A Hard Walk: Reconstructing Military Masculinity in Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and Other Novels of the Vietnam War

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Tutkielmani käsittelee Vietnamin sodan kirjallisuuksissa esiintyvää sotilasmaskuliinisuutta sotakirjeenvaihtaja Michael Herrin kirjassa *Dispatches* (1977) sekä valikoimassa sodan amerikkalaisveteraanien kirjoittamia omaelämäkerrallisia tekstejä. Työni tavoitteena on osoittaa, kuinka jo Vietnamin sodan aikainen sotilasmaskuliinisuus muodostui huomattavasti monimuotoisemmista maskuliinisista sukupuolirooleista kuin suuri osa Vietnamin sodan kirjallisuuksien kritiikeistä sekä perinteisen gender-tutkimuksen yleisistä paradigmoista antaisi ymmärtää.

Todellisuudessa ultramaskuliinisesta "performanssista" muodostui Vietnamissa sotilaiden keskuudessa parodioitu käsite, jonka katsottiin lähinnä hankaloittavan tai jopa vaarantavan yksittäisen sotilaan sekä tämän koko yksikön toimimisen tehtävässään. Monotonisen sankarimaskuliinisuuden hylkääminen vapautti sotilaan luomaan monisäikeisemmän sukupuolisen ja sotilaallisen identiteetin. Tuloksena tästä monimuotoisuudesta on tämänkin päivän Yhdysvaltojen asevoimien sotilashenkilöstön mahdollista omaksua työssään vanhanaikaista militarismia vapaampia sukupuolirooleja.

Sekä perinteinen ihanteellis-sankarillinen mielikuva sotilaasta että binaarinen sukupuoliasettelu käsittävät sotilasmaskuliinisuuden rationaalisena, taipumattomana ja kovana, ja useat Vietnamin sodan kirjallisuuksien kriitikot katsovat sen ylläpidon vaativan sotilasta kieltämään kaikki pelon, menetyksen ja kiintymyksen tunteet. Vietnamin sodasta kirjoitetuissa teksteissä ovat kuitenkin toistuvasti keskiössä kuvaukset raivosta suruun, epätoivoon, järjenvastaiseen taikauskoon ja homososiaaliseen rakkauteen, jotka eivät aseta kyseenalaiseksi maskuliinista/sotilaallista sukupuoli-identiteettiä.

Huolimatta Vietnamin sodan kaoottisuudesta ja pirstaloituneisuudesta sekä sen saamasta laajasta epäsuosiosta siviilien keskuudessa, sodassa taistelleiden nuorten miesten kokemus eroaa huomattavan vähän niin 1. ja 2. maailmansotien veteraaneista kuin myös 9/11 jälkeen Irakissa ja Afganistanissa palvelleista. Siviileille sotaan ja sotilaisiin suhtautuminen ei historiallisesti ole ollut mutkaton prosessi. Silloinkaan, kun lisäjännitettä ei ole tuottamassa Vietnamin My Lain kaltainen tragedia, on sodan todellisuus sitä kokemattomien mahdotonta käsittää, jolloin reaktiot jakautuvat joko yleiseen sodanvastaisuuteen tai tietämättömyydestä johtuvaan ylimalkaiseen kiitokseen. Konfliktiin osallistujalle tapahtumaa määrittää kirkkaimmin kasvava tunne sodan mielettömyydestä viattomuuden kääntyessä kokemukseen asetoverien menetysten sekä henkilökohtaisen trauman myötä. Veteraaneja yhdistää näin ollen tarve jatkaa tapahtuneen käsittelyä konfliktin päätyttyä; tämä tapahtuu oraalisen perinteen, "sotajuttujen", sekä kirjallisen luomisen kautta.

Avainsanat: sota, Vietnam, maskuliinisuus, identiteetti, transformaatio

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1. Introduction: The Vietnam War, reimagined

In Zach Snyder's superhero blockbuster *Watchmen* (2009), set in the cold war era, the American audience is given a glimpse of alternate history: the Vietnam War is won by means of a post-nuclear instrument, Dr. Manhattan, the body which cannot be destroyed and which carries the promise of total annihilation to its enemies. Consequently, the supernatural body functions as a stand-in for a United States that has complete global dominion—the physical manifestation of the unassailable body politic. It is also the futuristic expression of omnipotent masculinity: the body which can kill, defend, and regenerate itself.

The visual spectacle of the victory, complete with Hueys and fleeing Vietnamese fighters, is accompanied by the sounds of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* in an intercinematic allusion to the Vietnam classic, *Apocalypse Now* (1979); and afterwards, the winners are given the opportunity to make an ironic prediction, "If we'd lost here in Vietnam, I think it might've driven us crazy. Y'know, as a country."

This seems a fair assessment of the post-Vietnam syndrome. America remains preoccupied, if not obsessed with Vietnam. The word has long since stopped signifying a country, any geographical location or physical reality; instead it produces the instant association with political and strategic defeat. In popular culture the War is frequently present through the use of the "maladjusted Vietnam vet" for any unpredictable, antagonistic minor character, in the understanding that the veteran serves as a single-purpose symbol of a disassociated generation of broken men prone to violence.

With the barely concluded conflict in the Middle East, a trend has been apparent not only in the way military personnel are looking back and assessing failure by the Vietnam yardstick but how the parallels keep being drawn by the media, politicians, and policy analysts as well,

producing an abundance of titles such as "Iraq & Vietnam: Déjà Vu All Over Again?", "Iraq Is Not Vietnam, But…" and "Afghanistan: Vietnam Redux"[1].

The relevance of this thesis, then, rises as much from the unavoidable similarities with the post-9/11 wars as the still unfinished quest for meaning in the experience of Vietnam itself. More than thirty-five years after the fall of Saigon the War continues to produce new texts. One of the Vietnam veterans to have only recently published his memoirs explains in his preface,

> When I came home I shoved its memories deep into a subconscious file, locked the cabinet drawer, and threw away the key for a long time. It was so intensely real when I was in Vietnam that once gone I renounced it[…] the whole trip was too heavy a consideration if you wanted to get a life. (Cox, 2)

The situation is not dissimilar to the WWII veterans who found it difficult to deal with their experience directly afterwards, owing largely to the contemporaneous lack of awareness of combat-induced psychological trauma. Incidentally, it was the post-Vietnam era which brought about notable developments in the psychological treatment of veterans, including the clinical diagnosis of PTSD[2]. This not only gave the civilians a measure of insight into the struggle of the Vietnam veteran but opened up the avenue for the veterans of earlier wars to seek new ways of coming to terms with their experience, causing a flood of WWII memoirs thirty years after the war had ended (Casaregola, 189-190).

Despite the progress made in the field of military psychiatry, the supposed incongruity between psychological problems and military masculinities does not facilitate treatment of veterans for mental health issues. Even now, during the "new wars," it is not uncommon for a senior officer to react to news of psychological problems in his troops by "reduc[ing] some of those reports to the infantry's historically preferred diagnosis: 'He's just a pussy'" (Finkel, 187). At first glance, such attitudes would seem to demonstrate total disparagement of mental health problems; yet they can also be interpreted as belonging to the performance demanded of individuals in war, in addition to

[1] Krepinevich (2004); Karon (2003); Bird (2010).
[2] While a variety of combat stress phenomena have been acknowledged in the past, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in its contemporary form was codified in the 3rd edition of American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM—III) in 1980 (Hayman, et al., 363).

the demand for an officer to maintain the combat effectiveness of his troops by imbuing them with belief in their ability to carry on—encouragement through the *tough love* method.

The primary aim of this thesis is to demonstrate how the presence of these conflicting and contradictory characteristics in the military body produces the masculinity that, while resembling that of the traditional-heroic ideology, transcends it to produce a more flexible, self-aware military gender. This gender operates by the rules of context-dependent performativity and is therefore able to incorporate both the deliberate rejection of emotions and the acceptance of them.

While a notable part of the literary criticisms of Vietnam War novels tend to repeat the axioms of conventional masculinity which presume emotion as unequivocally forbidden or repressed, condensed into the idea that "[t]he collective male honor code precludes the contemplation of fear" (Horner, 260), my objective is to argue the possibility of reading the masculine war narratives so as to discover a wider range of ideological and personal conflict in the male construction of the self than has previously been recorded. Fear, grief, and affection inside the military, instead of being comprehensively disallowed by institutional or informal/subcultural rules, are permissible and present in virtually all portrayals of the conflict: men are less defined by the contemplation of fear than they are by their actions at the moment their unit requires them to act. Acceptable professional conduct thus necessitates the postponement/management, not the elimination, of the fear reaction. As a Vietnam newcomer who is embarrassed for vomiting after a firefight is reassured, "you're not the first guy to get sick after a little excitement. *Doesn't matter what you do afterwards*" (Ehrhart, 46, emphasis mine). My analysis, then, is focused on how the masculinities portrayed in the texts respond to or differ from the conventional models of the male stereotype.

Secondly, the war narratives studied in this thesis will be analyzed for the way these military masculinities intersect and interact—that is, I will be looking at not only the representations of individual masculinity but the coming together of these personalities in the theater of war, the encounters being contingent on a set of parameters that originate in military hierarchy and the

military cult(ure) with its unwritten rules and regulations. Additionally, while the institutional hierarchies are clear, in the masculine ideology the superior/subordinate partition is exercised not solely on the basis of rank but competence, producing a more sensitive complexity in the inter-relations inside the military community.

The main work on which this thesis rests is Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977), originally written as shorter missives for *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone* and *The New American Review* during Herr's stay in-country from 1967 to 1968. Put in its final form, *Dispatches*, together with the works of Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson, pioneered the field of New Journalism (Gordon, 16). However, its break from the "traditional forms and techniques for presenting current events to a nation inundated with media coverage" (ibid.) is not the only thing making *Dispatches* stand out—repeatedly, it is the novel's affinity with and awareness of the cinematic culture impacting the troops who are its subject that rises to the fore. The cinematic experience thus informs both the medium and the material of Herr's work; whereas it is the "structure, style and technique that make [*Dispatches*] seem almost a thinly veiled screenplay" (ibid.), the patterns of cinematic life equally permeate the (anti)heroes of Herr's portrayal, the grunts "[e]ducated by war movies rather than actual experience" (ibid., 17). In a much-cited passage of *Dispatches* Herr disrobes the movie-charmed grunt and ends up being collectively encompassed in the generation fixated with the movie/media paradigm, making even authentic violent action something to be equated with the rehearsed patterns of script and screen:

> They were insane, but the war hadn't done that to them. Most combat troops stopped thinking of the war as an adventure after their first few firefights, but there were always the ones who couldn't let that go, these few who were up there doing numbers for the cameras. A lot of correspondents weren't much better. We'd all seen too many movies, stayed too long in Television City, years of media glut had made certain connections difficult. (209)

Herzog, likewise, describes Herr's deviation from traditional literature, involving the attempt "to capture the language, music, culture, feelings, and emotions of the war" but, even more importantly, "to give the grunt's view of combat" (79). For Herr this means a balancing act between witnessing/representation and "the ethics of profiting, however indirectly, from the war, and the

anxiety that ensues from non-intervention and survival" (Lau, 193)—the latter relayed by the (un)easy confession, "of course we were intimate, I'll tell you how intimate: they were my guns, and I let them do it" (*Dispatches*, 67).

At worst, Herr says, "[w]e were called thrill freaks, death-wishers, wound-seekers, war-lovers, hero-worshipers[…,] ghouls, communist, seditionists" (228)—a string of invectives that is not difficult to believe when read alongside Larry Heinemann's unfailingly candid record of the grunts' opinion on correspondents:

> [R]eporters, as a gang, acted as though our whole purpose for being there was to entertain them. They'd look at you from under the snappily canted brim of an Abercrombie & Fitch Australian bush hat as much as to say, "Come on, kid, *astonish* me! Say *something* fucked up and quotable, *something* evil, something *bloody* and *nasty*, and be quick about it—I ain't got all day; I'm on a deadline." […] The younger, "hipper" ones popped opium on the sly or sprinkled it on their jays, and chewed speed like Aspergum, but their rap was the same, "Don't these ignorant fucking grunts *die* ugly! It's goddamned *bee-utiful*!" (*Paco's Story*, 11)

Even while the correspondents share many of the same risks, some more than others, they are limited by their label as noncombatants; the divide leaks into hilarious encounters and unintentional puns, such as the exchange where Herr's group is asked, "Don't you men salute officers?" and respond with, "We're not men[…] We're correspondents" (7).

In addition to *Dispatches*, I will be using examples from Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), James Webb's *Fields of Fire* (1978) and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990)[3], among others. Although the texts chosen for study in this thesis vary from straightforward autobiography to postmodernist imaginative literatures, in key ways all Vietnam literatures regardless of their genre present the experience as well as the core characteristics of the masculine agent as virtually identical. Despite the merging of fact and fiction, one is never in danger of feeling cheated out of some significant truth for it being dismissible as made up, since it is usually the most unbelievable, insane war stories which most closely articulate the reality of Vietnam; as Philip Beidler pronounces, "out of the inherent irony of the experience itself would come the appropriate means of its articulation. The matter of the thing would find a reality truer than the truth alone in the

[3] These novels will hereafter be referred to as *Rumor*, *Fields*, and *Things*, respectively.

literary means of its telling" (1982, 46). Vietnam presents itself as a quasi-mythological event, the knowledge of which is shared and carried among those who participated in it; as such, the Vietnam texts yield a profusion of subjective-collective narratives which overlap—each of them, in the end, based equally on memory/history and creation/imagination.

What will hopefully become evident is that the narratives from the Vietnam War, in addition to containing a wider variety of masculinities than previously documented, have also produced a wealth of links and signs that provide contemporary narratives with their touchstone in the American military history and the continuum of military-masculine experience and brotherhood. The problem of relating has not disappeared: similar to the 1960s youth that recognized the war in Vietnam mainly through what they had seen on their television sets, those fighting the war in the Middle East after 9/11 tended to relate their first firefight to *Call of Duty* videogames and popular post-Vietnam filmatizations. Officers have not been exempt from this; on entering a firefight raging at the bridge to Nasiriyah during the initial surge in 2003, *One Bullet Away* (2005) author Nathaniel Fick admits,

> My first reaction was to laugh. We had stumbled onto the set of a Vietnam War movie. […] I half-expected the notes of "Fortunate Son" to come drifting through the trees. (205)

A moment later, a warning from a fellow junior officer, "They're in the trees, man. They're fucking everywhere, and the fuckers can shoot, too" produces again the instant association, "Vietnam" (ibid., 206). Apart from the resemblances that concern the visual and auditory experience of combat, an essential part of the continuity comes from the shared knowledge spanning generations. O'Donnell recounts the job undertaken by the veterans of WWII, Korea, and Vietnam to welcome back the units returning from their deployments to the Middle East, one of whom says, "I'm doing this because, when we returned from Nam, nobody shook my hand. I don't want that to ever happen to another combat veteran" (214).

Contrary to the conventionally advanced agenda of the totalitarian violence of military masculinities, military identities are in fact a part of the basis onto which cultural change can build.

Already in the Vietnam era, the publicly demonized GI demonstrated, for instance, a notably postmodern outlook on nonconformity, whether it related to psychological, social, or sexual deviation. Despite the institutionalized prohibitions against homosexual action recorded in the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), Boyle notes, "texts written about the Vietnam War reflect a greater acceptance of alternative gender and sexual roles than such a policy would suggest and than literatures of previous American wars indicate" (98). The December 2010 repeal of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) policy symbolizes another watershed which will have notable effect on shaping not only military but civilian identities as well.

2. Masculinity and the Vietnam War: Background and Theory

The theoretical approach of this thesis is located in men's studies. While the American participation in the conflict in Southeast Asia was doubtless rationalized by socio-political aims, equally instrumental in its early stages was a collective national attempt to reinforce the masculine American identity. On the top-level military command this tended to take the form of cocky enthusiasm, as exemplified by the statement of one Normandy veteran: "It isn't much of a war, but it's the only one we've got, so enjoy it" (Sheehan, 58). On the level of the ordinary infantryman—not taking into account the percentage of the drafted who were violently opposed to the idea of any participation—the motivation was often born from a combination of adventure-seeking, perceived national duty, ideology, and the erotic attraction of militarism.

The premise for pre-Vietnam masculinities found in the majority of the literatures written by the veteran-authors of the war was based equally much on the traditional paradigms of normative/ideal masculinity as the era's popular culture images which largely conformed to the ideology of heroic masculinities[4]. The influence of mass culture was exemplified by the attempt by the recruits to live up to, or recreate, the masculinities observed in the Westerns and WWII movies of the time—leading, occasionally, to cognitive confusion, the experience of war-as-movie. The ontological grounds, on the other hand, were evident in the ingrained understanding of what it means to be and act as a man, an issue elaborated by R. W. Connell through his concept of hegemonic masculinity:

> The meanings in the bodily sense of masculinity concern, above all else, the superiority of men to women, and the exaltation of hegemonic masculinity over other groups of men which is essential to the domination of women. (1987, 85)

While central to the theory of hegemony is how it operates on levels of social and cultural organization in society (ibid., 184), the yet more interesting aspect in regards to this thesis is the physical structuring of hegemonic masculinity, the normative "maleness" critical in cultures of war:

[4] An obvious exception to the trend was Joseph Heller's black military comedy *Catch-22* (1961) whose satiric insights about war number among them such stark reductions as Yossarian's intonement, "Men went mad and were rewarded with medals" (16). The novel's refrain, "what difference does it make," in its inertia curiously precedes the Vietnam complement, "there it is".

> The physical sense of maleness is not a simple thing. It involves size and shape, habits of posture and movement, particular physical skills and the lack of others, the image of one's own body, the way it is presented to other people and the ways they respond to it, the way it operates at work and in sexual relations. (ibid., 84)

In narratives of war, inextricably entwined with the presence of the normative male body is the thought of its potential deterioration/destruction in the course of the fighting; by being physically wounded or by succumbing to combat stress[5] the performance in professional and sexual arenas is compromised, thus bringing to question the effect of the transformed body and psyche on the masculine identity.

To reiterate, the American youth was seeking to meet societally pre-set parameters of masculinity as well as to emulate the nation's mythical/cinematic heroes. These types of preordained masculinities have traditionally been enforced by the society at large, and, moreover, by the institutions for which they have been especially useful—the obvious example of these being the military. Yet whereas gender performance in the civilian world is a convention that is learned and assumed through (unconscious) social indoctrination, the military gender is a specific masculinity consciously and deliberately inscribed onto military bodies.

In critical studies of the gendered society, male hegemony is a pervasive and polemic theme, and a number of analyses on war literatures have pinpointed the military as one of the institutions that are instrumental in upholding gender inequality, outright misogyny, as well as attitudes of racism. These issues will be given brief consideration in subsections 2.2. and 2.3., while section 2.1. introduces the genre shift of Vietnam representations, its problems and associated scholarship.

2.1. Vietnam as Text: Literatures of Experience and Imagination

The debate over the appropriate literary way to portray the Vietnam War has been nearly as heated as the dispute over the war's political and military handling. "It is a kind of mystery which cannot be represented or even adequately named by straight or exterior history", pronounces McInerney,

[5] 'Combat stress' is a relatively new term, coined in the era of the clinical recognition of PTSD; it is curiously reminiscent in its generality of the older diagnosis, *battle fatigue*, and nearly as opaque as Vietnam's "acute environmental reaction" which, Herr notes, itself came as a substitute for "shell shock" (91).

drawing attention to the mutable lines between fact and fiction (191-3). Timmerman, also, questions the possibility of truthful portrayal:

> Can one capture the reality of the event in such a way that the reader imaginatively participates in it? Is there a point where the imaginative life evokes a greater reality that the factual accounting, so that the reader understands not only what happened but also why it happened and how it affected the soldier? (101)

Philip Beidler, for one, has emphasized the role of imaginative literatures in the national "sense-making" process, from the early narratives which already recognize and deal with Vietnam "as experience, as opposed to some problem defined in terms of moral, philosophical, or aesthetic abstraction" (1982, 62), to the post-1970 texts which become increasingly concerned with "dimensions of memory *and* imagination, with attendant experimentation in genre and mode" (89).[6] Generally speaking, Vietnam literatures could thus be seen to move from realistic (autobiographical) fiction toward postmodernism. However, irrespective of their stylistic and structural differences, what the Vietnam War literatures widely have in common is the predominance of depictions relaying the experience as disjointed, irrational and chaotic, belying a shared core of memory, trauma, and myth. Considering the widespread view of Vietnam as the first postmodern war[7], it is not surprising that the literatures of the war also share several features that lend themselves to postmodern portrayal, including "relativism, diversity, parody, alterity, anti-hegemony, fabulation self-reflexivity, and metafiction" (Carpenter, 36). Moreover, what the twisting together of fact and fiction often indicates is the flawedness of human perception and the unreliability of memory, particularly noticeable in the aftermath of traumatic, high-intensity situations: it is a common phenomenon in the military to receive, following a firefight or an ambush, several conflicting reports by men all swearing genuine audio/visual memory of the event.

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[6] As one of the seminal critics of the Vietnam War literature, Beidler has drawn his share of the ire and opposition of his fellow scholars. One point of dissent is over the capability of postmodern texts to impart lessons about the war: "Is it unfair to suspect that Beidler is vainly attempting to join the club of semantically hermetic writers? In any case: he cannot have his cake and eat it too. Vietnam War literature is either about experience and sense-making (the modernist paradigm) or about nothing but language and writing (the postmodern paradigm). It cannot be both" (Wimmer, 34).

[7] A notion generally credited to Fredric Jameson: "This first terrible postmodernist war cannot be told in any of the traditional paradigms of the war novel or movie—indeed that breakdown of all previous narrative paradigms is, along with the breakdown of any shared language through which a veteran might convey such experience, among the principal subjects of [*Dispatches*] and may be said to open up the place of a whole new reflexivity" (84).

In Vietnam War narratives, as discussed below in section 3.5., memory and truth spring equally much from gut instinct and emotion as factual details.

Finally, virtually all Vietnam novels portray a masculine journey, told in a masculine voice, adhering to the traditional perception of the interconnectedness between men and war. One of the central novels on the war, Caputo's *A Rumor of War* portrays a Vietnam which

> is less a military or political struggle than it is an American tragedy in which knowledge is gained only by a kind of collective death, the passing of long-supported notions of national goodness, invulnerability, and power. (Myers, 90)

This view exemplifies the general demand for the recognition of the insupportability of the concept of American exceptionalism which flourished before the conflict, the anticipation of a somewhat apologetic transcription of a war that was eventually judged to be unjust and badly executed. Consequently, the texts which sidestep this apologia with frank revelatory discourse, including confessional elements of the ambiguous, illicit attraction of combat, are generally received with hostility and suspicion.[8]

For the civilian audience, the consuming of Vietnam literatures is an act of reading a text which is already overlaid with a cultural narrative of symbols and collective, mediated memories. Near-simultaneous to its unfolding, the war was being broadcast to the American public in nightly news stories and political commentaries, and the subsequent readings of the Vietnam literatures are unavoidably interpreted through this collective civilian understanding of the war as it was perceived from the outside. As Herzog points out, very strongly linked with the Vietnam War are negativistic judgments from "quagmire" to "light at the end of the tunnel" (49) but, more than that, the incomplete, decontextualized information trickling out to the "World" transformed the war into a stream of symbolic images—from the early May 1966 immolations to Zippo lighters and burning villages, napalm air strikes, distraught civilians.

> We lose all distance and the violence of the war projects from the screen into the eyes, now known, no longer imaginable, but in our faces at 6:00 P.M. The "over-proximity" of Vietnam in America magnifies, clarifies, and transforms the real into the hyperreal.

[8] Possibly the most famous such text is "Why Men Love War" (1984) by William Broyles Jr., an exceptionally candid exploration of the taboo-like allure of war and, as such, an object of much criticism.

> […] The daily combat footage makes the images transparent, as if nothing or no one were there to see. Moreover, the grunts on the television screen are no more "real" than the grunts in any Hollywood movie: habituated to screens as (primarily) the surface of the fabricated, the medium itself impedes affect, an impassioned response to overexposed violence. (Harrison, 94)

What remained less documented was the underside of counterinsurgency warfare and the toll taken on the American troops: chronic sickness, lack of hot food or hot showers, and the intractability of fighting a war without fronts and without visible progress. This informational imbalance led to the GI becoming the equivalent of the immorality of the War whose "enduring image" were the atrocities committed by Second Lieutenant Calley and his men: "My Lai was Vietnam, the equation went, and Vietnam was where it all of a sudden fell apart, where America's boys[…] suddenly went off the rails" (Faludi, 318). The subsequent frictions in civilian/military relations eventually gave birth to such contested stories as that of the "spat-upon Vietnam veteran"[9].

What the veteran-authored texts seek to achieve is the correction of this imbalance. Portrayed by a number of Vietnam texts, the fracturing of the larger American mission in Vietnam occurs in tandem with the fracturing of the identities of those who have been tasked with the war's execution. The grunts, largely apolitical and apathetic when asked to reason their presence in Vietnam, further experience a crumbling of professional (military/masculine) identity in parallel with the increasing sense of the futility of their mission. The vicious cycle of arbitrary casualties and the subsequent violent acts of retribution begets an oscillatory movement between exhaustion, despair and rage, "the chimerical capacity of nonfeeling to transform itself instantly into its most destructive other" (Myers, 100). Recording this psychological transformation in detail, Caputo is one of the fighter-writers seeking to understand and perhaps to excuse decisions made in a state of impaired judgment.[10] In general terms, what the narratives written in the post-Vietnam state of contemplation habitually reveal is the darker side of human psyche, omnipresent albeit usually

[9] For in-depth study of the myth see Lembcke (1998).

[10] The ethical climax of *Rumor* occurs at the end of the book when Lt. Caputo and his men end up under investigation for a premeditated murder of two Vietnamese peasants. While Caputo had technically ordered his men only to apprehend, in the book he goes to some lengths to detail the psychologically taxing circumstances that led to the situation. "In my heart, I hoped Allen would find some excuse for killing them, and Allen had read my heart. He smiled and I smiled back, and we both knew in that moment what was going to happen" (317).

hidden, activated by the extraordinarily exhausting circumstances of fighting a war of attrition in which the pursuers become the pursued, picked off one by one.

Caputo's novel is written in the form of the archetypal tripartite Bildungsroman, assumed in some degree by a number of Vietnam texts to record the chronology of the tour of duty[11] and its associated psychological stages, from pre-enlistment/boot camp (excitement and bravado), to combat (loss of innocence, disillusionment), to the return home (ostracization, trauma)[12]. This literary model is explicitly ridiculed by Ringnalda who sees a lack of imagination in the repetition of the realistic formula:

> In the typical Vietnam linear narrative the author selects a group of recruits[…,] puts them through basic training, where they become somewhat robotized[…,] sends them to Nam, where they […] curse a lot and speak in the authentic argot, kills some of them, and sends the hero/narrator back home where Jane Fonda spits on him and calls him a baby killer. (17)

Such summary does not only denigrate and over-simplify, but glosses over a great deal of the meanings that are inherent in these frequent motifs of the Vietnam narrative. The "robotizing" effect of basic training, the in-group vernacular, loss of fellow soldiers, and even the use of nicknames are all meaning-carrying aspects of military masculinities, and will be discussed further in the analysis below. In short, the masculinities in Vietnam War stories operate and are constructed through language, hierarchies, and the specifics of the military cult(ure), all of which are capable of both reinforcing and subverting the traditional masculine ideal.

Ringnalda further criticizes the majority of the texts for "the absence of self-irony, and the fear of chaos", as even those soldier-authors disillusioned by the war, and disappointed by their own part in it, direct their reproach to the Vietnam War in particular instead of the American tradition and self-proclaimed mission in general, thus allowing the myth of American

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[11] The duration of the Vietnam tour was one year, except for the Marines, who, "still making a point of their willingness to suffer more and longer than anyone else, did it in months and added one for bad luck: thirteen" (Beidler 1982, 7).

[12] Paul Fussell's WWI-era analysis of this three-part coming-of-age war story likens it to the formula of traditional romances, which were similarly centered around a quest; the parts recognized by Fussell were "preparation", "the unmanning experience of battle", and, finally, "consideration, meditation, and reconstruction" (130). The main difference is in the third stage, the older model suggesting the sort of psychological healing generally not available for the Vietnam veteran.

exceptionalism and heroism to survive (21-22). By tying the realistic Vietnam novel to such uncritical attitudes toward the state and the self, Ringnalda does a disservice to many veteran writers. If the coming-of-age quality of Vietnam War novels and autobiographies is endlessly repeated, the phenomenon is perhaps indicative of a continuing need to attempt to fit one's participation in the war into a larger frame of national politics/identities. The infantry troops who were shipped off to Vietnam and subsequently experienced combat did undergo the same physical and psychological transformation. Lacking in sense (and, indeed, sanity) as their experience in Vietnam may have been, the attempt to detail that experience in the simpler format of the Bildungsroman is perhaps no less than an endeavor to realize the events through words and eventually come to terms with them, either as the veteran author or the veteran reader. Moreover, in spite of their apparent "openness to traditional literary values" (Beidler 1982, 62), the literary works of Vietnam are, as mentioned above, always suspended somewhere between "experiential memory and imaginative invention" (ibid., 63).

Even the texts which seemingly recreate most closely the conventional narrative of the masculine quest, such as Webb's *Fields of Fire*, portray evolutions of the male identity which carry meanings about the inescapable ironies of war. Snake, excessively violent and unable to keep a job in the civilian world, volunteers for the Corps and ends up excelling as a Marine: "He had always fought, and now it was right to fight" (*Fields*, 21). Despite his crudity and bravado, Snake is portrayed as a strikingly tragic character, finally finding a place in which to function as an equal of other men, only to be consumed as one of the many arbitrary sacrifices of the war, saving the life of a comrade he has disliked throughout his tour. Snake's platoon commander, Lieutenant Robert E. Lee Hodges, for all his well-meaning earnestness and genuine desire to do well by his country and his men, is equally unable to evade irony, from his very name which invokes a whole history of American warfare and loss, to his death mere moments after witnessing Snake's, when, staring at "the [bullet] holes that filled the weather-beaten flak jacket[…] for the first time his own death seemed logical" (405). Additionally, what the critics who view *Fields of Fire* as reinforcement of

the uncritical warrior masculinities that reigned prior to the American defeat in Vietnam have perhaps not taken into account is the fact that the novel was written largely as a deliberate counter(re)action to the liberal elitist opinion which alternatively scorned or ignored the returning veteran (Ricks, 134-6; Herzog, 110-1), and was conceived parallel to the larger process of reforming the Marine Corps and restoring a sense of pride in the service post-Vietnam (Ricks, 138-9).[13]

Placed opposite the conventional war story are the texts which make the complete stylistic and structural shift into postmodernism. The most successful Vietnam novels, Ringnalda contends, are those "guerilla" texts which "are conceived and written the way VC fought—in the jungle, off the main, well-traveled roads" (35). The darkness and impenetrability of the bush make for a compelling metaphor for the foggy, fragmented experience of the war as well as the darkness of the (American) mental journey through this landscape that is at once a concrete physical struggle, a site for mythic reinscription, and, finally, an ontological quagmire of political, military and social conflict. Myers, likewise, deems that the most successful war literatures are produced through novel approaches to language/writing, creating "a fully realized metalanguage of warfare. […] To respond adequately to the leveling process of popular myth and official reification, the novelist must light out for new aesthetic territory and begin anew" (13). These features are all encompassed by Herr's *Dispatches* which reveals not only "the wilderness for a marching civilization" but also "the murky ambiguities of a wilderness interior to the civilization itself" (Hellman, 159).

Approaching the issue from a different direction, Susan Jeffords, whose major study (1989) posits gender as the overarching theme and strategy in the texts of the War, "the matrix through which Vietnam is read, interpreted, and reframed in dominant American culture" (53), challenges the possibility of representation altogether: hindered by the imperfect capability to understand the experience, what the author ultimately can offer is "not an incoherent object, but a

[13] Also keeping in mind his post as Reagan's Navy Secretary, it is safe to say that Webb's novels have had a more explicitly political agenda than many other veteran writers. Of his post-war identification as Republican he says, "[t]here were a lot of people, like myself, who got really disillusioned by the Democratic Party getting away from its message of taking care of working people, and becoming the anti-military party rather than the antiwar party" (Boyer, 2008). For Webb's cultural revision, see Beidler 1991, 63-5.

confused subject" (22). According to Jeffords, the frequently fragmentary, "snapshot" style of narration "creates the appearance of a whole as if these disparate pieces all fit together as a unit" and *falsely* implies the collectivity of the Vietnam experience (25). However, one might argue that this is precisely the nature of this war, and wars in general: the mind's eye cannot view the vastness of the experience as a linear progression, causing memory and perception to jump and stop.[14] The collective memory/experience of the Vietnam War is thus largely characterized by the fractured portrayal of the absurd.

2.2. Living Up to It: JFK, the "Duke", and the Kids Shipped Off to Nam

The generation coming of age during the early stages of the Vietnam War carried metaphysical burdens before ever hoisting their combat gear, as it was expected they would rise to the challenges posed by historical examples, familial affiliation, cultural images, and the American masculine identity. Caught between the "heroic portrayals of the Old West and World War II" and a lifetime of reaping the benefits of the prosperous post-war society (Hellman, 71-72), these adolescents would eventually be divided into draft-dodgers, antiwar activists, conscientious objectors, and those who went to Vietnam, having either bought into the excitement linking war with manhood and adventure, or to appease their parents and communities, their government, or their conscience. John F. Kennedy's stirring insistence to ask "not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country," went to the heart of the matter, succeeding in rebreathing life into a lagging tradition of discipline and sacrifice.

In the wake of the celebration of the then-perceived "Good Fight," i.e. the Second World War's Allied victory in the theaters of war in Europe and in the Pacific, there reigned a sense of political and military superiority in America, and the nation's political leadership was at the forefront of the search for a new American mission, grasping at the chance to prove the generation's ability to follow in the footsteps of its fathers; "taking American life, which had grown too

[14] In 2009, Finkel recounts the same phenomenon: "the war, the battles, the gunfights, the explosions, the events, had finally become a blur. Is war supposed to be linear? The movement from point A to point B? The odyssey from there to here? Because this wasn't any of that anymore. The blur was the linear becoming the circular" (255).

materialistic and complacent, and giving it a new and grander mission" (Halberstam, 41). The French defeat and withdrawal from Vietnam in 1954 presented this opportunity.

Beyond the political tasking of fighting Communism was another, weighty goal of recording the next chapter in the book of American exceptionalism embodied by the "City upon a Hill" imagery. Vietnam was adopted as the new frontier[15], offering America the possibility of fulfilling its "traditional purpose" of "the preservation and extension of liberty" (Hellman, 43); the Green Berets "were real men going into a real country, but they were also symbolic heroes entering a symbolic landscape" (ibid., 38). The manifold political dreams saw this new "Indian Country" as a chance for redemption: this time, instead of exploiting and massacring ethnic minorities, as it had in the past, the US would fulfill its manifest destiny and defeat Communism, and accomplish this by working together with the South Vietnamese—even if the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) were no Americans where soldiership was concerned.[16] In addition, upstaging the beaten Frenchmen would undoubtedly only enrich the feeling of success.[17]

Kennedy's renowned love-affair with the mythology of the Green Berets resulted in the sending of four hundred Special Forces soldiers into South Vietnam in May 1961, ostensibly in the role of advisors. In literary texts, the hazy period of the early 1960s was viewed as "spookwar" and "adventure" in which the Special Forces possessed a unique position, being "not exactly soldiers, not even advisors yet, but Irregulars [*sic*], working in remote places under little direct authority, acting out their fantasies with more freedom than most men ever know" (*Dispatches*, 50). Through the escalation of the war and the loss of the fantasy, the masculine ideal was to fade into

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[15] Another reason for the eagerness of the political/military elite was what one might term the opportunity to play war games. This was the era of the birth of new counterinsurgency theories, thus far only formulated on paper, and Vietnam was the perfect place to test them (Halberstam, 42).

[16] "Despite more than $1,65 billion in American military aid between 1955 and mid-1961 and the supposed guidance of a 650-man training mission for most of those years[…] few of the regulars or territorials [of the South Vietnamese troops] knew how to adjust the sights of their rifles and carbines well enough to hit a target, let alone a guerrilla" (Sheehan, 55). Equally frustrating to the Americans were the shared ambush patrols where it occasionally seemed the South Vietnamese soldiers were deliberately giving away the patrol's position by making noise in order to avoid engagements with the VietCong (ibid., 57).

[17] Perhaps even more so than the Vietnamese, the French are at the bottom of every joke; their military failure aside, the traditional ethnic stereotype portrays them as a nation of effeminate cowards. Herr capitalizes on this by describing how a journalist might identify himself to avoid conflict: "The only Vietnamese many of us knew was the words 'Bao Chi! Bao Chi!'—Journalist! Journalist! or even 'Bao Chi Fap!'—French Journalist!, which was the same as crying, Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" (135)

nostalgia, "all the promise of good service on the New Frontier either gone or surviving like the vaguest salvages of a dream, still in love with their dead leader, blown away in his prime and theirs" (ibid., 52).

Kennedy, the New Frontier rhetoric, and the ideals of heroic masculinity embodied by the "Greenies" functioned to convince the ordinary all-American boy to join the adventure, and all these initial motivations turned into contested ideals upon the entry into the war. Similarly, the star of the Western and the WWII movie, John Wayne, "the romantic hero, the apotheosis of the GI" (Casaregola, 4), would become a gun-slinging stereotype, then a "syndrome" and, eventually, a warning example. The taste for cinematic masculinities was lost as it became clear that the better part of valor was doing what had to be done and no more. Apace, the cult(ure) of heroism was subverted and rejected, as exemplified by Dosier's reaction in *Close Quarters* (1977) when his Lieutenant comes to inquire about the specifics of the kill that occurred during an ambush:

> [The LT] wants to talk about the body count. Yes, sir, hand to hand. He says something about a Bronze Star. No, sir; no, thank you. Fuck a Bronze Star, sir. (76)

While this psychological transformation toward reserved, pragmatic masculinities characterized the experience of the majority of the troops, it was the stereotypic John Wayne parody which frequently governed the public consciousness, thus distorting the image of the war and exacerbating the problems in civilian/military relations as well as veteran affairs back in the States.

Yet prior to this disillusionment stage, the GIs were the object of a conditioning process that facilitated and encouraged the aspirations for ideal-heroic masculinity. This process is summarized in the next section.

2.2.1. Building Men

Connell's theory on hegemonic masculinity explores the features of the ideal masculine identity men are expected to aspire to. Essential to his concept of hegemony is the subjugation by those of superior masculine standing over women and "subordinated" masculinities (1987, 183) as well as the distinction that, rather than representing the reality of the majority of men, hegemonic

masculinity instead articulates the elevated status of such "fantasy figures" as John Wayne, Sylvester Stallone, or sports heroes, all considered by the society at large to be embodiments of the true masculine character (ibid., 184-5).

The principles of idealized masculinity have been especially valuable for militaries in creating and managing their troops. The mythos surrounding heroic masculinities has long been utilized in recruitment campaigns, as in the First World War posters proclaiming, "The United States Army Builds *MEN*" (Connell 1995, 213).[18] The association between the Soldier and the hero is traceable back to tribal practices of chosen men protecting the community, acting as symbols of bravery, resoluteness and responsibility (Gerzon, 30-31). In contemporary militaries, the rigors of training are made attractive through the conditioning process that posits military service as the link to these long-standing ideals of heroism and self-improvement, suggesting that military men embody a fuller, more organic masculinity which recognizes even pain and hardship as naturalized, as "militarism feeds into ideologies of masculinity through the eroticization of stoicism, risk-taking, and even lethal violence" (Hopton, 113).

Significant in this process of creating masculinities is the fact that the male sex are expected to struggle through violent rites of passage (Jokinen, 68-9), that they "must take actions, undergo ordeals, or pass tests in order to *become* men" (Goldstein, 264). Military masculinities in particular are not conferred instantly upon one's entry to the institution. Drawing on examples from the British Army, Hockey discusses a training tactic equally relevant to the U.S. military: the linking of infantry masculinity to maleness in its purest form. At the onset, it is heavily stressed to the recruits that they "do not have the *right* to be infantrymen, that in effect they have to earn that status" (16). The obstruction of inclusion into the elite warrior caste is done by delegating the recruits into the position of "boys" as opposed to men, thus ensuring that they will readily endure the hard physical and psychological training and, at the time of war, be willing to substantiate their

[18] To highlight the evolution in the utilization of concepts of ideal masculinity, one might compare this WWI example with the recruiting catchphrase employed by the USMC in the first decade of the twenty-first century: "We don't accept applications—only commitments." Differing also from the other branches of the US military, this approach is recognizable as one of the central characteristics of the Corps which, instead of offering material benefits, emphasizes challenge and the exclusiveness of the service (Brown, 72; see also Shapiro, 107, 110-1).

claim to masculinity by fighting and risking their lives in combat. The recruits are expected to learn to overcome the limits of their bodies and to build up the psychological barriers necessary for ignoring physical discomfort or outright pain, as stoicism is frequently considered one of the foremost signs of being a real man (ibid., 16-7).

In addition to the physical hardships, the training at boot camp is as much a mental process. Undoubtedly familiar to mass audiences from *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) is the image of the drill instructor (DI) ridiculing the recruits as "ladies" and "faggots". According to Phillips, such customs confirm that "[w]omen are the lowest of the low, and military men are taught not only to look down on them but also to worry that they themselves might stand revealed as permanent 'ladies'" (2006, 131). The implied misogynist or anti-gay attitudes have been widely employed as one of the supreme examples of problems within the military institution. One might wonder if, succeeding the recent social changes inside the military and the repeal of the DADT policy, some of these verbal tactics might be becoming obsolete; and yet the derogatory language favored by DIs and, post-boot camp, senior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) has never limited itself to sex and gender. Moreover, the point of such exercise has never been genuine inference of an individual's sexual orientation or outward appearance as much as a classic role play in which both the DI and the recruit have been more or less complicit. Lt. Col. Grossman identifies the use of verbal abuse to be a part of the psychological preparation of the future combat troops for encountering the hostility and lethal intent of the enemy; the crudity of insults functions as inoculation against what Grossman has termed "Wind of Hate", the seemingly personal enmity emanating from the enemy, which can in unprepared troops cause "shock, surprise and outrage" to detrimental effect, even compromising the ability to continue fighting (79-82). Additionally, as I shall argue in more detail below, the use of harsh language forms a part of the linguistic gender performance enacted by the military male, and frequently covers a variety of contradictory or veiled meanings.

The conventional gender dichotomies do remain central to the training process, as the employment of polarized gender attributes in role models and fantasy figures directs the recruits to

prove themselves as men/warriors: paradoxically, the process is largely applicable to women as well, who military service potentially compels to assume a partially masculine identity—one need only think of the movie *G.I. Jane* (1997) in which the protagonist, played by Demi Moore, enrolls in Navy SEAL training and outwardly, with her shaved head and well-defined musculature, embraces the most obvious requirements of physical masculinity, while her resoluteness eventually opens up a space into the bastion of male brotherhood. This gender performance exemplifies how, in the military setting, masculinity may refer not only to the way standards of maleness are superimposed onto the male body and psyche but how the same conditions are assumed by the female military body. Consequently, the term describes less an individual's biological reality than their ontological subscribing to the values of the military gender, such as capability, strength and resilience.

Traditionally, the dichotomies have had their basis in the sex-role theory and character opposites, according to which "men are supposed to be aggressive tough-minded, taciturn, rational, analytic, and promiscuous" (Connell 2002, 49). From binaries such as hard/soft and cold/caring, the side associated with masculine conduct is preferred, as Phillips notes (2006, 175), although, as we will see below, there are exceptions to the rule. Kovitz likewise offers a set of antonyms, the masculine being articulated, for instance, on the concepts "death", "war", and "strong", while the feminine embodies their opposites (6). Societies in general have conventionally associated attributes such as logic, detachment, composure and courage with male conduct, while women are considered to represent their more emotional counterparts. What the analysis in Chapter 3 will seek to demonstrate is the subversion of these default positions in several Vietnam War texts.

2.2.2. Masculinities in Transition

Ideal forms of masculinity have some of their oldest counterparts in the European tradition of knighthood and the warriors of Ancient Greece, but Mosse recognizes the roots of the modern masculinity paradigm in the era of the Napoleonic Wars (109). The formation of the kind of archetypal masculinity that is recognized by our contemporary society goes back to the rise of the

bourgeois in the late eighteenth century, although earlier models of manhood are central to the modern ideal as well (ibid., 17). The same time period can be traced as the origin of many of the tools used to create militarized and institutionalized masculinities:

> By the late eighteenth century, the soldier has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit. (Foucault, 135)

Foucault develops this idea further into the description of "docile bodies" produced by the conditioning progress, beginning as the "human body [enters] a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it", resulting in a closed circuit of obedience on the part of the soldier-individual and the subsequent gains to the controlling institutional body (ibid., 138).

The ideas introduced thus far all emphasize the institutional processes that seek to transform ordinary civilian males into identical parts of the greater war machine by methods varying from persuasion, coercion and compulsion, to physical training and psycho-social conditioning. These tactics, it could be argued, act as proof against the alleged links between men and institutionalized violence:

> Contrary to the idea that war thrills men, expresses innate masculinity, or gives men a fulfilling occupation, all evidence indicates that war is something that societies impose on men, who most often need to be dragged kicking and screaming into it, constantly brainwashed and disciplined once there, and rewarded and honored afterwards. (Goldstein, 253)

Although an important point to acknowledge, taking such an argument as literal truth would be unrepresentative of the whole picture. The conditioning process functions so as to facilitate psychological identification with the military cult(ure) and the realization of the male bonding phenomenon[19], and through the attachment to the military community the majority of men discover a certain pleasure in the martial performance. These two viewpoints are not mutually exclusive, but rather describe ideologies which govern the same military body at separate moments. As the Vietnam War stories discussed below will show, the masculinities depicted therein are dynamic,

[19] In his important work, Tiger determines male bonding to be simultaneously the prerequisite and the consequence of aggression and violence (218), a kind of military ouroboros.

contradictory, and often chaotic, moving back and forth between highly contrary mental states: the GI routinely expresses both support and opposition to the armed forces that constructed him, dissent and assent to the political agenda which sent him into Vietnam, and love and hate for the war he is fighting.

Crucial to the argument I will be making in the sections on war literatures below is the present-day acknowledgement of the multiplicity of masculinities. Following the gender movements of the 1970s and 1980s, which included widespread male participation in the collective attempt to redefine and reinvent masculinity (Connell 1995, 206-7), alternative interpretations of (masculine) gender performance and identification have come to the fore. In military setting, the change is perhaps less radical, but it is undoubtedly present. Hockey's argument reshapes masculinity as a "context-dependent construct" (22) which does also allow for behaviors that might in different circumstances be considered "feminine and therefore weak" (23)—for instance, expressions of grief succeeding the loss of a comrade. This new view in masculinity studies directly contests the traditional perception of ideal masculinities as unemotional and uncompromising. This traditional model (which endured well into the beginning of the 20th century) subscribed to the belief that "the aesthetic of masculinity was hard, stoic, and resolute. Passions had to be kept under control", up to and including the repression of tears even for the fallen brothers-in-arms (Mosse, 111). Goldstein concurs:

> If a man is to carry out manly deeds, he cannot be slowed down by taking the time to psychologically heal himself after the terrible things he has witnessed and endured. He must strap down his armor and press on, willing debilitating emotions out of his mind. (267)

Contrary to these conventional formulations, it has, after the Great War, become infinitely more acceptable to display anguish. Tears and momentary emotional collapse do not automatically undermine one's masculinity provided one can pick oneself up afterwards and continue as a reliable member of the unit, as it is the return to duty which "reaffirms masculine identity and subcultural acceptance" (Hockey, 24).

A final relevant theory for the arguments developed in the later sections is the "new Man Dance masculinity discourse", a concept coined by Boyle, defined as "the self-conscious enactment of gender from among a variety of masculinities. The Vietnam War era provided alternatives to the One True Way of being masculine, to the notion that a male body should behave in prescribed masculine ways" (4). The theory is formulated on the recognition that the Vietnam narratives do not, in fact, exemplify the expected models of the American mythos of manhood: "Rather than providing conditions to secure masculinity as a singular state, [the War's] narratives instead repeatedly and without apology fracture and multiply the ways in which masculinity can be manifest (ibid.).

The term "Man Dance" itself originates in a contemporary real life example, borrowed from a comment made by a retired senior officer working the private sector in Iraq in 2004, according to whom the "man dance" is the initial face-off between two men who size each other up, "like dogs sniffin' one another" (Boyle, 5). The paradigm is undoubtedly a natural part of the narratives of the 21st century wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as masculinity performances are now enacted by military bodies fully conscious of their nature as posturing behavior. The roots of this evolution, however, are in the Vietnam War narratives.

2.3. Gender, Race and Vietnam

The conventional view posits war as an exclusively male endeavor. To go very deep into the gender politics regarding war and militaries would be entirely outside the scope of this work; moreover, the matter of biology and social convention has been comprehensively attended to by Goldstein (128-182), by whose resulting observations a number of the supposedly masculine physical attributes which have traditionally been perceived as innately linked to the practice of war have been deconstructed, as "none of the gender differences arising from biology is sufficient to explain the puzzle of gendered war roles" (182). The example of *G.I. Jane* above, while taken from popular culture, coincides with Goldstein's assertion that the matter of genetics, size, strength, and male/female hormones offers only partial grounds for the gender division; furthermore, even

"*[m]ale bonding* turns out to be generic bonding in an all-male setting, and is accessible to women in mixed-gender settings" (407).

Female warriors, however, remain in the minority, and more frequently the critical attention is directed to the scrutiny of the patriarchal structures attendant on war and militaries as they appear on levels of language, oppression, and exploitation, as well as the consequences of warfare on the female civilian through rape, violence, and economic/social losses. Chief among the feminist criticisms of the Vietnam War, Jeffords's 1989 manifesto concentrates on the polarized relationship between the sexes and the consequent feminization of the loss of the War in order for a "regenerated" masculinity to grow out of the wreckage (135, 146).

In studying the links between gender and war, women and non-white males are commonly posited as victims of normative masculinity. In literatures of Vietnam, it is clear that of the levels of interactions and relations portrayed, several deal with issues of dominance/submission. The American actions in Southeast Asia have been accused of colonialism, imperialism, racism, misogyny, xenophobia, and, occasionally, of nothing less than genocide. Furthermore, the reported problems with gender and race do not limit themselves to the American conduct in relation to the Vietnamese, but appear as a fundamental part of the American military institution through the lingering black/white frictions following desegregation on one hand, and the alleged male dominance over women on the other.

2.3.1. The Feminine as Victim/Enemy

Vietnamese women in the narratives of the war most frequently appear as the peasants the GIs encounter, and are habitually perceived as uncooperative at best and as VietCong sympathizers at worst. Similarly, the native women working in Saigon or other cities, or around military bases, are regularly accused of or proven to be working as spies for the enemy. The lines of definition blur: the women holding service jobs are considered to be synonymous with sex-workers by the masculine outsider, and albeit the assumption does not always prove correct, on the occasions it does the women are further devalued for their "mercenary" characteristics: billing the transaction

even while they are unresponsive and cold in bed (Just, 19). An even more extreme view is visible in the myth about the Vietnamese women in popular R&R locations, the warning commonly relayed by the veterans in the unit to the fresh arrivals, who are cautioned "to watch for the ones with razor blades in their vaginas – communist agents" (*If I Die*, 107). This persistent legend explicitly articulates the Freudian castration anxiety which is already omnipresent in combat narratives through the constant, vague fear of the ultimate wound—shrapnel in the groin area—and is now transformed into a subconscious rejection of the ethnic, political, and sexual Other.

Such warnings share ground with Jeffords's articulation of the presence of "an enemy feminine" (1989, 171) that the American GI as the vessel of the traditional masculinity fights against. This dichotomy, Jeffords argues, is imbued in all Vietnam representations, one of the most unambiguous examples being the case of the female sniper in *Full-Metal Jacket*. However, instead of viewing the female VC as embodiment of the male fear over the loss of masculine dominance, it is possible to read the scene as an example of the masculine confusion on the intersecting characteristics of gender and politics. An enemy feminine—itself an oxymoron when viewed against the historical continuum in which war-time femininity has occupied the place of symbolic reproduction and regrowth and thus existed as separate from the killing—places the American GI in the difficult position of choosing between instincts for destruction and preservation.

Yet the woman in question has deliberately embarked on the road governed by the rules of combat: by asking the Americans to shoot her after she has been fatally injured, she enters that traditionally male mythology of heroism which adheres to the expectation for the warrior to "return with your shield or on it"[20]. Elsewhere in the Vietnam narratives as well, the reluctance of the Americans to engage women in conflict is clearly expressed. The remorse of an anonymous GI after shooting a woman wearing a NVA uniform would undoubtedly not have materialized had the victim been male: "Didn't know she was a woman, she just looked like any dink. God, she must hurt" (*If I Die*, 116-7).

[20] The exaltation was used by Spartan mothers to send their sons into battle circa 2,500 years ago, which exemplifies the longevity and resilience of such masculine ideals; incidentally, "Spartan" manners are to this day associated with good soldiership, meaning one who conducts himself with hardness and discipline.

At other times, however, the female enemy is punished more severely than the male counterpart, as brutally exemplified by the gang rape of the female VC in *Paco's Story* (1987). Here, the violation is deliberate, and guilt and shame surface only afterwards: "We looked at her and at ourselves, drawing breath again and again, and knew that this was a moment of evil, that we would never live the same" (184). Similar to the debate about American atrocities, exemplified by events such as My Lai, it must be acknowledged that the conduct of the GIs was not uniform in Vietnam; moreover, one GI could, during his deployment, commit acts of both terror and exceptional kindness toward the natives; and, indeed, many of the veterans interviewed later on have professed "profound love" for the Vietnamese people/culture (Grossman, 163). The Vietnam narrative, individually and collectively, is contradictory and ambiguous, mirroring the experience itself.

Conversely, Western women are mostly absent from these texts, appearing as nurses or aid workers or the occasional expatriate—and peripherally as the subjects of photographs, stories, and dreams about "the World". Herr's assessment, on one of the few occasions he makes any reference to women at all, is definitive: "Very few of the women really liked Saigon, and the rest became like most Western women in Asia: bored, distracted, frightened, unhappy and, if left there too long, fiercely frantic" (233). The appraisal carries, unluckily, implications of the outdated notion of the "hysterical" female. Another notable, though no more flattering mention of women is found in Herr's description of the correspondents sharing "great many things," including girls (226). For a representative of the supposedly liberal and forward-thinking Western media this is by no means an indicator of particular progressiveness or gender-equality. Yet it is endemic in war literatures, and the pervasive, near-unanimous male perspective which is their primary voice, that women be reduced to little more than flesh; and in this, too, Herr implies outlying membership of the military-masculine experience of Vietnam. The need to distance and distract oneself through external stimulation is conveyed, for instance, by the interior decoration of the track[21] to which

[21] Vietnam idiom; an armored personnel carrier.

Dosier is assigned upon his arrival, "decorated with tits and thighs cut from magazines and covered with acetate and green cloth tape" (*Close Quarters*, 15).

In *Remasculinization*, Jeffords argues that the Vietnam War discourse caused the masculine and the feminine to become increasingly exclusionary (185-6). Having written her notable study in the late 1980s, these conclusions perhaps reflect an incomplete picture of the larger effect Vietnam was to have on society, gender politics, and subsequent literatures. The absence of women from the collectivity of the experience that Jeffords criticizes (1989, 59) was to be at least partly corrected later on in the joyously pro-feminist O'Brien narrative "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" (1990) which will be studied below in the section on Vietnam legends and myths.

2.3.2. The Vietnamese and the Americans

If the Vietnamese women are portrayed as calculating, so the Vietnamese politics are described as "labyrinthine" (Just, 30) and honesty as "a state so rare […] that it was a real credit" when found in Vietnamese officials (ibid., 56). The consequences of the rapidly shifting power relations in Vietnamese politics reverberated to the States, as Lyndon Johnson's exclamation, "no more of this coup shit", would have us know: "He couldn't sell this war if they were going to play musical chairs" (Halberstam, 352).

These assessments bring forth an unmistakable echo of the stereotype of the "crooked" Oriental. In a chilling reversal from the texts of those American critics who judged the war in Vietnam as the epitome of chaos, confusion and senselessness, Just contrasts the actuality of the physical fighting with the larger insanity of bureaucracy, a wholly separate war that was being fought simultaneously:

> If Saigon was unreal, then the war must be real. The part of Vietnam that was straight and without corkscrews was the shooting war. It was the only part of it that made sense without qualifications. *All of the arguments and the doubts became irrelevant when men fought to survive*. (Just, 22, emphasis mine)

Although highly evocative of the romanticized view of war and male destiny, the juxtaposition nonetheless is not untruthful of the perspective of the ordinary GI following orders. For the troops,

the politics were largely irrelevant. Whereas it has been ordinary practice throughout military history for national armies to justify their wars by asserting "cultural distance" from their enemy, in Vietnam America's allies and enemies looked the same, making it imperative to emphasize the "moral distance" instead: the equation of the enemy with Communism (Grossman, 162). In reality, however, as mentioned above, the South Vietnamese ally was hardly valued or considered a dependable comrade, as evidenced by the circulating joke, "What you do is, you load all the Friendlies onto ships and take them out to the South China Sea. Then you bomb the country flat. Then you sink the ships" (*Dispatches*, 59).

The Green Berets were possibly the closest the Americans came to embracing the Vietnamese culture. Through the dual nature demanded by their mission, the Special Forces soldiers fused two opposites: "Hunter at the wooded edge of civilization, builder and teacher in the pastoral landscapes behind" (Hellman, 47-8). As the teacher-hunters, medic-destroyers, these men with their exceptional training were expected to procure a swift end to the conflict while living and working alongside their Oriental counterparts, espousing their traditions and learning their language and culture. However, the Greenies were most strongly associated with the early period in the war, and the majority of the troops who found themselves in-country post-Gulf of Tonkin Resolution[22] were ordinary grunts who moved around too much to form ties with the villagers. Attitudes toward the Vietnamese peasantry varied between cautious neutrality and aggressive suspicion. Crudely put, the harshest end of the spectrum was formed by the subscription to "the TOG rule. TOG: They're Only Gooks" (Beidler 1982, 67). This exceedingly callous mentality surfaces frequently in Vietnam narratives, either as verbal bravado or as the bitter outcome of months in the bush witnessing the growing numbers of casualties. The perceived difference between the worth of a Vietnamese and an American life is personified by a single off-hand admission by a Marine interviewed in the Morley

[22] In August 1964, North Vietnamese gunboats reportedly attacked two US destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin; although the attacks would later be widely questioned (Hammond, 28-9), the incident allowed President Johnson to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution virtually unopposed in the Senate, effectively leading to the escalation of the US participation in the conflict (Halberstam, 419) .

Safer report on Cam Ne, "I don't like to see a fellow marine […] as much as scratched over here in this country" (quoted in Hammond, 59).

From a less often considered point of view, Sheehan points out the culpability of the upper levels of command for such attitudes, and their coalescing in the PR nightmare that would become the single most damaging imagery of the War:

> The soldier and the junior officer observed the lack of regard his superiors had for the Vietnamese. The value of Vietnamese life was systematically cheapened in his mind. Further brutalized by the cycle of meaningless violence that was Westmoreland's war of attrition, and full of hatred because his comrades were so often killed and wounded by mines and booby traps set by the local guerrillas and the peasants who helped them, he naturally came to see all Vietnamese of the countryside as vermin to be exterminated. The massacre at Son My was inevitable. (690)

Yet if the Vietnamese lives were cheap, so were American: what is ironic about the acronym 'TOG' is that it could as easily be used to spell another ideology—they're only grunts—which, for the infantryman, frequently seemed to be the grand strategic plan of the senior U.S. officers: sending out units without clear objectives, resulting in high numbers of casualties and the increasing jadedness of the GI toward the command structure.

As one of the most frequent shortcomings of the Vietnam War texts Myers pinpoints the privileging of the American experience at the expense of the Vietnamese one, manifest in the lack of fully fleshed out native characters (50). Undoubtedly, the representation of the Vietnamese in the majority of the Vietnam novels falls into the stereotypical categories of peasantry or enemy troops. South Vietnamese soldiers are all but invisible, and when appearing in the text, their difference from American soldiers is frequently and explicitly articulated through judgments of effeminacy, cowardice or incompetence. Arguably, the American GIs are the only fully-fledged characters—complete human constructions not only by virtue of their traditional-ideal masculinities but through their identification as Americans/Westerners. They are politically and economically set in the contemporary time, whereas the Vietnamese are a reflection of some by-gone, tribal culture; their Orientalist difference not only sets them apart through their language and foreign customs but explicitly diminishes their humanity, transforming them into opaque, primordial ghosts. One of the

most well-known metaphors for the American experience of Vietnam is that of the obsolete map and the subsequent lack of referentiality:

> 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[…] It was late '67 now, even the most detailed maps didn't reveal much anymore; reading them was like trying to read the faces of the Vietnamese, and that was like trying to read the wind. (*Dispatches*, 3)

In the absence of deeper recognition, what forms the basis of American-authored Vietnam texts is a certain degree of caricature, a uniformizing of the Vietnamese. There are exceptions which offer a more multifaceted picture of the people; yet even such narratives as Jack Fuller's *Fragments* (1984), lauded by Myers as a "more fully realized realistic parable, a book that seeks both personal and natural closure" (41), which functions as much as a tragic love story as a war story, eventually demonstrates only the incompatibility of the American-Vietnamese cultural experience.

Ironically, the literary positions which most honestly represent the Vietnamese are the moments of epiphanies articulating the GI's identification with the enemy fighter. Being the ones constantly sharing the physical discomfort and the mortal danger in the bush, the foot soldiers on both sides potentially relate more easily to their immediate enemy-counterparts than to their command or, in the case of the American GIs, even to their fellow soldiers in the rear. Webb recreates the moral confusion and ambiguity of following senseless orders in a senseless war:

> We're a floating islet waiting to be killed just because Those Bastards think we should be killed so they can have more bodies on their tote boards when the React pulls us out from where we never should have had to go. Those Bastards sit somewhere with air conditioners around them and Coca-Cola inside them while we drink this goddamn wormy water. We're closer to being gooks than we are to being Them and yet here we are wanting to kill gooks[…] (*Fields*, 178)

Similar sentiments are expressed by Caputo:

> [W]e were becoming more and more like our enemy. […] We endured common miseries. In fact, we had more in common with the Viet Cong than we did with that army of clerks and staff officers in the rear. (*Rumor*, 276-7)

In most cases, such instances of relating with the enemy are fleeting, but serve to exemplify the grounds on which the GI shapes his judgments of others. Whereas the violent hatred for "the gooks" becomes personal as often as not, largely brought about by the brutality of the guerilla tactics

employed by the VC, the bitterness directed toward inept officers, superfluous journalists, and rear personnel can grow equally vicious. Front-line grunts are separated from their POG brothers[23] through the difference in military occupational specialties (MOS) which guarantees others a safe posting, while for the rest the time spent in the bush equals a decade of psychological transformation and distance, leading to the strengthening of bonds in combat outfits in a way that does not occur in rear units.

The difference between the rear and field troops is also relevant to the issue of racism inside the American military. On the whole, Boyle expresses concern about the invisibility of the black experience of the Vietnam War, as the lack of texts written by blacks leads to a "whitening" of the narrative perspectives (23-4). Although racial tensions existed in the war, the disproportionality is perhaps less an intentional attempt to "universalize" the war effort into one defined by the whites and more a kind of color blindness experienced by the veteran-author—namely, the tendency to perceive and value fellow grunts on the basis of their competence alone. What is plain in a number of Vietnam texts is that the brotherhood shaped by the circumstances largely surpasses issues of race: "Though divided by social background and politics, late adolescent males shared a common sex and a common need to define themselves as men" (Graham, 30). Moreover, the institutionalized promise of masculinity which contributed to the white adolescent males' fervor to prove themselves worked doubly well for the blacks: "The U.S. military was selling manhood during the Vietnam War, and African American men were eager to buy" (ibid., 15). Furthermore, there was something of the choice between the proverbial rock and a hard place in the black males' willingness to enlist:

> Although the military's reputation as a model of successful integration was overstated, it nonetheless functioned as an imperfect refuge from racism that shielded African American men from many of the offensive racial indignities of black life in America. For the first time in their lives, many African American GIs experienced meaningful equality and male power. (Graham, 23)

[23] POG: Persons Other than Grunts. Cheerfully also referred to as REMFs (rear-echelon-motherfuckers) by infantry troops.

This is the space in which the majority of the Vietnam narratives operate; the war as both an action and a location, with the laws of the jungle referring not only to the transformation of the participants into some state closer to the primal, but the dismissal of the emphasis on one's socio-economic status. In the bush, the soldiers operate on loyalties born from shared circumstances, not formed on the basis of skin color.

Herr, writing through the doubly distancing position of being both a reporter and a non-combatant, does make a point of mentioning the race of the men he is talking to even when he says little else of their physical appearance. In one instant Herr describes Day Tripper, who is black, jokily excusing the behavior of his white friend to Herr by saying, "Don't pay no attention to him[…] That's Mayhew. He's a crazy fucker, ain't you, Mayhew?" (116) Certainly there is no sign of any racial tension between the two; on the contrary, the men seem extremely close, enough so that when Mayhew decides to extend his tour, Day Tripper is first alarmed, then livid (130-1). By recording this exchange, Herr seems to be making a point about the realities of life in the line companies. While the desegregation was a relatively new phenomenon and racial tensions admittedly existed in the rear, the combat narratives describe a different reality—suggesting that the bonds forged in the bush supersede most pre-war anxieties, including diffidence about race. Instead, race becomes another subject to be poked fun at, such as in the exchange that takes place after the platoon taking fire: "No casualties?" "No, sir. Because I'm black, the shells couldn't see me" (*Rumor*, 273).

Furthermore, what is frequently suggested by black characters in the military setting is that even potentially racist conditions can be supplanted through competence: "Only thing you can do is be so goddamn *good* that it doan' matter" (*Fields*, 378).[24] Another point of view is the simple gravity of shared circumstances and the ability of war to put things into perspective:

> "What about these Negro troopers?"
> "What do you mean, what about them?"

[24] While the US military still may not have achieved total psychological integration, following the increased professionalization of the military it is now taken as a given that interpersonal antagonism is set aside in favor of task-orientation and appreciation of mutual skill. As the only black soldier in a platoon puts it, "I don't need you to like me, but I need you to respect me. I need you to want to go to war with me" (Junger, 177).

> "Are they…? I mean, do they carry their own weight?"
> "How long have you been here?" Kohler asked dryly.
> "Two months."
> "Why don't you wait about six more. Nothing like long-term reality to rid us of our foolish little prejudices." (Glasser, 166)

For the purposes of my thesis, this is the position that will be taken as given, as few racial tensions are visible in the novels discussed below, and the issues of American masculinity are equally applicable to all ethnicities inside the group.

3. Nam: Masculinities Reversed/Reworked

In his 1982 article for *The Nation*, Peter Marin describes the in-group interactions of Vietnam veterans after the war:

> Whatever their behavior—and it is often skeptical, joking, an affectionate roughhousing—there remains an undercurrent of easygoing and generous concern, or care, or what one might even call (*how one hesitates to use the word*) love. (558, emphasis mine)

In comparison, in Lt. Campbell's memoir of his unit's deployment to Ramadi in 2004, the word *love* appears no less than four times in the first chapter alone, including the following lines:

> Day after unrelenting day bound our platoon tightly together, eventually creating a whole much greater than the sum of its parts, and we grew to love one another fiercely. (8)

Not only is there no hesitation about using the taboo word of verboten sensitivity, the sentiment is amplified by the qualifier *fiercely*, suggesting that an essential change in (military) masculinities has taken place in the +25 years since the fall of Saigon. While this change is partly attributable to the larger social movement of the 1970s which sought to augment the conventional male role with greater emotional freedoms (Connell 1995, 207), I argue that the multiplicity of the masculinities of the Vietnam War have been imperative in the process. There has been a lack of critical attention paid to the incarnations of masculinity which exist diametrically opposed to the prevailing image of the military male; as Boyle remarks, even though "Vietnam War narratives abound with multiple and complex formulations of masculinities, critics of Vietnam War representations in general have not scrutinized the monolithic conception of masculinity or recognized the development of the Man Dance masculinity" (14). The intentional production of gender according to a set of expected parameters, an idea that Boyle acknowledges is indebted to Judith Butler's seminal work, is here adjusted to the working of a specific sub-gender—the *military* gender—in accordance with the "internalized" expectations of the appearance of masculinity in a "war venue" (ibid., 9-10). By consciously acknowledging the masculine identity role expected of military men, the Vietnam GI brought about the contemporary practice of performing (military) gender with awareness of its nature as a context-dependent act (ibid., 4-5).

Marin's hesitation regarding the use of the word *love* can perhaps also be traced to the larger societal denial of the Vietnam War veterans' brotherhood. In a war widely condemned by the civilian public, there did not seem to be space (or permission) for verbalization of the bonds between military men that were uncontested for the veterans of the World Wars. Ascribed, firstly, to the fixed-length tour of duty that was introduced for Vietnam, and, secondly, to the rotation often beginning and ending in solitude, the strength of the troops' commitment both to the cause and to their comrades have been questioned (Herzog, 55; Grossman, 268-70). Whereas the imagery of the veterans of the World Wars is a heroic-idyllic picture of a tight- knit group facing adversity together from the first days of boot camp until the return home, the Vietnam veteran is seen as a reluctant, unyielding cog that the war machine sucks in when a part of it detaches, and eventually ejects in the same manner.

As Goldstein points out regarding the correlation between (male) bonding and dedication to the mission, it is the camaraderie which proves the deciding factor to keep on fighting, irrespective of the original reasons that have placed one in combat (195-6). Such ideas have been linked with men and warfare since before the Sacred Band of Thebes; in the American literary canon, the sentiment is poetically expressed early on by one of the classics of war literature:

> There was a consciousness always of the presence of his comrades about him. He felt the subtle battle brotherhood more potent even than the cause for which they were fighting. (Crane, 44)

While the bonds forged in boot camp or training remain both highly visible and durable in most nonfictional as well as fictional accounts of the war, the bonds formed later on during the deployment prove no less important. In socio-psychological studies, the debate over group cohesion has arrived at a standstill at the point of causality: while there is no consistent proof that group bonds engender high performance, success in combat does produce stronger unit identification (Kier, 12-13). In Vietnam narratives, this evolution can be observed in the way the replacements, the "fucking new guys" (FNGs), tend to become accepted/acknowledged as part of the platoon following the first firefight the group experiences together.

The "complex formulations" of military masculinities encompass characteristics both unexpected of and contrary to the average masculine gender performance. The traditionally perceived gender dichotomy undergoes a rewriting where attributes usually associated with the feminine become markers of the masculine Vietnam War experience. Carton's term "collectivist ontology" describes writing which

> involves partially articulated and understood allegiances, not to private experience or to the prevailing American models of political organization and male selfhood, but rather to an ideal of relational identity and to qualities and values—the life of the body, the expression of emotion, the acceptance and provision of nurturance—conventionally associated with and relegated to the feminine. (297)

The characteristics that are valued in the World—hardness, self-interest, ambition—are, in the military context, censured as betrayal of the unit. Close bonding and the providing of mutual support inside the group as and when needed are another phenomenon with its gender connotations reversed inside military culture:

> [I]n contrast to wider cultural norms, this protection and mutual cooperation is presented as thoroughly *masculine* conduct. If one is a real man, one protects one's mates even at the cost of considerable sacrifice […] to oneself. Failure to do so can bring formal organizational sanctions […] as well as informal subcultural ones. (Hockey, 18-9)

Placing one's comrades before oneself is exemplified in martial myths ("war stories") which form the oral exhibits of the ideals of military cult(ure), such as the story of the ultimate self-sacrifice, the throwing oneself on top of a grenade to save one's comrades.[25]

As mentioned above, there are sets of antonyms that are frequently listed in order to demonstrate the traditionally viewed gender divide, "such as war/peace, death/life, strong/weak, military/civilian, defenders/defended, friend/enemy, and uniformity/diversity" (Kovitz, 6). The stereotypical oppositions are applied by the military institution to instill a belief in the separate martial identity that both justifies the military's violent tasking and separates its executors from "civilian society" (ibid.). Of mental states like courage/fear, indifference/compassion,

[25] While often dismissed as fantasy without basis in reality, the legend and its emotional significance nevertheless persist to this day: "The starkest version of this commitment to the group is throwing yourself on a hand grenade to save the men around you. It's courage in its most raw form[…]a deliberate act of suicide, and as such it occupies a singular place in the taxonomy of courage" (Junger, 244). A recent example of this sacrifice is recorded by Michael Phillips in *The Gift of Valor* (2005).

composure/hysteria, and rationality/irrationality, the former set of emotions tends to be linked with the masculine character in accordance with the conventions of socio-biological essentialism. Instead, what is found in the Vietnam War stories is a consistent narrative which portrays each of these latter ("lesser") characteristics—what one might expect to have been designated default-femininity—as substantial parts of the masculine experience.

Phillips's work on martial masculinities brings to light several crucial issues having to do with exploitation and gender inequality, yet in the quest to reveal patriarchal attitudes in the military her arguments become circumstantial:

> [H]ard/soft, cold/caring, courageous/cowardly, active/passive[…] Such lists elevate the terms classed as masculine, devalue the traits construed as feminine, and arbitrarily equate all the terms on one side of the great divide: caring *is* feminine *is* inferior. (2006, 175)

Such analysis functions as self-fulfilling prophecy, as it is possible to read literatures of the Vietnam War by seeking out the examples in which men recoil from emotional involvement; yet they also include an equal number of moments in which the outdated masculine mask is displaced in favor of accedence to emotion. Some of the starkest examples of the weight of such "caring" come from the stories of the Vietnam medics and corpsmen, some of them raised to the level of legend, most of them everyday fact for the US troops in Southeast Asia:

> A tour of Nam is twelve months; it is like a law of nature. The medics, though, stay on line only seven months. It is not due to the good will of the Army, but to their discovery that seven months is about all these kids can take. After that they start getting freaky, cutting down on their own water and food so they can carry more medical supplies; stealing plasma bottles and walking around on patrol with five or six pounds of glass in their rucksacks; writing parents and friends for medical catalogues so they can buy their own endotracheal tubes; or quite simply refusing to leave their units when their time in Nam is over. (Glasser, 54)

Similar kinds of stories surface in fiction and memoir alike, almost as asides, such as Dosier's casual description of the unit's medic, Stepik, "who would stay on and on in the platoon, and extend for six months and even turn down his month's leave" (*Close Quarters*, 147). In a war where, allegedly, the only thing the men looked forward to more than their DEROS were the infrequent

days of I&I leave[26], such anecdotes are bound to be taken as exaggeration. For the Vietnam veterans, a great deal of their experience has been mythologized, and not in the positive meaning of the word. Their truths are still unwritten in history, except when through their own effort.

> War is theater, and Vietnam had been fought without a third act. It was a set that hadn't been struck; its characters were lost there, with no way to get off and no more lines to say. And so when we came to the Vietnam memorial in Washington we wrote our own endings as we stared at the names on the wall, reached out and touched them, washed them with our tears, said goodbye. (Broyles, 74)

Thus closure is sought also through physical action, touching a concrete symbol of loss that ties the war which was fought in a distant location to its presence and consequences on domestic soil.

3.1. Becoming GI: "I *hate* this movie"[27]

> The Marine Corps is your father and mother. The DI is your priest and your doctor and your lover. The Marine Corps will give you everything you'll ever need. […] If the Marine Corps wants you to think, you'll be issued a brain. (Ehrhart, 17)

The act of "becoming" a (military) male has been touched upon above in subchapters 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 which acknowledged the significance of the traditional methods—boot camp, with DIs bearing resemblance to GySgt Hartman[28] dishing out verbal and physical abuse and keeping the privates under continuous mental and physical duress—in the process of building general-issue soldiers with the necessary skills as well as the necessary psychological programming to enable the risking of what has by the end of the training become the "docile body" in combat. Another process of change is initiated upon the entry into the war setting, where the trained body will be transformed by the experience into a masculinity more complex and fluid than the one existing pre-war.

As much as Ringnalda criticizes literatures exemplifying Fussell's tripartite model of the Bildungsroman, Herzog considers the "progression though innocence, experience, and reflection" (15) a necessary path to bringing about the understanding not only of the war experience but a larger "insight about self" (60). This can be seen in Webb's work where, shortly before assuming his first command, Lieutenant Hodges is cautioned by a Major about the upcoming

[26] DEROS: date of estimated return from overseas; I&I: intoxication and intercourse.
[27] *Dispatches*, 188.
[28] The Senior Drill Instructor in *Full Metal Jacket*, a performance which made famous and quite possibly commodified the image of the screaming Marine in a Smokey Bear Hat.

experience. Filled with green enthusiasm which the senior officer wishes to quell, Hodges has a sort of premonition, "he used to be me. But he isn't anymore. And in a month I won't be, either" (*Fields*, 77). Eventually, this pre-sight is proven right, as Hodges, after months in the bush, meets a classmate from Basic School freshly arrived in country: "This was me[…] But it isn't any more" (374). This transformation of the self is thus a personal/individual as well as a general/collective experience, as it happens very similarly to everyone who manages to survive through their first firefight. This change could be called "the evolution of the GI" if we take evolution to mean adaptation necessary for survival. At the same time, the change covers the individual's entrance into a brotherhood that is at once historical and mythological, and concrete and present.

All fictive and nonfictive representations of the Vietnam War (as well as those from practically any other war) are littered with references to "boots," "cherries," and "FNGs". One reason for this is in the challenge it lays down for the newcomer: group identity is not received instantly; like military masculinity, it has to be earned. The second reason is the initial need for emotional distance, as boots are much likelier to "get wasted" (a popular Vietnam expression) than combat veterans: thus it is in the old-timers' best interest to maintain some distance until the newcomers have proven they are not going to get themselves killed immediately through stupidity or carelessness. Upon making rookie mistakes, the cherries are mocked mercilessly:

> Who'd you think you were, Superman? […] Only a new dude would do that. Not even here long enough to be named yet. (*Fields*, 61)

Indeed, the common way to maintain the distance to the replacements is demonstrated by the habit of not learning their names for the first few days or weeks. Often the custom is augmented further, as the replacements are, in fact, re-named upon their inclusion into the unit by the bush veterans. In *Fields*, this act of renaming is ritualistic and glamorized, simultaneously a rite of inclusion and the subtlest inoculation against death: by being named, one is judged to be out of the initial danger period, in accordance with the grunt mythology that deaths occur most often in the very beginning or the very end of the time in the field.

Yet the re-naming is also another instance of being stripped of one's individuality. By being given a name that perhaps holds no more than a fleeting reminder of some aspect of one's life back in the World, one is made into an archetype, one of the Vietnam grunt caricatures which are eventually ephemeralized into myths and legends, one of the "Shakes," "Crazies," and "The Professors". This is evident nowhere more clearly than in the replicability of such nomenclatures: once Big Mac is gone from the unit, eventually the right person may merit the appellation "New Mac".

The beginning of the war experience, for the grunt, holds a mixture of play-acting and boredom with the reality of combat introduced in stages; for the US involvement as a whole, there is a similar progression into the war. Even after the decisive gesture of the deployment of ground troops, the US effort is initially defined as a defensive operation, in keeping with the idea of acting purely as an assistant force. The law is laid down by a company commander:

> When you brief your people, make it clear that our mission is defensive only. I don't want anyone going in there thinking he's going to play John Wayne. […] It's their war. (*Rumor*, 46)

The belief in the traditional-masculine ideal (and, in the case of *Rumor*, the specific Marine ethos), still alive in men who have not seen the true face of combat, leads them to instinctively rebel against such a cautious approach. In response to the captain opening the discussion for enquiries, a Lieutenant asks—tongue-in-cheek, and much to the amusement of other junior officers—"How do I get out of this chicken-shit outfit?" (ibid.)

After the tactic of waiting the war out with minimal involvement proves ineffective, the strategy changes, as does the language through which it is conveyed and created. On beginning a course of patrols and "small-scale search-and-destroy operations", the violent initiative is masked in paradoxical phraseology, the new tactics being labeled "aggressive defense," (*Rumor*, 69) and "their war" appropriated into shared violent action, "a jointly owned enterprise" (ibid.).

If the John Wayne cockiness is the starting point for officers and enlisted alike, the bravado is swiftly extinguished as the war picks up. That the line soldier comes to view his position

in the war as so much cannon fodder is not a novel thought in warfare and its (non)fictions, but in the Vietnam War the precarious position of the grunt is often uncomfortably linked with overly ambitious brass, as a certain segment of the senior officers are always willing to play a risky game for another promotion:

> Colonel's got a case of the ass about the mortars[…] Wants something done. He got this hunch about where they might be set up. And so he thinks to himself, all I need is some men to chase them out. And, by God, it dawns on him. The one thing he's got is men. Got 'em coming out the ass. (*Fragments*, 67)

Additionally, the preoccupation with John Wayne does not herald only the oft-repeated fixation on cinematic military masculinities and the wish for their emulation, but signifies the trouble of relating. Men entering war for the first time search for familiarity and attempt to draw parallels with civilian life, seeking anything that might potentially help them recognize and organize the surrounding reality. This disconnect between one's expectations of Vietnam and the reality of it is most frequently heralded by the outbreaks of double-vision: Vietnam the movie, or, in 21st century terminology, something that resembles Vietnam the reality show. Lt. Hodges articulates this confusion upon being woken from sleep for a chance to come see the company in contact with the enemy: "Do I want to watch. Why? Is it on TV?" (*Fields*, 56) As any engagement may theoretically be a part of a US news segment a few hours later, what is unremarkable to the line soldier becomes, through reporting, instant history, superficially imbued with meaning.

The ubiquitous movie references demonstrate not only what was, for many, the only fixed point of reference preceding personal involvement, but also the innate characteristics of the Vietnam experience that rapidly come to describe it: its insanity, lack of cohesion, and absurd, ironic quality. "This is unreal," says another marine; "Watching this. Like the movies or somethin'" (Ehrhart, 129). Notably, during the course of the war the GIs are allowed to occupy a position both of actors and spectators: viewed from the outside, the war becomes an illusory show that barely signifies; from the inside, action always holds the potential of being redefined as a series of stunts in a movie, rendering the reality of risk-taking unrecognizable. The real Nam movie is not a Western, nor a classic war film—what it most resembles is a high-budget death carnival, the ultimate *film*

noir production; the problem being, of course, that in war "there isn't any background music" (*Rumor*, 15).

The affinity with cinema involves not only the attempt to process the experience but to relay it in an intelligent way; there is a problem of describing events which are still disjointed to the self. Here the snapshot technique of the cinema proves apt, almost bringing to the literary narrative the visuals of flickering slides and sepia-toned photographs, complete with the background whirring of the projector. Caputo, admitting he has "only disjointed recollections of […] the spring of 1965" (96), exploits this style in a chapter which relays several seemingly unconnected scenes, the highest common denominator of which is the war as the exterior and the sense of disenchantment and fatigue as the interior landscape. The confusion is echoed by Herr, minimizing the anticipated difference between the experiences of an observer and a participant:

> Some of us 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. (8)

In the attempt to bring order into the surrounding reality, while being mortared and fired upon, lacking any ordinary reference points, even a childhood game will do; the surprise, then, being that while death has always been part of the play, this time it comes with the finality of an endgame:

> The rules now were tight and absolute, no arguing over who missed who and who was really dead; *No fair* was no good, *Why me?* the saddest question in the world. (*Dispatches*, 55)

Heinemann concurs:

> Why me?—the dumbest, dipstick question only the most ignorant fucking new guy would ever bother to ask.
> Why *you*? Don't you know? It's your turn, Jack! (*Paco's Story*, 136)

The same metaphor occurs time and time again in literatures of war, the violence as playacting, as participation in a war game. "It took me a month", admits Herr, "to lose that feeling of being a spectator to something that was part game, part show" (168). What is initially even more difficult to accept is the reality of death:

> It's as if a referee stepped in and blew a whistle, removing them from a game. Tweeeet. You're dead. You, too. (*Fields*, 160-1)

The witnessing of the first death, commonly included in the coming-of-age, loss-of-innocence model of the Bildungsroman, is always equally absurd, unreal, unbelievable. Each veteran writer records it in very similar terms.

> Oh shit, Rat Kiley said, the guy's dead. The guy's dead, he kept saying, which seemed profound—the guy's dead. I mean really. (*Things*, 12)

The transformation of masculinity thus happens first on the levels of body, mind, and perception, and, finally, language. Recruits molded into the GI model, functioning as actors in a massive production, present themselves with "poses" and masks, and the overtly masculine vernacular is another part of the gender performance. Language is used to demonstrate the speaker's right to be included in the group; to half-seriously jockey for position inside the hierarchy of that particular group; and to reinforce the male bond of those inside that group. Creating rapports within the masculine rules and limitations of the combat outfit is achieved through antagonistic male posturing that screens its actual, oblique purpose:

> Outwardly banter is aggressive, a form in which the masculine ego asserts itself. Inwardly, however, banter depends on a close, intimate and personal understanding of the person who is the butt of the attack. It thus works as a way of affirming the bond of love between men while appearing to deny it. (Easthope, 88)

The regard is sometimes expressed through address only, "Dude and Jive, Lifer and Shitkick and Motherfucker, touching this last with a special grace, as though it were the tenderest word in their language" (*Dispatches*, 189), and often by verbal jousting, contradictoriness for its own sake, linguistic rivalry over the definitive last word—all comprising the verbal equivalent of sparring in PT. The purpose of senior NCOs abusing their men verbally is to keep them sharp, alert, and grounded, distracted from excessive abstract thinking.

Working for two aims mainly, the language used in war is either one of exaggeration or reduction. Whereas the soldiers employ jargon to create a distancing effect from fear (Jokinen, 157-8), the official military language masks unpleasant realities in ambiguous, operational phrases. At the command level, the language of war is also a weapon and a tool, employed to create linguistic diversions from the shortcomings or failures of missions, and to proliferate one's

freedoms in planning and implementing future ones. Through verbal cosmetics, realities are reproduced as more palatable, as in the following terminological slide: "In operations orders, 'search and destroy' first became 'search and clear,' then 'reconnaissance in force,' and finally 'ground reconnaissance'" (Beidler 1982, 5). The language of the Vietnam War transforms in reverse proportion to the aggression with which the war is fought; as the body count becomes, first, the most significant, then the only strategy of the command, definitions are banalized in order to mask the constant emphasis on the kill alone. Thompson expounds on this unanticipated power in the language which "effaces, euphemizes, vaporizes[…] The violence of the letter that legitimizes killing to the extent that death becomes a rhetorical figure, doomed to stand in for a reality it cannot signify" (570).

In contrast with the incommunicable reality is the reality (re)fashioned through language alone. For the political and military elite the creation is a requirement of staying afloat in the quagmire, whereas the grunt engages in it out of need for psychological distance, out of boredom or sarcastic inclination. In the face of senseless strategies, such as the body count, laughter is sometimes the only appropriate response:

> "I killed a snake this morning, sir[…] Right out in front of my hooch."
> "No kidding. How big was he."
> "About three feet."
> "Any weapons?"
> "Two fangs."
> "Okay. Vc. Put it on the I-Sum[…]" (Ehrhart, 85)

On the other hand, the terms for death, loss or impairment are meant to gloss over reality, to make adversity less concrete, less final, in what Beidler calls "creative insouciance": "Men did not die. They got 'dinged,' 'waxed,' 'wasted,' 'zapped,' snuffed,' 'greased,' 'lit up,' 'blown away'" (1982, 6). According to O'Brien, such verbal customs reveal an instinct for self-preservation, the raucous playing up of tragedy in order to play down the fact that it is real:

> They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. […] It wasn't cruelty, just stage presence. They were actors. When someone died, it wasn't quite dying, because in a curious way it seemed scripted[…] (*Things*, 19)

"Scripted" only goes so far; it is a green tactic that does not survive twelve months. Language produces new ways to compartmentalize death:

> By our language, which was both hard and wistful, we transformed the bodies into piles of waste. […] It's easier to cope with a kicked bucket than a corpse; if it isn't human, it doesn't matter much if it's dead. And so a VC nurse, fried by napalm, was a crispy critter. A Vietnamese baby, which lay nearby, was a roasted peanut. (*Things*, 226)

Thus language and vocabulary are used to transform reality; they defile and sanitize in turns. Caputo has time to contemplate the absurdity during his temporary rear posting in the section titled "The Officer in Charge of the Dead":

> I could not write "shot through the guts" […] no, I had to say "GSW[…] through and through, abdomen." Shrapnel wounds were called "multiple fragment lacerations," and the phrase for dismemberment, one of my very favorite phrases, was "traumatic amputation." (166)
>
> "Sympathetic denotation" […] was another one of those dry, inaccurate military euphemisms. It meant that the explosion of the mine had caused his grenades to go off at the same time, and I could see nothing sympathetic about that. (193)

Finally, the language of death and violence is the professional jargon of the soldier and, similar to any occupational branch, specific and even understandable only to the group that shares it. There is little difference in what or who is at the bottom of the joke—not only the grunts, but officers as well, as evidenced by the old joke, "There's nothing as dangerous as a second lieutenant with a map and a compass. The first sergeant used to get pissed at some of the PFCs and threaten to bust them to second lieutenants if they didn't quit fucking up" (Baker, 34). Often humor is imperative in combating pre-mission jitters: "A good joke would help, something funny. Laughing makes you believe you are resigned if not brave" (*If I Die*, 113). Darker jests are exchanged for instance over an offering of unexpectedly lavish breakfast:

> "Steak and eggs? I gotta be seeing things. Steak and goddamned eggs?"
> "You ain't seeing things," a cook said. "Fattening you up for the slaughter, jarhead. Steak and eggs'll look terrific when your guts are hanging out." (*Rumor*, 78)

The grunt language is mired in the inappropriate; it is a constant renegotiation between the self that existed in the World and the one that is created in and by Vietnam.

> I blew up a village one time. It was a village outside of which my squad got ambushed. […] All the people were gone by then, so it was nothing but pigs and chickens. We got in line and shot the shit out of the livestock, pigs squealing across in front of us. It was a way of blowing off steam. We did My Lai with farm animals. (Baker, 136)

Herzog views black humor as not only a coping mechanism (39-40) but an inevitable outcome, as "giving oneself completely to war, a mental and emotional escape from the horrible truths of the battlefield, is more a conditioned response of the soldier's psyche than a choice" (43). In the same vein, Timmerman points out that it is hardly "coincidental that tragicomedy has surfaced as a subgenre in war literature. Tragicomedy as a literary mode essentially sees the world as an evil place; the necessary human response to it is laughter, for laughter holds evil in abeyance" (104). No place, one might argue, is as evil as war; yet for those in the middle of it, this, too, can be a matter of perspective: as one of Herr's Marines posits it, "them casualties don't mean nothing. *Nothing!* Shit, your chances are better here than on the L.A. Freeway" (137).

3.2. War as Contradiction

> I guess we believed in our own publicity—Asian guerrillas did not stand a chance against U.S. Marines—as we believed in all the myths created by that most articulate and elegant mythmaker, John Kennedy. (*Rumor*, 69)

> I started out smoking Camels, then cigars, then bigger cigars, then dope, lots of dope—just to feel it hit my lungs, to feel anything hit my lungs. I have lost the simple rhythm of breathing. (*Close Quarters*, 281)

> Take the glamour out of war! I mean, how the bloody hell can you do *that*? (*Dispatches*, 248)

O'Brien records his most explicit antiwar (and anti-male stereotype) statements in the eponymous piece of his short story collection *The Things They Carried*. Being so notably underlining, the veteran's bitterness threatens to veer the text, stylistically, into propaganda.

> They carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained[…] They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. (20)

The idea of men enduring war because they are "too frightened to be cowards" (*Things*, 21) is a recurring sentiment in O'Brien's (non)fiction, starting with the personal reasoning of Tim-the-narrator on deciding against escaping the draft to Canada:

> I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to. […] I was a coward. I went to the war. (*Things*, 57-8)

By overstating the oxymoronic rationale O'Brien is knowingly guilty of oversimplifying the matter; moreover, the overt self-flagellation does not conform to O'Brien's admitted preference for subtle truths, and instead of a war story confessional, the assertion becomes a political statement. For all that O'Brien endeavors to refute the powers and aims that placed him in Vietnam, as well as the mythology of national heroes the young Americans were expected to bring to life, in the interest of telling the truth he is forced to concede the undeniability of there being physical, concrete beauty even in destruction; a truth readily articulated by Herr, with memories of "how lovely .50-caliber tracers could be, coming at you as you flew at night in a helicopter, how slow and graceful, arching up easily, a dream" (*Dispatches*, 132).

> War is hell, but that's not the half of it[…] The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. […] You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not. (*Things*, 76-7)

Contradictions: the fascination with the potentially fatal spectacle, and the attraction of the high-risk, high-emotion conditions of life on the ground. "What people can't understand," says Hiers, Broyles's old radio operator, "is how much fun Vietnam was. I loved it. I loved it, and I can't tell anybody" (Broyles, 68). Such statements run the risk of being interpreted as admissions of blood lust, useful in criticism of war and its participants; Broyles goes on to elucidate, dismissing the motivations which are often tacked on to the GI stereotype and coming up with

> its being an experience of great intensity; its lure is the fundamental human passion to witness, to see things, what the Bible calls the lust of the eye and the Marines in Vietnam called eye fucking. War stops time[…] offers endless exotic experiences, enough "I couldn't fucking believe it" 's to last a lifetime. (71)

Alternating with great moments of intensity are, of course, great moments of terror, the grunt's live-in experience, explicit (dis)placement of the self onto a set of a movie, in a great narrative arc: "I

was John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*" (*Rumor*, 269). Holding meanings from a naïve starting point to the punch line of the collective Vietnam joke, the Wayne imagery is nevertheless an inescapable part of the cultural legacy of young Americans; all Vietnam masculinities spring from the same ideological position, the baseline of which are the body and the psyche that are whole prior to the war, but are eventually similarly fractured into confusion.

The Command—uncomfortably "High on War," as Herr would say—playing off the tactic of attrition and unable to acknowledge that the strategy is not bringing in the anticipated results, becomes another contradiction, a mechanism for the constant redefinition of "acceptable losses":

> The belief that one Marine was better than ten Slopes saw Marine squads fed in against known NVA platoons, platoons against companies, and on and on, until whole battalions found themselves pinned down and cut off. That belief was undying, but the grunt was not, and the Corps came to be called by many the finest instrument ever devised for the killing of young Americans. (*Dispatches*, 102)

On the occasions when the conviction in the American exceptionality translating directly into invincibility infects the troops on the ground, it results in the exact demonstrations of John Wayne caricatures that are scorned by those with experience. When a senior officer falls guilty to what in contemporary military vernacular would be called "moto" speech, and pronounces, "The Twenty-Fifth Marines is not a Regiment[…] It's a State of Mind", it begets the grunts' nonagreement, "Yeah[…] *Dinky-Dau*" (*Fields*, 355). Insanity, as we know, is not a requirement; but it does help. Heinemann's character Jesse, in an exaggerated if not wholly incorrect instance of pre-sight, predicts the exploitation of such willing martyrs for the American enterprise by visualizing one possible choice for the war's memorial:

> [T]hey'll get some half-hacked Boy Scout lieutenant ('All my life I've wanted to lead *brave* men to *victory* in a *desperate* battle!'), who's got a dick about the size of your thumb and a peach-fuzz mustache, a wrinkled-up bush hat and some godawful FX *cee*-gar, but, when it comes right down to the button, don't know his ass from a hole in the ground. He'll pose, fucking-new-guy-fashion, with this cheerleader, frat-boy grin on his face, as much as to say, 'Hi, Mom! I'm fucking-A *proud* to be dead! Semper *Fi*, Mac! (*Paco's Story*, 157)

The intentional antagonism of Heinemann's language demonstrates the bitter disappointment shared by many Vietnam veterans who feel betrayed by their leaders and duped by the national-masculine ideals.

Similar to how hegemonic military masculinities are now parodied by a new generation of soldiers and Marines, the Vietnam GI was not unaware of the farcical implementation of the hyper-masculine identity he and his comrades were expected to observe. The male ego recognizes the body it inhabits as another component of the machine in the supreme theater of war; and, indeed, *theater* here refers both to its military tactical meaning as well as to the scene of high drama which employs GIs as expendable statists in a production of the absurd. A sergeant reflects on this senselessness and the men's silent acceptance of it,

> realizing without the least satisfaction that if [the troops] had to they'd go again and again. It wasn't because they wanted to or even believed in what they were doing, but because they were there and someone told them to do it. […]just to make it 365 days and be done with it. They'd go, though; even freaked out, they'd go. (Glasser, 33)

Such compliance is at the heart of the military masculine identity, and despite the frequent back-talk and "bitching," to use the term favored by the troops themselves, the military male defines his professionalism exactly through the intentional, repetitive risking of the body as per orders, senseless *or* sensible.

Indeed, the men often embrace the role, layering their masculinity with insanity; in Vietnam, it is a subtly rude gesture directed to the Command which wastes their bodies in a fog of unclear strategy and bad decision-making. Often it is also a deliberate separation of the in-group from outsiders. A point is made by the signpost heralding a Special Forces camp: "If you kill for money you're a mercenary. If you kill for pleasure you're a sadist. If you kill for both you're a Green Beret" (*Dispatches*, 257). Certainly a world apart from Kennedy's romantic ideal, and the caricaturist embodiment of honor and purpose that was John Wayne, the sign is both physical and symbolic, seemingly a profession of bravado with the absurdity of their given position in the war as a loud undertone. The same kind of mocking audacity is exhibited in *Paco's Story* by Jesse describing the process of becoming Airborne:

> Training takes three weeks: first week they separate the men from the boys, second week they separate the men from the crazy motherfuckers, and the third week the motherfuckers jump. (152)

The jokey preference for lacking mental faculties in a GI is presented in the kind of verbal swagger expected inside the socio-cultural world of the military, but the pride that surely comes with the identification with any such elitist group is always tempered by the awkwardness of knowing the joke is more than half true.

More often than not, different military MOS's like to define themselves through the shocking or the absurd. Adversity works as well, especially when based on fact: among the US military branches, the Marines are secure in their position as the underdog. Caputo describes the physical maladies attacking the Marines, caused by poor diet and living conditions; reading "with amazement the stories about the luxuries lavished on the United States Army. The Ice-Cream Soldiers, we called them" (64-5). Herr, on the other hand, witnesses the occasional lack of body bags, the KIAs needing to be wrapped in ponchos during transport instead: "The Marines were always running out of things, even food, ammo and medicine, it wasn't so strange that they'd run out of bags too" (17). When, after one too many times fixing the same problem in his vehicle, a Marine complains, "You see those nice jeeps the army MACV guys cruise around in? *Their* wheels never fall off" (Ehrhart, 29), it sounds like an unintended metaphor for the allocation of resources. Consequently, the Marines view themselves as wrought upon, and ferocious because of it.[29] From the outsiders—in this case, the Army—the assessment is even less complimentary, in keeping with the old rivalry, as is apparent in their questioning of Herr:

> "Where you been? We ain't seen you."
> "Up in I Corps."
> "With the *Marines*?"

[29] The basis in casting the USMC as the martial underdog is largely in their being the smallest, newest branch of the US military. In the culture of the Corps, this has been turned around and made into a point of pride; in Iraq, Wright notes, "Recon Marines take pride in enduring the hostile conditions. One of the first guys I meet in the battalion brags, 'We're like America's little pit bull. They beat it, starve it, mistreat it, and once in a while they let it out to attack somebody'" (17). Dobie's (2010) description further echoes the ontological difference pointed out above by Brown and Shapiro: "The Marines, or Many Americans Running into Endless Shit, as they refer to themselves, are notoriously stoic. From the moment they enter boot camp, they're taught that nothing is stronger than the will, which can push the body through heat, mud, fear, exhaustion, and pain. The Marines are the "first to fight," the "tip of the spear"; they take the land, and then the Army rolls in and holds it. They call themselves the shit's shit; other soldiers call them bullet bags and bullet sponges".

> "That's what's up there."
> "Well, all I got to say is Good Luck! Marines. Fuck that." (*Dispatches*, 103-4)

A similar sentiment comes through in a seemingly off-hand remark by a member of the 1st Cavalry Division, "I hear the Marines stepped into the shit above Route Nine" (*Dispatches*, 158), which is translated into an unvoiced certainty,

> what he really meant was, Of *course* the Marines stepped into the shit, what *else* would they be doing in this war? The Cav's attitude acknowledged that they might die too, but never the way the Marines did. (ibid.)

The assessment is not without basis in reality. Tellingly, Herr describes a mission the reporters were present for:

> If this had been an Army operation, we would have been digging now, correspondents too, but the Marines didn't do that, their training taught them more about fatal gesture than it did about survival. (189)

Nowhere is this more apparent than in relation to Khe Sanh: while generally considered a dead-end situation by the media and the American public back in the World, any such appraisal was decisively denied by the troops mired in place, as "no Marine ever called what happened there for seventy-six days a 'siege.' […] Marines may get beleaguered, but not besieged" (*Dispatches*, 104), and high-ranking officers play the card to the full: "I'm not worried. I've got Marines." (ibid., 144). Such faith is grounded in the specific culture of the Corps, intentionally cultivated, and etched into the recruits from the beginning through

> the codes marines are expected to live by: they never leave their casualties on the battlefield, never retreat, and never surrender so long as they have the means to resist. "And the only time a marine doesn't have the means to resist," one instructor told us, "is when he's dead." (*Rumor*, 12)

More generally, the persistence can be explained through the need to uphold the conventional "laws of masculinity" (Horner, 260), which are the unwritten, ancient rules deemed to govern masculine identities: "A man must not cry. He must not whine or complain. Worse, he must not lose control over his emotions or run in the heat of crisis" (ibid.).

Although repeated, ad infinitum, in discourse on men and warfare, these decrees are challenged by the divergence between reality and expectation. As discussed in Chapter 2,

(post)modern masculinities are increasingly seen in terms of performance and context, and the policies and expectations of the traditional-ideal masculinity have greatly decreased in effect. In theory, fear and grief may be unacceptable weaknesses; in practice, in war men do break down, succumbing to the brutal stress or grieving the loss of friends or momentarily overcome by anything on the spectrum from relief, guilt, hysteria, to love. Herr describes one such occasion, expecting to have a chance "to talk to an actual hero, a Marine who'd just pulled his whole squad back in from deep serious, but he was sobbing so hard he couldn't get anything out" (257).

There is a marked disconnect between the clinical analyses arguing against the social cohesion in the units in Vietnam and the veteran-authored literatures and oral (hi)stories which state their authors had the closest relationships with their brothers-in-arms in Nam:

> These are vets who have, quite literally, brought one another back from the dead, often saved one another from suicide. Their relationships are full of a tenderness and generosity that is rare among American men—at least in public. (Marin, 559)

Vietnam War stories show the best and the worst of these rapports. At their fiercest, the bonds are uttered in the memorial pledge, "He'da died for me. And I killed 'em back for him" (*Fields*, 366). Next to rage exists grief: in *If I Die*, overlapping with the multiplying dread of advancing over booby-trapped territory day after day, having to scrape up the remains of a friend who has stepped into one proves to be the final drop:

> Afterwards, as dusk fell, Philip was swinging his entrenching tool like a madman, sweating and crying and hollering. He dug a foxhole four feet into the clay. He sat in it and sobbed. (126)

The response from the other members of the unit is delayed—comfort is offered only after the dark has fallen, as if the act is more easily accomplished under the cover of the night.

The ability to express grief can, in some instances, be envied. In *Things*, following Ted Lavender's unexpected, instant death by a sniper's bullet, and its reverberations to the platoon, Kiowa considers his superior who has given in to his emotions:

> The lieutenant's in some deep hurt. I mean that crying jag—the way he was carrying on—it wasn't fake or anything, it was real heavy-duty hurt. The man cares. (17)

Ordered to shut up by a platoon mate, Kiowa is drawn to introspection, recording the input of his senses, enjoying being alive, unable to muster up "some great sadness, or even anger[…] Kiowa admired Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's capacity for grief. He wanted to share the man's pain, he wanted to care as Jimmy Cross cared" (ibid.). Ironically, what their commander is in reality distraught over is more guilt than grief; having been distracted by thoughts of his girl back in the World, Cross feels responsible for Lavender's death. The setting is a parody of stereotypes: the embodiment of idealized masculinity, an infantry soldier, wishing for the ability to engage in what in gendered history would have been judged as feminine, "pussy" behavior, and feeling, perhaps, like less of a man and less of a good soldier for his inability to properly grieve a dead comrade. Known for his stout objection to the Vietnam War, equally before and after his personal participation, O'Brien's texts largely come across as caricatures, subverting both the military masculinities and the institutions that facilitate them.

Sometimes grief is stunted, but still recognizable, relatable. In *Close Quarters*, Dosier has just received a letter informing him about the death of a friend and struggles to put his emotional turmoil into words in order to explain the loss to Quinn, a fellow soldier:

> I want to say something about Willie; that he could low-crawl, alligator style, faster than anybody; that he had this fast little car; that I still owed him money and when I tried to pay him he wouldn't take it.
> "There's this dude," I say, and maybe Quinn sees the rest in my eyes, and nods. (136)

Herr views grief through another angle, successfully tying the darkness of the Vietnam humor to both resignation and the experience of reversed reality: "Few people ever cried more than once there, and if you'd used that up, you laughed" (235). Emotion is indulged in in limited quantities, for otherwise it might prove too difficult to snap back afterwards; instead, what becomes the acceptable response to everything from queer Nam legends to the death of a friend is the Vietnam catch-all phrase, "there it is". The condensing of the totality of the war into such seeming uninformationality is its own metaphor—the inexactitude conveying the denunciation of surplus, inadequate words. As Beidler notes, it is the war truth all recognize, one of the phrases which "in its way can crystallize

the whole experience of the war for anyone who carries its memory, the topic of a million radio zingers from the DMZ to the Delta: 'What the fuck, over?'" (1982, 97-98)

Contrary to the hypotheses positing Vietnam masculinities as self-involved and out-of-touch with reality, there is a specific set of circumstances which often produces a conscious dialing down of or stepping away from one's conventional (military) masculinity, in order to be at a later point able to assume the responsibilities of family life. As GIs or Marines become fathers, a number of them make the deliberate shift from violent-heroic masculinity into one defined by male parenthood instead: "No more of that shit for me. I'm a daddy now" (*Rumor*, 148).

In the end, an audience looking for definite judgments in soldier-author accounts finds a full stop in O'Brien's frank summary which reveals only the ambiguity of war and the impossibility of black-and-white rulings. In his search for overarching truths, O'Brien returns to the basics of loss, memory and the senses:

> Men are killed, dead human beings are heavy and awkward to carry, things smell different in Vietnam, soldiers are afraid and often brave, drill sergeants are boors, some men think war is proper and just and others don't and most don't care. (*If I Die*, 32)

Exemplified by Kiowa's natural sense of self-preservation and the ecstasy of survival, what O'Brien is repeatedly emphasizing is that death is final, and there is nothing very noble about dying in a war. Amid the Vietnam veteran writers, O'Brien is something of an anomaly, dedicated to deconstructing the myths of brotherhood, and only obliquely admitting to the love-hate relationship to war described by Herr, Caputo, Broyles, and countless others. In comparison, for all that Herr censures the politics surrounding the war and frequently criticizes the conduct of the GIs, he also makes no secret of his troubled affection for the grunts:

> Disgust doesn't begin to describe what they made me feel[…] But disgust was only one color in the whole mandala, gentleness and pity were other colors, there wasn't a color left out. (67)

Coming from the World, there seems to be an instant attraction for a certain kind of observer in the morbid bravado, the joking around death. Witticisms such as "KIA Travel Bureau" (*Dispatches*, 23) and "[a] sucking chest wound is Nature's way of telling you that you've been in a firefight", which,

according to Herr, is "just too good to share with anyone but a real collector" (226), raise perhaps not the question of who is expected to laugh at them, but who is allowed to. In Khe Sanh, Herr finds the coagulation of the darkest war material with the Marines:

> And what could be funnier, really, given all that an eighteen-year-old boy could learn in a month of patrolling the Z? It was that joke at the deepest part of the blackest kernel of fear, and you could die laughing. […]their secret brutalized them and darkened them and very often it made them beautiful. (103)

Taylor pinpoints such "romanticization" as Herr's most notable failure (92), thus unfortunately proving the insistence of the outdated need for flagellation of those involved in fighting a war: the paradox of sending young men to kill and condemning them afterwards. What Herr for his part manages to do is portray the ambiguity of the warring masculinities of Vietnam. The War, even as its preparations instill into the recruit the exacting standards of military conduct and normative masculinity, eventually frees the GI to enter a sphere of more elastic sexual/gender characteristics.

3.3. Ghost Country: Theater of War as the Site of Superstition and Legend

> 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[…] (*Things*, 192)

Oral storytelling has a long tradition of both passing on a particular community's culture and history and issuing warnings. In literatures of war, the storytelling habit assumes a similar kind of nature. One of the functions of war stories, in theater, is to display seniority and create distance toward "cherries" or "boots". In Vietnam literatures, the legends and superstitions also demonstrate immersion in the specific culture of the war. The stories that are told, and equally much the language in which they are told, are meant to separate those with experience from those without it, resulting in the martial tradition of stories "passed down like legend from old-timer to newcomer" (*Things*, 226).

Outside of war, commonly post-conflict, war stories amass an additional purpose, one articulated eloquently by O'Brien: being dead is "like being inside a book that nobody's reading" (*Things*, 232) and what the stories can do is bring people back to life. Caputo expresses a similar

sentiment in his eulogy for a dead friend; finding the right words holds the possibility for resurrection through literature: "I could make you speak again on this page and perhaps make you seem as alive to others as you still seem to me" (223). What is evident from a number of Nam memoirs is that the ghosts do not disappear; instead, the writer-veteran carries them with him and transforms them into text, less in an act of seeking absolution than obsessively wanting the memories to remain fresh and accessible.

In theater, loss is made relative, less absolute and thus more tolerable, by specific coping mechanisms. Denying the finality of death, O'Brien records, "[w]e kept the dead alive with stories. […] He wasn't dead, just laid-back" (*Things*, 226). In Vietnam, death is always close, and by bringing it even closer the grunts deal with what might otherwise be an unbearable situation: in Vietnam the only way to survive, it seems, is to develop an affinity with death, to court it and invite it in as a friend. O'Brien describes a scene where the platoon arrives at a deserted village and the narrator watches his fellow soldiers shaking the hand of a dead Vietnamese man or high-fiving the corpse: "I was brand-new to the war. It was my fourth day; I hadn't yet developed a sense of humor" (*Things*, 214). *A* sense of humor meaning, of course, the *Vietnam* sense of humor, grounded in the macabre and the morbid, the instinct rising from the omnipresence of death and injury, the constant fear of ambushes, mines and booby traps. The same is found in the exchange on the false reporting of the ongoing war: while the bush vets ironically pronounce it "the funniest goddamned thing", a newcomer denies any amusement, only for his Lieutenant to point out, "You just got here" (Ehrhart, 57).

The fear takes on distinctive forms which announce themselves in Vietnam literary texts. O'Brien details the inscription of this phenomenon not only into the mind but onto the body as well, through concrete, physical weights: "The things they carried were determined to some extent by superstition", everything from a literal rabbit's foot to its Vietnam incarnation, a cut-off thumb (*Things*, 12).

Superstition: what would ordinarily be considered an unequivocally feminine trait becomes, in combat, yet another phenomenon with its gender connotations either reversed or obliterated entirely. In circumstances in which one has very little power over one's fate, the smallest things are viewed as tools for survival; paradoxically, something that would be ridiculed in the World is not only acceptable but crucial in combat, as grunts operate according to rules of luck and superstition—Conrad's "the horror! the horror!" mated with the Freudian "Uncanny". Herr simultaneously excuses and explains himself by asserting, "I was no more superstitious than anyone else in Vietnam, I was very superstitious" (227). The admission demonstrates the subversion of all the usual fore-structures of male identity by the Vietnam (un)reality. Masculinities which are habitually grounded on toughness, courage, and sangfroid (Mosse, 22) are taken apart by nerves and uncertainty, until the fear becomes a part of the normative behavior, shared by grunts and reporters alike.

One of the recurring scenes in stories written by veterans is the transformation of the nature itself into enemy, the way Vietnam-the-land seems to be attempting to repel the Americans: "It was the land that resisted us, the land, the jungle, and the sun" (*Rumor*, 87). Rodents and leeches are the obvious plague—battled with Marine humor intact; "Were they VC rats or NVA rats?" (Ehrhart, 212)—but as the exhaustion and the paranoia set in, the enemy becomes increasingly intangible; it encompasses the heat, the rain, the foreign air, and, of course, the darkness which coats everything with menace:

> At night you sit there and look and look and look. Pretty soon you think you see something moving, changing shape, like watching a ghost. I must have thought a million times I saw the gooks moving towards me. Then as the night passes and it gets lighter, you see that it's just some old banana tree. (Baker, 32)

Herr's ironic-pragmatic prose puts the same in yet more colorful terms: "Forget the Cong, the *trees* would kill you, the elephant grass grew up homicidal, the ground you were walking over possessed malignant intelligence" (66).

Stories that describe the land-as-enemy are recounted throughout Vietnam War literatures, and they bring sharply to light the fact that the war was largely fought by boy-men of 18

or 19, for whom parts of the war were like an extended summer camp and other parts their every night terror brought to life. The unnamed terrors are occasionally fashioned into explicit ghost stories/war stories, such as the legend of the glee club heard by a lone patrol,

> like the mountains are tuned in to Radio fucking Hanoi. […] And the fog, too, and the grass and the goddamn mongooses. Everything talks. The trees talk politics, the monkeys talk religion. The whole country. […] Nam—it truly *talks*. (*Things*, 70-1)

Seemingly, for the grunts and other intruders, Vietnam is filled with spirits and malevolent curses, and by being placed into such a darkly repellent milieu the GIs are, through exhaustion and anxiety, transported into a near-childlike position of feverish imagination and wariness. The psychological regression which takes place transforms the newly-potentialized masculinities back to their boyhood selves: "You think about dark closets, madmen, murderers under the bed, all those childhood fears. Gremlins and trolls and giants" (*Things*, 195).[30]

Protection and deliverance are beseeched from the land, Vietnam, whose "name itself became a prayer," (Herr, 56) as well as the traditional quarter, the Christian God, "no atheists in foxholes like you wouldn't believe" (ibid.). Like a twisted echo, O'Brien agrees with the sentiment, only noting the difference the time of the day can make; while daylight assuages some of the most paranoid musings, "at night you turned into a believer: no skeptics in foxholes" (*Things*, 193). The rewriting of the old adage still acknowledges the presence of the Christian myth etched in the soldier's mind, alluding to the lingering belief in the existence of those powers which might destroy and those which might save. Gods, however, appear more rarely than the malign apparitions, and whereas the men in their trenches during past wars only had to fear the clean arc of the Grim Reaper's scythe, in Vietnam the Reaper is prone to a game of cat-and-mouse, and during the dark he always has the upper hand.

> It was ghost country, and Charlie Cong was the main ghost. The way he came out at night. […] Almost magical—appearing, disappearing. He could blend with the land, changing form[…] He could fly. (*Things*, 192-3)

[30] Death by war is not a natural death, and the perception of the unnatural easily slides into the preternatural. Such psy-op edge has been exploited far and wide; indeed, a great many of US military aircrafts have been given names to create maximum psychological effect: F-2 Banshee, F-3 Demon and, the Vietnam favorite, F-4 Phantom II.

It is worse when the fantastical is so seamlessly tied to how the enemy maneuvers, the jungle worn "as a second skin" by the VC (Epstein) and all its strengths utilized through skills honed in a long tradition of war; it becomes something unwillingly recognized as "Charlie's magic", recounted through tales such as "[t]he time some guys cornered two VC in a dead-end tunnel, no way out, but […] when the tunnel was fragged and searched, nothing was found except a pile of dead rats" (*Things*, 195). The story potentially operates on another level, through a suggestion of ugly transformative fantasy: "dead rats" as a metaphor for the enemy, the wish-fulfillment of the grenade's explosion revealing the "true" nature of the ghostly, cunning adversary.

Similar mysteries abound, and they frequently surround the body count: like the battle where, instead of the estimated 4,000 enemy KIAs, the number of bodies found is four:

> Spooky. Everything up there was spooky, and it would have been that way even if there had been no war. You were there in a place where you didn't belong, where things were glimpsed for which you would have to pay and where things went unglimpsed for which you would also have to pay[…] (*Dispatches*, 95)

In order to attain some control over one's fate, the rational (masculine) mind turns to the fantastic: charms both metaphorical and physical carried obsessively to lessen the uncertainty. The preoccupation with luck is another avatar of superstition, and one's luck is horded and counted with the same care that is shown for the countdown of time in-country.[31] Luck is seen as a fixed quantity that needs to be allocated with precision; taking dumb risks is wasting your luck, and bad things happen to any GI who does not observe the unspoken rules, who "used up his luck[…] Pissed it away" (*Things*, 184).

A recurring "*good luck*, the Vietnam verbal tic," (*Dispatches*, 55) is presented as the umbrella term encompassing all the varieties of greeting, parting, brotherhood, and sometimes merely the verbal equivalent of keeping up a routine, with luck wished perfunctorily to strangers and friends alike; sometimes "with such feeling and tenderness that it could crack your mask,"

[31] The military culture's obsession with luck and chance is well visible in today's wars, superstitions transpiring as a ban on a candy named *Charms* (Wright, 99) or a prohibition against taking group photographs (O'Donnell, 146) or, unlike Vietnam, *not* counting down one's days in-country, which is considered "as much of a jinx as picking up the white tray at the DFAC rather than the brown one, or stepping through a doorway with their left foot rather than their right" (Finkel, 173). The arbitrariness of casualties remains a puzzle to be accepted, not overcome: "The difference between life and death out here is seconds and millimeters – the sacred geometry of chance" (Fick, 281).

(ibid., 56) yet, in the end, "like telling someone going out in a storm not to get any on him" (ibid.). Herr implies something between defeatism and harsh realism; largely, the psychology of the participation in superstition, legend, and custom, stems from the wish to take charge of one's circumstances: not quite self-deception, more like faith that is not completely unlike religion—the church of Vietnam magical realism.

As much as there are attempts to horde and invoke luck, there are also the undeniable coagulations of it, such as "the charmed grunt" who is untouchable by death, and whose magic can extend to cover others in the outfit, the GI "who would take himself and whoever stayed close enough through a field of safety" (*Dispatches*, 57). The underside of the charm is that it always ends one way or another, the company charm comes to the end of his tour or the VC gets him, and the charm itself is not lessened, it is merely transplaced onto someone else (ibid.). The need for icons is greater than the pride men usually take in rationalist behavior.

The mythology has two sides: where there are charms, there are jinxes, too; entities with an insistent lack of fortune, no catching a break. Bad-luck, misfortune thick and frequent; and unlike the charm that is awarded to the individual GI, the poor luck swallows up the whole unit. Herr writes about a battalion seemingly attracting attacks:

> Some even believed that if anyone but 1/9 had been put there, [Hill] 861 would never have been hit. Of all the hard-luck outfits in Vietnam, this was said to be the most doomed[…] and when you were with them you got a sense of dread that came out of something more terrible than just a collective loss of luck. (121)

Even COs are not exempt from superstition, at least when it visibly involves the cost-effectiveness of the war:

> 'We're not going to take you out anymore.'
> 'How come?'
> 'I'll tell you how come. Because you have the worst fucking record with my tanks and I'm not wasting tanks on you. I don't care what happens to your men, but I'm not losing any more God damn tanks.' (Baker, 117-8)

Although doubtless exaggerated, the anecdote more than anything illustrates the disappointment the infantryman felt toward his superiors, both professionally and emotionally. By placing technology

above human lives, the colonel contributes to the downgrading (and, ironically, dehumanizing) of military masculinities that posits grunts at the lowest level of importance.

Sometimes bad luck congregates on the unlikeliest of figures, those who are supposed to be the saviors of other men, such as the medic who, having finally had enough, simply quits. On watching him leave, the rest of the outfit thinks, "There goes the company jinx, *now* maybe our luck will change!" (*Paco's Story*, 30) And it does—although, as we are told, "not by much" (ibid.). The anti-jinx, Paco himself, the lone survivor of the ambush that killed every last one of the members of his unit[32], is medevaced away and in a similar manner studied once he arrives at the hospital:

> The triage medics, the zonked-out Graves Registration slick-sleeve privates, and other passersby and hangers-on hustled out to help—to gawk, too, no doubt; *to touch luck*, we might think[…] (48, emphasis mine)

In addition to the constant spooks experienced during night patrols and the darkest hours spent in remote listening posts (LPs), there are peaks of horror in the stretch of the Vietnam experience. Khe Sanh is yet another theater production of the inhumane, the Vietnam *danse macabre*, and it gives rise to different kinds of stories, ones that

> became part of the worst Marine legends; the story of one Marine putting a wounded buddy away with a pistol shot because medical help was impossible, or the story of what they did to the NVA prisoner taken beyond the wire[…] Some of them may even have been true. (*Dispatches*, 122)

What is traditionally thought of as brotherhood, the watching-each-other's-back, is not the extent of the responsibility the grunts owe to each other. Paradoxically, killing can fulfill a promise as well as saving a life. In the vignette "Friends", a pact is made by two platoon mates: "if one of them should ever get totally fucked up—a wheelchair wound—the other guy would automatically find a way to end it" (*Things*, 62).

In most stories told about Vietnam, there is a persistent inference of the exceptionality of the war and its surroundings, the way the war infused everything in Vietnam; in Herr's words, "for years now there had been no country here but the war" (3). And, once experienced, Vietnam

[32] *Paco's Story* as a whole takes as its starting point one of the Vietnam legends, the story of the "Shake" character: "Every outfit had at least one guy named "Shake," good and tough and smart, but jumpy as hell from being on an ambush that got wiped out so long ago that only a few short-timers could remember it" (Beidler 1982, 8).

comes to signify a multiplicity of responses and emotions that keep on expanding, taking up more space inside one's head. Not an unprecedented thought, if Vietnam is indeed "as much a state of mind as a place or event" (McInerney, 191) it must signal that which is most fragmented and postmodern in Herr's text: a lack of coherence, lack of meaning, lack of sanity. Some go further: for them, Vietnam stops being a physical location or a historical conflict at all and is ironically labeled a pure death-fantasy instead: Vietnam, in the words of a grunt met by Herr, "don't exist" (125).

For all that Vietnam-the-land is involved in a large part of the horror mystique surrounding combat conditions, there are also instances of primal bonding between man and nature: "Aw, jungle's okay. If you know her you can live in her real good, if you don't she'll take you down in an hour. Under" (*Dispatches*, 10). O'Brien's description of the Green Berets reinscribes the imagery of the secretive, mystic relationship between the two planes, man as one with the earth, as the lingering features of civilization become replaced by such deep immersion in the culture of primitive jungle law that the men end up resembling some type of mythic tribal warriors more than the symbolic heroes of American society. The hootch of the Greenies is the clichéd native hut filled with candles, primitive music and "stacks of bones", and the smell of the wilderness:

> There was a topmost scent of joss sticks and incense, like the fumes of some exotic smokehouse, but beneath the smoke lay a deeper and much more powerful stench[…] the stink of the kill. (*Things*, 104-5)

Linked with the Greenies is also one of the many subversive Vietnam legends. In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong", Rat Kiley relays the story of Mary Anne Bell who, invited by her GI boyfriend, travels to one of the relatively peaceful outposts in Vietnam and ends up shedding the trappings of the girl-next-door femininity in lieu of assuming a more primal, androgynous union with Vietnam-the-land: "Sometimes I want to *eat* this place. The whole country—the dirt, the death—I just want to swallow it and have it there inside me" (*Things*, 106). Phillips sees in this a return to the gender division that links men with rationality, women with carnality:

> Whereas O'Brien's male characters who "joined the zoo" still remain recognizably human within the crazy slaughter, Mary Anne Bell, after she too has turned into "one more animal," disappears into outworn iconography for inhuman, devouring goddesses (2006, 138).

Phillips chooses to read Mary Anne's integration with the earth and the jungle as a (d)evolution into an amalgamation of animal, spirit, and pure carnivorous instinct; an incarnation of the "old, skull-necklaced goddesses such as Hindu Kali or Aztez Coatlicue" and through this reading insists on the hostile opposition of the two sexes (ibid., 139-140) of which there is no sign in the text. On the contrary, O'Brien writes with all the educated awareness of postmodernity as he lets his storyteller sell the legend: "Young[…] Like you and me. A *girl*, that's the only difference, and I'll tell you something: it didn't amount to jack" (*Things*, 93). Thus the juxtaposition points not toward a gender divide but rather a partition between the sterile (society) and the blood-tinted passion (pre-society/post-society), and as such functions more naturally as a metaphor of the destructibility of American presence in Vietnam. By denying Mary Anne's transformation as a symbol of realized autonomy, criticism such as Phillips's above plays into the hands of those outdated gender theories which place female agency only in the private (domestic) sphere. As Jokinen points out, whereas in the patriarchal society men do not become men until they have passed a test of masculinity, be it inflicting or enduring pain, for women these masculine rites of passage are an optional addition which do not act as proof of realized gender identity (69). According to this ideology, Mary Anne does not undergo the change in order to deepen her own (female) identity; instead, the change is indicative of a transformation into some queer deviancy, such as "the realm of the female masculine" (Boyle, 96), an unfortunate interpretation which situates Mary Anne distinctly apart from heterosexual femininity as well as post-gender autonomy. Thus if characteristics of courage, skill and resolve are attributed to her at the end of the story, they do not describe her as a woman, but as some kind of half-human hybrid: a cross between learned masculinity and reversal into animal state. O'Brien lets Rat Kiley articulate a clear judgment of such double morals:

> [I]f it was a guy, everybody'd say, Hey, no big deal, he got caught up in the Nam shit, he got seduced by the Greenies. […] You got these blinders on about women. How gentle and peaceful they are. (102)

"Seduction" here refers not to the body but ideology, the paradoxical freedom that comes from risking one's life. No sexual or romantic entanglements impede Mary Anne's experience of the war:

what the text offers is the female warrior placed level with the pervasive masculine agent. Mary Anne takes part in the Vietnam fever on her own terms, choosing independent action over remaining in the supporting role usually assigned to women; into her disappearance at the end of the story can be read O'Brien's articulation of metaphors not only of death but ascension, and the feminine example is elevated into a legend recounted by the masculine observer.

3.4. The Male Body, Eroticization of War and Male Homosociality

> Amazing, unbelievable, guys who'd played a lot of hard sports said they'd never felt anything like it, the sudden drop and rocket rush of the hit, the reserves of adrenaline you could make available to yourself, pumping it up and putting it out until you were lost floating in it, not afraid, almost open to clear orgasmic death-by-drowning in it, actually relaxed. (*Dispatches*, 63)

Another paradox of the Vietnam masculinities is the discrepancy between the archetypal capable/active military body and the recurrent reality of the body which is vulnerable, fragile, often impotent or wounded, and, most of all, subject to an exterior will. The potential response to these weakened masculinities is explored by Jeffords, albeit with the focus on the intentional "remasculinization" process that sought to reinstate the (male) American military body which was judged a failure following the loss of the war in Vietnam—a phenomenon dubbed by Jeffords as the "establishment of the veteran-as-victim mythology" (1989, 145).

The paradox is corporealized in the divergence between two distinct bodies, the first of which is the aspiring cinematic cultural symbol, the John Wayne body:

> 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, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire, getting their pimples shot off for the networks. (*Dispatches*, 209)

The second body is the one dominating the Vietnam War stories written by veterans, one constantly aware of the transience of life in a warzone. This latter type is a body defined by resignation, habit, and submission—not, as one might think, to the will of generals and politicians, but to the arbitrariness of violent engagement in general: the body attempting to recalibrate itself to the Vietnam settings, "developing a real war metabolism" (*Dispatches*, 14).

The contradiction continues: the military body, masculine and heterosexual by definition, is increasingly allowed leeway in expressing itself in a way not affordable to the civilian male. Military bodies acting in close proximity to each other in exceedingly testing circumstances become codependent, given to satirical performances of closeness that veil a real affection.

Tigerland (2000), a movie set in boot camp in 1971, includes the classic scene of two recruits out on night leave, intent on I&I; the predictable conclusion of such an outing takes place in a shared hotel room where, in postmodern fashion, the eroticization falls perhaps less to the heteronormative act itself than to the exhibitionist-voyeuristic sharing of space. The women are presented as single-serve, generic issue relief. The minimization of female presence in the scene is proliferated by the subsequent events, as afterwards the exit of the women goes virtually unnoticed by the two men now swept up in an argument about the war. As such, "the women serve as nothing more than a reminder of the heterosexuality of the soldiers" (Clarke, 24). Additionally, the women are presented as nothing but the body (the sexual act, post-act appetite) whereas the men symbolize the rational mind. The allegory encompasses the perceived role of women regarding politics and war while positing the two men in the continuum of philosopher-warriors dating back to Ancient Greece, a metaphor further suggested by the visual symbolic of the male debaters being only half covered by white sheets. The display of the mostly-nude military body echoes Connell's assertion of the links between superior (hegemonic) body and mind:

> The social definition of men as holders of power is translated not only into mental body-images and fantasies, but into muscle tensions, posture, the feel and texture of the body. This is one of the main ways in which the power of men becomes 'naturalized', i.e. seen as part of the order of nature. (1987, 85)

Yet there is the paradoxical element inherent in the ideology of military masculinities, considering these are the bodies which factually run the greater risk of losing the functionality which defines the physical ideal of masculinity. Not only through injury and death but the various physical and psychological effects of PTSD on the body, the military male is always on the brink of losing that which gives him purpose and upholds his masculine identity.

The willingness to engage in such high-risk behavior attracts various theories, one of which is the popular psycho-sexual one: "Masochism, the pleasure of being hurt, perfectly combines with the narcissism of the masculine ego" (Easthope, 52-3). Caputo's assessment of there being "an ineradicable streak of *machismo*, bordering on masochism, in all marines" (29) echoes this claim. Likewise, Caputo describes the violent disciplinary methods of his platoon sergeant, judging that "his man-to-man way of meting out punishment was preferable to the impersonal retribution of the Uniform Code of Military Justice" (ibid.). This perception is not dissimilar to tribal cultures where respect is accorded to age/experience, and the subordinate segment must accept the physical pain of training or a masculinity challenge in order to become/remain a full-fledged member of the community.

The microcosm of the military consists of several hierarchies which form the reality for the individuals in the group; militaries, albeit functioning under the command of civilian authority, are renowned for being clear societies unto themselves. One of the weaknesses of Phillips's argument regarding the active/passive dichotomy discussed above is her holistic view of (military) masculinity, when in fact there are multiple masculinities in existence inside the military society. Rank is only a part of it, as circumstance and subcultural conditions play an equal role; additionally, military masculinities are in constant transition, as men rise and fall through action or inaction. In a self-defining society functioning by the rules of meritocracy, every unit forms its own hierarchy with one "Alpha" dominating the pack; yet even the leaders are subject to exterior disciplines, oppositions, and regulations. In this Chapkins sees the core of militarism, the fluctuation of "domination and submission", the indulgence in the Western mentality in which "power has a deeply erotic component" (108-9). Chapkins theorizes further:

> The existence of an 'enemy' provides the justification for otherwise forbidden male bonding, submission to the power of a commander and the relinquishment of individual identity and agency in the unquestioning obedience to orders—in short, an enemy offers a justifiable pretext to be forced to be femme. Men are thus offered a fantasy of crossing gender boundaries and coming out not only intact but even more of a man. (110-1)

In the novels of the Vietnam War, the submissive, "docile" body, its actions usually determined by the needs of the Command, becomes dominant through instincts of revenge and resentment. The military body is frequently crystallized into the carnal, atavistic, straight-forward, flesh-and-blood product whose primary setting is the hunt-kill: "War is a function of the body of these men. […H]e is all armor, speeding bullet, steel enclosure" (Theweleit, 192).

The secondary functions involve the vulnerability of the dying body; the starving, malnourished body; the body over-exerted and exhausted by "humping the boonies". With the increase of bodily tension and frustration, the body is oversexed and undermaintained. The bodies become automatons that are suffering or vengeful in turns. There is no "mind" superimposing the physical: rationalism and intellect are obliterated by instinct, conditioning, and primal need and reaction. Cognitive functions are confined to small-unit level military tactic and strategy which, having dominated the GI's training, are more like muscle memory of the brain. The body is evaluated and defined by the precision of the destruction it wreaks.

Jeffords recognizes the "aesthetic of the male body as spectacle, enacted through the technologies of performance" (1989, 15) as one of the central modes of the Vietnam representation. For Jeffords, this strategy relates to the way the war was waged as a whole, the emphasis placed on means over ends: instead of the larger political/military aims, the traditional Vietnam text concentrates on *how* the war was fought, through "the valorization of performance, the aesthetic of spectacle through the male body as technology" (ibid., 41). Although Jeffords sees in this the negative effects of the militarist/masculine preference for action over deliberation, the view places the military body in the centerfold of the literary/cinematic Vietnam text, not only as a trained, coded mechanism applied strategically by a superior force but an avatar of individual capability.

The body is its own metaphor, able to signify values and beliefs. Since the formulation of modern masculinity the connection between physical appearance and one's character has been closely viewed through the ability of the male body to proclaim "virility, strength, and courage"

(Mosse, 23). In contemporary times, this concern equates directly to the ideology of "hard bodies[33]" as externally articulated ideal masculinity. In a stylistic throwback to literary realism, a large number of war literatures written by veterans include detailed descriptions of physical attributes of fellow soldiers, amounting to a careful consideration and admiration of male bodies. Caputo's descriptions of the men under his command span several pages, although in addition to the frequently telling labeling of his men as either "delicate-looking" or "an All-American boy" (25, 27), there are pragmatic notations of personal quirks which bring these monochromes to life: "[PFC Chriswell] had the irritating and unbreakable habit of addressing officers in the archaic third person: 'Would the lieutenant like me to clean his pistol?'" (26)

Fields of Fire offers the audience the somewhat rarer occurrence of bonding between an officer and the enlisted. The initial face-off between the platoon and their new Lieutenant is tense, if in a rather similar way to an encounter of strangers sharing instant chemistry:

> They approached Hodges slowly, singly or in twos and threes, like hesitant, wild animals inspecting their latest zookeeper. […] But he felt an immediate, visceral kinship with most of them, and sensed that it was mutual. (88)

And even as Hodges takes stock of his men, thinking "[Cat Man] walked with a feline delicacy, and yet each of his movements conveyed a sure, muscular firmness. Like a mountain lion" (89), the new platoon leader is equally much an object of appraisal:

> [Cat Man's] eyes measured Hodges continuously. They examined his face. They took in the muscle tone along his arms and back. They noted the calluses on his hands[…] (89-90)

Although the mutual assessment could be considered an assessment of superficially discernible skill and capability, Webb's word choices occasionally produce a degree of eroticization that threatens to transform the homosocial into the homoerotic. Moreover, with the subsequent unambiguous affection between Hodges and his men, most evident in the welcoming back of Hodges after his recuperation after being WIA, Webb participates in the Romanticist tradition of communicating the male bond:

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[33] I borrow the term from Jeffords's exploration of post-Vietnam cinematic masculinities in *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1994): the ideology of the hard body encompasses "strength, labor, determination, loyalty, and courage" (24) all at once.

> "Oh, Lieutenant. I never been so glad to see somebody in my whole damn life. You our Actual again?"
> […]
> Cannonball grinned slyly. "Hey, Lieutenant. Come on. Show us yo' scars." (343)

Scars, as well as "hard bodies," spell the body of a combatant. Even overt physical admiration can be explained by falling back on the physical requirements of combat, combining aesthetics with a utilitarian purpose; in theory, the man whose bodily image closely resembles that of the ideal soldier generates subconscious confidence in his comrades. The body is thus a symbol of skill, even invulnerability: "So long as there is very little fat, tensed muscle and tight sinew can give a hard, clear outline to the body. Flesh and bone can pass itself off as a kind of armour" (Easthope, 52). The "hard body" is, to an extent, inhumanized—its sole purpose is to restructure itself in accordance with the mission: "When attacking, our body is a weapon; when defending, it is a shield" (Gerzon, 40)

Consequently, in the jungle those men whose bodies seem most closely to adhere to the physical masculine ideal have a seeming advantage over the others. The features of the normative male beauty recounted by Mosse (28-32) suggest a stasis on the level of an artifact, whereas the functional beauty detailed by Easthope is more at home in the brutality of training and in theater of war. Caputo records the need for uniform military bodies as one of the expected outcomes of training:

> Like all evolutions, ours was accompanied by mutations. […] Gone were the shaggy, somewhat overweight children who had stumbled off the buses at OCS a long time before. They had been replaced by streamlined marines. (21)

The word "streamlined" echoes the likening of muscled bodies into armor, as discussed by Gerzon, Easthope, and Theweleit, the "hard body" spelling resilience as well as power.

The emphasis on bodies, one's own as well as those of fellow soldiers, leads to the expected flirtation with the lines of appropriateness. According to Boyle, "images of male homoeroticism and homosexuality[…] surface regularly in Vietnam War texts. Yet rarely do critics refer to, much less analyze them" (66). The lumping together of homoeroticism and homosexuality is interesting, if misleading, as the two separate phenomena occur in markedly dissimilar contexts.

Whereas instances of overt homosexuality are articulated through casual asides, such as Herr's remark on seeing a fellow reporter "looking totally mind-blown" after having "[woken] up that morning and heard two Marines lying near him making love" (257), homoeroticism is the spillover of homosociality, the unavoidable twisting together of war and sex, the eroticized adrenaline edge of danger in an all-male environment.

Although often excluded from stories of male bonding, which tend to concentrate on the interpersonal relationships between the enlisted, the emotions of junior officers toward their men can relay some of the most passionate, intense, and twisted instances of shared experience. A common linguistic tic, "my men," signals the acquisition of a possessive edge to the interactions between a platoon leader and his grunts. A Lieutenant who feels strongly about his men carries not only the responsibility for their lives and well-being, but their performance as well; giving orders that are followed to perfection is described as a near erotic experience. By collective action, the men are transformed from one's subordinates to extensions of one's body, and the soldier-author becomes a celestial body which directs and instructs. Caputo describes

> the thrill of having seen the platoon perform perfectly under heavy fire and under my command. I had never experienced anything like it before. When the line wheeled and charged across the clearing[…] an ache as profound as the ache of orgasm passed through me. (268)

Webb's Lieutenant Hodges expresses a similar pleasure at the readiness and near-organic social cohesion inside the platoon even when faced with the riskiest missions:

> It amazed him every time. They were so young in so many ways, so vulnerable, and yet an order filled with that kind of unknown was always obeyed almost before it was uttered. They did this part so goddamn well. (271)

Social cohesion bleeds into physical, organic cohesion, a twining together of former individuals into the male collective. Webb's description of a team executing a mission "unspeaking, knowing each other's tendencies and movements after months of naked closeness, one body that had six parts in perfect, conditioned harmony" (314), can be read simply as the result of intensive training, with emphasis on *conditioned*; the deconstruction of the ease of group action must, at a tactical level, include the minimization of the grunts' identities, as the "individual body becomes an element that

may be placed, moved, articulated on others" (Foucault, 164). Yet even as the individual undergoes "a functional reduction of the body", that body is "constituted as a part of a multi-segmentary machine" (ibid.), the organism which can protect as well as consume its individual parts. Through "naked closeness," the parts of the organism confuse the lines between self and other: caretaking extends not only to the singular, physical body, but appropriates the team as a holistic body/mechanism.

War as a near-sexual experience recurs in most combat memoirs, channeling a complete history of armed conflict; the phallic symbolism of the sword and the spear has become part of the paradigmatic discourse on war, and firearms equally clearly signal the explosive, instant personal discharge. The firing of a rifle holds connotations to a climax, and watching artillery strikes brings the same satisfaction through voyeuristic pleasure. In *Fields* all the men of the company attacking and firing in unison, screaming all the while, is portrayed as a shared instance of violent, forbidden titillation: a five-minute orgy after which the whole company lies "spent" (387). Herr, too, describes the high that comes with incoming rounds, utilizing the whole sexualized vocabulary of war: "'Quakin' and Shakin',' they called it, great balls of fire, Contact. Then it was you and the ground: kiss it, eat it, fuck it, plow it with your whole body" (63).

Technologies are a concrete extension of (masculine) power: with enough hi-power gadgetry masculinity can be augmented and amplified. "In Vietnam, technology, in the form of materiel and ordnance and chemical weaponry, was there at radio-command, the deus ex machine dropping vehicles of death from the sky" (Epstein). These are the impersonal back-up powers, not quite as sensually experienced as the technologies operated by oneself, from the symbolic fusion with one's rifle to the machinery one has immediate control over, from tracks to aircraft. Jeffords perceives the complimentary effect of the machine on the body as "an erotic act that fuses the multiplicity of the fragmented body with the unified power of technological display" (1989, 10). In such instances, the power of the machine becomes a power assumed by the limited human body:

> I was jumping around in the waves one time, and I saw a speck way off shore. All of a sudden I was eye to eye with a Phantom jet pilot. He gave me a nod and I'm looking at

> tail pipes, a black speck and he's gone. […] I said, 'Wow, that guy must be coming in his pants. What a fucking rush that's got to be.'" (Baker, 79)

Herr's fever-dream of the "collective meta-chopper" (9) is a frequently commented-upon example of the eroticization of machinery. The ubiquitous Huey is a central part of the technological fetishism in Vietnam War stories, encompassing a dual nature of the freedom bird as well as the death-slinging destroyer. Glasser devotes a whole chapter to "choppers," illustrating the significance of the machinery in this first "helicopter war" (196) morale-wise:

> I guess you could call it a frame of mind. You know, there are guys out there that need you. […] Nobody talks about it, but you can see it on their faces every time you come into an LZ. They know you'll be there; the Dust Offs have to go in whether the landing zone is secure or not. They try at least once. (Glasser, 204)

There is always a fragile balance in military masculinities between loyalty and self-sacrifice. From the Command's tactical point of view, risking troops (and, even more so, expensive machinery) needlessly is unacceptable; from a moral point of view, forsaking one's men or comrades equally so. Additionally, in Vietnam the reliance on superior technology and firepower frequently exemplifies the failure of the Western side to properly benefit from its strengths, as the fighting is governed by the laws of the bush where the technology can only do so much. Here, the machinery which is supposed to aid in the victory and thus augment the Western perception of ideal masculinity is in fact an insufficient, *impotent* tool.[34]

Sexuality is constantly present in the War and in the representations of it: combat is sexual, but it is simultaneously an explicit physical risk to one's gender identity. The fear mostly encompasses men, but the destructive penetration of the bullet that hits the lower body is its own kind of degradation equally felt by the female body: "She had been shot once. The bullet tore through her green uniform and into her buttock and went out through her groin" (*If I Die*, 116). The placement of the wound, apart from its lethality, is a threat to the feminine gendered self, albeit the articulation of the fear of such injury is exceedingly rare, quite unlike that of the corresponding

[34] In the 21st century warfare, machinery has acquired new significance in terms of gender. Whereas combat in the infantry may still be an exclusively male arena, in certain branches the female military body becomes the vessel of deliverance, depended on by the male grunt. On the eve of a major operation in Fallujah in 2004, a Marine expresses fervent appreciation for an AF gunship supporting his unit, unaware (and likely uncaring) of the fact that the plane is flown by a female Air Force officer (O'Donnell, 69).

male wound. Indeed, the Freudian castration anxiety is fully realized and ubiquitous in literatures of war; despite the multitude of risks to the body and to one's life, the fear of losing the essential, physical signifier of one's masculinity is the one prevailing dread. Masculinity may be contested, fragmented, or weakened through other bodily injuries, but the one overwhelming concern is the wound to the groin area.

> Whenever a shell landed in a group, everyone forgot about the next rounds and skipped back to rip their pants away, to check, laughing hysterically with relief even thought their legs might be shattered, their kneecaps torn away[…] (*Dispatches*, 134)

The scene is one of the motifs that unify not only Vietnam narratives but a great deal of all combat novels to date. Ironically, it is also one of the instances in which the homosexual threat of physical male closeness is not given any thought whatsoever, as platoon mates and even superior officers require positive identification, so to speak, such as the officer imploring his men to check his wound: "Is my dick all right? […] Tell me the truth. Is it?" (*Fields*, 66)[35]

Whereas the risk to the body is, in mainstream civilian culture, limited to sports injuries and accidental disabilities, physical combat trauma brings with it the social stigma of the bearer having participated in violent conflict. In Vietnam narratives especially, this twofold effect is particularly perceptible as returning veterans are judged not only by their fractured, struggling bodies, but also by their clear separation from the civilian mental state. In *Paco's Story* this divide is exemplified by the social ravine between the limping, alienated vet and the rest of the small town, especially the girl who is initially drawn to the idea of Paco's military masculinity, yet ends up scorning him and flaunting her sexual relationship with a "townie" as Paco listens from his room across the hall:

> By this time Paco's cock is iron hard and feels as big as a Coke bottle. And he's just a man like the rest of us, James, who wants to fuck away all that pain and redeem his body. (173)

The idea of "redeeming" one's body through either sex or violence rests on the conception that masculinities are articulated and upheld through physical acts, and the war wounds that have a

[35] The scene is equally endemic of Vietnam as it is of the contemporary combat memoirs: "Make sure my dick's not shot off" (Phillips 2005, 70); "Chavez was worried he'd been hit in the balls and so in the middle of the firefight he made Staff Sergeant Erich Phillips pull his pants down and make sure everything was okay" (Junger, 256).

lasting inhibiting effect on either are not only physical but become psychological, impediments to one's sexual ability and identity. "The construction of masculinity though bodily performance means that gender is vulnerable when the performance cannot be sustained" (Connell 1995, 54), the popular culture emblem of this surely being Oliver Stone's 1989 film version of Ron Kovic's autobiography, and the arresting scene which depicts the veteran's soundless grief on the collision of impotence and intimacy.

The final stage in the flirtation of the body with both the receiving and causing of injury is the ultimate fascination with death. From the tradition of Western movies, Horrocks identifies the connection between violence, death and love, "a worship of death, an eroticism around death, that is both disturbing and exciting" (81). In cultures where men are prohibited from exchanging embraces or orgasms, death is the one act which brings men together and momentarily releases them from the social constraints placed onto them, allowing a moment of intimacy (ibid., 80-81). In war stories, the death scene is present, if tempered by the often articulated emotional confusion between heartache for the dead and elation at personal survival.

In Vietnam, the self-preservation instinct signaled by the fear of death is, at times, overridden by the fear of loss. In these instances, the military male expresses a deep-seated resentment of his position as the constant bystander to deaths that are always arbitrary, nearly always chaotic, loud, undignified: survivor's guilt augmented by the special insanity of Nam, resulting in the wish of the sharing of death, of spreading it around like the last cigarettes or canned fruit in the laager at night:

> And somehow I think it's possible to get down into the prone, to snuggle down into the mud and oil-slick slime with him, and take on some of that sharp, heart-aching pain, some of his dying. Come on, I say to myself as I lie chest-flat, cut me and I'll help you bleed, grab me here at the shoulder and let it come into me, as though pain might be electricity. (*Close Quarters*, 163)

This morbid death-wish, survival-fantasy is an articulation of a half fraternal, half erotic immersion of self into the experience of Vietnam, a verbal lurch into the dream space that plagues the ironic reality of war.

3.5. Post-War/Post-Script: Truths and War Stories

> I was there. You were not. Only those facts matter. Everything else is beyond words to tell. As was said after the worst tragedies in Vietnam: "Don't mean nothin'." Which meant, "It means everything, it means too much." Language overload. (Broyles, 75)

The final battles of the masculine identity are not fought in a military setting but upon the return to the US soil. The problems of adjustment and relating to non-military masses that the Vietnam veteran faced originated in the intrinsic chasm between civilians and military personnel and were exacerbated by the condemnation of the war as unjust and unnecessary.

In comparison, the difficulties the WWII veterans encountered upon their return were mainly due to the rendering obsolete of their military masculinity and the substitution of the "confining expectation of domestic manhood that contradicted the masculinist military values they had gone to the war to uphold" (Adams, 30). The affluent post-war society held an ideal of the heroic military male that was starkly at odds with the often emasculating realities of the lethal or injurious consequences of war, a state of affairs that had been compounded by the era's rigid censorship of material that might have negatively affected the morale on the home front (ibid., 32-3). Ignorance about the masculine experience of WWII was challenged by novels such as Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) which brought an increased authenticity of portrayal by including the realistic battle description in an effort to "rehistoricize" the war for civilians (ibid., 36-7). Such effort could only produce incomplete results, owing to the problem already articulated by Fussell after WWI:

> The real reason is that soldiers have discovered that no one is very interested in the bad news they have to report. What listener wants to be torn and shaken when he doesn't have to be? We have made *unspeakable* mean indescribable: it really means *nasty*. (170)

O'Brien points out the hypocrisy of civilian attitudes, managing to encompass an arc of social conflict on the home front, unchanged from the Great War to Vietnam and beyond:

> If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth; if you don't care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty. (*Things*, 66)

The impossibility of relating exists not only in the inability to hear but the inability to ask any of the right questions. To being questioned on "'How many did you kill?' 'How does it feel to kill somebody?'", one of Baker's anonymous interviewees laconically replies, "A hell of a lot better than if he had shot me" (191).

In addition to the body that speaks out of turn, against the civilian expectation of military masculinity sanitized for post-war consumption, there is also the body conflicted by its feelings of guilt, failure, and survival. The military body's inability to define its purpose through the success of collective tasking leads to masculinities fractured into dissonance. Adams's study holds as its central theme this

> conflict between the civilian experience of victory—that is, that the male body and the combat unit will cohere—and the soldierly experience that, indeed, they cannot. This experience paradoxically reduces the soldier's investment in civilian ideals of masculinity by linking cohesion to survival instead of to victory. (73)

Consequently, the soldiers inhabit a position markedly cut off from all other social segments. Fussell's early description foreshadows countless contemporary counterparts:

> It was not just from their staffs that the troops felt estranged: it was from everyone back in England. […] The visiting of violent and if possible painful death upon the complacent, patriotic, uncomprehending, fatuous civilians at home was a favorite fantasy indulged by the troops. (86)

Thus even though the World War veterans returned victorious, they could only hope to assimilate into the general populace, brushing off the civilian imagery of heroic soldiership. Against this background it is easy to see how the returning Vietnam veteran, whose collective sins and mistakes were far better publicized than the hardships of life in the bush, was appropriated to stand as the epitome of savagery unpalatable to civilian sensibilities, posited apart from and at odds with the rest of the American society. The veterans, then, unsympathetic of the heightened pacifist sentiment, respond with antipathy, epitomized by the bitter wish of a Marine caught witnessing antiwar demonstrations, "They oughta ship 'em all to Russia" (Ehrhart, 54).

Where post-war existence is compromised by lasting bodily damage, the ecstasy of survival is soured by bitterness directed toward the unfeeling military powers-that-be as well as the

ignorant civilians. Where the survival is attached to a cohesive body, the veteran is to struggle with survivor's guilt as well as psychological trauma. In either case, the Vietnam veteran is removed from the masses both physically and ideologically, finding an outlet in exchanging war stories with those possessing the same knowledge-experience. Trapped in the absurd corporate reality of a World that does not correspond with one's pre-war memories of it, one is grounded in exchanging war stories mired in a more familiar type of the absurd, Nam: a life-long replay of the blackest comedy (un)imaginable. As Beidler puts is, "Most of the time in Vietnam, there were some things that seemed just too terrible and strange to be true and others that were just too terrible and true to be strange" (1982, 4), a paradox which glances off O'Brien's assertion: "It's a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn't, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness" (*Things*, 68).

"A true war story," as per O'Brien's pedagogical instructions, "makes the stomach believe" (*Things*, 74). Yet at the same time, 'truthful' does not necessarily equal 'factual'. Much of this owes to the inadequacy of human perception, the deficiency intensified by the hyperreality of combat: "In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen" (*Things*, 67). The same laws which govern the smallest entity of the whole—a war story—apply to the process of representing the entirety of the Vietnam War. "Truth" cannot be conveyed because it is mired in separate seeming-happenings; perception being colored by subjectivity, the telling becomes skewed by interpretation:

> Investigating and interpreting what happens at the heart of the combat experience involves wrestling with the confused, the contradictory, the irrational and often the incredible. It involves trying to strip away and analyse layers of deception, self-deception and reorganization. (Taylor, 14)

Obsessed with truth, with convincing the reader of its absurdity, O'Brien plays constantly with the subversion of words and traditional narrative values and expectations:

> "This next part," Sanders said quietly, "you won't believe it."
> "Probably not," I said.
> "You won't. And you know why? […] Because it happened." (*Things*, 70)

Ironically, in Vietnam the reality has made the experience into a farce of such proportion that the seeming truth ends up outweighing the literal, factual truths. O'Brien's take on the legend of self-sacrifice, a legend that is a war story, about the man who saves the others in his team by throwing himself on top of a grenade, is cautious: "Is it true? […] You'd feel cheated if it never happened" (*Things*, 79). Yet the story-truth of the legend is denied because, O'Brien seems to suggest, the tale is too straight-forward, the truth of it too easy.

After the war, there is not much left except the telling of war stories. As one of the anonymous speakers in *Nam* points out,

> I was geared up for dealing with a hundred thousand dollars' worth of equipment and a lot of responsibility for human life. I've come back here… to do what? Civilian level is bullshit. You make a mistake, nobody's going to die. Big fucking deal. (Baker, 188-9)

The return of the veteran to the World is the topic in *Paco's Story*, a literary effort characterized by Beidler in words reminiscent of Fussell's:

> It is a tale told by people who by definition could not possibly tell it to people who by consensus could not possibly wish to hear it. It is in sum the newest version of the oldest Vietnam story in the world: a war story that is a peace story; a Vietnam story that is an America story; a true story that is unrepentantly false; a false story that is heartbreakingly true. (1991, 99)

If Paco is not quite spat upon as he tours the town seeking work, the welcome is not much warmer; from one of the civilians, Paco receives barely grudging sympathy:

> Holland thinks to himself, a veteran a body ought to help along, and he's got about the right haircut, but that cane, those roughened clothes, and that funny look in his eyes (they all got it, don't they?) wouldn't sell so much as one decent pair of shoes, ask me. Besides, a body hears too many stories as to how they got to acting so peculiar. (84)

More frequently, one encounters outright hostility: "Them Vietnam boys sure do think you owe them something, don't they?" (85) In fact, the only moments of relating occur when Paco meets fellow veterans, imaginably with the shared feeling "of being sentenced, by unspoken national consent, to solitary confinement with the memory of [war]" (Beidler 1982, 9). A fellow veteran is the one who ends up employing Paco; moreover, this happens without Paco having to ask for work, which marks both the silent bond of recognition for the situation Paco is in as well as the release

from the subservient, vulnerable position Paco has been placed in in relation to the civilians who, by definition, do not (want to) know and cannot understand.

The gap between the military/its veterans and the civilians endures to this day. Without the public backlash rising to the level of anti-Vietnam War sentiment, the soldiers returning from today's wars find themselves adrift amidst the masses whose favorite political refrain has become "against the war, but for the troops". The veterans, however, still find themselves existing in a continuum of brotherhood defined by survival and the shared knowledge of horror, leading to a legacy of understanding passed down in subtle (masculine) fashion. One of the veterans of Operating Enduring Freedom recounts returning Stateside to an empty house,

> so he went out and knocked at the house of a Vietnam vet who lived next door. The vet understood without having to ask and pulled some whiskey out of the cabinet and they spent the rest of the afternoon drinking. (Junger, 179)

4. Conclusion

> Society can give its young men almost any job and they'll figure how to do it. They'll suffer for it and die for it and watch their friends die for it, but in the end, it *will* get done. That only means that society should be careful about what it asks for. (Junger, 154)

The above quotation is not a quote on Vietnam, despite its familiar tone, but on the fighting in Korengal Valley, Afghanistan, 2007 through 2008. Nonetheless Junger shares much with Herr, not least of which is the "documentary impulse" that "has always been strong in American literature" (Van Deusen, 82). Furthermore, Junger works in the same space that Herr occupied, overlapping with the grunts' experience while never completely being able to cross into it—and, like Herr, Junger is equally seduced and disturbed by what he is witnessing:

> War is a lot of things and it's useless to pretend that exciting isn't one of them. It's insanely exciting. […]but the public will never hear about it. It's just not something that many people want acknowledged. War is supposed to feel bad because undeniably bad things happen in it[…] (144)

In an era of dominance of the yellow ribbon in the domestic sphere, service members continue to struggle with the need to contain the pleasure and fulfillment that exist adjacent to the expected horror of combat.

Shapiro points back to the Gulf War as the originator of notable improvement in the American civilian public's perception of their military as well as their government's handling of foreign policy (110). As opposed to the typecast John Wayne disciple of the 1960s, the soldier who entered the Gulf War did it "out of necessity rather than a desire to express his hypermasculinity through the violent acts of the military" and the troops were thus viewed "as neutral performers of necessary violence in the name of the state" (Papayanis, 244). Moreover, a new consciousness of gender politics adjacent to the military institution had come about; the Gulf War veteran "represented a United States that had matured from its Vietnam image into a figure that could incorporate femininity into its masculine mould without being emasculated; he could inhabit a position as neither hypermasculine perpetrator, nor hyperfeminized victim" (ibid., 238). As I have argued in this thesis, this "maturation" was possible precisely *because of* the catalytic Vietnam War

masculinities and the unconscious groundwork laid by the 1960s GI for the reshaping of (the rules of) the military gender.

Yet parallel with the increased approval, even admiration, that the men and women in the armed forces have come to encounter, the professional soldier has sought to distance him/herself from the civilian society. Written in the mid-1990s, Tom Ricks's exploration of the culture of the USMC, for instance, goes some way toward explaining the deliberate separation of the Corps from corporate America. The departure holds in it the lack of faith in shared values as well as, post-9/11, the aversion to gratitude presented without knowledge. Elizabeth Samet writes,

> One former captain I know proposed that "thank you for your service" has become "an obligatory salutation." Dutifully offered by strangers, "somewhere between an afterthought and heartfelt appreciation," it is gratifying but also embarrassing to a soldier with a strong sense of modesty and professionalism. "People thank me for my service," another officer noted, "but they don't really know what I've done."

Samet concludes with the thought that if this

> theater of gratitude provoked introspection or led to a substantive dialogue between giver and recipient, I would celebrate it. But having witnessed these bizarre, fleeting scenes, I have come to believe that they are a poor substitute for something more difficult and painful—a conversation about what war does to the people who serve and to the people who don't.

In order to overcome the cultural divide, there is still the call for someone to "tell it": "Okay, man, you go on, you go on out of here you cocksucker, but I mean it, you tell it! You tell it, man. If you don't tell it…" (*Dispatches*, 207) In the tradition of Herr and his colleagues in Vietnam, those who died, went missing, or came back reliving the War as Herr did, contemporary journalists have continued the effort to make America's wars known to the American public. In order to inform the civilians of the experience that causes their countrymen and women to return home in multiple ways transformed, Herr and Junger have both participated in the documentary and literary attempt

> to explore a condition of spirit that might best be described as "the psychology of the mean"—not mean in the dictionary sense, mean as in "niggardly," "small," even "base"—but something more like rattlesnake mean, beaten-dog mean. It is the soul's ground zero[…] (Beidler 1982, 162)

It is the emotional progression in the face of Sisyphean missions that characterized Vietnam as much as it has the conflict in the Middle East, conveyed, for instance, by the chronology of the

subtitles in Campbell's book: EAGER / FIERCE / GRIM / TIRED. Instead of isolating the Vietnam War as an aberration in US political history, utterly defined by the overarching specter of My Lai, and its GIs as the uniformly destructive emblem of the warring patriarchal monolith, it is indeed possible to acknowledge the Vietnam masculinities as an organic part of the military continuum. The bodies carry the same need to contain fear and to push aside grief until it is safe to address them; they share the superstitions, the black humor, and the deep distrust of many of their officers and most rear personnel.

The members of the contemporary professional military have inherited a pragmatism and cynicism which mean they will do their job even when "predisposed toward the idea that the Big Lie is as central to American governance as taxation" (Wright, 6). While technically forbidden to criticize the missions given to them, the military body—skeptical of the once-more self-assumed US mission "as global enforcer, the world's Dirty Harry" (ibid.)—find ways to express doubts about the grand strategic scheme: "In Iraq", Wright states of the initial 2003 invasion, "the joke among Marines is 'After finishing here, we're going to attack North Korea, and we'll get there by invading Iran, Russia and China.'" (ibid.).

During a later deployment, another platoon comes up with "a handmade morale meter with seven different settings" to demonstrate the level of morale:

> "Embracing the suck," was one [setting].
> "Fuck this shit, I quit," was another.
> "Bend over. Here it comes again," was another.
> But it wasn't as if they had a choice. They were soldiers whose choices had ended when they had signed contracts and taken their oaths. […] Somewhere, far from Iraq, was where the orders began, but by the time they reached Rustamiyah, the only choice left for a soldier was to choose which lucky charm to tuck behind his body armor, or which foot to line up in front of the other, as he went out to follow the order of the day. (Finkel, 83-5)

Thus despite the numerous improvements that characterize the contemporary American military—technological, tactical, socio-political—what remains unchanged is the nucleus of the experience, the relinquishing of control and the subsequent shift into a space governed by chance. In this space, what brings meaning into the experience is the establishment of the bonds which, while not sexual,

"contain much of the devotion and intensity of a romance" (Junger, 155). The "Man Dance" phenomenon allows the coexistence of affection and humorous antagonism, allowing the freedom for circumstances in which "[t]he Hispanics in the platoon refer to the white guys as 'cracker-ass fucks,' the whites refer to them as 'muds' and to Spanish as 'dirty spic talk,' and they are the best of friends" (Wright, 24).

The indebtedness of contemporary military masculinities to the Vietnam era comes down to the normalization of the subcultural value system which enables a soldier to verbalize, unconcerned, something like the morning ritual which "so far had kept him and his closest friends alive: 'We tell each other we love each other right before we go out[…] and then we jump in the fucking truck'" (Finkel, 232). Emotion, instead of acting as a hindrance to professional conduct, is necessary for its upholding, as it is the shared bond between the members of the unit and the community which provides the motivation and the meaning to the missions. Loss, when it strikes, need not be concealed either: the dead are honored visibly, from military ritual to the personal, as in the case of the Sergeant tattooing "a memorial to a fallen friend from [Operation Iraqi Freedom] around his right wrist" (Frederick, 73). Today's male grunts recognize their privileged position as men without need for validation of masculinity, comfortable with the intimacy and physical closeness of the "hard bodies," easily appropriating the word *love* into their language.

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