

# Writing Experience: The Vietnam Veteran and his literary Voice\*

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## Abstract

The way Vietnam War veterans write about their war experiences, the reasons that led them to write about them and the meaning of writing such accounts are the main purpose presented in this article. The vets' accounts are often the result of what they saw, lived and suffered because of the Vietnam War. Therefore, historical and cultural approaches are used to show the importance of this historical moment in the characters' lives. The vets' accounts must be considered a legacy of great significance to understand the war narratives through their historical context and to understand cultural and intellectual history through literature. Finally, the article intends to show that the representation of the vets' experiences in war narratives is also the result of the vets' strength to transform the traumas of their war experiences into something meaningful.

## Keywords

Vietnam veteran; post-war; war experience; war literature

## Resumo

A forma como os veteranos da Guerra do Vietnã escrevem sobre suas experiências, as razões que os levaram a escrever sobre elas e o significado de escrever tais relatos é a proposta principal apresentada neste artigo. Os relatos dos veteranos são normalmente o resultado do que eles viram, viveram e sofreram por causa da guerra. Portanto, abordagens históricas e culturais são usadas para mostrar a importância desse momento histórico na vida dos personagens. Os romances que os veteranos escreveram devem ser considerados um legado significativo para compreender a narrativa de guerra por meio do contexto histórico e entender a história intelectual e cultural através da literatura. Desse modo, este artigo busca demonstrar que a representação da experiência dos veteranos nas narrativas de guerra é também uma demonstração do esforço do soldado escritor para transformar os traumas de suas experiências de guerra em algo significativo.

## Palavras-chave

Veterano do Vietnã; pós- guerra; experiência de guerra; literatura de guerra

*It took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did. The problem was that you didn't always know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later, that a lot of it never made it in at all, it just stayed stored there in your eyes.*

(Michael Herr, *Dispatches*)

TENSIONS BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION HAVE OFTEN MARKED the discussions related to the Vietnam War veterans' experiences narrated in their novels. The process vets undergo to write about their war experiences have not gone unnoticed either, and one of the reasons that makes the veteran writers so unique is because their "facts are tangled up" in their "personal experiences" (LOMPERIS, 1987, p. 42). Thus, everything the veteran writers saw, lived and suffered because of Vietnam, became somehow the account of their traumatic memories. Nevertheless, be their personal accounts fact or fiction, the vets did write about their war experiences, and the intersection between the historical moment they lived during the Vietnam period and the literature they have produced as consequence of the war is something that cannot be ignored. The vets' literary production is, among many other things, the representation of their traumatic memories. Therefore, the Vietnam War narratives are better understood when history and literature work together. Although the vets' experiences were, in a broader view, very similar, there are particularities, facts that belong to each one of them, and these facts are often registered as their own literary voices. The way Vietnam War veterans write about their war experiences, the reasons that led them to write about them and the meaning of writing such accounts are the main purpose presented here.

The literary voices of Vietnam War veterans, therefore, show the representation of history as a postmodernist work <sup>1</sup> and that history cannot be understood simply as a "linear progression of events" (TYSSON, 2006, p. 283). The relationship between history and literature is something that cannot be avoided. When working together, literature and history, generate a "movement that would destabilize our overly settled

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<sup>1</sup> The term postmodern literature is used to describe certain characteristics of post-World War II literature (relying heavily, for example, on fragmentation, paradox, questionable narrators, etc.) and a reaction against Enlightenment ideas implicit in Modernist literature.

Postmodern literature, like postmodernism as a whole, is hard to define and there is little agreement on the exact characteristics, scope, and importance of postmodern literature. But as is often the case with artistic movements, postmodern literature is commonly defined in relation to its precursor. For example, a postmodern literary work tends not to conclude with the neatly tied-up ending as is often found in modernist literature, but often parodies it. Postmodern authors tend to celebrate chance over craft, and further employ metafiction to undermine the writer's authority. Another characteristic of postmodern literature is the questioning of distinctions between high and low culture through the use of pastiche, the combination of subjects and genres not previously deemed fit for literature.

conceptions of what literature and history are. It is one, too, that would define history broadly, not as a mere chronicle of facts and events but, rather, as a “thick description” of human reality, one that raises questions of interest to anthropologists and sociologists, as well as those posed by traditional historians.” (THOMAS, 1991, p. 226)

Thomas understands that a work of art is a “kind of historical document,” and literature is not just of anthropological interest, but reveals the true tendencies of history. On the other hand, critics “have come to wonder whether the truth about what really happened can ever be purely and objectively known. They are less likely to see history as being linear and progressive, as something developing toward the present” (THOMAS, 1991, p. 228).

When literature and history work together the solid notion of their concept is shaken. The intersection between literature and history suggests a “new” concept which “involves the transfer of literary interest from the literary work itself to the literary work grasped in a historical context: as a result, the new construct that is the object of literary interest is, in fact, the complex interrelations between text and context” (CULLER, 2000, p. 288). Therefore, the historical text characterizes history extensively, not simply as an account of facts and events, but it also helps to explain human behavior and the context in which this behavior is inserted. Consequently, the text becomes not just meaningful to the reader, but also interesting.

The reasons why Vietnam War veterans write about their war experiences are wide and complex. Loren Baritz, a historian and former provost at the University of Massachusetts, in his book about the Vietnam War called *Backfire*, claims that he writes about the Vietnam War to “clarify American culture.” He understands that the Vietnam War “enlarged aspects of some of the ways” in which “Americans think and act” (BARITZ, 1985, p.11). Hence, the veterans’ interest to write about what they lived during the war period is much more than just registers of a historical war moment, and the reports of their war experiences, whether fictional or not, go deeper than the comprehension of those – journalist and the media in general – who were not directly involved in the Vietnam War.

Many soldiers claim that they are the only ones who can really tell us what it means to be haunted by the traumatic memories caused by the war. Ron Kovic, for instance, who served two tours of duty during the Vietnam War, was paralyzed from the “chest down” in combat in 1968, and has been in a wheelchair ever since. In his classic antiwar narrative, *Born on the Fourth of July*, he declares some of his hope for writing

such a book: “I wanted people to know what it really meant to be in a war -- to be shot and wounded, to be fighting for my life on the intensive care ward -- not the myth we had grown up believing” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 3). Kovic uses his writing to teach people about the truth that lay behind the war and also to show how destructive the consequences of a war can be. Kovic, however, understands that the American nation is somehow manipulated by a myth that persuades Americans to support the war, as if it was something necessary, a duty that must be done for the good of humanity. Baritz explains the myth: “in countless ways Americans know in their gut – the only place myths can live – that we have been chosen to lead the world in public morality and to instruct it in political virtue. We believe that our own domestic goodness results in strength adequate to destroy our opponents who, by definition, are enemies of virtue, freedom and God.” (BARITZ, 1985, p. 27)

The American people are raised and educated to believe that supporting the United States and their wars is something worth doing. When supporting the U.S. they are demonstrating patriotism and faith in their nation. Fighting in a war is a matter of honor and pride. The American people believe that after donating and risking their lives in combat to defend America, back home, their nation will worry about their needs and future. On the other hand, Kovic’s post-war experiences have shown differently. Therefore, to make Americans reconsider the way they think and feel and to make them aware of the myth they have grown up believing in are some of the topics that Kovic writes about. He wants people to know that the myth Americans were taught is based on interests that favor not the American nation as a whole, but only the ones who have the power to control the war, the Establishment. According to Kovic “The American government pursues a policy of deception, distortion, manipulation, and denial, doing everything it can to hide from the American people their true intentions” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 3). Once the veterans and the American nation become aware of the deceptiveness and illusion imposed by the U.S. government on them, and when they understand the reasons that led them to believe in such a myth, one of the purposes of Kovic’s writing will then have a meaningful function.

Before Kovic came back home, he was in his second tour of duty serving the United States in Vietnam, and just after being shot on the battlefield, he also wrote about one of his war experiences when he was being treated in the battalion area. When he wrote these letters in the battalion area, his reasons to write were completely different, and because he had not faced the post-war reality yet, the American myth he

once believed, was still stuck in his heart and mind. Lying down in his hospital bed, he writes:

I am in this place for seven days and seven nights. I write notes on scraps of paper telling myself over and over that I will make it out of here, that I am going to live. I am squeezing rubber balls with my hands to try to get strong again. I write letters home to Mom and Dad. I dictate them to a woman named Lucy who is with the USO<sup>2</sup>. I am telling Mom and Dad that I am hurt pretty bad but I have done it for America and that it is worth it. I tell them not to worry. I will be home soon. (KOVIC, 1976, p. 26)

In this passage, Kovic keeps declaring to himself and through his writing that he hopes to get rid of the bad situation he is in. He wants to live and he fights for that, believing that things are under control and that there is no need to worry about anything else. When Kovic writes “notes on scraps of paper,” he is, actually, deliberately trying to break free from the physical and psychological pain of war. Analyzing the Vietnam war veterans, Appy explains that during the war, “the relative safety of rear areas, when quiet reflection is possible, they usually try to take their minds off the psychic and physical burdens of war with music, beer, letters from home, and diversions of one kind or another” (APPY, 1993, p. 207). Therefore, the battalion area was the place where Kovic started his first drafts as a Vietnam War writer and where the reality of war begun to mix up with the trauma of being damaged for the rest of his life. Even though, at that point, Kovic believed that he had done his quota and there was no need to keep thinking about possible problematic situations or anything that could cooperate to make the situation he was in get any worse.

After being seriously wounded Kovic returns home crippled, thinking that he would soon die, and back home he takes the decision to write about what he had experienced during the war time. He understands that his writing is a way to tell of what he saw and lived as a Vietnam War combatant. As Kovic explains: “I worked with an intensity and fury as if it was my last will and testament, and in many ways I felt it was” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 16). Kovic writes about his Vietnam War experiences to show that he “was not a victim, but someone who had been trying to move beyond his terrible tragedy and the terrible injustice of that war” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 18). Thus, Kovic’s fictionalized memoir is the register of his traumatic memories inherited from the Vietnam War. The war was a difficult time and Kovic lived the most terrifying

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<sup>2</sup> The United Service Organizations Inc. (USO) is a private, nonprofit organization that provides morale and recreational services to members of the U.S. military.

experiences of his life, not only on the battlefield, but also back home where his pain and sadness were constantly increased.

In a certain way, his narrative reveals his struggle to see a world without wars. Kovic's writing is an attempt "to say no to the insanity and madness" that wars generate. Hence, Kovic addresses his writing to the Vietnam veterans, reminding them that,

many of us promised ourselves long ago that we would never allow what happened to us in Vietnam to happen again. We had an obligation, a responsibility as citizens, as Americans, as human beings, to raise our voices in protest. We could never forget the hospitals, the intensive care wards, the wounded all around us fighting for their lives, those long and painful years after we came home, those lonely nights. There were lives to save on both sides, young men and women who would be disfigured and maimed, mothers and fathers who lose their sons and daughters, wives and loved ones who would suffer for decades to come if we did not do everything we could to stop the forward momentum of this madness. (KOVIC, 1976, p. 22)

Therefore, Kovic now writes to protest, to declare firmly and emphatically his objection to war. He writes to assert his complete disapproval of this act of mass destruction. He writes to feel more alive than he had ever felt before and to inspire others to protest in favor of peace. Thus, Kovic's writing works as a weapon to fight not just against the Vietnam War itself, but any other war, for wars have similar and disastrous consequences. And not to "allow what happened to us in Vietnam to happen again," as Kovic has noted, many were the vets who decided to speak up and to write about the causes for which they went to fight in Vietnam. Thus, to denounce the outrages the vets were part of became in Kovic's words, a "responsibility" and an "obligation" (KOVIC, 1976, p. 22). In March 2005 in one of his anti-war activities, Kovic stated:

The scar will always be there, a living reminder of that war, but it has also become something beautiful now, something of faith and hope and love. I have been given the opportunity to move through that dark night of the soul to a new shore, to gain an understanding, a knowledge, and entirely different vision. I now believe I have suffered for a reason and in many ways I have found that reason in my commitment to peace and nonviolence. My life has been a blessing in disguise, even with the pain and great difficulty that my physical disability continues to bring. It is a blessing to speak on behalf of peace, to be able to reach such a great number of people.<sup>3</sup>

After so many years since the end of the war Kovic did not stop protesting and writing against American wars. His fight continues and has also inspired other veterans and civilians to join his cause.

It was in 1971, almost at the end of the war, that the Vietnam veteran and first lieutenant William Crandell, of the 199<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade, Americal Division,

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<sup>3</sup> Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ron\\_Kovic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ron_Kovic)

understood his “responsibility” and “obligation”. In his “Open Statement” at the “Winter Soldier Investigation”<sup>4</sup> hearings, Crandell and many other veterans expressed their outrage:

We intend to tell who it was that gave us those orders; that created that policy; that set that standard of war bordering on full and final genocide. We intend to demonstrate that My Lai<sup>5</sup> was no unusual occurrence, other than, perhaps, the number of victims killed all in one place, all at one time, all by one platoon of us. We intend to show that the policies of Americal Division which inevitably resulted in My Lai were the policies of other Army and Marine Divisions as well. We intend to show that war crimes in Vietnam did not start in March 1968, or in the village of Son My or with one Lieutenant William Calley. We intend to indict those really responsible for My Lai, for Vietnam, for attempted genocide. (VIETNAM, 1972, p. 1)

The vets witnessed violent and shocking scenes during the war and their writings are a way to confess such events. The veterans write so as not to forget Vietnam and not to forget those who were responsible to teach them to destroy people’s lives in a deliberate way. So, the veteran literary voice can also work to remind the veterans that all crimes that happened during the war were the consequence of the policies and orders given by their own government.

Paul Simon recalls to Vietnam veterans the cause for which they were sent to Vietnam, “over the border they send us to kill and to fight for a cause they’ve long ago forgotten” (VIETNAM, 1972, p. 1). Yet, the vets did not forget the war causes and their narratives work to keep their minds fresh and alive. Even though the American government seems to have forgotten about the vets and Vietnam, the veterans’ literary voices work to justify and to explain that they are not the only ones responsible for the crimes committed during the war. The vets did not rule or promote the war; rather, during the war, the young soldiers were used and abused as much as possible, until the end of the war and, for many young soldiers, until the end of their lives. Thus, the veterans write to demand justice and the end of the judgments that blame them as the only culprits for war crimes, which in turn was the irresponsibility of the men who made the war. The vets write to make their testimonies alive, as if confessing what happened in the war was a duty that must be done, a task that cannot be forgotten.

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<sup>4</sup> The “Winter Soldier Investigation” was a media event sponsored by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) from January 31, 1971 – February 2, 1971. It was intended to publicize war crimes and atrocities by the United States Armed Forces and their allies in the Vietnam War.

<sup>5</sup> My Lai was the Vietnam War mass murder of 347–504 unarmed civilians in South Vietnam on March 16, 1968, by United States Army soldiers of “Charlie” Company of 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 11th Brigade of the Americal Division. Most of the victims were women, children (including babies), and elderly people. Many were raped, beaten, and tortured, and some of the bodies were later found to be mutilated. “Murder in the Name of War – My Lai.” BBC. July 20, 1998.

Michael Bibby claims that, “in testifying the soldiers seek to atone for their own complicity in the crimes of the war and to provide evidence of those crimes” (BIBBY, 1996, p. 151). Therefore, the veterans are not running away from their responsibilities in terms of assuming what happened in Vietnam. They do not want to escape from the crimes they committed during the war. Actually, the veterans have the need to confess, and they often do it through their narratives. They want to show through their stories everything that happened in Vietnam, as well as what happened after the war. They want to reveal their stories as real and accurate as possible, as a depiction of what they saw and lived during this outrageous period. One thing they really wanted to point out is the deceptiveness that lay behind war crimes. They want to confess what is true about Vietnam. As one of the representatives of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), Crandell explains:

We went to preserve the peace and our testimony will show that we have set all of Indochina aflame. We went to defend the Vietnamese people and our testimony will show that we are committing genocide against them. We went to fight for freedom and our testimony will show that we have turned Vietnam into a series of concentration camps.

We went to guarantee the right of self-determination to the people of South Vietnam and our testimony will show that we are forcing a corrupt and dictatorial government upon them. We went to work toward the brotherhood of man and our testimony will show that our strategy and tactics are permeated with racism. We went to protect America and our testimony will show why our country is being torn apart by what we are doing in Vietnam. (VIETNAM, 1972, p. 1).

Thus, the Vietnam veterans write because they do not want to let their testimonies die. They want to preserve their memories as long as they can to show the world the truth behind the crimes they were forced to commit and also to show how America turned its back on them because they were not able to win the war. Once the vets’ testimonies are remembered, once they have their experiences recollected in their war narratives, a social bond among veterans can easily happen. Thus, the vets’ writings, work in this way, as an alliance to keep them united to continue to fight for their rights, for peace and for a world without wars. The veterans have the need to tell their traumatic stories; when writing their war stories, these stories give them a strong “sense of survival” and the testimony of their traumatic experiences can work to give the vets’ narratives an “ethically pragmatic meaning in the context of saving the country” (BIBBY, 1996, p. 152). Thus, the vets’ accounts are also an attempt to turn their shame into heroic merit, even though they did not win the war.

Kali Tal, explains that, “one of the strongest themes in the literature of trauma is the urge to bear witness, to carry the tale of horror back to the hall of ‘normalcy’ and to



testify to the truth of the experience” (TAL, 1996, p. 120). It seems that what remains for the veteran writers is to write about their war experiences, which are often full of traumas. Moreover, Tal explains that “trauma is a transformative experience, and those who are transformed can never entirely return to a state of previous innocence” (TAL, 1996, p. 119). Hence, trauma plays an important role in Vietnam War narratives and it seems to be the biggest legacy of those who fought the Vietnam War. The literature of Vietnam often carries the vets’ trauma as if it was a kind of curse that uninterruptedly haunts their minds and souls.

The war survivor, as Lawrence Langer has noted, “does not travel a road from the normal to the bizarre back to the normal, but from the normal to the bizarre back to a normalcy so permeated by the bizarre encounter with atrocity that it can never be purified again. The two worlds haunt each other...” (LANGER, 1982, p. 88). When veterans write their war stories, they recall their experiences, aiming to give their accounts a meaning that has never existed before. They try to explain to themselves what happened in Vietnam and why they were responsible to bear the results of this war. They also never understood why people that were against the war were against the veterans. The vets’ narratives show that their lives were completely destroyed. Kovic for example, claims that “Vietnam had killed God” (LOMPERIS, 1987, p. 52). So, what was once pure and normal in Kovic and many other veterans’ lives can never be settled again. To be treated as strangers, dangerous and killers, are constant ways civilians found to label the vets, something that they will always need to deal with. The vets create, imagine and expose their traumas to tell the stories of the war they lived because of Vietnam. They made a sacrifice to fight for their country that most of us will never understand. It seems that Vietnam War writers somehow use their narratives and wish, through their writings, to get rid of their sorrows, frustrations and irreconcilable innocence, desires that probably will never come true.

There are many other Vietnam veteran writers carrying along with them many other Vietnam War stories. Each one of the veterans brought their own Vietnam back home and produced their personal accounts of the events they have lived during the war period. There are veterans that create their own characters to write about the Vietnam War experience, and this creation mixes the historical events of the war with fiction. But this fictional process of writing has raised, among vets, questions that confront the veracity of the stories the veterans approached, and matters on how to differentiate fact from fantasy have being widely discussed among the veteran writers. For David Winn,

“what is ‘real’ in Vietnam also becomes surreal” (LOMPERIS, 1987, p. 144). Remembered “facts” of the past are selected and can be chosen among many other facts, while other facts might not be remembered or even be excluded. When writing their accounts of the war, the vets pass through a process that involves a constant mixed up recollection of events. Thus, events can be confusing, paradoxical or contradictory, but it seems impossible to separate reality from fiction. O’ Brien has noted that, “in war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it’s safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true” (O’BRIEN, 1999, p. 88). Whether or not the war narratives are real accounts, the fact is, these Vietnam War narratives are “persistent and vivid. Even during its lean years, it does not let the vets forget the Vietnam War” (LOMPERIS, 1987, p. 44). Thus, the veterans write to remember their war experiences and also to keep their war recollections alive, no matter if their writing demands the use of imagination to create, for example, a new character or a story that did not really happen. Observing the vets writers and their narratives, O’ Brien states that, “it is as if the writers are being held prisoner by the facts of their own Vietnam experiences. The result is a closure of the imagination, predictability and melodrama, a narrowness of theme, and an unwillingness to stretch the fictive possibilities” (LOMPERIS, 1987, p. 46). Therefore, the veteran writer of the Vietnam War becomes a unique writer of a unique period, trapped into his own experiences, but always willing to reinvent the reality and the form of communicating the war experience.

In Hayden White’s “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” (1974), while comparing truth and history, White argues that truth in history is not equivalent to scientific truth. On account of history being written by different people, history cannot be scientific. Experiencing scientific knowledge, people cannot do the same with history unless they are living it at that moment. He explains that historical narration is artificial and it is not possible to be experimented on. The Vietnam War novelists Tim O’ Brien and Stephen Wright perceive a similar artificiality in Vietnam War narratives. For them, “imagination was the writer’s richest resource as he sought to weave a memorable story whose truth would be fictive and transcendent, unbound by any obligation to historical fact, whether past or future” (LOMPERIS, 1987, p. 42). Thus, the imagination is vital to generate different forms of writing and it helps to diversify the vet’s war experience accounts as well as give the veteran writers an escape from the obligation of always having to write the “truth.” Artificiality is then inevitable and the written

accounts of the Vietnam War become a source of the vets' ability to create. Veteran writer James Webb explains that "Vietnam was many things. It varied year by year, place by place, unit by unit," (LOMPERIS, 1987, p. 45) and this variety of concepts about the Vietnam War transformed the vets' experiences and their accounts into a complex field to be explored, something vast and difficult to understand. Thus, the vets' experiences narrated in their novels can be also seen as recollections of the images and memories that insist on remaining in their minds, and these memories and images often remain as fictional accounts based on a true war event. According to White there is no "real story," every story is fiction. As he explains: "stories are not lived; there is no such thing as a real story. Stories are told or written, not found. And as for the notion of a true story, this is virtually a contradiction in terms. All stories are fictions. Which means, of course, that they can be true only in a metaphorical sense and in the sense in which a figure of speech can be true." (WHITE, 1999, p. 9)

Based on White's statement, it is possible to demonstrate that the vets' narratives cannot be limited only based on facts. A historical account in order to be written depends on a wide arrange of forms of discourses that rely on conventional narrative forms and the imagination. According to Timothy J. Lomperis, "people draw their lessons from their memories, from that set of images which stays with them the longest. Some, along with Ronald Reagan, remember Vietnam as a 'noble crusade,' while others relive with Daniel Ellsberg his nightmare of the war as a 'heinous crime'" (LOMPERIS, 1987, p. 3). Although Reagan and Ellsberg describe the same historical event both lived during the Vietnam War period, their accounts of this event are completely different, and for them to communicate their experiences they must rely on imagination. As a war veteran, Ellsberg sees the Vietnam War as a soldier, so his is able to understand the atrocities on which a war is based, while Reagan saw the war based only on his political interests. Therefore, the ones who narrate historical events must use their imagination to write about it, but it does not mean that what is written is true. Sometimes writers produce only what people want to read, and they do not consider the veracity of the historical event because their focus is to please their readers. According to White, "the historian, like any writer of discursive prose, is to be judged 'by the truth of what he says, or by adequacy of his verbal reproduction of his external model,' whether that external model be the actions of past men or the historian's own thought about such actions" (WHITE, 1965, p. 396).

History is recreated with different intentions, and in many circumstances when inspecting history, or drawing on an academic explanation of a story, one begins looking at the primary source, which in the case here proposed, is the Vietnam War. Since, to institute “the facts,” the historian cannot escape from invention, the process of creation and imagination is indispensable to originate the historical narrative, and to commit an error with the antecedents is unavoidable. Therefore, for the veteran writers to create their narratives they need to reconstruct moments, events and the historical facts that are fragmented in the primary sources. So, the Vietnam writers must not limit themselves only to the truth. For the reason that, “history in general is neither memory nor recollection, but the story of their relationship. The indiscriminate cultivation of recollection, the conscious effort to remember everything, is a threat to memory’s power to restore consciousness’s original relationship with its world.” (WHITE, 1970, p. 187).

Therefore, there is no need for the reader to judge the legitimacy of the facts narrated in the vets’ narratives. Whether or not the facts of these narratives are true, it is the authors’ decision to acknowledge the truth about what they are writing, and probably, the reader will never know the accuracy of the recollections and memories exposed by the author in their narratives. Nevertheless, Lomperis contends that “good literature lasts” and it lasts “because it tells the truth.” He has noted that, “what the truth is specifically, however, becomes quickly subject to the interpretation of politics, artistic expression, and morality” (LOMPERIS, 1987, p. 50). Truth in Vietnam War narratives can acquire different ideas and principles that are connected with each veteran’s own way to conceptualize the facts they lived during the Vietnam era. Because truth is interpreted, the veteran writer carries the responsibility to tell the “unvarnished truth” and, according to some Vietnam War writers, a little “lying” is needed to tell the truth. Stephen Wright, for instance, argues that, as an author, “the factual material of Vietnam War is so bizarre that many of the true stories, in fact, have a ‘tinny ring of inauthenticity to them,’ and to actually employ many of these factual coincidences and ironies in a book ‘would really, really ring false’” (LOMPERIS, 1987, p. 50).

It seems that in Vietnam War narratives many different opinions are necessary to idealize the Vietnam War that is believed by most veterans. The vets want to tell the truth in their narratives, but they have their own way to do it. Kovic, for instance, claims that “all he had tried to do was tell the truth about the war” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 165). In order to understand this artistic way of telling the truth, many were the veteran writers

that realized, as O'Brien has noted, that "lying is a way one can get to a kind of truth," and O'Brien explains that "issues can be clarified sometimes by telling lies" (LOMPERIS, 1987, p. 51). Therefore, literal truth in Vietnam War narratives seems far from existing, and once the veteran writer is preparing a piece of writing, all the drama that is necessary to judge what is right and wrong about their Vietnam War experiences turns into a difficult and problematic situation. However, the decisions between fact and fiction must be taken, although, most of the time, fact and fiction become of equal importance. White asserts that it is in the fictional narrative "that our desire for the imaginary, the possible, must contest with the imperatives of the real, the actual. If we view narration and narrativity, as the instruments by which the conflicting claims of the imaginary and the real are mediated, arbitrated, or resolved in a discourse, we begin to comprehend both the appeal of narrative and the grounds for refusing it." (WHITE, 1980, p. 8-9)

Thus, the imaginary struggles to gain control over the factual perceptions of the veteran writer. Even so, the writer might feel the need to hold to his honest vision of the war. For the war narrative to be attractive there is also the need to combine fiction and fact. On the other hand, if the writer does not hold to his creative process to produce his narrative, he will be then writing history. Larry Heinemann contends that "the story of war will always be the individual's story, for the same reason that 'authentic' war stories will always be anti-war stories" (NALLY, 1997, p. 1), "authenticity" is not enough to represent a "real" war story. Hence, the perception of veterans is very important when they are writing war narratives. It was impossible for the veterans, during the war, to witness everything and see facts in the same way. Perception however, becomes a moral responsibility for the veteran writer, and it also demands a "process of selection that Stephen Wright described as moving from 'crude fact to imaginative truth' by 'making all these facts human and giving them human sense' through creative leaps of imagination" (LOMPERIS, 1987, p. 51). As Heinemann has noted, "it is the writer's job to understand that some things demand knowledge as well as acknowledgement. Extreme human circumstance will always be story worthy" (NALLY, 1997, p. 1).

Although the Vietnam War ended more than thirty years ago, the veteran writer continues to draw lessons from that outrageous period. Some veteran writers still have difficulties in fully expressing in their narratives what they have experienced on the battlefield and on their return back home. The difficulty the vets have to express in

writing their experiences occurs mainly because not all facts and insights are precisely equal, and also because the traumatic act of war is still a fine that many of the vets have to pay. The debate between fact and fiction seems to be endless. Lomperis, however, has noted that most of the vets' narratives "reveal emotion and can examine motives" and that "it is in lying bare motives" that the veterans "find out why things happen. And these are the real facts: the information that is put in an insightful pattern that allows us to understand" (LOMPERIS, 1987, p. 62). He goes on to write that

an understanding of the Vietnam War is not going to come from one writer's personal experience alone. It is going to come from writing that will be able to make the experiences of others and their writings his own. He will have to incorporate facts that are not his own and that he has not known before. To make his pattern true, other facts, both fictional and nonfictional, are going to have to be related to his own, including the great lost fact of the Vietnam war literature so far, the Vietnamese people over whose hearts and minds the war was supposedly fought. (LOMPERIS, 1987, p. 62)

However, the literary voices of the Vietnam veterans has shown that there is no specific rule to pattern either the vets' writing or the reasons they write about their war experiences. Actually, each veteran has his own way of writing, his own reason to write about his war experiences and a personal way to tell his truth about the war and the Vietnam he once lived. The vets belong to the Vietnam War era and their narratives are the result of their deep connection and involvement with the war. The war stays and remains alive in the hearts and souls of the American soldiers who fought in Vietnam, teaching real values, life lessons, and highlighting hope.

For example, Kovic's writing, despite asserting an anti-heroic story that tried to affirm the morality of America's involvement in the war and deny the ideas of patriotism and glory associated with war, also works as an attempt to communicate the trauma of war. Kovic, a veteran writer, writes to teach people about the true horrors of war and his writing is a way to raise his voice against the war, as a refusal to be silenced. In a new introduction to his book, *Born on the Fourth of July*, released in March 2005, Kovic states:

I wanted people to understand. I wanted to share with them as nakedly and openly and intimately as possible what I had gone through, what I had endured. . . . I wanted people to know about the hospitals and the enema room, about why I had become opposed to the war, why I had grown more and more committed to peace and nonviolence. I had been beaten by the police and arrested twelve times for protesting the war and I had spent many nights in jail in my wheelchair. I had been called a Communist and a traitor, simply for trying to tell the truth about what had happened in that war, but I refused to be intimidated. (KOVIC, 2005, p. 17)

Kovic's writing besides exposing his devastated feelings and denouncing the U.S. administration's lies and manipulations, also shares many similarities with other

vets' accounts. Other than writing their own truth in their narratives, many of them tried everything they could to speak out against war. They organized themselves in many groups around the U.S. to protest against the war and consequently were beaten, arrested, and put on trial. However, the Vietnam veterans survived the so called "endless war" and they overcame the silence that used to hold them back in their mutilated bodies and disturbed minds.

The veterans' literary voices brought another sense to the vets' lives after the war, in which the search for hope and a meaning for their war experiences is a constant attempt for those who believed they were betrayed by America. The Vietnam War literature also strengthens the veterans who suffered a dramatic transformation from pro-war patriots to anti-war dissidents. Even though, the war is still going on in their hearts and souls and the vets' accounts remain as a vital component of the vets' trajectory between Vietnam and the other wars.

The Vietnam War was a jigsaw event with no apparent meaning, confusing and hard to follow. Most veterans assert that their literary production is a key factor to keep them in tune with the past, and their narratives work as a link between the Vietnam War era and the people that suffered in it. The vets' literary voices are calls that set their minds to honor those who lost their lives on the battlefield as well as those who survived. It brings back the vets' memories of the war period, and does not let the vets forget the sad loss of so many young American soldiers. For those who come after, Vietnam War literature is the vets' legacy to the world as well as their inheritance, as an attempt to convey their experiences through the facts and fictions that their often traumatized minds are able to bear.

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