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UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

REDDENING THE HEARTS AND MINDS: THE FRONTIER MYTH AND AMERICAN IDENTITY IN VIETNAM WAR LITERATURE

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

SAMANTHA JAYNE WARD
Norman, Oklahoma
1999

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A Dissertation

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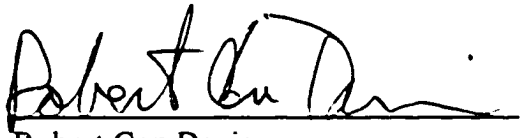

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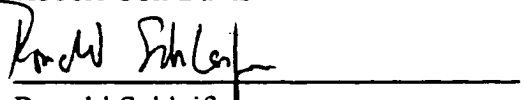

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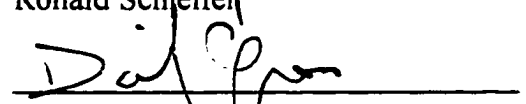

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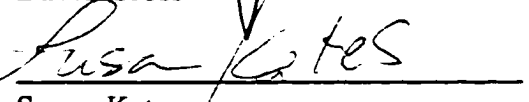

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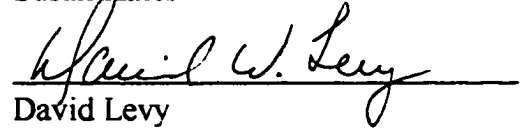

David Levy

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must, of course, begin by thanking my committee, R.C. Davis, Ronald Schleifer, David Gross, Susan Kates, and David Levy for their help and guidance throughout my graduate career and during the course of this project.

The greatest difficulty (and perhaps the greatest reward) in writing this dissertation has been the struggle with the solitary nature of the task. I would have been unable to complete the task were it not for companions who reminded me that I was not really alone. Karen Sheriff LeVan has been my friend since the first day of graduate school, and she read many parts of this document before I felt comfortable showing it to anyone else. She also gave me a shoulder to cry on when I felt most alone. Max Ward is just the kind of brother I need -- he listened to indecipherable descriptions of this project for months and then started nagging me to get finished and get a real job. Brian Johnson amazes me! Halfway through this project, when I was at my least lovable, he fell in love with me, reminded me that there are lots more important things than dissertation writing, and talked me into marrying him. That's the smartest thing I've ever done! Ladene Jayne Ward is my mother and friend. She's been telling me I was brilliant since I was born. I've never been as sure as she is, but her confidence rubs off at the right moments.

Perhaps my greatest measure of gratitude for help in this project should

go to my father, Tanoa Ward, who spent my infancy in Vietnam and my childhood telling me about it. I would never have even gotten interested in this project if it weren't for him. Furthermore, it was he who at a crucial moment told me something about bones and potatoes that I really needed to hear, and that's why it's also owing to him that I was finally able to finish.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Looking Back: My War Story 1

CHAPTER ONE

The Role of Myth in Vietnam War Literature 13

CHAPTER TWO

War Myths vs. War Stories: The Reception and Creation of Mythology in the Novels of Caputo, O'Brien, and Herr 61

CHAPTER THREE

Reddening the Hearts and Minds: The Cowboy-to-Indian Transformation of the Vietnam Veteran 97

CHAPTER FOUR

Exploring Christian Starkmann's Transformation in Philip Caputo's *Indian Country* 145

CONCLUSION
Looking Forward: Myth, Identity, and History in Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Buffalo Afternoon* 185

FILMOGRAPHY 201

WORKS CITED 203

INTRODUCTION

Looking Back: My War Story

My scholarly interest in the Vietnam War and American culture began with an analysis of some artifacts in a cultural studies seminar. In particular, I analyzed a belt buckle my dad saved as a souvenir of his participation in the Vietnam War. The belt buckle is one that my father had engraved in Cowshung, Taiwan during one of his naval tours of duty in the Vietnam War. My analysis of this text opened doors into the American cultural experience of the Vietnam War and the implications of this experience for my involvement in American culture.

My father is an excellent storyteller. In fact, until late in my undergraduate career the overwhelming bulk of what I knew of the Vietnam War came to me by way of my father's stories. Much of my early interest in Vietnam War literature involved comparing his accounts to those I read in novels and saw in films. It is because of my father's stories that I have come to study texts responding to the American experience of the Vietnam War, and it is partly because of the importance of his stories that I include my rendition of my father's story about his belt buckle.

My dad, Tanoa Ward, was a gunner's mate in the Navy. His job was to load and shoot one of the weapons on his ship. The ammunition for his weapon

was in two parts: the powder and the casing. The powder was stored in crates and packed in corks. To pass time on the ship, my dad and his buddies used these corks to make little sailboats. They inscribed the sails with nasty anti-communist messages, stuck the sails in the corks, and dropped the sailboats over the side of the ship off the coast of Vietnam.

One popular message to be put on these cork sailboats was, "Ho Chi Minh is a Communist Motherfucker." My dad and his friend Jack decided to have belt buckles inscribed with this, their favorite, sailboat message. In Cowshung, Taiwan, they found a person who would inscribe the buckles. Jack had his done first in a light, cursive type. When it was done, my father decided that Jack's buckle was too difficult to read, so he had his done in a bold, all-caps style. This was a very deliberate inscription -- it went through several drafts at the cork sailboat stage, and once they decided on exactly what they wanted to say, Dad made absolutely sure that it would be readable.

I recently asked my father why he thought he and his buddies would drop offensive anti-communist sailboats off the side of the ship. He said, "Because it was funny and nasty. Also for psychological stuff or positive U.S. support. Anyone who found the sailboats would think, 'Someone out there is saying the same thing I am.' The people we said were the bad people -- if they saw it, it would be disheartening." When my father explains his motivation, he self-

consciously makes the distinction between "bad people" and people "we **said** were bad people." This is a distinction my father would have found impossible to make during the war. It probably was not until several years later that he gained enough emotional distance from his war experience to be able to distinguish between what he was supposed to feel as a member of the American military and what his political feelings were toward the war.

The sailboat message conveys the anger of my father and his buddies about being where they were away from home, the negative judgment of many U.S. civilians toward the war, and having been sent to obliterate the communist monster that they could neither see nor understand. The sailboat message was directed toward communists, but it also represented the combination of fear, guilt, and anger my father and his friends felt toward United States citizenry and toward their situations. This fear and anger created a strong enough presence that a relatively detached understanding of the Vietnamese people and their political beliefs was only possible for my father years later.

The process through which my father has gone to create his current understanding of his experience in the Vietnam War is not unlike the one I think American culture has gone through. We understand the Vietnam War experience in much different ways today than we did during the war itself. Additionally, I think that by analyzing the specific ways that our understanding

of the war has changed we can learn about American culture more broadly configured. I see this happening in much the same way as my father understands himself as a person who did then, but would not now, deliver anti-communist, hate messages to a people he did not know or understand. In the span of time since the Vietnam War, a change in my father's political beliefs has occurred. He certainly would not inscribe a belt buckle with those words today, but he is no longer at war, scared and angry at his situation and his country. In these ways, my father both is and is not the person who inscribed those words on that belt buckle.

Throughout this project I concern myself not just with the experience of Vietnam War soldiers and veterans, but also with the ways that portrayals of that experience reflect the views and practices of American culture before, during, and after the war. My view of the relationship between the Vietnam War experience of participants and the American cultural understanding of the Vietnam War can be compared to the relationship between my father's understanding of the war as it is related to his belt buckle. My analysis of my father's belt buckle eventually led to my interest in the American cultural experience of the Vietnam War and allowed me to begin drawing conclusions about the ramifications of the Vietnam War on those immediately involved in it, like my father, and on those culturally implicated in the experience, like me.

These issues are directly related to my current project, wherein I operate from the assumption that the Vietnam War effected a fundamental change in the people who participated in it. My father has in common with the fictional veterans that I treat throughout this project that he returned from the war to a veteran-status in which he was a fundamentally different person than the one who participated with anger and fear in the Vietnam War. Throughout this dissertation I analyze the nature of the transformation undergone by textual Vietnam War veterans as one stemming from the combination of the events of the Vietnam War and the relationship between myths and history with which Americans have narrated themselves and their actions before, during, and after the Vietnam War. The relationship between my father's belt buckle and my current study tells me that, though I did not participate in the Vietnam War, I am implicated in the ways that the war affects my cultural identity, my understanding of American myth, and my understanding of American history. We all are.

These are some of the assumptions I carry into this project, wherein I examine the publicly available texts of Vietnam War novels and films. In Chapter One, I describe trends in the way that Vietnam War novels and films from the late 1960s through the early 1990s interact with American myth. My aim is to explore both the Vietnam War's impact on American literature and film

and the effect literature and film have had on our cultural understanding of the war. My exploration of various texts spanning nearly three decades leads me to the conclusion that Vietnam War literature tells us as much about American culture, history, and myth as it does about the specific set of events that are known as the Vietnam War.

Of course, texts are products of the era in which they were produced, and those texts can be analyzed in their historical context. More importantly to this project, however, Vietnam War literature makes revelations that go beyond the specifics of the Vietnam War. The past is revealed in the ways Vietnam War literature articulates our cultural impulses toward war and the myths invoked to popularize our motives. The future is revealed in the ways Vietnam War literature takes up the project of recovering from the American loss of the Vietnam War. Throughout the remainder of my dissertation, I trace this phenomenon in a way that moves from an analysis of the role of certain American myths in three Vietnam War novels, through an exploration of the specific effect of the frontier myth on a variety of films and novels, to an analysis of one novel in which I see my findings most directly embodied.

In Chapter Two, I examine Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* to analyze the impact of certain myths on American

cultural understanding of the Vietnam War. I believe that a complex relationship exists between the treatment and creation of myth in Vietnam War literature and the depiction of the Vietnam War experience as unique. Questions concerning the connections between history, myth, and literature arise in many critical discussions of Vietnam War literature as scholars try to establish correlations between American history, myths American culture uses to account for that history, and ways those myths are questioned as a result of crises arising from war. I look to the novels of Caputo, O'Brien, and Herr to describe ways war myths and myths of the American frontier are invoked and altered in Vietnam War literature. I argue that these novels dispel previously held American myths by revealing them to be ineffective in making sense of the respective narrator's experiences. In the process of debunking old war myths, these authors give a multitude of examples to show that the war did not, in some essential way, "make sense." In the process of trying desperately to make sense of a senseless war, a new type of myth emerges. The new myth states that the only sense to be made of the Vietnam War is that it made no sense, that it was an anomaly. The unfortunate result is that Vietnam War literature creates an anti-myth that allows for the continuation, once the war is over, of the American beliefs that got the United States into Vietnam in the first place.

In Chapter Three, I argue that the American myth of the frontier is

threatened by the Vietnam War, but that it is re-established in Vietnam War literature. I further argue that in American literature about the Vietnam War there is a roughly chronological progression taking the American soldier from a ready identification with the cowboy stereotype at the beginning of the war to a veteran-hood in which an identification with American Indians responds to defeat. I conclude that when the United States lost the Vietnam War, American cultural identity was threatened. The notion of losing a military engagement was not reconcilable with the providential view of history and the frontier myth. Cultural constructions were needed which could situate Vietnam veterans without destroying cultural notions of American history by demolishing those fundamentally important cultural notions. As a result, American culture articulated defeated warriors as Native Americans. The pervasiveness of these images in American literature about the Vietnam War, and the overwhelming evidence of American cultural identification with and use of the "cowboy and Indian" metaphor, lead me to conclude that we must look beyond the experience of the individual character in these films and novels to account for the Vietnam veteran's transformation from a "cowboy" to an "Indian."

In Chapter Three, I provide several examples from films and novels to illustrate the pattern through which the American Vietnam War veteran undergoes the transformation from "cowboy" to "Indian." I also argue that the

result of this transformation is both negative for American culture and positive for individual characters. The cowboy-to-Indian transformation reveals a deeply held cultural belief that Native Americans are "other." Further, it shows that there is a continued understanding of the Indian Wars as providentially ordained. On the other hand, the transformation undergone by individual characters reveals a localized understanding of the self that is more spiritual than cultural. The characters who adopt aspects of Native American identity in their post-war experiences are able to heal themselves of their war wounds in powerful ways.

In Chapter Four, I focus on Philip Caputo's *Indian Country* and its main character Christian Starkmann. I argue that throughout the novel Christian's growth is metaphorically linked with competing images of cowboy-ness and Indian-ness. I use that novel to show how a specific character learns to celebrate an "othered" status as a result of his recognition of the way he has been situated by the frontier myth and the American experience of the Vietnam War. Further, I explore the ramifications of that process of celebration. In Chapter Four, I focus my findings from Chapter Three to more fully understand the dual ramifications of the "reddening" of the Vietnam War veteran. Textual associations of Native Americans with Vietnam War veterans reveals a long-lasting and perhaps inescapable history of racism, but they also reveal a powerful ability of literary characters (and perhaps real people, as well) to undergo both

metaphorical and actual shifts in identity as a result of their recognition of the work of the frontier myth in American culture.

I find this dual result relevant to the information I discovered about my father's belt buckle. As I have described, my father both is and is not the person who inscribed those words on that belt buckle. The buckle articulates the helpless fear and anger my father felt during wartime. It reveals hatred toward an unknown enemy. However, the process of articulating the fear and anger is a positive one at the same time it is senselessly hateful. In much the same way that many Vietnam War novels are written by Vietnam veterans in an attempt to understand their war experience, my father's wearing of his anger must have been an attempt at sense-making.

The idea that American culture is illuminated by Vietnam War texts can be explored in many ways, and I have only begun in that inquiry. There are other ways that American cultural practices are illuminated by trends in Vietnam War literature. Jacqueline E. Lawson has argued, for example, that the institutions of war and rape are fundamentally connected in Vietnam War literature. Lawson's primary focus is on violence perpetrated on Vietnamese women. She writes, "Giving a young man a gun, and then ordering him to use it, is the state-sanctioned license to commit violence. That the gun takes on phallic properties scarcely needs to be elaborated" (27). The literary and filmic

Vietnam veterans I analyze in this work are often depicted as people who commit domestic violence and domestic terrorism. There is a complex and interesting relationship between these two types of domestic crimes that has yet to be explored in the study of Vietnam War literature. In future incarnations of this work, I plan to explore the ways American myths relate to gender issues in much the same way that I explore the relationship between American myth and race issues in this dissertation. I believe that this violence toward women and toward the nation is intimately bound up with the same issues of the frontier myth that I discuss throughout this study.

Additionally, literature about the Vietnam War and its aftermath tends to depict reasons we got into the war as deriving from the "sins of the fathers" and that ways to absolve ourselves of those sins are provided by the "healing touch of mothers." Lorrie Smith's work on women's Vietnam War poetry argues that women's writing challenges "the masculine 'monopoly' on representations of the Vietnam War" ("The Subject" 71). Maureen Ryan also argues that women's writings on the Vietnam War experience reveals new ways to understand the cultural ramifications of the war. The ways that the novels and films I discuss in this project limit gender roles can be interpreted in light of Smith's and Ryan's work. An expanded version of my current project, then, would include an analysis of the relationship between gender and American myth as it is revealed

in Vietnam War literature. In much the same way that taking on aspects of a Native American identity is both positive for the Vietnam veteran and negative for the culture as a whole, I see gender roles in much Vietnam War literature, and especially the father/mother schema, as both positive in that they provide modes of healing and negative in that they define masculinity and femininity in archaic and limiting ways.

The implications of the Vietnam War for American culture are vast, and we are still discovering how to decipher the treatment of the Vietnam War in American literature. In this dissertation, I have laid out parameters for myself that limit my analysis to the American cultural understanding of the Vietnam War as defined by the American myth of the frontier. Those parameters have allowed me plenty of space to explore the complex relationship between the depictions of Vietnam veterans and our still changing cultural understanding of the Vietnam War.

CHAPTER ONE

The Role of Myth in Vietnam War Literature

> *[T]he purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real).*
>
> Claude Lévi-Strauss
> "The Structural Study of Myth"

> *Just in case you thought there was no distinction between representation and reality, there is death. Just in case you thought experience and the representation of experience melted into one another, death provides a structural principle separating the two. See the difference, death asks, see the way language and vision differ from the actual, the irrevocable, the real?*
>
> Regina Barreca
> "Writing as Voodoo: Sorcery, Hysteria, and Art"

There is perhaps nothing more prevalent in Vietnam War literature than death, but I am more interested in what renders the war survivable. The relationship between death and myth can teach us how American veterans of the Vietnam War live in the postwar experience. The proximity of death for American survivors of the Vietnam War reveals the nature of the survivability of war. In particular, changing understandings of the American myth of the frontier allow some American Vietnam veterans to survive, and even thrive, in the postwar experience. In this chapter and throughout this dissertation, I explore

the relationship between the frontier myth and the changing mythical identity of fictional Vietnam veterans as well as the ramifications of these issues for American culture more broadly configured. My exploration is enriched by my understanding of the above definition of the purpose of myth from Lévi-Strauss and the ways that definition intersects with Barecca's sense of death's role in revealing the distinction between myth and history.

Although my use of the term "myth" in this project is almost exclusively limited to the American myth of the frontier, I generally define myth as a set of ideas that a culture uses to explain itself to itself. As Lévi-Strauss says, the purpose of this kind of explanatory narrative for a culture is to overcome contradictions. The contradictions myth overcomes seem to be inherent in the human project of understanding -- life doesn't make sense, but there is a fundamental human impulse to make sense of it. In order to make sense of our existences, we narrate events, and in this process of narrating, we create myths which make sense of things which do not make sense. Lévi-Strauss notes that myth's project is impossible when the contradictions are real. In other words, myth is always undertaking an impossible project, and, amazingly, most of the time it is successful. Most of the time we allow contradictions to be resolved through a cultural adherence to myth.

Barecca provides an understanding of the ways that myth's impossible

task is revealed. For Barecca, death reveals the difference between representation and reality, between experience and the representation of experience, between language and reality. In this way, we can understand that death allows us to see the history that myth conceals. If myth's project is to reconcile contradictions, death makes the contradictions more readily apparent. It sounds naive, even ridiculously so, to act as though we could ascertain "reality." Nevertheless, the Barecca quotation indicates that, though we may not be able to ascertain reality, we can certainly recognize the difference between reality and representation. The advent of death makes the difference visible.

The American myth of the frontier represents one set of ideas that American culture uses to explain its actions and motives. In Chapter Three I discuss, in detail, my understanding of the frontier myth. Here, I will note that one of the contradictions the frontier myth overcomes is that Americans claimed a divine right to everything they found on the frontier, despite the fact that they found that frontier already inhabited. The frontier myth overcomes this contradiction by telling us that providence is on our side, that the way things happen is the way that they are supposed to happen. Throughout this project, I argue that when the United States lost the Vietnam War a revelation into the truth behind the myth of the frontier became available. As I said, there is perhaps nothing more prevalent in Vietnam War literature than death, and, if we

believe Barecca, death reveals the difference between experience and the representation of experience.

No one doubts that the Vietnam War is a cultural phenomenon that is still affecting American culture in various ways. Some measure of the Vietnam War's impact can be seen in books and films that represent the American experience during and after the Vietnam War. There is also a mass of cultural criticism that has been produced in response to these books and films.[1] As Timothy Lomperis writes, "The real problem in understanding the Vietnam War is not a dearth of information or facts . . . The problem is bringing all these scattered bits together and arranging them into patterns that have meaning and can tell a coherent story"(6). Lomperis tells us that there is no dearth of information regarding the Vietnam War, even when we narrow the field to novels, films, and the criticism on them. My aim in this chapter is to create a pattern of meaning out of the large body of Vietnam War literature which speaks to my interests in the ways myth, history, and identity intersect in Vietnam War literature. In particular, I am interested in the way that the American myth of the frontier gets invoked, played out, threatened, replaced, and re-inscribed in Vietnam War literature. In this chapter I will trace the changing role of myth through three decades of textual production and criticism of Vietnam War literature.

John Wayne: The Invocation of the Frontier Myth in the Vietnam War

As I discuss in Chapter Two, John Wayne eventually becomes the most popular icon of the American myth of the frontier in Vietnam War literature. Countless novels refer to John Wayne's persona in Vietnam War combat sequences. "John Wayne-ing it" becomes a way to refer to a sort of devil-may-care soldiering, a fearlessly irresponsible way of charging into battle with no thought to the consequences of one's actions. The "John Wayne Syndrome" comes to be known as a process by which American soldiers in the Vietnam War think their war experience will create for them a hero's status but learn, as veterans, that just the opposite is true. In Chapter Two, I explore the complexities of John Wayne's relationship to what comes to be known as a Vietnam War myth. In Chapter Three, I examine the John Wayne persona's relationship to the American frontier myth. Here, I will sketch out the way John Wayne becomes a vehicle through which the frontier myth is invoked in relation to the Vietnam War as early as 1968.

Robin Moore's 1965 novel *The Green Berets* translates an old American story to the landscape of Vietnam. One of the few early novels on the Vietnam War to do well on the market, this novel unquestioningly treats the Green Beret as heroic. Alasdair Spark connects the novel's popularity to the popularity of the Green Berets which, Spark notes, "can be ascribed to the general confidence and

enthusiasm of the Kennedy era" (40). Spark further connects pro-Green Beret fiction and political propaganda that argued for "trust [of] the Green Berets . . . the trained committed soldiers who know what must be done" (46). Moore's novel clearly exemplifies this ideology as he portrays the Green Berets as both the military and moral superiors of the backward, superstitious Vietnamese.[2]

The relevance of Robin Moore's novel to the American myth of the frontier is plainly evidenced by the casting of John Wayne, the archetypal cowboy/soldier, in the novel's film adaptation in 1968. The movie, like the novel, was popular at its time of release but has since often been seen as propagandistic. Further, the film doesn't seem to fit in with other Vietnam War films, perhaps because, as Andrew Martin describes, it depends "on the conventions and ideological forms of the Western genre and World War II movies" (103). In the film version of *The Green Berets,* John Wayne plays a Green Beret, the moral and technological superior of American detractors of United States military presence in Vietnam as well as the South Vietnamese soldiers he is there to help. In this way, Moore's novel and Wayne's film represent Americans' political acceptance of United States early involvement in the Vietnam War as connected to American cultural adherence to the myth of the frontier.

Although the connection between the Vietnam War and the frontier myth

continues to appear throughout Vietnam War literature, there was an early backlash to the unquestioned nature of the connection in these early texts. Part of that early backlash is apparent in that, after Moore's novel, no other Vietnam War novel was a popular success between the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Nevertheless, there are a handful of other early novels which have received (and continue to receive) critical attention including David Halberstam's *One Very Hot Day* (1968), James Crumley's *One to Count Cadence* (1969), William Eastlake's *The Bamboo Bed* (1969), Josiah Bunting's *The Lionheads* (1972), and Charles Durden's *No Bugles, No Drums* (1976). Andrew Martin's *Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture* provides some insight into the lack of popularity of these early novels. Martin writes that in the spring of 1974 "reviewers in both the *New York Times Book Review* and *Time* magazine were insisting that the public 'does not want to hear any more about Viet Nam'" (76).[3] Clearly, the change in popularity of the Vietnam War as a subject matter for novels is attributable to the change in political tides in the 1960s as the war in Vietnam became less and less popular. However, the change in popularity is also connected to the fact that Moore's novel came to popularity during the moment I which the contradictions masked by the frontier myth were being replaced by the growing prevalence of death in Vietnam.

Those novels which did emerge in the late 1960s and early 1970s differ

from Moore's work in that they tell a truth specific to the Vietnam War experience but at the same time they adhere to older, and temporarily outmoded, American myths. Philip Beidler's "Truth-Telling and Literary Values in the Vietnam Novel" (1979) discusses the work of Halberstam, Bunting, Eastlake, and Durden and argues that these novelists

> have kept faith with the fragmentary, confused, and, for nearly a decade, almost unbearably 'true' Vietnam of the battlefield and the six o'clock news; and at the same time they have done so largely through recourse, albeit with complex modification, to an existing set of novelistic strategies, strategies arising from a view, perhaps peculiar to this nation, of war narrative as a kind of ultimate literary crucible of the American spirit. The alliance has not been an easy one to fashion. (Beidler, "Truth" 141)

Beidler's article gives a favorable reading of these novels, but as we look at the specifics of his reading we see that he views these novels as successful "because the reporter-participant has brought truth-telling and literary values into plausible, significant relation" ("Truth" 146). These novels begin to overcome the work done by John Wayne and Robin Moore of invoking the frontier myth in relation to the Vietnam War. However, in much the same way that *The Green Berets* (both the novel and movie) borrow from mythic narratives to construct

their stories, these novels overlook the material reality of the Vietnam War in favor of a mythic narrative. In this way, these novelists answer the question -- Why are we in Vietnam? -- with the answer -- We are there so the story can be told to those who are not.

The film version of *The Green Berets* told us we were there because we were needed both morally and militarily, but that kind of patriotic and heroic vision of the American soldier's role in Vietnam was shattered by later 1960s films which portrayed Vietnam veterans as outlaws and killing machines. A spate of late 1960s and early 1970s films indicate Hollywood's move in the opposite direction from the patriotic/propagandistic *The Green Berets*. Martin lists early films depicting Vietnam Veterans, including *Angels from Hell* (1968), *Satan's Sadists* (1969), *Chrome and Hot Leather* (1971), and *The Losers* (1971) and notes that in each film "Vietnam veterans were either equated with outlaw motorcycle gangs or set in violent opposition to them" (103). These films represent a period of backlash against the wildly popular image of the Green Berets, touted as the new frontier hero by Kennedy and represented in all his American heroic splendor by John Wayne. Martin sees the films as articulating public anxieties about the war manifested in the "form of a concern about the return of potentially violent veterans to civilian life" (103). This concern is fittingly depicted through the image of motorcycle gangs, as the Green Berets

have in common with bike gangs images which identify them as groups with "select membership, secrecy and violence" (Spark 40). Further, Spark argues that "this theme is used to suggest that the Green Beret soldier has become a 'killing machine,' the flawed product of America's ambition in Vietnam" (40). These depictions of Green Berets remove them completely, if only temporarily, from the heroic position occupied by John Wayne.

In the late 1960s the frontier myth is invoked through the portrayal of Robin Moore's heroic Green Berets by John Wayne. Fairly quickly however, it becomes apparent that the John Wayne persona is out of place in the Vietnam War and that the landscape of Vietnam does not provide a new frontier for the American hero to rightfully claim. To the contrary, the growing dissatisfaction of many Americans toward the war begins to mark a revelation of the contradictions which had been concealed by the frontier myth all along. As I move forward to discuss the types of Vietnam War novels and films to emerge in the 1970s, I will explore ways that the frontier myth is temporarily replaced in Vietnam War literature.

War and Realism: Vietnam War Myths in the Novels of the 1970s

The Barecca quotation at the outset of this chapter sets up a schema in which death reveals the difference between reality and the representation of

reality. I take a logical extension of Barecca's argument to be that death can also reveal the difference between history and myth. I believe there are instances in Vietnam War literature wherein that difference is revealed; however, I do not mean to say that Vietnam War literature is in the business of communicating "reality." In other words, I locate, throughout this project, instances of literary characters overcoming an identity ascribed to them by the American myth of the frontier and embracing an identity of their own choosing. This becomes possible for characters who recognize the difference between myth and history, between representations of reality and what is real. This ability of Vietnam War literature to present characters who recognize this distinction does not, of course, extend to an ability of this literature actually to convey reality.

However, many of the most often cited and critically acclaimed novels about the Vietnam War clearly attempt, through the use of narrative realism, to convey "truths" about the Vietnam War experience. In fact, critical judgements of many of these novels are based upon their relative abilities to render the experience of the Vietnam War authentically. Among the best known narratives on the Vietnam War are Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), Gloria Emerson's *Winners and Losers: Battles, Retreats, Gains, Losses, and Ruins from the Vietnam War* (1976), Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1978), and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1978).[4]

These five works have received enough attention in the field of literary scholarship on the Vietnam War that it is a real rarity to read an article which doesn't refer to at least one of them. Each of them, albeit in very different ways, succeeds in conveying a truth about the Vietnam War. Of course, that truth is really only what Barecca would call another representation. In fact, in the process of telling their truths, these authors have created what could be considered the foundation of a Vietnam War literary canon. As a result, we can look to these novels to learn about a new myth specific to the Vietnam War. In Chapter Two, I look specifically to Caputo's and Herr's novels (as well as a different novel by O'Brien) to explore this new myth of the Vietnam War in detail. In this section, I want to look at the relationship between realism and a Vietnam War myth in these five novels.

Kovic's and Caputo's books are both fictional autobiographies and, as such, form a natural pair. Both memoirs are narrated in traditionally realist ways. As in any discussion of Vietnam War literature, questions of believability, authenticity, and truth are intimately bound up in much critical discussion of Caputo's and Kovic's work. Peter McInerney's 1981 article "'Straight' and 'Secret' History in Vietnam War Literature" discusses Kovic's and Caputo's novels to highlight the questions of truth and history in Vietnam War literature.

> Both are personal and factual in the sense that they are autobiographies of real people, and historical in the sense that the record of the self in each is also a narrative of the Vietnam War. But in addition to the factual or historical qualities these books possess as memoirs or journals, both exhibit literary structures that we often identify in fictional autobiographies or historical novels. (McInerney 196)

For McInerney, as for many other critics, it is the very fictionality of Kovic's and Caputo's realistic narratives which adds to the element of "authenticity." McInerney adds that "[q]uestions about the authenticity and meaning of facts about the Vietnam War tormented interested observers and participants" so much so that "[w]riters about what was real in the American experience in Vietnam seem unable to represent reality except by imagining it" (McInerney 191, 193). Therefore, we can summarize the import of my first pair of 1970s novels as being bound up in their realistic narrative style, their autobiographical structure, and their attempt to render a "truth" about the American experience of the Vietnam War by narrating the experience of individuals from their lives before the war, through the soldiering experience, and to veteran-hood.

Emerson and Herr also write autobiographical and realistic accounts of their experiences in Vietnam, but their narrative styles differ both from each

other and from the work of Kovic and Caputo. Herr and Emerson were both foreign correspondents in Vietnam, and their books, though quite different from one another, contain characteristics of New Journalism, which can be described in much the same way as McInerney describes Caputo's and Kovic's work. New Journalism combines traditional reporting with more literary or fictional techniques, resulting in a kind of pastiche which becomes typical of Vietnam War literature which attempts to render the war experience truthfully. Again, as in McInerney's argument, it is the addition of fictional elements that make the realistic narratives more authentic.

Both *Winners and Losers* and *Dispatches* were nominated for the National Book Award for nonfiction in 1978. While Emerson won, Herr's work has been the most enduring in terms of the attention paid to it in the field of Vietnam War literature scholarship. Herr's *Dispatches* is perhaps the most respected and often cited American text to come out of the Vietnam War. Emerson, as one of the few women who have written first-hand accounts, received renewed attention in Maria S. Bonn's "The Lust of the Eye: Michael Herr, Gloria Emerson and the Art of Observation" (1993).[5] Much has been made of Herr's repeated characterization of the American experience in Vietnam as being movie-like. In much the same way that the pastiche of obviously fictional elements and realism combine to create authenticity in Vietnam War texts,

references to the war experience as movie-like seem to make narratives more believable. It is as if the act of a narrator admitting that the war experience was unrealistic makes that narrator's story more believable, closer to the truth.

Bonn provides several examples of places in Herr's text where the war experience seems like a movie, including the often quoted assertion from Herr that "we have all been compelled to make our own movies, as many movies as there are correspondents, *and this one is mine*'" (Herr 202). Bonn makes a rare criticism of Herr's work by arguing that,

> [l]ike the collage which both synthesizes and fractures conventional forms in order to create a new means of representation, Herr's text combines and collapses the models of both film and print as structures for understanding. . . . but we cannot be certain the process is complete because Herr is still using the movie as a form of comprehension; he has become a spectator at his own performance. (Bonn 35)

Bonn's analysis of Herr's text notes its aim to create a new means of representation in order to make sense of an experience that didn't seem sensible under the old modes of understanding. However, Bonn is not willing to view Herr's text as communication outside myth.

Herr and Emerson are both journalists observing and sometimes

participating in the war on a voluntary basis. Many critics have noted that their places in the war are connected to and contingent upon the suffering of others. Bonn contends that Emerson and Herr deal with these issues in much different ways. Herr's method is to write "a frank and graphic account of the war, full of dead bodies, blood and guts. He makes his readers complicit in his parasitic observation. He becomes their eyes and thus they share his guilt" (Bonn 41). Emerson's voice and language, on the other hand, are more restrained. Though passionate and angry, her tone is quiet. While Herr pulls us into his war experience, Emerson denies her readers access to much of hers.

> [That experience] is always present, but as a shadow, as a background that is never brought into full focus. Her style recapitulates the process of history and memory; we never can really 'see' the past, but only its results. By only giving us the results of violence and not the violence itself she attempts to cut herself off from carrying on the cycle of converting suffering into spectacle. (Bonn 42)

Bonn sees Emerson sidestepping some of the moves that Herr makes which result, for Bonn, in Herr's complicity with the war. Emerson denies us access to the war, does not even try to represent it. Instead, she represents only the results of the war. Much of Emerson's book comes from interviews from people who

have not experienced the war directly but who have been affected by the war nevertheless. Bonn sees Emerson's twice-removed portrayal of the war as a refusal to make a spectacle (and thus, a potential celebration) of the war.

Herr and Emerson have in common authorial view point and the use of the narrative method of New Journalism. However, *Dispatches* provides a much different picture of the war than does *Winners and Losers*. Both texts are relatable to Kovic's and Caputo's novels in that they dramatize specific historical events; however, Emerson's text remains the least novelistic whereas Herr's text is possibly the most novelistic of the four texts we have looked at so far from the 1970s. In this way, *Dispatches* has as much in common with O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* as it does with Emerson's, Kovic's, and Caputo's work. As novels, *Dispatches* and *Going After Cacciato* use a realistic narrative style to describe events so fantastic that those two novels could do nothing but inscribe a myth of the Vietnam War.

Many critics have held Herr's and O'Brien's work up as particularly apt accounts of the American experience in the Vietnam War. This aptness is often attributed to these novels' seemingly unique way of capturing a unique experience. However, Evelyn Cobley notes that both novels "offer critiques of war which remain...just as complicit with war as their precursors" (Cobley, *Representing* 209). Here Cobley denies the uniqueness of Herr's and O'Brien's

work. Cobley's aim is to uncover the ideological or rhetorical effects of these novels. Despite aspects of Herr's and O'Brien's novels which are particular to the Vietnam War experience, Cobley argues that both works create "rhetorical effects which can neither be adequate to the reality they denote, nor stand outside the social matrix mediating them" (Cobley, *Representing* 68). In this way, *Dispatches* and *Going After Cacciato* both inscribe a new myth particular to the Vietnam War and adhere to older modes of representation. Thus, "the resistant text is in many ways just as 'blind' to its ideological complicities as is the conformable one" (Cobley, *Representing* 68).

Many of the most important pieces of literature about the Vietnam War were written in the 1970s, either very shortly before or after American troops left Vietnam. Those texts from the 1970s, including Kovic's, Emerson's, Caputo's, O'Brien's, and Herr's work, form a body of texts which share in the creation of a Vietnam War myth. Each of these novels has the project of narrating, in a realistic way, a set of events which defy sensible narration. As with any myth, at least as Lévi-Strauss would have it, the Vietnam War myth's purpose is to overcome contradiction. However, in the set of 1970s novels I have been discussing, contradiction seems to be overcome by a process of emphasis on the unbelievability of the experiences being narrated.

The Social Becomes the Personal: The Work of Myth

Evacuation of the last Americans from Saigon began April 29, 1975, and Saigon was captured by the North Vietnamese on April 30, 1975, signaling the loss of what had been for years an increasingly unpopular American war. The late seventies saw writers and film makers trying to come to terms with the immediate after-effects of the war. The process was underway of trying to make sense of a set of events that defied understanding. If death makes apparent the difference between myth and history, this was the time during which that revelation was possible for American culture in relation to the frontier myth as it related to the Vietnam War. Andrew Martin calls the mid- to late-1970s a period of "critical reassessment not only of the war itself but, more crucially, of the cultural determinants of subjectivity and political discourse that made war possible in the first place" (Martin xx). Part of the project, then, of making sense of the war was to understand its ramifications for American culture and American identity.

With the war over, writers and film makers (and the American public) were able to begin to reflect, though perhaps not quite in tranquility, on what had happened in Vietnam. Martin argues that in the post-Watergate/post-Vietnam era a curiosity about the war experience of Vietnam veterans began to appear. He attributes this curiosity, in part, to the popularity of Caputo's *A Rumor of*

War, Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*, and Herr's *Dispatches*. A companion curiosity emerged about what had happened to the United States during the war, and many historians began to "characterize the Vietnam War era as a time when America 'came apart'" (Martin 110). If America had come apart as a culture, perhaps the work of myth in this era had to be done at the personal level rather than at the societal level. It was in this climate that three late 1970s major box office successes--*Coming Home* (1978)[6], *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and *Apocalypse Now* (1979)--addressed a "cultural landscape of loss and conflict" (Martin 110).

All three of these films attempt to articulate the damage done to American identity by the events which surrounded the Vietnam War. *The Deer Hunter*[7] and *Coming Home* focus on the veteran experience and the damage done to individual lives and psyches as a result of the war. *Apocalypse Now*, refers back to an older text (Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) and theme (British colonialism in Africa) to account for and provide an understanding of what happened to one soldier in Vietnam. The issues with which these films deal are taken up at the individual level. The attention is shifted from political and cultural motives for going to, and results of, being in Vietnam. During this period the attention is focused on the Vietnam War's impact on Vietnam veterans. Jason Katzman's "From Outcast to Cliche: How Film Shaped, Warped and Developed the Image

of the Vietnam Veteran, 1967-1990" identifies the period from 1975 to 1979 as generally portraying Vietnam veterans as shameful and potentially violent characters. Katzman lists *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Apocalypse Now*, as films which subtly shift the direction from the shameful/violent slant of typical 1970s Vietnam films in a more sympathetic direction. Part of the work of these films was to draw attention away from the war's effects on American culture and to focus on effects on individual veterans.

In Chapter Three, I look at the way *The Deer Hunter* and other films adhere to and depart from the frontier myth in creating a mythic identity for their characters. Here, I will note that following the success of *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Apocalypse Now*, Hollywood's interest in Vietnam faded temporarily, and when it returned it was accompanied by the rise of Reaganism which Martin sees as "an emergent sensibility of forces that inaugurated a return to a conservative hegemonic order" and which returns to Cold War modes of thought and recasts Vietnam as a noble cause (Martin xxi). When the work of myth is taken up in 1980s films, the frontier myth is returned to some of its former glory, as we will see later in this chapter.

Fragmented Narratives, Myth, and Memory

Memory plays an important role in the relationship between myth and

history. As I have said, myth's function is to reconcile contradictions, but these contradictions become visible when we recognize the difference between reality and the representation of reality. By the 1980s the Vietnam War had been represented for American culture through media ranging from the nightly news, through Hollywood movies, and to many literary works. This multitude of representations creates a situation in which memory becomes a function of myth rather than of history, even when individuals have personal recollections of the represented events. Vietnam War literature describing combat situations and being published in the 1980s is often considered "good" if it is narrated in a fragmented style -- either out of temporal order or, including sentence fragments, word fragments, or fragmented ideas. The relationship between the fragmented narrative style, myth, and memory is a complex one.

John Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley* (1982) is probably the most often-cited Vietnam War novel to appear in the 1980s. Other novels of the early 1980s which focus on the veteran as he existed both during the combat experience and back home after the war, include Stephen Wright's *Meditations in Green* (1983), Nicholas Proffitt's *Gardens of Stone* (1983), and Rob Riggan's *Free Fire Zone* (1984). Each of these novels contain a fragmented narrative style which is typical of many Vietnam War novels. Nancy Anisfield's "Words and Fragments: Narrative Style in Vietnam War Novels" discusses O'Brien's

Going After Cacciato as well as Wright's, Profitt's, and Riggan's novels as fragmented narratives. She contrasts these novels with more "easily read" novels like John Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley* and David Halberstam's *One Very Hot Day*. Anisfield argues that the experience of Vietnam is not adequately captured in traditional narrative modes. Specifically, she argues that fragmented novels better

> show the psychic dislocation of fighting in a war where the lines of combat were constantly changing, where there was no welcome and no debriefing, where drugs were prevalent, where the jungle environment was hostile, and where small squads and platoons were the functioning units rather than battalions and regiments. (Anisfield 57)

Anisfield's explanation indicates that a fragmented narrative is a superior mode of representing the Vietnam War experience because the experience itself seemed fragmented. Anisfield looks to features of the typical American soldier's experience in Vietnam to account for what occurs in narratives about the experience. Her methodology supports her aims when she writes, "If we are going to look to the literature for help in understanding what happened, both here at home and over there, perhaps the first step -- if you agree that language shapes reality -- is to put ourselves in a linguistic environment that resembles the

war as closely as possible" (Anisfield 57). Anisfield's belief in the fact that language shapes reality is clearly one that is supported by the Lévi-Strauss and Barecca quotations with which I opened this chapter. However, even if we agree that a fragmented narrative would place us in a linguistic environment that mimics the fragmented confusion of the war experience, these fragmented narratives only help us to understand, or remember, the memory of myth, not the memory of history.

My concerns here are echoed by Donald Rignalda as he begins his "Fighting and Writing: America's Vietnam War Literature" by describing a common sight at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. -- that of a person tracing onto a piece of paper the name of a relative or friend who was killed in Vietnam. Rignalda then identifies a problem that he perceives with many novels about the Vietnam War. "In most of these novels, the symbol often replaces the object and unexamined cultural and literary conventions tame America's jungle nightmare" in much the same way that the "traced symbol of a symbol *on* a symbol becomes reality" for those people who trace loved one's names at the Vietnam War Memorial (Rignalda 25). Here Rignalda prepares to make an argument privileging a fragmented narrative style over a more traditional adherence to realism. In this way his argument has much in common with Anisfield's; however, Rignalda's metaphor about tracing a loved one's

name from the Vietnam War Memorial complicates the notion that language shapes reality in relation to the Vietnam War. The person who makes a rubbing from the Vietnam War Memorial may have a personal memory of the dead person represented on the Wall. However, the dead friend or relative is only mythically memorialized by the monument, and the rubbing removes that representation yet another step away from reality. Here again memory becomes the work of myth and not the work of history, a phenomenon that is even more prevalent when we start considering Vietnam War literature's impact on people who have no personal recollection of the war itself.[8]

Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (1985) is the story of Samantha Hughes whose father was killed in Vietnam before she was born. She spends the novel trying to learn about the war which so defines her life. Mason's novel is unique to the late 1980s because it presents a character with a past tied to the Vietnam War, the experiences that character has decades after the end of the war, and that character's memories, which include the results of the Vietnam War but not the war itself. Martin articulates the relationship between Mason's novel and the time in which it was written: "A new generation came of age knowing little about the Vietnam War except what could be gleaned from the various mass cultural rewritings that were, by the mid-1980s, an established staple of the movie and publishing industries" (Martin 91).[9]

In Mason's novel, Samantha Hughes is too young to remember the Vietnam War. However, a distinction is also made in much Vietnam War literature and criticism between individuals (both fictional characters and real people) who experienced the war firsthand and those who did not. This distinction tends to privilege firsthand knowledge over knowledge gained through textual representations of the war. This argument, in conjunction with my discussion of myth and memory, tells us that if one didn't experience something there is no possibility of remembering it historically. In this case, the Vietnam War is forever lost to American culture through any other mode of memory than that of myth. However, Maureen Ryan argues that individuals, women in particular, can understand the war in important and different ways from American Vietnam War veterans.

Ryan's argument in "The Other Side of Grief: American Women Writers and the Vietnam War" is that although war is a male arena, it "necessarily includes and affects women" (Ryan 42). Ryan goes on to discuss a handful of texts by women who demonstrate what she sees as a valid and textually supported role of women in and after war. She discusses Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*, Susan Dodd's *No Earthly Notion* (1986), and Pat Ellis Taylor's stories "Descent into Brotherland" and "A Call from Brotherland" (1988) among others. These three authors have in common the fact that they've written

narratives in which a female relative of a veteran struggles to learn something about the experience of war. Ryan observes that "[m]ale critics of Vietnam literature have indicated that in the novels written by men about their experiences at the front . . . [they] experiment with a technique that foregrounds the fragmentary, disjunctive nature of the phenomenon of war" (Ryan 55-56). Ryan goes on to note that the female authors she discusses "rely on the 'old sources of illumination' -- the linear, realistic narrative culminating in an epiphanic conclusion -- not because they cannot replicate the chaos of the war, but because they and their protagonists will not settle for the platitude that 'war is hell'" (Ryan 56). In this way, Ryan sees the innovation in these female authors' works, not in their choice of narrative style, but in their ability to look at and articulate the Vietnam War in terms that revise the potentially romanticizing and mythologizing notion that the war is inarticulable.

Fragmentation in Vietnam War narratives creates a particular kind of memory, one which tells us that war is confusing, inarticulable, that it defies description, and that people who were not there cannot understand it. This is a particularly unhelpful type of cultural memory. In Chapter Two, I further develop my analysis of this aspect of the Vietnam War myth. Here I will move on to particular ways that the 1980s American political climate continued the work of removing the American experience of the Vietnam War from historical

to mythical memory.

Myth Images: How We Won the Vietnam War

The most well known celluloid version of the Vietnam veteran is Johnny Rambo, and his story is the prototypical version of the 1980s Vietnam War myth, in which America and America's Vietnam War veterans return to the landscape and battle of the Vietnam War to win this time. The cultural milieu out of which Rambo arose is the age of Reaganism. Reagan himself, in a commencement address at West Point in May 1981, spoke of America's noble cause in Vietnam and declared, "The era of self-doubt is over." Several critics have noted the odd relationship between Ronald Reagan and Rambo. Michael Klein argues that in the 1980s Vietnam became the setting for fables which carried directive implications for American foreign policy. "This was recognized by President Reagan, who prepared the nation for the possibility of military intervention in the Middle East by commenting: 'Boy, I saw *Rambo* last night; now I know what to do next time'" (Klein 23). In Chapter Three, I discuss the Rambo movies at length. Here, my interest is in the way this obviously fictional text was allowed (and encouraged) by a President of the United States to become part of a national myth that, for a while at least, masked the contradiction between the historic fact of our loss in the Vietnam War and

Reagan's portrayal of the United States military as undefeatable.

Katzman identifies a trend in the early 1980s movie industry "to rewrite Vietnam history, . . . to retrieve America's lost glory or fight the war on another front" (Katzman 12). In addition to rehistoricizing the results of the Vietnam War, *First Blood* (1982) taught us, through the continued focus of the popular image of the Green Beret, what had gone wrong in Vietnam. Rambo "was depicted as literally the domestic enemy, and furthermore, as the soldier most intimately associated with the war, representative of all Vietnam veterans. His select knowledge was evoked to imply flaws in American ideology, and the culpability of the public in America's defeat" (Spark 46-7). When Rambo says in *First Blood*, "There are no friendly civilians," we learn why we lost. When the sequel, *Rambo: First Blood II,* is released in 1985, "the notion that the war was lost because of home-front back stabbing is joined to the controversy over the possibility that American soldiers missing in action (MIAs) are still being held captive in Southeast Asia" (Martin 125).

Other films which cover the same revisionist ground include *Uncommon Valor* (1983), *Missing in Action* (1984), *Missing in Action II* (1985), and *P.O.W.: The Escape* (1986).[10]

> In effect, these portrayals of an intractable masculinity that refuses to accept the cultural terms of defeat, and that must continually

> return to the historic site of its castration, amounts to more than a simple case of revisionism, for what is at stake in these narratives appears to be the desire to recover the once-unquestioned power of the warrior male. (Martin 125)

My contention throughout this project is that in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War the American myth of the frontier was threatened. It was no longer able to overcome the contradictions that it was originally intended to mask for American culture. During the time that the myth was threatened, so was the mythic identity of the American male hero.

Susan Jeffords' *The Remasculinization of America* reveals textual attempts to "remasculinize" American culture. She defines "remasculinization" as "the large-scale renegotiation and regeneration of the interests, values, and projects of patriarchy now taking place in U.S. social relations" (Jeffords, *Remasculinization* xii). Though Jeffords admits that patriarchy was never absent from American culture, she locates a weakening of it during the Vietnam War. War protests became entangled with women's rights and civil rights protests. The inequities of the draft mingled with arguments about the horrors the war was perpetrating on women and children of Vietnam. Soon widespread challenges were being made of patriarchal constructions of gender and war. Jeffords argues that women's rights issues and civil rights issues, among others, threatened the

patriarchy that dominates American culture.

Remasculinization occurs through a dual process of feminizing the government and technologizing the male body.

> [T]he Vietnam War makes its most effective contribution to the project of remasculinization as it provide[s] 'evidence' of a group of men who were themselves victims, on a par with women and men of color, themselves victims of a third oppressor, in this case the government. For this reason, the chief opponent of the Vietnam soldier/veteran in films like *First Blood*, *Rambo: First Blood, Part II*, *Missing in Action*, *Missing in Action 2--The Beginning*, and *Uncommon Valor* was not the Vietnamese but their own government. (Jeffords, *Remasculinization* xiv)

Thus, government is feminized, and, once viewed as "soft," both it and women become enemies of the male world. In this way a sort of hybridized version of Johnny Rambo and Oliver North becomes the mythic hero who fixes the post-Vietnam American culture in both reality and representations thereof.

James William Gibson notes *Warrior Dreams: Paramilitary Culture in Post-Vietnam America* that the Rambo movies came into being during the same time period as Tom Clancy's *The Hunt for Red October* (1984) and *Red Storm Rising* (1986) became bestsellers featuring "Jack Ryan, Ph.D., a former Marine

captain in Vietnam turned academic naval historian who returns to duty as a CIA analyst and repeatedly stumbles into life-and-death struggles in which the fate of the world rests on his prowess" (Gibson 6). The success of these novels is certainly connected to support and accolades afforded Clancy by President Reagan and other governments officials (Gibson 6). Clancy's work, though not focused on combat during the Vietnam War, is describable as Vietnam War literature because of the veteran status of Clancy's hero, Jack Ryan. Further, according to Gibson, Clancy's work gave rise to a new type of pulp-fiction for men. These books are

> written like hard-core pornography except that inch-by-inch descriptions of penises entering vaginas were replaced by equally graphic portrayals of bullets, grenade fragments, and knives shredding flesh. . . . A minimum of 20 but sometimes as many as 120 . . . graphically described killings occurred in each 200-to-250-page paperback. (Gibson 6-7)

Gibson explains that these texts come into being in a culture of violence that he associates with post-Vietnam America and which he calls a "New War" culture. The New War is "one in which traditional mythological warriors--either with or without official approval--could do what was necessary to win victory and thus affirm the fundamental truths of America's virtue and martial prowess" (Gibson

28).[11]

The heroic version of the Vietnam veteran that comes into popularity in the 1980s is common to revisionist films and techno-thrillers or pulp fiction. These mythic images provide a rehistoricization of the results of the Vietnam War to such an extent that what was a clear military loss becomes a victory. Obviously, this is the work of myth, as nothing else would be able to mask contradictions of such an enormous magnitude.

Myth as Blind: Blindness/Insights into the Vietnam War

The 1990s has also seen changes in the types of texts that are being produced about the American experience in the Vietnam War. Our "victory" in the Persian Gulf War, the "fall" of communism, and the ostensible end of the Cold War have perhaps allowed the Vietnam War to become something less catastrophic in our culture and, thus, in our films and novels. Also, our cultural understanding of the Vietnam War is removed enough from the actual experience of the war that it can be used as a vehicle in popular generic novels to convey plots which are incidental to the Vietnam War itself. For example, several romance novels present Vietnam veterans as the romantic interest of the female protagonist, including – Sally Bradford's *Spring Thaw* (1989), Rachel Lee's *Lost Warriors* (1993), and Anne Mather's *Raw Silk* (1994). In each, the

veteran has a "shadowed past" or "came home fighting for his sanity -- and barely won," or the veteran knows that "hell was the stark wasteland he'd inhabited as a prisoner of war in Vietnam" (jacket blurbs). The more widely varied genre of mystery novels also uses the Vietnam War and its aftermath as a vehicle. Sharyn McCrumb's *If Ever I Return Pretty Peggy-O* (1990) and Tony Hillerman's *Finding Moon* (1995) are among them. This process of using the Vietnam war as a theme in a romance or mystery novel exploits a narrowly defined character type associated with Vietnam veterans. This exploitation raises new questions of authenticity in relation to Vietnam War literature. Philip Beidler's "Bad Business: Vietnam and Recent Mass-Market Fiction" deals with this issue of a lack of authenticity in many novels. Beidler discusses William Franklin Leib's *The Fire Dream* (1990) and Danielle Steel's *Message from Nam* (1990) as examples of a growing body of books that "mine from the war a new pornography of popular desire, and thus threaten to make national memory nearly as bad a cultural business as the kind of self-mythification that helped engender the conflict in the first place" (Beidler, "Bad Business" 64). Beidler's concern is a valid one. He worries that national memory of the Vietnam War will continue to move further and further away from historical understandings of the war and toward ever less reliable mythical ones. Beidler also notes a connection between this current process of forgetting (or mis-remembering) and

a self-mythification that he sees as the impetus for United states involvement in the Vietnam War. Beidler writes that Leib's and Steel's books "purport to claims of complex human seriousness, but instead, by the common definition of the term, trivialize human persons and the experience of living in the world, of trying to address certain fundamental responses to being human, of making difficult choices" (Beidler, "Bad Business" 74). He calls these acts of trivializing the experience of Vietnam a menacing banality, "[f]or it is not at all unlike the way a government attempts to persuade the average citizen to buy into supporting an ugly, morally questionable war: by painlessly serving up the easy gratifications of cliche and mercifully sparing the reader the rather more complex and painful effort of critical reflection" (Beidler, "Bad Business" 74). I would call the work of myth in novels of this sort a blindness, and Beidler's apt description an insight. As a Vietnam veteran himself, it is possible that Beidler has an ability in common with the characters I discuss in Chapters Three and Four, to recognize the distinction between representation and reality, history and myth, that Barecca associates with death.

We might consider a different set of slightly more hopeful possibilities in relation to the growing number of texts which deal only peripherally with the American experience in the Vietnam War. Pauline Uchmanowicz's "Vanishing Vietnam: Whiteness and the Technology of Memory," is a sophisticated and

theoretically fashionable discussion of authenticity in Vietnam War texts. In her article, she discusses O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, John Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley*, Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*, Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Buffalo Afternoon* (1989), and Kurt Vonnegut's *Hocus Pocus*. She argues that each of these narratives "mixes fact with fiction, history with mythology, authenticity with hocus-pocus, containing and monitoring the 'actual' truth in relation to the 'imaginary'"(Uchmanowicz 32). Calling on the Althusserian, Derridian, and Jamesonian notion that memory is "always already" in a simultaneous state of "vanishing and invention," Uchmanowicz says that each of the authors she discusses "does not necessarily attempt to embrace historical reality, but rather attempts to represent the 'absent cause' that is Vietnam, exploring how -- set in psychological time -- 'prior,' 'present' and 'future' narratives exchange and create collective memories" (Uchmanowicz 32-3). The difference between "embracing historical reality" and "embracing the absent cause that is Vietnam" is a complex one, relating to the issues of myth I have been discussing throughout this chapter, and which I will continue to focus on throughout this project.

However, the Vietnam War is still being written about in novels that focus primarily on the American experience of the Vietnam War. The 1990s has seen the publication of new works by the prolific and most critically acclaimed

creative writer of Vietnam War literature, Tim O'Brien. O'Brien's book of short stories, *The Things They Carried* (1990) and a novel about a Vietnam veteran but only partially about his combat experiences, *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994) both play with generic constructions and help readers to move beyond stereotypes of Vietnam veterans which became deeply entrenched in the 1980s and which are being exploited in many 1990s texts. Smith describes ways that *The Things They Carried*

> dismantles many stereotypes that have dominated Hollywood treatments of the Vietnam War and distorted our understanding: the basket-case veteran (the book's narrator is reasonably well-adjusted), the macho war lover (characters such as Azar are presented as extreme aberrations), the callous officer (Jimmy Cross is fallible and sympathetic), the soldier as victim of government machinations, the peace movement, or apathetic civilians. (Smith, "The Things Men Do" 38)

Here Smith gives a favorable reading of O'Brien's book of short stories in terms of its ability to reveal and revise stereotypical articulations of Vietnam veterans.

However, Smith goes on to say, "For all its polyphonic, postmodernist blurring of fact and fiction, *The Things They Carried* preserves a very traditional gender dichotomy, insistently representing abject femininity to reinforce

dominant masculinity and to preserve the writing of war stories as a masculine privilege" (Smith, "The Things Men Do" 19). Smith's discussion here is related to Jeffords' argument about the Rambo movies in *The Remasculinization of America*. Smith finds O'Brien's work particularly disturbing in that he

> inscribes no critique of his characters' misogyny or the artificial binary opposition of masculinity and femininity, no redefinition of power, no fissure in the patriarchal discourse of war. However ambiguous and horrible Vietnam may be, and however many new combinations of memory, fact, and imagination O'Brien composes, war is still presented as an inevitable, natural phenomenon deeply meaningful to the male psyche and hostile to femininity. (Smith, "The Things Men Do" 38)

Here Smith focuses on an set of issues particular to 1990s criticism on Vietnam War literature. It has taken a remarkably long time for critics to get around to discussing race and gender issues in Vietnam War texts, perhaps because critics were originally busy trying to figure out what had gone wrong in Vietnam and then trying to reveal the ways what had gone wrong was being covered up during the 1980s. The insights into the relationship between myth and the Vietnam War which are revealed in novels that reduce the Vietnam War to a plot point are indicative of both the blindness with which our culture perceives the war in the

1990s and the powerful potential the Vietnam War still has for teaching us about American culture and American myth.

Gender and Myth: Future Possibilities

Throughout the remainder of this project, I focus my interest in myth on the intersection between the American myth of the frontier and race issues in Vietnam War literature. In Chapters Three and Four in particular, I talk about Native American identities as being presented in many novels as mythic stereotypes. That race is available for use by myth as a stereotype is not surprising given myth's project to overcome contradictions. The process of stereotyping peoples reduces the likelihood that contradiction will occur. As I have said, criticism of Vietnam War literature has only recently taken up the project of gender issues. Myth's work on racial stereotypes is fundamentally the same as its work on gender stereotypes. Because of this, much of the study of gender issues in Vietnam War literature is applicable to my work here on race. The intersection between race and gender as it relates to the frontier myth in Vietnam War literature is one I plan to explore further in future study. Here I will briefly describe a few of the ways myth uses gender sterotypes to overcome contradictions in Vietnam War literature.

Jacqueline E. Lawson's "'She's a Pretty Woman . . . for a Gook"

examines the prevalence of misogyny in Vietnam War literature. Lawson's primary focus is on violence perpetuated upon Vietnamese women and identifies the dual evils of misogyny and racism as both stemming from a similar basis in fear and manifesting themselves "in powerful assertions of superiority directed against an objectified, inferiorized other" (Lawson 19). Lawson's article is a rhetorical analysis of the connections between the language of war, the military, and patriarchal culture and the misogyny present in a disheartening number of Vietnam texts by American soldiers.

> Giving a young man a gun, and then ordering him to use it, is the state-sanctioned license to commit violence. That the gun takes on phallic properties scarcely needs to be elaborated. . . . The male fear of the feminine, of woman's power to unsex man, is evidently so deep-seated and urgent a fear that the act of firing a weapon is imbued with the markers of sexual arousal and release. Firing a weapon that has become a surrogate penis is an act of sexual aggression: spontaneous, instinctive, and overpowering. Male sexual power, and the authority to use that power, vested in men by a patriarchal culture (including, but not confined to, institutions like the government and the military), was one of the conspiratorial forces behind the misogyny of the Vietnam War.

(Lawson 27)

The mythic relationship between masculinity and traditional heroism is one which makes the connection between sex and violence inescapable and unsurprising.[12] Lawson concludes her article by including several passages from such texts in which rape is described in gruesome but also numbing (often for the narrator of the event, but even potentially for the reader of these texts) detail. The passages she quotes are sufficient in number to convey the pervasiveness of the problems she discusses.

Jeffords provides a potential explanation for the problem articulated by Lawson. Jeffords argues that "[g]ender is the matrix through which Vietnam is read, interpreted, and reframed in dominant American culture. " (Jeffords, *Remasculinization* 53). Gender is the difference upon which Vietnam War narratives depend

> because it is the single difference that is asserted as *not* participating in the confusion that characterizes other oppositions. While friends may be uncertain, enemies unidentifiable, and goals unclear, the line between the masculine and the feminine is presented in Vietnam representation as firm and unwavering. (Jeffords, *Remasculinization* 53)

Jeffords takes steps to list and explain a multitude of uncertainties which are

communicated in Vietnam War texts, but she maintains that gender is never uncertain in these texts. She further argues that both men's and women's narratives depend on "an assumed structuration of gender" that determines the genre of Vietnam War literature (49). The prevalence of confusion in the experience of the Vietnam War is represented through fragmentation in many novels, so many in fact that confusion and fragmentation become mythic ways to understand a war that was incomprehensible. Jeffords claims that gender is the lone constant in many Vietnam War texts. As a result, we might view gender roles, and more particularly, relationships between men and women, as one of the tools myth uses to overcome the contradictions that are so prevalent in Vietnam War literature.

In much the same way that Uchmanowicz provides a possibility for mixing "fact with fiction, history with mythology, and authenticity with hocus-pocus," Lorie Smith supposes that women's narratives about the Vietnam War can recast gender roles in relation to the Vietnam War. Smith argues that "[w]hile Jeffords' study provides an essential framework for understanding women's invisibility and the misogyny pervading treatments of the Vietnam war over the past 20 years, her paradigm does not locate a female author and subject who might resist patriarchal ideology and transform the ways war is represented" (Smith, "The Subject" 71). Smith goes on to treat carefully the poetry that

appears in editors Van Devanter's and Furey's *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace* (1991), the first collection of poems by women veterans of the Vietnam War, as texts which indicate an "effort to revise these rigid definitions and challenge the masculine 'monopoly' on representations of the Vietnam War" (Smith, "The Subject" 71). Representations by women are, of course, still representations, but if we believe, with Uchmanowicz, that we should "embrace the historical reality" that women effect and are effected by the American experience of the Vietnam War, then challenging mythic gender stereotypes in relation to Vietnam War literature surely is a step in the right direction.

The connection between sex and violence in Vietnam War literature and the lack of complication of gender issues in many Vietnam War texts indicate that the problem of gender in Vietnam War literature has been another secret everyone knows yet no one discusses. Secrets everyone knows and no one discusses are prevalent in the history of Vietnam War literature. Everyone knows John Wayne was not a real cowboy or a real soldier. Everyone knows that America lost the Vietnam War. Everyone knows that real Vietnam veterans do not reenact their war experiences in sequel after sequel like Rambo. However, American cultural understanding of the Vietnam War is always mediated by represention which adhere far more commonly to American myth than to American history. As I move forward throughout this project, my aim is

to locate some of the places where death, or proximity to death, or the idea of death, or the fear of death, reveals both to us as readers of Vietnam War liiterature and to characters in Vietnam War literature the distinctions between myth and history.

Notes to Chapter One

1. There are several bibliographies which catalog primary and secondary works including John Newman and Ann Hilfiger's *Vietnam War Literature: An Annotated Bibliography of Imaginative Works About Americans Fighting in Vietnam* (1982, 1988 and 1996), Sandra Wittmen's *Writing About Vietnam: A Bibliography of the Literature of the Vietnam Conflict* (1989), Deborah Butler's *American Women Writers on Vietnam: Unheard Voices, A Selected Annotated Bibliography* (1990), and Philip K. Jason's *The Vietnam War in Literature: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism* (1992).

2. J. Justin Gustainis's *American Rhetoric and the Vietnam War* is a great source of information relating to the use of rhetoric during Vietnam. The book focuses on rhetoric from political sources both pro- and anti-war as well as rhetoric from popular media including film and comic strips. His argument is based on his assumption that "[r]hetoric during wartime is about the creation of consensus. Since wars tend to drag on, consensus among the citizenry is vital if victory is to be achieved" (Gustainis xv). He defines "rhetoric" as "the deliberate use of symbols to persuade" (Gustainis xvi-xvii). His study includes a fascinating discussion of the Domino Theory as well as a detailed analysis of Kennedy's use of the hero myth in relation to the Green Berets. Portions of these two discussions, as well as their connection to Moore's novel, will be laid out in more detail in Chapter III.

3. A discussion of the publishing industry's reception of Vietnam War novels can be found in Neil Baldwin's "Going After the War." The essay was written in 1983 and was precipitated, in part, by the then-current popularity of John Del Vecchio's *The Thirteenth Valley*. The article discusses publishing decisions, marketing strategies, and the reliance upon veteran readers of Vietnam novels. The article emphasizes the importance that novels be published so that the true story of Vietnam can be transmitted to non-participants who are still in desperate need of help in understanding the war.

4. My discussion here and throughout my project excludes any discussion at all of drama and poetry. David Rabe is the best known playwright of the war. See his *Sticks and Bones* (1972) and *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1973). John Balaban and W.D. Ehrhart are probably the best known poets. See Balaban's *After Our War* (1974) and Ehrhart's *A Generation of Peace* (1975).

5. In "The Subject Makes a Difference" Lorrie Smith's bibliographic work on texts by women veterans of Vietnam is current and thorough. She recommends Lynda Van Devanter's memoir *Home Before Morning* (1983),

Barthy Byrd's oral history *Home Front: Women and Vietnam* (1986), Kathryn Marshall's *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam 1966-1975* (1987), and Vietnamese civilian Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989). Also, the first collection of poetry by women veterans of the Vietnam War came out in 1991, *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace*, edited by Lynda Van Devanter.

6. The connection between *Coming Home* and Oliver Stone's popular 1989 film adaptation of Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* warrants noting. According to Martin,"[t]he making of *Coming Home* was influenced by the experiences of Ron Kovic, whose story was known to both Tom Mayden and Jane Fonda" (111). During production of *Coming Home* Kovic and Stone struggled to get *Born on the Fourth of July* into production. "Just four days before principle shooting was to begin, however, the film was canceled, and Kovic's story would have to wait until Stone's own story had already successfully translated into the box office hit *Platoon*" (Martin 111).

7. Spark, who I cited in my discussion of *The Green Berets*, finds an important Green Beret connection in *The Deer Hunter*. Of the three friends sent to Vietnam -- Michael, Nick, and Stephen -- only Michael becomes a Green Beret, and only Michael survives the war intact. Spark concludes that "*The Deer Hunter* skillfully uses the figure of the Green Beret to show that only the very special could survive the horror and contamination of Vietnam"(42).

8. In May of 1985 The Asia Society sponsored a conference on "The Vietnam Experience in American Literature" and invited many of the major authors of Vietnam War literature. Timothy Lomperis wrote "*Reading the Wind": The Literature of the Vietnam War* as an interpretive critique of the proceedings of that conference. In his introduction he outlines a series of "lightening bolts" that threatened to "wreck" the conference and which are a perfect example of the issues I am discussing in this section. James Webb gave the keynote address at the conference. Lomperis writes, "To some, Web's speech was a partisan and political defense of the Reagan administration's interpretation of the war as a 'noble crusade.' Quite obviously this was not an interpretation widely shared by the audience, at least to gauge by those who spoke" (Lomperis 6). The sentiment that the government had and was continuing to twist facts and that Webb was similarly twisting the facts "came to a head in Ron Kovic's speeches" on the second day of the conference" (Lomperis 6). His comments "were a fairly explicit rejoinder, even a backlash, to Webb's speech . . . . Grievously wounded physically (he is paralyzed from the chest down), [Kovic]

said that Webb's speech had wounded him again" (Lomperis 6). The discussions that arose from these and other "lightening bolts" at the conference indicate the importance of "truth" when it comes to Vietnam War literature as well as the clarity with which most participants understand the impossibility of attaining a "truth" of any kind. One conference participant pointed out, during a debate between Bill Ehrhart and Al Santoli, "I am surprised that in a conference on literature, talk of Asia is so concrete" (Lomperis 7). Bill Broyles, a panel moderator noted that "he had been 'exploring the geography of [his] heart' and found in himself, and in the conference, 'a confusion between the personal and the political'" (Lomperis 8). John Clark Pratt "somberly acknowledged that he is made up of at least nine persons, all of whom were displayed at the conference. Like the literature, they do not add up to a totality, but consist of 'fragments' (Lomperis 8). "These fragments cannot perceive the totality of the war, only its multiplicity. Such a literature cannot divine the truth, but it can present fragments of it and get the reader involved in the quest" (Lomperis 8). The connectedness of politics to the literature itself combined with the fragmented consciousnesses of these veterans indicates the difficulty that readers, writers, and critics must necessarily have in discerning the role of "truth" in the literature.

9. Criticism of novels from this period is varied, though Del Vecchio's and Mason's novels are often discussed in articles that deal with the role of gender in Vietnam War literature. An example is Kali Tal's "The Mind at War: Images of Women in Vietnam Novels by Combat Veterans" which is concerned "with the re-vision of images of women in novels written by American combat veterans of the Vietnam War and an examination of the connection those images have with the author's process of healing from the trauma of combat" (Tal 76). Tal's argument is that combat novels in general and Del Vecchio's work in particular portray female characters who represent the veteran's own level of alienation. Whether or not one agrees with Tal's claims, many critics seem to identify veteran authors with their characters' combat experiences. Of perhaps greater value are some of the particulars of Tal's argument. "Though taught in basic training or boot camp to adopt a hypermasculine stance, the soldier naturally experiences 'feminine' emotions in combat, including fear, confusion, a sense of being out of control, and an emotional attachment to his comrades. . . . Combat soldiers often deal with such emotions by repressing them in the face of more immediate need for survival. . . Consonant with this self-repression is the tendency to project his own weaknesses onto others and to take out his anger at his own fears and failings in hostility toward others. And since it is feminine

qualities which he fears in himself, women are the natural targets for his aggression" (Tal 88-89). Tal explains the process by which women become the target for masculine aggression in Vietnam combat novels and exemplifies her points using passages from *The 13th Valley*.

10. The sheer breadth of critiques leveled against the Rambo movies and other revisionist films during the early to mid-1980s is evidence of how ready American culture was for Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986). In addition to being "hailed by the critics as a welcome antidote to such films as Rambo and Missing in Action," it was "also received by most audiences as the first film of the 1980s to deal with the real war" (Martin 128). Following *Platoon*, the 1980s gave filmgoers *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Good Morning Vietnam* (1987), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *In Country* (1989), *Casualties of War* (1989), and in the 1990s *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and *Jacob's Ladder* (1990). This variety of films suggests to Martin that "the war in Vietnam has become invested with a range of melodramatic and tragicomic elements that signal the opening up of this once-taboo subject to multiple textual inscriptions" (Martin 139). However, the indication to Katzman is that "the Vietnam veteran in film is working his way back into the form of a cliche" (Katzman 22). In either case, films about the Vietnam War and Vietnam veterans transcend genre, as Martin describes Ramboesque fantasies, the claims to realism of *Platoon* and *Hamburger Hill*, the dark comedies of *Full Metal Jacket* and *Good Morning Vietnam*, the emotionally pitched *Casualties of War*, the family melodrama of *In Country*, and the melodramatic and uncompromisingly angry *Born on the Fourth of July* (146).

11. "Originally, all New War sagas--no matter where the battle took place--featured heroes or villains somehow connected to the Vietnam War. But by the late 1980s and early 1990s the New War was an established genre and its conventions were taken for granted. Movies and pulp novels no longer necessarily mentioned Vietnam or had Vietnam veterans as their heroes. The message remained the same, though: the warrior identity was the essence of masculinity; battle was the way to right any wrong" (Gibson 303).

12. Another important study of Vietnam War literature with a focus on gender issues is Katherine Kinney's "'Humping the Boonies': Sex, Combat, and the Female in Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*" in which she argues that "the use of sex as a metaphor for war . . . most often demands the objectification of women, as the female becomes the subjective battlefield on which the 'ritual of military memory' is enacted" (Kinney 39).

CHAPTER TWO

War Myths vs. War Stories: The Reception and Creation of Mythology in the Novels of Caputo, O'Brien, and Herr

> *No nation can survive without a myth; no nation profits from holding onto a myth that cannot plausibly include recent historical experience. The respective results can only be a cynical 'realism' or a self-deluding fantasy.*
>
> *John Hellmann*
> American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam

> *[A] mythology around the [Vietnam War] has become the sum of American cultural understanding . . . . The repeated American complaint is that the war did not make any sense; however, it is precisely the mythological framework in which Americans view that war that robs it of its sense.*
>
> *Renny Christopher*
> The Vietnam War/The American War

These passages from John Hellmann and Renny Christopher indicate that these two scholars are working at cross purposes as they study the impact of myth on American cultural understanding of the Vietnam War. Hellmann's project is to understand the way the Vietnam War relates to American myths. He is interested in how American myths like the myth of the frontier come to be invoked in the Vietnam War era and how the American experience of the Vietnam War changes those myths. For Hellmann, there is no question of the value of the American myth; he begins with the assumption that no nation can survive without a myth. Further, he assumes that myths must be altered

whenever recent historical events render them temporarily implausible.

Christopher's understanding of these issues is very different. Far from believing that myths help our culture to understand itself, she argues that it is precisely the mythology of the Vietnam War that robs the historical event of its sense. Christopher agrees with Hellmann that we understand Vietnam through a lens of American myth. However, rather than concern herself with the nuances of that understanding, Christopher questions the value of the myths and describes the cultural damage done by them. While Hellmann sees the Vietnam War subtly revising American myth, Christopher sees the mythology around the Vietnam War as a continuation of the propagation of American myths.

As both of these writers flesh out their arguments, they look to Vietnam War literature. One of the fundamental differences between Hellmann's and Christopher's understanding of Vietnam War literature has to do with the relative uniqueness of the Vietnam War as an event in American history. Of course it is possible to list aspects of any war, indeed any historic event, that are different from any other war or event. However, in some particular way there seems to be a cultural agreement that the Vietnam War was a unique event in American history. Perhaps that "uniqueness" is one that relates more to myth than to history. In other words, the stories we tell ourselves about the American experience in the Vietnam War have as a necessary component that it was utterly

different from anything that ever happened before. This difference is not a historical one, is not related to the notion that all events are unique. Rather, there is a mythical difference, culturally felt, to the Vietnam War. This difference is related to the particular ways the frontier myth is altered (albeit briefly) in Vietnam War literature. Christopher argues that the only truly unique aspect of United States involvement in the Vietnam War is that America lost, and she reminds us that even that is not without historical precedence because Americans on the side of the South lost the Civil War. Hellmann, as well as many other authors and critics, has identified additional factors that combine to make the Vietnam War a unique (or seemingly unique) event in American history.

It is rarely disputed, for example, that the Vietnam War was the most solitary in American history for the combatant. Americans were sent to and from Vietnam individually. They were also discharged back into civilian society individually. In contrast to the close-knit units of World War II that trained, fought, and returned home together, American soldiers of the Vietnam War were rarely part of a single military community for more than a year, and even during that year, the population of that community was constantly changing. Cornelius Cronin argues that this policy destroyed "unit cohesion by guaranteeing that each unit would have a 100 percent turnover each year, without figuring

casualties" (205). In this way, a soldier's status as a member of a group was weakened while his status as an individual was enhanced (Cronin 205). Additionally, from the day U.S. forces arrived in Vietnam, they knew exactly when they could expect to leave because each soldier was sent to Vietnam on a one-year tour of duty. The knowledge that one was drawing closer and closer to one's release-date created intense psychological strain on "short-timers." The nearly unprecedented American loss in Vietnam, military policies regarding tours of duty, and the guerilla nature of combat, combine to create a basis for arguing that the Vietnam War as a singular event in American history.

A complex relationship exists between the treatment and creation of myth in Vietnam War literature and the depiction of the Vietnam War experience as unique. Questions of the connections between history, myth, and literature arise in many critical studies of Vietnam War literature as scholars try to establish correlations between American history, myths American culture has in place to account for that history, and ways those myths are called into question as a result of crises arising from the war.

Throughout this project, I use the term "myth" to mean a set of ideas that allows a culture to explain itself to itself and which overcomes the contradictions that existence presents. In this chapter, I explore three first-person, autobiographical narratives: Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, Tim O'Brien's *If I*

Die in A Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home, and Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. I am particularly interested in the war myth that states that it is heroic and right for men to risk dying for their country in wars and the more particularly American myth of the frontier that states that Americans have the fundamental right to claim ownership of land and that that right is conferred upon them by providence. I describe ways war myths and myths of the American frontier are invoked and denied in Caputo's and O'Brien's texts. I argue that these novels dispel previously held American myths by revealing them to be ineffective in making sense of the respective narrator's experiences. In Vietnam War literature we repeatedly see authors working to debunk both of these myths because their characters experience events in the Vietnam War that are not explainable according to the myths with which the soldiers came to the war experience. In the process of debunking these old myths, countless examples are given that show that the war did not make sense.

I provide evidence from Herr's text to show that a new myth system has come to stand for the American experience in the Vietnam War. I describe Vietnam War literature as having inscribed a new set of myths particular to the Vietnam War experience. The result is a set of particular types of instances which become an anti-myth of sorts, a set of ideas that articulates the specific ways that things did not make sense in the Vietnam War. However, this anti-

myth, specific to the experience of the Vietnam War, becomes a myth in American culture which states that the only sense to be made of the Vietnam War was that it made no sense, that it was an anomaly. The unfortunate result is that Vietnam War literature is unable, finally, to debunk American myths of war and the frontier in a way that transcends the particular experience of the Vietnam War. Instead, Vietnam War literature creates an anti-myth that stands as a slight anomaly in the way American culture narrates itself. Finally, I return to the questions raised by Hellmann and Christopher as I reconcile my findings with the contradictory possibilities that myth helps us to explain the American cultural experience of the Vietnam War and that myth itself renders that experience incomprehensible.

Dispelling Old War Myths

Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce Et Decorum Est" was published two years after Owen was killed in action in World War I. In it, he writes

> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
> Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs
> Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
> Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,--
> My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

The old lie: *Dulce et decorum est*

Pro patria mori. (Owen 286).

The old lie, disguised in the poem in romantic Latin, is that "it is sweet and good to die for one's country." To Owen, who experiences war first hand, images of blood and gore turn romantic and patriotic themes of war into lies. Certainly, articulations of the innocence-to-experience change between the perceived romance of war by those who have not experienced it and the almost unbearable combination of horror and drudgery which make up the actual experience of war for combat soldiers are not unique to Vietnam War literature.

In fact, Philip Caputo begins each section of *A Rumor of War* with a quotation from a literary work having to do with the pain and remembrance of war. Part one of *A Rumor of War* begins,

> No great dependence is to be placed on the eagerness of young soldiers for action, for the prospect of fighting is agreeable to those who are strangers to it.
>
> Vegetius, Roman Military
>
> Writer 4th Century A.D.

In this way, Caputo identifies the similarities between his war experiences and others dating back at least sixteen centuries. Caputo writes, "I joined the Marines in 1960, partly because I got swept up in the patriotic tide of the

Kennedy era but mostly because I was sick of the safe, suburban existence I had known most of my life" (Caputo, *Rumor* 4). He writes that he was looking "to find in a commonplace world a chance to live heroically. Having known nothing but security, comfort, and peace [he] hungered for danger, challenges, and violence" (Caputo, *Rumor* 5).

Of course, this study does not claim to find anything singular about American Vietnam War soldiers as they perceive war as romantic before they experience it. However, in examining these passages, I will discuss the particularly American genesis of the myths that Caputo's narrator takes with him into the war experience, especially the Kennedy influence. John Hellmann notes that President Kennedy emerges early in Caputo's narrative (and in the narratives of others) "as a figure affirming that the [protagonist] should reject [his] present society for the frontier past [which is] properly the future of America as well" (Hellmann, *American Myth* 108).

For Hellmann, Kennedy's rhetoric hearkens back to the frontier era in American history. I will discuss this issue in greater detail in Chapter Three. Here, Hellmann's vision of Kennedy's use of the Frontier Myth is evidenced in Kennedy's public approval of the Peace Corps and the Green Berets as groups which were undertaking specifically American projects overseas. Hellmann argues that the youthful Caputo hears Kennedy's rhetoric as daring him to go

forth from the safe, secure, comfortable world provided for him by his father. These presidential urgings coincide, in Caputo's pre-war mind, with a sort of culturally received notion that the "danger, challenges, and violence" of war will be desireable as remedies for suburban boredom.

John Hellmann's ideas in *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* greatly influence my work throughout this project. Even though I highlight, later in this chapter, several points at which my interests and opinions diverge from his, Hellmann's description of the American Myth as it existed at the outset of the Vietnam War is one I subscribe to. For Hellmann, the West became the setting of American culture's central myth. The West itself is imagined alternately as a desert or garden where the hero, a stalwart frontiersman, enters the vast wilderness alone or in small groups. The action of the myth is the conquering or settling of the frontier, a conquering that is accomplished by drawing on the virtues of living in nature and battling the savage inhabitants of the frontier. The purpose of the fight is to make way for less adventurous but likeminded future Americans.

The myth is established early in American history with legends like the one of Daniel Boone and in literary works like James Fennimore Cooper's Leatherstocking novels. The myth is promoted also in countless essays, personal narratives, and folk tales. As the technology becomes available, movies and

television shows take up the project of communicating this fundamentally American myth.[1] Hellmann claims that, charged with such romantic, religious, and commercial expectations, "the American West and beyond it China and Japan became symbolic landscapes, separate yet connected, possessing a moral geography in which Americans perceived themselves achieving their identity and working out their special destiny" (Hellmann, *American Myth* 8). Little surprise, then, that in Caputo's narrative as well as in many others, Vietnam "appears to be the promised New Frontier into which the youth may flee his contemporary society and return to his mythic fathers' pursuit of America's mission" (Hellmann, *American Myth* 108).

The second chapter of Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* is entitled *"Pro Patria."* In it O'Brien describes his childhood yearnings for the romantic mystery of war:

> In patches of weed and cloud of imagination, I learned to play army games. Friends introduced me to the Army surplus store off main street. We bought dented relics of our fathers' history, rusted canteens and olive-scented, scarred helmet liners. Then we were our fathers, taking on the Japs and Krauts along the shores of Lake Okabena, on the flat fairways of the golf course." (O'Brien *If I Die* 21)

In this passage, the experienced narrator remembers the way an earlier, more innocent version of himself was entranced by old war stories. These imagined versions of fathers "taking on the Japs and Krauts" have come in the form of myth to the youths who fantasize about war.

In Caputo's text, nearly identical myths are invoked for a more mature, though still innocent, audience. Caputo recounts the way he was taught these war myths in Quantico Officer Candidate School:

> We were lectured on the codes Marines are expected to live by: they never leave their casualties on the battlefield, never retreat, and never surrender so long as they have the means to resist. . . . There were classes on Marine Corps history, or, should I say mythology. We learned of Lieutenant Presley O'Bannon storming the fort of the Barbary corsairs at Tripoli, of Captain Travis seizing the fortress of Chapultepec--'the halls of Montezuma'--during the Mexican War, of the 5th and 6th Regiments' bayonet charge at Belleau Wood, of Chesty Puller whipping the rebels in Nicaragua and the Japanese on Guadalcanal (Caputo, *Rumor* 12).

What Caputo calls "Marine Corps mythology" comes from the same system of myths as O'Brien's childhood games. These specifically American stories are used to convey old myths about war, namely that it is romantic, heroic, and

patriotic to fight for one's country. For the youthful Caputo, these myths convinced him so strongly of the heroism and excitement inherent in the efforts of war, that Caputo describes himself fantasizing about storming beaches and seizing forts illuminated by the rocket's red glare at his graduation from Officer Candidate School to the sound of the Marine Corps anthem. "It was glorious and grand, like an old-fashioned Fourth of July. Bugles, drums and flags. Marching across the field . . . we felt invincible, boys of twenty-one and twenty-two, all cheerfully unaware that some of us would not grow much older" (Caputo, *Rumor* 13). The theme of young and naive soldiers dying becomes an overriding one in the rest of Caputo's book. This theme is articulable by Caputo's narrator partly because his war fantasies are soon replaced by his actual experience.

Although the protagonist of O'Brien's narrative is drafted, he describes his pre-war experience in a similar manner to that of Caputo. The summer after he is drafted and before he enters the military, O'Brien's narrator is faced with the decision to comply with or flee from the draft:

> The decision was mine and it was not talked about. . . . I owed the prairie something. For twenty-one years I'd lived under its laws, accepted its education, eaten its food, wasted and guzzled its water, slept well at night, driven across its highways, dirtied and

> breathed its air, wallowed in its luxuries. I'd played on its Little League teams. . . .I reminded myself, I hadn't thought much about Canada until that summer. (27)

O'Brien articulates the compulsory nature of patriotism as something he "owes the prairie," as if his responsibility to his nation is actually connected to the land, or geographic space, which has afforded him his "freedom" to this point. In this way Hellmann's version of the Frontier Myth is in full effect for O'Brien, at least in his pre-war experience. Although O'Brien exhibits less excitement and more dread about entering the war than Caputo, and although he no longer has the romantic desire for combat of his childhood fantasies (which is still present in Caputo's war dreams), O'Brien shows a similar type of patriotism. The distinctly American images of the rocket's red glare in Caputo's text and of Little League baseball in O'Brien's both conjure up ideas of freedom and its rewards. One common sentiment in the United States is that the freedom to participate in institutions like Little League baseball should ensure the patriotism of the participants. In this way, O'Brien's narrator owes it to his country to go to war. The implication is that the narrator is free to participate in institutions like Little League baseball because of previous generations' willingness to participate in the institution of war. This is the contemporary American version of the old myth that if one wants to reap the rewards of freedom, one is obligated

to fight for it.

To this point, I have only described Caputo's and O'Brien's explanations of how they adhered to the old war myths. However, this adherance is shortlived in both narratives. It is not long before the reality of the war experience obliterates the romance of the prewar fantasies. As I begin to explore ways these two authors express their disillusionment, I will show that the first step in debunking old myths is to recognize that they no longer provide sensible ways of understanding human experience. Once the old myths are debunked, these authors replace them, but the nature of the replacement is up for debate.

Hellmann discusses Caputo's *A Rumor of War* and O'Brien's *If I Die in A Combat Zone*, among other novels as having begun remythologizing Vietnam as "an awful inversion of American assumptions and values -- a nightmare version of the landscapes of previous American Myth" (Hellmann, *American Myth* 102). Hellmann's argument is that, following the disillusionment each of these authors feel in relation to previously held beliefs in American myth, they begin to remytholgize Vietnam as an inversion of the old myth systems. For Hellmann, that inversion articulates the frontier landscape, which is traditionally configured as a sort of wild (but tamable) paradise, as a nightmarish place where the only possibility is the defeat of the frontier hero himself. Christopher argues that Hellmann fails to see that these Vietnam War texts are less an inversion of

American Frontier myths than they are an "unadorned continuation of the myth" (Christopher 20). Hellmann writes that underlying both Caputo's and O'Brien's texts is a common allegory, an ironic antimyth in which an archetypal warrior-representative of the culture embarks on a quest that dissolves into an utter chaos of dark relevation" (Hellmann, *American Myth* 102). Christopher counters, "The myth itself is the nightmare: the frontier is built on Indian blood, the American empire is built on slaughter" (Christopher 20). In other words, Christopher sees these texts' supposed revision of American myth as being continuous with the myth of the frontier in American history. As we look to specific passages where Caputo and O'Brien articulate their dawning realization that the myths that played such an important role in their pre-war fantasies and expectations were far from accurate, we will consider whether the possibility is open for these authors to revise these myths or simply to reinscribe them in new ways.

The "truth" about war, Caputo learns, is that war is alternately boring and terrifying. He highlights his pre-war misconceptions about these truths as he describes himself packing for Vietnam: "I would have liked to bring the books along, but . . . I was . . . sure there would not be enough time to read in Vietnam. I didn't know then that nine-tenths of war is waiting around for the remaining one-tenth to happen" (Caputo, *Rumor* 41). He learns this fact very soon after his arrival in Vietnam. Before the horror of war becomes apparent to Caputo, the

drudgery of war seeps into his consciousness, giving him his initial inclination that war isn't going to be what he thought it would.

> Ten days passed, ten days of total idleness. The novelty of our surroundings wore off and the battalion began to suffer from a spiritual disease called *la cafard* by the French soldiers when they were in Indochina. Its symptoms were occasiounal fits of depression combined with an unconquerable fatigue that made the simplest tasks, like shaving or cleaning a rifle seem enormous. Its causes were obscure, but they had something to do with the unremitting heat, the lack of action, and the long days of staring at the alien landscape; a lovely landscape, yes, but after a while all that jungle green became as monotonous as the beige of the desert or the white of the Arctic. (Caputo, *Rumor* 65)

Notably, Caputo identifies his boredom as a "spiritual disease" experienced by the French. The result is a temporary revision of the war myth to align his experiences with his mythic expectations. The boredom is made to seem romantic, but as Caputo describes the symptoms and causes it becomes apparent that he is beginning to believe that his expectations will not be realized. In Caputo's account, the romantic vision of war subsides rapidly after the boredom sets in and as the fear begins.

In *A Rumor of War*, the fear is not initially caused by death or even near-death. Earlier in the narrative, Caputo identifies those causes as having the potential to release him from his war responsibilities. According to the old war myth of his Quantico days, a Marine never surrenders, unless he is dead. Instead of arising from mortal danger, however, Caputo's initial war fears come from the darkness. "In [darkness] lies the jungle's power to cause fear: it blinds. It arouses the same instinct that makes us aprehensive of places like attics and dark alleys" (80). These initial fears are enough to shake Caputo's belief in the myths with which he was enculturated. Of course, throughout his war experience he encounters horror upon horror, but for Caputo -- as well as for many American writers of the Vietnam War -- the old myths disperse upon first proof that war is not a series of exhilerating adventures like storming beaches with the rockets' red glare in the background.

Of his fear of darkness, Caputo adds that men with active imaginations were most prey to these fears of war. "A man needs many things in war, but a strong imagination is not one of them" (80). The imagination that Caputo says is the cause of the greatest part of the fear he and his fellow soldiers are experienceing is also the imagination which affords those soldiers the ability to create new, more localized myths from the wreckage of the old.

Having lived through his combat experience, O'Brien reports that he is

left with "simple, unprofound scraps of truth."

> Men die. Fear hurts and humiliates. It is hard to be brave. It is hard to know what bravery *is*. Dead human beings are heavy and awkward to carry, things smell different in Vietnam, soldiers are dreamers, drill sergeants are boors, some men thought the war was proper and others didn't and most didn't care. (31)

What O'Brien describes as simple and unprofound amounts to a denial of the old myths of war. The denial is effected through a localization and specification of individual experience. O'Brien is countering the forces of myth by articulating truths about his personal experience. In fact, one of the primary truths O'Brien realizes is that if he has any power at all in the face of the long-standing and powerful war myths, it is the power to articulate his own experiences.

After listing his "simple, unprofound scraps of truth," O'Brien asks, "Is that the stuff for a morality lesson, even for a theme? . . . Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories" (O'Brien 31-32). The difference between "war stories" and "war myths" is an important one. A war story is localized and told by an individual to other individuals as a result of personal experience. A war story is told as "a truth" but it is clear to the receiver that there is a story being told. A war myth, on the other hand, is culturally received knowledge, often

undetectable as a story. Myths are received as "the truth" because of the nature of the reception of myth.

The ability to tell war stories mentioned by O'Brien and the strength of imagination focused on by Caputo point to the desire of Vietnam War literature writers to attempt to overcome the force of myth. The process by which these authors attempt to remove the narrations of their particular experiences from the larger pattern of American myth is one which reveals a personal understanding of the fundamental difference between history and myth, or more particularly between war stories and war myths.

Inscribing a New Myth of the Vietnam War

I have examined ways myths get discussed in Vietnam War literature as having been invoked in the pre-war experience. Further, I discussed ways these myths are called into question. Having established that Caputo's and O'Brien's (and many other Vietnam War authors') narratives counter the forces of myth, I want to further explore the possibility that Vietnam War revises and/or reinscribes old war myths.

One important reason that old war myths don't work in the Vietnam War is that the bulk of novels, films, and scholarship tell us that the Vietnam War was a "unique" event in American history. So, in the process of subverting old war

myths by telling war stories, Vietnam War literature creates its own, more localized -- but still powerful -- myth system. In fact, Scheurer identifies the innocence of the pre-war experience and the disillusionment with war myths that I have been discussing as the first phase in a Vietnam War mythology. The other two phases in Scheurer's three-phase process are madness and survival. For Scheurer, "[t]he myth of Vietnam . . . like all myths . . . attempts to order, focus and make intelligible the various facets and dimensions of any experience" (163). Vietnam War writers attempt to "draw order out of the moral and ideological contradictions" (163). Further, they attempt "to make known and tangible the unknown and the nebulous" (Scheurer 163).

Michael Herr's *Dispatches* is perhaps the most powerful Vietnam War text in terms of its ability to expose and examine a new kind of war experience.[2] Scheurer indicates that "madness" is part of a Vietnam War myth, and it is certainly an overriding theme in Herr's novel. Herr focuses on the madness of the political nature of the war, the madness of the actual experience of the war, and the ensuing madness experienced by its combatants. In *Dispatches*, this theme is often conveyed through what Tobey Herzog calls "charged language, perceptual overload, and frenetic jump-cut narrative style." The relationship between a frenetic use of language and the theme of madness on the part of Vietnam War participants highlights the fact that the war itself is rendered

incomprehensible to non-participants because it is inarticulable (in conventional language) by participants. In this way the myth of the Vietnam War initiates the notion that the war, its participants, American political motivations, Viet Cong combat methods, etc. are all inexplicable according to previously held American cultural understandings.

Examples of this theme are multitudinous in Herr's text, but the most famous instance is the following one, cited by Fredric Jameson in his discussion of *Dispatches* as indicative of postmodern warfare:

> He was a moving-target-survivor subscriber, a true child of the war, because except for the rare times when you were pinned or stranded the system was geared to keep you mobile, if that was what you thought you wanted. . . . Some of us moved around the war like crazy people until we couldn't see which way the run was taking us anymore. . . . As long as we could have choppers like taxis it took real exhaustion or depression near shock or a dozen pipes of opium to keep us even apparently quiet, we'd still be running around inside our skins like something was after us, ha ha, La Vida Loca. (Herr 8-9)

This passage indicates an implied reference to insanity with the frenetic language Herr uses in unfamiliar phrases like "moving-target-survivor subscriber." There

is also an overt reference to himself and his fellow journalists as crazy people and an example of that insanity at work as the passage becomes less intelligible until it almost collapses in on itself with the wild laughter at the end -- "ha, ha, la vida loca."[3] Herr and many other authors of Vietnam War literature include articulations of various elements of insanity present in their war experiences. The process by which these articulations of personal experience gain mythic status is very much dictated by the sheer number of authors (and film makers) who refer to insanity in their texts.

Once the old myths are dead and insanity has ensued, the only thing left is the soldier and the man next to him. From this comes another tenet of Vietnam War mythology -- survival. "Survival, however, carries with it a responsibility. He who 'gets out' must account for his survival. If one does emerge from the chaos, does walk . . . from the wasteland, how are we to understand him?" (Scheurer 161). And, in Vietnam War literature, the experience of Vietnam tends to render the story-teller at least partially incomprehensible to non-participants. For O'Brien, survival means that he must tell war stories. The same is true for many other Vietnam War writers, including Caputo and Herr. But, as I discussed in detail in Chapter One, many Vietnam War novels are narrated in fragmented language. The result is that the experience itself is presented as having been fragmented, resulting in a lack of intelligibility. In this

way, part of the Vietnam War myth becomes that survivors either will not or cannot narrate their experiences in easily understood ways. For Christopher, this unintelligibility of the Vietnam War is not a result of the experience itself, but only of the myth of the Vietnam War. As we begin to look at other aspects of a Vietnam War mythology, I will consider how the tenets of insanity and unintelligibility affect other aspects of the myth.

In addition to madness and unintelligible survival, a Vietnam War mythology includes the localized political issues of anti-war sentiment, black self assertion, and marijuana usage. Arthur Lubow sees each of these elements as essential to texts about the Vietnam War. Lubow's analysis of Cimino's film, *The Deer Hunter*, implies that Vietnam texts which do not articulate these specific elements as part of the singularity of the Vietnam War are not useful as Vietnam War literature. Of *The Deer Hunter*, Lubow writes, "Nothing new here: the exquisite sensation of combat was sung definitively 3000 years ago by Homer" (Lubow 96). For Lubow, *The Deer Hunter* ignores images of anti-war sentiment, black self assertion, and marijuana usage in favor of promoting "the grander truths of friendship, strength of will, and the American character" (Lubow 98). As a result, Cimino's film is, for Lubow, a film not about a particular war but about war in general. Lubow's analysis of *The Deer Hunter* is valuable in a discussion of Vietnam War mythology for his list of images

particular to the Vietnam War experience.

Again, *Dispatches* is a seminal text in creating a Vietnam War mythology for its inclusion of the images Lubow identifies as central to the American experience of the Vietnam War. In fact, Herr often focuses on these issues in conjunction with one another. Herr has a conversation with a black soldier who tells him that in his eight months in Vietnam he had not once fired upon the enemy despite having been in more than twenty firefights. The soldier reasons, "I go firin' back, I might kill one a th'Brothers, you dig it?" (Herr 180). The soldier goes on to tell Herr that there are more than a dozen Black Panthers in his company and that he is recruiting for the Black Panthers. As the conversation ends with this soldier, Herr sees him lean out of the rising chopper, laugh, and bring "his arm up and bending it back toward him, palm out and the fist clenched tightly in the Sign" (181). These passages refer richly both to an anti-war sentiment felt by many participants in the war and to the larger 1960s theme of black self-assertion. Both of these issues are articulated in many Vietnam War novels. That this particular passage refers to a conflation of these issues is not an isolated instance in Vietnam War literature. In fact, a black soldier who struggles with his moral obligation to fight for a country in which his people are currently struggling to gain Civil Rights is portrayed often enough in Vietnam War literature, both by white and black authors, that this figure has become part

of the mythology of the Vietnam War.

Herr captures a fundamental bitterness that comes from putting one's life on the line for something that one does not wholeheartedly believe in the following story:

> I'm walking along this road with two black grunts, and one of them gives [a] poncho a vicious, helpless kick. "Go easy, man," the other one says, nothing changing in his face, not even a look back. "That's the American flag you gettin' your foot into." (111)

While the soldier who kicks the poncho is filled with rage at the senselessness that accompanies the commonality of loss of life represented by the empty poncho left behind by some dead or dying soldier, he is also rendered helpless by the fact that he is not in control of the situation. He is part of the destruction that is the Vietnam War. Despite any ideological differences he has with United States governmental and military policy, this soldier cannot make a meaningful protest. He is made aware by the other soldier that as a tiny presence in the huge apparatus of American warfare, he is not able to challenge the apparatus.

In a war where little sense is to be made of relationships between one's own position in the military hierarchy and the perceived control over the situation, combat participants often look outside conventional modes of gaining control. Drug use, most often marijuana, is one ritualistic way that characters in

Vietnam War narratives help themselves come to terms with their experiences. As Herr remembers getting stoned with some infantry men, he describes the ritual of smoking marijuana in conjunction with another ritual performed by many soldiers in Vietnam -- enemy mutilation:

> One of them had worked for months on his pipe, beautifully carved and painted with flowers and peace symbols. There was a reedy little man in the circle who grinned all the time but hardly spoke. He pulled a thick plastic bag out of his pack and handed it over to me. It was full of what looked like large pieces of dried fruit. I was stoned and hungry, I almost put my hand in there, but it had a bad weight to it. The other men were giving each other looks, some amused, some embarrassed and even angry. Someone had told me once, there were a lot more ears than heads in Vietnam; just information. (34)

The ritual of smoking marijuana in a circle, the ritual of preparing the paraphernalia (the pipe with flowers and peace symbols), and the ritual of cutting the ears off of dead Viet Cong have something in common. The individuals performing each ritual gain some sort of control over the reality of their situation. To smoke is both an act of rebellion and an act of escape related to the 1960s credo to "tune in, turn on, drop out." To mutilate the enemy is an act of

rebellion and an act of control. The reverence of passing an ornately carved marijuana pipe around a circle is directly oppositional to what is seen as important to those in power. The act of defying that power structure by making the irreverent reverent is underscored by Herr's description of the little man who silently hands Herr his bag of enemy ears. These acts are raised to mythic status in Vietnam War literature because the rituals have resonance and power beyond their usage in any individual text and because they help to overcome the contradiction that Vietnam War history presents.

Another element of a Vietnam War mythology is the practice of fragging. "Fragging" is the intentional killing of an American (usually a higher ranking soldier or officer) by another American or group of Americans. Evelyn Cobley writes:

> Aside from recording the killing of prisoners and the mutilation of Vietnamese corpses, Vietnam narratives give the impression that Americans were mostly busy killing each other. . . . [S]oldiers . . . in Vietnam novels consider anyone who threatens their survival or their self-image to be fair game. (Cobley, "Violence" 92)

Examples include "fragging" incidents recorded in *The 13th Valley*, *The Short-Timers*, and *Dispatches* to name a few.

A final, and possibly most recognizable, tenet of a Vietnam War

mythology is the figure of John Wayne. John Wayne is a complex figure in Vietnam War literature. His initial influence on the Vietnam War was as a modern, celluloid incarnation of the Frontier Hero.

> By the early 60s, the Duke, through his movies and political stands, had already approached his present status as a cultural icon representing traditional American values of patriotism, courage, confidence, leadership, and manliness. Over the years, the man and his screen character had become one and the same -- a mythical figure. The name of John Wayne was invoked as a verbal shorthand to describe the character of the American warrior-gentleman and to represent for young American males the elements of manhood. (Herzog 18)

Though Wayne is often identified as a promoter of a mythical vision of war as romantic and exciting, most Vietnam War narratives soon begin describing a John-Wayne view of war as corrupt. In many narratives, "the romantic, happy-warrior mentality, and jingoistic spirit left over from the John Wayne films soon turn into disenchantment with the brutality of war, questions about the meaning of the war, self-doubts, and feelings of helplessness" (Herzog 21). The process by which John Wayne loses his hero status in Vietnam War literature is a complex one. Because many texts "use the same media-movie archetypes that

animated visions of glory to show the degree of disillusionment the soldier experienced" John Wayne's hero status is turned in on itself to become part of the Vietnam War myth in which John Wayne symbolizes the failure of the old myths (Scheurer 153).

The list of fictional texts which refer to John Wayne is long enough that scholars find Wayne's image to be a pervasive symbol in Vietnam War literature. Herzog recounts the following examples:

> From Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*: "Like Mickey Mantle and the fabulous New York Yankees, John Wayne in *The Sands of Iwo Jima* became one of my heroes" (43).
>
> From Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*: "Already I saw myself charging up some distant beachhead like John Wayne in the *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and then coming home a suntanned warrior with medals on my chest: (6).
>
> From Wallace Terry's *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans*: "We were so in the spirit that we hurt ourself. Guys would want to look like John Wayne. The dudes would just get in the country and say, 'I want a .45. I want eight grenades. I want a bandolier'" (35).
>
> From Michael Herr's *Dispatches*: "But somewhere all the mythic

> tracks intersected, from the lowest John Wayne wetdream to the most aggravated soldier-poet fantasy" (20).

The Kovic and Caputo passages identify Wayne's persona with heroism and the narrators' own heroic potentials. The Terry and Herr passages identify John Wayne fantasies as dangerous to both the bodies and the psyches of soldiers. In these passages, we can see a progression taking place from the treatment of John Wayne as a cultural icon who put dreams of romance in the heads of young men to the revelation that these imaginings were dangerous and corrupt. As Stephens notes:

> A young soldier might have visions of John Wayne early on in many of the more conventional of the Vietnam War novels, dreaming of personal glory while in flight or in a troop transport ship. But once these young Americans -- the average age was nineteen -- came in at Danang or the airstrip outside of Saigon, this perception of John Wayne soon altered. (Stephens 131)

In this way, John Wayne begins the Vietnam War as a conduit for old war myths and ends the Vietnam War as a vehicle by which those myths are shown to be corrupt. Further, John Wayne becomes an aspect of the more localized myth of the Vietnam War as his name is attached to a kind of combat insanity -- John Wayne-ing it -- in which soldiers would foolishly risk their lives.

I have discussed political issues of anti-war sentiment, black self-assertion, and marijuana usage, high incidence of "fragging," and the complex image of John Wayne as aspects of the Vietnam War experience which appear in Vietnam War literature frequently enough that they have been elevated to mythic status. Each of these aspects of the war experience is also intimately related to the general insanity and incomprehensibility with which the Vietnam War is typically depicted.

Exploring the Relationship Between New and Old War Myths

Michael Herr and other Vietnam War writers effect a revision/replacement of old war myths by creating a more localized system of myths particular to the Vietnam War. But, as I noted at the outset of this chapter, some aspects of this new Vietnam War myth only manage to reinscribe the old war myths. Cobley criticizes *Dispatches* as a novel which glorifies the Vietnam War. She describes Herr's work as being

> in constant danger not only of reproducing but of actually celebrating the mythopathological dimensions of the Vietnam War. The hyped-up language and the counter-cultural intertexts create a seductive discursive web whose appeal threatens to

rationalize the horrors of war which inspired it. (Cobley 219)

As much as *Dispatches* replaces old war myths with localized stories of Herr's and others' personal experiences in the Vietnam War, Cobley notes that the result is the romanticization and re-mythification of the American experience. In this way, Cobley identifies one problem with the myth that seems to be promoted in Vietnam War literature. Herr himself makes the point that as different as the Vietnam experience was, it was also the same old experience. He writes, "Somewhere on the periphery of that total Vietnam issue whose daily reports made the morning papers too heavy to bear, lost in the surreal contexts of television, there was a story that was as simple as it had always been, men hunting men, a hideous war and all kinds of victims" (214). Herr claims that the Vietnam War, for all its uniqueness, was still just another war.

As I conclude my discussion here, I want to return to the debate between Hellmann and Christopher with which I opened this chapter. Hellmann would have us believe that Vietnam War literature creates a nightmare inversion of American myths. He also sees the accomplishment of American literature stemming from the Vietnam War as leading American people back into Vietnam "to discover the continuing dimensions of Vietnam as a terrain of the American psyche. Having entered Vietnam as a symbolic landscape, Americans would through highly imaginative narrative art have to find their way back out to

American myth, enabling them to journey again forward into history" (Hellmann, *American Myth* 137). Here Hellmann himself says that more than effecting an inversion of American myths, Vietnam War literature allows Americans to account for a temporary threat to culturally held myths. I agree with Hellmann in that Vietnam War literature creates a myth quite different from the frontier myth but which, nevertheless, serves only as a temporary place-holder to account for historical events which rendered the frontier myth temporarily ineffective. Caputo's and O'Brien's narrators highlight the ineffectiveness of the frontier myth to explain their experiences in the Vietnam War. In the process of debunking this myth a new myth is inscribed. As they provide countless examples of the Vietnam War's senselessness an anti-myth emerges which articulates specific ways that things do not make sense in the Vietnam War. If myth's purpose is to help a culture make sense of their experiences, the anti-myth of the Vietnam War serves to carve out a temporary space where things do not make sense but at the same time the anti-myth provides for the frontier myth to be reestablished in the wake of the Vietnam War because the anti-myth is always only temporary.

As I noted at the outset of this chapter, Christopher's project is to critique the value of myth itself. To that end, she identifies a great irony of the Vietnam War: "It has been said that normally the winners of a war write the history and

the losers live with it. In the case of the Second Indochina War, the United States and the Republic of Viet Nam (RVN) are the losers, yet, on a worldwide scale, it is Americans who are writing the history of the war" (Christopher 2).[4] Christopher's articulation of this irony reveals the narrow scope of Hellmann's claim that Vietnam was simply a dark landscape which, once entered, Americans had to journey through in order to return the United States to its rightful place in history. Christopher's concern, one which I share, is that the relationship between myth and history and the American experience in the Vietnam War has ramifications which escape the attention of Hellmann as well as other authors and critics of Vietnam War literature.

In this chapter as well as throughout this project, I tend to agree with the substance of Hellmann's argument. In fact, in the next chapter, I continue to argue that the myth of the frontier is threatened by the Vietnam War, but that it is re-established in Vietnam War literature. However, in keeping with Christopher's project, I want to maintain a more critical stance toward American myth than does Hellmann. I want to maintain an awareness that Vietnam War literature provides a possibility to understand a truth about American history that is concealed when the myth of the frontier is in effect. At the moment of revelation the possibilities for changing American cultural understandings are vast and hopeful. However, that window of opportunity slams shut very quickly

and, as Christopher notes, Americans are provided the "winners' privilege" of writing the history of the Vietnam War, rather than being relegated to the "losers'" role of "living with it." The dismay with which we should all respond to these issues is highlighted by the fact that Hellmann himself concludes his argument with a statement that undeniably articulates the re-inscription of the frontier myth. He writes, "[F]rom the landscape of our Vietnam failure, we can find a new determination to brave the opening expanse" (Hellmann, *American Myth* 224). Hellmann's argument seems entirely unaware that there is no expanse to which Americans have a right.

Notes to Chapter Two

1. Timothy Scheurer also focuses his attention on how myth prompted young Americans to go to Vietnam. He sees that authors of Vietnam War literature present themselves and the nation marching quite willingly or unquestioningly into war not because they believe in all the old Americanisms but because they believed the Vietnam conflict formed part of a tradition lauded in films about World War II and Korea (Scheurer 150). Hellmann's's project complements Scheurer's in that both scholars agree on the effects of myth on Vietnam War participants; Hellmann, however, looks to earlier sources to account for the genesis of the myths that prompted men like Caputo and O'Brien to war.

2. *Apocalypse Now*, co-authored by Herr, is a filmic text which highlights that old war myths are no longer effective in the Vietnam War. Susan Jeffords discusses particular ways the old myths are revealed not to work in *Apocalypse Now*. "The Playboy dancers are flown into the jungle by helicopter, landing on a stage surrounded by hooting soldiers and phallic columns that appear alternately and indeterminably to be missiles and lipstick. The Bunnies here embody the fantasies of American manhood dressing as a Cowboy, an Indian, and a cavalry soldier, reviving yet another era of American expansionism and imperialism, of a less troublesome war where the battles were more clearly won and the slaughters more simply patriotic" (Jeffords 15-16).

3. In *Apocalypse Now*, the utter insanity of the situation of the Vietnam War is highlighted as Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall) offers a surfer recruit the option of fighting or surfing: "[I]t is merely a matter of which insanity he prefers -- either one could mean death in this case" (Scheurer 157).

4. Christopher goes on to note that Americans, including many scholars of Vietnam War literature, continue to refer to the Vietnam War simply as "Vietnam," willfully ignoring the fact that Vietnam is the name of a country.

CHAPTER THREE

Reddening the Hearts and Minds: The Cowboy-to-Indian Transformation of the Vietnam Veteran

> *He saw himself as a kind of halfbreed: his hair and skin were pale, but the war had made him an outsider in the land of his birth. The war had reddened his heart.*
>
> --*Philip Caputo* Indian Country

> *Saigon, November 1967: . . . not much chance anymore for history to go on unselfconsciously.*
>
> --*Michael Herr* Dispatches

> *If a metaphor like Cowboys and Indians is to work as a device for motivating great masses of people to engage in bloody and protracted war, its terms must do more than suggest that all this has happened before: they must connect what happens to principles that the culture has accepted as valid representations of the nature of reality, or moral and natural law, and of the vector of society's historical destiny.*
>
> --*Richard Slotkin* The Fatal Environment

The image of cowboys fighting Indians is deeply ingrained in the history of the American consciousness. For centuries, white authors in this country have made themselves known and knowable by juxtaposing themselves against an "other," often embodied by images of Native Americans in various forms. What is perhaps less obvious is the way contemporary American culture borrows these historical practices to articulate for ourselves what happened to American cultural identity as a result of our participation in the Vietnam War. As a result

of the loss of the Vietnam War, we have been forced to reconfigure our traditional use of the cowboy and Indian metaphor. In this chapter I argue that in American literature about the Vietnam War there is a roughly chronological progression taking the American soldier from ready identification with the cowboy stereotype at the beginning of the war to a veteran-hood in which an identification with American Indians is made in response to defeat. I trace this progression through three categories, each of which is related to one of the quotations at the beginning of this chapter.

The first category justifies our participation in the war, as the Slotkin passage indicates, through the invocation of the cowboys and Indians metaphor. The first category identifies white American soldiers as "cowboys." Vietnamese soldiers and civilians[1] are identified as "savages" in this category, and, placed as they are in opposition to the American cowboys, they become "Indians." This category is marked by moral certitude for Americans, for whom military success is imminent. The American "self" is positive, heroic, white, and right; the Vietnamese "other" is negative, savage, native, and misguided.

The second category articulates a culturally felt blood guilt[2] manifested in a sense of national shame for continued American participation in a cult of violence. The second passage at the opening of this chapter communicates Herr's notion that after the Vietnam War is underway, American culture loses its

ability to simply accept its role in history and in the Vietnam War in unselfconscious ways. The second category compares massacres perpetrated by the United States military in the Indian Wars to atrocities committed by American soldiers in the Vietnam War. This category is marked by moral ambiguity because military "successes" are viewed as moral failures. The relationship between the American "self" and Vietnamese/Indian "other" in this category is also ambiguous.

The third category expresses American culture's inability to reconcile American identity with the notion of losing a military engagement. The first passage at the opening of this chapter describes a process by which an American Vietnam veteran undergoes a symbolic "reddening." The third category uses signs traditionally associated with Native Americans to refer to defeated American Vietnam veterans. This category is marked by moral ambiguity for the individual subject, but restores moral certitude to the nation because only "othered" individuals have suffered defeat. For individual subjects, identification between self and other is complete as the self becomes the other in this category.

The change I am addressing occurs over time, though it does not occur with a perfect chronology in the texts I cite; for example, some instances of the second step may have been published after some instances of step three. An

examination of these categories will show that the process occurs in order for the frontier myth to "work" after defeat. Vietnam can be seen as a moment in which the limitations of frontier mythology, as a cultural and political force, become all too obvious. However, the myth is not abandoned.

Justification for Participation in War: Identification of Soldiers with Cowboys

In my first category, Native Americans are identified with Vietnamese civilians and soldiers as savages, and white American soldiers are identified with cowboys. As I explored in Chapter Two, much critical attention has been paid to the phenomenon of invoking the frontier myth as a political "reason" for America to participate in the Vietnam War. Slotkin sees the use of references to historical events like Custer's Last Stand and Indian wars as a "mythological" way of answering the question, Why are we in Vietnam? The answer, though illogical and empowered only through habit and tradition, says, "We are there because our ancestors were heroes who fought the Indians, and died (rightly or wrongly) as sacrifices for the nation"(*Fatal Environment* 19). The frontier myth must be invoked, and soldiers likened to brave frontiersman in order to ensure that the American public will support United States involvement in the Vietnam War. But the myth of the frontier can only be invoked after the culture has

established through texts that the Vietnamese are "savage" in the same way that Native Americans were characterized in the propagation of the frontier myth.

J. Justin Gustainis, in his *American Rhetoric and the Vietnam War*, reveals several important political reasons for the rhetorical strategy of invoking the frontier myth in relation to Vietnam. He identifies the "American monomyth" as describing "the account of a pure, brave dedicated American hero who defeats evildoers by virtue of his superior skills and high moral purpose. Such figures permeate U.S. popular culture and include such frontier heroes as Davy Crockett and the Lone Ranger"(23). Gustainis finds that the United States' historic fight with Native Americans is connected tightly enough to our involvement in Vietnam to be the actual reason for our being there. He locates proof of this connection in the way President John F. Kennedy allowed the American people to imagine the Green Berets,[3] and he sees this act of imagining as having been "aided by both traditional popular culture and the specific popular culture of the early 1960s. Televised Frontier heroes . . . all fit the mold: they were heroes who were physically tough and able to use the technology available to defeat their enemies"(Gustainis 30). Here Gustainis makes important historical connections between American soldiers in Vietnam and the American cowboy. American cultural knowledge of the frontier myth is particularized by 1960s television cowboys, like Paladin, the Lone Ranger, and

Wyatt Earp. The implicit connection to American military forces being sent to Vietnam is that these new frontier heroes share the cowboy's ability to develop an innate "toughness" in conjunction with the culture's "technology" to defeat the enemy.

Gustainis further notes that the frontier myth is so entrenched in our cultural understanding that without ever mentioning the term "frontier hero" in public, Kennedy was able to fully invoke the myth.[4] We can look to Slotkin for an explanation:

> The terminology of the Myth of the frontier has become part of our common language, and we do not require an explanatory program to make it comprehensible. We understand quickly and completely the rules of the Cowboy and Indian game, and what it means to invoke it in a place like Vietnam. (*Fatal Environment* 18)

Thus, Kennedy's task of equating the Green Berets with frontier heroes was a relatively easy one, gaining support among the American people for Special Forces operations in Vietnam. Never mind questions regarding American political purpose. The myth requires no real purpose. There need be nothing particularly threatening about the enemy. In fact, the question of who will reign victorious is a non-question: the hero will win. Neither is it necessary to

question why the hero is fighting because he is justified in the fight by the desire to conquer the frontier. Therefore, once Kennedy invoked the frontier myth in relation to Vietnam, it went without saying that the Green Berets would be the new frontiersmen.

Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* particularizes the connection between the American hero and Vietnam by describing the "John Wayne Syndrome."

> The common feature of the syndrome was the soldier's internalization of an ideal of superhuman military bravery, skill, and invulnerability to guilt, and grief, which is identified at some point with 'John Wayne.' The identification is not necessarily with a specific Wayne film or group of films, but with Wayne as a figure of speech, signifying the supposed perfection of soldierly masculinity.(Slotkin 519-20)

The "toughness" referred to by Gustainis is associated specifically with John Wayne's persona in Slotkin's argument. Slotkin notes that the "syndrome" is not associated with a particular Wayne film in that it is the conflation of all Wayne's film characters that allows the connection to be made between the soldier and the frontier cowboy. Wayne played both soldier and cowboy roles in a variety of films and, in this way, came to embody the cultural connection between the

American frontier and the contemporary quest of the American soldier. The culmination of this process of connection occurs in the movie *The Green Berets* (1968), adapted from Robin Moore's 1967 novel of the same title.

The novel version of *The Green Berets* is an entry point for understanding this identification of Native Americans and Vietnamese "savages." Americans are always the heroic rescuers of the misguided savages in Moore's Vietnam. Arklin, a Green Beret in charge of a company of Montagnards in Vietnam, is forced to "permit more frequent animal sacrifices and drinking parties to hold in check his tribesmen's blood lust, inflamed by the profusion of new weapons and their ability to use them well" (Moore 183). Here a specific difference is highlighted between the American ability to use technology for good and the Montagnard's inability to control their savageness. Of course, the Montagnards are silly and superstitious as well, so when it comes time to go out on a night patrol, one of them asks panic-stricken, "We must go out now? At night?" (188). In this way, readers learn that the American hero must both control the savages' blood lust and their superstitions, both preventing them from killing and forcing them to fight. The dual role escapes logic unless we view it as part of the myth of the cowboy who, alone, embodies the "right" position, always knowing both how and when to fight. Moore notes, "The Montagnards were still superstitious, even though Arklin had been training them in night patrolling for six months"

(188). The complete condescension Moore feels toward the Vietnamese is only made more unpalatable by his portrayal of Americans as patriarchal guides of these backward people. Moore's condescension should remind us of the historic condescension towards Native American "savages," both those who were positioned as enemies and those positioned as allies. Both groups, because they are "savage" and "native" in comparison to the "heroic" and "questing" American soldier, are equally misguided. Of course, the overwhelming reaction will be condescension because the position held by the American hero is pre-ordained to be the right one.

The Green Berets sold 100,000 copies in hard cover in 1965, and when it was released in paperback later that year, there were 1,200,000 copies printed in two months (Hellmann 53). "It reportedly induced so many enlistments of young men hoping to become Green Berets that the Selective Service was able to suspend draft calls during the first four months of 1966" (Hellmann 53). The book's message was certainly getting across, but if the book didn't successfully complete the job of creating "savages" out of the Vietnamese, then the movie version, starring John Wayne, and appearing in the summer of 1968, surely finished the job. Hellmann accurately describes the Viet Cong in the first half of the film as "whoop[ing] like marauding Indians" (Hellmann 91-2). The establishing of the image of the Vietnamese as "Indians" and, thus, as "savages,"

allows for the depiction of Americans as "cowboys" -- in other words, the good guys, in white hats. Part of the identification of American soldiers with cowboys occurs as a result of John Wayne's persona itself.[5] John Wayne was a (filmic) cowboy and a (filmic) participant in the Vietnam War; thus, the average American recruit could and should be both an American soldier in Vietnam and a cowboy. If the recruit gets to be both and gets to have so much in common with John Wayne, then he obviously gets to wear the white hat.

In texts like *The Green Berets* and others, the motif of the soldier as cowboy and Vietcong as Indian/other is unquestioned; however, this is not an invisible rhetorical move. There were several reviewers of the film version who were unwilling to accept this identification wholecloth, noting as ridiculously inappropriate the portrayal of Hollywood western motifs in relation to the Vietnam War setting. Hellmann illustrates this critical response with the following passages:

> from a *Time* review -- "[B]uilt on the primitive lines of a standard western, *Berets* even has the South Vietnamese talking like movie Sioux."
>
> from a *Life* review -- "[Wayne's] reference point is not life but movie tradition -- that long gray line of barrack's humor, fighting speeches and small-unit bravery, stained by the catsup bottles of a

thousand makeup men."

from a *Newsweek* review -- "In the Alamo section of *The Green Berets*, when the yellowskins are about to overrun the fort and the cavalry is nowhere in sight . . . "(Hellmann 91)

These reviews reveal that some viewers could recognize the film's identification of Indians with Vietnamese and could understand that the identification had more to do with movie-reality than historic similarities. However, whether or not the movie-going public was tricked into accepting a connection between war-reality and movie-reality, literary texts depicting the Vietnam War experience often articulate a strong connection between the two realities.

In *Dispatches*, for example, Michael Herr is willing to look at that which is ugly, scared, and wrong in Americans. The heroic American plays a minimal, if not absent, role in the novel. The irreverence with which Herr treats Americans makes more sense within the boundaries of the Vietnam experience than does the reverence with which they are treated by Moore. "[S]omewhere 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" (Herr 20). Herr describes a temporal and spatial place where movie-reality collides with war reality in a radical claim that is belied by the draft and by organizations like

Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Herr's active and willing participation in a war he finds so completely without worth is only made acceptable to him because he is able to create a reality in which nobody participated in the war involuntarily. Herr also makes a statement about the power of movie-reality in that no American in Vietnam escaped the Hollywood-provoked insanity that war is good and manly and patriotic.

To this point I have been articulating the first category in the transformation of the Vietnam soldier from cowboy to Indian. Kennedy's use of the frontier myth to garner support for the Green Berets is taken up by Moore in his novel and then by Wayne in his film. Once the Green Beret myth is in place as a modern-day return to the frontier, narratives like Herr's and others articulate the confusion between movie-reality and war-reality. Articulating the confusion between these types of realities is perhaps an integral step in the transformation of the Vietnam veteran from a cowboy-like figure to an Indian-like one.

Historicization of Cultural Guilt: Comparison of Indian Wars and Vietnam War

The second category becomes the impetus for the transformation. In this category, comparisons are made between American massacres in Vietnam and

massacres perpetrated on Native Americans. These comparisons work to articulate a cultural guilt for historical massacres as well as contemporary atrocities. This guilt is made visible to us through texts like Herr's which cause us to question our reliance on the frontier myth, which Americans have historically enacted through westward expansion, by highlighting the fact that justification for United States military policies in Vietnam was borrowed from American history to garner support and emphasize our "right" to enact war on the Vietnamese. Herr demands that we look at our history when he writes,

> Anyway, you couldn't use standard methods to date the doom; might as well say that Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along, the turnaround point where it would touch and come back to form a containing perimeter; might just as well lay it on the proto-Gringos who found the New England woods too raw and empty for their peace and filled them up with their own imported devils.(49)

The American heritage of aggression and violence is an increasingly apparent issue which Herr's readers must find familiar, if continually regrettable. As we look at other textual examples which compare American acts of aggression on Native Americans to those performed against the Vietnamese, we should keep these ideas in mind.

Jim Harrison's 1973 *A Good Day to Die* is narrated by a wandering poet/fisherman who tells the story of his unlikely journey with a Vietnam veteran and the veteran's girlfriend, both of whom he meets in Florida just days before the trio decides to drive west to blow up a dam. As the novel builds toward its climax, the trio travels over Chief Joseph Pass in Montana. The climactic section of Harrison's novel provides a specific comparison between the Vietnam experience and that of Native Americans. Fishing in the Big Hole River, the narrator realizes he is near the site of the massacre, and is unable to concentrate on fishing, the one passion he maintains throughout the novel. He describes the massacre,

> Then the charge with the Cavalry shooting low into the tents to pick up as many sleeping bodies as possible, which was a rather usual Army strategy in those days. Fifty women and children had been killed. Even babies. No Nez Perce sentries had been posted as this sort of attack wasn't in their own repertory and they were trying to evade the Army anyway.(Harrison 139-40)

As he muses over these historic facts, he misses a striking fish. He feels "very bad that [he] had begun to think about the Nez Perce"(Harrison 140). Two sentences later, in the same paragraph, "[i]t occur[s] to [him] with some amusement that a student in the future might have his grade dropped on an exam

from a B to a C because he misguessed the exact number of My Lai dead" (Harrison 140). For the remainder of the paragraph, his thoughts return to the battle between the Nez Perce and the Cavalry.

In Harrison's novel the geographical space of an earlier United States military massacre triggers the comparison, for the narrator and the reader, to the Mai Lai massacre. As I described above, the travels of the narrator and his companions take them over Chief Joseph Pass. Because one of the companions has been continually referred to as a Vietnam veteran, readers may have in mind atrocities committed in Vietnam or even the common anti-war sentiment which identified American soldiers in Vietnam as "babykillers." If readers are aware of the history of the Nez Perce Indians, then the plot action of traveling over Chief Joseph Pass may cause the reader to compare the two massacres perpetrated by members of the American military. No overt comparison is made in the text at this point, however. All we have is a paragraph of narratorial musings over the plight of the Nez Perce interrupted by a seemingly random thought about future students of history being required to know about the Mai Lai massacre. The massacre of the Nez Perce women and children reminds the narrator of the massacre at My Lai. At this point in the narrative, readers are aware that these two historical events should remind readers of one another. The question is why does Harrison bother to have his narrator and his readers make the comparison?

On the one hand, the comparison between these two disparate historical periods brings to mind the American cult of violence which has not abated at all in the course of the hundred years that occurred between the two massacres. However, as we see in the subsequent scenes of *A Good Day to Die*, the non-veteran narrator seems no less removed from the violence of our culture than his veteran counterpart. One of the messages of this text is that Americans (veteran and non-veteran alike) are not exempt from violence. Rather, violence is deeply ingrained (and comes to light especially in moments of comparative tranquility -- as when the narrator is fishing alone). In this text, the non-veteran is the only character who understands the comparison between atrocities in the Indian Wars and in the Vietnam War. We will see later in this chapter that, if the veteran Tim had made the connection, he could have survived his post-war experiences. First, however, I will continue to examine other texts which make comparisons between American acts of aggression against Native Americans and the Vietnamese.

Philip Caputo's 1987 *Indian Country* begins with a pre-war fishing trip for two childhood buddies -- Bonniface George St. Germaine (Bonny George), an Ojibwa Indian who has been drafted and who will enter the military in a matter of days, and Christian Starkmann, the white son of a prominent liberal, anti-war clergyman who has received a draft deferment as a result of his

enrollment in divinity-school. Christian makes several attempts to convince Bonny George to evade the draft either by running across the border into Canada or by hiding out in the Michigan Upper Peninsula woods. Christian's motivation for convincing Bonny George to evade the draft is a combination of guilt at his own deferment, genuine concern for his friend, and the deeply entrenched anti-war feelings of Christian's father. Christian's father believes that if Bonny George "consents to take up arms for a nation that once inflicted upon his people barbarisms as awful as those it is now inflicting upon the Vietnamese, it will be an act I shall find difficult to understand and impossible to condone"(Caputo, *Indian* 27). In Caputo's text, it is Christian's memory of a conversation with his father that reveals to the reader the comparison between American military barbarisms committed on the Native Americans and on the Vietnamese.

In the elder Starkmann's mind, Bonny George seems to possess a greater than usual moral obligation to resist enlistment as a result of his Indian heritage and the fact that his ancestors share with the Vietnamese the barbarisms the U.S. military inflicts upon them. Lucius Starkmann's condemnation of the war becomes a condemnation of all who are willing to become participants whether their participation is coerced by the draft or not. It may be helpful for us to view the historical relationship between Bonny George's "people" and Bonny George's potential role in the military invoked by the elder Starkmann in terms of "the

colonized" position and the position of "the colonizers." In the elder Starkmann's argument, he holds himself above and beyond the colonizer/colonized dichotomy and reads the boundaries between these two positions as fluid enough that Bonny George can cross over, but it is also rigid enough that, if Bonny George makes the "right" decision, he will maintain his position of colonized (in elder Starkmann's mind, the more valued of the two positions).

Bonny George's frame of reference doesn't allow him to perceive himself as colonized in Starkmann's paradigm. He remembers his grandfather's history lesson "about how the Ojibwa migrated from the Atlantic to the Great Lakes and then west of the Mississippi, and whipped everyone along the way.. . . We're not pacifists. We're not cowards. We don't run" (Caputo 42). Bonny George thinks of participation in the war not as an act of solidarity with the United States political position but one which places him in a position akin to his Indian ancestors. Perhaps his views are the views of a young man not yet able to ask the questions articulated near the end of the novel by his grandfather. "The seven Grandfathers . . . had taught that war was natural to man. . . . But the Grandfathers had also taught that it was natural only when fought against natural enemies. . . . Who were [Bonny George's] natural enemies? . . . What was [Bonny George], Ojibwa or American? Or both" (Caputo 263). Bonny George

may be incapable, pre-war, of viewing the complexities of his present relationship to the American military and his cultural historical relationship with the same institution. Regardless, what takes place is that both Bonny George and Christian Starkmann go to war, Bonny George because he can't imagine going into "exile" in Canada and because his grandfather had told him "that if you can't imagine something happening, then it can't happen" (Caputo 23). Christian also enlists because he is unable to imagine Bonny George "getting on that bus come Tuesday and me driving back to campus" (Caputo 51).

In Caputo's novel, Lucius Starkmann introduces the comparison between United States military massacres in the Indian Wars and in the Vietnam War. Bonny George and Christian struggle with where they will align themselves in relation to the comparison. For Christian, the answer is to evade the draft at whatever cost to avoid becoming the colonizer. Bonny George must go to war or lose his home (he must become the colonizer to avoid being further removed from his "homeland"). In fact, in terms of his reading of his own people's history, violence is a more comfortable position than pacifist reaction to the threat of war. His grandfather once told him "that the missionary's cross did more to ruin the Indian way of life than the army's guns and the trader's whiskey" (Caputo 28). Perhaps the most interesting position in this triad is that held by Christian who goes to war partially because of his guilt that his own position is

more comfortable than Bonny George's. We will see the intensification of guilt in Christian's post-war experience in the next chapter. He participates in a war that his father tells him is morally wrong, taking up the role of the colonizer against the Vietnamese in order to avoid what would feel to him like an overt act of colonization against Bonny George. Caputo's text begins by calling into question the political value of the war by referring to what the American military did to Indians historically as ironically related to the demand that contemporary Indians be required to participate in a new but equally corrupt act of colonization.[6]

A similar comparison is made in Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*--here the comparison is made between events surrounding the Indian Wars and the massacre at Mai Lai. In this text, the comparison occurs as we read what the narrator provides for us in several chapters interspersed throughout the book entitled "Evidence." These chapters often include statements made by various people with personal knowledge of Vietnam veteran and former Senatorial candidate John Wade whose political campaign crumbles amid a media revelation that he participated in the Mai Lai massacre. Other pieces of evidence are references to historic texts. Among these bits of "evidence" is the quotation, "John! John! Oh, John!" attributed to George Armstrong Custer. This quotation is repeated several times in various "Evidence" chapters, but upon its first

inclusion is accompanied by a footnote telling the reader that Evan S. Connell writes in *Son of the Morning Star* that "'John' was the name 'ordinarily used by whites when addressing an Indian.' At the little Big horn, on June 25, 1876, one terrified trooper 'was heard sobbing this name, as though it might save his life. . .. This plea echoes horribly down a hundred years.'" (O'Brien 145). At this point and at least one other point (p. 202) in the text the quotation from Custer is placed immediately adjacent to a quotation from a Vietnam veteran named Richard Thinbill who was present with Wade at the Mai Lai massacre and who is described as "a young, good-looking kid, a full-blooded Chippewa with nervous eyes and gentle moves" (O'Brien 204-5).

It is important to make a few notes about *Son of the Morning Star* here. It is a novelistic account of the life of Custer, especially his Last Stand. The novel met with mixed reviews after its publication in 1984. Some critics touted it as a welcome and accurate addition to Custer history. Others criticized it as inaccurate and misleading. Still others appreciated its complex mix of history and fictionality. The novel makes comparisons (some critics called them anachronistic comparisons) between the Vietnam War and the Indian Wars. I mention these details to highlight O'Brien's use of this novel as historical "evidence" in his fictional work, *In the Lake of the Woods*, which is also a sometimes confusing mix of "history" and "fiction." As we continue to look at

O'Brien's text, I should note that the "evidence" provided, though I am treating it in a rather straight-forward way, is not necessarily "historically factual."

In yet another "evidence" chapter, a quotation from Thinbill is placed before the following quotations:

> 'We must act with vindictive earnestness against the Sioux, even to their extermination, men, women, and children.'
>
> --General William Tecumseh Sherman
>
> 'Exterminate the whole fraternity of redskins.'
>
> --Nebraska City Press
>
> 'John! John! Oh, John!'
>
> --George Armstrong Custer.(O'Brien 260)

And later in the same chapter a Thinbill quotation is followed with a quotation from an Anonymous British infantryman who wrote after the battles at Lexington and Concord that "[t]hey did not fight us like a regular army, only like savages, behind trees and stone walls, and out of the woods and houses.. . . [The colonists are] as bad as Indians for scalping and cutting the dead men's ears and noses off"(O'Brien 262). Still later in the same chapter, Thinbill's quotation is followed by the statement from General Edward O. Ord: "I have encouraged the troops to capture and root out the Apache by every means, and to hunt them as they would wild animals. This they have done with unrelenting vigor. Since my

last report over two hundred have been killed"(O'Brien 264).

Because Thinbill is the only present-era Native American identified in the text and his words are continually juxtaposed with references to the Indian Wars, some kind of comparison between the events surrounding the Indian Wars in the United States and the Mai Lai massacre must be being made. However, the nature of this comparison is elusive at best. The first important factor is that Thinbill's participation in the Mai Lai action is actually revealed to the reader in chapter 21, "The Nature of the Spirit." It is in that chapter that we learn that Thinbill is Native American, described by the narrator as a Chippewa and later by Lieutenant Calley (who will be court-martialed as a result of his Mai Lai participation) as "Apache" (209). Thinbill is the one participant who articulates his horror at the massacre, saying to John Wade, "Man, I close my eyes, I can't stop seeing . . . Like a butcher shop."(210). Thinbill is also the first participant to be threatened by Calley not to tell. Later Thinbill asks Wade if they should, "You know. Tell somebody. Talk" (217). As the soldiers leave the site of the massacre to set up a perimeter near the coast, Thinbill cryptically speaks the fragment, "The spirit world" (O'Brien 209), and then after Thinbill and Wade have decided they won't tell anyone about the massacre, Thinbill speaks the last lines of the chapter: "I guess that's the right attitude. Laugh it off. Fuck the spirit world"(220). The role of Thinbill, as a Native American, is confusing in

terms of the metaphor of massacre established in O'Brien's text. Thinbill is a participant in the massacre, but he is the first to articulate regret for his participation, the first to be threatened with harm if he doesn't keep silent. It seems important that in a chapter entitled "The Nature of the Spirit" Thinbill's final statement is "Fuck the spirit world."

This comparison between massacres is at its most convoluted in O'Brien's text. One stumbling block I struggle with particularly is Custer's cry, "John! John! Oh, John!" along with the footnoted information that indicates this is some kind of plea for mercy. None of the other quotations from this historical period seem to be designed to elicit sympathy for the white participants in wars against Native Americans. But, at first reading, this often repeated plea by Custer reminds us that at least in this battle the U.S. Military suffered a defeat. Even here, though, an act of colonization is articulated because of the Anglo nature of the name attributed to the unrelenting victors.

In each of the three texts I have examined in terms of the second category, I find that acts of aggression on the part of the U.S. military in the Vietnam War are condemned through their comparison with barbaric acts against Native Americans.[7] Herr's suggestion that we "might as well say that Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along" sounds accurate (Herr 49). As we see the history of American aggression revealed in Vietnam War texts through

these comparisons, American identity is threatened, especially the American tradition of justifying violence through adherence to the frontier myth. As Herr writes, the tradition began when our ancestors found the "New England woods too raw and empty for their peace and filled them up with their own imported devils"(Herr 49).

Reconciliation of Military Loss with American Identity: Signifying Veterans and Indians

As we begin to look at my third category of images in which American soldiers are signified as Indians, I will explore two possibly opposed readings of this move. The more hopeful possibility is that individual healing of psychic wounds suffered in the war can be attained through a process of adopting the subject position of the "other," and that this adoption of a new subject position is articulated in Vietnam War texts by using Native American signs to refer to Vietnam veterans. The other possibility is that texts which portray Vietnam veterans with signs traditionally used to signify Native Americans participate in a fundamentally racist and imperialistic cultural lie. In order to explain how this use of signs can amount to this specific type of cultural lie, I will examine the ways I see the signs working. I hope it will be clear in my analysis that the "Indian" signs used to identify defeated American Vietnam veterans with Native

Americans are not necessarily referential of actual Indians, either historical or contemporary.

Representations of Vietnam veterans as Native Americans may articulate the same kind of national guilt I explored in the second category. This process reveals a disturbing cultural response both to Vietnam veterans and to Native Americans. Both groups (and anyone who would belong to both groups) are perceived as "other." Americans have long relied on a providential view of history to justify our forays into violence. Americans believe that America has God's plan for its success on its side. Up until the Vietnam War, United States victories supported this belief. The United States went to wars believing itself to be on the right side, and, when the military returned victorious, cultural belief in moral/military rightness was confirmed. This relatively simple description of how the United States maintains its national identity is borne out in the way that the frontier myth gets repeated to generations of potential American soldiers, who reenact the myth through United States victories. The uncontested truth is that we did not win in Vietnam, and this is a "truth" that has been profoundly damaging to American culture.

As we begin to look at films and books in which Vietnam veterans are signified as Native Americans, we must consider the following possibility. American culture did not have any signs in its arsenal to create meaning out of

defeat. But the culture did have the ability to borrow signs from a group which was defeated and then incorporated into American history as a part of America itself: Native Americans. When the United States lost, American culture had to make the losers into Indians because that is one sign the culture possessed to signify loss (the thing that keeps a group from being heroic) and otherness incorporated (the thing that makes up for the loss of heroism).

In an astounding number of texts dealing with the American experience in the Vietnam War and its aftermath, the soldier or veteran becomes Indian-like. In some texts, like Caputo's *Indian Country* (which I will examine closely in Chapter Four) this "becoming" is an overt part of the plotting of the text, but in many, many others the becoming happens more subtly. In the process of discussing the widely varied effects and political implications of this category, I will provide many examples. The process by which Vietnam veterans become Indians will emerge not as a narrative oddity but as a fundamental and deeply hidden thought process--a secret (culturally accepted and understood) that everyone knows but no one speaks aloud.

In his detailed and complex analysis of *The Deer Hunter*, Robin Wood makes an important observation applicable to this study. He sees most Hollywood films about Vietnam as repressing political analysis "and the possibility that it might be regarded as a war of American aggression/

imperialism [is] never permitted to surface"(271-2). One of the ways that Hollywood films mask American motives in Vietnam is by focusing on individual soldiers' struggles with their own identities. I will examine a group of films which identify (at some point) the Vietnam veteran with an Indian subjectivity, including *Billy Jack* (1971), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *First Blood* (1982), and *Missing in Action* (1984).

"Billy Jack . . . looks like a cowboy, but is always referred to as an Indian" (Katzman 8). The title character of *Billy Jack* (Tom Laughlin) is both a "half-breed" and a Vietnam veteran who manages to use his "Indian" intuition and Green Beret training to protect a school teacher and her multi-ethnic freedom school students from local bigots and a corrupt sheriff. The first scene of the movie, in which the title character emerges on horseback from the forest, establishes his status as a half-breed war hero who hated the war. He catches local government officials and police officers poaching wild mustangs and tells them, "When a policeman breaks the law there isn't any law, just a fight for survival." That the men are poaching mustangs seems to be an affront to Billy Jack's "Indian-ness." His statement that law becomes absent in the face of this affront prepares us for the re-enactment/parody of a jungle warfare battle which occurs a few scenes later in the city park. Billy Jack "goes berserk" (his words) in the icecream store, experiences a mystical vision, realizes that someone has

tampered with his vehicle, and, after removing his boots and socks, walks out into the park. Whether or not Indians have an innate ability to walk more quietly than other people, an astonishing number of texts refer to the ability of Vietnam veterans to do so. When this happens, the veteran is usually barefoot, wearing only socks, or wearing moccasins.[8]

As Billy Jack walks into the park, townsmen step out from behind the trees, completely invisible until they move deliberately into sight (like the Viet Cong, or like Indians?),[9] and surround him. As Billy Jack adopts a karate stance, one of the townsmen asks, "You think those Green Beret karate tricks are going to help you with all these boys?" Billy Jack replies that he has no choice, and the battlecry is sounded, "Kill that Indian son-of-a-bitch!" The movie tells us that Billy Jack is outcast because of his status as an Indian and as a Green Beret and that when he is most threatened, he must rely on both his Indianness and his military training for survival. In fact to the townsmen the aspects of his subject position resulting from being Indian and from being veteran seem to be one and the same. In *Billy Jack*, the veteran is ultimately victorious in his attempt to rid his local community of corruption, perhaps because of his ability to rely on his Indian heritage to accept his defeated status as a Vietnam veteran.

In *The Deer Hunter* we see three Ukrainian-American steel-workers journey together from a pre-war wedding and hunting trip, through a POW camp

escape, and into the veteran experience where Nick (Christopher Walken) has lost his life, Steven (John Savage) has lost his legs, and Mike (Robert De Niro) has lost his quest to bring his friend home from the war. At the outset of the film, Mike sees sundogs in the sky and says, "Sundogs. A blessing on the hunter sent by the great wolf to his children. It's an old Indian thing." They decide to go on "one great fucking hunting trip tonight." On the way to their hunting trip, they sing this song about Geronimo. "Look out below. Look out below. Geronimo. Geronimo." Mike is the character most aware of an Indian culture before he goes to Vietnam. His appreciation of sundogs as a blessing is one not shared by his companions who refer to an Indian heritage only in their drunken reference to Geronimo.

Later in the film, Mike manages to free Steven, Nick, and himself from a POW camp where they were forced to play Russian roulette. After escaping, Mike, Nick, and Steven float down the river wearing headbands. Of course other groups besides Native Americans wear headbands, and the climate in Vietnam is hot enough to warrant the use of some article of clothing to keep the sweat out of one's eyes. In any case, wearing a headband is an unambiguous identifier of individuals outside the dominant culture, and, like the ability to walk quietly, wearing a headband is often associated in our culture with "Indian-ness."

Mike loses track of his buddies after their escape. He returns home where

there is a welcome-home party, but Mike can't make himself go. Hellmann describes Michael aptly as "[l]iving on the outer edge of the town in a trailer, he is a part of the community, and yet is clearly separated from it by his alienation from its corruption and by his strict adherence to a personal code closely associated with the uncorrupted wilderness sand its original inhabitants" (Hellmann, "Vietnam" 60). Mike feels "a lot of distance" when he returns from Vietnam, and he goes on the movie's second deer hunt, but this time he has the deer in his sights but doesn't shoot, saying, "Okay." The deer walks off, and Mike yells, "Okay." His voice echoes back to him over the sound of a waterfall. He has become closer to nature and further away from "civilization." Again, there is no inherent connection between an ability to commune with nature and being Indian-like; however, this becomes another sign that associates Vietnam veterans with an Indian subjectivity. Mike, while he loses his quest to bring Nick home from the war, is the character who best manages to survive his war experience. His relative success is aligned in the text of the film with his ability to adopt "Indian" ways.

In *First Blood*, John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone), an ex-Green Beret, ex-POW, goes on a rampage in a small town after being harassed and arrested as a vagrant. After a chase scene wherein Rambo proves that he has now become quite capable of winning a jungle/forest war in which he is far outnumbered,

Colonel Samuel Trautman (Richard Crenna) tells the sheriff that Rambo is well equipped to win the war against local law enforcement officials. After causing havoc in the police station, Rambo retreats into the trees -- the veteran returns to the jungle, where he has somehow become more at home -- and disappears. We see Rambo make himself a poncho and headband out of a piece of tarp. The posse is following him and dehumanizing him by threatening to make a bearskin rug out of him when he is caught. As we follow Rambo and the pursuing posse through the woods, it is clear that Rambo knows what he is doing. He moves silently -- like Billy Jack. Nature is Rambo's helper; he is able to kill the gun wielding cop in the helicopter by throwing a rock at the windshield. It rains. Thunder and lightening create weather Rambo can work in to his advantage. He is able to hurt almost every member of the posse. Rick Berg notes, "In good shaman fashion, we have stolen, if not the magic of our enemy, at least his signs. Take John Rambo. In *First Blood*, after his escape from jail, he runs off to the forest, Indian country, where, almost always unseen, he leads the posse a merry chase" (Berg 62).

Hellmann locates the "identification of the veteran with traditional victims of American exclusion" as an underlying motif of *First Blood* (Rambo's Vietnam 147). "In the post-Vietnam American forest to which Rambo has had to flee," he is "driven into positions that iconographically identify him with the

Vietcong and Native American against U.S. society"(Hellmann, Rambo's Vietnam 147). After the posse uses a grenade launcher to bury Rambo in a cave, Rambo "completes his symbolic transformation into a Vietcong, escaping through a tunnel maze full of rats"(Hellmann, Rambo's Vietnam 147). "Bare-chested, with a band of cloth about his head and shoulder-length hair, Rambo comes back to the town an avenging Apache"(Hellmann, Rambo's Vietnam 148). During the final shoot out, Sheriff Teasle (Brian Dennehy) becomes a sniper on the top of the police station threatening Rambo's life while Rambo blows up a gunshop called the Outpost.[10]

Missing in Action is the story of James Braddock (Chuck Norris), a special forces ex-POW, who, disgusted with bureaucracy, undertakes a one-man mission back into Vietnam to rescue remaining POWs. This veteran has also become adept at jungle warfare. *Missing in Action* provides us with a new end to the war. This time the veteran gets to win. Braddock is victorious, as we see when the chase (finally) ends with Braddock emerging out of the water and machine-gunning in slow motion, having somewhere (almost mystically) gained his Indian-like headband, which wasn't there in the preceding shot of Braddock. Gibson notes in *Warrior Dreams* that many Hollywood directors saw themselves as modern mythologists, including Joseph Zito, director of the *Missing in Action* films. Zito "thought of Vietnam as an imaginary land, the perfect setting for

new Cowboy-and-Indian movies" (Gibson 28-29). In these representations we see the veteran returned to the jungle, his rightful place, where he will look for what America lost, continuing the fight until he gets it right; however, his status has changed from cowboy to Indian.

This portrayal of Vietnam veterans as Native Americans has little historical reference to actual veterans or to actual American Indians. This representation serves the function of a system of apologetics on two fronts: 1) we get to win the war now (like the one that had already been won against Native Americans); and 2) now we get to apologize to veterans and Indians without really seeming to do so by presenting one positive, noble, victorious image representing both groups. However, neither group won, and neither group was really being offered anything like a thank-you, a congratulations, or an apology. These movie portrayals of Vietnam veterans capitalize on the fearful images of their anger and insanity, strangely often combined with a fake, apologetic tone which allows for a healing of "national wounds" when the veteran goes back to Vietnam, or to the Old West in *Billy Jack*, or to the "jungle/forest" in *First Blood*, to try again until he gets it right. *First Blood* and *Missing in Action* tell us that we lost the war because we lacked will and moral fiber. *Billy Jack* and *The Deerhunter* tell us that we lost because we were already lost, "a morally and spiritually confused power" (Bowen 231). We see

many movies portraying the negative way veterans were treated upon their return home, but we can see Hollywood motives that are ultimately corrupt and bankrupt--portraying negative treatment of stereotypical Vietnam veterans for the explicit purpose of creating nationalistic, flag-waving tendencies.

I have examined a group of celluloid texts so far which create a complex comparison between Vietnam veterans and Native Americans.

> The conservative vision of America is declared to have been revealed by the Vietnam War to be a lie, and Rambo, the returned Green Beret who was created to be the New Frontier hero, symbolically purges Reagan's 'city on a hill' from the viewer's consciousness by returning as an avenging Vietcong who was really Geronimo all along. (Hellmann, Rambo's Vietnam 148)

Perhaps, however, the way Hollywood uses these signs is not the only way to use them. A reading in dialectical opposition to the one I have been recounting above can be made in terms of some texts, especially those in which the veteran "adopts" or attempts to adopt a hybrid subjectivity and allows himself to enact a redefinition of both terms. In some texts, then, the conflation of "Indian-ness" and "veteran-ness" results in a positive decision not to accept silent, stoic, native defeat wholecloth but rather results in a healing and powerful hybridization (or double-ness) wherein the veteran accepts and celebrates his position as "other."

However, as I provide examples of places where this potentially positive act of hybridization through adoption takes place, we should keep in mind that the other potential --the potential for denial of national culpability, enacted through a fundamentally racist use of signifiers -- remains. We cannot allow this new reading to stand on its own.

In Jim Harrison's *A Good Day to Die*, neither the non-veteran narrator nor his veteran companion, Tim, are really Indians. However, the narrator seems to be searching for a spiritual release which he finds in an adopted "Indian-ness." The narrator dreams of meeting Chief Joseph but realizes, "He clearly wouldn't like me and I didn't like him very much either. I could redeem myself in his eyes easily enough by blowing up dams. Fish were a staple for the Nez Perce"(143). It isn't made clear in the narrative why the narrator doesn't like Chief Joseph, but the reciprocal dislike is easy enough to imagine. The narrator is often indecisive, drunken, and misguided, a sympathetic character, but not very likeable. He sees a need for a redemption and imagines that he can gain it by blowing up a dam for the spirit or memory of Chief Joseph. But the narrator has taken Tim, the scarred and defeated Vietnam veteran, along with him on his journey. What is the connection?

As the unnamed narrator and Tim travel closer to the climax of their adventurous journey to blow up a dam, the narrator day-dreams of atrocities:

> Maybe Joseph stopped to water his thousand horses here while the Cavalry from Fort Fizzle were in pursuit. Fort Fizzle! The actual name. Look it up. Soldiers from Fort Fizzle killed fifty of our wives and children. It couldn't compete with Wounded Knee but then it is difficult to see atrocities racing neck and neck for the atrocity championship.(Harrison 149)

At this point in the narrative, the narrator is presenting his own chain of thoughts, but his language combines his own subjectivity with that of Chief Joseph -- "our" wives and children are killed. In fact, coming as it does after a rare direct address to the reader when the narrator tells us to "look it up" for ourselves, the use of the word "our" might include the readers as well.

As the narrator, Tim, and Sylvia begin to build the fertilizer bomb to blow up the dam, the narrator tells us,

> Sylvia brushed back our hair and made pig tails with rubber bands from her purse partly because we didn't want the hair blown into our faces by the wind and partly because we decided to be Indians. She drew large rings around our eyes and mouths with lipstick and three vertical streaks on our cheeks down to our chins. We were very happy. (Harrison 167)

The narrator identifies two reasons for donning an "Indian" costume. The first

reason is the costume's use value. Pigtails will keep their hair out of their faces. But there is also a symbolic value to the costume. The narrator and Tim decide "to be" Indians. For the narrator, dressing as an Indian is the same as "being" an Indian. The symbolic transformation to an Indian state is necessary for the narrator because the transformation of the self effects a transformation of the actions they are preparing to take. In the narrator's mind, Indians have a greater right to blow up the dam.

For my current study, however, Tim's potential transformation to an Indian subject position seems more interesting. Perhaps if the veteran can establish a positive identity by adopting the subjectivity of the "other," he can escape the culturally assigned role of loser/outcast. Of course the subjectivity that is being adopted is also "outcast" but the process of **choosing** that position rather than being assigned that position has power in it. In this way we might begin to understand why Vietnam veteran characters might choose to replace their "other" status with a different status with negative connotations for the culture at large. In any case, Tim is unable to affect this reversal. The narrator tells us that both he and Tim "giggled at how absurd our painted faces looked and Sylvia wanted to touch them up as it had begun to rain again and when we wiped the water from our eyes we smeared the lipstick. But Tim jogged down to the dam and I stayed just long enough to get my make-up corrected" (Harrison

169). The narrator is willing to work to "adopt" fully his Indian costume, but Tim continues to subscribe to "[t]he code of the . . . West. . . . And Tim's 'you'll never take me alive' attitude fit into the same code which was artificially inseminated a hundred times a year by the movies" (Harrison 149). Tim refused to break out of the Old West code presented to him in movies as a youth and unquestioningly accepted by him as a soldier.

Because he is unable to change from a cowboy to an Indian, Tim dies in the blast of the bomb. We learn that what remains of Tim's Indian costume almost allows the narrator to retrieve his body when the narrator tells us,

> I propped Tim against a rock and wrapped my hand around his collar and started pulling but his shirt ripped. Then I grabbed him by the pig tail and made some progress but the water had risen to my knees and I could see that the whole dam was on the verge of giving way just as we had planned. (Harrison 171-2)

But Tim is already dead at this point. In his death, what remains of his Indian makeup is washed clean by the rain. Ironically, while part of his Indian "costume" (the pigtail) could have saved him, it is his cowboy costume that does him in. The narrator sees him fall as he tried to run away from the blast "in those gaudy blue cowboy boots" (Harrison 172). As Sylvia and the narrator drive away from the racing water, leaving Tim's white, American, cowboy-booted

body behind, the narrator catches a glimpse of his own face in the rearview mirror "with the tribal stripes still intact" (Harrison 172). The Indian lives and the cowboy dies, creating a reversal of the historical meaning of the title, *A Good Day to Die* which was spoken by an Indian.[11]

The representation of Vietnam veterans with signs traditionally associated with Indians works powerfully in a variety of texts. For example, James Thayer's 1995 novel *White Star* falls solidly within the genre of blood-and-guts thriller. The novel contains graphic descriptions of physical wounds suffered by various characters, but even more pronounced is the detail with which the narrative describes exactly how to use technology to defeat one's enemies. My copy is a Pocket Star Books mass-produced paperback with a shiny metallic silver cover and a second, inside cover containing a high resolution double-exposure photograph. One exposure depicts a man in jungle fatigues and face paint aiming a sniper's rifle at the viewer, and the other exposure depicts a full-length shot of the same man in the red crosshairs of a gunsight. This novel is the story of a present-day Vietnam veteran who has spent the years since the war attempting to forget his experiences as the most talented and deadly sniper in world history. As an Assistant United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, the hero Owen Gray has succeeded in that mission to forget until Russian Nikolai Trusov (the second deadliest sniper in the world) comes looking

to settle an old score that began in Vietnam when Trusov, disguised as an American soldier, but working to train Viet Cong snipers, became what Gray thought was his accidental, 97th (and never reported) kill. The novel progresses (as one might imagine) with Trusov chasing Gray back to his childhood home in the mountains of Idaho for a battle which duplicates the two snipers' original confrontation.

Gray, forced to pick up a sniper's rifle after decades of escape from his past, is tricked by Trusov into killing Mrs. Orlando, Gray's children's Haitian nanny. In his moral agony, he retreats to Idaho where the narrator recounts an important detail from Gray's youth. "When he was twelve years old, Gray had made tobacco pipes out of syringa stems, using beetle grubs to eat through the pith to hollow the stems just as Chief Joseph had. . . . Gray had spent his youth studying the Nez Perce and Shoshone and Kootenai" (Thayer 138). It is at the moment when he most strongly remembers his Vietnam War experience that Gray recalls what I am terming his adopted Indian identity. Up to this point in the narrative, we have only learned about Gray's Vietnam war experience through the voice of the narrator and from other characters who uncover information by searching through Gray's military records, but from this point on Gray begins to articulate his memories of the Vietnam War and his skill as a sniper.

As Gray makes his transformation into an Indian-like state, the narrative often uses language and refers to situations which suggest that Gray is "at one" with nature. The first of these articulations occurs as Gray converses with a coyote which begs for a piece of beef jerky from the other side of a stream Gray is sitting beside. Gray says to the coyote, "When I was on a mission in Vietnam I would be so in tune with the terrain that I would merge with it. I'd become a part of the soil and trees and bush" and "I was so plugged into the bush that I lost my separate identity. I shared an awareness with the ground and all that was on it" (Thayer 148). Gray is clearly relearning that ability to be part of nature as he speaks with a coyote, but he is still apparently struggling with his "separate identity" because after his conversation with the coyote, Gray says, "This is the absolute nadir of my existence . . . Talking to a coyote. . . . Whining to a coyote. The absolute nadir"(Thayer 147). As he gradually comes to realize that becoming one with the terrain is the only way to ensure his survival, Gray reminds us of his childhood game of pretending to be an Indian when he tells another character, "I'm learning the terrain. Or relearning it, as I played a lot here as a kid" (Thayer 260). Whereas being an Indian was child's play to the youthful Gray, it gradually becomes serious business as the novel progresses. A few pages later we see Gray at another intermediary point in his "becoming" when he takes off his shoes and "slid[es] his stockinged feet along soundlessly" in an

attempt to sneak up on Trusov (Thayer 267).

As Gray begins his final encounter with Trusov, the transformation is complete. The narrator tells us, "Noise is the exception in the wilderness. Silence is standard. Gray moved along the creek with unearthly quiet. . . . He was imitating a fox's walk" (Thayer 288). And a page later, "He was a coyote" (Thayer 289). As Gray walks along, having become the coyote he was embarrassed to have spoken to earlier in the novel, he is wearing "buckskin moccasins that were almost as quiet as bare feet" (290). Here again it is the veteran's ability to adopt an "Indian" way that ensures his survival, both in Vietnam and back home when his Vietnam experiences are re-lived in various ways.

Conclusion

The sheer number of examples indicates that in his post-war experience, the American Vietnam veteran is often conceived as being Indian-like. In some ways, this conflation of signs seems to be almost a justification for defeat. After all, Indians are "supposed" to lose, right? However, in many texts it seems that it is the act of adopting an Indian-like identity that saves the veteran. A significant

problem in Harrison's and Thayer's texts (as well as the films I've discussed in terms of the third category) is that these "veteran/Indians" have no community. None of these texts make mention of anything that could be considered a tribe or community to which the veteran belongs. The aloneness that each of these veterans experiences amounts to a rugged individualism more associated with a cowboy identity than an Indian one.

In the next chapter, as I examine Philip Caputo's *Indian Country* in greater detail, the relationship between Native American identity in American history and Vietnam veterans continues to be a complex and interesting one. The difficult critical question is how does this conflation of subjectivities work to create meaning in our culture?

Because of the pervasiveness of the image of the Vietnam veteran adopting a Native American subject position in popular literature and film, and because of the overwhelming evidence of the American culture's identification with and use of the "cowboy and Indian" metaphor, we must look beyond the experiences of the individual characters in these texts to account for the veteran's transformation from cowboy to Indian. The deeply ingrained notion in American culture of a providential view of history necessitates the notion of victory for the American military. We always win our wars, and we win them because we are Americans, and by definition, right. Also deeply ingrained in the

American psyche is the notion that the frontier hero gains hero status by taming the frontier. This duo of the frontier hero and the providential view of history is invoked during the Vietnam era by John F. Kennedy, movies like *The Green Berets*, and a multitude of other cultural forces.

When the United States lost the Vietnam War, American cultural identity was threatened. The notion of losing a military engagement was not reconcilable with the providential view of history and the frontier myth. Cultural signifiers had to be chosen which could stand for Vietnam veterans without destroying cultural notions of American history by demolishing the fundamentally important notions of providence and frontier. The signs American culture chose to use to articulate defeated warriors were those which often signify Native American identity. In this way, post-Vietnam, American culture has "reddened the hearts and minds" of its Vietnam veterans.

Notes to Chapter Three

1. In the overwhelming majority of American literature on the Vietnam War, there is little distinction made between individual Vietnamese citizens based on their civilian or soldier status, or based on whether their political sympathies are with the North or the South. I rarely distinguish between Vietnamese soldiers and civilians in this chapter, not because I am insensitive to these issues but because literary depictions of "Vietnamese" characters are generally too totalizing to warrant a distinction in the literary interpretation of those characters.

2. See Evelyn Cobley's "Violence and Sacrifice in Modern War Narratives" for a discussion of blood guilt in Vietnam War texts. She argues that "Vietnam narratives . . . express a blood-guiltiness that remained unacknowledged and repressed in First World War accounts" (92).

3. Hellmann notes that Kennedy linked the frontiersmen who "'subdued a continent and wrested a civilization from the wilderness' to a 'new group of vigorous young Americans' who were protecting freedom 'today, in our time, in the jungles of Asia and on the borders of Europe'" (Hellmann, *American Myth* 44). The Green Beret is the culmination of this combination of frontiersman and soldier. "Kennedy's well-publicized interest in the Special Forces made them extensions of the commander-in-chief" (Hellmann, *American Myth* 45).

4. Hellmann identifies Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* and Ron Kovik's *Born on the Fourth of July* as novels in which Kennedy affirms for the protagonists that they should "reject their present society for the frontier past" and "follow the example of Kennedy himself, who has rejected the elderly complacency of Eisenhower and returned to the frontier virtues of the activist presidents" (Hellmann, *American Myth* 108).

5. A 1995 article in *The Dallas Morning News* reminds us that "[i]t has been 27 years since John Wayne, Daive Janssen, Jim Hutton, and Aldo Ray tried to drive a bayonet through the mushrooming anti-Vietnam War movement. Their legacy is the lone major Hollywood film to champion a fight to the death against communism in Southeast Asia" (Bark). The article refers, of course, to *The Green Berets*. Bark goes on to emphasize the ironic presentation of the 1978 best-picture Oscar to *The Deer Hunter* by John Wayne. "A gaunt and cancer-ridden Mr. Wayne lived to present the 1978 best-picture Oscar to *The Deer Hunter*, which portrayed the Vietnam War as a steamrolling destroyer of the

young Americans sent to fight it. The symmetry was both macabre and appropriate. Near death's door, the embodiment of a gung-ho war movies handed a trophy to *Deer Hunter* director Michael Cimino after mispronouncing his surname 'Chipino.' Again, it all fit" (Bark).

6. Uchmanowicz writes that following the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) in 1934, "many disempowered younger Indians, especially men, desperately practiced 'patriotism' in a manner common to most colonial systems" creating a situation in which Indians were "'allowed' to serve in the military of their oppressors, fighting and dying as mercenaries and in disproportionate numbers (usually against other peoples of color) during the Second World War, Korea, and Vietnam" (Uchmanowicz 40).

7. I have discussed no films in relation to the second category; however, several films from the early 1970s made implicit comparisons between Indian Wars and the Vietnam War. Martin identifies *Little Big Man* (1970) as having "obvious resonances for a public that had grown uneasy with the Vietnam War, particularly after having witnessed burning Vietnamese villages on nightly television news broadcasts" (104). Martin further makes comparisons between *Chato's Land* (1972) and *Ulzana's Raid* (1972) and the situation in Vietnam because in these films "the Indians become a symbolic Viet Cong, seeking revenge on a murderously arrogant frontier community" (104).

8. This is a particularly strange image to associate with Vietnam veterans since the health of a soldier's feet was a serious issue in Vietnam. The climate of Vietnam combined with the amount of walking a typical combat soldier did in Vietnam made "foot rot" a danger. The solution to these problems was certainly **not** going barefoot or wearing moccasins in the jungles of Vietnam.

9. Here I am more interested in the character of Billy Jack himself; however, this scene could be read as an interesting reversal of other early 1970s films like *Chato's Land* and *Ulzana's Raid* where it is Native Americans who remind viewers of Viet Cong.

10. Rick Berg notes that in the 1985 sequel to *First Blood, Rambo: First Blood Part II*, Rambo returns to Vietnam armed with a bow and arrows. "The Indian (like Billy Jack, Rambo is both a Green Beret and part Native American) is returned to 'Indian country,' the legendary bad bush where Charlie, in all his invisibility, once ran free, and where he again, disguised as John Rambo, will wreak destruction"(Berg 62).

11. Another novel which creates a similar reversal of this utterance is Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Buffalo Afternoon*. White protagonist Pete Bravado suffers from Post Truamatic Stress Disorder and is suicidal for much of the latter half of the novel. He repeatedly thinks, "This is a good day to die" (Schaeffer 452, 494). See Uchmanowics's "Vanishing Vietnam" for an interesting discussion of related racial and ethnic reversals in Schaeffer's novel.

CHAPTER FOUR

Exploring Christian Starkmann's Transformation in Philip Caputo's *Indian Country*

The cultural phenomenon of Vietnam veterans being articulated in ways traditionally associated with Native Americans lies at the heart of my understanding of the Vietnam War's impact on American culture. In Chapter Three, I explored several texts in which Indian signifiers come into play to articulate various elements of the American experience in the Vietnam War and its aftermath. The Vietnam war becomes an historical moment in which the frontier myth is threatened. This threat is at its most obvious when texts make clear the similarities between the Vietnam War and the and Indian wars. That the atrocities committed in both wars are directly attributable to a mass cultural adherence to the values articulated in the frontier myth reveals a long-lasting and perhaps inescapable history of racism.

In many works of Vietnam War literature a fictional veteran, in the process of being articulated in ways traditionally associated with representations of Native Americans, is placed in a role that doubly represents his status as a loser and an outcast. However, in some cases the dramatic terror of the Vietnam War experience creates a situation in which the Vietnam veteran is able to fully ascertain the distinction between myth and history. At that moment it becomes

possible for the character to overcome the interpellating effects of the myth and speak for himself in ways that amount to a conscious adoption of a different social position and often a different ethnic identity. In this way some Vietnam veterans choose to adopt a Native American identity in a way that transcends a culturally assigned "subject position" and becomes both a metaphorical and an actual shift in identity.

My aim in this chapter is to explore one text, Phillip Caputo's *Indian Country*, as an example of the kinds of phenomena that I have laid out in the previous chapter. *Indian Country* is the story of Christian Starkmann who goes to Vietnam because his childhood friend, Bonny George St. Germaine, an Ojibwa Indian, gets drafted. While in Vietnam, during a firefight, a confused Christian calls in an air strike but mis-speaks the coordinates, resulting in the death by napalm of Bonny George. Most of the novel occurs in the present day as Christian struggles to remember this occurrence and to come to terms with the trauma he experienced in the war and which still haunts him. The psychological ailment Christian suffers from is often associated with Vietnam veterans, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Christian's journey is metaphorically linked throughout the novel with competing images of cowboy-ness and Indian-ness. I want to use this novel to show how Christian Starkmann overcomes both his psychological injuries suffered in the Vietnam War and the limiting position

with which he was culturally inscribed as a result of the frontier myth in his postwar experience. In order to do this I will explore 1) what the novel tells us about the frontier myth; 2) what the novel tells us about Indian identity; and 3) what the novel tells us about the individual's ability to dictate his/her own identity.

The Frontier Myth in *Indian Country*

The novel provides several passages in which Christian Starkmann is referred to in ways that define him as a cowboy and (sometimes) as a frontiersman. These passages are treated rather negatively by the narrator and by other characters, especially Christian's wife, June, and her friend, Sandy. Passages in which Christian is cast as a cowboy generally focus on the violence that runs just beneath the surface of Christian's character. The passages in which Christian is figured as a cowboy almost always focus on the fact that he is isolated and potentially violent, with the isolation feeding the violence and vice versa. Fairly early in the novel, we learn that Christian and his family (wife June, stepdaughter Lisa, and daughter Christine) live in the middle of nowhere "like some pioneer family" (Caputo 113). This comparison between Christian's family and frontier families is made in a passage of free indirect discourse from

June's perspective. June's comparison is based on the isolation of the family home it's lack of technological comforts. In this instance, the comparison is clearly not one which flatters Christian's choice of living place.

The idea that the family lives without technological comforts, "except for the demand generator that supplied electricity and the well that gave them running water," alerts readers to the fact that a substantial shift has occurred since the inception of the frontier myth (Caputo 113). In Chapter Three I define the frontier hero as being gifted with the specific abilities of physical toughness and technological superiority. The cultural type of the frontier hero has become corrupt in the post-Vietnam era (possibly the image was always corrupt), because Christian is only partially enacting the frontier myth at this point. He is already yearning to cross over into the reservation land which borders his isolated property.

Christian is described in a way that establishes his identity as a cowboy in a passage recounting his marriage to June. He wore "highly polished cowboy boots, well-pressed jeans, a white shirt beneath a western-style leather jacket: a style of dress June had laughingly described as 'high-hick'" (Caputo 192). Here June, despite her attraction to what is often referred to by her and her friend, Sandy, as Christian's "Gary Cooper" persona, apparently views his cowboy identity both as a specific "costume" and as a potentially ludicrous one. June

views Christian's cowboy identity as a masquerade; though, as we will see later, June is the character in the novel who most consistently manages to shift identities in significant and positive ways. Therefore, we should interpret June's perception of Christian's cowboy costuming as ludicrous as being connected to the specific type of character Christian's costume implies rather than to the general act of playing a role. As we will see later, for June, playing a role implies more than a pretend game; rather, it is a method by which the novel teaches us that an individual can actually change his/her identity.

June and Sandy recognize something inherently unhealthy in Christian's cowboy identity. Sandy continually refers to Christian as the "reincarnation of Gary Cooper" because of his monosyllabic responses to any attempt at conversation, "Yup. Nope" (Caputo 113). Sandy also sympathizes with June, saying, "It must get pretty frustrating, living in the boondocks with Gary Cooper" (Caputo 228). The comparison between Christian and Gary Cooper has the potential for being a positive one. After all, Cooper is the hero of his films, generally reigning victorious over his foes. In fact, his ability to be the hero is connected to his stoic silence, almost as if his strength is dependent upon his isolation from community. For Sandy, however, Christian's similarity to Cooper is obviously not based on positive aspects of his identity, perhaps because the image of "cowboy" is not traceable past the era of Gary Cooper. Gary Cooper is

not a cowboy but a person playing a role. The implicit message here is that there are no "real" cowboys, only people who pretend to be cowboys. For June and Sandy, Christian's use of the dead or dying image of a cowboy to justify his stoic silence and isolation from community is unhealthy.

Christian reminds Sandy

> of those old westerns when two cowboys ride into a canyon, and the one cowboy says, 'Sure is quiet, Tex,' and the second cowboy says, 'Sure is, Jake.' Two seconds later, all hell breaks loose. That's how he scares me. I get this feeling that he's going to do something any second. (Caputo 229)

Here Sandy views Christian's silence as a sign of violence barely held in check. Neither June nor Sandy values the Frontier myth or its typical cowboy hero. One reason for this lack of value is that Christian (and his fellow Vietnam veterans) do not share victory with their frontier hero counterparts. In defeat, the potential violence of the traditional, silent, masculine hero is revealed. At the point of defeat, the possibility emerges that the traditional American hero was always corrupt. The Vietnam War reveals the frontier myth to be corrupt, and at that moment of revelation there is the potential for the myth to crumble, making history fully visible. During the novel's present moment, the quiet, brooding "strength" of the traditional hero's persona reveals itself as violence just barely

held in check and ready to spill out on anyone who can be defeated, the potential fight occurring for the sole purpose of re-establishing the hero's heroism.

June certainly struggles with Christian's silence, even when she does not seem to connect it with physical violence. During one argument, June says to Christian, "How about an answer, Chris? How about a few words from Gary Cooper?" (Caputo 233). In this statement, June articulates a difference between Christian and the cowboy persona she sees him enacting at the moment. She asks Christian for an answer but expects the words to come from "Gary Cooper." Or, more accurately, June knows that, in his Gary-Cooper-incarnation, Christian is unlikely to speak at all, let alone respond in what she will recognize as a communicative way to her question. Later in this chapter I will discuss June's consistent ability to recognize that Christian's self is composed, at times, of another identity. In addition, June recognizes what might (especially when Christian descends deep into a crazed state) be considered schizophrenia, not only as an altered and "healable" state but also as a real, legitimate way of dealing with one's material existence.

As Christian descends deeper and deeper into his psychological illness, June watches him clean his guns on a daily basis, "as if he were eager for some John Wayne shootout" (Caputo 309). Here, as in the "Gary Cooper" passages, Christian's illness is not connected generally to the fact that he is struggling to

come to terms with his identity, but that he is enacting a specifically "cowboy" identity. The fact that Christian is cleaning his guns regularly, signals (correctly) to June that Christian is on the brink of a dangerously violent outburst. The psychic space Christian is occupying in these moments is likened, by June and by the narrator, to a cowboy-like mentality, embodied in the text by the reference to a "John Wayne shootout." Despite the complexity and prevalence of the John Wayne syndrome for Vietnam veterans, the fundamental marker of it for June is Christian's potential for the violent destruction of himself, his family, and others.

According to June's prediction, after the repeated gun-cleaning, Christian barricades himself on their property in a desperate attempt to end his own life by engaging in a firefight with local law enforcement. June comes to think of the incident as "Starkmann's Last Stand," an important and interesting linguistic copy of Custer's Last Stand. The cultural existence of the "myth" that we know as Custer's Last Stand is discussed in detail by Slotkin. Ironically, "Starkmann's Last Stand" may have been the most fortunate action Christian could have taken, as it is at this point in the novel when Christian's "Indian-ness" begins to emerge.

In addition to portraying the "cowboy" aspects of Christian's identity in quite a negative light, the novel provides other clues that the frontier myth and the heroes it propagates are outdated and morally bankrupt. One of these clues is that June hates country music. We learn that June "hated the country music that

monopolized the airwaves up here. Piss-and-moan music, she called it -- anthems of self-pity, manufactured sorrow, and sentimental hog-wash churned out by the electronic studios of Nashville" (Caputo 331). Certainly country music has become the cultural property of groups other than "cowboys" (if it was ever their property in the first place). But it is also true that the country music industry might be one of the last remaining institution in which the cowboy is still highly visible in our culture. As such, given her experiences with her husband, it is unsurprising that June would dislike it. June articulates her dislike clearly and aptly. What remains in our culture, and in the world of the novel, of cowboy culture is self-pitying, obviously manufactured "hogwash." The notion that country music's sentiments are manufactured highlights June's belief, and the novel's message, that the frontier ideology, at least as it is manifested in cowboy-ness is outdated. No longer does it seem plausible that the stoic silence that only thinly veils the violence of the traditional Western hero should be connected to twisted, romantic visions of the sympathetic sorrow the "hero" feels as a result of his geographical isolation.

Another important way that the novel indicates its view of the frontier myth is in its portrayal of one of the families that June visits in the course of her job as a social worker. It is the family of a woman whose husband has left her (though the woman refuses to accept this fact and speaks of him as if he is still

present). During one visit, a bear reaches in a kitchen window to steal a pie and in the ensuing chaos, June kills the bear with the absent husband's hunting rifle that hangs above the fireplace "Davy Crockett style" (169). The fear the family experiences as a result of the bear's appearance momentarily explodes the family's collective acceptance of the myth that the father is still present. For the moment, the family is aware that their "hero" is absent.

But June restores order by killing the bear, an act for which she feels inexplicable guilt. As she drives away "[s]he could not think of a single commandment or ordinance she had broken; and yet, she swore she saw a judgment in the spectral eyes that glowed in the headlights, as if she had violated a law after all, an unwritten one" (Caputo 182). Of course, one of the unwritten laws June has broken is to enter briefly into the dysfunctional family and articulate its dysfunction to all the participants by taking on the traditional masculine role of hunter/protector. June's immediate feeling of guilt is probably more accurately connected to her own linking of Christian with the image of a bear. Nevertheless, in the course of this scene, the novel manages to provide one more instance in which the traditional frontier family is not working. To this point I have been discussing the frontier hero as an isolated (presumably unattached) individual, but this passage deals with the corruption of the frontier family unit. The lesson here is one taught in many western films -- the solitary,

silent frontier hero can only function alone. Because of this need to be alone, the male figurehead of the frontier family must leave his family to go in search of the next frontier.

When, in a later scene, the absent father returns home and the entire family is killed in a triple murder/suicide by the oldest male child, the frontier family is again shown to be corrupt at its core. June thinks that "[t]he rifle with which she'd shot the bear had been used to wipe out a family, a fact that, irrationally, heightened her sense of complicity -- and of failure" (Caputo 352).

We should not forget, that this book is about a Vietnam veteran who is suffering from psychic wounds he received in the war. The book clearly establishes that one of the ways Christian Starkmann tries to "heal" himself is by isolating himself in a rural area and interacting with other humans as little as possible. He has a job that allows him to spend the better part of his days driving around inspecting the work of local loggers to make sure they are cutting neither too much nor the wrong kind of timber. The fact that Christian lives and works in the "wilderness," however, is not only articulated in terms of "cowboy" metaphors. His silence and violence is most often portrayed in the cowboy metaphor, but his comfort in and love of the outdoors is most often connected to an Indian identity. As I begin to explore ways that Christian "becomes" Indian, I will first examine the ways the book defines Indian-ness. Though Christian's

mental health is restored by his transformation from a cowboy identity to an Indian one, the novel's definitions of "Indian-ness" are troubling when I consider limited (and limiting) descriptions of Native Americans.

Indian Country's Version of Indian Identity

The use of Native American signs to articulate the problems experienced by American soldiers as a result of their participation in Vietnam is overt and pervasive in this text. One of the novel's epigraphs defines "Indian country" as a "term used by American soldiers during Vietnam conflict (1961-1975) to designate territory under enemy control or any terrain considered hostile and dangerous" and as "a place, condition or circumstance that is alien and dangerous." I want to consider several issues as I examine the term "Indian Country." First, what does it mean to call Vietnam "Indian Country?" The utterance refers back to a war fought on land in which the enemy was of the land and the frontiersmen were trying to take it over with advanced technology and "providence" on their side. Indian Country, in this scenario is both desirable and alien/dangerous. The Vietnam War was also fought on foreign soil against a native enemy. Here however, advanced technology seemed no match against the enemy, perhaps because there was no collective sense that providence was on the

Americans' side. "Providence" can only become functional as a unifying concept through mass public acceptance. Thus, American soldiers were forced to fight in (and as if they were of) Indian Country.

The next question to consider is, what does it mean to call the reservation Indian Country? One way to view reservations is the framing or fencing in of what is alien (Indians), perhaps in an act of psychological interiorization, but with the added concept of repression. But this viewing also does not account for Christian's yearning for Indian Country as the novel defines it. Christian Starkmann lives, during the present moment of the novel, in a house which is divided by a mountain ridge from the neighboring Indian reservation, and he spends most of the novel figuratively crossing that ridge.

The narrator describes the land in this way: "The Hurons, the high lonesome -- wildcats in the draws, wolf and coyote country, uninhabited, never touched by the plow, Indian country" (Caputo 281). Here we are provided with a new definition of Indian country. This time Indian country is not an alien and dangerous place but a primitive and lonesome one. As we encounter the novel, it becomes apparent that we should not accept these definitions of "Indian Country" as the only ones. When the land near Starkmann's home is referred to as Indian country, he sees it not as alien and dangerous. Starkmann's journey away from his terrifying experiences in Vietnam (Indian country) to the

reservation (Indian country) near his home where he finally comes to terms with his war-memories is one that moves not toward a hostile, dangerous, or alien place but one that moves toward "home" and "self."

One of the novel's messages is that Vietnam veterans had to learn to reclaim "Indian Country" as a positive geographical and psychological space for themselves despite the fact that they, like Native Americans, had been relocated to a place other than "home." A possible ramification of this message is that once the soldier goes to the "Indian Country" of Vietnam, he can only return "home" to the "Indian Country" of the United States.

Exactly what is being compared when we refer to both Vietnam and reservations as "Indian Country?" One way to interpret the signification process that occurs in these passages is as a renaming or a reclaiming of the "country" as "Indian." Perhaps the textual link between Vietnam and the reservation is not a metaphor at all but a renaming. Thus, the novel tells us that for Christian, at least, Indian Country must become a good, healthy, safe place.

The question remains -- why does the issue of "Indian country" come up at all when we imagine the Vietnam War and its aftermath? My hypothesis is that the reality of a defeated American military creates a cultural necessity to look for what may be a hybridization of "self" and "other" as a mode for healing cultural wounds. This hybridization occurs because the American veteran

survivor of the Vietnam War has, by virtue of the fact that he survived a war in "Indian Country" (not through providential intervention, but by becoming "Indian-like"), returns from the war already an Indian. However, the novel relies on a narrow definition of Indians to move the reader through the process of understanding an important shift in Christian's identity.

As I argued in Chapter Three, many Vietnam War texts articulate veterans as "healed" by a process of "becoming" Indian through signs which include the wearing of Indian costumes (including war paint and headbands), a heightened degree of comfort in nature (including an ability to walk silently and to communicate with animals), and an identification with experiences traditionally associated with the practices of some Native Americans (like warring with European opponents and practicing "native" spiritual rituals). In *Indian Country* many of these signs play an important role in the development of Christian's character, both before and after his war experience.

As children and teenagers both Christian and Bonny George mythologize Indian history. Arriving at Bonny George's fishing hole prior to Bonny George's enlistment, Starkmann is disappointed because he envisions a place where "painted war-parties once crouched," and Bonny George excuses his exaggeration, saying, "I'm an Indian, a maker of myths, a dreamer of dreams" (Caputo 6). In this scene both young men romanticize their present by looking

to an Indian past. At this point in the novel, Christian defines Indian as "other"; whereas, Bonny George defines Indian as "self." Christian feels disappointment because he expected his Native American friend to take him to a place which would visibly articulate the past presence of "Indians"; he imagines that he will be able to see evidence that war parties once visited the same spot where he and Bonny George will fish. Christian is not solely responsible for this misplaced romanticization, because Bonny George specifically led him to believe that this would be the case, promising "[a]n honest-to-God frontier fort" (Caputo 6). Bonny George excuses his exaggeration by referring to a need to make myths and dream dreams as a part of his Indian identity. At this point in the novel, it is unclear whether we are learning how the novel defines Indians or how young boys (both white and Indian) are trained to define Indians. In either case, the novel provides evidence that our culture often affords a misplaced mystique to many aspects of Native American culture as it describes the road from the adult-Christian's rural home to the nearest town, Marquette, as marked by signs advertising vacation cottages, some of which are "called by Indian words to give them native mystique" (Caputo 83).

There are significant differences between Christian and Bonny George which relate specifically to Bonny George's Indianness and to Christian's lack thereof. Early in the novel, it is established that Bonny George, as an Indian, is

more comfortable in nature. In the woods, Starkmann feels "bony and awkward compared to his friend, whose compact physique and agile movements reminded him of a bobcat or wolverine" (Caputo 4). This comparison highlights the differences between the two boys and creates a sense that, while Bonny George is "other" to Christian, the "other" subject position seems to be one that Christian would like to embody. The comparison, which occurs in the childhood mind of sheltered Christian animalizes Bonny George in troubling ways. But, as a participant in a war against natives, a future embodiment of Christian will rely on an animal-like agility for his survival. We also learn that Bonny George has "a strong constitution and an innate stoicism" (Caputo 9). It remains difficult to tell, however, whether these potentially racist descriptions of Bonny George's "Indianness" are the misapprehensions of the young Christian, or the novel's definitions of "Indianness." In any case, the important descriptors of Native American identity articulated in these passages are a strong constitution, an innate stoicism, and an agile (perhaps animalistic) physique.

In a later scene in the novel, Christian articulates a preference for Indian spirituality over the fundamentalist Christianity preached by his father. As he and his daughters bury a fox, he tells them,

> The Indians . . . believed that everything alive has a master up in heaven. When something dies, its spirit goes to the master, who

> uses it to make a new creature to take its place.. . .[but] Human beings don't have a life-master because human beings are different from other things. The Indians believed that, too, and I don't think any of it's superstition. (Caputo 125-6)

Here we see how Christian envisions one aspect of Indian identity. Christian's view is reductive as he refers to "the Indians" as if they were one category of people with the same religious beliefs. However, I do not think that the fact that Christian's views of Indians are reductive is a point the novel tries to make. Rather, as we learn a few paragraphs later, Christian is both remembering information taught to him by Bonny George and repressing the source of the knowledge.

When June asks Christian where he learned the information he says, "Nobody told me. I must have picked it up somewhere" (Caputo 128). Christian is repressing the source of the information, but Christian is also claiming this information on Native American "lore" as his own. Christian also tells June, "The Indian's believed [otters] were sacred" (Caputo 127). It seems worth noting that each of these articulations of Native American religious beliefs is related to the valuing of animals, a fact which could compound our understanding of the animalizing of Bonny George.

The novel's depiction of Bonny George's shaman grandfather might help

us to learn how the novel would answer the question, "hat are 'real' Indians like?" Louis St. Germaine is the novel's only adult character who is always depicted as an Indian; however, even he seems to embody a heightened quality of "Indianness" at times. When Christian finally locates Louis to ask for his forgiveness, at the novel's climax, he finds him "opaque, enigmatic, somehow more 'Indian'" (Caputo 405). This gradation of "Indianness" is important to the process by which Christian "becomes" Indian by the end of the novel. Christian (and we as readers as well) can see that Louis, while on his vision quest is referred to by the narrator as Wawiekumig and he looks, acts, and thinks in different ways, clearly associated with the fact that he is undergoing a particularly "Indian" experience.

Interspersed throughout the novel are chapters which recount a present-day vision-quest being undertaken by Louis. In one such chapter, we learn his feelings about war.

> The Seven Grandfathers . . . had taught that war was natural to man. So was peace. There was a time for each . . .. But the Grandfathers had also taught that war was natural only when fought against natural enemies; engagement in the conflict of others was an offense .. .. Who were his grandson's natural enemies? The question prompted another: What was his

grandson, Ojibwa or American? Or both? (Caputo 263)

In this novel about the war experience of Christian Starkmann, one of the key sections has as much to do with racial and national identity as it does to do with war itself. In order for Louis to come to terms with his grandson's participation in the war, he must first decide whether Bonny George was more Indian or more American. Louis draws a specific distinction between Americanness and Indianness, but he is also willing to explore the possibility that one person could be both, despite the fact that this is a foreign notion to him. At this point in the novel Louis admits to himself, and introduces the idea to the reader, that identity cannot be considered monolithic, even within one individual person.

Near the end of the novel, Louis/Wawiekumig highlights what he sees as an insurmountable difference between himself and Christian when he perceives Christian's mental suffering.

> If the young man were one of his own, Wawiekumig would know the cause to be sorcery, or perhaps a trickster that had entered the young man and tampered with his balance. But the young man was white, and while whites had their own diseases of the soul, they were not subject to the influence of sorcerers or tricksters. (Caputo 406)

Louis draws a parallel between PTSD and tricksters and their common ability to

afflict a human soul, but he cannot imagine the afflictions crossing race boundaries. Wawiekumig realizes that "[Christian]sits within an arm's length of you, but there is a barrier between you that cannot be broken through or climbed over, the barrier that has always divided your people from his, your way of understanding the world is as strange to him as his way is to you" (Caputo 409). Here the differences between Christian and Louis seem so vast that nothing could bridge the gap; however, the novel provides just such a bridge between Christian and Louis.

As I have mentioned, Christian spends the bulk of the novel crossing the ridge that separates his land from the neighboring Indian reservation, and this journey has to do with Christian becoming Indian-like in his comfort in and appreciation of nature. "He could never work anywhere except in the woods, the great woods that had seemed full of menace when he was younger but were now his sanctuary. The real menace lay outside, in what people were pleased to call civilization" (Caputo 94). This passage notes that Christian's comfort in nature has grown since his youth and probably since his war experience. It is the absence from civilization that draws Christian to the woods where he is most peaceful and content. Throughout the novel, we see evidence that lack of community makes Christian comfortable. "He felt happy; he was by himself in the woods, where he belonged" (Caputo 301). There are two important details

here. First, Christian feels as if he belongs in the woods, but second, he feels as if he belongs outside community, alone. At this point in the narrative Christian has removed himself from the community to which he belonged in his prewar experience as a result of the war's positioning him in the role of loser/outcast. However, he has not yet begun to position himself. The narrative is articulating him in ways traditionally associated with Native Americans, but he has not begun to adopt a new identity. Once he does, his solitary existence will be replaced by a sort of tribal sense of community, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

There are several other points where the narrative tells us that Christian doesn't belong. Christian goes for a walk to get out of the house after he and June have had a fight.

> He'd intended to stop at [the blacktop], but was drawn to hike up the highway toward the reservation...[but he]...restrain[s] an inexplicable impulse to go farther. Why on earth did he feel a urge to enter the reservation at this hour? He turned around and started back. The reservation was another country, and he did not belong in it any more than he belonged in town. He belonged right where he was: between the two. (Caputo 133)

At this point, Christian embodies a liminal position between white and Indian

cultures, represented by his geographical location between the "white space" of town and the "Indian country" of the reservation. Christian himself feels as if he belongs this liminal position, but this "belonging" sounds more like a punishment than it does like a return to the frontier myth. Whereas there are places in the novel where Christian clearly enacts, by choice, a return to the frontier myth, here we see evidence that he is living on a self-imposed reservation. "[H]e'd bought the land precisely because it was useless; no one else would have it, so he would not have to worry about other people living too close to him" (Caputo 113). While we might envision Christian and June living "like a pioneer family," there is no attendant sense of adventure for Christian. He is not attempting to enact some sort of "taming of the virgin frontier;" rather, he exiles himself out of fear that others will be too near his home.

Also, in the above passage we see that Christian chooses his land because no one else wants it. Clearly the Native Americans who live on the nearby reservation did not "choose" their place; in fact, it was chosen for them, presumably because the land was of no use to the whites who chose the location of the reservation. We might question, then, how "reservationized" Christian really is. He makes his own choice. His Indian neighbors do not. His choice may be comparable to the choice he makes to go to Vietnam when he feels guilt for his own position of privilege in comparison to Bonny George's inability to

get a draft deferment. Perhaps his choice to live on land no one else would want is made out of an intrinsic sense of guilt at the privileges bestowed on him as a result of his whiteness. At the same time, he has come to believe (as a result of the war experience that "reddened his heart") that neither he nor anyone else "deserves" the privileges bestowed upon him as a result of imperialist, racist power imbalances. Perhaps he has come to hate the aspect of his identity which would capitalize on those impulses. Thus, his choice of living conditions could be an exterior attempt to flush out unwanted, "cowboy-like" urges.

By the novel's end, Starkmann has become wholly comfortable in nature, to the extent that he is both in it and of it in a real, material way.

> Starkmann inched his way along the cloaked trail toward his own camp. Halfway there, he startled a buck and a doe, watering in the lake. Rather, they startled him. He must have been moving very quietly because he almost bumped into the male before he saw it raise its head, antlers like lightning bolts. (Caputo 414)

By this point in the narrative, Christian has achieved a "Native American-like" ability to walk quietly in nature. It is interesting that Christian himself is actually startled by this ability. It is not as if he worked at or in any way tried to attain this ability. It seems to have come to him both naturally and unbeknownst to himself. However, the novel also provides as many examples which indicate that

shifts in identity occur as a result of effort expended by an individual as it does that identity is fluid but only changes "naturally."

Ability of Characters to Consciously Choose Aspects of Their Own Identity in *Indian Country*

In fact, the ability of individual characters to consciously choose aspects of their own identity is one of the most interesting factors in *Indian Country*. It seems as though the concept of the Vietnam veteran "becoming" Indian leads to an exploration of all manner of hybrids. An exploration of the novel's characterization of Dr. Eckhardt, June, and the local "Finndian" indicates a set of potential methods for Christian to employ as he goes about effecting healing in his life. Dr. Eckhardt, a fellow Vietnam veteran and psychiatrist who specializes in helping veterans deal with PTSD, is one character who provides a model for a hybridized subject position. We are introduced to him when Christian begins to suffer from a PTSD flashback, the most serious to this point in the narrative. He goes to town with a gun tucked in the pocket of his jacket. Eventually, he ends up at a bar where, "[o]ut of his peripheral vision he saw a bow-hunter in mottled green-and-brown dropping quarters into the juke box" (Caputo 197). He picks a fight with a logger and comes close to pulling the gun from his pocket. His

muscles are frozen with tension, with only his eyes moving. He looks around the bar and sees "the group of bow-hunters, in uniforms like the kind the reconnaissance teams had worn" (Caputo 199). At this point the image of being a bow-hunter is linked with the image of a camouflaged reconnaissance team in Christian's mind. Of course, Native Americans are not the only group of people to whom we could attribute bowhunting as a cultural signifier, but when Christian sees the camouflaged bowhunters, a suppressed memory of Bonny George's death is triggered.

The bartender, an acquaintance of Christian's and a fellow veteran, tries to lead Christian out of the bar, but Christian is having a flashback in which he remembers his actions after he accidentally calls in the air strike that ends up killing Bonny George.

> He walked until he came to a shallow ravine and obeying the voice only he could hear, knelt, scooped up the ashes of the earth, and poured them over his head. He rubbed them into his face and into his arms and hands until he looked almost as black as D.J. Then he lay on his back, his arms outspread and legs forked. (Caputo 200)

Here (and at several other places in the narrative) we get images of Christian's skin color being changed. In this flashback, brought on by the image of

bowhunting soldiers, Christian remembers that immediately after Bonny George's death (for which Christian blames himself) he rubs ashes on his skin. This darkening of the skin is not a "reddenning" per se, but it is the first in a series of actual physical attempts by Christian to change his physical appearance by coloring his skin.

When Christian returns from his flashback Treadwell, the bartender, and a stranger, "one of the bow-hunters, dressed in camouflage" lead him outside. The stranger turns out to be Dr. Eckhardt, the veteran/psychiatrist who works in conjunction with the VA hospital. Treadwell tells Starkmann he cannot return to the bar. "Sorry, brother, but I'm not running a Wild West saloon" (Caputo 203). At this point in the novel, Christian's struggle to overcome his "cowboy" identity is reaching a fevered pitch. He is cleaning his guns regularly, reinforcing the perimeter of his land, and preparing for Starkmann's Last Stand. When he has a bar fight, he gets thrown out by a fellow veteran who reminds him that he is not in the "Wild West." Perhaps, then, Treadwell has overcome the "cowboy" identity. Eckhardt goes a step further, aligning himself with a Native American subject position (or at least an appreciation of that kind of identity).

Doctor Eckhardt drives Christian home from the bar, and we learn that he loves bow-hunting, fishing, and being in "wild country." He describes the woods surrounding Christian's home as not looking "much different than when

those Indians were here" (Caputo 212). Christian takes Eckhardt's card, but does not call him. June finds the card, and when she finally calls Eckhardt to get help for Christian, he tells her "Soldiers -- warriors -- aren't supposed to express their emotions" (Caputo 311). Here Eckhardt indicates a conflation is his own mind between soldiers and warriors. Near the novel's end, Christian goes to Eckhardt's home to get help and sees "[a] bow and quiver, like a leather vase filled with bristling flowers, were propped against the lawn table" (Caputo 394). Eckhardt has achieved a hybridized identity of veteran/Indian.

Indian Country also identifies June with a series of different subject positions, usually articulated through physical appearance. When she is around the house she wears "a checkered shirt, Levis, and women's western boots -- might as well dress the part of the country wife" (Caputo 121). Here we get June's thoughts on costuming. She associates some aspects of her existence with the position of a "country wife" and "dresses the part." June has a consistent ability to understand that people "play roles" depending on their immediate circumstances.

We learn that June has "long black hair like an Indian's" (Caputo 118). And in another scene, we see June working in her garden; she pulls "a kerchief from her pocket, tying it above her eyebrows like an Indian headband, then took off her shirt and cast it aside . . .. The sun pierced her winter-paled skin, entered

her like a lover, and made her burn" (Caputo 279). In this sensual, even erotic, scene of the novel, it remains important that June's wearing of the Indian headband happens in conjunction with the sun reddening her skin. Here, rather than just wearing a costume, June's physical body undergoes an actual "reddenning," temporary though it may be.

June also aligns herself with a pre-American heritage her mother tells her about, "pre-Christian Finns, blue-eyed pagans who believed that bears were not animals but the sons of the sky-god" (Caputo 164). June finds an affinity for her Finnish ancestry as the family cross-country skis in the winter. "Sometimes, on a fast run through the stands of red pine near the Indian reservation, her knees bending and shoulder dipping to round a sharp turn, she felt so swift and graceful that she pretended she was Undurridus, the Norse ski-goddess, racing through the forests of heaven" (Caputo 231). Geographical nearness to the Indian reservation seems to provide for June a space in which she can identify with her "tribal" roots. As in Jim Harrison's *A Good Day to Die*, discussed in Chapter Three, the desire (and ability) to be "Indian-like" corresponds with the character's local conditions.

Consistently June's understanding of identity is a personal, often sexual/sensual, always bodily process, but not always a positive one. For example, June visits "a mob of half-breeds, known in local slang as 'Finndians,'

part Finn and part Indian and all screwed up, the most marginal of marginals" as part of her job as a social worker (Caputo 161). In this instance, a hybridized identity works against the individual subject. This group causes June to think that life for the Finndians is like life on the frontier, "but without the promise that had made the frontier's hardships bearable, the sense of great possibilities waiting over the horizon; if things didn't work out in one place, there was always someplace else to go." (Caputo 161). Again, June's thoughts remind us that the frontier myth is no longer applicable. The "sense of great possibility" that might have existed for June's (and the Finndians') ancestors manifests itself for June, not over the geographical horizon but inside the subject, as a result of the individual capability to overcome culturally designated (and limiting) identity.

June has a recurring sexual fantasy in which she has sex with a bear. When she first has sex with Christian (and at other points in the novel) she returns to this fantasy, a narrative move which tells the reader that, for June at least, Christian is a cross between a settler/Gary Cooper and the embodiment of a tribal Finn/Indian myth of the bear-god. Christian is again referred to as the "bear-god" when he and June make love after he returns home from his bar-fight and flashback (218). In this way, June understands both her own ability to shift aspects of her identity and Christian's.

This fact is complicated in the scene of the novel in which June kills a

bear (a scene I explored earlier in this chapter). Telling no one that she has killed the bear,

> [June] could not overcome the shame she felt about killing the bear, although when she thought sensibly about what she'd done, it seemed pretty brave, nothing to be ashamed of. Maybe she could even consider herself a heroine, thought she had no desire to be known as one. . . . It would only enhance her Amazonian image. June the bear slayer. (Caputo 207)

Here we see that June has little, if any, interest in making changes in aspects of her identity to impress or influence others; rather, she explores various aspects of her identity for personal, private reasons.

Taken together, Dr. Eckhardt and June provide models for healthily embodying multiple subject positions at once. We also see before Christian's war experience that he has the potential to explore alternate identities, at least as a willing observer. After he enlists, but before he enters the service, he goes dancing and we learn that as he dances in the light of the strobe, "he felt as if he were taking part in a weird rite of a tribe not his own" (Caputo 99). Also, after Christian enlists, his father writes him to express his own disappointment: "I do not fear for your life or safety . . . but for what may happen to you inside. *Homo furens*, half man, half beast. That is what I fear you will become" (Caputo 98).

Christian's father sees only danger in a hybridized identity. He is only capable of perceiving a beast-like identity as a result of the war experience he knows Christian will have, and he is right to a large extent. The war is particularly damaging to Christian's identity. However, the process of change that Christian undergoes, as painful as it is, seems, at least in part, to be one worthy of celebration.

An important part of Christian's cowboy-to-Indian transformation is communicated in the novel through physical images. There are several examples in which Christian "looks" Indian in various ways. Soon after Christian's return from the war he lives in his father's home for a time, but he and his father cannot mend their rift and Christian tells the elder Starkmann that he is moving out as he stares "at his image in the reddened window" (Caputo 102). Here we can envision Christian's skin reflected red in the window. In this scene we get an early indication that the war has "reddened" Christian in significant ways. Christian's father responds, "My son left a long time ago. . . . He never came back" (Caputo 102). The elder Starkmann recognizes the change in Christian to such an extent that he refuses to acknowledge the person before him as his son.

Another example of a physical change in Christian is recounted early in the novel when he wakes from a war-induced nightmare and takes a shower where he "work[s] up a heavy lather and scrub[s] hard with a coarse cloth,

reddening his skin" (Caputo 65). At this and other points, the "reddenning" of Christian seems closely associated with pain of varying degrees. At the height of Christian's insanity he is described with a "hideously painted face," "a camouflage cloth tied as a sweatband across his forehead," and "black and green stripes, like an Indian's war paint, had been smeared thickly over his face; and his eyes, rimmed by painted dark circles, looked like ice cubes pressed into lumps of coal" (Caputo 357). This scene is a breaking point for Christian. He violently embraces the Indian costume, but the self-destructive impulse is still with him. In this scene, we see that in Starkmann's Last Stand, Christian plays both sides of the "cowboy and Indian" game. The result, finally, is that Christian gets the psychiatric help he needs to come to terms with the death of Bonny George. Once he is able to do that, he is free to venture into Indian Country to look for Louis St. Germaine.

Christian's Cowboy-to-Indian Transformation

At this point, I want to include a longer version of the passage I included as an epigraph at the outset of the preceding chapter.

> Louis, like all his people, had been made a stranger in his own country, and something similar had happened to Starkmann. He

> saw himself as a kind of half-breed: his hair and skin were pale, but the war had made him an outsider in the land of his birth. The war had reddened his heart. (Caputo 413)

Here Louis recognizes something fundamentally similar between himself and Christian. The narrative articulates this similarity in terms of race, generally, and in terms of Native Americans' historical relationship to their native land, specifically. Both the Native American and the Vietnam veteran have been made outsiders in their native lands. The passage "[t]he war had reddened his heart" is linguistically interesting. "Reddened" obviously indicates, at least in this passage of thoughts attributed to Louis, some move toward an "Indian-ness." Also, however, because the subject of the sentence is the war, and its action (to redden) is taken on Christian's heart, the word reddened connotes a bloodiness. This passage, as I read it, has Louis conflating a state of "becoming Indian-like" with a violent injury. The two kinds of "reddening" seem to conflate around the axis of being made an outsider in one's native land. Thus, there is both pain and healing in Christian's shift from cowboy to Indian.

The result of this shift is that Louis and Christian are able to form a bond. "They'd adopted each other, each finding in the other what each had lost" (Caputo 417). The concept of adoption is an important one in terms of its ability to describe accurately the occurrence that I see taking place when Vietnam

veterans make shifts in aspects of their identities. When parents adopt children they take them as their own. The relationship between adoptive parents and their adopted children is not a natural one in the biological sense, but adoptive parents identify their feelings of connection with their adopted children as genuine, and decidedly not different than those feelings of connection felt by biological parents to their children. In the above passage, I believe that Caputo is articulating the same kind of relationship between Christian and Louis. As we read that they have "adopted" each other, we should interpret their bond as no less genuine than we would if it were biological/physical. Their emotional ties match those feelings the two men would feel toward each other if there were biological ties between the two. Further, when I say that Christian (or other Vietnam veterans) adopt Native American identities (at least when I am speaking about this shift in identity in a positive way), I mean to say that this adoption is a real, tangible choosing of a set of signifiers to equal (in part) the self which does not result in a kind of "fake" role playing but in an actual change in identity, perhaps even a spiritual or metaphysical kind of change.

Susan Jeffords, in her discussion of Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, establishes Caputo as an author who occupies "the shifting positions of observer and participant" when she examines a scene from *A Rumor of War* in which Caputo describes "seeing himself as an actor in the war, a soldier, and watching

himself performing those actions as a viewer. separated from his own activities" (Jeffords, *Remascullinization* 18-19). Jeffords calls the narrative description of occupying two positions simultaneously a "pretense" and a primary feature of Vietnam representation (*Remasculinization* 19). For Jeffords, the pretense of occupying two positions simultaneously

> functions primarily to promote a strategy of blurring: (con)fusing categories *at the same time* the categories are being maintained. The strategy of blurring categories leads, not to a challenging of categories, but to a sense of powerlessness, or an inability to alter the frame . . . within which the categories are presented. . . . This blurring . . . leaves the reader in a state of paralysis, unable to challenge the text on its (unspoken) grounds, able only to shift back and forth from one prescribed position to another. You are either in the movie or in the audience, but you are not producing the theater. (Jeffords, *Remasculinization* 19-20)

Jeffords' claims are made in reference to a different Caputo text from the one I am primarily interested in, but she reads the act of occupying more than one position in a way that I would like to explore more closely.

It is Jeffords' contention that the blurring between the participant and viewer positions creates not a challenging of either position but a solidifying of

those two positions as the only possibilities. In *Indian Country* Caputo makes a narrative move similar to that which Jeffords perceives in *A Rumor of War*. Rather than blurring the line between participant and viewer, *Indian Country* blurs the line between the cowboy-identity and the Indian-identity that Starkmann struggles to negotiate throughout the novel. Both types of blurring occur at the level of the character's position in the world. The blurring results in a different outlook for the subject in both novels and in a different view of the subject on the part of the reader.

Jeffords sees the blurring of the line between participant and viewer as fundamentally confusing and corrupting. The same may be true for the blurring between Starkmann's cowboy identity and his Indian identity. However, while in the final moments of *Indian Country*, the lines between these two identities could be described as "blurred," the other possibility is that those lines are erased at a point when Starkmann becomes, not one or the other, but really, powerfully, simultaneously both.

The individual character in *Indian Country* who is Christian Starkmann goes to the war because he feels personal guilt as a result of the fact that he experiences privileges as a result of his race and class that are not experienced by his Native American friend Bonny George. While in Vietnam, Christian causes the death of Bonny George. This is ironic because Christian went to Vietnam to

assuage his guilt over the fact that Bonny George had to go and Christian himself did not. Christian experiences a stress disorder as a result of the fact that the memory of Bonny George's death is suppressed in order for Christian to cope with the experience. When the individual returns from Vietnam, he must undergo a personal journey (both physical and psychic) to "deal with" the guilt he experiences but cannot account for. All of this happens to the spirit of Christian Starkmann.

However, partly because of the pervasiveness of the image of the Vietnam veteran adopting a Native-American subject position in popular literature and film, and partly because of the overwhelming evidence of American culture's identification with and use of the "cowboy and Indian" metaphor, we must look beyond the experiences of the individual character in *Indian Country* to account for Christian's transformation from cowboy to Indian. The deeply ingrained notion in American culture of a providential view of history necessitates the notion of victory for the American military. We always win our wars, and we win them because we are Americans, and by definition, right. Also deeply ingrained in the American psyche is the notion that the frontier hero gains hero status by taming the frontier. This duo of the frontier hero and the providential view of history is invoked during the Vietnam era by John F. Kennedy, movies like *The Green Berets*, and a multitude of other cultural forces. We can safely

say that these cultural signs were recognized by the overwhelming majority of Americans, both those who participated in the war and those who observed it from the safety of "home."

When we lost the war, we were unable to reconcile our American identities with the notion of losing a military engagement. We had to locate cultural signifiers which could stand for Vietnam veterans without destroying our entire history by demolishing the fundamentally important notions of providence and frontier. The sign we chose to use to articulate defeated (but still positive) warriors was that of the Native American. The use of the images traditionally associated with Native Americans to articulate a defeated American military (and specifically the individual veterans who returned from the war) reinscribes the racism which generates these images in the first place. Thus, the process by which we conflate images of Vietnam veterans and Native Americans is damaging to both groups. It is common for us to imagine Vietnam veterans (and to see them in books and films) living away from "civilization" in small communities in the woods of Oregon or any other isolated, jungle-like area, living off the land, lacking the ability to live in ways acceptable to the cultural dominant, much as Indians do who live in remote reservations.

However, Christian Starkmann and a number of other fictional representations of Vietnam veterans manage to achieve a measure of individual

healing through the process of adopting a Native American identity. As I discussed in Chapter One, this is possible in Vietnam War literature because the horror of the war experience provides a moment during which the truth that is masked by the frontier myth is revealed and an understanding of the historical relationship between the American military and Native Americans is recognized. This recognition allows the Vietnam War veteran to overcome the social position to which he is assigned and limited by the frontier myth. At that point he is able to celebrate a historical, rather than mythical, understanding of his identity as it is associated with a Native American identity. As a result, the healing that takes place, though it is only for the Vietnam War participant, has ramifications for American culture. Literary depictions of the relationship between myth and history in Vietnam War narratives make apparent the shortcomings, and even the lies, of the frontier myth. For the culture at large the frontier myth is re-inscribed in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. However, for individual characters, the lies of the frontier myth remain visible. Through the eyes of these characters the rest of us may be reminded of the all important distinction between myth and history.

CONCLUSION

Looking Forward: Myth, Identity, and History in Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Buffalo Afternoon*

The Vietnam War was an event of enormous proportion in American history, and American literature about the Vietnam War provides readers a window through which to view some aspects of the Vietnam War's impact on American culture and identity. In addition, Vietnam War literature reveals much about American culture and myth, broadly configured. As I reflect back on my work on this project, the most fascinating thing to have emerged is the pervasiveness of Native American images in Vietnam War literature. I find it fascinating because very rarely do Vietnam War texts attempt a portrayal of a contemporary Native American as a main character. It is far more common to see white characters who take on aspects of a Native American identity. As I have shown, this pattern reveals the pervasiveness of the cowboys-and-Indians metaphor in our culture. Throughout my study, I have been astonished both because the metaphor of cowboys-and-Indians is so pervasive and because so few of us seem to acknowledge that pervasiveness. The continuing importance of the frontier myth in our culture is saddening to me because, despite the apparent fact that there is not now, nor has there ever been, a frontier which it was Americans' divine right to inhabit, the frontier myth continues to be invoked

with little or no irony.

On the other hand, one of the most surprising things that has emerged throughout the course of this project is the healing that is evident in so many novels for Vietnam Veterans who adopt aspects of a Native American identity. I find the possibility that some authors have found ways to use the cowboy-and-Indian metaphor to heal the very wounds inflicted by the propagation of the frontier myth itself to be hopeful, even as I remain skeptical of this particular hope. As a way to reflect back on the terrain my project has covered and look forward to other places it might go, I want to conclude by looking to Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Buffalo Afternoon* (1989).

Schaeffer's novel is the story of Pete Bravado, the grandson of Italian immigrants, and the people with whom his life intersects before, during, and after he participates in the Vietnam War. Of particular interest to me are the characters named Li, a Vietnamese civilian, and the Chief, a Navajo Indian. Because of their abilities to refute and create myths and affect shifts in their own identities, these are the novel's two most relevant characters to my current project. This novel fits the patterns I have been talking about in that it portrays white characters who adopt Native American identities. For this reason, I could have discussed *Buffalo Afternoon* in Chapter Three or even chosen it as the focus of Chapter Four. However, I think *Buffalo Afternoon* does more with

these themes than the other texts I have analyzed so far, and in doing so I think it goes beyond the scope of my findings thus far. *Buffalo Afternoon* is unique among the novels I analyze earlier in this dissertation in that it was written by a woman, that it contains a fully developed Vietnamese woman character, that it provides other sets of cultural myths than the frontier myth, and, perhaps most interestingly, that it makes an overt reversal of the cowboy-to-Indian shift when the novel's one Native American character transforms into the White Man. The ways this novel departs from and adheres to my earlier claims deepens and complicates my findings and the questions with which I am left. As a result, this novel is a valuable site for restating my findings and testing their limits.

Though most of the novel's characters are presented as a supporting cast for Pete Bravado's experiences, Li is first presented to the reader in chapters which tell of her girlhood in a Vietnam village before she becomes affected by the war. Li's path first crosses Pete's when he visits the brothel at which she works as a prostitute. Later in the novel, she finds Pete in the field, tells him she is pregnant, and begs to join his company. The most horrible scene in the novel occurs immediately after the death of Li's baby when, surrounded by American soldiers awed by the beauty and innocence of the newborn, a South Vietnamese soldier grabs the baby and throws it to the ground, shattering its skull. In the wake of this tragedy, both Li and the Chief disappear, not to return to Pete's life

until the climactic scene of the novel which takes place twenty years later. In the intervening years, the two live as mythical creatures, Li as a kinaree (half bird, half woman) and the Chief as the White Man, a mysterious figure always dressed in white, sometimes like a mummy, sometimes like a monk. In the novel's final scenes, Li and the Chief reappear to Pete and to the reader both as themselves and in their mythical forms.

It is evident in the texts I have focused on in the foregoing chapters, as well as in the history I provide in Chapter One, that Vietnam War literature is a male-dominated genre in much the same way that war is a male-dominated social institution. The texts I analyze in Chapters Two, Three, and Four are all written by men. The main characters are men, and women play only supporting roles when they figure into the narratives at all. *Buffalo Afternoon* is among the novels which depart from this pattern. One of Schaeffer's main characters is a Vietnamese civilian woman. Li is introduced to the reader as a child, and we follow her from her village and her first contact with American soldiers, through her experience with Pete's company and the death of her infant, to her magical transformation into the "kinaree" and her appearance at the party in the novel's final scenes. In addition to including a fully developed Vietnamese character in her novel, Schaeffer also allows Li to speak directly to the reader. The chapters which focus on Li are narrated in the first person from her perspective, whereas,

the rest of the novel is narrated in the third person.

To be sure, the generally masculinist nature of Vietnam War literature has always been counteracted by some women writers. As I discussed in Chapter One, Gloria Emerson's *Winners and Losers* (1977) told readers about the effects of war on people in Vietnam and the United States while steadfastly refusing to portray the actual war experience in the vivid detail her contemporaries did. As a result, she manages always to avoid even the risk of romanticizing war in general. Many of her male contemporaries abhor the Vietnam War but valorize war itself as an institution. For Emerson, the primary horror of the Vietnam War is that war exists at all. Emerson's work differs from that of her contemporaries in that she portrays both men and women, and she portrays Americans both for and against the war as well as Vietnamese soldiers and citizens on both sides of the war, and her narrative focuses on the dehumanization that occurs to all in the face of war. In these ways Emerson's work is similar to that of Schaeffer.

Schaeffer's novel is comparable to Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*, another late 1980s Vietnam War novel. According to Maureen Ryan, Mason's work, as well as that of other women novelists working around the same time, demonstrates a role for women in and after war. She claims that novels like this "rely on the 'old sources of illumination' -- the linear, realistic narrative culminating in an epiphanic conclusion -- not because they cannot replicate the

chaos of the war, but because they and their protagonists will not settle for the platitude that 'war is hell'" (Ryan 56). Both *In Country* and *Buffalo Afternoon* also focus on the theme of childbirth. *In Country* provides a unique view into the confusion of the American cultural experience of the Vietnam War through the eyes of Samantha Hughes who is born fatherless because Sam Hughes dies in Vietnam. Samantha spends her young adulthood trying to negotiate a reconciliation between what she can know -- childbirth and her first sexual experiences -- and what she cannot know -- war and the scars it places on men she cares about.

The themes of war and childbirth collide violently in *Buffalo Afternoon.* When Li's baby is born, the men gently pass it from one to another. For a few seconds, the war is invisible, and all eyes are on the infant. Pete holds it and stares down at it, "its cheeks covered with purplish bruises, the baby covered with a white powder, no wrinkles on it. Pete opened one little hand and looked at the little unlined palm. It was brand-new. Its eyes were squeezed shut as if it weren't ready to look at any thing yet" (256). There is a marked difference between this newness and the fatigue all the American soldiers feel as a result of the war.

All of the American soldiers focus on Li, "who was smiling and wiping her eyes at the same time, and none of them wanted to say, *I don't like this place*

no more, not now. For a while it was washed away. Everything was clean and new as the baby" (257). For a few moments, motherhood is the focus, but the war reclaims the soldiers' focus when the ARVN soldier kills the baby, "all the noise in the world came back in a rush, and Pete had the ARVN by the throat" (257). The silence and reverence with which the men witness Li and her baby crash away, and the war returns full speed as Pete grabs the Vietnamese soldier and snaps his neck.

In many ways, Schaeffer's novel is more like other Vietnam War novels written in the late 1980s by women than it is like the works I have focused on throughout this dissertation. Li's inclusion in the novel as a fully-developed character who plays an important role in the plotting as well as in the narration of the novel is a departure from the nearly exclusive treatment of male characters. However, Schaeffer's novel also deals with many of the issues I raise throughout this dissertation. *Buffalo Afternoon* focuses on issues of American myths, identity, and American culture. Further, those issues are often conveyed, in the novel, through the characterization of the Chief and through other characters' response to him as well as through other characters' adoption of Indian values and even Indian identity.

In Chapter Two, I looked to the autobiographical narratives of Caputo, O'Brien, and Herr to explore the presence of myth in Vietnam War literature. I

argued that these authors' narrators articulate old myths which were invoked for them during their pre-war experiences and that, once each narrator realizes the old myths do not make sense of the war experience, they begin to believe those myths are lies. I also argued that, in light of the blank spot left by the debunked myths, these authors inscribe a new kind of myth localized enough to be considered simply war stories and, at the same time, elements of these war stories take on a mythic status.

Similar to the way Caputo and O'Brien imagine their fathers and other predecessors "taking on the Japs and Krauts," the Chief's personal history provides him with a pre-war myth that creates power for himself as an "Indian" in American military history. Ten Feathers Watson, or the Chief as he is called in Vietnam, did well at school as a child. "He studied the customs of Indians, and the nuns chose him to take part in an anthropological study, visiting other reservations and recording the customs of the other tribes" (103). It is partly these "anthropological" experiences that provide the Chief with his understanding of myth and his complex sense of his own identity.

The Chief's father and his uncle were Navajo code talkers in World War II. "They were sent all over Europe and they came back with medals and citations; they were in all the papers, and on the reservation, they were still heroes" (104). Just as Caputo and O'Brien were convinced to go to war by the

heroism of ancestors in World Wars I and II, the Chief joins the army because of the heroism of his father and uncle. The Chief's relationship to the myths that send him to war is similar to that of Caputo's and O'Brien's narrators in some ways. All three characters are persuaded that going to war will make them heroes. However, for Caputo and O'Brien, a large part of the pre-war myth stems directly from the myth of the frontier. The "logic" of the myth states that the American frontier extends to Indochina and that fighting to the death for the American frontier is right and heroic.

By including in her narrative details of the role myth plays in the Chief's life, Schaeffer provides a different set of myths from which he operates before, during, and after the war. In Chapter Two, I explored ways that Caputo, O'Brien, and Herr managed to debunk old myths. I argued that the result of debunking myths in these novels is a process of reinscription of the same old myths. In the character of the Chief, Schaeffer sidesteps this issue by starting from a different place. For the Chief, the frontier myth is not in operation. In this way, Schaeffer potentially succeeds in debunking old myths without reinscribing them.

Ten Feathers Watson identifies himself as an Indian and has Indian role models, although he is educated in white schools and is encouraged to treat Indian identity as an anthropological study rather than self-exploration. The

Chief, as a child, allows personal experience to mingle with myth and become part of his world view:

> One day in school, he picked up a magazine article about Indians who worked the high steel beams in Manhattan. In it was a picture of an Indian on a high beam. The picture must have been taken from below, because in it the Indian appeared to be twelve feet tall, and the sun streamed out as if he carried it on his back, and in his hair the clouds tangled. The top of his head seemed to rest against the perfect blue of the sky. (Schaeffer 102-103)

The Chief joins the army to follow in his father's and uncle's footsteps, but also because he dreams of returning to "walk the steal beams" and let the clouds "catch in his hair." Of course, the effect is the same for the Chief as it is for Caputo's and O'Brien's characters -- they go to Vietnam and experience the horror of the war. However, there is a significant difference in that the Chief's motives are individual and not part of an unquestioned national myth which robbed his ancestors of their homeland.

Another way Schaeffer's characters avoid a reinscription of old myths is by keeping localized Vietnam War myths specific to the context of the war. In Chapter Two, I argue that in the Vietnam War old American myths are replaced by localized myths which help soldiers to make sense of events they are

experiencing. Similarly, in *Buffalo Afternoon*, after the disappearance of Li and the Chief, "[s]ightings of the White Man became widespread" (261). However, differently from the localized myths that I talk about in Chapter Two, sightings of the White Man in *Buffalo Afternoon* don't become part of a larger cultural myth. The soldiers use the myth of the White Man to make sense of their experiences, but for non-participants in the Vietnam War, the White Man is non-existent. In fact, once he is back home, Pete sees a news broadcast in which the reporter talks about the occurrence of White Man sightings on battlefields after the battle is over and when morale is low. Pete's mother, who is watching the report with him, asks Pete if he had ever seen the White Man. Pete denies ever having seen him, although the reader knows there are several points in the narrative where he has. The myth of the White Man is only for Vietnam War participants, not for American culture at large. It is an important fact that this myth stays local.

In Chapter Three, I argued that the Vietnam veteran undergoes a transformation in Vietnam War literature from being a cowboy to being an Indian. I discuss three categories which make up this progression. The first is an identification of American recruits and soldiers with the American cowboy in his Frontier Hero guise. The second is a comparison between massacres committed by Americans in the Indian Wars and in the Vietnam War. The third

is an identification of American Vietnam War veterans with Native Americans. As I showed in Chapter Three, this pattern is revealed in many Vietnam War texts. The regularity with which a white character "becomes" Indian-like is Vietnam War literature makes the reversal that occurs in Schaeffer's novel particularly important. When the Chief becomes the White Man, the reversal is overt, but the pattern I describe in Chapter Three is reversed throughout the novel.

White characters identify with Indians in Schaeffer's novel before, during, and after their war experience. Pete's childhood neighbor, Eddie, decides he is part Indian and sleeps on the narrow wooden ledge outside his third floor bedroom. Eddie has no knowledge of Ten Feathers Watson, but he seems to participate in the imagining of Indians as people who feel comfortable in high places. Eddie eventually enlists because "he was tired of . . . listening to Cousin Brucie on the radio dedicating songs to those brave boys in Vietnam. . . . Besides, he said, he was part Indian. Indians liked war" (Schaeffer 86). Here, in a reversal of the patterns I locate in Chapter Three, a character goes to Vietnam, not because he identifies with cowboys but because he identifies (however mistakenly) with Indians.

After the Chief disappears and becomes the White Man, we see how convoluted the characters' identities have become. When Pete and his

companions successfully complete a dangerous mission, they are jubilant:

> One of them began dancing like an Indian, whooping, and the others followed suit . . . . Sal tore his helmet from his head, hurled it to the ground, and shouted, 'Goddamn! Goddamn!' until he was hoarse, and now he was doing his version of an Indian war dance, chanting over and over, 'I am the White Man! I am the White Man! (276)

The white soldiers celebrate their (temporary) victory by doing an Indian war dance, but during the war dance, one chants that he is the White Man. The result is a blurring of the characters' identities. I think, however, that Schaeffer is subverting the very pattern I articulate in Chapter Three. There I discuss that American Vietnam War veterans are identified with Indians to account for the loss of the Vietnam War. This identification clearly simplifies both groups to the point of stereotypes. Schaeffer's novel highlights the complexity of this kind of identification by doubling and even tripling the transformation as white soldiers do an Indian war dance and shout that they are the White Man who is also the Chief.

The complexity with which Schaeffer treats issues of ethnic identity are highlighted in the character of Pete in his post-war experience. In a move very much like the one I discuss in Chapter Three, Pete begins to think of himself as

Indian. For example, when Pete gets a job as a truck driver, he is struck by the beauty of the Western United States upon seeing it for the first time. "Out west, when the scenery thinned out, he studied the sandstone cliffs and their red shadows on the desert. He began to pick up small books about the local Indian tribes" (392). In Lubbock, Texas, he sees a buffalo in a residential backyard. Pete speaks to the miserable looking animal. "The land belongs to you . . . You and the Indians" (394). These musings are made more specific to Pete's identity when he dreams he is an Indain, after having been home from the war for a number of years:

> [H]e was with another Indian and they were on the bank of a river fixing their canoe and a white man came and looked over the bank and he shot both of them in the chest and killed them. He knew he wasn't supposed to die in a dream, but he did. So he thought, This country doesn't belong to anybody. This country belongs to the Indians. This country is only a baby. He thought, once I was an Indian and I came back as an Italian in America. I came back because my soul was good and I'll come back again. (437)

The remarkable thing about Pete's transformation is that he imagines himself to embody a hybridized ethnicity. He dreams of himself as an American who is both Italian and Indian. He has inherited both identities, one from his

grandfather and one from his war experience. He claims that the country belongs to Indians and identifies himself as Indian. And instead of identifying with Indians as a defeated group, Pete transcends the effects of the Vietnam War. He envisions himself, not as a frontier hero who's divine right it is to claim all that lies to the West, but as a rightful inhabitant of his country as a Native American.

One of my primary concerns in Chapter Four is an attempt to reconcile the healing aspects of Caputo's Christian Starkmann as he adopts an Indian identity with the potentially racist move to "become" Indian simply by taking on signs which may only amount to an Indian costume. In this way, Christian Starkmann embodies the cowboy-to-Indian transformation in ways that can be read as both healing for himself and as racist in terms of the culture at large. I conclude Chapter Four by asking what we should do with Christian Starkmann's ability to achieve a measure of individual healing through the process of adopting a Native-American identity when it is so narrowly defined that the definition of "Native American" becomes a set of potentially racist signifiers. I think the process by which Pete attains a hybridized identity is one that we may look to for help in understanding the positive aspects of the cowboy-to-Indian transformation of the Vietnam veteran.

In a complex metaphor of a healing that has been successfully completed,

the Chief is seen throwing away rolls of white cloth in the last chapter of Schaeffer's novel. The rolls of white cloth, often described as bandages earlier in the novel, are his White Man guise. As he gets rid of the disguise, the Chief is pictured "talking to the kinaree who hovered outside his window, twenty-two stories up" (531). He talks to the kinaree/Li, accuses her of leaving him, and asks if he can join her again. She wants to know if he is coming as the White Man to which he replies, "As myself" (531). "And he got up from the bed, walked over to the window, threw it open, climbed up on the sill, crouched there for an instant, and then stepped off into Li's outstretched arms" (531). He is able, finally, to embrace himself in his complexity, to stop being "the White Man" and to become "himself" again.

In this way, Ten Feathers Watson undergoes an Indian-to-White Man-to Indian transformation. The "reddening" of the Chief is a clear move toward healing and wholeness, and perhaps we can look back to other "reddenings" I have described throughout this project from this vantage point as more clearly positive. However, this is a complex process, as complex in this specific instance as the larger issue of the ways war and race and history and identity comingle in Vietnam War literature.

Filmography

Billy Jack. 1971. Director: T.C. Frank. Writers: Frank and Teresa Christina. Cast: Tom Laughlin (Billy Jack); Delores Taylor (Jean Roberts). (Written and directed by Tom Laughlin and Delores Taylor under aliases).

Chato's Land. 1972. Director: Michael Winner. Cast: Charles Bronson, Jack Palance, Simon Oakland, Richard Jordan, James Whitmore.

The Deer Hunter. 1978. Director: Michael Cimino. Writer: Deric Washburn; based on a story by Cimino, Washburn, Louis Garfinkel, Quinn Redeker. Cast: Robert De Niro (Michael); John Savage (Steven); Christopher Walken (Nick); Meryl Streep (Linda).

First Blood. 1982. Director: Ted Kotcheff. Writers: Michael Kozoll, William Sackheim, Q. Moonblood; based on the novel by David Morrell. Cast: Sylvester Stallone (Rambo); Richard Crenna (Trautman); Brian Dennehy (Teasle).

The Green Berets.1968. Directors: John Wayne, Ray Kellogg. Writer: James Lee Barrett; based on the novel by Robin Moore. Cast: John Wayne, David Janssen, Jim Hutton.

Little Big Man. 1970. Director: Arthur Penn. Writer: Calder Willingham; from the novel by Thomas Berger. Cast: Dustin Hoffman, Martin Balson, Faye Dunaway, Chief Dan George.

Missing in Action. 1984. Director: Joseph Zito. Cast: Chuck Norris (James Braddock); M. Emmet Walsh (Tuck).

Rambo: First Blood Part II. 1985. Director: George Pan Cosmatos. Writers: Sylverster Stallone, James Cameron. Cast: Sylvester Stallone, Richard Crenna, Charles Napier.

Ulzana's Raid. 1972. Director: Robert Aldrich. Writer: Alan Sharp. Cast: Burt Lancaster, Bruce Davidson, Jorge Luke.

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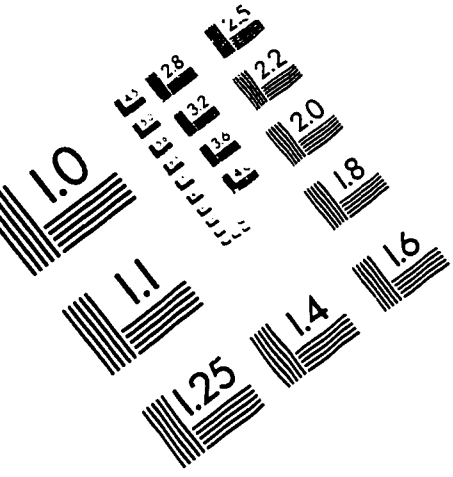

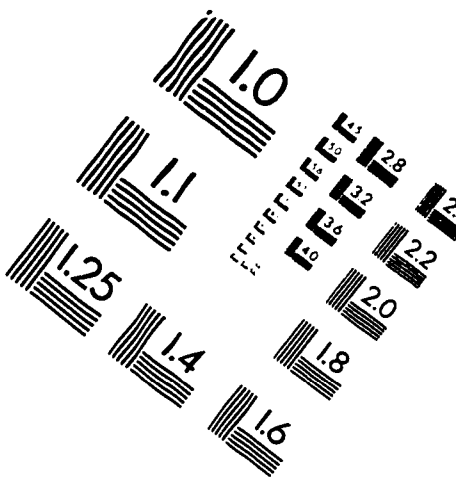

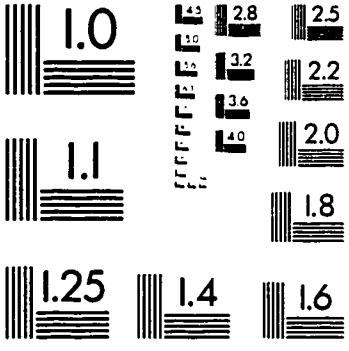

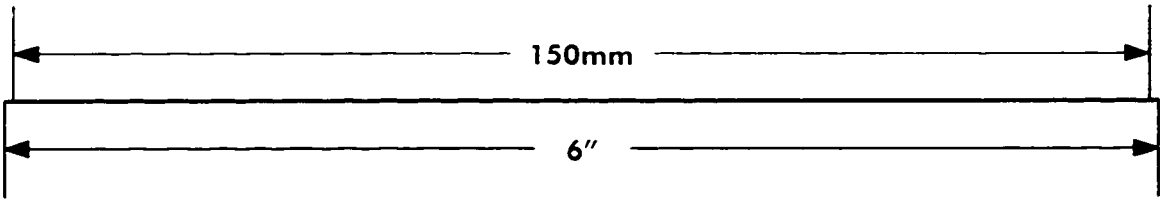

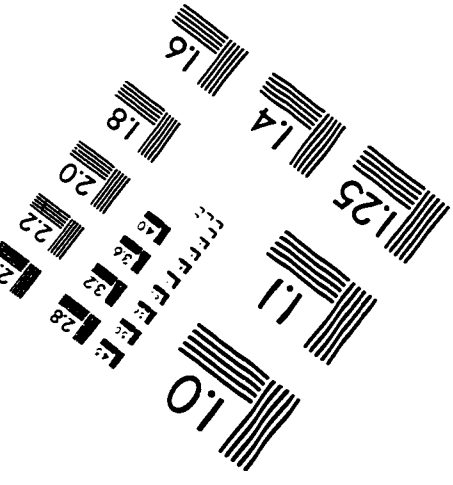

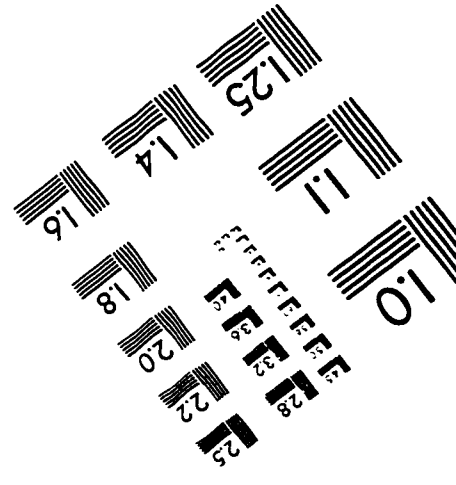

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