The mind at war with itself wants to be healed, but still clings to the old damaged way of being. And underneath resistance one always finds a reversal of the truth, another story, a hidden feeling, or a hidden experience.

—Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*

One of the great tasks of feminist literary criticism has been the "re-vision" of literary works in the manner suggested by poet and critic Adrienne Rich: "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (18). This essay is concerned with the re-vision of images of women in novels written by American combat veterans of the Vietnam War and an examination of the connection those images have with the author's process of healing from the trauma of combat.

The combat veteran, unlike writers in most other genres, has a personal stake in the way his story turns out; it represents his own "working out" of the events he has experienced. Arthur Egendorf, a Vietnam veteran and a psychologist who works with veterans, explains in his book *Healing from the War*: "Retelling one's story is an ancient cure. . . . Retelling is likely to allow us to feel 'more human' afterward, for recapturing the past in a sensitive way, often through the process of mourning, enables us to set aside our fearful self-protectiveness" (69). The loss of the ability to empathize with or care deeply about other people is a theme in all novels by Vietnam veterans. The conditions of combat demand that the soldier renounce empathy in order to survive. In warrior culture, the denial of humanity becomes a strength. But the line between soldier and sadist is easily crossed:

What makes a sadist recognizable is that he does not feel. He glories even in his unfeelingness. His very coldness gives him power. He cannot be
humiliated by rejection because he does not love. . . . His passion is not for union or for closeness, but for dominance. On the deepest level of this drama we see that the sadist seeks to dominate, humiliate, punish, and perhaps even destroy a part of himself. And this part of himself is his feelings, which come from his body, and his knowledge of those feelings. (Griffin 55)

The sadist, alienated from his body and desire, projects his alienation upon his female victims. The combat veteran generates female characters that represent the level of his own alienation. Both Asian and American women appear on the pages of novels by Vietnam veterans, but Asian women compose the most extreme category of objectified images. This is not surprising, since racism (as well as sexism) is an established tradition in Western literature.

Both more and less than a human being, the Asian woman character represents the reconciliation of contradictions within the author. Many Vietnam novels describe “love affairs” between Asian women and soldiers. But the Asian woman character has no real life before she meets her soldier and none that is pursued after; these women seem to fade painlessly (through death, desertion, or transfer of affection) out of existence. Asian women are mirrored as whore, or whore-with-a-heart-of-gold, or inscrutable lover, or will-less mistress, as the following examples demonstrate.

In Tim O’Brien’s Going After Cacciato (winner of the National Book Award), the protagonist Paul Berlin speculates on the fate of Private Cacciato, who deserted the squad after claiming he was going to walk from Vietnam to Paris. In his fantasy, Berlin and the rest of his squad pursue Cacciato (to capture him and force him to return to the war), meeting various people and having adventures along the way. Berlin imagines this journey during a long night of guard duty; the tale is punctuated by his memories of combat and his musings on the meaning of the story he invents. He imagines a Vietnamese woman refugee who accompanies him on his mental journey from Vietnam to Paris. A fictional character’s fantasy, Wan is many things to Berlin, including mother and lover. He creates her to fill an empty space in the war—there are no women in his Army life. Berlin’s relationship with Wan is an analogy for his relationship with himself—his own masculine and feminine parts—and the implied merging of the “masculine” American character with the “feminine” Vietnamese character.

Eric Leed has described the essential liminality of war, which is brought about by crossing and recrossing boundaries of perception, creating confusion with the destruction of natural, rational categories (21). Cacciato reflects that liminality as O’Brien struggles, through
Berlin, to lift himself out of the confines of the traditional masculine romance—the war story. Although *Going After Cacciato* possesses all the characteristics of that genre—"elusiveness and ambiguity of the protagonist, the need for constant textual activity to test and reaffirm his status, the . . . absence of strong narrative closure" (Batsleer 78)—Berlin is forced by his recognition of the destructive power of liminality to attempt to transcend traditional limits. He perceives that only through integration can men be whole and wars cease: men do not fight the Vietnamese, they fight the Vietnamese (female) qualities in themselves.

Berlin's imaginary journey is designed to remove him from the war, yet the imagined rationale for the mission is to bring Cacciato back to Vietnam. When Berlin reaches Paris, Wan urges him to give up his pursuit of Cacciato and dare to realize his dream of peace. Berlin replies that he feels he has undertaken a responsibility:

> The real issue is how to find felicity within limits. Within the context of our obligations to other people. We all want peace. We all want dignity and domestic tranquility. But we want these to be honorable and lasting. . . . We want a peace we can live with. We want a peace we can be proud of. Even in imagination we must obey the logic of what we started. Even in imagination we must be true to our obligations, for, even in imagination, obligation cannot be outrun. Imagination, like reality, has its limits. (378)

Wan and Berlin voice points of view which cannot be reconciled or synthesized: "There is no true negotiation. There is only the statement of positions" (378). This scene is the climax of the novel—or the nonclimax of the un-novel, for the protagonist fails to undergo any sort of change. The novel proffers a reactionary resolution: unable even in his imagination to go beyond the prescribed limitations and formulas, Berlin succumbs, in the end, to revising his liminality in order to conform to the traditional myths of male romance. The real hero (doomed to failure) is Wan, who does see another way. The division between men and women in this novel is unbreachable, and it is the male half which must triumph, even though that triumph will bring about the destruction of men and women alike. Wan and the sensitive and motherly lieutenant of the squad vanish in Paris, leaving Berlin to his fate: the woman and the "womanish" man are the only ones who can escape the trap of war. Paul Berlin is left exactly where he began, still wondering if Cacciato will make it to Paris.

Madame Dieudonne, the French-Vietnamese mistress of Captain Clancy in William Eastlake's novel *The Bamboo Bed*, has inherited
the largest rubber plantation in Vietnam from her husband, a French officer who died at Dien Bien Phu.

Madame Dieudonne was never known for her shyness, never famous for her modesty, tact, decorum, and all that passes for a lady, even in Nam. You do not control the largest rubber plantation in Vietnam by games that women play. . . . She seemed, in very tight silk and very high black hair, an Oriental toy. Maybe it was a woman in the middle of battle that did it. She did not belong. She must not be real. (10)

Madame Dieudonne can combine the masculine traits of competence and assertiveness with the feminine traits of beauty, delicacy, and doll-like appearance in a manner possible only in fiction. She is written to meet the emotional needs of the male protagonist and author.

One of the strongest points Eastlake makes in The Bamboo Bed is that maleness and femaleness are irrevocably and inherently different, and that maleness dooms men to war:

Every soldier hears death ticking off inside him. . . . Not every soldier, but every male human being. Not every female human being. They don't hear death ticking off inside them because they feel life ticking inside them. . . . A female would rather fuck than fight. . . . But alas, no. Screwing is not enough for a man. It helps, yes. Things would be much worse without it, but just screwing for a man is a poor excuse for the ecstasy of war. . . . He kills people because that's the only thing society permits him to do outside of being a mature person. I recommend dirty sex. I recommend that because it's more ecstasy than killing people and being a mature person. We got to find a substitute for war. (249)

Eastlake clearly equates maturity with femaleness. Men are so crippled (because they cannot create life) that there is no satisfaction in maturity. The solution, he suggests, is "dirty sex"—pornography. Pornography takes the act which is most life-connected for women and turns it into a male substitute for war, an aggressive act. Both war and pornography exist outside the boundaries of polite society; we acknowledge that sex and killing occur, but we would rather keep the action (and even the subject) out of the drawing room. Both are the domain of men. Both are concerned with questions of power, dominion, and violence. And both are so pervasive that the idea of a civilization without either is hardly imaginable.

Eastlake's vision of men at war is based on what Leed describes as the "drive-discharge model":

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War . . . becomes a world of instinctual liberty that contrasts sharply with the social world of instinctual renunciation and the deferment of gratification. It follows that the personalities formed within this arena of discharge must necessarily suffer on the scales that measure civilized behavior, that is, the tolerance of frustration. They have either been “primitivized” or infantilized, or have never had an adequate opportunity to become civilized and matured. The combatant is, apparently, not trained for that instinctual renunciation that is the lot of every civilized adult. (6)

In Eastlake’s eyes, only women are naturally (“instinctually”) civilized, and their presence and influence serve to restrain the more “primitive” male. In essence, Eastlake proposes removing the envy of the ability to create life by substituting the power to destroy that life. Madame Dieudonne’s lover, Captain Clancy, is obsessed with both Madame Dieudonne and with death, and the dichotomy is played out in the novel’s closing passages, where Mike, an Army observer, describes Clancy’s final choice: forced to choose between the life represented by Madame Dieudonne and the death represented by Ridge Red Boy, he chooses death. It is no accident that Clancy’s end is couched in traditional heterosexual language: “death—she was our captain’s bride” (394). But there is no triumph in Clancy’s decision. In The Bamboo Bed, just as in Going After Cacciato, the re-visionist’s hero must be the woman—here, Madame Dieudonne—who recognizes the path to peace and wholeness, though she cannot influence her lover to take it. Unlike in Cacciato, however, The Bamboo Bed’s female hero does not escape. Wan was a figment of Berlin’s imagination, twice removed from reality, and could simply disappear. Madame Dieudonne must face the devastation of Clancy’s choice, a tragedy she ultimately cannot survive.

The Vietnam veteran novelist’s preoccupation with the creation of idealized Asian women is not surprising. Women of other races and other cultures are particularly easy for an author and his characters to objectify and simplify. These writers are, on some level, aware of this, and many characters in Vietnam novels voice their appreciation of their simple relationships with Asian prostitutes. In William Huggett’s Body Count, Lieutenant Hawkins (a young Princeton graduate student who enlists in the Marines) expresses his opinion on whores and the advantages they offer: “You can bang ’em, pop, and roll right off. Now if I were going with a girl, I’d have to stay on top of her and hold her tightly and pretend like I wanted to keep her close to me” (178). Asian prostitutes are not real “girls.” To Hawkins all women are objects, but some require more care and tending than others.
Hawkins is similar to other characters in *Body Count*. In one scene, the character Chief goes over to visit with his buddy Wilson and Wilson's whore in their hotel room. Chief overpowers the whore and spreads her legs wide apart so that Wilson can look between them and see for sure that “Oriental pussy is *not* sideways” (30). This scene is intended to be very funny, but it is amusing only if the reader is complicitous, if he or she also regards women as objects. The woman does not take part in the “fun.” She is assaulted for Chief’s enjoyment; she is the punch line of his joke, rather than its intended audience.

James Webb’s *Fields of Fire*, one of the most critically acclaimed Vietnam novels by a combat veteran, describes the encounter that takes place between young Lieutenant Hodges and Mitsuko, a virginal Japanese girl, while Hodges is on a layover in Japan on his way to Vietnam. He propositions Mitsuko and, although she turns him down several times, succeeds in seducing her:

> He followed quickly, astounding himself with uncharacteristic boldness. He took her shoulder and stopped her and she turned around, angry, somehow insulted, but he needed her too much to worry about her insult. He pulled her to him, first gently and then tightly, kissing her and pushing her into the guardrail. Finally she responded, ever so slightly, not even wanting to. (43)

He proceeds to procure the perfect “zipless fuck”\(^1\): “He did not ask and she did not answer. Neither of them needed to. When she reached up and turned out the light they both understood.” Hodges deplores (after deflowering Mitsuko) “all the cruel clichés about Oriental women” (45), and yet Mitsuko is also a cliché, a soldier’s fantasy. What will happen to her when Hodges leaves? Is she pregnant? Is she in love? These are not Webb’s concerns, and it has obviously never occurred to him that they might be Mitsuko’s. Mitsuko has a resigned acceptance of the situation; she is happy to spend whatever time she can with Hodges, but she is “wiser” than he and knows their affair

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\(^1\)The zipless fuck was more than a fuck. It was a platonic ideal. Zipless because when you came together zippers fell away like rose petals, underwear blew off in one breath like dandelion fluff. . . . For the true, ultimate zipless A-1 fuck, it was necessary that you never get to know the man very well. I had noticed, for example, how all my infatuations dissolved as soon as I really became friends with a man, became sympathetic to his problems” (Jong 11). In order for the author of a Vietnam novel to create an “ideal” woman, he must make sure that he does not allow himself to become sympathetic toward her, or draw her too realistically.
will end: "'I love you, Mitsuko. No, really. Really I do.' 'Go back to sleep. Three days you go Vietnam'" (45).

More than six months later Hodges is once again in Japan, this time recovering from wounds, and looks up Mitsuko, who puts aside her Okinawan boyfriend to continue her relationship with Hodges. They have terrific sex, but Hodges does not communicate any of his feelings about Vietnam to Mitsuko, whom he believes to be incapable of understanding him (300-301). Hodges decides that he is going to marry Mitsuko anyway and even goes to meet her parents. Yet when the Marines offer him the opportunity to remain on Okinawa, he turns it down. Hodges articulates his reasons to his friend Bagger when Bagger asks why he came back to Vietnam: "Christ, I don't know. Style, I guess" (318). Hodges is killed in Vietnam, and Mitsuko is left with a half-Japanese child. Webb thoughtfully marries her off to a Japanese man who takes good care of her and her son. The story ends in a manner that leads, inevitably, to the conclusion that Hodges's son will turn out to be an unreflecting replica of his father: "I too will be a warrior" (389).

These fictional relationships with Asian women, whether mistresses or prostitutes, do not indicate any feeling on the part of either character or author that women are human beings deserving of respect. In fact, characters who "love" one prostitute or mistress will frequently participate in the debasement of another. Vietnam veteran novelists reflect the soldier's tradition of exploitation, intimidation, violence, and rape of native women in varying ways, the most pervasive of which is the tendency to generate Asian women characters who are simply sexual objects—nonpersons with no will, volition, or existence outside of their limited relationship with the protagonist.2

Larry Heinemann's first novel, Close Quarters, includes a character named Susie, a Japanese prostitute whom the protagonist, Philip Dozier, meets on his six-month R and R in Tokyo. She is tiny, beautiful, a good sexual partner, and genuinely affectionate, "a hundred-dollar-a-day whore [who] waited for me ... warming her hands and that fluffy raffle ticket of hers in a fur-collared coat; a woman who drank what I drank, ate what I ordered, and fucked, eagerly, any way

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2Susan Brownmiller explores the attitudes of American GIs toward Vietnamese women in a chapter in Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape. She asserts that American soldiers were conditioned by their limited contact, ethnocentrism, and sexism to think of Vietnamese women as prostitutes, sexual objects, and potentially hostile forces. Further, the structure of the American military and the nonspecific nature of the enemy in the Vietnam War encouraged these soldiers to direct violence against Vietnamese women without fear of punishment or reprisal.
I wanted to fuck” (189). Susie is exactly what Dozier wants in a woman; resigned to his eventual departure, she asks for no commitments, puts no claims upon him, acts upon his every desire (184–90). She suits his ideas about Tokyo women perfectly, ideas rooted in the notion of woman as sexual object, without a life of her own and without individual human consciousness.

By his own accounting, Close Quarters' Dozier treats his Tokyo whore Susie rather well. But he is not as kind to “Claymore Face,” a Vietnamese prostitute who lacks the beauty and sophistication that make Susie worth a hundred dollars a day. Claymore Face becomes a regular around the camp and will have sex with anyone for a few dollars. One day she is raped, in a graphic passage intended to be sexually stimulating to the reader: after she performs her services for a new man in the unit (as the rest of the men look on), Dozier forces her at gunpoint to perform fellatio on all of them. He never displays any regret about this brutal and degrading action, and his only comment is “After that Claymore Face didn’t come around much, and nobody much cared” (246–48). Claymore Face is the flip side of the whore with a heart of gold. As Heinemann writes her, she is a woman whose ugliness makes her eager to please, and who is detestable because she is ugly and eager to please.

In Donald McQuinn's popular novel Targets, the protagonist, Charles Taylor, has a “meaningful relationship” with the widow of a South Vietnamese officer, a woman named Ba Ly. Despite McQuinn's descriptions of Taylor's “love,” it is obvious that he has no real regard for women. Taylor’s misogyny is graphically displayed when he witnesses the torture of the Vietnamese prostitute Tuyet, whom both he and the torturer refer to as a “bitch.” The reader is presented with a blow-by-blow description of the naked Tuyet tied to a chair and tortured with an electric current: “The unnaturally erect position vividly outlined the musculature of her stomach and her breasts pointed tautly upward, the nipples in constant tremor from her ragged breathing and shivering” (109). This passage is meant to titillate the reader with adjectives associated with pornographic literature: erect, tremor, tautly, shivering, ragged breathing. Even though Taylor is “forced” to witness the scene, he is included in the erotic experience. When the electric clips are attached to Tuyet’s nipples, the scene becomes explicitly sexual:

Her back arched as far as she could manage, and in contrast to the defined muscles writhing under her skin, her face went limp, lips loosely parted. A long, erotic moan slid through the darkness, then another. Her head slumped
and she watched her breasts dance with each measured surge. A detached smile curved her lips and the lower one disappeared between her teeth. Her fingers clutched at the arms of the chair. Her hips twisted. (110)

The author portrays the torture as arousing for both tormentor and victim. But by writing the scene so that Taylor is forced to watch, sickened and horrified at the sight, McQuinn allows Taylor and the reader to escape blame. The reader can enjoy the image of the rape and then be let off the hook along with Taylor because he, too, is a mere observer, absolved of the sin of participation.

The recurring image of the abused Asian whore may be generated by an author who is attempting to exorcise the ghost of guilt. Egendorf states: “Many men who witness[ed] the death . . . of women . . . later admitted that they had been condemning themselves most of all for the flash of erotic stimulation they had experienced as witnesses or participants. It is as if they had said to themselves, ‘Anybody who gets off on such bestiality is less than human and deserves to be eternally punished’ ” (124). The author may legitimate the act by writing it into an acceptable context—Taylor viewing the torture of Tuyet—or he may condemn the character who commits it, or he may do both at the same time.

The creation of the Asian “love interest” is much more complex in its motivations. In some contexts she is developed in order to demonstrate that the soldier/killer is still worthy of love and capable of loving. But such relationships are doomed from the start—as the Asian woman character is usually aware. The Vietnam veteran author has an inherent inability to envision such a love affair continuing. Whether it ends with the death of the soldier or of the mistress, or is allowed to taper away gradually or ended abruptly by the soldier, this relationship can never carry over into the World. A classic example of this process can be found in McQuinn’s Targets, where Ba Ly states early on that Charles Taylor will abandon her: “You will leave here—forget the war, forget Vietnam, forget me” (143). Though Ba Ly dies (pregnant with Taylor’s child) before her prophecy is fulfilled, she is certainly correct about the doomed character of their relationship.

Images of American women in Vietnam War novels by combat veterans are directly related to images of Asian women. If Asian women are merely shadow characters who embody men’s needs and desires

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3“The World” is the term soldiers in the Vietnam War used to refer to the United States. Its illustration of the perceived unreality of the war is striking.
(whether hostile or loving), American women represent the anger and frustration of men whose needs and desires are not met. The protagonist of Kenn Miller’s *Tiger the Lurp Dog* draws these lines clearly as he begins to question the wisdom of his decision to take his thirty-day leave in the U.S.: “For the first time since signing his extension papers, Mopar regretted his decision to go home on leave . . . rather than taking his thirty days in Bangkok or Taipei—someplace where the girls were cheap and sweet and pretty and knew how to treat a soldier like a man” (117–18). American women don’t know how to treat a man. Unlike Asian women characters, they do not seem to be able to obey, fuck enthusiastically, and otherwise leave their men alone. Mopar returns to Vietnam with his doubts confirmed. He has a new attitude: “A soldier ought to spend his money on whores, and forget about the whole damn civilian world. . . . From here on, I’m gonna have a professional attitude toward women. If they ain’t pros themselves, I don’t want nothing more to do with them” (178).

The deliberate rejection of women who do not see themselves or their sexuality as a commodity is reflected in the Vietnam veteran novelist’s preoccupation with Asian prostitutes. American women never play the role of perfect and uncomplicated lover. In fact, images of American women are exactly opposite those of Asian women. American women are difficult, troublesome, untrustworthy. One of the most common images of the soldier’s American lover or girlfriend is that of the good woman turned “peacenik.”

John Del Vecchio’s best seller *The Thirteenth Valley* articulates the problem of men at war and their women at home through the character of Lieutenant Brooks:

The war was unpopular. Could any soldier really expect something more from his woman? The war was immoral, wasn’t it?, with all the indiscriminate killing, the bombings, the napalm, the defoliants. By extension then, were not the soldiers immoral too? Could anyone expect any righteous woman to stand by a barbaric man? By 1970 it had almost become the patriotic duty of a wife or girl friend to leave her man if he went to Vietnam. (109)

Many novels contain American women characters who question and reject their men because they go to Vietnam. Most are pictured as

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*"Lurp" is the pronunciation of the acronym LRRP, which stands for Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol. Lurps were famed for being among the toughest and spookiest soldiers in Vietnam. These teams of men were sent out beyond camp perimeters to "recon"—count enemies, locate caches, seek information, and so forth. They had a reputation as especially vicious killers, and even other soldiers were wary of them.*
foolish or soft-hearted girls who have lived such privileged lives that they don't understand the necessity of war. Their weakness allows them to be persuaded by the arguments of the peace movement. The major complaint soldiers voice about these women is that they are not capable of grasping the importance of war.

Winston Groom's novel *Better Times Than These* presents the reader with the images of two American women seduced by the peace movement, personified by a professorial peace activist named Widenfield. Becky is Lieutenant Holden's girlfriend, and Holden perceives her as turning against him and collaborating with Widenfield. In a letter to her, he writes:

You wrote that you were dumping our relationship to go with Widenfield and do all that silly crap you and he are involved with. . . . All those months we were seeing each other before I left I kept my mouth shut about what you were doing. I figured you would come to your senses sooner or later, but in fact, you only got worse. I don't know why I put up with it for so long, except that I loved you and hoped you would change. . . . There are things more important than merely loving somebody and I'm just beginning to understand them. . . . I'm really in the war now. . . . For the first time in my life I can honestly say that I feel completely and totally in control. (442-43)

It is not apparent how Holden could love and respect someone whose judgment he never trusted. Becky had been involved in the antiwar movement before he met her, and the enactment of Holden's hope that she would "come to her senses" would have required that she abandon her value system and adopt his, that she, in effect, abandon herself in order to become him.

Another of Groom's characters, a young private named Spudhead, has a girlfriend who has recently joined the peace movement. When Julie and Spudhead began their relationship they had the same beliefs, but while he is in Vietnam she comes under other influences:

. . . A group of girls had come to her room a few nights before with a petition against the war. She had refused to sign it. . . . But it had set her to thinking. She hated it, the war, because it frightened her. But she hadn't given it much thought, except for hating it, until now.

There had been someone speaking on campus, a man named Widenfield, a professor from a New England women's college. She had stopped to listen for a while. What he said had made sense. . . .

The speech had been well received for a conservative, Mid-western university. Of course—and Julie could not know this—it was not the same speech
Women do not join the peace movement of their own free will; they are seduced into it. Groom makes his point obvious by creating a character who seduces both Julie and Becky, a man Groom makes no bones about despising. It is no accident that Widenfield is a professor at a women's college. Widenfield surrounds himself with women and is even described, on several occasions, as effeminate—not “manly”—casting further doubt upon his motives and on his conclusions. No man's man could ever be associated with views like his. But if real men are not present to exert control over women, then less masculine specimens will take over. In none of these novels do women think and decide about issues for themselves.

Authors frequently depict American women as betrayers, joining moral forces with the Vietcong rather than supporting their own men. Consequently, aggression toward American women and toward the enemy are often mixed in the minds of characters. Cherry, the protagonist of Del Vecchio's *The Thirteenth Valley*, fidgets anxiously the night before a battle. He becomes aroused, and sexual images of his girlfriend Linda become entangled with thoughts of violence and killing:

Cherry rolled his tongue inside his mouth and imagined it in Linda's vagina. That bitch, he thought. I bet she's screwin like a rabbit. I bet she always has. Been screwin guys left and right even when we were goin out. Never gave me none. Bitch. Cherry's anger raised his excitement. Christ, he thought. I need a girl. I need someone to fuck. I got so much jizz stored up if I fucked right now I'd shoot so hard I'd blast her ovaries up to her sinuses. Oh, get em all. (555)

Groom's character Brill also mixes violence and sex when, lying in an ambush waiting to kill, he thinks about a brutal rape he committed back in the States. The killing of enemy soldiers and the commission of the rape seem to bring him equivalent joy:

Without further ceremony he mounted her savagely... pounding her and pounding her until she started to scream—not screams of joy but screams of agony... which was what he was remembering now in the heat of the jungle morning... bellowing the question, “*Why are you dry?*” until she was nearly hysterical, screaming and sobbing some answer he did not understand because he wasn't listening... The next morning he... stuck out...
his thumb on the highway, northward toward LA, feeling elated, feeling mean, the same as he was feeling now. (190-91)

Hostility toward American women may be an inevitable by-product of, if not a necessary factor in, making men warlike. Lieutenant Holden reflects, “If an army could be conscripted of no one but jilted men, there wouldn’t be a force on earth that could beat them, because they would be the meanest sonsofbitches in the world” (Groom 368).

But some soldiers are destroyed, rather than strengthened, by the betrayal of their women. These men are portrayed as “too sensitive” to be good soldiers and, by extension, too sensitive to be good men. Lieutenant Brooks of The Thirteenth Valley is destroyed by his wife Lila’s inability to understand his wants and needs, and he is reduced to fantasizing about her making love to his buddy Egan, and then to fantasizing about making love to Egan himself. Brooks is convinced that he has lost control of himself, that he is destroyed as a man. A similar, though less sympathetic, portrait can be found in McQuinn’s Targets. A secondary character, Kimble, makes explosive devices for espionage agents. His fear and hatred of war and personal danger is symbolized by his attachment to his wife, Lenore. Kimble is a weak man whose weakness is revealed when he receives a Dear John letter from Lenore. In the protagonist Taylor’s eyes, Kimble’s need for Lenore, and his lack of manly self-sufficiency, is pitiful and disgusting. Taylor, in control of all his relationships with women, has no patience for Kimble, whose preoccupation with his wife makes him irrational—a danger to the men who rely on him. Kimble recognizes, in a moment of clarity, that he is “less a man than most” (232-35). The equation that is constructed in this novel is that Love = Dependency = Weakness = Unmanliness = Cowardice = Letting Down Your Buddies. When Kimble kills a man to save Taylor, he redeems himself and finally (as Taylor says) stops his “infantile bullshit” (235). Taylor breaks Lenore’s hold on Kimble by helping him join the “man club” and reducing her from love object to bitch.

War is the ultimate shock to male self-perception, shattering pretensions to self-control and to control over environment. War breaks down the barriers between known categories, throwing the soldier into a situation where he must revise his ideas of reality in order to survive. One of the first categories to be violated is that of gender role. Though taught in basic training or boot camp to adopt a hypermasculine stance, the soldier naturally experiences “feminine” emotions in
combat, including fear, confusion, a sense of being out of control, and an emotional attachment to his comrades. The pain that accompanies the death or horrible injury that often ends his relationships with comrades is understandably difficult to bear. Combat soldiers often deal with such emotions by repressing them in the face of more immediate needs for survival. Herbert Hendin and Ann Haas, in one of the earliest studies of posttraumatic stress disorder, describe this stress reaction as “the price [the soldier] later pays for suspension of his emotions in the service of objective combat” (7). The price he has to pay for not feeling anything about killing and dying is no longer feeling anything at all.

The warrior psyche is created by a systematic destruction in the male of all “feminine” characteristics. . . . To fight we must gird up our loins, toughen ourselves, feel no pain, no fear. . . . The sexuality of the warrior is a blend of homosexuality and phallic assertion. A boy is made into a warrior by removing him . . . from the influence of women and placing his care and training in the hands of men. . . . One of the ways in which the warrior covers up his unconscious hostility toward the feminine and his latent homosexuality is by phallic aggression. His penis, instead of being a potential means of expressing tenderness, becomes a tool, a rod, a gun. (Keen 130–31)

The combat veteran is frequently a man who has been committed to repressing any sign of femininity in himself. Consonant with this self-repression is the tendency to project his own weaknesses onto others and to take out his anger at his own fears and failings in hostility toward others. And since it is feminine qualities which he fears in himself, women are the natural targets for his aggression. This process of projection is played out clearly in the literature written by veterans of the Vietnam War.

By writing war fiction, the combat veteran novelist may attempt either to reconstruct the world image which was shattered by the war or to reintegrate his wartime experiences in some more acceptable manner. In fiction, the novelist is both God and creation; like Paul Berlin in Cacciato, he is free to imagine what he likes, bound only by the restrictions he himself devises. If we view Vietnam novels by combat veterans as “retellings” that are written as part of the veteran’s process of working through the unresolved nature of his war experience, it becomes possible to judge the relative success or failure of the venture. A key may be found in the author’s portrayal of his women characters: the degree to which he can make his female characters live and breathe is a good gauge of just how “healed” the author is. Most
Vietnam novels, when examined in this light, are clearly failures.

In order to examine the importance of the generation of female characters to the combat veteran author, it is first crucial to have an understanding of the alternatives to psychic healing from the war, and to examine the categories of denial, a psychological state which prevents healing and growth. The act of denial—an attempted return to a prewar world view, or the denial of the effects of the combat experience—is common in Vietnam novels and manifests itself in several ways. The most common tactic of the denial novel is to leave the protagonist trapped forever in the war. The simplest way to do this is to end the novel before the end of the protagonist's tour, a strategy chosen by Huggett in *Body Count*, O'Brien in *Going After Cacciato*, and Del Vecchio in *The Thirteenth Valley*. (See also Halberstam, Hasford, Hathaway, Pelfrey.)

The next most obvious tactic is to kill off the main characters before they get home, the strategy of Webb's *Fields of Fire*, Eastlake's *The Bamboo Bed*, and Miller's *Tiger the Lurp Dog*. (See also Anderson, Haldeman, Rubin, Smith.) The use of death as a solution to the literary problem of developing and continuing a relationship is an indication of the author's inability to conceive of workable and believable resolutions. Leed asserts that “the fantasies that appear within the war literature in general are constructions designed to resolve a problematic reality” (117). The lack of resolution in the use of death as a literary device is typical of the soldier still caught, years after the war, in the “slash” between life/not-life, unable to write his way out because he cannot imagine a way out. The protagonist who dies a physical death represents the emotional death of the author. Other options are to destroy the main character either through insanity or mental breakdown or to leave the main character on a plane headed home.

The final strategy of denial is the most difficult: the author takes his characters back into the World and insists that the war was, if not a good experience, a necessary one to make the man a traditional hero. The finest example of this strategy can be found in the three novels of James Webb, who, beginning with *Fields of Fire* in 1978 and continuing with *A Sense of Honor* (1981) and *A Country Such As This* (1983), creates characters who are strengthened both as men and as patriots by their Vietnam War experience.

In *Fields of Fire*, the novel written closest to the author's war experience, even Webb cannot manage to bring his heroes home: the only character who lives to make it back to the U.S. is Goodrich, a spoiled Harvard boy who couldn't achieve the exalted status of Webb's
most heroic characters. Goodrich loses a leg and is changed forever; when he comes back he has nothing but contempt for the know-nothing, effeminate men who populate the academic world and the peace movement. Webb implies that even Goodrich is now more of a man than these men could ever be. This novel is remarkable for its savagery toward women, both American and Vietnamese, and for its confusion of sex and violence.

Webb's second novel, *A Sense of Honor*, takes place entirely outside the physical arena of the war, though a number of the characters are shaped by it. In this book, an older student at Annapolis takes a younger student into his charge, attempting to instill in the younger man his idea of the virtue of a Marine and to erase the effeminate cowardice natural to the younger intellectual. Though the cadet is frightened at first, he is later grateful for the older student's efforts, but the older student is thrown out of Annapolis because a meddling academic professor/"peacenik" decides to prosecute on behalf of the young cadet. Women appear in this novel only as incidental (and mildly contemptible) characters.

In his third novel, *A Country Such As This*, Webb has written himself entirely out of his war experience and into a kind of right-wing Disneyland, where his characters are stock and his plots prefabricated. Vietnam is explained in terms suitable for World War II, and the disturbing nature of the war is no longer a theme. Webb's women are particularly flat and unrealistic, having become more and more two-dimensional in each successive novel.

As this essay demonstrates, the novels which exhibit denial strategies are also those least likely to have three-dimensional female characters. Flat female characters indicate that the author is projecting his own fears onto those characters and is unable or unwilling to come to terms with his experience. More interesting than the fact that most Vietnam War literature embodies what is really a general male self-hatred and fear of the feminine is that some novels by combat veterans do integrate the veteran's prewar world view with his war experience to create a new postwar frame of reference. The protagonists of these novels triumph over a combat-induced state of alienation and rejoin society. And in these novels, women are often depicted as healing influences; novelists create soldier characters who choose to abandon the destructive "maleness" which they learned in the war (total self-control, callousness, violence) and to replace it with "female-ness" (gentleness, sharing, emotional responsiveness, openness).

The role women play in the healing of real-life veterans is unmis-
takable. Myra MacPherson, in *Long Time Passing*, notes a study done for the Veterans Administration in 1981 comparing the experiences of combat veterans, noncombat veterans, and nonveterans of the Vietnam generation:

Married men in all three groups are consistently better off, in terms of psychological adjustment, than men who are not married. However, this effect is heightened for Vietnam veterans. Those with low spouse support were extremely demoralized and stressed. . . . While combat exposure alone tends to increase the probability of psychological problems, unmarried men and married men with little spouse support were drastically more troubled. . . . Conversely—and this may be a major factor in differentiating between combat veterans who have made successful readjustments and those who have not—men who had high spouse support were as well off psychologically as men who had experienced no combat. (305–6)5

*Dau*, by Ed Dodge, is an excellent example of a healing novel. Morgan, the protagonist, returns to the U.S. after prolonged exposure to heavy combat. He has witnessed the death of several close friends and has lost his Vietnamese lover, Tam, in the My Lai massacre. He finds it difficult to readjust to civilian life; he hears the voices of his dead friends and experiences severe survivor guilt. When he commits himself to the V.A. hospital he dreams, under the influence of Thorazine, that all the voices inside his head will consume him. After six months he is released, still on medication. Because of the rumors of his psychological problems, Morgan must leave the small town that has been his home since childhood. In Los Angeles, Morgan meets Rhonda, a nurse in an ob-gyn ward. He does not mention his Vietnam experiences until they are intimately involved, and when he does, she is supportive and understanding. They marry, but months later Morgan’s survivor-guilt nightmares begin again. It is not until he can finally articulate his feelings about the deaths of his friends that he can stop dreaming about them. His memories of Tam are more difficult to deal with. He journeys out into the wilderness and has a mystical vision of her in which he tells her he has to go and get on with his life and she forgives him. When he comes back home to Rhonda after this vision, she tells him she is pregnant. After they have the baby, Morgan explains his Vietnam experience: “What I’m trying to say is that Vietnam has scarred me, along with thousands of other guys. I’ll always feel pain to some degree or other, but I can live with it. What

counts now is that I'm with you and our little girl. It's been a long trip, but here I am right where I belong" (277). Rhonda is perhaps stereotypically maternal, but her character is somewhat complex and she is shown as having concerns and interests of her own. Further, Morgan is cognizant of her interests and does his best to help her serve them.

Stephen Wright's *Meditations in Green* (winner of the Maxwell Perkins Prize) takes the reader on another journey of healing. Griffin, a veteran ten years out of the war and still living with the heroin addiction he picked up there, cannot experience healing until he can come to terms with his past. Griffin's war buddy, Trips, is plotting to kill a man he believes is Sergeant Anstin, a career soldier who made Trips and Griffin's existence in Vietnam miserable and was responsible for the deaths of several friends. Griffin is sure the man is not Anstin. But Trips cannot leave his war behind; he must generate his own Anstins even when they no longer exist. When Griffin defends the stranger against Trips, the hold the war has had on Griffin is broken, and he can begin to live his life again. His healing experience is entwined with his relationship with Huey, his lover. She is independent, wandering in and out of his life, continually asking him questions that make him think about himself. Her character is enigmatic, and Wright does not presume to know her intimately. The book is fragmented into small chapters which rise like shrapnel from a wounded mind: healing occurs finally when the last of the irritating pieces have worked their way out.

Dozier, the main character of Heinemann's *Close Quarters*, also journeys toward healing. One of the most alienated characters in Vietnam literature (a murderer, a rapist, an entirely callous and brutal man), he heals himself through his relationship with his long-time girlfriend Jenny. When he returns to her after the war, he believes he has found his salvation: "I wanted to draw her into me so she would know the sheer release and relief I felt; so I wouldn't have to explain it—since the saying is always awkward" (299). But this first impulse to "draw her into" him is unsuccessful, because it is she, and not he, who is the pillar of stability. In the early stages of trying to heal, he desires her to become him, rather than allowing each of them to confront the issues of the war as two human beings who must verbalize in order to communicate. The arrival of a letter informing him of the death of his closest friend in Vietnam, Quinn, shatters Dozier's fragile composure, and his greatest anguish is his inability to articulate his pain and hopelessness: "At that moment I could have destroyed whole cities, whole civilizations, whole fucking races of people. If Quinn can't make it back, none of us can" (310). When Dozier realizes that there are no mythical heroes, his last justification for continuing to live in
the war is gone. He manages to talk to Jenny about his feelings for Quinn, and then he takes the therapeutic process even further: he visits Quinn’s parents, and together they view, for the first time, Quinn’s collection of slides of the Vietnam War. The slides are graphic, showing body counts and wounded civilians. Dozier shares the war with Quinn’s parents, and they, in essence, go to war with him and bring him home. At Quinn’s grave, Dozier contemplates the difference between Quinn and himself: Quinn would not have been capable of leaving the war even if he had lived. The barriers to communication and feeling which Dozier surmounts were, for Quinn, impassable, perhaps because Quinn was such a good soldier, a good “man”—the embodiment of martial myth. Dozier comes to realize that Quinn never existed—that the character whom he perceived as Quinn was constructed out of a collusion between Quinn and himself. Dozier’s last words to Quinn (“God damn you Quinn”) curse the figment of both men’s imagination which Quinn became. Subordinated to the myth, the real Quinn never had a chance.

Because war acts to accentuate traditional gender role distinctions, men suffering the stresses of combat are forced to adopt exaggeratedly “masculine” personality traits to survive. The armed forces mentality is geared to perpetuate those distinctions. One of the healthiest characters in any Vietnam novel, Private Hawkins of Charles Durden’s No Bugles No Drums, puts it this way:

I still can’t see no virtue in bein' all man 'n' no boy. 'Specially when bein' all man means killin’ or never questionin’, just sorta lying down so’s you don’t get in the way of those that think they know how everything should be. I heard a lot of people sayin’ a man’s gotta do this, do that. A man’s life is this way or that way. Those that said it to me, I most often told to stuff it. (95)

Hawkins is also very aware of the role models he has been given. He immediately questions the expectations that others have of him when he receives his orders for Vietnam:

I . . . wondered, just for a moment, what would happen if we all went back to bed. No way. We’d all seen too many John Wayne movies. Jesus, what he coulda done for the anti-war movement if he’d spent only half his time hockin’ up that drawl to say fine things like “Fuck you, Cap’n. If these little Jap bastards want this island so bad, they can have it. I’m hitchin’ me a ride back to the fleet.” (2)

Hawkins ultimately does walk out on the war. His refusal to play by the rules, to “do what a man’s gotta do,” is a firm step in the direction of breaking down artificial and damaging gender stereotypes.
Many veterans who do manage to work through the healing process recognize the debt that they owe to American women:

Although we [veterans] needed women more than ever, and feared them more as well, we looked to them for leadership in a way that would have been unthinkable a short time before. We had the women’s movement as a constant example, with their use of consciousness-raising groups as a major organizing tool. In the way we described them, the veteran rap groups were clearly inspired by women’s groups: Not only were they a place to heal those who attended, but also as a forum for getting the word out. (Egendorf 130)

Most Vietnam novels contain two-dimensional women characters, women who, in Virginia Woolf’s words, serve “as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice his natural size” (6). But some of them also contain a female character who possesses greater depth: she is a literary/psychological instrument which the writer uses to heal himself. After all, if the problem lies in the veteran’s self-image, the mere reflection provided by a flat female character would not provide a cure. Instead, the veteran must see something in the woman herself that helps him to create a new, postwar self. The Vietnam veteran novelist generates these special female characters to play a therapeutic role—the alter ego who insists that the accumulated “masculinities” of the soldier are a trap the protagonist must escape.

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