

Childhood's End: Self Recovery in the Autobiography of the Vietnam War

Jeff Loeb

Are you experienced? I am.

Jimi Hendrix, "Are You Experienced?"

I think that Vietnam was what we had instead of happy childhoods.

Michael Herr, *Dispatches*¹

Over the past decade, the literature of the Vietnam War has become something of a growth industry. In part this has resulted from the continued topicality of the war in the culture at large—witness the debates over President Bill Clinton's and Vice-President Dan Quayle's draft situations and the self-serving handwringing of Robert MacNamara's autobiographical *In Retrospect*.² The proliferation of excellent primary works by Vietnam survivors, however, has played just as large a role. In just the past five years, two have won Pulitzer Prizes—Robert Olen Butler's story collection *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain* and Lewis Puller's autobiography *Fortunate Son*—and several others have been broadly praised, including one novel by John M. Del Vecchio and two by Tim O'Brien, as well as memoirs by Tobias Wolff, Winnie Smith, Le Ly Hayslip, Robert Mason, Lady Borton, and John Balaban, among many others.³ Critical works have also kept pace. Since 1990, no fewer than eleven full-length offerings and two collections of articles have appeared.⁴ Add to these the more than 1100 primary works and 400-odd critical pieces, including books, articles, and dissertations, published before 1990.⁵ Located, however, somewhere between the survivor narratives—which for purposes of this paper include not

only memoirs but also novels, poetry, and oral histories—and the critical evaluations is a gap, an interstitial opening into which has slipped something of primary importance that has escaped many critics, and that something has to do with the humanity of the narrators themselves.⁶

Thematized within the narratives of Vietnam survivors is an undercurrent of loss and self-division not always readily apparent because it is frequently encoded in ordinary images. Because of its innocuous phrasing, readers and critics often pass over this coded trauma, and yet it provides the key to a deeper understanding of both the works themselves and their authors' motivations. In addition, from work to work, whatever their genre, these phrases and images remain remarkably constant, but always pointing us toward the locus of loss felt by the narrator. In the following article, I will concentrate primarily on one of one of these embedded internal motifs, that of loss of youth or premature aging, and in so doing excavate the underlying social, psychological, and philosophical implications for students of the Vietnam experience.

The sad fact is that criticism tends many times to read its own considerations, be they historical, ideological, or political, into these survivor narratives, and the result is too often that the two projects end up existing at cross purposes with one another. Vietnam survivor narratives themselves are almost never political in purpose, however didactic they might be, but rather are always deeply personal; critical accounts of the narratives, on the other hand, far too often explore them from a point of view achieved through a process of politically inspired cerebration, one that seems to search for a use for them and to celebrate this usefulness only as long as they reinforce their political or ideological position. This is not to say that such critics are always incorrect in their observations but rather that in using the narratives in this way they lose or dismiss an important component—perhaps *the* important component—of the narrative project: the human being behind the story. In stressing the human dimension of the various representations of the Vietnam experience, I hope to reverse what I perceive to be a widespread distortion of the existing record as well as to provide a more useful context for understanding the purpose and spirit in which its survivors have undertaken to tell their stories. This article thus attempts to incorporate this lost or muddled personal context within the critical considerations of Vietnam literature.

Most frequently, works by Vietnam survivors are ignored because their potential evaluators simply do not know how to read them. In other words, critics lack a generic context for their proper analysis. What seems to be needed is a larger frame of reference in which to place these narratives so that they might be judged both in their own light and in terms of their authorial intent. One critic who seems to provide such a method of viewing the narratives is Kali Tal, who notes a pattern in Vietnam survivor narratives that has much more in common with a literature of trauma survival, such as the memoirs of the Holocaust or victims of rape or incest, than it does with more general literary forms. She observes a pattern in what she terms the “literature of trauma” that includes, first, separation

from society, followed by a state of liminality, during which the traumatic experience of the war itself and the surviving of it take place, and finally ending back home, in "The World" (230).⁷ This post-liminal reintegration, however, is never complete, according to Tal, which is to say, the self-alienation continues, often manifesting itself in compartmentalizing experience or denying portions of memory, though often unrecognized as such.

Survivors experience a number of stages. The first, at least with male narratives, is often marked by the dehumanizing ritual of bootcamp, in which the individual is forcibly stripped of any individuality and integrated into a military society, a society totally unlike that which he just left. During the second stage, that of trauma survival, both "personal myths," such as an everlasting sense of youth and immortality or a complete power to control one's own destiny, and "national myths," like a sense of racial superiority, are exploded; the person, what is left of him or her psychologically, becomes a victim, self-alienated, with all sense of control or individuality gone (225-26). Tal notes that the final stage is marked by a continued self-alienation, but I would observe further that this condition is compounded by a different sense of alienation as well from that which was once most familiar: home and society. All survivors seek "home" and a reunion with family (both representing the previously whole self) while in the liminal state, but the post-liminal homecoming is rarely satisfying. Rather, this dual alienation continues, the survivor-veterans seeing themselves as being somehow at fault, as having made some fatal personal decisions that placed them in the traumatic circumstances, or conversely, feeling guilty about having survived. This differs from the second stage, one marked by inner-directed, self-destructive tendencies, in that narrators in the third stage concentrate on geography as the source of or salvation from their problems. Thus, we see survivors as diverse as Lynda Van Devanter, Ron Kovic, and John Ketwig all either avoiding returning to or striving to leave home at the very point when their need for community support is greatest.⁸ It is only when they are able to make sufficient connection to some community, usually one of other survivors (hence, a new home and new family, which is to say a new self), that they can once again begin talking about the events. Thus, in this Vietnam literature of survival, the narrative movement of the survivor is typically, according to Tal, "from normal to bizarre," and then to a state of half-normalized bizarreness, a condition which includes, I would suggest from my readings of the survivor narratives, a sort of doubly overlaid consciousness in which memories of the events of the trauma are continually mixed in with the impinging perceptions of present phenomena (229). This dual consciousness has a compelling immediacy that eventually forces the veteran-survivor to attempt to bear witness to the trauma in hopes of reintegrating the self with the world.

Critical attempts that *fail* to recognize the memoirs, novels, and testimony as survivor literature, as distinct from some other genres, do not understand that the veterans are attempting to reorder personal myths (i.e., a sense of self). Tal argues

at some length that all of the major critical works of the 1980s, specifically those by Philip D. Beidler, James C. Wilson, Thomas Myers, and John Hellmann, tend to view these very personal narratives in symbolic terms, typically as attempts by their writers to reorder “national,” or, as I would call them, cultural, myths (218-24).⁹ Worse, these same critics, as they concentrate on symbols, often reduce the survivor-narrators to positions of subjectivity, forgetting that the war was not only symbolic—i.e., happening only in the realm of the imagination to its participants—but rather it was also real, experienced by people whose later representations are an attempt to repair personal ruptures to individual psyches. I would further suggest that in tending to interpret representations of Vietnam on a symbolic level, these critics—including the ones Tal identifies and several who have followed in the past six years—accept these stories only insofar as their basic insights do not interfere with the critics’ own cultural conceptions. Thus, for example, the political right finds in Vietnam narratives an opportunity to promote increased militarism or to boost the concept of American heroism; witness, for example, the enthusiastic responses by certain public figures to the many POW books of the mid-seventies. At the same time the left, especially those academic critics who use the text as an occasion for reading culture, utilizes those parts that are useful as ideological diatribes against their perceived opponents. The survivor literature of Vietnam is, as a result, nearly always a marginalized literature: somebody else’s story, not something personally experienced, and thus usually only invoked when it is consistent with or conveys a message useful to a specific ideological or political project—e.g., the Vietnam War as expression of American imperialism or an American psyche based on frontier violence or an inherent and destructive patriarchal bent.¹⁰ My intent here is to take this literature out of the realm of somebody-else’s-story-to-be-used-for-one’s-own-purposes and to consider it rather as a series of attempts to overcome a sense of both self- and societal alienation.

I have suggested that the attributes of this literature of survivors of the Vietnam War include both a desire to bear witness to the trauma and a need to structure the experience so that a recreated self can emerge. Thus authors of survival accounts seek to create personal meaning out of the chaos, an essentially romantic task. Indeed, as many critics have correctly noted, a sense of journey or quest is a major theme in Vietnam literature of survival. Veterans describe surviving their tours in order to return home, literally represented as a journey in many cases, and always as a movement from innocence to experience. The avowed purpose of the Vietnam survivor narrative is to relate the discovered meaning of that experience or, alternatively, to take the reader along on the recreated journey. There are other quasi-romantic aspects to this literature as well—for instance, an almost universal impulse to establish or re-establish a distinct self, one that can synthesize experience and then project it onto a chaotic situation in order to render the chaos meaningful. Thus, survivors attempt to reinvent their world because not to and to remain in postmodern uncertainty is unendurable for them. They need to find order and meaning in their trauma and



Vietnam memoirist Michael Clodfelter standing (far left) next to pointman Wendell Rose, members of 2nd “Hard Core” Squad at Tuy Hoa, September 1966. Courtesy of Wendell Rose.

to bear witness to that meaning (“And I only am escaped alone to tell thee,” Ishmael ends that great survival narrative *Moby Dick*). This inner necessity that compels the survivors to “tell” their trauma is a distinct compulsion to find a self, many times a crippled and radically altered self, but an identifiable self nevertheless.

This brings us to the problem of personal identity, a vexed one in the academic community for at least two decades. Philosophers and literary theorists of even centrist persuasion have moved during that period from a belief in the humanist notion of a unitary self to thinking that personality is constructed by things located outside the physical person—texts, language, culture. The romantically constituted self has, for many of these thinkers, conceptually mutated into a subject and, for some, to a sign.¹¹ For survivor-narrators of the Vietnam War, the problem of personality is similarly vexed but for entirely different reasons: what they formerly believed was a unified self has, as a response to trauma, been fragmented. Unlike the theorists of the putative subject/sign, who would maintain that the self was “always already” fragmented, if not completely invented from the whole cloth of romantic thinking, Vietnam survivors seek a return to a unified self that they firmly believe was once there, one that for nonparticipants in the war was never violated or fragmented.

Most narrators, several years removed from their experiences in Vietnam, are compelled to see themselves as previously whole, but broken by those experiences, even though many emphasize that a certain healing has begun to take place. It is this sense of prior wholeness, which they generally represent in cultural terms—what cars they drove before they left, what music they listened to, how certain movies affected them, or which words by which politicians (John Kennedy's "Ask not . . ." speech is a favorite target) moved them to enlist—that impels the recuperative, and essentially therapeutic, purpose of their narratives. It is, however, the broken self that does the writing and telling about the trauma, and this self always attempts to find a way of objectifying the experience, of rendering it comprehensible in the form of concrete images or incidents that correlate with the internal, psychological state. What follows is a description of what I feel is a major component of this objectification process, one slippery for narrators because of the chimerical quality of the self being sought and because the audience does not share the traumatized experience.

Typically, survivor narratives arise from two sources, one a sense of inner division and the other a feeling of being cut off from family and society, and the resultant testimony seeks to clarify the experience by displaying both inner- and outer-directed representations. To do so, narrators embed in the texts an elaborate code of repeated terms or figures that constitute, through a process of repetition and specialized definition, internal motifs. The terms in this code are remarkably similar from work to work. For instance, the one that I have identified as most frequently representing the narrators' outer-directed trauma, the sense of their being cut off from others, is "home," which narrators radically redefine. Intermingled with images of and references to home is the most often chosen inner-directed figure, the one that I will concentrate on for the remainder of this paper: severed youth or growing old before one's time, which signifies a diminished or ruptured self.¹² One of the few critics to recognize the phenomenon of lost youth is Jacqueline E. Lawson in "'Old Kids': The Adolescent Experience in the Nonfiction Narratives of the Vietnam War," noting that "the concept of a lost or truncated youth" is endemic to Vietnam narratives (35).¹³ I, however, reach different conclusions than she does about the import of the phenomenon. She states, for instance, that "the myth of manhood is exploded in nearly every veteran's account," whereas I would argue that what they are actually denoting is a feeling of self-division expressed as a sense of premature aging (35). In fact in searching for ways to signify their sense of being cut off from family and friends, these narrators have imbued terms concerned with youth with additional meanings having deep implications for our understanding of their stories. Their ultimate goal seems to be to attach to this term the same markings that we associate with the psychological site where self, family, and community interrelate. Lost youth thus becomes one of the most important terms in the survivor-narrators' search for a representational code that will allow them to transcend the inherited limitations of received language and communicate the nameless alienation they feel.

Although the concept of lost youth is practically universal among Vietnam narrators, most times, if noticed at all by readers, it appears unobtrusive and innocuous. For instance, in the prologue to his well-known memoir *A Rumor of War*, Marine infantry Lieutenant Philip Caputo represents himself as “severed from youth,” and in the opening chapter says that he “came home with the curious feeling that [he] was older than [his] father,” that he had “an old man’s convictions,” even though he was barely twenty.¹⁴ Army nurse Lynda Van Devanter, in relating her fatigue from several hours of nonstop emergency trauma surgery in Pleiku, says, “I began feeling as if I were turning into an old woman” (144). In *Dispatches*, correspondent Michael Herr describes his situation during the harrowing first days of the Tet offensive: “I realized . . . that, however childish I might remain, actual youth had been pressed out of me in just the three days that it took me to cross the sixty miles between Can Tho and Saigon” (73). Finally, Robert Santos, a platoon leader with the Army’s 101st Airborne division, speaking of a newly arrived soldier, best summarizes the theme of lost youth:

It wasn’t so much that he was younger than us, but he was a kid by our standards. We got old fast. We were exposed to so much shit and you find out so much about yourself—your good, your bad, your strengths and your weaknesses—if your’re honest with yourself—so quickly that you might as well have aged. You might as well be eighty years old looking back or looking forward, however you want to talk about it. It’s the only way to survive.¹⁵

Representing a sense of lost youth is basic to the narrative strategies of Vietnam survivor-memoirists, but since the phenomenon of aging, and all its causes and effects, is universal, what distinguishes these particular narrators’ use of the concept from that of other writers? I contend that when Vietnam survivors talk and write about lost youth they are suggesting not only its literal and commonly accepted meanings—e.g., a sense of one’s frailty and mortality or a recognition that the putatively unique self is actually only a part of a larger and inevitable process—but, in addition, they are attempting to express a deep sense of self-division. And, for Vietnam survivors, this self-division expressed through loss of youth not only retains its highly personal character but also has philosophical, psychological, and social aspects as well, each discussed in turn in the sections that follow.

I

Philosophically, Vietnam survivor-narrators see themselves as existing in a state in which they have suffered the permanent loss of a quality intrinsic to their personhood, that they now lack something that nonparticipants have somehow

retained. Most frequently, they refer to this quality as innocence, and they contrast it with their present state of experience, much the way early Romantics like William Blake and William Wordsworth did. A number of critics, most notably Tobey Herzog in *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost*, have used the innocence-to-experience cycle as the basis for cultural analyses, but only Vince Gotera has recognized it as constituting a basic structural component of the literature itself.¹⁶ In *Radical Visions: Poetry by Vietnam Veterans*, he notes, for example, that Steve Mason's poem "The Last Patrol" is a "search for . . . [the] lost childhood" from which Mason knows "he has severed himself violently."¹⁷ He also refers to the "Adamic innocence" of Bill Shields's poem "innocence to kill" (245) and discusses at some length the frequently employed narrative strategy of using a description of one's youth as a counterpoint to the ravages of experience (130-135). Additionally, Gotera identifies the speaker's descriptions of rapid maturing in David Hall's "The Ambush of the Fourth Platoon," although rather than exploring the thematic nuances that would lead to a discussion of permanent loss and the intractability of memory, he unfortunately chooses, following Richard Slotkin, to analyze this phenomenon in terms of a naive American "faith in regeneration through violence" dating to a frontier consciousness, by now a rather hackneyed position in Vietnam literature criticism (134-35).

It has been left to close observers of the behavior (as opposed to the writing) of veterans to see that they describe their post-traumatic stress in neo-romantic terms. Sociologists Joel Osler Bredendick and Erwin Randolph Parson state, for instance, that "going home . . . meant leaving a part of one's youth and life behind. And it meant leaving one's innocence behind, because a killer is no longer innocent," not that all, or even most, Vietnam survivors could be classed as killers even by the most unremitting critics of the war (43).¹⁸ In Bredendick and Parson's basic sense, however, narrators, looking back in a search for a counterpoint to the loss and bitterness of experience, often represent youth as a time of impressionable innocence in which war, or at least the actual war yawning before them, as opposed to a romantically idealized one formulated from the soft history and cultural mythmaking of their upbringing, is unimaginable. For instance, Army Sergeant Lee Childress specifically refers to the state of childhood in relating the results of his traumatized memories:

Today I go down the street and see things in a way that nobody else sees them. I look at my own kid and it scares me. 'Cause it's a baby, and babies are alive and they're beautiful and they're perfect, and they've got arms and legs and feet and toes, and their mind is like an empty plate that hasn't had all these things happen to it. And I think, "If you ever saw what I've seen. If you'd spent the time that I spend every fucking day of my life, going over and over again the *why?* and the *why?* and I always know there's no answer. (Santoli, 63-64)

Thus we see a sense of the former self as being a type of *tabula rasa*, as Lawson has it (although her reference is to the cultural rather than the ethical and psychological), and the present, writing self as the site of a continual, gnawing anguish that never abates (28). It is also the repository of constantly impinging memories that narrators structure into images of innocence-versus-experience. Over a decade after her return, for instance, Army nurse Anne Simon Auger continued to have “periods of real depression at the time—very happily married, a good job, wonderful husband, a beautiful baby—and I would consider suicide. I didn’t understand why I was so depressed.”¹⁹ She was also plagued with nightmares and had a tendency to fly into violent rages at her family. In relating how she is eventually able to begin coming to terms with her experience, Auger explains:

I think the turning point in the group came when I watched a certain movie on TV. *Friendly Fire*. I remember being just overwhelmed because the guy who played the part of the GI in that film looked just exactly like the guy in my nightmares. He was blond; he was young; he was so innocent and naive. He went over to Vietnam just like most of us did, thinking he was doing what he should be doing . . . and you could just see him evolve. He went from being naive and innocent through being scared and confused into being hard-nosed and cynical. (Walker 85)

Auger is prepared to see this TV movie in terms of the innocence-to-experience cycle because she has constructed her own memories in exactly such terms, the philosophical paradigm already exists for her. Many narrators, Auger included, come to accept, Job-like, this burden of experience, but only as a kind of existential state of diminished possibility. In *Achilles in Vietnam*, a study resulting from several years of counseling veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), psychiatrist Jonathan Shay notes that the loss of innocence is multifold.²⁰ “The task is to remember, . . . and to grieve,” he states. “For combat veterans, this means grieving not only the dead but also their own lost innocence in both its meanings, as blamelessness and as unawareness of evil” (192). As an example of the complexity attached to this perception of personal loss, Ron Kovic, an ex-Marine who lost the use of both legs in combat, splits *Born on the Fourth of July* in two, the first part portraying his innocent, or whole, self and the second, his experienced, or broken, one. Such a strong contrast is necessary to his conception and purpose, which are to convince readers that he was made a victim by his government and culture. Since Kovic wants his psychological loss to be considered when we contemplate his physical loss, represented graphically in the book’s second half, he presents his youth as a

carefree time during which he innocently accepts the lessons that American culture has to teach, for example, that war is heroic and that the U.S. is always right.

To underscore this contrast between innocence and experience, and thus to make his rather deterministic point that he had been inexorably funnelled to his ultimate end, Kovic appends an afterword to his book recalling all that was joyous (and thus gone) in his childhood. Making up the last two pages of text, this short section is written in italics to differentiate it from the preceding chapters, and the effect gives it great emphasis. In the gauzy, idealized lens of his italicized prose Kovic essentially encapsulates many of the incidents and feelings that he has previously presented of his growing up: the exultation of playing sports, the sweet agony of first dates, the sense of feeling close to his family. The descriptive terms he uses are similarly warm and fuzzy: e.g., “it was all sort of easy”; “it was lovely”



Soldiers Glen Whited and Tommy Morales at Phu Tuan, September 1966. Courtesy of Wendell Rose.

(twice); “feeling like I could live forever” (224-25). Since readers at this point presumably have finished the book and thus incorporated Kovic’s war-related trauma into their consciousness, the desired effect, of course, is that they also share his feelings of loss. The book’s last paragraph, in which Kovic remembers that “it was a beautiful spring day and we were young back then and really alive,” contrasts with the final sentences of the prior page—i.e., the end of the book proper—that relate his feelings just after being hit and that conclude the actual narrative: “I was frightened to death, . . . all I could feel was cheated. All I could feel was the worthlessness of dying right here in this place at this moment for nothing” (222-24). The book as a whole then ends as follows, with images of his (gone) youth: “This song [Del Shannon’s “Runaway”] was playing and I really got into it and was hitting baseballs and feeling like I could live forever. It was all sort of easy. It had all come and gone” (224).

Through the figure of lost youth, Kovic therefore compels us to contemplate with him other losses as well: of dreams, of innocence. All of these were, of course, inevitable in what would have been his normal maturation process, but in his estimation they have been accelerated by the conspiracy of American culture and government (he does not really distinguish) to abbreviate his youth by sending him to war, and particularly an unjust war. The conclusion of Kovic’s self-reconstruction is, therefore, bitterly uncompromising in its implication that he has in some sense been robbed of life’s possibilities, and from this situation no complete recovery is ever possible.

II

This sense that youth equals possibility, and the opposing one that the moral aging process of Vietnam has marked an end to hope, permeates the narratives, but it also has a sound basis in the psychological studies of survivors. Norma Winkler, for instance, argues that adult development among civilians differs from those who experienced war in late adolescence, as the majority of Vietnam participants did.²¹ She states that “according to widely accepted theories of developmental psychology [most specifically, those of Erik Erikson], each stage in the adult life cycle entails a set of specific tasks or ‘crises’ through which the individual must pass in order to successfully mature into adulthood” (88). She also concludes that “the general maturational task of establishing an adult identity involves a certain amount of experimentation and the trying out of various social roles” and that “youth are expected and allowed to experiment with life styles and personal roles before assuming the responsibility or stable identity of adulthood” (88n).

Using Erikson’s theories as her basis, her particular observation is that most Vietnam survivors were unable to proceed through the requisite tasks or “crises,” in addition to being denied opportunities to experiment with social roles the way their peers did. Winkler also asks us to “consider the combat situation as a setting

for older adolescents or younger men to forge their adult personalities . . . and to work out a moral component of the self,” compared to civilians, who are “spared” the ordeal of discovering in themselves capacities that “would be highly dissonant and perhaps intolerable to previously held conceptions of the self” (89). Her conclusion is that this denial of role experimentation, coupled with the experience of trauma at a crucial point of social development, has resulted in a truncation of identity for survivors. Thus, Caputo, struggling to recall his feelings ten years afterwards, describes his mental state in Vietnam as wandering and confused, and he employs imagery of lost youth and self-division alike as he conflates events happening in the present with those from his childhood:

The water [in a rice paddy he was crossing] was cold and chest-deep in places, and the rain dimpled on the water in a way that reminded me of an evening rise on a trout stream. That was how the Ontonogan River looked in the evenings.

. . . Bill, my fishing buddy, and I used to cast for browns in the deep pool at sunset. We never caught many, but we had a fine time, casting and talking about the things we were going to do when we left school, about all that awaited us in the great outside world, which seemed so full of promise. We were boys and thought everything was possible. The memory sent a momentary pang through me; not so much a feeling of homesickness as one of separation—a distancing from the hopeful boy I had been, a longing to be like that again. (263)

The most comprehensive observations and psychological analyses of Vietnam survivors’ behavior in relation to the aging process were carried out by psychologist John P. Wilson, a long-time veterans’ advocate and founder of the largest outreach program in the country.²² Wilson, like Winkler, employs Erikson’s basic theories about the stages of maturation and identity development in describing the results of post-traumatic stress. Specifically, he addresses the subjects of “role confusion” and the “loss of ego identity” as they pertain to interruptions in the “development process of identity integration” in those people who went to Vietnam (132). In regard to role confusion, Wilson theorizes that for Vietnam veterans, “the normal course of maturation and ego-development is accelerated in such a way that the individual begins to assimilate the experience into an identity structure that normally would occur later in life,” which, simplified, is to say that survivors grew up too fast (135). He terms this phenomenon “psychosocial acceleration,” a condition in which the “normal, linear sequence” of personality is interrupted by trauma, resulting in the “temporal disorientations”—i.e., premature aging—characteristic of virtually all of the testimony given above (152). In addition, Wilson theorizes that for the survivor this results in the curious adoption of a heightened sense of morality, that the

“expectations that others and society have of him are no longer congruent with his own [enhanced] expectations, ideologies, and moral judgement[s]” (155). Thus, survivor-narrator John Ketwig describes the acquisition of a guilt-ridden knowledge that parallels his loss of a youthful self:

The most basic tenets of human morality had to be put on a shelf, in safekeeping, until the day when you boarded the airplane headed for home. That day, we told ourselves, we would take the precious package off the shelf and slip into the comfortable dress of respectability, walk the familiar Main Streets of America, and everything would be all right again. Unfortunately, most of us never realized that the contents of that package would be rotted. The “men” the military had fashioned would no longer fit into the raiments of children. (125)

The other component of identity change, loss of ego identity, Wilson defines as impairment of the “inner agency of central control” that produces “a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity” in survivors (127). Its abbreviation at the crucial point of late adolescence would thus result in a sense that one is no longer the same person that he or she used to be, a common lament among narrators. Wilson elaborates that survivors feel trapped in a “type of psychological time warp since the questions men asked of themselves, their ultimate concerns in life, their interpersonal orientations and view of society, were characteristic of those that normatively emerge later in the life cycle” (146). For example, Ketwig, in depicting his state of mind at the point where he left Vietnam, though writing some fifteen years later, says: “Oh Mom, if only you could understand why [my] letters seem strange! I’m not the boy you raised; I’m not the teenage kid you kissed goodbye” (160).

Thus, we see a clear division expressed between the former, innocent self, represented as a youth, and the older one, irremediably tainted by experience. Ketwig, however, goes beyond simple regret and also voices a distinct desire to return to that earlier, innocent state: “I can’t go back to being the kid who left. I want to but I’ve learned to get by without the things I want” (160). This deep desire to return, far from being isolated, is, in fact, a basic characteristic of Vietnam narratives. Tracey X. Karner observes, for instance, based on her extensive interviews with Vietnam veterans suffering from PTSD, that “more than two decades after their return, . . . [they] found themselves in a nebulous space between their youthful past and their troubled present. Many longed to return to their innocent, youthful beliefs.”²³ Similarly, Shay notes that “veterans speak of losing their innocence and longing to regain it. They ask: ‘Why can’t I just go back to the way I was?’” (184).

Many times this wish takes the form of a lament for the security of the former self, but other times it is represented as a desire to return to the actual site of the

trauma, which is to say Vietnam itself: “Sometimes I was almost homesick for The Nam. Life had been pure there, simpler,” Ketwig says. (209). Statements like this, which permeate Vietnam survivor narratives, should not be mistaken for bravado or warmongering. Rather, they reflect a lack of center in the speakers’ present lives, a sense of incompleteness dating back to their experience in Vietnam, a perceived failure to end or close their experience.

That the expressed desire to return is not always entirely literal does not diminish its centrality to the psyches of the narrators. For instance, correspondent Gloria Emerson’s *Winners and Losers*, a sensitive and highly regarded account of the war’s survivors, reveals the following incident:

In Social Circle [a rap session for veterans] the black men are suspicious and uneasy if I hang around them. I had picked up the habit, so used to armies, of talking to anyone, but back home it makes people uneasy, for they do not know what you have in mind.

One of them, Daniel, says he wants to go back to Vietnam, back to Marble Mountain. “I left something there.”

“A girl?”

But he shakes his head: it is something more important than that. He did not wish to tell me.²⁴

Memory thus inextricably links the there and then with the here and now, the long pull of the former forever coloring the latter, and many times, reading the accounts of survivor-narrators, it is possible to discern that this mnemonic connection is always present in their minds, though discontinuous, as if the former and present selves are two different people.

This strange identification of the state of innocence with the site of trauma, and the subsequent desire to return to that site, I have suggested, can be related to a desire for closure, personal and narrative. While much of the above testimony seeks such a closure on a figurative level, many narrators have quite literally returned to Vietnam, and for each the act of doing so invariably becomes the culminating gesture of his or her narrative. For instance, in the epilogue to *Home before Morning*, Van Devanter, describes her journey back as resulting from “a need to return to the place that held the most powerful and most important memories of my life” (309). The penultimate incident of her story shows her crying on the shoulder of a *New York Times* reporter travelling with her, tearfully explaining, “I wanted to come back here to find something I had left, and I just found it. It was my youth, my innocence. I know now that I can never get them back, and it’s okay. I know where they went. I even think I know where they are. It’s so sad” (314).

Thus, like many Vietnam memoirists, Van Devanter quite literally writes beyond the actual ending of her story, appending an epilogue that purports to lend closure to that story but actually only displays the uneasy, divided memory that



Michael Clodfelter, squad leader, and Rose consulting map before patrol in Phu Yen Province, October 1966. Courtesy of Wendell Rose.

impels her back to the site of her trauma.²⁵ We see here another phenomenon common to Vietnam survivor narratives, and perhaps trauma literature in general: the experienced voice always seeks the innocent state. Whether the return is a figurative one, a move to recuperate somehow a perhaps vague but nevertheless strongly felt sense of lost personal identity, or whether it is literal, an actual return to the site of trauma, the survivor remembering always goes back to that point that would logically seem to a non-traumatized reader to be the most eminently avoidable. Doing so affords him or her a certain relief and release, even a sort of ending, even if this is only a narrative ending point as opposed to a complete repair of the split psyche. Van Devanter, while testifying to healing and recuperation, admits that closure remains elusive because, once violated, her troubled memory will never again allow her the wholeness, the freedom from itself, that continued innocence would have afforded her. Thus, her “It’s so sad” collects in the book’s final passages the freight of all her earlier and continued trauma and attempts to convey to the reader the permanent division—here and now constantly mixing with there and then—that she recognizes and accepts.

III

Among Lewis Puller’s many regrets following his return from Vietnam as a paraplegic, the most telling seems to be that no one listens to him when he tries to talk about his experiences; his peers, in their early twenties and totally given

to opposing the war, as he himself also comes to do, are interested in him only insofar as he can add to and legitimate the general antiwar rhetoric, not what has happened to him or how he feels.²⁶ He notes, “when I finally came to understand that my contemporaries did not want to share the pivotal experience of my life, I learned to keep my silence. I also attempted to ease my own frustrations and insecurities about the future by turning more toward alcohol” (278). Thus Puller’s testimony reveals an additional, social component to the loss of youth: being out of step with one’s peers. Feeling “used up and discarded,” he employs alcohol to dispel his “conflicting and unresolved emotions” about the fact that only a narrow dimension of his experience and his self are acceptable to the youth culture of America that he is chronologically, though not psychologically, a part of:

On the one hand, I wished that all the unscathed young men from whom I was now hearing a different view of the war had been forced to endure the war experience firsthand. On the other, I wished that none had been called to serve and that the insanity still unraveling in Southeast Asia would simply stop. In an effort to break with the military traditions that had so defined much of my earlier thinking, I let my hair and sideburns grow to the length that was currently popular in the civilian community; I ordered wire-rimmed glasses to replace my horn-rimmed ones, and I wore the flowered shirts that Toddy [his wife] brought home from the shopping trips on which she went to escape from me and my depression. (308)

Puller is not isolated in his attempts to adopt protective coloration to erase perceived differences between him and his peers. Vietnam survivors feeling estranged from their contemporaries—being different—is, in fact, a basic component of Vietnam literature. Returning to a world in which the watchword was “Don’t trust anyone over thirty,” and surrounded by what Leona Kanter calls “the prolonged adolescence of our modern technological society,” survivors perceive youthful-seeming trappings such as Puller describes as mere accoutrements of their painfully reconstructed personalities (23). To them, such things are consciously and superficially adopted social strategies, not something that can ever again be integral to their true selves (as they perceive such behavior as being in their peers), given their experience of the trauma and separation of war.

The tension described here shows up primarily as a certain ambivalence toward war protestors in many narratives, including those by Michael Clodfelter and Tim O’Brien, both of which show marked uneasiness or even self-contradiction on this point.²⁷ Clodfelter’s purpose in his memoir *Mad Moments and Vietnam Months* revolves around his “youthful romance” with the idea of war: “This book is the story of my quest for glory and search for history and of the

disillusionment I felt when my flirtatious quarry at last turned in its tracks to confront me” (4). Clodfelter observes that although he has “witnessed the atrocities committed on the human body and soul by war,” and that the entire “teenage war” was “a saddening, sobering experience that would undermine [his] confidence in [his] government and nation,” “still [his] attraction to war remains” and still he “clings to” the experience “like the memories of a lost love affair” (5). Contained in these words, perhaps more honestly stated by Clodfelter than by most narrators, is the essential dichotomy faced by nearly all: steeped in patriotic gore from near infancy, and acculturated to feel that death and maiming have something of romance about them, they feel, after the fact, duped and betrayed by their government (and many times by their schools and families), but at the same time they continue to feel, often in spite of their self-protestations to the contrary in the face of peer pressure, a measure of pride in their service and a loss of intensity in their lives following their return. In this, narrators feel divided from their nonparticipating peers, who have not experienced what Clodfelter calls the “maturing effect that the war had” (5).

Frequently—and Clodfelter is a good example—this dichotomy is reflected in an ambiguity in the text itself, a sort of indecision about how to regard the protest of the war, by others as well as by oneself, after having fought in it. Written over twenty years after he found himself transformed from an eighteen-year-old resident of tiny Plainville, Kansas, to a gung-ho soldier in the Army’s elite 101st Airborne Division, Clodfelter recalls his feelings upon returning toward his stay-at-home peers:

The peace phalanx parading American streets represented only the spoiled, gutless middle class kids who cowered in college classrooms to escape the battlefield and campaigned to discredit whatever honor and prestige we might earn through courage and sacrifice in battle. The peaceniks might not be attacking the integrity of the American soldier directly (that would come later with My Lai and taunts of “Baby Killer!” hurled at returning vets), but they were proselytizing against the war as a contemptible and dishonorable venture, and we offspring of this conflict therefore felt we too were being held in low regard. (38)

Additionally, Clodfelter remembers veterans like himself feeling just as separated from their parents as their peers. “We found ourselves alienated from those elders who took pride in our defense of the democracy of their American Legion and Fourth of July speeches . . . , he recalls, “and our generation, from whom we were separated by a class gap, a philosophical gap, and a gap of 6,000 miles and 365 days” (38). In a gesture designed to show the changed perspective attained by the writing self, however, Clodfelter shows some later distance from

such thinking, referring in one place to the demonstrators as “soldiers for peace who brandished flowers instead of firearms,” and to himself as having his “vision obscured by glory dust” and having a heart “hardened by the poisoned blood of machismo” (37). He also represents himself as actively turning against the war, “march[ing] in anti-war demonstrations and campaign[ing] for the peace candidacies of Senator McCarthy in 1968 and Senator McGovern in 1972,” thus making it clear where his sentiments about protest ultimately came to reside (226).

And yet, if we revisit his opening statement, we are placed once again in a quandary of purpose because he says there that what follows is the “story of a romance with war not entirely ended,” and he refers to the war as “an old lover,” a “clinging mistress,” and a “lost love affair.” Thus the prologue, situated in the writing present and, one would assume, operating to some degree as a metacommentary on the text to follow, conveys ambiguity about the nature of these “new perspectives” and “broader compassion.” Presumably, the book itself, which expands on the prologue, is Clodfelter’s exploration of both and is designed to lead us, along with him, into a place of greater enlightenment and self-knowledge. And if this is so, if he indeed gains such an enhanced sense of the effects of his ordeal on both himself and his culture, we would expect it to be related in his summarizing epilogue. The opposite, however, is the case; here Clodfelter confesses to even more trauma and confusion that in many ways underscore the contradiction between remorse and the “clinging mistress” of love of war expressed earlier. Clodfelter ends by reviewing the sources of his remaining self-division and reflecting on the bitter and lonely place in which he is left: “Vietnam clinging[s] to my emotional side, . . . usurping reality and exiling the rest of my life to empty absurdity. . . . I remain a hostage to [its] ghost” (228). The “new awareness” promised in the prologue has become “an awareness of the fragility of both my body and my soul [that] had made me stare into the vulnerability of my life; had drained the youthful arrogance of assumed immortality from my veins” (228). In words reminiscent of Kovic’s closing, Clodfelter continues that he had been ripped away from the “innocent days” of the “summers of [his] youth” and “compelled to trace the boundaries of [his] manhood,” in the process “bartering away integrity to satiate a passion for glory” (229). Continued self-division and separation from community mark these final comments, and he is left, despite his opening assurances, somehow incomplete, separated not only from his peers but also from the person who was and who could have been.

The body of Tim O’Brien’s works, on the other hand, contrast with Clodfelter regarding the subject of survivors reacquiring community.²⁸ These include a memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, and three novels, *Going After Cacciato*, *In the Lake of the Woods*, and *The Things They Carried*, shaped like a memoir. In each one, O’Brien represents the struggle faced by every young male in the late 1960s: whether to serve in the military, with the likelihood of going to Vietnam, or whether to find some way, legal or illegal, of avoiding doing so. Repeatedly,

O'Brien wrestles with the theme of personal commitment to an immoral war. In *The Things They Carried*, he represents his narrator as wrestling with the decision whether to cross over into Canada to avoid the draft, as most of his friends—i.e., his youthful peers—had at that point advised him to do, or whether to submit to induction, with its near assurance that he would go to Vietnam. In the end, the narrator decides to go, largely because he feels that he will be thought a coward if he doesn't, and much of the book describes his Vietnam experiences and resultant traumatization. Yet, struggling to reach some closure for his experience, he nevertheless cannot conclude that he was mistaken in not heeding his peers' advice to avoid the draft, although he sees the immorality of the war quite clearly. In fact, O'Brien makes this ambivalence the motivating point of his quest for self. Other values—perhaps, he suggests, more enduring ones: for example, loyalty to his new peer group, those he served with—come to outweigh the abstract and somewhat lifeless moral approbation that he, along with those now-estranged older peers, the ones that protested the war, felt before he went.

Significantly, O'Brien ends *The Things They Carried*, which is concerned with stories and how they can, in his words, "save us," with a story, one composed of equal parts remembered images of Vietnam and reveries about a companion from his youth, now dead from a brain tumor. In his concluding paragraph, he struggles to understand the meaning of the story, the uneasy connection—one that resides in his own lost youth and gained sense of mortality—between the linearity of narrative and memory's sudden vertical thrust:

So I followed her down to the frozen pond. It was late, and nobody else was there, and we held hands and skated almost all night under the yellow lights.

And then it becomes 1990. I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, still dreaming Linda alive in exactly the same way. She's not the embodied Linda; she's mostly made up, with a new identity and a new name, like the man who never was. Her real name doesn't matter. She was nine years old. I loved her and then she died. And yet right here, in the spell of memory and imagination, I can still see her as if through ice, as if I'm gazing into some other world, a place where there are no brain tumors and no funeral homes, where there are no bodies at all. I can see Kiowa, too, and Ted Lavender and Curt Lemon [companions from Vietnam, all dead], and sometimes I can even see Timmy skating with Linda under the yellow floodlights. I'm young and happy. I'll never die. I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story. (273)

With O'Brien we see return as an attempt at self-redemption, a way of coping with memory. By no longer resisting his memories—an act, after all, of repression—he refuses to repudiate his Vietnam experience as worthless, something to be shunned or denied, but rather comes to regard it as being as valid as his other memories, for instance those of his childhood, painful and regrettable as even some of them are. Recovery of his history thus becomes for O'Brien self-recovery as well. Like all survivor-narrators, he realizes that while innocence can never be regained, it can be revisited and re-evaluated through the act of testimony, of making oneself the witness to experience, and for the few, brief moments of that revisitation the terrible weight of that history is lightened.

Powerless to control events—Vietnam participants operated almost totally on the timetables of the enemy and their own unseen superiors—at the mercy of a hostile climate, and with the solace of religion an increasingly uncertain commodity, survivors find themselves operating in an existential situation with essentially romantic reflexes. Where they seek unity, there is only division; where they search for a self, they find only chaos; and where, in order to give them meaning, they re-form their tortured memories into quests, their goals shimmer and grow distant. They are left only with words, which seem somehow inadequate, incapable of expressing what chafes inside, and they instead (true romantics) seek correlates from the external world, signs to reveal what their often limited literary gifts cannot begin to express. The signs invariably are of recuperation and return, politically and psychoanalytically conservative values, ones that suggest a way out of the uncertain whirl. And in the end, the signs and images are many times simple ones because the available words are simple and the makers only as good as their tools. But the edifice constructed with these simple tools, despite its unimposing appearance, is as complex and deeply inlaid as any cathedral, and what is expressed as vital and human as any work of art.

NOTES

1. Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York, 1978).
2. Robert MacNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York, 1995).
3. In addition to Robert Olen Butler's *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (New York, 1993) and Lewis Puller's *Fortunate Son: The Autobiography of Lewis B. Puller, Jr.* (New York, 1993), these works include Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (New York, 1991), and *In the Lake of the Woods* (New York, 1994), Tobias Wolff's *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War* (New York, 1994), Winnie Smith's *American Daughter Gone to War: On the Front Lines with an Army Nurse in Vietnam* (New York, 1993), Le Ly Hayslip's *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (New York, 1994), Robert Mason's *Chickenhawk: Back in the World* (New York, 1992), Lady Borton's *After Sorrow: An American Among the Vietnamese* (New York, 1995), and John Balaban's *Remembering Heaven's Face: A Moral Witness in Vietnam* (New York, 1992).
4. The books include Philip D. Beidler's *Rewriting America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation* (Athens, Georgia, 1991), Renny Christopher's *The Viet Nam War The American War* (Amherst, Massachusetts, 1995), Owen W. Gilman's *Vietnam and the Southern Imagination* (Jackson, Mississippi, 1993), Vince Gotera's *Radical Visions: Poetry by Vietnam Veterans* (Athens, Georgia, 1994), Tobey C. Herzog's *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* (London, 1992), Larry R. Johannessen's *Illumination Rounds: Teaching the Literature of the Vietnam War* (Urbana, Illinois, 1992), Barry M. Kroll's *Teaching Hearts and Minds: College Students Reflect on the Vietnam War* (Carbondale, Illinois, 1992), Andrew Martin's *Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture*

(Norman, Oklahoma, 1993), Phillip H. Melling's *Vietnam in American Literature* (Boston, 1990), Don Ringnald's *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War* (Jackson, Mississippi, 1994), and Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (New York, 1996); the collections include *America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War*, ed. Owen Gilman and Lorrie Smith (New York, 1990), and *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature*, ed. Philip K. Jason (Iowa City, 1991).

5. Statistics on publication numbers come from Sandra M. Wittman's bibliography *Writing about Vietnam: A Bibliography of the Literature of the Vietnam Conflict* (Boston, 1989).

6. Lawrence L. Langer makes a persuasive case in *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, (New Haven, Connecticut, 1991), his landmark study of the narratives of Holocaust survivors, that we should evaluate oral and written testimony according to completely different guidelines; see especially his chapter entitled "Deep Memory" (1-38). I agree with Langer, but the oral histories that I cite are not the same type of unmediated oral testimony that he and observers like Jonathan Shay and Tracey Karner employ inasmuch as they have been, for the most part, edited for style and content. Additionally, since the same terms—e.g., "home," "youth," etc.—occur in both the written and oral testimony that I describe herein, the code these Vietnam narrators erect to objectify their experiences seems archetypal in its reference to commonly recognized symbols, leading me to gloss over the otherwise substantial structural and rhetorical differences between the two modes.

7. Kali Tal, "Speaking the Language of Pain: Vietnam War Literature in the Context of a literature of Trauma," in Jason, ed., *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature*, 217-50. Tal also recapitulates and expands upon her argument in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (New York, 1996), but its recent publication date made it impossible to include information from this source.

8. Lynda Van Devanter, *Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam* (New York, 1983); Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (New York, 1976); John Ketwig, . . . *And a Hard Rain Fell* (New York, 1985).

9. The works that Tal takes exception to include Philip D. Beidler's *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (Athens, Georgia, 1982), James C. Wilson's *Vietnam in Prose and Film* (Jefferson, North Carolina, 1982), Thomas Myers's *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam* (New York, 1988), and John Hellmann's *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York, 1986). She argues—and I concur—that the work of all four is "inadequate" in its "total reduction of war to metaphor" (218, 223). Beidler, for instance, maintains that "cultural myths" such as those of the American frontier generate their own history, and Hellmann maintains that in order to understand the war we must "reduce it to a symbolic landscape" (221). Tal responds that "because their critical strategies cannot encompass the actual events of the war, they must ignore these events and concentrate on symbol and image," precisely my own complaint (223). Like Tal, I feel—and can attest from personal experience—that war is a series of real events happening to real people, however much later analysts would like to reduce its survivor texts to a site for cultural commentary. The fact that the most influential early works of Vietnam criticism took primarily a cultural, rather than a personal, approach to this testimonial literature has, in my opinion, skewed our reading of it, judging by the questionable quality of more recent, derivative critical studies such as Martin's jargon-ridden cultural rehash, which essentially uses the war to argue against "a return to a conservative, hegemonic order" (xxi), and Melling's opaque and error-filled diatribe. For an example of his unfathomable reasoning, see the puzzling analysis of the hero of Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers* (New York, 1979), Pvt. Joker, whom Melling feels is motivated by a "campaign for social control" (8-12). His factual errors are many, but one example is his confusing the defense lawyers in Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers* (New York, 1974) with prosecutors or judges (it's not clear which), thus partially negating his argument comparing Vietnam with Puritan New England on the subject of "removing recalcitrants from the wilderness" (176).

10. One of the more egregious examples of the critical arrogance that many times inheres in cultural studies also comes from Melling, who writes the following of Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*: "He invites the reader to assess his work as a not unromantic moral tragedy. The tendency is common among veterans who are first-time writers. Many autobiographies are ruined by their role as cathartic therapy for war veterans who wallow in violence and the narcissism of individual experience" (63). Or, witness Don Ringnald's comment in valorizing cultural "vision" over testimonial "fact": "Most [veterans] make poor critics. Mired in their own facts, these veterans quite understandably don't want to read great books or see great cinema. . . . When these same people write novels and make movies about Vietnam, their beam of light often is so privately narrow that very little illumination takes place" ("Unlearning to Remember Vietnam," in *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War*, ed. William J. Searle (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1988), 65. The most virulently anti-experiential of all, however, is Renny Christopher, in *The Viet Nam War The American War* (Amherst, Massachusetts, 1995), which purports to show that most American representations of the war "have been impoverished and crippled by racism" and that only "Vietnamese exile writers," who are able to "transgress . . . against dominant American myths, can create new, nonracist representations" (21). Her position is that virtually all of the "Euro-American" literature of the Vietnam War, because of its emphasis on "the experiences of teenagers, with their

adolescent moral visions" (7), is "doomed to repeat endlessly its history of ethnocentrism, immaturity, and apolitical reliance on "experience" (11). Ironically, Christopher's resistance to what she would have us believe is a poisoned mainstream of credentialism is undercut by her own self-authentication strategies in her Preface (ix-xiv). There she describes her own "experiences," including her salvation from educational deprivation through her association with a series of Vietnam veteran "lovers," thus suggesting that she is masking a univocal agenda under a banner of multiplicity. On balance, however, some of the more recent critical works, mainly those by Johannessen, Kroll, and Gotera show an uncommon degree of sensitivity to the personal voice.

11. I refer here primarily to psychoanalytic and politically oriented theorists who align themselves with semiotics and, in some cases, cultural studies. Many see Freud's theories as having initially "decentered" the unitary self, originally a creature of Renaissance thinking but sustained by romantic and transcendentalist movements. Arguing that we are all slaves to the same basic drives and repressions, Freudian theory argues that the self becomes more the subject of a system of analysis than a discrete individual. From this point, other psychoanalytic theorists such as Jacques Lacan and, later, Luce Irigaray have posited that this subject is a self-contained unit of significance defined only by language—a sign. Similarly, such thinkers as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida have in one way or another posited that meaning itself is ultimately unapproachable, that the sign has in effect been sundered. With no real signified, what is left are unattached signifiers free to be defined by whichever group enjoys political and cultural hegemony at any given moment.

12. Refer to my dissertation, "After the Flood: Survivor Literature of The Vietnam War," unpub. dissertation, University of Kansas, 1995, especially the first three chapters, for a fuller discussion of several terms in this semiotic code.

13. Jacqueline E. Lawson, "'Old Kids': The Adolescent Experience in the Nonfiction Narratives of the Vietnam War," in Searle, 26-36.

14. Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York, 1978) xv, 4.

15. Al Santoli, *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-Three American Soldiers Who Fought It* (New York, 1982), 122-23.

16. Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost*.

17. Gotera, *Radical Visions*, 222.

18. Joel Osler Brende and Erwin Randolph Parson, *Vietnam Veterans: The Road to Recovery* (New York, 1985), 43.

19. Keith Walker, *A Piece of My Heart: The Stories of 26 American Women Who Served in Vietnam* (Novato, California, 1986), 83.

20. Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York, 1994).

21. Norma Winkler, "Hidden Injuries of War," in *Strangers at Home: Vietnam Veterans since the War*, eds. Charles R. Figley and Seymour Leventman (New York, 1980), 87-105.

22. John P. Wilson, "Conflict, Stress and Growth: The Effects of War on Psychosocial Development among Vietnam Veterans," in *Strangers at Home: Vietnam Veterans since the War*, eds. Charles R. Figley and Seymour Leventman (New York, 1980), 123-165.

23. Tracey M. Karner, "Fathers, Sons, and Vietnam: Masculinity and Betrayal in the Life Narratives of Vietnam Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" (unpublished article, 1995), 22.

24. Gloria Emerson, *Winners and Losers: Battles, Retreats, Gains, Losses, and Ruins from the Vietnam War* (New York, 1992), 13.

25. Loeb, "After the Flood: Survivor Literature of the Vietnam War." As I argue in Chapter Three, "The Dead" (134-220), the construction of "false endings" is extremely common in Vietnam survivor narratives and signifies, in my estimation, a failure to achieve the sought-for closure of healing from trauma.

26. Puller, *Fortunate Son: The Autobiography of Lewis B. Puller, Jr.*

27. See especially Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*, Michael Clodfelter's *Mad Minutes and Vietnam Months: A Soldier's Memoir* (Jefferson, North Carolina, 1988), Winston Groom's *Forrest Gump* (Garden City, New York, 1986), and John M. G. Brown's *Rice Paddy Grunt: Unfading Memories of the Vietnam Generation* (Lake Bluff, Illinois, 1986) for examples of personal and ideological clashes between members of the anti-war movement and returning veterans who actively opposed the war. Brown's memoir contains extended descriptions of several prominent members of the anti-war movement. As far as I know, no other critic has even considered Clodfelter's and Brown's books in their analyses; at the same time, they seem to gloss over Kovic's ultimate distaste for the univocal tendencies of the movement. Similarly, *Forrest Gump* rated mention only in bibliographies until the success of the movie, at which point Groom was roundly criticized by the intellectual community for representing certain members of the anti-war movement as something other than totally admirable.

28. O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (New York, 1978); *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (New York, 1973); *In the Lake of the Woods*.