



The Wall, the Screen, and the Image: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial

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The Wall, the Screen, and the Image: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial

THE FORMS REMEMBRANCE TAKES indicate the status of memory within a given culture. In these forms, we can see acts of public commemoration as moments in which shifting discourses of history, personal memory, and cultural memory converge. Public commemoration is a form of history-making, yet it can also be a contested form of remembrance in which cultural memories slide through and into each other, merging and then disengaging in a tangle of narratives.

With the Vietnam War, discourses of public commemoration have become inextricably tied to the question of how war is brought to a closure in American society. How, for instance, does a society commemorate a war for which the central narrative is one of division and dissent, a war whose history is highly contested and still in the process of being made? As Peter Ehrenhaus writes, "The tradition of U.S. public discourse in the wake of war is founded upon the premises of clarity of purpose and success; when such presumptions must account for division, equivocation, and failure, and when losing is among the greatest of sins, commemoration seems somehow inappropriate."¹ Yet the Vietnam War—with its division and confusion, its lack of a singular, historical narrative defining clear-cut purpose and outcome—has led to a very different form of commemoration.

I would like to focus this discussion of public remembrance on the notion of a screen, in its many meanings. A screen can be a surface that is projected upon; it is also an object that hides something from view, that shelters or protects. It can be a surface, or even a body—in military language a *screen* is a "body of men" who are used to cover the movements of an army. Freud's screen memory functions to hide highly emotional material, which the screen memory conceals while offering itself as a substitute. The kinds of screens that converge in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., both shield and project: the black walls of the memorial act as screens for innumerable projections of memory and history—of the United States' participation in the Vietnam War and of the experience of the Vietnam veterans since the war—while they screen out the narrative of defeat in preparing for wars to come. Seeing the memorial as a screen also evokes the screens on which the war was and continues to be experienced—cin-

ematic and television screens—through which the contested history of the war is being made.

Cultural memory represents the many shifting histories and shared memories that exist between a sanctioned narrative of history and personal memory. The formation of a singular, sanctioned history of the Vietnam War has not yet taken place, in part because of the disruption of the standard narratives of American imperialism, technology, and masculinity that the war's loss represented.² The history of the Vietnam War is still in the process of being composed from many conflicting histories, yet there are particular elements within these often opposing narratives that remain uncontested—the irony of the war, the pain and subsequent marginalization of the Vietnam veteran, and the divisive effect the war had on American society. This essay is concerned with how certain narratives of the war have been constructed out of and within the fluid realm of cultural memory, in which personal memories are shared for many different purposes. I would like to examine how the screens of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial act to eclipse personal and collective memories of the war from the design of history, and yet how the textures of cultural and personal memory are nevertheless woven throughout, perhaps over and under, these screens.

The 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a repackaging of the 1960s and the Vietnam War—a phenomenon that is steeped in the language of nostalgia, healing, and forgiveness. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial has become a central icon of the “healing” process of confronting difficult past experiences, and it has played a significant role in the historization and rehistorization of the war. Since its construction in 1982, the memorial has been the center of a debate on precisely how wars should be remembered, and precisely who should be remembered in a war—those who died, those who participated, those who engineered it, or those who opposed it.

The Status of a Memorial

Although administered under the aegis of the National Parks Service of the Federal Government, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was built in 1982 through the impetus of a group of Vietnam veterans, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF), who raised the necessary funds and negotiated for a site on the Mall in Washington. Situated on the grassy slope of the Constitutional Gardens near the Lincoln Memorial, the memorial consists of two walls of black granite set into the earth at an angle of 125 degrees. Together, the walls form an extended V almost 500 feet in length, tapering in both directions from a height of approximately ten feet at the central hinge. These walls are currently inscribed with 58,132 names of men and women who died in the war, as well as with opening and closing inscriptions. The chronological listing of names begins on

the right-hand side of the hinge and continues to the end of the right wall; it then begins again at the far end of the left wall and continues to the center again. Thus, the name of the first American soldier killed in Vietnam in 1959 is on a panel adjacent to that containing the name of the last American killed in 1975. The framing dates of 1959 and 1975 are the only dates listed on the wall; the names are listed alphabetically within each "casualty day," although those dates are not noted.³ Eight of the names on the wall represent women who died in the war. Since 1984, the memorial has been accompanied by a figurative sculpture of three soldiers and a flag, both facing the monument from a group of trees at a distance of about thirty yards.

The memorial stands in opposition to the codes of remembrance evidenced on the Washington Mall. Virtually all of the national memorials and monuments in Washington are made of white stone and are constructed to be seen from a distance. In contrast, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial cuts into the sloping earth: it is not visible until one is almost upon it, and if approached from behind, it seems to disappear into the landscape. While the polished black granite walls of the memorial reflect the Washington Monument and face the Lincoln Memorial, they are not visible from the base of either of those structures. The black stone gives the memorial a reflective surface (one that echoes the reflecting pool of the Lincoln Memorial) that allows viewers to participate in the memorial; seeing their own images in the names, they are thus implicated in the listing of the dead.

As a memorial, rather than a monument, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is situated within a particular code of remembrance, one that Arthur Danto evokes: "We erect monuments so that we shall always remember, and build memorials so that we shall never forget."⁴ Monuments are not generally built to commemorate defeats; the defeated dead are remembered in memorials. While a monument most often signifies victory, a memorial refers to the life or lives sacrificed for a particular set of values. Memorials embody grief, loss, and tribute or obligation; in so doing, they serve to frame particular historical narratives. They are, according to Charles Griswold, "a species of pedagogy [that] seeks to instruct posterity about the past and, in so doing, necessarily reaches a decision about what is worth recovering."⁵

Thus, whatever triumph a particular memorial refers to, its depiction of victory is always tempered by a foregrounding of the lives lost. The Lincoln Memorial is a funereal structure that connotes a mausoleum, embodying the man and his philosophy in privileging his words on its walls. The force of the Lincoln Memorial is thus its mythical reference to Lincoln's untimely death. The Washington Monument, on the other hand, operates purely as a symbol, making no reference beyond its name to the mythic political figure. This contrast outlines one of the fundamental differences between memorials and monuments: monuments tend to use less explanation, while memorials tend to emphasize texts or lists of the dead. Therefore, while monuments (and victories) are usually anon-

ymous, the irony of lives lost for an unattained goal—in the case of the Vietnam War, an unspoken goal in an undeclared war—in a memorial seems to demand the naming of the individual.⁶

The traditional Western monument glorifies not only its subject but architectural history as well. The obelisk of the Washington Monument, which was erected from 1848 to 1885, has its roots in Roman architecture; long before Napoleon pilfered them from Egypt to take to Paris, obelisks carried connotations of the imperial trophy. The Lincoln Memorial, which was built in 1922, is modeled on the classic Greek temple, specifically referring to the Parthenon. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, however, makes no direct reference to the classical history of art or architecture. As a blank slate, it does not chart a lineage from the accomplishments of past civilizations.

Yet the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is unmistakably representative of a particular period in Western art. In the uproar that accompanied its construction, it became the focus of a debate about the role of modernism in public sculpture. Just one month prior to the dedication of the memorial in November 1982, Tom Wolfe wrote a vitriolic attack on its design in the *Washington Post*, calling it a piece of modernist orthodoxy that was “a tribute to Jane Fonda.”⁷ Wolfe and other critics of modernism compared the memorial to two infamously unpopular government-funded public sculptures: Carl Andre’s *Stone Field Sculpture* (1980) in Hartford, Connecticut, and Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (1981) in downtown Manhattan.⁸ These two works had come to symbolize the alienating effect of modern sculpture on certain sectors of the viewing public, leading to questions by those viewers about the ways they felt tax-funded public sculptures were being imposed on them.

Before it was built, the memorial was seen by many veterans and critics of modernism as yet another abstract modernist work that the public would find difficult to interpret. Yet in situating the Vietnam Veterans Memorial purely within the context of modernism, Wolfe and his fellow critics ignore fundamental aspects of this work. The memorial is not simply a flat, black, abstract wall; it is a wall inscribed with names. When the “public” visits this memorial, they do not go to see long walls cut into the earth but to see the names of those whose lives were lost in the war. Hence, to call this a modernist work is to privilege a formalist reading of its design and to negate its commemorative and textual functions. While modernism in sculpture has been defined as a kind of “sitelessness,”⁹ the memorial is specifically situated within the national context of the Mall. Deliberately counterposed to the dominant monumental styles surrounding it, the memorial refers to, absorbs, and reflects the classical forms of the Mall. The black walls mirror not only the faces of viewers and passing clouds but also the Washington obelisk, thus forming an impromptu pastiche of monuments. The memorial’s relationship to the earth shifts between a sitelessness and site specificity, between context and decontextualization. It delicately balances between effacing

and embracing the earth—it cuts into the earth, yet strikes a harmony with the terrain.

But it is as a war memorial that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is most importantly different from modernist sculpture. The first national memorial to an American war built since World War II memorials, it makes a statement on war that diverges sharply from the traditional declarations of prior war memorials. The Vietnam veterans who organized the construction of the memorial stipulated only two things for its design—that it contain the names of those who died or are missing in action and that it be apolitical and harmonious with the site. Implicit within these guidelines was also a desire that the memorial offer some kind of closure to the debates on the war. Even so, in these stipulations the veterans had already set the stage for the dramatic disparity between the message of this memorial and that of its antecedents. While the concern for the memorial's context in the Mall tended to rule out a vertical monument, the intent that the work not espouse a political stand in regard to the war ensured that in the end the memorial would not glorify the war.

The traditional war memorial works to impose a closure on a specific conflict. This closure contains the war within particular master narratives either of victory—in this country, affirming our military superiority and ability to impose our will on others—or of loss and the bitter price of victory, a theme dominant in the “never again” texts of World War I memorials. In declaring the end of a conflict, this closure can by its very nature serve to sanctify future wars by offering a completed narrative with cause and effect intact. In rejecting the architectural lineage of monuments and contesting the aesthetic codes of previous war memorials, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial also refuses the closure and implied tradition of those structures; yet it both condemns and justifies future memorials.

The Black Gash of Shame

Before it was built, the design of the memorial was an object of attack not only because of its modernist aesthetics but, more significantly, because it violated implicit taboos about the remembrance of wars. When its design was first unveiled, the memorial was condemned by some veterans and others as a highly political statement about the shame of an unvictorious war. Termed the “black gash of shame,” a “degrading ditch,” a “black spot in American history,” a “tombstone,” a “slap in the face,” and a “wailing wall for draft dodgers and New Lefters of the future,”¹⁰ the memorial was seen as a monument to defeat, one that spoke more directly to a nation's guilt than to the honor of the war dead and the veterans. One prominent veteran of the VVMF read its black walls as evoking “shame, sorrow, and the degradation of all races”;¹¹ others perceived its refusal to rise above the earth as indicative of defeat. Thus, a racist reading of the color

black was combined with a sexist reading of a feminized earth as connoting a lack of power. Precisely because of its deviation from traditional commemorative codes—white stone rising above the earth—the design was read as a political statement. An editorial in the *National Review* stated:

Our objection . . . is based upon the clear political message of this design. The design says that the Vietnam War should be memorialized in black, not the white marble of Washington. The mode of listing the names makes them individual deaths, not deaths in a cause: they might as well have been traffic accidents. The invisibility of the monument at ground level symbolizes the “unmentionability” of the war. . . . Finally, the V-shaped plan of the black retaining wall immortalizes the antiwar signal, the V protest made with the fingers.¹²

This analysis of the memorial’s symbolism, indeed a perceptive reading, points to several crucial aspects of the memorial: its listing of names does make these individual deaths rather than the singular death of a body of men; the relationship of the memorial to the earth does refuse to evoke heroism and victory.

Certainly the angry reactions to the memorial go beyond the accusation of the elite pretensions of abstraction, since the uncontroversial Washington Monument itself is the epitome of abstraction. Rather, I believe that the primary (and unspoken) aspect of the memorial that is responsible for the accusations that it does not appropriately remember war is its antiphallic presence. By “antiphallic” I do not mean to imply that the memorial is somehow a passive or “feminine” form but rather that it opposes the codes of vertical monuments symbolizing power and honor. The memorial does not stand erect above the landscape; it is continuous with the earth. It evokes contemplation rather than declaring its meaning. The intersection of the two walls of the memorial form the shape of a V, which has been interpreted by various commentators as V for *Vietnam*, *victim*, *victory*, *veteran*, *violate*, and *valor*. Yet, one also finds here a disconcerting subtext in which the memorial implicitly evokes castration. The V of the two black granite walls has also been read as a female V, reminding us that a “gash” is not only a wound but slang for the female genitals. The memorial contains all elements that have been associated psychoanalytically with the specter of woman—it embraces the earth; it is the abyss; it is death. To its critics this antiphallos symbolizes the open, castrated wound of this country’s venture into an unsuccessful war, a war that emasculated the role the United States would play in future foreign conflicts. The discourse of healing surrounding the memorial is an attempt to close many wounds, the suturing of which would mean a revived metanarrative of the United States as a successful military power and a rehabilitation of the masculinity of the American soldier.

The controversial, antiphallic form of the memorial is attributable to its having been designed by a person unlikely to reiterate traditional codes of war remembrance. At the time her design was chosen anonymously by a group of eight male “experts,” Maya Ying Lin was a twenty-one-year-old undergraduate at

Yale University who had produced the design for a funerary architecture course. She was not only young and uncredentialed but Chinese-American and, most significantly, female. Initially, the veterans of the VVMF were pleased by this turn of events; they assumed that the selection of Lin's design would only show how open and anonymous their design contest had been. However, the selection of someone with "marginal" cultural status as the primary interpreter of a controversial war inevitably complicated matters. Eventually, Maya Lin was defined, in particular by the media, not as American but as "other." This "otherness" became an issue not only in the way she was perceived in the media and by some of the veterans; it became a critical issue of whether or not that otherness had informed the design itself. For architecture critic Michael Sorkin, "Perhaps it was Maya Lin's 'otherness' that enabled her to create such a moving work. Perhaps only an outsider could have designed an environment so successful in answering the need for recognition by a group of people—the Vietnam vets—who are plagued by a sense of 'otherness' forced on them by a country that has spent ten years pretending not to see them."¹³ Lin's marginal status as a Chinese-American woman was thus seen as giving her insight into the marginal status experienced by Vietnam veterans, in a move that noticeably erased other differences.

Debates about Lin's design have also centered on the question of whether or not it is a passive work that reflects a female sensibility. There is little doubt that it is, in its refusal to glorify war, an implicitly pacifist work, and by extension a political work. As art critic Elizabeth Hess wrote, "Facing the myriad names, it is difficult for anyone *not* to question the purpose of the war" (269). Yet as much as this is a contemplative work that is continuous with the earth, it is also a violent work that cuts into the earth, evoking a wrenching in flesh. Lin has said,

I wanted to work with the land and not dominate it. I had an impulse to cut open the earth . . . an initial violence that in time would heal. The grass would grow back, but the cut would remain, a pure, flat surface, like a geode when you cut into it and polish the edge.¹⁴

The black walls cannot connote a healing wound without signifying the violence which created that wound, cutting into the earth and splitting it open.

Trouble between Maya Lin and the veterans began almost immediately. "The fund has always seen me as a female—as a child," she has said. "I went in there when I first won and their attitude was—O.K. you did a good job, but now we're going to hire some big boys—boys—to take care of it."¹⁵ Lin was defined, primarily because of her sex and age, as outside of the veterans' discourse. She had also made a decision deliberately not to inform herself about the war's political history to avoid being influenced by debates about the war. According to veteran Jan Scruggs, the primary figure behind the memorial's construction, "She never asked, 'What was combat like?' or 'Who were your friends whose names we're putting on the wall?' And the vets, in turn, never once explained to her what the words like 'courage,' 'sacrifice,' and 'devotion to duty' really meant" (79). That Lin

could not understand terms such as “courage” and “sacrifice” was implicit to the veterans because she was a woman and hence positioned outside of the (male) discourse of war.

In public discourse, Lin’s Asian-American identity was read as particularly ironic by virtue of her role in defining the discourse of remembrance of a war fought in Indochina—even if, given the complex politics between China and Vietnam, this conflation of ethnic identities is a particularly American one. (Further, while Lin’s ethnicity seemed appropriate to some in that Asians had suffered most in the war, it also appeared as a supreme irony in a war now considered remarkable for its racism.) Hence, Lin’s status as American disappeared and she became simply “Asian.” Conversely, Lin stuck to her position as an outsider in consistently referring to “the integrity of my design,” while the veterans were primarily concerned with the ability of the design to offer emotional comfort to veterans and the families of the dead, either in terms of forgiveness or honor. The initial disagreements on design between the veterans and Lin, which ultimately led to several compromises—the veterans agreed to the chronological listing, with indexes at the site to facilitate location, and Lin agreed to the addition of an opening and closing inscription—were hence concerned not so much with aesthetics as about to whom the memorial ultimately belonged.

In the larger political arena, these aesthetic and commemorative discourses were also at play. The initial response to Lin’s design was so divided that it eventually became clear to the veterans of the Memorial Fund that they had either to compromise or to postpone the construction of the memorial (which was to be ready by Veterans Day, November 1982). Consequently, a plan was devised to erect an alternative statue and flag close to the walls of the memorial, and realist sculptor Frederick Hart was chosen to design it.¹⁶ Hart’s bronze sculpture, placed in a grove of trees near the memorial in 1984, consists of three soldiers—one black and two white—standing and looking in the general direction of the wall. Their military garb is realistically rendered, with guns slung over their shoulders and ammunition around their waists, and their expressions are somewhat bewildered and puzzled. One of the most vociferous critics of modernism in the debates over the memorial, Hart said at the time,

My position is humanist, not militarist. I’m not trying to say there was anything good or bad about the war. I researched for three years—read everything. I became close friends with many vets, drank with them in bars. Lin’s piece is a serene exercise in contemporary art done in a vacuum with no knowledge of its subject. It’s nihilistic—that’s its appeal.¹⁷

Hart bases his credentials on a kind of “knowledge” strictly within the male domain—drinking with the veterans in a bar—and unavailable to Maya Lin, whom he had on another occasion referred to as “a mere student.” Lin is characterized by Hart as having designed her work with no “knowledge” and no “research,” as a woman who works with feeling and intuition rather than exper-

tise. Hart's statement ultimately defines realism as not only a male privilege but also an aesthetic necessity in remembering war. Hart's sculpture does not call into question how suitably to honor the individual dead, because in this work the veterans and the dead are subsumed into a singular narrative. It thus follows in the tradition of the Marine Corps War Memorial depicting the raising of the American flag at Iwo Jima, a work that has attained an iconic status as *the* realist war memorial and a symbol of the United States' right to raise its flag on foreign soil.¹⁸

The battle over what kind of style best represents the war was, quite obviously, a battle over the representation of the war itself. Hence, in choosing an "apolitical" memorial, the veterans of the VVMF had attempted to separate the memorial, itself a contested narrative, from the contested narratives of the war, ultimately an impossible task. However, after the memorial had actually been built, the debate about aesthetics and remembrance surrounding its design simply disappeared. That controversy was replaced by a multiplicity of cultural discourses on remembrance and healing. Even Maya Lin, who had not attended the opening ceremonies, positioned herself at this point as just another viewer experiencing the memorial like everyone else.¹⁹ The experience of Lin's work seems to have been so powerful for those who have visited it that negative criticism of its design has vanished.²⁰

The Names

There is little doubt that much of the memorial's power is due to the effect of the 58,132 names inscribed on its walls. Unlike the singular narrative and totalizing image presented by realist sculptures like the Marine Corps Memorial and Hart's statue, images that exist as confirmations of official history, these names, by virtue of their multiplicity, situate the Vietnam Veterans Memorial within the multiple strands of cultural memory spawned by the individual names. The most commonly noted response of visitors at the memorial has been to think of the widening circle of pain emanating from each name—to imagine for each name the grieving parents, sisters, brothers, girlfriends, wives, and children; to imagine, in effect, the multitude of people who were directly affected by the war.

This listing of names creates an expanse of cultural memory, one that could be seen as alternately subverting, rescripting, and contributing to the history of the Vietnam War as it is currently being written. The histories evoked by these names and the responses to them are necessarily multiple and replete with complex personal stakes. These narratives are concerned with the effect of the war on those who survived it, whose lives were irrevocably altered by it. The listing of names is steeped in the irony of the war—an irony afforded by retrospect, the irony of lives lost for no discernable reason.

While these names are marked within an official history, that history cannot

contain the ever-widening circles that expand outward from each name. The names on the walls of the memorial comprise a chant of the war dead (they were, in fact, read out loud at the dedication ceremony as a roll call). They are etched into stone, creating a negative space. The men and women who died in the war thus achieve an historically coded presence through their absence. These names are listed without elaboration, with no place or date of death, no rank, no place of origin. The lack of military rank allows the names to emerge from a military narrative and to represent the names of a society. It has often been noted that these names display the diversity of American culture: Fredes Mendez-Ortiz, Stephen Boryszewski, Bobby Joe Yewell, Leroy Wright. Veteran William Broyles, Jr., writes,

These are names which reach deep into the heart of America, each testimony to a family's decision, sometime in the past, to wrench itself from home and culture to test our country's promise of new opportunities and a better life. They are names drawn from the farthest corners of the world and then, in this generation, sent to another distant corner in a war America has done its best to forget.²¹

Broyles is not atypical here, either in his seeing the diversity of names as indicative of American society as the promised land, or in his putting the United States at the center from which these places of cultural origins and foreign wars are seen as "distant corners." His reading of the ethnicity of the names on the walls does not consider the imbalances of their ethnic distribution—that this was a war fought by a disproportionately high number of blacks and Hispanics, that it was a war in which the predominant number of soldiers were from working- and middle-class backgrounds. Proper names in our culture have complex legal and patriarchal implications, identifying individuals specifically as members of society. On this memorial, these names are coded as American—not as Asian, black, or white—in a way that Maya Lin could not be. The ethnicity of these names is subsumed into a narrative of the American melting pot, into which Maya Lin, as an agent of commemoration, will not fit.

It is crucial to their effect that these names are listed not alphabetically but in chronological order. This was Maya Lin's original intent, so that the wall would read "like an epic Greek poem" and "return the vets to the time frame of the war." The veterans were originally opposed to this idea; since they conceived the memorial specifically in terms of the needs of the veterans and family members who would visit it, they were worried that people would be unable to locate a name and simply leave in frustration. They wanted the names to be in alphabetical order to facilitate their location. They were swayed in their opinion, however, when they examined the Defense Department listing of casualties. Listed alphabetically, the names presented not individuals but cultural entities. There were over six hundred people named Smith, and sixteen named James Jones. Read alphabetically, the names became anonymous statistics.

The chronological listing of names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial provides it with a narrative framework. Read chronologically, the names chart the story of the war. As the number of names listed alphabetically within a casualty day swells, the intensity of the fighting is told. As one walks along the wall, one can conceivably walk through the history of the war; Lin and others have referred to it as a "journey." The chronological listing thus provides the veterans with a spatial reference for their experience of the war, a kind of memory map. They can see in certain clumps of names the scene of a particular ambush, the casualties of a doomed night patrol, or the night they were wounded.

This is not a linear narrative framework. Rather, the names form a loop, beginning as they do at the central hinge of the memorial and moving out on the right wall, then continuing at the far end of the left wall and moving toward the center. They thus form a narrative circle, in which one can read from the last name to the first. This refusal of linearity is, in many ways, appropriate to a conflict that has had no superficial closure. The hinge between the two walls thus becomes a pivotal space, the narrow space between the end and the beginning of a war; it connotes peace, yet a temporary peace between wars.

The question of who are and are not named on the wall is crucial within the memorial's representation of intersecting discourses of cultural memory and history. The veterans of the VVMF were concerned that the memorial be a tribute not only to those who died but to those who survived the war. There is little doubt that the memorial has become a powerful symbol for all Vietnam veterans, yet only the names of the war dead and the MIAs are inscribed on the wall, and thus within history. The distinction of the named and unnamed is thus significant for the intersection of memory and history in the memorial—in particular, for how this memorial will construct the history of the Vietnam War after the generation of surviving Vietnam veterans is dead. These veterans, and those whose lives were altered through their opposition to the war, are not named. Significantly, the Vietnamese are conspicuously absent in their roles either as victims, enemies, or even the people on whose land and for whom this war was ostensibly fought.

The inscription of names on the memorial has posed many taxonomic problems. While the VVMF spent months cross-checking and verifying statistics, there have been errors in the naming. There are at least fourteen and possibly as many as thirty-eight men who are still alive whose names are inscribed on the wall.²² How can this be resolved? To erase the names would leave a scar in the wall; if the names are etched out, these veterans will be categorized as the not-dead, doubly displaced within the war discourse. There have been several hundred names added to the memorial since it was first built (the initial number inscribed on the walls was 57,939), names that were held up previously for "technicalities" (including, in one case, a dispute over whether or not the men were killed in the "presidentially designated" war zone), their status now changed from "missing" or "lost" to classifiably dead.

The problems raised by the inscription of names on the memorial signifies, in many ways, the war's lack of closure. The unmanageability of 58,000 sets of statistics, the impossibility of knowing every detail (who died, when and where) in a war in which remains were often unidentifiable, prevents any kind of closure.²³ Names will continue to be added to the memorial; there is no definitive end to the addition of names. There has been considerable discussion of the fact that the names of the veterans who have died since the war (from causes stemming from it) are not included on the memorial—veterans who committed suicide, who died from complications from their exposure to Agent Orange. Are they not casualties of the war? The battles still being fought by the veterans foreclose any ending to the narrative of the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam Veteran: The Perennial Soldier

With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile, human body.

—Walter Benjamin²⁴

The incommunicability of the experience of the Vietnam War has been a primary narrative in the Vietnam veterans' discourse. It was precisely this incommunicability that rendered, among other things, the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial necessary. This incommunicability has been depicted as a silence rendered by an inconceivable kind of war, a war that fit no prior images of war.

While the Vietnam Veterans Memorial most obviously pays tribute to the memory of those who died during the war, it is a central icon for the veterans. It has been noted that the memorial has given them a place—one that recognizes their identities, a place at which to congregate and from which to speak. Hence, the memorial is as much about survival as it is about mourning the dead.

The construction of an identity for the veterans since their return from the war has become the most present and continuing narrative of the memorial. The central theme of this narrative is the way the veterans had been invisible and without voice before the memorial's construction and the subsequent interest in

discussing the war. Veterans have told innumerable stories of the hostility that greeted them upon their return from Vietnam, and there has been a noticeable lack of interest in the war in popular culture until recently—the direct result of an ambivalence toward the war due to an inability to fit it into traditional paradigms. The experience of the Vietnam War as *different* from all previous ones has made the process of narrativizing it particularly difficult.

Unlike World War II veterans, Vietnam veterans did not arrive home en masse for a celebration but one by one, without any welcome. Many of them ended up in underfunded and poorly staffed Veterans Administration hospitals. They were expected to put their war experiences behind them and to assimilate quickly back into society. That many were unable to do so resulted further in their marginalization—they were labeled social misfits and stereotyped as potentially dangerous men with a violence that threatened to erupt at any moment. According to George Swiers, a veteran,

The message sent from national leadership and embraced by the public was clear: Vietnam veterans were malcontents, liars, wackos, losers. Hollywood, ever bizarre in its efforts to mirror life, discovered a marketable villain. *Kojak*, *Ironside*, and the friendly folks at *Hawaii Five-O* confronted crazed, heroin-addicted veterans with the regularity and enthusiasm Saturday morning heroes once dispensed with godless red savages. No grade-B melodrama was complete without its standard vet—a psychotic, axe-wielding rapist every bit as insulting as another one-time creature of Hollywood’s imagination, the shiftless, lazy, and wide-eyed black.²⁵

The portrayal of the veteran as a psychopath was a kind of scapegoating that absolved the American public of complicity and allowed the master narrative of American military power to stand. For Thomas Myers, “To ask the veteran to play the villain is a way to quiet a loud memory, to rewrite a new national narrative so that it can be joined, without disturbance, to older ones.”²⁶ Implied within these conflicting narratives is the question of whether or not the veterans are to be perceived as victims or complicit with the war: “Vets are in an ambiguous situation—they were the agents and the victims of a particular kind of violence. That is the source of a pain that almost no one else can understand,” writes Peter Marin.²⁷ Ironically, the attempt to make them silent—in effect, to make them disappear—has resulted in the Vietnam veterans’ assumption of hybrid roles; they are both, yet neither, soldiers and civilians. At their demonstrations, many wear fatigues and comport the trappings of their status as soldiers.

While the marginalization of the Vietnam veterans has been acknowledged in the current discourse of healing and forgiveness about the war, within the veterans’ community another group is struggling against an imposed silence: the women veterans. There were eight women military nurses and three women Red Cross workers killed in Vietnam. It is estimated that 7,500 military women and an almost equal number of civilian women (many of whom were nurses) served

in Vietnam.²⁸ Upon their return, these women were not only subject to the same difficulties as the veterans but were also excluded from the veteran community. Several have since revealed how they kept their war experience a secret, never telling even their husbands that they had been in Vietnam. One has since recounted how she was not allowed to participate in a veterans' protest march because male veterans thought that "Nixon and the network news reporters might think we're swelling the ranks with non-vets."²⁹

These women veterans were thus doubly displaced, unable to speak as veterans or as women. Several are presently raising funds to place an intentionally "apolitical" statue of a woman near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. In August 1990, a design competition for the memorial, to be located just south of the wall, was announced, and the fundraising of the \$3.5 million to construct the memorial continues.³⁰ The two women who direct the Vietnam Womens Memorial Project, Diane Evans and Donna Marie Boulay, told Elizabeth Hess that it is Hart's depiction of three men who make the absence of women so visible; they would not have initiated the project had Lin's memorial stood alone.³¹

This double displacement of the women veterans is related to a larger discourse concerning masculine identity in the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War is seen as a site where American masculinity was lost, and the rehabilitation of the Vietnam veteran is thus heavily coded as a reinscription of American masculinity.³² Because they were denied the traditional praise afforded veterans, Vietnam veterans have a particularly complex collective identity—one that ironically has been strengthened by their marginalization. The pain and suffering that they experienced since the war continues to be read as masculine, and the inclusion of women into that discourse of remorse and anger is seen as a dilution of its intensity and a threat to the rehabilitation of that masculinity.³³

The primary narrative of the veterans in the discourses surrounding the memorial is not their war experience but their mistreatment since the war. This narrative takes the form of a combat story in which the enemy has been transposed from the North Vietnamese to the antiwar movement to the callous American people, the Veterans Administration, and the government.

The story of the struggle to build the memorial also takes on this combat form. In his book *To Heal a Nation* (later a TV movie), veteran Jan Scruggs, who conceived the memorial and was the main force behind its being built, equates the *battle* waged by the veterans to have the memorial built by Veterans Day, 1982, with the battles of Vietnam: "Some 58,000 GIs were, in death, what they had been in life: pawns of Washington politics" (93). Scruggs is the lone fighter for much of this story (the idea of building a memorial when veterans did not have adequate support services was initially thought ludicrous by many veterans), and his determination becomes exemplary for all veterans. In his story, "grunts"—those who experienced the "real" war of combat—battle the establishment and win.

There is a powerful kind of closure here. The one story for which the memorial appears to offer resolution is that of the shame felt by veterans for having fought in an unpopular war.

One has to question the sudden rush to welcome home veterans ten years after the war had ended, the clamoring of the media to cover the fallout of the Vietnam War after ignoring it for years. While the closure for the veterans of their period of estrangement seems not only just but long overdue, its implications when transferred into mainstream discourse about the memorial, and into history, can become insidious. When, for instance, *Newsweek* printed a story entitled “Honoring Vietnam Veterans—At Last” in 1982, the desire not only to rectify but to *forget* the mistreatment of the veterans was obvious. To forget this episode in American history is not only to negate the ongoing struggles of veterans—those who are ill or dying due to their exposure to Agent Orange, for example—but also to cease to examine the reasons why these men and women had been scapegoated. This denial, in turn, is irrevocably tied to the question of the rupture in public commemoration caused by the Vietnam War’s difference from other wars, and the possible lessons to be learned from it.

The Healing Wound

The metaphor of the healing wound that has prevailed in descriptions of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and its effect is a bodily metaphor. It evokes many different bodies—the bodies of the Vietnam War dead, the bodies of the veterans, and the body of the American public. The memorial is seen as representing a wound in the process of healing, one that will leave a smooth scar in the earth. This wound in turn represents the process of memory; its healing is the process of remembering and commemorating the war. To dis-member is to fragment a body and its memory; to remember is to make a body complete.

In war, the “tiny, fragile, human body” becomes subject to dismemberment, to a kind of “antimemory.” The absence of these bodies—obliterated, entombed—is both eclipsed and invoked by the names on the memorial’s walls. The names act as surrogates for the bodies (Lin says that she conceptualizes the dead as being in a space behind the wall). Yet the bodies of the living Vietnam veterans have not been erased of memory. Rather, they embody personal and cultural memory; their bodies are those of *survivors*. History has a problematic relationship to the lived body of the individual who participated in it; in fact, it operates more efficiently when survivors are no longer alive. These veterans’ bodies—dressed in fatigues, scarred and disabled, contaminated by toxins—refuse to let historical narratives of completion stand.³⁴ Memories of the war have been deeply encoded in them, marked literally and figuratively in their flesh—one of the most tragic

aftermaths of the war is the genetic deformities that Agent Orange has caused in veterans' children.

If the bodies of the surviving veterans resist the closure of history, they provide a perceptible site for a continual remembering of the war's effect. Elaine Scarry describes how wounded casualties function as vehicles for memorialization, noting that the act of injuring is not only "the means by which a winner and loser are arrived at" but a "*means of providing a record of its own activity*" (emphasis mine).³⁵ The wound gives evidence of the act of injuring, for Scarry the primary object of war.

The veterans' healing process has involved the closure of individual and collective narratives of the war. But when the healing process is ascribed to a nation, the effect is to efface the individual bodies also involved in that process. When a nation heals a wound, the wounds of individuals are subsumed in its healing. Scarry writes that the common metaphor of an army as a single body works to deny the body of the individual soldier. Yet the soldier's body that Scarry describes is the wounded body of the conventional army—the army of fronts, rears, flanks, and arteries. In the Vietnam War the army was not, from the beginning, a whole body but a body of confused signals, of infiltrated bases, mistaken identities and a confusion of allies and enemy. In this already fragmented body, remembering (that is, the wholeness of the body) is highly problematic.³⁶

The Memorial as Shrine

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial has been the subject of an extraordinary outpouring of sentiment since it was built. Over 150,000 people attended its dedication ceremony, and some days as many as 20,000 people walk by its walls. It is presently the most visited site on the Washington Mall. The memorial has taken on all of the trappings of a religious shrine—people bring personal artifacts to leave at the wall as offerings; coffee-table books of photography document the experiences of visitors as representing a collective recovery from the war. It has also spawned the design or construction of at least 150 other memorials, including the women veterans' memorial and a memorial to the veterans of the Korean War.³⁷

This rush to embrace the memorial as a cultural symbol reveals not only the relief of voicing a history that has been taboo but also a desire to reinscribe that history. The black granite walls of the memorial act as a screen for myriad cultural projections; as a site for contemplation, it is easily appropriated for diverse interpretations of the war and of the experience of those who died in it. To the veterans, the wall is an atonement for their treatment since the war; to the families and friends of those who died, it is an official recognition of their sorrow and an



FIGURE 1. Memorial items left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Photo: Wendy Watriss.

opportunity to express a grief that was not previously sanctioned; to others, it is either a profound antiwar statement or an opportunity to rewrite the history of the war to make it fit more neatly into the master narrative of American imperialism.

The memorial's popularity must thus be seen in the context of a very active scripting and rescripting of the war and as an integral component of the recently emerged Vietnam War nostalgia industry. This nostalgia is not confined to those who wish to return to the intensity of wartime; it is also the media's nostalgia for its own moment of moral power—the Vietnam War was, shall we not forget, very good television. For Michael Clark, the media nostalgia campaign “healed over the wounds that had refused to close for ten years with a balm of nostalgia, and transformed guilt and doubt into duty and pride. And with a triumphant flourish it offered us the spectacle of its most successful creation, the veterans who will fight the next war.”³⁸ The rush to reexamine the Vietnam War is, inevitably, a desire to rescript current political events and to reinscribe a narrative of American imperialism, most obviously in Central America and the Persian Gulf.

As the healing process of the Vietnam War is transformed into spectacle and commodity, a complex nostalgia industry has grown. Numerous magazines that reexamine and recount Vietnam War experiences have emerged; the merchandizing of Frederick Hart's statue (which includes posters, T-shirts, a Franklin Mint miniature, and a plastic model kit) generates about \$50,000 a year, half of

which goes to the VVMF and half to Hart; and travel agencies are marketing tours to Indochina for veterans.³⁹ In the hawkish *Vietnam* magazine, between articles that reexamine incidents in the war, advertisements display a variety of Vietnam War products: the Vietnam War Commemorative Combat Shotgun, the Vietnam Veterans Trivia Game, Vietnam War medallions, posters, T-shirts, and calendars. Needless to say, the Vietnam War is also now big business in both television drama and Hollywood movies.

While Maya Lin's memorial has yet to be made into a marketable reproduction, it has functioned as a catalyst for much of this nostalgia. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is the subject of no fewer than six books, three of which are photography books.⁴⁰ The memorial has tapped into a reservoir of need to express in public the pain of this war, a desire to transfer private memories into a collective experience. The personal artifacts that have been left at the memorial—photographs, letters, teddy bears, MIA/POW bracelets, clothes, medals of honor—are offered up as testimony, transposed from personal to cultural artifacts, to bear witness to pain suffered (fig. 1). Relinquished before the wall, they tell many stories:

We did what we could but it was not enough because I found you here. You are not just a name on this wall. You are alive. You are blood on my hands. You are screams in my ears. You are eyes in my soul. I told you you'd be all right, but I lied, and please forgive me. I see your face in my son, I can't bear the thought. You told me about your wife, your kids, your girl, your mother. And then you died. Your pain is mine. I'll never forget your face. I can't. You are still alive.

I didn't want a monument, not even one as sober as that vast black wall of broken lives. I didn't want a postage stamp. I didn't want a road beside the Delaware River with a sign proclaiming: Vietnam Veterans Memorial Highway. What I wanted was a simple recognition of the limits of our power as a nation to inflict our will on others. What I wanted was an understanding that the world is neither black-and-white nor ours. What I wanted was an end to monuments.⁴¹

Many of these letters are addressed not to visitors but to the dead (very similar to the texts of the AIDS quilt). They are messages for the dead that are intended to be shared as cultural memory.

The National Park Service, which is now in charge of maintaining the memorial, is compiling an archive of the materials left at the memorial and is storing them at the Museum and Archaeological Regional Storage facility (MARS). Originally, the Park Service classified these objects as "lost and found." Later, Park Service officials realized the artifacts had been left intentionally, and they began to save them. The objects thus moved from the cultural status of being "lost" (without category) to *historical* artifacts. They have now even been transposed into artistic artifacts; the curator of the collection at MARS writes:

These are no longer objects at the Wall, they are communications, icons possessing a substructure of underpinning emotion. They are the products of culture, in all its complexi-

ties. They are the products of individual selection. With each object we are in the presence of a work of art of individual contemplation. The thing itself does not overwhelm our attention since these are objects that are common and expendable. At the Wall they have become unique and irreplaceable, and yes, mysterious.⁴²

Labeled “mysterious” and coded as original works of art, these objects are given value and authorship. Many were left anonymously, or simply signed with first names, and some of those who left them have since been traced by the media and book authors. This attempt to tie these objects and letters to their creators reveals again the shifting realms of personal and cultural memory. Assigned authorship and placed in an historical archive, the objects are pulled from cultural memory—a discursive field in which they are presented to be shared and to participate in the memories of others—and made into aesthetic and historical objects. More than 5,000 of them have been left at the memorial and catalogued, tagged, and stored at MARS.

The ritual of leaving something behind can be seen as an active participation in the accrual of many histories; the archiving of these artifacts also subsumes them within history. Does this archive represent the shifting territory between history and cultural memory? Michel Foucault has defined the archive as the “law of what can be said” and a “system of enunciability.”⁴³ Certainly, the traditional archive is a limited system of enunciation with a narrative function, one that prescribes the limits of history and defines what will and will not be preserved. The archive of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, while regulated by the government, is constituted differently than many archives. There are no regulations for what is included in the archive; it contains all artifacts left at the memorial that have been personalized in some way. This collection will have a primary effect on future interpretations of the Vietnam War and of how the country dealt with its memory. Couched within an official history—that is, in a government institution—the narratives inscribed in these letters to the dead will continue to reassert strands of cultural memory that disrupt historical narratives.

The Construction of a History

The walls of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial act as a screen for many projections about the history of the Vietnam War and its aftermath. Beyond its foregrounding of individual names and the implicit condemnation of war in that listing, the memorial does not take a stand on the specific controversies about and contested versions of the Vietnam War. It has nevertheless catalyzed the writing of a particular narrative of the war, precisely because its emphasis on the veterans and war dead has allowed the discourse of heroism, sacrifice, and honor to resurface. As Thomas Myers has written, “A block of stone may be a powerful text

with many subtexts, or it may be an inert simplification of historical reality that assuages memory—it depends on the readership” (192).

Much of the current embrace of the memorial smacks of historical revisionism. The memorial's placement on the Washington Mall inscribes it within a nationalist discourse, restricting in many ways the discourse of memory it can provide. In the interim between the end of the war and the positioning of the memorial as a national wailing wall, there has also been plenty of opportunity for memories and culpability to fade. It is rarely noted that in none of the discussion surrounding the memorial are the Vietnamese people ever mentioned. This is not a memorial to their loss; it does not even recognize that loss. They cannot even be named in the context of the Mall. Key players in this historical drama such as Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Henry Kissinger also remain noticeably absent in the memorial discourse. In the context of this outpouring of grief, the intricate reasons *why* the lives represented by the inscribed names were lost in vain remain absent.

Thus, remembering is in itself a form of forgetting. Does the remembrance of the battles fought by the veterans in Vietnam and at home necessarily eclipse and screen out any acknowledgment of the war's effect on the Vietnamese, in whose country the war was fought? Does the process of public commemoration of a war necessitate choosing sides?⁴⁴

The act of commemoration is a legitimation process, one that Ehrenhaus notes “entails reaffirming the legitimacy of purpose for which a community has issued its call for sacrifice” (97). If that purpose has been highly contested, the act of commemoration would seem to necessitate the choice of one narrative over another. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial has spawned two very different kinds of remembrance: one a retrenched historical narrative that attempts to rewrite the Vietnam War in a way that reinscribes American imperialism and the masculinity of the American soldier, the other a textured and complex discourse of remembrance that has allowed the Americans affected by this war—the veterans, their families, and the families and friends of the war dead—to speak of loss, pain, and futility. The screens of the memorial thus act as screen memories in two senses: they attempt to conceal and to offer themselves as the primary narrative, while they provide a screen for projections of a multitude of memories and individual interpretations.⁴⁵

The incommunicability of Vietnam War experience has been mollified by the communicability of the experience of its memorial. Yet, we cannot understand the role played by this memorial, by its *difference* as a memorial, unless we understand what made the war it memorializes different. In the Vietnam War, the standard definitions of warfare had no meaning. This was a war in which the enemy was not always known, and in which master narratives of “free” world versus communism and first-world technology versus third-world “peasantry” were no longer credible. The rupture in history made by the Vietnam War is not only of

the experience of warfare and the ability of this country to impose its will on others; it is a rupture in how we perceive war. It now appears that there are desperate attempts to conceal and suture that rupture, and to reinscribe in wars such as the recent Persian Gulf War these narratives of American technological superiority, masculinity, and imperial power. Couched within nationalist discourse yet the catalyst for a rich and diverse discourse on the tragic and futile aspects of war, the memorial stands in a precarious space between these opposing discourses.

Notes

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1. Peter Ehrenhaus, "Commemorating the Unwon War: On *Not* Remembering Vietnam," *Journal of Communication* 39, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 96. Subsequent citations will be given in parentheses in the text.
2. Attempts to give the Persian Gulf War a simple and neat narrative reinscribing master narratives of World War II—in which, for example, the United States liberates a desperate and weak country imperiled by a dangerous tyrant—make it clear that the disruptive and fragmentary narrative of the Vietnam War is not due simply to its situation in the late twentieth century. Current government and military administrations learned many things from the Vietnam War: the importance of the kind of finely tuned war narrative the Vietnam War lacked, as well as the need for military censorship and for quickly putting American lives at stake to foreclose debate on the war.
3. Each row contains five names, with space at the end of each line where additional names have been added. There is a system of distinguishing the names of the unverified dead from the classifiably dead. Each name is preceded by a diamond shape; in the case of the 1,300 POW/MIAs, the name is preceded by a small cross that is then changed to a diamond in the event that the remains of that person are identified. If that MIA should return alive, this symbol would be changed to a circle (but, as one volunteer told me at the memorial, "We don't have any circles yet").
4. Arthur C. Danto, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *The Nation*, 31 August 1985, 152.
5. Charles L. Griswold, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thoughts on Political Iconography," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Summer 1986): 689.
6. I do not mean to imply that these are hard-and-fast rules. There are many World War I and World War II memorials in Europe, for instance, that list the dead. (For example, memorial designer Maya Lin was influenced in her design by a memorial in Thiepval, France, for the dead of the Somme offensive in World War I, which consists of a great arch inscribed with 73,000 names.) These are, however, memorials and not monuments, albeit memorials of a victorious cause. Their emphasis is thus not on celebrating victory as much as mourning the price in lives of that victory.
7. Tom Wolfe, "Art Disputes War: The Battle of the Vietnam Memorial," *Washington Post*, 13 October 1982, B4.

8. Carl Andre's work, which consists of thirty-six large boulders positioned on a lawn near Hartford's city hall, is widely regarded with derision by residents as a symbol of the misguided judgments of their city government. Richard Serra's now notorious *Tilted Arc*, an oppressive, leaning slab of Cor-Ten steel that bisected the equally inhospitable Federal Plaza in New York, was dismantled in March 1989, after several years of controversy, when workers in the Federal Building petitioned to have it removed. See Kenneth Baker, "Andre in Retrospect," *Art in America*, April 1980; Patricia C. Phillips, "Forum: Something There Is That Doesn't Love a Wall," *Artforum*, Summer 1985; Robert Storr, "'Tilted Arc': Enemy of the People?" *Art in America*, September 1985.
9. See Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wash., 1983). The site-specificity of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is crucial to its position as both subversive of and continuous within the nationalist discourse of the Mall. Maya Lin calls herself "super site-specific" and did not decide on the final design until she visited the site. However, a traveling version of the wall has toured the country with powerful effect. This effect would seem to be the result of the traveling wall's reference of the site-specific wall, in addition to the power evoked by the inscribed names in whatever location.
10. These attacks came mostly from a certain faction of veterans and members of the "New Right," including veteran Tom Carhart, who had been involved in the VVMF; Phyllis Schaflly; and millionaire Ross Perot, who had contributed the money for the design contest.
11. Tom Carhart, quoted in Elizabeth Hess, "Vietnam: Memorials of Misfortune," in *Unwinding the Vietnam War: From War into Peace*, ed. Reese Williams (Seattle, 1987), 265. This argument against the color black was quickly ended by Gen. George Price, who is black, who said at a meeting concerning the memorial, "Black is not the color of shame. I am tired of hearing it called such by you. Color meant nothing on the battlefields of Korea and Vietnam. We are all equal in combat. Color should mean nothing now"; quoted in Jan C. Scruggs and Joel Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (New York, 1985). Subsequent citations for both these texts will be given in parentheses in the text.
12. "Stop that Monument," *National Review*, 18 September 1981, 1064. What the editors of *National Review* did not take into account in their interpretation of the memorial's V as the peace sign is the malleability of this particular symbol, one that was easily appropriated by Richard Nixon, for instance, with both hands waving in the air, to symbolize his personal political victory. The memorial actually seems to take on many shapes in the innumerable photographs of it. It could conceivably be seen as evoking the shape of an airplane's wings, although I have never heard this comparison made. Lin has stated that she never saw it as a V but as a circle.
13. Michael Sorkin, "What Happens When a Woman Designs a War Monument?" *Vogue*, May 1983, 122.
14. Maya Lin, quoted in "America Remembers: Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *National Geographic* 167, no. 5 (May 1985): 557.
15. From "An Interview with Maya Lin," in Williams, *Unwinding the Vietnam War*, 271.
16. Frederick Hart was reportedly paid more than ten times the \$20,000 fee that Maya Lin received for her design from the same fund. See Peter Tauber, "Monument Maker," *New York Times Magazine*, 24 February 1991, 53.
17. From "An Interview with Frederick Hart," in Williams, *Unwinding the Vietnam War*, 274.
18. It is interesting to note that this status is heavily dependent on modern codes of

realism. The Marine Corps War Memorial is based on a famous Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph taken by photojournalist Joe Rosenthal, and thus coded as a moment captured from reality. Of the six men in the photograph, three survived the war and posed for sculptor Felix W. de Weldon. However, the famous Rosenthal photograph was, in fact, a restaging of the actual event of the flag raising. See Marvin Heiferman, "One Nation, Chiseled in Pictures: The Monumental Nature of American Photography," in "Lee Friedlander: American Monuments," *The Archive* (Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, no. 25, n.d.); and the National Parks Service brochure of the United States Marine Corps War Memorial.

19. Lin told *National Geographic*, "Later, when I visited, I searched out the name of a friend's father. I touched it and I cried. I was another visitor, and I was reacting as I had designed it"; "America Remembers," 557.
20. Since the construction of both of these memorials, there have been approximately 150 memorials to the Vietnam veterans built or proposed around the country. Elizabeth Hess notes that "for the most part, it is Frederick Hart, rather than Maya Lin, who has managed to set (conservative) aesthetic and ideological precedents for the cloning of the Vietnam memorial. A strong desire to diminish, rather than engage the radical elements in Lin's design is evident in the majority of these new memorials"; "Vietnam," 275. However, Lin has continued in her career to have influence on the aesthetics of memorials. She recently designed a civil rights memorial for the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama, which adds water to the motif of names inscribed on a wall; people touch the names of those martyred in the civil rights movement as water runs over the inscriptions.
21. William Broyles, Jr., "Remembering a War We Want to Forget," *Newsweek*, 22 November 1982, 82.
22. See Associated Press, "38 Living Veterans May Be on Memorial," *San Jose Mercury News*, 15 February 1991, 6F. The reason for this error appears to be the result of faulty record keeping by the Defense Department and a 1973 fire that destroyed many records. Robert Doubek, a cofounder of the VVMF, decided to include thirty-eight names of casualties for which there were incomplete records because he felt it was better to err by inclusion rather than omission.
23. It has been barely noted in the media, for instance, that the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier for the Vietnam War, which was approved by Congress in 1974, was left empty and uninscribed until 1984, when some publicity drew attention to the situation. The ostensible reason for this delay was, according to the army, that there were no unidentifiable remains. (In fact, the army had several unidentified remains that they were refusing, under some pressure from MIA families, to finally classify as such.) Technology's ability to decipher the individual status of the body, and hence achieve a kind of closure, is thus at stake here. See Ehrenhaus, "Commemorating the Unwon War," 105.
24. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1969), 84.
25. George Swiers, "'Demented Vets' and Other Myths—The Moral Obligation of Veterans," in *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons From a War*, ed. Harrison Salisbury (New York, 1984), 198.
26. Thomas Myers, *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam* (New York, 1988), 190. Subsequent citations will be given in parentheses in the text.
27. Peter Marin, "Conclusion," in Salisbury, *Vietnam Reconsidered*, 213.
28. See Keith Walker, *A Piece of My Heart: The Stories of Twenty-Six Women Who Served in Vietnam* (Novato, Calif., 1985), 2.

29. Susan Wolf, "Women and Vietnam: Remembering in the 1980s," in Williams, *Unwinding the Vietnam War*, 245.
30. See Barbara Gamarekian, "Competition Opens on War Memorial," *New York Times*, 20 August 1990, A16.
31. Hess, "Vietnam," 276. Hence, the singular narrative of Hart's realist depiction is one of inclusion and exclusion. This would also account for why so much has been written about the ethnicity of the three men in the statue—one is obviously black, but the two others are ambiguous, leading some observers to call them Jewish or Hispanic. Not surprisingly, Lin is not happy with the potential addition of the women's statue. The congressional bill for the women's statue stipulates that it will be the last addition to the memorial, but according to *The Nation*, there are already other groups such as Air Force pilots, Navy seamen, and Native Americans who are demanding their own statues, as well as occasional attempts (including one at the time of the initial debate) to erect a flag in the center of the walls' V. See David Corn and Jefferson Morley, "Beltway Bandits," *The Nation*, 4 June 1988, 780. Corn and Morley, like many other commentators, have mistakenly assumed that these constituents feel left out of the wall. It would appear, however, that it is Hart's statue that makes them feel excluded.
32. See Susan Jeffords' extensive study, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989).
33. The Vietnamese have been portrayed metaphorically in feminine terms in many Vietnam War narratives. In two recent Hollywood films, *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and *Casualties of War* (1989), for instance, a Vietnamese woman comes to symbolize Vietnam in general. The absence of Vietnamese male protagonists in American Vietnam War films is notable.
34. The film *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), based on veteran Ron Kovic's autobiography, foregrounds the veteran body. Between the requisite scenes of Kovic as a patriotic, young American and his awakening as an antiwar activist, the film concentrates on the painful details of his life as a paraplegic—the wounded veteran body, impotent, with uncontrollable bodily fluids, attempting to heal in a squalid VA hospital.
35. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York, 1985), 116.
36. The high proportion of American soldiers killed by "friendly fire" in the Persian Gulf War also undermines the traditional notion of the conventional army moving forward as a singular body. If you can be killed so easily by friendly fire, then does it matter if you know who the enemy is or not?
37. Most of these memorials have conventional realist designs, but several stand out in their innovative approaches to commemoration. One project in Wisconsin includes a hundred-acre memorial park and museum for artifacts and memorabilia, and other projects include memorial trees and time capsules. See Elizabeth Hess, "Vietnam"; and Ben A. Franklin, "143 Vietnam Memorials, Vast and Small, Rising Around Nation," *New York Times*, 9 November 1986, 26. The New York Veterans Memorial in downtown Manhattan, like the memorial in Washington, also privileges text. It consists of a wall of glass brick onto which are inscribed quotes from letters written by veterans as well as quotes from newspapers and politicians.
38. Michael Clark, "Remembering Vietnam," *Cultural Critique* 3 (Spring 1986): 49.
39. Joshua Hammer, "Cashing in on Vietnam," *Newsweek*, 16 January 1989, 39. Evidence of the potential marketing power of the wall can be found in the rather perverse recent campaigns of two companies, Coors Brewing Company and Service Corporation International, a funeral and cemetery conglomerate. Both have built their own

- “moving” walls for marketing purposes, against the wishes of the veterans in charge of the traveling memorial. See Michelle Guido, “A Wall Divided by Commercialism,” *San Jose Mercury News*, 14 March 1991, 1A.
40. In addition to Scruggs’s book, these are: Saul Lopes, ed., *The Wall: Images and Offerings from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (New York, 1987); Lydia Fish, *The Last Firebase: A Guide to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Shippensburg, Pa., 1987); Michael Katakis, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (New York, 1988); Duncan Spencer, *Facing the Wall: Americans at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (New York, 1986); and Laura Palmer, *Shrapnel in the Heart: Letters and Remembrances from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (New York, 1988).
 41. See Lopes, *The Wall*, 56, 121.
 42. David Guynes, quoted in Fish, *Last Firebase*, 54.
 43. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan (New York, 1972), 129.
 44. That the Vietnamese are excluded from this discourse about the war, and represented only as anonymous figures in contemporary Vietnam War films, points of course to the central question of why this war was fought. If the remembrance of the war in the United States excludes the Vietnamese, then perhaps it points to the real reason for the war, not to “save” a foreign country but to retain the image of a world power for the United States. Hannah Arendt has written, “This enterprise was exclusively guided by the needs of a superpower to create for itself an *image* which would *convince* the world that it was indeed ‘the mightiest power on earth’”; see “Home to Roost: A Bicentennial Address,” *New York Review of Books* 22, no. 11 (26 June 1976): 4. The parallels to the recent Persian Gulf War are painfully obvious. The reiteration in popular-culture Vietnam War representations that the war was not about Vietnam but about us (for instance, the protagonist in *Platoon* says that “we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves—and the enemy was in us”) also effaces the Vietnamese and the devastation of their country.
 45. The limitations of this memory in the nationalist context became particularly clear in the recent appropriations of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the antiwar movement of the Persian Gulf War. As testament to the iconic status of the memorial as a statement about the human costs of war, there were several “Desert Storm Memorial Walls” in evidence at antiwar rallies. Here, the inscription of ten to twenty American names seemed ludicrous in light of reports that hundreds of thousands of Iraqis were being killed. At the University of California, Santa Cruz, where the student antiwar movement constructed a memorial wall at the base of campus, someone responded by scrawling “85,000 to 100,000 Iraqis but Who’s Counting, Proud Yet?” in spraypaint after the short list of American names. It would seem then that this project backfired. Appropriations of the memorial for the Persian Gulf War thus demonstrated both the iconic power of the memorial as well as its limitations.