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The Vietnam Veteran as Ventriloquist

Who is speaking? . . . Who is qualified to do so?
—Michel Foucault

I am the man, I suffer’d, I was there. —Walt Whitman

Metaphors and similes related to the act of speaking and to the absence of speech surround the Vietnam veteran. Young men and women were “called” to Vietnam (whether they answered that call was, of course, another matter). Among U.S. troops in Vietnam the collective response to devastating action was the ironic expression “Don’t mean nuthin’,” suggesting that further comment on violence and its motives was futile. Equally as popular for such circumstances was the laconic “There it is,” a line that implies that “nothing more . . . needs to be said, or indeed can be said.” The U.S. foot soldier in Vietnam, the GI of earlier wars, became a “grunt,” reduced to language’s lowest common denominator. In this the veterans all became “quiet Americans.” For many years, or so myth would have it, the war in Vietnam was “the War That Dared Not Speak Its Name.” This situation was to change during the administration of Ronald Reagan, the “Great Communicator,” when the Vietnam veteran was hailed a hero and allowed, even invited, to articulate his/her experience.

The intense concern with giving the veteran a “voice” resulted in the veteran’s central positioning within representations of the war and its impact. However, the limitations inherent in this representation are evident in the fact that the far-reaching ramifications of the war for economic, “race,” gender, and regional differences are not adequately embodied in
or reducible to the figure of the veteran. Rather, an accurate and inclusive portrayal of the impact on U.S. culture of the Vietnam War demanded approaches derived from a variety of subject positions throughout the culture. Despite such provisions, the emphasis on the veteran proved convenient within a culture that has traditionally expressed itself through a virtually exclusive reliance on the (male) individual.

The representational appeal of the veteran also persisted despite the objection that such a focus ignored the Vietnamese people and marginalized the U.S. domestic resistance to the war. Further, within the majority of textual representations the term “Vietnam veteran” has functioned to largely exclude Americans of diverse cultural backgrounds. Contradicting this situation, to a limited degree, are representations of the experiences of ethnic veterans in the novels China Men (1981) by Maxine Hong Kingston, Captain Blackman (1988) by John Williams, Coming Home (1971) by George Davis, and Love Medicine by Louise Erdrich (1984), and in the films Journey through Rosebud (1972), Johnny Firecloud (1975), Ashes and Embers (1982), Latino (1985) Powwow Highway (1989), and the “Billy Jack” cycle of films: The Born Losers, Billy Jack, The Trial of Billy Jack, and Billy Jack Goes to Washington (1967, 1971, 1974, 1977). Typically, however, these works have not been included in critical discussions of war-related texts. Similarly, women have been almost entirely excluded from representations of the war, or are included to function as the objects of men’s aggression. Vietnamese women are especially targeted in this way, often literally—“shooting Vietnamese women” is a popular theme within representations of the war in Vietnam.

A number of texts have, to a limited degree and with varying success, rewritten exclusionary practices and derogatory representations to position women within the definition of “Vietnam veteran.” Examples here include the television series China Beach (1988) and Lynda Van Devanter’s memoir of her time in Vietnam as an army nurse, Home Before Morning (1984). Despite the relatively high degree of popular appeal of these examples, texts of the war and its aftermath have traditionally failed to incorporate representations of women in ways that are capable of revising the masculine point of view of the majority of texts concerned with the “Vietnam experience.” Attention has been drawn to the elision and derision of women in textual representations of Vietnam through feminist theory’s focus “on the appropriation of ‘woman’ by (masculine) discursive practices that deny women independent speech. The exclusion of these ‘other’ voices is sustained by a critical enterprise that places its
value on the representation of authentic experience.” In privileging authentic experience, only those “who were there” (that is, who took part in the war) are legitimated to speak of the experience. As commonly represented, only males existed in Vietnam. Women, therefore, were not allowed to speak since, according to the logic of popular definitions, they were not “there.” Van Devanter highlights this problem in her memoir when she refers to the reaction to her presence at a demonstration by Vietnam veterans in Washington, D.C.:

I took a place near the front. However, one of the leaders approached me. “This demonstration is for vets,” he said apologetically. “I am a vet,” I said. “I was in Pleiku and Qui Nhon.” “Pleiku!” he exclaimed. “No shit! I used to be with the 4th Infantry. You must have been at the 71st Evac.” “I worked in the OR.” “You people did a hell of a job,” he said. “You folks saved my best friend’s life.” He smiled at me for a few moments while I shifted awkwardly under his praise. “Do you have a sign or something I can hold?” I asked. “Well,” he said uncomfortably, “I . . . uh . . . don’t think you’re supposed to march.” “But you told me it was for vets.” “It is,” he said. “But you’re not a vet.”

Seeking to contest exclusions and to retrieve marginalized voices, deconstructive critical practices have, together with feminist theory, “added a ‘pluralism’ to the name of ‘Vietnam.’” In this relation, deconstruction, as with feminist theory, becomes a way of understanding what is, and what is not, articulated within representations surrounding the Vietnam War.

Employing ideas since associated almost exclusively with Jacques Derrida, both Catherine Belsey and Pierre Macherey have offered interpretations of deconstruction in terms of presences and absences, silences and articulations. The object of deconstructing a text is, for Belsey, “to examine the process of its production” and “to locate the point at which it is constructed.” This point is to be found, as Macherey has argued, within “the tension between the text’s aspiration to completeness and the actual incompleteness which it cannot avoid . . . this is the contradiction which proclaims the position of the text within ideology.” According to Macherey, the source of this contradiction can be traced to the language of the text that in its incompleteness can reveal textual “silences.”
constructive analysis, according to Macherey’s method, highlights the absences in texts—that which the text is unable to say.

Deconstruction defined in this way intersects with the popular texts dealing with the war and its impact on the U.S. home front through a consideration that within these works “all except white inarticulate males” remain “missing from the action.” A form of analysis that focuses upon the silences inherent in representations is particularly suited, then, to texts in which various languages (literary, cinematic, and scholarly) have together constructed a silent, or silenced, veteran. Working with the direction established by deconstruction as identified here, understanding the privileging of this figure involves locating the point of contradiction within the textual representation of the Vietnam veteran. Such an analysis reveals that the contradiction at the center of the textual construction of the Vietnam veteran centers on “his” ability or inability to articulate his experience.

This contradiction is explicit within a historicization of the cultural and textual trends and assumptions that constructed and reconstructed the veteran in various guises during the twenty-year period from the late sixties to the late eighties. Initially, the veteran was crudely depicted as an inarticulate psychopath, a prejudicial characterization that effectively silenced him within representations. The inarticulate veteran continued as a motif within the dominant representations while at the same time, yet not solely within the same texts, the veteran was being constructed as an authentic spokesperson. The paradox involved in the veteran’s speaking role was extended, though not exposed, when the newly constructed veteran-as-spokesperson was permitted to speak only on a limited range of topics, predominantly, if not exclusively, concerned with the commonsense notion of cultural unity. In this way the veteran emerged a hero, valorized, in effect, not for his war experience but for his ability to contribute to the maintenance of cultural homogeneity and holism.

Surrounding the contradiction at the center of the representations of the veteran outlined here is a debate concerning the meaning of the experience known as “Vietnam.” The construction of the veteran as psychopath was predicated upon the notion of an unspeakably horrific “Vietnam” that led to psychosis in all those unlucky enough to be sent there. (In this sense the term “Vietnam” is used to evoke both the war and the alien and threatening country in which the war was fought.) Alternatively, yet equally as disturbing in its consequences, the image of the veteran as hero is implicated in the revised view of Vietnam as a “noble
cause.” A critique of the contradiction that informs the construction of the Vietnam veteran is therefore central to an understanding of the ways in which the experience of the war and its impact were represented in the period under discussion. With this context in mind, the analysis within this part is a form of deconstructive critique focused on the contradictory positions—silence and speaking—centrally implicated within representations of the veteran. The exploration and critique of this contradiction involves seeking answers to certain questions. By refusing to ask questions relating to the veteran’s transformation from a silent or silenced figure to a privileged interpreter is to give credence to the spurious assumption that silence continues to surround the war. Certain questions demand to be asked: Why was the veteran silenced? What circumstances allowed him to speak? And, most important, In whose voice did the veteran finally speak?

Comments made by Roland Barthes provide an introduction to an understanding of these questions together with an outline of the conclusion of the deconstructive task undertaken here. Implicit in the way in which the above questions have been posed is the suggestion that there is only one language being spoken in any culture at a given time. However, as Barthes has noted, there are a number of languages within a culture, each stemming from the different positions subjects occupy at various times, or at the same time, within the culture. The result is an “inveterate war of languages.”15 In this way different languages are detrimental to cultural cohesion; they interrupt a shared language and system of meanings, placing the pax culturalis in jeopardy.16 The absence of, or failure to achieve, collective meanings and common discourses thus threatens the maintenance of the cultural and social status quo.

The situation is problematized through the fact that just as there are many languages within a culture, so too there are many competing realities that are defined within and between ideologies that change over time. Complicating these connections is the acknowledgment that truth, like reality, is not a fixed concept. The resolution, then, to the problem of competing languages, realities, and truths resides within the dominant and overriding system of explanation and meanings that Barthes referred to in terms of an absence of language as “what goes without saying.”17 An end to the “war of languages” is arrived at through the imposition of the “meta-language of bourgeois mythology,”18 which answers the question, posed above, “In whose voice did the veteran finally speak?” In the final stage of deconstruction the paradox outlined above dissolves into doxa.

The term “voice” is defined here in a way similar to that used by Bill
Nichols:, “By ‘voice’ I mean something narrower than style: that which conveys to us a sense of a text’s social point of view, of how it is organizing the materials it is presenting to us. In this sense ‘voice’ is not restricted to any code or feature, such as dialogue or spoken commentary.” 19 In one sense, then, “voice” is a metaphor for the ideological effects of the text. Ideology is not only inscribed in the articulations of the veteran, it is etched in the text itself, in the author’s language, and the common effects of the cinematic apparatus that permit only certain authorized speakers a certain, limited, speech. To grant sovereignty to the text in this way is to agree with Barthes that “all speech is on the side of the Law.” 20 Within this conception the veteran’s utterances are a sentence—a form of penology, a conformist act. Yet to claim that all speech supports the dominant order is to ignore polysemy, and to deny those texts in which the veteran retrieves a voice from what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “silence of the doxa.” 21 “Voice” is thus an ambivalent metaphor—it registers ideological effects and, in a different context, encodes the contestation of ideology.

An understanding of the manner by which what “goes without saying” came to be expressed by the veteran requires an explication and critique of the assumptions implicit in the textual construction of the veteran, and the historical circumstances that attended that construction. Such an analysis is aimed at answering the initial question—“Why was the veteran silenced?”—and begins with one of the earliest representations of the veteran.

Silencing the Messenger

The filmic veteran made his most prominent debut in The Born Losers (1967) in the character of Billy Jack (Tom Laughlin), Native American and ex-Green Beret. 22 The film did not augur well for the future of the veteran in mainstream fiction film, in fact it set a B-grade precedent that was to have prominence for the next few years. 23 In The Born Losers, the first in a cycle of Billy Jack films, Billy Jack confronts and defeats a gang of renegade motorcyclists that has terrorized the citizens of a small California coastal town. While this sketch suggests the actions of a figure easily appropriated by a law-and-order campaign, Billy Jack’s excessive use of violence and the fact that he is, as the introductory voice-over narration informs the spectator, a “trained killer,” position him outside acceptable society. When, at the end of the film, he is shot by a policeman,
the audience recognizes that legitimate authority has been restored over the potentially wayward and dangerous veteran.

Central to the representation of the veteran in *The Born Losers* is the fact that he is pathetically incapable of speaking for himself. The character of Billy Jack is derived from the traditional cinematic Indian who expresses himself in an absurd pidgin composed of little more than “ugh” and “how.” In one scene Billy Jack states: “I’m an Injun, we know how to strike secretly, silently.” Silence and violence are the keys to the character of Billy Jack. During a standoff with a member of the motorcycle gang Billy Jack goads his opponent to violence with the words “Are you going to fight or talk me to death?” Billy Jack would rather fight than talk. In *The Trial of Billy Jack* (1974) the character is called upon to express himself in a different way—vocally, in court. And in *Billy Jack Goes to Washington* (1977), the final film in the series, his loquacity is his main weapon against government corruption. However, in *The Born Losers* Billy Jack abrogates the need to express himself verbally, a point that is reinforced early in the film with the opening voice-over being relied upon to inform the spectator of his history. The theme song of the biker/veteran film *Angels from Hell* (1968), “No Communication,” ironically summarized the language void that enmeshed the Vietnam veteran. The laconic figure of Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) in *Taxi Driver* (1976), and the inchoate ramblings of Jack Falen (Dennis Hopper) in *Tracks* (1976), subsequently did little to contest this impression of the veteran as a figure incapable of effective speech.

Silent, or lacking the verbal skills to communicate effectively, the veteran of these films found expression in the only avenue open to him: physical violence. In 1975 Julian Smith commented that the war in Vietnam had failed to inspire films about physically disabled veterans “perhaps because the psychic wounds have been deep enough (and because the returned soldiers have needed all their strength for striking back at a society that is depicted as having betrayed them).” With the eventual change in attitude toward the veteran, the presence of physical disabilities became prominent as a motif for a society seemingly obsessed with the wounds of war. Yet, within its historical context, Smith’s comment is accurate. In these early films the veteran’s disability is almost exclusively and literally cerebral: an affliction of the cerebrum leading to psychosis and the loss of the ability to formulate language. Smith’s observation also highlights another aspect of the early representation of the veteran: the veteran as violent victim. The characteristic is expressed in the veteran’s
positioning as an outsider in relation to established order—“neither for
nor against, he is marked as a classless threat to the dominant values” —
who frequently expresses himself through acts of violence against the very
order that sent him to Vietnam and ignores him on his return. The vet-
ern-as-victim theme was to prove endurably popular among the early
representations of the Vietnam veteran, continuing until its apotheosis in
the film First Blood (1982). Smith noted that the “two extremes (violent
or victim)” were “so prevalent that Robert Jay Lifton felt the need, ap-
parently, for a disclaimer in the subtitle of his study of the psychological
impact of the war: Home from the War; Vietnam Veterans: Neither Vic-
tims nor Executioners.”

Besides incoherence and inarticulation, the other aspect first associated
in The Born Losers with the veteran, that of the presence of biker gangs,
continued to figure prominently in the early representations of the vet-
ern. The intersection of biker and veteran was exemplified and exploited
in films in which the veteran fought against motorcycle gangs (The Angry
Breed, 1968; Satan’s Sadists, 1969; Chrome and Hot Leather and The
Hard Ride, both 1971), and in those films featuring a Vietnam veteran as
a member of a biker gang (Motor Psycho, 1965, Angels from Hell, 1968;
The Losers, 1970). Film historian and Vietnam combat veteran Rick Berg
has attributed this association to the position that the motorcycle gangs
hold within popular culture. “Since The Wild One (1954), [such gangs]
have come to signify a marginal and irreconcilable counter-culture,
whose members work within the dominant culture but are hardly part of
it.” Berg’s analysis of the experiences of the Vietnam veteran on screen
highlights the cultural readiness to represent the veteran as outsider.
Berg’s observations can be extended by analyzing the reasons behind the
demonization and marginalization of the veteran and by examining why,
during the early seventies, Vietnam war veterans were linked with bikers
and not some other popularly marginalized group, such as the hippies.

Specifically, the equation of the veteran and bikers functioned to en-
sure that violence, together with marginality, would be associated with
the veteran, a prejudicial assessment that increased in currency after the
public disclosure of the events at My Lai. That the violence at My Lai was
so excessive—so outside acceptable or accepted boundaries (even in war),
and was therefore determinately insane—opened the way for a further de-
monization of the veteran as mentally deranged or psychotic. Indeed, the
veteran is literally turned into a fiend in the execrable Blood of Ghastly
Horror (1971) and Deathdream (1972, also known as The Night Walk
and Dead of Night), both of which had release dates corresponding with the revelation of the full extent of the My Lai massacre. This conflation of violence and psychosis proved to be immensely popular in mass-culture representations of the veteran during the early seventies. In a number of films, including My Old Man’s Place (also known as Glory Boy), The Visitors, Welcome Home Soldier Boys, and To Kill a Clown (all 1972), the veteran is marked by the war in his murderous outbursts.

The cliché of the violent veteran reflecting the excessive violence of the war in Vietnam was also carried in various episodes of a number of television series, and can be traced through a variety of novels. In other texts, including the films The Crazy World of Julius Vrooder (1974) and Heroes (1977), the veteran had overcome senseless violence, to be depicted as merely “senseless” or “crazy.” The veteran’s derangement was parodied in The Stunt Man (1978) in which Pirandelloesque techniques cunningly exposed the veteran’s psychosis to be the result of the operation of a cinematic apparatus that ideologizes the everyday conditions of existence. Ironically, beyond the world of film the veteran was chided for having “adjusted too well” to postwar life.

The willingness of the popular media during the late sixties and early seventies to construct and circulate images of demonized veterans is explicable within an historicization of the images. By the early seventies the nightly televised images of body bags and metal coffins signified a failed military venture in which the veteran, albeit the dead veteran, was, in effect, screaming to those who would hear of the immorality of the war and of its disastrous human toll. Articulations by veterans provided the potential to further damage the war effort by verbally reinforcing the same issues that the dead exemplified. In this relation, the voices of the Vietnam veterans, informed by the disruptive experience of war, were defined ideologically as a problem in relation to officially sanctioned impressions of the war. While the war was still being fought, the Nixon administration inadvertently conceded the influence of veterans’ protest through its anxious yet transparent attempts at delegitimizing the actions of antiwar veterans. In 1971, during a weeklong protest against the war organized by Vietnam Veterans Against the War called Operation Dewey Canyon III, named after a series of military operations in Vietnam, “veterans threw their medals at the White House in protest of a war that disgusted and degraded them.” In response, “the Nixon administration implied that they weren’t really veterans but actors.” Similarly, during protests by Vietnam veterans at the Republican National Convention in Miami the
following year, “the same administration pointed to [the veterans’] freshly scrubbed, non-veteran peers as a shining hope that would not ‘stain America.’”

Evidently, the news media at the time were also unwilling or incapable of accepting the reality of veterans’ protest. For example, when veterans gathered in Detroit in February 1971 to publicly confess to having committed crimes related to their service in the war in Vietnam, the so-called Winter Soldier Investigations, CBS refused to screen film of the testimony and generally “[t]elevision barely covered the event. . . .” In a footnote to his study of the media’s coverage of the antiwar movement, media sociologist Todd Gitlin suggests that the testimony was not broadcast because, according to the networks, “antiwar veterans were not legitimate sources of jarring news.”33 Alternatively, however, the networks’ refusal to screen the sessions points to the veterans’ testimony as especially damaging to many of the political positions favored by the networks. Such testimony would have called into question a number of traditional American self-perceptions that were already being tested by the nightly revelations of the incidents at My Lai.

It is significant that during the early seventies, when negative representations of the veteran flourished, veterans’ antiwar activity (a phenomenon that is often overlooked in accounts of the antiwar movement) was at its peak. Against this context, the negative media representations can be interpreted as reactions to the rise of veterans’ political protest. At issue was the ability of the veteran to continue to protest America’s intervention in foreign affairs in ways capable of threatening “not only the specific objectives in Vietnam but the viability—the good sense—of intervention based solely on an overdetermined, hyperpositivist commitment to what (has been called) ‘mechanistic anticommunism.’” In another way the veterans’ experiences proved a cogent source of criticism of U.S. governmental policy. Contrary to the cliché that the returning veterans were spat upon by antiwar protestors (a view that attempts to deny that many veterans were members of the antiwar movement), the principal agent of mistreatment of the veterans was the U.S. government and its departments and agencies, among them the Veterans Administration, which failed to provide returning Vietnam veterans with adequate benefits and health care. The experience of this maltreatment was the basis of informed criticism by Vietnam veterans of governmental inaction on matters of priority for many veterans.

In effect, the mainstream media, by labeling the veterans as deviant,
“damaged the credibility of the veterans as witnesses,” as the media analyst Paul Camacho has noted.35 “That is, regardless of the audience’s momentary sympathy for this group, Vietnam veterans still end up victims of the mass produced images—they’re crazy, or sick; they are damaged goods. Thus, their testimony about what really happened is nullified.”36 Depicted as mentally deranged, violently emotional, or hysterical, the veteran is forced into silence, the mark of hysteria.37 The conclusion can, in many respects, be interpreted within the framework proposed by Stanley Cohen in his study of the British urban-youth subculture of the “Mods” and “Rockers” of the early sixties. “A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests,” a threat that Cohen terms a “moral panic.” As a result of the perceived threat, the media, functioning in support of the prevailing consensus, resorts to a demonization of those responsible, who thus become, in Cohen’s term, “folk devils.”38

The culture industries, of which the mainstream U.S. commercial cinema known as Hollywood is one, compete with other cultural or economic forces to establish a terrain upon which, and from which, they sell their products. To maximize profits, these industries customize their products to their perceptions and re-creations of the desires of spectators who consume or negotiate industrial cinema’s message with every film ticket purchased. The limits on political and experiential horizons referred to as hegemony intervenes by restricting the available ideological space, in effect reinforcing commonsense assumptions by limiting the number of choices open to the audience through the perpetual circulation of clichéd commercially viable genres, formulas, and images. Threats to this status quo in which Hollywood has so much invested are either marginalized or “situat[ed] within the dominant framework of meanings” by a process that involves labeling. To paraphrase British sociologist Dick Hebdige, the veterans as folk devils were “returned, as they are represented . . . to the place where common sense would have them fit” as “violent,” or “psychotic,” or both.39

By continuing to circulate derogatory stereotypes, the culture passed judgment on the veterans’ wartime experience: it was best forgotten, avoided, negated, or denigrated. This cultural attitude could have been summarized by the Vietnam-era soldier’s lament: “Don’t mean nuthin’.” If the veterans’ experience had any utility within the culture, it was restricted to serving as a pretext for psychosis or violence. However, a continuation of this process was, within the terms of common sense, not
without its problems. The negative depiction of the veteran ran contrary to the “personalist epistemology” that has a “venerable history” within American representations. Specifically, derogatory images of the veteran contradicted “the American myth that an individual’s experience must be significant.”40 The observation is extended through reference to Christopher Lasch’s outline of cultural trends within the seventies. The representational privileging of the veteran as psychotic figure contradicted the “therapeutic sensibility” and the cultural need for images of well-being mapped by Lasch.41 In this way what Lasch called the “culture of narcissism” provided a context for the “redemption” and rehabilitation of the Vietnam veteran leading to his representation in the service of certain cultural dispositions, particularly the need for unity. Through a process of renovation the veteran thus transcended the derogatory associations of the psychotic or sick figure. However, the veteran continued to be plagued by the lingering legacy of inarticulation, examples of which abound within textual representations of the Vietnam veteran.

“If I Only Had the Words”

In The Deer Hunter (1978) Cimino’s directorial style fails to invest his characters with anything other than a rudimentary level of expression. In one scene Linda (Meryl Streep) asks of Michael (Robert De Niro): “Did you ever think life would turn out like this?” Michael’s response is a perfect summation of his communicative abilities: an unelaborated “No.” Michael’s friends habitually rely on physical gestures such as backslapping or the use of expletives to express themselves—“fucking A” is the response by Axel (Chuck Aspergren) to most situations. Early in the film Steve’s mother (Shirley Stoller) had begged of the local priest: “I do not understand, Father. I understand nothing anymore. Can you explain? Can anyone explain?” It is plain that within the film’s context the question implies America’s failure to understand the essential question “Why are we in Vietnam?” Unfortunately, the question “Can anyone explain?” becomes rhetorical under Cimino’s direction. Exemplifying this situation, the prevalence of violence in American culture, elsewhere interpreted as one of the contributing factors for U.S. involvement in the war,42 is reduced within the film to a puerile piece of sophistry. Preceding a deer hunt Michael holds up a bullet and “explains” to his friends: “This is this.” The banal assertion unintentionally informs the spectator that Michael’s
understanding of violence and the role that it plays in his life is extremely limited. When Michael eventually renounces violence his only comment on this decisive action is, simply, “Okay.”

Just as the film fails to present any reasons for U.S. involvement in Vietnam, so too it evades the need to understand the war itself. The old woman’s question of the priest is repeated as the group of friends approach a returned Green Beret soldier at the wedding reception for Steve (John Savage) and Angela (Rutanya Alda). Michael’s questions “Well, what’s it like over there? Can you tell us anything?” are met with a terse “Fuck it!” The response points to “the major ideological problem of the film, Cimino can no more show Vietnam than the Green Beret can speak it.”43 Indeed the in-country segment of the film depicts the Vietnamese people, north and south alike, as devilishly Other, and the war as an inexplicable moral vacuum swallowing young Americans of good intentions.

One of the few references to the nature of the war, besides the implication that the South Vietnamese were not worthy allies, comes in the form of the metaphor of Russian roulette. The crucial scene in which despicably cruel North Vietnamese soldiers force American prisoners to “play” the game replicates, as H. Bruce Franklin points out, the “infamous historical sequence in which General Nguyen Ngoc Loan placed a revolver to the right temple of an NLF prisoner and killed him with a single shot.”44 The Deer Hunter manipulates this image to “reverse the roles of victim and victimizer.”45 The spurious nature of the metaphor is reinforced through the fact that the “game” is known as Russian roulette, an allusion that implicates broad geopolitical blocs within the Vietnam War in terms consistent with popular Cold War interpretations. As a comment on the war in Vietnam, the metaphor is lamentably inaccurate. The inadequacies of The Deer Hunter are further illustrated through reference to Cimino’s failure to invest his characters with any opportunity to speak. In the initial roulette scene and in the subsequent scenes of the game being played in Saigon, speaking, other than the hysterical shouts of those betting on the outcomes, is absent. As a result of the violence Nick (Christopher Walken) experiences at the hands of his captors, he is excused from further attempts at speech by retreating into virtual catatonia.

Released the same year as The Deer Hunter, the film Coming Home explicitly addresses itself to giving the veteran a voice—in fact the film opens with physically disabled veterans speaking of their attempts to come to terms with their situation. Issues that The Deer Hunter failed to raise concerning the meaning of the war are here referred to in the course of the
veterans’ conversation. One paraplegic veteran comments: “You got to justify [the war] to yourself, so that you say it’s okay. If you don’t do that the whole thing is a waste.” Pursuing this notion the film depicts various characters attempting to explain their wartime actions and seeking to address ways in which meaning can be retrieved from the experience of the war. On rest-and-recreation leave in Hong Kong, Bob (Bruce Dern) tells his wife, Sally (Jane Fonda): “I know what [the war is] like. I want to know what it is.” Unfortunately, Bob’s discoveries, if any, are not revealed. Later, when Sally receives a letter from Bob in Vietnam, Luke (Jon Voight) states: “Whatever he says, it’s a hundred times worse.” With this comment Luke expresses the position later popularized in representations of the veteran: “You had to be there.” “Being there” was, within a variety of textual representations, to become an integrally necessary component for complete understanding of the war. However, Luke’s response implies that despite his knowledge of war he is still incapable of communicating his understanding—and with this position the film comes perilously close to validating the suggestion “that the whole thing was a waste.”

Devoid of effective communicative skills, Luke would seem an unlikely candidate to teach others of the meaning of the war. Nevertheless, this is exactly what the final scene of the film has him do. Addressing a group of high-school seniors, Luke is reduced to tears as he states: “[War] ain’t like it is in the movies.” Ironically, in this scene the film exposes its own inability to explain the war or the impact of the war. The result is the inescapable conclusion: it ain’t like it is in Coming Home. In an overtly visual medium the picture of the weeping wounded veteran is meant to tell a thousand war stories. However, this picture inadvertently tells one story too many. The mise en scène of a weeping veteran in a wheelchair is intended to serve as a statement regarding the wounding impact of the war on U.S. culture. Yet another conclusion is available. The scene suggests that the experience of this particular war defies the veteran’s language. Try as he might to express his experience, he is capable only of tears. The veteran is reduced to silence; the war remains unintelligible.

This conclusion is inconsistent with a film that from the beginning seeks to retrieve meaning from the war and to voice certain concerns. At one point in the narrative, at a meeting of the Marine Wives Club, Sally attempts to persuade the group to focus attention on the plight of disabled veterans by including photographs of their circumstances in the base’s weekly newspaper. The widespread media denial or “silencing” of the veterans’ cause is alluded to here when the group rejects Sally’s pro-
posal. Contrary to its own intentions, *Coming Home* contributes to the exclusionary silencing of the veteran that is criticized in this scene.

Like Luke Martin, the Vietnam veteran Emmett Smith in Bobbie Ann Mason’s novel *In Country* (1987) is an unlikely teacher. Emmett’s enthusiastic seventeen-year-old student Samantha Hughes seeks to uncover information concerning her father, who died in Vietnam, and, by extension, to understand the war. However, Sam’s task is complicated by Emmett’s reluctance to speak and by his refusal to consider that Sam will understand what he has to say. Emmett’s stance is one that Mason criticizes elsewhere in her fiction. In Mason’s “Big Bertha Stories” (1990) the strained relationship between Donald, a Vietnam veteran, and his wife, Jeanette, is illustrated by Donald’s references to Vietnam, which Jeanette “didn’t want to hear about.” Pushed to her limit, Jeanette pleads, “[M]aybe I could understand if you’d let me.” Donald’s response, “You could never understand,” allows him to retreat once again into silence. Later Jeanette adds: “I think you act superior because you went to Vietnam, like nobody can ever know what you know.”46 The perspicacious comment cuts to the crux of Donald’s position and is reconstructed as the basis of Emmett’s response to Sam’s curiosity.

As with Jeanette, Sam is denied access to knowledge of the war because she is a woman. Emmett reinforces the gendered basis of exclusion when he adds: “Women weren’t over there . . . so they can’t understand.” Emmett summarizes his excommunicatory attitude when he admonishes Sam to “stop thinking about Vietnam. . . . You don’t know how it was, and you never will. There is no way you can ever understand. So just forget it. Unless you’ve been humping the boonies, you don’t know.” Refused access to the knowledge of the initiated, Sam seeks to recreate the experience of Vietnam by spending a night “in country” alone in a swamp near town. When Emmett finds her there the next morning, he merely repeats his earlier statements and in the process reinforces his own inability to offer Sam any assistance in her quest for understanding: “You think you can go through what we went through out in the jungle, but you can’t.”47 Emmett, like the veteran Travis Bickle of *Taxi Driver* (1976), imprisoned in and by his own inability to express himself, is unable to communicate on any level. It is not surprising, then, that Emmett can no longer maintain a relationship with his companion, Anita.

While the characters in *The Deer Hunter* let the words of “God Bless America” speak for them, the words of Bruce Springsteen’s ironic anthem “Born in the U.S.A.,” a song that provides the novel’s inscription and that
features throughout the text, speak to Sam of the veterans' predicament. Springsteen's song of the disillusionment and disappointment facing a Vietnam veteran suits Emmett's current situation: "You end up like a dog that's been beat too much / Till you spend half your life just covering up."48 "Covering up," literally and metaphorically, has become Emmett's chief preoccupation. Emmett spends much of his time digging a hole under the house, like "a foxhole to hide in" according to Sam.49

Emmett is not alone in this desire to hide from past experiences. The townspeople of the ironically named Hopewell also refuse to confront the past, and Sam's mother has moved away from town in an attempt to make a new life for herself, leaving behind the clothes and music records of her youth. Sadly, Sam's mother can "hardly even remember" her first husband, Sam's father.50 Sam's paternal grandparents possess a vague memory of their son, but they fail to confront the person he became in Vietnam. The clues to this identity are contained in his wartime diary, which they refuse to read. To a degree, the silence that surrounds the past is a result of this failure to confront the past. "You get the feeling," comments one reviewer of the novel, that the townspeople would tell Sam "if only they could remember."51 Alternatively, if they could tell her, they would remember. At fault for these characters is not their memory but their refusal or inability to talk. Memory suffers as speech, through which the collective memory is expressed, atrophies. Mason criticizes this situation by evoking the inane language of mass culture and its invasion of the thought and language of these characters. Language itself is impoverished, replaced by acronyms and brand names: MTV, FM, VA, TV, K-Mart, Dodge Dart, Coke, Burger Boy, Holiday Inn. The market culture is so intrusive that Emmett has named his pet cat after a commercial product: Moon Pie.

However, while Mason may be conscious of the impoverishment of language as a result of the commercialization of culture, her own prose also affects the characters' speech. The prose of the novel is pared to the level of a young adult novel. In one way, this characteristic is a reflection of Mason's ability to capture the language and thought of her young-adult heroine—however, all the characters and actions in this novel, written in the third person, are described in this language. The naïveté of the authorial voice is, for much of the novel, overdetermined; a problem not alleviated by Mason's recourse to the cliché that "veterans don't like to talk up their war experiences."52 The result is the representation of characters who suffer a triple victimization: they are victims of the war, of their
inability to adequately express themselves, and of the novel’s inadequate language. In his victimage Emmett reflects the verbal incapacities of Luke Martin (Jon Voight) and presages the experiences of Nick (William Hurt), the veteran character in _The Big Chill_ (1983), who is also unable to communicate effectively with those around him.

Like the other veterans described here, Nick is a failed instructor, though he had been an “on-air” radio psychologist, presumably able to communicate in a medium that demands eloquence. His background, however, is inconsistent with his present persona. The character lacks the ability to communicate; he is, in the vernacular, “off the air.” Throughout the film Nick is taciturn, alternatively silent, or expressing himself laconically. The friends gathered at the home of Harold and Sarah (Kevin Kline and Glenn Close), ostensibly to mourn the death of a friend, revel in an orgy of conversation. In contrast, Nick retreats to the seclusion of the living room and films a conversation he has _with himself_. Another scene contrasts the group of friends noisily watching a football game on television while, at the same time, Nick is alone at the hosts’ cabin listening, in silence, to the sound of bird calls. Elsewhere, Nick’s inarticulacy is underscored when, while watching late-night television (ironically, and cruelly, Nick is obsessed, it seems, with the communicative potential of the electronic media), he is interrupted by Sam (Tom Berenger), who asks him what he is watching. Nick answers: “I’m not sure.” When Sam asks, “What’s it about?” the reply is brief: “I don’t know.”

In Coppola’s film _Apocalypse Now_ (1979) a narcotized hippie photojournalist played by Dennis Hopper (of course!) laments his inability to represent “Vietnam” in images or language. “If I only had the words,” he rants in one scene. The inarticulacy of the character played by Hopper is emblematic of the veteran’s verbal abilities in a range of representations. Nevertheless, despite the prevalence of the practice of silencing the veteran in texts from the seventies and eighties, the simultaneous operation of certain cultural and critical trends indicates that the practice was not universal. In a variety of texts during this time a number of interrelated assumptions concerning representations of the war functioned to reconstruct the veteran, ostensibly, as a spokesperson centrally placed to interpret the war and its impact on the American domestic scene. That this “change” was merely apparent is illustrated by the fact that far from being able to comment on a range of topics, the veteran was restricted to speaking of the culturally necessary topic of union. In this way the construction of the veteran as a “spokesperson” served to overcome the dif-
difficulties associated with the earlier representation of the veteran in which he was consistently denigrated and denied a voice. At the same time the veteran’s articulacy offered an avenue for the promulgation of the homogenizing notion of unity.

A Unique War

The first step in the process that permitted the emergence of the veteran as a spokesperson or privileged interpreter was the circulation and wide acceptance of a definition of the war in Vietnam as a unique conflict. Definitions from a range of sources from the late seventies and early eighties attest to the popularity of this assumption. For example, Myra MacPherson included a chapter in her report Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation (1984) that describes Vietnam as “a different war.” In 1981 Lance Morrow, feature writer of Time magazine, stated: “Viet Nam was different from other wars. . . . There were no front lines. Reality tended to melt into layers of unknowability. The same person could be a friend and an enemy.” Similar comments on recent history came from various quarters. In a typical observation, made in 1980, one commentator preempted Time by arguing that the Vietnam War was unique in U.S. military history:

Soldiers who did enlist or submitted to the draft marched not toward linear objectives (“On to Berlin!”) but in circular, inconclusive patrols. Their goal was not the war’s end but the duration of three hundred and sixty-five days in the country. . . . Operations were conducted high on grass to the tune of transistorized rock and roll; barracks yielded to apartments or hooches with black light and stereo. Enemies blended with friendlies. There was no front, and no heroes’ welcome home for a job well done. Nothing from previous wars seemed to apply.

However, it was Michael Herr’s Dispatches and the almost universal critical acclaim that the book has received since its publication in 1977 that helped to circulate and make acceptable a definition of the war in Vietnam as unique. Herr’s frequent use of hyperbole evokes the impression that this war was unlike any other. In Herr’s terms casualties were “unbelievable,” and firefights focused “all the dread ever known, ever known by everyone who ever lived.” The terrain upon which the war was fought defied typography and normal expectations: the Vietnamese
highlands were “spooky, unbelievably spooky, spooky beyond belief.”\textsuperscript{57} Fredric Jameson argues that the “extraordinary linguistic and representational power” of \textit{Dispatches} exceeds that of previous representations of war. For Jameson, Herr “does not merely \textit{express} the nightmare of the Vietnam War, [he] substitutes a textual equivalent for it.”\textsuperscript{58} In Herr’s interpretation, the war in Vietnam was without precedent in its surreal, unnerving, and finally apocalyptic quality. The quality of uniqueness Herr found in the war was echoed in the Vietnam War novel \textit{No Bugles, No Drums} (1978) by Charles Durden in which the central character, Jamie Hawkins, comments: “Maybe everybody’s war is the worst. But I’m here to tell you . . . if the next one is any more fucked up than this one I don’t want to know nothin’ from nothin’.”\textsuperscript{59} Walter Capps reiterated the common perception of the war as unique when he wrote that “the Vietnam War did not mean what other wars meant.”\textsuperscript{60}

It is notable that the assertion of the uniqueness of the war in Vietnam ignores the many parallels that can be drawn between the conflict and earlier wars. The Vietnam author Tim O’Brien elaborated this perception when he commented that “it’s very nice and easy to say that Vietnam was special because it was formless and absurd. But certainly World War I must’ve seemed equally chaotic and absurd to Siegfried Sassoon or Robert Graves or Rupert Brooke or Erich Remarque.”\textsuperscript{61} O’Brien reinforced this position in his novel \textit{Going After Cacciato} (1980) in which two characters, Doc and Captain Rhallon, discuss whether the war in Vietnam was different from other wars fought by Americans.\textsuperscript{62} Although both sides of the argument are presented, O’Brien agrees that he gives Doc’s side more credence. Doc’s position, O’Brien argues, is that “war kills and maims and rips up the land and makes orphans and widows. These are the things of war. . . . I’m saying that the feel of war is the same in Nam or Okinawa—the emotions are the same, the same fundamental stuff is remembered.”\textsuperscript{63}

Despite their cogency, comparisons such as O’Brien’s, based on the experience of combat, have not dispelled assertions of the singularity of Vietnam. Many claims of the uniqueness of the “Vietnam experience” ignore combat conditions and are based on references to exceptional levels of discrimination faced by soldiers returning to the United States from Vietnam. While simple comparisons demonstrate the sad reality that the veterans of \textit{all} wars are treated badly,\textsuperscript{64} the absence of such comparisons favored the continual assertion that the war in Vietnam was unique. Those who sought to define what they saw as the exceptional qualities of
the conflict resorted to referring to it as a war to end all modern wars: a postmodern war.

Early in the war Norman Mailer referred (in a statement that has since been commonly cited) to what he perceived as the different—postmodern—basis of the war. “If World War II was like Catch–22, this war will be like Naked Lunch. Lazy Dogs, and bombing raids from Guam. Marines with flame throwers. Jungle gotch in the gonorrhea and South Vietnamese girls doing the Frug. South Vietnamese fighter pilots ‘dressed in black flying suits and lavender scarves’ (The New York Times).”65 The experiential uniqueness of the Vietnam War was, for Mailer, summarizable in a shift in literary forms—from Catch 22 to Naked Lunch. Mailer’s assumption that this unique war demanded forms of representation capable of depicting its alleged exceptional qualities became widespread in critical and textual circles and is clearly evident within Herr’s Dispatches.66 Herr argued that conventional written histories were incapable of adequately representing this war. He decried “traditional historical analysis” as “[s]traight history, auto-revised history, history without handles” in which “something wasn’t even answered, it wasn’t even asked. . . .” According to Herr, the bankruptcy of “straight history” demanded fictive techniques capable of unlocking the “secret history”67 to reveal the truth.

The encoding of such critical assumptions within Dispatches placed it centrally within the field of texts referred to as the “new journalism.” Mailer’s account of the 1967 March on the Pentagon, The Armies of the Night (1968), reproduced the dominant suppositions of this style of journalism. Mailer argued that “an explanation of the mystery of the events at the Pentagon cannot be developed by the methods of history—only by the instincts of the novelist.” Therefore, although his “collective novel” is “written in the cloak of an historic style, and . . . scrupulous to the welter of a hundred confusing and opposed facts,” it “unashamedly enter[s] that world of strange lights and intuitive speculation which is the novel.” According to Mailer, a unique, inherently mysterious event requires a form of representation that mixes the techniques of traditional narrative history with what he calls “interior” history.68 Only by the fusion of “fact” and “fiction” is it possible to excavate the “truth” of the experience.

In keeping with Mailer’s technique, the war in Vietnam—widely considered to be unique—was commonly represented within “stories” that combined fact and fiction to reveal “truth.” Graham Greene, for example, opened The Quiet American (1955) with the ironic disclaimer that he
was not writing “history” but a “story.” Lederer and Burdick’s *The Ugly American* (1958) closed with a “Factual Epilogue” in which they argued that they had written “not just an angry dream, but rather the rendering of fact into fiction.” Robin Moore asserted that his book of nine stories, *The Green Berets* (1965), “blended fact and fiction” to produce “a book of truth.”[^69] Similarly, during the seventies and eighties “the fictional and quasi-fictional works of Phil Caputo, Tim O’Brien, C. D. B. Bryan, Frederick Downs, James Webb, Mark Baker, Al Santoli, John Del Vecchio, Anthony Grey, and Peter Goldman and Tony Fuller have all been prefaced by the same implicit or explicit rejection of ‘formal history.’”[^70] In each of these texts a central element reinforces the veracity of the representations. The feature is rarely articulated in criticisms of texts of the war, suggesting that the characteristic is taken for granted as common sense. The implicit element is summarized in the phrase “You had to be there.”

**You Had to Be There**

According to the assumption “You had to be there,” only those who experienced the war in Vietnam can legitimately lay claim to the truth of the conflict. This empiricist position is reflected in the fact that texts praised by critics as harboring the “real war” were typically, if not exclusively, written by authors who either participated in the war as soldiers or witnessed it firsthand as journalists. The emphasis on “being there,” then, delegitimates nonparticipant accounts of the war, no matter how authentic they may seem. There would be no *Red Badge of Courage* from Vietnam. Indeed the pervasiveness and tenacity of the assumption that “you had to be there” quite likely contributed to the fact that it wasn’t until 1989, with the publication of Susan Fromberg Schaeffer’s *Buffalo Afternoon*, that a novel dealing with the war by a nonparticipant was published to popular and critical acclaim.[^71] In another way the construction of participation as the guarantee of truth ignores and erases the limitations on knowledge encountered in Vietnam. Tim O’Brien has summarized the effect on the troops of these limitations in a passage from his book *Going After Cacciato* (1980) entitled “The Things They Did Not Know”:

They did not have targets. They did not have a cause. They did not know if it was a war of ideology or economics or hegemony or spite. . . . They did not know the names of villages. They did not know which villages were critical. They did not know strategies. They did not know the terms of war,
its architecture, the rules of fair play. When they took prisoners, which was rare, they did not know the questions to ask, whether to release a suspect or beat on him. They did not know how to feel. . . . They did not know good from evil.72

“As any Civil War historian will tell us,” notes one observer, a claim to comprehensibility and understanding based on personal participation “is not a particularly compelling argument.”73 Despite this admonition, literary texts and documentary films such as CBS’s *Christmas in Vietnam* (1965), and the independent productions *The Anderson Platoon* (1967) by Pierre Schoendorffer and *A Face of War* (1968) by Eugene Jones, privileged the “GI’s experience of the war . . . as the moment of authenticity and knowledge—of authenticity as knowledge—upon which the war can be evaluated and validated.”74 However, it was not only the GI who had access to this unmediated experience, as memoirs by “in-country” nurses and volunteers suggest. Kathryn Marshall, for example, argues that the stories told by women nurses and volunteers who served in Vietnam produce a sense of “the real.”75

Similarly, Michael Herr proposes that as a participant journalist he “experienced” the war and witnessed its essential truth. Only by being there, and keeping your eyes open, would the mysteries of the conflict be revealed. Speech was incapable of this task. Herr describes Vietnam as a place where speech was absent, abandoned on entry into the country: “The departing and arriving [troops] passed one another without a single word being spoken.”76 Herr reflects on the poverty of speech when he observes that “sometimes an especially smart grunt or another correspondent would . . . ask me what I was really doing there, as though I could say anything honest about it. . . .” He characterizes the talk of reasons for “being there” as “overripe bullshit.” His reason for being in Vietnam was simple: he was there “to watch.”77 The emphasis throughout *Dispatches* on eyes and seeing reinforces the notion that the war had to be seen for oneself. Nevertheless, as Herr contends, it was possible to see “far too much.” The result, madness, is, ironically, reflected in a person’s eyes. As one soldier states, referring to a “crazy” soldier in his squad, “All’s you got to do is look in his eyes, that’s the whole fucking story right there.” Herr notes that the eyes of the marines at Khe Sanh “were always either strained or blazed-out or simply blank, they never had anything to do with what the rest of the face was doing, and it gave everyone the look of extreme fatigue or even a glancing madness.”78 During the battle for the
citadel at Hue, “[a] little boy of about ten came up to a bunch of Marines. . . . He was laughing, and moving his head from side to side in a funny way. The fierceness in his eyes should have told everyone what it was, but it had never occurred to most of the grunts that a Vietnamese child could be driven mad too.”  

The dangers associated with seeing too much leave Herr with an ambivalent attitude: “[Y]ou want to look and you don’t want to look.” Herr’s ambivalence forces him to detail the problems of bearing witness:

I went [to Vietnam] behind the crude but serious belief that you had to be able to look at anything, serious because I acted on it and went, crude because I didn’t know, it took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did. The problem was that you didn’t always know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later, that a lot of it never made it in at all, it just stayed stored there in your eyes.

For Herr, part of the knowledge derivable from “having been there” is that what is seen can never be articulated—“it just stayed stored there in the eyes,” a perception that reinforces the suggestion that only those who participated and witnessed the war can fully understand an experience that is otherwise untranslatable.

The film The Green Berets (1968) initiated the basic assumption, raising it to the level of an imperative, that only those who were “there” can hope to understand the truth the war was capable of revealing. Confronted by a journalist (David Janssen) skeptical of the value of American involvement in Vietnam, a Green Beret colonel (John Wayne) asks: “Have you ever been to Southeast Asia?” When the journalist responds that he hasn’t, the colonel ends the discussion and walks away in disgust. With this exchange the film unproblematically insists that only those who have experienced the war can judge it or speak of it. The point becomes explicit when the colonel states: “It’s pretty hard to talk to anyone about [the war] till they’ve come over and seen it.” The colonel’s position returns him, the journalist, and the audience to silence. The problem is reproduced in John Ketwig’s memoir . . . And a Hard Rain Fell (1985) in the statements “If you were there, you’ll know. If you weren’t you never will,” and “The strangest things happened [in Vietnam], and everybody just sort of shuffled by and accepted it, you can’t explain it to someone who wasn’t there.”

William Broyles, Jr., reinforced this conclusion in his account of a trip
to postwar Vietnam. Broyles deduced from his visit “that I had more in common with my old enemies than with anyone except the men who had fought at my side. My enemies and I had something almost beyond words.”82 The function of the exclusion, as Susan Jeffords has observed, “aligns [Broyles] with all men who fought in battle, for whatever side, against all those who took the ‘part of staying behind.’”83 Within this position those who weren’t there are the real enemy—they weren’t there, they’ll never know, and they should thus remain silent. Philip Caputo, author of the Vietnam memoir *A Rumor of War* (1978), upheld this perception when he stated: “I feel . . . the only people who have a right to say anything against the war . . . were the ones who were there.”84 The strategy of delegitimizing oppositional voices through recourse to “being there” is evident within a number of texts.

In the revisionist film *Hamburger Hill* (1987), for example, the peace movement is consistently criticized for holding what are in the film’s terms, ill-informed opinions. However, the strategy of denigration was most clearly enunciated by the character of John Rambo within the film *First Blood* (1982). Rambo’s virulent outburst against the demonstrators at the airport on his return to the United States after the war is explicit: “Who are they unless they’ve been me and been there and know what the hell they’re yelling about?” The exclusionary emphasis here would not only deny antiwar opposition; the outcome of the position is to lose “sight of every individual’s responsibility to pursue their own, albeit informed, opinion on ethical and moral issues: perplexity and timidity are encouraged.”85 To resist or abandon the emphasis on “being there” is, therefore, the first step in the emergence of an effective, politically astute voice for the veteran. Indeed, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a site that “speaks” to many veterans of the experience of the war and that encodes a variety of political perspectives, was designed by a nonparticipant in the war, Maya Lin. The practical outcome of Lin’s simple admission—“I don’t think you have to live through a trauma to understand it”86—effectively subverts and revises the strategy of denigrating antiwar protest implicit within an emphasis on participation in the war as the basis of a right to pass judgment on the conflict.

The critical force of Lin’s position is, however, eroded within the continual assertion of variations of the supposition “You had to be there”. Throughout the literature of the Vietnam War the narrating of “war stories,” the vehicle of truth according to participants in the war and Vietnam authors and their critics, functions to extend the emphasis on being
there as an epistemological necessity. Herr recounts a war story he heard in Vietnam that encapsulates a truth that only those who were there can understand:

“Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened.”

I waited for the rest, but it seemed not to be that kind of story; when I asked him what had happened he just looked like he felt sorry for me, fucked if he’d waste time telling stories to anyone as dumb as I was.87

The simplicity of the story is repeated in the shortest of all war stories, the line “There it is,” which is deemed to contain a truth so patent that explanation is unnecessary. In this case, as Philip Beidler has pointed out in relation to another war story, “A lesson, a message, a truth, in sum, could come off as so simple that it seemed a kind of Orphic movement to the very fulcrum of reality.”88 Stories heard in war and the narrating of war stories in forms that conflate fact and fiction have traditionally informed accounts of war. The process that Vietnam author Stephen Wright describes as the transformation of “crude fact” into an “imaginative truth” is pronounced in narratives of World War I.89 Robert Graves had summarized this process when he wrote that “the memoirs of a man who went through some of the worst experiences of trench warfare are not truthful if they do not contain a high proportion of falsities.”90

Obvious traces of this literary tradition are exposed in narratives of the Vietnam War, notably in the nonfiction and fictional work of Tim O’Brien, who cunningly manipulates Walt Whitman’s ironic suggestion that the true story of a war is never told by anyone who was there. O’Brien’s contradictions of authenticity, inauthenticity, fact and fiction, truth and lies expose the basis of all “war stories.” In his memoir If I Die in a Combat Zone (1980), O’Brien asks, “Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely by having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories.”91 In Going After Cacciato, after listing the things that U.S. soldiers in Vietnam “did not know,” O’Brien concludes that these features would not be included in war stories since “uncertainties [were] never articulated in war stories.”92 On one level, O’Brien subverts the notion that participation in the war is a requirement of knowledge (there were many things the soldiers did not know). On another level, participation provides the experiences that form the raw materials that are reconfigured into the essential truths of a war story. O’Brien details the necessity of participation and the transformation of knowledge into
truth in the chapter “How To Tell a True War Story” from his book *The Things They Carried* (1991). Throughout the chapter O’Brien states variations of the conclusion that “[i]n war you lose sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it’s safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true.” The point of such assertions resides in Whitman’s emphasis on experience as the basis of authenticity and knowledge: “I am the man, I suffer’d, I was there.”

William Broyles, Jr., concurs. In an article with the notorious title “Why Men Love War,” he argues that the purpose of a war story “is not to enlighten but to put the listener in his place.” That the teller of the tale participated in the war and that the listener did not are the only facts that matter. “Everything else is beyond words to tell.” Broyles’s emphasis on war stories as lies, but lies that “have a moral, even a mythic, truth, rather than a literal one” was disputed by Harry Maurer in the introduction to his book *Strange Ground: An Oral History of Americans in Vietnam, 1945–1975* (1990). Maurer sought to “keep his bullshit detectors out” and to include in his volume only those accounts he perceived as factual. His aim was to “minimize the mythic truth and stay close to what happened.” The effect of Maurer’s claim that oral testimony would replace the “mythic truth” with fact—the undisputed truth—privileged the large number of oral accounts of the war and formed the basis of the veterans’ legitimate right to speak of the reality and, in particular, the truth of the “Vietnam experience.”

In his analysis of the “special privilege” accorded the author function within oral histories of the war, John Carlos Rowe comments that “the author’s credibility is generally established both by his direct experience of the War and his criticism of American conduct in the War. These credentials are generally supported by the popular American mythology of the ‘author’ as a ‘free agent,’ who assumes full responsibility for his statements and intentions.” The sense of responsibility that Rowe points to is explicit in Maurer’s insistence that by asking the contributors to *Strange Ground* “to in effect sign their names to what they said” he would lessen the likelihood of invention and assumption passing as truth. In the preface to *Vietnam: The Heartland Remembers* (1989), an oral history of Oklahomans who served in Vietnam, Stanley Beesley claims the status of a free agent, and accepted the responsibility it involves when he states: “No commission appointed me. No governmental agencies nominated me. No organizations asked me to represent them. No foundations financed the project. No groups bankrolled the book.”
Implicit within this statement is the suggestion that editorial decisions were not tainted or influenced by the pressures of partisan sponsorship. Beesley reinforces this position when he asserts: “No single political bent is represented within. I resisted attempts to flavor the book with dogma.”

Such assurances function to reinforce the authority of Beesley’s text by suggesting that the project provides virtually unmediated access to veracious accounts of the war and the home front scene. Contrary to the implicit assurances of editorial noninterference, however, the four parts to Beesley’s work—beginning with the process of volunteering, through descriptions of the war, and impressions of what is defined as an alien and threatening countryside, to the final section, “Getting Home”—reflect a structure common to many oral histories of the war. The pattern of Beesley’s text mirrors, for example, Mark Baker’s *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There* (1982), which, as Rowe notes, “follows precisely the recognizable features of what literary critics term the Bildungsroman, or ‘novel of education.’” Baker organizes the contents of his work “under the following large headings: INITIATION, OPERATIONS, WAR STORIES, THE WORLD. [The] paradigm is that of mythic heroism, in which the hero undergoes a process of ‘initiation’ by means of struggle and heroic contest.” The result is that the hero “returns from his spiritual and physical ordeal to ‘the world’ having achieved his identity as hero and subsequently realizing that identity more fully in the deeds he performs back in the world: lifting the plague, solving the riddle, restoring social order.”

Accompanying the realization of this new identity is the depoliticization of the veteran’s voice. For example, despite Beesley’s insistence on editorial nonpartisanship, he admits that he had planned “to include a draft dodger [the refusal to specify draft resistance is common], but I couldn’t find the heart for it. Not in a book from the point of view of those who went.” Having “gone” leaves no room, it seems, for oppositional moral or political stances. Al Santoli reinforces this conclusion when, in his editorial preface to *Everything We Had* (1982), a work he claims to be the first oral history of the war in Vietnam, he states: “The American people have never heard in depth from the soldiers themselves the complicated psychic and physical realities of what they went through in Vietnam.” Santoli’s humanism elides the political through an emphasis upon the “psychic and physical.” Politics, the expression of power relationships between people, is displaced within a focus that presents history
at the level of individual actions. This depoliticized voice becomes part of
the veteran’s new identity, which, as Rowe points out, is achieved through
the act of restoring and renovating a social order disrupted and divided
by the war. In this way the essential truth alluded to in these texts is be-
yond politics; it is a transcendental, unifying truth. Specifically, as the fol-
lowing discussion elaborates, it is the truth of unity.

Teaching the Truth

The assertion of unity—of the reality and truth of unity—was especially
pronounced in the early and mid-eighties. The articulation of this truth
by the Vietnam veteran positioned him as the bearer of an essential and
immutable characteristic of culture. The recuperative power of this mes-
sage for the veteran was tremendous. Represented as the embodiment of
the notion of incorporation, the veteran was no longer an outsider. The
veteran had arrived at this position through the operation of a series of
interrelated cultural assumptions beginning with the notion that Vietnam
was a unique war. These aspects of common sense and, more important,
the uses to which they were put are exemplified in Walter Capps’s The
Unfinished War (1982 and 1990). Capps begins from the position that
the war was unique,104 and as a result he considers a focus on the veteran
the best way to interpret the exceptional conflict. In chapter 5, “The
Combatants,” the narrative is donated to lengthy quotations from veter-
ans. Capps believes that it is within “[t]he autobiographical literature”
that “the story of the war in Vietnam is being told.”105 He stresses the
“disillusionment and ambivalence” felt by the soldiers in Vietnam, which
increased on their return to the United States.106 It is here that Capps’s
own comments and those of the people he chooses to quote revert to an
earlier stereotype: the veteran as victim.

Introducing this theme, Capps asserts that returning veterans met the
“spittle of the anti-war protesters lining their pathway,”107 which is a
story found in a number of sources concerned with documenting veter-
ans’ experiences. For example, Bob Greene organizes his book Home-
coming: When the Soldiers Returned from Vietnam (1989) into sections
that include the titles: “Yes, it did happen. . . . It happened to me” and “I
was never spat upon.”108 The prevalence of references to this experience
may prove the validity of the claim. However, the prominence of the as-
sertion also betrays the position of authors who choose to deny veterans
any form of agency that would allow them, metaphorically, to “spit” back. In Capps’s text there is no mention of antiwar veterans, and antiwar protestors are the rabble that met the returning soldiers with “jeers, taunts, tomatoes, and spittle”—a characterization that comes very close to Rambo’s verbal assault on the “maggots at the airport, protesting me, calling me all kinds of vile crap.” Capps also avoids any mention of struggle or protest within the army: “fragging,” desertion, and acts of disobedience and non-compliance are all absent.

Having defined the veteran as victim, Capps is able to assume that the veteran has firsthand knowledge of anguish and hurt. As a result of this knowledge, the veteran, according to Capps, was uniquely positioned to interpret the postwar confrontation with suffering: the situation referred to as healing. Capps combines the separate experiences of individual veterans into a narrative supportive of the need for healing. Here the figure of the veteran, constructed from many individuals to be a representative of universal human experience, contradicts the historical reality of the veterans’ variegated voices. No sooner had the veteran put down one of “the heaviest burdens of the war,” in Capps’s words, than he was asked to shoulder the weight of leading American society through the task of reunification. Capps’s suggestion that “the [national] collective healing process must follow a similar course” to the “acts of confession” that are “taking place daily” in the centers of the national Veterans’ Outreach program positions Vietnam veterans as leaders of a form of cultural catharsis leading to national unification. From a battered victim suffering “shock,” “disorientation,” and especially, “disillusionment,” the veteran of the war in Vietnam becomes a model for confessional practices capable of revealing the truth of unity.

The emphasis on the transformation of the veteran into an authentic spokesperson articulating cultural unity is especially pronounced in Oliver Stone’s Platoon (1986), a film that relies on realistic effects to ensure the experiential truth of the message articulated by the central character, Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen). The critical reaction to the film supported the perception that, at last, the “real story” of the Vietnam War had been told, and reviewers frequently mentioned Stone’s war experience as a crucial element in approving the film’s realism. This aspect of Stone’s autobiography was exploited in the narrative image of the film—indications of a film’s story, its stars, and its director circulated to a potential audience by means of promotional material and reviews—
which included a print advertisement featuring photographs of Stone on duty in Vietnam.

Such extratextual claims to authenticity are supported within the film by the conceit that fiction can be true only if it recreates experience in minute detail. In an attempt to ensure the self-evidentiary aspects of filmic reality, Stone recreates the “things-as-they-really-are” style of documentary films. The audience of documentary film tends to presume “a privileged status for the indexical link between sign and referent” within the documentary text. Documentary claims the status of direct observation; to reproduce, rather than represent, “the facts.” The documentary film staple of talking heads, direct address by authoritative figures through interview procedures (or, figures whose authority is validated by the documentary form), supports the notion that documentary films have a pedagogical purpose. Reinforcing this notion, Chris Taylor’s voice-over narration, meant to represent the contents of letters he writes to his grandmother, approximates the omniscient instructional voice-of-God narration of many documentary films. Further, the frequent exchanges between Barnes (Tom Berenger) and Elias (Willem Dafoe) equate to the process of interviews in certain documentary films. The replication of documentary interview techniques is, however, most pronounced in a confrontation in a bunker frequented by the platoon’s doper “heads” in which Barnes indirectly asks Elias a series of questions focusing on the central issue of “Who do you think you are?”

The camera work of Platoon also replicates the methods and techniques of certain forms of documentary film. Use of hand-held cameras in jungle scenes, replete with leaves flapping against the lens on jungle patrols, and a shaking frame following explosions, evokes a style of documentary filmmaking initiated with cinema vérité and direct cinema. However, Platoon surpasses the documentary style through the employment of the shot/reverse shot camera technique: a method in which a second shot traces the field from which an establishing shot is assumed to have been taken. The powerful effect of this technique is to present “reality” in an apparently unmediated way. The camera’s presence is effaced from the screen as the spectator is presented with a three-hundred-sixty-degree field of vision as opposed to the more common one-hundred-eighty-degree plane of sight. Stone employs the technique on at least one occasion in a scene depicting the platoon’s search for enemy bunkers hidden in the jungle.
In an attempt to ensure realism in all aspects of his film, Stone employed Captain Dale Dye, retired, a Vietnam veteran, and the services of his film consultancy company “Warriors Inc.” to work in association with his directorial team. In preparation for the film, Dye led the actors through a training course in the jungle of the Philippines. “In Stone,” asserted _Time_ magazine, “Dye found a kindred spirit who wanted _Platoon_’s actors to experience the fatigue, frayed nerves and fear that preyed on the Viet Nam infantryman and to understand the casual brutality that often emerged.” According to _Time_, Dye’s consultancy resulted in “the authenticity of every detail, from Barnes’ wicked dagger (‘Worn upside-down for quicker killing,’ Dye explains) to the proper use of white plastic C-ration spoons.” During his Oscar-acceptance speech for _Platoon_, Stone stated: “I think that what you’re saying [through the presentation of the award] is that for the first time you really understand what happened over there.” Only after watching his film could audiences understand what “really” occurred in Vietnam.

The services of Warriors Inc. were also called upon by director Patrick Duncan to aid the production of his film _84 Charlie Mopic_ (1989), which, like _Platoon_, seeks to efface its own fictionality by presenting itself as a documentary. The film concerns a U.S. reconnaissance unit in Vietnam on a patrol accompanied by a cameraman who is filming the actions of the unit for an army training film. Notably, Duncan’s film erases the distance between spectator and object maintained in Coppola’s _Apocalypse Now_ and Kubrick’s _Full Metal Jacket_. In _Apocalypse Now_ a news camera team, which includes Coppola in an acting role, films soldiers during a battle; in _Full Metal Jacket_ Kubrick includes a scene in which a film crew interviews his principal characters. The effect of these scenes is to intrude upon the spectator’s suspension of disbelief, distancing the spectator from the object and thus relieving the spectator, briefly, from his or her positioning as subject. In this way the acceptance of the world of the film as commonsensical, real, taken for granted is disrupted by self-reflexive moments that function to fulfill the call of the Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky in “‘making strange’ the world.” In contrast, _84 Charlie Mopic_ returns the spectator to the position of subject of the powerful ideology of realism through the elimination of traces of its own textuality.

One reviewer of _84 Charlie Mopic_ asked: “Why did we need a fictional re-creation of a Vietnam documentary? The genuine articles exist.” Such a comment overlooks the place of this film, and others like _Platoon_, within the movement toward capturing the “real truth” of the experience.
of the war in Vietnam. According to the assumptions already outlined, texts that re-create the “secret history” of the war have “more to say,” that is, they are supposedly capable of teaching us more, than documentary texts that present “straight” historical accounts. Given this assumption, the conflation of documentary and fictional styles produces texts such as 84 Charlie Mopic and Platoon, which authoritatively and truthfully present the lessons of the war. Duncan, like Stone, sustained this assumption through reference to the fact that he is a Vietnam veteran. “I was in [the war], I felt it from the inside, and I express it from within,” Duncan asserted. Duncan’s emphasis on factual and truthful instruction (which is supported diagnostically—the film being made in 84 Charlie Mopic is an instructional film) is reinforced in Platoon’s presentation of the veteran as a teacher of the lessons of war.

In the introduction to the published film script of Platoon Stone underlined the fact that there are many truths of the Vietnam War but maintained the existence of an overriding truth—his own. Stone commented that he wrote the film script “as straight as I could remember it,” asserting that, as a result, he had captured the truth of the war. During the filming, he hoped that he would not fail the veterans who had admonished him “not to ruin their dreams that the truth be told.” The truth articulated within Platoon is summarized in Taylor’s final voice-over soliloquy in which he observes that “we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves.” The comment is repeated in various forms throughout the discourse of “Vietnam,” its continual repetition pointing to something that lies deep within the culture beyond the ethnocentrism encoded within the remark. Taylor’s statement rewrites the Russian roulette scenes of The Deer Hunter in which Americans are depicted as the victims of the North Vietnamese, to suggest self-victimization: the war becomes “something that Americans did to themselves.” In Platoon the allusion to suicidal tendencies within Taylor’s comment intersected with the notion of a fratricidal malaise (Americans fighting one another) to reinforce the conclusion that it was morally wrong for Americans to fight themselves and that such a “civil war” should not recur.

Taylor’s most engaging words, however, concern his desire “to teach to others what we know and to try to find a goodness and meaning to this life.” Here in a documentary form that the audience expects to be instructive Stone delivers Platoon’s ultimate lesson: that it is imperative that the veteran become a teacher and guide to unity on the home front. Chris Taylor must return to impart the knowledge (the truth) that he has
learned in Vietnam: that Americans should not fight among themselves, that unity and consensus must be maintained. The veteran had not only found a voice, he was virtually condemned to speak of unity.

The Voice of Unity

The construction of the veteran as spokesperson points to the changes that the representation of the veteran had undergone in a relatively short space of time. At the end of Coming Home the veteran fails to teach the lesson of “Vietnam.” In Platoon, released only eight years later, the veteran is clearly defined in a teaching role and is unequivocal in the nature of the lesson to be taught. The end of Platoon’s lesson came in Oliver Stone’s subsequent representation of the impact of the war, Born on the Fourth of July (1989), in which the wounded veteran Ron Kovic (Tom Cruise) is especially vociferous. Kovic’s wound needs to be healed and since the VA and medical science cannot help, he turns to frequent tirades against the war and his predicament. In a manner different from, but seeking the same effect as, the psychoanalytic technique by the same name, Kovic’s solution is a talking cure. In this way the Kovic character in Born on the Fourth of July represents the end of the various maneuvers involved in the construction of the articulate veteran. As a result, it is not surprising to note that earlier attempts to produce the film proved unsuccessful. The construction of the veteran as a vocal figure was a process spanning two decades. By the time Born on the Fourth of July was eventually produced, the veteran had already been endowed with a voice that he was able to fully employ in his role of teaching the truth of unity.

The construction of a definition of the Vietnam veteran as one who teaches the lesson of unity was discursively reinforced and expanded within a number of speeches made by President Reagan during the eighties. On Veterans Day 1988 during a ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Reagan spoke of the Vietnam veteran as someone who can offer “a lesson in living love.” In this the veteran becomes an exemplar of camaraderie, patriarchy and, finally, patriotism. “Yes, for all of them, those who came back and those who did not, their love for their families lives. Their love for their buddies on the battlefields and friends back home lives. Their love of their country lives.” According to Reagan, the veteran was also a figure capable of healing: “Perhaps we are finding . . . new strength today, and if so, much of it comes from the forgiveness and
healing love that our Vietnam veterans have shown.” Like Capps and Stone, Reagan saw in the “healing” actions of the veteran a prototype for national reconciliation, and it was through this task that he continued to valorize the veteran.

The rhetoric in Reagan’s 1988 speech echoed the content of a speech he delivered on October 27, 1983, in which he attempted to defend American foreign policy against criticisms stemming from America’s invasion of Grenada and the terrorist bombing of a U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. Although the 1983 speech makes no reference to Vietnam veterans, and indeed is aimed at veterans of present and future wars, it nevertheless provides a perspective on situations affecting the Vietnam veteran. Speaking of the Marine Corps, Reagan stated that its members “have all been faithful to their ideals. They have given willingly of themselves. . . . They have given every one of us something to live up to.” He added that “[t]hey were not afraid to stand up for their country or . . . to give others that last best hope of a better future.” Throughout the speech the U.S. soldier is clearly constructed as a role model. Reagan had earlier represented the Vietnam veteran as such a figure when, in August 1980, as a presidential candidate, he first referred to the war in Vietnam as a “noble cause,” thereby implying that those who fought for this cause were also valorous.

The valorization of the Vietnam veteran intersected with, and contributed toward, the textual construction of the Vietnam veteran as a privileged spokesperson and was facilitated by a number of planned events, the first of which took place on November 13, 1982, with the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. The dedication coincided with the National Salute to Vietnam Veterans, which involved a reading of the names of the Vietnam War dead in the National Cathedral and a parade of 150,000 veterans led by none other than William Westmoreland. Additional noteworthy events followed in 1984 when, on Memorial Day, the remains of an unidentified American who died in Vietnam were interred in the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery. On Veterans Day of the same year Reagan dedicated the statue of three fighting men that stands near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. On the same day, in the presence of 150,000 people, he officially accepted the memorial on behalf of the nation, focusing a new round of media attention on what has since become the most visited site in Washington, D.C. The acceptance climaxed a weeklong series of commemorative events called “Salute Two,” named after the inaugural
“salute” to the Vietnam veteran. In the spring of 1985 a number of “welcome home” parades, beginning with New York City’s parade (May 7), were held nationally to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the end of the war. In May 1987 a “Thankyou Vietnam Veterans” parade was held in Los Angeles. In 1989, according to one source, 143 memorials to the war in Vietnam and its veterans had been built or were under construction within the United States.\(^\text{127}\)

By themselves such incidents and circumstances would not have fully accomplished the widespread and almost universally accepted valorization of the veteran that contributed to promoting what Reagan called the new morning that had come to America.\(^\text{128}\) The growth and spread of a militarized culture created a situation in which the veteran spoke regularly from within mass-media texts of a nation that had strengthened itself militarily and morally. War toys, magazines such as Soldier of Fortune, a number of television programs, including Magnum, P.I. (which premiered in 1980) and The A-Team (1983), together with action-adventure books with militaristic themes contributed to this end. Abetting the (re)militarization of culture, a number of films, including Private Benjamin (1980), Stripes (1981), Taps (1981), An Officer and a Gentleman (1982), Lords of Discipline (1983), Heartbreak Ridge (1986), and Top Gun (1986), attempted “to restore the army to its pre-Vietnam credit and, in certain instances, to reintegrate it with a lost patriotic vision of the United States.”\(^\text{129}\) Indeed, the construction of the veteran as hero involved placing him within this recuperated patriotic vision.

This vision was given impetus with the outpouring of patriotic rhetoric that accompanied Reagan’s election to the presidency in 1980 and the return of the hostages from Iran. In his first Inaugural Address (January 20, 1981) the new president summoned Americans to “begin an era of national renewal,” which would be accomplished because “after all..., [w]e are Americans.”\(^\text{130}\) A “new national mood” of “We’re Number One” prevailed throughout America. The mood continued through 1984 when Reagan’s reelection campaign used the theme “America Is Back,” and American spectators at the Olympic Games in Los Angeles that year echoed the patriotic enthusiasm of the election slogan in the chant “USA! USA!” in response to the feats of American competitors. The renewed chauvinist spirit was reflected and strengthened in part through the advertising industry. In 1985 the Chrysler Plymouth corporation, for example, employed the slogan “The Pride is Back” (with its echoes of Reagan’s “America is Back”) and “Born in America” (an appropriation of the title...
of Springsteen’s song “Born in the U.S.A.”) to advertise its product. The patriotic vision was further enhanced by the 1986 centennial celebrations for the refurbished Statue of Liberty. The outpouring of patriotism continued in a less hysterical form the following year with the bicentennial celebrations of the U.S. Constitution.

In his sixth State of the Union Address (February 4, 1986), Reagan declared the existence of “a rising America—firm of heart, united in spirit, powerful in pride and patriotism.” Within this vision the veteran was once again called into active service and this time, according to the dominant representations, he answered the call willingly committed to patriotic principles. It was through this commitment that the Vietnam veteran emerged a hero and took his place alongside other American heroes. In this relation, Lawrence Grossberg has argued that the essential defining characteristic of a number of contemporary “postmodern Hero[es]”—including Rambo, Oliver North, and Sonny Crockett, all Vietnam veterans—is that the figures are committed. “Apart from the absoluteness of their commitment, they appear to be not very different from the rest of us and more importantly they are no different than the bad guys.” What makes them the “good guy[s], what makes [them] better, is, in the end . . . precisely because [their] commitment is absolute and it is to America.”

Significantly, Reagan frequently apostrophized the “extraordinary ‘ordinary Americans’” as America’s real heroes, defining them as such through their unwavering patriotism. Reagan pointed to the veterans’ patriotism in a speech delivered on Memorial Day 1984 at the Tomb of the Unknowns when he redefined an American hero, the Vietnam veteran, as one who embodies both “courage” and “the spirit, the soul of America.” Similarly, his 1984 Veterans Day speech contained as many references to the Vietnam veterans’ loyalty as to their courage. Throughout this speech, appropriately delivered at the national Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Reagan made frequent mention of the desire for a healed America, a nation that “in the end [is] stronger than . . . if it had not been broken.” According to Reagan, a healed (united) America derived from courage and loyalty. Similarly, the veteran was healed, and heroized, when his voice, body, and actions aligned to articulate loyalty and courage.

The most obvious mass media expression of such a definition is the character of John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) in Rambo: First Blood, Part II. The “spirit, the soul of America” that Reagan spoke of in 1984 became muscle-bound flesh the next year in the form of a character whom the advertisements for the film referred to as a “symbol of the
American spirit.” Rambo’s patriotism is as well defined as his gleaming deltoid and pectoral muscles. Admonished not to hate his country, Rambo responds: “Hate it! I’d die for it!” In the film’s Reaganite rhetoric the patriot is the real hero, and the definition rests as much upon his willingness for self-sacrifice as upon the distinction the film makes between “country” and “government”: the hero performs his duty in the name of his country, whereas he may be abused and betrayed by its bureaucratic officials.

The irony of Rambo is that it is a film in which the central character reverts to an earlier stereotype—he is virtually inarticulate. However, during a well-timed oration at the end of the film Rambo is permitted to “speak volumes for the Voiceless vet.” Having returned with the prisoners of war, having thus contributed to the maintenance of American unity, Rambo’s final words concern the veteran: “All they want, and every guy who fought in Vietnam wants, is for our country to love us as much as we love it.” Such love would thus seal the patriotic pact, validate the words of the sound track’s song, “The strength of our nation belongs to us,” bring the veteran home once and for all, and put a seal on the union of American society that had consistently been sought through the figure of the veteran. Officialdom pronounced its desired end on Veterans Day 1988 when Reagan’s cloying sentiments praised the Vietnam veterans as “gentle heroes” and concluded that “as a nation, we say we love you.”

A measure of the success of the reconstruction of the Vietnam veteran as hero can be found in the number of media accounts that foregrounded experience of the war as a central element in the careers of various politicians, public servants, and business executives. After listing a number of senators and governors who had served in Vietnam John Wheeler, author of *Touched with Fire: The Future of the Vietnam Generation*, emphasized the fact that “[m]any executives in the Reagan Administration are Vietnam veterans, notably Robert McFarlane, the national security adviser,” adding that “few people realize that the overnight delivery service, Federal Express, was organized by Vietnam veteran aviator Frederick Smith —using a hub-and-spoke system like the military airnet in Vietnam.” Wheeler underlined the redemption of the veteran by noting that “Bruce Caputo’s 1982 campaign for the Republican nomination for the U.S. Senate from New York ended when he acknowledged that his campaign literature incorrectly claimed he had served in Vietnam. The fact that the claim was made to begin with is itself instructive.” In a different way, Dan Quayle’s lack of military service in Vietnam, and the circumstances...
surrounding his admission to the Indiana National Guard during the war, became a focus for questions concerning his vice-presidential qualities during the 1988 general election campaign. Throughout the Gulf War commentators frequently referred to the leadership qualities, and hinted at the political abilities of both Colin Powell and Norman Schwarzkopf by noting that both men’s careers included service in Vietnam.

The irony surrounding the relationship of legitimate leaders and the benefit of service in the Vietnam War is reinforced within a comment made by Samuel Popkin, a political polling consultant, writing in the *Washington Post* on Veterans Day 1984. Within his assessment (one that implies a species of white victimage), Popkin argued that the survival of the Democratic Party rested on the careful selection of presidential nominees:

Above all, the Democrats will have to nominate a man who, when he says “we,” will be able to convince white men that he includes them too. In the context of the 1980s such a candidate might have to be a Vietnam veteran, or someone too old to have dodged the draft. Only such a candidate will appeal both to the Democratic Party’s new core of blacks and working women and white men who espouse the new patriotism and extol the competitive spirit.140

The Democratic candidates in the 1980s and 1990s did not match either of Popkin’s criteria. Nevertheless, Clinton’s legitimacy as a presidential leader rested in part on his ability to justify successfully the fact that he had not served in Vietnam.

During the 1980s the patriotic, heroic veteran emerged as the person who spoke of “we.” In fact, the Vietnam veteran, represented as hero, was enshrined as the voice of a united America—a voice that reached heroic status by speaking only of union. The contradiction at the center of the construction of the Vietnam veteran between a silent, silenced figure on the one hand and an articulate spokesperson and hero on the other was mediated by the intervention of the expression of uniformity and indivisibility. The cultural imperative of indivisibility forced its presence on a range of postwar discourse, but it was through the representational figure of the veteran that this need was most clearly articulated. Unity erased the veteran’s silence, lifting him from marginality and reincorporating him into a position where he could speak only of incorporation. The cultural drive to holism therefore constructed a figure who was constrained to speak the truth of unity—and nothing but the truth.
Talking Back

It is possible, however, to resist and revise the above conclusion. A rewriting is available through the fact that the ideology of unity is not total or complete. Within a number of various texts veterans have been denied the opportunity to articulate the meanings of their different experiences. This is not to say that Vietnam veterans as “real concrete individuals,” to use Marx’s phrase, lacked, or lack, the ability to contest some of the more extravagant demands of a powerful ideology. In select and specific ways Vietnam veterans have drawn upon their experiences within the war and on the home front to inform their criticisms of militarist policies and domestic inequities. Such articulations contradict and contest unity by revealing the inadequacy of a notion that presumes and asserts a basic cultural homogeneity. In this sense the veteran’s voice of dissent is a way of “talking back”—an insolent and insubordinate voice that “dare[s] to disagree.” ¹⁴¹

Veterans of the Vietnam War have continued to speak out on issues of U.S. foreign policy and have found a voice for their protests through groups that include Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Vietnam Veterans Against the War—Anti-Imperialist, Vietnam Veterans Foreign Policy Watch, and Veterans for Peace. In the eighties Vietnam veterans contested the Reagan administration’s support of the Contras in Nicaragua, and in the nineties veterans of the war in Vietnam were prominent in anti–Gulf War demonstrations. Protest against the lasting effects of Agent Orange and the lamentable level of postwar health services rallied, and continue to rally, Vietnam veterans.

Records of such “insolent” actions and experiences are, typically, located outside the field of recognized textual canons. The role of a core of legitimated and authorized texts is, it has been argued, central to the maintenance of a (unified) culture conceived as a transcendental bearer of civilization.¹⁴² Similarly, the assumptions studied in this part form the basis of a canon of Vietnam War texts in which cultural unity is emphasized.¹⁴³ Acknowledgment of the limitations of “central” texts, specifically the impact that canonized texts have on the effectiveness of attempts to articulate experiences that contradict dominant interlocutory positions, informs this archival excavation of the uncanonized voices of veterans speaking on a range of topics beyond “healing” or cultural unity.

An account of veterans “speaking out” discussed in a paper in Radical History Review in 1985 raises other issues pertinent to this act of recu-
peration. Referring to the practice of providing Vietnam veterans as speakers for schools to counteract high school recruitment drives by the armed services, the author commented that “the most effective part of the vets’ presentations [in the schools] is their personal testimony about what GIs learned in Vietnam.” While evidence could be gathered to support the assertion that “most of the students have never before heard Vietnam discussed in . . . [a] language that facilitates criticism of international aggression,” the author’s conclusion that “veterans’ testimony about the war is a catalyst that can make these debates come alive for Americans too young to remember Vietnam” assumes too much. Those too young to remember Vietnam are not necessarily convinced by the power of veterans’ words. The limits of veterans’ testimony has been illustrated within a discussion of the reception of the film Rambo. Vietnam veterans demonstrating in Boston in February 1986 against the film and Stallone’s receipt of an award for the film were “told to ‘go home’ by a group of teenagers. . . . Stallone, the teenagers screamed, was ‘a real veteran.’” The response yet again demonstrates the power of the mass media to submerge popular experiences within and through its recreations. (At the level of the young audience, the most effective critical response to, and delegitimation of, the narrative absurdities of Rambo may be the popular parodic critique Hot Shots II, [1992].)

The reaction to the veterans in Boston suggests that, by itself, unmediated veterans’ testimony is limited in its capacity to produce political or cultural changes. The dismissal of veterans’ experience and the revision of the experience within commercialized textual forms have led veterans to explore various forms of representation. Among the projects initiated by veterans are video productions (such as Joseph Gray’s Ambush, 1992, an exploration of personal motives, memories, and guilt surrounding the war), veterans’ poetry (including work published by 1st Casualty Press, a publication house established by poets associated with Vietnam Veterans Against the War), veterans’ art works, and theatrical productions (including the works of the Vietnam Veterans Ensemble Theater of New York, and plays workshopped and produced by veterans, such as John DiFusco’s Tracers). Each of these examples is an attempt by veterans to present viewpoints and voices that contest the dominant representations of a “healed” and “heroic” veteran. However, the examples demonstrate that in order to be heard veterans are required to adopt narrative forms that are readily appropriated or superseded by the mass media. Exemplifying the problem here, John Carlos Rowe mentions the case of a
piece of freelance writing submitted in the summer of 1979 to a local newspaper in the southern California area. The piece, “Remembrances of Vietnam,” was published as the first of a two-part report. After the publication of the first installment, the newspaper was alerted to the fact that the “report” was in fact a plagiarized extract from Ron Kovic’s memoir Born on the Fourth of July. Rowe “hesitated long before using this anecdote, because it risks reinforcing that other powerful mythology we use as defense against our responsibility for the War: that is, the ‘madness’ of the returning veteran.” Rowe sees in the incident “that to be heard at all [the veteran] had to accommodate himself to the existing channels of communication in this culture: the press, the publishing industry, and the ‘readers’ whose expectations are shaped by the forms of those media.”

Attempts to evade the restrictions of existing forms of mass media have been varied, and include the call by Frankfurt School theorists for the development of forms of “popular media.” However, as Robert Ray has argued, “[d]espite the optimism of such media theorists as Walter Benjamin and Hans Enzensberger, the average person in the twentieth century has less access to the means of cultural production than he would have had a hundred years ago.” According to cultural historian Jackson Lears, studies of resistant practices—practices that encode the memories of experiences that disrupt traditions of consent—must “distinguish between genuinely popular culture and the corporate-sponsored mass culture that is so often mistaken for it.” Unfortunately, Lears does not specify the methodology for such studies. The distinction between “genuinely popular culture” and mass cultural forms is complicated in a number of ways, not the least by the powerful appropriational effects of corporate-sponsored media that can rapidly commercialize new and emerging trends, fashions, genres, and texts.

The naiveté of the Frankfurt School’s position, reinforced within countercultural demands to “seize the media,” is underlined by the fact that an effective popular political voice in an era of mechanical reproduction is implicated with mass media representations; and the success of alternative or oppositional representations rests, in large part, on the ability to finance and broadcast such representations. Exemplifying this problem, David Rabe’s play Sticks and Bones, a bitter indictment of the domestic pressures to silence the veteran, was itself silenced on one occasion as a result of a refusal by CBS to screen a production of the play. Similarly, the muddled release of Ivan Passer’s film Cutter’s Way, a film in which a Vietnam veteran attempts to expose and condemn the powerful people
and institutions responsible for his being sent to war, did little to ensure that the film’s message would be effectively heard by a wide audience.\textsuperscript{151}

Such difficulties are further exemplified by the relative obscurity, in relation to a text such as \textit{Rambo}, of films such as \textit{Riders of the Storm} (also known as \textit{The American Way}, 1986) and Haile Gerima’s \textit{Ashes and Embers} (1982), both of which effectively encode unusual narratives in forms not commonly manipulated in mass-media texts. \textit{Riders of the Storm} concerns a pirate television station operated by Vietnam veterans from an old B29 bomber circling above the United States. The station is used to interrupt right-wing broadcasts and to subvert the presidential campaign of a candidate seeking to involve the United States in another war. The self-reflexive narrative of the film represents Vietnam veterans contesting the excesses of media and political representations. The film historians David James and Rick Berg have argued that “the worst of \textit{Platoon}’s crimes is that the standard of representation it provided ended a tradition of films that called representation into question (e.g. \textit{The Stunt Man}).”\textsuperscript{152} Like \textit{The Stunt Man}, \textit{Riders of the Storm}, released the same year as \textit{Platoon}, continued to self-consciously question the assumptions and representational practices that naturalize the constructions of realistic Vietnam War films.

\textit{Ashes and Embers} is a nonlinear narrative exploration of the psyche of a black veteran, Nay Charles (John Anderson). The film begins in Los Angeles, where Charles and a friend are stopped by the police, an incident that provokes the first of Charles’s violent flashbacks to the war. The frequency and poignancy of the flashbacks foreground “Vietnam” as an additional location within the film as the narrative moves eastward from Los Angeles to the rural South, and then to Washington, D.C., where Charles’s strained relationship with his girlfriend (Kathy Flewellen) becomes evident. Increasingly disoriented by the frequent flashbacks, Charles is rescued by his friend Jim (Norman Blalock), who fortifies him with stories of the courage of Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Du Bois. Throughout the film, Nay Charles’s flashbacks and deteriorating psychological condition are linked to aspects of experience in the United States, thus implicating racial and economic conditions, together with the war, as the causes of the difficulties faced by black veterans.

\textit{Ashes and Embers}, then, places the black veteran in historical context. Nay Charles explores features of his personal and ethnic history in his relationships with his friends, his grandmother, and with white figures of authority. In the end, he is depicted moving toward a more informed understanding of black history and experience. With this shift from the per-
sonal to the political the film transcends the cliché of the wounded vet and proposes a specific form of resolution for the veteran’s adjustment problems—continuing political action—that revises traditional modes of depoliticized healing. *Ashes and Embers* stands apart from the majority of texts dealing with the Vietnam veteran in which a passive form of reintegration is privileged over the need to question the terms of collectivity. Further, in *Ashes and Embers* and *Riders of the Storm*, alternative content is reflected in forms (self-reflexive irony; nonlinear narrative) that interrogate and, to a degree, subvert the content typically conveyed through traditional realist modes of representation.

The issue of the representation of problematic content in realist forms is evident in a number of documentary texts that, ironically, seek to grant the veteran a voice. The documentary films *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* (1972), *Vietnam Requiem: Vets In Prison* (1982), and *Frank: A Vietnam Veteran* (1981), which presents a veteran’s admission of atrocities committed in Vietnam and crimes committed on his return to the United States, attempt to represent and analyze aspects of experience not traditionally featured in dominant representations of the veteran. Nevertheless, taken together, or privileged singly, these films reinvoke and reinforce the stereotype of the “sick vet,” a dysfunctional or psychotic figure incapable of an informed, or informing, opinion. The continued representation of socially deviant or psychologically troubled veterans functions to displace images of veterans’ agency and direct action.

Contrasting with the record of “deviant” images found in a wide variety of sources certain documentary films, while still relying on traditional realist forms, have avoided negative stereotypes in their approaches to a history based on the collective action of veterans. Examples here include *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger* (1968), *Good Bye and Good Luck* (1969), and *GI José* (1975), in which veterans of color question and protest the war and the postwar treatment of Vietnam veterans, issues explored subsequently in Gerima’s *Ashes and Embers*. Other examples include *The Secret Agent* (1983), which examines the lingering effects of exposure to Agent Orange, thus serving as an indictment of the U.S. Air Force, the Veterans Administration, and the Dow Chemical corporation, a maker of the defoliant. *Vietnam Veterans: Dissidents for Peace* (1988) features the continuing political activities of Vietnam veterans, as does *The War in El Cedro* (1988), which focuses on Vietnam veterans who rebuild a clinic in a Nicaraguan village destroyed by Contras. *Going Back: A Return to Vietnam* (1982) follows the journey by the first group of
American combat veterans to return to Vietnam after the war. The return trip leads to a questioning of the justifications for the war and also provides an insight into postwar Vietnamese ways of life.

The representation of Vietnamese experiences found in *Going Back* and other accounts of return journeys to Vietnam provokes, in terms of a thorough archival excavation of the experiences of veterans of the war in Vietnam, the importance of considering veterans of the “other side.” The bicultural focus achieved through study of Vietnamese exile narratives is one method of providing insights into the lives of the Vietnamese diaspora in America and, further, offers a way of revising the ethnocentrism of many American studies of the Vietnam War. The project of enhancing cross-cultural understanding implicit in such narratives is extended within the representations of wartime and postwar life in Vietnam found in cultural productions indigenous to Vietnam. The need to circulate Vietnamese representations of the war and its aftermath is underlined by Gayatri Spivak, author of one of the most pressing questions in cultural studies—“Can the subaltern speak?”—who insists that subalterns must speak for themselves. The insistence derives from, but is not dependent upon, the fact that “no amount of raised consciousness field-work can ever approach the painstaking labor to establish ethical singularity with the subaltern.” The perspectives of the formerly colonized people of Vietnam, subalterns in this sense, were expressed throughout the war in Vietnamese representations of their (armed) struggle to “find a voice.”

One form of cultural production, documentary films, continued throughout the years of the “American war.” Such films were made, often under conditions of prolonged aerial bombardment, in the southern zones by the National Liberation Front, and by the state-operated studios in the North, notably the Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio. Documentary films of the period include *The Most Dangerous Situation* (1967), *Cu Chi Guerrilla* (1967), *Ngu Thuy Girls* (1969), and *Vinh Linh Fortress* (1970), which depicts the lives of people living underground at this heavily bombed site. The prevailing aesthetic among these films is a starkly realist form of instruction (derisively dismissed in the West as “propaganda”) intended to support and extend the “government policy [of] keeping alive the fighting spirit of the people.” Vietnamese critics have recognized the aesthetic limitations of these films, while also acknowledging the utility of the films to the war effort.

While documentary film production was maintained throughout the war, the more expensive feature-length fiction filmmaking virtually...
ceased. Beginning in the late seventies production resumed on fiction films that include a number of works that deal with the war and its aftermath. Notable among an impressive output is Hong Sen’s *The Abandoned Field—Free Fire Zone* (1979) in which a family living in a floating house in the Mekong Delta shortly before the 1968 Tet offensive is consistently fired upon by ever-present American helicopters. Dang Nhat Minh’s *When the Tenth Month Comes* (1984) concerns a young wife who, after the death of her husband, a soldier at the front, returns to her village burdened with remorse and is subsequently unable to inform her in-laws of their son’s death. In 1987 Dang Nhat Minh made *The Girl on the River*, a story of the love between a leader of the Liberation Front and a prostitute from one of the many small boats used as brothels on the Mekong. Le Dan’s *Black Cactus* (1991) deals with a different kind of love, that between Lai, a black Amerasian, and a Cham girl, Ma. In Chau Hue’s *The Strolling Singers* (1991), Hung, a demobilized soldier suffering eye injuries, attempts a reconciliation with his wife, Tram.\(^{160}\)

The representation of the painful experiences of veterans of the war found in *The Strolling Singers* is a central theme within postwar Vietnamese film production. The film *Brothers and Relations* (1986), directed by Tran Vu and Nguyen Huu Luyen, both veterans, extends this theme in a story of a Vietnamese veteran who returns from the war to his family who thought him dead. The theme of forgetting the war, and the denial of veterans of the war, is extended when the veteran is sent to recover the remains of a relation killed in the South only to find that the cemetery has been relocated for a housing construction project. The indifference of his family toward the remains of their relative leads the veteran to return the bones to the grave in the South. *Karma* (1986) was the first feature film of postwar Vietnam not financed by the government and is the only Vietnamese film to deal with a veteran of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. The complicated melodramatic plot involves the return of an ARVN veteran, Binh (Tran Quang), to his wife, Nga (Phuong Dung), during the war. Believing Binh to have been killed in battle, Nga has been working as a bar girl in Saigon. Binh’s inability to accept Nga’s new occupation drives him back to the front, where after a final attempt at reconciliation in an army hospital, he is killed in battle.

The documentation conducted on film of the experiences of Vietnamese veterans has been extended through the publication of a number of remarkable novels dealing with various aspects of life in Vietnam during the war. Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War* (1994) tells the story of Kien,
a soldier who returns to the battlefield as part of detachment to bury the dead. Throughout his grim task Kien reflects on his life in Hanoi and grieves for his friends who died in battle, the latter memories inspired by the ghosts of friends that populate the battlefield where he works. Kien’s suffering and his intense memories of the war contribute to an identity that is informed by sorrow and loss. In Duong Thu Huong’s controversial *Novel Without a Name* (1995) the central character, Quan, journeys to Hanoi after ten years of fighting in the South on a mission to locate his childhood friend. The search becomes a form of personal revelation in which Quan is forced to confront his memories of war, and the consequences of the war for those living in the North. The powerful effect of *Novel Without a Name* owes much to author Duong’s own experience, at the age of twenty-one, of leading a communist Youth Brigade on the demilitarized zone. After seven years of fighting, she was one of three survivors of a volunteer group that originally had included forty members.

Drawing on a different set of experiences and employing a divergent aesthetic, Trinh T. Minh-ha’s self-reflexive “documentary” *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) examines the role of women in the war. Trinh’s film represents Vietnamese women in America and, purportedly, in Vietnam as they reflect on their lives in the war. The film disrupts audience expectations of the documentary mode through the inclusion of reenactments and the conceit that all the women in the film, even those who supposedly recount their stories from Vietnam, are in the United States. The presence of the fictive mode within a form of representation typically understood to be factual occurs within this “resistant text,” one in which understandings are implicated with culturally specific meanings and language that Trinh “translates” to the United States.

The method of translating a plurality of voices reflects on and finally exposes the filmmaker’s strategies and the “site from which these voices are brought out and constructed.” Trinh’s interrogation of the ways in which identities and stories are interwoven raises a number of issues concerning women’s identity within and across cultures. In addressing these issues, the film implicitly critiques many of the assumptions common to narratives of “Vietnam”: that realist forms are the most appropriate to the task of representing and understanding the “Vietnam experience”; that there is one “truth” to the story of the war (as *Platoon*, for example, proposes); and that this truth is accessible only through males. Trinh’s film destabilizes various identities to produce the conclusion that identities, even those as “fixed” as Vietnam veteran, are mutable. In this way,
Trinh’s approach to stories and identities becomes a form of “talking back,” which is the contestation of the force of the ideology of unity.

In the preface to *Tell Me Lies About Vietnam* (1988), a collection of essays concerned with print and visual representations of the war in Vietnam, the editors state:

> How [the] figure [of the Vietnam veteran] is perceived and constructed is of crucial significance as an index of ideology: narratives of his actions and thoughts are emblematic of meanings, values and attitudes in the wider culture. Indeed, we may claim that the cultural representation of the soldier and particularly the veteran is perhaps the single most influential ideological discourse of the war.¹⁶⁵

The veteran as a vocal figure was constructed within and through representations, and his ability to speak has been the result of ideological imperatives, while his messages are concerned with unity. The comment quoted above, then, reflects the irony through which the veteran of the war in Vietnam has come to be known: he has been privileged within post–Vietnam cultural discourse because of his ideological importance to unity. Had not the veteran been appropriated ideologically, our perceptions of him would, of course, be entirely different. He has been, as it were, singled out to speak of unity on the basis of his wartime and homefront experiences that authorize his metalinguistic pronouncements.

This observation is not meant to deny or denigrate the veteran’s experiences. Rather, it points to the power of the ideology of unity to rewrite experience. Thus, to adopt words Michael Herr used in relation to the representation of the war, something “hasn’t been asked”¹⁶⁶ with respect to the veteran: Who is this person—an indexical voice of ideology, or a person capable of bringing the experience of the war to bear on the question of unity? The different voices heard talking back speak of a range of experiences beyond the clichéd stories concerning an essential cultural union.

Through a deconstructive and historicized form of critique, the representation of the veteran as a vocal figure and the ideology of unity speaking through this figure have been exposed. The analysis of ideological operations pursued here has involved the paradoxical operation of listening to what is not said within the taken-for-granted assumptions encoded within the narratives of the veteran—those characteristics that, as Stuart Hall puts it, ideology “systematically blips out on.”¹⁶⁷
tique informs communication by assisting in tuning out the ahistorical noise of unity and tuning in to the different messages of diverse voices. This action is capable of revising the impressions of the terrain of post–Vietnam cultural life represented in dominant interlocutory dispositions. It is this terrain—filled with images of resisting and protesting the war, the powerful effects of “race” and class, and the insensitivity of governmental administrations—that is represented in the *voices* of veterans of the war in Vietnam.

However, the efforts to retrieve these voices must contend with a history in which the Vietnam veteran has been characterized and canonized as a heroic figure by the mass media, by commonsense assumptions, and by politicians seeking to appropriate features of the veteran’s experience for political gain. In this sense the Vietnam veteran is a figure defined within the specific historical context of post–Vietnam United States culture and the history of the changes undergone by this figure is one of ideological attempts to construct cultural unity from the effects of the Vietnam War.