indochina War, to the "alien landscape" (1985, 68–69). Elsewhere, "it was the enemy that resisted us, the land, the jungle, and the sun" (1985, 87). 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). In fact, 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.

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

[44] On the other hand, O'Brien is the canonical author most interested in the humanity of the enemy. In his memoir, 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 (2006, 99–100). 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 Vietnam, a subsequent part titled "Mori" actually regards a shot NVA nurse whom O'Brien and his platoon watch die. *Going After Cacciato* contains the entire chapter dedicated to Cacciato's pursuers' political and philosophical, not unfriendly, discussion with an NVA officer whom they find imprisoned in a tunnel system they have fallen into. In *The Things They Carried*, 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.

[45] U.S psyops officers were aware of the terror brought about by the American B-52 Stratofortresses, the flagship bomber of the war and a considerable innovation in the business of raining death from the sky. Like other aircraft, it was routinely portrayed on leaflets and pamphlets dropped in their hundreds of thousands over North Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh trail. One such leaflet, reproduced in Friedman 2007, reads: "This is the B-52 evil genius, a constant threat to you." And on the other side, "Dear North Vietnamese Communist Cadre: On your supply routes into the south, you have surely heard a lot about the terrible death and

destruction of the B-52 evil genius. The B-52 evil genius is capable of carrying many different kinds of bombs. It usually flies at an altitude of more than 10 kilometers, so that you can neither see it nor hear it. Unmarked graves on both sides of the road are the consequences of bombing by the B-52 evil genius. Therefore, whenever the North Vietnamese Communists make you move supplies to the South, you will be bombed. Do you still hope to escape the Angel of Death and return to your families? You had better find a way to escape and save your lives. The Government of Vietnam will welcome you with open arms."

[46] *Going After Cacciato*: "[The infantrymen] did not know even the simple things: a sense of victory, or satisfaction, or necessary sacrifice. They did not know the feeling of taking a place and keeping it, securing a villager and then raising the flag and calling it a victory. No sense of order or momentum. No front, no rear, no trenches laid out in neat parallels" (1980, 256). And so the passage continues. Like the entire notion of the "inadequacy" of Vietnam in comparison to World War II, this excerpt belongs, of course, to the "different war" discourse.

[47] 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 thesis; 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.

[48] O'Brien later also makes a generally rare, if quick, reference to the other type of comparison to World War II, when he likens the U.S. tactic of helicopter combat assault in Vietnam to "the dropping of the bomb on a sleeping Hiroshima, (...) the Nazis' rush through Belgium and Poland and Czechoslovakia"; as he boards the chopper to be CA'd with his company into Pinkville, he thinks of the fact that "[f]ourteen miles to the south, the villagers of My Khe were sleeping"; "My Khe" will be soon destroyed by Americans (2006, 113–114).

[49] In his own scene of departure, Herr leaves Vietnam on a plane while high on opium, still thinking of Vietnam in spatial and geographic terms, the memory a way of cementing his construction of Vietnam as both a fantasyland and a phantasmagoric extension of America: the journey home is "time outside of time, a trip that happened in seconds and over years; Asian time, American space, not clear whether Vietnam was east of

west of centre, behind me or somehow still ahead. (...) There'd been nothing happening there that hadn't already existed here, coiled up and waiting, back in the World. I hadn't been anywhere" (1978, 200; the final part of the quotation may refer to Herr's personal issues, too).

[50] 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).

[51] Caputo's complaint is that in Vietnam, "[e]thics seemed to be a matter of distance and technology," meaning 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 complaint about rules of engagement is that, to the U.S. soldier on the ground, the war was one for survival and that he did not care whom he had kill in the process; the rules of engagement were an attempt "to impose on his savage struggle the mincing distinctions of civilized warfare" (1985, 229). In other words, Caputo's American self-absorption and self-pity are relentless.

[52] Quoted anonymously from a private interview about William Calley and the charges against him, in Hersh 1970, 155.

[53] Peter Arnett talking about the invasion of Cambodia, which he witnessed, in an interview on *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite*, July 7, 1970; quoted in Wyatt 1993, 190.

[54] Some of the same strategies enumerated in this list are discussed in a very interesting paper by Amy Schlegel on the naturalization of Son My in the U.S., 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 (1995, 53–54).

[55] Another war crime is looting, instances of which, though rarely, are nevertheless also recorded. 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: "We stole it because we wanted it. (...) They had it and we wanted it—we figured, 'What the hell, they're gooks (...).' Everybody was just taking things" (1970, 35–36).

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.

[56] 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. Beyond inspiration, the comparison between Eaglestone's work and my project ends

[57] This is not to make an aesthetic statement and claim that it is impossible to enjoy reading *Going After Cacciato*. Other readers may very well do so. However, my brief discussion of the novel is predicated on its status as a *Vietnam narrative*, the limitation made defensible by the minor significance the book seems to have outside of the Vietnam canon on the one hand, and the significance afforded O'Brien within that canon. If *Going After Cacciato* is usually read as a successful representation of the war, criticizing its formal and aesthetic aspects in this specific context is fair.

[58] A pose which 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*.

[59] Here the inherent weakness of the privilege of the veteran voice is most starkly revealed. Caputo, as an ex-soldier who fought in Vietnam, appears to have the authority to make proclamations about the war, and his judgement of it is deemed as particularly valuable, authentic, and so on. But then—would his personal perspective on the war *not* be limited to his own experience, to what he witnessed and did? (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 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 involvement in the antiwar movement; but his long-term contribution to the memory of Vietnam, unlike that of the WSI veterans, has been to produce his book, a self-absolutory account of one crime which he justifies,

and from the sales of which he profited.) 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."

[60] I would argue that there is no reason to discount Berlin's position as simply a fictional character's opinion, and thus not discourse-forming. For one thing, he is the character to identify with in the novel, and his perspective is shared by the narrator. In the context of literary criticism, and especially of O'Brien's Vietnam oeuvre, it is rather obvious that Berlin stands in for O'Brien himself. Finally, O'Brien, at least in his Vietnam works, is not particularly good at creating characters, who are quite undistinguished and, unless they are allegoric, like Mary Anne or Azar, usually serve to convey what O'Brien wishes to say about the Vietnam War or storytelling.

[61] 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).

[62] "Perhaps [my] interest in the women's movement, the early excitement over its huge importance, ended that night in Saigon in 1971 when Germaine Greer was there on a brief visit. One evening there were half a dozen of us in the same room. She was witty, wonderfully bright, very talkative. She looked nice. Her manners were charming and she made the men in the room light up. What really provoked her, she said, was seeing a group of Vietnamese women filling sandbags near Long Binh, the biggest U.S. Army base in Vietnam, the ugliest of places. What she resented was a sign in English, near the Vietnamese women, that said MEN AT WORK" (Emerson 1992, 2).

[63] The public reactions to Calley's guilty verdict, among which open protest against his 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 in *Friendly Fire*, gives an interpretation of the outcry: "Aren't you shocked

the American people are now trying to make a hero out of [Calley]? Why do you suppose they are doing this? 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).

[64] 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.

[65] Phan's death was also the subject of a 1970 West German film, *o.k.*, directed by Michael Verhoeven.

[66] 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.

[67] Excluding the 3,561 separate ratings of *Redux*.

[68] I am, again, aware of another major 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 70s, and a certain attitude of condemnation in academia and criticism, harsher than in the U.S., has persisted there. The reception of these Vietnam films in countries like the U.K., 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 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.

[69] Jeffords, whose well-known thesis is that the aftermath of the Vietnam War served as a vehicle of cultural remasculinization in the United States, links the betrayal of the Vietnamese civilians to the need to restore American masculinity, and simultaneously offers another interpretation of the importance of "Vietnam" to Americans: "because American manhood itself seemed to be on trial, with soldiers fighting and frequently being killed by women, children, and an often poorly equipped and nutritionally depressed enemy, it is important to revive the image of American strength through Vietnam, the place where it was apparently 'lost'" (1989, 135). See Neilson 1998, 159–161, for a polemic with aspects of Jeffords' thesis.

[70] 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] made his political mark by opposing [Jimmy] Carter's plan to extend a pardon to some deserters and to upgrade the discharges of veterans who had received less than honorable discharges. In contrast, he pleaded for clemency and an honorable discharge on behalf of a marine veteran convicted of point-blank shooting of a group of unarmed women and children in Vietnam. Webb argued that they were not 'innocent civilians' because of his supposition that they supported the Viet Cong" (2009, 85).

[71] At least this is what I think the villagers are asking for; even with the slang glossaries at hand, the rendition of Dan's pidgin translation is difficult to decipher: "She say babysan get boo-coo bac-bac bomb, same-same K.I.A. Say honcho mebbe souvenir chop-chop. (...) She say mebbe one case C-rats same-same one babysan" (2001, ch. 19).

[72] 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 1 million civilian casualties in general, the "most sophisticated analysis yet of wartime mortality in Vietnam, a 2008 study by researchers from Harvard Medical School and the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, suggested that a reasonable estimate might be 3.8 million violent war deaths, combatant and civilian [in both North and South]," 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, also those caused by the Diem and other South Vietnamese regimes, the ARVN, other U.S. allies (especially South Koreans), the NLF, and the NVA.

[73] Similarly, in the case of the Phoenix program, Frances FitzGerald writes outright that it "in effect eliminated the cumbersome category of 'civilian'" (1972, 412).

[74] A 2008 article that looked at the history of demographics in military enlistment, found that "significant disparities exist only by socioeconomic status," and not by race, ethnicity, or immigrant status: since the end of conscription in 1973, "[t]hose with lower family income are more likely to join the military than those with higher family income. (...) Class differences in military enlistment likely reflect differences in the non–military occupational opportunity, structured along class lines" (Lutz 2008, 184–185). The political and cultural forces behind this trend are examined in Michael Moore's film, *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). Lutz's study contradicted the 2006 report by the conservative think tank Heritage Foundation, which 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; in response to the study, an army recruitment

spokesman said that the trend was "an indication of the difficult recruiting environment we're in, both with the impact of the ongoing wars [in Iraq and Afghanistan], an economy competing for high school graduates, and a decline in the percentage of students who graduate from high school" (White 2008).

As Lutz herself writes, not enough research has been done into class in the military, and so it is difficult to say with certainty what the demographics were exactly at the time of MacPherson's *Long Time Passing*, or in other words what the likelihood of a person's enlistment was in relation to his class, educational background, or family income; the Heritage Foundation report certainly aims to refute the "conventional wisdom" that volunteer enlistment stems from fewer opportunities and poverty, and sets out to show that it stems from patriotism instead. The studies cited above, and Lutz's article in particular, nevertheless provide an analysis of demographic processes in armed forces enlistment that began with the end of conscription and result from the institution of all–volunteer force instead—they are directly linked, in other words, to the no–draft discussion in the early 1980s.

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 18, and a bill that would require women to do the same is in works in Congress as of 2016. In practice, draft has not been enforced since 1973; it also appears that registration is patchy and failure to register has never been prosecuted (Wikipedia 2016a).

[75] By 1967 and the siege of U.S. Marines at Con Thien, "[i]ncreasingly costly warfare, which saw the deaths of two hundred to three hundred Americans a week, had produced congressional debate challenging the Johnson administration's policy and had caused some measure of public dissent"; after 1968 and the Tet Offensive, coverage of the war in leading American magazines decreased as the public "wrote Vietnam off" as impossible to win and too costly (Landers 2004, 99–103). By the time of the Tet Offensive in 1968, "Americans came to realize that the cost in lives and treasure was simply too great to sustain without some successful end in sight" (Wyatt 1993, 188). One scholar saw an analogy with the response to the Korean War: "It should not be forgotten that public support for the shorter and less costly limited war in Korea also dropped as its costs rose, despite the fact that television was in its infancy, censorship was tight, and the World War II ethic of the journalist serving the war effort remained strong" (Hallin 1986, 213). (A wholly different perspective on those critical years is offered by Noam Chomsky, who argues that 1968 was the year in which big American corporations turned against the war and "called for the enterprise to be liquidated" [Chomsky 1997, 166].)

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Summary

The aim of the dissertation is to examine canonical American narratives of the war in Vietnam from the perspective of victimhood. I argue that these texts should primarily be read in the context of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the period when they were published and received, and when the American cultural narrative of the conflict was simultaneously developing. The status of the victim of "Vietnam" turns out to be a key fact in the eventual cultural narrative, and one bestowed primarily on the American veteran. Having discussed the discourses of the time, as well as their ideological motivations, as they pertained to the conflict itself as much as to the figure of the vet, I formulate the proposition that mythologization of the war was necessary in order to obscure its historicity and to turn into an exclusively American affair. In this way, the country of Vietnam becomes a symbolic landscape of American myth, in which the American tragedy of the war is set. I set out to deconstruct the various strategies of representations employed in canonical narratives in order to perform this type of mythologization. In the final chapter I turn to the representations of the U.S. soldiers and Vietnamese civilians in the canonical films and books, so that I can trace the strategies used to establish and explain the various forms of victimhood. I come to the conclusion that the American Vietnam canon to a large degree hinges on the problem of handling war crime. The thesis approaches the problem of victimhood in the contexts of myth and ideology.

Streszczenie

Celem rozprawy jest zbadanie kanonicznych narracji amerykańskich dotyczących wojny w Wietnamie pod kątem problemu wiktymizacji. Wychodzę od założenia, iż teksty te powinny być odczytywane głównie w kontekście późnych lat 70. i 80., czyli okresu, kiedy zostały one wydane oraz kiedy rozwijała się amerykańska narracja kulturowa dotycząca konfliktu. Status ofiary „Wietnamu" okazuje się być kluczowym aspektem tej kulturowej narracji, przyznanym przede wszystkim amerykańskim weteranom. Przedyskutowawszy kwestię ówczesnych dyskursów odnoszących się do wojny w Wietnamie oraz postaci weterana, a także ich ideologicznych pobudek, formułuję propozycję wedle której mitologizacja wojny wietnamskiej była niezbędna by przesłonić jej historyczność i uczynić z niej wyłącznie amerykańską sprawę. W ten sposób państwo Wietnam staje się symbolicznym krajobrazem amerykańskiego mitu, w którym rozgrywa się amerykańska tragedia. Moim celem jest dekonstrukcja różnych strategii przedstawiania Wietnamu oraz jego mieszkańców w kanonicznych narracjach, które dopuszczają się owej mitologizacji. W ostatnim rozdziale rozprawy zajmuję się przedstawieniami żołnierzy USA oraz wietnamskich cywilów, aby prześledzić strategie użyte to ustanawiania oraz wyjaśniania różnych „typów" ofiar wojny. W konkluzji zauważam, iż amerykański kanon wojny wietnamskiej w dużej mierze polega na „radzeniu sobie" z problemem zbrodni wojennej. Rozprawa odnosi się do kwestii statusu ofiary w kontekście mitu i ideologii.