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## The Uses of the Fantastic and the Deferment of Closure in American Literature on the Vietnam War

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After the massive historical changes that have occurred since the early 1970s and particularly with the end of the Cold War, after numerous military conflicts the U.S. has been involved in during the last twenty years, and after decades that have been spent, individually and collectively, on the difficult work of mourning, the question, polemically speaking, of why we are still in Vietnam is fairly obvious. What is it about the Vietnam War that it seems to be haunting America more than any other localized event in its recent history? Why is there, whenever we talk about the Vietnam War, a tacit assumption that in some way it is still present and always will be? That, unlike other historical events, it refuses to fade into history as something that eventually becomes truly and irreversibly past? Shouldn't we be moving on, getting over it, adapting to new circumstances, and putting the Vietnam War behind us? Shouldn't we be looking to the future rather than the past? Shouldn't we resist the reactionary implications of nostalgia? Yes, of course we should learn from the past — or be doomed to repeat it — but not dwell on it neurotically, obsessively, morosely.

The fact that different positions in the present debate on the Vietnam War can be sketched out with so few strokes of the keyboard indicates how familiar we all are with the shape of the discussion. These positions, varied as they might appear otherwise, follow two distinct lines of argument. One is based on a broad definition of trauma, the other on a pragmatism in which the uses of history in political discourse are understood not so much by their effects as by their causes. Respectively, one of these two camps argues that the Vietnam War is not really over because it has caused an as-of-yet unresolved trauma within the American psyche, which makes it impossible to put the event behind us. The other camp, meanwhile, suggests that we remain anchored in the past because pragmatic interests recognize the usefulness of the Vietnam war as a historical point of reference, a context that legitimizes political action right now. One camp acknowledges the existence of genuine trauma, the other recognizes its pragmatic uses. One camp sees us as victims of history, the other as victims of historiography. Cultural pro-

duction, from political rhetoric to fiction or film, can be explained with the help of these two models. A film, novel, short story, or poem about the Vietnam War provides its audience with a sense of catharsis. A reference to the Vietnam War in a political speech might explain or justify the speaker's position or demand. A similar reference in a policy statement might ensure a military budget increase, help define international relations, or create a sense of shared history and community among listeners or readers. As these examples demonstrate, history has its uses. What is of crucial importance when history is put to use is to distinguish those who get to speak from those who are being spoken about and those who are listening. In other words, the question is: who bears the burden, provides the labor, and profits from the process of remembering?

When speaking of discourses revolving around the Vietnam War, I am thinking primarily of the vast culture industry that has provided a steady stream of texts and images about the Vietnam War. Roughly twenty years after the official end of the war, American audiences have been taught how to read Vietnam with surprising competence. Stories have hardened and become genres, narrative options have turned into reliable conventions, characters have been transformed into heroes (or villains), symbols and metaphors into clichés, and landscapes into stage settings. Fiction has, in turn, provided all other discourses with an inventory of easily recognizable stereotypes, no matter how genuine their claim to truth and authenticity might otherwise be.<sup>1</sup> In a postmodern society geared toward the production, circulation, and consumption of images as its dominant form of economic exchange, the historical and political imagination functions more or less indistinguishably from the culture industry. Images circulate more freely and indiscriminately than ever before.

Any descriptive effort on the texts that this vast machinery has been and still is producing is bound to notice a relatively small number of crucial characteristics about the discourse itself. It is extremely prolific and spread out over a variety of different genres, yet at the same time it appears monolithic and homogeneous in its elaboration on a limited number of memorable images. What one might have reasonably expected with the steadily increasing historical distance and the rapidly changing historical situation has not, in fact, happened. The discourse on the Vietnam War has neither decreased significantly in quantity nor in emotional or ideological investment. The issue is still controversial, and the need to address and discuss it seems still as strong as ever. Also, despite its steady proliferation, the discourse has failed to diversify significantly over time. A few highly conventional tropes and narratives still summarize, for most readers or viewers, an otherwise dauntingly complex reality. A collection of interrelated short stories like Robert

Olen Butler's *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, which describes the interpenetrations of U.S. and Vietnamese culture in the aftermath of the war, still constitutes an exception within a discursive field where the dominant conventions are still those of direct combat experience, frontier rhetoric, exoticism, etc. It is important to note that even the more self-conscious forms of postmodern narrative, such as the postmodern novel or the new journalism, which became a cultural force to be reckoned with around roughly the same time as the Vietnam War, share these characteristic tropes with their more traditional realist predecessors.<sup>2</sup>

On the whole, Vietnam literature succeeds fairly well in staging its reappearance as a pertinent issue or at least as a discursive frame of reference for another event. James Der Derian is one critic who believes that the Gulf War has actually superseded Vietnam in the production of images that are both memorable, more immediate by virtue of steadily advancing communications technologies, and iconic in their ability not only to capture the present state of military technology but also to represent, in a larger, allegorical framework, the changes, or the lack thereof, in America's interaction with the post-Cold War world: images of a sky blackened by burning oil wells, infrared images of the skies over Baghdad lit up by tracers and air-to-ground fire, the video camera viewpoint of a Cruise Missile homing in on a ground target and dissolving into the static of invisible devastation, etc. However, in commenting on the intertextual dimension of the Gulf War, even Der Derian cannot pass up the opportunity to mention the Vietnam War, as much as he himself might disagree with the interpretation of events delivered by George Bush. Der Derian writes:

Just as a foreign implant is set upon by antibodies, the "radical" lessons of the Vietnam War and the Cold War not only suffered pathological rejection [in the Gulf War] but became the perverse justification for a hot, curative war ("By God, we've kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all," said George Bush the morning after [the beginning of the Desert Storm campaign]). (177)

Whatever the Vietnam Syndrome happens to mean, it is remarkable how little need there is to define it for Bush's and Der Derian's audience. Whether Bush actually believes that a causal relationship between the Vietnam War and the Gulf War exists, and whether Der Derian believes that Bush believes it, is not so much the question here. Rather, what is remarkable about the passage is that the Vietnam Syndrome is an unquestioned constitutive element in constructing a narrative about the origins of the Gulf War. "Just as a foreign implant," the perpetually sustained discourse on the Vietnam War appears as a kind of discursive machine, lodged deeply within the body politic. Both the business of politics itself, as George Bush's strategic sigh of relief demonstrates, as well as the business of political analy-

sis depend on it. Even a critic like Der Derian tacitly agrees with Bush that the Vietnam War is essential to understanding America's global political rationale. What fuels the textual machinery and helps to keep political and critical discourse in place, are forces deeply embedded in American culture. Whatever Bush and Der Derian are tacitly agreeing upon, we are in on it as well, if not by conscious political choice then at least as a competent audience.

It is this connection between ourselves as a competent audience and the discursive fecundity, intrinsic stability, and self-reflexivity of the discourses on the Vietnam War that I want to use in order to rephrase my opening question — why are we still in Vietnam? — as a question about the morphology and ideology of Vietnam literature: how does this literature itself justify its prolonged existence in the light of political and historical changes? How does it position itself toward critics that allege that its time has passed, that, as a cultural phenomenon, it has outlasted its usefulness, and that, polemically speaking, it entraps its readers in a sentimental, reactionary myth of the past that separates them from the present moment and the future it leads us to anticipate? How does it answer to these challenges, how does it distract us from them, or how does it impose an ideological agenda upon them that successfully overrides these concerns and convincingly, compellingly rewrites the present according to the past?

The political theme of nostalgia, which always tends to be closely related to the aesthetic problem of closure, manifests itself most urgently in the figure of the Vietnam veteran. In social and political as well as in aesthetic terms, this figure raises questions about the pastness of the past. The plight of the Vietnam vet speaks eloquently and concretely of the lasting significance of the Vietnam War. Here is a living reminder that, for many Americans, the war is far from being over. Individually, the prolific research conducted on post-traumatic stress syndrome, to mention the one example that comes to mind besides the health damage caused by Agent Orange and the highly publicized lawsuits for recompense, demonstrate that Vietnam vets vitally contribute to keeping the memory of the war alive. Collectively, the Vietnam veteran is being inscribed into contemporary culture as one of the memorable images, the easily recognizable stereotypes, that have come to define the war for most Americans, even, or especially, those who have never had any direct contact with it. In the process of this fictionalization, the Vietnam veteran is divested of his individuality and transformed into an allegorical figure, a narrative device which takes on even more significance in so far as the author can heighten its significance by abandoning a limited mimetic discourse.

How such a figure functions within a larger allegory about the deferment of closure is worked out beautifully in Larry Heinemann's Pulitzer Prize winning

*Paco's Story*. The novel's protagonist is a veteran who, being the sole survivor of a massacre in which his entire battalion was wiped out, wanders aimlessly through post-Vietnam America. In a very real, historical sense, a figure like Heinemann's protagonist, his displacement and the lack of a niche in society that he can return to after the end of the war, represents the lack of closure that keeps recurring as a key theme throughout most Vietnam literature. At the root of this radical displacement, Heinemann suggests, is a complete breakdown of one's former identity. Hours after the massacre, on board the Medevac helicopter, Paco becomes "famous as the nameless wounded man from Alpha Company's massacre" (49) and thus loses all identity connected to name, biography, and social connectedness. Although Paco states, "I'm looking for anything steady" (72), the end of the novel, which has him leaving his temporary job and heading further out west, confirms that the only steady factor in this narrative is the deferment of psychological, ideological, and most of all narrative resolution. Discussing the social and spatial marginalization of the insane prior to the Enlightenment in *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault points out that the effects of this degree of personal liberty, if it is not voluntary but enforced from the outside as a condition of punishment, equal those of extreme confinement. It condemns the individual to what Foucault calls

that great uncertainty external to everything ... [the insane] is a prisoner in the midst of what is the freest, the openest of routes: bound fast at the infinite cross-roads. He is the passenger par excellence: that is, the prisoner of the passage. (11)

Condemned to this dissociated existence, Paco's own story mirrors that of the novel's narrative. Like its protagonist, the narrative exists in the moment of transition which might end it but does not necessarily provide proper closure.

*Paco's Story* is grounded in a culture which is dominated more by fabricated images than by personal experience. It pushes this fictionalization or textualization of experience even further by transforming some of the metaphors of mimetic narrative into literal agents in the narrative, which incidentally happens to be one of the distinctive features of the fantastic. In Paco's state of deep alienation, the dead are, metaphorically speaking, more real than he himself is. While they have become even more powerful, Paco has begun to define himself more and more through the trauma of their absence. Consequently, Heinemann decides to use the voices of the men of Alpha Company as the novel's collective narrator: "And we're pushing up daisies for half a handful of millennia" (17). True to the literalized metaphor, Paco loses ontological autonomy to the extent that he appears as a character in the story they tell and control. Like the incarnation of omniscience and omnipotence, they move effortlessly through time — "The Bravo Company

Medic who finds Paco will tell the story of it (this years later) in Weiss's saloon" (20) — slide into the thoughts of other characters, and invade, even cause, the dreams that plague Paco with possibilities of what might have been:

We come to stand behind him — we ghosts.... We reach out as one man.... And Paco always obliges us ... and when Paco is all but asleep, *that* is the moment we whisper in his ear, and give him something to think about — a dream or a reverie. (138)

At this point, Heinemann also introduces the metaphor of the ghost. While the collective narrator identifies himself as the ghosts of the men killed at Firebase Harriette, some of the characters that come in contact with Paco think of him as being a ghost. In her diary, Kathy remarks that "Aunt Myrna says he has a way of stiffening up and staring right through you. As if he's a ghost. Or you're the ghost" (206). Going through his days with profound indifference — "Clean, dirty, it's all the same to him" (206) — he looks "like death warmed over. Like he was some-one back from the dead" (207). This trope is used so indiscriminately that none of the characters remains exempt from the possibility of being undead. Far beyond the implications of survivor trauma, Heinemann suggests that the trauma of the massacre is not restricted to the ones physically present to carnage. Like a kind of creeping contamination, it disrupts the relationships among the characters, separating them from one another in a way that they can still enter into superficial relationships, like the one between employer and employee, but that deeper, more socially and spiritually profound connections have become impossible. Hence, Kathy can dream up scenarios in the privacy of her room, her diary, and her mind in which she and Paco become lovers, and Paco can pay furtive attention to her, never taking any steps toward actually making contact with her. When Paco leaves town and heads out further west at the end of the novel, we are reminded that, as long as the ghosts of the past are not exorcised, we all remain "prisoners of the passage," floating in a state of dissociation, existing as readers in the same ghostlike trance as the characters themselves.

Heinemann's choice of narrator, as well as his handling of the ghost metaphor, performs two important ideological operations. First of all, overcoming trauma by "exorcising the ghosts of the past" is crucially tied to the process of storytelling itself. By using the dead as narrator, Heinemann asserts that the present moment, as a narrative with a host of different potential outcomes, is still in the hands of the past. Only if Paco were capable of taking over the narrator's position, asserting his personal identity against the absence that defines him, could we establish a proper present and take charge of the narrative future. Control over the narrative is a precondition for control over the transition from past to present to fu-

ture. Second, in suggesting that the lack of authenticity that is caused by the trauma of being the undeserving survivor is not restricted to the individual, *Paco's Story* suggests that a psychological term like "trauma" can be used metaphorically as a description of the effects of the war on American culture. Paco's physical and emotional scars will come to stand for what connects him to society and not for what is setting him apart. To the degree that we are to look at him as a monster, the monster is looking back at us, reminding us that we are equally distorted and disfigured.

Heinemann's novel illustrates almost in exemplary fashion how the fantastic tradition in Vietnam literature uses the metaphorical literally. Heinemann is almost typical in using the ghost as a figure representing the burden of the past and the impossibility to accomplish closure for the narrative itself both metaphorically and literally, often with a great degree of self-consciousness as well. Similarly, the ghost plays a crucial role in Tim O'Brien's novel *In the Lake of the Woods*, in which the protagonist admits to his wife, "I don't feel real sometimes. Like I'm not *here*" (74), a trope the narrative will eventually come to literalize through the mysterious disappearance of its two main characters. Psychological truth transforms itself into literal truth when, in a footnote, O'Brien's commentator goes on to elaborate: "It *was* the spirit world. Vietnam. Ghosts and graveyards.... The unknown, the unknowable.... The overwhelming otherness" (203). In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien's narrator reflects on war stories by telling an exemplary anecdote in which a dead man asks for an explanation for his own death (90). "We called the enemy ghosts," the narrator explains in another passage. "To get spooked, in the lingo, meant not only to get scared but to get killed" (228). In Robert Olen Butler's *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, a collection that includes a story explicitly titled "A Ghost Story," the protagonist of the story "Open Arms" sees an ARVN major who, to him, has "the steady look of a ghost" (4), knowing that "sometimes a ghost will appear in human form and then vanish. When that happens and you think back on the encounter, you realize that all along you felt like you were near something enormous" (3).

Yet ghosts do not constitute a departure from reality. "If ghosts are a metaphor for history," Jack Cady's narrator in "Kilroy Was Here" muses, "then belief is a leap into reality" (148). All that the folkloric and the gothic traditions accomplish is to reverse the direction of the metaphorical transformation. "If history is a metaphor for ghosts," Cady's narrator goes on, "matters get really serious." And the fantastic is capable of having it both ways, casting the ghost simultaneously as metaphorical and literal discourse. In this ambivalent function, ghosts embody history in general, but also history as the life of the past in the present, history as

aberration, history as moral tragedy. Ghosts live beyond their allocated time. They exist in a way that makes either themselves or the ones around them unreal. Ghosts raise questions about ontology, about human agency in the world. They make it difficult to determine who is the ghost and who the living human being. Their existence is often a tortured one, cursed by the inability to find peace and a natural, desired end. In merely coexisting, ontologically speaking, with human beings, ghosts often carry more power than they ever did when they were more like us. And therefore, ghosts are either unable or unwilling to end and thus figure prominently in Vietnam literature as figures of perpetually deferred closure.

No matter if the ghost functions literally or metaphorically, whether he is a fantastic extension of the natural world or merely a figure of speech, his appearance always raises the specter of the past, the fear of being perpetually haunted by it and incapable of ever leaving it behind, and the inability to tell the difference between past and present altogether. In discussing Magical Realism, Lois Parkinson Zamora states that ghosts

are often bearers of cultural and historical burdens, for they represent the dangers, anxieties, and passional forces that civilization banishes. They may signal primal and primordial experience, the return of the repressed, the externalization of internalized terrors.... [In short] literary ghosts are deeply metaphoric. (497)

Zamora's excellent summary of the metaphorical properties of ghosts in literature neatly fits most of the characteristics of *Paco's Story*. Ghosts anticipate a future moment when the repressed not only returns but can be named and recognized, and thus confronted and eventually overcome. Just as the ghost, always a troubling and disruptive force, needs to be exorcised, the past needs to be granted severance. Ignoring or rationalizing it are merely forms of temporary repression, which will only lead to a return of the specter and a renewal of the cycle. Learning to perceive the past experience in a meaningful new context of community and acceptance, admitting to the historical guilt and articulating it openly, repeating the often obsessive urge to break the silence, and approaching the painful subject obliquely if necessary — these are ways of breaking out of the cycle of repression and denial.

My somewhat loaded language in the preceding paragraph is not meant as an exercise in, or a pastiche of, pop psychology, but a demonstration of the affinity of different discourses toward each other, in this case that of the Gothic and that of psychoanalysis, when the figure of the ghost can act as a conceptual link. Just as ghosts need to be exorcised, past trauma needs to be overcome by breaking through the strategies of repression and denial. As both discourses slide into each other, the culture at large takes the role of the individual patient and a term like

“trauma” makes an unproblematic transition from individual to collective experience. Studies of the political, diplomatic, and historical circumstances of the war, like Paul M. Kattenburg’s book *The Vietnam Trauma in American Foreign Policy*, as well as an extensive discussion of post-traumatic stress syndrome in an unexpected place like the foreword to Jack Dann’s anthology of fantastic Vietnam literature *In the Fields of Fire*, demonstrate quite strikingly how separate vocabularies have invaded each other. The figure of the ghost, in other words, allegorizes history.

Since allegory constitutes a decisive shift away from mimesis and thus traditional realism, ghosts contribute to the text being fantastic, even when they function primarily metaphorically. Switching back and forth between literal and metaphorical speech, fantastic tropes like ghosts facilitate the circulation of images and their distribution across a broad spectrum of discourses. What we are witnessing is what Susan Jeffords has described as the “blurring of categories [which] leads not to a challenging of categories, but to a sense of powerlessness, or an inability to alter the frame ... within which the categories are presented” (22). In this situation, overcoming the trauma or exorcising the ghost of the past is always present as a promise of things to come. The individual text perceives itself as a step along the way but hardly ever as providing the final piece that, once it has fallen into place, will bring peace. From reading the figure of the ghost alone, it becomes clear that Vietnam literature sees itself fundamentally as process; fluid and in motion toward a goal that is situated outside its reach. The possibility of closure exists within it only as a utopian gesture, though without the elation or optimism that often accompanies such gestures in other discourses.

Combining elements of both Science Fiction and Magical Realism, Bruce McAllister’s 1989 novel *Dream Baby*, based on a short story published previously in Jack Dann’s and Jeanne van Buren Dann’s anthology *In the Fields of Fire*, is another example of a text that can be read as a self-conscious meditation on the deferment of closure in Vietnam literature. Told through a series of loosely arranged interviews that all revolve around incidents of paranormal experiences or perceptions by U.S. military personnel in Vietnam, the novel tells the story of Mary Damico, a nurse whose special talent allows her to foresee the deaths of those around her. Simultaneously a blessing and a curse for its bearer, Damico’s gift becomes a valuable asset in the research program of Major Bucannon, who, in the service of the CIA Psychological Warfare Program, detects, isolates, and utilizes all those whose special talents might be useful in helping America win the war. Damico and others are trained and sent on a mission to sabotage the dikes upstream from the areas in which the U.S. is involved in its heaviest combat mis-

sions; an action which, if successful, will end the war in one broad decisive stroke, an action that will “make history.”

This brief summary already demonstrates that the novel is strongly preoccupied with issues of temporality, finality, and history as narrative. Knowing what the end will be, or even better, actively determining the end, is what is at stake for the novel and the characters in it. McAllister leaves no stone unturned in confronting his readers with the question to what degree knowing and foreseeing the future carries with it the possibility and, by implication, the ethical responsibility to take action in order to prevent the loss of human life. The factual and pragmatic answer to these questions are relegated, to a large extent, to the narrative logic and ontological consistency of the novel’s fictional world — how Damico responds to the challenges raised by her ability, what the outcome of her actions, or lack thereof, is from one individual situation to the next, etc. Still, the crucial questions raised by the text are whether free will can prevail against historical determinism, and to what degree knowledge alone is already a way of placing oneself in the world. Is the future written for us, McAllister asks, or are we writing it? And if the future were indeed determined for us, would that automatically absolve us from the ethical and political responsibility of our actions, especially when their consequences affect not only ourselves but are likely to have an impact on larger, historical events? As much as McAllister wants us to contemplate these questions as abstract philosophical issues, the fantastic elements of the novel leave us no escape into “naturalizing” Mary Damico’s gift.

In this regard, it is of great significance that Damico’s special gift is not only to foresee the future but, to be more precise, to foresee the exact circumstances under which an individual human being will die. It is the finality of human life, its *telos* and its moment of ultimate closure, so to speak, that Mary Damico has privileged access to. The novel reflects upon this preoccupation with closure and finality also through the final objective of the mission upon which the plot largely hinges. Although Mary can see that some individual members of her team are going to lose their lives during this mission, she cannot tell whether the mission itself is going to succeed or fail. Success or failure depend on a concerted team effort so that the life-story of the individual is taking place independently of the larger collective and historical narrative it is embedded in. Since the connections between individual and collective are so highly complex and ambivalent, Mary’s special talent ultimately fails to measure up. In order to understand history, it is not enough simply to extrapolate from the individual life.

In one passage of the novel, Damico sees a future in which political unrest will lead to American intervention in South and/or Central America. Characters who

are marginal and never make a direct appearance in *Dream Baby* — Damico's brother Jeffrey, the child of one of the other members of the failed mission — become agents in this political tragedy. The elsewhere, in which all of this ostensibly takes place, is an easily recognizable scenario for the reader who has already witnessed the Iran Contra Hearings and the increased political pressure and largely covert military interventions in Nicaragua in the 1980s under the Reagan administration. Setting alternative or displaced variants of the narrative in these locations and tying them in with other, perhaps structurally similar political conflicts between the U.S. and anti- or post-colonial movements suggests that Vietnam, as a cultural discourse, extends into U.S. foreign policy far beyond the historical watershed moment of 1975 and far beyond the personal trauma of the individual veteran trying to find a place in postwar American society. Yet it is crucial to note that McAllister does not go so far as to draw a simple analogy between the two conflicts or to offer a systematic critique of a foreign policy that continues throughout the post-Vietnam years, despite the public lament about the American trauma sustained in Southeast Asia. South and Central America, viewed through the lens of Vietnam, are fragments in an ongoing narrative. They cannot be analogous to each other because they are one and the same, which means, by implication, that it is impossible to learn from one in approaching the other. All that is visible, to employ McAllister's crucial metaphor, is that the death of individual human beings is at stake; what the larger historical framework is remains invisible, even if our perceptions, like Mary Damico's, are beyond the range of ordinary humans. Historical understanding and historical agency are hardly one and the same, as Jack Cady's narrator in the short story "Kilroy Was Here" reminds us: "The reason to understand history is not to avoid the mistakes of history — because some fool will make those mistakes for you. Some maniac will start a war ... and you'll be the poor bastard or gets to drop the bomb or be hit by it. No, you understand history so you can understand yourself" (131).

The second, and perhaps even more crucial aspect in which *Dream Baby* comments on the question of historical and narrative closure is the final fictional document with which the novel ends. Preceding it is a brief narrative section that offers the reader the comfort of a more or less reliable, mimetically acceptable end to Mary Damico's story: voluntarily transferred to a mental hospital where she can either recover from the trauma of the failed mission or work on controlling, perhaps even losing her talent altogether, protected by the ever-present possibility of joining forces with her powerful allies on the outside, Mary Damico has found a small community of women where she can be herself for a while. Following this reassuring scene is another brief sequence of personal testimonies, one of which

indicates the termination of project Orangutan, initiated from within the project itself, the other and last one in the book being a letter from President John F. Kennedy to President Le Duan of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Hanoi, written on February 12th, 1968, in which Kennedy offers economic help, in the context of the apparently successful Paris peace talks, to a united Vietnam that is still recovering from the devastation caused by the breaking of the dams near Dong Noi and the subsequent flooding of large areas of the country.

First of all, it seems reasonable to ask the question whether the document is meant to underscore the possibility that from all American presidents holding office during in the Vietnam War, it would have to be Kennedy who would eventually show the determination and wherewithal to end the war and bring both countries to the table where a peace accord would finally be within reach. If this is, in fact, the case, then McAllister's textual play alludes to the enduring political speculations that cast Kennedy in the role of secular martyr, assassinated for his intentions to prevent further escalation of the war before his actual death in 1963. *Dream Baby's* alternative history, however, has Kennedy not only live into the closing years of the 1960s, but also has Mary Damico's mission succeed and thus force North Vietnam to the bargaining table after the country has suffered debilitating damages in the flooding. What the fictional closing document of *Dream Baby* argues is, in much more simplified terms, that, given history's multiple possible outcomes, peace has been and still is always an option at any given point of the historical process, though it depends on the smallest, most insignificant factors that determine the historical narrative. In a way, McAllister's narrative, in its use of simultaneously suspended alternative histories, literalizes what Eric Rabkin has described as one of the critical uses of the fantastic. "To perceive ambiguity," Rabkin suggests, "is to abandon perspective" (218). Since we tend to "reject reality in the face of our perspectives," we can look to the fantastic to give "us the chance to try out new, "unrealistic" possibilities, and thus perhaps, change seen reality" (216). Like Mary Damico, who ultimately transcends the limitation of only seeing the end of an individual story, we are made to see the potential ends of the larger narrative. And though this narrative remains contingent on factors beyond our control it is still within the range of an imagination that, both for Rabkin and for McAllister, has undeniable utopian potential. To the degree that *Dream Baby* resists closure by holding several narrative options in dialogic suspension, it reminds us that what we might perceive as our categoric inability to achieve closure is nothing more than the result of our confinement within one specific perspective. Opening up our thinking to the multiplicity of perspectives, the novel

enables us to imagine closure first and then invites us to pursue it, not as passive spectators but as active participants, conscious of our choice.

The ghosts discussed so far are truly supernatural. They derive from a prescientific, primitive conception of the world. Not so that ghost in Lucius Shepard's short story "Shades," published in the Dannels' anthology *In the Field of Fire*. Drawing from the technological rhetoric of Science Fiction, Shepard offers his readers a rationale for the existence of ghosts that has nothing to do with the supernatural. The science at work is embodied in a machine that allows a group of Vietnamese scientists, headed by a charismatic leader named Tuu, to raise the dead. Among the specters they manage to conjure up is Stoner, an American soldier who died during the war in a freak accident while searching a Vietnamese village. As part of a group of American journalists invited to witness the scientific spectacle, the narrator, Tom Puleo, discovers that Stoner's ghost tends to break out of his apathy only when he is confronted with Puleo, probably because both were members of the same unit during the war and, more importantly, because Puleo happened to witness Stoner's death. Despite his deep unease about the experiment, the journalist volunteers at the request of the scientists to enter the field in which Stoner is made to appear in order to talk to him and bring back valuable information. But the experiment goes awry. After the apocalyptic collapse of the scientifically created, enclosed simulacrum of the village, which was already pre-figured by Puleo's hallucinations and lucid dreams, he returns only to discover that his presence was required, as a kind of human appendix to the machine, to exorcise Stoner's ghost and annihilate him. The story ends with Puleo surprisingly feeling "reconciled" to the end of "that passion" which he used to associate with his lingering bitterness after the Vietnam War. Although he was ultimately tricked, the cathartic technological exorcism of the experiment has left him with "a heart that seemed lighter by an ounce of anger" (157).

Even with the technological rationale for the fantastic elements added, the gothicized imagery is still strikingly familiar: exorcising the ghosts of the dead, negotiating for control over the past, opening up the possibility of personal and collective redemption and reconciliation. Stoner's ghost appears as the icon of what Shepard denounces as the essence of American presence in Vietnam. Not unlike the narrator himself, he is violent and destructive. Despite his efforts at affecting a casual, unaffected manner in dealing with other members of his unit, he can scarcely hide that he is the product of a highly disciplined, technologically implemented regimen of power and repression. The narrator, acting out of "some old loyalty resurrected" (153) clearly identifies with Stoner, which raises the by now familiar questions about which one of the two is really the ghost and which one

has gone on to create a meaningful life for himself after the end of the war. Ostensibly then, Stoner's exorcism and Puleo's sense of relief are complementary indications that the past has been dealt with, which would imply that "Shades" aims, more than anything else, at closure and reconciliation. This would ring true if the story was solely about personal redemption, but there are details that deserve a closer look, details of crucial importance.

At first glance, it seems odd that Shepard devotes so little attention to the nature of the technology; after all, science fiction, by virtue of its tacit contract with the reader, conventionally foregrounds scientific method and, more importantly, scientific rhetoric in order to integrate the fantastic into the quotidian world of everyday life. Shepard's almost lackadaisical treatment of this genre convention, its condensing into the formulaic, makes more sense, however, when we look at it in connection with the question of who is in control of the technology — i.e. the Vietnamese — and who is controlled by the power emanating from the technology. The Americans, represented by Stoner's ghost and the group of journalists, appear physically, mentally, and technologically impotent. In its current incarnation, America is the professional spectator, descended from its position of global hegemony and reduced to transforming the superiority of Vietnamese science and technology into entertainment for the mass audiences of *Esquire* magazine, CNN, or the *Chicago Sun-Times* (122-3). Caught up in its own unresolved past, America is harmless. Only in its past incarnation, as Stoner's ghost, does America appear "dangerous, malevolent" (138). This is, however, Tom Puleo speaking and not the Vietnamese, and even Puleo's assessment of Stoner quickly changes from fear to horror and finally to pity.

Taking these elements of the story into consideration, Shepard's lack of enthusiasm for the trappings of technology makes more sense simply because Puleo is a narrator who is systematically excluded from a technological discourse controlled by forces outside of him. The power of technology, Shepard suggests, is no longer implied in and meted out through the American perspective. All that is left to America is the power to control discourse, which is still construed as a source of power although it is clearly separate and inferior to that inherent in its subject matter. While technology drives the discourse by providing the incentive and the dramatic substance of narrative, the narrator's task is to provide interpretation and legitimation of this technology as an unalterable fact to be accounted for, admired, and dealt with.

It is the degree to which someone has access to, and control over, technology, Shepard suggests, that will ultimately determine who has access to and control over the past — a diagnosis that clearly places the story within the more materi-

alist traditions of Science Fiction, despite its Magical Realist overtones. What “Shades” demonstrates is a growing awareness that global power is, in fact, gradually slipping away from an America, whose proverbial century is fading since the end of the Cold War and the global restructuring of political alliances. Shepard suggests that the benefactors of this historical transition are, among many others, the Vietnamese. The issue here is not so much whether Shepard’s assessment of global politics is in fact correct but rather that the story constructs a dichotomy which exposes Puleo’s and the other two U.S. journalists’ misapprehensions about themselves. For this purpose, the text carefully distinguishes between the emerging and solidifying power of an industrial culture in the post-Cold War period and the waning power of a postindustrial culture whose influence is a remnant of historical conditions that are rapidly and radically undergoing averse transformations. America, in Shepard’s assessment, is reproducing itself as a kind of cultural commodity, weakened by its inability to distinguish between the simulacrum and the real thing. Although — or because — Stoner’s ghost appears “more than real, ultra-real” (139), Puleo cannot arrive at a correct reading of the situation, complaining that he and Stoner “were governed by an arcane rationality to which we both were blind” (140).

Similarly, the “Land of Shades,” as Stoner calls the mythical testing-ground where he is made to materialize, becomes a palpable reality for Puleo. Named after the mirrored sunglasses that also happen to be the tribal icon of the most ostensibly postmodern form of Science Fiction, Cyberpunk, the Land of Shades is a place where the reflection of the outside world, reduplicated in the mirror lenses, covers up the depth of the eyes, the mirrors to the soul. Puleo’s earlier outburst of indignation — “Why is it, I ask you, that every measly little wimp in the universe thinks he can put on a pair of mirrored sunglasses and instantly acquire magical hipness and cool” (130) — which is also a recognition that reproducing an image is less important than producing it, is forgotten when he himself is given the opportunity to resolve his conflicts in the simulated setting of the Vietnam War. Ultimately, Puleo’s sense of reconciliation at the end of the story, as ardently as we readers might wish for it as a gesture of conventional dramatic closure, can be read as an indictment against him. Distancing himself from his narrator, Shepard’s implied author makes it clear that all Puleo has done is passively to position himself toward a narrative that has been thoroughly outside his control. Instead of taking control, Puleo makes the best of his impotence according to the only rules he knows how to apply.

The sense of panic in the face of industrial disenfranchisement through global restructuring in the post-Cold War period, as well as the unease triggered by the

largely accomplished shift from an industrial to a postindustrial economy, belong more to the implied author than to Tom Puleo, the narrator. As much as these vague ideological sentiments might echo those of more easily recognizable Cyberpunk, they are still alarmingly xenophobic in regards to the Vietnamese characters, even though Shepard's indictment of Puleo's smug sense of reconciliation might tilt the story's ideological balance back toward a more acceptable median. After all, it is Tuu who openly acknowledges, "Between our peoples, deception is a tradition" (155).

The texts discussed here, with different degrees of success, all illustrate that the self-conscious deferment of closure is one of the crucial objectives in the production, imitation, rephrasing, and circulation of memorable images of the Vietnam War in contemporary American culture. The degree to which they simultaneously assist in the preservation of this objective and to which they attempt to launch a critique of its ideological implications also illustrates how difficult it is to step outside of inherited cultural traditions. Even though Heinemann's, McAllister's, and Shepard's uses of the fantastic clearly represent an effort to reify closure by shifting it from a metaphorical or rhetorical to a literal register of the discourse, some critics, like Susan Jeffords, would still insist that their writing, despite all good intentions, ultimately leads to a deferment of real analysis. Based on her analysis of the audience's positioning in regard to the issue of spectatorship, Jeffords concludes that Vietnam discourse produces "not an incoherent object, but a confused subject, one that is positioned by its representations in such a way that it is incapable of acting on the information it seems so clearly to hold" (22). Consequently, the "proliferation of Vietnam representation in contemporary American culture must be read, not as increasingly refined attempts to arrive at an explanation of the war, but as increasingly *deferred* logics that produce a (con)fusion from which explanation cannot occur" (22; my emphasis).

Tim O'Brien, a lucid commentator on not only the Vietnam War but also on the literature that has sprung up around it, concurs. "True war stories," he has his narrator explain in "How To Tell A True War Story," one of the self-consciously titled segments in *The Things They Carried*, "do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis" (84). Since "in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true" (88), meaning derives from the intuitive recognition of a deeper truth, which is at times so distinct from literal truth that only fiction and, I would argue, perhaps only fantasy can tease it out. In other words, it must have the ability, as O'Brien puts it, to make "the stomach believe" (84). The fantastic offers the means of translating this intuitive knowledge of some deeper truth into discourse. Although the fantastic as an arsenal of representational strategies has the capacity

to reify and thus articulate this inexorable truth, which for O'Brien and the majority of Vietnam writers is synonymous with trauma in one way or another, it also immobilizes us. It arrests and casts us into a mythic time in which the constitutive borderlines of reality are erased. The psychology of the individual victim of trauma becomes one with the ideological discourses of an entire culture. Historical time is being subsumed by a mythic time in which the trauma always takes place right now, and overcoming it is always an ongoing, open-ended process. Similarly, victim and perpetrator are increasingly indistinct as origins of agency and thus responsibility. It is not the complacency of nostalgia we have to be worried about when Vietnam literature utilizes the fantastic. It is the fact that the irresolvable, incalculable, irritant, irreconcilable, unclassifiable, or uncontrollable, which can be expressed in concrete dramatic form, is made to circulate as a kind of cultural currency. True, most war literature in the twentieth century has had to struggle against the inadequacies of language in capturing the intensity, the complexity, and the larger significance of the war experience. But more than any of its predecessors, Vietnam literature has appropriated the impossibility of its endeavor, has made it an integral part of its rhetoric, and has endowed it with a specific moral and ideological purpose. It has made itself into a cultural institution, and like all institutions it has developed an arsenal of means to ward off change.

Although the texts discussed here insist on a deferment of closure that is not all that different from the political rhetoric quoted in Der Derian, they nevertheless tend to be more willing to acknowledge their subjectivity than "serious" historical and political analysis. Their complicity in self-perpetuation is alleviated by the fact that fiction construes a relationship to empirical historical truth (whatever that may be) that is self-conscious in regard to its own ontological status. In the words of the Russian formalists, fiction bares its devices. The fantastic, in heightening the ontological self-awareness of both the text and its readers, drives this point home even more dramatically. Operating against the ideology of a single, monolithic ontology, the fantastic allows us to turn back time, invert space, alter the outcome of history, and confer with the dead. Its universe is one of possibility and potential. Hence, it serves as a reminder of the constructedness of all narratives surrounding us. It reminds us to question the forces that bring a specific narrative to life, keep it vital, and eventually make it disintegrate and fade away.

The institutional character of Vietnam literature makes it vulnerable to criticism. Readers might complain that it is hopelessly, perhaps even nostalgically, mired in the past. As history marches on, confronting us all with new challenges and crises, Vietnam literature stubbornly refuses to let go of the past. And as it fails to address the pressing issues of the day, it gradually becomes obsolete. It at-

tempts to recreate the personal trauma of the rightful victims as the collective preoccupation of an entire culture; a culture which seeks solutions, reassurance, or, if push comes to shove, distraction. By devoting its creative and ideological energies to the problem of closure, Vietnam literature clearly means to answer to these complaints. Its answers will come across either as an immediate response, dictated by specific circumstances. Or they will appear as pre-emptive strikes, which are written into the discourse from the very beginning in order to provide it with a sense of stable identity. In a way, this might be perceived as a diversionary tactic, an overwriting of an inherent conceptual flaw before everything comes unraveled from the inside.

The use of the fantastic, though it might not solve these problems altogether, allows us to see them as the effects of deliberate aesthetic and ideological choices. It puts things, to return to Eric Rabkin's definition of the fantastic, into perspective, thus giving "us the chance to try out new, 'unrealistic' possibilities, and thus perhaps, change seen reality" (216). Whenever fantastic literature steers clear of the continued therapeutic reiteration that characterizes so much of the more realist Vietnam literature, it suggests that we can extricate ourselves from inherited traditions by recognizing their hold over our imagination. Despite its inevitable but partial indebtedness to these traditions, the fantastic can lead us to a recognition of how crucial the ontological boundaries are that we construct in order to guarantee the proper relationship between text and world. In showing us that these boundaries are artificial, perhaps even arbitrary, and therefore negotiable, it can teach us that getting past Vietnam is something that does not have to take place outside of the narrative by which we place ourselves in the world. Just because closure is always projected beyond the literary text does not mean that closure is equally unattainable within the larger social or historical text. Vietnam literature can tell us stories with proper endings, or at least show us that the lack of a proper ending is neither our personal nor our historical destiny. The perpetually deferred utopian moment of granting the past severance from the present can be moved back into the text and imagined as an event that happens right here, right now. If we want to escape from our confinement as "prisoners of the passage," we must first trade in one utopian moment, which is utopian largely by virtue of being inaccessible, for another, which is practically within our reach.\*

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Shiner’s story “The War at Home” reflects upon this phenomenon in a strikingly original manner. After a passage of text which describes a familiar scene of Vietnam combat experience, the protagonist wakes up from his nightmare, tells his wife that he has had another flashback to Nam, only to have her remind him that he was never there. The great accomplishment of Shiner’s story is that it forces the reader to recognize retroactively that what appeared as mimesis in the story’s opening passage is in fact nothing but pastiche. In reading Shiner’s “Nam prose,” we as readers fall prey to the same cultural mystification as the protagonist — we confuse the recognition of aesthetic conventions with the recognition of a lived experience. Though Shiner’s original intention with the story might have been primarily different — to insinuate the reversal of Americans and Vietnamese as a device of defamiliarization, not unlike Kate Wilhelm’s in her story “The Village,” or to suggest that the “home front” was indeed mentally and ideologically tied into the combat experience in a genuinely authentic manner — it still reads as a brilliant commentary on the formation and consolidation of genre conventions and the willingness of an audience to accept them as second nature. See Lewis Shiner, “The War at Home.”

<sup>2</sup> This summarizing statement is largely indebted to Philip Melling’s knowledgeable and lucid account of the larger trends in Vietnam War literature; see chapter 6 of *The Vietnam War in American Literature*, “Contemporary Critical Theory and Debate,” 111-125.

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