

Steven P. Liparulo

“Incense and Ashes”: The Postmodern Work of Refutation in Three Vietnam War Novels

“You see, the people, they do exist from time to time, but they’re only a shadow. When they need rice, the people are the buffalo that pulls the plow. When they need soldiers, they cover the people with armor, put guns in the people’s hands. When all is said and done, at the festivals, when it comes time for the banquets, they put the people on an altar, and feed them incense and ashes. But the real food, that’s always for them.”

—Duong Thu Huong,
Novel Without a Name (275)

“**M**any literary critics have rightly characterized [Tim] O’Brien’s uncertainty [in *The Things They Carried*] as postmodern,”

Christopher Michael Mc-Donough writes, citing several critics I will deal with in more detail shortly, going on to argue that these uncertainties are “topics which might more profitably be considered from a Homeric rather than Socratic viewpoint” (24). Mc-Donough’s contention raises two important questions for the study of O’Brien’s work, and Vietnam War literature in general: What exactly does it mean to call certain war stories “postmodern”—what work gets done by postmodernist elements in the telling of war stories? What would the Socratic viewpoint Mc-Donough dismisses actually help us to see in these war stories? As I will briefly demonstrate shortly, the critics Mc-Donough refers to tend to use somewhat banally the term postmodernism and its junior partner metafiction, that is, without critical reflection, theorizing, or a sense of it as problem—creating a peculiar paradox in which postmodernism, which according to Jean-François Lyotard has to do with skepticism towards knowledge or what can be known, is itself treated

by these critics as if it were easily known. Furthermore, the critical deployment of the term tends to favor it as an aesthetic function (see, for example, Maria S. Bonn characterizing some of O'Brien's trickster work as "aesthetic postmodern gamesmanship" 13). In contrast, I will argue for a critical approach that returns somewhat to Lyotard's sense of postmodernism as a social and political phenomenon (in *The Postmodern Condition*, with its concern for a "just society" xxiv-xxv), and to sharpen the political analysis, I will add Fredric Jameson's concept of "master narratives" (specifically, what he calls in *The Political Unconscious* "providential histories," which might read a nation's successes or failures not in terms of tactical decisions and historical contingencies but as a manifestation of its "destiny" 28). I will also introduce a third factor that forces a reevaluation of both postmodernism as a critical term and O'Brien's use of it as a narrative and stylistic tactic in *The Things They Carried*: with the publication in the mid-90s of two novels by North Vietnamese veterans, *The Sorrow of War*, and *Novel Without a Name*, both of which include startlingly similar "postmodern" elements (specifically, self-conscious metafiction, generic heterogeneity, and ambivalence towards the type of story they are telling—war story or love story?), the whole question of literary postmodernism and its location in history and culture seems to need reevaluation. While I will not attempt, in this limited space, a redefinition of postmodern theory or practice, I will suggest that for these three Vietnam War novels we might provisionally theorize these "postmodern" elements in terms of a Socratic refutative literary practice that seeks to unsettle its reader's sense of certainty, to challenge the reader's understanding of the obligations of citizenship and belief in myths of national "exceptionalism," and to emphasize its own complicity in creating scenes of harm and suffering.

Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* tells, through a metafictionally shifting set of narrative frames, the story of Kien, a veteran of ten years of combat as a North Vietnamese infantry scout platoon leader, who has taken up writing to process, reshape, and recover his wartime experience—the novel opens allegorically with Kien working in 1975 with the Missing In Action Remains-Gathering Team. Indeed, the novel takes in a vast scope of Kien's experience, especially his life-long love for his neighbor Phuong, as it has been distorted by the war. Mostly told in third-person closely aligned to Kien's perspective, the novel occasionally shifts to his first-person narration, and towards the end to a different first-person narrator who takes over organizing Kien's manuscript,¹ emphasizing narrative indeterminacy and metafictional reflection. A defining passage comes near the end of the novel:

As for the author [this unnamed second narrator relates], although he wrote "I," who *was* he in that scout platoon?

Was he any of those ghosts, or of those remains dug up in the jungle?

Was he among those kids from decent families who in fighting a war lost touch with the sources of culture? Those free spirits who were now full of prejudice?

All I knew was that the author had written because he had to write, not because he had to publish. He had to think on paper. (230)

Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name* depicts Quan, another long-serving veteran of the ground war, as he undertakes a mission to escort home Bien, an old friend from his village who has apparently gone insane from the traumas of combat. The narrative weaves together heterogeneous generic elements, alternating between realistic representations of life as an infantry soldier and mythically-inflected episodes of dreaming, meeting a Buddha figure on the road, encountering a keeper of the dead, and sleeping in a coffin, along with frequent inclusions of prayers and songs.² The complexity of the novel's treatment of mythic materials can be seen in a humorous remembered episode in which teenagers Bien and Quan seek to work out the relationship in size between gods and mortals; Bien, who is described in superhuman terms himself as far as strength and capability, imagines the gods as hundreds of times the size of humans, while Quan is "dumbfounded. I never thought a decent fellow like Bien would come up with a fantasy like that" (99-100). Allegorically, the passage indicates that the novel will take a strong interest in the relationship between the mythic and the human, but that it will also maintain skepticism. Indeed, the mythic and the political will significantly intersect in this novel. The text also includes, depending upon one's perspective, parodic, scathing, or realistic portrayals of members of the leadership class of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, whose overheard conversations on a train, for example, reflect the prolonged struggles of the nationalist-communist movement:

"You, me, and many others," [one of the fat Party functionaries says], "we abandoned everything for an ideal. That came with our seventeen-year-old consciences. Once you're over fifty, they're just a bunch of moldy old memories. That ideal, well, the kids need it. And it's all we need to turn them into monks, soldiers, or cops. And it worked, whether it was the revolutionary uniform or the Nationalist police cap." (160)

Thus far, the critical response to the Vietnamese novels comprises main

review engages in a troubling “aesthetic” double-speak in which the reviewer is both privileged to judge the aesthetic merit of the novel (“startlingly well written”) and at the same time negligent of its aesthetic, formal, and stylistic complications—to term “transparently honest” a novel whose narrator is at many points uncertainly identified, and on the penultimate page deeply suspect (“Surely this is what the real author of this novel intended to say?” 232), seems like either wishful thinking or deliberate suppression of the facts.

These responses to the novels peculiarly fail to recognize the work the texts may be doing through formal and stylistic manipulations, and by their failure raise what I consider to be obvious and crucial questions: Given that both Bao Ninh and Duong Thu Huong ran into serious trouble with the Vietnamese government for the dissident content of their novels, why would these writers risk their freedom, if not their lives, simply to reiterate such commonplaces as “war is hell—even when your side is supposedly the winner” (Burns)? If simple truth-telling, Carver’s “transparent honesty,” is the objective of these novels, then what motivates their metafictional devices—what work is the postmodernism doing? Two critics have at least acknowledged and sought to account for the “postmodernism” of the two Vietnamese writers’ work. Andrew Rosenheim, reviewing *Sorrow* for the *Times Literary Supplement*, identifies a parallel with Tim O’Brien’s National Book Award-winning *Going After Cacciato* in creating a metafiction to compete with the televised “reality” reporting of the war, but in a five paragraph review doesn’t have the space to develop the thesis. Rosenheim does, however, touch upon one level of refutation for the Western reader of Bao Ninh’s novel: “The partisan, often racist perspective of American involvement is completely subverted ...we see the Vietnamese soldier, often outmanned, usually out-gunned, with the feelings that most Vietnam war books attribute to G.I.’s alone—fear, cynicism, bewilderment.” The novel can, in other words, begin or contribute to a process of dissuading the American reader from his or her exceptionalist and culturally-narcissistic assumptions that what mattered most about the war was American suffering.⁷ In one of the few essay-length critical responses, William J. Searle suggests a “political” reading of the style, considering these postmodern metafictional effects as an “aesthetic protective device” deployed by the dissident writers against government censors. While there’s merit in the suggestion, Searle’s politics are probably too static, recapitulating the traditional binary between “good peasants” and “bad communists,” or between “Vietnamese patriot[s]” and “Communist bureaucrats” (228), without considering how the one group might feel itself complicit in empowering the other. While they don’t follow up on their premises, Rosenheim and Searle help to counter the prevalent liberal humanism of the other reviewers, and suggest access to the rhetorical and political work of the texts.

Catherine Calloway, in one of the essays cited by McDonough, writes that Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* "demonstrates well the impossibility of knowing the reality of the war in absolute terms. ... O'Brien draws the reader into the text, calling the reader's attention to the process of invention and challenging him to determine which, if any, of the stories are true" (249). Calloway's essay only goes so far in identifying *Things* as "a work of contemporary metafiction" (250), though, not really pushing forward the question of *why* the reader should be challenged or why metafiction should matter, but in citing Robert Scholes' definition of fabulation like this as "ethically controlled fantasy," she at least encourages us to consider the ethical function of the text. What is the point of unsettling our sense of the narrator's identity, as *Things* does by giving the author Tim O'Brien a daughter the person O'Brien doesn't have, or by shifting his place in successive versions of several stories, the most important of which relate the "shit-field" episode when Kiowa is killed⁸ and the story of the North Vietnamese soldier killed in an American ambush? Calloway notes that this last tale is fragmented, segmented, and retold intermittently over a span of some hundred pages, and that only in a late chapter, "Good Form," "does the reader fully question the truth of the incident" (254). The thematic focus of this passage makes it worth quoting at length:

But it's not a game. It's a form. Right here, now, as I invent myself, I'm thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is. For instance, I want to tell you this: twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. I remember his face, which was not a pretty face, because his jaw was in his throat, and I remember ling the burden of responsibility and grief. I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present. (*Things* 179)

The keywords for the "postmodernism," metafiction, and narrative indeterminacy of the book are probably "form," "as I invent myself," and "why this book is written as it is." The keywords for the *function* of the postmodernism, however, are further into the paragraph: "presence," "guilt," "responsibility," "grief," and "blamed." The formal and stylistic manipulations of the text, if we agree to provisionally consider this a "true theorizing" of *Things* from the inside, are motivated not only by grief and guilt (the trauma model) but also by urgencies of responsibility caused by presence, which itself is caused by the obligations of citizenship. If this "work of fiction" should be considered postmodernist, then, it's not primarily because

it plays an aesthetic game but because it enacts a “crisis of legitimation,” to use Lyotard’s term,⁹ in which the narrator’s complicity in the wrongs and harms of the war enforce a responsibility upon the storytelling in relation to its audience.

Don Ringnalda argues for a similar functional relationship between content and form in *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War*, contending that “the reason Americans fought it, the way they fought it, and the way they often write about it all stem from the very same failure of imagination, which in turn stems from this nation’s righteous, sense-making rage for order and its perennial flight from the humility engendered by self-irony” (ix-x). Ringnalda identifies a small group of American writers, among them O’Brien, whose work actively resists the epistemology of certainty he claims led America into the war in Vietnam; these writers, “the most alert, seeing-in-the-dark novelists, poets, and dramatists sift through the wreckage and offer up deconstructive, interrogative collages composed of unsettling juxtapositions” (xi).

To see how we might imagine relationships between form and content as more than aesthetic concerns and as involved in the work of theorizing and “deconstructing” commonplace understandings of American participation in the Vietnam War, we can reread “The Things They Carried,” the opening chapter in O’Brien’s 1990 text, as building on a tension between materialist and humanist understandings of the war experience. Stylistically, its salient features include generic heterogeneity—its segments juxtapose lists, definitions of words from the soldier’s lexicon, and a plot line about an infantry platoon—and thematically, it is marked by ambivalence: is this a love story about Lieutenant Jimmy Cross’s ambiguous love for Martha the Virgin Poet, or is it a war story about Ted Lavender getting shot while urinating? The ambivalence and ambiguity run deeper, as “the things they carried” included both physical items like mines and rations and mosquito repellent, and also “psychological” things like “grief, terror, love, longing . . . shameful memories” (21). While a “postmodernist” reading might emphasize that these “heterogeneous” elements are coordinate and coincident, no hierarchies or arbitrary codes ensuring their significance, there’s also an interpretation that makes sense of the disparate components without recapitulating the usual humanist certainties. It starts with the recognition that formally speaking, there’s an oddly-placed epiphany in this story, a long rich sentence in a work marked by “economical” understatement:

Purely for comfort, they would throw away rations, blow their Claymores and grenades, no matter, because by night-fall the resupply choppers would arrive with more of the same, then a day or two later still more, fresh watermelons

and crates of ammunition and sunglasses and woolen sweaters—the resources were stunning—sparklers for the Fourth of July, colored eggs for Easter—it was the great American war chest—the fruits of science, the smokestacks, the canneries, the arsenals at Hartford, the Minnesota forests, the machine shops, the vast fields of corn and wheat—they carried like freight trains; they carried it on their backs and shoulders—and for all the ambiguities of Vietnam, all the mysteries and unknowns, there was at least the abiding certainty that they would never be at a loss for things to carry. (15-16)

Taking on a Whitman-esque tone of singing American diversity and abundance, the passage indicates the degree to which the soldiers carry America with them (the supply chain can provide them with Easter eggs and sparklers for the Fourth of July, sacraments for rituals of a Christian American empire), and the extent to which everything is replaceable (they would never be at a loss for things to carry), which must at least imply that they, too, are products of America, expendable and replaceable. This materialist epiphany is wrongly placed, however, to serve as a formalist “climax” to the story, too near the middle and not at the end, but applying the fundamental narrative logic of cause and effect, we see it is ideally suited to serve as exposition relative to *cause*. The “humanist” storyline’s central conflict is cited on the same page as this materialist epiphany—“[Jimmy Cross] hated himself. He had loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence Lavender was now dead”—and it leads to the conventional resolution of the story, Jimmy Cross’s vow to be a more responsible platoon leader, to burn Martha’s pictures and to stop dispersing his energy in romantic fantasizing.

Lorrie Smith interprets this storyline as central to what she calls *Things*’ role in a “larger cultural project to rewrite the Vietnam War from a masculinist and strictly American perspective” (17), a thesis that is probably generally true but arguably less so for O’Brien’s work.¹⁰ First of all, within her general formula for *Things*, that “survival itself depends upon excluding women from the masculine bond” (24), she may well be treating O’Brien as if he were an author of masculinist discourse rather than a subject defined within it—or struggling to refute its ideological effects. Secondly, I believe that Smith is dealing with effects and not investigating causes. Jimmy Cross’s sense of an exclusive gender paradigm (“women=distracted=danger=death,” as Smith captions it) more than likely has its source in the same place as the other “things they carried,” whether they be guilt, shame, or colored Easter eggs. Ringnalda argues that “to a great extent it is

because of, not just in spite of, the products of our civilized technology and the resulting attitudes towards the dirty, ungeometrical jungle¹¹ and its inhabitants, that we got into trouble in Vietnam” (19), suggesting as I do that American productivity, material abundance, stunning resources—in a word, American *capitalism*—produces the cultural, gender, and psychological ideologies of which war, sexism, and guilt are surface effects.¹² Jameson, in equating postmodernism with late capitalism, would probably see in O’Brien’s materialist epiphany evidence of “that enormous properly human and anti-natural power of dead human labor stored up in our machinery” (1984 77), the only apparent certainty in a world of mystifications. If there is an unspeakable or unmentionable, to use Carver’s terms, in the representation of the American experience in Vietnam, it is more likely to be the economic rather than the traumatic, and in leaving the reader to sort out the relationships between the ambiguous elements of “The Things They Carried,” love and war, emotional things and material things, O’Brien’s text initiates the unsettling work of refutation.

O’Brien’s refutative motive, to coin the sort of neologism of which the late Kenneth Burke¹³ was fond, takes center stage in *Things*’ metafictional performance piece, “How to Tell a True War Story.” This seems to be the most heterogeneous and fragmented of stories, interweaving three major lines: Mitchell Sanders tells a story about an LP/OP patrol, the narrator and Vietnam veteran “Tim O’Brien” tells a story about Curt Lemon and Rat Kiley, and the highly-educated writer “Tim O’Brien” (ABD/PhD, Harvard, Political Science) writes an essay about war stories. It also seems intent on *not* telling stories, full of interruptions and undercutting of narrative authority: “This elaborate story,” Mitchell Sanders protests later in the book, implicating this same unsettling effect, “you can’t say, Hey, by the way, I don’t know the *ending*. I mean, you got certain obligations” (113). Even in its “authoritative,” essayistic mode, it seems to undo itself with contradictions—the most allegorically perfect of which is the generalization that “True war stories do not generalize” (78)—and expressions of incredulity: “In many cases a true war story cannot be believed” (71). Yet, if we know anything, we know uncertainty—appearances can be deceiving. “How to Tell A True War Story” is simultaneously a heterogeneous text of indeterminacy, if read as expressive or expository, but also a tightly unified text if read as performance and refutation. In order to read it that way, we should return to the terms laid out by McDonough in our opening and consider the profoundly Socratic nature of O’Brien’s literary project.

Maria S. Bonn observes that in O’Brien’s first book, the memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone*,¹⁴ the early analogy between the author’s choice to go to war and Socrates’ choice to stay in Athens to face his accusers, as opposed to the option of flight represented in the memoir by Hemingway’s Frederic

Henry, indicates that “because O’Brien elected to remain with the army, we assume that, at least in part, he chose to follow the model of Socrates” (5). What Bonn means by a Socratic model takes an disappointing turn in the essay, following, I think, the common perception that Plato was a philosopher and Socrates simply a tool for enacting his doctrine (she mentions a “text fitting for education in the Platonic model” 6), and she seems to have to import an increasingly-less “Socratic” language to describe what O’Brien does: “nudging his readers to question some of their assumptions about fiction and truth” (12), “not solely aesthetic postmodern gamesmanship, but a form that is a thematic continuation of the author’s concern throughout his career with the power and capability of story” (13), “wiley [sic] postmodern perceptions of the reader’s relationship to the text” (14). She never uses the word *refutation*, and yet that seems exactly the term to connect O’Brien and Socrates. Perhaps the problem is that refutation is often misconstrued, and Plato only half-understood.

James L. Kastely, in *Rethinking the Rhetorical Tradition*, argues that Plato is often read the way the reviewers tend to read the Vietnamese novelists, as if the formal and stylistic peculiarities of their texts were mere incidental inconveniences. It’s not a trivial question to ask why a “philosopher” should be granted authority when he chooses to represent his “doctrines” through a dramatic figure in Socrates who almost never convinces anyone of anything. Instead of treating the texts as distant artifacts expressive of truth, Kastely considers the intimate and performative nature of the Socratic dialogues relative to the reader:

The situations in the dialogues repeatedly demand that the readers assess not only the arguments or myths set forth but also the motives and, by extension, the characters. These demands lead ineluctably to the reader’s making judgments that prove to be wrong, obtuse, hasty, partial, or fail in a variety of other ways. Through this process of taking positions that must be rethought the reader becomes implicated in the issues of the dialogue and his or her understanding is then put in play. To read Plato is to engage the issue of being an adequate reader, and this, in turn, raises the issue of being an adequate—that is, a just—citizen. (51)

If O’Brien chooses to follow the model of Socrates, with an emphasis upon the obligations of citizenship, then his texts may be read as implicating their readers in the choices leading to war, and may fundamentally unsettle the certainties that led to those choices.

The relationship between storyteller and audience thematically unifies

O'Brien's story, which might be retitled "How to Tell (If You Are the Appropriate Audience for) a True War Story." After Curt Lemon dies, Rat Kiley writes a letter to Lemon's sister, who never replies. Wrong audience for his lurid masculinist tales about his buddy with the "stainless steel balls" (67). Mitchell Sanders tells a story about a listening post/observation post patrol that has a hard time believing what they hear up in the mountains, and then have an even harder time convincing a colonel of what they have heard. Wrong audience, Sanders concludes, many wrong audiences: "Nobody listens. Nobody hears nothin'. Like that fatass colonel. The politicians, all the civilian types. Your girlfriend" (76). Tim O'Brien tells a story about telling the story about Rat Kiley shooting the water buffalo after Curt Lemon dies, and a woman in the audience who thought she was so sure about what the story was about but "wasn't listening" (85). It's an apparently unified story. "It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen." It's also a performance piece for the audience in the sense that every time a character asks "understand me?" or "hear that?" the reader is being asked if they are the right audience. When the story describes Dave Jensen singing "Lemon Tree" as O'Brien and he peel what's left of Curt Lemon off of the trees (83), it implicitly queries, do you understand how this is simultaneously obscene and funny—that the comedy is implicit in the obscenity? At the end, it challenges, do you understand that you are being asked to check yourself against the "older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics" who likes the story about the baby water buffalo—are you making the same mistakes as she is, confusing a love story for a war story? If so, start again—"you can tell [and become a more just reader of] a true war story if you just keep on telling it" (85). The story implies the negative lesson in citizenship, I would add, that if you choose not to start again, that if you don't engage in a process of learning how to listen, then you can become a "fatass colonel" who doesn't need facts and truth troubling his certainty about the war¹⁵ or the world. What Kastely says about characters in the Platonic dialogues can be applied to the relationships between O'Brien's texts and their readers: "Socratic refutation is always directed at a particular individual in an attempt to move that character to become an audience that is willing to risk its self-understanding to take appropriate responsibility for its position in the world" (17).

Prompting audiences to rethink their responsibilities seems to be at the heart of the work Duong's *Novel* sets out to do, as well. Take, for example, this scene in which we see, not Mitchell Sanders' "fatass colonel," but fat Party officials, one of whom says to the other, commenting on a seemingly innocuous exchange they've witnessed on a train:

"Those two young tricksters called the ticket collector

‘Comrade.’ The ticket collector addressed us the same way. In reality, though, the first case was a relationship between delinquents and an agent of the law. The second case, now that was a relationship between masters and servants. If the Party is the faithful servant of the people, as Ho Chi Minh says, then the ticket collector is just a servant’s servant. Is that clear? So the word ‘Comrade’ can mean many things. From a linguistic point of view, it’s a lie. From a historical point of view, it’s an adaptation. And from a practical angle, well, it’s just a leader’s trick.” (159)

At first glance, we see the linguistic skepticism that marks the Socratic refutation. Taken further, we might reflect upon its implication that all sorts of speech betray a history of class struggle and potentially unjust hierarchies. Then we could reflect upon our own relationship to the text and the characters. While we might initially incline towards distaste for the speaker (Searle shrugs him off as a “cruel parody of Marxis[m]” 234), a fat man in a hungry country, maybe even discount his utterance, we should also consider that his speech offers us useful access into the manipulations which have led us into war—an unsympathetic character, he can nonetheless teach us something important about ourselves (a function not unlike Callicles’ in Plato’s *Gorgias*). Even further, imagining ourselves a Vietnamese reader and veteran of the war (if possible), we might develop acute anxiety in realizing that the populist movement that stirred our passions to war has also been linked to a political hierarchy which has marginalized us. We might finally observe as literary critics that here is yet another example of a text theorizing itself from within (how to read skeptically this “true war story”), urging a postmodernist explosion of subject positions and a refutative series of sense-making maneuvers that keep us from settling into unearned certainty—we must beware of becoming a reader who cannot change throughout an engagement with a text, or a critic who sees the same thing in every text (the liberal-humanist commonplace that war “is the most universal of experiences,” for example, while meaningful war histories tend to differentiate various causes and effects for each war). To avoid this easy certainty I’ll spend the rest of this essay rearranging traditional hierarchies of authors, critics, theorists characters, historical figures, leaders, adversaries, and allies, to continue the unsettling activity of refutation, the target of which here is largely a master narrative of patriotic war and national exceptionalism, and how it was manipulated to stir passions and create erotic attachments by soldiers, American and Vietnamese.

In refuting their manipulation into fighting the war, Duong and Bao may also be refuting their own passions, and creating the similar opportunities

for their readers. When Duong's *Novel*, for example, depicts Quan returning to his village to find an old girlfriend now pregnant and outcast into the hills, Bao Ninh might offer a theorizing of the ambivalence between love and war to implicate the complicity of one in the other. As Quan enters Hoa's hut, he smashes face-first into a pillar, waking an elemental passion within himself:

From the depths of my pain, a wave of rage overcame me. I felt it rise in me, the fever of combat, the hatred, the irrepressible desire to kill, to annihilate, like a fire sweeping through my body, my brain. [...] My hands twisted, greedy for carnage. To snap a neck, to plunge a bayonet into flesh, to turn a hail of machine-gun fire on someone ... on everything that reminded me of this life, of everything I had lost, of all the invisible forces that had ransacked and trampled my existence. (Duong 152; unbracketed ellipsis in original)

This violent rage towards a former lover speaks of the intimate complicity between love and war, and Bao Ninh's book, which has been published as both *The Sorrow of War* and *The Sorrow of Love* works out the relationship in further detail:

The sorrow of war inside a soldier's heart was in a strange way similar to the sorrow of love. It was a kind of nostalgia, like the immense sadness of a world at dusk. It was a sadness, a missing, a pain which could send one soaring back into the past. (94)

An earlier passage in *Sorrow* implies the complicated and intimate relationship between Kien and the 1965-1975 war by contrasting it with the subsequent Cambodian-Chinese conflict, which doesn't interest Kien: "For him there had been just the one war, the one which had involved the Americans" (75). A strange, fatal romance, a monogamous love affair with his "one true war," is suggested by its parallel to Kien's one love, Phuong, whose life, like Kien's, was severely damaged by the war. In a later passage, following the Socratic logic that we owe refutation most to those we love,¹⁶ the novel depicts Phuong playing the role of unsettlement to Kien's sense of what he loves:

"You had little in common with your father [a melancholy, rebellious painter] and as you grew you resembled him less and less. You didn't love your father or your moth-

er. You loved the idea of going to war; you were headstrong, you wanted to remain pure and loyal to your ideals. I don't want to sound disdainful, but there's nothing original in all that." (135)

Stylistically, the refutative effect is enhanced by the second-person form of address of the speech, so that the reader is virtually directly addressed and asked to consider his or her own commitments, as well. This passage also connects Kien to a larger social problem and point of anxious complicity in suggesting that he has at least partially consented to the purposeful rearrangement of his erotic attachments, from local patriarchal loyalty (which would amount to following his father in political dissent) to the patriotism of passionate commitment to a war of national liberation.¹⁷

If we accept, at least provisionally, Bao Ninh's implication that a war requires a lover's devotion, we should also consider that a soldier must be partially seduced into his or her attachment. *Sorrow* depicts some of this seductive process in describing the environment in which Kien and Phuong carried on their adolescent romance:

The Youth Union members resented them, teachers were deeply concerned, and there were so many others caught up in the patriotic campaigns which denounced any form of liberalism or romance.

There were frenzied campaigns championing the "Three Alerts" and "Three Responsibilities," and harshest, the "Three Don'ts," which forbade sex, love, or marriage among young people. Love affairs for ninth- or tenth-formers were regarded as a disgrace, unpatriotic. (131)

In her subsequent refutation of Kien, quoted above, Phuong probably refers to this pervasive social pressure to conform (and to conserve one's passion for war) in her accusation that there's nothing original in Kien's devotion to war. Real courage would require different choices.

What Phuong theorizes, Tim O'Brien confesses; "On the Rainy River" in *Things* portrays the meaningful act of choice that is often overlooked in liberal-humanist revisions of the history of the war (i.e., in creating an image of the veteran as victim instead of as agent; in emphasizing suffering and guilt over responsibility, etc.). It is not simply a matter of going to war or not—the responsibilities run deeper than that, citizenship is more than an abstraction, communities make material and contradictory demands. In this story, the narrator receives his draft notice and heads north to the Minnesota-Canada border to struggle with his choice. The scene in which

he goes out onto the river itself,¹⁸ perhaps to cross, includes a long surreal and epiphanic paragraph that embodies what is at stake in the narrator's decision: figures from history—personal, local, national, global—form an imagined audience for the narrator's dilemma, among them Abraham Lincoln and anti-war activist Abbie Hoffman, Plato and/or Homer, actors Gary Cooper and Jane Fonda, the narrator's family and Huck Finn. This emphasizes the social connections involved in the decision, and runs counter to the humanist ideal of an individual isolated with his free choice. The narrator cannot resist the accumulated social forces and obligations, deciding to go to war. The last few pages of the story seem flagellating and perhaps even self-pitying ("I couldn't risk the embarrassment" 59), but they are probably also attempting the work of refutation, unsettling the potentially easy sense that choosing to fight demonstrates courage: "I was a coward. I went to the war" (61).

If choosing to fight reflects conformity more than courage, what would courage entail?¹⁹ All three novels dramatically answer this question—choosing love—in the process deepening the sense of ambivalence between love and war, continuing their refutations of passions, and emphasizing their generic or narrative heterogeneity as formulated by Bao Ninh and echoed by Tim O'Brien: "... a love story. ... Not a war story" (*Sorrow* 60); "It *wasn't* a war story. It was a *love* story" (*Things* 85). Paralleling an earlier scene in which Kien "couldn't summon the courage" to confront the mysteries of sexuality when presented the opportunity by his neighbor Hahn (66), *Sorrow* depicts Kien and Phuong at the sexual threshold in a romantic evening on the shore of one of Hanoi's many lakes, as his entry into the war looms imminent. "But [Kien] dared not accept her challenge to make love to her" (133). Similarly, Quan, *Novel's* narrator, is presented with the chance to make love to the physically unattractive "keeper of the dead" he encounters at a shelter along his trail out of the war zone on his way to pick up his fellow villager Bien. Like Kien, Quan admonishes himself for lacking the courage to choose love, and adds a compounding charge of lacking compassion for the woman. He contrasts himself to To Vu, a monarch from Vietnamese antiquity: "Why didn't I have this ancient king's resolve, his compassion? Out of respect for a certain woman's dignity, he had made her a queen, despite the hideousness of her face. These rare men, had they been sages or wild beasts?" (*Novel* 47). This etches a moment of profound ambivalence, emphasizing a choice not only between love and war, but also between competing master narratives of national or tribal identity—to follow the ancients and choose love and compassion, or to follow the modern and its "Three Don'ts" and prohibitions against expending passions vital to the patriotic war?

Lorrie Smith's explication of a similar scene of sexual renunciation in

favor of adhering to the master code of patriarchally and patriotically defined masculinity in “The Things They Carried” seems to understand the “Three Don’ts,” but also reflects troubling elements of Americanist ideology. In that story, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross resolves to put away his romantic fantasies²⁰ about his “friend” Martha in order to become a more responsible platoon leader in terms that signal ambivalence: “He was realistic about it. There was that new hardness in his stomach. He loved her but he hated her” (*Things* 24). Smith claims that “Lieutenant Jimmy Cross’s survival and his coming of age as an effective soldier depend upon letting go of all that is not necessary and immediate—here equated completely with *the feminine, the romantic, the imaginary*” (24, emphasis added to underscore “three don’ts”). Smith’s guiding thesis, however, that O’Brien “purports to tell ‘true’ war stories, but stops short of fully interrogating their ideological underpinnings” (16-17), relies upon an absolutism (that O’Brien could *fully* interrogate these ideological underpinnings and still tell the story) that is markedly American²¹ and may obscure the refutative work of the text. The ideological underpinnings are strongly implied in the “materialist epiphany” I analyzed above, and we should recall that the pictures of and letters from Martha are among the things that Jimmy Cross carried, along with the other “goods” of American productivity, there in his rucksack with his bullets and books of communication codes. We should also recall the ambiguity between physical or material things they carried and mental or ideological things, and might conclude that Jimmy Cross’s gender ideology is as much a product of American culture as the Easter eggs and Claymore mines America supplies to its troops. In other words, I think it’s mistaken of Smith to critique gender ideology independent of class ideology (a rather typically American mystification, of course²²). She identifies Jimmy Cross as a *soldier*, which is only partially accurate—he is an *officer* (as are Kien and Quan), and part of his story is the class ambition inherent in occupying a place in the hierarchy of command (and a *chosen* place—a soldier may be drafted, but he has to volunteer to become an officer), and he is further influenced by *competition* (to be a better officer than others, to seek promotion ahead of others, to succeed in a socially-defined role), the underlying condition for both “market capitalism” and war (and, one should quickly add, the “business” of academic scholarship²³).

Not surprisingly, given the Marxist-Leninist environment of her upbringing and education, Vietnamese writer Duong Thu Houong is more explicit in her understanding of the function of class struggle in the manipulation of affections used to “seduce” soldiers into passionate commitment to war. In particular, *Novel* theorizes how a leadership class in North Vietnam manipulated the masses through overlaying their hierarchies onto religious structures. The fat man on the train, the Party official we’ve seen before,

notes that “for a people as primitive as ours, using a religion to guide them through some shortcuts to glory is a hundred times easier than trying to civilize them” (162). He goes on to specify the transfer of rituals and sacraments from the religious to the political-ideological:

“So you think we’re atheists? No way! We demolished the temples and emptied the pagodas so we could hang up portraits of Marx, enthrone a new divinity for the masses. Remember the army’s ideological rectification campaigns? With the cadres from 1952 to 1953? Were those really and different from confessions in church? We invented sins. We tortured ourselves. We repented in exchange for a pure soul, hoping it would bring us one step closer to the Supreme Being.” (163-164)

Like Foucault in theorizing how confession is given “a central role in the order of civil and religious powers” (58), this passage describes part of the “incense and ashes” process of creating a certain type of “holy warrior,” whose commitment in this case is to a war to manifest national destiny. Duong’s novel is remarkable in its extensive development—and skeptical refutation—of what we might term a myth of Vietnamese exceptionalism.

Early in the novel, Quan converses with a senior NVA commander, and in their dialogue we should sense a contrast between patriotism that finds its roots in the traditions of the past, and a new kind that sets itself loftier objectives. Quan confesses:

“Everybody has their own particular blind spots. My generation, we joined the army as soon as we reached the age to do our patriotic duty. The blood in our veins is Vietnamese. As long as a foreign invader remains on our soil, we’ll fight. That’s the way it was for the Tran dynasty against the Mongols, and the same for the Le dynasty against the Ming Chinese invaders.” (75)

His view, then, is one that resists totalizing, and sees the war within a “local” context of defense, made honorable by a “blood” connection to heroic ancestors. Quan also admits that he has managed to elude most of the ideological training given to officers, and his views tend to represent the pragmatic soldier’s thinking. Dao Tien, the NVA commander, reflects the new “brand” of exceptionalism: “Our ancestors were brave, but they were not as fortunate as we are; history didn’t entrust them with the same mission” (76). In Duong’s version of this nationalist myth, Marxist theory marks

the difference between traditional and modern heroism, as the Party secretary in Quan's hometown, Mr. Ly, notes: "You should forge your own will to conquer We Vietnamese have a long tradition of heroism. And now, on top of it, we're armed with the dialectical materialism of Marxist thought. Who can beat us?" (151). *Novel*, then, theorizes that the leadership class drew upon and exploited the faith practices, filial piety, and patriotism of the general Vietnamese population to create a generation of soldiers willing to feed on "incense and ashes" and endure the long struggle towards the Vietnamese "destiny."

An American perspective synthesized from the works of Henry Kissinger, National Security Adviser to President Richard Nixon during the second half of the American involvement in the war, and Richard Slotkin, a "cultural historian" studying the persistence of the myth of the frontier in American culture (he claims that "[m]yth is the language in which a society remembers its history" 655), may give us an opportunity to reflect upon similarities and differences between the American and North Vietnamese conceptualizations of the war and of their "national characters," destinies, and what makes them "exceptional," before we return to the postmodern work of refutation in Duong's novel.

Kissinger looks skeptically at the American tendency to see the nation's history in abstract and moralizing terms. Of the 19th century, he writes:

Rather arrogantly we [Americans] ascribed our security entirely to the superiority of our beliefs rather than to the weight of our power or the fortunate accidents of history and geography. But these [19th century American Civil and Indian] wars were not seen in terms of a concept of international relations; to Americans they reflected the imperatives of a manifest destiny. (58)

Kissinger is describing the ideology or myth often termed "American exceptionalism," which emphasizes abstract notions of election, selection, and destiny over material particularities of location, productivity, and military power.²⁴ Marxist critic Jim Neilson is more blunt in unmasking what he sees as the myth and the violent history it conceals: "The notion that the use of force to maintain power and wealth is something outside of rather than common to our national experience is the defining feature of American exceptionalism" (109). Kissinger agrees, in his own way, that peace should be considered the exception in American history, especially in the more specific context that surrounded the Vietnam War: "Our deeper problem [in the Cold War era] was conceptual. Because peace was believed to be 'nor-

mal,' many of our great international exertions were expected to bring about a final result, restoring normality by overcoming an intervening obstacle" (61). America was expected to be exceptional in the sense that unlike other nations it would not be changed by war, but would continue along its path to achieving its destiny.

Slotkin similarly describes the role of violence in the American cultural mythology: "In each stage of its development, the Myth of the Frontier relates the achievement of 'progress' to a particular form or scenario of violent action" (11). This myth applies equally well to the American western frontier of the Indian wars or the global frontier of Third World nations and wars against "Communist insurgencies." But Kissinger, writing about his protracted negotiations with Le Duc Tho and the North Vietnamese Communist Party leaders, reflects a combination of his avowed Machiavellian pragmatism and what is likely an unconscious reflex to differentiate American motives and "destinies" from those of the North Vietnamese, which seem startlingly similar.²⁵ "Le Duc Tho . . . rejected neutrality for both Cambodia and Laos, and emphasized that it was his people's destiny not merely to take over South Vietnam but to dominate the whole of Indochina. . . . Hanoi's insatiable quest for hegemony—not America's hesitant and ambivalent response—is the root cause of Cambodia's ordeal" (433). Kissinger seems to get it half-right, indicative perhaps of American ambivalence over its violent application of force, an ambivalence supported by the mystification implying that imposing the "free market system" which benefits America economically is not "hegemonic" itself. In his version, America intervenes when North Vietnam invades its neighbors (including South Vietnam), but Kissinger cannot escape the confines of discourse and gain unmediated access to truth, of course, and he can be theorized by the Vietnamese writers. In contrast, as we've seen, in Bao's and Duong's novels the Americans are depicted as the invaders who initially prompt the patriotic military response—but that patriotism is then overwritten with a larger sense of destiny, a Vietnamese version of "exceptionalism,"²⁶ an overreaching that leaves both Kien and Quan feeling betrayed. This sense of having betrayed themselves through the exertion of passion seems to motivate the work of refutation in the novels.

Novel formally resembles a confession in its first-person narration, and I argue that it functions in part as a refutation of the inescapably human capacities and needs for faith, love, tradition, purpose, community, and identity, which can neither be cynically rejected (without giving up on life) nor unreflectively adopted (without the dire risk of "choosing" oppression). Returning to the scene cited above in which the fat man's conversation reveals the manipulations of the leadership class, we find Quan chilled and sobered by what he has overheard—the fat man "had spoken the truth"

(165). The text then includes, set off by italics, a vision of Quan's that combines the imagery of superstition and magic, religion and politics:

I see a magician who by sleight-of-hand transforms a piece of wax into a figurine. He blows on it. The marionette becomes a grandiose, majestic genie. Billions of men prostrate themselves and begin to pray. Billions of eyes opened wide in fear and adoration. Billions of lives wait for the signal to jump into the fire, into hell . . . I am one of them, they are my kin, all those who are dear to me.

In a text marked by its willingness to represent prayer, and unabashed in its invocation of things supernatural, this epiphany of recognizing the connections between religion, superstition, and political exploitation must reflect deep ambivalence, anxiety, and complicity. Like O'Brien, whose presence in the war ensures his guilt and responsibility for its damage, Quan cannot exclude himself from the masses both fearing and adoring the image of their majestic destiny—indeed, Quan later identifies with a version of O'Brien's patriotic soldier, an American his unit has captured: "He too must have been drunk on a vision of himself marching till dawn with medals across his chest against a horizon of fire and flames" (285). In both instances, on the train and in the presence of the American, Quan reacts with cold sweat. Is this the body responding to the mind's having been duped? Is this anxiety and guilt, Quan reproaching himself for failing to learn the ideology that might have helped him resist manipulation? Is this ambivalence and complicity, fearing and adoring the "incense and ashes" of a chosen myth that has failed to bring glory or deliverance?

Kenneth Burke warns, paraphrasing Marx, that under capitalism we are likely to encounter a "rhetoric of mystification . . . a fog of merger-terms where the clarity of division terms is needed" (109), or in the terms of this essay falsely-certain universalizing identification where we might more meaningfully seek difference. So, while Bao Ninh, Duong Thu Huong, and Tim O'Brien are far from unique in writing war novels from a dissident perspective²⁷, there are cultural, political, and economic differences between them and their works that should give us pause before extending any of their similarities towards the absolute pole of "universality." Based upon differences of assumptions in their educations, American and Vietnamese writers will very likely experience ideological structures at different degrees of transparency or visibility. At the same time, most anyone who chooses to can begin to see in their experience the traces of class struggle, whether between rich and poor, politically empowered and politically disenfranchised, landowners and peasants, or officers and enlisted men. Thus, while

we recognize strong parallels, especially in terms of these representations of class struggle, we should not blandly equate Bao Ninh's lover's refutation in *The Sorrow of War* with Duong Thu Huong's believer's reproach in *Novel Without a Name* or Tim O'Brien's intellectual's skepticism in *The Things They Carried*, nor should we efface the class difference in their characters—Bao's urban quasi-socialist Kien should not be equated without problem to Duong's agrarian peasant-villager Quan or O'Brien's market-consumer carrying American productivity and capitalism on his back. And yet, finally, the books *do* similar things, and the parallel I've chosen to emphasize in this essay, namely their deployment of stylistic features often termed "postmodernist," has the advantage of representing a matter of craft, and thus a degree of choice by the writer. The stylistic and formal similarities of these three Vietnam War novels, their strategies for troubling the reader's sense of certainty, I've argued, represent a similarity of purpose (if not, necessarily, of content or message): these texts can be said to engage in Socratic refutations of powerful master narratives (especially of national exceptionalism) and the ideological seductions, manipulations, commitments, and refusals that may have led their authors to participate in the war, and to represent anxiety and ambivalence towards love, patriotism, religion, the obligations of citizenship—those passions and capacities necessary for life beyond mere survival that also create in us all profound and intractable vulnerabilities. At a time when the singular logic of "free-market global capitalism" trumpets itself ever more stridently as the sole certainty in a complicated world²⁸, novels like these, which deploy postmodernist tactics to refuse the incomplete certitude of "realism"²⁹, offer the thoughtful and responsible citizen valuable critical resources for navigating through the incense and ashes to locate and re-locate sites for decision and action, regions Hélène Cixous imagines, in postmodern terms, as the "elsewhere" of writing, places "that [are] not economically and politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise ... not obliged to reproduce the system" (72).

Notes

1. Its narrative maneuvers might be compared to those in Paul Auster's New York Trilogy novels, especially *City of Glass*.
2. Jameson notes in *The Political Unconscious* the generally resistant nature of this sort of "popular culture" reconstruction of "fragments of essentially peasant cultures: folk songs, fairy tales, popular festivals, occult or oppositional systems of belief such as magic and witchcraft. [It can be seen as] a systematic deconstruction and undermining of the hegemonic aristocratic form of the epic, with its somber ideology of heroism and baleful destiny" (86).
3. Jim Neilson claims in *Warring Fictions* that "commercial literary culture rejects and repudiates as biased any discourse indecorous enough to acknowledge its own ideology, rather than to disguise this ideology (in the manner of liberalism) as common sense" (36). See also

Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*: “The convenient working distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not becomes something worse than an error: namely, a symptom and a reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life” (20).

4. *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1.*

5. Parodied, for example, in a *Simpsons* episode in which Homer suffers from PTSD—not from the war, but from a Vietnam War film festival!

6. Cf. Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious*, paralleling his project with Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*: “to reassert the specificity of the political content of everyday life and of individual fantasy-experience and to reclaim it from that reduction to the merely subjective and to the status of psychological projection which is even more characteristic of American cultural and ideological life today than it is of a still politicized France” (22).

7. While this is a subject for an essay of its own, here I would just point to the often-criticized ethnocentrism of such works as *Platoon*, *Apocalypse Now*, *A Rumor of War*, and *Dispatches*, to name only the most canonical of films and texts in which the Vietnam War is reduced in some ways to a conflict within the American psyche. Explicating this common theme drives the interpretive work of John Hellmann in *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, which notes that even as early as in *The Ugly American*, “the success of the external struggle ... depends upon the outcome of an internal struggle taking place within the American psyche and American society” (24).

8. “Speaking of Courage,” “Notes,” and “In the Field.”

9. Apropos to consider here, as well, is Jameson’s characterization of the results of Marxist “situated/relational” analysis of class struggle in *The Political Unconscious*: “normally, a ruling class ideology will explore various strategies of the *legitimation* of its own power position, while an oppositional culture or ideology will, often in covert and disguised strategies, seek to contest and to undermine the dominant ‘value system’” (85, emphasis in original).

10. Such an argument would have to take into account how O’Brien’s 1978 landmark novel *Going After Cacciato*, in contrast to the predominant “masculinist and strictly American perspective,” includes a female Southeast Asian character, Sarkin Aung Wan, who not only speaks but also challenges the choices of the authorial surrogate, Paul Berlin.

11. We should note, by way of contrast, that the Vietnamese novelists insist upon locating their narratives in heterogeneous spaces of both physical and supernatural dimensions: within their opening pages, *Novel* establishes its setting as “the Gorge of Lost Souls” (1), while *Sorrow* depicts Kien on his way to the “Jungle of Screaming Souls” (4).

12. Jameson speculates in *The Political Unconscious* that “the conditions of possibility of psychoanalysis become visible, one would imagine, only when you begin to appreciate the extent of psychic fragmentation since the beginnings of capitalism” (62).

13. Burke’s work is notoriously difficult to cite in the sense that one learns ways of reading and interpreting from his example without his necessarily having set out distinct “theoretical” principles; nonetheless, this essay is deeply influenced by his work, especially in *A Rhetoric of Motives*.

14. The text formally marks its Platonic/Socratic influence further by beginning Chapter XXII with a quotation from Book IV of *The Republic* that supplies its title—"Courage Is a Certain Kind of Preserving"—and by naming the major in that chapter Callicles, the powerful resister of Socrates' refutation in the *Gorgias*.

15. Imagine, for example, General William Westmoreland in his many versions of the same statement that his strategy of attrition would soon bring the enemy/friendly casualty ratio to its numerical "crossover point," certainly predicting a victory that finally eluded him (see Robert McNamara's *In Retrospect* 238, for example).

16. See, for example, *Gorgias* 480d: "He should be the first to accuse himself and his kinsmen, and should use rhetoric for the sole purpose of exposing his own misdeeds and ridding himself of the greatest of all evils, wickedness."

17. Truong Nhu Tang's *Vietcong Memoir* includes a similar scene of transfer, as Ho Chi Minh visits with the author in Paris: "It had been another Sunday with my grandfather at one of his educational sessions, but with a difference. Grandfather's text had always been morality. Ho's was politics and revolution" (16).

18. On the surface of which, interestingly enough, the actual borderline cannot be precisely determined.

19. McDonough's essay, we should note, concerns itself with a more traditionally masculinist (war-oriented) courage; in these dissident war novels, that masculinity is at least implicitly part of what is being refuted.

20. It seems fitting that this American version is more *abstract*, a scene of fantasized romance instead of physical temptation or opportunity as in the Vietnamese novels; Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* caustically satirizes the powers of abstraction of that quintessential American in Vietnam, Alden Pyle: "He gets hold of an idea and then alters every situation to fit the idea" (167-168).

21. To cite the most obvious of contemporary examples that offer the promise of absolute certainty in a complicated political world, we could look to the "Bush doctrine" governing the war on terrorism, in which "you are either with us, or you are with the terrorists."

22. As Jim Neilson argues in *Warring Fictions*, "critics preoccupy themselves with culture as superstructural expression and ignore the economic base that influences these expressions" (216), his key terms reflecting the fundamental Marxism of his analysis, which very deliberately works to refute liberal-humanist mystifications, but which also creates a sameness, and possibly a too-easy certainty, in his work.

23. I have to cite and own up to my own complicity in a master narrative of academic competition (and, earlier, the competition for "elite" special operations assignment as a commissioned officer), and hope that refutation (of critics I believe to be working with too little attention to potential problems) provides a method for tempering this competitive drive with one that undercuts premature closure and certainty.

24. McNamara, in *In Retrospect*, for example, cites one of President Lyndon Johnson's 1964 campaign speeches: "Friendly cynics and fierce enemies alike often underestimate or ignore the strong thread of moral purpose which runs through the fabric of American history" (147).

25. At other times, Kissinger's judgment more fiercely reflects his subject position: "Vietnamese history and Communist ideology combined to produce almost morbid suspicion and ferocious self-righteousness. This was compounded by a legacy of Cartesian logic from French colonialism that produced an infuriatingly doctrinaire technique of advocacy. Each North Vietnamese proposal was put forward as the sole logical truth and each demand was stated in the imperative (the United States 'must')" (259).
26. In collecting the personal effects of Hoang, one of his soldiers killed in battle, Quan finds a diary in which the youth has written, "delirious with enthusiasm," that "only the war gives me the chance to participate in our country's historic mission" (*Novel* 220).
27. The tradition of dissident war literature can be traced at least as far back in the Western tradition as Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (which is strangely appropriate to Vietnam), and in the 20th century alone includes classics like *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Thin Red Line*. Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, with its bitter renunciation of "the charms and spells of political witch doctors like John F. Kennedy" (332), can take its place as one of these great dissident texts specifically focused on the American experience in Vietnam.
28. A currently-running television advertisement asserts that "e-business" (a common synecdoche for post-industrial capitalism) is not just a game, but *the* game.
29. Ringnalda in *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War* cites Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* to the effect that "the only 'appropriate' context for realism is a tautological, imperialist mind-set" (5).

Works Cited

Note: I am following the Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Page format for citing Vietnamese names, which are sometimes indicated in reverse order in scholarly works.

I would like to thank my colleagues at the University of Houston, Hosam Aboul-Ela, W. Lawrence Hogue, and especially James L. Kastely, for their indispensable support for and assistance with this project.

- Bao, Ninh. *The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam*. Trans. Phan Thanh Hao. Ed. Frank Palmos. New York: Riverhead Books, 1993.
- Bonn, Maria S. "Can Stories Save Us? Tim O'Brien and the Efficacy of the Text." *Critique* 36.1 (Fall 1994): 2-15.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. 1950. Berkeley: U of California P, 1969.
- Burns, Erik. Rev. of *The Sorrow of War*, by Bao Ninh. *New York Times Book Review* 5 Mar. 1995: 14.
- Calloway, Catherine. "How to Tell a True War Story": Metafiction in *The Things They Carried*." *Critique* 36.4 (Summer 1995): 249-257.
- Caputo, Philip. *A Rumor of War*. 1977. New York: Owl, 1996.
- Carver, Robert. "Another Side." Rev. of *The Sorrow of War*, by Bao Ninh. *New Statesman and Society* 4 Feb. 1994: 46.
- Cixous, Hélène, and Catherine Clément. *The Newly Born Woman*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986.
- Duong, Thu Huong. *Novel Without a Name*. Trans. Phan Huy Duong and Nina McPherson. New York: Penguin, 1995.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley.

New York: Vintage, 1978.

Greene, Graham. *The Quiet American*. 1955. New York: Penguin, 1973.

Hellmann, John. *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*. New York: Columbia UP, 1986.

Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984): 53-92.

———. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981.

Kastely, James L. *Rethinking the Rhetorical Tradition: From Plato to Postmodernism*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1997.

Kissinger, Henry. *White House Years*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1979.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.

McDonough, Christopher Michael. "'Afraid to Admit We Are Not Achilles': Facing Hector's Dilemma in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*." *Classical and Modern Literature* 20.3 (Spring 2000): 23-31.

McNamara, Robert S., with Brian Van De Mark. *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*. New York: Vintage, 1995.

Neilson, Jim. *Warring Fictions: American Literary Culture and the Vietnam War Narrative*. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1998.

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. New York: Broadway Books, 1990.

———. *Going After Cacciato*. New York: Broadway Books, 1978.

———. *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. New York: Laurel, 1973.

Plato. *Gorgias*. Trans. W. D. Woodhead. In *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*. Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961. 229-307.

Proffitt, Nicholas. "The Mission of Comrade Quan." Rev. of *Novel Without a Name*, by Duong Thu Huong. *New York Times Book Review* 12 Feb. 1995: 13-14.

Ringnalda, Don. *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994.

Rosenheim, Andrew. "Seen From the Other Side." Rev. of *The Sorrow of War*, by Bao Ninh. *Times Literary Supplement* 11 Feb. 1994: 21.

Searle, William J. "Dissident Voices: The NVA Experience in Novels by Vietnamese." *War, Literature, and the Arts* 10.2 (Fall-Winter 1998): 224-238.

Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Atheneum, 1992.

Smith, Lorrie. "'The Things Men Do': The Gendered Subtext in Tim O'Brien's *Esquire* Stories." *Critique* 36.1 (Fall 1994): 16-40.

Truong, Nhu Tang. *A Vietcong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath*. Trans. David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai. New York: Vintage, 1985.

Steven P. Liparulo received his Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Houston, where he works as a researcher in writing instruction at the UH Writing Center. A former Army officer and Special Forces "A" Team Leader, he recently completed a novel, *Blood Halo*, about a Houston Police Department detective investigating the murder of his partner, a Vietnamese veteran of the war.

Though postmodernist literature does not include everything written in the postmodern period, several post-war developments in literature (such as the Theatre of the Absurd, the Beat Generation, and magic realism) have significant similarities. These developments are occasionally collectively labeled "postmodern"; more commonly, some key figures (Samuel Beckett, William S. Burroughs, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez) are cited as significant contributors to the postmodern aesthetic.[citation needed]. Although his most famous novel, *Lolita* (1955), could be considered a modernist or a postmodernist novel, his later work (specifically *Pale Fire* in 1962 and *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* in 1969) are more clearly postmodern.[15]. Scope[edit]. Liparulo, Steven P. "Incense And Ashes": The Postmodern Work Of Refutation In. *Three Vietnam War Novels.* War, Literature & The Arts: An International Journal Of. The Humanities 15.1/2 (2003): 71-94. Academic Search Premier. Web. 9 May 2012. Ninh, Bao, and Phan T. Hao. *The Sorrow of War* a Novel of North Vietnam. New York: Pantheon, 1993. Print. Robinett, Jane. "The Narrative Shape Of Traumatic Experience." *Literature & Medicine* 26.2 (2007): 290-311. Before World War Two, Vietnam had been part of the French Empire. During the war, the country had been overrun by the Japanese. When the Japanese retreated, the people of Vietnam took the opportunity to establish their own government lead by Ho Chi Minh. However, after the end of the war, the Allies gave back South Vietnam to the French while the north was left in the hands of the non-communist Chinese. The Nationalist Chinese treated the North Vietnamese very badly and support for Ho Chi Minh grew. He had been removed from power at the end of the war. The Chinese pulled out of North Vietnam i