

# POETRY BY AMERICAN WOMEN VETERANS

*POESIA DE AMERICANAS VETERANAS DE GUERRA*

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## Abstract

While there is a significant body of literature – fiction, memoirs, poetry – by American male veterans that has been discussed and analyzed, writings by American women who served in Vietnam receive less attention. This essay looks at some poetry by women within contexts of collective political and cultural amnesia. It argues that in recovering women's voices there is often a reiteration of dominant masculine tropes which in turn does not interrogate fundamental structures and justifications of the Vietnam War. However, the poems are indicative of alternative visions, of “things worth living for” in the aftermath of a war that has specific reverberations in the United States of America.

**Palavras-chave:** Guerra do Vietnã; mulheres e guerra; poesia de autoria feminina; memória; Memorial do Vietnã.

## Resumo

Se por um lado há um conjunto considerável de literatura – ficções, memórias, poesia – composta por veteranos da Guerra do Vietnã, por outro pouca atenção tem sido dada à escrita de mulheres que serviram nesse conflito. O presente ensaio aborda parte da poesia de autoria feminina sobre essa guerra dentro do contexto da amnésia política e cultural. Ele defende que, diferentemente do que se poderia esperar, no processo de recuperação das vozes de mulheres ocorre com frequência a reiteração de tropos masculinos dominantes, que não interrogam as justificativas e estruturas fundamentais para a Guerra do Vietnã. No entanto, os poemas são indicativos de visões alternativas, de coisas “pelos quais vale a pena morrer” no período que se seguiu a uma guerra que gerou reverberações específicas nos Estados Unidos da América.

**Mots-clés:** Guerre du Vietnam; les femmes et la guerre; la poésie écrite par des femmes; mémoire; Memorial du Vietnam.

## Résumé

S'il y a, d'une part, un nombre considérable d'ouvrages – fiction, mémoires, poésie – composés par des vétérans de la guerre du Vietnam, d'autre part, peu d'attention a été accordée à l'écriture des femmes ayant servi dans ce conflit. Cet essai approche une partie de la poésie sur cette guerre écrite par des femmes, dans le cadre de l'amnésie politique et culturelle. On y fait valoir que, contrairement à ce à quoi l'on pourrait s'attendre, dans le processus de récupération des voix des femmes se produit souvent une réitération des tropes masculins dominants, lesquels ne mettent pas en question les structures et justificatives fondamentales de la guerre du Vietnam. Toutefois, les poèmes sont révélateurs de visions alternatives, de choses “Pour lesquelles ça vaut la peine de mourir” à la suite d'une guerre qui a généré des réverbérations spécifiques aux États-Unis.

The Vietnam War and its aftermath continue to haunt the United States in policy, cultural, military, and imaginative contexts. While Hollywood productions from *Apocalypse Now* to *Platoon* to *Full Metal Jacket* have arguably had the greatest “impact” in terms of creating and perpetrating myths of a war fought for noble reasons but lost by internal bickering and betrayals, there is a distinguished body of writing on Vietnam that is occasionally critical of the American foray into Indochina. Within this literary field works of fiction such as Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War* or Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* tend to dominate the literary and academic market although there is an extensive archive of poetry written by American veterans and some such as Yusef Komunyakaa, John Balaban, Bruce Weigl, and William D. Ehrhart (to name a few) have a justified literary profile. Poetry of varying quality seems to be a major mode of literary expression during and after the war and its continued proliferation within visual military cultures is a notable phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

Poems by American veterans of the Vietnam War, particularly their more recent writings, offer new modes of perceiving the realities and aftermath of the war. These re-descriptions also encode a resistance to its masculine orientation and linguistic justification. Presidential speeches by John F. Kennedy or Richard M. Nixon projected involvement in Vietnam in paternalistic terms and saw negotiation or withdrawal as a sign of weakness (Nixon’s “pitiful, helpless giant” paradigm). Military training has always enhanced macho ideals of war and, as some commentators have pointed out, the consolidation of male warrior identity was based on opposition to the female “other”. Robert Jay Lifton highlights this process in Marine training:

[...] confirmation as a Marine and a man were one and the same [...] to graduate from contemptible unmanliness – to be confirmed as a Man-Marine sharing the power of the immortal group – one had to absorb an image of women as a lower element. And that image fits in readily with (and is further magnified by) the male-female dimension of the gook syndrome in Vietnam.\*

\* (LIFTON, Robert Jay. *Home From the War: Vietnam Veterans, Neither Victims Nor Executioners*. London: Wildwood House, 1974: 242-243.)

The “gook syndrome” was translated into contempt not only for the enemy but also for south Vietnamese “allies” who were seen as effeminate or “queer”. Within the United States, the anti-war

<sup>1</sup> See Subarno Chattarji, *Memories of a lost war: American poetic responses to the Vietnam War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

movement, the press, and any other component of society that did not support the war effort were perceived in terms of the “other”, specifically the feminine. In post-war America, as Susan Jeffords notes, reasons for loss were conflated with a peculiar feminisation of the “enemy”:

Although the feminine is used chiefly to account for failure and to provide explanations about the loss of the war, what becomes apparent is that the feminine is used finally to identify the “enemy” – that against which the soldier had to struggle in order to fight and possibly win the war in Vietnam, whether the Vietnamese, a difficult landscape, or the U.S. government itself.\*

Jeffords’ thesis is that within a remasculinized America women’s voices are either non-existent or marginalized through derogatory representations. Her analysis ranges over political language, prose writings by veterans, politicians, and journalists, and film. While it is an acute dissection of the ways in which Vietnam has been recuperated in the post-war period, it ignores the voices of male veteran poets. Some poems by John Balaban, Bruce Weigl, and W. D. Ehrhart can be constructed as separate from Jeffords’ dominant strain of masculinist justification, a strain that Carol Cohn sees as exclusionary: “What gets left out, then, is the emotional, the concrete, the particular, the human bodies and their vulnerability, human lives and their subjectivity – all of which are marked as feminine in the binary dichotomies of gender discourse.”\* A specifically binary and gendered discourse of Vietnam representations such as Cohn’s tends to ignore the nuances available in writings by male poets, for it is precisely these qualities of emotion, vulnerability, and particularity that we find in poems such as “In Celebration of Spring”, “Her Life Runs Like a Red Silk Flag”, or “The Farmer”.\* Veteran poetry does contribute to the “feminising” of war discourse, and to posit a theoretical paradigm based on pure oppositions is to undercut the validity and complexity of poetry by men and women. Poetry by women veterans expresses opposition to the war, but in its perception of the masculine as the “other” it reiterates the dichotomies that sustain war. This is a problem in some stateside poetry that tends to valorize the Vietnamese and project America as pure “evil”. It is, I suspect, a factor that contributes to the anger and resentment in some women’s poems I will discuss.

The purpose of the exegesis outlined is not to denigrate the problem of a woman’s language in a culture of masculine domi-

\* (JEFFORDS, Susan. *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989: 155.)

\* (COHN, Carol. “War, Wimps, and Women: Talking Gender and Thinking War”. In: COOKE, Miriam; WOOLACOTT, Angela (org.). *Gendering War Talk*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993: 232.)

\* (BALABAN, John. *Locusts at the Edge of Summer: New and Selected Poems*. 1997. Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2003: 108-9; WEIGL, Bruce. *What Saves Us*. Evanston, Ill.: Tri Quarterly Books, 1992: 13; EHRHART, W. D. *Beautiful Wreckage: New & Selected Poems*. Easthampton, Mass.: Adastra Press, 1999: 79.)

nance, but to emphasize the inadequacy of simplistic theories within complex literary and cultural contexts. It is undeniable that the masculinist discourse of war is powerful and dominant, but it is not a monolithic one. There are fissures within this discourse, and recent mature poetry by male veterans indicates divergences, as well as opening avenues for writing by women. There is a literary context that eschews masculine myths that led soldiers to Vietnam, and thus there is an alternative discourse available to women poets. Of course, women articulate different experiences and perspectives. The equivalent of male combat poems are poems about the stresses and travails of nursing in a war zone; like their male counterparts, women write about their sense of exclusion and trauma in post-war America, but unlike them, there are few poems of solidarity with the Vietnamese. This is surprising, given the rich tradition of prose writing by women on Vietnam. Frances Fitzgerald, Susan Sontag, Mary McCarthy, Denise Levertov all visited the country and provided a sympathetic witnessing, particularly of the North Vietnamese. For combatants, perhaps, the proximity to battle and its horrors makes solidarity difficult. The war poetry by women is also one of mourning: for loved ones, for loss of innocence, for the difficulties of reintegrating a self marked by war. In that sense, it is subversive, for grief, as Gill Plain notes, “is a problem: unpatriotic in wartime and unwelcome in the brave new world of post-war reconstruction”.\* In the context of Vietnam, it is the not so brave post-war silence that women poets attempt to break.

*Visions of War, Dreams of Peace: Writings of Women in the Vietnam War*, published in 1991, was a seminal collection of poems by women veterans. The editors, Lynda van Devanter and Joan Furey, projected it as an important cultural statement rather than simply a literary one. They write in the Preface:

Some of the works contained in this anthology may not be what is referred to as great literature, but first writings rarely are. We believe the poems and thoughts in this book have great value beyond their literary quality. They help people to understand the reality of war from a perspective rarely seen or acknowledged.\*

The representation of women in and after Vietnam had been either non-existent or stereotypical and this collection attempted to voice some of the traumas that women, like their male counterparts, had to contend with. While they shared the initial invisibility of male veterans, women found themselves excluded from the

\* (PLAIN, Gill. “‘Great Expectations’: Rehabilitating the Recalcitrant War Poets”. *Feminist Review* 51 (Autumn 1995): 41-65.)

\* (DEVANTER, Lynda van; FUREY, Joan (org.). *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace: Writings of Women in the Vietnam War*. New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1991: xxiii. Subsequent references are indicated as *Visions* after the quotation.)

discourse on aftermath problems as the men found recognition and were appropriated into mainstream cultural and military myths. Part of the problem lay with the conception of war as a uniquely male domain, an initiation rite for young men into the mysteries and terrors of life and death. The idea of the male as warrior and the female as nurturer is not only central to war myths but is also reflected in women's representation of their experiences. Jean Elshtain defines the latter as the "Beautiful Soul" paradigm. Within these stereotypes, "Men fight as avatars of a nation's sanctioned violence. Women work and weep and sometimes protest within the frame of discursive practices that turn one out, militant mother and pacifist protestor alike, as the collective 'other' to the male warrior".\* The distinction, however, as Elshtain notes, is a biological one: "a woman's non-combatant status derives from no special virtue located within her; rather, male bodies are more easily militarized".\*

\* (ELSHTAIN, Jean Bethke. *Women and War*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1987: 3-4.)

\* (ELSHTAIN, Jean Bethke. *Women and War*, op. cit.: 183.)

The designation and perception of war as a masculine zone helps us to comprehend two dominant threads in the poetry by women. One is a sense of resentment at having been shut out of perceptions of the war, and the other, complementary impulse is the desire to insert a feminine discourse in the language of war. The elision of feminine experience is evident in the lack of information regarding women in Vietnam. As Kathryn Marshall observes in the introduction to her oral history of women in Vietnam:

No one seems to have an accurate count. This apparent lack of data on the part of the Department of Defense and the State Department both serves as a reminder of government mishandling of information during the Vietnam War and points to the more general belief that war is men's business.\*

\* (MARSHALL, Kathryn. *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966-1975*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1987: 4.)

It is estimated that between 33,000 and 55,000 women served in Vietnam. They volunteered for economic reasons, as well as being inspired by Kennedy's ideal of service to one's country. They went there largely as "caretakers and helpmates", as "support" personnel, a fact that explains part of their invisibility and silence.\* Veterans such as Retired Lt. Col. Ruth Sidisin, however, express a sense of pride at having served in Vietnam: "Yeah, if there was ever an example of brotherhood and helping and doing and love, that was it. I really feel very fortunate and very blessed that I was able to go to Vietnam and do what I could do."\* Whether as nurses, engineers, or "donut dollies" (American women who joined the Red Cross Supplemental Recreational Activities [SRAO] programme

\* (MARSHALL, Kathryn. *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966-1975*, op. cit.: 12.)

\* (*Ibidem*: 32.)

and served for a year in Vietnam as morale boosters for US combat troops), women contributed significantly to the war effort. Their efforts were, however, subsumed within gendered notions of what exactly women *do* in war. As Renny Christopher writes:

Women in the military often felt that what they were doing was not as important as what the men were doing, and that in addition to their own jobs they also had the responsibility of acting as mother, sister, and girlfriend to male soldiers. Having absorbed the gender role stereotypes of the larger American society, these women were expected to submerge their own needs, and to take care of the men, whose role as combat soldiers was valued more highly than that of nurses or other 'support' personnel.\*

This submergence carried over to post-war existence, and it was only with the commemoration of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. and personal accounts, such as Lynda van Devanter's *Home Before Morning*, that women veterans started to speak of their experiences and trauma. Poetry by women veterans enlarges the discourse of Vietnam, but it paradoxically encodes problems and contradictions that it might hope to counter by its inscription in the first instance.

Dana Shuster's "Like Swans on Still Water" begins with an idealized portrayal of Vietnamese women, and contrasts that picture with the speaker's personal inadequacies:

Like swans on still water they skim over the war  
*Ao dais* gliding, rustling serenely  
gleaming black hair pulled primly away  
from faces that reveal nothing save inner repose,  
a beauty so deep even war can't defile.

I note my reflection in their obsidian eyes -  
an outsized barbarian, ungainly, unkempt,  
baggy in ever-wilted greens,  
five-pound boots taking plowhand strides,  
face perpetually ruddy, dripping in alien heat.

In their delicate presence I exhume teenage failures -  
the girl in the back row forever unnoticed,  
the one no one ever invited to dance,  
the one never voted most-likely anything,  
the one who was never quite something enough.\*

This vision of Vietnamese women as one of beauty and inscrutable depth serves to highlight the intrusive and alien character of the American presence. The language is accurate in its summa-

\* (CHRISTOPHER, Renny. "I Never Really Became a Woman Veteran Until...I Saw the Wall": A Review of Oral Histories and Personal Narratives by Women Veterans of the Vietnam War" in LAWSON, Jacqueline. ed. *Vietnam Generation*, Vol. 1, No. 3-4 (Summer-Fall 1989), Special issue: *Gender and the War: Men Women and Vietnam*: 33-45.)

\* (*Visions*: 17.)

tion of that difference: “outsized barbarian”, “ungainly”, “plow-hand strides”. Perhaps this awareness implicitly hints at the politics of domination that underlay the American presence. Written in 1966, this portrait of serenity is ironic in the context of the brutalization of Vietnamese women that had been taking place since Dana’s male counterparts had been pouring into the country from early 1965. The “I” in the poem is a curiously masculinized entity with her “five-pound boots” and baggy greens, and the sense of inferiority is related to a stereotypical notion of what femininity implies. Her “teenage failures” refer to a past where she seemed to lack the qualities that define a desired feminine appeal, and her work in Vietnam provides her a sense of self-worth and purpose:

But once in a while, on a crazy-shift morning,  
when I’ve worked through the night and I’m too tired to care,  
a young man who reeks of rice paddies lies waiting  
for someone to heal the new hole in his life.  
He says through his pain, all adolescent bravado,  
“Hey, what’s your name? Let’s get married. I love you.”

And just for a moment I become Nefertiti  
and for all the Orient’s pearls and silks  
I would not trade the glamour and privilege  
of these honored hands, licensed to touch  
one filthy GI.\*

\* (*Visions*: 17.)

Self-validation occurs through work, its healing and service ideals, but it is also premised on male acceptance. The poem opens with an awareness of “otherness”, but the turn in the fourth section ignores the questions raised. It is the male GI who confers worth, and in its reference to Nefertiti and “the Orient’s pearls and silks”, the poem reverts to stereotype, unable to imagine the real hardships of the women who inhabit a different world. The poem tells us more about the individual insecurities of an American nurse and presages some of the problems inherent in poetic representations of the war by women. As aliens in a strange land the women find that their roles, while crucial, are circumscribed within gender stereotypes, the need to be the “round-eyed”, all-American lover and saviour of the men who are fighting to protect the very society that sustains these paradigms. Shuster’s poem tentatively hints at an alternative notion of commitment centred on her work of healing. This paradigm, as Susan Jeffords observes, is at variance with the masculine one of validation through war: “Feminine commit-

ment – that there are ‘things worth living for’ – proves destructive to a masculine commitment – that there are ‘things worth dying for.’”\* Jeffords’ binaries, however, are too neat, and several women veterans implicitly internalize masculine ideals by accepting the official American view of the war. Lt. Col. Marsha Jordan rationalized her involvement by echoing the dominant political justification: “That’s the way I looked at it. If we weren’t there, then their [the Vietnamese] living conditions are going to get worse, they’re going to be under communist rule, so we’re there to try and prevent that.”\* Another veteran, Pinkie Houser, an African-American in the Army Engineer Corps, declared her distaste for the people her government had sent her to “save”: “So you want to know what were my feelings toward the Vietnamese: well, I didn’t like them at all. I shouldn’t hate them but again I think I have a reason to because of the war”.\* Participation in the war, whether as warrior or healer, engendered hatred of the “other” and it was primarily after the war that some women perceived the value of the commitment to “things worth living for”.

A paradox in this commitment appears with the need to insert a feminine participative discourse within male domains of war. This is a necessary and salutary intervention, but it obscures the distinctiveness of feminine voices. A large number of poems in *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace* are marked by anger and resentment at being “pushed” to the back of the bureaucratic filing cabinet”.\* This is similar to the resentment that male poets expressed in their early poetry. With women veterans, however, the anger is sharper since they are excised from the representation of war altogether. Their poetic intervention is crucial because it creates a potential space for alternative discourses. As Carol Lynn Mithers points out:

To admit that women serve and suffer in war is to destroy the claim to special male knowledge and all the privileges it brings. To admit that women have been in danger and died is to contradict the myth that women need to be protected. Most of all, to hear the stories of combat nurses is to contradict the myth of war’s glory itself.\*

While Mithers’ contention is theoretically accurate and desirable, it is not wholly borne out by testimonies of nurses and by the poetry. The alternative perspective is inevitably bound up with dominant male discourses on war, particularly the ways in which women justify their involvement. Winnie Smith in her memoir, *Daughter Gone to War*, draws upon a lineage of male soldiers in the

\* (JEFFORDS, Susan. “Things Worth Dying For: Gender and the Ideology of Collectivity in Vietnam Representation,” *Cultural Critique*, Number 8, Winter 1987-88: 79-103.)

\* (MARSHALL, Kathryn. *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966-1975*, op. cit.: 165)

\* (*Ibidem*: 41)

\* (ENLOE, Cynthia. *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarization of Women’s Lives*. Boston: South End Press, 1983: 109.)

\* (MITHERS, Carol Lynn. “Missing in Action: Women Warriors in Vietnam,” *Cultural Critique*, Number 3, Spring 1986: 79-90.)

family: “I came from a long line of warriors, at least back to the Civil War, when my mother’s great-great grandfather served as a bugle boy for the Confederacy”.<sup>\*</sup> Later in the memoir she writes: “If I could, I’d be a man. Then I’d be a chopper pilot and fly every day”.<sup>\*</sup> Her desire to accept dominant war myths is disturbing even if it is linked with the idea of healing. “War’s glory” is undiminished as long as the feminine intervention does not question the premises of war. In some poems, such as Diane Evans’s “Our War”, the emphasis is on a collectivity rather than on difference:

I’m a woman  
And I have tasted  
Man’s hell – his war.  
Our War.<sup>\*</sup>

<sup>\*</sup> (SMITH, Winnie. *Daughter Gone to War: The True Story of a Young Nurse in Vietnam*. London: Warner Books, 1992: 20.)

<sup>\*</sup> (SMITH, Winnie. *Daughter Gone to War: The True Story of a Young Nurse in Vietnam*, op. cit.: 143)

<sup>\*</sup> (*Visions*: 96.)

The transition from the “I” as “woman” to “his” and “Our” is predicated on invisibility, a paradoxical disappearance of the self soon after its assertion. War, the larger entity into which the self is submerged, is not questioned; what is queried is the absence of the feminine in that world. The poetic voice is enclosed within the larger discourse of war as “Man’s hell” and cannot make the imaginative or intellectual leap that will allow for freedom from its patriarchal power structures. Grace Paley posits an alternative that most women poets do not envision: “As far as I’m concerned, I would not like to be equal with men in being enlisted. I wish that men would be equal with me in not being drafted, in not being enlisted, in not going to war.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps participants in war find it difficult to achieve the clarity advocated by Paley, but there are some voices that are more aware of complexities in their delineation of war experience and its aftermath.

Lady Borton was sent to Vietnam by the American Friends Service Committee in 1969 to be assistant director of the Quaker refugee programmes in Quang Nai, a provincial capital in central Vietnam. She was there for two years and has made several trips back to Vietnam since the war.<sup>3</sup> In several poems she expresses a

<sup>\*</sup> (PALEY, Grace. “Of Poetry and Women and the World,” *The Writer in Our World: A Symposium, Tri-Quarterly*, Vol. 65, Winter 1986: 247-253.)

<sup>2</sup> Paley echoes an earlier statement of exclusive pacifism by Virginia Woolf: “we [women] can best help you [men] to prevent war not by repeating your words and following your methods but by finding new words and creating new methods”. (WOOLF, Virginia. *Three Guineas*. San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1938: 143.)

<sup>3</sup> Borton’s *After Sorrow: An American Among the Vietnamese* (New York: Viking, 1995) is perhaps the most insightful and moving account of Vietnamese women

heartfelt sympathy for the Vietnamese, especially the children. In “Row Upon Endless Row”, however, she dwells on the memory of war at a point when American troops were being withdrawn. The violence inflicted in Vietnam has its source in the US and the poem conveys the terror within:

It was the summer of 1971  
America seemed wild and frightening,  
brazen with freeways.  
...  
Then,  
on both sides of the highway,  
as far as I could see,  
stretched a graveyard.  
Stone after gray stone.  
...  
The tombstones went on and on  
like rows of parading soldiers.  
...  
The radio announcer listed the body count  
for American soldiers  
disregarding the Vietnamese.  
...  
The road and the water grayed  
until panic washed over me.  
I pulled off onto the shoulder of the road  
and wept.\*

*\*(Visions: 53-54.)*

This vision of violence within America manifesting itself in Vietnam, and then returning to haunt the country is available in poems by Robert Bly and Allen Ginsberg. While the latter tend to dramatize the apocalyptic nature of that involution, Borton, like John Balaban, internalizes the pain and horror of war. The parade of tombstones emphasizes a basic fact of war: it kills and maims. These acts of injury, as Elaine Scarry notes, are often made invisible through re-description. Thus, kamikaze pilots in the Second World War were called “night blossoms”, and in Vietnam euphemisms such as “collateral damage” or “pacification” attempted to relocate the war in a neutral domain. That psychological displacement is resisted in the poem as the poet writes the fact and memory of death. “War memory,” as Scarry observes, “is etched in the land and the body for both ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ – without speci-

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and their involvement in the war. It expresses the kind of post-war solidarity seldom available in American representations of Vietnam.

\* (SCARRY, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985: 63, 115.)

fyng political beliefs.” This “fluidity of referential direction” dislocates the carefully constructed political oppositions on which wars are based.\* Thus, although the radio announcer disregards the Vietnamese losses, reconstructing an opposition that allows for the dehumanization of the “other”, the poem is inclusive in its awareness of this process of exclusion. The idea of reconstitutive grief, that which will not make the distinction between “friendlies” and “enemies”, is summed up in the desolation that overwhelms the poet at the end: “I pulled off onto the shoulder of the road/and wept.” It is a personal sense of horror, hopelessness, and inadequacy, but it also encodes a resistance to dominant representations of the war.

Implicit in Lady Borton’s poem is a notion of personal anguish and protest at the continuing insanity of war. In her work for Vietnamese children and in her poems, Borton gestures to an aftermath where grief and desolation combine with resilient memory and hope. The idea of a feminine discourse that transcends the binary paradigm indicated by Jeffords is implicit in Borton’s poem, and her concern with the aftermath of war in terms of grief, trauma, and healing, is also available in Tran Mong Tu’s work.

In “A New Year’s wish for a little refugee”, Tran Mong Tu, who worked with the Associated Press in Vietnam during the conflict, deals with the theme of exile in post-war America. In a different context and milieu Tu highlights the sense of alienation so powerfully articulated by Borton.

Let me send you some words, a simple wish.  
On New Year’s Day, alone on foreign soil,  
you feel just like a seaweed washed ashore –  
you don’t know what the future holds for you.

No lack of kindly hands to welcome you  
and take you home to change what’s now your name.  
They’ll turn you into some new human breed  
that thinks your yellow skin is cause for shame.

They’ll send you off to school, where you’ll be taught  
their own land’s history, modern ways of life.  
You will grow up denying what you are -  
You’ll never hear your forebears spoken of.

...

O little child, may you retain intact  
your past of sorrows, all your world of griefs.\*

Tu projects her anxieties onto the future of a child and is acutely conscious of lives divided by memories, loss and, paradoxically,

\* (THONG, Huynh Sanh (ed. and trans.). *An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems From the Eleventh through the Twentieth Centuries*. New Haven, CT., and London: Yale University Press, 1996: 198-99.)

freedom. It was a conception of un-freedom back home that led to their fleeing in the first place. “Home”, in a curious throwback to and extension of American veteran’s alienation, is a spatial and psychological goal that is unattainable. The predicament of the immigrant is compounded by the need to conform, to learn the history and “ways of life” of the host country, and forget, if not repudiate, one’s homeland. In fact, the “otherness” of the country of origin is further emphasised by the repression of that matrix of culture and memory. There is a peculiar necessity and aggression involved in the process of socialisation in the new country; to belong to the great “melting pot” one must acquiesce, since there is no “home” to turn to. Edward Said writes that “Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and a real bond with one’s native place; the universal truth of exile is not that one has lost that love or home, but that inherent in each is an unexpected, unwelcome loss”.\* Said is accurate in emphasising the exile’s bond with his native country, and Tu’s poem emphasises the bond precisely through the loss of home. It may be theoretically possible to work through attachments rather than rejecting them, but the recovery of home is impossible. The repetition of “they” in the poem underlines this sense of inexorable assimilation.

\* (SAID, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage, 1994: 407.)

The Vietnamese experience in America is further defined by the relationship between the two nations during the war. Politically and ideologically the Americans were there to “defend” and “save” South Vietnam. In this endeavour, however, they destroyed large areas in the south, disrupted family and village life, and treated their “allies” with scant respect. US administrators and soldiers expressed grudging respect for the commitment and endurance of the Vietcong in contrast to the cowardice and corruption of their “allies”. Indeed, a succession of South Vietnamese military leaders were keener on power than on fighting the communists. As an exasperated American official asked: “What are we doing here? We’re fighting to save these people, and they’re fighting each other!”\* In defeat, these leaders and their devastated people sought refuge in America and it was unlikely that they would be treated with more respect there. The child in the poem may be welcomed by “kindly hands”, but those hands will mould him anew, instilling a sense of shame premised on origin and race. The poem conveys an anxiety of rootlessness very different from Kevin Bowen’s notion of “rootedness” in Vietnamese poetry.<sup>4</sup> The intricate networks of family,

\* (KARNOW, Stanley. *Vietnam: A History*. London: Pimlico, 1994: 460.)

<sup>4</sup> See BOWEN, Kevin. “Vietnamese Poetry: A Sense of Place”. *Manoa*, 7:2 (Win-

memory, and land that sustained a meaningful community have been irrevocably disrupted, and the poet's exhortation at the end is a forlorn one. The poem articulates adult anxieties as if to prepare the child for a difficult future and the legacy the speaker bequeaths is one of sorrow and grief. "A New Year's wish" is enmeshed in history and memory, and in its self-reflexive meditations it transcribes sad conclusions to a terrible war.

The Vietnam Memorial constitutes one powerful mode of reconciliation, and it is seen as such by many veteran poets and commentators. Laura Palmer, a journalist in Vietnam, acknowledges the therapeutic power of the Wall:

Vietnam isn't behind us at all; it's in us. Sometimes it is only a shard of memory; sometimes it is a ferocious trauma. It defined one generation and influenced those that preceded and followed. To understand it, we need to think about it and feel it; the memorial is the one place we have in common where those feelings can be expressed. Until we go there, we are, in a sense, incomplete and so is the memorial.\*

\* (*Visions*: 143)

Palmer is accurate in her summation of the continued presence of the war as memory and trauma, but she perceives the Wall as a holistic site of healing. That this has actually been the case for many veterans points to the ways in which the Wall encodes the desire for closure through acknowledgement of grief. This closure subtly edits questions regarding the morality of the war, its effect on another people and culture and, perhaps, the need to turn away from the structures of war itself, of which the memorial is an embodiment.

In her collection, *The Widow's Quilt*, Castan articulates personal grief in conjunction with awareness of other losses and sorrows. "Unveiling the Vietnam Memorial" moves beyond the sublimation offered by the Wall:

In the failing light, survivors  
found the name they sought  
cut in the polished stone  
and they stroked it  
as if it were a person.  
I watched on television,  
far from that monument, far  
from your grave.  
If I do nothing  
to release myself from this pain,

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ter 1995): 49-50.

I will never forget you.  
In the village of my body,  
I, too, am a burn victim,  
draped in wet skin.  
And I will be buried as you were,  
unhealed, as were the others –  
Americans and Vietnamese.\*

\* (CASTAN, Fran. *The Widow's Quilt*. New York: Canio's Editions, 1996: 37. Subsequent references are indicated as *Quilt* after the quotation.)

The poet distances herself from the collective therapy offered by the Wall, and the mediation of an event by television (an echo of the “television war” beamed to American homes) further alienates that scenario. The alienation from a socialized outpouring of grief leads to a concentration on – and a movement beyond – the realms of a purely personal loss. The Wall allows for a convenient encapsulation, an enclosed world to commemorate memory and loss. The poet, however, wishes to transcend that circle for without release from pain she feels circumscribed in a solipsistic memory warp: “If I do nothing/to release myself from this pain,/I will never forget you.” Forgetting her dead soldier is not a sign of callous disregard but an articulation of the need to remember why he died, to comprehend the war and its consequences. Without that responsibility to herself and to the dead she feels she too will wallow in purely personal mourning: “And I will be buried as you were/unhealed, as were the others – /Americans and Vietnamese.” The apparently feminine role of mourning must be enriched with a larger idea of a woman’s role in post-war America. The poem begins with the classic paradigm of the bereft woman and then moves on to healing that is neither self-centred nor limited; the conjunction of the Americans and the Vietnamese is significant precisely because of its inclusiveness.

While the idea that there are “things worth living for” is indicated in the first part, it is developed in the second:

Remember our dog?  
She rolled in feathers, in leaves,  
even dried turds – anything  
to disguise herself, to stalk her prey.  
How did we learn  
to make a monument to some  
and to call others enemy,  
to conceal our species from itself?  
With the body of each warrior  
we place in the earth,  
we etch ourselves most truly

\* (Quilt: 37-38.)

into the cold memory of stone: the acid  
history of our kind, which murders its own.\*

The analogy with the dog stresses similarity and difference: war is perceived as an inevitable rite of passage for each generation, the expression of an instinctive social violence, yet it is a peculiarly human construction. That the Vietnam Memorial is inadequate as a symbol of loss is evident in its suppression of the “other”. The problem lies not only with the American memorial, since Vietnamese ones would equally deny their “enemy’s” loss. Castan turns therefore to the essential site of war, the body that is injured or killed. Elaine Scarry points to this basic location of war:

[...] a cousin whose damaged hip and permanent limp announce in each step the inflection of the word “Vietnam”, and along with the injuries of thousands of his peers assures that whether or not it is verbally memorialized, the record of war survives in the bodies, both alive and buried, of the people who were hurt there.\*

\* (SCARRY, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, op. cit.: 113.)

Scarry is right about the inscription of war in injured bodies, but it is also the verbal record that locates the meaning(s) of that war. Vietnam veterans paraded disabled bodies to protest against the war; similar mutilated veterans joined the Welcome Home parade that rehabilitated the soldier in American historical memory. It is the specific location and writing of those bodies that imbues them with particular meaning. The Memorial in Washington is both a physical entity and a literal inscription of the dead. As Harry Haines says, “Each name locates the meaning of war in the lived, individual experience of a specific casualty, whose absence from the social network extends the meaning of war to the community”.\* Those meanings of Vietnam are mediated verbally as well, so that the Memorial can also be seen as a sign of healing and reconciliation that blandly ignores historical complexities and the “other”, the enemy against whom these deaths were sustained. This is the mediation that Castan refuses in her poem. Behind the Memorial she sees the bodies and lives destroyed, and beyond that an insight into the condition of human history as manifested in war: “the acid/history of our kind, which murders its own”. The poem has traversed the path from personalized mourning to an awareness and remembrance of the costs and continuing legacy of Vietnam. Fran Castan etches a new paradigm of looking at the war, one that implies the possibility of “things worth living for”, but only within a context of responsible memory and solidarity.

\* (HAINES, Harry W. “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Authority and Gender in Cultural Representation”. In: WALSH, Jeffrey; AULICH, James (org.). *Vietnam Images: War and Representation*. Basingstoke and London: The Macmillan Press, 1989: 208.)

“Unveiling the Vietnam Memorial” is an exception within the body of poetry written by women. As noted earlier, most poems in *Visions of War* are constrained by anger and resentment. Diane Jaeger’s “My War” is typical of the need to insert a feminine presence, without any questioning of the paradigms of war itself: “Did I ever tell you about being a nurse in a war... My War?”\* One of the consequences of this anger and reactive energy is that the poems are often repetitive and their quality suffers. The quality of many poems written – by both men and women – about Vietnam calls to mind Virginia Woolf’s observations on Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*:

She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot.\*

Of course, the American women who went to Vietnam lived in a society less constrictive than Bloomsbury, and being in the war had given them a sense of empowerment largely absent in the world that Woolf delineates. Yet gender stereotypes persist, and the poetry is often written in “rage” at the elision of women’s experience from the language of Vietnam. The emphasis on “My War” or “Our War” is indicative of the attempts to resist marginalization. Women participated in Vietnam as nurses and healers, as well as engineers, clerks, and entertainers, and some testimonies and poetry reveal bigotry and hatred very similar to that of their male counterparts. That is a problem during a war marked by racism and atrocity, and the difficulty of transcending this dichotomous perception is evident in most of the poetry. The neat binaries of men as warriors and women as peacekeepers is complicated by the large number of men who either evaded the draft or opted for conscientious-objector status, and women (such as the Gold Star Wives) who staunchly supported the war and accepted the POW/MIA (Prisoner of War/Missing in Action) myth. The masculinist mode of war and its specific encoding of male virtues are undeniable, but it is evident from some of the poetry by women that they implicitly accept those paradigms.

The problem of writing different perspectives is partly related to the inadequacy of a radically alternative language. As Lorrie Smith points out, “the woman subject seems to disappear into the gap between the masculine discourse of war and the female experience of war, with no language to assert women’s presence and authority”.<sup>5</sup> The poets negotiate an often unclear path between

\* (*Visions*: 79.)

\* (WOOLF, Virginia. *A Room of One’s Own*. New York; Burlingame: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1929: 73.)

\* (SMITH, Lorrie. “The Subject Makes a Difference: Poetry by Women Veterans of the Vietnam War”. *Journal of American Culture*, Volume 16, No. 3, Fall 1993: 71-79.)

<sup>5</sup> The difficulty of narrating war from a woman’s perspective is evident in Bobby

trauma and resentment, on the one hand, and “things worth living for”, on the other. However, poetry by women veterans offers a valuable intervention in a dominant climate of amnesia, providing an insight into war experiences excluded from Vietnam poetry anthologies and from popular culture representations such as films.<sup>6</sup> There are exceptions to the invisibility that Smith refers to, such as Fran Castan’s poem that authorizes a distinctively feminine vision of the consequences of the Vietnam War. Perhaps that inscription is a beginning within a body of poetry that is relatively new and often obscured by the politics of war and its gendered construction.

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Ann Mason’s *In Country*, where the protagonist Samantha can enter the world of Vietnam only through male perceptions and voices.

<sup>6</sup> W.D. Ehrhart, in his “Foreword” to *Visions of War*, mentions the fact that *Winning Hearts and Minds*, the seminal anthology of veteran poetry “contained only two poems by women, only one of whom had actually been in Vietnam”. The companion anthology, *Demilitarized Zones: Veterans After Vietnam*, “contained only five poems by women, none of whom had been in Vietnam” (xvii). Hollywood representations, ranging from *The Deer Hunter* to *First Blood*, seldom feature women except in supportive or derogatory roles. See Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculanization of America*, Chapter Four.

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