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Remembering and Recording the Vietnam War

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Remembering and Recording the Vietnam War

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I. Introduction

Michael Herr, in his memoir *Dispatches*, offers a story “as one-pointed and resonant as any war story [he] ever heard . . . ‘Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened’” (6). Despite this concise and revealing summation of the war experience for combat soldiers, the body of literature that has grown out of the Vietnam War suggests that, for many, there is more to say. The story itself speaks to the desire to know what happened—what happened on patrol; what happened to the soldiers who never came home; what happened in Vietnam. The Vietnam War as a historical moment haunts and defines the United States and especially the generations that lived through the 1960s and early 70s. The literature that has come out of it varies enormously, from fiction to memoir to history; from combat accounts to nurses’ accounts to those of conscientious objectors. While Vietnamese veterans and civilians have also produced a significant body of writing about the war, the differences between the American and the Vietnamese experience make combined literary analysis difficult. Doan Van Toi, in the introduction to *‘Vietnam’: A Portrait of Its People at War*, observes two fundamental differences in experience: time and choice. The concept of a 365-day tour of duty so prominent in American soldiers’ understanding of the war “meant nothing to any Vietnamese. They were there for the duration, until one side or the other called it quits. And after that they’d have to live with the consequences. The American-style short-term view was especially alien to the Vietcong and North Vietnamese” (Chanoff xx). In addition, the moral questions that arose for Americans in the context of the Vietnam War did not apply to the Vietnamese: “From many [Americans] it demanded a moral decision: to support it or not, to fight in it or not. For Vietnamese the war was vastly more complex—a maelstrom in which the contending

tides of colonialism and liberation, communism and nationalism, reform and revolution, Northern revanchism and Southern regionalism clashed violently and mixed treacherously” (Chanoff xxi). These differences prove fundamental to the way in which individuals narrate their war experiences and call for distinct types of analysis.

In contrast, the American experience of the Vietnam War, while far from cohesive, offers a common social and political context as well as structural similarity in experience. While the war has inspired texts in a wide range of genres, the memoirs and oral histories of the war are especially compelling in the context of non-fiction narrative construction. The common content of many of the texts offers both an opportunity to examine the way in which the genres of memoir and oral history operate and an opportunity to explore how Americans involved in the Vietnam War record, transform, and share their personal experiences through literature. Within these genres, texts vary greatly in structure and style. A consideration of traditionally-structured oral histories like Al Santoli’s *Everything We Had* and texts that diverge from the norms of the genre offers insight into the different ways in which war stories can be told. For example, Mark Baker, in *Nam*, uses the concept of oral history—a compilation of individuals’ stories—to create a text that more closely resembles a work of fiction in its structure, omitting individual names and blending fragments of different stories. Works of fiction can also shed light on these memoirs and oral histories because they tend to address similar themes and confront similar narrative concerns. Larry Heinemann, in *Paco’s Story*, offers several versions of Herr’s one-pointed war story, for example, and Tim O’Brien, in *The Things They Carried*, includes a chapter called “How to Tell a True War Story” which speaks directly to questions of narrative construction. Finally, several iconic

Vietnam War films, such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, must be taken into consideration when analyzing Vietnam War narratives, because they are not only mentioned frequently in oral histories but also reflect different ways to conceptualize the war.

Even within a narrowed body of memoirs and oral histories, there is great diversity of experience. Gender is perhaps the most prominent division among these texts, and while male voices tend to be more common, women's experiences in the Vietnam War complement and complicate the male perspective. In her introduction to *In the Combat Zone*, Kathryn Marshall observes, "if talking was hard for the men, it was harder for the women" (10). Narratives of the Vietnam War often erase women's participation in the war. Referring to *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*, Marshall explains, "Hollywood kept women on the homefront" (12). Yet awareness of women's experiences has grown over time, and texts like *In the Combat Zone* and Keith Walker's oral history, *A Piece of My Heart*, now diversify Vietnam War literature, provide a more comprehensive depiction of the war, and confirm many of the thoughts and themes that emerge from male-narrated texts. Despite these facts, the vast majority of Vietnam War literature, both fiction and non-fiction, remains focused on men's experience, reflecting the significantly greater number of men present in country during the war.

In addition to differences based on gender, Americans' experiences in Vietnam varied depending on their position in the war. The stories of enlisted men in combat positions, for example, contrast significantly with those of soldiers in rear echelon positions or non-military participants such as Red Cross employees and journalists. The war experience also varied depending on the region. Ronald Glasser, in *365 Days*,

explains that the Vietnam War was “not one war but four or five. To fight in the Delta is as different from fighting in the Central Highlands as fighting in Burma was from fighting in France. The DMZ, Cambodia, Laos, North Vietnam—none of them is the same” (xii). In addition to differences based on geography, the war varied over the years. The conditions of Jan Barry’s “nine-to-five war,” from 1962 to 1963, before U.S. troops were officially deployed to Vietnam, differed greatly from those of the 1968 Tet Offensive (Santoli 5). From July 1965, when President Johnson “made an open-ended commitment to employ American military forces as the situation demanded” to the withdrawal of the last American troops in March 1973, the conduct of the war and the sentiment behind it changed greatly (Herring 141). In Johnson’s words, the initial deployment of troops intended “to do ‘what will be enough, but not too much’” (Herring 143). But “within two years, the optimism of 1965 had given way to deep and painful frustration” (Herring 146). With the Tet Offensive, beginning on January 30th, 1968, American public opinion turned against the war, and “by 1969, Nixon and Kissinger recognized that the war must be ended” (Herring 218). American soldiers became increasingly disillusioned, especially as it became clear that the United States would not win the war. The structure and conduct of the war varied depending on the government’s strategy at any given time and made for diverse experiences. Finally, individual personalities and mentalities affected each person’s war experience and should be kept in mind when considering personal accounts that necessarily provide a single perspective on the war. Yet despite the many elements that differentiate individuals’ experiences, including assigned duties, location, year, and personal factors, their stories remain within a relatively limited framework—Americans in country during the Vietnam War. Their

texts raise fundamental narrative questions that arise in non-fiction Vietnam War literature regardless of specific experiences.

To begin exploring these questions, it is first useful to establish the unique nature of war stories, including the difficulty of narrating the war experience. The struggle to communicate an “all-but-incommunicable reality” can then be applied specifically to Vietnam War memoirs and oral histories (Fussell 174). Considering these texts in their particular context allows for an examination of the nuances of narrative construction on a theoretical and textual level and demonstrates the way past war literature and personal motivations play into this construction. Second, keeping in mind the communication gap between veterans and civilians, it is necessary to explore the accusation that many veterans perceived as coming from the American public, as well as the confessions it provokes in the narratives. This pattern of accusation and confession sets the foundation for a process of explanation and justification that defines the works and differentiates them from other war narratives. The elements that made the Vietnam War experience exceptional also influence the language and narrative structure of the texts themselves, creating a unique body of literature that strives to explain the conditions of the war. The tension between traditional narrative norms and the irregularity of the Vietnam War ultimately reveals narrative’s inherent tendency toward “structures of meaning” (Olney 1). Throughout this analysis, Herr’s memoir, *Dispatches*, provides a useful thread between topics and texts, incorporating elements of both memoir and oral history and presenting a unique narrative structure and literary style.

II. War Stories: Confronting Disparate Experiences

“After a year I felt so plugged in to all the stories and the images and the fear that even the dead started telling me stories,” Michael Herr reveals in *Dispatches* (31). This statement suggests the abundance and gravity of war stories emerging from Vietnam. *Dispatches* both chronicles Herr’s experience as a war correspondent during the Vietnam War and retells war stories he heard from those around him—soldiers, nurses, other correspondents, Vietnamese civilians. Herr’s reference to the story-telling dead cannot help but bring to mind Larry Heinemann’s novel, *Paco’s Story*, which is narrated by a dead soldier, as well as Paul Fussell’s comment that in World War I fiction a “favorite rhetorical situation is the speaking of the dead” (4). Herr’s literary device, common to other war literature, indicates the wealth of war stories in both fiction and non-fiction accounts.

Herr claims that “war stories aren’t really anything more than stories about people anyway” (245). This is, on one hand, fundamentally true; war stories are stories about people, about life, death, and the essence of human existence. Tim O’Brien observes, in his work of fiction *The Things They Carried*, “in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. . . . It’s about love and memory. It’s about sorrow” (81). However, while love, memory, and sorrow undoubtedly play a part in war stories, these stories also have common elements that identify them as a distinct and defined genre. Indeed, O’Brien’s chapter titled “How to Tell a True War Story” acknowledges the existence of war stories as a unique type of narrative.

Perhaps the most emphasized element of such stories is that they are neither easy to tell nor easy to understand. Referring to World War I, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell observes, “even if those at home had wanted to know the realities

of the war, they couldn't have without experiencing them: its conditions were too novel, its industrialized ghastliness too unprecedented. The war would have been simply unbelievable" (87). This statement highlights the particular difficulty of understanding the conditions of World War I but can easily be applied to the Vietnam War. There, too, the conditions were unfamiliar to the American civilian population; the effects of napalm and the quantity of bombs dropped unimaginable. Fussell's idea of the incomprehensibility of modern warfare is affirmed and expanded upon in the body of Vietnam War literature. For example, in Herr's presentation of one of the most "one-pointed and resonant" war stories he has ever heard, he admits, "it took me a year to understand it" (6). Herr comes to understand this story only after spending a year as a war correspondent. War stories claim as part of their very essence the near-impossibility of being understood by those who have not lived them in some form. Many memoirs, oral histories, novels, and films focus on the communication gap between those returning from the Vietnam War and American civilians. At times, memoirs and oral histories acknowledge this communication gap directly and simply, noting the silence of both veterans and civilians. Emmanuel Holloman, in Wallace Terry's *Bloods*, remarks, "it's funny how nobody has said anything to me about Vietnam" (Terry 87). On the other hand, Herr states, "it seemed now that everybody knew someone who had been in Vietnam and didn't want to talk about it" (251). These statements speak to the difficulties that lie at the heart of the works themselves.

The communication gap emerges initially on a linguistic level, but the fundamental barriers to understanding move beyond language. The language of the Vietnam War differed significantly depending on its source. Combat soldiers, as well as

medical staff, developed their own slang, referring to rear-echelon soldiers as “REMFs” or “rear echelon motherfuckers” and burn victims as “crispy critters” (Van Devanter 381, 378). Lynda Van Devanter, in *Home Before Morning*, explains this vocabulary as “the darkest humor,” and Cindy Randolph observes, “in Vietnam, you didn’t deal with or process feelings. You denied everything. Like the whole Nam language—you could carry on whole conversations and not use anything other than the slang of Vietnam” (Van Devanter 112, Marshall 233). The “Nam language” worked as a defense against the horror of the war and remains present in veterans’ accounts. In fact, various authors and editors, including Van Devanter, Santoli, Walker, Marshall, and Terry, have chosen to include glossaries at the end of their texts to aid civilian readers in their understanding. The use of “the World” to designate the United States exemplifies the space between the world of Vietnam and the “real world” at home (Marshall 233).

The official language of the American government presented a very different image of Vietnam than the combatants’ slang. Referring to this language, Herr notes, “Vietnam has spawned a jargon of such delicate locutions that it’s often impossible to know even remotely the thing being described” (91). He offers the phrase “acute environmental reaction” as an example of the obfuscation of reality by these “delicate locutions,” explaining, “most Americans would rather be told that their son is undergoing acute environmental reaction than to hear that he is suffering from shell shock, because they could no more cope with the fact of shell shock than they could with the reality of what had happened to this boy during his five months at Khe Sanh” (91). Herr’s observation indicates the way the government negotiated the knowledge gap between combatants and non-combatants with euphemistic language. Herr suggests that these

“delicate locutions” were designed expressly because of “most Americans” inability to understand the reality of the war. Resisting the government’s willingness to soften its language on behalf of a civilian audience, Herr offers a temporally and geographically specific statement—“five months in Khe Sanh”—whose implications can only be fully understood by people familiar with the events at Khe Sanh. While most American civilians found (and find) the language of landing zones and M-16s, Bouncing Betties and medevacs, unfamiliar, both the official jargon and the soldiers’ slang involve more than technical vocabulary to be learned through glossaries. The official language often tries to soften what the soldiers’ slang renders more blunt, but both sets of vocabulary reveal the experience gap that separates veterans from civilians and complicates the transmission of war stories.

This division between veterans and civilians becomes further dichotomized in Tobias Wolff’s memoir, *In Pharaoh’s Army*. Wolff narrates the retelling of a story while simultaneously meditating on the implications of storytelling and the communication gap between those who have “been there” and those who haven’t (209). He presents a scene in which he tells the story of Captain Kale to his date, Jan, and a fellow Vietnam veteran, Dicky:

We had in that moment become a duet, Dicky and I, and she was in the dark. . . . I looked over at Jan and saw her watching me with an expression so thoroughly disappointed as to be devoid of reproach. . . . So instead of easing up I laid it on even thicker, playing the whole thing for laughs, as cruel as I could make them, because after all Dicky had been there, and what more than that could I ever hope to have in common with her? (209)

Wolff’s language heightens the division between himself and Jan; he allies himself with Dicky and places Jan “in the dark,” in a position of perpetual incomprehension. Wolff’s admission that he and Dicky become a “duet” is all the more meaningful considering his

negative portrayal of Dicky. Just before admitting his allegiance with Dicky, Wolff describes a scene in which Dicky, “trying to break into [his friend’s] car after he’d locked the keys inside . . . went into a rage and smashed out the driver’s window” (205). Wolff, in choosing to reveal Dicky’s unfortunate personality, emphasizes the power of shared experience. While he has nothing in common with Dicky beyond Vietnam, the significance of this commonality, especially when telling war stories, and Jan’s unspoken judgment override the differences between the two men. In light of Jan’s uncomprehending disappointment and Dicky’s sympathetic mirth, Wolff commits to a specific tone, “playing the whole thing for laughs.” This moment reveals the self-reinforcing exclusivity of war stories; the storyteller tailors his narrative, which is already difficult to tell and to understand, to the most receptive audience, furthering the divide between those who can understand and those who cannot.

The date scene in *In Pharaoh’s Army* recalls Susan Jeffords’ critical reading of Vietnam War texts in *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. As Jeffords observes, “the most obvious expression of difference in Vietnam representation, and often therefore apparently that of least notice, is gender. The defining feature of American war narratives is that they are a ‘man’s story’ from which women are generally excluded” (49). Because the Vietnam narrative relies on the “framework of the masculine bond” and the idea of a community of men who have been there, women’s position outside of this community and their exclusion from war stories make them a convenient symbol of the American public’s inability to understand the war experience (25). By excluding women from war stories, the narratives deny their presence in Vietnam and, therefore, their ability to comprehend the experience of Vietnam veterans.

The date scene in which Jan is left in the dark while Wolff and Dicky find a certain form of camaraderie reinforces the perception that, while all non-combatants fail to understand veterans, women are particularly unable to understand because the combat zone is reserved for men (this assumption of course fails to acknowledge the many women who worked as nurses, flight attendants, Red Cross employees, and communications officers).

Jeffords' analysis of this division in *The Deer Hunter* reinforces this idea. She observes, "the film opens with shots of a masculine territory—the steel mill—and the men leaving work together. They go to a bar where only men are present" (97). Continuing with this analysis of space, she argues that the wedding scenes are "the arena of women" while Vietnam is "the arena of men, not only as they fight in battle, but also as they risk their lives for each other" (98). In Vietnam, and in the wake of Vietnam, "only the masculine bond remains," excluding women from the dialogue surrounding the war (98). William Broyles' essay, "Why Men Love War," furthers this dichotomy; the title alone indicates Broyles' gendered perspective. His language emphasizes the exclusivity of his argument and relies on generalizations about the genders: "War is a brutal, deadly game, but a game, the best there is. And men love games" (2). Broyles later refers to "most men who have been to war, and most women who have been around it," presenting women's proximity to war as an afterthought and locating them outside of the war itself.

While Vietnam War narratives often illustrate the communication gap through the gender divide, the difficulty of communicating the experience is a concern that goes beyond this dichotomy and appears in a variety of contexts. Even between fellow veterans, different experiences can complicate communication about the war. "I couldn't

discuss the war with my father even though he had two tours in Vietnam and was stationed in the Mekong Delta when I was there. He was a staff sergeant. A lifer. Truck driver. Jeep driver or somethin'. In a support unit with the 9th Division. I couldn't come to terms with him being in a noncombatant unit," explains Arthur Woodley in *Bloods* (254). Woodley's comment draws a line between soldiers in combat units and soldiers in rear-echelon positions, touching on the tendency for differing experiences to lead to silence and limit meaningful dialogue. Concerns about communicating the experience of war lead to particular narratives in which the authors strive to explain the exceptional circumstances of the war. By considering these memoirs and oral histories in their specific framework as Vietnam War narratives, it is possible to see how both non-fiction genres function under the specific constraints of the war.

III. Narrative Construction and War Stories

In addition to the question of who will understand such stories, Wolff's narration of the story of Captain Kale raises the question that lies at the heart of non-fiction accounts of the Vietnam War: "How do you tell such a terrible story?" (207). Implicit in this question is the more fundamental question of how stories of any type get told. Hayden White suggests in *The Content and the Form*, "narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate knowing into telling" (1). Narrative arises, according to White, "between our experience of the world and our efforts to describe that experience in language" (1-2). If narrative can be considered a "solution," however, it remains far from uncomplicated. Non-fiction war stories lead to particular questions surrounding truth and fiction, effective communication, and the goal of narrative. To answer Wolff's

provocative question about how stories are told, it is first necessary to consider several issues that arise in the context of non-fiction narrative generally, as well as specific concerns that affect the narration of war stories. While some basic theory can facilitate this end, the primary texts themselves often either self-consciously and directly address narrative questions or implicitly provide insight into these issues through their tone, style, and structure.

“Historiography is an especially good ground on which to consider the nature of narration and narrativity because it is here that our desire for the imaginary, the possible, must contest with the imperatives of the real, the actual,” states White (4). While Vietnam War memoirs and oral histories may not be considered traditional historiography, they are inseparable from their historical context and integral to the historical record of the Vietnam War. This type of non-fiction narration raises a variety of questions about the interaction between fact and invention, as well as concerns about the fragility of memory and the reliability of the narrator. In a discussion of autobiography, Georges Gusdorf refers to “the psychological problem of memory” and “the moral problem of the impartiality of the self to itself,” raising two of the most complex aspects of memoirs and oral histories (Olney 40). Because Vietnam War memoirs and oral histories combine historical narrative and autobiography, they involve questions both about the representation of historical events and the representation of the self.

The issue of memory emerges persistently in discussions of memoir. Memory, “fuzzy and variable,” forms the basis for non-fiction narrative (Chanoff xv). It is neither objective nor reliable, and as Herr comments, “what they say is totally true, it’s funny the

things you remember” (28). Herr offers an example of what Fussell refers to as “irony-assisted recall” (30): “On a cold wet day in Hue our jeep turned into the soccer stadium where hundreds of North Vietnamese bodies had been collected, I saw them, but they don’t have the force in my memory that a dog and a duck have who died together in a small terrorist explosion in Saigon” (28). Remembering a dead dog in the midst of a war is in fact the same example that Fussell uses in his explanation of the phenomenon. He cites a memory shared by Sir Geoffrey Keynes, concluding, “it is . . . the small ironic detail of the major’s dead dog that enables him to ‘see these things as clearly today as if they had just happened’” (31). The tendency to remember moments of irony, which is prominent in World War I memoirs, also emerges consistently in Vietnam War memoirs. For example, Tracy Kidder, in his memoir *My Detachment*, observes, “another story often told, probably in all wars, was the one about the soldier who died with only a day or two left in country” (177). This captures an irony similar to that of noticing a dead animal rather than human corpses, and Kidder suggests that this irony not only exists but is also remembered vividly and frequently enough to be a specific type of war story.

Even more troubling than its general lack of reliability, memory and its subsequent narrative construction are highly susceptible to surrounding stories, throwing into question the extent to which Vietnam War stories can be considered original and truthful. Because people continually absorb the language and narratives surrounding them, “it would seem impossible to write an account of anything without some ‘literature’ leaking in. Probably only a complete illiterate who very seldom heard narrative of any kind could give an ‘accurate’ account of a personal experience” (Fussell 173). According to Fussell, in order for an individual even to be capable of narrating a

story, he would have to “learn somewhere the principles of sequence and unity and transition and causality” (173). Not only these fundamental narrative elements but also “the available language of traditional literature” limit the ways in which stories can be told. Commenting on World War I literature, Fussell claims, “writers about the war had to appeal to the sympathy of readers by invoking the familiar and suggesting its resemblance to what many of them suspected was an unprecedented and (in their terms) an all-but-incommunicable reality” (172).

Deference to “the familiar” is not exclusively a literary decision on behalf of readers; rather, it is an unavoidable reality of memory and narration. This is most evident in the variety of narratives that explicitly influence the way in which authors conceptualize their war experiences. Philip Caputo, in *A Rumor of War*, describes his decision to enlist in the Marines: “Already I saw myself charging up some distant beachhead, like John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and then coming home a suntanned warrior with medals on my chest” (6). Caputo’s mention of this idealized image reflects the way in which individuals form their preconceptions of war, as well as his own self-conscious memory of having been susceptible to such influences. His sarcastically dramatic language—“charging up,” “suntanned warrior”—parallels the romanticized representation of war found in John Wayne movies and mocks his own naïveté. While John Wayne shows up frequently in the oral histories, references to Hemingway and other authors who wrote about their war experiences are especially prominent in memoirs by professional writers such as O’Brien, Wolff, and Kidder. Wolff admits, “I’d always known I would wear the uniform. It was essential to my idea of legitimacy. The men I’d respected when I was growing up had all served, and most of the writers I looked up to—

Norman Mailer, Irwin Shaw, James Jones, Erich Maria Remarque, and of course Hemingway” (43-44). Both Caputo and Wolff indicate that this focus on the ideals of manhood and, in Wolff’s case, authorship, affected their decisions to enlist, and their memoirs allow them to throw these ideals and influences into question.

Despite their self-conscious critiques of the influence narratives had on their initial conceptions of war, many authors continue to rely on such narratives to discuss the war. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, O’Brien refers to Hemingway and quotes Plato’s dialogue on courage, *Laches* (137, 140, 146). This section of his memoir provides a post-war analysis of the meaning of courage in the context of Vietnam. O’Brien’s use of these quite different authors suggests the diversity of influence that informs the way he thinks and writes about his war experiences. Kidder also quotes Hemingway, though his reference to *A Farewell to Arms* is a purely retrospective literary device: “‘I was going to forget the war. I had made a separate peace,’ says Lieutenant Frederic Henry, the hero of *A Farewell to Arms*. On a night soon after the briefing that I was going to forget, I sat in my hootch and wrote to David” (142). The connection, drawn through the repetition of “I was going to forget,” is not related to his thought process at the time, but rather to the way he conceptualizes the moment for its retelling. Acknowledging his susceptibility to the narratives around him, Kidder notes his most important “literary experiences of war,” stating, “mainly Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* and his stories ‘In Another Country’ and ‘A Way You’ll Never Be,’ love and illusion destroyed by war. So much war fiction managed to deplore and romanticize at the same time” (110). Herr crudely but honestly sums up the varying influences on individuals’ ideas of war: “Somewhere all the mythic tracks intersected, from the lowest John Wayne wetdream to the most aggravated soldier-

poet fantasy, and where they did I believe that everyone knew everything about everyone else, every one of us there a true volunteer” (20). Herr’s observation not only identifies others’ “mythic tracks” but begins to reveal his own mythology of the Vietnam War. His proposition that everyone in Vietnam was a volunteer at heart provides a particular perspective on the war and the ideals of war that soldiers carry with them.

In addition to their awareness of the narratives that pushed them toward the war, the authors acknowledge the ways in which they relate to representations of Vietnam and others’ war stories upon their return home. Captain Joseph Anderson, speaking of a documentary film about his platoon titled *The Anderson Platoon*, states, “as time passes, my memory of Vietnam revolves around the film. I have a print, and I look at it from time to time. And the broadness and scope of my two-year experience narrows down to 60 minutes” (Terry 228). This observation points to memory’s vulnerability to external narratives; as individuals are introduced to other people’s war stories, whether through text, film or conversation, their own memories adopt elements of both the content and style of these stories. At times, the sources that influence the way people discuss war are less clearly identifiable. Herr remembers, “coming back, telling stories, I’d say, ‘Oh man I was scared,’ and ‘Oh God I thought it was all over,’ a long time before I knew how scared I was really supposed to be or how clear and closed and beyond my control ‘all over’ could become” (21). On the other hand, authors often define their experiences against the narratives being presented to them. Many veterans reject films like *The Deer Hunter*, which present symbolic representations of the war. Becky Pietz explains, “*The Deer Hunter* I did not like. I don’t think I ever understood what was happening—it didn’t make sense to me” (Marshall 107). *The Green Berets*, on the other hand, is so

clearly unrelated that veterans pay it little heed. Herr explains, “*The Green Berets* doesn’t count. That wasn’t really about Vietnam, it was about Santa Monica” (Herr 188). While Herr’s comment is flippant rather than serious, it alludes to the idea that a story is not “really about Vietnam” simply by being set there; rather, only specific types of narrative are able to communicate the experience.

The initial impetus behind narrative creation also alters and defines Vietnam War narratives. White poses the question, “What kind of insight does narrative give into the nature of real events?” (5). That is, in the context of Vietnam, how do narratives help individuals and society understand the events of war? Quoting Wingfield-Stratford, Fussell proposes that narrative strives for “structure and meaning”:

‘A vast literature has been produced in the attempt to bring [the Great War] into line with other wars by highlighting its so-called battles by such impressive names as Loos, Verdun, the Somme, and Passchendaele. . . .’ This is to try to suggest that these events parallel Blenheim and Waterloo not only in glory but in structure and meaning. (9)

While Fussell’s example refers to World War I, the “vast literature” growing out of World War I attempts to address a narrative problem common to the Vietnam War. That is, the reality of World War I, like that of the Vietnam War, defied (though for different reasons) the narrative traditions of war accounts and resisted the impulse toward “worlds of traditional moral action delineated in traditional moral language” (Fussell 23). The literature of World War I employs the paradigm of the glorious, meaningful battle in an attempt to situate WWI in a logical historical context. Like the “so-called battles” of WWI, the “battles” of the Vietnam War are far from traditional, and Vietnam War literature rarely uses the word to describe them, referring instead to the siege of Khe Sanh or the Tet Offensive. Caputo, in the preface to *A Rumor of War*, admits, “repeatedly, I

have found myself wishing that I had been the veteran of a conventional war, with dramatic campaigns and historic battles for subject matter instead of a monotonous succession of ambushes and fire-fights” (xiv). In saying this, Caputo links the practices of a conventional war with the way in which these wars are narrated. While a conventional war accommodates a traditional narrative approach by providing specific battles to incorporate into a linear plot, the “monotonous succession of ambushes” that characterizes the Vietnam War defies these traditions. A defined goal and clear spatiality, including a front and a rear, are among the principle elements of standard warfare, and these elements parallel those of “traditional narrative,” which include linear temporality, a defined setting, clearly identified characters, and a plot that advances towards a resolution. The desire to narrate a traditional war with traditional narrative elements lingers in Tim O’Brien’s memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone* as well. Describing a combat assault, O’Brien states, “it is like the cloudburst, like lightning, like the dropping of the bomb on a sleeping Hiroshima, like the Nazis’ rush through Belgium and Poland and France” (110). Taking examples from World War II, he seems to draw the Vietnam War closer to a “conventional war,” but the poetics of this statement contradict his claim—a single Combat Assault in Vietnam encompasses two of the most dramatic events of the twentieth century. O’Brien later returns to World War II as a point of comparison, revealing that the concept of a “conventional war” carries with it important moral implications:

Kill and fight only for certain causes; certain causes somehow involve self-evident truths; Hitler’s blitzkrieg, the attack on Pearl Harbor, these were somehow self-evident grounds for using force . . . but the war in Vietnam drifted in and out of human lives, taking them or sparing them like a headless, berserk taxi hack, without evident cause, a war fought for uncertain reasons. (138)

The Vietnam War's failure to fit into narrative norms surrounding war stories serves as a reminder of the moral failure of those who conducted it. Hitler's blitzkrieg is not only unavailable as a literary device but also as a moral justification. And yet, despite the difficulty of fitting either WWI or Vietnam War stories into traditional expectations of war narratives, the impulse to create a familiar narrative that makes sense of a historical event remains.

The many influences on Vietnam War narratives and the desire to maintain a traditional narrative structure speak to the complex process of narrative construction that goes into Vietnam War memoirs and oral histories. In light of this process, it is useful to examine several narrative questions that emerge in both genres, as well as the particular construction that each requires. First, however, it is helpful to acknowledge the internal narratives within these texts that establish a contrast between other stories being told about the war and the author's own text. This is especially true of the narratives that were being produced by the media and directed toward the U.S. public during the war. As a journalist, Herr gives specific attention to the types of narratives that were being constructed by the media and directed toward the United States public during the war. In *Dispatches*, for example, he refers to the "Five O'Clock Follies," the daily military press briefing which he describes as "an Orwellian grope through the day's events as seen by the Mission" (99). The "Jive at Five" was notoriously polished and inaccurate, the language of these broadcasts expressly designed to veil the reality of the war. Herr remarks, "nothing so horrible ever happened upcountry that it was beyond language fix and press relations" (42). Casting doubt on this type of war narrative, Herr proposes an alternative: "If you wanted some war news in Saigon you had to hear it in stories brought

from the field by friends, see it in the lost watchful eyes of the Saigonese, or do it like Trash-man, reading the cracks in the sidewalk” (42-43). This statement not only reinforces the idea that war stories are most reliable when coming from those who have been in the field, but also introduces Herr’s own mythology surrounding the Vietnam War. His language moves beyond the rather common assumption that the media misrepresented the war and into the creation of a larger framework in which to understand the war. Herr’s recommendation to search for “war news” in untainted sources and his wariness of the “language fix” discretely validate his own text. Nevertheless, the artful language and meticulous construction of *Dispatches* reveal a different type of “language fix.” Herr recalls, “for months now, Flynn and I had been living vicariously off each other’s war stories, his Ia Drang stories and my Hue stories” (242). The image of “living off” stories suggests that beyond providing information and understanding, they are the basis of existence, a stand-in for the thrill of war itself.

As Herr’s particular language indicates, the memoirs of the Vietnam War involve careful narrative construction and manage the questions surrounding non-fiction in a variety of ways. The authors themselves often provide their own perspective on their work, including varying ideas of its goals and possibilities. The prologues and introductions to these works give authors a defined space in which to discuss the writing process and their hopes for the memoir. Caputo, in his prologue, explains *A Rumor of War* as “simply a story about war, about the things men do in war and the things war does to them. More strictly, it is a soldier’s account of our longest conflict, the only one we have ever lost, as well as the record of a long and sometimes painful personal experience” (xiii). In this statement, Caputo suggests that his memoir is a personal account, a

universal description of the effects of war, and, more particularly, an account of the Vietnam War—“our longest conflict, the only one we have ever lost.” Speaking of his memoir, he admits, “it might, perhaps, prevent the next generation from being crucified in the next war. But I don’t think so” (xxi). O’Brien, like Caputo, is skeptical of his memoir’s potential to educate, but he situates his thoughts in the body of the memoir rather than in a prologue: “Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories” (23). Both authors speak of storytelling as a goal in and of itself and reject a more didactic approach; their comments suggest the authors’ awareness of the potentially ambiguous intentions of Vietnam War texts. Caputo also comments on memory in his prologue: “I have made a great effort to resist the veteran’s inclination to remember things the way he would like them to have been rather than the way they were” (xxi). By acknowledging memory’s potential to revise events, he asserts that his memoir is as accurate as possible. Glasser makes a similar but more direct claim in his foreword: “The stories I have tried to tell here are true” (xi). This claim echoes O’Brien’s “How to Tell a True War Story,” which begins, “this is true.” (*The Things They Carried* 64). This preemptive insistence on the truth of their texts suggests the authors’ wariness both of misrepresenting the experience and of being accused of such misrepresentation.

While Glasser does not leave room to doubt the truth of the stories, he hints at another type of narrative self-consciousness that appears frequently in the body of the works themselves. The process of “trying to tell” a story, while apparent throughout the entirety of a text, often merits direct comment by the authors. Heinemann’s novel,

Paco's Story, reflects on the way a speaker chooses to tell his war story when Paco responds to the question of why he uses a cane:

How many times is it, James, that Paco has answered that? He has dwelt on it with trivial thoroughness, condensed it, told it as an ugly fucking joke (the whole story dripping with ironic contradiction, and sarcastic and paradoxical bitterness) . . . There's been folks to whom he's unloaded the whole nine yards, the wretched soul-deadening dread, the grueling, *grinding* shitwork of being a grunt (the bloody murder aside); how he came to be wounded, the miracle of his surviving the massacre—as good as left for dead, you understand, James. . . . Paco . . . immediately distills all that down to a single, simple sentence, squares himself (standing as straight as he can), looks the old man full in the face, and says bluntly, 'I was wounded in the war.'" (72-73)

The reference to “ironic contradiction, and sarcastic and paradoxical bitterness” brings to mind Fussell’s idea of “irony-assisted recall,” and the story Paco finally tells—“I was wounded in the war”—speaks to Herr’s “one-pointed” war story of the patrol that goes up the mountain. The space between Paco’s minimalist story and the detailed stories he has told in the past suggests the range of voices and styles available to tell the same story.

Though *Paco's Story* is fictional, Paco’s description of the many ways he has told his war stories illuminates the range of possibilities available to an author when writing about the Vietnam War. From offering a distilled story to unloading “the whole nine yards,” each author must choose a particular tone and style. Wolff’s memoir, *In Pharaoh's Army*, speaks directly to this process, paying specific attention to the interaction between memory and narrative construction. Remembering an incident with a Vietnamese man, Wolff remarks, “he inclined his head and smiled. It might have been an innocent smile, but I think of it now as a complicated, terrible smile” (131-32). Wolff’s acknowledgment of his inclination to enhance memories reminds the reader of the authorial influence behind non-fiction narrative. Wolff later calls into question the very idea of non-fiction. After recounting a story about breaking a precious bowl to get

revenge on its owner, he asks, “Really, now. Is the part about the bowl true? Did I do that? No. Never” (159). The reader must ultimately apply these questions not only to “the part about the bowl” but to the memoir as a whole. Wolff, aware of his ability to manipulate the truth, whether through a few carefully placed adjectives or through an invented story, alerts the reader to the complicated process of storytelling, including the translation of experience into memory and memory into language.

Perhaps the most compelling moment of narrative self-consciousness in Wolff’s memoir revolves around the story of Captain Kale. This moment, analyzed above in the context of the gender divide and the communication gap, also provides insight into Wolff’s process of narrative construction. He tells the story for the first time without raising direct narrative questions, presenting it as he does the other stories in the text. He describes a scene in which he allows Captain Kale to let a helicopter land very near to some villagers’ homes, knowing that the situation will end poorly but wanting to humiliate the captain. The helicopter’s proximity destroys the Vietnamese hooches, and Captain Kale is duly flustered. In addition to a description of the scene, Wolff offers his reflections on it, expressing a sense of guilt: “This was my work, this desolation had blown straight from my own heart. I marked the discovery coolly, as if for future study. This was, I understood, something to be remembered, though I had no idea what that would mean. I couldn’t guess how the memory would live on in me” (180).

Wolff’s allusion to “future study” materializes later in the memoir, when he narrates the retelling of the story, offering not only another glimpse of the situation itself but also of his storytelling process. Through a self-conscious examination of the way in

which he told the story to Dicky, a fellow veteran, and Jan, his date, Wolff throws into question his previous rendition of the same story. He writes,

I couldn't find the right tone. My first instinct was to make it somber and regretful, to show how much more compassionate I was than the person who had done this thing, how far I had evolved in wisdom since then, but it came off sounding phony. I shifted to a clinical, deadpan exposition. This proved even less convincing than the first pose, which at least acknowledged that the narrator had a stake in his narrative. The neutral tone was a lie, also a bore. (207)

Wolff's direct acknowledgement that "the narrator [has] a stake in his narrative" calls for a critical reading of the entire memoir and especially of the story of Captain Kale, which has already been told. Was Wolff's initial narration of the story "somber and regretful"? After the first telling he notes that the incident would shadow his "sense of entitlement to an inviolable home," a statement that is nothing if not regretful (180). A detail that arises in both narrations of the story proves especially revealing. In the first, Wolff says, "Captain Kale . . . should've had the whole area cleared, but I didn't tell him that. Nor did I offer him the ski goggles in my pack. I just stood there with the others and watched." Wolff's inaction becomes a source of guilt, and the juxtaposition of his choice not to tell Captain Kale to clear the area with his choice not to offer him the goggles suggests that even this more minor omission plays into the questionable morality of the situation. The detail of the goggles provokes a turning point in the way in which he tells the story to Dicky. Referring to the question of choosing an audience, Wolff states, "Dicky took the last problem out of my hands by laughing darkly when I confessed that I'd omitted to offer Captain Kale my ski goggles. He grinned at me, I grinned at him . . . I naturally pitched my tune to his particular receptivities" (208). Wolff's culpable passivity in the first version becomes malicious intent in the second, revealing the extent to which he has altered the tone of the story. His admitted sensitivity to his audience

during this incident suggests that the memoir itself has taken into consideration its readers' "receptivities" and tailored its tone to correspond to their expectations. In the midst of this retelling, Wolff inserts a series of theoretical questions about narrative construction: "How do you tell such a terrible story? . . . What do you owe the listener, and which listener do you owe?" (207-08). Moving between theoretical questions and concrete detail, this meta-narrative moment explicitly acknowledges the literary questions surrounding the memoir genre. Wolff's discussion of his search for the appropriate tone is not unlike the narrator's description in *Paco's Story* of the many ways Paco has told of being wounded in the war. The similarity between the two passages challenges the assumption that memoirs are straightforward non-fiction accounts and suggests that, like novels, they undergo a nuanced process of narrative construction.

While similar questions arise in the genre of oral history, the process of assembling such narratives involves several different factors. Although *Dispatches* is a memoir, it has certain elements of oral history and provides a starting point from which to examine the differences between the two genres. Herr not only shares his personal experiences in Vietnam but also dedicates a large portion of the text to recounting the stories of combat soldiers. Indeed, his profession as a war correspondent places him in a position to be an on-site oral historian, and his text is a journalistic account, a personal narrative, and a compilation of soldiers' experiences. Herr frequently quotes soldiers directly, offering their words as documentation and relating their war stories. In one italicized passage, he quotes a collage of voices in "compulsive replay" of recent ground action, moving from one soldier's comment that "a dead buddy is some tough shit, but bringing your own ass out alive can sure help you get over it" to another soldier who

begins, “we had this lieutenant, honest to Christ he was about the biggest dipshit fool of all time, all time” (26). The blend of voices, stories, and perspectives evokes the narrative strategy of oral histories, but, unlike oral history, Herr couples these direct quotations with more developed war stories narrated in the third person. He opens one such story with a short but revealing sentence: “This was his third tour” (5). The individual, identified as a “4th Division Lurp who took his pills by the fistful,” and his story are not free of Herr’s literary inclinations, however, and the LURP (long-range reconnaissance patrol) is constructed as a character and situated within the tone of the text: “He wore a gold earring and a headband torn from a piece of camouflage parachute material, and since nobody was about to tell him to get his hair cut it fell below his shoulders, covering a thick purple scar” (6). The image of the drug-addicted, expert killer plays into Herr’s constructed representation of the Vietnam War.

This representation focuses on the extremes of the war and links Vietnam to rock-and-roll culture and postmodernism. Describing his reconceptualization of Vietnam after returning to the United States, Herr imagines “a collective meta-chopper . . . cassette rock and roll in one ear and door-gun fire in the other, fuel, heat, vitality and death” (9). He later refers to a specific rock band, noting, “There was a song by the Mothers of Invention called ‘Trouble Comin’ Every Day’ that became a kind of anthem among a group of around twenty young correspondents. We played it often during those long night gatherings in Saigon, the ashtrays heaped over, ice buckets full of warm water, bottles empty, the grass all gone, the words running” (218). The glamour of music, drugs, language, and danger in Vietnam appears throughout *Dispatches*, and Herr refers directly to this glamour when he observes, “I never knew a member of the Vietnam press

corps who was insensible to what happened when the words ‘war’ and ‘correspondent’ got joined” (187). Herr’s unveiled influence on the tone and style of the text, including others’ war stories, presents a clear example of his particular narrative choices.

Though oral histories less often reveal the type of overt narrative construction that can be seen in Herr’s memoir, they do undergo a deliberate process of creation, and much of the restructuring and presentation lies in the hands of the editor. In general, the editor’s voice emerges only in a few particular moments, most commonly through an introduction or an afterward. Perhaps for this reason, Thomas Myers, in *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam*, suggests that oral histories “are uncorrelated data. They demand rather than supply a new level of historical commentary” (76). Oral histories do tend, as Myers says, to strive for “the evocative strategy of portraiture” and eliminate direct analysis, providing less historical commentary than most memoirs or critical essays (76). However, while Myers disagrees with “the assumption that the mere compilation and arrangement of voices in historical chorus constitute by themselves interpretation,” the structure of oral histories such as Baker’s *Nam* goes beyond “mere compilation” (76). Even the most traditionally structured oral histories—Terry’s *Bloods*, for example—cannot be considered purely “uncorrelated data” (76). By its very nature, *Bloods*, which assembles the stories of black veterans, provides a certain perspective on the Vietnam War and interrogates the implications of race in the war, suggesting that black veterans have specific stories that need to be told. Similarly, Walker’s *A Piece of My Heart* and Marshall’s *In the Combat Zone* present a historical argument by compiling women’s stories and therefore implying that they should be heard.

Oral histories traditionally begin by introducing the speaker's name and role in Vietnam and then provide a first-person narration of the individual's experience. The vast majority of the stories themselves, like most memoirs, follow a standard chronological order beginning with entrance into the military, continuing with key memories or elements of one's time in Vietnam, and ending with the return home and adaptation to civilian life. The speakers' stories negotiate the same questions of memory, tone, and structure that memoirs do, but the indirect presence of the editor adds another layer of influence and narrative construction, revealing the extent to which oral histories are not pure historical data. This fact comes across clearly in the ordering of the stories; for example, in *Bloods* Terry chooses to juxtapose two very different accounts. Arthur Woodley shares the story of killing a fellow soldier to end his suffering and describes multiple atrocities he committed. His account ends with a description of a recurring nightmare in which he switches places with the American soldier he killed: "I ask him over and over. He won't pull the trigger. I wake up. Every time" (257). Following this description and three repetitions of "I still cry," the introduction to Dwyte Brown's story feels especially intentional: "I didn't see the ugly part of the war. I enjoyed the war 'cause I was at Cam Ranh Bay. Cam Ranh Bay was paradise, man" (258). Brown describes the luxuries he enjoyed at the base, but he also observes that "the only serious fighting . . . was between black guys and white guys" (259). His discussion of race stands in contrast to Woodley's, who tells of becoming best friends with a Klan member and explains, "once you started to go in the field with an individual, no matter what his ethnic background is or what his ideals, you start to depend on that person to cover your ass" (239). Terry's choice to juxtapose these experiences affects the way in which each

story is read and understood and reveals the diversity of experience within the Vietnam War.

Al Santoli provides another approach to structuring and giving meaning to the individuals' stories in *Everything We Had*. Santoli divides his oral history into phases of the war that are loosely chronological and returns to certain speakers multiple times throughout the text rather than presenting each individual's complete story once. The fragmented, anecdotal nature of each section reflects Santoli's construction and ordering of the narrative. Titled "Welcome to the War, Boys," and narrated by medic David Ross, the opening story is a half-page introduction to the rest of the text and presents a scene in which newly arrived soldiers casually waiting in line are surprised by body bags being dumped from helicopters. Ross, who was observing the new soldiers, explains, "one of the bags broke open and what came out was hardly recognizable as a human being I said to myself, 'Welcome to the war, boys.'" (3). The image of a body "hardly recognizable as a human being" and the emphasis on the psychological space between seasoned soldiers and new arrivals provide an initial provocation to the reader about to enter the war through Santoli's text. This anecdote is an ideal literary device and a natural opening to the text, despite the fact that it is told by a soldier who was in Vietnam from 1965 to 1967. Santoli's choice to use it despite its chronological inconsistency with the following story, narrated by a veteran who was in country from 1962 to 1963, indicates that the overall power and effectiveness of the text overrides the need for exact chronology.

In *Nam*, Mark Baker takes this deviation from the traditional structure of identified, individual stories to much greater lengths. Combining "well over a hundred

anonymous voices offering confessions, charges, and thumbnail assessments,” Baker creates an oral history that does not identify its speakers and feels very much like fiction (Myers 74). Like *Everything We Had*, *Nam* is divided into sections chronologically, but Baker provides an introduction to each section. These passages, written in the third-person, seem to advance his interpretation of the stories to follow, an opportunity for the editor himself to contribute to the text. These short introductions also push the oral history closer to the realm of fiction. Describing a scene in which several combat soldiers watch an airplane take off for the United States, Baker writes, “the nose lifted abruptly and the wheels bounded over the last hump on the runway . . . a brief cheer reverberated through the cabin . . . A few men on a night ambush looked up . . . The words that pulsed in each of their minds were, ‘They’re going back to the World.’ Their thoughts diverged as each man quickly calculated his own remaining time in-country” (239). This type of narrative detail and Baker’s role as an omniscient narrator place the paragraph firmly in the realm of fiction. The anonymity of setting and character suggest the universality of the description and deviate greatly from the concept behind a traditional oral history, which recounts the experiences of a specific individual.

From Caputo’s linear memoir to Baker’s non-traditional oral history, Vietnam War narratives present a range of styles and structures in an attempt to effectively communicate the war experience. Despite varying degrees of organization, they share key elements of the process of narrative construction, including the desire to maintain a familiar structure and their tendency to draw from past war narratives. While there may be no single answer to Wolff’s question, “How do you tell such a terrible story?” (207),

these common elements and the shared context of the narratives create a unifying thread between even the most dissimilar texts.

IV. The Motivation Behind the Texts: Accusation, Confession, and Justification

In the context of this struggle for narrative construction, for the creation of truthful, believable, and powerful text, and despite the notorious difficulty of communicating the experience of war, a great deal of writing has come out of the Vietnam War. It is helpful to examine the motivation and intention behind these texts—what inspires the writing of a Vietnam War narrative and what is the author hoping to achieve? At their most fundamental level, the texts strive to minimize the communication gap and provide an explanation of the experience. If the soldiers themselves struggled to make sense of the situation, the American civilian population needed at the very least an explanation of the conditions, mindset, and realities of the war to begin to understand a conflict that was deemed by many unnecessary, imperialist, and cruel. The American public's lack of understanding and the war's increasing unpopularity led to a collective accusation of Vietnam veterans, who became notorious for atrocities such as the My Lai Massacre and were labeled by some as "baby-killers." This term emerges indirectly in the texts however, and the authors often apply it to anticipated attacks against themselves that do not materialize. Kidder, for example, describes sitting in the airport before leaving for Vietnam and ignoring several men who are trying to get his attention, thinking, "they were probably anti-war people who wanted to have a little sport with a baby killer" (50). His application of this term to himself, even before having gone to war, reflects the internalization of the accusation against veterans. *Paco's Story* reveals a similar idea when Jesse states, "Been waiting for one of those

mouthy, snappy-looking little girlies from some rinky-dink college to waltz up and say’—and his voice rises into a fey falsetto, squeaking as though he’s rehearsed it—‘You one of them *vet’rans*, ain’cha? Killed all them mothers and babies. Raped all them women, di’n’cha’” (156). This passage alludes to some veterans’ perceptions of antiwar protestors—“mouthy” girls from “rinky-dink” colleges—as well as to their awareness of the accusations against them.

The interplay between this type of accusation and the confession it provokes in the narratives is exceptionally complex because the accusation, directed toward returning soldiers and stemming from the war’s unpopularity at home, exists largely outside of the texts and is re-narrated by the accused, while the act of confession takes place within the texts themselves. Because the accusations are only described by the veterans themselves, the question of who is accusing them, and of what exactly, often remains ambiguous. Despite this ambiguity, the narratives tend to react to the assumed accusation with various types of confession—of atrocities committed or witnessed, of racism and hatred, of longing for the war. These confessions are, in turn, surrounded by the narratives as a whole, which often work as justifications of the acts and feelings to which the veterans confess. These justifications consist largely of explanation—under what conditions did American soldiers kill children, witness the destruction of villages, enjoy the adrenaline of violence? By detailing the elements of the Vietnam War that differentiated it from other wars, and by integrating these elements into the very narrative structure of the texts, the authors produce unique literature tailored to the circumstances of Vietnam. In an effort to explain and thus justify their actions, veterans focus on the elements of the war that set it apart from more conventional wars, including the conduct and structure of the

war and the nature of the enemy. In order to understand the way in which the process of justification influences the narratives themselves, it is first necessary to explore the representation of accusation by the American public toward soldiers, as well as the veterans' subsequent confessions.

In *My Detachment*, Kidder presents the following accusation as a "story": "A soldier returns from Vietnam and at the airport runs into a bunch of antiwar demonstrators, who welcome him home by spitting on him. This became one of the most common stories from the war" (181). Kidder recounts this story in a hypothetical context: "I think the tale acquired wide currency because it neatly expressed the feelings shared by a part of a generation of American boys. For the minority who had seen combat, the myth surely expressed a figurative truth" (181). Describing this situation as a "tale," "a story," and "a myth," Kidder casts doubt on the accusation presented by many other authors as an underlying reality of being a Vietnam veteran. While Kidder believes "the myth spoke mainly about disappointed expectations" (182), the anecdote he provides and the words of other veterans illustrate that their perception of an accusatory American public originated from more than expectations of a warm reception.

Unlike Kidder's rather blunt presentation, the majority of Vietnam War texts rely on assumption and implication to present the accusation that informs them, describing the accusation from an intimate perspective. Richard Ford, in Terry's *Bloods*, explains, "people that wasn't even there tell us the war was worthless. That a man lost his life following orders. It was worthless, they be saying. I really feel used" (52). Ford's language is layered and replete with implications, not least of which involves the space between those who were there and those who were not. This sentence does not present a

direct accusation; instead, it indicates the way some civilians spoke about the Vietnam War and reveals the implicit accusation that this language carried. While it is not clear whether Ford feels “used,” “manipulated,” and “violated” because he was sent to a worthless war or because he was told that the war in which he fought was worthless, his description of the accusation is far more emotional than Kidder’s hypothetical representation. Similarly, Lily Adams, who was a nurse in Vietnam, describes her feelings upon returning home, saying, “I lived alone and was very angry and very hostile, only I didn’t know what I was angry and hostile about. I didn’t know if I was angry at the country for being angry at me. I didn’t know if I was angry because all that work in Vietnam was for nothing—I mean, I was very, very confused” (Marshall 225). This sentence reveals Adams’ awareness of an accusation, a collective sentiment directed toward her, but the passage focuses on her own reactions and the fallout from the war. The fact that the narrator’s own emotions obscure the hostility illustrated by Kidder suggests that the accusation perceived by veterans as coming from the American public was so uniform it does not demand explanation in these texts. Adams need only say that the country was angry with her to evoke the American public’s attitudes toward the war. The accusing party in her statement, the equivalent of Ford’s “people that wasn’t even there,” is “the country.” The ambiguity of the accusation’s source proves appropriate because the accusation remains largely unexplored.

Rather than elaborate on the origins and nature of the accusation against them, many authors move directly to some form of confession. Because their stories involve not only narrative but also history, they assume a common understanding of the social and political context surrounding the war and dedicate themselves to reacting to an

accusation they faced in their everyday lives. In combining a real-world public accusation of Vietnam veterans with a literary expression of war-related guilt, the texts develop a unique presentation of confession. Before examining the ways in which moments of confession appear in the narratives, it is useful to explore the basic theoretical constructs behind the phenomenon. Confession appears most frequently in religious and legal contexts, but Peter Brooks, in *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature*, observes, “Western literature has made the confessional mode a crucial kind of self-expression” (18). Brooks’ observation that “confession alone will bring release from the situation of accusation and allow reintegration with normal social existence and community” speaks to veterans’ situations upon returning from the war (23). Within a “situation of accusation” and a struggle to reintegrate, veterans’ accounts strive to acknowledge a sense of guilt.

This acknowledgment shows itself not in drawn out narrative but in moments of recognition and reflection. Within the narratives, three significant types of confessions emerge, and all employ similarly understated language. The most prominent type of confession addresses atrocities committed or witnessed during the war. Arthur Woodley’s story in *Bloods* recounts several instances of violence that include pushing prisoners out of planes, murdering civilians, and raping women. His tone is not overtly remorseful; speaking of a Vietnamese woman, he notes, “we found out she was pregnant. Then we raped her” (248). He retrospectively critiques his inaction and acceptance in the face of such violence: “When I seen this GI stomp on this fetus after this pregnant woman got killed in a ambush, I did nothin’. What could I do? I was some gross animal” (248). Woodley admits his complicity and participation in what he describes as “crimes against

humanity” and explains the emotional toll of these crimes: “I started disliking myself for what America, the war, and bein’ in the Army had caused me to become. But I was still a animal” (250). The structure of this sentence indicates a loss of agency; while Woodley offers a confession for crimes for which he feels responsible, he also suggests that he was at the mercy of “America, the war, and bein’ in the Army,” alluding to the exceptional circumstances in Vietnam.

While Woodley’s confessions are direct and entirely personal, many of the other texts provide more veiled confessions. Throughout *Dispatches*, for example, Herr relates a number of atrocities committed by soldiers, stating, “disgust doesn’t begin to describe what they made me feel, they threw people out of helicopters, tied people up and put the dogs on them” (67). He tempers the strength of this reaction with his own confession: “Of course we were intimate; I’ll tell you how intimate: they were my guns, and I let them do it” (67). His direct address to the reader frames this statement as a confession, an admission of guilt delivered consciously to those willing to listen. This moment of *Dispatches* is all the more meaningful when read in conjunction with Herr’s earlier observation that “you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did” (20). The universal “you” removes this observation from his personal responsibility and offers the statement as a general rule of the war. The memoir unveils Herr’s personal proximity to the soldiers and their crimes not only in moments of direct acknowledgement but also through the detailed content of the text itself.

Herr’s perspective on confession stands apart from most veterans’ confessions and must be considered in the context of his representation of the glamour of the war. His voluntary presence in Vietnam is a point of both guilt and pride in the memoir.

Speaking of soldiers' perceptions of journalists in the war, Herr notes that even the soldiers "who preferred not to be in your company . . . would cut back at the last and make their one concession to what there was in us that we ourselves loved most: 'I got to give it to you, you guys got balls'" (207-08). His realization that the soldiers hated him "the way you'd hate any hopeless fool who would put himself through this thing when he had choices" is at once self-deprecating and self-validating (208). In light of Herr's earlier comment that "maybe you had to be pathological to find glamour in Saigon . . . but Saigon had it for me, and danger activated it," these affirmations of bravery play into Herr's ideas of glamour (41). Herr's choice to quote his British friend Page suggests he is not alone in this conception of the war: "Take the glamour out of war! I mean, how the bloody hell can you do *that*?" (248). Although Herr recognizes his responsibility for everything he witnessed, the glamour of having been present in the first place defines the tone of the memoir as a whole and challenges the credibility of his confession. The tension between his admission of responsibility and his glorification of the war brings to mind Kidder's comment that "so much war fiction managed to deplore and romanticize at the same time" (110). The potential for both fictional and non-fictional literature to engage in contradictory processes suggests the complexity of literary confessions.

This complexity appears not only in the context surrounding confession but also in the way confessions are presented. Although Woodley and Herr admit personal responsibility for war crimes and atrocities, other texts provide more discreet confessions through depictions of other people's wrongdoings. Caputo tells a story of a soldier who had "taken a 'souvenir' off the body of a dead VC. . . . two brown and bloodstained human ears" (67). Caputo presents this story, which has many variations in other

Vietnam War texts, as a metonym for the war itself: “Nothing could have been better calculated to give an idea of the kind of war Vietnam was” (67). He also notes that the soldier was “a mirror image” of himself, creating a link between the specific acts of another soldier, the war as a whole, and his own participation in the war. An even more indirect confession appears in William Merritt’s memoir, *Where the Rivers Ran Backwards*, when he dedicates a short chapter to Harlan John’s first contact with torture. This chapter receives no introduction, and John never reappears in the narrative; Merritt’s relationship to him is mysterious, and the lack of explanation lends the chapter a fictional feel. It also maintains an element of oral history, especially in its opening line: “John, Harlan H., USA 1 Lt., 02, Intelligence” (110). The chapter includes a vivid description of torture through electric shock to the prisoner’s genitals, but John’s unwillingness to participate separates him from the violence he witnesses. Merritt chooses to include this section despite the fact that it does not speak directly to his experience in Vietnam, and he draws no link between the incident and his experiences. What seems to be a moral argument of sorts—Harlan does not accept the torture of one Vietnamese man as a means to save the lives of many Americans—is marginalized by the fact that Harlan can abstain from the violence but cannot prevent it. Merritt observes, in an almost omniscient voice, “he knew we would prevail over this prisoner” (120). The ambiguous “we” implicates Merritt himself in the situation and complicates the moral message of the passage.

A second type of confession reflects a similar sense of violence on a lesser scale and involves admissions of racism, hatred, and gratuitous infliction of harm. In Marshall’s oral history, Pinkie Houser explains that Vietnamese prisoners of war in a camp near her base would shout through the fence to the nurses walking by. Houser

admits, “I know I shouldn’t say this, but I’d just pick up a rock and throw it at the fence” (40). Although conscious of the way in which such an act could be perceived, Houser commits herself to this moment of confession. While she recognizes that she “shouldn’t say this,” she does not dwell on a sense of remorse. Similarly, Cindy Randolph describes an incident in which she threw grenades from an airplane into the ocean, then notes, “in retrospect, though, I can’t imagine myself trying to kill sharks” (Marshall 239). Although she condemns her behavior on an abstract level, observing, “I believe you should live and let live,” Randolph disassociates herself from the act rather than expressing remorse (239). These confessions, while minor compared to confessions of torture and rape, speak to the level of guilt shared by most veterans, including women.

Finally, veterans often admit to the fact that the war was thrilling and even enjoyable at times. While such an admission does not necessarily imply a confession, the moral implications of enjoying the war and the role that this enjoyment played in the American public’s accusations suggest its appearance as a type of confession in the texts. “Some people found it distasteful or confusing if I told them that, whatever else, I’d loved it there too,” Herr observes (251). The decision to share his enjoyment of the war, despite some civilians’ negative reactions, amounts to a confession. Caputo seconds this confession: “After I came home from the war, I was often asked how it felt, going into combat for the first time. I never answered truthfully, afraid that people would think of me as some sort of war-lover. The truth is, I felt happy” (81). Caputo’s apprehension that he would be seen as a “war-lover” originates from an awareness of the potential for this type of accusation. The structure of the final sentence announces Caputo’s statement as an untold truth, framing it as a confession. Many women share a similar sentiment, as

evidenced by Randolph's comments in Marshall's text: "Going to Vietnam, you know, was one of the better highs in life. That's an unfortunate commentary on the war, but it says a lot about the shadow side of ourselves" (242). Randolph's analysis of her own confession also works as a justification; she attributes the "high" from the war to a part of each person's human nature. In this vein, Broyles' article "Why Men Love War" can be read as an extended explanation of the question posed in the title and a justification of this type of confession. He begins the piece by discussing his friend Hiers' comment, "What people can't understand . . . is how much fun Vietnam was. I loved it. I loved it, and I can't tell anybody" (1). Broyles' comment, "we were mute, I suspect, out of shame," suggests that the very fact of admitting "the possibility of loving war" constitutes a confession (1).

While each moment of confession tends to incorporate some type of immediate justification, the texts also present explanations of the irregularity of the war that act as more general justifications and apply to the narratives as a whole. Herr's broad explanation of the soldier's mentality during the war exemplifies this type of direct justification: "In war more than in other life you don't really know what you're doing most of the time, you're just behaving, and afterward you can make up any kind of bullshit you want to about it, say you felt good or bad, loved it or hated it, did this or that, the right thing or the wrong thing; still, what happened happened" (20-21). This sentiment suggests that Vietnam War narratives themselves, which provide a retrospective analysis, struggle to assign meaning to decisions that lacked reason in the moment. Herr reiterates this idea later in *Dispatches*, highlighting the disassociation between "real life" and the war: "While we were there and the war seemed separate from

what we thought of as real life and normal circumstance, an aberration, we all took a bad flash sooner or later and usually more than once, like old acid backing up, residual psychotic reaction” (252). Differentiating between the war and “real life” or “other life,” Herr emphasizes the way in which particular circumstances and mentalities influenced soldiers’ actions. His reference to “psychotic reaction” evokes the language of insanity that permeates the narratives and brings to mind Reginald Edwards’ observation in *Bloods*: “I mean we were crazy, but it’s built into the culture. It’s like institutionalized insanity. When you’re in combat, you can do basically what you want as long as you don’t get caught. You can get away with murder” (Terry 14). While Edwards speaks of “institutionalized insanity,” he rejects the depiction of soldiers in *Apocalypse Now*, explaining that “by making us look insane, the people who made that movie was somehow relieving themselves of what they asked us to do over there” (14). Like Edwards, Annie Auger points out that others were responsible for the wrongdoings committed in Vietnam: “Those people, whoever they were, who sent us over there made us do all these terrible things” (Walker 106). Edwards associates the level of violence with a conscious lack of accountability, an essential component of the “culture” of “institutionalized insanity.” Woodley also notes the way in which a lack of accountability altered soldiers’ perceptions of their actions: “You think no crime is a crime durin’ war, ‘specially when you get away with it” (Terry 254). One of the speakers from *In the Combat Zone*, Jeanne Christie, provides a different perspective on this type of justification. Speaking on behalf of the soldiers, she states: “I had fellows bring me ears to see. . . . I remember being shown the scalps of the VC, and little peckers in little glass jars. Because it was a way of survival for some of the men . . . like kids collecting frogs

or birds' eggs, the guys wouldn't collect trophies forever. So it was alright" (Marshall 179). The ultimate justification was, of course, that "Vietnam was a world unto itself" (Marshall 233). Baker, in his comments before a section entitled "Victors," states, "the brutal stories are delivered with a nervous chuckle, dirty jokes from another world that don't quite survive translation. 'I guess you had to be there'" (168). Cindy Randolph further negates the possibility of translation by simply explaining, "anything that happened in Vietnam wasn't real" (Marshall 233).

V. Justification Through Explanation: Elements of the Vietnam War Narrative

While specific moments of justification assure communication of the author's ideas, the narratives explain the Vietnam War and justify their authors' actions most effectively through extended attention to the unique conditions of the conflict. Several essential aspects of the war correlate with the ways in which its narratives take shape. Among these, the way the war was conducted, conceptions of space and time, and the nature of the enemy play out in important ways in the memoirs and oral histories. These elements must be considered in conjunction with one another, as both the conduct of the war and perceptions of the enemy influence the soldiers' understanding of space and temporality. Ultimately, each factor constitutes a thread in the process of justification essential to the narratives, and their interwoven consequences reveal the particular nature not only of the war but also of the narratives it has inspired. The desire to represent the conditions of the Vietnam War as effectively as possible and to explain and justify various aspects of the war has led to narratives that stand apart from other texts, just as the Vietnam War stood apart from other wars.

Warfare in Vietnam differed greatly from the warfare of the World Wars, and this contributed to the troops' sense of disorientation. Kidder, speaking of the position of American soldiers he is monitoring, imagines that the enemy troops were "fooled and were returning to Pinkville while our troops were advancing on them. Whatever *advancing* meant" (135). By throwing into question the term "advancing," which evokes steady movement forward, he offers a passing acknowledgement of the spatial confusion of the war. In contrast to the uncertainty of what advancing troops would look like in Vietnam, Caputo provides a straightforward explanation of the objective of the war: "Our mission was not to win terrain or seize positions, but simply to kill: to kill Communists and to kill as many of them as possible" (xix). In *If I Die*, O'Brien reiterates the same phenomenon: "It is not a war fought for territory, nor for pieces of land that will be won and held. It is not a war fought to win the hearts of the Vietnamese nationals, not in the wake of contempt drawn on our faces and on theirs, not in the wake of a burning village, a trampled rice paddy, a battered detainee . . . the only obvious criterion of military success is body count" (127). O'Brien suggests that in addition to lacking conventional military goals such as gaining land, the war also disregarded alleged political goals. Furthermore, Herr notes that the Air Cavalry "killed a lot of Communists, but that was all they did, because the number of Communist dead meant nothing, changed nothing" (96). While the only goal was to achieve a high body count, the body count left the situation unchanged and brought the war no closer to an end.

The futility of the purported missions was exacerbated, according to combatants, by the military hierarchy's orders to refrain from shooting the enemy. Herr quotes a soldier who observes, "Command gettin' in your way so you can't even do your job.

Shit, last three patrols I was on we had fucking *orders* not to return fire going through the villages, that's what a fucked-up war it's getting to be anymore" (29). Merritt's chapter "A Mad Minute" speaks to the way the military hierarchy managed the soldiers' frustration with these orders. Revealing his own naïveté by asking, after a barrage of shooting, what they had been shooting at, his fellow soldier responds, "what were we shooting at? You believe this fucking new guy? What were we shooting at? We weren't shooting at nothing. It was a Mad Minute. One Mad Minute. They give us one every day . . . They don't never let us shoot at Charlie. So one minute, every day they just let us shoot" (82). The term "fucking new guy," often abbreviated "FNG," alludes to the close correlation between time in country and level of experience (and subsequently, disillusionment). The ambiguous "they" refers to a military or governmental hierarchy that controlled the conduct of the war, but the lack of clarification contributes to the war's seeming arbitrariness, and the term "Mad Minute" is in itself an acknowledgment of a sense of insanity that appears throughout many of the texts.

Other than stressing the already-limited official goal of killing as many enemy combatants as possible, the narratives often emphasize that survival was each individual's main objective. Corpsman Douglas Anderson explains, "When you're out there, politics notwithstanding, the basic idea is to stay alive, and in a situation where we were fighting an unconventional war, which confused most of us, the main point was to stay alive" (Santoli 63). While the prioritization of survival is not surprising, Anderson's awareness of what he calls an "unconventional war" and his allusion to a shared confusion reveals the sentiment surrounding the war. Caputo also alludes to the contrast between conventional war and Vietnam in the prologue to *A Rumor of War*, explaining that

enlisted men, “born during or immediately after World War II” and “shaped by that era, the age of Kennedy’s Camelot,” quickly came to see the conflict as “an exhausting, indecisive war of attrition in which we fought for no cause other than our own survival” (xiv). The preconceived notion of an honorable war and the desire to fight for “something altogether noble and good” were shattered by the conduct of the war (Caputo xiv). Caputo reinforces this idea, including the contrast with other, more structured wars, in the body of his memoir. Emphasizing the way in which this phenomenon provoked unprecedented levels of brutality, he explains, “It was no orderly campaign, as in Europe, but a war for survival waged in a wilderness without rules or laws; a war in which each soldier fought for his own life and the lives of the men beside him, not caring who he killed in that personal cause or how many or in what manner” (229). The term “cause,” originating from the idea that a war should have a goal, reappears in Kidder’s memoir when he describes his time traveling around the United States and interviewing Vietnam combat soldiers. He asked “what they thought they’d been fighting for,” to which one soldier replied, “we had a cause. Yeah, stay alive” (144). Kidder notes, “this was the commonest answer I heard from former combat soldiers” (144). The sense of futility brought on by fighting only for the “cause” of survival recalls the feelings associated with World War I. Both the Vietnam War and WWI can be viewed in historical and narrative contrast to World War II, seen and narrated as the “good” war. While academics have challenged this concept, the dichotomy remains and brings to mind Studs Terkel’s *The Good War*: *An Oral History of World War II* and Kim Willenson’s *The Bad War: An Oral History of the Vietnam War*, which plays on Terkel’s title.

The fact that there was no land to gain or front to advance alters perceptions of space and does away with the concept of a safe rear area. Herr notes, “You could be in the most protected space in Vietnam and still know that your safety was provisional” (14). One of the few concrete spatial markers was the perimeter of a base, a theoretical marker of secured territory, but because the perimeter was frequently violated by enemy fire, it contributes little to a clarification or solidification of space in the narratives.

Dispatches, for example, begins with a tangible representation of space: “There was a map of Vietnam on the wall of my apartment in Saigon” (3). Almost immediately, however, Herr challenges the familiarity of this image and the security of space that a map implies, observing, “that map was a marvel, especially now that it wasn’t real anymore” (3). While Herr names the old territories of Vietnam, “Tonkin, Annam, and Cochin China,” and describes specific geography, he also moves into a more mythic mode:

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 one they’d been using since ’64 . . . 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. We knew that the uses of most information were flexible, different pieces of ground told different stories to different people. We also knew that for years now there had been no country here but the war. (3)

This introduction to Herr’s memoir situates the reader in a space in which maps are myth and the fundamental unit of geography is the war itself. Herr’s representation seems to contradict the major geographic features of the conflict, including the division between North and South Vietnam, the demilitarized zone, and the Laotian and Cambodian borders. Although this geography appears well-defined, it offers limited structure. When Herr, writing about 1967, labels Cambodia “the Sanctuary,” he is referring to the safety

the country provided for the North Vietnamese, but in 1969, President Nixon sanctioned a massive operation in which “more than 100,000 tons of bombs were dropped on Cambodia” (Herr 96, Herring 221). This type of drastic change in the implications of basic geography undermines the structure that national borders would normally provide. In addition, both Jonathan Polansky in *Everything We Had* and Cherie Rankin in *In the Combat Zone* tell of accidentally flying over Laos, and Van Devanter speaks of men who “had been operating over the fence for at least six months,” meaning in Cambodia or Laos (Santoli 168, Marshall 67, Van Devanter 130). These facts challenge the potential for geographical organization and reinforce Herr’s representation. Casting out the hope of a traditional conception of space, a conception embodied in maps, Herr offers the only alternative—the war. “The war,” as a geographical marker, relies largely on the atmosphere created by landscape and climate.

The Vietnam War’s spatiality revolves around the jungle, the iconic image that parallels the trenches of World War I, which were “assimilated so successfully by metaphor and myth” (Fussell 36). Combatants in World War I insisted, to little avail, on capturing very specific slices of land, rendering the realities of space absurd. The Vietnam War’s spatial absurdity, on the other hand, originated from the vast but meaningless spaces surrounding the soldiers. O’Brien notes that “each piece of ground left behind” immediately succumbed to the enemy (127), and Caputo observes, “our days were spent hacking through the mountainous jungles whose immensity reduced us to an antlike pettiness” (xx). Despite the “immensity” of the jungle, the verb “hacking” evokes a sense of claustrophobia and continuous struggle. This comes across in veteran Richard Ford’s account of losing track of several enemy soldiers: “The terrain was so thick there

that we lost them. It was jungle. It was the wait-a-minute vines that grab you, tangles you as you move in the jungle” (Terry 44). Describing the way in which the jungle not only keeps him from the enemy but also executes its own violence against him, the speaker mimics the struggle by entangling the language of the passage, repeating the word “jungle” and moving from first to second person. Following the death of a soldier due to heat stroke, Caputo refers to the menace of the land and introduces the link between the country’s space and climate and the atmosphere of insanity in Vietnam: “It is as if the sun and the land itself were in league with the Viet Cong, wearing us down, driving us mad, killing us” (106).

In addition to the infuriating climate, the ground, covered in mines and booby traps, became an extension of the enemy. Caputo explains,

That kind of warfare has its own peculiar terrors. It turns an infantryman’s world upside down. The foot soldier has a special feeling for the ground. He walks on it, fights on it, sleeps and eats on it; the ground shelters him under fire; he digs his home in it. But mines and booby traps transform that friendly, familiar earth into a thing of menace, a thing to be feared as much as machine guns or mortar shells. (Caputo 288)

Here, the terror of the war lies in a reversal of norms. While past wars have established a “friendly, familiar” relationship between the foot soldier and the earth, warfare in Vietnam throws this relationship into question, adding to the constant anxiety of the situation. The significance of mines in defining the everyday reality of the foot soldier explains O’Brien’s decision to dedicate a chapter of *If I Die* specifically to a “catalogue of mines” (127). Personifying the mines, O’Brien observes that the booby-trapped mortar rounds “hang from trees. They nestle in shrubbery. They lie under the sand. They wait beneath the mud floors of huts. They haunted us” (123). By providing a detailed list of the types of mines used in Vietnam, O’Brien counteracts the terrible

uncertainty and fear of the ground, embracing that which is certain—“you’re walking in mine fields, walking past the things day after day” (124). The mines, which “haunted” the soldiers, and the earth, which seemed to be “in league with the Viet Cong,” were more than just unnerving; they were malicious.

Herr takes this animation of the terrain further, adopting it into his particular mythology. He observes, “The Puritan belief that Satan dwelt in Nature could have been born here, where even on the coldest, freshest mountaintops you could smell jungle and that tension between rot and genesis that all jungles give off. It is ghost-story country” (94). Through the translation of the Vietnamese landscape into a “ghost-story” atmosphere, the seeming neutrality of the land becomes a symbol of the horror of the war. Herr continues, “the Highlands of Vietnam are spooky, unbearably spooky, spooky beyond belief” (95). The repetition in this sentence provides emphasis while striving to communicate something “beyond belief.” The idea of spookiness also appears multiple times in O’Brien’s “How to Tell a True War Story” in *The Things They Carried*. First, the narrator explains that the men on his patrol “didn’t understand about the spookiness” of the deep jungle (66). His friend Mitchell Sanders later recounts a story of a six-man patrol that embarks on a “basic listening-post operation” in the mountains (68). The soldier telling the story provides an extended description of environment: “And man, I’ll tell you—it’s spooky. This is mountains. You don’t *know* how spooky till you been there. Jungle, sort of, except it’s way up in the clouds and there’s always this fog—like rain, except it’s not raining—everything’s all wet and swirly and tangled up and you can’t see jack” (69). Sanders’ claim that the mountains could be even spookier than the jungle suggests that though the landscape varied, it was consistently eerie. Continuing

the story, he tells how the men began to hear music coming from the rocks, then one night, voices and a “big swank gook cocktail party” (70). Sanders explains, “The rock—it’s *talking*. And the fog, too, and the grass and the goddamn mongooses. Everything talks. . . . The whole country. Vietnam” (71). In the story, the patrol attempts to bury the mysticism of Vietnam with firepower—white phosphorus, napalm, incendiaries. This approach fails, however, because the soldiers “still *hear*” the sounds; the fact that American military power cannot silence the noises reinforces the land’s spookiness (72). When the men return to the base camp and their colonel demands an explanation, they “walk away, because certain stories you don’t ever tell” (72). The fact that this final assertion is inherently contradictory, as both Sanders and the narrator have indeed told the story, indicates the impulse to share even the most unbelievable events.

Herr provides an explanation for the spookiness of the land through an anecdote originally told by photographer Sean Flynn: “It was at dusk, those ghastly mists were fuming out of the valley floor, ingesting light. The colonel squinted at the distance for a long time. Then he swept his hand very slowly along the line of jungle, across the hills and ridges running into Cambodia (the Sanctuary!). ‘Flynn,’ he said. ‘Somewhere out there...is the *entire First NVA Division*.’” (96). The connection between the landscape and the enemy informs the American perception of space and land in Vietnam. The colonel’s knowledge that the enemy is spread throughout that “bloody, maddening,” uncanny terrain contributes to the danger and the frustration of the jungle (95).

While Caputo tends to take a more literal and structured approach to his account in *A Rumor of War* than Herr does in *Dispatches*, he also employs the language of the uncanny when he describes the jungle. Intertwining the nature of small-unit operations

and the land, he states, “the patrol that morning had the nightmare quality which characterized most small-unit operations in the war. The trail looped and twisted and led nowhere. The company seemed to be marching into a vacuum, haunted by a presence intangible yet real, a sense of being surrounded by something we could not see. It was the inability to see that vexed us most. In that lies the jungle’s power to cause fear: it blinds” (85). Locating the jungle’s power in its ability to obscure, Caputo describes the same phenomenon that the colonel in *Dispatches* does, and his use of the verb “vex” recalls the colonel’s tone of frustration. Caputo’s decision to speak of “a presence intangible yet real” and his reference to haunting echoes Herr’s “ghost-story country.”

Herr’s extended, mystic description of the jungle, and Caputo’s simplified reiteration, resemble O’Brien’s description in his novel *Going After Cacciato*. Enjoying the liberties of fiction, the passage expands on the essence of the jungle:

Yes, they were in jungle now. Thick dripping jungle. Club moss fuzzing on bent branches, hard green bananas dangling from trees that canopied in lush sweeps of green, vaulted forestlight in yellow-green and blue-green and olive-green and silver-green. It was jungle. Growth and decay and the smell of chlorophyll and jungle sounds and jungle depth. Soft, humming jungle. Everywhere, greenery deep in greenery. Itching jungle, lost jungle. A botanist’s madhouse. (29)

The repetition of “jungle” imitates its overwhelming nature, and the sensory language of the passage immerses the reader in the space. The gradations of green, the plant smell, the sounds, and even the tactility of the jungle contribute to its essence. O’Brien’s assessment—“a botanist’s madhouse”—recalls Herr’s reference to the “maddening” terrain and employs the language of insanity common to many Vietnam War narratives. Caputo connects the conditions of the land to the behavior of the soldiers, drawing an explicit link between explanation and justification: “Everything rotted and corroded quickly over there: bodies, boot leather, canvas, metal, morals. Scorched by the sun,

wracked by the wind and rain of the monsoon, fighting in alien swamps and jungles, our humanity rubbed off of us as the protective bluing rubbed off the barrels of our rifles” (229). The physical disintegration of materials parallels the disintegration of the soldiers’ morals, and Caputo hints at a causal relationship between the harsh climate and landscape and the exceptional violence of the war. His language echoes the opening to T.E.

Lawrence’s World War I autobiography *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*:

Some of the evil of my tale may have been inherent in our circumstances. For years we lived anyhow with one another in the naked desert, under the indifferent heaven. By day the hot sun fermented us; and we were dizzied by the beating wind. . . . By our own act we were drained of morality, of volition, of responsibility, like dead leaves in the wind.

The parallel references to the sun, wind, and loss of morality reveal the influence of past war narratives, especially those of World War I, on authors writing about Vietnam.

Lawrence’s “naked desert” becomes “alien swamps and jungles” for Caputo, but his suggestion that evil can be inherent in one’s circumstances remains pertinent.

Like space, time in Vietnam functioned in unconventional ways and played an important role in soldiers’ perceptions of the war. Introducing a soldier called Day Tripper with a calendar on his helmet, Herr explains, “like every American in Vietnam, he had his obsession with Time. (No one ever talked about When-this-lousy-war-is-over. Only ‘How much time you got?’) (118). The passage focuses on Day Tripper’s particular obsession, but Herr’s parenthetical explanation calls attention to the fact that Day Tripper represents a shared perspective on time. This perspective, which revolved around a tour of duty of 365 days and which Kidder describes as “an unusual arrangement in the annals of war,” reveals itself in both the content and narrative structure of the memoirs and oral histories (46). O’Brien, describing his arrival in Vietnam in *If I Die*, introduces the

countdown: “You feel dread. But it is senseless to let it go too far, so you joke: There are only 365 days to go” (69). The tour of duty’s default temporality had important implications for combatants’ understanding of the war. In *Nam*, a veteran explains, “One of the first things you realized when you got to Nam was that you weren’t going to win this war. There was no way we could win doing what we were doing. After the first month, me and everybody else over there said, ‘I’m going to put in my twelve months and then I’m getting the fuck out of here. It’s not worth it’” (Baker 95). The two specific time indicators in this passage show an evolution of opinion—the soldier quickly realizes the futility of the war, and in light of this futility, completing the twelve-month tour of duty becomes his only goal. Herr reinforces this idea, quoting a grunt who told him “‘Far’s I’m concerned, this one’s over the day I get home’” (250).

The tour of duty, on a narrative and linguistic level, provides a defined end to the memoirs and oral histories in the same way that it provides a defined end to the combatant’s time in Vietnam. Structurally, the texts tend to employ a before-and-after chronology that reflects a conventional narrative approach. The pre-war sections of the narratives often describe either why the narrator chose to join the military or how he was drafted. The post-war sections deal with readjustment to a non-combat situation. Within the framework of the 365 days, the war can be broken down into phases based on time in country. Arthur Woodley, Jr., in *Bloods*, comments, “I was still a cherry boy—and that’s what you stay until you get 90 days in country” (Terry 239). The counterpart to a cherry boy is a short-timer, someone with only a few weeks left in country. While Woodley refers to a specific number of days that corresponds to the designation of “cherry boy,” the seemingly structured nature of this language is easily subverted by experience.

Merritt shares a fellow soldier's story of being stuck at the bottom of a canal at night in the middle of a fire fight between his patrol and an enemy patrol. The soldier explains at the beginning of his story, "I was the newest guy out there. Cherry Boy, they called me." After surviving this ordeal, he gains the respect of his patrol. The soldier attests to this respect by commenting, "Nobody ever called me Cherry Boy again" (170-71). The correlation between what the soldier has lived through and the level of respect he is accorded alters the temporal language used to describe him. The transition from a new arrival to a seasoned soldier could happen in a matter of days, and, Caputo's claim that "a lifetime of experience" could be compressed into a single tour of duty speaks to the subversion of what would seem to be a structured 365-day period (4).

Many veterans note that, due to the intensity of the experience, time expands and compresses unexpectedly. One soldier observes, "in a fire fight time is either very long or really short. You lose how much time is involved" (Baker 148). Similarly, Ruth Sidsin, a nurse in Vietnam, explains, "some days you felt you'd lived a lifetime in just a week. Because Vietnam was not John Wayne on the beach of Iwo Jima. It was not ketchup on make-believe wounds" (Marshall 29). The reality of the violence, like the intensity of a fire fight, distorts time. Herr illustrates the same concept with an anecdote about a fellow journalist's interaction with a soldier: "There was a standard question you could use to open a conversation with troops, and Fouhy tried it. 'How long you been in-country?' he asked. The kid half lifted his head; that question could *not* be serious. The weight was really on him, and the words came out slowly. 'All fuckin' day,' he said" (179). The fact that such a question was a classic conversation opener reinforces the importance of the progression of time, but the soldier's response reveals the every-day

distortion of this time. While Day Tripper may have a calendar drawn on his helmet, to have been in Vietnam “all fuckin’ day” is to have been in Vietnam for a lifetime.

In addition to the irregular spatiality and temporality of Vietnam, the nature of the enemy, and especially the difficulty of locating and identifying him, contributed to the unique circumstances of the Vietnam War. The majority of the narratives acknowledge this difficulty and its contribution to the atmosphere in country. One of the speakers in *Nam* explains, “You been out there every God damn night for a month and you ain’t seen the first VC. Where in the hell are they?” (115). The use of the second person lends this statement an instructional tone, and the question, which is rhetorical in the narrative, was once literal. Anderson, in *Everything We Had*, explains the “enormous logical fallacy” of the search-and-destroy operation: “You send a patrol out in order to get it ambushed, in order to mark a target with a smoke rocket from a helicopter so jets can come in and napalm the area. In other words, you have to get ambushed before you can find the enemy” (Santoli 63). Anderson’s methodical description of the search-and-destroy operation reveals his frustration with the conflict between the need to locate the enemy, which can only be done by putting oneself in danger, and the desire to survive. Herr translates this phenomenon into his particular language, alluding to the increasing ineffectiveness of the war: “Either way, it was us looking for him looking for us looking for him, war on a Cracker Jack box, repeated to diminishing returns” (61).

In addition to the general difficulty of locating the enemy, the fact that “there was no reliable criterion by which to distinguish a pretty Vietnamese girl from a deadly enemy; often they were one and the same person,” added to the anxiety of the setting and, in the narratives, plays an important role in soldiers’ understanding of the brutality and

seemingly arbitrary violence of the war (O'Brien, *If I Die* 116). Caputo comments: "The old woman shuffled away, a sack of bones covered by a thin layer of shriveled flesh. The Enemy" (91). Despite his sarcastic tone, there remains a lingering sense of reality to his statement because even the most unlikely suspects became "The Enemy," a proper noun and a cohesive unit against which to fight. Anderson rationalizes the "cruelty and brutality" against the Vietnamese, observing: "It took me awhile in country to realize why it was happening. In this type of fighting it was almost impossible to know who the enemy was at any one time. Children were suspect, women were suspect. Frequently the ARVNs themselves were on two payrolls" (Santoli 59). Anne Auger, in *A Piece of My Heart*, uses the same explanation for her mistrust of "any slant-eye," saying, "we could never be sure *who* the enemy was" (Walker 103). Her choice to maintain the use of the derogatory term "slant-eye" in her story suggests the tenacity of the language and sentiments of the war and speaks to the effects of confronting an unclear enemy.

The futility of the warfare, the distortion of space and time, and the ambiguity of the enemy are integral to the process of justification that motivates many Vietnam War texts. By explaining these conditions, which defined the Vietnam War experience, the authors strive to bridge the gap in understanding between combatants and civilians. These elements, so essential to communicating the reality of Vietnam, affect the language and structure of the texts as much as they do the content, and while it is not easy to isolate the influence of each factor, they come together to create narratives that cannot be grouped indiscriminately with other war stories. Rather, these works stand apart as a body of literature specific to the Vietnam War. Marshall's comments allude to the narrative consequences of these particular conditions:

Vietnam War narratives weren't like the World War II novels I'd devoured in seventh grade, and they weren't like the WWII footage on Walter Cronkite's *The Twentieth Century*. . . . Vietnam War narratives . . . seemed deformed—fragments, images, severed pieces of plot. There was no way to order them . . . After a while, the Vietnam War story became so jumbled and ambiguous it was not a narrative at all. It was a kind of nightmare geometry. And it overwhelmed and undermined everything. There was no organizing principle, no discernible narrative line—instead there was a web of stories. (14)

Marshall's observations not only differentiate between Vietnam War and World War II narratives but also identify certain aspects that set them apart. In referring to the fragmented nature of the narratives and the lack of cohesive plot, she touches on the way in which these texts are fundamentally different from other war stories. The narratives, which lack an "organizing principle," reflect the conditions of the war itself. Caputo comments, "without a front, flanks, or rear, we fought a formless war against a formless enemy who evaporated like the morning jungle mists" (95). Glasser reiterates this idea: "There is no novel in Nam, there is not enough for a plot, nor is there really any character development" (xii). Yet despite assertions that the structure of the war itself omits the possibility for traditional narrative, authors and editors insist on documenting the Vietnam experience, whether through fiction, memoir, or oral history. Glasser himself goes on to write a novel titled *Another War, Another Peace*, and Marshall, setting aside the idea that "there was no way to order" Vietnam War narratives, compiles women's stories into a traditionally-structured oral history. That said, the war's irregularities continue to reveal themselves throughout the texts, creating tension between the structuring impulses of narrative and the reality of the experience.

Most of the memoirs attempt to maintain a chronological organization. Fussell's explanation that narrative strives to create "structure and meaning" suggests the logic behind the impulse to make sense of the Vietnam War through a familiar narrative.

Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, for example, proceeds with standard narrative structure that documents the passage of time. He acknowledges the monotony of what he calls "stationary warfare," noting that "the days were all alike," but the memoir attempts to maintain a cohesive linear plot (59, 60). Not only does he chronicle his time in basic training and his preparatory experience in Japan, he also details the ambushes and periods of waiting throughout his tour of duty. Insistently chronological, *A Rumor of War* works against the demands of the Vietnam War itself, striving to assign structure to an infamously unstructured experience. Despite Caputo's attempts to stick to a traditional linear narrative, he allows certain moments and chapters to give in to the impulses of memory and the confusion of the war. Nonetheless, he fits these less-structured sections into his organization, prefacing them with an explanation: "Because of the sporadic, confused nature of the fighting, it is impossible to give an orderly account of what we did. With one or two exceptions, I have only disjointed recollections of this period, the spring of 1965. The incidents I do remember, I remember vividly; but I can come up with no connecting thread to tie events neatly together" (96). Caputo's language suggests he tried but failed to find a "connecting thread" between memories, but his analysis of the reason behind this failure assigns logic to his "disjointed recollections." Taking into consideration Caputo's tendency to adhere to a relatively linear narrative and the fact that in 1965 the war was just beginning and had not yet deteriorated into the futile struggle of the early 70s, his reference to "sporadic, confused" fighting foreshadows the even more chaotic combat to come.

The chapter continues with a series of memories, narrated in the present tense and set in various locations, moving from the company "tramping down a dirt road" to the

platoon “manning an outpost on a hill” (96, 97). Although Caputo attributes the sixth chapter’s disjointed structure to the “nature of the fighting” itself, directly recognizing the way experience can influence narrative, *A Rumor of War* as a whole resists this fact.

Following his presentation of “disjointed recollections,” he returns to a traditional temporality and spatiality, using a sequential marker and specific geography: “Our next operation took place in a desolate area southwest of Danang” (111). Similar sequences of memories appear later in the text, once again announced by Caputo’s explanation.

Speaking of the month following an attack, he says, “I can recall only snatches of that time; fragmentary scenes flicker on my mental screen like excerpts from a film: There is a shot of the company marching. . . *Click*. The next scene. A crazy, running fire-fight” (312). His cinematic language provides a way to understand the blend of images that constitute his memory and allows for narrative flexibility, but the majority of the narrative continues with a traditional structure. Caputo documents his transfer to a new platoon, completion of a successful mission, the death of several soldiers, and the burning of a Vietnamese village in detail. In his description of the ambush on the village he employs standard military vocabulary, stating, “then D Company, three hundred yards away on our left flank, met heavy resistance” (302). Even in describing the “constant and maddening” noise of the battle, he maintains a linear narrative line: “Then it happened. The platoon exploded. It was a collective emotional detonation of men who had been pushed to the extremity of endurance” (304). He describes this “emotional detonation,” noting that “most of the platoon had no idea of what they were doing,” and then explains that “the platoon snapped out of its madness almost immediately” (304). Caputo expresses guilt for the burning of the village and later for the execution of two

Vietnamese by members of his platoon. The latter occurrence leads to a legal case and a very literal accusation against him, though the charges are later dropped. Caputo returns home shortly after this incident and participates briefly in the anti-war movement. The memoir ends with an epilogue that discusses Caputo's return to Vietnam in 1975 as a correspondent. The symmetry of being among the first troops to arrive in Vietnam and leaving only shortly before the fall of Saigon lends structure to Caputo's narrative.

Myers articulates this structure when he states that both Caputo's and O'Brien's memoirs "successfully take the reader outward on a personal voyage and return homeward with collective news" (76). Within this traditional trajectory and the strict structure of *A Rumor of War*, the more fragmented moments of the text become little more than a literary device and submit to the desire to craft the Vietnam War experience into a recognizable format.

While Caputo only rarely accepts less-structured narrative moments and even then attempts to make sense of them within the space of the memoir as a whole, *Dispatches*' structure relies heavily on anecdotes that are not located in any specific time and that receive no explanation. Herr does follow a geographical and chronological order in the overall arc of the memoir, but the disjointed nature of the text suits his particular tone and the idea of a "post-modern," "rock-and-roll" war that he develops throughout. For example, Herr moves from a description of riding in a chopper under fire to a five-line story told by a Special Forces captain, omitting time indicators and transitions (172). This anecdotal approach suggests that the essence of the war itself can be captured in a single moment. Herr quotes a soldier, who says of a fellow Lurp, "All's you got to do is look in his eyes, that's the whole fucking story right there" (6). Herr's language reflects the

fragmented structure of the memoir: “Time and information, rock and roll, life itself, the information isn’t frozen, you are” (20). Like the anecdotes, the unexplained juxtaposition of phrases suggests a larger meaning, a connection between “time and information” and “rock and roll” that could capture the essence of the war, but the lack of explicit logic and the incomplete sentences resist the desire to fit Vietnam into a familiar structure.

Merritt takes a similar approach in his memoir *Where the Rivers Ran Backwards*, interspersing song lyrics, dialogue, and first-person narration. The memoir follows the expected before-during-after structure but consists of one- to two-page anecdotes. He opens one chapter with a sentence fragment: “More war stories in the dark” (170). This incomplete phrase is characteristic of the language throughout the memoir and contains within it a description of the text, which is indeed a series of war stories. Within the genre of oral history, Baker’s *Nam* parallels Herr’s and Merritt’s memoirs by providing short, decontextualized passages, but he counteracts the novelty of this technique with a strict organization of the oral history as a whole, breaking it into four sections, each with two subsections. *Nam* maintains a linear progression, beginning with “Initiation,” which describes how soldiers became involved in Vietnam, and ending with “The World,” which explores the experience of returning to the United States.

Within the oral histories, individual stories present a variety of structures, some more traditional than others. For example, Jeanne Christie’s account in *A Piece of My Heart* begins with a description of how she “accepted to go to Vietnam” in 1967 with the American Red Cross (69). Christie speaks of her time at each of three bases, Nha Trang, Da Nang, and Phan Rang. She then describes her homecoming and offers an analysis of what she learned from the war, assigning meaning to the experience despite her claim

that, upon her return, “Vietnam was just a figment of my imagination” (82). She explains, “I learned in the war that there wasn’t a right and there wasn’t a wrong” (83). While this lesson contradicts the “worlds of traditional moral action delineated in traditional moral language” mentioned by Fussell, it still insists on translating the incoherence of the war into a defined message (23).

The straightforward structure of Christie’s story differs significantly from Jonathan Polansky’s narrative in *Everything We Had*. This is in part because, in editing his oral history, Santoli selects specific sections of each individual’s account and situates them in the larger structure of the oral history, limiting their potential for continuity. In his excerpt titled “Lang Co Village,” Polansky begins by describing the landscape of the region where he was stationed as a rifleman, emphasizing that it was “a peaceful little village” (51). He tells of falling in love with a Vietnamese woman and teaching English in the village schools, noting, “all of a sudden I didn’t believe the war was going on” (52). This positive portrayal is shattered when Polansky explains that the troops pulled out for three months and returned to find the village had been destroyed by the Viet Cong. Polansky states, “It just couldn’t come together for me” (53). Unlike Christie, who finishes her narrative by translating her experience into a concise statement of meaning, Polansky’s narrative ends with an assertion of his inability to make sense of the situation. Santoli’s choice to place “Lang Co Village,” which begins in the middle of Polansky’s time in Vietnam, before several other Polansky excerpts, obscures the overall narrative arc of his story. A later passage describes how Polansky was drafted and his arrival in country, focusing on the plane flight and beginning, like Christie’s account, with a date. This section suggests that Santoli’s editing purposefully disrupts the

coherent structure of the original narratives. While “Lang Co Village” speaks to the confusion of certain moments in the war, the other excerpt reveals the way Polansky has organized the experience as a whole.

Both Christie and Polansky provide traditional introductions to their narratives, but Robert Mountain, in *Bloods*, opens with a more immediate moment: “‘Burns! Burns!’ I’m calling out to tell him that I’m hit. ‘Burns, I’m hit. Oh, God I’m hit.’ But Burns, he’s getting into the bunker” (171). The use of dialogue and the present tense suggest a vivid memory rather than a structured narrative. Mountain attempts to contextualize the story, stating, “I guess it was three in the morning, December 23. The round came in, messed me up.” Yet the combination of uncertainty—“I guess”—and specificity—“three in the morning, December 23”—undermines this attempted clarification (172). Mountain continues to blend past and present tense and repeat his friend’s name: “Burns is standing there, and Burns turned to walk away. I’m calling, ‘Burns. Oh, Burns’” (172). The inconsistency of the language and the lack of context reflect the chaos of the situation, and the intensity of the memory. Mountain’s story begins to take a more traditional form after his opening, when he explains why he volunteered for the Army and describes his arrival in country. The combination of less-structured recollections and standard narrative suggests that while certain parts of the war resist organization, people tend to tell cohesive, chronological narratives.

VI. Conclusion

In some cases “you can’t even tell a true war story. Sometimes it’s just beyond telling,” O’Brien states in *The Things They Carried* (68). His reference to the difficulty of communicating war stories speaks to the unique challenges of narrative construction

that define these narratives. Although war stories include elements of basic human experience found in all stories, the struggle to narrate an unfamiliar situation and to bridge the experience gap between soldiers and civilians sets them apart from other types of stories. This struggle is especially apparent in Vietnam War texts, which attempt to explain the conditions of an unconventional war. When Becky Pietz, speaking about the movie *Apocalypse Now*, comments, “somebody told me it wasn’t really a movie about Vietnam, that it was just another war story,” she draws a distinction between war stories in general and Vietnam War stories (107). Her comment, however, contradicts director Francis Ford Coppola’s well-known claim at the Cannes Film Festival in 1979 that “*Apocalypse Now* is Vietnam.” Coppola’s argument that the intensity and chaos of the film capture the essence of the war corresponds to Herr’s representation of Vietnam in *Dispatches*. For example, the scene in which the helicopters play Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” during an air strike echoes Herr’s rock-and-roll mythology as he imagines “cassette rock and roll in one ear and door-gun fire in the other, fuel, heat, vitality and death” (9). While both Herr and Coppola define the Vietnam War experience through its extremes, Pietz is not alone in her rejection of *Apocalypse Now*’s depiction of the war. Reginald Edwards, in *Bloods*, responds directly to the Wagner scene, saying, “the helicopter attack on the village? Fuckin’ ridiculous. You couldn’t hear music comin’ out of a helicopter. And attacking a beach in helicopters was just out of the question. The planes and the napalm would go in first. Then, the helicopters would have eased in after the fact” (13-14). Edwards’ focus on the logistics of the scene suggests an alternative approach to processing the war, structuring the experience through detail. But while each individual conceptualizes the war differently, they all point to its exceptional nature.

Edwards' observation that "the napalm would go in first" is ultimately no less particular to Vietnam than *Apocalypse Now*.

From "the worst colonel stories" to "close call" stories to "combat stories," the memoirs and oral histories of the Vietnam War announce themselves not as tools to educate but forums for storytelling (Herr 204, Wolff 93, Baker 92). The telling of war stories is, however, its own form of education. Through a focus on the key aspects that defined the Vietnam War, from the mysticism of the jungle to the "logical fallacy" (Santoli 63) of search-and-destroy patrols to the always-present but never-visible enemy, the authors and editors of these texts strive to communicate the particular conditions of the war. The texts allude to the American public's accusation of veterans and respond by offering a series of confessions, but both an awareness of the accusations and the resulting confessions appear only sporadically throughout the narratives. Rather than dwell on these aspects, the narratives engage directly in a process of explanation and justification. The texts illustrate the exceptional circumstances of the war not only in their content but also in their language and structure. The "nightmare geometry" of the works—the fragmented structure, the spatial inconsistency, and the temporal chaos—underscores the nature of the war and attempts to exemplify for the civilian reader that which defies explanation (Marshall 14).

Texts like *Dispatches* and *Nam* embrace the disjointed nature of the experience by providing a series of unconnected stories, and even the most traditional narratives, such as Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, allow for moments of fragmented memory that capture the particular essence of the Vietnam War. Yet, "so natural is the impulse to narrate," and so fundamental to narration the process of "fashioning human experience into a form

assimilable to structures of meaning,” that the inherent push towards structure overrides the war’s incoherence in these works (Olney 1). Despite the fact that the Vietnam War does not lend itself to the configurations of a traditional narrative, most authors inevitably accord some type of organization to the texts, revealing narrative’s role as a tool to make sense of even the most chaotic realities. Coppola’s decision to base *Apocalypse Now* on Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, a literary classic, reveals the need to employ pre-existing narratives and familiar structures even in the most unique depictions. Vietnam War literature, like film, struggles to communicate an exceptionally disorganized situation, but “narrative ‘ceaselessly substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of the events recounted’” (Olney 2). In narrating their experiences in Vietnam, authors choose to impose structure on their experiences, reformulating lived realities into war stories. While the irregular conditions of the Vietnam War call for fractured, incoherent narrative, the fundamental structural impulses of narrative fail to allow for this. The tension between these two sets of demands suggests that the authors’ desire to communicate the chaos of the Vietnam War experience cannot be entirely fulfilled through memoir and oral history. All the same, these texts, when read in dialogue with one another, are a valuable attempt to educate a public that tends to judge without knowing and accuse without understanding. In essence, the authors and editors of these Vietnam War narratives strive to rewrite Herr’s “one-pointed” story: “‘Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back’” (6). And he told all that he possibly could.

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