

# Vietnam Generation

---

Volume 1

Number 3 *Gender and the War: Men, Women and Vietnam*

Article 11

---

10-1989

## Sexist Subscript in Vietnam Narratives

Nancy Anisfield

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Anisfield, Nancy (1989) "Sexist Subscript in Vietnam Narratives," *Vietnam Generation*: Vol. 1 : No. 3 , Article 11.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol1/iss3/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vietnam Generation by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [careyc@lasalle.edu](mailto:careyc@lasalle.edu).

# SEXIST SUBSCRIPT IN VIETNAM NARRATIVES

## NANCY ANISFIELD

Doc says, "Sometime a dude got plenty of brains for dealin on dinks, but he loses his powers when applying it to pussy."<sup>1</sup> Although this particular Doc appears in John DeVecchio's *The Thirteenth Valley*, many Docs and many grunts appearing in Vietnam war narratives profess similar ideas through similar language. The idea—that the savvy which ensures success in combat doesn't ensure success with women—is one worth contemplation, but the language chosen to express it demands immediate attention. The in-country jargon of "dinks," "dudes," and "dealin" is characteristic of the Vietnam war infantry experience. The term "pussy" is characteristic of the sexist language used in America before, during and after the Vietnam war.

Many Vietnam war novels and personal narratives contain glossaries, a phenomenon previously peculiar to science fiction texts. These glossaries are indicative of the amount of attention paid to the language and lexicon of that war. George Cornell terms this speech "slanguage" and describes it as an "urgent" language, one through which the American troops took out some of their frustrations and sense of futility. According to Cornell, the military slang, pidgeon French and Vietnamese, drug lingo, acronyms, in-country terminology, and pervasive obscenity "constituted a response to the control and domination of the military machine."<sup>2</sup> There is some truth to this claim, but in the grunts' use of language, the primary system for counterbalancing control and domination is one operating on the basis of gender discrimination, which is neither new nor unique to the Vietnam war.

In his study of the "Paradoxical Paradigm of Nomenclature," Owen W. Gilman, Jr. refers to "the radical newness of language found swirling in the fiction of Vietnam."<sup>3</sup> He discusses this nomenclature in terms of coinage and innovation; however, there is little actual coinage in the language of this war. Words like "gookhoppers" or "short-timers" are the result of compounding. "Fragging" and "souvenired" were created by functional shift. Imitation and blending generated many new words, but outright coinage—making new words out of unrelated, meaningless elements—is virtually nonexistent. Instead, what sets this lexicon apart from others is its size and the constancy with which it appears in the writings about the war. Hence, the language found in Vietnam war narratives may contain characteristic words and word usage that readers would not uniformly find in any other group of narratives, yet that language is not radically new.

Glancing beyond the vocabulary itself will show even more clearly that the language of Vietnam war narratives is not unique. It does

not even constitute its own dialectal community. Whereas the vocabulary may differ from that found back in *The World*, pronunciation and grammar are not consistently different. In-country, for example, midwestern accents remained midwestern and the grammatical structures found in Black English were left intact. Along with these linguistic consistencies, the androcentric gender discrimination which has a firm grasp on Americans' word choice and usage also persists in the language of the Vietnam war and its narratives. Whether unconscious of sexist language, or conscious of it but striving to "tell it like it was," both male and female writers of Vietnam war narratives cannot claim that their language exposes the uniqueness of the Vietnam experience when it rests on the same sexist constructs as language that preceded the war.

Before examining the sexist language inherent in the Vietnam war narratives, it is necessary to establish the danger of such a mode of expression. Though the Sapir-Whorf "linguistic relativity hypothesis"<sup>4</sup> (attesting that a particular language imposes a particular perception of reality upon its speaker) is no longer accepted *carte blanche*, it is generally agreed that the language an individual speaks will facilitate particular ways of thinking. Anthropologist Peter Woolfson writes:

Why are habitual patterns of expression so important? We all have approximately the same set of physical organs for perceiving reality....Reality should be the same for us all. Our nervous systems, however, are being bombarded by a continual flow of sensations of different kinds, intensities, and durations. It is obvious that all of these sensations do not reach our consciousness; some kind of filtering system reduces them to manageable proportions. The Whorfian hypothesis suggests that the filtering system is one's language. Our language, in effect, provides us with a special pair of glasses that heightens certain perceptions and dims others.<sup>5</sup>

If, in using a particular mode of expression, individuals filter their reality through a lens which discriminates against one sex or stereotypes gender roles, assumptions of sexual inequality will be reinforced. Gender-biased language, then, broadly influences cultural behavior, contribution, and social control.<sup>6</sup>

In boot camp, where young men and women are ostensibly stripped of their individual identities and retrained into a collective identity, language is saturated with words whose connotation and denotation are derogatory towards women. Applying these words to the new male recruits is designed to shame them into attaining a stronger sense of masculine values. Jacqueline E. Lawson refers to this language as "emasculating rhetoric" and notes that "boot camp served as a personal test of individual mettle, a proving ground for one's adolescent machismo."<sup>7</sup>

# SEXIST SUBSCRIPT 111

The first thirty pages of Gustav Hasford's *The Short Timers* focuses on Marine Corps basic training on Parris Island. In this section, the nine referrals to the troops as "ladies" occur sprinkled among other addresses such as "amphibian shit," "maggots," and "scumbags," setting them all on equal ground, equating the female identity with the subhuman.

On Hasford's Parris Island, as in other boot camps, weapons are quickly given female names. After singing "I don't want no teen-aged queen; all I want is my M-14," the drill sergeant tells his new recruits to name their rifles:

This is the only pussy you people are going to get. Your days of finger-banging ol' Mary Jane Rottencrotch through her pretty pink panties are over. You're married to *this* piece, this weapon of iron and wood, and you will be faithful.<sup>8</sup>

Women are discussed only in sexual terms, and fidelity to a military tool is given status over any association with women. This, however, is not the full extent to which female objectification is carried in this instance. When trainee Leonard Pratt prepares to murder Sergeant Gerheim, he first field strips his rifle, whose name is Charlene, saying, "This is the first time I've ever seen her naked." Protagonist Joker thinks about having sex with his girlfriend back home while Leonard "inserts the metal magazine into his weapon, into Charlene."<sup>9</sup> This association between women (passive sexual objects) and weapons is reinforced by the dual use of the word "piece" to refer to male-female sexual relations, as in "knock off a piece for me,"<sup>10</sup> and to refer to a gun, as when Joker hears incoming rounds and tells Rafter Man to "Get your piece."<sup>11</sup> In both cases, the man masters the object—the soldier is trained to use his instrument with authority, putting him not only in control, but also in a position of power.

In the language of the Vietnam war narratives, the majority of references to sexual intercourse are expressed in terms of objectification, dominance or abuse. Joker wants to "slip his tube steak" into Cowboy's sister, and when he thinks about Vanessa he thinks of "fucking her eyes out."<sup>12</sup> Animal Mother almost "gets...some eatin' pussy," and judges a girl's suitability as a sexual partner with the aphorism: "If she's old enough to bleed she's old enough to butcher." In addition, the officer who reprimands Animal Mother for attempting to rape a Vietnamese girl is considered a "poge" (a weak, lazy rear echelon soldier—not particularly masculine).<sup>13</sup>

Dominance and abuse rest more easily on the speaker's conscience if they follow objectification and distancing. Women are usually identified by men in metonymical and synecdochic terms, as "blondes," "cunts," "a set of tits," or "a piece of ass." Even the women in Elizabeth Ann Scarborough's *The Healer's War* refer to themselves as "round eyes."<sup>14</sup> Derogatory terms proliferate in William Pelfrey's *The Big V*, where

## 112 VIETNAM GENERATION

protagonist Henry Winsted and his friends never use the word “woman” and only say “girl” three or four times in the entire novel. The character Fi Bait’s pen-pal is exclusively referred to as “the French bitch,” and the Vietnamese women are never called anything other than “gook bitches” or “gook whores.” Other words used to denote women include “fuck,” “babe,” “broad,” “pig,” and “pussy.” Conversely, consistent use of the words “man,” “officer,” “troop,” and “GI” create an asymmetrical labeling pattern, one that goes beyond gender marking into female gender derogation. What is additionally revealing is that the night before a major operation, when the members of Henry’s squad are particularly nervous and fearful, their usual teasing about the “French bitch” turns “suddenly obscene.” At this point their habitual verbal patterns no longer offer solace in the face of forces over which they have absolutely no control.<sup>15</sup>

Male Marines often think of themselves as brothers and refer to each other by that name. There are “man-to-man friendships” and respect for other male grunts, even North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. On the other hand, the “sister services” are characterized in several novels as having relationships based on rivalry, conflict, and stealing.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the ultimate gesture of friendship in many novels appears in the form of a male humorously offering his sister or mother as a sexual object. The drill instructor in *The Short-Timers* tells Joker, “I like you. You can come over to my house and fuck my sister,” and Joker’s ongoing negotiation with Cowboy deals with what Cowboy will take in trade from Joker for Cowboy’s sister.<sup>17</sup> In this way, female familial bonds are subverted for non-familial male relationships.

The ubiquitous use of the pseudogeneric masculine pronoun and false generic “man” warrants little discussion other than to note that even the novels that probe the philosophies of conflict remain bound by sexist constructs. For example, in *The Thirteenth Valley*, variations on “man” range from “Mangod” to “pre-men men” to “mankind” to a reference to the “Creator” as “He.” Similarly, Kitty McCulley, in *The Healer’s War*, uses the pronoun “he” in generic reference to patients at the same time that she is preoccupied with one particular case—a Vietnamese girl.<sup>18</sup> Lt. Brooks, a character in DeVecchio’s novel, sincerely ponders the causes and solutions to conflict in a long thesis on human nature. He writes about giving “the man-in-the-street, a new freedom to participate in the flow of history, in the direction of his nation’s policies, in the humanity of mankind.” Ironically, he also notes the importance of language in influencing interpersonal and international conflict, but he again uses the discriminatory—and therefore conflict generating—pronominal form: “Let us develop a new mode of thinking which is more closely tied to reality than our present mode. A mode where every man is independent because his language allows him alternatives.”<sup>19</sup> Linguists Frank and Treichler point out that such “so-called generics...frequently and inaccurately imply a white male norm; and that satisfactory stylistic alternatives, many within the prescriptive

tradition, are increasingly plentiful.”<sup>20</sup> Finding lexical or syntactical alternatives seems particularly significant when the narrative voice switches from informal to formal, as in the device of Brooks’ thesis, and when issues central to conflict are being examined.

In-country, in combat, women are associated with weakness, and female identifiers are used to condemn cowardice. The word “cherry,” used to signify a new soldier who hasn’t experienced combat, picks up on the negative charge of the slang term for virgin. In *The Short-Timers*, Rafter Man hugs his cameras as if they are babies and his inexperience is characterized by the fact that he writes a letter to his mother. Cowboy insults Joker’s prowess as a soldier by saying, “the Crotch [Marine Corps] ought to fly your mom over here so that she can go into the bush with you.”<sup>21</sup> Joker complains about the ease of his job in the rear, noting, “A high-school girl” could do it, and the South Vietnamese soldiers are referred to in derogatory feminizing terms: “An Arvin infantry platoon is about as lethal as a garden club of old ladies throwing marshmallows.”<sup>22</sup>

If women are associated with inexperience and cowardice, experience and bravery are described in hyper-masculine terms. When *The Big V*’s Henry Winsted sets a battalion record for kills on his second day in the bush, Sergeant Kell says, “Feels like you’re nine feet tall with a hard-on, don’t it Henry boy?” This is a relief to Winsted, no doubt, since he was called a “pussy” the day before when he became exhausted and frustrated on his first jungle patrol.<sup>23</sup> Tracing such usage, Mark Gerzon writes:

To lose one’s “reputation as a man among men” means to be identified as a coward or, more explicitly, as a woman....[T]o become the Soldier, the real leader for whom the armed services are so desperately advertising, the boy must reject his mother’s voice (“Don’t hit, Johnny!”), reject his (woman) teacher’s voice (“Stop that fighting, boys!”) reject his (effeminate) minister’s voice (“Thou shalt not kill!), and identify with that all-male voice of the drill sergeant (“Kill! Kill! Kill!”)....But what exactly does the epithet “woman” signify? When the Soldier blurts it out venomously, it means that he is without fear, while women are fear-ridden: that he is strong, while women are weak; that he has courage, while women are cowards.<sup>24</sup>

The American male soldier’s sense of distance from and superiority over the Vietnamese is often acknowledged, but their sense of superiority over all women (as expressed in their language) is taken as a given in the military arena. Portraying females as passive and ineffectual serves the purpose of enhancing an aggressive, soldierly mindset or evoking feelings of camaraderie. This image is carried off the battlefield when, after the war, soldiers’ stories reinforce the discriminatory pattern of gender differentiation.

# 114 VIETNAM GENERATION

The overriding irony in the use of sexist language by soldiers is that it gives them an illusion of control when, in fact, the opposite is true. Individuals responding to military domination and the war's arbitrary forces may feel empowered by language biased in their favor, but, as Gerzon concludes in his discussion of the masculine warrior image, "our language is misleading. The Soldier is not in control. On the contrary, he is controlled by his conditioning."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, many writers of Vietnam narratives precondition their representations of the war not only by employing sexist constructs, but perhaps also by relying too heavily on language and lexicon to distinguish Vietnam from other wars. Readers of the war's literature should keep a keen eye on the subtleties of its language and should not underestimate the importance of deeper linguistic characteristics. If America's perception of the war and its participants remains filtered through the same lens as wars preceding Vietnam no accurate image can be attained, no clear understanding achieved.

<sup>1</sup> DelVecchio, John. *The Thirteenth Valley* (New York: Bantam) 1982: 103.

<sup>2</sup> Cornell, George. "GI Slang in Vietnam," *Journal of American Culture* (1981 Summer): 196.

<sup>3</sup> Gilman, Owen W. Jr. "Paradoxical Paradigm of Nomenclature," in William Searle, ed., *Search and Clear* (Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press) 1988: 72.

<sup>4</sup> Woolfson, Peter. "Language, Thought, and Culture," in V. Clark, et al, eds., *Language* (New York: St. Martins) 1981: 45.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*: 46.

<sup>6</sup> See Frank, Francine Wattman, and Paula A. Treichler. *Language, Gender, and Professional Writing* (New York: MLA) 1989: 3-25; 123-126.

<sup>7</sup> Lawson, Jacqueline E. "Old Kids': The Adolescent Experience in the Non-Fiction Narratives of the Vietnam War," in William Searle, ed., *Search and Clear*: 29.

<sup>8</sup> Hasford, Gustav. *The Short-Timers* (New York: Bantam) 1979: 12, 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*: 27.

<sup>10</sup> Pelfrey, William. *The Big V* (New York: Avon) 1972: 129.

<sup>11</sup> Hasford: 46.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*: 27.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*: 91-92.

<sup>14</sup> Scarborough, Elizabeth Ann. *The Healer's War* (New York: Doubleday) 1988: 28.

<sup>15</sup> Pelfrey: 95.

<sup>16</sup> DelVecchio: 469; Pelfrey: 116.

<sup>17</sup> Hasford: 4, 20, 40, 127.

<sup>18</sup> Scarborough: 25.

<sup>19</sup> DelVecchio: 560.

<sup>20</sup> Frank and Treichler: 142.

<sup>21</sup> Hasford: 42.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*: 49.

<sup>23</sup> Pelfrey: 34, 42.

<sup>24</sup> Gerzon, Mark. "The Soldier," in Reese Williams, ed., *Unwinding the Vietnam War* (Seattle: Real Comet Press) 1987: 149-150.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*: 153.