The Scar That Binds
Beattie, Keith

Published by NYU Press

Beattie, Keith.
The Scar That Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/7856.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/7856
Introduction

It had come to this. Two presidents from two different political parties had spoken, as if in unison, on what was once a fiercely contentious topic. During his presidential inaugural address, George Bush pronounced that “the final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory.”1 Speaking at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1993, President Bill Clinton stated, “Let [the war in Vietnam] not divide us as a people any longer.”2 In the two statements “Vietnam” is foregrounded as a rupturing presence within American culture while at the same time it is used to evoke the need for unity. Both quotations connote a single object: the desire for totality achieved through the erasure of the divisions associated with the war. Within the strategies that function to achieve this end, the notion of unity is constructed as an uncomplicated and coherent condition critically necessary for the common good.

Another American president, Ronald Reagan, repeated on a number of occasions the contradiction sketched here in his evocations of the impact of the Vietnam War upon U.S. culture. When formally accepting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on behalf of the nation, Reagan referred to the “scars” suffered by those who served in Vietnam and made reference to those who had “strong opinions on the war.” Having alluded to protest stemming from the war, Reagan went on to argue that it was time to “move on, in unity,” thereby rhetorically relegating a divisive experience to the past and presenting social unity as a condition necessary for America’s progress into the future.3 Four years later, again speaking at the Wall, as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has become known, Reagan referred to the “memories of a time when we faced great divisions here at home.” The existence of these memories became the occasion to stress what he defined as a “profound truth about our nation: that from all our divisions we have always eventually emerged strengthened.”4 According to Reagan, then, the existence of divisions within the United States foregrounds
the profound and indisputable truth of strength through unity that is the real history of the nation.

American presidents have not been the only ones to represent the impact of the Vietnam War in terms of a contradiction involving social division, on the one hand, and a presumed cultural unity, on the other. Certain interpretations of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, for example, have stressed its function in circulating a memory of the mortally wounded soldier; yet equally as popular, if not more so, have been references to the Wall as an object that brings Americans together by healing the wounds of war. The practice of healing is the erasure of the memory and the “scarring” effects of the divisive impact of the war in the presumption of an America reunited in the wake of the Vietnam War. The film *The Deer Hunter* (1978) depicted the human toll of the war on small-town, working-class America while seeking closure in a final scene in which the damaged characters unite to sing “God Bless America”—an action that, in the absence of any directorial sense of irony, is a reaffirmation of the ties between them as individuals and as members of the nation. The novel *In Country* (1987) establishes the deleterious effects of the war upon the lives of a number of characters only to conclude with the three central characters united at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which is defined in the novel as a site that functions to foster social integration.5 In the novel *Indian Country* (1987) a Vietnam veteran who has alienated his family as a result of his violent and psychotic responses to his service in Vietnam is eventually healed of the psychological wounds of war through reunion with his family.6 In such television series as *Magnum, P.I.* (1980), *The A-Team* (1983), and *Riptide* (1984) military service in Vietnam features as an experience that unites the otherwise marginalized characters to one another and to other Vietnam veterans. In time it was the status as group player that allowed these characters to reunite with society. The message of the film *Platoon* (1986)—that “we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves”—suggests that social cohesion will obviate the need for war. The television series *Tour of Duty* (1987) and *China Beach* (1988) used the war as a device to evoke social divisions between Americans that weekly were displaced within the affirmation of group loyalty and unity.

Within each of these examples the assertions of disruption and division that are central to representations of the impact of the war upon the United States are eroded and contradicted within a widespread and continual ideological operation that has functioned to reinstate the notion of cultural, social, and political collectivity and holism. Michael Herr iden-
tified the contradictory nature of the experience of the Vietnam War when he wrote that the word “Vietnam” signified the best and worst of experiences, which he summarized as “pain, pleasure, horror, guilt, nostalgia.” However, through processes of revision and rearticulation such an awareness of contradictions has been transformed into a different set of meanings. “Vietnam . . . we’ve all been there,” Herr concluded. As the personal pronoun of collectivity—*we*—intimates, the connotations of division inherent in the word “Vietnam” have been replaced with an imaginary holism. “Vietnam,” once the sign of social segmentation and political divisions, has been appropriated as a site for the representation of unity. It is this paradox—the impact of the war defined as both rupture and union, and how the former collapses into the latter—that is the general object of analysis within this study.

As this outline suggests, this book examines American culture. It is not a book about the Vietnam War and its representations. There is little mention here of the seemingly endless stream of texts dealing with the battles and in-country trauma of America and Americans in Vietnam. Critical work continues in this crowded field of study—the films, novels, poetry, memoirs, and military and diplomatic histories of the war have all received critical attention. What such studies emphasize is that the texts of the war can provide useful opportunities for those wishing to study American culture. Andrew Martin’s *Receptions of War* (1993) perceptively illustrates this point. Martin studies representations of the war as a way of commenting upon “the process through which an unpopular war has come to be received in popular culture.” His study differs from many within the field through its focus on texts drawn from film, fiction, and written history. Typically, studies of the representation of the war have incorporated only one or two of these categories as the objects of analysis (notably film and fiction). In these studies the method of separating written texts from visual texts tends to contain meanings within form. In opposition to such categorization, an interdisciplinary approach permits the tracing of common meanings across the arbitrary boundaries of textual categories. An effective study in these terms is Susan Jeffords’s laudable *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (1989). Aspects of Jeffords’s analysis have contributed to certain features of my study, although no attempt has been made to duplicate her method of employing representations of the war as a way of exposing patriarchal beliefs and values.

In contrast to the proliferating studies concerned with representations
of the war as a combat experience, *The Scar That Binds* opens and examines an unexplored critical space through an analysis of representations of the effects, traces, presences, and legacies of the war in Vietnam upon and within the culture of the United States. The focus on texts dealing with the impacts of the war, as opposed to representations of the war itself, provides a cogent and unique impression of the place and function of “Vietnam” within U.S. culture. An interdisciplinary approach is adopted in this study as an aspect of a method that seeks to reveal historical and ideological conditions in the wake of the war. Specifically, the aim of interdisciplinarity is to render a more detailed impression of the context that is post–Vietnam War U.S. culture than is achievable through an analysis of texts of a single discipline. In keeping with an interdisciplinary focus, this study traverses and is informed by perspectives from the areas of historiography, political theory, literary theory, sociology, communications, and cultural studies. The need to confront this wide interpretative terrain is the result of the demands of examining what is said about the impact of the war in texts drawn from various fields, including film, written and oral history, literature, and journalism. The focus reveals a unique and detailed historical record that includes the antiwar movement, the role and place of the Vietnam veteran, definitions and perceptions concerning the war years of “the 60s,” and varieties of national commemoration and historical revisionism, among other topics. Although this study involves texts from a number of areas, no attempt has been made to undertake an encyclopedic coverage of all documents dealing with the cultural impact of the war—the task of the bibliographer differs from the form of interpretative critique pursued here. Nor does the analysis necessarily seek to offer a detailed explication or a close reading of individual texts.

This study of contemporary American culture recognizes that political and economic structures set limits on individual and collective agency and the production of cultural meanings, inscribing those actions and meanings with varieties of unstated presuppositions. Thus, the analysis is not only concerned with what is said. Unarticulated positions inform the paradox of segmentation and unity and add crucial dimensions to the topics and issues available within a variety of textual representations. Accordingly, the task is to address hidden textual meanings that typically remain unsaid. The interrogation of concealed meanings pursued within this book takes the form of a decoding and critique of the operation of what I call the ideology of unity.
Certain terms within this phrase require explication. As it is used here, “ideology” refers to mental frameworks or categories that people use to define and interpret experience; it consists of simple yet meaningful concepts and images of “practical thought” that are reproduced as coherent and universal interpretations of everyday reality. In turn, the assumptions are informed by common sense. Commonsense explanations and conceptions do not rest on logic or argument; rather, they appear to be spontaneous or preconceived notions that are widely shared. As such, common sense “feels . . . as if it has always been there, [a] sedimented, bedrock wisdom . . . , a form of natural wisdom,” as the cultural theorist Stuart Hall has noted. The ideology of unity shares the general characteristics of ideology by directing commonsense forms of everyday interpretation toward a specific end. The ideology of unity represents the commonsense notion that an essentialized form of social, cultural, and political unity is necessary to the good of all Americans. On a basic level the ideology operates through expressions that, having passed into cliché, are taken for granted as common sense. Expressions such as “unity is strength,” “unity is power,” “united we stand; divided we fall,” and “out of many, one” validate unity and function to delegitimate contradictory or oppositional voices. To be outside the union, that is, to refuse or contest the ideology of unity, is to risk being marginalized as alien, unmanageable, dangerous, anarchic, even unpatriotic. It is with the assistance of such powerful rhetorical and social supports that conceptions of homogeneity and uniformity are naturalized within the culture.

Culture is the site of the generation of meaning. It is a determining, productive, and open field through which experience is constructed, defined, and interpreted. Culture involves the shared lifestyles, personal dispositions, beliefs, values, codes, and language of a small group or a society. Reference to shared meanings does not imply that meanings are common, or inherent, to a specific culture nor does it suggest the absence of conflict in the reproduction of meaning. The field through which meaning is constructed and circulated is not quiescent or static—it is a space characterized by contending definitions leading to the emergence of dominant meanings and concepts.

Throughout its history America has used this space to express and defer to supposedly nonpoliticalized concepts of national and cultural unity. The continued evocation of the notion of holism in the specific context of the impact of the Vietnam War highlights the particular effectivity of “Vietnam” in the perpetuation of cultural conceptions of unity and ex-
poses the shortcomings of the common claim that the war ruptured the existing ideological structure. The assessment of rupture recognizes only one side of the Vietnam paradox. The other side of the paradox, the one traced in this book through a focus on the operation of the ideology of unity, demonstrates that fundamental ideological and mythological patterns were not destroyed by the war in Vietnam. The notion of unity, a basic ideological premise historically ingrained within U.S. culture, survived the war.14 Indeed, aspects of what Time magazine has called “The War That Will Not End” remain in the culture precisely because they provide a unique vehicle for the representation of cultural unity.15 The depiction of the impact of the war as a crisis within American culture has reinforced and legitimated calls for an ameliorative response in the form of the necessity of cultural unity. The continued deployment of the ideology of unity underlines the fact that the impact of the war—believed to be profoundly disruptive—has in practice been the central focus for the assertion of the notion of unity.

There is a crucial issue at stake in the representation of unity that belies the seeming neutrality of the category. The ideology of unity analyzed here functions to negate a simple fact, namely, that the United States is a culture structured by divisions, diversities, and differences. The notion of a differentiated culture—a multiculture—is ignored by an ideology that reduces cultural and political complexity to a unified whole. The paradox of division and unity features a contest between differing conceptions of the effects of the war and varying perceptions of the structure of U.S. culture that are mediated by the force of an ideology that emphasizes cultural indivisibility and collectivity. The continual slippage away from cultural division and difference toward cultural unity that results from this mediation foregrounds the central issue at stake in the paradox: the denial of difference within U.S. culture.16 The specific aim of this study, then, is to examine the ways in which the ideology of unity operates and produces effects within and through representations of the impact upon American culture of the Vietnam War, and to suggest that the privileging of the seemingly natural notion of unity displaces and denies cultural relations of difference. By exposing the operations of the dominant ideology of unity, I affirm the existence of cultural difference within the United States. I hope that the denaturalization of the ideology of unity undertaken here will invite further interrogation of cultural unity, leading to a broader understanding of the United States as an hierarchically organized multiculture.
The critique undertaken within this study of the signs of the ideology of unity operating within American culture revealed three dominant meanings structured within metaphor within a range of texts: the “wound,” the “voice” of the Vietnam veteran, and “home.” I refer to these decoded dominant meanings as “strategies of unity,” a term used to evoke the specific work and material effects of the ideology of unity within U.S. culture since the late sixties. The first strategy, identified as “The Healed Wound,” concerns the encoding of the ideology of unity within a powerful and widespread metaphor. The divisive impact of the war in Vietnam upon American culture has commonly been defined as a “wound,” while reconciliatory efforts have been termed “healing.” An examination of these positions reveals that the wound is cultural division, a long-standing characteristic of U.S. culture though one that was widely attributed to have resulted from the impact of the war. Through the circumlocutions surrounding the Vietnam War this condition was commonly expressed as impotence. The erasure of division and difference in the “healing” of the disabling wound resulted in unity and attendant perceptions of cultural reinvigoration and strength. The healing outcome was predicated in part on the denial—or forgetting—of the memory of the war and matters stemming from U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The healing process operated across a wide cultural terrain, specifically at the level of the individual and the community as synecdochic expressions of the need to heal the nation. A healed nation results in unity and consensus and the inscription of the status quo. The centrality within popular and critical interpretations of the metaphor of healing the wounds and scars of the Vietnam War positions the trope as the dominant strategy studied here. Aspects of other strategies examined in this study interact with and contribute to features of “healing the scars of war” while advancing and enlarging a number of unique positions that contribute to the work of negotiating, and overcoming, the paradox associated with the impact of the Vietnam War on American culture.

The second strategy, referred to as “The Vietnam Veteran as Ventriloquist,” encodes the “truth” of unity within representations of the American veteran of the war in Vietnam. Early representations of the male veteran depicted him as an inarticulate psychopath incapable of effective communication, and hence functionally “silent.” Subsequently, however, the intersection of a number of factors resulted in altering the veteran’s speaking position. The first factor in this process involved the critical project in which the Vietnam War was defined as unique. The unique war, it
was argued, needed a form of representation capable of revealing the truth of the war. The result of this conception was the denigration of conventional written histories, which were deemed incapable of adequately representing the war. This conclusion reflected the exclusionary notion that only those who experienced the war could adequately describe its truth. Participation—“having been there”—became the crucial indicator of the truthfulness of accounts of wartime experience. The outcome of the interrelated set of assumptions was that the male veteran’s experience of the war in Vietnam positioned him as the sole legitimate domestic spokesperson of the essential truth of the conflict. Ironically, having been accorded a central speaking role, the veteran’s heavily mediated voice was heard to speak only of unity. Compounding the irony surrounding the representation of the veteran, it was through his pronouncements on the topic of cultural integration and union—and not as a result of his war service—that the veteran, in the final phase of apotheosis, was represented as a hero. The denial of the veteran’s agency implicit within this conclusion is, however, actively contested within the process of “talking back”—a consideration of forms of representation in which the veteran is heard to speak in a variety of voices.

The final strategy, titled “Bringing the War ‘Home,’” concerns the assertion of unity defined in terms of “home.” The notion of home was reworked and realigned across a twenty-year period, beginning in the late Sixties when sections of the antiwar movement sought to “bring the war home.” This radical position was subsequently revised within commonsense assumptions emphasizing home as a condition devoid of contest and opposition. Similarly, representations during the early to mid-seventies depicting the repatriation of the war with the veteran were revised during the latter half of the seventies within cultural characteristics that functioned to recuperate the “violent” or “sick” veteran within the unity of the therapeutic family. During the eighties the notion of a consensual, convivial “home” was reinforced within the nostalgic agenda of the Reagan administration, while in the late eighties home was represented as a feature of the war in Vietnam and of the American home front. The transferability of home reinforces the notion that home is not a place but a set of homogenizing definitions inscribed within the culture.

The three strategies referred to here are understood to represent different strands of the same ideological discourse and to operate simultaneously throughout the period covered in this book. The years that mark the temporal boundaries of the analysis are defined by the release dates
of the first and last texts selected as central to this study: 1968 to 1989.\textsuperscript{17} Within this period the height of the ideological assertion of unity is understood to coincide with the years of the Reagan presidency. During these years, as with the entire period covered here, unity is interpreted as a project operating through ideologically structured signifying practices to produce a specific outcome. Political theorist Michael Ryan has argued that a reality different to that presented in dominant depictions of American political life and American society would be created if representation “addressed the multiplicity of contiguous social parts instead of pretending to give a substitute for an imaginary whole.”\textsuperscript{18} Unfortunately, there is one major hurdle to overcome before this issue can be confronted: the ideology of unity. This study demonstrates the depth and breadth to which this ideology is inscribed within representations of the impact of the Vietnam War, and the effects of that inscription. The divisions exposed by the war are negated, difference is elided, unity prevails—America is no longer asunder. Or so the ideology of unity would have us believe.