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BACK AGAINST THE WALL: ANTI-FEMINIST BACKLASH IN VIETNAM WAR LITERATURE

LORRIE SMITH

While America's current fascination with the Vietnam war may stem partly from an earnest desire to come to terms with its effects, more pernicious cultural forces are at work as well. Most popular treatments of the war—for all their claims to “tell it like it was”—reveal more about the cultural and political climate of the 1980s than about the war itself. In a recent overview of movies and television shows about the Vietnam war, John Demeter suggests that in current depictions of the war, “the lessons remain buried, insights are narrowed,” and there is “a retreat from history to a ‘me-decade’ personalizing of the Vietnam experience.” We must therefore recognize that “what is hidden by the films is almost as striking as what is revealed.”¹ Most written and mass media versions of the Vietnam war repress the realities of racism within American ranks and towards the Vietnamese, objectify the Vietnamese as faceless “gooks,” omit the antiwar movement, and rationalize American atrocities. The current re-scripting of history hides those realities by foregrounding the individual (white) soldier's *angst* and setting the war in a political vacuum that ultimately inhibits a full understanding of the complicated events surrounding US intervention in Indochina. The illusion of political neutrality in most works about the war in fact masks agendas driven by the conservative politics of the eighties.

What is *not* hidden—in fact, what seems so natural in stories of war that it usually escapes notice—is the misogyny which is a mainstay of popular Vietnam war literature and film. The very *visibility* of oppression of women, both American and Vietnamese, suggests that reading and viewing consumers of the eighties not only permit but expect it.² In the wake of the women's movement, an atmosphere of social and political backlash against women prevails. Its most obvious manifestations include the increasing incidence of rape, the desiccation of abortion rights, the feminization of poverty, the absence of child care support for working women, and the weakening of affirmative action and anti-discrimination legislation. Against this backdrop, the Vietnam war is being reconstructed as a site where white American manhood—figuratively as well as literally wounded during the war and assaulted by the women's movement for twenty years—can reassert its dominance in the social hierarchy. Using Vietnam as the stage and the veteran as the main character, popular discourse on the war is desperately attempting to reclaim masculine power.³ Although the drama is played out in

personal terms, it is embedded in a political power struggle within the culture at large. At the heart of much Vietnam War literature is fear that the whole system of patriarchy which gives men power and gives war validity has been weakened (as indeed it has) by a two-headed monster: feminism and defeat in Vietnam. Yet few writers who reach popular audiences use these fears to question the premises and values of patriarchy itself; on the contrary, their work reinforces those premises and values with a vengeance.

Feminist scholars have begun to mine the field of Vietnam literature (blowing up as well as digging) for its insidious messages about gender roles and relations in post-war America. In this endeavor, it is important to re-historicize and re-politicize the war in relation to the women's movement. As Demeter puts it, "Historical veracity, rendered by male veterans...takes as much direction from contemporary attempts to neutralize the challenge of a social movement that questioned not only women's roles but the origins of machismo-driven policy as well."⁴ Indeed, many male writers deliberately or unconsciously link the Vietnam war and feminism (or female power and autonomy) in ways that reveal anxieties which operated during the war and which continue to influence constructions of gender. Because of their mass appeal, these representations not only reflect but feed the anti-feminist backlash of the eighties.⁵

REVISIONS

Two recent commentaries on the war, from opposite ends of the political spectrum, make explicit connections between the Vietnam war and the women's movement and articulate their historical observations in terms of gender tensions in the eighties. Their phallogentric attempts not only to neutralize but actually to appropriate feminism mirror the political subtexts of popular film and literature of the war. In his study of the coming of age of the Vietnam Generation, *Touched by Fire*, John Wheeler argues for the interconnectedness of all the social movements of the sixties. However, his efforts to reinstate the Vietnam veteran as a masculine hero and to invest the war with patriotic meaning in a postfeminist world results in strained logic. In his chapter "Separations: Woman from Man," Wheeler claims that "the Vietnam war was the primary catalyst of the upheaval of the sixties." He then constructs a shaky syllogism which he never bothers to prove, even emphasizing his point in italics: "...the Vietnam War was the proximate cause of women's equality in America. This is a redemptive aspect of the war. If the war had been over quickly and been won, the women's protest movement would not have flourished. *The protracted, tangled war formed the great land bridge in American woman's Exodus.*"⁶ Taking a typical conservative line on the war, Wheeler had previously castigated the protest movement (which he views as one symptom of the "feminization" of American culture during the Sixties) for holding back the military and extending

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the war; he then turns the war into a “redemptive” force, the cause and impetus of feminism. Wheeler’s assumptions—that “women’s equality” has been achieved and that the war furthered that achievement—are never proven. In the absence of reason, he appeals to emotion. Lest we take his gift for granted, he underscores its cost: “There is a certain sense in which the women’s movement sped to fulfillment across the backs of the American men in Vietnam. But for our presence in battle, their protest would have died.”⁷

Intellectual and savvy, Wheeler does not outright recuperate the old roles as, for instance, the Rambo films, *Platoon*, and many novels and memoirs attempt to do, nor does he deny the validity of feminism. Rather, he tries to coopt “liberated” women into a new alliance defined in his own terms and framed in the language of Ollie North patriotism and Harvard Business School organizational behavior theory: “The most severe anger and denial among women regarding these issues is aroused by the idea that the Vietnam veteran has been a proximate instrument of the fulfillment of their dreams. This may be misinterpreted. My hypothesis does not diminish the resourcefulness of women leaders. The important result is the signal creativity of America in fashioning a true partnership between woman and man.”⁸ Wheeler does not offer evidence for the equality of men and women except, perhaps, within his professional class. (His wife is an Episcopal minister and half of his classmates at Yale Law School were women.) The ideal dialogue he imagines would “generate a healthy readjustment of societal concepts about masculinity and femininity.”⁹ Healthy for whom? Readjusted to what?

It is tempting to say that such patronizing sophistry is a product of New Right moralism, Republican conservatism, or Hollywood sensationalism (all three conveniently embodied by Ronald Reagan, who told us in the eighties we could finally be proud of our Vietnam war and maybe even try it again in Central America). But in fact, the backlash against women is appearing in even the most traditionally enlightened liberal arenas. Robert Bly, a poet active in the antiwar movement and now in what he calls the men’s movement, claims “women came out of the sixties and seventies with considerable confidence in their values, but men lack this clarity and belief.” This “erosion,” he asserts in aptly military language, is caused by “the attacks launched against men by the separatist part of the women’s movement and the Vietnam War.”¹⁰ Bly dispatches feminism in a paragraph which retells an allegory about “the transformation” of the “ugly dragon man called the Lindworm” and his “bride”:

After he has removed all seven skins, he lies helpless and white on the floor. She then whips him with whips dipped in lye, then washes him in milk, and finally lies down in the bed and holds him a few minutes before falling asleep. Connie Martin, the storyteller, has suggested that women in the seventies got the whipping part down well, but did not wash the man or hold him. They were too tired after the whipping to do the last two steps.¹¹

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Without commentary and without apparent awareness of the irony of his whipping metaphor (perhaps the quintessential symbol of racist and sadomasochistic violence), Bly then shifts suddenly to his main subject: "the Vietnam War and its influence on men's confidence." The bulk of his essay actually reminisces about his own "good war" and decries the betrayal of younger men sent by their elders to an immoral, unwinnable war in Indochina. One senses in Bly's lament, as in Wheeler's, nostalgia for a simpler time when fathers could teach their sons the noble military arts and "clarity and belief" resided in traditional identities: male warriors and female nurturers.

By mentioning the women's movement with a passing jibe and directing his rancor at the corrupt old men willing to have young men "pay any price" in Vietnam, Bly evades the stickier, more frightening question of how feminism contributed to a crisis of masculinity. He conveniently (and with implicit homophobia) targets supposedly hostile separatists as destructive for all men, but implies that feminism itself has fostered "considerable confidence" for all women. Both claims are inflated, and, as anyone familiar with the evolution of the women's movement knows, such a distinction is misleading and simplistic. Like Wheeler's, Bly's "argument" begs more questions than it answers: Are male and female values essentially and necessarily different? Are the differences based in biology or culture? Precisely which "truly masculine values" do men lament losing and which "female values" do women supposedly feel confident about? Exactly how do feminist separatists launch their attack on men and how do they relate to the movement at large? What precisely have women gained since the sixties? Both Wheeler, from the Right, and Bly, from the Left, attempt to tame the women's movement and inscribe it within their own agendas—reappropriating male power by rewriting history.

In the more coded ideology of literature and film, writers have used a variety of strategies for suppressing (often punishing) the feminine and elevating (often glorifying) the masculine; outright exclusion, derogatory slurs and stereotypes, scenes of violent rage and aggression. The women's movement is sometimes a clear target, sometimes a shadow hidden by the foregrounded drama of men at war. For some writers, the war is perceived as a refuge from a world where women were attacking patriarchal values and social structures, often in the context of the antiwar movement (which did, as Wheeler points out, have moral and ideological connections with the women's movement). Other writers blame women or the women's movement for the suffering men endured in Vietnam and reclaim their "clarity and belief" within a reconstructed system of patriarchal values and identities. The Vietnam war turns out to be the ideal screen on which to project anxiety about the power and position of white American manhood in the eighties.

RETREAT

Paradoxically, the war is often portrayed simultaneously as a site of unspeakable horror and the source of orgasmic thrill, a world of hurt and a welcome refuge from a domestic front where men and women were engaged in their own painful battles. This retreat is facilitated, of course, by the fact that war is traditionally perceived (and portrayed) as an all-male domain. In *Platoon*, Oliver Stone presents Chris' apotheosis as a miracle comparable to the immaculate conception: he is "born of two fathers" after his manly baptism by fire. As Susan Jeffords points out, this is not an androgynous synthesis of masculine (Barnes) and feminine (Elias), but an appropriation of the feminine into the patriarchal codes Chris reproduces.¹² In the male sanctum of war, women aren't even necessary for procreation. Besides, there will always be enough "gook" women around to take care of the more pressing need for sex, to judge by the ubiquity of racist violence and rape in the literature and memoirs of the war. Though "round-eyed" women remain the fantasy objects of choice, story after story also expresses outright nostalgia for a world without bra-burning libbers, peacenik coeds, and deceiving girlfriends. (That Jane Fonda, sexpot of *Barbarella* fame, actually *followed* men to the war zone made her "treason" that much harder to take.) The difficulty so many veterans had readjusting to life at home must be attributed at least in part to the changes wrought by the women's movement while these men were in Vietnam.

In a more subtle but no less revealing manner, Philip Caputo narrates what amounts to the archetypal story of retreat, at least for those who willingly enlisted to go to war. Describing himself as "a restless boy caught between suburban boredom and rural desolation,"¹³ his fantasy escape pits wilderness (where heroes are made) against civilization (where men are domesticated): "I would dream of that savage, heroic time and wish I had lived then, before America became a land of salesmen and shopping centers. That is what I wanted, to find in a commonplace world a chance to live heroically. Having known nothing but security, comfort, and peace, I hungered for danger, challenges, and violence."¹⁴ In the early sixties, the Vietnam war offered just such an escape for young men. Caputo's parents, having worked hard to give their son the suburban comforts which caused his malaise (and perhaps remembering their own war), couldn't understand his desires: "Their vision of my future did not include uniforms and drums, but consisted of my finding a respectable job after school, marrying a respectable girl, and then settling down in a respectable suburb."¹⁵

Though he never explicitly ties his prewar *ennui* or his postwar rage to the women's movement, Caputo's narrative patterns and images link him to a long tradition in American literature in which male initiation takes place beyond the binding, civilizing influences of women. Ahab heads for sea, Huck Finn heads for Indian territory, and baby-boomers head for the quagmire. In a major break from the tradition,

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however, Caputo's chronicle of war leaves him at the end with plenty of "danger, challenges, and violence," but without the counterbalancing heroism and glory his culture had promised. Neither respectable nor heroic, Caputo is left with a confused sense of what it means to be a man in postwar America. His sense of betrayal turns out to be just as emblematic as his initial retreat.

Redoubt

The crisis in male confidence Robert Bly describes does indeed find frequent expression in literature and film of the Vietnam war. The sense of betrayal by older men is a pervasive theme, and loss of masculine power is often tied metonymically to the impotence and frustration American men felt in a guerrilla war they had no chance of winning. Losing the war, despite an unprecedented show of military might, dealt a severe blow to the military's collective male ego as well as to the youthful illusions of the men who fought. In addition, beneath much of the rage and macho posturing which runs through the war's literature lies deep anxiety about masculinity in an age when women have asserted power in previously male-dominated realms. Both the war and the women's movement gave the lie to our culture's most fundamental assumptions about the omnipotence of the American male and, by extension, the American military. Unfortunately, many writers direct their anger and resentment towards American and Vietnamese women. The more men suffer, it seems, the more women are to blame.

Consider, for instance, the work of Steve Mason, praised by both Caputo and Oliver Stone, and dubbed "Poet Laureate of the Vietnam Veterans of America." Hawking his work on the veterans' memorial circuit and sounding like a cross between Chuck Norris and Rod McKuen, Mason's lugubrious ramblings have little to offer the serious reader. His work is significant, however, because as a slick commodity of popular sentiment, it gives expression to some of our culture's more inchoate anxieties about men, women, and war. The following passage explicitly links the pain of losing a war and the pain of losing power to strong women:

All American men my age
suffered the bad luck and ill-timing
of drawing Vietnam and women's lib
in the same ten years!

Sort of like getting hit by a truck
the same day they told you
about the stomach cancer.¹⁶

Evidently, we are meant to smile wryly in sympathy, but the female reader (excluded from most war texts and assaulted by many) can only wonder if she is the truck or the tumor. Like Bly and Wheeler, Mason

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generalizes about "all American men," stating his assumptions as if they were historical fact rather than subjective feelings.

Mason's brand of misogyny is almost a cartoon. More troubling are the many writers who lay claim to serious artistic vision. Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story* and Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" (originally published in the glossy men's magazine, *Esquire*) contain scenes of graphic atrocity committed by men as payback for American losses. In each case, the atrocity takes form as hostility against women. As with much of the "realistic" literature of the war which depicts brutality without providing a clear framework for judging it, the reader is not sure how to take these scenes. On the one hand, these writers tell us, war is hell, men become brutes, normal rules are suspended. On the other hand (the hand that holds the pen/penis), something beyond verisimilitude is served by a scene such as the bone-chilling gang-rape in *Paco's Story* or the slow torture of a helpless water buffalo (later dumped, symbolically, into a well) in Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story." The line between titillation and condemnation is thin, indeed. The very argot of war, as many have pointed out, suggests that military atrocity is simply an egregious expression of the misogyny and violence which define patriarchal culture. Long before the rape scene in *Paco's Story*, the grunts are described as "busting jungle and busting cherries...humping and *hauling ass* all the way."¹⁷ Yet male writers appropriate this language with no apparent awareness or critique of the cultural assumptions which give it meaning.

Paco's extended flashback of the horrific rape scene is triggered by his frustration at having to listen to Cathy, "the prick tease from down the hall," taunt him by "honey-fucking the everlasting daylights out of some guy...teasing that gimp."¹⁸ The omniscient, voyeuristic ghost narrator takes the reader back and forth from Cathy's room to Paco's room. The narrator builds sympathy for Paco, using imagery reminiscent of Bly's whipped Lindworm and sadistic woman, but his appeal clearly excludes the female reader:

By this time Paco's cock is iron hard and feels as big as a Coke bottle. And he's just a man like the rest of us, James, who wants to fuck away all that pain and redeem his body. By fucking he wants to ameliorate the stinging ache of those dozens and dozens of swirled-up and curled-round purple scars, looking like so many sleeping snakes and piles of ruined coins. He wants to discover a livable peace...¹⁹

This fantasy of redemptive, nurturing sex is undercut by the abrupt intrusion of memory: "He...suddenly remembers the rape of the VC girl, and the dreams he has had of the rape....He winces and squirms; his whole body jerks, but he cannot choose but remember."²⁰ This juxtaposition is significant, for Paco's flashback in effect punishes Cathy, the insensitive bitch, just as the rape had punished the Vietcong

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woman, who had ambushed a “night listening post” (paralleling Paco’s present vulnerable position) “and shot two of them dead.” Present and past then collapse: while Cathy and Marty-boy “are still fucking up a storm an arm’s length away,” Paco, who “cannot help his hard-on,” remembers the rape. The reader is placed in the role of unwilling spectator and treated to the grisly details of the rape-murder. The narrator pointedly emphasizes the importance of gender difference in a long, parenthetical “what if”: “You’ve got to understand, James, that if the zip had been a man we would have punched on him, then killed him right then and there and left him for dead.”²¹ But because “the zip” was a girl of fourteen, Gallagher “commenced to fuck her, hard, pressing his big meaty hand into the middle of her back....And when Gallagher finished, Jonesy fucked her, and when Jonesy was done, half the fucking company was standing in line and commenced to fuck her ragged.”²² When the men had had their fill, “Gallagher squeezed off a round. Boom.”²³

The narrator does judge this action: “We looked at her and at ourselves, drawing breath again and again, and knew that this was a moment of evil, that we would never be the same.”²⁴ But he never develops a context for understanding the genesis or implications of the evil, beyond the fact that shattered men will suffer guilt and flashbacks for the rest of their lives. The sympathetic center of the book is Paco, the ultimate veteran victim. (The flashback focuses on Gallagher and only implies Paco’s participation). It is *Paco’s* pain which matters, not the Vietnamese woman’s. The men are granted an emotional rationale for their violence (revenge); she is not. The book develops no moral or political framework within which to judge this evil. Nor is there any movement towards reconciliation. Heinemann leaves us, at the end of the chapter, with an image of hopeless division between men and women: “Cathy lounges on her bed, murmuring. Paco lies on his bed with his eyes closed, but awake, daydreaming....”²⁵

A similar narrative ambiguity informs Tim O’Brien’s “How to Tell a True War Story.” The story, which moves back and forth from remembered war stories to a framing narrator’s metafictional meditations on his craft, climaxes and hangs upon the resonance of one drawn-out, dirty word—“cooze”—which is applied to two different women and which appears in both the war stories and the commentaries. The word is first attributed to Rat Kiley (but spoken by the narrator), who writes a heartfelt letter to the sister of his best friend, who was killed. “So what happens?” the narrator tells us, “The dumb cooze never writes back.”²⁶ O’Brien then uses this word as the jumping-off point for a meditation on the amorality of war:

A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things they have always done....As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war

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story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. Listen to Rat Kiley. *Cooze*, he says. He does not say *bitch*. He certainly does not say *woman*, or *girl*. He says *cooze*. Then he spits and stares. He's nineteen years old—it's too much for him—so he looks at you with those big gentle killer eyes and says *cooze*, because his friend is dead, and because it's so incredibly sad and true: she never wrote back.²⁷

One of the stories within the story ("what actually happened") centers on Rat Kiley's immediate reaction to his friend's death: he slowly and deliberately tortures a baby water buffalo to death in an act of purely gratuitous vengeance and violence. The troop's reaction echoes the epiphany of Paco's companions: "The rest of us stood in a ragged circle around the baby buffalo. For a time no one spoke. We had witnessed something essential, something brand-new and profound, a piece of the world so startling there was not yet a name for it." One of the men comments, "Well, that's Nam...Garden of Evil. Over here, man, every sin's real fresh and original."²⁸ As in *Paco's Story*, this evil is presented as an ineffable, inevitable given of war.

O'Brien's insight is valuable, as far as it goes: "Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty." Like Heinemann, he recognizes the ambiguity of war—its horror and its allure, its fear and its acts of courage. But why should this ambiguity lead away from judgment and toward "the æsthetic purity of absolute moral indifference?" Why should men do "the things they have always done?" And why should women be blamed? At the end of the story, the narrator aligns himself with Rat Kiley, attacking those non-initiates (always women) who would presume to find a moral and a meaning in war stories. The narrative repeats its dirty word to underscore the parallel between "sisters who never write back and people who never listen":

Now and then when I tell this story, someone will come up to me afterward and say she liked it. It's always a woman. Usually it's an older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics. She'll explain that as a rule she hates war stories, she can't understand why people want to wallow in blood and gore. But this one she liked. Sometimes, even, there are little tears. What I should do, she'll say, is put it all behind me. Find new stories to tell.

I won't say it but I'll think it.

I'll picture Rat Kiley's face, his grief, and I'll think, *You dumb cooze*.

Because she wasn't listening.²⁹

Neither O'Brien's nor Heinemann's story is gung-ho; in fact, they are deeply moving witnesses to the pointlessness of war, the bankruptcy of traditional notions of heroism, and the continuing suffering of the Vietnam veteran. Yet the compensation for these losses is inevitably

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anger directed at women, who are not only excluded from the male domain of war, but punished for their absence.

RETURN

Before the initiation into battle (and for some hard-core POW-rescue types, after the return home), Vietnam is an imagined place where the male codes of honor and brotherhood still presumably work, where a rifle is still for killing and a gun is still for fun. But of course, as Caputo and many others found out, these codes no longer worked in the real war, and the soldier found anything but "clarity and belief" once he actually experienced combat. The clash between fantasy (nourished by John Wayne movies and JFK speeches) and reality (learned quickly once the soldier was in-country) does much to explain why so many narratives of the war are confused, paradoxical, and pathos-ridden. Unprepared by the culture to deal with the new demands made by women, and equally unprepared for the kind of war they were asked to fight, men were thrust into a void where none of the old codes of masculinity worked. Robert Bly is right to locate men's rage in a sense of betrayal. But in excoriating men like Rostow, McNamara, Rusk, and Westmoreland, he stops short of placing blame where it really belongs—not on the fathers themselves, but on the whole system of patriarchy that perpetuates the acceptability of war. At the core of all the bitter narratives of the war—from the anguished anger of Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* to the sardonic cynicism of Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (an interpretation of Gustav Hasford's novel *The Short-Timers*)—is a loss of power which had been an assumed privilege of white American manhood.

That the most prevalent reaction to this loss would be backlash against women rather than an attack upon the culture that sent them to war is ironic, but not surprising. Ironic, because until his recent reconstruction in Washington and Hollywood, the veteran shared with women a place on the margins of mainstream culture. Like women, veterans after the war were both part of the system (soldiers, of course *were* the war) and excluded from it, ironically acting in history but muted, for ten years, in the official discourse about that history. Like minority women, the male veteran suffered a double objectification by the patriarchy. As a soldier, he was the visible hero and defender of the system which defined his identity and granted him power (especially if he was white). But he was also manipulated by an impersonal, omnipotent military; he was converted, by the end of basic training, into a numbered body which was "shipped," "inserted," "replaced," "greased," "zapped," "wasted," "dusted off," "fragged," "tagged," "bagged," or, if he was lucky, "discharged." (As a corollary, think of all the things verbs do to women's bodies in our language.) Once converted by the military into a fighting machine (a transformation recorded in countless war memoirs and novels), he returned to a society which rendered him mute and invisible—and hence, in the symbolic order of patriarchy, un-male—

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with its apathy, amnesia, and distaste for unhappy endings. Stereotyped as victim, scapegoat, guilty survivor, Rambo extremist, druggie, baby killer, walking time bomb, and crazy motherfucker, the veteran was for a decade the reminder of all the chaos, fear, embarrassment, and failure which we associated with the war. He was emasculated by the very system that created him and sent him to war.

The veteran's powerlessness and silence paralleled for a time the role of Other in patriarchy. A marginal position *could* serve, as it has for women and minorities, as the locus for a transformation of the dominant culture and a redefinition of identity, an entry point for a revolutionary disruption of the patriarchal values which failed him. But the cultural and political conservatism of the eighties has allowed the veteran to be reintegrated into the mainstream and has recruited him for the general assault on women. Feminism has succeeded in changing some of the more blatant expressions of sexist inequality, but the oppressive structures, language, and hierarchy of the system itself remain intact. Hence, while many popular writers and filmmakers have explored the veteran's pain and anger as dramatic material, none that I know of has gone so far as to expose the root causes of betrayal: a patriarchal system which rests upon violence and aggression, which enshrines battle as the ultimate rite of passage into manhood, and which condones the violent oppression of women, minorities, and Third World peoples. As long as we recreate Vietnam as the staging ground for war between men and women, we keep the system running.

¹ John Demeter, "(It's) *Good Morning Vietnam!*" *Radical America* 22:1 (Jan/Feb 88): 8.

² For a penetrating study of how violence against women in non-fiction narratives of the war is symptomatic of deeply embedded patriarchal attitudes, see Jacqueline Lawson's "'She's a Pretty Woman... for a Gook:': The Misogyny of the Vietnam War," forthcoming in *Journal of American Culture*. Also forthcoming (reprint) in Philip Jason, ed., *Landing Zones: Approaches to the Literature of the Vietnam War* (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press) 1990.

³ Susan Jeffords has elaborated this process, which she calls one of debridement and resurrection, with reference to Vietnam war films in "Debriding Vietnam: The Resurrection of the White American Male," *Feminist Studies* 14:3 (Fall 88).

⁴ Demeter: 15.

⁵ In tracing out this neutralizing project, I have chosen to focus on works produced by white men and available to a mass audience. Though black men make appearances in many films and novels, they are almost always assigned token roles to fill out the affirmative action ranks. Wallace Terry's *Bloods* (New York: Random House, 1984), a collection of oral histories by black veterans, is the only mainstream text to my knowledge where black men are central subjects. The backlash I refer to encompasses racist as well as sexist attitudes.

For the sake of my argument, I am making the somewhat misleading distinction between popular and high art. These realms are clearly intertwined, especially in this field, but I think it is fair to say that there are literary texts which do not reach a wide popular audience. Though I cannot present an argument

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here, my sense is that the more popular genres of fiction, film, and oral history (all narrative) differ mainly in the degree to which they buy into the patriarchal order, while the less marketable, inherently more subversive and semiotic genres of poetry and drama are better equipped to resist the status quo. I develop these ideas in "Resistance and Revision in Poetry by Vietnam Veterans," Philip Jason, ed., *Landing Zones: Approaches to the Literature of the Vietnam War* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press) forthcoming; and "Disarming the War Story," in Owen Gilman and Lorrie Smith, eds., *America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War* (New York: Garland) forthcoming.

⁶ John Wheeler, *Touched with Fire: The Future of the Vietnam Generation* (New York: Avon) 1985: 140.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 141.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 145.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 148.

¹⁰ Robert Bly, "The Vietnam War and Erosion of Male Confidence," in Reese Williams, ed., *Unwinding the Vietnam War: From War into Peace* (Seattle: Real Comet Press) 1987: 162.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 163.

¹² See Susan Jeffords, "Born of Two Fathers: Gender and Misunderstanding in *Platoon*," in William Searle, ed., *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War* (Bowling Green: Popular Press) 1988.

¹³ Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Ballantine) 1977: 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 7.

¹⁶ Steve Mason, *Warrior for Peace* (New York: Simon and Schuster) 1988: 93.

¹⁷ Larry Heinemann, *Paco's Story* (New York: Penguin) 1987: 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 173.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 174.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*: 177.

²² *Ibid.*: 180.

²³ *Ibid.*: 181.

²⁴ *Ibid.*: 184.

²⁵ *Ibid.*: 185.

²⁶ Tim O'Brien, "How to Tell a True War Story," *Esquire* (Oct 87): 208.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 210.

²⁸ *Ibid.*: 214.

²⁹ *Ibid.*: 216.